

By Adam Lyons

At a time when economic constraints are unleashed across broad areas of public spending, it is right that defence should receive its share of the pain. However, during a time of conflict in Afghanistan, it is essential that defence should not bear the brunt of the cuts that are to come, as continued operations have added unforeseen, but necessary strain to the defence budget. Neither should the outcome of the Strategic Defence and Security Review be overwhelmingly influenced by that conflict. Afghanistan is a current priority. Consequently there is a danger that this will result in an overwhelming focus upon counter-insurgency operations, to the detriment of future operational effectiveness. Where, and in what form future conflicts shall take, cannot be accurately predicted. It is vital, therefore, that the United Kingdom's armed forces should remain effective, whilst becoming increasingly economical. To abscond from its world role and relegate itself from the league of true blue-water military powers, for mere short-term savings, would be devastating for British security and global influence. The maintenance of a modern, technological force is becoming increasingly expensive to the point where elements have become unaffordable. As coalition warfare has become the norm, some capabilities and assets can be dispensed with. A complete overhaul of the defence procurement budget is also needed to make it more affordable and effective. Yet, significant investment in air, land and sea projects must be continued to meet the unforeseen challenges of the future.

An ability to cope with any contingency in the years to come, ranging from interstate warfare to emergency relief operations, should be preserved. Defence and foreign policy should aim to be a benign force that will be of benefit to the world in providing aid, friendly relations, anti-piracy patrols, counter-terrorism and drug-trafficking prevention. That policy should also be ready to protect British interests with force, if necessary. Therefore, the SDSR, should not only be held at regular intervals, it should also be combined with a review of foreign policy aims, to determine the requirements of the armed forces. Britain must be prepared to respond to any eventuality that may arise in the future. Indubitably, as an island nation, the UK relies upon seaborne trade, which can only be protected by an ocean-going navy. As a consequence, the Royal Navy should rightly be concerned about the recent surge in piratical activity around the Horn of Africa and contribute to multinational operations there. Equally, a presence should be preserved to reassure British overseas territories of its responsibility to provide for their defence, with guard ships patrolling the South Atlantic and with anti-drugs patrols in the Caribbean. Equally, the ability to protect UK airspace and provide air superiority during combat overseas is essential. Air, naval and land power are all important, they are all costly, but they have provided the British population, as well as other parts of the world, with many years of peace and stability, and this should be continued. The importance of Britain's nuclear deterrent has been acknowledged, especially as states such as Iran and North Korea attempt to extend their capabilities, which in turn could further destabilise their regions with new arms races. A Trident renewal secures British security and influence for another generation.

However, the war in Afghanistan has veered away from the norms of interstate warfare, as NATO is not at war with a nation equipped with all of the resources that only a state can muster. Whilst operations are tough, given the insurgency opposing allied forces, control of the air is guaranteed. The Taliban and other Islamist groups do not possess much in the way of heavy equipment and this has altered strategy. Most other nations are not failed states without functioning air forces, structured armies or navies (as most countries possess a coastline). Iraq had suffered at the hands of war and economic sanctions, which crippled these once held abilities. Afghanistan likewise, did not have a credible air force because of its long history of internal conflict. Kosovo,

the centre of what was initially a war solely fought in the air, occurred less than five years from the beginning of these other conflicts. What will happen five years hence? How could Britain have guessed that its Cold War role, which required so much emphasis on anti-submarine and anti-tank capabilities, against a background of nuclear deterrence, would suddenly evaporate, only to be replaced with a multitude of other dangers? The Falklands War required a powerful naval and amphibious task force; the Gulf War required the use of airpower and main battle tanks; peacekeeping has utilised infantry; Kosovo ♦ airpower; whilst Iraq and Afghanistan has slowly replaced organised military structures with an insurgency, necessitating a sustained manpower-intensive response. To concentrate solely on such counter-insurgency missions would be a massive risk to security when such a diverse range of capabilities have been needed so recently. Defence policy should not be viewed solely through the lens of Afghanistan. Whilst it is important that British forces remain committed to stabilising that country, an overwhelming focus upon its challenges would be harmful to the future of the armed services if they were called upon to launch military action against a state with effective military institutions. Given combat operations in Afghanistan are likely to cease in less than four years' time, this is a realistic future scenario. Such a concentration on counter-insurgency operations would inevitably attribute greater importance to sustained ground-based anti-personnel missions. To become entrenched upon such a long-term course should not be allowed to occur at the cost of diverting funding away from naval and air power.<br /><br />It is unfortunate that the armed forces have already taken massive reductions in manpower over the last two decades and now face further cuts. This should be alleviated, to a degree, as it is likely Britain will be accompanied to war by its allies, in coalitions formed of nations belonging to NATO, the EU and others. However, the MoD should remain committed to maintaining a range of capabilities. With the necessary resources to handle unforeseen future challenges, issues which Britain's allies deem to be outside of their interests can be responded to effectively, such as when British forces were used to extend stability to Sierra Leone. To do this an amphibious capability should be retained, combining airpower with naval resources to respond to any threat that can then be stabilised with sufficient ground troops. The Royal Navy allows the UK a global presence, which itself offers advantage and brings with it a capability that a number of British allies do not possess, unlike counter-insurgency abilities. To be rid of military capabilities to provide for temporary financial savings would do great damage to the effectiveness of the services. If a capability is lost, then its associated knowledge and manpower dissipates. If it is required again, it could take years, at cost, to relearn, develop and train sufficient personnel. In order to preserve as much capability as possible, the forces should become more adaptable and mobile. This can be factored into the defence procurement process, but manpower is essential to preserve capability. Current manpower should be maintained as the minimum standard for the effectiveness of the forces. Operating at levels of sustained overstretch has not provided a desirable defence environment and a reduction in manpower will limit effectiveness. With the commitment to Afghanistan, there would be little remaining to cope with contingencies. Operational effectiveness would essentially be crippled, if an emergency were to arise elsewhere, where, perhaps, British nationals needed evacuating, or combined with a homeland crisis, such as covering for striking firefighters or containing the spread of a foot-and-mouth style epidemic.<br /><br />Although it is essential that manpower and large segments of capability be retained, military procurement should be completely overhauled. Too much emphasis has previously been placed upon British industry to provide equipment solutions, often at huge cost and delay. Commitments to British industry has left unnecessary

capability gaps, the current lack of a dedicated maritime patrol aircraft in service (for an island nation), being one such example. In Afghanistan, a lack of needed equipment has led to many expensive Urgent Operational Requirement purchases. Whilst it is important to support British industry, due to obvious tax and employment advantages, it should be made clear that this should not occur at any cost. When buying 'off-the-shelf', it would be wise to do just that, instead of buying a foreign product and unnecessarily modifying it with British equipment (such as the Chinook HC3 debacle). Such practices have, time and again, contributed to hugely inflated costs and delay. Equipment should be put out to international tender to drive down costs, whilst Private Finance Initiatives have generally not offered efficient or cost-effective alternatives. Additionally, the MoD too often opts for the most expensive and capable equipment as it sets out its requirements too high, necessitating hugely expensive solutions, like the single-role Type 45 destroyer. Unfortunately, there are too many examples of poor equipment purchases to list here, but the result of many projects has been the reduction in the quantity delivered to compensate for cost increases. After all, six Type 45s can only cover half of the commitments that could be provided by the originally intended twelve. To maintain adequate power projection, cheaper and fewer types of multi-role naval and aerial platforms should be acquired in the future. With a commitment to airpower, the British Army should retire a significant portion of its main battle tanks and heavy artillery, and instead focus on mobile infantry and special forces. Some of the heavier roles could be provided by coalition partners. This would optimise the abilities of the army's relatively small number of personnel, whilst providing valuable assets to a multinational security force.

The way equipment requirements are decided should also be altered. Inter-service rivalry over defence budget allocations have been widely publicised and should be negated by creating a joint-service focus on purchases. Instead of division by service, the budget should be divided into different roles, given the overlap of certain capabilities amongst the forces. For example, the budget should be divided into categories that appear in two or more services, which could take the following form: 'strategic' ♦ including submarines, air and sea logistics, airpower, ISTAR assets; 'tactical' ♦ including small arms, personnel carriers, helicopter airlift, close air support; 'amphibious' ♦ including assault ships, seaborne aircraft, escorts; 'homeland defence' ♦ including training, fishery patrols, air defence, ground radar, search and rescue; and 'infrastructure' ♦ including human resources, accommodation and bases. Sharing a budget by inter-force capability may result in increased cooperation, making each service more efficient and to complement one another by eradicating duplicated capabilities. No single service would dominate the defence budget allocations.

All areas of the battlespace ♦ sea, land and air ♦ are important to defence and so a wide range of capabilities should be retained. The best multi-role equipment that the defence budget can allow should be acquired in the quantities needed for the purpose. This may result in less British industrial input and more 'off-the-shelf' purchases, but that is the price of recession. The purchase of the most advanced equipment money can buy (or that British industry can produce) can be sacrificed in order to preserve manpower and a wide range of abilities. It is imperative that the United Kingdom should be able to contribute its forces globally as part of a coalition, or solely in small-scale amphibious operations, as well as provide for the defence of its territories and the sea lanes. Britain needs to fight against becoming an irrelevance in an ever-changing world, which will see the emergence of new powers in Asia and Latin America. To do so, the MoD should adapt to fiscal reality and radically alter its defence procurement policy, whilst retaining a good defence partnership with Britain's allies. A financially driven SDSR overly influenced by counter-insurgency operations will not

adequately prepare the armed forces for the future. To think the unthinkable would be to transform the armed services into a purely counter-insurgency force. For the sake of British security, it should remain unthinkable.

About the author:  
Adam Lyons is currently completing a PhD on an early eighteenth-century military and naval expedition. He has long been interested in military affairs and enjoyed a successful period in the Air Training Corps, followed by a year in the University of Birmingham Air Squadron, at RAF Cosford. Adam has given numerous lectures on military history in Birmingham, Belfast and London. Most recently he gave a lecture for the National Maritime Museum, which related elements of eighteenth-century defence policy to the present day.