

Already the debate ahead of the next Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) due in 2015 is warming up. Whilst politicians in the UK are concentrating on local and European elections in May, and the Scottish referendum in September, the eyes of the strategic think tank community are looking further ahead. Professor Michael Clarke, the Director General of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) has been reflecting with the U K DEfence Forum's Nick Watts on what he sees as key questions that the next SDSR needs to consider.

His analysis starts with the UK's place in the world. "Objectively the UK is a significant player – but we have gone back to a feeling in the 1970s, that we are a declining power. We are not as confident as we were." He makes the point that statistically UK is an important country; with 1% of the world's population the UK represents 4.4% of global trade and has the fourth or fifth largest economy in the world. "Being a globalised player is still to our advantage."

But he notes a decline in the self-image of the UK population as to what kind of country Britain is.

"The idea that we should be playing a fairly proactive role in maintaining the international system is not as popular in the UK as it was a few years ago." This is due to Iraq and Afghanistan and the sense that we have overreached ourselves militarily. "Defence is not a popular idea at the moment. It is regarded as optional. We use our defence policy to create an image for ourselves in the world and that has gone wrong."

He believes that this attitude represents a key context as we approach the next SDSR. Clarke also believes that this view is challengeable. But in the next SDSR the people of this country will have to ask themselves what the UK's strategic role in the world is? If the UK wishes to retain its relationship with the US, its role will need to remain expansive. With the US pivot to Asia, if UK wants to stay close to Washington, it will have to identify strategic issues that matter to us both.

This could mean being prepared to deploy forces to the Gulf, the Indian Ocean and East Asia.

"UK forces are less capable of doing this than at any time in the past. We need to make a strategic choice – are we prepared to pay the price and take the risk of staying close to the US. If so we need to do more – if we can't then we have to accept that our role will be less U S centric." Politicians need to recognize that this would not be a choice of US v Europe. "The UK could take on a role like the 1920s or even the 1880s." But he notes that "This would not be comfortable to 3 generations of policy makers."

But Clarke notes that the SDSR will not address this question, as it is too difficult. He believes that it will be an exercise in "steady as you go." But "any SDSR that does that will be smoke and mirrors. Any SDSR that is honest will be turbulent as it will have to confront some very difficult decisions; such as are we able to keep full spectrum capability at such low numbers, I don't think we can. If the UK is not prepared to pay more than 2% of GDP on defence, what will this buy?"

If the UK can't keep full spectrum capability alive, what should we invest in? "If the US is still important to us then it might mean the UK would be a more maritime power." This would mean the balance of forces that has prevailed over the last 30 years would be changed. If this is not the preferred choice, then the UK's defence policy needs to be less US centric. Clarke believes that these are the choices which need to be addressed, and the direction in which British defence policy is headed, but which will not be addressed in the next SDSR.

An allied question relates to the balance of investment in defence and security. As General Sir Nick Houghton the CDS said in his RUSI Christmas lecture, the services are in danger of investing in exquisite technology and not enough in people. Clarke is inclined to agree "personnel are more important if you want adaptable forces. Ideally you need both, but platforms can be bought. You can't just grow an officer corps in 3 years."

Clarke believes that "we should privilege security more, so that British citizens can go about their business freely and with confidence" To do this the UK would get more value out of investment in such capabilities as intelligence-led policing. Also by investing more in societal resilience, meaning protection against the extent to which modern society is reliant on imported energy. Clarke can see the armed forces contributing to that agenda however this is defined, as we have recently seen during the floods.

"I think we are likely to see a shift to security expenditure away from defence expenditure." Whether it is called upstream engagement, the trick is to do it efficiently. Clarke believes that governments are going to have to enter into partnerships with the private sector to achieve this. "It is not efficient to spend small amounts of the budget on small training exercises, it would be better to link government and private sector efforts. "The world is twice as wealthy as it was a decade ago. According to Credit Suisse there is \$220 trillion of wealth in the world; there was only \$100 trillion in 2002." Clarke points out that this money is not held by governments. It could be possible to link military training with governmental and private sector initiatives to generate prosperity in fragile areas. This would produce "more middle class people who have a stake in society and pay taxes."

The UK has always seen itself as a key player in NATO, which will hold its next summit in the UK in the autumn. Clarke believes that the Alliance faces a new threat. "The glib answer [on the future of the Alliance] is that NATO is fading away, but that's not true. What is true is that the US is moving away. In Washington when people say NATO, they mean Europe, so it's as if the US has already psychologically detached itself." Therefore the UK's objective in NATO are challenging. "Now the Alliance has got to show that is prepared to take the strain in the European theatre, and possibly in some areas such as the eastern Mediterranean and the Gulf, which are valued by the US." Clarke believes that the UK should play a key role in helping to broker this.

The UK's approach to developments in the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy needs to be more nuanced. "The EU has been in a state of economic crisis since 2008. It became a political crisis in 2010, with developments in southern Europe. So all of the EU's intellectual energy has gone into saving the euro. As a result Europe has become so introspective that in the defence arena it has nothing to offer." Clarke notes that EU initiatives in the defence arena "haven't reached first base." EU Battle groups exist more on paper than anything. Future operations involving the EU are likely to resemble the Libya operation where NATO played a significant role. Therefore Clarke would like to see the UK take a more relaxed attitude to EU security policy. "For the foreseeable future, certainly for the next defence review, NATO is the only game in town."