

Richard K. Betts' article, 'A disciplined defence: How to regain strategic solvency' was published in the Winter 2007 issue of Foreign Affairs. The full article can be viewed online at:

<http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20071101faessay86605/richard-k-betts/a-disciplined-defense.html?mode=print>

In his Foreign Affairs article, Richard Betts argues that US defence spending does not reflect a rational assessment of the risks and challenges that the country faces and laments that the 'traditional constituencies for restrained spending in both major political parties have evaporated'. Instead, he calls for a long-term transition to a 'modest and sensible' strategy with a lower price tag. He points out that:

With rare exceptions, the war against terrorists cannot be fought with army tank battalions, air force wings, or naval fleets... the main challenge is not killing terrorists but finding them.

The challenge, as outlined by Betts, is to achieve 'strategic solvency' by focussing on capabilities and priorities that reflect the broad threats that the US faces. In order to do this, Betts points out, 'democrats will have to get over their long battle against the wimp image [and] republicans will have to rediscover the virtues of fiscal responsibility'. This will – he admits – be an 'uphill struggle' for cuts that would counter 'real enemy capabilities, not merely maintaining traditional service priorities'.

Lessons for UK defence spending

Betts' article is squarely concerned with the position of the United States' defence budget. But it has a wider significance for UK policymakers. In particular, Betts asks a question that has all-too-infrequently been asked – what do we want to achieve, and how should we go about doing this? This is the subject of a paper soon to be published on UKDF Viewpoints by Dr Richard North, 'Defence off the rails'. Watch this space.