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Lost Over Libya: The 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review - an obituary

The British government's 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) was intended to be a fundamental review of Britain's defence and security posture. By the turn of 2011, the SDSR was being widely described as fundamentally flawed. This article examines the politics and strategic direction of the SDSR and it assesses the extent to which the SDSR was 'strategic'. It goes on to evaluate how the 2011 intervention in Libya has impacted on the premise of the SDSR. This paper argues that the Libya policy highlights the critical disjuncture between the strategic intent underpinning the response to the Libyan crisis and the fiscally-led nature of an SDSR and the government's inability to articulate a strategic vision for the UK.

Introduction

Immediately after the formation of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government following the May 2010 general election, the conduct of a Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR), in line with election manifesto pledges,¹ was announced. This SDSR was published just prior to the Comprehensive Spending Review in October 2010. It was intended to be a fundamental review of Britain's defence and security posture, based on the strategic need established by the 2010 National Security Strategy², rather than another example of the budgetary salami slicing seen in the 1990s and in the revisions to the 1998 Strategic Defence Review (SDR) during the 2000s. The message was clear: the SDSR was distinctive precisely because it was the operational embodiment of the NSS's strategic assessment. However, by the turn of 2011, the SDSR was already being seen as fundamentally flawed by parliamentarians, defence professionals and expert commentators alike.³ Shortly thereafter, the first live test of the SDSR's conclusions came with the onset, in the early part of 2011, of the 'Arab Spring', the democratic contagion that spread across North Africa and the Middle East. The British government's response to the crisis that developed in Libya as a result of

¹ Conservative Party, *Invitation to Join the Government of Britain*, The Conservative Party: London, 2010; Liberal Democrats, *Manifesto 2010: Change that works for you*, Liberal Democrat Party: London, 2010.

² HM Government, *A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The National Security Strategy*, The Stationary Office: London, October 2010.

³ Nick Richie, 'Rethinking Security: A Critical Analysis of the Strategic Defence and Security Review', *International Affairs*, Vol. 87, No.2, 2011, pp.355-76; House of Commons, Oral Evidence: *The Strategic Defence and Security Review and the National Security Strategy*, 18 May 2011, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmdfence/uc761-iv/uc76101.htm>.

the Gaddafi regime's response to pro-democracy demonstrations was particularly interesting in the context of the SDSR, in that it seemed to go against the core logic underpinning the review. To have ruled out – as the SDSR did - air-cover via aircraft carriers until 2015 at the earliest, airborne intelligence cover altogether, and a critical mass of capability required for such operations, but then be at the forefront (along with France) of the international commitment to a military response seemed confused. The government's response also provided ample opportunity for opponents of the SDSR to highlight the strategic inadequacies within the government's approach and focused attention on the far from straightforward question of what, in practice, 'strategy' actually means and requires.⁴

It is in this context that this article examines the politics and strategic direction of the SDSR.⁵ We assess the extent to which the SDSR was a 'strategic' defence review, and we argue – as our title implies – that the SDSR has been fatally undermined by the decision to intervene in Libya.⁶ We argue that the Libya policy highlights the critical disjuncture between the strategic intent underpinning the response to the Libyan crisis and the fiscally-led nature of an SDSR driven by the Cabinet Office and Treasury without an explicit understanding (nor the ability to articulate it) of its relationship to political understandings of the UK's wider strategic interests.

From SDR to SDSR

The October 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review, *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty*, was the first substantial United Kingdom (UK) defence review in over a decade, and represented the first time that strategy regarding defence, security and intelligence had been formally integrated into a single review. The previous defence review, New Labour's 1998 Strategic Defence Review⁷, had established the broad strategic direction of defence for the following decade, with just one updating strategy document, the *Delivering Security in a*

⁴ For excellent discussions about British strategy see, for example, Patrick Porter, Why Britain Doesn't Do Grand Strategy, *The RUSI Journal* Vol.55, No.4, August 2010, p.6-12; John Gearson and James Gow, Security, Not Defence, Strategic, Not Habit: Restructuring the Political Arrangements for Policy Making on Britain's Role in the World, *The Political Quarterly*, Vol.81, No.3, 2010, pp.406-19 and Nick Witney, Britain's Defence Review: The Real Strategic Questions, *The Political Quarterly*, Vol.81, No.3, 2010, pp.431-33.

⁵ Others have considered the SDSR in a large number of different terms, and for examples of this see: Michael Codner and Michael Clarke (Eds), *A Question of Security: The British Defence Review in an Age of Austerity*, RUSI: London, 2011.

⁶ Prior to the Libya operations, Colin Gray provided an interesting prescription for defence policy planners to consider strategic questions. Please see: Colin S. Gray, Strategic Thoughts for Defence Planners, *Survival*, Vol.52, Number 3, 2010, pp.159-78.

⁷ http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/65F3D7AC-4340-4119-93A2-20825848E50E/0/sdr1998_complete.pdf

Changing World White Paper, being published thereafter, in December 2003.⁸ The purpose behind the October 2010 SDSR was to set out the practical direction of defence policy in the light of a strategic assessment that would inform the period of Conservative or coalition government to come in the same way that the 1998 SDR had defined New Labour's era in defence policy.

As the 2003 White Paper noted, the 1998 SDR had represented, "a fundamental rethink of how the Armed Forces and their supporting infrastructure should be structured to face the challenges of the increasingly complex security environment which followed the ending of the Cold War and the emergence of uncertainty and instability in many areas of the world."⁹ To this end, the conclusion of the SDR had been that the UK needed 'modern' armed forces – i.e. forces "equipped and supported for rapid and sustainable deployment in expeditionary operations, usually as part of a coalition."¹⁰ By the time of the 2003 White Paper this capacity had been tested in the Balkans, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan and Iraq, bringing to the fore questions about military over-stretch. At the same time, though, the Western response to the events of 9/11 and the decision to invade Iraq had contributed to an international security environment characterised by even greater uncertainty than had characterised the post-Cold War environment of 1997-98, with the potential consequence that the UK's armed forces faced "an even broader range, frequency, and often duration of tasks".¹¹ In this context, the White Paper concluded that:

The breadth of the tasks [the Armed Forces] will be required to undertake, from peacekeeping humanitarian support and confidence building operations through to counter-terrorist and large-scale combat operations, demand that our forces be flexible and responsive, multi-roled and able to reconfigure to achieve the desired outcome. In taking forward effects-based planning and operations, our focus will move away from simple calculations of platform numbers to developing network enabled capabilities

⁸ Ministry of Defence, *Delivering Security in a Changing World* (Cm 6041-I, London, TSO, December 2003), http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/051AF365-0A97-4550-99C0-4D87D7C95DED/0/cm60411_whitepaper2003.pdf. The early New Labour defence era was also replete with a number of European defence initiatives such as the declarations at Poertschach (October 1998), Saint Malo Accords (December 1998) and the negotiations towards the Nice Treaty. It is important to note that the so-called Capabilities Catalogue (which was created at the 1999 Helsinki Council and aimed at providing Europe with the means to become a strong military actor by 2004) was never fully populated, and thus the failure to fill defence equipment gaps is not unique to the UK, but a pan-European phenomenon.

⁹ *Delivering Security in a Changing World*, p.2.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

designed to achieve a range of strategic effects. A new range of equipment and systems entering service over the coming years will greatly enhance capability and ensure that UK forces remain amongst the finest in the world.¹²

The origins of many of the problems confronted via the SDSR are to be found in the SDR. Expensive equipment procurement decisions (like the aircraft carriers) were highlighted in the SDR, but only resolved in the dying days of the Brown Labour government.¹³ Similarly, decisions regarding armoured troop moving vehicles (the ‘snatch Land Rover’/IED debate and Future Rapid Effect System - FRES) were botched or avoided during most of the New Labour 2000s, resulting in both anguish to service families and large cost over-runs and false starts (to the tune of £188m) in trying to sort these problems out in a hurried manner. At the same time, the absence of a thorough overhaul of defence management meant that the problem of the MoD’s inflexibility and unresponsiveness in the face of changing operational and commercial demands was never resolved.

The defence challenges facing the newly-elected coalition government were set out in a January 2010 pre-election Conservative Party document, *A Resilient Nation*.¹⁴ The economic tension involved in continuing to play a lead international role in meeting the wide range of uncertainties set out in the 2003 White Paper is clearly evident in this document. It warned that the SDSR it would undertake if elected; “will need to be forward-looking and face up to some very tough decisions that have been put off for too long. Equipment programmes cannot be based on wish-lists or the fantasy world of what we would like to do if resources were unlimited.”¹⁵ Logically, this would also have implications for the automaticity with which the UK Armed Forces were committed to conflict situations, as policies and priorities were in future determined in the light of available resources. Hence, the SDSR would; “need to harness our national strengths - our willingness to play a part far beyond our borders, strong public support for our Armed Forces, the character of our fighting men and women, the strength of our defence industry and technologies – to an overall strategy which makes the most effective use of them rather than putting them in a state of permanent overstretch...That means calibrating our role and our capabilities to the sort of conflicts

¹² Ibid, p.19.

¹³ Roland Watson and Deborah Haynes, ‘Brown goes into battle with billions for defence’, *The Times*, 1st February 2010.

¹⁴ The Conservative Party, *A Resilient Nation: National Security Green Paper* (Policy Green Paper No.13), January 2010. See, http://www.conservatives.com/News/News_stories/2010/01/A_Resilient_Nation.aspx.

¹⁵ Ibid, p.11.

which are most likely to arise in the next twenty years not the last twenty.”¹⁶ The implication was clear – economic constraints would result in defence budget cuts which, in turn, would have a policy impact in mandating greater selectivity in the deployment of UK forces. The government did try to mitigate this by adopting an Anglo-French initiative begun by the Labour government in 2010. This November 2010 agreement was distinctive for the fulsome pledges of defence industrial base cooperation, leading to an Anglo-French prime contractor and the extent to which the two militaries would cooperate in the future including a joint expeditionary force.¹⁷

Nevertheless, once it was underway, the SDSR was presented as being, “led by the requirements of foreign policy as well inevitable financial constraints”¹⁸ with these strategic requirements being understood in the context of the changing nature of warfare (i.e. ‘the conflicts of the next twenty years, not the last twenty’). As Foreign Secretary William Hague observed in a major foreign policy speech of July 2010:

the nature of conflict is changing. Our Armed Forces are currently involved in fighting insurgencies or wars-amongst-the-people rather than state on state conflict, they are involved in counter-piracy operations rather than sea battles, the projection of force overseas rather than homeland-based defence. And security threats themselves are more widely dispersed in parts of the world which are often difficult to access, lawless and in some cases failing, where the absence of governance feeds into a cycle of conflict and danger that we have yet to learn to arrest but are likely to face more often.¹⁹

This was the basis of what Secretary of State for Defence Dr Liam Fox termed the ‘2020 option’ – “looking ahead to the end of the decade and deciding what we want our Armed Forces to look like at that time based on the foreign policy goals we have set ourselves, our assessment of the future character of conflict and anticipating the changes in technology that we will need to incorporate.”²⁰ This ‘looking ahead’ would be facilitated by the newly-

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ HM Government, *Declaration signed by the UK and France following the UK-France Summit 2010 in London on 2 November 2010*, <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/uk%E2%80%93france-summit-2010-declaration-on-defence-and-security-co-operation/>

¹⁸ William Hague, ‘Britain’s Foreign Policy in a Networked World’, Speech at the FCO, London, 1st July 2010, <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/news/latest-news/?view=Speech&id=22472881>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Liam Fox, ‘The Need for Defence Reform’. Speech to the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors, 13th August 2010,

constituted National Security Council (NSC), which “agreed that the overarching strategic posture should be to address the most immediate threats to our national security while maintaining the ability to identify and deal with emerging ones before they become bigger threats to the UK. This flexible, adaptable posture will maintain the ability to safeguard international peace and security, to deter and contain those who threaten the UK and its interests, and where necessary to intervene on multiple fronts.”²¹ Nevertheless, this strategic vision existed in the context of, and so would be conditioned by, a Labour legacy of unfunded liability in defence estimated at approximately £38 billion in the 2010-2020 period. Short-term cuts in the defence budget were an unavoidable consequence.

Hence, the challenge for the incoming Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government was to address the multiple problems bequeathed to them by New Labour - under-investment in defence during the 2000s, unfunded defence spending promises via new programmes and the absence of replacements, institutional inertia within the MoD, the new security challenges from asymmetric and networked adversaries, the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan and, of course, the record breaking deficit being carried forward by the Treasury. Whilst a long period of reflection was probably needed on defence and security policy, akin to that which preceded the 1998 SDR (a review which took over a year to complete), the coalition government’s prioritisation of rapid deficit reduction in effect outweighed all other considerations.²² Officials within the MoD, who were close to the SDSR process, described the SDSR as the best of all possible reviews in the circumstances, the clear implication being that the focus of analysis should be on the factors that framed the review, rather than on the review itself.²³

The 2010 National Security Strategy

The SDSR was designed to be umbilically linked to the coalition government’s National Security Strategy (NSS), *A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty*.²⁴ Initially, the two documents were to be published together, but in the event were published separately on

<http://www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/AboutDefence/People/Speeches/SofS/20100813TheNeedForDefenceReform.htm>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Overseas development was somewhat controversially ring-fenced, but subsequently it was announced that overseas development aid was to be used as a tool to provide security and stability.

²³ Private information collected in Whitehall between August 2010, and April 2011.

²⁴ HM Government, *A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The National Security Strategy* (Cm 7953, London, TSO, October 2010),

http://www.direct.gov.uk/prod_consum_dg/groups/dg_digitalassets/@dg/@en/documents/digitalasset/dg_191639.pdf.

successive days, on 18th and 19th October 2010. The NSS was based on the premise that in late 2010 Britain was “entering an age of uncertainty” and hence the NSS was “about gearing Britain up for this new age of uncertainty.”²⁵ However, as noted above, ‘uncertainty’ had also characterised the environment in which the 1998 SDR was conducted and it was not clear why late 2010 promised to usher in a new “age of uncertainty”. Strategy always exists to mitigate the impact of uncertainty, which is inherent in the international system (more so on some readings of international relations theory than others). At the same time, it is clear that uncertainty provides a strong narrative for government action.

Nevertheless, a restatement of Britain’s strategic aims and the means for achieving them was overdue by 2010. The absence of strategic thought in, for example, the piecemeal commitment to Afghanistan was, by the time of the NSS and SDSR, evident to many. The Public Administration Select Committee highlighted the absence of strategic thought in its 2010 report, *Who does UK National Strategy?*²⁶ Prime Minister David Cameron pointed to it in his 2010 Lord Mayor’s speech.²⁷ The absence of strategic thought and understanding around the initial Afghanistan commitment was also clear from the published diaries of Labour MP Chris Mullin. These recorded Prime Minister Tony Blair explaining to a meeting of backbench Labour MPs at the December 2001 fall of Kabul how Afghanistan’s future would evolve in three implicitly straight-forward stages: “First, the US, the UK, France and a few others would establish secure bases, Bagram airport for example. Second, there needed to be a UN force, involving Islamic countries. Third, the creation of a proper Afghan force.”²⁸ A month later Blair was reassuring the same backbenchers that, “it was nonsense to talk about overstretch. We would be sending about a thousand troops for a maximum of three or four months and then someone else would take over.”²⁹

However, precisely what was meant by ‘strategy’, and hence the purpose of a NSS, was less straightforward than recognising the need for one. The PASC report identified a deficit in strategic thinking in the UK to the extent that the country had lost the habit of undertaking

²⁵ Ibid, p.3.

²⁶ Public Administration Select Committee (PASC), *Who does National Strategy?* (HC 435, London, TSO, October 2010). In particular, see the evidence of Sir Robert Fry, formerly Director of Operations in the MoD (Ev 36).

²⁷ David Cameron, Speech to Lord Mayor’s Banquet, 15th November 2010, <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/speeches-and-transcripts/2010/11/speech-to-lord-mayors-banquet-57068>.

²⁸ Chris Mullin, *A View From the Foothills: The Diaries of Chris Mullin* (London, Profile Books, 2009), p.239.

²⁹ Ibid, pp.245-6.

it.³⁰ One consequence of this, itself in part a consequence of the contemporary ubiquity of the term, was that ‘strategy’ and ‘policy’ were often confused – or, at least, the distinction between the two was not fully understood (a trap into which the PASC considered the Foreign Secretary, William Hague, to have fallen³¹). In giving evidence, Hew Strachan (who chaired the government’s working group on the military covenant) offered the view that; “the relationship is an interactive one. In theoretical terms...the implication is that strategy flows from policy and in an ideal world that would be the case. But, in reality, there’s not much chance of implementing your policy if it’s strategically unsound and impossible to fulfil, so there is likely to be a much more dynamic relationship between the two.”³² In an effort to bring some clarity to discussion of strategy, the PASC offered a definition of strategy as being; “about dealing with uncertainty, complexity and the dynamic. It is not a plan or a paper. In modern politics it is about ensuring that the whole of government identifies and acts upon the national interest.”³³ This through-government commitment echoes that recommended by Strachan’s working group with the military covenant, and the government’s commitment to the concept.³⁴

Given such potential for confusion, it is reasonable to ask how effectively the NSS outlined a strategic vision for Britain. It began by outlining the government’s vision of Britain’s role in the world. The Foreword identified what might be regarded as three strategic priorities:

In order to protect our interests at home, we must project our influence abroad. As the global balance of power shifts, it will become harder for us to do so. But we should be under no illusion that our national interest requires our continued full and active engagement in world affairs. It requires our economy to compete with the strongest and the best and our entire government effort overseas must be geared to promote our trade, the lifeblood of our economy. But our international role extends beyond the commercial balance sheet, vital though it is.

³⁰ Public Administration Select Committee (PASC), *Who does National Strategy?*, *op.cit.*

³¹ PASC, *Who does National Strategy?* para.12.

³² *Ibid*, Ev 1, Q3.

³³ *Ibid*, para.11.

³⁴ Ministry of Defence (December 2010) Report of the Task Force on the Military Covenant (<http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/3C6A501D-5A85-47C9-9D89-B99C5E428061/0/militarycovenanttaskforcerpt.pdf>)

Our national interest requires us to stand up for the values our country believes in – the rule of law, democracy, free speech, tolerance and human rights. Those are the attributes for which Britain is admired in the world and we must continue to advance them, because Britain will be safer if our values are upheld and respected in the world.

To do so requires us to project power and to use our unique network of alliances and relationships – principally with the United States of America, but also as a member of the European Union and NATO, and a permanent member of the UN Security Council. We must also maintain the capability to act well beyond our shores and work with our allies to have a strategic presence wherever we need it.³⁵

On this basis, UK grand strategy might reasonably be interpreted as being designed to maintain and, where possible, enhance relative influence in these relationships and organisations, both via diplomacy and via an ability and willingness to deploy military force in support of shared goals. This is akin to the notion commonly used in EU studies of ‘preferences’ and ‘policies’, where government preferences are stable over a considerable amount of time – for example, the UK’s strongly transatlantic disposition - and its policies are the short-term developments that give expression to the preferences.³⁶ It is by being able to do the third of the things set out above (project power) that the first is achieved and the chances of achieving the second are greatly improved - so long as power is projected judiciously. In the NSS this strategic vision was boiled down to a definition of the UK NSS as being; “to use all our national capabilities to build Britain’s prosperity, extend our nation’s influence in the world and strengthen our security.”³⁷ These then were the ends, albeit presented in the language of a corporate mission statement. As the NSS recognised: “A national security strategy, like any strategy, must be a combination of **ends** (what we are seeking to achieve), **ways** (the ways by which we seek to achieve those ends) and **means** (the resources we can devote to achieving the ends).”³⁸ The purpose of the SDSR was to move beyond this level of generalisation and identify ways and means - to outline how these ends would be realised, and the configuration of resources necessary to this realisation, in the

³⁵ HM Government, *A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty*, p.4.

³⁶ Andrew Moravcsik, ‘Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics’, *International Organization*, 1997, Vol. 51, No. 4, pp.513-53.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p.9.

³⁸ *Ibid*, para.0.14. Emphasis in original.

context of an analysis of both the actually existing security environment and future possible threats.

To this end, the NSS indicated that the SDSR would set out how the coalition government would “sort out the mess we inherited” in order:

- to ensure our forces in Afghanistan have the equipment they need;
- to begin to bring the defence programme back into balance; and
- to enable Britain to retain the best and most versatile Armed Forces in the world – better equipped to protect our security in an age of uncertainty.³⁹

However, there was an obvious tension here between the second and third aims. This extended to a tension between the opening statement of the NSS, that the government had “given national security the highest priority” and the later statement that the government’s “most urgent task is to return our nation’s finances to a sustainable footing and bring sense to the profligacy and lack of planning that we inherited.”⁴⁰ Given the limited reference to economic security as a strategic goal in the SDSR, and the clear governmental prioritisation of a rapid reduction in the national deficit – more rapid than that advocated by other political parties during the 2010 general election campaign – this seemed to suggest less a pan-governmental strategic approach and more the traditional British approach to departmental budget-setting.⁴¹ Moreover, the circumscribed timescale for the SDSR had itself been determined by the government’s requirement that it be concluded in parallel with the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) and, to this end, the SDSR was led by a combination of Cabinet Office and Treasury.⁴² Moreover, reflecting the prevailing economic climate, while the SDSR was premised on Fox’s ‘2020’ timeframe, the overwhelming focus

³⁹ Ibid, p.6.

⁴⁰ Ibid, paras. 0.1 & 1.9.

⁴¹ These concerns were raised by both the PASC, *Who does National Strategy?* Paras. 61-63, and the Defence Committee, *The Strategic Defence and Security Review* (HC 345, London, TSO, September 2010), paras. 10-12. In the House of Commons debate on the SDSR, Chair of the PASC, Bernard Jenkin, explained that the PASC had found that: “Whitehall Departments each have their own version of strategy, with their own strategy units, but none of them knows what they are meant to contribute to national strategy, if they even knew what that was. That applies to the Treasury in particular. There is no doubt that the main strategic effort of this Government has to be deficit reduction, but I think that, as far as the Treasury is concerned, it is the Government's sole strategic effort. To have a sole strategic effort is strategic blindness, not strategy.” Hansard, 4th November 2010, col.1115.

⁴² Defence Committee, *The Strategic Defence and Security Review*, para. 12.

of the SDSR was the period to 2015 – i.e. the period of the CSR and the perceived needs of the Afghanistan campaign plus minimal additional requirements.

The question of Afghanistan also represented a strategic tension. On the one hand, the NSS offered a succinct and clear statement of Britain's strategic aims in Afghanistan as being, "to prevent Afghan territory from again being used by Al Qaeda as a secure base from which to plan attacks on the UK or our allies."⁴³ On the other hand, the future vision for Afghanistan was more characterised in terms of what it would not be than what it would be ("We want an Afghanistan that is not a threat to the UK or the international community."⁴⁴). This raised the question of the public declaration of a 2015 date for the withdrawal of British troops from a combat role in Afghanistan by Prime Minister David Cameron. How would progress towards the 2015 date be measured? What would happen if adequate progress had not been made as the date approached? What would be the effect of the announcement of a withdrawal date on the approach of insurgent forces? In a sense, this withdrawal date sat outside the strategic thinking that informed the NSS and SDSR, but the SDSR can be seen as having set the foundations for continued involvement in Afghanistan, with the possibility of change in 2015.

Unlike the NSSs produced by the previous Labour governments, the October 2010 NSS involved a National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA) which resulted in the identification of 15 categories of risk, prioritised across three tiers based on an assessment of their relative likelihood and relative impact. Reflecting the importance attached to Afghanistan, the first tier included international (and Irish) terrorism alongside: attacks on UK cyber space and large-scale cyber crime; major natural disasters requiring a national response; and an international military crisis between states into which the UK and its allies are drawn, and into which other states and non-state actors could also be drawn.⁴⁵ The range of threats – especially in the second and third tiers – together with the financial environment resulted in an emphasis on the importance of conflict prevention, and a highlighting of the importance of being able to identify risks at an early stage and so prevent them from developing into threats. As a consequence the government decided to focus all development aid on furthering British

⁴³ HM Government, *A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty*, para 1.2.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, Box p.13. This was also largely true of Cameron's treatment of Afghanistan in his November 2010 Lord Mayor's Banquet speech, in which he explained: "We are not there to build a perfect democracy, still less a model society. We are there to help Afghans take control of their security and ensure that Al Qaeda can never again pose a threat to us from Afghan soil." David Cameron, Speech to Lord Mayor's Banquet, 15th November 2010.

⁴⁵ HM Government, *A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty*, p.27.

security interests and, in line with implicit recommendations in the 2005 Butler Review, to improve the government's horizon scanning capability.⁴⁶ This had been undermined by the decision to remove the position, in 2010, of DCDS Commitments, the principal intelligence customer in the MoD, whose job was to provide a macro-level estimate and to ensure that the MoD was configured to effectively confront future threats. Some in the MoD use the example of Libya to demonstrate the fallacy of removing this post, and we understand that it is currently under review in the MoD, with the key debates being around whether the post is in uniform (as had always been the case) or as a civil servant.

The Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR)

The risks identified as Tier One via the NSS would determine the prioritisation of capabilities, which were set out in the SDSR – the balancing of ends, ways and means. How effectively the SDSR did this, and how far capabilities were driven by economic rather than strategic factors, is a question that came to dominate discussion of the SDSR, especially in light of the intervention in Libya.

In terms of force deployment, the SDSR set out a vision whereby in future the UK would be able to simultaneously conduct: one enduring stabilisation operation at brigade level (up to 6,500 personnel with maritime and air support (similar to, but at a lower level to, the 2010 Afghanistan commitment); one non-enduring complex intervention (of up to 2,000 personnel); and one non-enduring simple operation (of up to 1,000 personnel). Alternatively, it provided for three concurrent non-enduring operations (assuming no simultaneous enduring commitment – e.g. that UK troops had left Afghanistan by that point), or for a larger single intervention of up to three brigades with maritime and air support (at approximately 30,000 personnel, around two-thirds the number deployed to Iraq in 2003).⁴⁷

Another dimension of the 'means' part of the strategic equation related to procurement decisions which would facilitate such operations. To this end, the SDSR announced the immediate cancellation of the Nimrod MRA4 programme (a costly proposition given that it had not come into service, but was due to do so imminently), and the withdrawal of British forces from Germany by 2020 (contrary to popular belief, unlikely to generate savings for the

⁴⁶ Lord Butler, *Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction* (London, The Stationery Office, 2004), pp.11-14.

⁴⁷ HM Government, *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review* (Cm 7948, London, TSO, October 2010), para. 2.15.

MoD as it does not own the land it uses in Germany and, moreover, is liable for repairs to the land when it hands it back). At the same time, the SDSR unveiled plans to decommission the UK's existing aircraft carriers and Harrier aircraft while continuing with the procurement of the Queen Elizabeth-class aircraft carrier and procuring the carrier-variant of the Joint Strike Fighter.⁴⁸ This would provide a future carrier strike capability, but not until 2020. One carrier would be held in 'extended readiness' (i.e. mothballed)⁴⁹ or even sold,⁵⁰ a decision postponed until the 2015 SDSR when, presumably, it would be made in light of economic performance relative to Treasury predictions. If it were to be sold, continuous carrier strike capability would depend on agreement with France on carrier sharing or access.⁵¹

The SDSR had been clear that there was a "strategic requirement for a future carrier-strike capability", but at the same time could not "now foresee circumstances in which the UK would require the scale of strike capability previously planned",⁵² notwithstanding the overarching theme of uncertainty which informed the NSS and SDSR – and hence mandated a very different approach to the question of Trident. General Sir David Richards, Chief of the Defence Staff, conceded that the carrier decisions did represent both a risk and a trade-off in light of the demands of the commitment in Afghanistan, telling the Defence Committee in November 2010:

In our collective judgement, it is certainly a risk, but it is less of a risk than doing away with certain other capabilities... It is jolly nice to know that, by 2020...we will have carrier strike back. It is a hugely useful and big reassurance. But between now and 2020, particularly between now and 2015-16, looking at what our excellent intelligence services and our own analysis and defence intelligence tell us, and at our commitment to Afghanistan and the things from which that springs - namely extremist ideology - we

⁴⁸ The JSF was controversial because of the expensive re-fit to meet British specifications and the adaptation of the carrier for what many perceived to be the purpose of re-sale.

⁴⁹ As Chair of the Defence Committee, James Arbuthnot, explained to the House of Commons, "we all know that 'extended readiness' in Ministry of Defence-speak means exactly the reverse." Hansard, 4th November 2010, col.1094.

⁵⁰ HM Government, *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review*, p.23.

⁵¹ The SDSR did speak of an intention to, "intensify our security and defence relationship with France...and where possible, develop future military capabilities in complementary, cost-efficient ways." Ibid, para. 5.7.

⁵² Ibid, p.22.

can manage without the carrier. We need aircraft, but we know we can deliver aircraft from land-based options, such as airfields.⁵³

The Politics of the SDSR

Traditionally, in party political terms, defence has been a Conservative Party strength. Within Parliament defence experts were usually to be found on the Conservative benches. The party enjoyed the better links with defence professionals, some of whom routinely joined its number in the House of Lords upon retirement. Hence, expertise and institutional support were disproportionately concentrated in the Conservative Party, reflecting its self-image as the Party most committed to ‘strong defence’ and ‘standing up for Britain’. This image was reinforced during the 1980s by both the military campaign to recapture the Falklands/Malvinas Islands and the Labour Party’s formal adoption of a policy of unilateral nuclear disarmament in its 1983 general election manifesto. However, jettisoning the reputation for being ‘weak on defence’ that had contributed to Labour defeats in the 1983 and 1987 general elections, and was still being utilised as a weapon in the Conservative armoury in the 1992 general election, became a priority for Tony Blair as leader of the Labour Party.

Labour’s serial military interventions under Blair’s premiership also contributed to banishing the ghosts of Labour’s 1980s’ approach to defence. Now, Labour too had friends in the defence community (including in the defence industries), some of whom it promoted to its benches in the House of Lords. Greater expertise on defence could be found on Labour’s own benches in the House of Commons, which included former armed forces personnel. Under Blair, Labour’s advocacy of military interventionism presented the Conservative opposition with a dilemma. Unless it opposed the actual interventions it had little chance of creating clear blue water between itself and Labour. In relation to the Iraq war, this fact severely restricted the party’s ability to criticise and hold to account the Labour government, and the Prime Minister personally, when weapons of mass destruction were not found and the premise underpinning the war and the certainty with which it was expressed were exposed as being unfounded.

However, by 2010 the Labour Party had come full circle, and was once more largely discredited on defence. By this time, as a result of Labour’s commitment to a military

⁵³ Defence Committee, Minutes of Evidence Appointment of the Chief of the Defence Staff, 17th November 2010. *Witness*: General Sir David Richards KCB CBE DSO ADC Gen, Chief of the Defence Staff,

interventionist foreign policy, the armed forces were seriously overstretched: the operational costs of Britain's military commitments were increasingly challenging; senior retired military figures were speaking out in public⁵⁴, criticising the government for breaching the 'military covenant'⁵⁵ and for insufficient investment in defence; coroners' cases exposed equipment inadequacies which had been contributory factors in deaths⁵⁶; and the families of those killed or injured in Iraq and Afghanistan were vocal and critical and, provided a focus for opposition to Labour's military interventionism. In late 2009 and into 2010 a succession of witnesses to the Chilcot Inquiry into the Iraq War criticised the military preparation for it. The then Chancellor Gordon Brown was also criticised for seeking a "complete guillotine" of defence spending in December 2003, just nine months after the invasion.⁵⁷

The consequences of this were twofold. Firstly, the SDSR offered the Cameron coalition government the opportunity to unveil a strategic vision for defence in the next decade and so claim back defence as a Conservative strength. Secondly, the opposition to the SDSR was likely to be weak. The Conservatives' Lib Dem partners were locked in the coalition embrace, and so unable to give voice to the distinctive positions on defence outlined in their general election manifesto - e.g. ruling out a like-for-like replacement for Trident and cancelling tranche 3B of the Eurofighter programme.⁵⁸ The Labour Party was divided on the legacy of the Iraq and Afghanistan interventions, and on the implications of these for any future policy that advocated a central role for military intervention, whilst wanting to strongly defend its record in government. Controversies over adequacy of equipment and equipment shortages in Iraq and Afghanistan meant it could not easily claim to represent the interests of the armed forces in a debate largely characterised by questions of where and how far cuts should fall. The fact that Labour had initiated the commitment to Afghanistan, and increased it in scale, had the effect of largely depoliticising Afghanistan as a front bench political issue. With this tacitly parked to one side, except for the question of adequacy of equipment – in the past (for the Conservatives) and in the future (for Labour), the focus of party political debate was on the nature of the proposed cuts and hence just how 'strategic' the SDSR actually was.

⁵⁴ Nicola Boden, 'Brown admits defence budget did not rise every year', *Daily Mail*, 17th March 2010.

⁵⁵ Sean Rayment, 'Generals Enter Military Covenant Debate', *Daily Telegraph*, 25th November 2007.

⁵⁶ BBC News, 'Afghanistan Soldier Widow in plea to new government', 14th May 2010
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/8683751.stm>.

⁵⁷ James Sturcke & Patrick Wintour, 'Brown Accused of Cutting Defence Budget', *The Guardian*, 4th February 2010.

⁵⁸ Liberal Democrat Manifesto, *Change That Works for You: Building a Fairer Britain*, 2010, p.65.
http://network.libdems.org.uk/manifesto2010/libdem_manifesto_2010.pdf.

This debate was informed by the concerns expressed by Liam Fox in a letter sent to David Cameron on the eve of an NSC meeting to finalise the SDSR, and subsequently leaked to the *Daily Telegraph*. The focus of these concerns was both the direction of the review in absolute terms and also in relation to pre-election strategy documents. Fox expressed the view that:

Frankly this process is looking less and less defensible as a proper SDSR and more like a "super CSR". If it continues on its current trajectory it is likely to have grave political consequences for us, destroying much of the reputation and capital you, and we, have built up in recent years. Party, media, military and the international reaction will be brutal if we do not recognise the dangers and continue to push for such draconian cuts at a time when we are at war...I am concerned that we do not have a narrative that we can communicate clearly.⁵⁹

He concluded the letter by warning that: "It would be a great pity if, having championed the cause of our Armed Forces and set up the innovation of the NSC, we simply produced a cuts package. Cuts there will have to be. Coherence, we cannot do without, if there is to be any chance of a credible narrative."⁶⁰

The construction of a 'credible narrative' involved Cameron and Fox setting up several oppositionals during their presentation of the SDSR, via which they were able to contrast their handling of defence with that of the previous Labour government in order to reclaim 'strong on defence' territory:

Figure 1 - Narrative Points:

Conservative	Labour
Costed	Un-costed
Responsible	Irresponsible
Selective Intervention	Overstretch
Treat the causes of conflict	Deal with the consequences
Coherence	Mess

⁵⁹ Thomas Harding, 'Liam Fox: Defence Cuts Will Have 'Grave Consequences'', *Daily Telegraph*, 28th September 2010;

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

It also involved the securitisation of the economy to an extent not trailed in the NSS, as in Liam Fox's contention that: "If we learned anything from the cold war, it is that a strong economy equals strong defence. The economic legacy of the previous Government is a national security liability. We were left with a situation in which the country's finances were wrecked while the world is a more dangerous place than at any time in recent memory."⁶¹ This led on to the presentation of the SDSR as involving two stages, the first (2010-2015) which involved difficult choices whilst the legacy of the Labour government was dealt with, and the second (2015-2020) which would be "about regrowing capability and achieving our overall vision."⁶² Parliamentary opposition from the Labour benches was essentially limited to protests and lobbying relating to the implications for employment in particular constituencies. Indeed, some of the most effective questioning came from the Conservative benches – particularly the chairs of the Defence and Public Administration committees – James Arbuthnot and Bernard Jenkin respectively. Arbuthnot in particular occupied an interesting position in relation to the debate – Chair of a relatively powerful select committee whose business was defence, which had already published a report critical of the SDSR process, and in a climate in which the majority party governed from a position of relative weakness, being required to sustain a coalition with a party to which it had displayed a clear antipathy in that year's general election campaign if it was to continue governing with an overall parliamentary majority. Having described the SDSR process as "pretty much rubbish" and offered the view that the, "haste of this review meant that an opportunity to consult the wider public, defence academics, the defence industry and Parliament was missed",⁶³ he understood the SDSR in domestic political rather than solely strategic terms, explaining that:

My greatest concern about defence is that the British, and perhaps the European, public believe that defence is a job done and that the end of the cold war meant the end of the need to spend serious amounts of money on defending our interests. They think we can rely on the Americans to protect us, but they are wrong: the Americans will protect us only for as long as it is in their interests to do so. Until our constituents demand that we spend more on defence, no Chancellor of the Exchequer will wish to do so, but that will not happen until the public are properly engaged in talking about defence or until they

⁶¹ Hansard, 4th November 2010, col.1062, and Liam Fox, 'Strong Economy, Strong Defence, Strategic Reach – Protecting National Security in the 21st Century', Chatham House: London, 19 May 2011, http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/files/19334_190511fox.pdf

⁶² Hansard, 4th November 2010, col.1069.

⁶³ *Ibid*, col.1092.

understand its importance and purpose. If one conducts a defence review behind closed doors, while everyone is away on holiday and at a pace that would startle Michael Schumacher, no such understanding will arise.⁶⁴

Lost Over Libya

The core tensions between the SDSR and the UK's strategic posture were given even greater salience by events in Libya in early 2011. Did the vision outlined in the SDSR suggest that Britain would play the prominent role it did in relation to Libya, or did the intervention over Libya represent a deviation from that vision? What role did Britain aspire to play within the formal and informal international security architecture. This question is particularly pertinent to an era when the concept of failed or failing states and an emphasis on preventive interventions have combined to create an environment in which wars of choice rather than necessity are a key feature of security debates. In this environment, the extent to which the government views the UK as playing a lead role, or a supportive role, in these debates and interventions is a key strategic question. By no means all future scenarios arising from these considerations will represent a direct or discernible challenge to UK national security.

While the NSS did contain a reference to “occasions when it is in our interests to take part in humanitarian interventions”⁶⁵ (albeit not until Part Three) such interventions could hardly be said to have been presented as a priority or defining feature of Britain's foreign and security policy. Prior to the SDSR, the Cameron government had moved to position itself as opposed to the serial interventionism of the Labour era and offering a different approach, more rooted in a traditional Conservative outlook. This seemed to suggest an approach that bore some relationship to that adopted by Prime Minister John Major and Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd over the question of intervention in Bosnia in the mid-1990s. For example, in a September 2010 speech, *Britain's Values in a Networked World*, Foreign Secretary William Hague explained how:

We understand that idealism in foreign policy always needs to be tempered with realism. We have a liberal-conservative outlook that says that change, however desirable, can rarely be imposed on other countries, and that our ability to do so is likely to diminish with time. We know that we have to promote our values with conviction and determination but in ways that are suited to the grain of the other

⁶⁴ Ibid, col.1093.

⁶⁵ HM Government, *A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty*, para. 3.33.

societies we are dealing with, particularly in fragile or post-conflict states... Democracy cannot be imposed on other countries by ditkat or design. It was one of the many illusions of Communism that societies can be designed in the abstract and restarted at year zero. They cannot. Our own experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan should also teach us modesty in this regard...We should never turn a blind eye to countries which display the trappings of democracy while violating basic human rights, or that lay claim to the rule of law while lacking the independent courts and proper systems of accountability and transparency to prevent abuses of state power. But we do not have the option, unlike Gladstone or Palmerston, of dispatching gunboats and relying on the power of the British Empire.⁶⁶

Moreover, the entire emphasis in the NSS and SDSR on investing in conflict prevention was widely understood as being based on the fact that this was less costly than intervention, and that intervention would become increasingly rare for a combination of ideological and economic reasons. The logic of this view was that the threshold triggering a future humanitarian or other military intervention by the UK would be raised, and hence its occurrence would be far less frequent. Indeed, the SDSR explained that;

we will be more selective in our use of the Armed Forces, deploying them decisively at the right time but only where key UK national interests are at stake; where we have a clear strategic aim; where the likely political, economic and human costs are in proportion to the likely benefits; where we have a viable exit strategy; and where justifiable under international law.⁶⁷

In presenting the SDSR to Parliament, Cameron had emphasised the difference between it and previous reviews, one of which was the shift “from a strategy that is over-reliant on military intervention to a higher priority for conflict prevention.”⁶⁸ In short, under the coalition, military intervention would not look like either the Iraq or Afghanistan interventions of the New Labour era. In that strategy concerns making strategic choices, this could even be seen as one of the key strategic indicators to emerge from the SDSR process –

⁶⁶ William Hague, ‘Britain’s Values in a Networked World’, Speech delivered at Lincoln’s Inn, London, 15th September 2010, <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/news/latest-news/?view=News&id=22864405>.

⁶⁷ HM Government, *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty*, para. 2.10.

⁶⁸ Hansard, 19th October 2010, col.798. He went on to say that; “Iraq and Afghanistan have shown the immense financial and human costs of large scale military interventions, and although we must retain the ability to undertake such operations we must get better at treating the causes of instability, not just dealing with the consequences. When we fail to prevent conflict and have to resort to military intervention, the costs are always far higher.” Ibid.

that, in future, Britain's world role would be less characterised by a ready interventionism but instead by an emphasis on conflict prevention.

The Libyan intervention was clearly at odds with this logic, evident from the fact that the equipment best suited to undertake the Libyan operation had been taken out, or was being taken out, of service. As the First Sea Lord, Sir Mark Stanhope, conceded in June 2011, had the aircraft carrier *Ark Royal* not been mothballed it, together with its Harrier aircraft, would have been deployed in the Mediterranean.⁶⁹ Rather than fly Tornado aircraft from a base made available by Italy at Gioia del Colle, the cheaper, more reliable and faster option (both strategically and tactically) of deployment from carriers could have been utilised. Further illustrating the gap between the strategic vision contained within the SDSR and David Cameron's strategic vision as revealed over Libya, HMS *Cumberland* was diverted to the Mediterranean to take part in the operation whilst on its way back to the UK to be scrapped. Stanhope also expressed concern that, as a consequence of the SDSR, maintaining naval operations around Libya at the level of May-June 2011 would require "some challenging decisions about priorities" if the conflict dragged on over the summer.⁷⁰

Cameron's Libya commitment was a product of a strategic sense of Britain's role in the world that was absent as an identified driver of the SDSR, and was also absent from his own statements in presenting or explaining the SDSR. It was also absent from William Hague's more traditionally Conservative articulation of *Britain's Values in a Networked World*. This is why General Sir David Richards felt able to tell the Defence Committee that the country could "manage without the carrier" – because the kind of operations for which they would be required had not been accorded any prominence in the strategic review. For the equipment decisions that emerged from the SDSR to be so wide of the requirement generated by operations over Libya less than six months after the review requires some explanation. A number of possibilities suggest themselves. Firstly, that David Cameron suddenly chose to march outside the strategic understandings around which the SDSR was based – that is, Cameron himself undertook a sudden strategic shift that moved UK defence and security away from the premises of the SDSR. Secondly, that the SDSR was little more than a collection of separate, rather than joined-up and meaningfully prioritised, statements of broad

⁶⁹ Nick Hopkins, 'Libya Campaign Cannot be Kept at Current Level, Says Navy Chief', *The Guardian*, 14th June 2011. Cameron subsequently met with Stanhope, after which, Cameron told the House of Commons, Stanhope "agreed that we can sustain the mission for as long as we need to." Hansard, 15th June 2011, col.777.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

national interest designed to reassure the military, parliament and public that the forthcoming defence cuts were strategic rather than simply Treasury-led. The suspicion that they were not strategic was clearly articulated by the PASC and Defence Committee and their respective chairs throughout the SDSR process, and is reinforced by the case of Libya. Thirdly, that the Libya intervention was consistent with the strategy underpinning the SDSR given that it places such importance in the maintenance of the ‘special relationship’ with the US, as a consequence of which the government has a vested interest in making NATO clearly relevant in the 21st century. On this reading, apparently stepping outside the logic of the SDSR was consistent with the logic of the SDSR. This may have been the intent, but the performance of NATO without a US military lead, and perceptions of the commitment and capacities of individual member states, has served to raise questions about its future utility for the US rather than cement any US commitment to it.⁷¹ Ultimately, then, the SDSR may well contribute to a weakening of NATO – undermining rather than securing its own strategic goals. Hence, even on this reading, in its inability to balance ends, ways and means, the SDSR has been exposed as strategy-lite.

Conclusion: Balancing Ends, Ways and Means?

We want to conclude by considering further this question of the relationship between the SDSR and the UK’s strategically central relationship with the US. Hidden in the detail of the NSS, and in contrast to Prime Minister David Cameron’s public rejection of “this thesis of decline”, lies the recognition that Britain’s world role may be unavoidably changing and that while Britain may continue to work hard to punch above its weight, this may merely mitigate some of the effects of this change rather than prevent their occurrence, echoing a debate that has existed within British defence circles since 1946. In his 2010 Lord Mayor’s Banquet speech, Cameron had explained Britain’s national strengths by reference to the fact that:

We sit at the heart of the world’s most powerful institutions, from the G8 and the G20, to NATO, the Commonwealth, and the UN Security Council. We have a deep and close relationship with America. We are strong and active members of the European Union, the gateway to the world’s largest single market. Few countries on earth have

⁷¹ James Blitz, ‘Gates Salvo Spurs Allies to March in Step’, *Financial Times*, 11/12 June 2011.

this powerful combination of assets, and even fewer have the ability to make the best use of them.⁷²

At the same time, the NSS explained that:

The world of 2030 will be increasingly multipolar, with power distributed more widely than in the last two decades. The circle of international decision-making will be wider and potentially more multilateral. We are already seeing new systems of influence develop where countries share interests and goals which are outside the traditional international architecture.⁷³

The G8 had evolved into the G20, the rise of China, India, and Brazil raised a series of issues for the UK, the EU continued to evolve, and the UN Security Council faced calls for reform increasingly difficult to ignore on rational grounds. Such changes to the international order, coupled with another one – unstated in the NSS or SDSR – the relative decline of American power, meant that the SDSR represented an opportunity for sustained strategic thought to be given to Britain’s role in the world at an appropriate moment. As Julian Lindley-French told the PASC:

For the last 50 or 60 years, our penchant for balancing others has tended to lead us to seek common ground between the American worldview and the French-European view, to put it bluntly, but those pillars are changing. Those assumptions that we’ve had for 50 or 60 years about where our best national effort should be made to achieve the most likely security for our citizens are themselves in question. Right now, I would put the question as being, how does the United Kingdom cope with the relative American decline? We handed over from British power dominating the system to American power dominating the system. Now, the Americans do not dominate the system as they did.⁷⁴

He also pointed to the reality that; “we’re no longer the ally of first resort that we once were because of performance in Iraq and Afghanistan, and that because of our position financially, we may have to say no for other reasons.”⁷⁵ However, the NSS, and hence the SDSR, does not address this reality. The NSS reaffirms the relationship with the US as the UK’s most

⁷² David Cameron, Speech to Lord Mayor’s Banquet, 15th November 2010.

⁷³ HM Government, *A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty*, para 1.15.

⁷⁴ PASC, *Who does National Strategy?* Ev2 Q4.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, Ev2 Q17.

notable alliance and this was similarly reinforced by President Obama's visit the UK in May 2011.⁷⁶ In the SDSR "our pre-eminent defence and security relationship with the US" is listed as the first of the "five priorities for our international engagement that we have identified as essential to our future security."⁷⁷ This helps explain the government's role in Libya in 2011. As with the previous Labour government, the logic here is that the coalition government will have to work increasingly hard to prove its ongoing value to the US and maintain the 'special relationship' with the US. In the past the special relationship has, to a significant extent, been demonstrated by the country's ability and willingness to deploy force in pursuit of goals essentially defined in Washington (this has been true since the time of the 1950 Korean intervention and associated rearmament programme).⁷⁸ However, it now pursues this goal as a country with no aircraft carrier capability, a decision of symbolic and as well as military significance, and one that does not seem particularly strategic if a key goal is the maintenance of influence through a key role in NATO and propping up notions of an ongoing special relationship with the US.

Indeed, in light of the Libyan intervention, there seems relatively little separating the coalition's strategic approach to the world from that of the governments of Tony Blair or Gordon Brown: there is greater continuity than there is change. Indicative of this, in his 2010 Lord Mayor's speech, David Cameron characterised his government's foreign policy as being "one of hard-headed internationalism..[that] will focus like a laser on defending and advancing Britain's national interest."⁷⁹ Whether deliberately or not, this rather echoed the "hard-headed pragmatism" of which Tony Blair spoke as guiding his foreign policy in a keynote foreign policy speech in Texas in April 2002. Moreover, Gordon Brown had also termed his approach to foreign policy one of "hard-headed internationalism" in his 2007 Lord

⁷⁶ "Our relationship with the US will continue to be essential to delivering the security and prosperity we need and the US will remain the most powerful country in the world, economically and in military terms." HM Government, *A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty*, para.1.10. Later, it is described as being "central to our national interest." Ibid, para.2.11.; David Cameron, David Cameron and President Obama: An essential relationship, The Conservative Party: London, May 24 2011, http://www.conservatives.com/News/Articles/2011/05/David_Cameron_and_President_Obama_an_essential_relationship.aspx

⁷⁷ HM Government, *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review*, para. 5.2.

⁷⁸ See, for example, John Dumbrell, *A Special Relationship: Anglo-American Relations from the Cold War to Iraq* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, revised ed. 2006) and Mark Phythian, *The Labour Party, War and International Relations 1945-2006* (London, Routledge, 2007). The intelligence relationship is the other important pillar. See, for example, Richard J. Aldrich, *GCHQ: The Uncensored Story of Britain's Most Secret Intelligence Agency* (London, HarperPress, 2010).

⁷⁹ David Cameron, Speech to Lord Mayor's Banquet, 15th November 2010.

Mayor's Banquet speech.⁸⁰ Foreign Secretary David Miliband said that this 'hard-headed internationalism' would still have resulted in an invasion of Iraq had Brown been Prime Minister in 2003.⁸¹ In this respect, the SDSR was less a review and more a reaffirmation of an approach that locks Britain into a pattern of behaviour. In this sense, the SDSR might be seen as merely the latest indication that the Acheson dilemma, of defining a post-empire international role, continues to haunt UK defence policymakers.

This also helps explain why, despite the NSS and SDSR articulating a vision of a shift to conflict prevention (typified by the July 2011 cross-department initiative called Building Stability Overseas Strategy)⁸², there remains such a strong emphasis on conventional military capabilities. Given the emphasis on conflict prevention in the NSS it might well be asked why the UK needs a carrier capability at all, let alone a continuous carrier strike capability. In effect, the inclusion of the need to counter an "international military crisis between states that draws in Britain, its allies and other state and non-state actors" as the last of the Tier One risks in the NSS is necessary, as it reflects the lead role Britain seeks to retain in NATO and in EU foreign and defence policy-making, as well as its need to continue to attempt to prove itself a reliable ally to the US. In practice, this is likely to retain a greater prominence than the NSS suggests. However, it does undermine any notion that conflict prevention is likely to come to define Britain's grand strategy in the coming years.⁸³ Moreover, the trade-off between long-term defence requirements and short-term economic priorities inevitably results in a strategic disjuncture. As James Arbuthnot noted; "the thrust of [the SDSR] seems to be that we shall be gambling our security in the short term in exchange for its enhancement in the longer term. That is preferable to the reverse, provided that we always have at the front of our minds the need not to fail in Afghanistan."⁸⁴ Hence, while the SDSR was presented as an innovative recasting of defence policy its continuities are its most significant characteristic. Through it the iterative recasting of British defence continues on, with only its bureaucratic underpinnings being subject to radical review. It represents a missed opportunity for a genuinely strategic approach to British defence and security.

⁸⁰ <http://www.acronym.org.uk/dd/dd86/86uk.htm#brown>.

⁸¹ Colin Brown, 'Miliband: We Would Still Have Invaded Iraq with Gordon Brown in Command', *The Independent*, 14 November 2007.

⁸² Department for International Development, Ministry of Defence, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, *Building Stability Overseas Strategy*, The Stationary Office: London, 2011.

⁸³ On this, see also Michael Clarke, 'Defence Review: Can Britain still pack a punch?' *Daily Telegraph*, 19th October 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/defence/8074920/Defence-review-Can-Britain-still-pack-a-punch.html>.

⁸⁴ Hansard, 4th November 2010, col.1093.

