



INTERVIEWS

This section of the *Journal* features interviews with Kenton White, Lecturer, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Reading, UK; and David Lonsdale, Senior Lecturer in War Studies and Director Postgraduate Taught Programmes, Hull University, UK. The interviewees offer their perspectives on the recently released *UK Strategic Defense Review*, and place this *Review* in the context of similar such efforts over the past several years. While the document contributes to the public debate about the British government's defense spending, it remains to be seen whether the government will be able to provide the necessary funding to deliver capabilities the *Review* proposes.

An Interview with Kenton White, Lecturer, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Reading, UK

Q. What is the significance of the UK Strategic Defense Review?

A. The Strategic Defense Reviews in the past articulated new defense policies or reconfirmed old policies, and they used to be done annually during the Cold War. It is a political device, rather than a military statement. The most recent version focuses on how we integrate defense concepts into everyday functioning of the state. It is also a document that justifies the defense spending.

The Strategic Defense Review is a tool for explaining to the public where the money has been spent. After the end of the Cold War, we invested the peace dividend into welfare, and now government has to justify domestic spending cuts to invest in defense. The current government announced a defense spending increase, although it is a bit vague on where this spending will come from. The idea that the United Kingdom will spend 3 percent of GDP on defense by the next Parliament, if it at all happens, is laughable in the context of the government saying it intends to be moving toward a warfighting posture. We should be spending 3-5 percent of GDP on defense already.

Overall, the Strategic Defense Review is an anodyne document that does not say much. It talks about technology, and reads more like a business plan than a document explaining defense of the country.

Q. In your opinion, what is the greatest obstacle to the implementation of recommendations outlined in the document? How likely is the British government to overcome it?

A. Money is the greatest obstacle, and a lack of a public understanding regarding the need for defense is another obstacle. Of course, it is hard for a government to get the public to understand why resources should be spent on something intangible like defense, which doesn't immediately benefit them, at least not in a way that funding for retirement or schools



or hospitals does. Today, the United Kingdom has too few tanks, no real capability, and a diminished Navy, which is a bad place to be for an island nation. This Strategic Defense Review facilitated interactions with members of the public. The document can help to raise awareness of these issues and of defense's profile in public discourse, but it is not clear to me it would be enough.

Q. In several instances, e.g. when discussing the need to adapt technological innovations for defense purposes quickly, the document calls for a “fundamental” transformation. In practice, fundamental transformations are extremely difficult to achieve in peacetime. What would it take to achieve these aspirations?

A. The use of the word “fundamental” is a prime example of the academia and business worlds impinging on defense. We do not need to transform defense, we want the armed forces to defend and protect us. To do that, we need people, machines, and technology; but technology alone does not win battles. These “fundamental” transformations are useful politics, because they are difficult to measure and provide nice sounding talking points, unlike let's say whether a government fielded 500 tanks or 100 jets, which would be imminently measurable.

These new terms are missing what the military is for. The natural habitat of the armed forces is war. The fundamental requirement for the armed forces is to be able to fight war, and if we do not have the capability to do that, technology does not matter. It is no good to have a great military cyber system if we run out of munitions on day 3. The government's statements that the United Kingdom has a warfighting posture is nonsense if factories cannot turn out equipment, and no amount of technology can fix that. We want the capability and flexibility to counter adversaries. So far, we have been failing to plan for a long-term threat.

Q. Where do you see the main benefit of publishing a document like the Strategic Defense Review? Is it worth the effort?

A. The Strategic Defense Review is a useful public relations exercise, and is a part of preparing the public for the necessary cuts in domestic spending to increase defense spending. The review is designed to justify the politicians' expected decisions, but flexible enough to accommodate future changes.

I am skeptical the review was worth the effort, partly because its objectives cannot be measured. For example, the document says several times that the United Kingdom will build “up to” 10 new attack submarines. So, if the government builds a 0.3 submarine, we are winning, right? Language like that obscures the real issues, e.g. a lack of spare parts for the Typhoon aircraft.

Q. The threat section describing the main adversaries the UK faces is fairly short. Is it because there is such a societal consensus that it does not need explaining, or because the consensus is not particularly robust?

A. The understanding that Russia is a threat is reasonably robust. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, particularly the full-scale invasion, shows that Russia cannot be trusted. The China threat is different, because the government is trying to maintain a trade relationship with China. The United Kingdom is too dependent on trade with China that it cannot disengage. We even rely on China for parts in our weapon systems! What kind of nation relies on components for its weapons on a potential adversary?

Then we have Iran and the Middle East. There is a perception that countries in the Middle East are victims of Western Europe. Immigration from the region, including anti-Israeli sentiments, possibly shapes UK's domestic politics. We are looking at almost a sliding scale of robustness in terms of threat perceptions, from Russia to China to Iran and the Middle East.

Q. Where is U.S.-UK defense cooperation headed based on your reading of the document?

A. The change in the U.S. administration has brought U.S.-UK relations into a sharp focus. The United Kingdom wants to hold onto the special relationship, and benefits from it more than the United States. We plan on fighting alongside our most important ally. UK forces are interoperable with U.S. forces.

The government is walking a tight rope in the document. On one hand, there is an endorsement of the United States. On the other we do not want to say we fully depend on it because it makes us look weak. So far, we have not heard an unequivocal endorsement of the special relationship from the United States. With regard to extended nuclear deterrence, the gap between the United States and the UK has widened and we have not fully trusted the United States perhaps since the 1961 Cuban missile crisis.

Q. The 2021 Integrated Review recommended that the UK should move to an overall nuclear weapon stockpile of no more than 260 warheads, an increase from no more than 225. Although the nuclear threat has arguably increased since then, the UK Strategic Defense Review is rather silent on this issue and specific steps the UK plans on taking to strengthen deterrence. Why?

Ambiguity has been the cornerstone of the UK policy. Nuclear deterrence is a very low-profile issue. People view nuclear deterrence generally poorly in this country, or rather they are happy to not think about it at all.

An Interview with David Lonsdale, Senior Lecturer in War Studies and Director Postgraduate Taught Programmes, Hull University, UK

Q. What is the significance of the UK Strategic Defense Review?

I am trying to be optimistic, but this is the third review in about four years, so there is a degree of a review fatigue and a catchy phrase fatigue. The Strategic Defense Review gives insight into the government's thinking in terms of geostrategic outlook (procurement strategy, sense of balance among services). The problem is that the government always seems surprised that the world changes, and is in a sense enamored with change. I just do not believe that, and I do not think that challenges are constantly worth reviewing. Take for example the language on warfighting readiness. Are we to assume we were not ready before? And if so, why is that not concerning? History tells us that the militaries are never ready. The Strategic Defense Review's focus on defense industry procurement is significant, but procurement seems to have been under review on and off for years, so why should we assume that this one will lead to a great step forward?

Q. In your opinion, what is the greatest obstacle to the implementation of recommendations outlined in the document? How likely is the British government to overcome it?

Funding and implementation. The three percent of GDP on defense is aspirational and subject to economic and fiscal conditions. This will be an important issue. The current government is unpopular and seems unable to implement policies, including regarding immigration, an increasingly more salient issue for an average voter. The government seems to be constantly reacting, so it is quite possible that the document will be obsolete by events sooner rather than later in today's review culture.

Q. In several instances, e.g. when discussing the need to adapt technological innovations for defense purposes quickly, the document calls for a "fundamental" transformation. In practice, fundamental transformations are extremely difficult to achieve in peacetime. What would it take to achieve these aspirations?

A. I am not sure this can be achieved at all without massive investments that we are unwilling to make for the time being. It is also worth keeping in mind that technologies do not win wars. They are important enablers, but it seems to me we are relying on technologies too much. How much should one transform, given that the newest and "shiniest" is not always the best? Additionally, while doing things quickly is important, it is yet more important to do them right. The need to be transformational just by itself is problematic. Transformation

requires a system that tolerates failure, wacky ideas, and culture of experimentation. We do not seem to have the budget, manpower, and materiel to support such a system right now.

Q. Where do you see the main benefit of publishing a document like the Strategic Defense Review? Is it worth the effort?

A. There is such a thing as too many reviews too often, so it is hard to get excited about this current iteration. UK institutions have gotten really good at writing these kinds of documents, but many of the terms are vacuous. For example, what does it mean when we say that the Army will be ten times more lethal? Like most things, lethality is contextual. There are so many aspirations that we have had before. It seems to me that the focus on technology is perhaps overly enthusiastic.

There are some significant points in the current review, e.g. the “NATO First” idea and the emphasis on the importance of the Euro-Atlantic region. U.S. policy seems to be shifting away from Europe, so the government’s emphasis on NATO seems significant. Similarly important is the document’s focus on industry procurement, but we have known for a while that our defense industrial base might struggle to mass produce many systems with which we fight.

Q. The threat section describing the main adversaries the UK faces is fairly short. Is it because there is such a societal consensus that it does not need explaining, or because the consensus is not particularly robust?

A. The review engaged with the public. The document itself has launched a national conversation about funding priorities that the government needs to have. In the UK, it would be difficult to find many people who think that Russia and China are direct threats to them. There does not seem to be a consensus on the threat between the government and the public. The public is more interested in national security implications of illegal immigration than Russian or Chinese threats and the debate is just not happening. On the government level, the threat is somewhat established with regard to Russia, China, and North Korea.

Q. Where is U.S.-UK defense cooperation headed based on your reading of the document?

A. The document is very standard with regard to U.S.-UK defense cooperation. The United States is the UK’s closest security ally. The document notices the shift in U.S. attention to the Indo-Pacific region. The UK does not have forces that would be capable of operating globally on any significant scale. European security would be very difficult to manage without the United States, but perhaps the emphasis on NATO and the Euro-Atlantic area indicates an acknowledgement that Britain’s capabilities are increasingly limited.

Q. The 2021 Integrated Review recommended that the UK should move to an overall nuclear weapon stockpile of no more than 260 warheads, an increase from no more than

225. Although the nuclear threat has arguably increased since then, the UK Strategic Defense Review is rather silent on this issue and specific steps the UK plans on taking to strengthen deterrence. Why?

A. This question is difficult to answer, because the review lacks details. We get “enhanced UK participation in NATO’s nuclear mission,” but it is not clear what it means. Perhaps the wording is an indication of a debate about whether we need to diversify nuclear capabilities. The Labour Party has a tradition of being somewhat cooler on nuclear weapons and perhaps does not want to lean forward too much. That being said, the government has just announced the purchase of 12 F35-As, which will be nuclear capable.