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# Strategic Defence Review 2025: Rebalancing UK Armed Forces

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In recent years the UK's armed forces have become grudgingly familiar with the effects of ever-tightening constraints in public finances – direct cutbacks in some areas, calls for so-called 'efficiency savings' in others. Yet these same armed forces have not been immune from a steady decline in global security and stability and are expected to cope with an ever-widening set of conflict scenarios and crises. As the UK Strategic Defence Review (SDR) team set about determining national security and defence policy over the coming months they will, doubtless, be seeking to define the most (strategically) effective and (financially) efficient military force posture. And a large part of that effort, surely, will be to establish what capabilities will be most useful in deterring the UK's adversaries. The part played by naval forces in this combined defence/deterrence force posture will be important to consider. Naval forces are very well regarded by the public and are often portrayed as symbols of UK strength and vigour. But they are also hugely capital intensive, cannot be replaced quickly or easily, are not optimised for homeland defence (nor for that of the overseas territories) and arguably have only limited utility in deterring adversaries. If value is defined as the ratio of function to cost, then the relative value of the UK's current naval force structure needs clear-headed analysis rather than passionate evangelism.

The UK is an island nation, surrounded by the sea, and dependent on maritime trade for nearly 90% of goods (by weight not value). The undersea infrastructure (i.e., cables and pipelines) has also become a critical enabler for modern life.

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**“[I]t is essential that our long-held notions about the purpose and value of our armed forces are tested against the contemporary world.”**

Our sea lines of communication provide the food, fuel and raw materials on which we depend as an economy and a society, as well as providing our connectivity for the nation’s digital infrastructure. *Ergo* a navy is a prerequisite to national survival.

Or so the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century navalist logic runs.

As the SDR team go about their work, determining the new government’s outlook on national security and defence, and deciding the size and shape of the armed forces for the next decade or so, it is essential that our long-held notions about the purpose and value of our armed forces are tested against the contemporary world (and the one likely to emerge from the battlefields of the 2020s). Consideration should also be given to the undeniable reality that the UK has neither the financial nor the political and diplomatic clout it once had. The UK’s strategic outlook must, necessarily, be more constrained. But it can also be cleverer. Strategic cleverness lies in the realisation that a large part of the value of the UK’s reduced (and reducing) military posture lies in its retaining sufficient credibility to deliver deterrence against a host of adversaries.



The 21st century has so far provided abundant evidence of the in-built tendency for warfare to evolve, just as it has demonstrated the unavoidable case for deterrence to be a standard component of defence thinking. But unlike their counterparts on land or in the air (and perhaps even in cyber and space), western navies – their strategy, their thinking, and the force design of their fighting fleets – have not reflected these decisive shifts in our understanding of the purpose of war and the practice of warfare. And neither do those who persist in the argument that naval forces should be at the centre of UK defence strategy. As Talleyrand once said of the Bourbons, “they have learnt nothing and forgotten nothing.”

It has long been claimed that the UK has a fundamental, non-discretionary responsibility for policing the seas. As the argument goes: if the Royal Navy does not secure these global commons, then who will? But today, as we enter the second quarter of the 21st century, in the distinctively post-expeditionary era of British national security policy, this claim has become embarrassingly threadbare. There is now little evidence that these most capital-intensive capabilities (warships, submarines, aircraft and support vessels) have more strategic value than other aspects of military power. By ‘strategic value’ we mean the deterrence of adversaries through the possession of credible hard power, rather than simply the promotion of British soft power. The credibility of the UK’s military posture is judged both by the UK’s adversaries (actual and potential) and by its allies.

## “[T]he UK has a fundamental, non-discretionary responsibility for policing the seas”



It is – or ought to be – significant that the UK’s most important ally feels more concern about the UK’s military capabilities on the land and in the air than about the UK’s ability (or otherwise) to deploy 12 F35s on a piece of sovereign territory into the Indo-Pacific.

Arguments made over previous generations about the relative utility for the UK of navies versus armies have largely been debunked. Together with air power (and, latterly, cyber power and space power), these tools of war and statecraft are mutually reinforcing rather than exclusive, as many now accept. And if deterrence is a strategic priority, then it should by now be clear that the UK’s naval forces cannot be relied upon to provide a convincing buffer against potential foes. History has shown that a powerful naval fleet has not deterred the UK’s adversaries from taking action. Neither are the UK’s enemies unpicked by the application of precise and devastating fire from the sea; a claim as false today as it was in the 19th century – the lack of impact of the naval force deployment on the Houthis in Yemen is a contemporary case in point.

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NETWORKS

The absurdly zero-sum, 'either/or' arguments for naval versus land forces have re-emerged recently in commentaries seeking to influence the outcome of the forthcoming SDR. But too little has been said about the need for both; about the critical need for coherent and complementary sea and land capabilities to meet crisis and conflict in years to come. If, as we argue, both naval and land power (as well as air, cyber and space power) are required, and if budgets do not change, then UK defence debate will need to become much more nuanced and much more output-oriented. Rather than reminisce about the exclusivity or 'sovereignty' that stand-alone options might in the past have been thought to provide, the forward-looking SDR will need to produce a credible, coherent and unified national military posture, seeking the optimal (yet adaptable) arrangement of the various parts and capabilities of this posture. The SDR should also be explicit as to the cost and value of each and every one of these components in a national security policy that prioritises two things: deterrence and NATO. Above all, the SDR will need to acknowledge, even if only tacitly, that there has recently been something of a gap between policy rhetoric and strategic reality. An aircraft carrier off Libya in 2011 would not have made a difference to the current state of affairs in North Africa. The UK's amphibious capability (as currently conceived) would not have deterred Russia from invading Georgia (2008), nor from landing in the Crimea (2014), nor from acting in Syria (2014). And nor will it deter China from further actions in the South China Sea or from invading Taiwan.

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**“[T]here has recently been something of a gap between policy rhetoric and strategic reality.”**

And salutary though it might be, the SDR might also accept that Iran could very well prefer to attack a Royal Navy capital ship in the Persian Gulf rather than an equally prestigious US Navy warship: Iran might calculate that there would be less risk of devastating retaliation from any remaining UK ‘sovereign’ force.

That is not to say that the British naval force structure is doing nothing. It is being ‘sweated’ in a manner that is simply not sustainable. Yet it is also underperforming. This should be attributed not to the sailors but to myriad factors and micro-decisions made by successive chiefs and ministers about how the force is sustained, maintained and employed. Funding is a key part of this but so too is the coherence of the force structure.

The UK’s two aircraft carriers lie at the heart of this conundrum. As envisaged in the laudable Robertson Strategic Defence Review of 1998, a balanced Royal Navy fleet was to possess two aircraft carriers, 32 (later 30) surface combatants (destroyers or frigates), ten nuclear hunter-killer attack submarines, four Trident ballistic missile submarines, a recapitalised amphibious fleet to deploy 3 Commando Brigade, and the requisite enabling capabilities from a sophisticated mine hunting and sustainment flotilla.



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# Strategic Defence Review 2025: Rebalancing UK Armed Forces

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NETWORKS

It was a very balanced force design that would have provided the UK with options to act – alone if necessary – in an expeditionary fashion, with the ability to deploy, sustain, influence and fight far from home waters, with a force of 5,000 light infantry (Royal Marines) supported by fast air (fighters, bombers and reconnaissance) and aviation (helicopters), land attack missiles, naval gunfire, networked communications, and strategic enablers, all protected by an integrated system of sensors, weapons and platforms that could repel even the most determined and sophisticated attack. But cost inflation in the acquisition of the aircraft carriers taxed the MoD budget severely for more than two decades and required military and naval leaders to make cuts across to every other aspect of the naval force in order to make up the capital costs. The result of those decisions is a fleet utterly out of balance. Moreover, it is also a fleet structure that is largely out of touch with current priorities in Whitehall and largely lacking the capability and credibility to deter and, if necessary, fight adversaries.

The lessons from contemporary conflict make these two huge platforms look more like attractive targets than critical national assets. If the forthcoming SDR is concerned about the strategic future then the UK would arguably be better served by a combination of more *working* nuclear attack submarines and another two army divisions than either carrier. Aircraft carriers do have utility but only when they are appropriately equipped, maintained, protected and supported: the Royal Navy does not now possess the means to do any of these things, making the argument about the ‘sovereign’ capability they provide somewhat spurious.

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# Strategic Defence Review 2025: Rebalancing UK Armed Forces

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Questions should also be asked about the current state of the UK amphibious forces. In terms of capital cost, this formation could well be the most expensive conventional capability that the UK possesses. The Royal Marines no longer envisage deploying or fighting as a brigade sized structure (what some strategic analysts consider is required between now and 2040), preferring instead to consider themselves as a collection of small fighting elements while still maintaining the ships and skills necessary to reconstitute over time for different tasks. Currently (2024) structured as a force suitable for the national security challenges for the 2010s, this brigade has dwindling utility to NATO and neither is it capable of acting independently in any form of contested amphibious battlespace.

If the UK's naval force is out of balance, so too are the arguments about its relative importance. The Royal Navy is indeed busy but does all this activity represent value-for-money in terms of deterring adversaries? As a set of discrete capabilities, some elements of the current force structure do have enormous influence on the calculations of adversaries that could not be done better in another form: the sheer power and latent threat from the Trident/Dreadnought ballistic missile submarine fleet; the unseen menace and danger presented by nuclear hunter-killer submarines; the nascent but critical mine hunting capability; the unique protection envelope for air defence capability provided by the Type 45 Daring-class destroyers; and the sustainment assets of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary all provide significant utility to allies and coalition partners, and play a vital role in deterring adversaries from seeking to dominate European and Atlantic waters.

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The remaining force structure is less compelling against adversaries. Does an aircraft carrier or a defunct amphibious force with limited air and aviation assets really deter adversaries from acting against the UK or its allies? How do Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, or even Syria, the Houthis, or trans-national organised crime groups really view these diminished and diminishing assets? Does the presence of a nuclear submarine have more influence on their decision making and perceptions of deterrence than an aircraft carrier? Would a new armoured division have even greater impact than a mothballed and uncrewed amphibious flotilla?

If the UK cannot afford a balanced set of military capabilities (and an increase in the UK defence budget to 3% GDP would not allow for that, even with the MoD's renowned optimism bias), then the SDR must produce a strategic outlook that is, at least, honest. UK national strategy can no longer be based on legacy thinking; presumptions of success; a false interpretation of history (or indeed of current conflicts); a doctrine of technological supremacy; or unproven arguments concerning, *inter alia*, the value of soft power and the influence that might result from potential defence sales. A clear head is required to make decisions based on the deterrence value of platforms and their survivability (or ability to be replaced) in modern combat operations. Against these arguments, it is hard to see how either the UK's carrier strike force, or its amphibious capability, provide convincing value to the UK or its Allies.

# Strategic Defence Review 2025: Rebalancing UK Armed Forces

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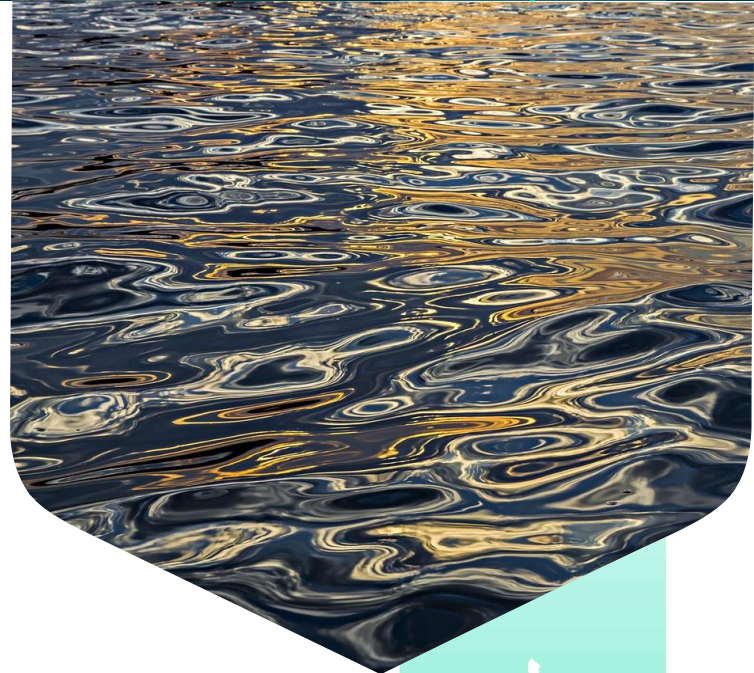
As part of a coalition or alliance (i.e., NATO), some of these capabilities could be extremely valuable. But when the primary driver of national security and defence is the need to deter actors closer to home (Russia and Iran amongst others), does a force designed for expeditionary warfare in the Indo-Pacific make strategic sense and does it provide the options that politicians will require for the 21st Century?

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## Get in touch

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