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UK defence review 2025: Plus ça change?

Professor Paul Cornish
Professor Peter Roberts

Policy @ Exeter



The Labour Party's arrival in power after the next election would herald yet another defence and security review. The rumours of a year-long process providing (another) full and complete, root and branch review will leave the national security apparatus in a vacuum for nigh on two years. Indeed, the vacuum has already begun to work, sucking oxygen out of UK defence policy and planning. And since those drafting the next review are the same people who constructed the previous two iterations, how much real change is likely? Is yet another set of oxygen-starved 'transformations', change programmes, and tweaks to the procurement process going to achieve anything useful? But perhaps the more important question, given the state of the world and the maturity and complexity of the threat landscape we are facing, is whether we have 12 months to spare before some very large decisions will be forced upon us?

There is a general acceptance across the national security communities in Western capitals that the world is becoming an increasingly dangerous place; it is an identifiable and evidenced trend that has been obvious since early in the 2010s. Previous UK defence and security reviews picked up on this late, in 2021 to be precise, and gambled on placing technology as the foundation stone that could guarantee Western survival. Understanding that adversaries had invested more, earlier and with greater direction and focus into the same areas of technological advancement makes this a peculiar decision – but, perversely, one that no UK defence secretary in the last 25 years has doubted.

Political rhetoric in the UK seems to acknowledge the idea of a more dangerous and lethal world yet UK national security policy finds itself treading a difficult line between accepting that fundamental change is occurring while insisting that a reversion to a status quo ante world (the desired political end state) remains possible. The thinking seems to be that, in the end, the world will return, with a sigh of relief, to the professed 'rules-based international order' (or 'system') that has suited the West for decades. The notion that change is somehow discretionary and probably benign is not solely a Western assumption, however: from Chinese ideas of 'manifest destiny', and Russian aspirations for a revanchist federation of aligned states, to economists and sooth-sayers at the Davos summit, it seems a homogenous reaction from policy makers and others to welcome change only if it supports their particular view of societal wealth (psychological, cultural as well as financial) and advantage.

In chasing the vision of a 1990s post-Cold War world of trade opportunity and economic growth, politicians across the world have combined fiscal austerity in military spending with a fixation upon, and occasional investments, in technology and innovation. The expectation has been that a 'silver bullet' will emerge that will provide fewer people with greater lethality.

This highly efficient, eye-catchingly modern approach to obsolescent problems of security and defence will then, it has been supposed, deter the West's adversaries from challenging the Westphalian idea of an international system of sovereign states sharing a common set of rules – an idea, incidentally, that is accepted by only some 15% of the world's population, whose governments happen also to be those imposing sanctions on Russia.

Misconceptions abound among political and military leaders about how deterrence can be achieved (and reinstated after it has objectively failed) as well as in areas such as the democratisation of sophisticated weapons and technology, the ways wars are being fought, the spread of conflict, and in the ideological and philosophical drivers of conflict. The assumptions being made about what can be achieved with fewer, more technologically advanced military forces, being 'smarter' about where and when to employ them, and what lessons can be drawn from contemporary conflict simply do not add up. It has long been understood that the tactical utility of military mass (ships, battalions, aircraft) can be 'multiplied' by the introduction of technology (new weapons, equipment, communications etc). But we seem now to have been seduced by the idea that technology might not be a multiplier of military mass but a substitute for it.

And so we come to our present condition, where politicians and military officers are no longer able to match words and ideas with fiscal realities, with technological possibilities and with society's understanding of, and preparedness for conflict in such a way that is not only coherent but might actually be militarily effective.

In terms of national power (whether military or political), influence, intelligence and deterrence, the stark outcome is that the UK has become successively weaker as an actor with each policy review undertaken by governments of both varieties since at least the 1957 'Sandys Review', if not earlier. Despite political assurances given to the contrary, post war governments have actively sought to cut defence spending in a misguided belief that it is wasted money and that a strategic holiday can be taken.

We should not expect a fresh, new strategic direction in 2025 simply because the incumbent government will by then have woken up to the threats the UK faces. Other fiscal priorities will, as ever, take precedence and spending on defence and security will be expressed in unintelligent binary terms (tanks versus schools, ships versus hospitals). Government, of whatever complexion, will also remain nervous about spending on military capabilities or people given that the entanglements in Iraq and Afghanistan sullied the idea of military engagements by British forces.



All that said, events might force a change in UK policy and strategy during the next government's first year in office. Rumours already abound that a second presidential term for Donald Trump would see an ultimatum presented to all European allies: increase defence spending to 4% of GDP with immediate effect or do not expect US security guarantees to continue. Given the frequently declared centrality of the 'special relationship' to London, it is entirely possible that the US election result could force change on Britain's defence policy paradigm more significantly than any 'full-spectrum' examination of the nation's security.

Get in touch

Professor Paul Cornish | [P.N.Cornish \[at\] exeter.ac.uk](mailto:P.N.Cornish@exeter.ac.uk)

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