

## **Written evidence from Professor Patrick Porter, University of Exeter (NSS0002)**

In this submission, I will address the following issue:

*The extent to which the NSS & SDSR 2015 is founded on a realistic assessment of the UK's future goals, position in the world and uncertain future relationships with international organisations and nation states.*

### **Summary**

- 1) The National Security Strategy (NSS) and Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) of 2015 suffers from the constraints of 'public strategy', yet should be credited with making important strides in identifying risks created by a deteriorating security environment, and addressing gaps between the UK's power and its commitments.
- 2) The review also has flaws. These are: a misplaced confidence in Western capacity to act preventively and pursue 'anticipatory' security; under-recognition of the trade-offs between the pursuit of a stable governing 'order' and the revolutionary ambition to be a 'force for good'; a degree of wishful thinking, manifested in insufficient attention to volatile regions where the UK has security interests, Afghanistan-Pakistan and NATO's 'eastern flank'; and an unbalanced, overly 'commercial' conception of its relationship with China.
- 3) The process of strategic review should build in measures designed to prevent restating untested assumptions and check against wishful thinking, while also including a classified component to provide more specific guidance.

### **Part 1: NSS & SDSR 2015**

The making of an official, published British strategy is partly a response to a widespread anxiety, echoed in successive parliamentary reports, that the UK has not made strategy well. It is also part of a relatively recent international trend that has been adopted by states as various as Singapore, Russia and France. The practice of articulating strategy formally and publicly was originally an American innovation, developed in the wake of the Vietnam War (and other disappointments) as a mandated exercise to force regular review and accountability.

The public, democratic quality of today's national security strategy creates difficulties. Historically, strategy is covert and adversarial. Done 'out in the open', there are powerful incentives to make such documents bland, omit details and offer general rhetoric about the state's mission rather than a rigorous means-ends calculus. As a statement of the country's identity, a general manifesto risks being a 'signalling' vision rather than 'strategic' document. At worst, in the words of Professor Eliot Cohen, such documents are the 'vapid products of committees.' We cannot expect too much of such documents.

Nevertheless, institutionalised strategy and the new pattern of a quinquennial strategic review remains a more promising approach than merely 'muddling through.'

Just as important as the formally articulated strategy is the wider process of analysis that creates it. Done self-critically, with assumption-testing built in (a subject I discuss in Part III below), the process helps by posing longer-term questions to officials who are normally absorbed in day-to-day governing. It prompts valuable debate about the balance between resources and goals, and the underlying rationale for the country's behaviour. It helps government define and rank interests, measure problems and align interests with capabilities, frequently enough for re-calibration. While government's ability to forecast is limited, a rigorous review provides a coherent framework through which to interpret and respond to the unexpected.

The UK NSS and SDSR compare favourably with the US *National Security Strategy* of 2015. It strikes a better balance between general statements and specific direction. The US document, like most of its forerunners, is a 'dog's dinner of goals.' It gives little guide to the relation between means and ends, and is more of a theological statement of the country's national mission and 'global leadership' than a guide to actual choices, or the alignment of means with ends.

The NSS and SDSR of 2015 should be credited with making important strides in identifying and weighing risks, and addressing gaps between the UK's power and its commitments. It rebuilds capabilities that have been eroded. To address the UK's depleted capacity for diplomatic insight and early warning, it extends country expertise to areas salient to British security interests, including language ability in Mandarin and Arabic, and rebuilding expertise on Russia.

On the military front, SDSR helps Britain adjust away from an era of protracted, intensive, and unsustainable armed nation-building efforts, and towards an era of raiding and disruption. The investments that match SDSR 2015 at least give the United Kingdom the ability to contain and limit threats from afar, enabled by strengthened security and intelligence agencies, to buy time for local parties to restore order. The move to a 'raiding' posture also informs the formation of new, more mobile 'strike brigades' designed to be deployable at high tempo over long range with a lower logistical footprint.

Russia's persistent probing of British airspace and its nautical environs suggests that Britain is right not to proceed on the long-standing assumption of a benign immediate neighbourhood. SDSR restores maritime reconnaissance and anti-submarine warfare capability. The Boeing P8 maritime patrol aircraft enables Britain's capacity to monitor the 'deep, far Atlantic' and add a layer of security to its nuclear deterrent and aircraft carriers. Neighbourhood tensions also make increased Anglo-French collaboration valuable.

The review builds also on some prudent steps the UK has taken to reduce potential threats: helping to roll back the Iranian nuclear program, gradually turn the tide against the Islamic State through interdiction, air strikes and policing, and bolstering NATO's eastern flank in the face of Putin's revisionism.

These positive steps may not in themselves be enough, and the vision of *Joint Force 2025* may not be enough, to respond well if Britain's security situation continues to deteriorate. Britain's capacity for independent action is reduced, and NATO must deal with some troubling vulnerabilities. For the Royal Navy, a reduced

escort fleet and insufficient personnel means that it would struggle to protect its (coming) carriers without thinning out the rest of its fleet, and with a lack of redundancy, can't afford to make mistakes. As things stand, the Royal Navy could become a stretched and risk-averse force, fielding a limited number of exquisite capabilities that it dare not gamble with.

Though moves to bolster NATO's forces in Eastern Europe should be commended, they are not yet enough. On the evidence of recent exercises, the United Kingdom still would struggle to assemble a brigade at credible readiness. There is also a deficiency in the deterrence and escalation ladder. Beyond the sheer ability to operate, there may be a dangerous gap within the correlation of under-sized conventional forces (under-sized compared to what Russia could concentrate in the region) and Western nuclear forces. NATO needs the ability to escalate with conventional forces, both in order to deter and in order to slow the pace in the event of escalation. Should the gap between lighter forces and nuclear forces appear too large, it is possible that the tripwire of an international protective force may not be enough. An aggressor might gamble on the perception that NATO would be unwilling to go rapidly to the top of the escalation ladder. Or it could use salami-slicing tactics to seize territory and then dare NATO into a disproportionate response. This remains a remote contingency, but remote contingencies occasionally happen.

## **Part II: Problems With NSS & SDSR**

The review of 2015 also contains some deficiencies, all of which are based on wishful assumptions that are mostly unexamined.

Firstly, there is a misplaced confidence in Western capacity to act preventively and pursue 'anticipatory' security both the SDSR of 2010 and 2015 define an ambitious, difficult role for the UK in preventing problems 'upstream,' stabilizing fragile states and spreading enlightened governance. The rationale for this posture, also of 'Defence Engagement', is that it is better to prevent conflicts in fragile states than to engage later when they have erupted. Despite the continued emphasis on unpredictability and uncertainty in SDSR, this suggests a highly confident vision of the West stabilising and rebuilding foreign societies and bringing order into chaos. The results of efforts to supply advice, training, and resources have been mixed, some have had serious unintended consequences, and this suggests that Western governments should be more mindful of their own capacity to destabilise. Libya is now almost a shattered state in a security vacuum left by western intervention. Violent disorder following intensive efforts to rebuild Iraq helped spawn the Islamic State, while western-trained troops in Syria have surrendered equipment and weapons to Islamist groups. The confidence SDSR shows in 'anticipatory security' is therefore misplaced.

It is difficult to bring stable governance to fragile states by increasing their technical capacity to govern. The difficulty is the 'misalignment problem,' where other actors who are given Western assistance often have a separate, and sometimes conflicting view of their interests. Providing predatory or partisan governments with weapons, skills and money may reinforce rather than reform their behaviour, and implicate the West in what victims see as repression, stoking resistance and hardening

division. If a host government is predatory on its population, for instance, this can undermine security sector reform. This does not mean that the UK should never engage: playing an active role in brokering a sustainable regional order is an important part of its strategy. But it should be clear-eyed about what it can achieve, get the best possible information about those being trained and equipped, the conditions of assistance and the risks involved.

Secondly, there is an under-recognition of the tensions and trade-offs between the pursuit of a stable governing 'order' and the revolutionary ambition to be a 'force for good.' On the one hand, Britain casts itself as a stabiliser, supporting the enforcement of a 'rules-based international system.' Yet at other times, it positions itself as a revolutionary, revisionist and even insurgent force, supporting the overthrow of authoritarian regimes and backing rebel forces in civil conflicts. This results in an odd combination of policies that lack a coherent overall framework. By turns, Britain supports rebels in the name of human rights, and supports regimes despite large-scale human rights violations; it seeks the approval of the UN Security Council in the insistence on formal rules and 'legality' or bypasses it with other justifications; and uses military force sometimes for limited and achievable objectives, at other times for more utopian purposes of societal transformation. As Malcolm Chalmers argues, by repositioning itself as a force for order, rather than a force for 'good', the UK can give its armed forces more realistic missions. And by thinking in terms of order rather than rules and moral absolutes, the UK will be better positioned to respond to a multipolar era of negotiation and compromise.

Thirdly, the 2015 review says little about Afghanistan. It was central to the review of 2010. Then, it was a 'current' commitment that conditioned the review and, was accorded the status of 'Main Effort' with protection and priority. Understandably with the planned transition to Afghanistan security forces, it is no longer the main effort. But it almost slips off the radar of SDSR 2015, which briefly describes British aid and NATO's training and advisory mission. Unfortunately, Afghanistan as we speak may be unravelling, with the undying Taliban seizing back ground, and the Islamic State establishing a foothold. These reversals would not be so alarming, were it not that Afghanistan borders a nuclear Pakistan. It's a remote but real contingency, that a rise in conflict could spill over, with part or all of its arsenal falling into radical hands in the event of a breakdown of governance or a revolution. Nuclear terrorism is very difficult to pull off, but we wouldn't wish to run the experiment, and the US-led coalition has an interest in taking achievable steps to prevent it. Afghanistan is neither an existential struggle with unlimited stakes that some proponents suggested it was five years ago, nor conversely should it be an afterthought now. There is the case for a 'middle ground' measure, namely an international coalition committed to 'holding the line' with a garrison in Afghanistan while brokering a regional settlement.

NSS & SDSR 2015 also have a China problem, born of wishful thinking. The government's current Treasury-driven approach embraces China and defines it as a primarily commercial actor and partner. This is evident in the documents, which use notably softer language about China than about Russia, playing down China's recent practice of seizing and militarizing disputed territories in the South China Sea. It is also evident in hard deals recently negotiated between both countries, including allowing Chinese investment in Britain's nuclear power plants. The government does

not go so far as to define China as exclusively a trading state. But it does place other strategic aspects of the relationship in the margins.

This approach to China could create difficulties. China is as much a geopolitical actor as a commercial one. It is bidding for regional recognition and dominance, and engaged in an escalating rivalry with the United States and its Asian neighbours. This could directly affect Britain's trade routes and the 'commons.' Britain's approach is at odds with that of the United States, which is resisting China's bid for primacy, and views the relationship more holistically across human rights, territorial and power-political domains. With Washington's Asian Pivot, its redeployment of naval air assets to Asia, and its strengthening of ties with Asian states, it emphatically does not elevate commerce above all else in its relations with Beijing. The UK is also tightening its defence and security collaboration with Japan. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this, but under worsening conditions it could create tensions in what is supposed to be the Anglo-China 'golden time.'

The government's wager may be 'worth it.' It might be possible to maintain a close security relationship with Washington, a predominantly commercial one with China, and that the two will not collide. But it is not clear that the UK is prepared for the event that the US and China perceive the UK as 'bandwagoning for profit', or if escalating rivalry presents it with more painful strategic choices. More intensive scrutiny is needed about the costs and risks of the choices involved.

### **Part III: Testing Assumptions and Providing Specific Guidance**

The NSS and SDSR both make several assumptions: about the extent to which 'inputs' of 'soft' and 'hard' power actually generate desired outcomes; the utility of Defence Engagement; the nature of the relationship with China, and the emphasis on carrier strike and hi-tech equipment over personnel. Within government, these and other assumptions were not subject to integrated evaluation. The process of creating the 2015 review did not do enough to build in scrutiny of its own assumptions.

It is hard to rise above ideological constraints. Policymakers, like all people, are susceptible to prior beliefs and ideological commitments that bound rationality and make dispassionate analysis difficult. In approaching problems, they tend to resort to imperfect analogies, unexamined beliefs and habit, and are prone to 'solve' problems without carefully defining them. They may be open in principle to challenge and creative thinking. But in the absence of institutionalised dissent and external crises that inflict negative feedback in large batches, orthodoxies tend to go unquestioned.

For precisely this reason, a good process of strategy deliberately anticipates this problem and builds in adversarial mechanisms to test its own premises and what it may be recycling as received 'common sense.' This is otherwise known as 'red-teaming', 'a structured process that seeks to better understand the interests, intentions and capabilities of an institution – or a potential competitor – through simulations, vulnerability probes, and alternative analyses.' To ensure greater self-scrutiny, future reviews should institutionalise 'friendly dissent', using empowered 'red teams' and a 'shadow' national security strategy.

To test assumptions properly, government must be capable of imagining ‘the unthinkable.’ This must include not only the ‘worse case’ contingency based on currently identified risks. It must also contemplate contingencies that would flow from the failure of current policy, such as the prospect of the Assad regime holding onto power, Iran acquiring nuclear weapons, or even the disruption of Britain’s Sea Lanes of Communication and its seaborne trade and food supply.

That there is insufficiently ‘red-teaming’ and testing does not necessarily make the assumptions of strategic reviews wrong. But failure to test assumptions runs the risk of governments making decisions on an ‘axiomatic’ rather than a ‘calculated’ basis. In other words, it risks policy being made without the makers being fully aware of the potential risks, costs and consequences of their own choices, and unprepared for the event of their failure.

In contrast to states such as Israel and Singapore, the process of evaluation lacks a proper institutional home, especially since the abandonment of the Advanced Studies and Assessment Group at the British Defence Academy. Possible steps could include the creation of an Office of Net Assessments or a ‘devil’s advocate’ group writing a ‘shadow’ national security strategy, as well as cross-government scenario simulation in conjunction with partner institutions. To better integrate strategy-making with informed military advice, the Chief of Defence Staff ought to be a permanent member of the National Security Council, and the Chiefs of Staff Committee ought to be restored as a sub-committee of the Council.

Finally, there is a need to balance the ‘democratic’ quality of UK strategy with the inevitably covert element that is always present in strategy, especially in an era of the return of multipolar competition. The NSS should balance between publicly articulating orienting principles around which to build support, and privately defining interests and organising capabilities in greater detail. Strategy concerns limits and the ranking and concentration of effort, as well as the possibility of conflict. A classified component would potentially provide policymakers, diplomats and militaries with a clear ranking of goals and effort.