



WHERE DOES UK DEFENCE GO FROM HERE?

When our Association published its book on the challenges facing the UK in the Air and Space domains, we knew that we were likely to see a change in Government, that the public finances were in a poor state and yet the threats we faced were never more clear or present.

Since publication we have seen the start of a much needed Strategic Defence Review in the UK that is looking as challenging as we predicted, and as unlikely to see a fast recovery to a higher share of GDP. The Labour Government gave a “cast iron commitment” to a 2.5% share of GDP for defence, but without a defined timeline the question on everyone’s lips is when – and with the Treasury on a determined and narrow path, with little or no headroom, that doesn’t look like anytime soon.

Just to add complications to an already difficult conundrum, we have recently seen the arrival of a new US administration which is boldly staking out its agenda. Whilst we have yet to see the actual policy fall out, the rhetoric and early signs point towards an administration more focussed on sovereign priorities, which include an even more determined stance towards China. President Trump appears determined to ensure that others pay their way, be it in trade, territory or security, and he has already made some early (speculative?) statements on NATO country contributions in terms of GDP.

Whilst 5% of GDP on Defence looks like a stretch target to either shock or prepare the ground for a lower figure (even the US are some 2% shy of that target), what is clear is that those who underpay the current, agreed 2% target are likely to face significant pressure. But the wake-up call also precedes the potential of the US withdrawing assets and support in the European theatre. It is this latter point that now brings everything into stark relief for its European members, including the UK.

That Europe collectively needs to spend more, spend it better and learn to look after itself more is now beyond much doubt. The fact that this comes at a time when Europe has never been more vulnerable to, or under pressure from, Russia only makes this more prescient. The war in Ukraine provides the ultimate test of resolve on all sides, and its resolution or not will set the conditions for any ‘peace’ that follows. But Russia is already testing European NATO members with acts that currently might fall below the threshold of a conventional military attack, but the acts and attempted acts of sabotage or disruption on land, in the air and under the sea could certainly be labelled as attacks. They may not yet have crossed the threshold for an Article V declaration in the North Atlantic Council, but they certainly meet the criteria.

It is true that security cannot be considered in geographical or national isolation – the hand of China is being felt

in Europe through its support for Russia, and the use of North Korean troops on European soil has manifestly crossed a line. There is a question of how to address the threat from China, but that will, almost certainly, be dictated by US policy. The question for the UK is how much effort and resource does it attribute to dealing with global threats globally – the reality might be very little.

The UK SDR was set out with 2 key remits in its terms of reference [<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/strategic-defence-review-2024-2025-terms-of-reference/strategic-defence-review-2024-2025-terms-of-reference>] to remain within the resources available (2.5%) and a NATO-first defence policy position. Whilst the constraints of resource will continue to be an issue of debate, it is perhaps the latter point that is of equal importance, especially in the context of a less present US. Despite the acknowledgement that security is a global challenge, the combination of a NATO first policy, the fiscal constraints and the threat of Russia, means that the UK will almost certainly focus on Europe and the NATO AOR. That and its enduring overseas responsibilities will be more than a challenge for the review team and the MoD to deliver after decades of under investment and a lack of long term strategy that has allowed force structures, resilience and readiness profiles to drift at best or erode at worst.

Any UK global ambition will need to be tempered by affordability, but the reality is that the UK is going to have to take a long hard look at its needs back home and in the near abroad in Europe. The truth is that even that modest ambition will be tough to deliver; indeed we have already seen early announcements on retirements – notably those platforms that had been mothballed, placed on extended readiness or given short term reprieves in the hope of more money flowing in. The other reality is that even 2.5% now is not enough to meet every demand, so where does the SDR take us?

Unsurprisingly, as The Air & Space Power Association we believe that these two domains remain a critical, indeed more critical, element of the UK's future

security. Uniquely, they also provide part of the economic solution for getting to 2.5% of GDP or beyond, as the two associated industries remain a critical element of National growth. As our publication laid out, they both face a growing and increasingly sophisticated threat. The first priority is to protect our nation, its territory, people and its infrastructure (including in space) – this will require a reset in our air and missile defence posture, but one commensurate with our specific and an appetite for appropriate levels of risk. The next priority is to retain the capability to hold an enemy at risk in order to deter, or if necessary, to defeat that threat. This requires the ability to detect and decipher enemy intentions or actions and meet and overmatch them, and, if necessary, strike back. Obviously,

these need to be viewed in a NATO context, but that might be one that is less able to rely on the fullest US support.

When we published our book, we had no idea how long its contents would be relevant. The good news is we wouldn't change a single word today, the bad news is the World got a "little" more dangerous and a lot less predictable in just a few short months.

Our next few articles will seek to explore some of the details contained in the book and ask where next for UK Air and Space power.

**Air Marshal (Ret'd) Greg Bagwell CB CBE MSc FRAeS
President, The Air & Space Power Association**



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