Richard Mottram

The future of UK foreign policy: Sir Richard Mottram

Report

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October saw the unveiling over three days of the British Government's review of national security. First a strategy document, then more detail on means, then resource provision as part of the wider Comprehensive Spending Review. This elaborate choreography was presumably designed to show that decisions on security and defence in particular were not simply resource determined, though the critics were unconvinced and others like me wondered what strategy meant without resource constraint. The results and the associated documentation illuminate the challenges in addressing Britain's future international role.

The titles of the two-part security Review are interesting: "Securing Britain/A Strong Britain in an Age Of Uncertainty". Why is the age uncertain? The Review identifies that – rightly – an increasingly information driven, networked world brings with it both risks and opportunities in which security will become more complex. We might note in passing that in the Review this complexity is contrasted with the Cold War "when we faced an existential threat from a state adversary through largely predictable military or nuclear means". In fact for much of the Cold War security policy had to tackle a range of risks and challenges and the Cold War itself was at times anything but predictable. Personally I would trade an existential threat for more complexity any time; but the challenge of the post Cold War world is to find a way to anchor our security policy.

The starting point of the national security review, as in all such exercises, is:

> ***"...a hard-headed reappraisal of our foreign policy and security objectives and the role we wish our country to play, as well as the risks we face in a fast-changing world"***

Four paragraphs on we find:

> ***"The National Security Council has reached a clear conclusion that Britain's national interest requires us to reject any notion of the shrinkage of our influence."***

While the Foreword to the Strategic Defence and Security Review begins:

> ***"Our country has always had global responsibilities and global ambitions."***

BRITAIN'S INFLUENCE

The shrinkage or otherwise of our influence is not it might be thought wholly in our hands. As a country we have a seat at every top table. Some of these tables are expanding to reflect changing economic and geo-political realities (e.g. the creation of the G20). Others we would like to see expanded (e.g. the number of Permanent Members of the Security Council). It is hard to see how these changes will not dilute British influence?

The Review audits Britain's international role and identifies our strengths, including our security relationships with the USA, the reputation of our Armed Forces and intelligence agencies, our contribution to NATO, and our commitment to Official Development Assistance (ODA).

How much influence should and do these buy? As the Review recognises cautiously but by government standards interestingly: "the world of 2030 will be increasingly multi-polar". A favourite posture of the British elite (if not of their American counter-party) of Britain as a transatlantic bridge is perhaps

a wasting if not wasted concept. Our relationship with the United States remains central for us but in a world in which the focus is shifting away from the Atlantic and Europe. And there are other uncomfortable truths. The financial crisis has perhaps most obviously damaged the reputation of a particular form of capitalism: the Anglo-Saxon model. As for our Armed Forces, the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan have shown up serious shortcomings in our capacity for strategic thinking and planning and ability to conduct counter-insurgency warfare. It may well be to apply the wrong perspective but possibly our expenditure on Development Assistance may not buy commensurate influence?

What of instruments of soft power? Here we have real strengths to be celebrated from the reach of the English language, and from key institutions such as (some) British universities, the British Council, and the BBC, including the World Service, and British culture more generally. All these we might expect to be safeguarded and developed.

SETTING STRATEGY

Perhaps reflecting the challenge in countering international terrorism and our experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, strategy development and implementation in a security context is back in vogue. The present government's security strategy is the third such document in three years. The government makes a number claims for beneficial change over its predecessor, including that:

- It has developed a proper strategy, which allows the Government to make choices about the risks we face;
- More emphasis is to be placed on spotting emerging risks and dealing with them before they become crises;
- In contrast to the situation it inherited on defence, it has begun the process "to bring the defence programme back into balance" and "to enable Britain to retain the best and most versatile Armed Forces in the world"

A "proper strategy" might perhaps have five characteristics:

- A clear aim or purpose.
- An understanding of the context or environment in which the purpose needs to be achieved.
- A small number of broad strategic directions or goals.
- A set of actions of the various agencies involved best fitted to achieve the desired goals. This involves choices, ideally made wherever possible on the basis of comparative cost-effectiveness.
- A feedback or learning mechanism, which ensures the strategy is adapted in the light of experience.

HOW DOES THE NEW STRATEGY MATCH THESE DESIDERATA?

To take some examples at different levels:

The stated aim of the National Security Strategy is: "to use all our national capabilities to build Britain's prosperity, extend our nation's influence in the world, and strengthen our security." A neat formulation but it might be thought to be a demanding combination in a changing international context and at a time of significant resource pressures. Perhaps there are trade offs between building prosperity and extending influence? But apparently not: the Review asserts that: "The networks we use to build our prosperity we will also use to build our security".

In understanding contexts for the deployment of influence and power, we need to recognise that significant elements of the analysis and assessment used to inform government's strategic decisions have proved false or over-optimistic, fundamentally because of a failure to understand the environments in which we plan to operate from the perspectives and values of those who live there rather than our own. This could be a fault of understanding

or decision-making processes or both. The Review helpfully recognises the importance of effective diplomatic reporting and intelligence, alongside taking decisions properly.

It is clearly right to place emphasis on spotting emerging risks and trying to deal with them before they become a crisis as well as on being more cautious in the exercise of power Here the language used in the Review is important – it talks of an age of "uncertainty". As we have re-learned to our cost in the financial crisis, uncertainty is not the same as probabilistic risk. This makes the laudable effort in the review to assess possible future developments in terms of likelihood and as well as impact methodologically as well as practically fraught. It points, as the Review explicitly recognised, to "adaptable" structures. But flexibility and adaptability are expensive and as goals can quickly lead to an unwillingness to choose. In so far as it is achievable, spotting crises and dealing with them early requires effective cooperation on the ground and in Whitehall, and funding for preventative action.

In past national security strategies, there has tended to be a jump in the analysis from fairly high-level objectives to lists of capabilities defined in terms of existing institutions. Among the missing pieces in the argument has been which elements of influence and power are likely to be most relevant and cost-effective given our priorities and the contexts we are seeking to affect. The basis of choices has rarely been clearly articulated. Analysing the cost-effectiveness of instruments of different character is certainly difficult but, if based on judgement, ideally that would be exposed. The complexity arises not only, of course, from trying to think about the future but because of the legacy of the past- the inheritance in terms of people, infrastructure and other investment. Because this Security Review has been conducted in parallel with the Spending Review, we can see choices manifested in terms of budgetary allocations.

ALLOCATING RESOURCES

In addressing the coherence of analysis and resource allocation, there is the important qualification that departments have multiple objectives and responsibilities and it would be difficult to isolate budgets for national security. The headline numbers therefore need to be treated with caution. But we could rank the outcome and ask whether it fits the story line sketched above.

The most striking headline number is that, within UK Development Assistance, support to fragile and conflict-affected states and to tackle the relevant drivers of stability is forecast to double from £1.9billion in the current year. The Conflict Pool to help prevent conflict and support post-conflict stabilisation is forecast to grow from £229 to £309 million, although still perhaps small beer within the total security envelope.

If we compare Departmental programme and administration budgets in 2014/15 with those in the current financial year, international development is up 37%. Intelligence provision falls by 7.3%, defence by 7.5%, the FCO by 24% but in practice much less because responsibility for funding the World Service is to be transferred to the BBC and the licence fee (hardly a ringing endorsement of its centrality to our effort to sustain influence). While Home Office expenditure is heavily reduced, the aim is to limit the effect on counter-terrorism Police funding.

The conclusion might be that, compared with recent spending reviews, international and security affairs broadly defined have been given relative priority, but that in allocating the available resource the government is hemmed in by a commitment to international development expressed as a share of national income (always a dubious concept) and a legacy of over-commitment in the Ministry of Defence. We might wonder from the process of the Review whether the right lessons have been learned in relation to defence programming or the same issues of systemic over-programming may not be with us in five years time.

Within these numbers, there is to be a 34% cut in Whitehall administration budgets. There is certainly scope for doing things differently and more efficiently. But the litany of new initiatives in the Review sits oddly with the effort to hold down Whitehall spending. And, if the more strategic approach in the Review is to be delivered, there needs to be the capacity at the centre of government to think strategically, give impetus to cross-government effort, and ensure plans and programmes are developed and implemented. Past success stories, like the Civil Contingencies Secretariat, involve substantial staff effort; other issues like the development of the "comprehensive approach" were arguably under-resourced. There needs to be a better approach to recruitment, training and development to build a cross-departmental national security cadre and the culture to underpin more effective co-operation. All of this involves administrative expense.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

What might we conclude? The relatively stable environment in Europe is an immense prize to be sustained through effective relationships and Alliances. We need to sustain our counter-terrorism efforts and tackle new challenges particularly from cyberspace. Beyond this we have choices about the level of our engagement, the levers of choice and how we best operate in an increasingly multi-polar world. Some of the rhetoric about our position needs to give way to the promised realism. The shift towards prevention is attractive, if harder to do than to postulate. The government's security review has much of value including an effort to define priorities. The focus now needs to move towards understanding what we are getting for the considerable provision made, particularly in international development and defence. This may throw up uncomfortable issues. ■