



House of Commons
Defence Committee

**Deterrence in the
twenty–first century:
Government Response
to the Committee's
Eleventh Report of
Session 2013–14**

**First Special Report of Session
2014–15**

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The Defence Committee

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The Reports of the Committee, the formal minutes relating to that report, oral evidence taken and some or all written evidence are available in a printed volume. Additional written evidence may be published on the internet only.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are James Rhys (Clerk), Karen Jackson (Audit Adviser), Eleanor Scarnell (Committee Specialist), Ian Thomson (Committee Specialist), Christine Randall (Senior Committee Assistant), and Rowena Macdonald and Carolyn Bowes (Committee Assistants).

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Eleventh Special Report

The Defence Committee published its Eleventh Report of Session 2013–14 on *Deterrence in the twenty-first century* on 27 March 2014. The Government's response to this Report was received on 6 June 2014. This is appended.

Annex: Government response

The Government welcomes the House of Commons Defence Committee's interest, engagement and recommendations on the future of deterrence and is pleased to present its response to its Eleventh Report of Session 2013-2014 *Deterrence in the 21st Century*.

As the Committee recognised in its report, deterrence forms an integral part of the UK's defence; indeed, it is the primary peacetime role of the armed forces. As a result of the difficult decisions taken in the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR), the defence budget is balanced for the first time in a generation and we have a highly effective and scalable contingent capability that provides a deterrent effect, utilising both conventional forces and the nuclear deterrent. The Defence contribution to deterrence is an essential component of the full range of options, including political, economic and diplomatic, that the UK has at its disposal to deliver a deterrence effect.

The Committee's report draws a number of conclusions on the changing nature of the threats that the UK faces, and the complexities that this introduces to the UK's ability to deter. We recognise these complexities and note the Committee's recommendations. Our priority remains the delivery of the current SDSR; however, work is now beginning on the next National Security Strategy for 2015. Led by the Cabinet Office, the MOD, alongside other departments across Whitehall, is also taking forward initial preparatory work for the 2015 SDSR. As the work for the next National Security Strategy and SDSR will span the period of the next election, no decisions have yet been taken on their final scope.

Our formal response to the Committee's recommendations and conclusions is set out below. The Committee's headings and findings are highlighted in bold, with the Government's response set out in plain text. For ease of reference, paragraph numbering in brackets refers to the order in which they are presented in the Committee's Report.

Introduction

1. The concept of deterrence remains fundamental to the way in which the UK seeks to manage the threats to its security. Deterrence must be credible to be effective. This means that it must be possible to both scale the threatened response to be proportionate to deter the attack in question and it must be possible to carry out the threatened response. Any proposed reductions in conventional capabilities must be considered in this light. Communication of will and intent is also an essential component of deterrence. (Paragraph 10)

The Government recognises the importance of capability, credibility and communication to effective deterrence. Britain has some of the finest and best equipped Armed Forces, underpinned by the second largest defence budget in NATO and backed up by the nuclear deterrent, the ultimate guarantor of our national security. With NATO and our allies, we will continue to play our part on the world stage and are ready to deal with threats, whatever they may be.

2. We recommend that the MoD set out in the 2015 Defence and Security Review the contribution provided by the NATO Alliance to the deterrence of threats identified in the National Security Strategy and focus on how the UK can best contribute to the Alliance's continued effectiveness and overall deterrent capability. Recent events in the Ukraine illustrate that this remains of profound importance (Paragraph 11)

The UK is an integral and influential part of the Alliance, with our strategic nuclear deterrent committed to its defence. The 2010 SDSR confirms NATO as the basis for the UK's territorial defence and deterrence and demonstrates how such co-operation is natural for the UK. NATO remains the world's most successful, and unrivalled, military Alliance, based on a shared set of democratic values. The UK government recognises that deterrence is, and has been, fundamental to NATO's success as a military Alliance. The situation in Ukraine has only served to emphasise this truth. Following NATO's proposed package of Immediate Assurance Measures, the UK demonstrated its commitment to the organisation's deterrence posture through a significant and comprehensive offer of support that ranged from Typhoon aircraft to augment NATO's peacetime Baltic Air Policing mission, through to increasing the UK's participation in a number of NATO exercises. The Government recognises that deterrence and reassurance are two important elements for ensuring the Alliance remains responsive in the future.

Taking forward the interoperability culture and practices gained by Allies and partners is vital if we wish to address the future threats to NATO. The Connected Forces Initiative (of which the UK is a major contributor) aims to maintain and improve upon these interoperability gains that NATO Allies and non-NATO Partner Nations developed during recent operations, such as the ISAF Operation in Afghanistan.

International terrorism

3. The Contest counter-terrorism strategy draws on the concept of deterrence in seeking to deny terrorists the benefits and outcomes that they expect from their actions, in punishing those responsible, including their sponsors and financiers, and in addressing the ideological convictions of potential terrorists. There are evidently limits in the effectiveness of deterrence by punishment when dealing with ideologically driven or genuinely irrational actors, or when faced with an adversary whose precise identity may be difficult to establish. The increasing difficulty of deterrence of such asymmetric threats, whose connection to hostile states may be uncertain, heightens the importance of the role of intelligence and diplomacy in seeking to understand the motivations of such groups. (Paragraph 18)

4. Communication is fundamental to the concept of deterrence in all its forms, and the difficulty of communications with terrorists and non-state actors makes the challenge of looking to deter these actors even greater. The 2015 Defence and Security Review

provides an opportunity to build on the UK’s messaging about its resilience in the face of attack and the determined measures that it is prepared to take to punish terrorists and those that assist and finance them. We also look to the Government to set out in the 2015 Defence and Security Review its thoughts on the role of strategic messaging in deterring terrorist threats. (Paragraph 19)

Understanding the world views, motivations, and objectives of potential adversaries is a key element of effective deterrence in relation to both state and non-state actors. Intelligence and diplomacy are important tools for achieving this understanding and for communicating the UK’s ability and willingness to act in response. In seeking to deter terrorist threats, it is important to maintain and develop the capacity to bring to justice terrorists and their supporters, whoever they are and whatever their motivation. Communication is one of the core elements of effective deterrence in relation to any potential adversary and the UK is active in messaging aimed at deterring terrorist threats. Whilst no decision has yet been taken on the scope of the next SDSR, we note the Committee’s comments on the opportunity it affords to convey important messages about UK resilience and determination and to refer to the role of strategic messaging.

Cyber attack

5. At one level, once a destructive cyber attack has been launched, deterrence has de facto already failed. However, if Government is unable to respond to an attack because it does not know for sure who was responsible, the ability to deter future attacks will be undermined. The costs of retaliation against the wrong target might be high. (Paragraph 24)

6. The potentially increased difficulty of identifying the source of a cyber-attack on the United Kingdom or its interests, given the proliferation of non-state actors or the potential for rogue states using proxy actors, raises the question of whether the burden of proof needs to be revisited to ensure that the UK’s deterrent capability in this field remains credible. This might require the UK Government to state that it would consider a response where evidence existed of the strong possibility of the source of an attack. (Paragraph 25)

The Government agrees that the difficulty of identifying actors involved in a potential or actual cyber attack is a particular and significant challenge to achieving deterrence in the Cyber area although the means of attributing responsibility need not be limited to the cyber area. The 2011 UK Cyber Security Strategy recognised the need to enhance our capability to defend against and deter cyber threats. Our National Cyber Security Programme exists to help meet the objectives of the Cyber Security Strategy. We are working across and beyond government to improve our defensive capabilities in order to deny or minimise the opportunity for adversaries to attack.

International understanding of norms of state behaviour in cyberspace are at an early stage. The UK is working with international partners to shape cyberspace norms, including through a UN Group of Governmental Experts (UNGGE). The 2012/13 UNGGE agreed that international law applies in cyberspace; also that ‘States must not use proxies to commit internationally wrongful acts’ and that ‘States should seek to ensure that their territories are not used by non-State actors for unlawful use of Information and

Communication Technologies'. Early agreement on these issues provides a foundation for further discussions, likely to include how to respond to the difficulties associated with attribution and, in particular, how international law applies in practice.

7. We welcome the emphasis that the Government places on the importance of cyber defence and we note the commitment of resources to a new cyber strike capability. We are concerned that the difficulty in identifying actors in a cyber attack makes the ability to deter that much harder as hostile parties may feel more confident that they can mount an attack with impunity. Another challenge for deterrence is that question marks over the proportionality and legality of a response to a cyber attack may have a bearing on a hostile actor's calculations about the UK's readiness to deploy its own offensive capability, adding to this sense of impunity on the part of a potential aggressor. (Paragraph 26)

As the Committee have noted, the MOD announced in September 2013 that, to supplement our defensive capability, the UK will build a cyber strike capability; an offensive capability to deter adversaries from attacking us. Any use of these cyber capabilities will be in accordance with national and international law, and the use of any UK military capability is subject to strict ministerial oversight. Our national security interests must also be balanced with our legal obligations and policy approaches in other areas such as international humanitarian law and international human rights law.

8. We call on the MoD to set out in more detail in the 2015 Defence and Security Review the Government's thinking on how it can deter cyber attack from both state and non-state actors and what messaging it can employ to make it clear that an attack on vital national assets will elicit an appropriate and determined response. Where it is not possible to deter a cyber attack by threatening a response against the interests of a hostile actor, emphasis needs to be placed on ensuring that critical systems are resilient to attack and contingency plans for recovery are in place. (Paragraph 27)

The Committee will understand that the content and conduct of the next Review remains to be confirmed as it spans the period of the next election, and that cyber deterrence is a cross-government issue, rather than one specific to the MOD. However, the Government recognises that cyber threats and the deterrence of them are emerging issues which are continually evolving, and we are determined that we will respond to these changing threats.

Attack by another state using CBN weapons

9. To remain credible, an effective nuclear deterrent relies on conventional forces that are able to deter threats to the UK and its Overseas Territories short of those that threaten the very continued existence of the state. This is a more fundamental test of the adequacy of our Armed Forces than whether they are sufficient to meet the demands of the Defence Planning Assumptions. We call on the MoD to show how this essential test will be factored in to the outcome of the 2015 Defence and Security Review. (Paragraph 36)

10. There may come a point where further reduction in the size of the UK's conventional capabilities brings into question the effectiveness of the nuclear deterrent. The next Defence and Security Review must be conscious of this risk. (Paragraph 37)

While the Government agrees with the Committee's statement that the UK's nuclear deterrent capabilities remain the ultimate deterrent against a nuclear-armed state, it does not agree that the nuclear deterrent requires substantial conventional forces to defend it (paragraph 29). Conventional assets can be deployed to assure the security of the submarine as it moves to and from its patrol area, in addition to those assets that routinely support or facilitate its operation. A ballistic missile submarine at sea is designed to be self-sustaining and operationally independent. Its stealth, operational profile, intelligence support and the ocean environment are its key strengths.

We note the Committee's comments that, in order to be credible, the UK's ability to deter a range of threats needs to be underpinned by a strong mix of conventional and nuclear capabilities. The UK's nuclear deterrent and its posture of Continuous At Sea Deterrence exists to deter the most extreme threats to our national existence and to prevent nuclear blackmail. In addition, our updated Negative Security Assurance to non-nuclear weapon states in 2010 also made clear that states pursuing significant chemical or biological weapons programmes might lose the guarantees of that assurance. The nuclear deterrent is not designed to deter the full range of threats that face this country; those threats are countered by other activities including conventional military capabilities.

There is not a smooth continuum between conventional and nuclear capabilities. There must be a gap between high-end conventional capabilities and nuclear capabilities in order to ensure that all parties to a conflict are aware of the implications of crossing the strategic threshold into nuclear use. But that gap must not be so large as either to lower the threshold whereby nuclear use may be currently contemplated or question the credibility of nuclear deterrence. We believe the UK has, and continues to invest in, the right balance of conventional and nuclear capabilities. The Government remains committed to an Equipment Plan growing at 1% a year in real terms after the next Spending Review to deliver this.

11. The blurring of lines between state and non-state actors poses a particular challenge in seeking to deter attacks using CBRN weapons. It may not be possible to deter a hostile state intent on launching attacks by threatening punishment where that state is confident that it can successfully cover its tracks. Circumstances in which the hostile actor is not clear or where it is not clear that a hostile state can be held to be responsible to an acceptable standard of proof pose a particular challenge to the concept of deterrence. Such a threat is akin to an act of international terrorism and the similar difficulties in attribution and in determining a proportionate response raise the same challenges for the concept of deterrence. (Paragraph 38)

The Government notes the Committee's comments. As set out in response to conclusions three and four, we recognise that identifying and understanding potential adversaries is a key element of effective deterrence in relation to both state and non-state actors. Intelligence and diplomacy are key tools for achieving this understanding and key vehicles for communicating the UK's ability and willingness to act in response.

Tier three risks

12. The deterrent strength of the UK armed forces against conventional military threats is reliant on the credibility of the Armed Forces to project military power.

Fighting power is the key calculation in measuring this deterrent strength; this includes not only the physical capabilities of the Armed Forces, but also the conceptual and moral components reflecting a readiness to undertake operations. We call on the MoD to describe the fighting power of the UK's conventional forces in contributing to deterrence. (Paragraph 43)

We have a global power projection capability second only to the US, and among the most capable troops, aircraft, ships and submarines. We are investing over £160bn over the next decade in modernising our capabilities; bringing the Queen Elizabeth class carrier and Joint Strike Fighter aircraft into service are a clear demonstration of that. The Future Force we have designed will be well equipped, capable and deployable, and more sustainable.

As the Committee recognises, fighting power defines the Armed Forces' ability to fight and is about more than just capability. It consists of a conceptual component (the thought process), a moral component (the ability to get people to fight) and a physical component (the means to fight). As British Defence Doctrine points out, fighting power should always be considered relative to that of other parties, and the notion of effectiveness itself will change over time as the strategic context and our national objectives change, making comparisons challenging. Given the diversity of scenarios in which the Armed Forces may become involved, fighting power should be applied in a way that best suits the prevailing situation and conditions. In some circumstances the UK may seek to deter and the components of fighting power, alongside our continued investment in new capabilities, give us the capability and credibility to do so.

Conclusions on deterrence of National Security Strategy risks

13. Deterrence of asymmetric threats is more complex than deterrence of another state either by conventional or nuclear means as it is more difficult to communicate with potential adversaries; may be difficult to identify them; and is likely to be difficult to identify interests against which a response can be legitimately threatened or targeted. However, the concept of deterrence is still key to countering these threats. Questions around the attribution of hostile acts (or the degree of responsibility of a hostile state) raise questions about the proportionality and legality of any response and risk bringing the credibility of the use of force into question, undermining the ability to deter such acts. We call on the MoD to set out more of its thinking on how it can act to deter such asymmetric threats, overcoming these challenges, in the 2015 Defence and Security Review. (Paragraph 44)

14. There will be risks to the nation's security and vital interests, and to the collective security and interests of our allies and friends, that are not covered satisfactorily by the existing definition of risks in the National Security Strategy. These risks may not necessarily amount to a direct attack against the UK, but may involve a hostile state seeking to deter, contain or otherwise constrain the country's actions either through their conventional military forces or through economic or diplomatic pressure. Strong conventional forces provide the UK with a contingency against the unexpected and, as yet, not quantified threats that may emerge. In a rapidly changing global environment, there is unlikely to be much warning of events that might require the reconstitution of conventional forces, once cut back, to adequately deter new and emerging threats.

Recent events in Ukraine illustrate the speed with which new threats, and indeed the reappearance of old threats, can manifest themselves (Paragraph 45)

The Government agrees that it is important to have a strategy for all risks to security. The next National Security Risk Assessment is due this year and will inform the next National Security Strategy and SDSR. Initial preparatory work is underway and the Government notes the Committee's recommendations.

15. We call on the MoD to ensure that the 2015 Defence and Security Review articulates a more coherent and convincing policy of conventional deterrence, based on a balance of capabilities of UK Armed Forces, and placed in the context of the military capability of our allies. Deterrence, after all, is based on achieving the credibility, in the eyes of those that we seek to deter, that we have the capability and will to employ armed force (Paragraph 46)

As stated above, no decision has yet been taken on the final scope of the next National Security Strategy or Strategic Defence and Security Review. However, initial preparatory work, including on the role of conventional deterrence, is underway and the Government notes the Committee's recommendations.

Nuclear deterrence

16. We note, however, that while the potential range of emergent threats is significant, they do not preclude either the re-emergence of tensions with an existing nuclear power, nor the emergence of a new power whose interests are inimical to those of the United Kingdom with the capacity to deliver a CBRN attack on the UK or its interests. (Paragraph 57)

17. The fourth of the deterrent roles identified in the White Paper is to provide potential retaliation against threats that may emerge over the next 50 years. Nuclear proliferation is not under control and many of the sources of future insecurity could in themselves contribute to state-on-state conflict, creating an ever more unstable, and increasingly nuclear-armed, future strategic context. The assessment of future threats is as important as the assessment of current threats in considering the case for the nuclear deterrent (Paragraph 58)

The Government notes the Committee's comments that we cannot rule out the emergence of a nuclear threat to the UK or its interests in the future. We believe that in this uncertain world, and with the procurement and in-service life of military equipment spanning decades, it is right to maintain and renew a minimum, credible and effective nuclear deterrent that underpins our own national, and NATO's collective, security against the most extreme threats.

The opportunity cost of the nuclear deterrent

18. The operation of a nuclear deterrent clearly does not obviate the need for substantial investment in other approaches to security, including the diplomatic, and measures to tackle risks at source. As we have noted, the nuclear deterrent cannot be used to deter all threats to national security. Given the importance of communication

to the concept of deterrence, investment in diplomatic and intelligence assets must be integral to the UK's security apparatus. However, it would be naive of us to assume that a decision not to invest in the nuclear deterrent would release substantial funds for investment in other forms of security. We believe that the decision on the retention of the nuclear deterrent, and whether its retention is still merited as a means of deterring existential threats to the UK, should be made on its own merits, rather than on the basis of what else could be bought with the money saved. (Paragraph 63)

The Government notes the Committee's comments. The Government's nuclear posture and commitment to the Trident system, and its successor system, is clear. It is not designed to deter the full range of threats that face the country, but to deter the most extreme threats to our national existence and to prevent nuclear blackmail.

Implications of advanced conventional weapons for nuclear deterrence

19. It is possible to foresee an environment in which the core role of nuclear deterrence – to protect a state from attack – is achieved by the deployment of advanced conventional weapons, providing both offensive and defensive capability. However, we are not yet in a position to evaluate any viable technical options. This will be a matter which our successor Committee may wish to examine further. (Paragraph 71)

We note the Committee's comments and will assist any successor Committee should they wish to examine this issue further.

20. It is not the purpose of this report to re-open the question of the future of the UK's nuclear deterrent. We did not re-examine the evidence in the detail that our predecessor Committee did. The 2015 National Security Strategy will identify a new order of threats and we will look to the 2015 Defence and Security Review to identify which of these threats the nuclear deterrent will be expected to deter. (Paragraph 72)

As stated above, the UK's nuclear deterrent and its posture of Continuous At Sea Deterrence exists to deter the most extreme threats to our national existence and to prevent nuclear blackmail. As the Committee suggests, it is not designed to deter the full range of threats that faces this country; those threats are countered by other activities including conventional military capabilities. Whilst no decision has yet been taken on the scope of the next National Security Strategy and SDSR, the Government notes the Committee's comments.

Conclusion

21. Although the concept of deterrence is most commonly thought of in respect of the nuclear deterrent, the ability of the Armed Forces to deter threats worldwide to the UK's interests is integral to the National Security Tasks and applies to all branches of the UK's security apparatus. (Paragraph 73)

The Government notes the Committee's conclusion. The deterrence of threats to the UK's security, influence and prosperity is the primary peacetime role of the Armed Forces; though deterrence is in fact most effective when it harmonises effects across government,

drawing together and using all the instruments of national and international power, political, economic and diplomatic.

22. The deterrence of threats to national interests is made more complex by the greater significance of asymmetric threats compared to the Cold War strategic context, but is still a concept fundamental to national security. We call on the Government to use the opportunity of the 2015 Defence and Security Review (DSR) to set out more of its thinking on the role all parts of Government play in deterring asymmetric threats, including those from the ideologically driven and radicalised. (Paragraph 74)

As noted in response to previous conclusions, the Government agrees that it is important to have a strategy for all risks to security, and this strategy will be most effective when it draws on instruments from across Government. Whilst no decision has yet been taken on the scope of the next National Security Strategy and SDSR, the Government notes the Committee's comments.

23. It also needs to be emphasised that, even in this new strategic context, NATO remains the cornerstone of UK deterrence and we call on the Government to ensure that the 2015 Defence and Security Review focuses also on how the UK can best contribute to the Alliance. Recent events in Ukraine not only illustrate the importance of NATO to UK security, but bring into question the continued relevance of the categorisation of threats in the current National Security Strategy. The 2015 National Security Strategy must reflect that threats to UK security include the re-emergence of state threats that we may have been tempted to think had diminished with the end of the Cold War. These state threats may become manifest in a range of ways, including through attack with CBRN weapons, conventional forces, terrorist proxies or cyber capabilities. We will return to this point in our overarching report on Towards the next Defence and Security Review, later in the year. (Paragraph 75)

The next National Security Risk Assessment is due this year and will inform the next National Security Strategy and SDSR. The Government notes the Committee's recommendations and welcomes their intention to further explore this point in the overarching report.

24. The UK Armed Forces have a deterrent capacity dependent on calculations of their capability and on perceptions of the UK's readiness to use force when the need arises. We are concerned that recent comments by Robert Gates, former US Defence Secretary, about the UK's value as a military partner for the US in the wake of defence cuts, illustrate a deterioration in perceptions abroad of the UK's military capabilities. The 2015 Defence and Security Review must be drafted with reference to the Armed Forces' continuing deterrent capability and decisions around the MoD's financial settlement in the next Comprehensive Spending Review must be made in the light of the need to retain a credible deterrent capacity in the country's Armed Forces. A failure to do so could have significant implications for the country's security. Credible conventional forces are also essential to maintain the credibility of the nuclear deterrent. (Paragraph 76)

Defence cannot operate outside the context of the economic health of this country, and a Strategic Defence and Security Review must balance strategic threats and fiscal perspectives

to find a sustainable solution for Defence. The overall budget for Defence will be decided under the next Spending Review, in consultation between departments, although the Government remains committed to an Equipment Plan growing at 1% a year in real terms after the next Spending Review.

A key tenet of our Defence posture is to be flexible and adaptable to meet the UK's strategic objectives. We have shown how resilient we are when the financial means available to Defence change unexpectedly. But our ability to meet our strategic ambition is not solely related to our financial resources. Although we plan to spend more than £160 billion over the next ten years on state-of-the-art equipment, and to regenerate the Armed Forces for the requirements of the post-Afghanistan defence and security environment, in the last Strategic Defence and Security Review we also said that closer co-operation with allies and partners would be increasingly important to our security and prosperity. We are increasing the depth and breadth of our co-operation with our key allies to improve our policy and strategy alignment, and interoperability to ensure we can work increasingly effectively together and deliver greater effect from our respective defence budgets. We continue to develop our relationships with new international partners to enhance our global influence. All of this contributes to the UK's credible deterrent capability.

Any significant future budget reductions, which cannot be absorbed by non-front line savings alone, run the risk of impacting upon our strategic ambitions.

25. We conclude that deterrence, both nuclear and conventional, has an important place in the defence philosophy of the UK but will increasingly form part of a more complex security strategy alongside greater need for resilience and recovery as the world becomes more multi-polar and less stable and where the certainties of identifying an aggressor may be reduced. (Paragraph 77)

We agree that deterrence has an important role in the defence of the UK, but we recognise that it is not always possible to prevent disruption. The Government has continuing programmes to develop robust response capabilities to ensure that disruption is minimised when it does occur, and that recovery is as quick as possible.