

Reflections on the UK's 2025 Strategic Defence Review

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Takeaways

- *The Strategic Defence Review reflects the UK's ambitions as a defence leader in the wider region.*
- *The review is seen through the lens of a more dangerous world.*
- *The threat is enhanced by the intent and action alignment of hostile state actors, with technology serving both as shield and as sword.*
- *Increasing defence capabilities is also a means of stimulating the economy.*
- *Defence development goes beyond stimulating the defence industry for answering national security needs to actually reaching overcapacity in order become an exporter of defence materials, thus both enhancing national and regional security and creating more jobs.*
- *Technology is intently and holistically interwoven in the proposed actions and recommendations of the strategy.*
- *Digital, data and AI capabilities are systematically interwoven in defence development initiatives.*
- *A new covenant between the armed forces and civilians is needed, as the civilian – military relationship has faded away from public view due to 1) decades of fighting wars overseas and 2) shrinking personnel numbers.*
- *With its bold yet down to earth wording, the strategy often reminds of Churchill's war time speeches, enabling a whole of society approach to resilience and serves as a wake up call for a national engagement with conflict preparedness, mentally and logistically.*

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Reflections on the UK's 2025 Strategic Defence Review

This week has seen the publication of the UK's Strategic Defence Review (SDR), which has caused considerable stir in both specialized and general UK and international circles. A careful read reveals a stark contrast with most public EU member states and EU defence documents. In the UK's new approach, security and defence become central topics. The strategy contains concrete, punctual action steps, showing that national defence is better suited to be tackled by national level strategies (as is the mandate of defence). The stark tone of the document is backed by the tone of public interventions from the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Defence while presenting the document.

The review is seen through the lens of a more dangerous world: "Previous [defence] reviews hav[e] recognised the rapid deterioration of the international security environment." The threat is enhanced by the intent and action alignment of hostile state actors, with technology serving both as shield and as sword: "Our adversaries are working more in alliance with one another, while technology is changing how war is fought".

The SDR also reflects the UK's ambitions as a defence leader in the wider region, as defined by the roles it explicitly assumes, not only to defend and protect its national and overseas territory (1), the Euro-Atlantic (2) but also shape the global security environment (3). Therefore, the assumed position is that in order to deter, defence must be ready for war, and provide definite insurance policy if deterrence fails.

The defence dividend. Connecting defence development with economic growth and the labour market

The first point that clearly comes across is the explicit connection made between investments in the defence sector and their economic effects, placing the latter not as an added benefit but as an assumed goal of the strategy itself:

- "Defence should more purposefully use its market power to create economic growth".
- "Defence has significant untapped potential to be a new engine for growth at the heart of the UK's economic strategy".

Increasing defence capabilities is thus a means of stimulating the economy. Investments in and development of defence programmes are quantifiable linked in the SDR to creating new jobs needed for reaching the defence production targets. Although the strategy focuses on delivering a 10 year Defence Investment Plan, it comes across as logical that the creation of new jobs is one of the immediate actions to begin to have both practical and economical effects:

- "Engine for growth—driving jobs and prosperity through a new partnership with industry, radical procurement reforms, and backing UK businesses."

Rapid R&D cycles and getting the latest technology delivered to front line combatants first (decisive factor in winning today's war) is also linked with economic growth:



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- “This will deliver the best kit and technology into the hands of our front-line forces at speed and, importantly, invest in and grow the UK economy.”

This economic drive is doubled by a focus on cutting costs of 1) deployed technology on the battlefield, given the cost-efficiency ratio observed in combat in Ukraine and 2) the requirement of running training and education programs in-house only when it cannot be obtained externally at a suitable cost.

Defence development goes beyond stimulating the defence industry for answering national security needs to actually reaching overcapacity in order become an exporter of defence materials, thus both enhancing national and regional security and creating more jobs. Additionally, stimulating the defence industry is planned both in terms of capacity production, R&D cycles, reaching higher TRL levels and developing innovative, disruptive technologies, by strategically integrating innovation and industry in a new approach for deterrence and growth. Developing defence industry above the threshold of (anticipated) national consumption needs thus encourages export of defence material, as “exports will underpin the long-term health of the defence sector.” This is accompanied by structural initiatives such as the creation of a Defence Exports Office in the ministry of Defence “to drive exports to our allies and growth at home” and a review of export licensing practices. Connected to this remains the need for defence procurement to change from a timeframe of years to one of months. This trend is not UK specific, as NATO and EU member states also lament waiting times measured in years for orders placed with producers.

Smooth transition to a war economy is also asked for by enabling fast repurposing of industry sectors and plans to mobilise private and commercial assets. Reaching defence production overcapacity does not exclude external industrial partnerships. In the SDR, partnerships with industries across NATO allies are indicated as a diplomatic means, under the principle “if we fight together we should build together”. However, the area and subject of these partnerships are not detailed and the external collaboration receives a secondary focus in relation to the development of the national industry.

Technology

Historically, war and conflict have driven innovation in all forms, from repurposing of economies to development of technology needed for combat, in what have been races for technological supremacy. In an assumed position, “the UK must pivot to a new way of war”. Thus, within the SDR, the need for technological advancement on multiple fronts is underlined several times, mapping current capabilities against anticipated needs across the entire spectrum. The need for “innovation at wartime pace” is addressed through the length of the R&D cycle. The need for this fast track innovation is made clear by the developments in Ukraine and exemplified in the SDR as “whoever gets new technology into the hands of their Armed Forces the quickest will win”.



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Technology is intently and holistically interwoven in the proposed actions and recommendations of the strategy, with the Defence-Wide Secret Cloud and systematic integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) being two of the noteworthy technology focuses and technology developments, in addition to direct energy weapons, quantum and engineering biology, among others.

War readiness assumes increases of capabilities and increase of lethality through integration effects and technological development. Increases in overall capacity - “creating an ‘always on’ munitions production capacity” - are backed by increases in lethality. Increasing lethality for both the UK Armed forces and NATO is planned by means of integration of capabilities and their exponentially increased lethality effect. Lethality is also enhanced by means of digital integration, with a proposed target of “minimum annual shift of 10% expenditure from current to next-generation capabilities on its enterprise digital platforms and services”. The strategy goes further into quantifying lethality in an integrated capabilities approach: “We will create a British Army which is 10x more lethal to deter from the land, by combining more people and armoured capability with air defence, communications, AI, software, long-range weapons, and land drone swarms” and moving to warfighting readiness. The strategy also mentions the introduction of a “digital warfighter group that would allow Defence to deploy digital and conventional warfighters on operations side-by-side, maximising opportunity for rapid learning and adaptation”.

Delivering this “step-change in lethality” requires also the development of a “common digital foundation and shared data” and a single ‘digital mission’ - to deliver a digital ‘targeting web’. Current lack of resilience in data flows is an identified drawback in the SDR. Data is also to be treated as strategic asset, with protected computing and data infrastructure, and assured data flows from allies and the UK Intelligence Community. An additional initiative aims to appoint a data/ AI lead within each procurement capability portfolio ensuring that “data and AI are considered through the full lifecycle of new capabilities”. A shift towards greater use of autonomy and Artificial Intelligence in the conventional forces, with complex implications of forecasted AGI is foreseen.

Embedding artificial intelligence within the defence structures and standard processes would facilitate reallocation of the human resources, enabling their shift towards the front lines, according to the SDR. Although this might not be directly or immediately transposable, digital, AI and data skills are identified as being in high demand within NATO, thus making AI and data specialists a commodity that agencies and departments need to compete for and thus any efficiency measures for maximizing their use are welcomed. Optimal use of scarce skills is also foreseen through strategic deployment of flexible teams, in a systematic inter-departmental, interdisciplinary approach that can be extended to allies: “small, flexible teams of military and/or civilian technical experts [...] in specialist areas such as cyber, space, intelligence, and counter-hybrid warfare without diverting operational personnel”.

AI implementation and harmonisation across military and civilian organisations is foreseen, with the defence sector referencing harmonization with AI strategy developed in civilian context, such as the AI Opportunities Action Plan (2025). However, development and



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deployment of disruptive technology is also put in relation with the pace and character of regulatory actions: “The UK’s competitors are unlikely to adhere to common ethical standards in developing and using them”. The implication here is that these standards come at the disadvantage of the abiding party in a confrontational situation of having to reach maximum gains.

Resilience

War readiness is planned across several fields, in direct defence actions and preparedness of society for war. Another determining factor for the UK’s defence forward facing role is the acutely felt presence of Russian threats on UK soil, publicly known through mediatized cases of assassinations, espionage, sabotage and foreign influence. These overt attacks are accompanied by increased “sub-threshold” activities that require a systemic approach to counter as well as societal resilience build up: “a renewed emphasis on home defence and resilience is also imperative, with ‘sub-threshold’ activities, growing access to space and cyberspace, and unrelenting advances in weapons systems all making it easier for adversaries to cause the UK harm, even at distance”.

Pivoting to a new way of war, focusing on embedding new technology and reengaging the whole of society in defence initiatives are all measures part of a the new strategy of war readiness, explicitly making the whole of society approach part of the UK’s national security strategy. This was needed given that the current defence posture did not, up to now, require “whole of society” approaches for preparations for war and resilience. The strategy also states the need for reconnecting defence with society as a starting point for a renewed focus on home defence and resilience. A new covenant between the armed forces and civilians is needed, as the civilian – military relationship has faded away from public view due to 1) decades of fighting wars overseas and 2) shrinking personnel numbers. These factors have led to a society with less awareness of Defence. This is not a top down approach developed for facilitating resilience of the population. Unlike the centrality of “emergency packages” in other national resilience programs, the UK SDR asks from the population an action centric approach to getting involved in national defence.

With its bold yet down to earth wording, the strategy often reminds of Churchill’s war time speeches. In the current context, the SDR serves as a wake up call for a national engagement with conflict preparedness, mentally and logistically:

- “Preparation for war is crucial to an effective response to armed attack. It can also help to deter an adversary from such an attack in the first place. In such extreme but no longer unthinkable circumstances, nations go to war, not just armed forces”.

One recommendation is to “build national preparedness and resilience, ensuring the UK can withstand attacks and recover quickly”. The whole of society approach for resilience is also



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found in the concept of “One Defence’: People, Training, and Education”. Proposed partnerships between the defence sector and research and development institutions indicate the desire for a wider implication of society into the defence responsibility of the nation, and is another concrete manifestation under the assumed “whole of society approach” to defence. This at least in terms of unilateral declared intent until manifested as phenomenon in terms of actual volumes of contracts.

Another interesting mention is that “Infrastructure that is critical to the UK economy and *way of life* must be protected. Re-establishing credible national preparations for war, home defence, and industrial mobilisation is a priority” (emphasis added). This might seem somewhat antagonistic, since measures meant for enabling war preparedness do actually imply a change in the current way of life in order to reach that level of preparedness. And if defence industry development has foreseeable fast positive effects, preparing for actual conflict also means preparing for less positive changes.

The protection of critical national infrastructure under private administration is another challenge faced by different nations and also addressed in the UKs SDR, indicating the need for cross-border alliances or partnerships.

Strategic Partnerships

Nationally, several initiatives addressing partnering with academia and industry are planned: the new UK Defence Innovation organisation and the forthcoming Defence Industrial Strategy, indicating again a system wide approach for increasing public support and involvement in the national defence efforts while at the same time addressing the innovation cycle and TRL levels.

The defence review stands as starting point for Defence’s Global Relationships, with strategic alliances across several geographies. The “NATO first approach” thus does not come at the expense of lateral partnerships. Examples of these are the UK-EU Security and Defence Partnership, the GCAP and the JEF. This is backed by a “new Defence Diplomacy Strategy to be completed by December 2025”.

Taking the holistic approach to defence, the SDR aims at measures for enhancing the UK’s nuclear capabilities and proposing a greater role within NATO regarding nuclear capabilities and nuclear deterrence. This is where existing partnerships make their effects and costs felt, in this specific case indicating that dialogue with the US is desired for “potential benefits and feasibility of enhanced UK participation in NATO’s nuclear mission”.

Final remarks

The SDR deserves a close analysis that is best undertaken at topic level, given the documents’ complexity and the ramifications of the recommendations put forward. Both the tone and direct applicability of the proposed measures contrast with many other defence oriented policies developed by international, overarching structures. Reflecting on the applicability of the



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measures, what comes across is the fact that supranational structures, needed as they are and serving their collective defence purpose, become superfluous in harmonisation efforts, require multiple rounds of negotiations and efforts for solving tensions between overlapping structures and roles, thus hindering implementation and development efforts in terms of time and efficiency. Containing the most firm language by far, in terms of the argumentation for the proposed steps as well as the action steps themselves, the UK Defence strategy sets a forward facing defence position, underlining the urgency by insisting the changes need to be done at “wartime pace”.

The assumed linkage in the UK's SDR between defence development and economic growth could be labelled by critics as a labour politically daring move, one that could be interpreted as creating a defence need for economic reasons, much like the US's engagement in wars of choice stimulated its defence sector for decades. The backdrop differs though, due to the closeness of war in the region, the potential shift of focuses within NATO, the role the UK has had, wants to have and ultimately needs to have if there is to be a shift in the responsibility balance within NATO in terms of defending Europe and the role economic stability and autonomy have in preparation for a more conflictual world. If economic security is part of national security, enabling stability and autonomy, then economic growth must be part of national defence strategies. This is already acknowledged in terms of dependencies in supply chains for critical technologies and critical materials that are needed in peace times and that become mission critical in war times.

Referenced documents

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About the author.

Diana Popa has over 17 years of experience in research and academia and has authored numerous reports and scientific articles. Recent research and analysis focus on resilience as part of defence programmes, emerging disruptive technologies, in particular Artificial Intelligence in high risk areas, including defence.

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