

The Strategic Defence Review: Challenges and Opportunities



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The Government has just announced its “root and branch” strategic review of the UK’s armed forces. The review will take into account the challenging geopolitical environment and the capabilities and resources the UK needs to meet current and emerging threats. Work is beginning now, with submissions requested by the end of September and recommendations expected in the first half of 2025.

Robin MacKenzie, CEO of Strategy International, interviewed Evie Aspinall and Seumas Kerr CBE, about their initial views on the context and likely content of the review. Evie is the Director of the British Foreign Policy Group (BFPG), the UK’s only think tank dedicated to the intersection between foreign and domestic policy. Seumas is Managing Director of the D Group, a strategic membership organisation with a strong focus on defence.

Robin: Let’s discuss the geopolitical context in which the review will take place. What are the key geopolitical challenges the Government are going to need to think about in this review?

Evie: We are in an period of worsening global instability, with three main strands. Firstly, there’s a **growing number of conflicts**. The war in Ukraine is still ongoing, with little sign of stopping anytime soon. The conflict in the Middle East, which is of course of huge significance in and of itself, is also leading to **growing mistrust of existing international systems and structures**.

And that’s the second strand. Not just conflicts but things like climate change, where developing nations are increasingly frustrated with how much they are having to take on of the climate transition, which leads to growing disillusionment with existing mechanisms. It seems that the leadership of the USA and Europe is waning. If former President Trump wins in November we may start to see an increasingly isolationist USA, which could further increase this frustration.

Thirdly, **other powers are increasingly able to take advantage of these fissures**. Countries like China are able to exploit the fracturing of existing structures and mechanisms.

And let’s not forget that we are constantly seeing unpredicted events happening. We don’t know what the next challenge will be, and that is a very difficult environment in which to conduct such a review.

Seumas: We can draw some parallels with the 1930s, with a resurgence of right-wing politics combined with a long underinvestment in defence. In the 1980s, Thatcher increased defence spending, as did Reagan in the US. But since then we have seen a decline. For all the reasons Evie mentioned we may now be in a ‘pre-war’ phase, and we need to commit to an increase in defence spending to meet those threats.

Robin: Given the complexity of the geopolitical environment, where do you stop and start the framing of the review? Within the context of unpredictability, how do you position a review without covering every possible eventuality?

Evie: I would like to see a broader review than I think this is probably going to be. It looks like it will be a defence review rather than a comprehensive review, which may be a mistake. Security needs to be about our broader foreign policy. If defence isn’t accompanied by broader thinking, we may see a lack of a cohesive approach across government and wider society.

Seumas: I also think a broader view is necessary. Defence doesn't operate in isolation. We need to understand the larger context and our place in the world. For example, we are no longer a global power that can operate across the world; should we be refocusing on Europe? Secondly, we talk about land, sea and air, but if we don't include space then we are not looking at the full picture.

During the Cold War, defence forces existed to buy time, to ensure that no country had to resort to the nuclear option. A strong defence force still means that a country doesn't have to go to war. If we are in a pre-war phase, then having a strong defence force is essential.

Industry needs to be part of this too, because they are part of our broader defence capability.

Robin: If the review is operationally focused, how should we understand the current operational context for our defence capabilities?

Seumas: Much of our focus right now is on Ukraine. We are strongly committed to NATO and the Government has made it clear that the defence review will reinforce that commitment.

However, we have hollowed out our armed forces. The view was that industry would hold stockpiles of weapons, and we would be able to acquire those on a 'just-in-time' basis. That has not happened: those stockpiles no longer exist. In my view, we demonstrated our inability to adequately respond when Putin invaded Georgia and Crimea; the lack of will internationally to respond to that meant Putin felt he could attack Ukraine with impunity.

The UK has never had a smaller defence force. At the end of World War II there were 2.9 million troops in the army. In the early 1970s it was 200,000. We currently have a regular Army of 73,000. You might argue that numbers aren't that important, but we need to have a defence force that is strong enough to protect the UK and ensure we make our contribution to NATO.

The Cold War only ended by NATO being strong and unified. We need to be so again. But if Russia invaded one of the newer mem-

bers of NATO and breached Article 5, would we be ready to go to war?

Finally, if former President Trump is elected, will he stop supporting Ukraine? And if so, are we building up to an even larger problem?

Robin: Simplistically, then, we don't have enough people, machines or armaments, and we may not be able to meet our existing commitments to NATO.?

Evie: Yes, but we also haven't touched on grey zone warfare and cyber, which we also need to invest in and scale up. Some of the biggest threats posed by Russia and China, beyond Ukraine, are cyber and disinformation. The threat from these is increasing. The destabilising impact cyber and disinformation can have is huge.

We also need to consider the wider domestic context, which is primarily economic. With the economy in such a difficult place, the Government will need to focus on growth in order to meet any new spending commitments.

We should also consider defence as a contributor to the economy, not just as an expenditure. If we think about the role of industry, scaling up our defence contributions can mean more jobs, more production, and ultimately more tax revenue.

Seumas: I agree. The new Government has a focus on prosperity and growth; defence should be seen as part of that agenda, not separate from it.

Robin: From Ukraine we've learned that land war is still an issue, but technology and innovation are also key. If strategy is about choices, what are the key choices that should be fleshed out in this review?

Evie: Budget, first and foremost. Money and ambition need to go hand in hand. It's not an easy choice to make in the current economic climate, though.

Secondly, which capability area do you prioritise, for example troops or cyber? Then, geographic priorities. If we prioritise Europe, what do we do in the Indo Pacific? Or the Middle East? How flexible can those decisions be? If we prioritise Ukraine entirely, for example, we can't do anything else. These are all difficult choices that need to be made.

Seumas: The review needs to include a plan to implement the recommendations it brings forward. Ideally, it will look internationally, then line up our economic interests, foreign policy and then what defence strategy is needed to support those.

Robin: This isn't the first strategic defence review, and we have not seen a real track record of delivery. What do you hope will be different this time?

Evie: We need to move away from the 'shopping list' of wishes and wants and have a very clear view of the top priorities and how they are going to be delivered. Simultaneously, we need to look at accountability mechanisms and how they can be strengthened.

Seumas: I would like to see a clear and defined purpose, followed by a strategy, with a solid plan and accountabilities. Something the nation can understand and get behind. It will also need to be clear on where the money is held, whether it's Ministry of Defence (MOD) with the Secretary of State, or the front-line commands.

Evie: If the review is being led externally, the key challenge is securing buy-in from MOD without them controlling the process. The most effective reviews are run from the Cabinet Office, and without that there is a risk of failing to get buy-in across government for both design and implementation.

Ultimately, the Review must engage beyond the MOD. For example, if it is about deploying technology then the Department for Science, Industry and Technology (DSIT) will need to be involved. Buy-in on the process and subsequent ownership across Government will be essential.

Robin: Finally, this review will set the tone for this Government for the next five years. What are your personal hopes and fears for the review?

Evie: I would like to see a whole of society approach to engagement and implementation. In BFPG we talk a lot about building public support for foreign policy; this review offers the perfect opportunity to build such support. I would also like to see the review used to build and strengthen relationships,

both between Government, civil society and industry and across Government.

My concerns are that the approach isn't comprehensive, and that we end up with another shopping list of ideas that are not practical, or budgeted, and that accountabilities aren't clear.

Seumas: I hope the approach will be strategic, pan-government and will include buy-in from industry.

Looking at previous reviews, there are key themes that can be picked up on; I hope this review will take those into consideration.

My fear is that we have an exciting and aspirational review, but without the budget commitment to implement it.

Robin: To summarise, then, our view is that a successful strategic defence review will need to be tied into a national growth agenda and aligned across the various departments within Whitehall. It will need to be translated into a tangible and costed set of activities underpinned by clear accountabilities for delivery.

Finally, we see this as an excellent opportunity for the defence industry and civil society to be involved in shaping recommendations and driving forward this key piece of our national agenda well into the future.