Smart muddling through: rethinking UK national strategy beyond Afghanistan*

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When the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition was formed in May 2010 it was confronted with a Ministry of Defence (MoD) in crisis, with armed forces committed to intensive combat operations in Afghanistan and with an unenviable financial situation. Yet within five months the coalition government had published a new National Security Strategy (NSS—the third in three years), a new Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) and a spending review.[1] Among the United Kingdom's allies, France and Australia had prepared their defence white papers of 2008 and 2009 respectively in the context of a more benign global economic environment, while the United States used its national security policy of 2010 to provide a strategic overview without setting out in much detail what it would require of the relevant departments.[2] The UK was effectively, therefore, the first western state to undertake a complete defence and security review in the 'age of austerity'. To add to the challenge, the coalition recognized that there were also problems within its own machinery of government, and came up with some novel solutions. In a radical step, it decided that national security would henceforth be overseen by a new National Security Council (NSC) chaired by the Prime Minister. A National Security Advisor—a new appointment in UK government—would lead Cabinet Office support to the NSC and the review process. The novelty of these arrangements raised questions about whether a more established system might be required to manage such a major review of UK national security. Nevertheless, the strategy review proceeded apace.

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† The analysis, opinions and conclusions expressed or implied in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Joint Services Command and Staff College, the United Kingdom's Ministry of Defence or any other government agency.

1 HM Government, *A strong Britain in an age of uncertainty: the National Security Strategy*, Cm. 7953 (London: The Stationery Office, 2010); HM Government, *Securing Britain in an age of uncertainty: the Strategic Defence and Security Review*, Cm. 7948 (London: TSO, 2010); HM Treasury, *Spending review*, Cm. 7942 (London: TSO, 2010).

2 Presidency of the Republic of France, *White paper on defence and national security, 2008* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2008); Government of Australia, *Defence white paper 2009. Defending Australia in the Asia–Pacific century: force 2030* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2009); US Government, *National Security Strategy 2010* (Washington DC: White House, 2010).

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Written with the benefit of almost 18 months of hindsight, this article is concerned with the formulation, the implementation and particularly the longer-term implications of the 2010 strategy review. The first part of the article assesses the review as a national strategic plan. What were the strategic challenges addressed by the review, what decisions, judgements and misjudgements were made, and what was overlooked? The second part turns to operational matters: how far was the UK's post-review strategic experience (in Afghanistan and particularly in Libya) consistent with the decisions and promises made in 2010? The third section discusses the review as a public statement of national policy and assesses the quality of the debate surrounding it. The fourth and final section asks what the 2010 review and its aftermath reveal about the formulation and implementation of national strategy in the United Kingdom. Was the 2010 review simply the latest in a long series of attempts by government to find a convincing and durable compromise between security challenges and national resources? Or was the review the beginning of something different altogether? Could UK national strategy henceforth be more of an adaptive, iterative process than a compressed period of analysis and reflection, followed by the publication of a policy statement with an inevitably brief shelf-life?

Evaluating the plan

As the central components of a new national security and strategic outlook, the NSS and the SDSR were met with a range of reactions—largely adverse, and bordering at times on panic. A survey of the membership of the Royal United Services Institute found that many felt that the SDSR represented 'a lost opportunity' (68 per cent) and that it had failed to address the MoD's overspend (53 per cent).[3] Yet 'first-cut' assessments of this sort, however thorough and considered, are not often the best measure of the quality of a policy statement, particularly one which has a broad and long-term outlook.

The conceptual framework and much of the content of the NSS and SDSR were probably as good as could have been expected. The more important question, as with all previous reviews, is whether the concepts, structures and decisions set out in these documents can be implemented in full, thus avoiding the 'Groundhog Day' trap into which previous UK reviews have fallen.[4] A broader and more balanced assessment of the 2010 review would take into account five key points.

First, unlike its two predecessors, the 2010 NSS not only identified the likely threats and challenges to the United Kingdom and its interests; it also sought to prioritize those threats and to use this methodology as the basis for government decision-making and response. In other words, the government adopted explicitly a risk-based approach to national security, examining the likelihood and impact of threats and challenges and categorizing them accordingly. The assessment process

[3] Malcolm Chalmers, Michael Clarke, Jonathan Eyal and Tobias Feakin, *The defence and security review survey*, RUSI occasional paper (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2010).

[4] Paul Cornish and Andrew M. Dorman, 'Breaking the mould: the United Kingdom Strategic Defence Review 2010', *International Affairs* 86: 2, March 2010, pp. 395–410.

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required consultations across government and with the intelligence organizations, all of which are represented on the NSC. It is salutary to remember, however, that even the most sophisticated threat assessment process, driven by the very best of intentions, cannot be expected to be right every time. Threat assessments tend to take the coldly rational approach expected of them and cannot predict the politics of the moment, particularly the populist demand that 'something must be done'. And it is almost inevitable, in any case, that assessments and reality will diverge, with some threats over- or underemphasized, or even missed entirely. The risk-based approach is arguably the most reasonable response to a diverse, uncertain and fast-changing security future. The NSS creates a process which promises to be as good as can be expected, with the UK National Security Risk Assessment being reviewed in full every two years.

The second point concerns defence spending and the condition of the national economy. The government made clear that in its view the principal threat to the United Kingdom was economic and that it was particularly concerned to control the spiralling national debt and to protect the UK's AAA credit rating. With this in mind, the scale of the cuts to defence, at just 7.5 per cent in real terms, was actually rather smaller than many commentators expected or recommended, and certainly much smaller than that planned for other government departments. Where defence suffered was in being held responsible for its poor management under previous administrations. It was thus left to resolve the issue of unfunded equipment programmes worth some £38 billion, as well as the Trident submarine replacement programme with its officially estimated cost of £15–20 billion.

Third, there was considerable criticism of the focus of the cuts. On first appearance the Army appeared to have been largely spared while the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force endured the deepest reductions. As a result, the NSS and SDSR promised to make the relative size of the army, when compared to the navy and the air force, greater than in other European countries. This seemed counterintuitive given that the United Kingdom was (and remains) an island nation. This outcome arose in part from the dominance of Afghanistan in the coalition government's short-term outlook. However, as a result of the US decision to move away from the combat phase earlier than originally planned, Secretary of State for Defence Liam Fox was able to announce a further cut of 8,000 in army personnel in July 2011, thus bringing the three armed services into something closer to equilibrium.

Fourth, some of the measures adopted to achieve short-term savings seemed ill-considered at best, and extreme at worst. For example, the decision to scrap the new Nimrod MRA4 maritime patrol aircraft, just at the point at which it was about to enter service, seemed eccentric given that it contributed to the response to three out of the four Tier 1 priority risks.[5] The decision was clearly a matter of some concern for both the navy and the air force. Both services have tried to mitigate this loss of capability: for example, the RAF has deployed a number of former Nimrod crews to other NATO partners to preserve what is described as a 'seed corn' capability. On the other hand, given the difficulties with the develop-

[5] HM Government, *A strong Britain in an age of uncertainty*, p. 27.

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ment and deployment of the aircraft, the MRA4 decision could be evidence of the government's willingness not only to articulate but actually to implement a risk-based approach. Steps have since been taken that would allow the capability to be regenerated in future should it be needed. The success (or failure) of this policy will only become clear, therefore, over time: either a maritime patrol capability will never be needed again or, if it is, the capability will have to be regenerated successfully and on demand.

Finally, the SDSR was criticized for failing to deal with the whole range of difficulties confronting defence. Unlike previous reviews, the SDSR was not comprehensive—a function of the speed at which it was undertaken. Instead, while accepting the constraints of the spending review, the SDSR also outlined a further series of studies that would form part of the review process. These included a review of the defence acquisition process (still to report), a study of reserve forces, the report of the Military Covenant Task Force, the Defence Reform Unit (DRU) report and the white paper on science and technology. These studies differ in scope and quality, and their effect has varied. The DRU report, for example, made a series of recommendations for reforming the MoD which included downgrading the role of the single-service chiefs and creating a new Joint Forces Command. However, rather than simplify the organization of the MoD and meet the promise to reduce senior officer posts, the report appears to have added another level of management between the Vice Chief of the Defence Staff and those units and organizations for which he was formerly responsible. For all that, there does now appear to be a thirst for change within parts of the MoD which has not been seen before. The army, for example, has gone so far as to abandon its original post-SDSR plan and has started again from first principles.

Stress-testing the plan

The test of any strategic and defence review comes when the decision is taken to commit armed forces operationally. In the spirit of Donald Rumsfeld's 'known unknowns', it was probably no surprise to connoisseurs of British defence policy that shortly after the publication of the NSS and SDSR the armed forces yet again found themselves committed to an unforeseen and unplanned operation—this time in Libya. It was in the light of the Libya operation that a new wave of criticism of the NSS and SDSR emerged, in three areas.

The UK's commitments to the intervention in Libya—the air campaign Operation Ellamy and the maritime enforcement Operation Unified Protector—led a number of commentators and analysts to question whether the NSS and SDSR had already been found wanting within just months of their publication. This misgiving seemed to be reinforced by the content of speeches made by both the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Mark Stanhope, and the head of the RAF's Air Command, Air Chief Marshal Sir Simon Bryant. There appeared to be some substance to these reservations. For example, the navy used a number of warships that were about to be decommissioned to assist with the evacuation

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of UK citizens and other entitled personnel from Libya. And the provision of maritime air power was restricted by the decision to scrap the Harrier force and by the very recent withdrawal from service of HMS *Ark Royal*. Yet the scale of the operations was consistent with the MoD's planning assumptions and the UK was able to support operations around and over Libya. The crucial point of the public comments made by Stanhope and Bryant was that if the Libya operation had lasted for longer than six months (which is, after all, not a long time for a complex military operation to run and to achieve success) then the MoD planning assumptions would have been outstripped. Fortunately the operation ended just within the six-month limit: if it had not, the NSC would have had to reassess its priorities and logically provide additional resources to defence. The intervention in Libya could, therefore, be said to have confirmed the wisdom of the 'adaptable posture' chosen by the authors of the SDSR as the best description of the UK's overall strategic policy framework.

The second area of criticism concerned cuts which had actually been planned before the coalition government took office and therefore before the NSS and SDSR had even been written. The previous Labour government under Prime Minister Gordon Brown had planned, for example, to retire the Nimrod R1 reconnaissance aircraft fleet in March 2011, accepting a capability gap before its replacement would arrive in 2014. Yet during the Libya operation the requirement for aerial reconnaissance was such that the decision was taken to avoid the capability gap as a matter of emergency. As a result, the time in service of the Nimrod R1 was extended by some months until British crews had completed training on American-owned Boeing RC-135 Rivet Joint aircraft, pending the delivery of the first of Britain's three RC-135 aircraft in 2014.

A final tranche of criticism concerned cuts to equipment that would be made once the UK commitment to combat operations in Afghanistan concluded in 2014. The most important system here was the Raytheon Sentinel R1 stand-off airborne ground surveillance aircraft. The Royal Air Force had acquired five Sentinel aircraft for operations over Afghanistan through the Urgent Operational Requirement (UOR) route rather than through the usual procurement process. Thus, a role for Sentinel in Libya was in some ways an unplanned bonus, and it was not therefore unreasonable for the SDSR to have assumed that the aircraft would not be needed once the Afghanistan operation was over. The problem would appear to be that the armed services had been misusing the UOR process and had assumed that equipment acquired by this route, to meet a specific operational need, could then be transferred to the general equipment holding. But this assumption was in clear contravention of the understanding established between the Treasury and the MoD concerning the rules of the UOR process. If there had been a general defence need for Sentinel then it should have been procured via the normal route, and costed within the main MoD budget. If anything, therefore, the Sentinel saga reflects poor management control within the MoD under the previous administration—something the coalition government had pledged to rectify as part of the SDSR process.

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Reactions to the plan

In a liberal democracy, the task for government is not simply to devise public policy, but to communicate and explain it. To a considerable extent, the authority and durability of the 2010 national strategy review depend not simply on its ability to deal with unforeseen challenges, but also on the impression it makes on both elite and public opinion. Thus, while the 1981 Nott Review was rapidly undermined by 'events'—the Falklands conflict—the 1994 review entitled *Frontline first: the defence costs study* failed to acquire the traction expected of it because it was seen as merely a cost-cutting exercise. This part of the article examines the impression made by the NSS and SDSR on the national strategic debate, from the perspectives of the UK political elite and public opinion more broadly.

The results of the NSS and SDSR have been thoroughly, indeed perhaps a little obsessively, examined both in the UK and abroad. The debate that followed has been interesting for what it says of the defence community in the United Kingdom. It was perhaps not surprising, given the speed at which the papers were produced and some of the associated cuts were made, that the review received significant criticism from the media and, to a lesser extent, the defence academic community. However, it should be noted first that some of the themes of this criticism—such as concerns relating to the Military Covenant, to the basing of the armed forces, to the failings of the procurement system and to a lack of strategic thought within the MoD—were not new and could be traced to problems that had emerged during the previous Labour government.

In the months that followed the publication of the NSS and SDSR the Labour opposition was, predictably enough, highly critical of some of the decisions taken. Yet the opposition proved unable to provide any meaningful alternatives while at the same time tacitly accepting the need for defence cuts. At the level of backbench participation in debates, it was noticeable that a series of individual members of parliament raised matters relating to individual constituency interests, focusing either on base closures or the local defence industry. At a slightly higher level, the Scottish Nationalists attempted to play the nationalist ticket. They complained about the closure of a number of RAF bases north of the border, arguing that this represented a disproportionate disadvantage to Scotland, and that their replacement with army units returning from Germany would lead to a reduction of spending in the local economies. At the same time they have sought to prevent any regimental changes within the British Army in case this might result in a reduction in the disproportionately high number of Scottish infantry battalions.

Within the wider media there was significant coverage of the proposed cutbacks, and a series of letters written by senior retired military personnel protesting at particular decisions were published. Interviews with and comments from the general public revealed how little engagement most had with the armed forces, which perhaps explains some of the confusion over the decisions taken. Such surveys also seemed to suggest that public opinion expected defence to take its share of expenditure reductions. Furthermore, there appeared to be a lack of sympathy with some of the entitlements and allowances being claimed by the

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armed forces. In this respect the armed forces probably suffered from the effects of parliament's expenses scandal.

More generally, the commentary on the NSS and SDSR raises the issue of who counts as a strategy and defence expert in the United Kingdom. A variety of retired military personnel, politicians, analysts and academics from different disciplines and backgrounds all competed to have their say with the result that the narrative that followed was of mixed quality at best, and at worst little more than special pleading. As a result, however, there has been a welcome resurgence in writing on the subject of British defence and security policy: a marked change from the previous two decades, which had seen it slowly disappearing as an area of research and analysis. It is too soon to tell, of course, whether this resurgence will endure.

The triumph of 'smart muddling through'

In any sector of society and at any level, strategy is very largely a matter of making difficult choices in conditions of radical uncertainty, resource scarcity and, of course, ignorance about the future. Thus, like its predecessors, the 2010 strategy review showed the inevitable bias to the present: the NSS and the SDSR were shaped considerably by the strategic outlook and the political rhetoric of the moment. It should come as no surprise that the detailed judgements made at the time of writing a strategic review rarely stand the test of time. This is not to say, however, that the value of a strategic review can only ever be measured in months rather than years (even though that has sometimes been the case). If a national strategy should never be expected to provide a prescriptive blueprint for the future, it can nevertheless be expected to provide a guide to decision-making and action. The 2010 strategy review could usefully be seen, therefore, as an attempt to articulate national strategic principles and to establish a doctrinal framework with which to make sense of complexity and urgency.

The hardest test of the NSS and the SDSR will be how well they equip the UK government and its armed forces to meet an uncertain and possibly volatile future. The result of this test will be revealed over time—more time than the mere 18 months that have lapsed since the publication of the 2010 review. But what can be judged in the short term are the tone and trajectory of the review. If the future were even slightly knowable then it might seem fair to ask whether the right choices had been made in the course of a strategy review. But since the future is fundamentally unknowable, and since the concern of national strategy is with non-trivial matters such as the security and perhaps even the survival of a society, then it is more important to be as sure as possible that the wrong strategic choices have not been made. The security future might be neither black nor white: the UK might not be at war, but might not feel at peace either; security threats might not be 'existential' but will not necessarily be trivial or peripheral. It will probably be very difficult, even with the most sophisticated risk management process, to set priorities among a wide range of security challenges—both (natural) hazards and

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(man-made) threats. And it will also be difficult to discriminate between short-term security dangers which appear to be answerable within a political cycle and those longer-term challenges to national security and individual well-being which require a solution that might have to be sustained over a generation or more. In these circumstances, making strategic choices could be a very high-risk activity. If the right choice is made then it could be more by luck than by judgement. And if the wrong choice is made the penalties could be severe and enduring.

There is, therefore, an unavoidably precautionary aspect to national strategy; and it is this which explains the historical preference, particularly in the UK and perhaps elsewhere, for a national strategy based on hedging or, in other words, on deliberate indecision. This preference has been mocked as little more than 'muddling through'—implying a confused, anxious and even fatalist view of the strategic future. But, if understood properly and managed correctly, 'muddling through' could represent confidence and strength rather than uncertainty and weakness. The upgraded 'version 2.0' of Britain's strategic software, known as 'smart muddling through', has a number of features.

The first requirement of 'smart muddling through' is to reject austerity-led strategic decision-making. This is not to suggest that resource scarcity should not influence strategy—that it must is surely to state the obvious. The complaint comes, instead, when austerity directs strategy rather than influences it. The fallacy of austerity-led strategic planning is that, by some strange magic, austerity will make it easier to see into the future; to identify the security challenges which will present themselves and to make preparations accordingly. But of course the opposite must be true. Austerity is about narrowing options and forcing choices, and so its effect must be to make the future more, rather than less, difficult to manage. Confronted by a security future which appears to be diverse and volatile, austerity could therefore prove to be a dangerously insecure basis for national strategy.

The UK national strategic debate is currently preoccupied with discussions about this or that capability: Typhoon combat aircraft; aircraft carriers and the F-35; armoured fighting vehicles (AFVs); the role of the submarine-based nuclear deterrent and so on. But no matter how hard the future is interrogated it will not reveal whether F-35s will be a more useful investment than new AFVs. The truth which informs all of these discussions is that fewer of all of these equipments can be afforded. Yet it is mere guesswork to insist that this or that capability will be necessary to meet this or that commitment which is sure to take place at some point in the future. Austerity makes it necessary to reduce armed forces, with the result that strategic options must be narrowed. This prospect is already disconcerting; it is not helpful to compound the problem by pretending that resource constraints can organize and discipline the future such that the future narrows itself conveniently to fit the resources currently available.

Having put austerity in its proper place, 'smart muddling through' has other features that can widen the range of options available to government. The first, conceptual step is to embrace the idea of a 'grey area' national strategy—an

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analysis and policy framework devised in such a way as to allow movement from one plausible strategic scenario to another, and back again, and to operate in the gaps between them. Another way to make this argument is to suggest that national strategy should be eclectic, in the spirit of the analytic eclecticism proposed by Rudra Sil and Peter Katzenstein: 'Without a dose of eclecticism, scholarship based on a single paradigm risks mistaking some trees for the forest . . . analytic eclecticism offers opportunities to enhance our collective ability to communicate across paradigmatic boundaries, and to engage normative and policy issues of interest to a broader public.'[6]

In practical terms, 'smart muddling through' confirms several trends which appear, whether intended or otherwise, to lie at the heart of the 2010 national strategy model. The first is the government's investment of time, resources and intellect in sophisticated risk analysis and management. The risk and prioritization framework set out for public consumption in the NSS is one of the most important features of the 2010 review. Yet for all that, it should be remembered that risk management is a practical rather than a merely descriptive exercise. That is to say, if a particular security scenario or challenge is placed in the most worrying quadrant of the risk analysis matrix, the next step must be to act in such a way that the challenge is defused and can be moved to a more comfortable area of the risk matrix. Coupled with a sophisticated risk management process, there must also be investment in early warning—covering technology, intelligence capacity and language training, for example. Ironically, governments that wish to spend less overall on defence might find it necessary to increase their spending in these important 'enabling' functions.

Another trend in 'smart muddling through' concerns the institutionalization of the national strategic review process. Having made a commitment to produce a new NSS and SDSR every five years, the UK government has taken a significant step along this path. But in the current and foreseeable circumstances of international security, even the fixed-term review might not be sufficient. Whether by accident or design, the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government might already have moved beyond the fixed-term review model, initiating a new approach to national strategic analysis and planning: the 'rolling review'. The number of reports and studies which have been required since 2010 suggest that the strategy review might more accurately be understood as the beginning of a multi-year exercise in transforming, managing and calibrating national strategy in order better to correspond to the threats, challenges, commitments and resources of the moment. In that case, the five-yearly review might become more of a formal stocktaking exercise than a complete reassessment and audit of policy. If assessing the national strategic outlook is to become more of a process than an event, it might also benefit from the cultivation of a national strategy cadre among government officials, along the lines suggested by the House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee.

[6] Rudra Sil and Peter J. Katzenstein, *Beyond paradigms: analytic eclecticism in the study of world politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 217–18.

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In terms of the structure of the armed forces, 'smart muddling through' translates into a requirement for the most highly capable, balanced and agile force posture achievable. A balanced force posture would include a mix of naval, land and air power, able to meet the widest possible range of 'priority risks' set out and reviewed in the NSS. Where gaps in capability become apparent, then consideration must be given to collaboration with allies in the spirit of interoperability, 'pooling and sharing' and, most recently, 'smart defence'. At all times the goal should be to match capability to risk, rather than vice versa. For its part, government should demonstrate the political and electoral courage to argue for defence spending, not because it has glimpsed the future but precisely because it cannot. Along with an emphasis on risk assessment and management, and with adequate investment in early warning and intelligence capabilities, an operationally capable and balanced force will create the broadest range of political and strategic options with which to meet an uncertain and volatile future.

Conclusion

The 2010 national strategy review was an urgent and ambitious exercise, conducted in the context of demanding combat operations in Afghanistan and an inherited financial situation best described as appalling. Yet, in spite of some adverse reactions at the time and subsequently, the National Security Strategy and the Strategic Defence and Security Review were neither unreasonable nor illogical; and, with hindsight, it is difficult to describe these documents as in some way 'anti-defence'. Both documents were probably as good as could have been expected, and the overall review is likely to be resistant to the short shelf-life followed by political oblivion which has been the historic fate of national strategic reviews in the UK. The SDSR was stress-tested by the Libya intervention and in general terms was not found wanting. The operation was broadly consistent with the MoD's planning assumptions, although it was certainly fortunate that it did not run beyond October 2011. The wider reaction to the 2010 review was muddled, politicized and tendentious. It is important to record, nevertheless, that the review had the effect of reinvigorating the defence debate in the United Kingdom. It remains to be seen how long that effect will endure.

The 2010 strategy review was also incomplete, and that might prove to be its most significant feature. The review required a series of follow-up reports and studies, and as a result it is best understood as the beginning of a process rather than an end in itself. By this means the UK government, inadvertently or otherwise, might have turned national strategic analysis and decision-making into a more nuanced process, sensitive to change and capable of adaptation. If the five-yearly review of the NSS and SDSR can henceforth be seen as less of a formal strategic reappraisal and more of a periodic stocktaking exercise, then the United Kingdom might finally have come to terms with its historic inclination, in the form of 'smart muddling through'.

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