



**A National Defence & Strategy Research Group**  
**Exposing the incoherence and Weakness in the United Kingdom's Defence and Security Strategies**  
[www.defencesynergia.co.uk](http://www.defencesynergia.co.uk)

**DefenceSynergia Input for the House of Commons Defence Select Committee**  
**Planning Assumptions, Funding and Capability in a Post Covid-19 World**

**Summary**

DefenceSynergia (DS) is concerned about the potential economic effect of Covid-19 on United Kingdom (UK) Defence funding which has the most immediate impact on the Readiness, Responsiveness, Resilience, Regeneration and Capacity (R4C) of our Armed Forces. DS feels it wholly appropriate to provide this post Covid-19 brief ahead of any proposed parliamentary inquiries.

DS draws particular attention to the Defence Planning Assumptions (DPA) – which, since SDSR 2015, has been classified<sup>1</sup> - because these formerly offered Parliament and the Public a yard stick by which to judge Government actions against stated objectives. A method, if you will, to assess whether the Armed Forces are operating within funded parameters or are, as some former chiefs of staff have alleged, **'running hot' or 'over stretched'**.

DS then also considers the Defence Budget in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) terms and the likely effect upon HM Armed Forces and Defence related industry should, as is predicted, national GDP fall. To ameliorate the effects of negative GDP on the Defence budget DS determines that the budget base line must be FY19/20.

**Main Discussions**

In respect of this government's policy, strategy and tactics, we begin by setting out DS understanding of how Number 10 Downing Street thinks and speaks. DS has had significant discussions with MPs and other authorities on the existence of a void in governmental thinking and pronouncement - a lack of Grand Strategy to guide decisions and achieve rational outcomes across government in pursuit of declared policy. Sir Bernard Jenkin has led forcefully on this issue within Parliament.

DS believes that Strategy is important because the resources available to achieve aims are usually limited. A government strategy assists by describing how, why and when goals will be achieved leaving the Treasury and Planners to fund and assign the means (resources) to achieve the aims according to the agreed Strategic priorities.

---

<sup>1</sup> MoD FOI Response 18 May 2016 - "The information you have requested can be found within Defence Strategic Direction 2016. This document remains at a SECRET UK EYES ONLY classification. There will be no UNCLASSIFIED version of this document published. However, in the early summer the Defence Strategic Operating Concept will be published by the Development, Concepts & Doctrine Centre. This document will be UNCLASSIFIED. And while this will not list the Defence Planning Assumptions in full, the Concept will draw on and provide an UNCLASSIFIED summary of them."

Sadly cohesive Strategic planning and Strategic thinking in UK are rare commodities. The National Security Adviser and the council (NSC) he chairs ostensibly exist to implement the National Security Strategy (NSS) yet this document and the NSC itself are Strategic in name only. Most Council time is devoted to crises management or in a subservient role to a Cabinet Office activated COBRA.

## **DPA**

The existence of the DPA is not in question only its availability for scrutiny outside the MoD. The NSS and SDSR for 2010 defined for the public certain unclassified aspects of the DPA as follows:

*HM Armed Forces to be able to conduct 2 concurrent battle group and one brigade size operation of 6500 to 8000 troops - one of which could be long term with little or no war fighting but with increased exposure to humanitarian intervention and aid - OR - HM Armed Forces to be capable of conducting a one-off operation of up to 30,000 personnel inclusive of 'supporting sea and air power' but time limited to 6 months of active operations - probably in concert with allies.*

Since SDSR 2015 the DPA has been classified (note 1 refers) and the only clarity offered by the SDSR was a commitment by HMG to increase the maximum effort from 30,000 to 50,000 personnel.<sup>2</sup> The latter being accepted at the time without challenge despite the British Army, Royal Navy (RN) and Royal Air Force (RAF) being downsized in equipment and personnel before and after the 2010 and 2015 SDSRs. This is not a Strategy led plan but a case of 'hope over experience'. The concept was unworkable in 2015 and 5 years later the manning and equipment position is, if anything, even worse.

However, as the DPA overall is classified, it is no longer possible for Parliament or the tax paying Public to judge whether the operational tempo, such as it is, or the plan for future potential operations, can or is being met within the current funding limitations? Recent evidence by Sir Stephen Lovegrove to the Public Accounts Committee into the NAO MoD Equipment Plan out to 2029<sup>3</sup> confirmed that the Defence procurement budget would, yet again, be overspent.

It will come as no surprise to the Defence Committee that there are rumours of cuts in personnel especially in the Army where it might be perceived that there is more flesh to cut into. It is this question of personnel numbers and the now secretive DPA that DS would like the Committee to pursue most carefully. For all the Services the hardest overseas operation to maintain is the Enduring case, not a six month one-off all out effort. And experience tells us that UK operations are invariably Enduring – ie conducted over several years not months.

For the RAF it was established during Options for Change and Front Line First in the 1990s that a one off deployment of up to 12,000 personnel and 90 fast jets lasting a maximum of 6 months (a Contingency Force) was far less draining on manpower and resources than an enduring 6 month deployment of up to 7000 personnel and 72 fast

---

2 [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/492800/20150118-SDSR\\_Factsheets\\_1\\_to\\_17\\_ver\\_13.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/492800/20150118-SDSR_Factsheets_1_to_17_ver_13.pdf) “The key outcome of SDSR 15 for Defence will be the new Joint Force 2025, building on the Future Force 2020 set out in the last SDSR. Composed of a full spectrum of capabilities, it will provide the ability to conduct a greater range of operations up to and including major combat operations, for example under NATO Article 5. At the most demanding end of the scale, we now intend to be able to deploy a potent, expeditionary force of around 50,000, based on a Land Division, Maritime Task Group and Expeditionary Air Group. The force will be equipped with a range of cutting edge capabilities.”

3 <https://www.nao.org.uk/report/the-equipment-plan-2019-to-2029/> NAO MoD Equipment Plan 2019 to 2029

jets (a Formation Level Force). This was because after 6 months of contingency operations the **DPA** plan was to hand responsibility for the operation to another nation and for UK forces to rest, recuperate and regenerate.

However a Formation Level Force required at least 21,000 RAF and Army Specialist personnel to be committed at any one time to allow for full force training and rotation every 6 months. DS has been informed that the British Army require up to 5 times the deployed force numbers for an equivalent enduring operation. [Assuming that the enduring operation in question was brigade size – circa 5000 to 7000 - then 25,000 to 35,000 Army personnel would be required to train, maintain, replace and rest the force committed.]

If HMG commits British Forces to more than one operation at a time **Concurrency** becomes an additional stress point for the forces committed – in the past, Afghanistan and Iraq or more currently, Mali, Middle East and Baltic. The stress being even more pronounced on resources and manpower if the operations require increased rates of effort due to war fighting - personnel training, maintenance, support, casualty and R&R commitments all increasing beyond funded levels. It is the same for all 3 services albeit they may each have different deployment factors to consider - length of detachment, vacant manning levels, pinch trade issues, recuperation and roulement.

It is not speculative to say that the Nation will be sorely economically depressed because of Covid-19 measures and that GDP will decline, probably very significantly. This will have a major depressing effect upon Defence and the Defence related industries. As GDP declines HMG can reduce funding for HM Armed Forces in real terms and still righteously claim to be meeting its NATO 2% of GDP commitment thus, both the Armed Forces and the industries that depend upon MoD spending will decline in effectiveness – some industries, especially SMEs will not survive. If this issue is not tackled early, retaining the 2% of GDP NATO target for UK Defence spending will be rather meaningless and counterproductive to operational effectiveness.

Government, historically, has not got a strong record of looking at things in the round. There is an inevitable tendency to look at savings measures purely on a cost basis; this neglects the effect on operational capability and the tax take from those in indigenous industry working to deliver both equipment and services to HM Forces. DS has argued time and again that buying abroad must be essential to meet a Defence requirement that cannot be met in UK - not a cost factor alone.

What appears on the surface a cost advantage of buying abroad can become a cost drain when the domestic opportunity costs of unemployment and lost economic multipliers are factored in. The retention of capital in industry rather than sending outside of the UK is a factor that ought to be taken into account. Therefore, in view of the unprecedented Covid-19 effect on the economy DS is also now calling for Government to adopt a policy of "home sourcing" whenever practicable. This is why DS is putting down a marker. If HMG is truly committed to 'Defence of the Realm being the first priority of Government' then, at the very least, they must declare that the 2019/2020 financial year funding settlement is the new base line (minimum) for all future defence funding and adjust the percentage of GDP accordingly.

## **Conclusion**

DS argues that Covid-19 has and will continue to depress the British economy and as a consequence it is inevitable that HMG will be looking for ways to save money and that many areas of public spending will be targeted. The area that concerns the

Defence Committee and DS most is that of Defence. Indeed, it is already being rumoured that Armed Forces personnel, a soft target – most especially the Army – are in the Treasury's sights.

The problem, as always, is to be able to quantify and evaluate the effect of allocated defence spending upon Readiness, Responsiveness, Resilience, Regeneration and Capacity and this has been much more problematic since MoD elected to classify the Defence Planning Assumptions in 2015. It certainly seems to DS that if the order of battle and personnel establishment funding for 2010 – the last time the DPA was visible to the general public – was leading to 'overheating' and 'overstretch' then the steady reductions in the same over the intervening 10 years must surely speak of chronic underfunding now.

Reducing real Defence funding in the current economic climate may allow HMG to stay within artificial NATO percentages. It might even be possible for MoD to disguise Armed Forces capability and capacity behind an opaque DPA that is secret. But the consequences of further reducing the Armed Forces in terms of cash are that personnel and equipment budgets, which are already below critical mass, will fall further endangering British Industrial recovery as well as National prestige, Defence and Security.

Which is why DS argues for a commitment from HMG to the effect that: **The 2019/2020 financial year funding settlement must be used as the base line (minimum) for future defence funding irrespective of GDP.**