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AN EXPEDITIONARY MILITARY: DOES BRITAIN HAVE A CHOICE?

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JCSP 46

Solo Flight

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CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE – COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES

JCSP 46 – PCEMI 46

2019 – 2020

SOLO FLIGHT

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By Wing Commander Ade Mellors

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Word Count: 5,336

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Nombre de mots: 5,336

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INTRODUCTION

The United Kingdom (UK) is a sea faring, trading nation that has enjoyed considerably more global influence than its relatively limited geographical size and natural resources would suggest is reasonable. As one of the first nation states to introduce a professional volunteer military, Britannia ruled the waves for centuries, pioneering international trade routes and overseas territories to grow the largest empire the world has ever seen.¹ Now with the world's sixth largest economy in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and a member of both the Group of Seven (G7) political forum and Group of Twenty (G20) economic forum, the UK continues to sell the brand of a 'Global Britain', supported by its soft and hard power.² British media and sport remain incredibly popular across the globe, and English remains the primary language of international business and aviation, helping to put the UK at number two in the global 'Soft Power 30' rankings, as shown in Figure 1 at Annex A.³

As one of only five permanent members of the United Nations (UN) Security Council (UNSC), the UK retains the standing power to veto any proposed UN action. In 2019 the UK also claimed to have the highest defence budget in Europe, second only to that of the United States (US) within the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO),

¹ Michael Howard, *War in European History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); WorldAtlas, "Largest Empires In Human History," last updated 1 May 2017, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/largest-empires-in-human-history.html>.

² Caleb Silver, Investopedia, "The Top 20 Economies in the World," 18 March 2020. <https://www.investopedia.com/insights/worlds-top-economies/>; UK Government, *National Security Capability Review* (n.p.: Cabinet Office, March 2018), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-security-capability-review-nscr>.

³ Soft Power 30, "Overall Ranking 2019," last accessed 1 April 2020, <https://softpower30.com>.

although independent sources suggest France has spent more in recent years.⁴ NATO remains an alliance the UK, and arguably all members other than the US, heavily rely for their mutually assured security. As Hew Strachen suggested, whilst writing about the importance of multilateral organisations such as NATO:

Today Europe's armies are designed less to fight and more to exercise diplomatic leverage...Small [military] contingents are a means by which a state pays its dues to the international community and to multilateral organizations...in which most modern, westernized and democratic nations invest their hopes of a stable international order.⁵

With a rich history of military success across the globe, Britain has retained an expeditionary outlook and its expeditious military continues to serve as a key instrument of national power. However, British military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq over the past two decades seem to have yielded little but destruction and condemnation, leaving the British public war weary and scarred.⁶ Further, the UK is likely to face increasing economic challenges, as it wrestles with the aftermath of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic and establishes new trading relationships outside of the European Union (EU).

This paper will explore the concept of a growing public and internal demand for a new approach to achieving the UK's national security objectives of 'protect our people', 'project our global influence' and 'promote our prosperity', as stated in its latest National

⁴ Ministry of Defence, "Finance and Economics Annual Statistical Bulletin: International Defence 2019," 10 September 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/international-defence-expenditure-2019/finance-and-economics-annual-statistical-bulletin-international-defence-2019>; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), "Military Expenditure Database," last accessed 26 March 2020, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>.

⁵ Hew Strachen, *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 125.

⁶ Gian P. Gentile, *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency* (New York: The New Press, 2013); Christopher Hope, "Britain is War Weary after a Decade in Iraq and Afghanistan, says George Osborne," *The Telegraph*, 1 October 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/georgeosborne/10347671/Britain-is-war-weary-after-a-decade-in-Iraq-and-Afghanistan-says-George-Osborne.html>.

Security Strategy (NSS).⁷ In particular, given decreasing support for major military interventions amongst the British population, it will be argued that the UK should focus more of its defence spending on innovation over expeditionary military capability to better serve the wider British economy. As a thesis statement, it will be proven that a ‘Global Britain’ that enjoys the benefits of the international market will always require a credible military force, but increased defence spending on innovation over expeditionary mass is not out of the question.

To provide some context and bound consideration, the UK Government’s vision of the future in its ‘Future Operating Environment 2035’ document will be used as a general guide.⁸ In particular, it will be assumed that the UK will participate increasingly less in major Counter Insurgency (COIN) operations overseas, as the threat of state-on-state competition increases “primarily below the threshold of armed conflict” in what Morris et al term the “grey zone”.⁹ This is not to say that the UK need not continue to deter the spectre of full state-on-state conflict, which history tells us is always a possibility, it must.¹⁰ Having now set the scene, provided a thesis statement to prove, and some context and assumptions to bound consideration, this paper will analyse the feasibility of this new proposed approach in terms of economics, politics and national security. As will be demonstrated in the discussion to follow, it should also be noted

⁷ UK Government, *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015* (n.p.: HM Government, 23 November 2015), 11-12, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-security-strategy-and-strategic-defence-and-security-review-2015>.

⁸ Ministry of Defence, *Strategic Trends Programme: Future Operating Environment 2035* (n.p.: UK Government, 14 December 2015), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/future-operating-environment-2035>.

⁹ Lyle J. Morris, Michael J. Mazarr, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Stephanie Pezard, Anika Binnendijk, and Marta Kepe, “Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone: Response Options for Coercive Aggression Below the Threshold of Major War,” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2942.html.

¹⁰ Colin S. Gray, *Another Bloody Century: Future Warfare* (London: Hachette UK, 2012).

upfront that these perspectives are interlinked and interdependent, i.e. economics, politics and national security can each affect the other two, and vice versa.

ECONOMICS

Money, as the root of all evil, but more often than not the ultimate motivation of governments and therefore the people they serve, seems like a good place to start an analysis of defence priorities.¹¹ Further, as both the 2010 and 2015 UK Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) recognised, “Our national security depends on our economic security, and vice versa.”¹² This section will consider the UK’s economic standing, how defence currently contributes to the wider British economy, and the economic case for focussing an increasing proportion of defence spending on innovation over expeditionary mass.

In 2018 the UK had the world’s fifth largest economy in terms of GDP at \$2.8 trillion, just ahead of France (\$2.8 trillion) and India (\$2.7 trillion), but continued strong economic growth in India saw it overtake the UK in 2019.¹³ Commensurately, the UK had the sixth largest annual defence budget in 2019; Figure 2 at Annex A illustrates how the UK compares to the rest of the world.¹⁴ What this chart does not show however is that the US spends almost as much on its military “as the next eight largest-spending countries combined” and that China is now by far the second biggest investor in defence, accounting for “14% of world military spending”.¹⁵ In terms of financial amounts, the

¹¹ “For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.” BibleGateway, “King James Version Bible, Book 1 Timothy, Chapter 6, Verse 10,” last accessed 1 April 2020, www.biblegateway.com.

¹² UK Government, *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015...*, 5.

¹³ Worldbank, “GDP World Rankings 2018,” last modified 14 December 2019, <https://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/GDP.pdf>.

¹⁴ Ministry of Defence, “Finance and Economics...Bulletin: International Defence 2019”...

¹⁵ SIPRI, “Military Expenditure Database...”

UK currently spends around £38 billion on defence annually and is committed to a £188 billion ten year defence equipment procurement programme, the general detail of which is provided in Figures 3 to 5 at Annex A.¹⁶ Significantly, the UK is one of only three major powers (the others being the US and France) to have more or less consistently met the 2% of GDP defence spending NATO target, a ‘fact’ the UK keenly shares.¹⁷

Much of this investment in defence will directly benefit the British economy, by supporting the UK defence industry and its suppliers, but also indirectly in many less immediately obvious ways, such as training the national workforce and supporting tourism through the military’s ceremonial commitments.¹⁸ Usefully, given the thesis of this paper, in 2018 the UK Government commissioned the then Secretary of State for Defence (MP Phillip Dunne) to produce an independent study into “Growing the contribution of defence to UK prosperity”.¹⁹ Dunne provided the following summary of what UK defence is expected to deliver:

Defence makes possible our secure domestic environment and rules-based international order so that we can live and prosper...[it] enables many of the benefits we rely on to conduct our daily lives...protects the trade routes that carry the goods we consume...guards the underwater cables and

¹⁶ Ministry of Defence, *The Defence Equipment Plan 2019* (n.p.: UK Government, 27 February 2020), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-defence-equipment-plan-2019>; SIPRI, “Military Expenditure Database...” As mentioned earlier, the UK actually claims to spend more on defence than France, but the independent SIPRI numbers have France significantly ahead from 2014 onwards in terms of financial amount and percentage of GDP.

¹⁷ SIPRI, “Military Expenditure Database...”; Ministry of Defence, “Finance and Economics... Bulletin: International Defence 2019”...

¹⁸ Phillip Dunne MP, Ministry of Defence, *Growing the Contribution of Defence to UK Prosperity: A Report for the Secretary of State for Defence* (n.p.: UK Government, 9 July 2018), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/growing-the-contribution-of-defence-to-uk-prosperity-a-report-for-the-secretary-of-state-for-defence-by-philip-dunne-mp>. The detail of some of these ceremonial duties will be expanded upon later.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*; Vincent P. Luchsinger and John Van Blois, “Spin-offs from Military Technology: Past and Future,” *Journal of Technology Management* 4, no. 1 (1989): 21–9. This article provides some examples of military technology spin-offs, for which there will be parallels for the UK: “Since the start of the Cold War, US government funded defence research had given rise to technologies such as the internet, virtual reality, jet travel, data joining, closed-circuit TV, global positioning, rocketry, remote control, microwaves, radar, global positioning, networked computers, wireless communications and satellite surveillance.”

satellites...and counters the cyber-attacks that could bring our technologically-dependent lives to a standstill. Virtually invisible, this protection underpins our economic growth.²⁰

This also provides a reminder of what the British military must continue to deliver no matter which defence capabilities the government and its Ministry of Defence (MoD) chooses to focus its investments on in the future. Much of how the MoD plans to practically achieve this is contained within its 2019 doctrine ‘Deterrence: The Defence Contribution’. The key word being ‘deterrence’, which by its very definition suggests the MoD plans to “discourage an action or event through instilling doubt or fear of the consequence”, rather than spend huge sums preparing for war.²¹ As will be expanded upon later, this also supports the view that the UK does not plan on fighting a major war on its own and hence must maintain strong relationships with its most powerful allies.

In his 2019 report, Dunne goes on to provide the following summary of the direct relationship between British defence spending and the continued strength of the British defence industry.

The UK defence industrial sector is one of the world’s strongest, with an annual turnover of £22 billion and supports 260,000 jobs, many of which are highly skilled and well paid. The UK is also one of the world’s leading, responsible exporters of defence capability, securing export orders worth £5.9 billion in 2016.²²

Depending on one’s point of view, achieving export sales of less than £6 billion per year into the British economy may seem like a small return for an annual

²⁰ Dunne, *Growing the Contribution of Defence to UK Prosperity...*, 5.

²¹ Definition of ‘deterrence’ taken from online Oxford dictionary on 31 March 2020, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/deterrence>.

²² Dunne, *Growing the Contribution of Defence to UK Prosperity...*, 17. Independent sources seem to corroborate the annual turnover and number of jobs supported statistics quoted, but they also suggest the 260,000 jobs includes 144,000 or so currently serving regular armed forces personnel. Statista, “Number of People Directly Employed by the Defence Industry in the UK Between 2010 and 2018,” accessed 13 April 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/605100/employment-figures-uk-defense-industry/>.

defence investment of around £38 billion. Further, this suggests that almost half of the defence budget does not go to British industry and therefore does not directly benefit the British taxpayer. However, the direct employment of 260,000 staff within defence, even if this includes 144,000 or so currently serving regular armed forces personnel, is still a huge workforce being actively employed and paying taxes.²³ Finally, the UK Defence Journal recently reported that:

As the only Level 1 partner, the United Kingdom has garnered sizeable economic benefits from the F-35. British industry will build much of each of the more than 3,000 planned F-35s...with up to 10-15% of every jet sold being built or developed in Britain.²⁴

This suggests that the British defence industry may in the future contribute far more to the wider economy than the £5.9 billion of annual exports claimed in 2016. If the UK Defence Journal numbers are correct, and assuming a conservative sale cost of around £100 million per F-35, the UK would stand to receive a turnover of £30 billion in initial sales for F-35 business alone. This would then usually be followed by many years of significant income from the provision of spares and support services for the parts and systems the UK is responsible for over the full lifecycle of the platform. Considering the UK has currently only committed to buying forty-eight F-35 aircraft for an estimated \$9.1 billion, this seems like an excellent bit of business for the UK.²⁵

²³ Noel Dempsey, Briefing Report Number CBP7930, *UK Defence Personnel Statistics* (n.p.: House of Commons Library, 26 September 2019), 3, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7930/>.

²⁴ George Allison, "How British is the F-35?," *UK Defence Journal*, 14 October 2019, <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/how-much-of-the-f-35-is-british-built/>.

²⁵ Jamie Johnson, "UK may not be able to buy new fleet of F-35 fighter jets unless black hole in Defence budget is plugged warn MPs," *The Telegraph*, 1 February 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/02/01/uk-may-not-able-buy-new-fleet-f-35-fighter-jets-unless-black/>.

What defence might contribute to the wider British economy indirectly is harder to assess. Again, Dunne's paper offers some useful ideas, even if one has to be aware that as the Secretary of State for Defence, he had a vested interest in highlighting any economic positives of defence in the best possible light to maximise his budget. First and foremost, and as already mentioned, military capability provides a deterrence to those who might threaten global trade and the rules based international order on which the UK and its allies rely for their prosperity. However exactly how much military capability is required to achieve this is very difficult to say.

Next, defence by its very nature must be cutting edge to ensure its products remain competitive; it therefore should not only breed innovation and creativity, but also a highly skilled workforce that contribute more to the wider economy in both taxes and transferable knowledge.²⁶ The extra mass and innovation defence brings to British industry, most notably "aerospace, engineering, space, cyber and now the knowledge and creative sectors" helps keeps the UK ahead of its international competitors both militarily and economically.²⁷

Further, when one also considers indirect employment, the UK defence industry is said to support 500,000 jobs, which is similar to the number of full-time teachers in the UK; the MoD is also the single largest provider of apprenticeships in the UK.²⁸ Finally, the British military conducts a number of popular ceremonial duties, including the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace, the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo and Red Arrow flypasts; these all add to the British brand and contribute to a British tourist

²⁶ Dunne, *Growing the Contribution of Defence to UK Prosperity...*, 26-35.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 27; British Educational Suppliers Association, "Key UK Education Statistics," last accessed 1 April 2020, <https://www.besa.org.uk/key-uk-education-statistics/>.

industry predicted to be “worth £257 billion by 2025”.²⁹ After considering all the current benefits of defence on the wider economy, one could therefore rightly ask, is it really wise to change how the MoD currently invests in defence?

Economically speaking, the UK would be best served prioritising defence investment into whatever UK businesses and technology is expected to generate the most turnover and profit for people and companies that pay taxes in the UK. Increasing investment in likely high growth areas such as cyber, space and data, and commensurately reducing investment in expeditionary capability such as aircraft, ships and armoured vehicles, seems like an obvious opportunity at first glance.³⁰ However, any change in defence spending priorities must not undermine the deterrence or international contribution UK defence is required to offer.

Further, and equally critical, any change in focus must not diminish the UK’s relationships with its most powerful allies, and in particular those within NATO whom it would rely upon during a time of war. Given how differently NATO members currently spend their defence budgets, for example Canada spends only 13% on equipment compared to the US’s 28% and the UK’s 23% (which is above the median), suggests there may be some room for manoeuvre.³¹ Assuming the UK continues to arguably meet the 2% of GDP NATO target, it seems economically feasible to focus more of its defence spending on wider economic growth over expeditionary mass, as long as its most powerful allies remain unaware, or do not feel significantly disadvantaged by it. To

²⁹ Visit Britain, “Britain’s Visitor Economy Facts,” last Accessed 1 April 2020, <https://www.visitbritain.org/visitor-economy-facts>.

³⁰ As explained in the introduction, it is assumed that the UK will maintain its current overall level of defence spending at around 2% of GDP for the foreseeable future.

³¹ NATO, *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries 2013-2019* (Bruxelles Belgique, NATO Press & Media, 29 November 2019), 2, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2019_11/20191129_pr-2019-123-en.pdf.

achieve this may require careful stage management and the maintenance of healthy international political dialogue, which brings us to the political perspective.

POLITICS

Any significant change in defence spending priorities must be internally popular, or at least sellable to the average British voter, and externally palatable, i.e. not upset important international relations. This section will therefore consider if the proposed increased investment in innovation, and a commensurate divestment in expeditionary mass, would be politically possible at home and how this might be received by the international community. Further, as mentioned in the introduction, it is considered likely that there will be increasingly less public support for major military COIN style interventions going forward.³²

Firstly considering the British political landscape, it is often said that “one of the most fundamental obstacles to effective governance is the short electoral cycle embedded in many democratic systems”.³³ Given that the UK is on its third Prime Minister in four years, it could be argued that thinking of what is best for the country in the longer-term may not be a priority for the current leader, Boris Johnson.³⁴ Add to this the extreme disruption and uncertainty created by the Covid-19 pandemic and Brexit, and one might suggest that now really is not the time to implement significant defence reforms. Yet viewed from a different perspective, such shock events may present an

³² The alternatives to military intervention will be discussed within the national security perspective section later in this paper.

³³ “Endless elections, unqualified leaders, uninformed voters, and short-term thinking are impeding economic growth.” Dambisa Moyo, “Why Democracy Doesn’t Deliver,” *Foreign Policy*, 26 April 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/04/26/why-democracy-doesnt-deliver/>.

³⁴ UK Government, “Past Prime Ministers”, last accessed 1 April 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/history/past-prime-ministers>.

opportunity to make a step change in policy that would ordinarily be considered (politically) too high a risk. Given that the Conservative party has remained in power since 2010, despite pursuing a huge austerity programme shortly after its election to power, might suggest Boris Johnson has a similar opportunity to make sweeping changes.

One must also consider how an increasingly environmentally conscientious population will feel about its expeditionary military continuing to burn huge quantities of fossil fuels fighting unpopular wars it may not be able to win.³⁵ Flying uninterrupted combat air patrols over troubled regions of the world that often offer very little operational benefit will certainly not help the British Government meet its very public goal of reaching net zero carbon emissions by 2050.³⁶ Further, and linking back to the economic perspective, achieving such ambitious environmental goals will require significant investment from the government; spending of up to £5 billion per year on overseas military operations, as shown in Figure 6 at Annex A, would be a useful amount to receive back into the UK coffers to invest elsewhere.

³⁵ Gian P. Gentile, *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency*... This talks of the difficulty in decisively winning COIN campaigns, such those currently being fought in Iraq and Afghanistan.

³⁶ Royal Air Force, "Combatting Daesh: the Air Campaign," last accessed 2 April 2020, <https://www.raf.mod.uk/what-we-do/overview/combating-daesh/>. The Royal Air Force reports on its website that it flew 8000 sorties to strike 1500 Daesh targets in Iraq and Syria between 2014 and 2017, i.e. 80% of sorties did not result in the prosecution of an enemy target; "New target will require the UK to bring all greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050." UK Government, "UK Becomes First Major Economy to Pass Zero Emissions Law," *Gov.uk*, 27 June 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-becomes-first-major-economy-to-pass-net-zero-emissions-law>; Alistair Smout, "British Airways owner IAG commits to net zero carbon emissions by 2050," *Reuters*, 10 October 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-climate-change-britain-iag/british-airways-owner-iag-commits-to-net-zero-carbon-emissions-by-2050-idUSKBN1WP125>. Such is the popularity of this environmental goal amongst the British public, that British Airways has also committed to being carbon neutral by 2050 even though it has little idea of how to achieve it.

Finally, although the liberally minded British public may feel morally obliged to support military ‘wars of choice’ and feel a ‘responsibility to protect’ (RtP) vulnerable populations in extremis, they may equally view war as a failure of government.³⁷ In terms of UK politics, it is not a stretch or too contentious to suggest that the UK faces some difficult years ahead, and therefore focussing on its own need to recover and grow over expensive military operations overseas would probably be a popular policy; primarily due to the likely hugely damaging Covid-19 pandemic, both emotionally and economically, at a time when the UK is yet to establish how it will do business with many of its biggest trade partners as it leaves the European single market.

Before discussing how the international community might view the proposed change in policy, it is worth first considering what it might expect of the British military. It is important to note that “alliances help keep armies small and serve to constrain the circumstances in which they may be used”, or as Alan Henrikson put it:³⁸

No one country any longer has either the physical capacity, the intellectual competence, or, manifestly, the political will to attempt to manage the transition to a new world order by itself. The increasing complexity of world affairs and the multiplication of problems to be dealt with require wider participation and a more cooperative conception of the work to be done.³⁹

As mentioned in the introduction, European armies are not designed to fight large wars alone. Further, because each European nation possesses limited military means, they must

³⁷ Strachen, *The Direction of War...*, 125-130. Strachen talks of how war may be perceived as a “failure of policy”, before discussing the difference between “wars of choice” and “wars of necessity”, and the origins of the phrase “responsibility to protect”, which has now been adopted by the UN; United Nations, “Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect,” last accessed 2 April 2020, <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/about-responsibility-to-protect.shtml>.

³⁸ Janne Haaland Matlary, *European Union security dynamics: in the new national interest* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

³⁹ Alan K. Henrikson, “Leadership, Cooperation and the Contribution Principle,” *NATO Review* 42, no. 1 (January 1995): 17-21, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/1995/9501-4.htm>.

be careful that their political ambitions are similarly limited to avoid “strategic incoherence”.⁴⁰ The Libyan conflict of 2011 is a recent example of European nations choosing to fight only a limited war, where the UK ostensibly only committed to a limited air campaign, and only after the UN had given its blessing.⁴¹ In broad terms, what the international community expects from Britain is for it to contribute to international security in-line with the benefits it receives because of it; Henrikson talks of this as:

The contribution principle, as it may be termed, is the expectation, amounting to a norm, that individual nations will and must do what they can to help maintain international peace and security and to fulfil other essential tasks of the world community.⁴²

Remaining one of very few NATO members to consistently meet the 2% of GDP defence spending target, even if spent slightly differently, would surely give the UK some firm ground on which to argue it is indeed doing its bit. Further, given a perceived failure of costly allied COIN operations in Afghanistan and Iraq (in terms of blood, treasure and lengthy duration), is the demand for major military action really expected to continue? The current UK Secretary of State for Defence, Ben Wallace, suggests such a demand is not going to come from the US anymore.⁴³ The ‘America First’ policy of “isolationism, protectionism and restricting immigration” adopted by the current President, Donald Trump, is not only popular amongst Republicans, but also hardly contested by Democrats.⁴⁴ It therefore seems unlikely that the US is going to commit to

⁴⁰ Strachen, *The Direction of War...*,129.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁴² Henrikson, “Leadership, Cooperation and the Contribution Principle...,” 17-21.

⁴³ “London could no longer assume that its involvement in any war would be providing support to Washington.” Douglas Barrie, “UK Defence Review: Repent at Leisure,” *IISS Military Balance Blog*, 30 January 2020, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/military-balance/2020/01/uk-defence-review>.

⁴⁴ Robert Kagan, “America First Has Won,” *The New York Times*, 23 September 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/23/opinion/trump-foreign-policy-america-first.html>.

further major military operations overseas as it has in the past, which reduces the prospects of the UK being invited to fight another major 'war of choice', such as the Second Gulf War of 2003, any time soon. Yet given the excerpt below from a speech delivered to the UN by US President Bill Clinton in 1994, one could argue that the US has been here before, but unforeseen events (primarily 9/11) forced a change of heart:

The United States has a special responsibility that goes along with great power but that it would seek to fulfil that responsibility in cooperation with other nations. Working together increases the impact and the legitimacy of our actions, and sharing the burdens lessens everyone's load. The United States has no desire to be the world's policeman.⁴⁵

However, given the events of the last 20 years and the arguments already made, it is still proposed that the likelihood of US and NATO led military interventions will continue to decline by mutual consent.

Finally, parallel to this proposed decline in the will of the US and its NATO partners to lead and fight major military interventions, helpfully the UN seems to be filling the void.⁴⁶ As Conor Foley put it:

There are now more than 100,000 United Nations (UN) uniformed peace-keeping personnel deployed around the world in missions that have legal authority from the Security Council, under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, to use force to protect civilians (POC). Although such mandates have been given to missions since 1999, POC has only become a central task in more recent years.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ William J. Clinton (speech), "Building a Secure Future on the Foundation of Democracy," address to the UN General Assembly, New York City, 26 September 1994.

⁴⁶ "Recent scholarship has discerned an increasing tendency of the UN Security Council to push the boundaries of UN peacekeeping beyond traditional doctrine by equipping peace operations with ever more robust and even peace enforcement mandates." Denis M. Tull, "The Limits and Unintended Consequences of UN Peace Enforcement: The Force Intervention Brigade in the DR Congo," *International Peacekeeping Journal* 25, no. 2 (2 August 2017): 167-190, <https://doi-org.cfc.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/13533312.2017.1360139>.

⁴⁷ Conor Foley, *UN Peacekeeping Operations and the Protection of Civilians: Saving Succeeding Generations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1.

Without getting into a debate over the efficacy and success rate of UN peace enforcement operations compared to those led by the US or NATO, the greater neutrality of the UN (because of its wider membership) adds legitimacy to any military intervention. Further, as mentioned earlier whilst discussing how alliances permit smaller armies, increasing the number and variety of members who must agree to an action will also reduce the likelihood of action being taken; for example it is often difficult to get all members of the UNSC, including Russia and China, to approve the UNSC Resolutions required for Peacekeeping and RtP missions. Partaking in UN missions overseas is also seen as an opportunity by many developing nations, who gain both international recognition and monthly wages from the UN often far larger than those passed onto their soldiers.⁴⁸

The UK may therefore increasingly consider a future of ‘contribution through leadership’, and allowing developing nations operating under the more legitimate banner of the UN to fight ‘wars of choice’, rather than deploying its own armed forces en masse.⁴⁹ Although it must be acknowledged that by demonstrating its military power around the world, assuming it is actually impressive to both potential adversaries and international partners, the UK does gain some intangible benefit. Using its high technology and great depth of warfighting experience in more limited volume at key moments, or in training others, may be a more efficient way of demonstrating its military power. In sum, it also seems politically feasible, from both an internal and external perspective, for the UK to focus more of its defence spending on wider economic growth

⁴⁸ “Countries are paid to provide personnel to UN missions and the top countries providing troops are unrepresentatively poor. The amount countries are paid for providing those troops is considerably higher than the average wage in most of the countries sending large numbers of troops.” Madeleine Rees, “How much does a UN Soldier Cost?,” *BBC*, 15 February 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-43046554>.

⁴⁹ Henrikson, “Leadership, Cooperation and the Contribution Principle...,” 17-21.

over expeditionary mass. However, politics would also dictate that the UK's national security objectives still be met, which brings us to the national security perspective.

NATIONAL SECURITY

This final section will consider if the proposed shift in defence spending, from maintaining expeditionary military mass to fuelling innovation that benefits the wider British economy, is feasible from a national security perspective. This will be informed by discussing the likely threats to UK security, what relationships and tools the UK will be able to draw upon, and the so what of reducing military expeditionary mass on all of the above. As already introduced, the UK's current and clearly interdependent national security objectives are to: 'protect our people', 'project our global influence' and 'promote our prosperity'.⁵⁰

These security objectives are best achieved by the synchronised and complimentary use of all instruments of national power, i.e. national security is about much more than just military capability and equipment, even if a tempting topic of discussion.⁵¹ This need for synergy was recognised in the 2018 National Security Capability Review (NSCR) report and the release of a new UK 'Fusion Doctrine'; Theresa May commented that:

Based on the new Fusion Doctrine, this approach will ensure that in defending our national security we make better use of all of our capabilities: from economic levers, through cutting-edge military resources to our wider diplomatic and cultural influence on the world's stage. Every part of our government and every one of our agencies has its part to play.⁵²

⁵⁰ UK Government, *National Security Strategy...2015...*, 11-12.

⁵¹ UK Government, *National Security Capability Review...*, 10-11.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 2.

Figure 7 at Annex A also provides a useful visualisation of what British ‘economic’, ‘security’ and ‘influence’ tools form part of this fusion approach, which importantly also includes a greater pooling of budgets across MoD departments to encourage flexibility and lateral thought.⁵³

As the 2018 NSCR recognised, threats to national security come from both within and outside the UK.⁵⁴ Internal threats include complex challenges such as terrorism, cyber and organised crime, but also the potentially less obvious and arguably far more destabilising threat of public disorder, i.e. a breakdown in support for the government sufficient enough to threaten law and order.⁵⁵ Effectively countering some of these internal threats, but in particular terrorism and organised crime, heavily relies on the sharing of information between nations and international organisations.⁵⁶

The UK’s membership of the FIVE EYES intelligence sharing alliance remains key, but Brexit has now placed the UK’s future relationship with security organisations anchored in the EU, such as the Counter Terrorism Group (CTG), in doubt.⁵⁷ However, even if politically challenging, Nigel Inkster makes a good case for why all members would benefit from the UK’s continued involvement in such organisations and alliances:

The UK intelligence community is a major contributor to these shared arrangements. It is one of the few intelligence communities in the world with the capability to undertake counter-terrorism operations globally, including in denied areas, rather than having to wait until terrorists show up in its immediate territory, and is therefore able to provide valuable proactive and sometimes pre-emptive threat intelligence that would

⁵³ UK Government, *National Security Capability Review...*, 10-11.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁵ Riccardo Alcaro, “Europe’s Struggle in the Fraying Transatlantic Order,” *Survival* 61, no.6 (2019): 77-88, doi: [10.1080/00396338.2019.1688568](https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2019.1688568).

⁵⁶ “While the UK has chosen to leave the EU, we are unconditionally committed to European security and defence and want to work closely with our European partners to keep all of our citizens safe and our continent secure.” UK Government, *National Security Capability Review...*, 5.

⁵⁷ Nigel Inkster, “Brexit and Security,” *Survival* 60, no.6 (2018): 27-34, doi: [10.1080/00396338.2018.1542797](https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2018.1542797).

otherwise be unavailable. Most European intelligence agencies have a much more limited capability to operate in this way, or none at all.⁵⁸

Further, as discussed earlier, European nations can only afford to invest such small sums in defence if they pool their resources to pose a credible deterrent; this would be greatly diminished if the UK's significant contribution was lost from the alliance, particularly in the face of a persistent America First policy.⁵⁹ However, it remains to be seen if pragmatism will prevail.

Finally, considering the prospect of public disorder in the UK as an internal threat to national security, Richard Alcaro suggests that the 2008 financial crisis and the mass migration of refugees to Europe combined to fuel anti-establishment sentiment; he offers the decision of the British public to leave the EU against the advice of their government as evidence of this.⁶⁰ The after effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, which are likely to reduce living standards for many in the UK, may add yet more pressure to the relationship between the Government and a hard pressed public. The UK Government will need to take account of this when deciding how to employ its military, and in particular, whether further military interventions overseas are wise in this context.

⁵⁸ Inkster, "Brexit and Security..." 27-34.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ "The Obama years, especially his first term, coincided with the global recession, which originated in the US and affected the US economy most heavily, and with the ensuing eurozone crisis. At the same time, migration flows towards Europe, starting in or transiting through a Middle East roiled by political upheavals and civil conflicts, steeply increased. These economic and demographic shocks cemented the perception that European governments were unable to manage their economies or control their borders. The new narrative in both Europe and America was one of individual and national disempowerment by unaccountable 'globalist' elites. Channelled through and amplified by social media, this storyline fuelled widespread scepticism about, and later outright resentment towards, established parties, mainstream media, and expert technocratic and scientific analysis." Riccardo Alcaro, "Europe's Struggle in the Fraying Transatlantic Order..." 77-88.

Now focussing on external threats, it is time to address the elephant in the room, is ‘major war’ likely and how does the UK best prevent it?⁶¹ Although this paper is not proposing a reduction in spending on the UK’s nuclear deterrent, it is worth briefly understanding the logic for maintaining this expensive capability. As Colin Gray highlights, history repeatedly reminds us of the human will to fight for major gains.⁶² Even Michael Mandelbaum, who twenty years ago wrote about the ‘obsolescence of major war’, now believes that the risk of major war may have returned as governments pursue aggressive nationalist policies to gain public support where economic growth is lacking; the Russian invasion of Crimea may be one example of this.⁶³

Although one could argue that the world’s greatest nuclear powers simply have too much to lose from waging major war in a globalised economy, having a credible nuclear deterrent in uncertain times seems like a wise insurance policy.⁶⁴ Having this strategic capability also gives the UK influence and should help it retain its beneficial position within the UNSC and NATO. Interestingly, this strategic capability only consumes around 10-15% of the MOD’s annual equipment support budget and around 15-20% of its future equipment spending plans.⁶⁵ So, although it may become

⁶¹ A ‘major war’ is usually defined as “a great war between nation states.” Colin Gray, “Clausewitz Rules, OK? The Future Is the Past-with GPS,” *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 5 (1999): 161–182, doi: [10.1017/S0260210599001618](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210599001618).

⁶² “It is true that interstate wars are rare occurrences in the current era. However, it would only take one or two such rare events to spoil a decade, or even a century. Major war, employing every class of weapon in the arsenal, remains possible in a world where states remain the final arbiters of their own security.” *Ibid.*

⁶³ Michael Mandelbaum, “Is Major War Still Obsolete?,” *Survival* 61, no.5: 65-71, doi: [10.1080/00396338.2019.1662104](https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2019.1662104).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ National Audit Office, *Ministry of Defence Annual Report and Accounts 2018-19* (UK: Ministry of Defence, 25 July 2019), 196, <https://www.nao.org.uk/report/ministry-of-defence-annual-report-and-accounts-2018-19/>. Records that £3.8 billion was spent on supporting the British nuclear deterrent in 2018/19, which was around 10% of the total defence budget, although this does not include continuing disposal and waste management costs of around £1 billion per annum (numbers likely to vary year by year); Figure 3 at Annex A shows that £46.7 billion of the £188.4 billion defence equipment spending plan

increasingly difficult to convince the British public to spend large sums on defence, it could be argued that the UK nuclear deterrent offers good value for money compared to maintaining large conventional forces.⁶⁶ Such a debate is beyond the scope of this paper however.

National security, in a world where nuclear weapons reduce the probability of major war, is heavily dependent on relationships and the strength of mutually beneficial alliances. Most significant of these relationships, at least for the next twenty years or so, is the UK and Europe's relationship with the US.⁶⁷ As Alcaro noted, "the EU can only thrive in a rules-based international order" and the US has traditionally provided "the hard power needed to permit that order to function and prosper".⁶⁸ Although Alcaro places some doubt over the long-term commitment of the US in this regard, Jeffrey Anderson et al provide a sound counter argument:

Historically, Europe's bond with the United States has been exceptionally resilient. In return for fealty to US foreign policy, the United States has guaranteed Europe's security and amplified its influence by agreeing to European over-representation in multilateral institutions such as the UN Security Council and the International Monetary Fund. Extensive societal connections and shared values have turned an interest-based, pragmatic partnership into a normative bond capable of enduring severe shocks.⁶⁹

is allocated to submarines, the majority of which will be consumed by the building of the four 'Dreadnaught' class submarines that will replace the current 'Trident' class that presently carry the UK nuclear deterrent.

⁶⁶ Increasingly difficult due to both the rise of anti-establishment feeling within the UK and the economic hardship likely to be experienced by the British public post the Covid-19 pandemic, as already discussed.

⁶⁷ Derek Scissors, "US-China: Who is Bigger and When," *AEI Paper & Studies* (March 2019), <https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-582399320/us-china-who-is-bigger-and-when>. This is one of a number of academic articles that suggest China will not overtake the US economically for many years, if ever. Further, although comparing the likely future military might of China and the US over the next 20 years is beyond the scope of this paper, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that the US will most probably still have a significant military advantage over China in 2040.

⁶⁸ Riccardo Alcaro, "Europe's Struggle in the Fraying Transatlantic Order..." 77-88.

⁶⁹ Jeffrey J. Anderson, G. John Ikenberry and Thomas Risse, *The End of the West? Crises and Change in the Atlantic Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

The future of the UK's relationship with the EU, which with the UK has the mass to engage with the US on equal terms, will influence how the US views the utility of its European partners.⁷⁰ As the UK recognised in its 2018 NSCR, its security is intrinsically linked with that of Europe. Further, the UK must hope that US citizens feel as strongly as the British public about not committing to further major military interventions, because if the US asked, the British may again feel it had no choice but to acquiesce.

Next, one must consider the viable alternatives to major military intervention and what tools other than an expeditionary military the UK has to offer. Again, Henrikson offers some useful ideas and suggests that there are essentially three approaches to conflict: avoidance, intervention, or containment.⁷¹ He also introduced the concept of 'constructive containment', which in brief translates to resisting the expansion of a threat whilst mediating reconciliation between stakeholders.⁷² As noted by Inkster earlier in this section, the UK has the advantage of a world leading intelligence network over other countries such as Canada that have enjoyed significant success with this approach.⁷³

Whilst on the topic of intelligence agencies, Rory Cormac also reminds us of the wider utility of covert action, a tool the British government has "long used flexibly and pragmatically as a means of bypassing or masking constraints heralded by decline".⁷⁴

Cormack sees covert action as an integral part of hybrid warfare and as a "wider form of

⁷⁰ Riccardo Alcaro, "Europe's Struggle in the Fraying Transatlantic Order..." 77-88.

⁷¹ Alan K. Henrikson, "Constructive Containment: Introduction to Alternatives to Military Intervention," Fletcher Forum of World Affairs 19, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 1995): 1-18.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*; Inkster, "Brexit and Security..." 27-34.

⁷⁴ Rory Cormac, *Disrupt and Deny: Spies, Special Forces and the Secret Pursuit of British Foreign Policy* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2018), 11. Cormac argues that the UK has been in managed decline since the 1950's, however given the likely damaging after effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and Brexit, his thoughts relating to masking decline seem particularly pertinent.

interventionism”.⁷⁵ Finally, the UK still has a technological advantage over, or at least parity with, the majority of would be adversaries, which as Warren Chin observes below, allows the UK to contribute to conflict at lower human cost:

Technology gave western governments the internal independence to prosecute wars because they demanded little sacrifice from society. In a period characterized by a plethora of politically unpopular ‘wars of choice’, this allowed states to employ force in pursuit of even vague, value-based objectives. Most importantly, these new means of war enabled nuclear-armed states to continue fighting each other in the space between war and peace using both military and non-military means.⁷⁶

From a national security perspective, if the UK wishes to retain its global ambitions and economic growth, it must not only retain its nuclear deterrent, but also maintain mutually beneficial security relationships with the US and Europe (Germany and France in particular as the most powerful nations in the EU). Whether the UK can achieve this with a smaller expeditionary military depends on the likely demand for their services from these key partner nations and how accepting they may be of the UK’s contribution by other means. These could include providing access to intelligence, covert action, high technology and mediation as an alternative to high troop numbers, which could be provided by developing nations keen to operate under the banner of the UN. In sum, unless the US unexpectedly commits to further major wars of choice in which British involvement is implicit, it also seems feasible from a national security perspective to focus on defence innovation over maintaining expeditionary mass.

⁷⁵ Rory Cormac and Richard J. Aldrich, “Grey is the New Black: Covert Action and Implausible Deniability,” *International Affairs* 94, no. 3 (May 2018): 477–494, <https://doi-org.cfc.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/ia/iyy067>.

⁷⁶ Warren Chin, “Technology, War and the State: Past, Present and Future,” *International Affairs* 95, no. 4 (July 2019): 782, <https://doi-org.cfc.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/ia/iiz106>.

CONCLUSION AND THE FUTURE

After suggesting there could be an increasing internal demand for a new approach to national security in the UK, this paper has proven that it should be feasible to focus a greater proportion of defence spending on innovation over expeditionary military mass. To make the case, this paper looked at the feasibility of this proposal from an economic, political and national security perspective. Although some risks were highlighted and mitigating actions suggested, the proposed shift in focus was found to be feasible from all three perspectives, albeit with some caveats.

Economically speaking, the UK would be better served investing its defence expenditure in growth areas such as cyber, space and data, which are more likely to result in innovation and competitive advantage that is sellable to a wider commercial market. Although the British defence sector currently contributes much to the wider economy, particularly when one considers indirect benefits such as the training of transferable skills, this does not mean it could not focus more on products that generate better returns. However, this must not come at the expense of the UK's relationships with its most powerful allies on which it relies to maintain its international standing and continued security.

Considering the political perspective, it was noted that the UK would need to ensure that there was both sufficient internal appetite and external acceptance for such a change in policy. It was considered likely that a policy aimed to better serve the British economy would be popular with a population suffering the aftermath of a damaging, both economically and emotionally, Covid-19 pandemic. Such shock events were suggested to

present an opportunity to implement more radical policy changes, rather than waiting for more certain times as argued by Douglas Barrie prior to the Covid-19 pandemic below:

The UK might want to wait a few years until the dust has settled before making big decisions about spending priorities and the shape and size of its security apparatus.... not only is the future relationship between the UK and the US in flux, but how London views and is seen by the EU as a military partner has yet to become apparent.⁷⁷

Looking externally, the US seems increasingly unlikely to fight yet further major ‘wars of choice’, and therefore the call on the British military to similarly deploy major expeditionary forces should also reduce. It was noted that the UN seems to now be taking on this international policing role and that developing nations are often keen to provide the troops required to prosecute widely supported UN backed military interventions. However, to continue projecting the brand of a ‘Global Britain’ and to avoid difficult questions from its most powerful allies, the UK should maintain its commitment to meeting the 2% of GDP defence spending NATO target. Any change in focus away from expeditionary military mass would also have to be carefully stage managed to show the UK is not reducing its contribution, but simply contributing in other equally valuable ways.

From a national security perspective, recently published reviews show the UK Government is already seriously looking for smarter ways to meet its national security objectives, whilst better supporting the wider economy. It was suggested that the UK’s security is intrinsically linked to that of Europe, not just due to geography, but because a European alliance that includes the UK has the mass to compete with the US et al. The

⁷⁷ Douglas Barrie, *UK Defence Review: Repent at Leisure*, IISS Military Balance Blog, 30 January 2020. <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/military-balance/2020/01/uk-defence-review>.

UK is also expected to overcome the political challenges of Brexit to retain its place within EU anchored intelligence sharing alliances that contribute to countering the internal threats of terrorism and organised crime. However, worryingly, there appears to be a growing anti-establishment sentiment in the UK, which if not managed carefully by the Government, could lead to public disorder and significant long-term damage.

Considering external threats, it was proposed that although major war with another state seems unlikely, the maintenance of a credible nuclear deterrent and the strength of the UK's security alliances (most notably NATO) remain key. Whilst discussing the alternatives to military intervention, it was suggested that the UK could employ its intelligence agencies, high technology and new 'fusion' approach to contribute to conflict prevention or containment at a lower cost. Further, given the UK's significant soft power and high international standing, it could look to act more as a mediator and 'constructive contributor', rather than the provider of expensive military mass.

Finally, unless the US unexpectedly again starts committing to major wars of choice, rather than taking the opportunity to play a supporting role to the UN, the proposed shift away from expeditionary military mass also seems feasible from a national security perspective. In sum, what has been proposed here seems both logical and feasible, but it will be interesting to see if the British Government has both the capacity and confidence to see the difficult days ahead as an opportunity to improve, rather than an obstacle.

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ANNEX A - FIGURES

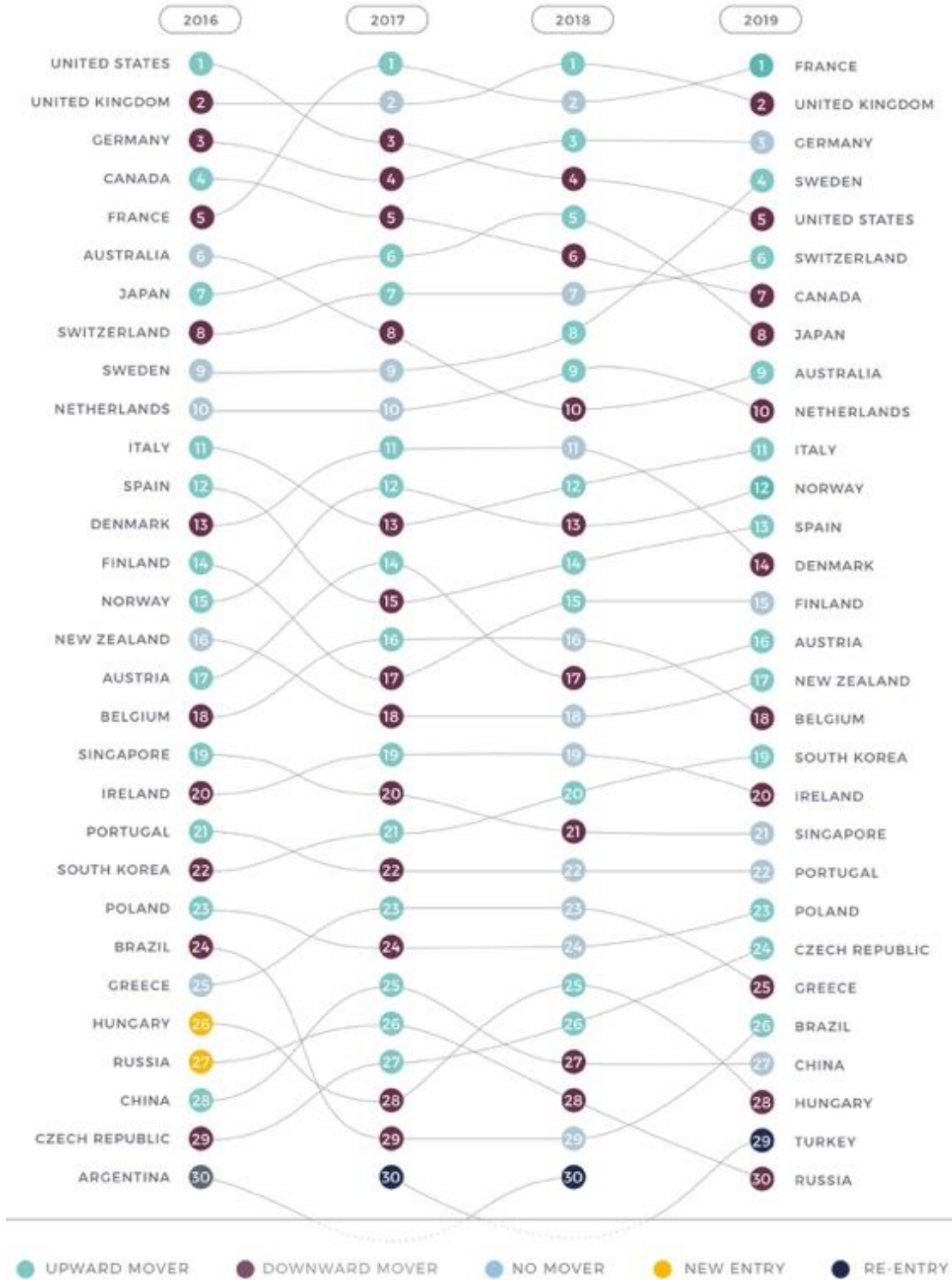


Figure 1 -- Soft Power 30 Ranking of Nations 2016 - 2019

Source: The Soft Power 30, 2019 Report, 40.

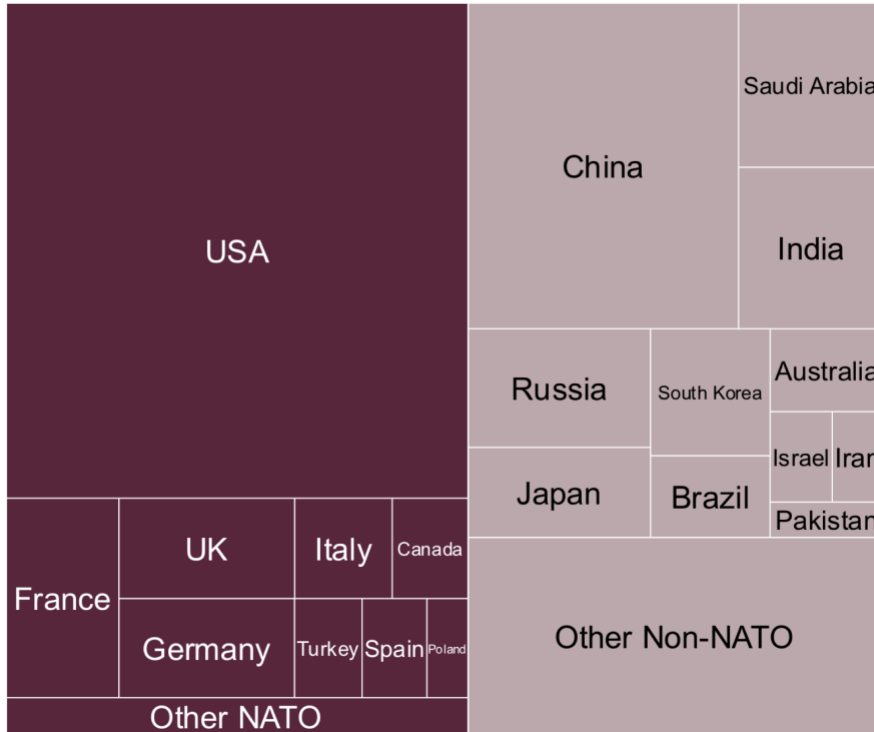


Figure 2 – Global Military Expenditure in 2018 Based on Market Exchange Rates

Source: Ministry of Defence, *International Defence Expenditure 2019*, 7.

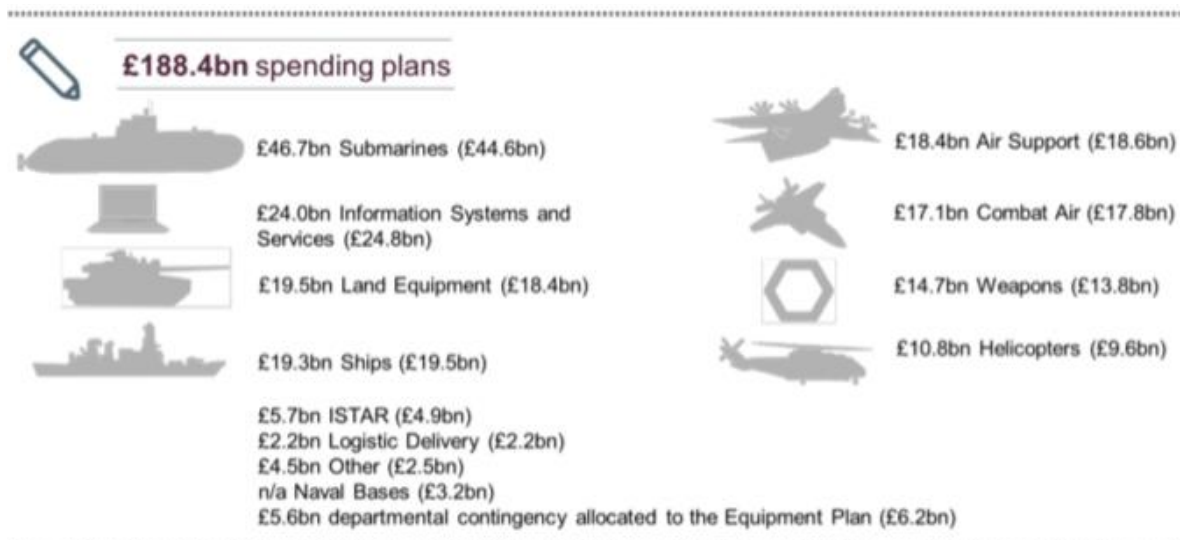


Figure 3 – UK Defence Equipment Spending Plan 2019

Source: Ministry of Defence, *The Defence Equipment Plan 2019*, 6.

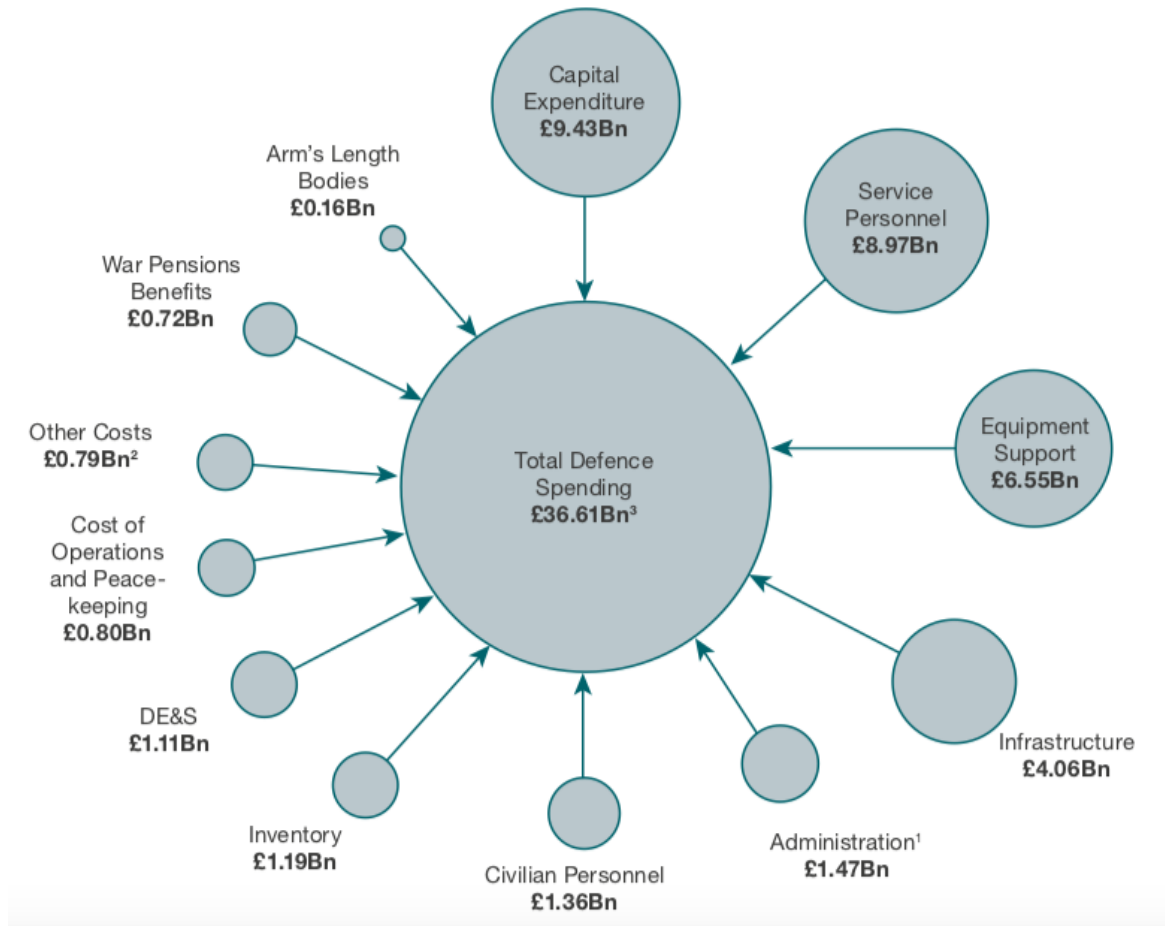
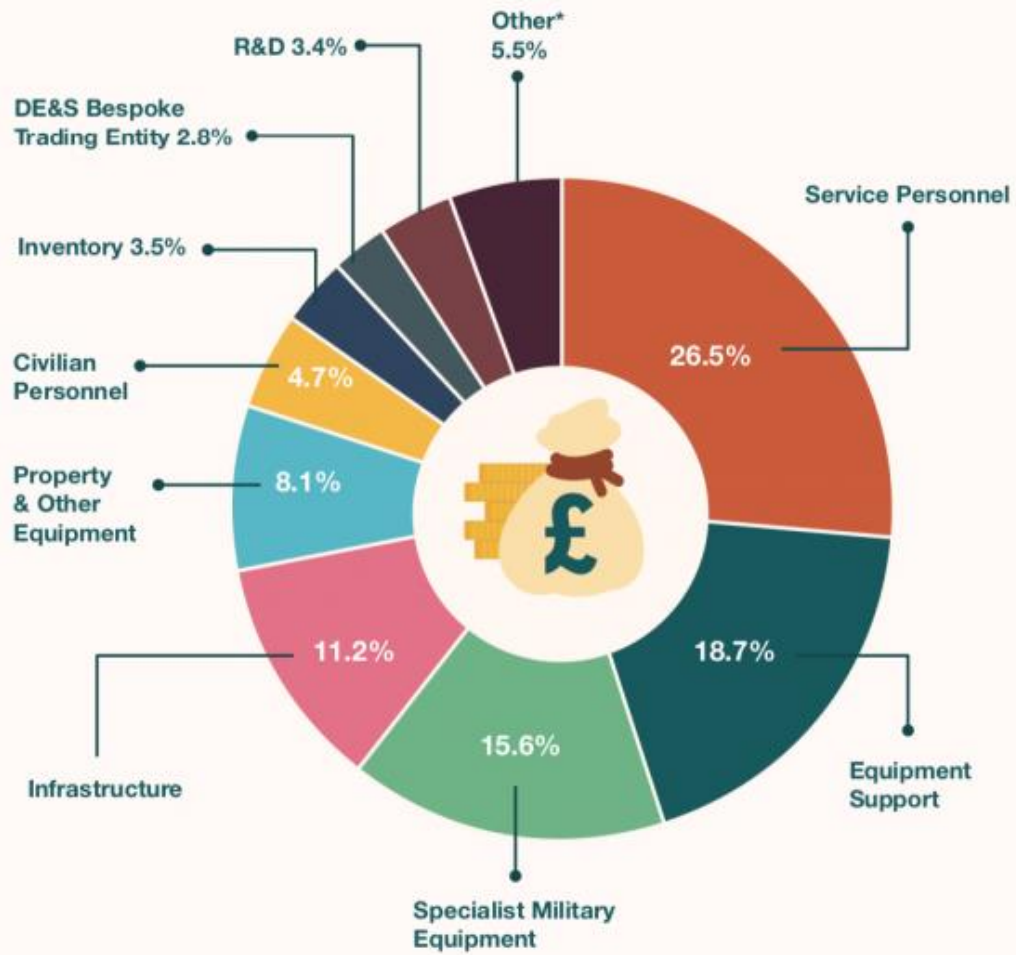


Figure 4 – UK MOD Expenditure in 2017-18

Source: Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report and Accounts 2017–18*, 16.

The breakdown of Defence Expenditure in 2017/18 was:



*Other includes travel & subsistence, professional services & fees, training, receipts from various sources, costs recoveries, dividends, interest, release of provisions, Conflict Stability and Security Fund, War Pension Benefits and spend on Arm's Length Bodies.

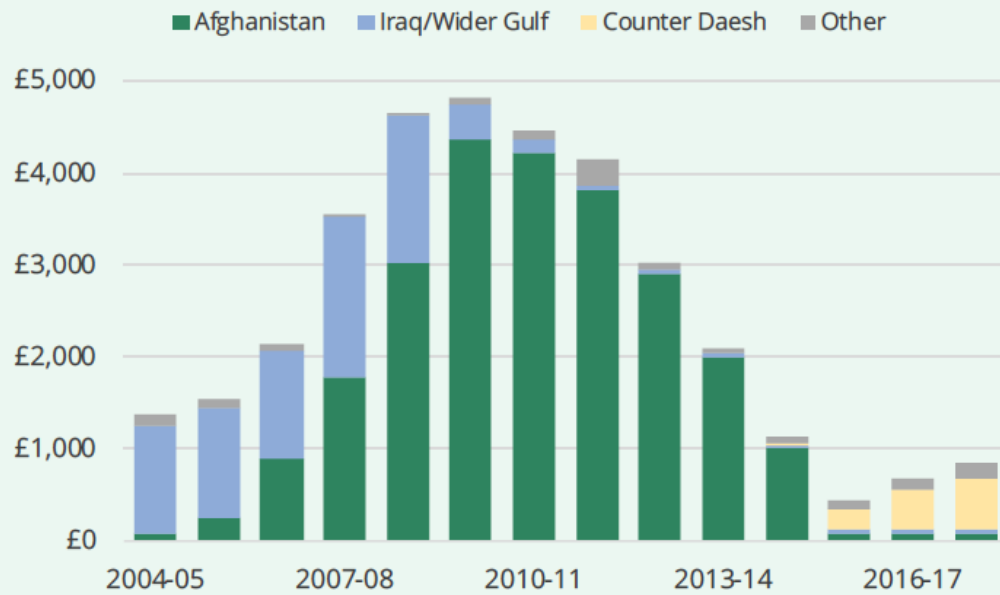
Source: MOD Annual Report & Accounts 2017/18

Figure 5 – UK Defence Expenditure in 2017/18

Source: The Week, *UK Defence Spending: where the money goes.*

THE COST OF MILITARY OPERATIONS

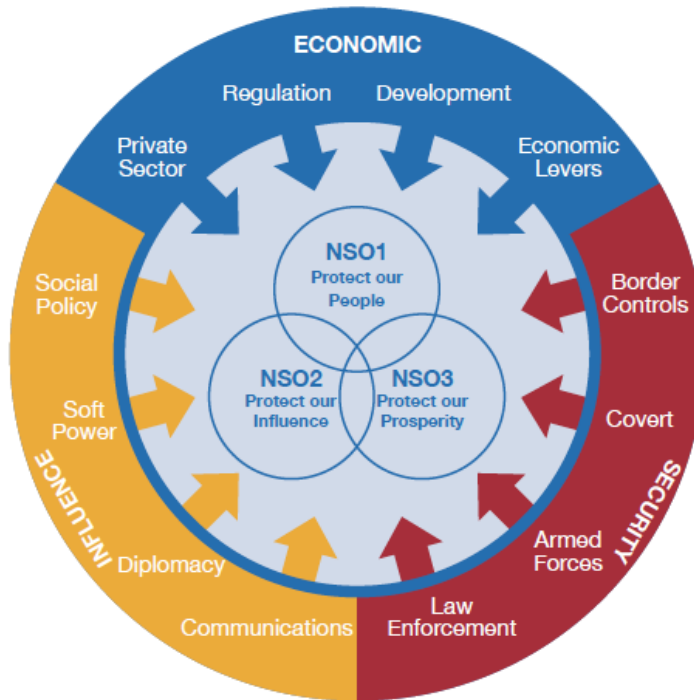
Annual audited cost of military operations, £ million in real terms at 2017/18 prices



Source: MOD, Defence Department Resources 2018, table 6b; HMT, GDP Deflators September 2018

Figure 6 – Audited Annual Cost of UK Military Operations from 2004 to 2017

Source: House of Commons Library, *Defence Expenditure*, 11.



Principle: "To deploy security, economic and influence capabilities to protect, promote and project our national security, economic and influence goals."

Figure 7 – Fusion Approach to Achieving UK National Security Objectives

Source: UK Government, *National Security Capability Review 2018*, 10.