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THE DEFENCE INVESTMENT PLAN: HOPING FOR TOO MUCH

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For 25 years the UK has spent considerable time and resource conducting defence and national security reviews. The effort expended in constructing these documents has been significant. By contrast, the promises each has made – usually about making the UK more secure – have never been delivered. In 2025 the Labour government issued another wordy Strategic Defence Review and raised defence spending, with another promise to grow defence capability and capacity. The detail was due to be delivered in a Defence Investment Plan by Autumn 2025, which would – apparently – set out a decade long plan for investment, prioritisation, commercial contracts, military spending, force design, and personnel numbers. Given the record of governments from all political persuasions over the past quarter century, one might well wonder why anyone takes this seriously?

The 1998 Defence Review outlined a funded force model around the Joint Rapid Reaction Force. The 2010 SDSR unveiled a military force structure known as Future Force 2020. By the 2015 SDSR, this was deemed unaffordable and a new force was outlined as Joint Force 2025. In 2017, the National Security Capability Review and the Modernising Defence Programme planned no cuts to the existing force structure but, in reality, abandoned Joint Force 2025 and continued to salami slice defence capabilities without ordering replacements for major programmes. By the 2021 Integrated Review, an entirely new force structure was revealed: Integrated Force 2030. This was not a force in structure, rather a philosophy for putting technology ahead of people, and rhetoric ahead of reality. The funding to deliver the changes required was not put in place, leaving the UK military able to detect a good deal of activity but without the capability to do anything about it (information ahead of action).

This short history tells a story; since 1998 successive governments have outlined an ambition and a force structure they believed necessary to match the strategic challenges that the UK faced but have then failed to fund and deliver it, alongside continuing cuts ('efficiencies') to the necessary enablers and training that make a military force credible. This is not an uncommon situation for the United Kingdom and its political relationship with defence and military spending. Since the 1970s, politicians of all parties and persuasions have regarded the military as a lower priority than welfare spending, rescuing banks, pensions, or healthcare. That attitude is probably an accurate reflection of short-term populist sentiment, but not indicative of responsible government behaviour.

Nonetheless, the forthcoming Defence Investment Plan continues to be hailed as a reset of British defence capabilities. There is a fair amount of excited anticipation and even passion associated with this document from industry, politicians, and the

military itself. But why should this be? Given that no government has delivered on the promises made in similar documents over the past 25 years, and that the fiscal ideology of the current government makes spending the necessary sums unrealistic without (apparently unthinkable) tax rises, any force design outlined by the promised Defence Investment Plan is likely to be as much of a paper tiger as all the others outlined in 1998, 2010, 2015, 2017 and 2021.

Worse still, the delays in outlining the priorities for recapitalisation of the UK armed forces have placed Britain at the back of an already long queue for arms and ammunition, now exacerbated after Operation EPIC FURY. Scarce materials needed for any proposed rearmament now have a healthy multi-year waiting list from others who made their orders more than six months ago. A belief that any 'special relationship' will elevate the UK position in the order books of US companies is hardly warranted. Britain's increasingly shaky relationship with the US Trump administration undermines expectations of US support while the US's desperate need to restock missiles and systems after the expenditure on a short war with Iran will delay any US system updates and delivery by around five years.

But at least the UK's Defence Secretary, John Healey, can claim credit for creating a new military strategic headquarters and for appointing a National Armaments Director. Apart from making the UK's military forces much weaker over the two years since its election, these are the only successes that this Labour government can claim in terms of national security. More bureaucracy and less fighting power; national credibility has been degraded with allies and adversaries alike, deterrence has been reduced, resilience and preparedness now stand at all-time lows. Morale across the fighting force, and the supporting infrastructure (that includes defence industries), is reportedly at rock bottom.

The underlying issue for all politicians, and military chiefs, is their inability to persuade the Treasury and other cabinet colleagues that national security is a higher priority than other areas of the UK public sector. With a plethora of demands on the public finances, those representing national security have demonstrated an inability to debate, cajole, persuade, and coerce their peers from across government that more resource is required. Weak ministerial representation across the defence portfolio has not helped. But military chiefs must also bear some of the responsibility. An inability to explain their case to defence ministers, in clear and compelling terms, provides those political incumbents with no ammunition to take to cabinet meetings. Equally, the inability of defence chiefs to explain their case in open and honest terms to bodies that scrutinise government defence policy (primarily, the House of Commons Defence Select Committee and the Joint Committee on National Security Strategy), does not

aid their case. Until defence leaders, political and military, learn to debate and persuade others across Whitehall it seems unlikely that a change in government spending priorities will happen.

If one believes the continued announcements from the Labour government, the UK's latest Defence Investment Plan will be issued sometime in 2026. It might be a detailed document outlining spending allocations, priorities, force structure details, funded recapitalisation, exercise, training, and infrastructure plans, as well as identifying those areas that will be no longer supported and must be cut away. More likely, however, the plan will be a set of broad guidelines that satisfies no one. In either case, it won't really matter. The evidence tells us that no British government will stick to a funded plan for as long as a decade. A myriad reasons for adapting, changing, 'transforming', or evolving what is (and is not) funded will be offered. One cannot be surprised that defence industry has trouble in holding faith with any British government over announcements on military spending: their corporate memories over changes, amendments, cancelled contracts, and deferred money over 25 years make investment a risky proposition.

So, what needs to happen? Publishing the Defence Investment Plan is important but not vital. The release of cash to the Ministry of Defence and fighting arms is. Continued cuts to training, maintenance and infrastructure further reduces the credibility of the UK as a military actor – as do the enforced deployment lengths of British units. The devil will be in the detail; more well-meant speeches from political defence chiefs will not halt the very real decline in capability being experienced. That detail will follow on from the publication of the Defence Investment Plan in whatever form it takes: each arm of the UK military will be required to undertake their own investment decisions when the cash settlement from the Treasury is announced. One might hope to see defence contracts start being negotiated by the middle of 2027. But the gordian knot remains in the amount allocated to the military and national security: there are a variety of levers that the Treasury could use to fund the necessary investment, from membership the DSR Bank to dedicated tax rises, or even the removal of VAT from military spending. But, again, it is incumbent on defence chiefs—both political and military—to make the case. As yet, there are few signs they are capable of doing so.

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Professor Peter Roberts is a Senior Associate Fellow, previously Director of Military Sciences, at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI). His work at RUSI is centred around research on contemporary conflict, the development and trends in how we fight, and trying to understand what the norms and behaviours will be in future conflict between major military forces. During his eight years in the academic world, Peter was a regular commentator for global media outlets, provided evidence to parliaments around the world on military matters, and advised UK and foreign ministers, military chiefs and governments on conflict, force design, and the future risks from warfare. Prior to joining RUSI, Peter spent twenty-three years in the Royal Navy as a warfare officer and served all over the world with a variety of militaries and agencies.

Comment

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