

***'The SDSR: Tough Choices for Tough Times – Are We Making the Right Decisions?'***

On Tuesday 16<sup>th</sup> November, Global Strategy Forum (GSF) held a seminar entitled *'The SDSR: Tough Choices for Tough Times – Are We Making the Right Decisions?'* The seminar took place in the **House of Lords** under the co-chairmanship of the **Rt Hon Michael Ancram** and the **Rt Hon Jack Straw MP**.

The speakers were: Mr. Jonathan Clarke (JC), Managing Partner, Washington Analysis and Assessment Service; Professor Michael Clarke (MC), Director, Royal United Services Institute; Mr. Brian Hanrahan (BH), BBC World Diplomatic Editor; Field Marshal the Lord Inge (PI), Former Chief of the Defence Staff; Commodore Steven Jermy (SJ), former Strategy Director in the British Embassy, Kabul; Rt Hon Lord King (TK), Former Defence Secretary; Mr. Phil Marker (PM), Head, Conflict, Humanitarian and Security Department, DFID; Rear Admiral Alan Richards (AR), Assistant Chief of Defence Staff (Strategy and Plans), MOD. Additional audience participants (identified in this summary as speakers) included Admiral Lord Alan West (AW), Bernard Jenkin MP (BJ) and Lord Lee (JL).

The following main themes emerged:

**The SDSR philosophy:** One presentation (AR) described the methodology that underlay the SDSR in considerable detail. This included such factors as ends, ways and means, the division between national contingencies and allied cooperative operations, the gradations in states of readiness, the need to protect the national industrial base and technical skill levels, and the vulnerability of cost assumptions to external factors. It stressed the connection between the SDSR and earlier reviews. Nonetheless, a number of speakers (PI, TK, SJ, BJ) drew on their cabinet or high military experience to question how accurately any review can foresee the future as far ahead as 2020. One (MC) pointed the high degree of uncertainty in the international environment. Examples were cited of the end of the Cold War, the reunification of Germany, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and 9/11 resulting in the invasion of Afghanistan.

**The limitations of futurology:** Given these limitations on our ability to forecast contingencies, many speakers (MC, TK, AW, PM) emphasised that a core requirement was to avoid allowing defence planning to limit options or to produce rigid structures. Of prime importance was the need to preserve flexibility, mobility and adaptability. One speaker (BJ) described this as a 'string and sealing wax

mentality', that is, retaining the ability to improvise at low cost. It was suggested (AW) that aircraft carriers best represented these qualities, whereas (MC) suggested that the relative over-proportion of ground forces in the UK force profile might limit options. Others (SJ, TK) stressed the need for high quality special force and intelligence capabilities.

**Governance issues:** Questions were raised about whether UK government structures were well adapted to execute strategy. One speaker (PI) faulted the 'demise of cabinet government' for the failure to plan adequately for the post-conflict phase in Iraq; another (SJ) highlighted strategic missteps in force deployments in Afghanistan which he traced to poor coordination between Whitehall departments (in contrast to a better inter-departmental cohesion in the field) and a failure to identify the competing dynamics in play within Islam. It was suggested (AW) that the miscalculations implicit in the Afghan deployment raised serious questions about the government's ability to conduct grand strategy or even (SJ) basis political analysis. Radicalisation of Muslim opinion had resulted. One speaker (JL) raised the question of whether the MOD decision-making structures were 'fit for purpose', being overcomplicated and redundant. By contrast, another speaker (PM) underlined the closeness of cooperation between DFID and the FCO and MOD.

**The threat environment:** While uncertainty was an major feature of the international landscape, speakers (MC, TK) agreed that the UK would remain a global player with the British 'way of life' needing to be defended in a global order where the earlier favourable balance of power to the West was no longer 'uncontested.' Threats identified (TK) included resource competition, population dislocation through climate change, terrorism, cyber attacks, nuclear proliferation and piracy. Many speakers agreed that the UK needed to retain the capability for sovereign operations, for example in defence of the Falklands or even the 'defence of the realm.' One (PM) identified the need to use development tools to address fragile states like Yemen, 'ungoverned spaces' like Somalia and uncontrolled migration. This brought with it a need to build capacity. At its best, actions of this sort could mitigate conflict.

**The implications of the shifting US role:** While one presentation (JC) outlined a relative lack of interest in Europe in the US, another (PI) stated that NATO remained an important aspect of US thinking. One speaker (MC) posited a shift away from Europe to Asia and the Pacific, especially if the US commitment to Afghanistan is extended beyond 2011. This raised the question of whether the UK needed to revive an "East of Suez" strategy in the form of a much closer relationship with India, greater involvement in the Persian Gulf and also of whether new thinking was required toward continental Europe. It was pointed out (AR) that US personnel had

been fully integrated into the SDSR process as had UK experts in the US Quadrennial Defense Review process. Doubts were raised (SJ) about how significant the UK military contribution was to US operational capabilities.

**The Nuclear Dimension:** While one audience participant questioned whether the UK should retain its independent nuclear deterrent, the balance of opinion among speakers (TK, PI) was firmly in favour. The rationale was to preserve the UK's sovereign ability to respond to national contingencies. One issue was whether nuclear modernisation should be funded out of MOD funds or out of wider government funds.

**Procurement Decisions:** while the seminar did not set out to examine particular equipment decisions, inevitably this aspect arose. Discussion focused on the future role of the aircraft carrier fleet, the number of frigates, the ability to deploy and sustain a brigade globally and the decision to abandon the Harrier. One speaker (AW) emphasised the Indian and Chinese interest in carrier capabilities. In answer to these criticisms, one speaker (AR) defended the thinking implicit in the SDSR which has led to these decisions. He stressed that all decisions has been based on a comprehensive involvement of the relevant Whitehall departments and, where necessary, had been coordinated with the US.

**The US and other alliances:** One audience participant raised the question of whether the UK's traditional alliances were still valid. The US was described as an 'ageing power.' Speakers (MC, TK, PI) gave their views that it was still in the UK interest to remain close to the US.

**Public opinion:** While the majority of the seminar was conducted between serving or former high officials or defence-focused parliamentarians, one speaker (BH) addressed the role of public opinion in defence policy. While he suggested that public opinion was generally supportive of official positions, there were instances (Greenham Common, CND, the post-Cold War peace dividend) where public opinion diverged. There was a risk today that public opinion might react against '24/7' Cold War policies in force deployment. He suggested that the main competition for defence spending came not from other defence-related items but from civilian priorities. He recommended that the defence debate, including a public defence of the SDSR, needed to be conducted in wider circles than inside the MOD. This included other previously secret agencies like MI6. Some of these concerns were echoed in audience questions on, for example, whether modern warfare was really a 'war of ideas' and whether nation states were the best equipped to counter this.