



King's Research Portal

DOI:

[10.1093/ia/iiz101](https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz101)

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Uttley, M. R. H., Wilkinson, B. J., & van Rij, A. L. M. (2019). A Power for the future? Global Britain and the future character of conflict. *International Affairs*, 95(4), 801-816. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz101>

Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact librarypure@kcl.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

A Power for the Future? Global Britain and the Future Character of Conflict

Matthew Uttley, Benedict Wilkinson & Armida van Rij

Abstract

This article explores the way that the United Kingdom's (UK) armed forces plan for and predict the character of future conflicts in which they may become involved. We ask how successful the UK is in building these visions of the future into its current defence policy decision-making. We conclude that while it is the duty of the state to plan for new forms of conflict in the future, in practice the UK's vision of future operating environments is significantly shaped by the past and the present. We argue that this is because existing UK defence policy is driven by previous choices, investments and events, rather than by the way it conceives of the future. These 'path dependencies' mean that while future planning may be considered important by the UK, its primary effect is to validate the UK's existing defence policy assumptions, force structures and existing procurement choices.

Introduction

There is a famous Clausewitzian axiom that the nature of war remains constant but its character is constantly changing.¹ War is always brutal, but the weapons with which it is fought, as much as how and where it is fought are always shifting, buffeted by political and social forces as much as technological ones. It is precisely because the character of war is constantly changing that militaries continuously obsess about the future: they suffer from a constant fear of being outdone by technological advantage, or surprised by some previously unnoticed rival, or caught unprepared by some new-fangled threat. Indeed, the history of war is littered with examples of unexpected victors cashing in on some unexpected advantage: the longbow, the rifle, the computer.² With the potential for surprises, shocks and 'unknown unknowns' around every corner, it is not surprising that states invest significant resources in anticipating and responding to the ever-changing character of the future conflicts in which they conceive they might become involved.

But how successful are militaries in absorbing their own visions of the future into their current plans and structures? For all their predictions and prophecies, how much of this really influences their choices in the present? In this article, we ask these questions of the United Kingdom, focusing on its efforts to anticipate and adapt to the future, through what it terms the 'Future Character of Conflict' (or, more recently, the 'Future Operating Environment'). We ask how the UK plans for the

¹ For an discussion on current debates regarding this mantra see, for example, Christopher Mewett, 'Understanding War's Enduring Nature Alongside its Changing Character', *War on the Rocks*, 21 January 2014, <https://warontherocks.com/2014/01/understanding-wars-enduring-nature-alongside-its-changing-character/> [accessed on 14 February 2018].

² See Robert O'Connell, *Of Arms and Men: A History of War, Weapons, and Aggression* (New York: Oxford University Press), 1989.

future, and how it has absorbed these visions of the future into its policy goals, force development and weapons acquisition choices. In doing so, we attempt to address a key policy problem for defence officials and practitioners: on the one hand, they are under pressure to adapt armed forces to ensure they are fit for purpose in a rapidly changing world, and on the other, defence decision-makers face a difficult task in attempting to change a system that is largely already 'set' and fixed in place by a host of previous policy decisions. In short, how does one influence a system when many of the decisions have already been made, and when 'wiggle room' is in short supply?

In asking these questions, our aim is to address gaps in two discrete literatures. Our objective is to explain the UK's approach towards adaptation in response to envisaged potential future operating environments. In doing so, we address a gap in the 'military innovation studies' literature which seeks to account for drivers of institutional inertia and change in military organisations.³ Research in this field has developed rich conceptual insights into how national militaries innovate, but the empirical focus has been primarily on ex post historical case studies, with the result that it says little about drivers of continuity and change at the higher defence policy level in anticipating and adapting to the potential future character of conflict.⁴ Our analysis seeks to shed light on this in order to inform future research directions in military innovation studies.

The second gap relates to the British defence policy studies field, where research into the institutional approach of the Ministry of Defence (MoD) towards predicting and adapting to the future operating environment has received comparatively little conceptual or empirical attention. The UK has invested significant effort and resources into analysing future conflict; since the early 1990s, it has conducted detailed risk analysis, 'horizon scanning' and 'futures' work designed and intended to inform future force development as well as policy and procurement choices in anticipation of potential future operating environments. The MoD regards its endeavours as an essential component of defence planning, and one that has been a successful exercise. But it has attracted criticism: for some in the British defence policy studies field, the MoD's performance in this activity has been questionable. These scholars point to the poor historical track record of government in predicting future events, and flaws and limitations in the application of national security risk assessments undertaken in the UK and elsewhere.⁵

³ For a comprehensive survey and analysis of the military innovation literature relating to drivers for institutional continuity and change see Stuart Griffin, 'Military Innovation Studies: Multidisciplinary or Lacking Discipline?', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40:1-2, 2017, 196-224.

⁴ See, for example, Theo Farrell, 'The Dynamics of Military Transformation', *International Affairs*, 84:4, 2008, pp. 777-807; Theo Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain's War in Afghanistan 2001-2014*, (London: The Bodley Head), 2017; Tom Dyson, 'Convergence and Divergence in Post-Cold War British, French and German Military Reforms', *Security Studies*, 17:4, 2008, pp. 725-774; Paul Cornish & Andrew Dorman, 'National Defence in the Age of Austerity', *International Affairs*, 85:4, 2009, pp. 733-753; and, Lawrence Freedman, *The Future of War: A History*, (London: Penguin Books Ltd), 2017.

⁵ See, for example, David Blagden, 'The Flawed Promise of National Security Risk Assessment: Nine Lessons from the British Approach', *Intelligence and National Security*, 33:5, 2018, pp. 716-736.

Our focus in this article is not on the success or failure of these assessments – not least because the future is always going to be hard to predict. Instead, we focus on the UK's success or failure in absorbing and reflecting visions of the future in its current defence policy, including the structure of its armed forces, its procurement choices, and wider defence policy decision-making. In this respect, our analysis builds on that of Patrick Porter's 2016 study. Porter's work underscores a tension at the heart of UK defence policy: on the one hand, there is 'the impossibility of anticipating the character of future conflict' and on the other, UK policy necessarily presupposes 'a fixed future set by the UK's current strategic role'. As a consequence, Porter suggests, the UK's defence decision-makers and military leaders have fallen 'prey to a misplaced confidence in their ability to anticipate and prevent threats' because of an excessive faith in the predictive power of risk analysis, 'horizon scanning' and 'futures' techniques.⁶ Porter attributes this to a form of self-delusion in which the UK's decision-makers have been seduced by the prediction of the future character of conflict underpinned by a 'coherent, though dangerous, ideological premise, that the West – by virtue of being the far-sighted guardian of world order – brings order into a chaotic world'.⁷ Our analysis broadly supports Porter's assertion that the MoD's vision of the character of future conflict presupposes a future that is significantly shaped by its current strategic role. Where our analysis differs, however, is on the causes and consequences of this predicament, and therefore the extent to which the MoD is effectively able to carve out a new, or altered military role for the UK.

Rather than focusing on UK's 'misplaced confidence about its ability to anticipate and prevent threats', the novelty of our approach is that it focuses instead on the capacity of the UK radically to alter its future direction. Our primary arguments are that the MoD has rarely strayed from its basic direction of travel precisely because it cannot: to do so would require a change in the very foundations and fundamentals of British defence policy, namely that the UK is a global power, with global reach and full spectrum capabilities that it can deploy in an attempt to ensure the status quo in the current rules-based international order. As a concept, this self-image permeates and drives all defence and foreign policy decision making in the UK and, in our assessment, the UK is no more able to change these fundamentals than it is able to shift any other elements of its national identity.

The notion that UK defence policy is characterised by significant continuity and that change is primarily incremental is not new. Writing in 1989, John Baylis charted Britain's post-Second World War approach towards balancing recurring issues in defence policy formation and implementation.⁸ He pointed to enduring choices in policymaking over whether the UK's main contribution to European security should be on land ('the continental commitment') or at sea ('the maritime strategy'), whether threats to European security should be prioritised over military intervention

⁶ Patrick Porter, 'Taking Uncertainty Seriously: Classical Realism and National Security', *European Journal of International Security*, 1:2, 2016, p. 245, p. 239.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

⁸ John Baylis, *British Defence Policy: Striking the Right Balance*, (Basingstoke: MacMillan Press), 1989.

elsewhere in the world, whether the ‘special relationship’ with the United States should take precedence over defence cooperation with European allies and, the appropriate balance between investment in nuclear strategic forces at the expense of conventional forces. In doing so, Baylis affirmed a largely unchallenged component in British policymaking, namely that the UK is a state with the power, interest and defence capability to make choices about its balance of engagement and investment in each of these areas, with the wherewithal to re-prioritise where necessary. Baylis suggested that British defence decision-makers’ post-1945 responses to these dilemmas were characterised by a continuous process of incrementalism and ‘muddling through’ as successive governments sought to keep their options open in reaction to constant changes in the international system environment and the budgetary resources available to fund the national defence effort. In reviewing the post-Cold War era, Paul Cornish and Andrew Dorman reached similar conclusions, identifying that incrementalism and ‘muddling through’ the same recurring dilemmas has remained the dominant paradigm in UK defence policy formulation and implementation in reaction to global events and financial stringencies.⁹

Moreover, it is widely recognised that since the mid-20th century the UK has pursued ‘status quo goals’ as a ‘residual Great Power’ that seeks to maintain and continue the US-led international order.¹⁰ Jason Davidson puts the argument neatly:

Declining states face two fundamental choices. They may either adopt status-quo goals – they may seek to preserve the status quo beyond their own borders – or they may be reclusive with regard to the status quo they may be unwilling to bear costs to defend the external status quo and seek only to preserve their own territorial integrity.¹¹

Confronted with this binary choice, the UK has pursued status-quo goals in response to its relative decline as a defence power in the international system, and adopted a reactive posture in responses to challenges to the US-led international order by ‘revisionist’ powers. As we shall show, this role as a preserver of the status quo is evident in the history of UK Defence Reviews. These, the major inflexion points in defence policy, clearly capture in print form the UK’s inherently ‘conservative’ approach to defence policy: largely reactive and incrementalist. An examination of post-Cold War reviews suggests that the path of British defence policy has been set by the fundamental assumptions of the UK’s international role. There are few radical or sweeping innovations; indeed, the UK has persisted with broadly the same structure: full spectrum capability, the ability to project power globally and, if needed, through nuclear weapons and world-leading special forces, alongside ‘balanced’ armed forces of about 150,000 regulars, and an army of about 80,000 men and women. Indeed, as we demonstrate subsequently, in just over twenty years

⁹ Paul Cornish & Andrew Dorman, ‘Dr Fox and the Philosopher’s Stone: The Alchemy of National Defence in an Age of Austerity’, *International Affairs*, 87:2, (2011), pp. 335-53.

¹⁰ For an extended conceptual and empirical analysis see David Blagden, ‘Two Visions of Greatness: Roleplay and *Realpolitik* in UK Strategic Posture’, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 28 November 2018. See also Andrew M. Dorman, Matthew R.H. Uttley & Benedict Wilkinson, The Curious Incident of Mr Cameron and the United Kingdom Defence Budget: A New Legacy?, *The Political Quarterly*, 87:1, 2016, pp. 46-53.

¹¹ Jason W. Davidson, *The Origins of Revisionism and Status-quo States*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), 2006, p. 89.

of defence reviews, the UK has made little more than incremental and limited forms of change to the higher-level ‘ends’ (objectives of defence policy), ‘ways’ (courses of action intended to achieve the ends) and ‘means’ (instruments by which the ends can be achieved) of its defence policy.¹²

Our analysis posits that ‘muddling through’, incrementalism and reactive ‘status quo goals’ in UK defence policy identified by Baylis and others reflects deep-seated drivers for continuity rather than change. Our explanation for this inertia is derived from the ‘New Institutionalism’ approach developed in other areas of public policy analysis and places an emphasis on the role of history in driving public policy choices. As Pierson puts it, ‘it is not the past per se but the unfolding of process over time that is theoretically central’.¹³ In taking this approach, our view is that the current ‘ends’, ‘ways’ and ‘means’ in UK defence policy are primarily a product of the past, in the form of persistent and baked-in institutional ideas about the ‘appropriate’ role of Britain as a military power, and previous and ongoing investment decisions in areas including force posture and weapons acquisition arising from these ideas. In the case of the former, this is evidenced by the largely unchallenged consensus among politicians and defence decision-makers on the ideas that Britain should remain a ‘Tier 1’ defence power with a nuclear capability capable of projecting conventional military power on a global scale through ‘balanced forces’ across the ‘full spectrum’ of maritime, air and land capabilities.¹⁴

In doing so, we suggest that outcomes of UK defence policy formation during major Defence reviews is strongly influenced by path dependency in terms of an institutional ‘logic of appropriateness’ about what *should* be done,¹⁵ with limited options of what *can* be changed. We argue that this results from previous force planning decisions at those critical junctures where external changes in the international security environment, or externally-imposed defence budget reductions, required a response. By inference, this suggests that the persistence of the long-standing ideas, concepts, and historical capability investments underpinning UK defence that are costly to reverse, all serve the interests that motivate politicians and defence actors, such that path trajectories remain largely

¹² The ‘ends’, ‘ways’ and ‘means’ formula of strategy making has become deeply engrained in UK and elsewhere in policy narratives and military doctrinal thinking. For an extended discussion and critique, see Jeffrey W. Meiser, ‘Are Our Strategic Models Flawed? Ends + Ways + Means = (Bad) Strategy’, *Parameters*, 46:4, Winter 2016-17, 81-91. For a study of how discourse can limit defence policy and strategy, see Michaels, Jeffrey H. *The Discourse Trap and the US Military: From the War on Terror to the Surge*. 2013 edition. New York, N.Y: AIAA, 2013.

¹³ Pierson, 2000, op. cit., p.264.

¹⁴ Financial Times, ‘Defence Secretary Pledges to Maintain UK Status as Tier One’, 17 December 2018.

¹⁵ We refer here to the concept of ‘ideational path dependency’, which suggests the persistence of dominant ideas and associated concepts within institutions that provide decision-makers with their understanding of both their identities and interests. It suggests that dominant ideas – in the form of established institutional ends, ways and means – function as ‘structures’ that constrain the range of ‘appropriate’ choices open to decision-makers when external or internal pressure for institutional change arise. Ideas can also be seen as ‘cognitive filters’ through which decision-makers are able to conceive of their interests. For an extended discussion, see Stuart Croft, ‘Introduction’, in Stuart Croft, Andrew Dorman, Wyn Rees & Matthew Uttley, *Britain and Defence 1945-2000: A Policy Re-evaluation*, (London: Longman), 2001, p. 3; and, Colin Hay, ‘Ideas and the Construction of Interests’, in D. Beland & R.H. Cox (eds), *Ideas and Politics in Social Science Research*, (Oxford: OUP), 2011, p. 69.

unaltered.¹⁶ That is to say, there are ‘relative benefits’ to defence actors from staying on that same path, which include potential electoral gains for politicians through the preservation of the UK’s status as a Tier 1 defence nation, and for military leaders through the retention of existing personnel numbers and structures, and through the ongoing acquisition of state-of-the-art weapons systems. This, in turn, contributes to a *reactive and incremental response to externally-imposed pressures to change the status quo*.¹⁷

By extension, we argue that if these embedded path dependencies explain the development of previous and current UK defence policy, then it should come as no surprise that the current ends, ways and means in UK defence are projected forward in the MoD’s institutional view of potential future operating environments, resulting in limited change within established paths. In adopting these assumptions, our analysis follows previous studies that have employed the concept of path dependency in defence decision-making in the UK and elsewhere, and builds upon them in the context of states’ approaches to envisaging and responding to potential future conflict.¹⁸

In the remainder of this article, we develop two exploratory case studies to scrutinise these arguments. The first explores some of the mechanisms through which the UK’s MoD seeks to make predictions about the future, and considers whether the MoD’s institutional vision of the potential future operating environments conforms to ‘New Institutionalism’ predictions about path dependencies driving continuity in defence policy outcomes. The focus here is on identifying evidence that suggests the MoD’s view of future conflict can be interpreted as a path dependent consequence of current policy and force planning assumptions. The second case study applies a similar approach in identifying evidence suggesting that current UK defence policy is a product of path dependencies that have been ‘baked in’ by previous Defence Reviews, which are the key inflexion where the ends, ways and means of UK defence have been subjected to formal and public scrutiny and modification.¹⁹ Our findings indicate that the concept of path dependency provides a plausible conceptual tool to explain why the MoD’s institutional vision of the operating environment in years to come presupposes a fixed future based on its current strategic role and long-term defence planning procedures, and the incrementalism manifested in key developments in

¹⁶ Farrall et. al., p. 16.

¹⁷ Paul Pierson, ‘Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics’, *American Political Science Review*, 94:2, 2000, p. 252. For an extended discussion, see Adrian Kay, ‘A Critique of the Use of Path Dependency in Policy Studies’, *Public Administration*, 83:3, 2005, pp. 553-571.

¹⁸ On the UK case, see Timothy Edmunds, ‘The Defence Dilemma in Britain’, *International Affairs*, 86:2, 2010, 377-394; Timothy Edmunds, ‘Complexity, Strategy and the National Interest’, *International Affairs*, 90:3, 2014, 525-539. For applications in other states see, for example, Erik Olson, ‘Iran’s Path Dependent Military Doctrine’, *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Summer 2016, 63-93; Kerry Longhurst, ‘Why aren’t the Germans debating the draft? Path dependency and the persistence of conscription’, *German Politics*, 12:2, 2003, 147-165; and, Bastien Irondelle, ‘Civil-military relations and the end of conscription in France’, *Security Studies*, 12:3, 2003, 157-187.

¹⁹ The distinction between formal defence reviews and periodic realignment of forces to meet the financial situation of the time in British defence policy analysis remains contested. For a discussion, see Paul Cornish & Andrew M. Dorman, ‘Breaking the mould: the United Kingdom Strategic Defence Review 2010’, *International Affairs*, 86:2, (2010), pp. 396-98.

post-Cold War UK defence policy. We acknowledge that this exploratory approach limits the validity of the findings. Nevertheless, they suggest that UK defence policy development and the MoD's institutional picture of the future operating environment are more path dependence than have previously been recognised.

Case Study 1: Resolving the Dilemma of an Unknowable Future

'It is hard to make predictions', Yoga Berra, great baseball player and master of the one-liner, once said, 'but particularly about the future'. Predicting the future character of war is no different. Questions over what practices to continue and what to change in anticipating and mitigating the potential character of future conflicts are vital for armed forces over the globe, not least because they all face a central, and perennially unsolvable dilemma that:

On the one hand, conflict is a chaotic, human activity, in which the adversary gets a vote; surprise, even shock, are features of this strategic landscape. On the other hand, defence planning for conflict involves aligning policy and resources, and has to be a rational process. The planning cycle involves committing substantial resources well in advance based upon long range forecasts.²⁰

The policy problematic is thus one of reconciling the tensions between two entities: on the one hand, a misty, opaque future in which their armed forces may become involved in new forms of conflict and which is inherently uncertain and unknowable because conflict is 'neither linear, nor constant'.²¹ On the other hand, the deep imperative to forecast and plan for the future by predicting the possible character of such conflicts based on a 'rational', 'linear' and reductionist forecasting and long-term force development to mitigate 'conflict's unpredictability'.

In short, it is an effort to resolve the tension between an unknowable future, and the need to know it. In institutional terms, the UK defence establishment's attempt to resolve this dilemma is currently founded on three elements. Firstly, development of the MoD's long-term institutional vision of the potential future character of conflicts is undertaken by the Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre (DCDC). Founded following the 1998 *Strategic Defence Review*, the DCDC is the MoD's internal 'think tank' conducting long-term 'futures' analysis to inform long-term defence strategy-making, capability development and operations.²² Its latest published assessment of the characteristics of possible future operating environments is contained in Joint Concept Note 1/17, *Future Force Concept*, which provides the current 'principal

²⁰ Ministry of Defence, Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre, *Future Character of Conflict*, 3 February 2010, p. 1.

²¹ *Ibid.* For an extended discussion, see Patrick Porter, 'Taking Uncertainty Seriously: Classical Realism and National Security', *European Journal of International Security*, 1:2, 2016.

²² Ministry of Defence, Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre: The MoD's Independent Think Tank, (London: Ministry of Defence), p. 3. For an extended description and analysis of the DCDC's development since its inception, see Tom Dyson, 'Defence Policy under the Labour Government: Operational Dynamism and Strategic Inertia', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 13, 2011, pp. 218-220; and, Alex Alderson, 'The Army Brain', *RUSI Journal*, 155:3, pp. 10-15.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/507544/2016_0217_DCDC_Pamphlet_Web_2_.pdf, accessed on 18 October 2018.

Defence-level guidance' for all future MoD force development to 2037.²³ In it, the DCDC has sought to mitigate potential 'surprises' through methodologies including 'horizon-scanning', 'futures' analysis and related analytical tools in order to identify 'plausible [future] operating environments, resulting from rigorous trends analysis.'²⁴

The second element is the MoD's force development planning cycle intended to prepare the UK's armed forces for possible future operating environments. Its primary focus is on the delivery by 2025 of 'Joint Force 2025' (JF 2025): a 'highly capable' conventional expeditionary force of approximately 50,000 personnel configured around a maritime task group centred on a Queen Elizabeth Class aircraft carrier, a land division with three brigades, an air group and special forces task group. The assumption is that JF 2025, together with the renewal of Britain's independent nuclear deterrent, 'will ensure that the Armed Forces are able to tackle a wider range of more sophisticated potential adversaries' and maintain the UK's 'military advantage and extend it into new areas, including cyber and space'.²⁵ In military capability terms, JF 2025 as the 'funded force' forms the centrepiece of the MoD's long-term planning system and its baseline for analysis of the future operating environment 2035 (Figure 1).²⁶

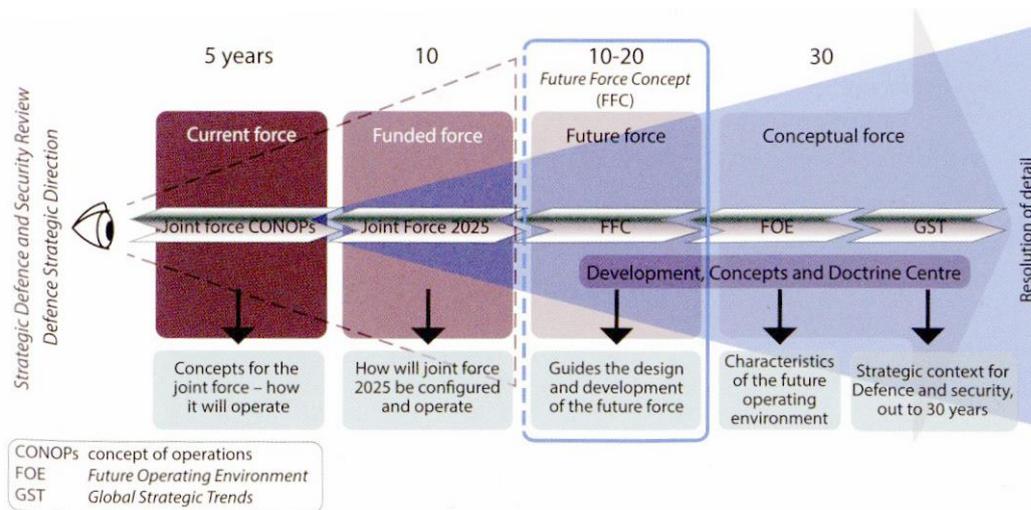


Figure 1 – The Future Force Concept; guiding coherent future force development

The third element of the MoD's resolution of this dilemma is the recognition that the future operating environment is likely be characterised by 'changing complex

²³ Ministry of Defence, Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre (DCDC), *Joint Concept Note 1/17 Future Force Concept*, July 2017, pp. ix-xi.

²⁴ Ministry of Defence, Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre (DCDC), *Future Operating Environment 2035*, 30 November 2014, p. viii.

²⁵ HM Government, *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: a secure and prosperous United Kingdom*, Cm. 9161 (London: The Stationery Office), 2015.

²⁶ DCDC, *Future Operating Environment 2035*, 30 November 2014, p. vii.

environments’, which will necessitate institutional ‘adaptation’ through incremental changes to ‘tactics, techniques, procedures, structures and equipment to improve performance’, as well as ‘innovation’ that often involving ‘large-scale changes, requiring a mix of doctrinal, structural and technological change’.²⁷ In this regard the MoD is committed to institutional change through forms of ‘organisational learning that underpins innovation, adaptation and agility’ in responding to its vision of, and long-term planning for, the changing future operating environment.²⁸ On the face of it, institutional arrangements in the MoD suggest that the DCDC’s ‘authoritative high-level analytical concept’ of the future operating environment guides long-term defence planning in the design and development of the UK’s future force out to 2035. Our analysis points to the opposite. It suggests that it is the MoD’s long-term planning cycle – with JF 2025 and renewal of the UK’s nuclear deterrent as its centrepiece – that shapes the ‘long-range forecasts’ of the future operating environment, rather than the other way round.

Evidence for this inversion can be found in explicit and implicit assumptions employed by the DCDC in formulating its vision of the foreseeable future strategic context and military operating environments over the next two decades. Firstly, it assumes that the current overarching ‘ends’ of UK defence policy – to ‘protect’ the UK mainland and Overseas Territories, to ‘shape’ the international environment by promoting UK interests and contributing to international security and stability, and to ‘respond’ to crises by projecting military power overseas to maintain international security and stability – will remain relevant in the future.²⁹ Secondly, it is predicated on future continuity in the overarching strategic and operational defence concepts (‘ways’) by which current UK defence policy ‘ends’ are to be achieved, primarily through NATO in order to generate sufficient mass to deter the most dangerous threats and for expeditionary operations.³⁰ Finally, the DCDC’s vision assumes long-term continuity in the military capability (‘means’) developed to achieve policy ‘ends’ – namely, that the UK will remain a ‘Tier 1’ defence power capable of projecting military power on a global scale through ‘balanced forces’ across the ‘full spectrum’ of maritime, air and land capabilities – that are encapsulated in the planned introduction of JF 2025, nuclear deterrent renewal,³¹ and a range of other funded programmes under development in the MoD’s current £186bn Equipment Plan for the 10 years from 2018/19.³²

In the context of the MoD’s resolution of the epistemological dilemma, these factors lend weight to Porter’s contention that whilst acknowledging that the future character of conflict is neither linear, nor constant, it presupposes a fixed future set by the UK’s current defence ‘ends’ and ‘ways’. It also echoes Jan Angstrom’s recent finding regarding the US Armed Forces, which suggests that ‘how the US

²⁷ JC 1/17, p. 6.

²⁸ JC 1/17, p. 6.

²⁹ DCDC, *Future Operating Environment 2035*, p. 5.

³⁰ DCDC, *Joint Concept Note 1/17 Future Force Concept*, p. ix.

³¹ DCDC, *Joint Concept Note 1/17 Future Force Concept*, p. ix.

³² See Ministry of Defence, *The Defence Equipment Plan 2018*, 18 March 2019.

understands future war is, in turn, a reflection of how it organises its long-term defence planning procedures' regarding the 'means' of defence policy.³³ In turn, this raises questions about why and how current axioms of UK defence policy shape the scope of the MoD's institutional vision and response to potential future operating environments, and what this tells us about contending drivers for continuity and change in military organisations. As the subsequent case study demonstrates, the MoD's resolution of the epistemological dilemma can be understood as path dependent outcomes of 'historical contingency' – that is, events and decisions made in the past underpin dominant ideas and decisions that influence current ends, ways and means in UK defence. We suggest that it is these factors, rather than hubris, that account for the perpetuation and forward projection in the MoD's institutional view of the future character of war.³⁴

Case Study 2: Path Dependency and Institutional Pasts, Presents and Futures

The concepts of reactivity and path dependency provide conceptual tools to explain incrementalism manifested in key developments in post-Cold War UK defence policy. Defence reviews are significant because they are key inflection points where the ends, ways and means of UK defence are subjected to formal and public scrutiny and modification. These concepts provide insights in accounting for the significant degree of continuity in the ends, ways and means of UK defence policy, and where and how change has occurred in successive defence reviews. By inference we subsequently suggest they also assist in explaining why the MoD's institutional vision of the operating environment in years to presuppose a fixed future based on its current strategic role and long-term defence planning procedures.

The 1990 *Options for Change* review³⁵ encapsulated the UK's first reaction to the changed strategic circumstances following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.³⁶ Uncertainty over the security implications of the post-Soviet era attracted speculation from external commentators about how UK defence might adapt to the changed strategic circumstances, but the review itself was conducted in a strategic vacuum.³⁷ In the event, the primary outcomes were marked by continuity rather than change.³⁸ The Cold War primacy of Britain's commitment to 'the continental

³³ Jan Angstrom, 'The US Perspective on Future War: Why the US Relied upon Ares rather than Athena', *Defence Studies*, 18:3, 2018, p. 318.

³⁴ Paul Cairney, *Understanding Public Policy: Theories and Issues*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), 2012, p. 74.

³⁵ See *Statement on the Defence Estimates, 1991: Britain's Defence for the 1990s*, Cmnd. 1,559, (London: HMSO), 1991.

³⁶ See Claire Mills, Louisa Brooke-Holland & Nigel Walker, *A Brief Guide to Previous British Defence Reviews*, House of Commons Library Briefing Paper Number 07313, 9th July 2018, pp. 14-16.

³⁷ See, for example, Philip Sabin, *British Strategic Priorities in the 1990s*, (London: Brassey's), 1990. Adelphi Paper 254; Malcolm Chalmers, *United Kingdom Defence Requirements, 1990-2000*, (Bristol: Saferworld Foundation), 1990; A. Chalfont, *Options foreclosed: the cost of avoiding a strategic review*, (London: Alliance Publishers), Institute for European Defence and Strategic Studies Occasional Paper, 55; and, D. Bolton, 'Defence in Transition: Options for Change', *RUSI Journal*, 136:3, 1991, pp. 1-3.

³⁸ See Richard Mottram, 'Options for Change: Process and Prospects', *RUSI Journal*, Spring 1991.

commitment' via the NATO alliance and the 'special relationship' with the USA remained unchallenged. The changed international security environment and reduced threat perceptions offered the Conservative government of the time the opportunity to 'reap the peace dividend'. This was reflected in an 18 per cent reduction in total military manpower, hull reductions in the Royal Navy fleet and the closure of RAF tactical air power bases in Germany. Nevertheless, the review reaffirmed the importance of retaining a strategic nuclear deterrent. In meeting the 'peace dividend' the armed services were able to choose which areas they cut back, defaulting to the preservation of many of their existing Cold War programmes and existing force structures. In essence, as Andrew Dorman points out, the net effect of the changed strategic circumstances and budget reductions arising from *Options for Change* process was an incremental modification that 'left all three Services with essentially the same basic force composition as they had during the Cold War but on a smaller scale'.³⁹

The subsequent *Frontline First: The Defence Cost Study* conducted by the Conservative government in 1994 retained the commitments outlined in the 1990 review, limiting its reform ambition to making further defence budget savings whilst retaining front line operational effectiveness.⁴⁰ Measures intended to achieve savings included the privatization and outsourcing of defence functions, the amalgamation of command, training and support function on a joint service basis on the assumption that this would enhance defence capability at reduced cost, together with targets for further military and civilian personnel reduction target of 18,700 by the year 2000. *The Defence Cost Study* did mark an ongoing shift away from a Cold War 'threat-based' defence policy centred on the continental threat via NATO towards a 'capabilities-based' policy requiring the deployment of UK forces beyond Europe as a reaction to deployments in Iraq and the former Yugoslavia. Nevertheless, like its predecessor it was primarily a reactive and incremental review that reaffirmed a similar front line conventional force structure and commitment to Britain's nuclear deterrent capability.⁴¹

The 1998 *Strategic Defence Review* (SDR), published a year after the then new Labour government entered office, was heralded by the Secretary of State, George Robinson, as 'the most radical restructuring of our armed forces for a generation'.⁴² On the one hand, the SDR ushered in a readjustment of established priorities in response to the changing international security context, notably instability in Africa and the Middle East and a rise in threats from non-state actors. The SDR recognised

³⁹ Andrew Dorman, 'Crises and Reviews in British Defence Policy', in Stuart Croft, Andrew Dorman, Wyn Rees & Matthew Uttley, *Britain and Defence 1945-2000: A Policy Re-evaluation*, (London: Longman), 2001, p. 21. See also David French, 'Have the Options Really Changed? British Defence Policy in the Twentieth Century', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 15:1, 1992, pp.50-72; and, A. Chalfont, (1992) *Options foreclosed: the cost of avoiding a strategic review*, (London: Alliance Publishers), Institute for European Defence and Strategic Studies Occasional Paper, 55.

⁴⁰ *Front Line First: The Defence Cost Study*, (London: HMSO), 1994.

⁴¹ See Malcolm Rifkind, 'Front Line First', RUSI Journal, December 1994, pp. 1-6.

⁴² George Robertson, *The House Magazine*, 27th July 1998. For an extended analysis of the Review, see Tom Dodd & Mark Oakes, *The Strategic Defence Defence Review White Paper*, House of Commons Library Research Paper 98/91, 15th October 1998.

that there was no direct threat to the UK or western European allies, but that continued membership of NATO and a strong transatlantic link remained essential in the event that conditions deteriorated. Continued UK influence in NATO was maintained based on its commensurate national conventional and nuclear contribution. Conversely, the UK forces structure was no longer to be defined by contributions to NATO, being derived instead from the expeditionary missions that the armed forces were likely to perform. Key organisational reforms included an intensification of 'jointery', a change in emphasis in the Royal Navy towards rapid deployment of expeditionary forces, reorganisation of the Army's existing structure intended to increase deployability and mobility, and the preservation of the broad range of RAF capabilities. On the other, despite these changes, the *SDR* was seen by many analysts to be evolutionary rather than revolutionary.⁴³

The outcomes, in effect, ushered in a rebalancing of the recurring issues and trade-offs identified by Baylis in response to changed external circumstances.⁴⁴ Like preceding reviews, it remained predicated on providing 'an insurance policy against future uncertainty by advocating a continuation of planning for the full range of defence capabilities, the precise balance of which could be reviewed and readjusted as necessary'.⁴⁵ Incrementalism was evident, for example, in the military missions and military tasks of the armed services, which remained largely unchanged from the previous 1998 review. Moreover, changes to the composition of the RAF and Royal Navy were limited and marginal, and modifications to the Army involved 're-rolling' at brigade and regiment level in line with the notion of rapidly deployable and flexible expeditionary forces, and closer integration of a reduced number of Territorial Army (TA) units.⁴⁶ In effect, the UK's dominant commitment to balanced forces remained, which was reflected in significant continuity in force posture and capability development.⁴⁷

The *SDR New Chapter* published in July 2002 re-examined UK defence priorities in light of the 11th September terrorist attacks on the USA.⁴⁸ In light of the changed security situation the review re-affirmed that the emphasis on expeditionary operations in the original *SDR* was correct, but that additional measures were necessary to address terrorism and other forms of asymmetric warfare. The *New Chapter* identified the requirement for 'defence diplomacy' and military means to deter, detect and destroy terrorist organisations. It also committed to the

⁴³ See, for example, Paul Rogers, 'Reviewing Britain's Security', *International Affairs*, 73:4, 1997, p. 655; and, Michael Codner, 'The Strategic Defence Review: How Much? How Far? How Joint is Enough?' *RUSI Journal*, 143:4, 1998, pp. 5-11; and the chapters in Ken Aldred, *et al.*, *The Strategic Defence Review: How Strategic? How Much a Review?* (London: Brassey's for the Centre for Defence Studies), 1998.

⁴⁴ See Colin McInnes, 'Labour's Strategic Defence Review', *International Affairs*, 74:4, 1998, pp. 823-846; Bruce George, 'Political Perspectives on the Outcome of SDR', *RUSI Journal*, 143:5, 1998, pp. 26-30; Henry Crum-Ewing, 'After the UK Strategic Defence Review: The Need for an Ongoing Reasoned Critique of Positions, Policies and Operations', *Defense Analysis*, 14:3, 1998, pp. 323-334.

⁴⁵ Claire Mills, Louisa Brooke-Holland & Nigel Walker, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴⁷ Andrew Dorman, 'Reconciling Britain to Europe in the Next Millennium: The Evolution of British Defence Policy in the Post-cold War Era', *Defense Analysis*, 17:2, 2001, pp. 187-202.

⁴⁸ See Geoff Hoon, 'A Blueprint for Reform', *RUSI Journal*, 147:4, 2002, pp. 10-15.

development of a 'Network Enabled Capability' (NEC) through the fusion of rapid intelligence gathering, decision making and the use of military force within 'real time'. In the context of ongoing operations in Iraq and elsewhere the subsequent 2003 *Defence White Paper* developed planning structures and capabilities designed for flexible expeditionary warfare, leading to revisions to assumptions about the size, scale length of deployments that the UK's armed forces were expected to undertake.⁴⁹ In line with these assumptions, the paper acknowledged that the most demanding expeditionary operations would be undertaken under a US lead in coalitions or via NATO, but that Britain needed to maintain the military capability to act as a framework nation for a European coalition or similar coalition operation of medium scale. The subsequent July 2004 White Paper entitled *Future Capabilities* focused specifically on the structures and capabilities required by the armed services to meet the revised planning assumptions. Although the paper emphasised the acquisition of NEC capabilities it was the ongoing and incremental procurement of major maritime, land, and air platforms and capabilities necessary to sustain a 'balanced force' capable of independent power projection dominated expenditure in the MoD's subsequent equipment plan.⁵⁰

In May 2010, the incoming Coalition government announced the launch of a *Strategic Defence and Security Review (2010 SDSR)*, which was subsequently published in October of the same year in conjunction with a new *National Security Strategy (NSS)*. A novel feature of the 2010 NSS/SDSR was that it sought to establish a more coherent and integrated cross-government approach to security risks and threats, whereby the NSS set out criteria for what national military capability was intended to achieve. Set against the context of £38 billion of unfunded commitments projected over the subsequent decade inherited from the previous government, the cuts to the defence budget were 'far greater than those imposed by any previous UK defence review'.⁵¹

Nevertheless, long-term continuity in UK defence policy was evident in the SDSR's five key priorities, namely the pre-eminence of defence and security relationships with the US, bilateral defence and security relations with key allies and partners, support for an effective and reformed United Nations, NATO as the bedrock of UK's defence, and a commitment to an outward-facing European Union that promotes security and prosperity. Similarly, the NSS emphasised that Britain's 'ability to remain adaptable for the future will be fundamental, as will our ability to identify risks and opportunities at the earliest possible stage. It will be essential to maintain highly capable and flexible Armed Forces so that we can exercise military power

⁴⁹ For an extended analysis, see Claire Taylor, *The Defence White Paper*, House of Commons Library Research Paper 04/71, 17th September 2004.

⁵⁰ See Paul Rogers, 'Big boats and bigger skimmers: determining Britain's role in the Long War', *International Affairs*, 82:4, 2006, pp. 651-665.

⁵¹ Paul Cornish & Andrew Dorman, 'Dr Fox and the Philosopher's Stone: The Alchemy of National Defence in the Age of Austerity', *International Affairs*, 87:2, 2011, p. 341. For a summary of the Review, see Claire Taylor, *In Brief: Strategic Defence and Security Review – Headline Recommendations for the Armed Forces*, House of Commons Library, SN/IA/5716, 19th October 2010.

when necessary'.⁵² In its review of UK defence priorities, commitments and spending the 2010 SDSR established two main objectives. The first was to ensure resources and capabilities considered necessary for ongoing operations in Afghanistan. The second – based on the assumption that it was essential for the UK maintain capabilities enabling it to maintain an 'Adaptable posture' towards an uncertain future strategic and potential operating environment from 2020 onwards – was the initiation of 'Future Force 2020' (FF 2020). The intention behind FF 2020 was to reconfigure military capability to be 'flexible, adaptable and expeditionary' confirming a continuing commitment to maintain a conventional 'Tier 1' military capability across the broad spectrum of operations. Despite extensive external critical commentary and radical alternative recommendations for reforms to the desired ends, ways and means of British defence policy, the 2010 SDSR pursued incremental development of well-worn paths.⁵³

The subsequent 2015 SDSR published on 23rd November 2015 can be viewed as an incremental development of the 2010 review.⁵⁴ It re-affirmed core assumptions in the previous 2010 SDSR but highlighted the 'greater possibility' of international military crises over the next five years drawing in the UK and discussed the resurgence of state-based threats. It reiterated that NATO remains 'the heart of the UK's defence policy', as does the 'special relationship'. The 'eight missions' for the armed forces described in SDSR 2015 are almost the same as in 2010, with the exception of the addition of 'Conduct major combat operations if required, including under NATO's Article 5'. The Defence Planning Assumptions⁵⁵ envisaged a larger expeditionary force by 2025 than in 2010, up from 30,000 to 50,000 personnel. The 2015 review laid out the new Joint Force 2025 building on Future Force 2020, and new capability being acquired to meet this, in part by filling in capability gaps left over from the 2010 defence cuts, with contracts for P-8 Maritime Patrol Aircraft, a re-affirmation of 2010 plans to operate two fast-jet aircraft types from 2020 (Typhoon and F35), and recapitalisation of the RN. The 2015 SDSR also re-affirmed the UK's possession a nuclear deterrent and the 'Successor' (to Trident) programme.

⁵² HM Government, *A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The National Security Strategy*, Cm 7953, October 2010, p. 70.

⁵³ See, for example, the chapters in Michael Codner & Michael Clarke (eds.), *A Question of Security: The British Defence Review in an Age of Austerity*, (London: I B Tauris), 2011; John Gearson & James Gow, 'Security, Not Defence, Strategic, Not Habit: Restructuring the Political Arrangements for Policy Making on Britain's Role in the World', *The Political Quarterly*, 81:3, 2010, pp.406-419; Trevor Taylor, 'The Essential Choice: Options for Future British Defence', *RUSI Journal*, 155:2, 2010, pp. 14-19; Nick Ritchie, 'Rethinking Security: A Critical Analysis of the Strategic Defence and Security Review', *International Affairs*, 87:2, 2011, pp. 355-376; Andrew Dorman, 'Making 2+2=5: The 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review', *Defense & Security Analysis*, 27:2, 2011, pp. 77-87; Malcolm Chalmers, 'Keeping Our Powder Dry: UK Defence Policy Beyond Afghanistan', *RUSI Journal*, 156:1, 2011, pp. 20-28; D.M. McCourt, 'Has Britain Found its Role?', *Survival*, 56:2, pp. 159-178; Jason Ralph, 'No Longer Special? Britain and the United States After Iraq', *International Politics* 50:3, 2013, pp. 333-359; Trevor Taylor, 'The Limited Capacity of Management to Rescue UK Defence Policy: a Review and a Word of Caution', *International Affairs*, 88:2, 2012, pp. 223-242; Matt Cavanagh, 'Missed Opportunity: How Failures of Leadership Derailed the SDSR', *RUSI Journal*, 156:5, 2011, pp. 6-13.

⁵⁴ For an extended analysis, see Louisa Brooke-Holland & Claire Mills, *The 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review*, House of Commons Library, Briefing Paper 7462, January 2016.

⁵⁵ Guidelines for the MoD to plan its force structure to deliver the military tasks.

Taken collectively, these developments point to considerable continuity in the ends, ways and means of post-Cold War British defence policy, which is attributable to the persistence of dominant ideas about Britain's place in the world and the incremental development of its force posture. This also provides insights into why the MoD explicitly and implicitly assumes similar continuity in the ends, ways and means of UK defence in formulating its institutional vision of the future military operating environment in future conflicts in which the armed forces may become involved.

In our view, however, the UK is approaching a critical moment: while it has been able to sustain this approach until now, at some point in the future, changes to the character of conflict arising from the rise and actions of proactive 'revisionist' states seeking to change the world order, and resources the UK has available for the conflicts of the future will diverge to such an extent that the ends, ways and means of UK defence policy will diverge. As things stand, this means that the UK will have to adapt its role somewhat to continue to play a role on the international stage, although this looks to be one that is more limited than the one it currently envisages being able to play.

Conclusion: The Limits of Reactivity

'Plans are worthless, but planning is everything' proclaimed Eisenhower, neatly capturing the futility of trying to know an unknowable future in which the unanticipated always threatens to upset even the most carefully laid schemes. All too often, people focus on the first half of that phrase, but in many ways it is the second 'planning is everything' that is critical, because it underscores the importance of spending time and effort thinking about what the future might hold. For Eisenhower, the very exercise of considering different options is a worthwhile one, even if the ultimate plan fails to survive contact with the enemy (to paraphrase Moltke).

In this article, we have scrutinised this core problematic in the context of defence policy: the need to think about – and prepare for – the future character of conflict, whilst recognising that the future is inherently unknowable and that existing plans might prove inadequate. In the UK context, we have identified the MoD's institutional structures and processes that have sought to resolve this problematic, largely through futures work and horizon scanning. In tandem, we have attempted to chart some of the inherent assumptions about the kind of power that the UK is and will be, and shown how these underpin the UK's vision of the future and make it potentially risky. These characteristics are long-term and largely static elements of the UK's self-image, namely that it is a 'status quo' power that seeks to maintain the post-1989 international order; that it is a reactive power that responds to external changes retrospectively, rather than seeking to proactively pre-empt or prevent those changes; that it is a nuclear power with full spectrum capabilities.

Taking these two together, we have sought to argue that, rather than the UK's vision of its future influencing its decisions and choices in the present, in practice the opposite is true: the UK's past and present drive its vision (and planning for) the future. In our estimation, for all its futures work, the UK's understanding of the future is driven largely by decisions and events in the past, rather than by predictions and prophecies about the future. For instance, the UK Parliament voted in 2007 to renew Trident which now has a delivery date of 2028. Without a radical overhaul in the UK's defence policy, Trident looks set to be a core element of the UK's defence capabilities for decades to come. To 'undo' this decision now would be so costly in terms of both financial resources and political capital that it is extremely unlikely to happen. And yet, the future character of conflict *may* be one that is more suitable for special forces, or drones, or cyber capabilities than for nuclear weapons.

In simple terms, the UK looks set to continue down a well-beaten path: a largely responsive, reactive state; a status quo power; a nuclear weapons state; a full spectrum capability nation with significant, but balanced armed forces. To a certain degree, it may be that there is nothing palpably wrong with this: after all, it is a posture that has worked for the UK for decades, allowing it to 'punch above its weight'. Clearly, the problem for the UK is that the external environment may be changing in ways that do not suit its long-standing trajectory. Rapid changes in the international order, as well as in the technological realm, might suggest that the UK's current path is misaligned: the emergent threat of cyber war, for instance, might suggest that the UK needs to increase investment here to match those other states. Equally, the potential conflicts of the future might require radically different forces structures, balances and capabilities.

The real problem – certainly for policymakers and officials – is how to extricate oneself from the self-reinforcing cycle. Horizon-scanning and blue skies thinking – for all their value (and we do see value in these activities because, as Eisenhower says 'planning is everything'), existing path dependencies are sufficiently strong as to mitigate against any significant changes to the UK's general direction of travel. Put bluntly, even if the MoD's horizon scanning developed a new course for the UK, any significant deviation from our current trajectory would likely be dismissed as impractical and un-implementable, regardless of how seemingly brilliant and radical the idea was.

For some, the only way out of the cycle is to conduct better, more robust, more data driven futures work; for it is only by making it more accurate, they argue, that we will really be able to galvanise support for radical new thinking about the UK's defence and security futures. Our analysis suggests that this is not entirely accurate. It suggests that no matter how robust and accurate futures work is, it will never be acceptable unless it reflects existing and underlying assumptions about the UK's role in world. Clearly, the only way of incorporating this futures work into current defence policymaking and strategy is by changing the very assumptions about what role the UK can and should play in the future. This will not happen quickly; it will

require soul-searching, as politicians, officials and the public look at and debate the foundational principles of what the UK as a nation state really is and the values the UK wants to espouse globally. But, to some extent this is a task that is already taking place in the current debate about 'Global Britain'.⁵⁶ Although this might, for the first time in over a generation, provide a real opportunity to ensure the UK is suited to the future rather than built on the past, our analysis suggests that ultimately, the latter will dictate the former.

⁵⁶ HM Government, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 'Global Britain: delivering on our international ambition'. 13 June 2018.