

➤ Sir Rodric Braithwaite

The new Coalition government came to power to find that their predecessors had bequeathed them a national defence strategy that was intellectually void; a military procurement policy paid for on the Micawber principle - that something would surely turn up, but measured in billions rather than sixpences; a bunch of generals on the verge of revolt; an unwinnable war in Afghanistan; a vision of Britain's place and influence in the world based largely on wishful thinking; and a horrendous financial crisis. Given all that, their new National Security Strategy is not a bad piece of work. Of course the Strategic Defence and Security Review, the practical measures by which they propose to implement the strategy, is full of flaws and absurdities. Of course the Coalition, or at least its Tory component, is still gripped by illusion and by nostalgia for a vanished past when Britain could punch above its weight. But the government had to start somewhere, and they have at least taken a significant step towards devising a national defence posture suited to the twenty first century.

And so, for the first time, we have a national strategic concept which is not, as its predecessors were, simply a piecemeal scaling down of the ideas which we brought to the Cold War. It is no longer NATO-centric and based - despite many denials - on the idea that we needed to be capable of fighting a conventional war against a formidable conventional enemy (read Russia), and capable too of deterring - independently, all on our own - a nuclear enemy (read Russia or China or Iran). Instead the government has tried to think realistically about what constitute the real threats to Britain in a rapidly changing world, and come up with an orderly and reasonably plausible hierarchy - terrorism, cyber warfare and natural disaster. More money is rightly being given to the intelligence agencies and the special forces. There is a welcome recognition that diplomacy, and the much maligned Foreign Office, have an essential role in helping to shape a world where we are less vulnerable to violence. The aid budget has been refocussed, for the same reason, towards countries which spawn terrorism. The new strategy rightly recognises the distant but not impossible prospect of involvement in a war between states. But future forays abroad are to be undertaken only if they are legal and in the national interest: obvious criteria, one would have thought, but set aside in the days when we engaged in the heady and arrogant adventures of "liberal interventionism". Painful but inescapable cuts have been made to the army, the navy, and the airforce. When they are complete we will no longer be able to mount a campaign on the scale of Iraq in 2003. Since that was a war we should never have fought in the first place, that is all to the good.

This is all very satisfactory. A wholly sensible outcome was, of course, most unlikely. The course of the defence review was determined not by the imperatives of affordable national security, but by powerful political, industrial, emotional arguments which had little to do with our real needs, and often depended on historical analogy, a analytical tool of notorious unreliability. The military, with whom one may have much sympathy, and others who do not deserve it, argued disgracefully through leaks to the press that the task of government was to assure the security of the nation regardless, it sometimes seemed, of any financial reality. The airmen put a Spitfire in front of the Treasury to remind us of the Battle of Britain, and talked of fast jets and aerial dominance. The navy talked of securing our vital sea lanes, as if Admiral Mahan were still alive and we were still fighting the Battle of the Atlantic. Both seemed to think it was somehow unfair that cuts in the army should be postponed merely because the soldiers

were actually fighting a real war in Afghanistan. This relentless pressure was echoed by strong voices in the Conservative Party.

And so a number of sacred cows have remained unchallenged. Concessions to political reality - inevitable perhaps - have left us with armed forces still suffering from atrophy in some places and elephantiasis in others. The navy has got its two aircraft carriers, the largest ships in its history. The argument that we had to build unneeded aircraft carriers in order to retain the skills to build aircraft carriers we did not need does at least display a delightful circularity. But at least one of these great vessels is unlikely ever to ship any aircraft. Eventually they will no doubt be recognised as the white elephants they are. Like HMS Vanguard before them - the largest, fastest and last of the Royal Navy's battleships - they will be broken up before they have ever seen effective service. More practically, someone has suggested, they might be converted for use as prison ships, as redundant warships were during the Napoleonic wars.

The ballistic submarine fleet may survive, and the Trident successor may be built. But no one has produced a convincing explanation of why we need an "independent" deterrent, or against whom it would plausibly be directed. The answer seems to be at least as much political as military - that is after all why the Treasury once agreed to take the costs on the central budget, instead of leaving them where they belonged, on the defence budget. People argue that we need the deterrent because we would otherwise lose keep our place on the UN Security Council. That is rubbish. We could veto any attempt by the other member states to pass a reform of the UN Charter that took away our place. Whether in the event we would have the political guts to do so is of course another matter. The net result is that we will end up with a very small navy, consisting of a few large ships designed for improbable emergencies, and too few of the frigates and other naval workhorses that we need to counter real current threats, such as piracy. At the root of our problem is the continuing desire of the British to punch above their weight and our

feeling that we are, and need to be, still "a power of the first rank". David Cameron says that even after the cuts, the British defence budget will still be the fourth largest in the world, and that we are the only European member of NATO to achieve the defence expenditure target of 2% of GDP. He argues, like his predecessors, that Britain needs be able to project power at a distance. But he does not explain why all this is in the national interest, and indeed there is no obvious reason why it should be. The truth lies elsewhere, and it is rooted in emotion not reason. We want aircraft carriers and submarines, and the ability to piggyback on any American expedition that happens to be going, not because these things are essential to our defence, but because they feed our historical sense of national greatness: that is the sort of power we are, and you'd better know it. It is a posture driven by testosterone, not cold analysis.

But whether we like it or not, we now stand at a turning point in British foreign and defence policy at least as significant as the failed Suez campaign of 1956. From Suez the British drew the lesson that they could no longer have a wholly independent foreign policy, and concluded that to retain a modicum of influence in the world they needed to remain very close to the Americans. The French drew the same lesson, but a different conclusion: that they could retain some influence in the world by differing from the Americans - within the bounds of prudence.

But even during the Cold War, when our defences really did depend on the Americans, our own Prime Ministers - Harold Wilson, Edward Heath, Mrs Thatcher - were prepared to differ from the Americans when they thought the national interest required it. The roof did not fall in then, and there is even less reason to suppose it will fall in now. Of course the Americans like the extra political cover that they get from our involvement in their undertakings. Of course they value their cooperation with our military and our intelligence agencies, even though it is marginal to their own capacities. Why should they not? That is why Hillary Clinton and Robert Gates intervened - not too elegantly - in our domestic fight over the cuts. Our willingness to follow the Americans rarely

brought us commensurate influence in Washington even in the heyday of the "special relationship". Now the relationship is looking increasingly frayed. Donald Rumsfeld woundingly but correctly told us the Americans could fight the Iraq war perfectly well without us. Bob Woodward's recent book "Obama's Wars" shows that the American government never even thought about the British when they were considering what to do next in Afghanistan. Our "independent" deterrent is entirely vulnerable to American decisions about the future of their own deterrence technology. It is even worse than that. These days, when people in America and Europe talk about the "Big Three" who are shaping the future of the continent, they mean France, Germany, and Italy. They barely mention Britain at all. Far from punching above our weight, we are in danger of punching below it.

We should draw the right conclusions from all that. And indeed, although the new strategic concept continues to pay a dutiful lip service to the need to go wherever the Americans choose to lead, it also talks of cooperation with the other Europeans in

a surprisingly ungrudging manner. It even speaks, apparently sincerely, of collaboration with the French - admittedly in the unpromising context of aircraft carriers - in the same breath as it talks of cooperation with the US Navy. That is something welcome and new, though experience shows it will not be at all easy to achieve.

It will no doubt take many more years, and more painful upheavals, before we finally rid ourselves of our crippling nostalgia for past glories. Fortunately the government has committed itself to conducting further strategic reviews at five yearly intervals, and that will provide the opportunity to correct the glaring mistakes of this one. Perhaps by the time the first review comes round we will already have learned a bit of humility, and we will finally redesign our defence forces to match both our requirements and our means. Sooner or later we will in any case have to learn that lesson whether we like it or not. As Chaucer's Dame Prudence said: "I counsel that ye begin no war in trust of your riches, for they ... suffice not wars to maintain." ■