



Linking spending to strategic priorities: why the MDP should be published in full

Liam Walpole

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Since January 2018, the opportunities to engage with Ministry of Defence (MoD) decision-making around the Modernising Defence Programme (MDP) – the longest defence review in the UK’s history – has been limited. A failure to improve this is unlikely to advance the debate which so far has focused disproportionately on Russia, to the detriment of a strategic debate about the way in which many British troops are currently engaging abroad.

Our work has highlighted a shift away from the large-scale deployments of Iraq and Afghanistan towards supporting local and regional partners to do the bulk of frontline fighting. While this shift towards what we refer to as “remote warfare” is a large feature of UK engagement abroad, it has lacked sustained parliamentary and public debate.

That is why the format of the MDP’s release is so important. It is commendable that the government has now, [according to recent media reporting](#), confirmed it will release the full report, rather than limiting its release to a written ministerial statement. There are many important reasons why a full publicly accessible report is preferable.

Foremost among them is that it would allow for a more constructive dialogue between government, parliament and the wider public over the full spectrum of British defence issues affecting the UK today, not just those in the headlines. But also, it would mark a step towards moving the debate on defence away

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from one solely about spending to a broader discussion that links the MoD's budget more clearly with the UK's strategic priorities.

Encouraging external engagement

The National Security Capability Review (NSCR), announced in July 2017, came under intense criticism for the lack of engagement with parliamentary select committees, journalists, and wider civil society.

The MDP was separated out from the cost-neutral NSCR in January 2018 and it appears that the MoD attempted to learn from the NSCR process. In July 2018, for instance, the defence secretary said: "Throughout the MDP, the department has worked with colleagues across Whitehall, with academics, subject matter experts, allies and partners, and ran a public consultation exercise."

Publishing the findings and conclusions of the MDP as a full report would mark an important step in the MoD's efforts to engage with external stakeholders. As the defence select committee asserted in its June 2018 report, parliament should be given an opportunity to debate the findings of the MDP properly in order for MPs to have "an opportunity to influence the process". The publication of the MDP as a full report will maximise those opportunities and demonstrate that the MoD values external input.

Going beyond the spending debate

Having the findings of the MDP set out in a full, publicly-accessible report would also help move the debate away from a narrow discussion about the threat posed by Russia. That is not to say that we should underestimate the threat posed by Moscow, as the attack in Salisbury in March 2018 and recent events in Ukraine demonstrate.

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However, the UK government must not forget about its current deployments. It must also be able to conduct a level-headed debate about its current operations – and what capabilities Britain’s armed forces need to respond to the current threats – as well as planning for the most “dangerous threats”.

To adapt to the post-Iraq-and-Afghanistan political climate, the UK and its allies have sought to tackle perceived threats abroad without the deployment of large numbers of their own forces. The current approach sees the UK increasingly playing a supporting role alongside local and regional groups through the provision of training and equipment from below, and airpower and ISR support from above.

Faced with political, military and economic risk aversion, the UK has not necessarily adopted this approach because it is the most militarily effective, but because it is regarded as the only politically viable option for it to retain its presence on the world stage. Indeed, in our own interviews, comments about the decisions being made in Whitehall ranged from descriptions of strategic sleepwalking to a risk-averse process of elimination, whereby remote warfare was all that was left once the list of permissions and restrictions had been run through.

There is little sign that this risk aversion is going to dissipate anytime soon. This is despite the fact that government ministers are keen for the UK to adopt a “more assertive posture on the world stage”. Moreover, despite the uplift in defence spending announced last month the MoD is still facing pressures to implement greater efficiencies. For that reason, it will probably remain the “most likely” form of British military intervention overseas for years to come.

This is important given that a [key strand of the MDP's work](#) has been to review the “changing strategic context and how...[Britain's] armed forces need to be able to respond”. This includes a process of reviewing “existing capability plans” and shaping “new policy approaches...[to] identify investment priorities”.

But investing in capabilities and kit for our troops that don't reflect the propensity for Western countries to operate by, with and through local partners could undermine the effectiveness of Britain's armed forces. To mitigate against this, having the MDP released externally will provide a better opportunity for parliament, journalists and civil society to feed lessons learned from recent campaigns into future force design.

Looking ahead to 2019

The whole purpose of the MDP was to assess what capabilities Britain's armed forces required to meet the challenges posed by current threats – and whether the MoD needed increased funding to respond. The budget uplift suggests that this argument was, in part, won by the MoD.

However, to hold the government accountable on the decision it has taken around defence spending – and whether this represents an effective use of taxpayers' money – the publication of the full MDP report will provide a valuable degree of transparency and accountability.

With the 2019 Whitehall spending review almost upon us, broader consultation may also help the MoD win over allies when it comes to “crunch time” over future spending priorities.

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About the Author

Liam Walpole is a Senior Advocacy Officer at the Remote Warfare Programme.

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Contact

Unit 503
101 Clerkenwell Road London
EC1R 5BX
Charity no. 299436
Company no. 2260840

Email us

020 3559 6745

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