



# Special Measures: Donald Trump and Trans-Atlantic Relations

## Richard Reeve

20 January 2017

### Introduction

The election of Donald J. Trump to the US presidency could scarcely have come at a worse time for the British government of Theresa May, struggling to define the terms of its divorce settlement from its other long-term partners in continental Europe. For all Whitehall's enthusiastic language – at odds with that from much of Europe, or, indeed, London's own rhetoric towards Brussels – about working closely with the new President, the change of administration presents major challenges to the diplomatic and security alignments that have defined the British place in the world since at least the 1940s. Given Trump's erratic presentation of his own international priorities, and their frequent variance from those of his proposed cabinet, it seems inevitable that there must be a good deal of reacting to events and pronouncement rather than clear strategies and policies before the UK and the rest of the world understand how they fit into the new 'America First' global strategy.

Given that the 'Special Relationship' with the United States has defined British foreign policy for the three-quarters of a century of Pax Americana, it is tempting for some to conclude that the UK has little option but to find an easy working relationship with the Trump administration, just as liberal Europhile Tony Blair did with the neo-conservative Bush administration. From intelligence-sharing to joint development of nuclear weapons, the trans-Atlantic ties are certainly strong and the retreat from Europe might suggest an inability to consolidate alternative arrangements. Yet the UK does have options and, as

#### Latest

[An Update on the Security Policy Change Programme](#)

[Chances for Peace in the Third Decade](#)

[A Story of ORG: Oliver Ramsbotham](#)

[A Story of ORG: Gabrielle Rifkind](#)

#### Related

[Chances for Peace in the Third Decade](#)

[Marib: A Yemeni Government Stronghold Increasingly Vulnerable to Houthi Advances](#)

the latter part of this briefing will endeavour to demonstrate, these extend beyond the simple binary of choosing between the US and Europe.

The first part of this briefing will expand on two good reasons why it is in the interests of the UK government and people to embark upon a full assessment of its central relationship with the US under a Trump presidency. The first and most fundamental is that the policies 'proposed' (his word) by Trump, present a significant and existential threat to common global security, or sustainable security, as indeed have the general security policies of all recent UK and US governments. The secondary argument is that, even against the standards and priorities laid out by the British government in its November 2015 National Security Strategy, the impact of Trump administration actions is likely to be a significant increase in the threats to UK 'national security'.

Defining a new special relationship with the UK's main bilateral ally is, then, about much more than managing reputational risk to Britain and its leaders. With relative US power, and that of the 'liberal' Western alliance in general, already past its peak and likely to decline throughout this century, the challenge is for the UK to assert itself in ways that contribute to a relatively peaceful rebalancing of global relations rather than raging against the dying of the old order of dominance.

## **Trump and Sustainable Security**

A sustainable security strategy may be defined as one that meets the human security needs of the population (whether defined locally, nationally or globally) by actively addressing the root causes of insecurity rather than attempting to control or suppress their symptoms. It is thus not achieved at the expense of other states or peoples. It does not prioritise short term 'security' over long

### **Looking Back to Look Forward: The Value of ORG's Approach to Conflict**

---

### **COVID-19: The Dangers of Securitisation**

#### **Most read**

### **The Role of Youth in Peacebuilding: Challenges and Opportunities**

---

### **Making Bad Economies: The Poverty of Mexican Drug Cartels**

---

### **ORG's Vision**

---

### **Remote Warfare: Lessons Learned from Contemporary Theatres**

term peace. And it must, thus, be ecologically sustainable. It barely need be said that, notwithstanding the commitment of President Obama to carbon reduction, such a concept has never been the basis of international security thinking under US or UK hegemony.

This said, there are reasons to believe that US security policy under the Trump presidency will be even less sustainable than previously. Perhaps most obviously, Trump and his team have declared their open scepticism towards human induced **climate change** and may well seek to withdraw the US from its multilateral commitments to curb carbon emissions or encourage renewable energy provision. Given the recent centrality of US-China leadership in leading attempts to mitigate climate change, this is bad news for international cooperation and may have a knock-on impact among other sceptic states keen to sell their hydrocarbons, not least Russia, which shares Trump's inclination to open up the Arctic oil frontier.

Conversely, as Paul Rogers has noted, there is a mood of determination among almost all other states to defy US scepticism, as well as major commercial incentives for international business to lead the technological transition from fossil to renewable fuels. The implication of the US recommitting to oil-based technologies, let alone the mooted plan to boost coal usage, would seem to be the acceleration of US industrial decline as well as further reputational damage, not least relative to global rival China.

Trump's populist prioritisation of North American hydrocarbons to meet US energy needs might be bad for the environment as well as business in the longer term but it might just be better news in terms of US engagement with the rest of the world. Controlling access to and profits from international oil and gas fields has been central to US (and UK) power for decades. Reduced

dependence on hydrocarbon imports could help to reduce the incentive to intervene aggressively abroad, not least in the Persian Gulf and perhaps Venezuela.

However, given the relatively low dependence of the US economy on imported oil and gas, US corporations have arguably stood to gain more than the state from the dominant US military role in oil-producing countries. Trump's designated Secretary of State Rex Tillerson is clearly well versed in such alignments as former chief executive of ExxonMobil. It might be predicted that advancing the foreign interests of US-based mining companies will receive high priority from the incoming administration and not be unduly constrained by concern for environmental standards. Trump's concerns about Chinese state influence advancing the interests of Chinese extractive firms in, for example, Africa, it seems likely that his America First orientation will seek to work in partnership with US-based multinationals. The outlook for **competition over resources** to drive global conflict thus still looks gloomy overall under Trump, if not as doomy as under George W. Bush.

More unequivocally pessimistic must be the forecast for the role of **marginalisation** in driving conflict under Trump. Having campaigned explicitly on a platform of penalising immigrants and monitoring Muslims, Trump has sent powerful signals to Americans and the rest of the world that white Christian power and privilege are back in control. For all his rhetoric of championing the common man against vested political and bureaucratic interests, the number of billionaires (five, including Trump) in his designated cabinet strongly suggests a dominant ongoing political role for business elites. This looks likely to exacerbate inequality and perceptions of marginalisation at

home and abroad, further stimulating recruitment to such groups as al-Qaida and the Islamic State.

Finally, there is the issue of **militarisation** and the US' relationship with potential military rivals or adversaries. Notwithstanding his own avoidance of military service during the Vietnam war, the new president is keen on the expansion of US military power and spending, promising higher expenditure, more fighter aircraft, a much bigger Navy and adding over 100,000 troops to the Army and Marine Corps. He has also tweeted (at variance with his team) of expanding the US nuclear arsenal. The Republican Congress is equally keen on rebuilding the US military, as seen in Senator John McCain's recent proposals on 'Restoring American Power'.

While the incoming president has said he is not interested in regime-change operations, the emphasis of his defence sector 'proposals' is very much on power projection, not least through an expanded and re-equipped Marine Corps and Navy, with the so-called Islamic State (IS), China and perhaps Iran as the apparent adversaries. Overall, his plans seem to indicate an expansion of something like 10-15% on current military strength and expenditure, reversing some (but not all) cuts made during Obama's second term. Pressure on low spending allies from Japan and South Korea to European NATO seems to be intended to in-fill additional capacity in conventional deterrence contexts.

As important as what the Pentagon may be buying is where it might deploy it, and how that would influence peers or adversaries to respond. Indications are that Trump's twin obsessions are with IS and China, neither of whose activities or interests he has a firm grasp of. While he appears strongly disposed towards Israel and its position towards Iran, he does seem reluctant for US forces to get more directly involved in Middle Eastern geopolitics, including the Syrian proxy

war, and there will be strong commercial pressures on him not to upset the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. Unlike Obama, he is very open to engagement with Russia, perhaps even on nuclear disarmament, although this risks undermining the unity of NATO and leaving the UK – Europe’s leading opponent of Putin – isolated.

Ironically, Trump’s big opening move on the international stage appears to be the perpetuation of the ‘pivot to Asia’ maritime containment of China, the signature diplomatic endeavour of Hilary Clinton when she was Obama’s Secretary of State. Build-up of US naval forces in the western Pacific and South China Sea, as well as the stirring of relations with Taiwan, presents a real threat of military confrontation with the only state that could credibly even consider open warfare with the US and is likely to accelerate the pace of the arms race already underway there.

## **Trump and National Security**

So far, so what? Even if Obama committed to global action on climate change, drew down most US forces from Iraq and Afghanistan and slashed the Defense budget, he still authorised scores of unaccountable ‘remote warfare’ operations in multiple countries, supported new regime-change operations in Libya and Syria, oversaw the vast expansion of US shale oil production (‘fracking’), continued the aggressive military containment of Iran, Russia and China, and (at best) drew a blank on nuclear arms reduction. The last Bush administration actively undermined climate science and (with the UK as its lead partner) tore up international law to redraw the Middle East. With variable concessions to multilateralism and the welfare of its major allies and trade partners, the US has always pursued an unashamed national security policy, not sustainable security.

How, then, do the early indications of foreign and defence policy priorities from the Trump team look when measured against its closest ally's publicly defined national security priorities? This section looks at the likely impact of Trump's sketched-out foreign policy on the priority threats to UK national security set out in the 2015 National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR).

## **1. Terrorism, Extremism and Instability**

The 2015 SDSR shares Trump's belief that the greatest immediate threat to Western security comes from Islamist terrorist groups, especially IS. While the British government has been increasingly harsh in its attitude to migrants and refugees, and an increasingly dynamic member of the international military coalition fighting IS in Iraq and Syria, it has fallen well short of calling for the identification and monitoring of all Muslim citizens and immigrants. There is good reason to believe that the UK's current military-first strategy against IS, as well as its long colonial history in the Islamic world and elements of its domestic 'Prevent' counter-terrorism strategy, are counter-productive in the longer term. But none seem as likely to have the immediate impact of the Trump presidency – and, indeed, his endorsement by a near-majority of ordinary American voters – and its open embrace of the them-and-us concept of a clash between Christian West and Muslim East. Trump's campaign messaging was surely a gift to IS. The UK may not be as easy a target for terrorists as parts of Schengen Europe, but it is likely to become more of a target for a reinvigorated enemy through its alliance with Trump's America.

## **2. Resurgent State-based Threats**



The 2015 SDSR is quite clear that it is an “aggressive, authoritarian and nationalist” **Russia** that is the resurgent state threat to the UK and NATO. Trump has been conversely clear that Russia is not a real threat; he admires Vladimir Putin and believes he can do a deal with the Russian president over the heads of other NATO leaders. He has variously described NATO as essential, obsolete and unwilling to pay its fair share of collective security provision. Other members of Trump’s team have tended to stick to traditional lines that Russia’s behaviour is problematic and US commitment to NATO is unwavering.

This is a big challenge to UK foreign policy, not least because London has been among the most outspokenly anti-Russian states in Europe, even before the 2014 Ukraine crisis. The UK has also made major security commitments to the Baltic States since 2014, and is currently deploying an armoured regiment to Estonia. Trump’s rhetoric leaves it unclear if the US (which is currently deploying similar forces to Poland and Lithuania) would act in collective defence of the Baltics under the NATO Treaty. Formerly closer to Obama’s Washington than to much of Europe on Russia policy, the UK thus risks being left out in the cold, baiting Moscow without support.

That said, de-escalation of tensions between Washington and Moscow would serve to reduce the heightened prospect of direct clashes between NATO and Russia. While these are more likely to be the result of accident or miscalculation than of deliberate policy, they present the real prospect of nuclear escalation. The question for the UK and Europe is what balance might Trump and Putin strike between de-escalation and normalisation of relations given the ongoing Russian occupation of Crimea and its military presence in parts of eastern Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova? US recognition, or even de

facto acceptance, of Russia's annexation of Crimea would set a precedent that would deeply worry European states with large Russian (or pro-Russian) minorities.

Unlike the SDSR, Trump has been overt in presenting **China** as a major state threat to US interests, chiefly through trade and currency manipulation but also through its maritime military expansion. While this is to some extent a continuation of the Obama administration's attempt to contain China through a build-up of forces in the western Pacific, it seems to lack Obama's more nuanced engagement with Beijing on economic and environmental issues. Trump also

Trump's demonization of China presents something of a dilemma for Mrs May's Brexiting government as it attempts to court new trade relationships in the Far East. As far as London is concerned, China, Japan, South Korea and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) are all key potential new major markets to offset the exit from the European common market. Part of May's courting of these countries has been a revived demonstration of the UK's value as a military partner. Exactly as Trump was being elected in the US, RAF Typhoon fighters were deployed to South Korea for the first time to join exercises with Korean and US peers. Weeks earlier, the same aircraft had exercised with the Japanese air force for the first time while May met premier Abe. As from about 2020, the Royal Navy's new supercarriers will provide the UK with the ability for the first time in nearly half-a-century to project serious air and naval power all the way to South East Asia, where Britain retains mutual defence treaty commitments to Malaysia and Singapore, as well as a permanent base in Brunei.

Unlike the predecessor government of David Cameron and Chancellor George Osborne, the current UK government has been much less overt in its courting of Beijing's investment, even before Trump's surprise victory. Has the UK, then, fallen into line with US balance of power strategy in the Far East? Does it aspire to play a more active role in defence and deterrence in this distant region in future? What risks does this present for the UK to become involved in future major power direct or proxy conflicts? These are important questions that the Cameron government's SDSR did not ask.

Finally, there is the ongoing potential for the UK to be embroiled in state-to-state conflict in the **Middle East**. This is hardly something new given the Blair and Cameron government's 'wars of choice' in Iraq, Libya and Syria, and successive British governments' cultivation of basing infrastructure and 'loan service' personnel in all the Gulf States. However, the Trump government is likely to be more hawkish towards Iran and perhaps guided by Israeli strategic concerns. Trump also seems to see the quid pro quo for US leadership of NATO as being unquestioning European support for the war against IS, potentially well beyond Iraq and Syria.

More than this, the transactional nature of Trump's foreign policy suggests that there is perhaps a double quid pro quo for the UK as it looks for a rapid post-EU trading agreement with the US. In this unfavourable context it may be difficult for May's government to exercise any meaningful ability to stand apart from US-led interventions. The UK armed forces are, after all, 'international by design' - structured largely to provide niche inputs (maritime, intelligence, special forces, nuclear) to wider coalitions that could only be led by the US.

The two new aircraft carriers are particularly significant in this regard. While HMS Queen Elizabeth will be commissioned in 2017, the UK will not have

sufficient F-35B Joint Strike Fighters to operate from it until at least 2023. Defence Secretary Sir Michael Fallon thus signed an [agreement](#) in Washington on 15 December to allow the US Marine Corps to operate its F-35Bs from the British carriers in the interim period, achieving operational capability by 2020, the last year of Trump's (first) term. With the Marine Corps set to expand its inventory and role under Trump as the US spearhead against IS, it will surely be a difficult decision for any UK government to deny it access to essential Royal Navy platforms. A silver lining? Perhaps the US Navy would be interested in buying one or more of the British carriers should the admiralty concede they are beyond its needs or resources.

### 3. **Cyber and Technological Threats**

Trump has pledged to commit new resources and efforts to protect the US from cyber security threats, but it is hard to know whether this will achieve any more results than the Obama administration's efforts or, given uncertainties over NATO's mandate and commitment, whether its protection would extend to the UK and other NATO allies. While one can speculate on the relative cyber threats emanating from Russia and China, it does not look as if the change of leadership in Washington will have much impact on the UK's national security.

In terms of wider technological change, there is an interesting question over whether Trump's apparent obsession with power through conventional rearmament – more troops, ships, aircraft, in which China approaches quantitative parity – will be achieved at the expense of investment in the next generation of weapons that would change the nature of the future battlefield. Will the Pentagon be able to afford to pursue a Third Offset Strategy? Arguably, such research and development has provided the real benefit of the US to its allies in the past, and effectively won the Cold War. Yet the Reagan

administration was able to push conventional, strategic and future weapons superiority from a colossal commitment of resources to the military: 6% of GDP. Trump will probably have to work with nearer half of that and make serious investment choices, not least if he is to continue or expand Obama's global counter-insurgency campaign against IS.

#### **4. Threats to the Rules-based International Order**

With the twilight of Pax Americana, or the liberal world order, it has become something of a mantra in Whitehall to talk of the UK's strategic interest in upholding the 'rules-based international order' against illiberal challenges. While there is a strong argument that the US and UK decision to flout the Security Council in invading and occupying Iraq killed the UN-based system in 2003, it is almost certain that the old order has been buried with the election of Trump. This is not just because authoritarian Russia was successful in hacking and subverting the US presidential election campaign, nor because China will disregard the International Court of Justice in pursuing its territorial claims on the South China Sea, but because a near majority of the US electorate (imitating large minorities of European voters) cast their lots for the most overtly illiberal candidate in modern US history. They voted, inter alia, to support the routine use of torture, the fortification of US borders, and the registration and monitoring of Muslim citizens.

Beyond nostalgia for the squandered post-Cold War liberal 'moment', is there much that the UK or its partners can do to rebuild faith in multilateralism and liberal norms like democracy and human rights? Certainly there is, but now more than ever this will entail practising what is preached. This is a tough call for a government that has prioritised trade deal-making with some tough customers and cannot afford to be too conditional in its approach. It is also

tough when the UK appears to have turned its back on the EU, the most significant experiment in liberal integrationism.

Perhaps the upside lies in recognising that elements of liberalism, though currently threatened in the Western core (US and Europe), now also flourish in most of Latin America and significant parts of Africa and Asia. A Global Britain that really wants to assert a rules-based order would do well to set three priorities: critically evaluate its own behaviour to be sure that it conforms with international law and justice; work to reform its major institutional relationships (NATO chief among them) to be sure that they conform to international rules and serve to uphold and promote democracy and rights, internally even more than externally; and look beyond the old 'White West' to work in partnership with the many newer democracies of the South.

### **North Atlantic Drift: Aligning between Trump and Brexit**

Nothing to be done? The official rhetoric from London on the Trump presidency rather suggests that the UK can and must get on with business as usual with its key ally, and is even looking forward to it. But such is diplomacy. Despite the three-way division of the Foreign Office in 2016 (to create new departments for Exiting the EU and International Trade), it may be assumed that some capacity is being devoted to thinking through future relations with the US, as well as with Europe. This final section presents four possible variants of the UK's future international security relationships broadly within the three traditional spheres: NATO and the trans-Atlantic relationship; Europe, if not the EU; and the Commonwealth and wider world. They assume a reality in which the UK will leave the EU by mid-2019 and in which NATO broadly endures, though of course the fragmentation of either the EU or NATO is no longer as wildly implausible as it was this time last year.

## **Option 1: The Special Relationship at any cost**

This is the status quo option and the one which both May and Trump have projected as the most likely to prevail. Half-Scottish President Trump will move the bust of Winston Churchill back into the Oval Office, the UK will remain the key defence partner of choice for Washington and a host of joint military and intelligence projects will continue to make interoperability of forces and policies not only possible but necessary.

The advantages of this option would seem to be its predictability, its conformity with the way things have been done for 70 years. The UK would not have to alter its force design nor look to alternative suppliers for military or intelligence products. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine even trying to disentangle GCHQ and British intelligence agencies from the Five Eyes network (US, UK, Australia, Canada, New Zealand) or for UK intelligence and special forces to perform their sharp end functions without access to the most sensitive US-supplied technologies. Given that the Ministry of Defence has recently committed to buying a raft of critical new systems (F-35B fighters, P-8A maritime patrol aircraft, AH-64E attack helicopters, MQ-9B armed drones, vital parts of the Trident nuclear weapons system) from US manufacturers, there is now more than ever an impetus not to rock the boat.

The disadvantages to continuing this privileged relationship to large extent depend on what President Trump does while in office. Some damage has certainly been done to the reputation of US allies simply by association with some of the wilder rhetoric of the Trump campaign; much more would be done if the Trump administration really did govern with such disregard for liberal norms or expanded the US' (and NATO's) portfolio of small wars. As discussed, the prospects for getting hung out to dry on Russia and dropped in the hot

waters of the South China Sea are of concern. From Washington's perspective, of course, the loyalty and capabilities of the UK would have to be weighed up against its status as a loner outside of the EU, no longer a true Atlantic bridge.

## **Option 2: Collective Defence – A new European compact**

This is the closest to a binary alternative to the trans-Atlantic relationship – committing to an alternative special relationship with Europe that binds the UK closely to its continental allies on security policy even as it walks away from the EU and Common Market. To some extent, the major European states (Germany, France and Italy) have already begun this process through their 2016 attempts to create an EU military headquarters and more functional coordination in procurement, research and development. Is this the seeds of European collective security outside of NATO? Almost certainly not. Would European states even consider involving the traditionally spoiling UK in such arrangements? Only reluctantly.

While there are certainly precedents for non-EU states participating in NATO and even in the European Defence Agency (Norway), the UK has always been seen to represent the US interest in weakening such alternatives to a US-led NATO. A radical divergence between Washington and its European partners, perhaps over Russia, could give the impetus for the UK to shift its position towards Europe but it is hard to see this happening without an overt push from the US, not least as relations between London, Brussels, Paris and Berlin are likely to be strained by EU exit negotiations until at least 2019.

The security advantages of this option for the UK are perhaps more reputational than practical at present given the closer fit between UK and US capabilities and ambitions. To sell to the UK electorate would probably require



not only a push from the US but a more welcoming pull from the continent. That is, if the UK came to see the US as a less reliable security partner than key European states. The advantages for the UK would thus be more apparent if London felt it gained something diplomatically or economically in exchange for bringing its military heft to Europe.

The disadvantages of this option would include a significant need to redesign UK forces to operate without the assurance of US support, or indeed to play the leading role in European defence. Being tied in to procurement of its most important systems from the US would be a possible headache were the US to look less favourably on the UK, although this scale of rupture seems quite unlikely.

### **Option 3: Territorial Defence Plus – Britain First**

This option is the closest to mirroring the kind of foreign and security policy that Trump has outlined for the US: America First. Under a Britain First scenario, the UK might remain loosely within NATO but scale back its ambitions to fight wars not directly in its own interests and beyond its comfortable area of operation. This might include disengaging from the coalition campaigns in the Middle East and Afghanistan and perhaps from forward deployment of forces to the eastern fringes of Europe. In effect, the UK would be favourably disposed to the US and much of Europe but without asserting a leading role in either's defence.

The advantage of this more isolationist option stems perhaps from its limited ability to disrupt or do harm abroad. It might be a significantly cheaper option in terms of equipment, though the current commitment to defend the Falkland Islands and overseas territories in four other seas and oceans make UK territorial defence unusually stretching. That said, it would clearly comprise a

weak commitment to collective European defence in the face of, most obviously, Russian assertiveness. Most problematically for the present government at least, it would also be a clear indicator of a British retreat from the global role that it covets.

#### **Option 4: Global Britain – an outreach to Empire**

The final option might be described as the French Option, at least historically (1966-2009), as France has now moved close to wholly embracing Option 2. In this scenario, the UK would opt to align neither more closely with the US than with the rest of Europe but position itself as a more internationalist maritime power with a rough convergence of security and trade alignments beyond the North Atlantic. These might seek to privilege relations with Commonwealth (semi-)democracies like India, Canada, Australia, Nigeria, Malaysia, South Africa, Singapore and New Zealand, or perhaps follow a more mercantile or transactional path to those countries most critical to the UK economy, which might include Gulf States, Japan and Korea.

As in the US, there is an attractiveness in this approach for some British interests yearning for trade and empire and keen to unshackle Britain from European geopolitics. In some respects it fits with traditional British foreign policy: as closely aligned with Australia, Canada and New Zealand as with the US; a treaty ally of Malaysia and Singapore; keen to use the Royal Navy as the police force of global trade routes; jealous guardian of a nominally independent nuclear deterrent. Theresa May's government has emphasised defence diplomacy across the world and the role of military assets as flagships of British commercial interests across the world.

The disadvantages of this option chiefly stem from historical reality. While the UK has a blue water navy, it is a shadow of the Royal Navy of imperial past. The ability to project power can be a liability as much as an asset because it leads to entanglements in many kinds of conflict, often with adversaries who cannot be beaten by conventional means. Clearly there are reputational risks of closer alignment with other illiberal states and greater practical risks of alliances with very distant states and regions than with one's neighbours.

## Conclusion

The reality, of course, is that contingency and opportunity will guide the eventual reshaping of the UK's relations with the Trump administration, Europe and the rest of the world far more than any vision from Downing Street or Whitehall of what Britain's principled place in the world should be. Inertia is an enormously strong force, not least in strategic alignments, and it will likely take a tremendous amount of pressure on the current government to convince it to move away from the existing special relationship. Much as it might seem pragmatic to consolidate security relations with the rest of Europe, this will not be easy during the Brexit period, for both diplomatic and domestic reasons. The government has been clear that it wants a more global role for Britain even as its resources to achieve that are circumscribed by the long-term decline of UK influence relative to most regions beyond Europe.

Where the UK ends up will depend on a series of pragmatic and probably unsatisfying trade-offs. It seems likely that NATO will hang together but with reduced coherence as the UK and Europe differ over whether to deter Russia or combat IS. As one of the rare states to be equally concerned by both the UK may be torn in different directions by its alignment with the US, as well as potentially more embroiled in distracting state-based conflicts in the Gulf and

South East Asia. This, then, looks like a continuation of the messy 21<sup>st</sup> century business as usual. The great risk is of delusion and over-stretch, gaining a presence everywhere at the expense of achieving impact anywhere. Arguably, this is already the great weakness of the force structure set out in SDSR 2015, which is already critically dependent on piggy-backing US capabilities. Unlike in previous defence reviews, it is worth doing the thinking now on quite where Britain would be if -by push, pull or shove - the old certainties were gone and those US capabilities could no longer be relied upon.

### **Download as PDF**

---

Image credit: Matt Johnson/Flickr

---

### ***About the Author***

***Richard Reeve*** is the Director of the Sustainable Security Programme at ORG. He has worked as a Research Fellow with King's College London, Chatham House and at Jane's Information Group.

---

**Copyright Oxford Research Group 2017.**

**Some rights reserved. This briefing is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Licence. For more information please visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>.**

### **Share this page**



## Contact

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

Email us

020 3559 6745

## Follow us



## Useful links

[Login](#)  
[Contact us](#)  
[Sitemap](#)  
[Accessibility](#)  
[Terms & Conditions](#)  
[Privacy policy](#)