

Modernising Defence Programme

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson)

In January, together with the Prime Minister and Chancellor, I launched the Government's modernising defence programme (MDP). The Ministry of Defence (MOD) is now able to share our headline conclusions. 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.

The MDP was launched after the national security capability review acknowledged the increasing security challenges we are facing. Its purpose was to deliver better military capability to meet the increasing threat environment and value for money in a sustainable and affordable way. Defence protects our people, projects our global influence, and promotes our prosperity. And, at this key moment as the UK leaves the European Union, defence and the armed forces will continue to deliver security in Europe and further afield, helping to make global Britain a reality.

Threats and risks to national security have diversified and become more complex since 2015. Although we anticipated many of the threats and risks we now face, we underestimated the pace at which they would intensify and combine to challenge UK national security at home and threaten the rules-based international order that has delivered peace, security and prosperity over many decades. And, we did not fully understand the ways in which they would interact with each other.

Alongside this, the character of warfare has changed since 2015. We are in a period of constant aggressive competition between states, often developing into undeclared confrontation and, in some cases, proxy conflicts. Technology, especially digital technology, is developing at a breath-taking pace, making pervasive many capabilities once only imagined in science fiction.

Our adversaries are working to take advantage of this contested environment by systematically identifying and exploiting our vulnerabilities and those of our allies and partners. Peer and near-peer states are investing heavily in both conventional and emerging technologies, and are increasingly adopting hybrid or asymmetric approaches to gain advantage. This has included

attacking our digital networks and those of our allies, and operating in unconventional and legally questionable ways. Broader developments in the world including demographic change, increasing urbanisation, the risk of pandemics, resource and environmental pressures will all contribute to a global strategic context which will become more complex.

All this means that the challenges to our national security and prosperity—and to our allies' and partners' security and prosperity—are increasingly complex, ambiguous, destabilising and potentially catastrophic.

Work in the first phase of the MDP has reviewed this changing strategic context and how our armed forces need to be able to respond. We have reviewed our existing capability plans, and begun to shape new policy approaches and identify investment priorities, and through work streams, we have developed a blueprint for a major programme of top-down transformative reform to defence. In all of this, we have been guided by the three key roles that our armed forces should be able to fulfil in the 21st century:

Contribute to strengthening global security through our leading role in NATO, and provide the structures and capabilities to defend the UK;

Meet the challenges of the wider threats to international security and stability, including through operations and activities alongside our global allies and partners. Defence must be engaged and outward looking, meeting the challenges of our age, from state-based competition and confrontation, violent extremism and terrorism, instability and crises in Africa and Asia, illegal and irregular migration, serious and organised crime, to climate change and environmental disasters.

Act independently, when appropriate, to protect UK interests and citizens overseas, leading multi-national operations and developing strong defence relationships with partners around the world.

Headline conclusions

1. Our armed forces need to be ready and able to match the pace at which our adversaries now move.

The pace at which our adversaries can act against us has grown quickly since SDSR 2015. Today, our adversaries disguise their actions by launching attacks that are hard to attribute, or by operating below the conventional

threshold for a decisive, collective response. Whilst our armed forces already protect us against these challenges every hour of every day, we need to be able to respond to this new character of warfare, both in the traditional land, sea and air domains, as well as in the new domains of space and cyber. The MDP will make sure that the armed forces can continue to protect our prosperity and security, while reinforcing Britain's place in the world.

To defend our national security, we should make the best possible use of the unique mix of hard and soft power that makes the UK a major global actor: from our economic levers to our wider diplomatic and cultural influence on the world's stage. This integrated, collective approach to national security is captured in the Government's fusion doctrine. Defence has a vital and increasing role in underwriting it, including through contributing to deterring and disrupting hostile state activity, delivering the CONTEST counter-terrorism strategy in the UK and overseas, or supporting wider security and prosperity objectives.

The armed forces have a unique network of alliances and friendships spanning every corner of every continent. We have made significant progress in making defence more "international by design", and we will look at how we could do more. We have already strengthened relationships with key allies and partners, including through ambitious capability collaborations, and we will seek to go further still. We will consider our global defence network, to make sure we have the right military and civilian staff deployed around the world. We will seek to optimise our programme of world-class international education and training, which is so highly valued by our allies and partners, and gives the UK competitive advantage and strategic influence across the globe. And we will continue to lead multinational forces and deepen our relationships across the globe.

Most importantly, we need to make sure we can respond rapidly to future crises on our terms. Our elite and high-readiness forces are critical in this regard, enabled by collective training and our high-end exercise programme. We will consider how we can rebalance our training and equipment to mainland Europe, the far east and the middle east and review our overseas basing to improve our interoperability with allies and partners. NATO's readiness initiative will also play an important role in this endeavour. Equally, our ability to respond rapidly will depend on an improved understanding and anticipation of the strategic confrontations that define this era: we will therefore build a strategic net assessment capability in the MOD. Strategic net assessment looks across all dimensions of competition—political, economic, military, resources—to assess how the choices of both friends and

foes may play out over the short, medium and long term. Its conclusions can be used to develop more nuanced and better-informed strategy, so we can better anticipate our adversaries' actions and counter them more effectively.

As outlined in SDSR 2015, protecting our security safeguards our prosperity, so our armed forces will continue to provide the assurance and reassurance for our global trade and development commitments, and support our ambitions for global Britain. As we continue our commitment to defence investment we will consider a much more agile approach to the development of future equipment, with a clear focus on the increasing flexibility required to maintain strategic advantage over our adversaries.

2. A fighting force fit for the challenges of the 21st century

We intend to modernise our force structure so that it is better able to meet the increasing threats we face. The key design principles of Joint Force 2025 are right: we want armed forces able to operate with agility and pace in the information age. Our armed forces need to be able to meet a full range of missions now and into the future. This includes, if necessary, warfighting operations under NATO article 5 and further afield.

We need to be able to meet future threats and face down our adversaries to continue to protect our prosperity and security. We may need to accelerate elements of the programme to meet the most acute threats sooner. Equally, we might want to introduce new capabilities or equipment that provide significant advantage in the immediate term. We intend, in each case, to look to the right balance of conventional and novel capabilities to meet the threats we face.

Alongside this, we will consider how to improve our resilience, so that our networks and systems across defence are protected against cyber-attack and infiltration, and our submarines can continue to avoid detection. We will also strengthen our equipment, training and facilities, like the investment we are making in a chemical weapons defence centre to counter chemical biological radiological and nuclear threats like we saw in Salisbury and Amesbury. Through advancing our resilience we will make sure our forces and bases are better protected.

A fighting force fit for the challenges of the 21st century also means our armed forces need to be able to operate in the space domain. So, to guide future investment in our satellites and wider space capabilities we will publish a space strategy.

To operate effectively in the information age, we need “information advantage”. Conflicts of the future will increasingly be won and lost based on who uses information technology most effectively: sensors, computing, communication, cyber and machine learning, artificial intelligence and autonomy. We will consider how to enhance our ability to collect, analyse, disseminate and act very rapidly on the vast quantities of data that characterise the contemporary operating environment. That will allow us to understand how our adversaries are thinking, how they may choose to act against us, and how we can deter or defeat them.

We are also looking at how to update the way we fight. For much of the last two decades, the UK has been conducting or contributing to significant overseas operations, in Afghanistan, Iraq and the wider middle east. Our adversaries have learned a lot about how we operate, and how they can disrupt our preferred methods. So, we are considering what a more active and dynamic approach to operations in all five domains—land, sea, air, space and cyberspace—should look like.

At the same time, we will consider how to modernise our approach to technology and innovation. By taking a more co-ordinated approach to technology and experimentation, with better central oversight, we may be able to pursue opportunities for modernisation more aggressively and accept higher levels of risk pursuing novel ideas. We intend to invest in a series of “Spearhead” initiatives on key new technologies and increase our spending on innovation, science and technology. Pursuing this approach will allow us to become quicker at turning advances in research and development into strategic advantage. In support of this, we will publish a “Defence Technology Framework”, setting out the Department’s technology priorities so that we can focus efforts and guide strategy, investment and plans across defence as a whole.

And we should also ensure that we use the combined talents of our whole force of regulars, reserves, civil servants and industry partners more effectively. The character of conflict and the world of work more generally are changing, so defence will need to up-skill our people, harness the advantages offered by reserves, and reflect the expectations of the modern workforce.

3. Transforming the business of defence to deliver a robust, credible, modern and affordable force

We are re-setting and re-energising the way MOD is led, organised and managed, with clearer responsibilities and accountabilities to deliver better value for money. We will embrace approaches, processes, technologies and best practice with a proven track record of success elsewhere. We will encourage a culture of experimentation, and change our acquisition and commercial processes to better support the rapid and incremental adoption of new and emerging technologies.

To help create financial headroom for the additional modernisation, we will consider how to deliver greater efficiency by adopting ambitious, digitally-enabled business modernisation. In parallel, we will consider removing existing areas of overlap and duplication within our force structure and burden-sharing more effectively with allies and partners.

We intend to adopt a more collaborative and demanding approach to our relationship with industry, centred around an agreed set of productivity, efficiency, skills and innovation challenges that we need to meet together. At the same time, in the next stages of our work we will consider what we might do to grow even further the already considerable contribution that Defence makes to UK prosperity. The important work conducted by my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) in his independent report can inform these considerations.

Conclusions

The first phase of the MDP has looked to set the direction we intend to take. It has clarified three key themes we should consider in the next phase: first, our armed forces need to be ready and able to match the pace at which our adversaries now move. Secondly, our armed forces need to be a fighting force fit for the challenges of the 21st century. And, finally, we need to transform the business of defence to deliver a robust, credible, modern and affordable force.

The Prime Minister, Chancellor and I will continue to work closely throughout the next phase of the MDP, and I will keep the House updated as decisions are made.

We will continue to meet our commitment to our partners and maintain a full spectrum of nuclear, conventional and cyber capabilities to match our global ambition. With one of the largest defence budgets in the world, and the highest in Europe, our defence budget is increasing in real terms by £1 billion a year during this Parliament. The stage is now set for the next phase of this

programme of work to ensure UK defence and our armed forces can continue to keep our country safe, our people and interests around the world secure, and help ensure that the UK can continue to play a major role on the world stage.