**Why two percent on defence is too much – a response**

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Writing in New Republic in 1976, the great satirist Woody Allen recalled a mythical conversation between President Lincoln and his press secretary, George Jennings, in which the President unveiled a new joke. “How long should a man’s legs be?” Lincoln had asked the somewhat bemused Jennings. The answer: “long enough to reach the ground.”

Allen’s intent was to bring a spot of levity and ridicule to the otherwise deadly serious business of governing a country. Paul Robinson’s article in this journal, “Why Two Percent on Defence is Too Much” does not have the same comic objective, but plays with the same logical paradox. In raw economic terms, as Robinson very effectively argues, it makes no sense at all to peg defence spending to a rather arbitrary percentage of GDP, as we currently do under our NATO obligations. For a start, GDP will go up and down year on year in response to things that have little or nothing to do with defence priorities, potentially causing the defence budget to fluctuate in a rather troublesome way. Secondly, defence expenditure should reflect a sensible assessment of security threat, and deliver a suitably designed response to that threat, in a process that should have nothing to do with the performance of the economy per se. Linking the two together is like comparing apples with pears, or indeed, casting judgement on the ideal length of a man’s legs.

Robinson’s argument is that the security threat picture has changed away from large-scale military threats and more into the civil, policing realm. This, in turn, means that the extant calculation of two percent of GDP to be spent on defence, which, in most years, equates to approximately £35 million per annum, is now far too much to meet the security need, given that policing and intelligence activities are far cheaper than fighter jets, tanks and aircraft carriers. In most of this thinking, Robinson is absolutely right and his paper is a timely and important one. Indeed his argument chimes with political thinking on both sides of the Atlantic in the contemporary era. In the UK, the leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, has called for “new thinking” in foreign policy and defence which moves away from military intervention and towards enhanced diplomatic efforts to resolve crises. In the US, an Obama-era desire to move away from “Bush’s wars” of the early 21st century has been coupled more recently with an “America First” notion in the Trump administration that says (at least outwardly) that the US is no longer prepared to shoulder the security burden of everyone else in the world. (It should be said that the recent announcement of a troop uplift in Afghanistan seems to contradict this notion.)

Paul Robinson’s argument is therefore most useful within the context of post-Cold War security restructuring, and indeed with regard to post-Brexit defence policy thinking in the UK. In this response, I examine these arguments, and, while broadly agreeing with the central concept, suggest they could be challenged in two important areas. First is the importance of the UK’s relationship with NATO, which delivers a complex set of political objectives beyond simple economic calculations. These objectives are arguably even more important in the light of Brexit. Second is the notion that a significant proportion of the terrorist threat we currently face is entirely our own fault. I would argue that this is a form of Western self-flagellation which perhaps belies some of the internal complexities of the Middle East.

**The contemporary threat picture and NATO**

Whether one agrees or not with Jeremy Corbyn, there was an inescapable logic in his view expressed at Chatham House during the recent election campaign that “we need to step back and have some fresh thinking” on defence[[1]](#footnote-1). If the policies we have been pursuing have made us less safe rather than more, then the time may be ripe to question the established order of things. At the same time, the follow-up to Corbyn’s logic is that a military-oriented foreign policy provokes discord and should be replaced with a policy based more on political negotiation and diplomacy. In a sense, this is also an argument for spending less on defence, but for different reasons than purely economic ones. Robinson accords with this general view, noting that “there is little or no evidence that military power makes a more effective contribution to international stability than other forms of government action”, as the “debacle of Britain’s campaign in Afghanistan has shown.”

In some ways, the former Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government recognised the dangers of linking the Strategic Defence Review (renamed at the time the Strategy Defence and Security Review (SDSR)) to the political cycle, especially in an immediate post-economic crash period, as was the case in the 2010 elections. With intense downward pressure on public sector budgets following the 2008 economic crisis, there was a strong political tendency to use the changing nature of security in the modern era as a justification for slashing defence budgets. In some ways, this made no sense for similar reasons to those described above, namely that security threat and suitable responses to it should generally have little or nothing to do with the economy. The Coalition government therefore delinked the SDSR cycle from that of the change of government, in an attempt to put some clear blue water between debates about the defence budget and the febrile atmosphere of elections. Time will tell as to whether this works, but it is likely to have a limited effect as defence and security tend to be inescapably political, whenever they are discussed.

The issue with which Paul Robinson takes issue in his recent article is not so much about British defence spending taken in isolation, but about the agreement struck with NATO that all members should spend at least 2 percent of their GDP on defence. Robinson is absolutely right that the sorts of defence capabilities on which very large amounts of money are spent across NATO, and particularly those in the realms of sea and air defence, start to make less and less sense when we are articulating the key threats as international terrorism or cyber attack. Indeed, in an address to the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) in January 2010, the then Chief of General Staff and former Commander of ISAF operations in Afghanistan, General Sir David Richards, reflected this view, noting that:

*Hi-tech weapons platforms are not a good way to help stabilise tottering states – nor might their cost leave us any money to help in any other way - any more than they impress opponents equipped with weapons costing a fraction. We must get this balance right.[[2]](#footnote-2)*

The context in which Sir David was speaking was the run-up to the 2010 SDSR and a consideration of defence spending and restructuring in the light of counter-insurgency conflicts with which the West had become primarily involved in the post-Cold War period. It is fair to say that the likes of the Taliban, armed with little more than Kalashnikovs and pick-up trucks, are not terribly deterred by fighter jets, tanks or aircraft carriers. This is a particularly prescient observation at the current time as we consider how best to respond to a resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the spectre of all the military gains of the last 16 years being lost.

The same logic, of course, extends to the question of the nuclear deterrent. On this issue, Jeremy Corbyn could be said to demonstrate a degree of contortion, since his personal view is clearly that nuclear weapons are morally indefensible, but he has to toe the official Labour Party line that the party is committed to a renewal of the Trident capability. Robinson does not quite nail his own colours to the mast on this particular issue, but he does hint at a degree of doubt about the merits of continuing to spend large amounts of money on a nuclear capability. Aside from the economic argument (the MOD estimates that a replacement system will cost between £17.5 and £23.4 billion[[3]](#footnote-3); while anti-nuclear groups estimate the cost as much more), Robinson argues that the main threat at whom the nuclear deterrent is supposedly directed – Russia – hardly constitutes a suitable threat in reality.

On the question of Russia, there are generally two schools of thought in political science. One is a sort of alarmist continuity school, which sees Putin’s Russia as a modern incarnation of the Tsars and the Communist leaders, continuing their desired legacy of expansionism and empire. For this line of thinking, Russia’s activities in Crimea, Ukraine and elsewhere represent extremely grave threats and a wake-up call for NATO. The other school is far more relaxed, described by Professor Niels Poulson of the Royal Danish Defence College as the “café latte brigade”[[4]](#footnote-4). For this school, to which Robinson and indeed this author subscribe, the threat from Russia is more paper-tiger than iron-fist. As Robinson very aptly points out, despite an impressive programme of expansion in defence expenditure by Russia in recent years, primarily aimed at modernising an extremely aged and creaking military, The Bear’s defence capability is still dwarfed in very considerable terms by that of NATO. The European members of NATO alone currently account for 15.8 percent of global military expenditure, compared to Russia’s 4 percent. Russia’s economy is structurally frail and it seems highly unlikely it could sustain a prolonged major conflict with the West, even if it wanted to commit suicide in that way. Indeed, there would seem to be very little logic in Russia provoking such a conflict with NATO anytime soon.

What this means for the policy-makers is a complex calculation. Robinson’s conclusion is that, because the threat from Russia is far less than we usually articulate, this key pillar in Western defence strategy is flawed and cannot justify the current levels of defence expenditure. We can have much sympathy with this view, but conversely, some of the logic of the Cold War should surely apply. It may be the case that maintaining an impression that NATO is not only highly capable but also fully committed to responding to an attack on any of its member-states, is important symbolism for leaders in the East such as Putin to reflect upon in their private thinking. Thus, the symbolism of a highly capable and state-of-the-art military is as important in deterring major conflict as a programme of de-escalation and contraction. Foreign Policy is all about messages and signals, and messages of this nature – unfortunately – cost money to maintain. Furthermore, it is not just Russia to whom this may apply; North Korea is currently a case in point, in terms of a rogue power needing to be under no illusion about the consequences of an expansionist or pre-emptive military strategy.

It is this political and symbolic element of NATO that perhaps is most at odds with a strictly positivist economic line taken by Robinson. The NATO alliance has always been as much about the messages conveyed of Western unity, resolve and shared values as about raw military capability. Such values cannot necessarily be quantified in raw economic terms. NATO helped to ensure that a catastrophic war did not erupt in the twentieth century, and that has to count for something as we move into an increasingly less predictable world.

For Britain, meanwhile, there are very particular questions here about our desired place in the world; questions which are becoming suddenly more complicated as we decide to extract ourselves from the European Union. Leaving the EU will surely reduce our standing and weight in certain diplomatic and economic fora, but in the military sphere, this could and should be counterbalanced by a continued enthusiastic support for NATO as our defence umbrella. If we try to stand completely alone militarily, we are too small to be of any consequence in any major conflict. But symbolism can be illusory. That is why a more recent US president than Lincoln – Donald Trump – has ruffled some feathers across the alliance by casting doubt on the future viability and indeed objective of the NATO alliance. But his comments were driven primarily by questions of financing. Trump has merely repeated a concern expressed by many in the US Department of Defense in recent years that non-US contributions to NATO have declined relative to those of the US, and only two members (UK and France) have come anywhere close to sticking to their agreement to spend at least 2 percent of their GDP on defence. Thus, America has increasingly shouldered the financial burden of defending the Free World, and is becoming less happy about this being an assumed position. Being a member of certain important clubs costs money. We might want to leave the EU club, but do we really want to do the same with NATO?

A second point concerns the “threshold argument” as it applies to major military expenditure and capability. Going back to the 2010 SDSR, while the army, under General Sir David Richards, was keen to move to a more flexible and fleet-of-foot military of rapidly deployable small forces able to fight in difficult counter-insurgency environments, the navy in particular pointed out that the world may not always looks as it did at that point when Afghanistan defined our understanding of military engagement. (Admiral Sir John Woodward, who led the naval operation to retake the Falkland Islands in 1982, claimed that defence cuts meant we could no longer mount an operation of that scale unilaterally[[5]](#footnote-5).) If we were to scrap our nuclear capability, for example, which would make perfect sense in many ways in raw financial terms, it would be largely impossible to reinstate it at any stage in the future. Capability, expertise and indeed political will would be lost forever. Similarly, if we dropped below a certain number of naval vessels or key aircraft, then the requirements of always having one or more in for repairs or otherwise out of commission would mean that there is a red line below which a reduced capability might mean no realistic capability at all. If you suddenly decide you need another aircraft carrier, it takes years and a lot of political lobbying to put one in place.

This, in turn, would mean that we would have to rely heavily on key partners in involvement in any major operations, and this, I would argue, again underlines the importance of a continued commitment to NATO. It would also mean that our justification for a seat at the top table of global security governance would become less and less viable. As a non-nuclear weapon state, a non-member of the EU and a minor contributor to NATO, how would be justify continuing to be a permanent member of the UN Security Council? This may or may not matter to British national identity but it would certainly transform it in substantial ways. In a post-EU world where Britain is trying to go it alone, these are calculations of the gravest significance.

What all of this means is that correctly calibrating defence expenditure is an extraordinarily complex calculation, which is as much about politics, national identity and predictions of world affairs far into the future, as about raw economics. This in turn means that the ideal size of the defence budget – rather like the ideal length of a man’s legs – can be seen in many different ways and is no black-and-white affair.

**The Middle East**

Robinson states that the threat posed by ISIS “is at least in part a product of the British and American invasion of Iraq in 2003”. While there is an element of validity to this, in the stark terms in which it is expressed, this statement risks an over-simplification of threats emerging from the Middle East.

There is no doubt that the failure to institute a comprehensive recovery plan in Iraq following the surprisingly rapid destruction and removal of the Saddam Hussein regime in 2003 led to the transformation of Iraq into a dangerously fractured state with lacking central authority. Given that Iraq was never a substantive unified state in the first place but a creation of convenience for the colonial authorities who shared out power across the region following the defeat of the Ottomans, removal of centralised power allowed a flowering of bitter sectarian enmities and power struggles that had festered for years but been suppressed by the Saddam’s iron fist. In many ways, it was a perfectly chaotic environment in which the architects of Al Qaeda in Iraq could establish a foothold on the ground and develop their plan for a physical Caliphate.

Anecdotal evidence from the Arab street suggests that the removal of Saddam had a long and deep legacy, even creating the groundwork for the Arab Spring uprisings from 2010 onwards, since the removal of Saddam showed that despotic leaders who had seemed invincible could meet their day of judgement with the right application of force.

Similarly, as Robinson points out, there seems little doubt that the same mistakes were repeated in Libya in 2011, when a strong centralised regime was suddenly removed by NATO’s campaign of airstrikes without there being a plan of action for what would follow. The state of Libya subsequently collapsed into a brutal and bitter conflict between a myriad of ethnic and political militias, all vying for power, and the Salafi extremists of the so-called Islamic State have similarly exploited the environment of violent chaos for their own ends. The implications for brutal insecurity are not just confined to these states alone, but to a much wider region encompassing thousands of kilometres of the Middle East and North Africa. Indeed, Europe feels the effects too in the shape of waves of desperate migrants fleeing the chaos.

So much is true in essence, and it is difficult to dispute the charge that Western military policy has a lot to answer for when we survey the dystopian scene that now engulfs parts of the Middle East. Indeed, the architect of Britain’s involvement in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, former Prime Minister Tony Blair, who is so often lambasted in British political debate for plunging us into a foreign policy maelstrom in the Middle East, himself seemed to acknowledge in a recent interview that mistakes in the Iraq campaign may have contributed to the rise of the Islamic State[[6]](#footnote-6).

I would argue, however, that there are problems with viewing this situation in such narrow terms. Indeed, I would even go as far as to suggest that to view events in the Middle East as products of our own Western thinking and policy could constitute a touch of neo-Orientalism, in which all independent decision-making and agency are removed from the people of the Middle East themselves.

To understand the rise of ISIS, we have to go much further back than 2003. Iraq and Syria were artificial postcolonial states in which single, and, in the case of Syria, minority ethnic elites, took the mantle of power then steadfastly refused to relinquish it. The states themselves were the results of a fairly shameful European colonial carving-up of the whole region under the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916. (Foot soldiers in ISIS will sometimes make bizarre reference to Sykes-Picot, when most people in the West are either unaware of, or have long ago forgotten this ignominious episode in colonial history.)

Policy in the ensuing years in such countries has been to brutally suppress any opposition to the dictatorial rule. Meanwhile, Western views of the region are often apt to underestimate the importance of developments in political Islam. The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran was an event of seismic significance in the region, arguably much more so than the 2003 invasion of Iraq. It triggered a renewed Persian and Shia nationalism in the region, spearheaded by Iran, and, in response, a reactionary assertion of Sunni Wahhabist thinking led by Saudi Arabia to counterbalance the perceived ideological threat from across the Gulf. Coupled with the stunning success of the Mujahideen in Afghanistan through the 1980s, this fed into a renewed, revolutionary Salafi ideology, of which Al Qaeda has been a product. Meanwhile, millions of petro-dollars of Saudi funding have gone to Wahhabist *madrassas* and religious institutes across the entire Muslim world, promoting an austere and uncompromising vision of Sunni Islam to a whole new generation of young men and women.

The massive elephant in the room in Middle Eastern politics is religious sectarianism. The so-called Islamic State is a fiercely and brutally sectarian movement which sees Shias as akin to all other *kuffars* in the world, and not worthy of tolerance. When the forebear of ISIS, Al Qaeda in Iraq, rose to prominence in 2005/6 under Mussab Al-Zaqawi, the agenda was much more fiercely directed at Shias in Iraq (many hundreds of whom were slaughtered) than at the West, although both were considered viable targets. Indeed, this period saw a bitter rift emerge between what became ISIS and Al Qaeda central, who saw the policies of the former as too uncompromising and brutal to be able to garner widespread support across the *ummah*. Despite recent attempts, this rift has not been healed.

The Middle East continues to be riven with brutal religious sectarian terrorism between Sunni and Shia groups, notably in Iraq but also in other countries such as Pakistan. Very often there is minimal reporting in Western media of such attacks, either because they are not understood or are not considered significant to the broader picture.

More recently, if there is anyone to blame for the shameful mess in which Syria finds itself, it is President Bashar al-Assad. In 2011, when largely peaceful demonstrations developed about economic difficulties, he could have responded with offers to initiate a dialogue about meaningful economic and political reform. This would have been good for his country and for his people. Instead, he responded like his father before him with a brutal intolerance of any opposition to his word, imprisoning, torturing and murdering with impunity those he saw as dissidents. In Iraq, meanwhile, President Maliki’s continual denial and suppression of Sunni Muslim representation and rights in favour of his own Shia constituency represented a slow-motion car crash leading to a crisis that everyone around him could have foreseen. For embattled Sunni Muslims in rural areas, ISIS represented something of an alternative, much as the Taliban have achieved in rural parts of Afghanistan.

The 2003 invasion of Iraq initiated a period in which central authority was removed in a significant part of the region to allow a dangerously chaotic playground for extremist groups. There can be little debate about that. But other regional factors cannot be ignored in the rise of ISIS, and notably those concerning developments in political Islam and religious sectarianism. These have much longer tails than 2003, and have sometimes minimal connection with what we in the West do or think directly.

**Conclusions – policy implications?**

Paul Robinson’s thesis is a compelling one, which chimes with much political thinking across the Western world. The proposed fresh thinking in defence and foreign policy, for which Jeremy Corbyn among others have called, should undoubtedly feed into wider structural discussions within NATO about how it should and could transform itself to be better equipped to deal with the threats of the 21st century. For the West itself, counter-criminal and counter-terrorist threats do indeed remain the most pressing security priorities at the moment, and are to be tackled primarily in the policing and intelligence spheres, not to mention in other areas of policy such as community cohesion, counter-radicalization and suchlike. This may mean that the 2 percent of GDP metric agreed within NATO some years ago may no longer make complete sense in the contemporary era, and should not be exempt from examination and challenge.

In terms of policy which flows from such fresh thinking, the late 1990s Chicago Doctrine of Tony Blair suggested a degree of morality-driven liberal interventionism in the world’s trouble-spots. When 9/11 happened, Blair famously noted that the “calculus of risk” had changed yet further and intervention in rogue states such as Iraq was even more justified[[7]](#footnote-7). More recently, the bitter legacy of the War on Terror has caused a more “separationist” agenda to emerge, in slightly different forms across the political spectrum. On the Alt-Right, a view espoused perhaps most recently by the likes of Douglas Murray[[8]](#footnote-8) suggests that Europe and the Islamic World are fundamentally at odds with one another, and the best thing to do is to erect a metaphysical wall between the two and to let the Middle East tackle its own problems. This is a sort of “stew in their own juice” policy, or, as Gaby Hinsliff described it, “gentrified xenophobia”[[9]](#footnote-9).

Back in the centre-ground, the thinking revolves more around replacing military interventions with “softer” policy responses, such as diplomatic dialogue to resolve crises, and structural aid and investment to allow the world’s trouble-spots to make longer-term gains against the deeper institutional factors leading to state collapse and violent extremism. Suffice to say that the security calculations are changing and fresh thinking of the type offered by Paul Robinson is strongly encouraged. For Britain in particular, the calculation is even more complex and certainly more significant as we extract ourselves from the EU and attempt to stand alone.

1. https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2017/05/jeremy-corbyns-chatham-house-speech-full-text/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. General Sir David Richards, ‘*Future Conflict and its Prevention: People and the Information Age*’. Address at IISS, London, 18 January 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-2015-scotland-32236184 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Lecture at BUCSIS, 14 October 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. T. Harding, ‘Britain can do ‘nothing’ to prevent Argentina retaking Falkland Islands’, *The Telegraph* (12 June 2011). <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/southamerica/falklandislands/8571442/Britain-can-do-nothing-to-prevent-Argentina-retaking-Falkland-Islands.html> accessed 17 June 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/10/25/blair-says-iraq-invasion-played-role-in-isil-rise.html [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. T.A. Peter, ‘Blair Iraq war enquiry: Calculus of risk on WMD changed after 9/11, *The Christian Science Monitor* (29 January 2010). <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/terrorism-security/2010/0129/Blair-Iraq-war-inquiry-Calculus-of-risk-on-WMD-changed-after-9-11> accessed 2 July 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See for example, Douglas Murray, *The Strange Death of Europe*. London: Bloomsbury, 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/may/06/strange-death-europe-immigration-xenophobia> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)