

# Striking in the Dark? The British Army and the New Strike Brigade Concept

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SDSR 2010 was criticised almost from the moment it was published for its lack of strategic direction and its failure to deal with the challenges facing British defence and security policy.<sup>1</sup> The Conservative Government elected in May 2015 was therefore under pressure to come up with a document that was far more strategic in outlook and was not focused purely on cost cutting, given the changes in the international environment over the preceding five years. A combined SDSR and National Security Strategy (NSS) was published in November 2015 which contained what many considered to be some positive developments for British defence and security. These included the funding of extra resources for combatting terrorism and for addressing significant technological challenges, including the growing threat of cyber warfare<sup>2</sup>; they also included a restructuring of the armed forces.<sup>2</sup>

However, an analysis of SDSR 2015 and the Defence Fact Sheets that support them reveal that, when it comes to the restructuring of the British Army, there is little detail underlying the broad statements of intent. The Army now has a force structure it can develop around but what exactly is the desired 'end state'? As part of Joint Force 2025, the Army is to 'recover' from the effects of fighting two long counterinsurgency operations and return to a more flexible, mobile stance. It will be able to contribute around 40,000 personnel to a divisional-level expeditionary force of around 50,000, but how is it supposed to rapidly deploy what will constitute virtually half its regular strength? It is also supposed to be able to contribute up to 10,000 personnel to smaller contingencies, including flood and emergency relief here in the UK. From which formations will these personnel be drawn? What will be the impact on readiness levels? What can be done to boost the retention of quality personnel?<sup>3</sup> How will all this be affected by the continued difficulty the MOD has had in recruiting reserves, the target for which is now 35,000? Has there been a change of emphasis in their planned use?<sup>4</sup>

A central component of the reorganisation is the formation of two new 'strike' brigades. Given that the number of brigades in both the Reaction Force and Adaptable Force (formed under the Army 2020 force structure) is staying the same (at eleven) it looks as if the two strike brigades will be formed by 'downgrading' one of the armoured infantry brigades and 'upgrading' one of the infantry brigades, but what exactly does that mean and what support assets will they contain? No detailed organisational charts have yet been published, and the only information available about them is that each will be a 'medium' brigade, have 5,000 personnel in three battalions and be equipped with the Ajax AFV and an as yet undetermined mechanised infantry vehicle (MIV). If an armoured infantry brigade is re-roled, what will happen to the armoured regiment? If the idea is rapid mobility, which combat

support and combat service support assets will be included? Will the UK look again at acquiring the M777 155mm lightweight howitzer?<sup>5</sup> Being such an unknown quantity, how can the strike brigade's transportation and logistics requirements be gauged and planning begin?

Under the plans for Army 2020, 589 Ajax vehicles (which are supposed to be around forty-two tons) were ordered, so as to equip three cavalry regiments (one for each armoured infantry brigade) and nine reconnaissance platoons (one for each of the three armoured regiments and six armoured infantry battalions in the three armoured infantry brigades). How will Ajax be distributed? If the total ordered doesn't increase, how will the fleet be managed so that the fourth brigade is covered? If the numbers do not increase, it might just be possible to equip four cavalry regiments (one for each of the strike and armoured infantry brigades) as well as the reconnaissance platoons within the armoured regiments and armoured infantry battalions, with a bit of creative whole fleet management or limiting access to only those units that are actually deploying.

There is no detail on the mechanised infantry vehicle (MIV), only that it was originally intended to replace the Mastiff and Ridgeback MRAP vehicles and is likely to be a wheeled 8x8 MRAP-style vehicle. The exact roles both Ajax and the new MIV are intended to fulfil, and what that means doctrinally, needs to be clarified. What will the impact be on sustainment, air-land integration and force readiness? What is the procurement timeframe of the new MIV and how will it interact with Ajax and Challenger II?<sup>6</sup>

Such questions need to be answered quickly, if the British Army is to reorganise itself and move forward under the plans for Joint Force 2025.

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<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Defence Committee. (2014) *Towards the Next Defence and Security Review: Part One*, Volume I, HC 197 [Incorporating HC 1090-I, Session 2012-13], London: The Stationery Office Ltd, 7 January 2014, located at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmdfence/197/197.pdf> as of 19 May 2016, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ito, Pete and Antill, Peter. 'Assessing What Matters' in *Defence Procurement International*, Winter 2015-16, pp. 12-17.

<sup>3</sup> Quentin, P. (2015) 'Endorsement, Not Investments: The British Army in the 2015 SDSR', *RUSI Commentary*, 27 November 2015, located at <https://rusi.org/commentary/endorsements-not-investments-british-army-2015-sdsr>, as of 20 May 2016.

<sup>4</sup> BBC News. (2014) 'Armed Forces Plans Criticised as Reservist Recruitment Stalls', *BBC News* website, posted 13 November 2014, located at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-30033506>, as of 20 May 2016; Think Defence. (2015) 'All Change for the Army Reserve', on *Think Defence* website, posted 25 February 2015, located at <http://www.thinkdefence.co.uk/2015/02/all-change-for-the-army-reserve/>, as of 20 May 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Defence (MOD). (2008) *Future Land Operating Concept 2008*, DCDC, October 2008, p. 2-10. Gabriele. (2015) 'After the SDSR – Strike Brigades: A Big Deal?', *UK Armed Forces Commentary* website, last updated 2 December 2015, located at <http://ukarmedforcescommentary.blogspot.it/2015/11/after-sdsr-strike-brigades-big-deal.html>, as of 20 May 2016.

<sup>6</sup> *Op Cit.* Quentin (2015); Clark, M. (2016) 'Strike Unsure? Clarifying the Role of Armour in Joint Force 2015' in *RUSI Defence Systems*, Vol. 18, posted 22 April 2016 at [www.rusi.org](http://www.rusi.org), as of 20 May 2016.