

## **‘Why the new Strategic Defence Review is a curate’s egg – excellent in parts’- Speech to the House of Lords – 18.07.25**

My Lords, like others, I congratulate the noble Lord, Lord McCabe, on his maiden speech, which seemed to be robust and sensible. No doubt we will hear many more excellent words from him. I cannot conceal from noble Lords my extreme pleasure that we are able to hear again the tones of my friend, the noble Lord, Lord Hennessy, who guides our thoughts so skilfully on the constant need for constitutional evolution and reform for our society to stay together. Indeed, he begins to cast a beam of light on the whole changing relationship between the state and the citizen, which of course affects everything else, including in particular the nature of defence in our society.

I hope that the excellent and wise reviewers, whom I greatly respect, will not in any way feel I am being deprecatory in saying that I see this review as very excellent in parts—there are many new insights and concepts about the changed nature of warfare in the digital age recognised in it, and about time too—but that, alongside those, there are some very curious omissions and flaws that challenge the value and thrust of the whole exercise. I will come briefly to those.

First, on the positive side, the emphasis the noble Lord, Lord Robertson, put on whole-of-society thinking is absolutely right and, of course, it is the same as the emphasis in the national security review. It is not a new thought; as noble Lords know, the Russians have made an open aim of trying to undermine civilian morale and destroy civilian facilities in order to undermine, in turn, the front-line troops. The aim, in all these things, is to destroy civilian life and morale—to put that first, and the military collapse will follow. That is what has happened in history: the Germans thought they could do it in 1939, and the Russians are trying to do it now. They are trying to kill the supply lines, kill civilian life and kill the nation. It probably fails every time, and it will probably fail again. But it is what the whole thrust of modern, as opposed to traditional, warfare has introduced.

Secondly, there is a marvellous emphasis in this review on new technology: microchips, hyperconnectivity, fundamental change brought on by drones of every shape and size in huge quantities, amazing missile accuracy, and enormous range. As the review itself says, technology is driving the greatest change in how war is fought for a century—I would say almost the greatest change in the whole of our history. Then there is a call for a new national armaments director, something we tried back in 1970 with Sir Derek Rayner and the new ministry of procurement. There were difficulties. We learned from it, but I am not sure we have yet learned enough.

There is the huge expansion of reserves, which the noble Lord, Lord Soames, has just welcomed—that is absolutely excellent—and of course the cadet forces as well. This sounds a bit like restored national service, and I would like to know more; this is a big move in the right direction. There is quicker recruitment and much better force integration, although I note there is no actual merging of forces, which is always a delicate matter with regimental loyalties. There is talk of the hybrid Navy: yes, the Navy will have to concentrate on undersea drones and unmanned submarines patrolling the seabed. These will be features 10 years from now, and they will require a whole new approach via the naval strategy. There were good remarks on space warfare. That is the good part of the story.

The bad side has briefly to be mentioned; I do not think it can be hidden. First, there is no reference in this whole document to nuclear proliferation, which the rest of the world is discussing. We have spent 50 years trying to prevent nuclear proliferation through the NPT, but now, suddenly everyone is talking about it and saying that, if Ukraine had hung on to its nuclear weapons, it would not be where it is now.

There is nothing on the central financial issue of Treasury overdominance, the need for a revised private finance initiative and the sort of ideas touched on just now by the noble Lord, Lord Hennessy—restoring a central drive to a budgetary strategy system at the very heart of government, one that is not always dominated and delayed by Treasury bean-counting. I would like to see much more island patriotism in this report. I do not mean nationalism; I mean that everyone needs a country to love, and we certainly do. I am worried about placing too much emphasis on NATO first: the next challenge may well come from a new war zone in the Indo-Pacific, which has now become the really dangerous crossroads of world trade and prosperity, with Diego Garcia in the middle of it.

The Commonwealth was mentioned. The coastal and island states of the Commonwealth are the ideal network for the integration of maritime data on movements of all shipping—surface and subseas—and they should be exploited. I could not find any reference to that in this report. Bearing in mind that the Red Sea entrance is now closed, the Strait of Hormuz is now threatened and the Cape route is now also being challenged, these are very dangerous times for this nation on the high seas. I would like to see a much stronger hand stretched out to Japan, which is anxious to merge with us on all sorts of new projects, including AUKUS and the combat aircraft it is working on.

Finally, what about the United Nations? Everyone says that it should either be reformed or replaced because it is not doing its job. We will not be safe until we have joined in and contributed powerfully to what should replace the international order for the new international issues in the present time: climate, energy, migration and all the rest. Populism is more assertive.