



University
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Centre for the
Public Understanding
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Strategy in the Spotlight:

Culture, Comradeship and
Capability in UK Defence
and Security

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Foreword

General (Retd) Sir Patrick Sanders KCB CBE DSO

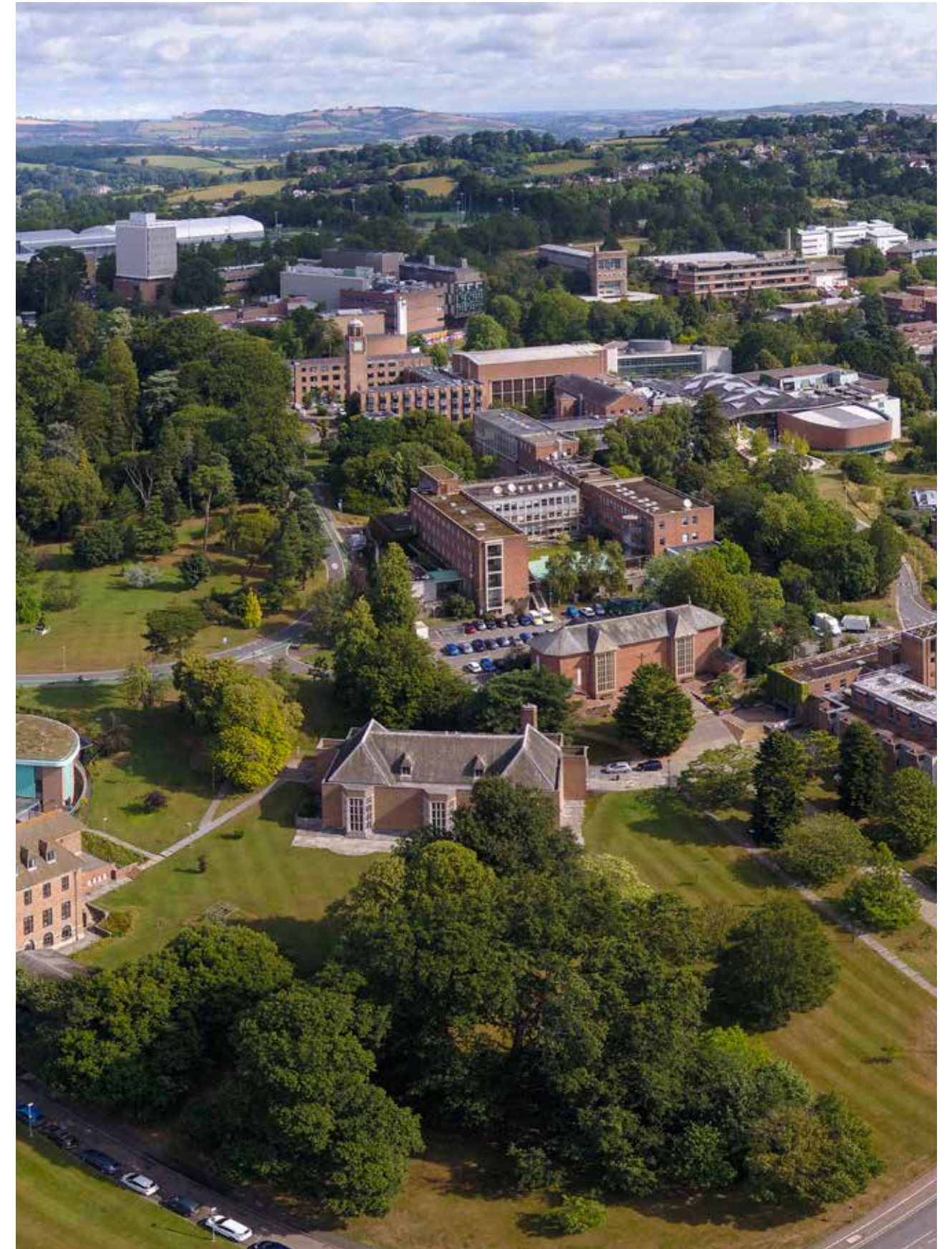
I was delighted to have been invited to write a foreword to *Strategy in the Spotlight*, the collection of essays published by the Centre for the Public Understanding of Defence and Security at the University of Exeter. As I have noted elsewhere, Exeter has acquired a considerable reputation for its research, analysis and teaching in many areas of public policy, including defence and security, and it is a pleasure to be asked to contribute.

When I spoke recently at Exeter's Strategy and Security Institute I included a comment often attributed to Antonio Gramsci: 'The old world is dying, the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters' (*Prison Notebooks*, 1930). Whether or not this is exactly what Gramsci wrote (a matter of some discussion) I rather wish he had. I find these words to be both compelling and prophetic, and I think they should serve as an alarm call. At the risk of appearing trite, it is fair to say that the world is not at present in a comfortable and stable position, that the 'old' world is engaged in a struggle with the 'new' and that there are too many political 'monsters' roaming free.

The UK defence and security policy debate is currently in a particularly active phase, with intense discussion of all predictable topics; risks, threats, budgets, organisation, capabilities, alliances and so

forth. But there is one subject that often receives less attention than it should; the critical need for public understanding of our national defence and security posture. To be clear, this is not a plea for placid compliance with the conclusions of the 'defence establishment'. Far from it. I have long believed, and argued, that public understanding – born of questions, arguments and debates – is an essential component of our ability, as a society, to deter our adversaries and, when necessary, to remain resilient and defend ourselves. And, at several points in my own career I have also seen the need for public understanding of the effects of conflict on members of our Armed Forces.

I am grateful to the authors of *Strategy in the Spotlight* for this collection of essays and congratulate them for their insightful and provocative contribution to the public understanding of defence and security.



Preface

Professor Paul Cornish

Established at the University of Exeter in early 2024, the purpose of the Centre for the Public Understanding of Defence and Security, as its title hints, is to promote public discussion of aspects of UK national strategy. Strategy, loosely defined as the use of persuasive influence, coercive force and many other means by which political goals can be achieved and maintained, is arguably more complex today than ever in the past. This is a world of technological revolution, organised crime, glaring financial inequality, vulnerability to disease, deepening climate stress, weapons proliferation, trade imbalances, economic stagnation, extremist violence, mass migration and resource scarcity. It is a world in which conviction is steadily overtaking compromise as what might be described as the organising principle of domestic politics. And it is a world in which the so-called ‘rules-based international order’ that has been the organising principle of international politics since the late 1940s is also being questioned, if not overturned, by governments, regimes and enterprises that reject the dominance of the old (i.e., Western) order.

CPUDS is established to stimulate public understanding and debate in one, relatively confined area of this vast and constantly expanding set of problems: UK defence and security. But why ‘public understanding’? Who cares what the public think about national strategy and, in particular, about security and defence? What could be the benefit for national strategy in deepening the ‘public understanding’ of defence and security? Isn’t this stuff best left to the experts; the politicians, generals, spies and intelligence analysts? In his recent book *In the Long Run: the Future as a Political Idea* (Profile Books, 2024), Jonathan White explains how we have, indeed, become accustomed to precisely the opposite of what CPUDS is seeking to achieve: ‘The military strategist tended to approach warfare with a calculating outlook, which meant keeping uncertainties to a minimum so as to better extrapolate from past experience. The attention of the public was something that could disrupt this.’

But there is a clear enough case for improving the quality of the public debate in the field of defence and security. This is an area of national life and public policy in which a great deal can be at stake. Calculable risk must be assessed and managed while the challenge of radical, ‘over the horizon’ uncertainty must also, somehow, be anticipated. Difficult choices must be made and remade, with priorities reviewed as circumstances change. Defence and security must compete with other demands for scarce national economic resources. Ethical, legal, diplomatic, geopolitical and technical constraints must all be acknowledged and incorporated in the strategic decision making process. And all of this must take place, often with some urgency, in a country that aspires to be a confident and fully functioning democracy in which the electorate expects to have a say in decisions that might incur immense cost, both in human terms and in terms of the expenditure of public finances. It is difficult to see how defence and security policy that seeks to avoid public debate or to offer bluster and condescension in place of public understanding could be at all convincing or enduring.

Why then establish CPUDS in a university rather than a public policy research institute or a party political think tank? It is precisely because defence and security are so complex and, very often, contentious that the most sophisticated analysis undertaken at the UK’s best research universities should be brought to bear on the subject. And it is because universities are the locus for well-informed, open debate, in which difference of opinion is the norm, rather than considered to be a regrettable failure of some sort, that CPUDS has its home at the University of Exeter, known for its expertise in defence and security.

Strategy in the Spotlight: Culture, Comradeship and Capability in UK Defence and Security begins with six essays on topics that might, in the past, have been described as the ‘soft’ side of the defence and security debate; a description that could scarcely be less accurate or useful in the contemporary context.

In ‘Ukrainian Soldier Poets: the Cup of War’ **Hugh Roberts** shares the experience and insights of Ukraine’s warrior poets in the midst of their ‘combined struggle for cultural and physical survival’. One quotation from a poem by Yaryna Chornohuz provides an eloquent case for beginning this collection of essays with a discussion of war poetry: “in this country poets are the first to sense war / and every time people say they must be mad / but everyone drinks from the same cup...” **Catriona Pennell** then asks how war has shaped British cultural memory more broadly, noting the painful irony that while war (particularly the Second World War) is still remarkably ‘present’ in British society and culture, for most Britons war is something that happens “over there”, to ‘other people’, and for ‘reasons that can appear irrelevant.’

Memory and sentiment are endowed with political agency in the form of public opinion, but of a particular sort. **Catarina Thomson** acknowledges that while ‘public opinion does not translate directly into policy ... it can foment or constrain foreign policies in democracies, including the initiation of warfare’. Public opinion matters, very much. But ‘snapshots’ of events carry less weight in policy terms than ‘how underlying public attitudes interact with predictable responses to international events.’ In ‘No such thing as whole-of-society?’ **Harry Pitts** questions the extent to which we should expect society (and public opinion) to remain coherent and consistent in the ‘Age of Unpeace’. He concludes with a stark warning: ‘In an increasingly divided and distrustful polity where people exist in parallel realities, there is no single understanding of what society is and whether it should be defended at all.’

The Compendium then moves to the memory, sentiment and experience of a section of society whose opinion of war is too often overlooked – veterans of military service. **Stefan Schilling** and his co-authors **Summer Bedford, Juliet Wakefield and Tarli Young** provide a closely researched assessment of the importance of social connectedness to military veterans. Some 16,000 veterans leave the UK Armed Forces each year, too often taking with them a struggle with mental health problems compounded by social isolation and loneliness. ‘Serving well, leaving well’ will resonate closely and often painfully with many military veterans and their relatives and acquaintances, and will surely answer any doubts concerning the pressing need for better public understanding of defence and security. This requirement is then amplified by **Roo Haywood Smith** a British Army veteran, who places

the UK Armed Forces Covenant very firmly at the centre of defence and security policy. Describing the Covenant as ‘one more way of connecting society with the Armed Forces’, she concludes with the wry observation that ‘in an era of global instability, fostering an understanding between the forces and civilians has to be welcomed.’

The final three essays of the Compendium turn more directly to the capability of defence and security. While keeping in mind the general requirement for public understanding of defence and security, **Frances Tammer** notes that although there are ‘palpable security reasons for keeping hidden the vast majority of UK intelligence work’ this can invite fictional James Bond-like figures to step forward into the limelight and, more significantly, can allow ‘negative stereotypes’ to take hold in the public mind. She suggests several ways by which the general public can become better educated, qualitatively and quantitatively, about the intelligence function. **Paul Hough** considers the state of the defence industrial base in Europe. The procurement of military equipment and materiel has too often been slow and over-budget, and of sub-standard quality. A ‘new line of thinking’ is essential if value for money is to be ensured and if public opinion is to be confident that armed forces have the military capability they require. Finally, **Peter Roberts** returns the discussion to the June 2025 UK Strategic Defence Review (SDR). ‘The audience for the SDR,’ he suggests, ‘was, in the main, the British public’. But if the purpose of the SDR was to ‘make the residents feel more secure’ then it attempted to do so ‘more through reassuring language than through practical actions,’ trying desperately to create ‘the impression, rather than the actuality, of a UK secure within the North Atlantic’. It remains to be seen whether the UK public will understand or, least of all, have much confidence in a strategic-level public relations exercise of this sort. Roberts concludes with a blunt prediction: the SDR ‘will not make the UK safer and more secure, nor will it add strength to the UK’s dwindling power.’

As editor of *Strategy in the Spotlight* it remains for me to thank the contributors to this volume of essays as well as all those involved in its publication. CPUDS is committed to open debate of defence and security and we welcome comment on these essays and on many other briefing papers and articles published on the CPUDS website: <https://www.exeter.ac.uk/research/networks/policy/ourwork/cpuds/>

Authors

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Ukrainian Soldier Poets: the Cup of War

Hugh Roberts

Not since the First World War has Europe witnessed poetry of such significance and magnitude by writers who are also combatants as that produced by members of the Ukrainian Defence Forces in the Russo-Ukrainian war.¹ Culture is already a matter of defence and security, something that becomes salient in a war that is genocidal in character, given Russia's intent to destroy Ukraine as an independent state and erase its national identity, based on a false narrative of historical union.²

There are fundamental lessons for understanding defence and security in the UK and beyond to be learned from Ukrainian warrior poets. For all their differences – and there is great strength in their diversity, as in the Ukrainian Defence Forces and civil society generally – Ukrainian soldier poets have chosen to drink from the ‘cup of war’, in a combined struggle for cultural and physical survival, since capture or occupation is likely to lead to their extermination. The kidnapping and killing of Volodymyr Yakulenko, the children's writer and prominent cultural figure, in the occupied territories in 2022, before his body was recovered from a mass grave in Izyum of bodies with hands tied behind their backs bearing the signs of torture, is a salient example.³ ‘Freedom for us is survival’, as the poet and cultural advocate Yuliya Musakovska, to whom I personally owe my knowledge of this work, puts it. War poetry that gives voice to this freedom therefore gives urgent insights to those of us who are not Ukrainian, including specifically in the UK: the doubtless deliberate targeting of the British Council offices in Kyiv on 28 August 2025, for instance, delivered a clear message for public understanding that our cultural activity is under attack, too, and the choice to defend and secure it is upon us.⁴

For the prize-winning poet, drone pilot, former marine and volunteer paramedic, Yaryna Chornohuz, this commitment to defend their country is most apparent to poets who, aware of their lineage within a national tradition that has been subject to colonial oppression for centuries, become prophets:

my nation has wept over graves for centuries,
and I cry
all I can do, besides crying,
– is get my hands on an automatic
I did that a while ago
because in this country poets are the first to sense
war
and every time people say they must be mad
but everyone drinks from the same cup
some halfway
others – to the dregs⁵

Unlike the aggressor, Ukrainians did not want this war but for Chornohuz, who is also steeped in existentialist philosophy, there is no choice but to commit, which entails freedom. As she writes in another poem, [earth]: “let this cup pass from me,” but then the cup does not pass, / it's drunk to the iron dregs, / where happiness waits, or a bullet. Same thing.’ Russia's war on Ukraine is as existential as the choice to drink from the cup, which alludes to Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane before the crucifixion: ‘And he went a little farther, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.’⁶ Her devastating lines and shocking associations are nothing if not realistic: her poetry is also an extended meditation on comrades and loved ones she has lost, including her partner who was killed by a Russian sniper in early 2020 when she was in the volunteer Hospitallers Battalion.

1 See, for instance, Timothy Snyder's introduction to ‘Why we must defeat this enemy. Serhii Zhadan, Oleg Sentsov, Yaryna Chornohuz’, Yalta European Strategy 20th Annual Meeting, Kyiv, 13–14 September 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i7Uil-wuxrXM>.

2 Vladimir Putin, ‘On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians’, 12 July 2021 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>; see Denys Azarov, Dmytro Koval, Gaiane Nuridzhanian, Volodymyr Venher, ‘Understanding Russia's Actions in Ukraine as the Crime of Genocide’, *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, 21 (2023), 233–264, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jicj/mqad018>.

3 Veronica Tien, ‘“As Long as a Writer Is Read, He's Alive”: The Legacy of Ukrainian Writers Victoria Amelina and Volodymyr Vakulenko’, PEN America, <https://pen.org/as-long-as-a-writer-is-read-hes-alive-the-legacy-of-ukrainian-writers-victoria-amelina-and-volodymyr-vakulenko/>.

4 Alethua Adu and others, ‘At least 23 dead in overnight Kyiv attack as UK and EU summon Russian envoys’, *The Guardian*, 29 August 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/aug/28/uk-summons-russian-ambassador-over-british-council-missile-damage-in-kyiv>.

5 [monologue], [*dasein: defence of presence*], translated by Amelia Glaser with Fiona Benson and Hugh Roberts (London: Jantar, 2025, forthcoming); the Ukrainian original was published in 2023.

6 Matthew 26:39, King James Version.

Such realism and associations are even more apparent in the work of Maksym Kryvtsov, the poet and machine-gunner who was killed by a Russian shell in January 2024 at the age of 33, shortly after the publication of his first collection of poetry. In his masterpiece, “‘Mary’ to ‘Golgotha’”, Kryvtsov writes of the interwoven lives of a crew struck by a cluster bomb on “Golgotha” – a slag heap in Donbas – including the anti-tank gunner with the call sign “Jesús”:

In early February
[Jesús] said to his friends,
May the cup of war be taken from me
but if it is not
I’ll drink every last drop,
and he meant every word.

So every day he’d climb Golgotha
dragging the heavy Stuhna launcher
up to man their post
brewing filter coffee
watching
streets be destroyed
convoys of equipment on the move
crows hunting for food in the slag heap
night swallowing war and worlds
he drank from that cup ‘til he choked.⁷

Chornohuz’s and Kryvtsov’s admiration was mutual, so either one or both may have been drawing on the other in their use of this shared image. More importantly, though, both saw that, in a sense, the cup of war also contains hope, for the choice to drink from it is also a commitment to defence and security not on a geopolitical level, but on an interpersonal one, an interwoven set of obligations to defending the limitless value of human life. The outpouring of poetry in Ukraine from the front line and beyond, and the exceptional levels of public engagement with literary festivals and readings in bomb shelters, is testimony to this expression of the human spirit in defiance of genocidal force.⁸

In an interview published a few months before he was killed, Maksym Kryvtsov spoke of this immeasurable value of individual lives that inspired his military service and poetry alike:

In this war, each person carries a unique, extraordinary story. They’re filled with distinct sounds, voices, and dreams. Some have spent their lives building a house, others became shift managers at poultry farms, some cherished reading thick books, while others collected fallen leaves and chestnuts. A person, to me, is a story.⁹

Such attention to individual stories is shared by war crimes investigators Oleksandra Matviichuk, who heads the Centre for Civil Liberties, which was awarded the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize, and her late friend, the novelist Victoria Amelina, who died following a Russian strike on a pizza restaurant in summer 2023.¹⁰ Poetry, the pursuit of truth and justice, and defending individual and collective forms of human existence, are one.

This oneness and possibly the cup of war itself also contain love and beauty, seen in the poetry Victoria Amelina started writing during her war crimes investigations, as well as in the dying vision of “Jesús”, also at the age of 33, in Maksym Kryvtsov’s poem:

In the final seconds of his life
Jesús
exhaled
summers and winters
universities and streets
pigeons and fish
museums and parks
sins and sorrow
solitude and trees
seas and rivers
love.

The final poem of *We Were Here* by the young poet and now veteran (following a serious injury) of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, Artur Dron’, ‘The 1st Letter to the Corinthians’, shares a similar vision with his readers:

Love never fails.
But where there are prophecies, they will cease;
where there are tongues, they will be stilled;
where there is knowledge, it will pass away.
Because sometimes when the shelling ceases,
friends close love’s eyes,
wrap it in sleeping bags
and carry it away.

And then it passes on
to the living.¹¹

Should we choose to accept it, then, poetry by members of the Ukrainian Defence Forces, passes on a double-edged gift. It offers some, albeit inevitably limited, understanding of the horrors of war to those who have never experienced them. As Yaryna Chornohuz wryly queries in her [monologue] ‘a bit of a downer, right? / not so optimistic, hmm? / but at least it’s honest’ – yet she immediately draws attention to the other dimension of the gift she and her comrades offer:

even once we’ve forgotten our real name and
language,
we’ll never ever ever
lose hope
in our beauty and strength, in freedom,
and so
even left under a blanket of ash
we won’t give up

this, it seems, is my people’s gift

The gift of this poetry is widely shared in Ukraine and increasingly so internationally. It forms part of the support for troops’ morale through the Cultural Forces, for which, for example, the important poet and soldier Fedir Rudyi has given readings.¹² Other military poets including Anatoliy Dnistrovyi, Dmytro Lazutkin, Ihor Mitrov, Eva Tur, and Liza Zharikova, are supported and promoted by colleagues who advocate for their work internationally.¹³ The Ukrainian Ministry of Culture has collected over 40,000 poems by members of the public written since the full-scale invasion began in 2022, a demonstration of the collective nature of the phenomenon.

No-one wants the cup of war unless they seek it out of deference to the ersatz greatness of a totalitarian state that demands their sacrifice or for the sake of financial or other material rewards. For Ukrainian soldier poets the story is very different: their free choice to drink from the cup of war despite everything offers inspirational lessons in what truly matters in defence and security. The lessons are ones that have doubtless slipped from public understanding for most people in the UK and Western Europe since the Second World War. Hence the urgency of attending to what Ukrainian soldier poets are sharing, lest the cup of war reach us practically undefended and insecure.

7 Ukrainian original first published as *Virshi z biynytsi* (Verses from the Loophole [*the aperture for a machine gun in a trench*]) (Nash Format, 2023). I am quoting from forthcoming translation by Larissa Babij and Helena Kernan, slightly adapted by me, with thanks to them for sharing.

8 Iryna Tsilyk, “‘Yesterday a missile hit. Tonight, we have poetry’: the writers drawing crowds on Ukraine’s frontlines”, *The Guardian*, 14 November 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2024/nov/14/poetry-readings-ukraine-frontline>.

9 Interview with Natalya Korniyenko, ‘Echoes from the frontline: Maksym Kryvtsov on war, poetry, and why Ukrainian youth give him hope’, 23 May 2023, <https://chytomo.com/en/maksym-kryvtsov-i-had-a-fearsome-dream-to-walk-around-kyiv-with-a-rifle-in-my-hands/>

10 Victoria Amelina, *Looking at Women Looking at War: A War and Justice Diary* (London: William Collins, 2025).

11 Artur Dron’, *We Were Here*, translated by Yuliya Musakovska, edited by Hugh Roberts and Helen Vassallo with Fiona Benson and Charlotte Shevchenko Knight (London: Jantar, 2024), p. 96; Ukrainian original published in 2023.

12 See https://culturalforces.org/en/military_en/ and Fedir Rudyi, ‘The Position’, translated by Olena Mevsha with Yuliya Musakovska and Hugh Roberts, <https://youtu.be/EBNblSczBG1?si=puJwulmQLIRpSrSm>.

13 See the Ukrainian Wartime Poetry playlist curated by Lviv UNESCO City of Literature, https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLx2YPXiQlIQvRHSFfabgsOZM_5G5eqj5O&si=W9tHPFo8qnc7HaOE.

14 ‘Poetry of the Free’, <https://warpoetry.mkip.gov.ua/>.

How has war shaped British cultural memory?

Catriona Pennell

The devastation caused by rising violent conflict – fuelled by unresolved regional tensions, a breakdown in the rule of law, power vacuums, illicit economies, and the scarcity of resources exacerbated by climate change – is experienced predominantly by populations in the global south.¹ With no conflicts proximate to the United Kingdom and with no British armed services personnel declared to be deployed on combat missions, it is fair to say that most people in Britain are sheltered from the realities of war. This sense of distance is exacerbated by a relentless – and numbing – 24/7 news cycle; what Thussu has described as ‘bloodless infotainment’.² War, while visually present on handheld devices and TV screens, is something that, for most British people, happens ‘over there’, to ‘other people’, and for reasons that can appear irrelevant.

This lack of connection with twenty-first century conflicts sits in stark contrast to how present war is in modern British society and culture. War is part of the fabric of our daily lives – what Michael Billig includes in his concept of ‘banal nationalism’; war memorials, cadet groups, military bases, red poppies, and Armed Forces Day are ‘so familiar that they are easily overlooked’.³ Past conflicts regularly feature in print, television, film, photography, radio, art, computer games, and increasingly the internet.⁴ They are the blocks upon which British cultural memory – the shared knowledge, beliefs, and practices that are passed down through generations within a specific cultural group, shaping their identity and understanding of the past and creating a sense of identity and belonging – is built.⁵

The two world wars are ubiquitous in British cultural memory. So much so that they have inspired the name of an anti-Brexit political activism group (‘Led By Donkeys’)⁶ and become an easy, shorthand reference that captures the pressures of modern living (‘Keep Calm and Carry On’),⁷ with little need for explanation. Despite receding further into the nation’s past, with no living veterans of the 1914–18 conflict and a diminishing number from the 1939–45 conflict, these wars continue to have a lingering and vivid presence in British popular culture.⁸ Even those who were not born during either conflict have particular ‘memories’ of them. People who were born after these wars have ‘acquired a learned historical memory informed by successive narratives conveyed in a range of media, thereby adopting the memories as their own.’⁹ You do not have to have lived through either world war to have a strong sense of experiencing those years.¹⁰

Like any historical remembrance, the way the two world wars are reimagined today has very little to do with the past and is instead shaped by contemporary concerns and values. As Dan Todman has outlined, representations of these conflicts are recast with each generation ‘to meet the needs of the moment’.¹¹ In 2014, at the start of the centenary of the First World War, then Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, attempted to weaponize the cultural memory of the war by criticising what he termed ‘the Blackadder view of the war’.¹² In his opinion, ‘left-wing versions of the past designed to belittle

1 ACLED Conflict Index Results: July 2024. See <https://acleddata.com/conflict-index/index-july-2024/>, last accessed 1 July 2025. Russia’s war against Ukraine is the only active conflict zone in the global north.

2 Thussu, D.K. 2003. ‘Live TV and Bloodless Deaths: War, Infotainment and 24/7 News’, in D. Thussu and D. Freedman (eds), *War and the Media: Reporting Conflict 24/7* (London: Sage).

3 Billig, M. 1995. *Banal Nationalism*. London: Sage.

4 Garde-Hansen, J. 2011. *Media and Memory*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

5 Pennell, C. et al. 2025. ‘The Iraq War at 20: Anniversary Journalism, British Cultural Memory, and the Politics of Closure’, *Journal of War & Culture Studies* online first: 1–21.

6 ‘Led By Donkeys’ was established in December 2018 to criticise the Conservative government, particularly in the aftermath of Brexit. Its name was inspired by the phrase invented in the 1960s to refer to soldiers (‘Lions’) in the First World War who were believed to have been led to their deaths by incompetent and indifferent leaders (‘Donkeys’) (see <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/may/25/led-by-donkeys-reveal-identities-brexit-billboards-posters>, last accessed 3 July 2025).

7 The iconic ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’ poster was designed months before the outbreak of the Second World War and was never officially sanctioned for display. It only achieved its prominent position in contemporary culture after a copy was found in a bookshop in the early 2000s (see <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/truth-behind-keep-calm-and-carry-on>, last accessed 3 July 2025).

8 Research published in June 2025 by the Royal British Legion suggested there were about 8,000 surviving Second World War veterans in England and Wales, based on census and ONS data. See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c86g9p05dx4o>, last accessed 1 July 2025.

9 Noakes, L. and J. Pattinson. 2014. ‘Introduction: ‘Keep calm and carry on’: The cultural memory of the Second World War in Britain’, in *British Cultural Memory and the Second World War* (London: Bloomsbury), 2.

10 Eley, G. 2001. ‘Finding the people’s war: film, British collective memories and World War II’, *The American Historical Review* 106(3), 818–38.

11 Todman, D. 2009. ‘The Ninetieth Anniversary of the Battle of the Somme’, in H. Herwig and M. Keren (eds), *War, Memory and Popular Culture. Essays on Modes of Remembrance and Commemoration* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland), p. 21.

12 See <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2532923/Michael-Gove-blasts-Blackadder-myths-First-World-War-spread-television-sit-coms-left-wing-academics.html>, last accessed 4 July 2025.

Britain and its leaders' were diminishing the sacrifice of those who died in a 'just war' against German aggression. He was referring to the dominant view of the First World War – that emerged in the 1960s through stage plays like 'Oh! What a Lovely War' (1963) and books like Alan Clark's *The Donkeys* (1961) – that it was a futile conflict resulting in a tragic waste of human life, with little lasting positive impact to justify the immense suffering. In short: 'blood, mud, and poppycock'.¹³ In the end, the centenary did little to dislodge this powerful and enduring cultural memory of the war that centred on male combat death on the Western Front. While some progress was made at including the experiences of non-white colonial soldiers, several communities continued to feel excluded from national narratives of belonging propagated during the centenary.¹⁴ Individual, familial, and community loss remained at the heart of commemorative activity between the years 2014 and 2018.¹⁵ Perhaps the durability of the First World War as futile is unsurprising; at a time when confidence in political leaders is low the belief that political and military elites of the early twentieth century let down 'ordinary' people is hard to shift.¹⁶

The popular image of the First World War as 'one of horrific slaughter for no particular reason' was solidified by the outbreak of the Second World War. How could the First World War have been anything other than futile if a second global conflict broke out only two decades later? The Second World War was also easier for people to comprehend; fewer British casualties, fought for a revitalised and fairer Britain,

and against the evils of Nazism.¹⁷ In many ways, the 'simpler' history of the origins of the Second World War enabled the construction of a more morally satisfying narrative of 1939–45 in British cultural memory that had a clear beginning, middle, and end.¹⁸ Both sides of the political spectrum could find something in this story to be proud of. For the Left, it was the achievement of the Welfare State and the implied egalitarianism of ordinary working people 'pulling together' in a form of patriotic comradeship known as 'the people's war'.¹⁹ For Conservatives, it was the country's 'finest hour'; a war that rekindled Christianity, love of country, patriotism, and valour won by elites on the battlefield (Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery), in the laboratory (bouncing-bomb inventor Barnes Wallis), and in Whitehall (Winston Churchill).²⁰

In France and Germany, the memory of the two world wars has evolved into a positive narrative of the twentieth century as the eventual triumph of European integration.²¹ In Britain, in contrast, the result of the Brexit referendum of 2016 has consolidated the idea that it singlehandedly saved the world from Nazi tyranny and, therefore, can do without European camaraderie. Despite all historical evidence to the contrary, a peculiar nostalgia has emerged in Britain for the Second World War where Europe is the source of conflict and Britain is better off standing alone.²² Nigel Farage, former leader of UKIP and current leader of Reform, was cited in 2019 as saying that his biggest regret was 'not taking part in D-Day'.²³

The next UK general election must take place before August 2029, which would coincide with the 85th anniversary year of the D-Day landings. While Reform's claims of a youth-surge in their support base is currently more hype than reality, it is outperforming both Labour and the Conservatives among the age group that makes up over a third of the British electorate and is by far the most likely to vote on polling day – those age 50–70 years old.²⁴ That is also the generation with a strong connection to the Second World War through a relative they knew in person (their parent or grandparent). Rise

in Reform support amongst an age group nostalgic for the Second World War is a heady mix. As the traditional two-party system continues to unravel and political loyalties are abandoned in 'protest', British cultural memory of the Second World War will be further subjected to opposing interpretations and political mobilisation as we head towards the next general election. There is a bitter irony that the legacy of a war that for many has become shorthand for solidarity and togetherness, now has the potential to exacerbate societal fractures and community alienation in Britain.



¹³ Vance, J.F. 2015. 'Commemoration and Cult of the Fallen (Canada)', in *1914–1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin.

¹⁴ Meredith, G.B. 2021. 'Dominant' First World War memory: race, nation and the occlusion of Empire. *First World War Studies*, 12(2), 89–109.

¹⁵ Noakes, L., et al. Forthcoming. *Capturing Commemoration: Reflections on the Centenary of the First World War in Britain*. Berghahn: Oxford.

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¹⁷ Connelly, M. 2001. *The Great War, Memory and Ritual: Commemoration in the City and East London, 1916–1939*. Boydell Press: Woodbridge, 2.

¹⁸ Reynolds, D. 2017. 'Britain, the Two World Wars, and the Problem of Narrative', *Historical Journal* 60(1): 197–231.

¹⁹ Eley, 'Finding the people's war'.

²⁰ K. Kowol. 2020. 'Britain's obsession with the second world war and the debates that fuel it', *The Conversation*, 4 June. See https://theconversation.com/britains-obsession-with-the-second-world-war-and-the-debates-that-fuel-it-139497?utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=bylinecopy_url_button, last accessed 4 July 2025.

²¹ Reynolds, 'Britain, the Two World Wars, and the Problem of Narrative'.

²² Macleod, J. 2022. 'Looking Forward to the Centenary of the Second World War: Lessons from 2014–2018', *British Journal for Military History* 8(3): 2–16. See also Todman, D. 2017. 'Drunk on Dunkirk spirit, the Brexiters are setting sail for a dangerous future', *Guardian*, 3 June. See <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jun/03/dunkirk-spirit-brexiters-uk-britain-europe>, last accessed 4 July 2025.

²³ <https://www.ft.com/content/1a61f30c-7263-11e9-bf5c-6eeb837566c5>, last accessed 4 July 2025. Approximately 4,400 Allied soldiers were killed on D-Day (6 June 1944). Estimates for total Allied casualties, including wounded and missing, range from 10,000 to 12,000.

²⁴ See https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/most-young-people-unlikely-to-vote-reform_uk_686502e1e4b019cf5d5395eq, last accessed 4 July 2025.

What kind of public opinion matters in times of conflict?¹

Catarina Thomson



The ongoing war in Ukraine and the Trump's administration change in policy towards NATO have fundamentally altered the international system. Across Europe, shifts in public opinion have paved the way for the previously unthinkable. Longstanding neutral states – Finland and Sweden – are joining NATO, Germany is committed to rearming, and the UK is working closely with key EU allies in a context in which it is increasingly clear that Europe needs to change course and be able to defend itself.

What kind of public opinion matters in times of conflict? While some pundits focus on survey responses to the matters of the day, for foreign policy experts what matters most isn't a given snapshot, taken at a given point in time, concerning an issue citizens might not know very much about, but rather how **underlying public attitudes interact with predictable responses to international events.**

In the field of political science, we know that across the globe the public has real propensities to act in certain ways in times of conflict. Some of these predictable responses can be observed in the current conflict in Ukraine, including countries coming together when facing shared threats. Strengthening NATO may be a popular thing to commit to in Europe these days, but just a few years ago, in a less-threatening international environment, institutional bonds were fractured enough to culminate in a shambolic withdrawal of allied forces in Afghanistan (Thomson 2022). French President Macron was openly describing NATO as 'brain dead'.² Other predictable public predispositions include voting based on perceptions of economic performance (immortalized by Carville's 'it's the economy stupid')³, a tendency to resist painful tradeoffs, and a public predisposition to rally 'round the flag' and support the executive in times of crises – particularly in the foreign policy realm (Zaller 2003).

If these public opinion trends are found across domestic audiences in different countries, does it mean national differences are insignificant? Not quite. Decades of research in foreign policy has allowed us to identify national-level foreign policy attitudes that serve as a baseline with which the general trends mentioned above interact. In times of shared international threats would we expect public opinion across Europe to be more likely to support a coordinated regional security response? Yes (Mader et al 2023). Does this mean we would expect British and German citizens to be similarly enthusiastic about a strengthened focus on defence? Certainly not. **General patterns in public opinion are shaped by underlying foreign policy views held by domestic publics at a national level.** These views tend to stay stable over time, so while people in different countries may react similarly to threats, their starting points often vary.

Research on UK attitudes towards the war in Ukraine confirms this. In the case of the UK, an underlying strong public support for military options is one of these foreign policy attitudes that differs from attitudes in other European states. In other words, the UK public is generally more supportive of military action (even in times of relative peace). Cross-national survey research conducted in 10 European countries finds that **public support for Ukraine in the UK is as staunch as it is among Eastern Europeans or in countries that had just joined NATO** (Finland and Sweden). It is higher than in Germany, France and Spain. This included support for various policy options, including economic sanctions against Russia, not wanting to urge Ukraine to accept territorial losses to end the war, and encouraging NATO to increase its military presence in Eastern Europe (Thomson et al 2023).

¹ This essay builds on a knowledge exchange activity undertaken with the International Affairs and National Security Hub of the House of Commons. The Hub provides policy analysis for parliamentarians and professional development for staff, with a remit to build relationships with academia.

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-50335257>

³ <https://www.ft.com/content/b8e4f7c8-5070-11e9-9c76-bf4a0ce37d49>

⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c9vygkzkrvo>

A strong commitment to multilateralism is another persistent foreign policy attitude present among domestic UK audiences. That is, there is a national tendency to being favourably predisposed to support joint action taken with allies. In a world in which even the bedrock of alliances that is NATO has been recently questioned, and where states are adopting more flexible models of alliances such as Prime Minister Starmer’s ‘Coalition of the Willing’ to act in Ukraine,⁴ the importance of this propensity in times of conflict cannot be overstated (Thomson 2022).

Does the preponderance of these public opinion trends and national foreign policy attitudes mean we should ignore surveys? Of course not. Snapshots of domestic thinking can be useful but should be considered in the broader context of what we already know about public opinion in times of conflict. Political leaders should focus strategically on what are likely to become relevant views in the next election (Zaller 2003). Whatever the specific issues of the day will be, we know they will be shaped by citizens’ *“ingrained sets of values, criteria for judgment, attitudes, preferences, dislikes – pictures in his head– that come into play when a relevant action, event, or proposal arises. To know how the public will respond to a contemplated course of action, those in positions of leadership and authority need only to relate that action to their estimate of the picture in people’s heads –and adjust their strategy accordingly”* (Key, 1961, p. 264)

Polling data is more ubiquitous than ever, and we know officials consider public opinion when providing policy advice on security and defence policies (Lin-Greenberg 2021, Thomson and Blagden 2018, Thomson 2023). However, political actors systematically misrepresent the views of the general public, including in foreign and security policy (Thomson and Reifler 2025). In the U.S., political leaders assume the public is more isolationist and less supportive of engaging internationally than they really are (Kretzer et al. 2022). UK decision-makers fall prey to similar biases. The Brexit vote, for instance, is often taken as evidence of an isolationist UK. However, **public opinion in post-Brexit Britain does not support taking a back seat from the world stage: isolationist attitudes are low across the board.** Instead, post-referendum research finds that those who voted to leave the EU tend to be more supportive of unilateral action (Thomson 2018).

This translates into being more supportive of measures that will enable to UK to ‘go at it alone’ internationally if needed, including increasing defence spending and retaining national nuclear capabilities (Thomson 2022).

Public opinion does not translate directly into policy, but it can foment or constrain foreign policies in democracies, including the initiation of warfare (Thomson 2022). Information asymmetries between decision-makers and the public are greater in the foreign policy domain compared to other political arenas, and thus relatively uninformed members of the public are more likely to defer to experts. However, in the words of D.C. Foyle, *“while public participation in the choice of foreign policy is not desirable, public support for the chosen policy is necessary”* (Foyle 1997, p.146).

So, what to do with public opinion in times of conflict? A strategic way forward would focus on the interaction between political leaders and views citizens may hold (some more crystalized than others) in the democratic process (Zaller 2003). There are crises in which informed leadership might play a role in activating what they know to be latent propensities in public opinion, building on an understanding of national foreign policy attitudes. This can’t be reduced to effective rhetoric, however. While the case for increased defence spending in the UK should be made in the context of working militarily with international allies (building on known national foreign policy attitudes), systematically framing the issue around heightened international threat levels means little until the public feels more threatened that they have in the past.

UK foreign policy decision-makers have more security policy leeway than German and French counterparts. They are less constrained than leaders in other countries because members of the UK public accept they will have limited influence in the foreign policy domain. They accept this limited influence as they perceive experts in the area will require levels of expertise, secrecy, and need for swift action in order to implement successful policies. In Germany there is a larger gap between public and expert expectations as to the role public opinion should play in foreign policy decision making, but the widest gap in our study exists in France (Thomson et al. 2025).

While responses to individual surveys should be interpreted in the broader democratic context discussed above, trends may be identified across multiple surveys that remind us that states are not unitary actors and targeted communication with key groups may be required. One illustration of this how **differences among age groups may constrain UK action internationally.** Older Britons are more supportive of Ukraine relative to their younger counterparts. Sixty percent of those aged 60 and above are in favour of NATO increasing its military presence in Eastern Europe as well as in admitting

Ukraine to NATO, compared to a minority in Britons aged 18–39 (Thomson et al 2023). Similar trends are observed when it comes to policies central to national defence. According to a [YouGov survey](#) carried out in January 2025, around half of those aged 65 and above support increasing defence spending, even if it means spending less in other areas; however, only 10% of those aged 18–24 agree. When it comes to supporting young people serving in the military for a year, a [YouGov survey](#) of September 2023 shows that 46% of those aged 65 and above are in favour, compared to just 10% of those aged 18–24.

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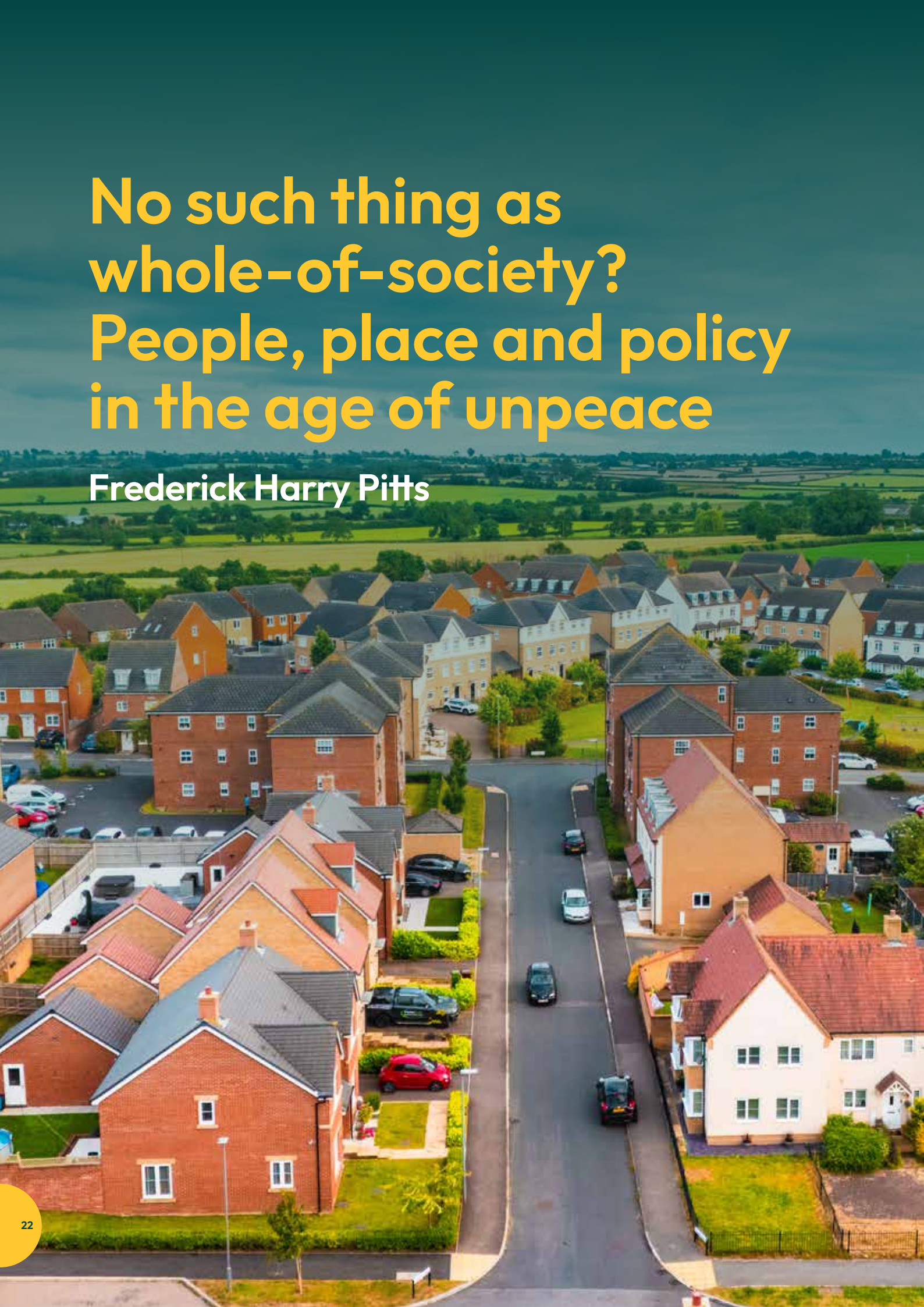
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No such thing as whole-of-society? People, place and policy in the age of unpeace

Frederick Harry Pitts

In the context of a more dangerous world and a crumbling liberal order, the Labour government has defined itself around a politics of security focused on both defence and economic resilience.

This comprehensive reorientation of UK domestic and foreign policy has at its centre the concept of a 'whole-of-society' approach attuned to the distributed character of contemporary conflict in what Mark Leonard calls an 'age of unpeace' whereby the country's enemies seek to disrupt and destabilise on a daily basis across a range of domains.

Indebted to countries like Finland, Norway and Sweden, this approach seeks to integrate military, civilian, industrial, and societal capabilities into a unified national effort so that the country can be on a war-ready footing in short order.

The 'whole-of-society' vision is laid out in the National Security Strategy, the Strategic Defence Review, and the Defence Industrial Strategy, all published in 2025 and all of which respond to a rapidly evolving threat landscape marked by geopolitical tension, technological disruption and strategic competition.

The National Security Strategy sets out a scheme of security at home, strength abroad and sovereign capability, areas taken forward in the Resilience Action Plan. The SDR, meanwhile, focuses on how to reshape the relationship between state, capital and society to ensure that the country's capacity to defend itself keeps pace with the threats confronting it.

From guns or butter to guns and butter

The Defence Industrial Strategy, meanwhile, sets out to understand foreign aggression as being directed not only at the Armed Forces but at 'industry, our supply chains, our know-how and our people'; its aim being to 'place the UK in a position where, if needed, it has the capacity, capability, skills and industrial resilience to be ready for warfighting'.

This it proposes to do via measures like UK Defence Innovation and regional clusters as means to realise the defence dividend and sovereign capability that SMEs can offer in every corner of the UK.

These initiatives and documents look beyond conventional military means to embrace instead an expansive notion of security – running the gamut from borders to cyber. This manifests in a spirit of broad-based societal and industrial mobilisation for national resilience.

This will be achieved partly through exploring the potential of 'dual-use' technologies and sectors to combine civilian and defence objectives and outcomes across industries, rather than be confined to existing defence producers and suppliers alone.

As more companies switch from civilian to military applications and inputs in pursuit of the opportunities opened up by increased investment in defence, a greater proportion of the country's workers and communities can benefit from the multiplier effects of even modest upticks in spending.

The role of defence and security as engines for economic growth will be underpinned by a substantial programme of reforms to procurement and investment to support sovereign capability and cutting-edge technological capacity.

All of this rests on an increase in defence spending to 5% of GDP by 2035, in line with NATO expectations; this increase would comprise 3.5% on military capabilities and 1.5% on broader resilience and security including infrastructure and the cyber domain.

This is indicative of the inclusion of ever-greater areas of the economy within a 'whole-of-society' defence mindset. Many businesses and other organisations will face a sharpened expectation to protect society from threats through a more demanding compliance regime with regards to areas like cybersecurity.

But in order for this compliance to be more than lip service, companies and bodies will need to recognise the need, to some degree, to subordinate their corporate interest to the national interest as part of a wider shift towards a different balance between state and market in capitalist political economies.

Those responsible for the ownership and operation of Critical National Infrastructure will face a particular imperative to comply with a whole-of-society approach to security, being at the frontline of a constant barrage of probing attempts from the country's adversaries to compromise their integrity through cyberattacks and sabotage.

Yet the complex character of contemporary networks and energy supplies is such that a wide array of sites and systems are now incorporated into what can be considered CNI. And the proliferation of online and offline threats also demands a commensurate expansion of where defence is seen as beginning and ending.

These challenges require a state that is prepared to invest in people so that they can develop the skills and knowledge to secure infrastructure. Promisingly, the Resilience Action Plan commits to train thousands of public and private sector personnel for the protection of state and society.

Taskforce Kindred spirit

There are however question marks as to the capacity of the British state as presently constituted to advance a competent and comprehensive integration of different domains of policy – domestic and foreign, defence and industrial – around the pursuit of a truly 'whole-of-society' approach to economic and national security.

The culture of our public institutions can seem uniquely ill-matched to the pace, innovation and decisiveness demanded by a fast-moving and rapidly unravelling world picture.

The relatively adventurous experimentation that saw the civil service rapidly roll out Taskforce Kindred to supply the Ukrainian frontline with the latest and most cutting-edge UK defence technology provides a potential model for how to create structures and cultivate talent that smashes through the cultural stasis of an ailing British state.

The government sees the new National Armaments Directorate as doing some of the work of revolutionising how private sector innovations and practices are mainlined into the defence establishment.

But there is also a people aspect to this step change, with the SDR stating that the 'transformation of UK Defence must ultimately be delivered by its people'.

Plans to unblock bureaucratic barriers include a more flexible recruitment process through military 'gap years', reducing civil service staff costs through automation, providing training and upskilling to shake staff out of their culture of risk aversion, and valuing civilian qualifications as a means to invigorate the workforce with new entrants and 'reduce the barriers between Defence, industry, and wider society'.

Beyond the blob

Beyond the state apparatus, a key aspect of the 'whole-of-society' approach is the relationship between civilians and the armed forces. Measures in recent policy documents seek to reinforce the role of conventional armed forces within society through an extension of opportunities to serve.

The SDR recommends a major expansion of the Reserves and Cadets, with more funding, training and outreach supported by a greater integration of military and defence education within civilian institutions and curricula.

Such attempts at raising the level of strategic literacy among the public resonate with other initiatives to bolster and formalise the role of non-uniformed specialists in areas like cybersecurity, influenced by the experience of countries like Estonia.

An increasing emphasis is being placed upon cyber and digital as areas in which new approaches to recruitment can be taken, both in and beyond a defence context, opening up the potential of a different pool of entrants and applicants and a different talent pipeline.

The push to expand routes into the Reserves and Cadets provide a potentially promising response to some of the challenges of a labour market that furnishes workers – from younger to mid-career workers – with few prospects for purpose or progression.

However, there are challenges presented in the form of an aging population and shortfalls in recruitment. Armed forces and defence recruitment and retention are seen as being in state of 'crisis'.

As part of a 'new social contract' with forces personnel, government has committed to streamline recruitment into the armed forces, establishing a single point of entry for applicants across different functions and domains. Supported by pay increases unprecedented in the past two decades, the aim is to broaden, diversify and expand recruitment as the necessity to rebuild and rearm the country's defence capacity intensifies.

Retention will be bolstered through the MoD's planned 'flexible working' initiative, prioritised investment in military accommodation and the recommendation that Defence explore ways that Service personnel can be helped to achieve home ownership in order to 'strengthen the bond between those that serve and the communities that support them'.

The government is also seeking to do more to support labour market participation among veterans, providing support and guidance and ensuring companies are configured to realise the potential of former armed forces personnel.

Society must be defended

This all goes to show that no 'whole-of-society' approach will be complete without the people involved and the places they inhabit.

The Defence Industrial Strategy has set out an ambitious workforce strategy to meet the local skills needs of defence reindustrialisation, tackling specific challenges such as the low rate of female participation in defence employment, the uneven regional distribution of opportunities and the difficulties of transfer between Armed Forces, defence industry and neighbouring industries.

These will be addressed through measures like the Defence Skills Passport, Defence Technical Excellence Colleges, and a Defence Universities Alliance.

Of these initiatives, emblematic of the opportunity and the challenge ahead is the 'Destination Defence Campaign', an attempt to combat the apparent ethical stigma of working in defence.

The necessity of such a campaign demonstrates how, despite many worthwhile initiatives to integrate more closely civilian and military forms of defence and security, a crucial issue remains.

In an increasingly divided and distrustful polity where people exist in parallel realities, there is no single understanding of what society is and whether it should be defended at all. This provides weak foundations around which a 'whole-of-society' approach to defence can cohere, inevitably impacting the readiness through which security is seen as a shared civic responsibility rather than the remit of the defence establishment.

The SDR rightly recommends a cultural effort to reframe defence as a civic duty, but in order to do this there has to be a strong sense of what, precisely, is being defended. Public consent for even moderate increases in spending cannot be guaranteed where a basic commitment to the preservation of our liberal democracy is lacking.

Liberal democracies have lost the confidence that they had in articulating this attachment when the West was last facing such threats. If the ideological front of a new world civil war is to be won, a conversation about what is at stake needs to start sooner rather than later.

Otherwise, policymakers may find out that there was no such thing as 'whole-of-society' after all – just individual men and women, as Margaret Thatcher once put it.

Serving well, leaving well: why social connectedness matters across the defence lifecycle and beyond

Stefan Schilling with Summer Bedford, Juliet Wakefield and Tarli Young

Bottom Line Up Front

Social connection is a critical but neglected resource across the defence lifecycle. While the consequences of this neglect directly impact retention, readiness, and future-force resilience – post-service life is where it becomes most visible.

Each year, around 16,000 individuals leave the UK Armed Forces, many of whom struggle with social isolation and loneliness (SIL), which compound mental health issues such as depression, PTSD, and suicidality. Existing transition programmes focus on mental health and employment but rarely address the social challenges of this transition, leaving veterans ill-prepared to establish supportive civilian networks in their community and workplaces. NHS and public services bear substantial costs of these ‘failed’ transitions, highlighting an urgent need for targeted interventions that foster healthy, integrated civilian lives.

Our work suggests that the same factors that underpin resilience, morale, and psychological wellbeing during service – namely, strong group identification and social connectedness – also determine the success of the military-to-civilian transition. More emphasis on social identity processes in the defence lifecycle would not only benefit veterans by facilitating a successful transition and more fulfilled lives post-service, but would also enhance defence capability by improving retention, increasing active reserve participation, and strengthening Defence’s long-term relationship with society.

Social Identity and Connectedness Across the Defence Lifecycle

During active duty, close connection to one’s team or unit provides many benefits. Operationally, shared connection underpins discipline, morale, performance, and mission success.¹ Individually, it has been linked to higher levels of social support, resilience, improved mental health outcomes, and lower levels of PTSD.²

Two theoretical pathways are useful in explaining these effects. Social identification with a meaningful social group (e.g., ‘us Royal Engineers’, or ‘us Commandos’) provides psychological resources such as meaning and belonging, improved wellbeing and job satisfaction, ability to cope with stress, and reduced turnover intentions³; while multiple group memberships (both military and civilian) increase resilience and wellbeing.⁴ This is especially true during life transitions, where having multiple strong social group memberships has been shown to be protective during times of uncertainty by enhancing physical health, mental health, general wellbeing, resilience and longevity.⁵ A recent study provides evidence for these pathways in active-duty Royal Air Force (RAF) personnel, showing that both stronger identification with the military and multiple – and diverse – group memberships were significantly linked with greater wellbeing and resilience, and lower distress.⁶

1 Anthony C. King, *The Combat Soldier*, [Oxford University Press, 2013]; Stefan Schilling, “Visualizing the Ties That Bind Us: A Cross-Sectional Thematic and Visual Analysis of Cohesion Across Three British Military Formations,” *Armed Forces & Society* 50, no. 3 [2024]: 1–28.

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5 Catherine Haslam et al., “Life Change, Social Identity, and Health,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 72 [September 2020]: 635–61.

6 Craig A. White et al., “More Positive Group Memberships Are Associated with Greater Resilience in Royal Air Force (RAF) Personnel,” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 60, no. 2 [2021]: 400–428.

While military forces are exceptionally effective at developing a ‘*chronically salient*’ (i.e., self-defining) military identity⁷, this often comes at the expense of the second pathway, i.e., multiple group memberships. Multiple (especially non-military) group memberships are routinely framed as threatening operational effectiveness by undermining cohesion and discipline. Additionally, deployment and training cycles often mean the military identity itself is incompatible with many non-military group memberships, such as parenthood or participation in civilian social groups.

Yet, having only one chronically salient identity deprives active-duty military personnel of an important source of social and psychological resources during high-stress periods. Frequent changes of duty stations also leave their families with diminished abilities to cope and ultimately exacerbate military-to-civilian transition difficulties. In fact, losing valued social group membership(s) during life transitions (e.g., after leaving elite sports, having a baby, or retiring) is frequently associated with social isolation, disconnectedness, adjustment difficulties, and mental ill-health – with those who have fewer social groups being at higher risk.⁸ For example, in active military personnel disruptions to their identity during transitional periods (e.g., in task-organised personnel) have been linked to adverse mental health outcomes, underscoring the necessity of fostering identity continuity and facilitating social integration throughout these transitions.⁹

The Visible and Hidden Costs of Leaving the Military

While identification with and belonging to one’s team or unit is fundamental to morale and cohesion during service, its abrupt loss at transition is too often treated as a personal failing rather than a systemic issue. Much of the discussion around military service leavers in public discourse relies on tropes of veterans as “mad, bad, or sad”.¹⁰ This is not surprising, given that over half of UK veterans experience health problems, including higher rates of PTSD, depression, psychosis, alcohol use disorder), and suicide rates two to three times higher than non-veterans.¹¹ Nevertheless, veterans are reluctant to seek support or disclose veteran status. Many rely on peer and family support, often only seeking professional help once they reach crisis point (estimated to be around two years post-transition). As a result, the national cost of failed veteran transitions is estimated at £110 million annually, most of which is related to welfare and wellbeing.¹²

These challenges are compounded for underserved veteran subgroups, who face additional barriers to support and poorer post-service outcomes due to systemic inequalities and differing needs, including female veterans, who are less likely to access employment support¹³; medically discharged veterans, who face greater identity disruption and economic instability¹⁴; and minoritised veterans, who often contend with cultural stigma and institutional distrust.¹⁵ These patterns highlight the need for more tailored, inclusive transition support that acknowledges the diverse experiences of those leaving the Armed Forces.

Loss of identity and social connectedness – a barrier to mental health and social integration

The issues many service-leavers face can be seen as an occupational hazard, directly related to leaving behind a career and meaningful identity, one associated with a strong sense of group belonging, anchored in their ‘oppos’ and ‘mates’, which provides social support, purpose and meaning.¹⁶ Issues of transition are exacerbated by the fact that military identity often emphasises the difference between military members and ‘civvies’, making social integration into the civilian world difficult, with those who have very strong military identities and few civilian affiliations struggling the most.¹⁷

Many veterans in our research (publication forthcoming) reported that negative beliefs about civilians made social integration and adjustment to civilian life particularly difficult, with several saying they “drifted for years” trying to find a new identity and purpose. Given that loneliness compounds health risks – including anxiety, depression, and cardiovascular disease¹⁸ – the fact that 75% of British veterans report feeling lonely underscores the scale of the issue.¹⁹

Resentment and Organisational Betrayal – A Barrier to Defence Engagement

This sense of social and institutional rupture also appears to influence longer-term attitudes towards the Defence Forces. Our data suggest that the longer participants had served, the more they expressed resentment and regret about their military experience, with participants describing feeling they were “just a number” or that “the Army didn’t care about me”. Many reported cutting ties with the military, with military charities, and/or with other veterans after leaving the military. This decision to avoid further engagement with the military can limit the support veterans receive from these sources. It is also problematic for the military, because the

Reserve forces rely on service-leavers deciding to become Reservists post-service in order to maintain membership (a policy recommended in the 2025 Strategic Defence Review). Strengthening social connectedness during the final phase of service and early transition – both within and beyond the military (e.g., through alumni networks, veteran organisations, and civilian groups) – could help mitigate these feelings of disengagement. Reinforcing a sense of value and belonging among service-leavers may not only support individual wellbeing but also foster a continued, voluntary affiliation with Defence that makes Reserve service more attractive.

Current Transition Support

While a range of veteran transition programmes exist, most focus on practical or clinical support – such as housing, employment advice, or mental health services – and rarely address the deeper social and identity-related challenges of this transition. In our upcoming review of such programmes, few offer support around purpose, group belonging, or navigating the civilian social world. Yet our preliminary findings show that veterans who left the Forces within the last 10 years consistently reported these as the most pressing needs: understanding how civilian organisations operate, coping with the loss of structure, translating military skills into civilian terms, and rebuilding social connections. Very few had received this kind of support; and among those who did, satisfaction with the quality of the support was low.²⁰

Notably, veterans who received support that they perceived as helpful reported better outcomes including greater civilian job satisfaction, higher person-job fit, and smoother military-to-civilian adjustment. While most found employment within six months (79.8%), job stability was mixed. These findings suggest that the missing piece is access to identity- and purpose-supporting structures that help veterans sustain meaningful, stable roles in civilian life.

7 Juliet Wakefield et al., “Brothers and Sisters in Arms: A Mixed-methods Investigation of the Roles Played by Military Support and Social Identity Processes in the Mental Health of Veterans during the Transition to Veteranhood,” *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 34, no. 1 [2024].

8 Tarli Young et al., “More than Sport: A Social-Identity Intervention to Support Transitions out of Elite Sport,” *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* 75 [2024]: 102697; Magen Seymour-Smith et al., “More to Lose? Longitudinal Evidence That Women Whose Social Support Declines Following Childbirth Are at Increased Risk of Depression,” *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* 45, no. 4 [2021]: 338–43.

9 Carolyn Heward et al., “A Scoping Review of Military Culture, Military Identity, and Mental Health Outcomes in Military Personnel,” *Military Medicine* 189, nos. 11–12 [2024]: e2382–93; Stefan Schilling, “Cohesion in Modern Military Formations – A Qualitative Analysis of Group Formation in Junior, Specialised and Ad-Hoc Teams in the Royal Marines. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation,” *Kings College London, London*, 2019, 1–250.

10 Rita Phillips and Vince Connelly, “Examining Myths of the Mad, Bad, and Sad British Veteran in Today’s Media: A Qualitative Approach,” *Journal of Political & Military Sociology* 48, no. 1 [2022].

11 Charlotte Williamson et al., “Military Veterans and Civilians’ Mental Health Diagnoses: An Analysis of Secondary Mental Health Services,” *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 58, no. 7 [2023]: 1029–37; Cathryn Rodway et al., “Suicide after Leaving the UK Armed Forces 1996–2018: A Cohort Study,” *PLoS Medicine* 20, no. 8 [2022]: 2022.12.12.22283340.

12 Forces in Mind Trust, *Continue to Work: The Transition Mapping Study 2017 Evaluation Report* [2017].

13 Lauren Rose Godier-McBard et al., “Barriers and Facilitators to Mental Healthcare for Women Veterans: A Scoping Review,” *Journal of Mental Health* 32, no. 5 [2023]: 951–61; House of Commons Defence Committee, *Protecting Those Who Protect Us: Women in the Armed Forces from Recruitment to Civilian Life Second Report of Session 2021–22* [2021].

14 Office for National Statistics and Office for Veterans Affairs, “Health and Wellbeing of UK Armed Forces Veterans: Veterans’ Survey 2022, UK,” December 4, 2024.

15 E.J. Pearson et al., “Mental Health Treatment Experiences of Commonwealth Veterans from Diverse Ethnic Backgrounds Who Have Served in the UK Military,” *BMJ Military Health* 168, no. 1 [2022]: 20–24.

16 Mary Keeling, “Stories of Transition: US Veterans’ Narratives of Transition to Civilian Life and the Important Role of Identity,” *Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health* 4, no. 2 [2018]: 28–36.

17 Eve Binks and Siobhan Cambridge, “The Transition Experiences of British Military Veterans,” *Political Psychology* 39, no. 1 [2018]: 125–42.

18 WHO Commission on Social Connection, *From Loneliness to Social Connection: Charting a Path to Healthier Societies* [2025]; John T. Cacioppo et al., “Social Isolation,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1231, no. 1 [2011]: 17–22.

19 The Royal British Legion, *Social Isolation and Loneliness in the Armed Forces Community*, Psychosomatic Medicine [2018], 161–70; Charlotte Williamson et al., “Loneliness among UK Veterans: Associations with Quality of Life, Alcohol Misuse, and Perceptions of Partner Drinking,” *Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health* 9, no. 4 [2023]: 88–99.

20 Our Veteran Employment survey is still ongoing, and these results are preliminary. However, they are in line with our qualitative interviews and with similar research using the MCARM.

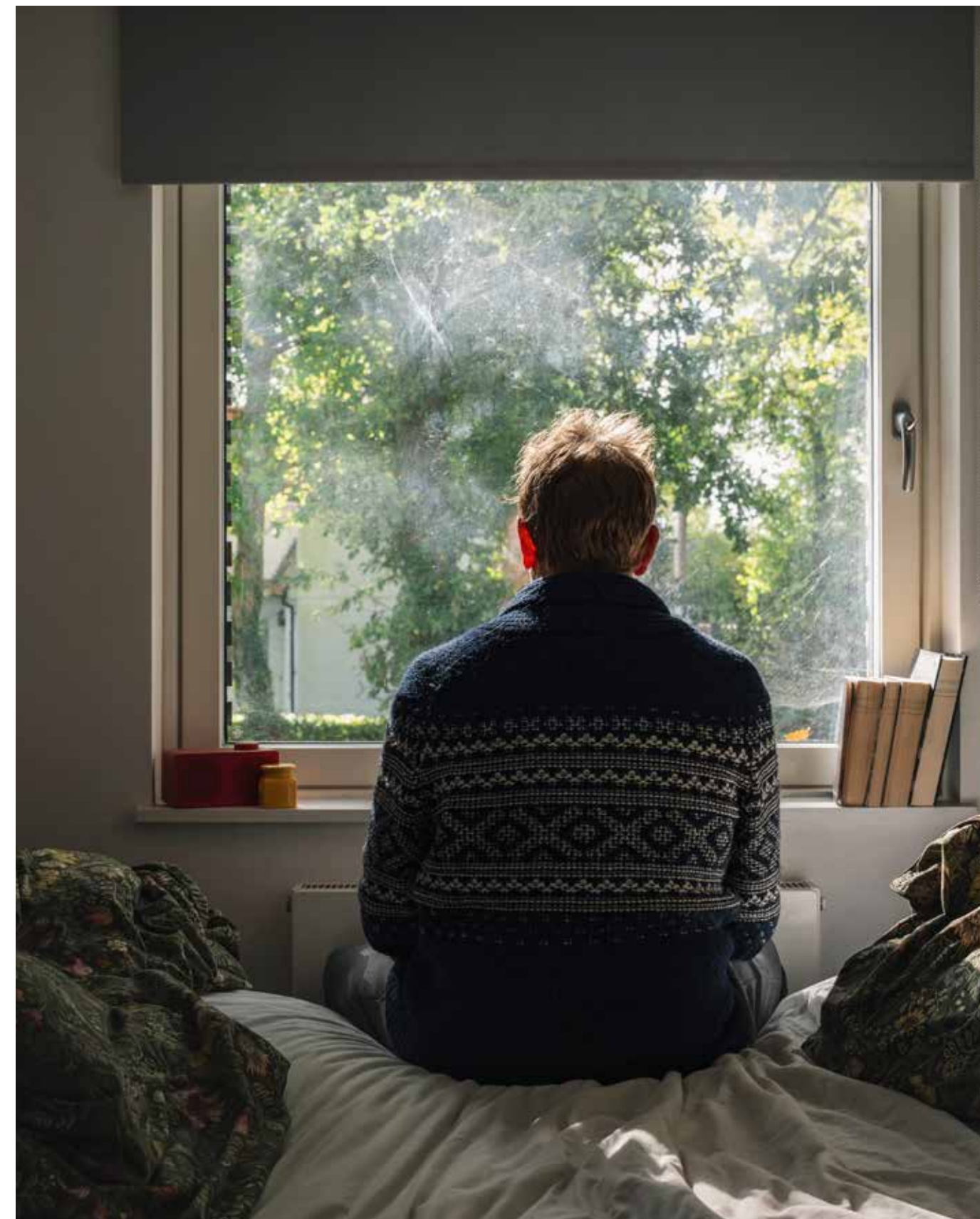
Our Evidence and Ongoing Work

Our collaborative work on military veterans – conducted at the University of Exeter, Nottingham Trent University, and the University of Queensland – has provided evidence of the benefits of social connectedness in both UK and Australian service leavers.²¹ For example, our co-investigator Juliet Wakefield at Nottingham Trent has shown that both service leavers' ability to maintain their social group memberships during the transition and to find new social groups after the transition, predict enhanced mental health when entering veterancy.²² Building on this, we co-developed a psychoeducational intervention with veterans – the Veteran Connection Programme (VCP) – which we piloted in 2024. The programme, which is aimed at enhancing veterans' ability to manage social group membership, led to marked improvements in thriving, group gain, self-efficacy in managing social groups, psychological wellbeing, and Military-Civilian Adjustment and Reintegration (MCARM).²³ We found that our intervention was effective in reducing negative beliefs about civilians as well as increasing purpose and connection – both subscales of the MCARM which have been found to predict transition success. Building on these insights and supported by over 20 partners from the UK Armed Forces, charities, and the NHS, we are now aiming to test our Veteran Connection programme in a feasibility trial to investigate the feasibility and acceptability of this intervention for service leavers before a larger Randomised Controlled Trial to ascertain effectiveness of the programme.

Leaving Well – A Strategic Opportunity, Not Just a Welfare Necessity

In this essay we argue that the social and psychological dimensions of military service and the subsequent military-to-civilian transition are not merely an issue that affects individuals but are of strategic importance. Transition failures are costly – economically, clinically, and socially – yet they are also predictable, and, for many, preventable. The dominant focus on practical support for veterans neglects the deeper challenge: the loss of military identity, purpose and meaning, and meaningful group belonging. Our findings suggest that navigating identity loss and (re)building purposeful group memberships, results in greater adjustment, job satisfaction, and wellbeing across the Defence lifecycle. Moreover, improving these outcomes can help veterans who feel organisational betrayal and disconnection, reducing barriers to post-service engagement such as Reserve uptake.

Supporting social connection before and during transition is therefore not just a welfare issue but is key to developing a more resilient Defence Force, and sustaining veterans' continued, voluntary affiliation with Defence. Investing in pathways that rebuild connection, and social identity moves us from managing the aftermath of failure, to enabling successful, lasting reintegration – for veterans, for Defence, and for society. To achieve this, social connectedness must be recognised as a core component of Defence strategy, with targeted investment in evidence-based interventions that strengthen identity, belonging, and support during and beyond service.

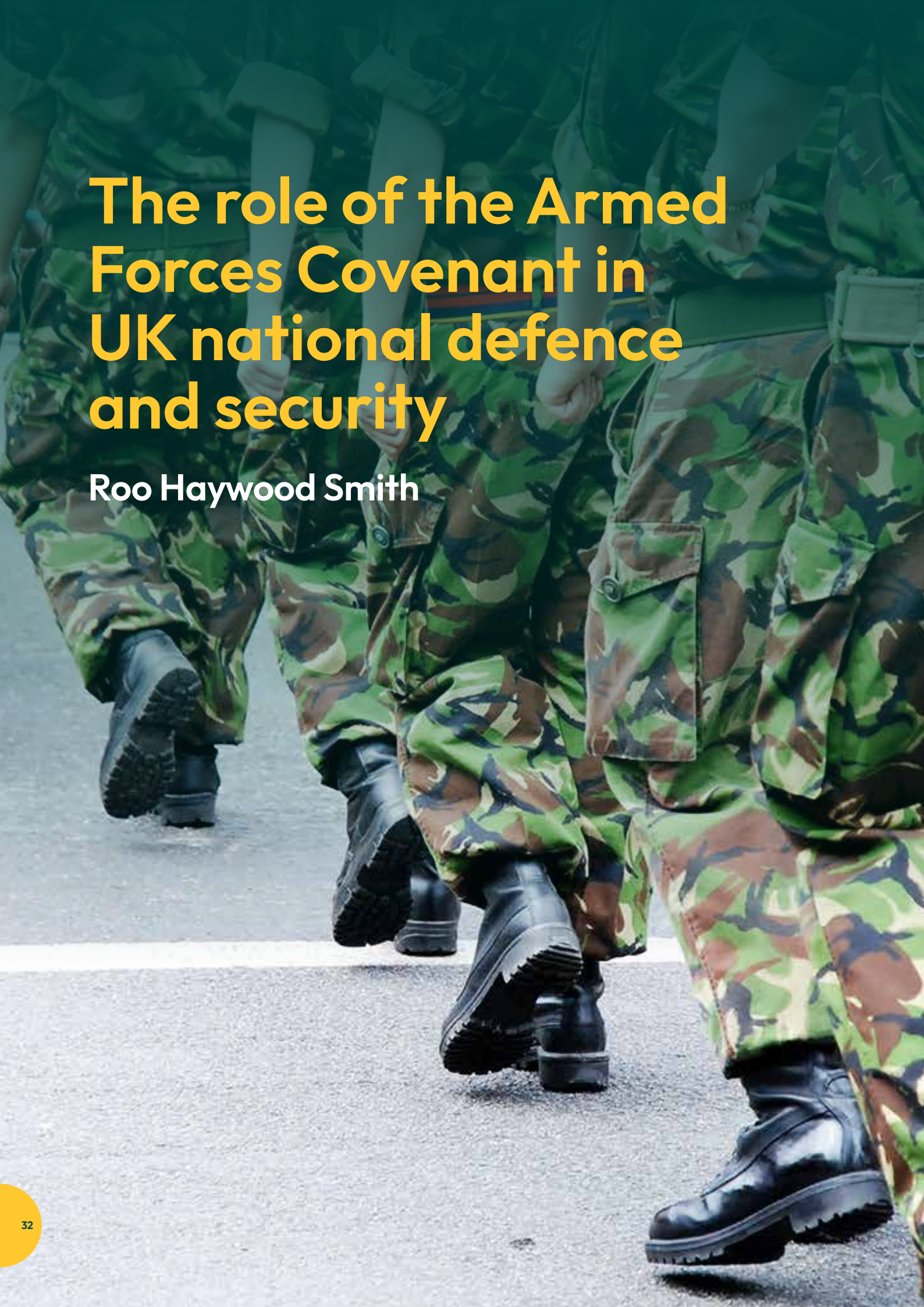


²¹ More information on the Veteran Connection Programme (VCP) can be found at www.vetconnectprogram.org

²² Wakefield et al., 2024.

²³ Results have been presented at the FIMT conference 2025 and are currently being written up for publication.

²⁴ Madeline Romaniuk et al., "Development and Psychometric Evaluation of the Mental Readiness for Military Transition Scale (MT-Ready)," *BMC Psychiatry* 23, no. 1 [2023]: 575.



The role of the Armed Forces Covenant in UK national defence and security

Roo Haywood Smith

Interestingly, and perhaps surprisingly, the Strategic Defence Review 2025 (SDR 2025) does not explicitly mention the Armed Forces Covenant at all. It does, however, take a refreshingly strong stance on the important and oft unstated need for a connection between society and defence, albeit specifically in the context of Home Defence and Resilience. Nevertheless, the dedication of a discrete chapter on “A Whole-of-Society Approach” is a good first step to engaging with a population that seems largely to be taking its security, and its home comforts, for granted despite increasing geopolitical turbulence.

Furthermore SDR 2025 does talk about connecting society to defence through the “better use of, and connection with, Reserves and veterans” and the promotion of “unity...across society... to raise public awareness” signalling at least the intention to increase public understanding of defence and emphasising that national security is not just the military’s responsibility but a collective national effort. It could be argued, perhaps, that it is a reflection of how good UK security services and armed forces are that we have such a high level of national security while they remain largely invisible; not wearing uniform in public reduced the risk to service personnel during the Northern Ireland Troubles so they all but vanished from public view. More recent images have been of wounded veterans from Afghanistan, for example, and those too have skewed public opinion.

SDR 2025’s clear statement on working with society shows, at last, government recognition that the Ministry of Defence (MoD) needs to be able to work collaboratively with industry, society and academia, to ensure a warfighting capability and national survival including in the face of armed conflict taking place below the formal threshold of war. The MoD’s approach may be resource-driven but the notion of connecting the public more strongly to the defence and security of the nation is welcomed and the Armed Forces Covenant has a key role to play. So what is the Covenant? And what does it really do?

The Armed Forces Covenant (AFC), established in its current form in 2011, is a promise by the nation to “ensure those who serve or have served in the Armed Forces, and their families, are treated fairly”. In 2021 the Covenant Duty was added conferring a “legal obligation” to look after veterans on “specified bodies” such as local authorities and hospital trusts.

The Covenant covers ‘service people’ including members of the Armed Forces (full-time and reserve) and veterans, but it also recognises that the wider military family will be affected as a result of military service, so it includes family members, and the bereaved. It encompasses, for example, service spouses or partners who have moved house (and even country) many times and put their own career aspirations on hold, or those who have spent weeks or months single parenting while their partners were deployed. It also includes service children who have likely experienced a disrupted education and have missed (and worried about) a parent for weeks or months at a time, or worse suffered the injury or loss of a parent through military service. Latterly an additional emphasis on supporting Cadets has been incorporated into the Covenant’s Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS).

Put simply the Covenant is all about people – and how society can and should support service people because of their commitment to the country. The strength of the Covenant is in its simplicity: any organisation, company or charity, of any size, can sign the Covenant and pledge its support to service people by simply offering what it can. Collectively Covenant signatories raise the profile of the service community, highlighting their attributes, contributions and needs and jointly creating a web of support. For those still serving this support should look after them and enable them to give more of themselves to the Services. For veterans and service families society supports them so they in turn can support their service person; ideally creating a virtuous circle of societal support for the Armed Forces who in turn secure our future.

Signing the AFC, and becoming a Bronze level signatory, is often the first step in an organisation's commitment to support the service community. Those wishing and able to do more and make larger financial commitments (though supporting a greater number of paid leave days for Reserve and Cadet commitments for example) become eligible to apply for a Defence Employers Recognition Scheme (ERS) Silver or Gold award. But all Covenant signatories are valued for their contribution and become part of the network. It is this national cover and assurance that makes a difference to service people, increasing public visibility and understanding of service people and the Armed Forces.

Covenant pledges vary in number and complexity, reflecting the size and activity of the parent organisation. While these commitments normally align with core business they can incur direct cost or, at least, take staff time to deliver. All signatories have therefore already taken an altruistic step to support national defence and security through their direct support. Once again, the Covenant's simple implementation model works well; creating a network of advocates who collaborate to signpost and support service people. Expanding this model and embedding the philosophy and approach more widely will not only increase the understanding of defence it will establish a nationwide safety net for service people (especially veterans).

There are 2.4 million veterans living in the UK; 86% are men and 40% are aged between 16 – 64 years old. They have a wealth of skills, leadership and experience but many still struggle to transition into meaningful civilian careers. Covenant signatories support veteran recruiting, often through the MoD's own resettlement organisation – The Career Transition Partnership. When pledging support each organisation offers what they can; clearly this is hugely variable but then so are the service people they are pledging to support. Recognising veteran skills and experience – by, for example, providing work experience, supporting veterans through job application processes, guaranteeing interviews if they meet essential criteria, and then tailored

onboarding processes – all help veterans transition to the civilian workforce. Embedding the Covenant as part of an organisation's diversity and inclusion work, or within procurement and tendering processes, not only spreads the word but also ensures service people feel welcomed and able to talk about their service.

The University of Exeter first signed the Covenant in 2019 and was awarded a Silver recognition award in 2022 when the commitments were largely still HR-focussed. In late 2022 the Armed Forces Covenant Advocacy Group formed to embed the Covenant across the University, resulting in the award of Gold in 2024. Being a 'service person' is not a protected characteristic but the University, like many similarly minded organisations, has expanded its EDI considerations to include this group where at all possible. The Advocacy Group is embedded within the University governance and is represented on the University's Executive Board by the Deputy Vice Chancellor for People and Culture. Moreover the Covenant is included, for example, as part of the University's commercial procurement and partnership due diligence processes; veterans and service partners can self-identify through the recruitment process and on the HR IT system; staff onboarding and induction includes information about service people and the Covenant; service child status is captured during undergraduate student registration and through this the University knows our service children have normal academic attainment levels and importantly our welfare teams can support them differently if needed. PGCE students learn about service children and Primary School pupil premiums, so they are better prepared for their teaching placements, and the AFC is specifically included in Equality Impact Assessments.

The Advocacy Group has strengthened links with the Officer Training Corps (OTC) and the University Royal Naval Unit (URNU) and collaborates with the Military Education Committee (MEC) to supporting students to complete their studies alongside their Officer Cadet commitments. The popular AFC University staff/student community network welcomes anyone with a Service connection offering community and understanding.

SDR 2025 recognises the value and flexibility of Reserve forces and calls for an increase, when funding allows, by 20%. This would enable flexible engagement of high-quality specialists, but it does inevitably move some cost from the MoD to the private sector. The Covenant network can help here by supporting businesses to recognise the skills and experience their staff gain through reserve service and again this does support wider societal understanding of defence.

The Defence Review calls for an increase in cadets by 30% by 2030 as part of the "renewed focus on home defence" and a "modern deterrence" again knitting defence and society together in a way not seen recently; recognising the value of engaging with the younger generation as a means of connecting with the wider UK society. While the Covenant itself does not explicitly mention cadets, a key expectation of the Employer Recognition Scheme is that organisations will offer some support for their local detachments of Sea, Army or Air Cadets. University of Northampton research¹ has shown that Cadets' skills and experience confers future employment advantages, while concurrently ensuring that gate keepers – parents, grandparents, teachers – see the value of Cadets and are more likely to support ambitions to join up later. Cadet forces are typically underfunded, hence linking them with the Covenant for in-kind or monetary support. There is also a wider value in cadets being part of a whole of society approach. There is no doubt Cadets can raise standards and ambitions, especially for disadvantaged young people, and their enjoyment can boost recruiting.

In sum, the Armed Forces Covenant is the embodiment of social value. It delivers a national promise that the values, skills, resilience, and experience of service personnel, veterans, and their families will be noticed and harnessed. The Covenant is one more way of connecting society with the Armed Forces. And in an era of global instability, fostering an understanding between the forces and civilians has to be welcomed.

¹ Simon Denny, Richard Hazenbarg and Meanu Bajwa-Patel 'What is the social impact and return on investment resulting from expenditure on the Cadet Forces in the UK?' University of Northampton, Institute of Social Innovation and Impact. (2021)

UK Intelligence Community: looking behind the budgets, the clichés and the veil of operational security

Frances Tammer



It Isn't All About the Money

The Chancellor of the Exchequer confirmed in her Spring Statement on 26 March 2025 that the Single Intelligence Account (SIA), which provides funding for the key Intelligence Agencies, the Security Service (MI5), the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) and the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), would increase by roughly 7% to £4.6 billion for 2025/26. Funding for Counter Terrorism Policing, which works closely with MI5, was also increased to £1.2 billion for 2025/26. However, the UK Intelligence Community (IC) comprises a larger alphabet soup of organisations, for which there is additional expenditure, albeit not publicly quantified. These budgetary uplifts, declared and undeclared, acknowledge the growing criticality of these services.¹

Why Does it Matter?

Whilst a considerable and increasing amount of taxpayers' money is being spent on these intelligence activities, the vast majority of the public really know and think little about these agencies and organisations that are acting to keep them safe at home and abroad and that are crucial to evidence-based decision making.² Does this really matter? The answer is certainly yes, not least in terms of democratic accountability, inserting into national political life a degree of trustworthiness that is increasingly perceived to be lacking.³ Since there is no single audience, any strategy and its implementation needs to work out how, by whom and on what platforms to appeal on a generational, demographic, gender and educational basis.

There are palpable security reasons for keeping hidden the vast majority of UK intelligence work and activities. Yet, this approach, however necessary, leaves gaping holes to be filled largely by fictional stereotypes. James Bond is probably the most famous of these but he has now been joined by a plethora of films and streamed series, accompanied by a wave of disinformation, misinformation and hallucinations, proliferating all too easily on the internet. In 2024 the UK Government-approved Office of Communications (Ofcom) published a study of general media habits, revealing that social media was a significant component of online news consumption, with more than half of UK adults (52%) using it as a news source.⁴

The veil of secrecy in this cloistered world also means largely negative connotations can become embedded in the minds of those, among the public, who do take note of anything intelligence-related. In this respect, the politicised claims made in 2003 with regard to Iraqi weapons of mass destruction loom large, as do other perceived UK intelligence failures in preventing the London 7/7 bombings or in preventing UK citizens from joining ISIS in Syria. The Snowden and Wikileaks revelations also highlighted not only a lack of security control over very highly classified material, but also that activities were being conducted at the edge of, or contrary to democratic procedures, by the UK intelligence agencies. Public uncertainty regarding the IC's cyber security has become more pronounced in the wake of the 2025 MoD Afghan data leak, which is set to cost the taxpayer at least £850m.⁵

¹ The Single Intelligence Account (SIA) budget is not currently included in the Ministry of Defence budget but by 2027 will be considered to qualify fully as NATO-level defence expenditure.

² There have been few studies on UK public knowledge of the UK intelligence agencies. The most recent and comprehensive findings were published in May 2025 in the *Intelligence and National Security*, reflecting polling of 2,000 British adults. Interestingly, the research found public trust level in GCHQ, MI5 and MI6 to be comparatively high, certainly in relation to other government organisations.

³ See John Curtice, Alex Scholes and Aisha Chabdu, Britain's Democracy: A Health Check (BSA 42, NCSR, June 2025). The report discusses the health of British democracy, with just 12 per cent of respondents saying they trust the Government to put national interest before party interest "just about always" or "most of the time" – the lowest figure recorded in the survey's history.

⁴ Ofcom, 'Report: News consumption in the UK: 2024. Research findings', 10 September 2024.

⁵ Jim Dunton, 'MPs launch probe into MoD's Afghan data breach', Civil Service World, 4 September 2025.

On-line recruitment campaigns and the public drip-feeding of sporadic good news stories are thought to provide some form of remedy. For example, it is claimed that since 2022 MI5, in conjunction with the Police, have foiled 20 Iranian-backed lethal plots;⁶ public speeches are routinely made by the Directors of the main UK Agencies⁷; and gender equality success is claimed on the basis that, for the first time, both the current Directors of GCHQ and SIS are women. But measures such as these are, arguably, an insufficient response to the grave requirements of legitimacy and transparency. The Defence Intelligence on Ukraine, started in February 2022, is the first time any intelligence product has been disseminated publicly, but its readership is still very limited, suggesting that opportunities have been missed.

Oversight but Flawed Mechanisms

The public, which does not have an explicit role in this matter so to speak, must rely on Parliament as the oversight machinery of the IC. Although the statutory responsibility has resided with Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) since 1994,⁸ to date it has not been able to establish a reputation for rigorous accountability when it comes to in depth and timely scrutiny of the policies, expenditure, administration and operations of the agencies under its remit. The reasons for this are relatively clear – inadequate funding and profile of the ISC; generally glacial publication of its investigatory reports; organisational conflicts within its governance, notably with the Cabinet Office; and, crucially, the tendency for the agencies and organisations, under its remit, to see their participation as a 'tick-box' exercise, doing the minimum required to honour their statutory duty.⁹

In the mix is also the Investigatory Powers Commissioner's Office (IPCO). In some respects, its remit is much narrower than the ISC as it is concerned only with investigatory powers. However, in other ways, its remit is broader in that it oversees more than 600 public authorities, including the whole of the IC. Public awareness and interest in both of these organisations is not likely to be very high.

Loss of Sovereign Capability

In December 2023 the ISC argued that "Ministers and the Intelligence Community must ensure that the UK retains sovereign intelligence capabilities to enable it to stand on its own two feet in intelligence terms, in the highly unlikely and undesirable event that there is a breakdown in the US partnership".¹⁰ The stark issue to be addressed here is the increasing politicisation of the US Intelligence Community which is the largest provider of raw intelligence collection and shared assessments within the 5 EYES intelligence partnership involving Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the US. The implications were very much front-page news in March 2025 when President Trump withdrew intelligence support for Ukraine, albeit on a temporary basis, after the infamous Zelensky/Trump meeting in the Oval Office. This meant that the UK, as it was not the owner of the raw intelligence generated by the US, could not continue to provide the full suite of support to the Ukrainians on the battlefield. The lack of a sovereign UK intelligence capability was laid bare.

Conclusions and Recommendations

There is still a long way to go for the UK IC both to educate the general public, qualitatively and quantitatively, about the intelligence function, and to play their part in the wider process of engendering democratic oversight and trustworthiness within the political spectrum. To that end, the following list of seven recommendations is offered as a starting point for discussion:

1. Develop a comprehensive strategy and mechanisms for communicating more about the UK IC. This strategy must have the support of all parts of the UK IC.
2. Any strategy must be tailored to meet the varying generational use of media forms. Outreach to external experts, including academia, should be fostered to counter group-think. Security clearance issues should not be presented as an insurmountable obstacle.
3. Where possible, Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) should be used by the IC for publicly issued reports including commercial satellite material.
4. If the Cabinet Office is to play a meaningful cross-government role, it too, must be properly resourced with staff who have a background either in the IC or in communications.

5. Oversight organisations – both ISC and IPCO – should be promoted more fully. The ISC should be provided with the resources and tools needed to function fully and effectively. The IC should be directed to co-operate fully with Parliamentary oversight.
6. Best practice in other Western nations' intelligence communities should be examined for evidence of the encouragement both of public trust in the IC and of the IC's adherence to democratic processes.
7. Reassure the public there will be no politicisation of the UK IC, as seems increasingly the case in the US, and that, where possible, mitigations to overcome intelligence dependencies are in place.

⁶ Security Service – MI5, 'Director General Ken McCallum gives latest threat update'. 8 October 2024: <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/director-general-ken-mccallum-gives-latest-threat-update>.

⁷ See, for example, Richard Moore, then Head of MI6, in reported conversation with William Burns, then Director of the Central Intelligence Agency: Gordon Corea and Jemma Crew, 'Heads of CIA and MI6 say world order 'under threat not seen since Cold War'', BBC News, 7 September 2024.

⁸ The ISC Committee was established under the Intelligence Services Act 1994. Its powers were reinforced in the Justice and Security Act 2013 and in an accompanying Memorandum of Understanding that can be found at Annex A in the Committee's Annual Report 2013-2014. The ISC oversees MI5, MI6, GCHQ, Defence Intelligence, the National Cyber Force, the Joint Intelligence Organisation, the National Security Secretariat and Homeland Security Group.

⁹ See Rosamund Powell, '30 Years of Scrutiny: What next for the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament?' (Centre for Emerging Technology and Security, Alan Turing Institute, 16 May 2024).

¹⁰ See Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, International Partnerships (Report to Parliament, HC 288, December 2023), p.75.

Is America's 'last supper' an inspiration for Europe?

Paul Hough

Suppliers and Buyers

This essay offers an alternative perspective on the configuration and management of the European Defence Industrial Base. This is a perspective that recognises that the market is a monopsony – where the balance of power tilts heavily towards the buyer – and recognises that continuing with the procurement methods of the last thirty five years, given the surge in European defence spending, runs the risk that the prioritising of commercial over military outcomes will fail to deliver a timely response to the extant threat to European security. If Europe, that is the European Union (EU), its member nations, and the UK, accepts its role in shaping the future industrial base and adopts procurement methods consistent with that role then it is more likely that it will enhance military capability whilst delivering value for all stakeholders.

Competitive procurement and arm's length trading between European governments and industry have dominated defence procurement in Europe since the end of the Cold War. This has prompted both an absolute and relative decline in the industrial base, where capacity and capability has contracted and necessitated an increasing reliance on US technology.

Industry for Defence

In the alternative perspective offered here, the defence industrial base is considered to be a key element of military capability and appropriate procurement methods are applied to prioritise military outcomes whilst maintaining value for money for the taxpayer and reasonable commercial returns for the shareholder. This approach recognises the central role of the military in designing and shaping the market. Competition and arm's length contracting would be only one of a number of procurement methods deployed to deliver the materiel element of military capability in a timely manner. This approach also recognises the international nature of the supply chains and aligns allied procurement activity, giving effect to the capability partnerships referenced in the UK Strategic Defence Review published in June 2025.

The European Union is taking steps in this direction, and the UK will participate via its overarching Defence and Security agreement with the bloc and its bilateral agreements with EU members such as Germany. More needs to be done, however, and more quickly. Relatively recent history provides us with an analogy that will support the development of an industrial strategy for defence.

The Last Supper

On 21 July 1993 the US Secretary of State for Defense Les Aspin and his Deputy William Perry hosted a dinner at the Pentagon. The meeting became known as the Last Supper; a title provided by Norman Augustine, then CEO of Martin Marietta, who attended along with senior executives from more than twenty other USA defence companies. In a presentation after the dinner Deputy Secretary Perry set out the cuts to defence spending resulting from the end of the Cold War and argued that the US could no longer afford to sustain all of the defence companies in the room or indeed the broader market. The Pentagon wanted the companies to start a process of mergers and acquisitions to reduce industrial capacity and the corporate overhead to a level that could be sustained by the new budgets. This process was overseen by the Departments of Defense and Justice and it had impressive momentum: by 2003 the number of defence prime contractors in the United States had shrunk from 51 to 5. Along the way, Augustine's Martin Marietta had merged with Lockheed to create Lockheed Martin (LM). In 1996 LM acquired the troubled Loral Corporation, prompting some to suggest the merged company be renamed 'Lomoral'.

How could the Last Supper serve as an analogy to help Europe deal with the current challenges? Today's circumstances are, of course, very different from the period of industrial rationalisation and consolidation that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. Today, the challenge for European governments is to deliver a rapid expansion of industrial capacity and capability whilst driving greater interoperability and, wherever feasible, commonality across nations.



Monopsony Money

The key point to take from the Last Supper is that it confirms that the market for defence products, systems and services was, and remains, a monopsony; a market where a single buyer, or a small group of buyers, rather than 'classical' market forces or the suppliers, has the power to set the conditions of business and shape the supply chain. The US government carefully develops and nurtures its defence industrial base, which is clearly seen part of the US national military capability. Conversely, in their pursuit of commercial outcomes, the UK and other European nations have prioritised competitive

procurement, alongside protection of national champions, resulting in an industrial base that lacks the capability and capacity to respond immediately to the urgent rearmament that is ever more plainly necessary to meet threats from Russia and other adversaries. There is a risk that if these same procurement methods are deployed in the current climate (what might be called the time of feast), as were used in the time of famine (i.e., the period since the end of the Cold War), then an expanded industrial capability will be optimised for commercial imperatives (i.e., for governments and corporations) rather than to ensure the military outcomes that will deter adversaries.

There are a number of problems with arm's length procurement resulting from a myopic focus on efficiency. The purpose for governments and companies becomes one of compliance with the contract, leading to an emphasis on commercial and programme management outcomes rather than military capability. With duplication of effort from governments and companies the result can be wasteful cost. And, more importantly, arm's length procurement takes time. In the UK, as in much of Europe, contract placement is usually a lengthy and complex process, with excessive effort expended on defining, and complying strictly with, performance and contractual requirements. In the programme management 'golden triangle' of performance, cost and time, time is relegated to a second order priority. For all parties success becomes the avoidance of failure. This is sub-optimal since as threats increase the timely availability of materiel becomes correspondingly vital for deterrence and success in any battlespace.

The Last Supper is an argument, by analogy, that the buyer can, and should, play a key role in the design and development of the defence industrial base. What then would such a meeting look like today in Europe? In the United States there have been calls for a 'First Breakfast' to increase the level of competition. But in Europe I suggest that it is not the *level* of competition that is the problem. The corporate response to the procurement methods of the last thirty years has produced an unbalanced industrial base with duplication of capability and capacity in some areas and single points of failure or no capability in others. The European Defence Agency reports that EU defence procurement expenditure was €88Bn in 2024 a rise of 39% over 2023, an impressive trend that the Agency expects to continue in 2025 and beyond.¹ Yet neither the EU, the governments of Europe nor the UK appear to be taking the opportunity of this surge in defence spending to shape the industrial base to prioritise military outcomes. A review of media statements, for example, gives the impression that ammunition plants are being established across the continent to deliver a total European capacity of two million 155mm artillery rounds per annum. But are these plants in the optimal locations? And whilst such a capacity might be impressive, it also remains unclear whether the rest of the supply chain, not least the weapons required to utilise such a capacity, will be similarly expanded. And on that note, how many

different producers of main battle tanks (MBT) and other types of armoured vehicles does Europe actually need? The recent collaboration between Leonardo and Rheinmetall, with the support of the Italian Government, to design and build another MBT variant is an example of the dysfunction with the European defence industrial base. Equally, is it really sustainable for two consortia – one comprising the UK, Italy and Japan, and the other Germany and France – to be separately developing sixth generation air systems?

To be really effective, any work to shape the European Defence Industrial base should take place at a continental rather than national level. It will necessarily involve the application of a variety of procurement methods, which are employed on the basis of desired outcomes in military capability rather than adherence to a belief in the efficacy of arm's length contracting as a sufficient solution. This will inevitably require the selection of winners and losers and probably a programme of continent-wide mergers and acquisitions. The winners may be assured of long term income streams; however this should not be taken as an opportunity to generate excessive shareholder value. It would be reasonable for the surety of income streams to be a *quid pro quo* for companies to grant to governments greater transparency in programme status and risks, as well as a key role in arriving at strategic decisions. This would stop short of allocating an equity stake to either national governments or the EU, however. It would treat the defence industrial base as a strategic level asset in the defence of Europe and the corporate entities as operators of such strategic assets rather than sole owners and therefore arbiters.

In the End, Einstein

As Einstein is reputed to have said 'We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them'. Threats from Russia and elsewhere, together with the indifferent stance of the United States towards the defence of Europe, requires European nations, including the UK, to think and act differently. An active approach to the development and sustainment of the defence industrial base is a key element of this new line of thinking.

¹ EDA Defence Data 2024 - 2025

UK Strategic Defence Review 2025: reach versus resources

Peter Roberts

Whilst many assessments of the UK June 2025 Strategic Defence Review (SDR) have been published in recent months, two central questions remain pertinent and – in the main – largely unaddressed. The first of these relates to the UK's ambition for strategic reach; what does the UK understand to be its strategic interests? At what point, and where, do often loosely defined interests translate into more explicit and even inescapable responsibilities? And what are the geopolitical limits – if any – to the UK's strategic reach; global, European or national? The second question concerns, quite simply, the funding of UK national strategy.

In many ways the SDR fudges both questions by noting the importance of everywhere and everything that could be described as 'strategic' while leaving ostensibly concrete funding decisions to the government's National Security Strategy (NSS – a steroid-assisted reprise of the SDR, published in the same month) and, above all and at all times, to the Treasury. By this all-too familiar device the reviewers dodged the most difficult question of all: what to give up in order to set a path towards the new vision of "Making Britain Safer: secure at home, strong abroad". In the end, the writers of the SDR (and indeed the NSS) delivered a vision that achieves neither of these things. Whilst both UK Foreign and Defence Secretaries had called publicly for national security to be considered in terms of 'NATO first', the recommendations made in the SDR were generally more concerned with homeland security. And there was no hint of excluding anything on the current 'to-do list' globally in order to make it all fit together, including the strange deployment of the UK's under-equipped carrier capability to the Far East.

There is no doubt that the audience for the SDR was, in the main, the British public. Some mention was made of the UK's overseas and dependent territories but, unless these territories also had UK military bases, nothing was mentioned that might contribute to their security and defence. It seems reasonable, therefore, to suppose that the central concern of the SDR was with making the residents of the UK feel more secure – albeit more through reassuring

language than through practical actions – and building economic gains into any government expenditure on national defence. Thus, mention was made of anywhere the UK has a treaty, an Alliance, an economic interest or a legacy obligation of some form. As a result, Europe featured strongly, as did North America. Africa and South America were also mentioned, together with both the Arctic and Antarctica. The Indo-Pacific region retained the high strategic status awarded in earlier reviews and continued to be described as a 'big issue'.

The desire to satisfy, to acknowledge and accept the interests and stakes of everyone and to be dutifully concerned with every expressed wish or criticism, is a core failing of the SDR. This uncritical, unconfident approach avoids prioritisation or even the merest hint that some activities or commitments might have to cease. Depending on how the document is read, one can imagine that every area of the world was regarded by the SDR's authors as being vital in one way or another for the well-being and security of the British people and, hence, that everyone, everywhere and everything were to be treated with more-or-less equal interest. And prioritisation of resources is important: no matter what the UK government decides to spend on defence and military budgets, whatever is left over of UK military power after the inevitable cuts cannot be everywhere and will need to focus its presence on a couple of geographic locations. To think otherwise would be folly; yet there is an absence of prioritisation through considered policy within the SDR.

Where to focus efforts and finances is a very awkward problem for the Ministry of Defence, given the passion and uncompromising conviction of many vocal lobbyists – individuals and organisations – that hover around the UK defence and security apparatus. A cartoonish version of these interest groups caricatures each of these interests, cruelly but accurately. Those demanding that the Indo-Pacific should remain key (including the recently retired UK Chief of the Defence Staff – in violent disagreement with the US government) are pictured as 'little Englanders'; mainly navalists, still captured by the delusion that the UK can deploy a global footprint

and have impact. Those who believe continental Europe is central to UK national security are often characterised as unreconstructed allies of the ‘remainers’ in the BREXIT debacle. High North lobbyists are branded as environmentalists. Enthusiasts for the North Atlantic are caricatured as 19th century free traders. People who wish to see cyber and seabed threats as the priority are deemed to be digital evangelists. And those that advocate for a focus on space are often dismissed as mere sci-fi enthusiasts.

Others might prefer to use themes and interests rather than geography to achieve some degree of insight. The difficulty here is that interests can be very difficult to describe, quantify and prioritise with any degree of consistency. National interests are simply too abundant, dispersed, subjective and contingent to be pinned down: should these be economic (e.g. concerned, in a Trumpian style, largely with ‘deals’ that deliver economic gain of some sort for the people of the UK); ethical (e.g. based in values such as human rights); political-philosophical (e.g. expressing a preference for like-minded democracies); or historical (e.g. encumbered by the burden of claimed legacy obligations to the Commonwealth)?

Neither of these frameworks (geographical or thematic) is sufficient to the task that the SDR reviewers, the MoD, or the government itself claim to have set for themselves. Unfortunately, it appears instead from the SDR that government policy is to be built around giving the *impression*, rather than the actuality, of a UK secure within the North Atlantic. There are some suggestions that this ambition might at least have received some thought: the mention of a home guard, a bastion in the North Atlantic, a missile defence capability, a sovereign space port, and more funding for digital enablement all genuflect in the direction of a grand strategic vision of some sort. Yet the reviewers have ‘thin sliced’ each of these ideas. There is a lack of depth to their analysis and, while they might resonate with mainstream media, the MoD, and think-tanks in London, their recommendations lack credibility in the eyes of any serious national security professional, whether allies or adversaries.

For example, in mooted a Home Guard for the UK homeland (neither Overseas nor Dependent Territories are, apparently, thought to require a similar capability), the SDR cannot seem to decide whether the resulting force should have a constabulary mandate or something more martial. Should the new organisation be based on the traditional British model of a Territorial Army, or the US National Guard concept, with similar authorities and capabilities across land, sea, air, and digital? By using imprecise language (a ‘home guard’), the reviewers have left any detail, concept of employment, or plan for implementation open to interpretation. The idea appeared wholly unsatisfactory at the time of announcement, and little has changed or emerged since that one might find reassuring.

The idea of a ‘Bastion’ (ironically, a popular Russian naval concept also recently adopted by the Chinese navy), in the North Atlantic is on the face of it a brave and courageous decision. The inference – for there is no statement of prioritisation – is the overwhelming need for the funding, resourcing, and tactical development of naval forces to fulfil this task. But this is a distinctly different set of priorities for the Royal Navy, which, since the last SDR delivered by Lord Robertson in 1998, has focused on global power-projection; sacrificing every other aspect of its remaining flotilla in an overwhelming desire to acquire an extremely limited capacity for carrier strike. Given the speeches by naval leaders, and the arguments made by the recently retired UK Chief of Defence Staff, it is difficult to believe that the requisite cultural change needed to deliver a bastion concept will be much in evidence for the foreseeable future.

In Missile Defence terms (or, more accurately, in terms of the need for an integrated air and missile defence system), the SDR reviewers acknowledged the accelerating and demanding challenge. Yet their solution, alarmingly, was largely to rebrand existing capabilities and claim that these would be sufficient. The reality, according to experts, is far from the review’s complacent portrayal. And, once again, there was no acknowledgement that the UK’s responsibilities for its Overseas and Dependent Territories extended to providing for their defence (in the area of air and missile defence or indeed any other).

Even if the SDR is interpreted as having settled priorities (say, homeland first, then NATO, then everything else), one important issue remains outstanding: none of these priorities can be delivered credibly along the lines set by the reviewers. Nevertheless, the MoD will doubtless feel little compulsion to do much of real substance, in terms of force structure or planned deployments, before claiming success in their characteristically tone deaf manner and insisting that they are ‘delivering’ a coherent, competent and – above all – comprehensible national strategy that the UK public and taxpayers can understand. It could be, of course, that real change and real decisions will be the task of the new Military Strategic Headquarters. But, at least for the present, the MSHQ is yet another MoD initiative that is shrouded in uncertainty and scepticism as to its role and value.

Finally, there is the issue of funding. This is a matter not simply of where ‘new’ money is to come from to match the government’s ambition (aside from a certain amount from the overseas development aid budget), but when it is to be delivered and in what quantities. At present the figures do not add up, and MoD and individual commands are being required to undergo another round of cuts to capability, scale, and training in order to live within their means (all the while making the current force weaker). But the SDR reviewers had instructions to write a review based on an ambition of 2.5% GDP spending within this parliament and no more. President Trump has changed that paradigm with demands for 3.5% GDP (on defence) within an overall 5% GDP (on national security) becoming a reality for NATO members states over the next decade. There is no guidance in the SDR to understand what this means for the UK, for defence, for national security, or for society, nor does there seem to be an understanding about where additional money will come from – nor what it will be spent on. The UK might remain a clever accountant – putting cyber security measures, broadband provision, and even some healthcare spending within those budgets – and meet the targets in a rather dishonest way, but other European powers are all too aware of the limitations of British hard power. Perhaps the government simply hopes that by sleight of hand it will be able to keep UK taxpayers in the dark.

The 2025 SDR will not make the UK safer and more secure, nor will it add strength to the UK’s dwindling power. It is a missed opportunity and there is a sense that even the reviewers (Robertson, Barrons, and Hill) are now rather perplexed at what they produced. We should be more than worried.



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