

The air defence of the UK: defence on a shoestring in an age of uncertainty

Article

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Preamble

This article talks broadly about strategy, planning and its practice. It uses examples from Britain's defence policy, and hard numbers from the Cold War experience, to illustrate some of the problems the RAF faces today. It looks at Britain's commitment to the air defence of its own islands during the Cold War – an age of certainty – and compares it directly to the current defence policy and practice in the age of uncertainty.

An historically pessimistic view of international relations and strategy is taken. The reason for this pessimism is based on historical precedent. In 1914, Europe went from peace to war in less than two months. In the 1930s Britain's rearmament began in mid-decade to replace bi-planes and other equipment, but the RAF still went to war in 1939 with obsolescent, vulnerable equipment, and suffered serious losses of personnel and machinery.

Introduction

I take it someone has worked out whether we can defend ourselves.

Jim Callaghan, Labour Prime Minister, 1978

This comment is written on the front page of a Joint Intelligence Committee report on the ability of the Soviet air force to attack targets in Britain.¹ The report showed Britain was poorly prepared to defend itself in times of war, despite the clear threat from the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact.

Questions relating to Britain's air defence capability are as relevant now as they were then, however the circumstances are very different. The familiar bipolarity of the Cold War is missing, and the range of threats to the UK is much broader, including both state and non-state actors.

Deterrence

An important role of the RAF is to deter attack, and ultimately the defence of UK airspace if that deterrent fails. Deterrent plans are aimed at a perceived threat: planning for the manifestation of that threat. These plans relate intimately to national strategy. The nation must appear to have a

¹ JIC(77)10, The Soviet Capability to Attack targets in the United Kingdom Base, 26th October 1977, 'Defence against the Soviet Threat to the United Kingdom', n.d., PREM 16/1563, TNA.

capable air force if it is to act as a deterrent. But deterrence also requires the ability to sustain operations. Britain's air defences protect around 1 million square miles of airspace, reaching out into the North Atlantic. This indicates how important airborne maritime reconnaissance is in the defence of the islands.

The 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review reads "The Government's most important duty is the defence of the UK and Overseas Territories, and protection of our people and sovereignty."² In written testimony to the House of Commons Defence Committee in 2013, Lord Hennessy of Nympsfield told the committee that, in an ideal world, air defence of the UK should be the priority of UK defence policy.³ The 2015 SDSR states "The Royal Air Force protects our airspace and is ready at all times to intercept rogue aircraft."⁴ Concerted attack from the air by a peer adversary is not perceived as an imminent threat.

Threat Analysis

The conventional threat during the period of "Flexible Response", as the NATO strategy was called, was clear – direct attack from bombers equipped with gravity bombs or stand-off missiles aimed at denying the vital infrastructure needed for the reinforcement of Europe by UK and US forces. The UK was responsible for the air defence of the Eastern Atlantic and the UK itself, and the airspace over the UK was an Air Defence Region in its own right. However, the defensive response to the threat was never completely put into place, leaving UK airspace extremely vulnerable, and Britain's ability to continue a fight very doubtful.

What is the threat analysis today? The House of Commons Defence Committee identified several distant threats to national interest, and whilst qualifying the analysis heavily, identified the Russian/Middle Eastern threat as being the greatest to the UK itself.⁵ In 2015 the HCDC commented that 'The resurgence of an expansionist Russia represents a significant change in the threat picture ... and has implications not only for the UK but also for our allies as well.'⁶ The ability of the Russians to

² 'National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom', Cmnd 9161 (The Cabinet Office, November 2015), chap. 4.

³ 'Towards the next Defence and Security Review: Part One', HC 197 (House of Commons, 7 January 2014), 58.

⁴ 'SDSR 2015'.

⁵ <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/defence-committee/an-sdsr-checklist-of-potential-threats/written/22550.html>

⁶ 'Flexible Response? An SDSR Checklist of Potential Threats and Vulnerabilities', HC 493 (House of Commons Defence Committee, 17 November 2015), para. 58.

interfere with the sea and air communications into the UK is seen as a considerable problem⁷, and the capability to use cyber-attacks to cripple the country has been recently in the news thanks to the Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson.⁸ Unofficially at least in public, is also the fear of the break-up of NATO, and the need for Britain to be able to defend itself alone, as in 1940.

What is being defended?

In order for us to understand the demands of the air defence of the UK, we must understand what is being defended. The knee-jerk response to this may be that the population is being defended. But the official documents indicate otherwise. During the early Cold War, the first thing being defended against attack in the UK was the nuclear deterrent. Other targets such as other military installations, ports and airports were next on the list for air defence, with civilian installations such as power generating stations as poor runners-up.

Once the nuclear deterrent took wholly to sea in submarine launched missiles, the priority of defence changed. There is not now the clear military imperative to defend the nuclear deterrent if it functions correctly with one boat always at sea, but neither is there the capability, nor the political will, to defend the vital military and civil installations in the country from attack from the air. Security documents speak in vague terms about 'defence of the UK'.⁹

Self-defence of the RAF, in other words maintaining the RAF air defence and surveillance capability, seems the obvious next choice given that the resources available to the RAF are insufficient to defend the national infrastructure.

What are the vulnerabilities?

Internal Vulnerability

The 'internal' vulnerability comes from Government cuts, and a drive for greater 'efficiency'. This results in a lack of equipment, weapons, supplies and trained personnel. There are many examples

⁷ 'Flexible Response? An SDSR Checklist of Potential Threats and Vulnerabilities', para. 50.

⁸ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/01/25/crippling-russian-attack-britains-infrastructure-could-kill/>, accessed 30/1/2018

⁹ 'SDSR 2015', chap. 4.

of short-sighted 'cost-savings' which resulted in reduced air defence capability.¹⁰ To many in the RAF and the other armed services, the greatest enemy is the Treasury.

Air defence of the UK suffered considerably during the early Cold War. Because the expectation was that any war would turn nuclear very quickly, the provision of expensive air defence systems was considered unnecessary.¹¹ The RAF finds itself in a similar situation now, following a period of cuts, 'refocussing' or simple indifference by the government.

National air defence should be flexible and capable of responding to a multitude of threats. But the historical lesson is that even in a period of certainty, the resources were not made available to the RAF to provide what it saw as the minimum level of defence for UK airspace. Flexibility comes at a cost. It relies on balance within the forces, and sufficient numbers to respond to different scenarios.¹²

There is a lack of a layered surface to air defence system. Other services rely on layered defence, whereas the RAF has been forced into a two stage defence: overhead and arm's length. Without the numbers, achieving flexibility becomes problematic. But not all aircraft will be available all the time, so a simple count up of aircraft in service is misleading – battle damage, faults and maintenance will reduce the numbers available.

The Armed Forces are increasingly run by governments of all colours in the fashion of a business, with 'outputs' and 'levels of cost effectiveness'. The only true measure of an armed force is how it operates in its true environment, which is war. Which brings us to the second vulnerability.

Self-Delusion

This is primarily political self-delusion, but also some self-delusion within the Service. Strategic vulnerability has developed out of the policies which attributed success to the NATO strategies. However, lack of failure does not equal success.

This vision of success contributes to the self-delusion. According to the politicians of successive Governments, aircraft numbers could be cut, pilot training be restricted, and obsolete weapons

¹⁰ Kenton White, "'Effing" the Military: A Political Misunderstanding of Management', *Defence Studies* 17, no. 4 (2017): 346–58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2017.1351879>.

¹¹ A07783, Defence of the United Kingdom, DOP(78)12, Memorandum to the Prime Minister from John Hunt, 1st August 1978, 'Defence against the Soviet Threat to the United Kingdom', 2.

¹² Group Captain Paul O'Neill, 'Developing a Flexible Royal Air Force for an Age of Uncertainty', *Air Power Review* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 46–65.

retained, but the overall strategy was still successful. Behind this apparent success the UK air defence capability had effectively been eviscerated.

This same self-delusion of success led to the cuts under the 'Peace Dividend', and also led to very quickly forgetting how to face an adversary that has capable Air Power in terms of credibility and numbers. To reinforce this misplaced belief, most recent RAF operations have been fought in more-or-less permissive air environments. They have not had to deter nor fight a peer state.

The political class, public, and even the other armed services have lost sight of the fact that 'air superiority' is not a given. The memory of what it is like to have to operate against an adversary which has credible and numerically similar Air Power has been lost. This extends to the protection of the supporting infrastructure, which in recent deployments has remained free from attack. The ground facilities suffer from vulnerability to air attack to blind the surveillance systems, which is why Maritime Reconnaissance, Air Surveillance and Control Systems (ASAC) and AWACS are so very important. Indeed, a lack of maritime patrol aircraft has been an embarrassment to the British Government in the recent past.

Existential vulnerability

The third vulnerability is the physical existence of the RAF if it is faced with a peer enemy.

This vulnerability, a result of the combination of the first and second threats, is particularly applicable to Britain's Armed Forces. If military excellence is accomplished by a relatively small force, the effect of combat losses will be disproportionately devastating.¹³ The RAF may be truly excellent, capable and agile in all its operations, but because of its reduced size, any combat losses, should it come to a peer-to-peer war, will be truly ruinous.

Difficulties, if not disasters, in the early stages of war, and the need for time to recover and re-arm, have been vital for the UK. This was experienced by the BEF in World War One, and nearly by the RAF in World War Two. Had Dowding not refused to send more fighters to defend France it was likely that the air defence of the home islands would not have been sufficient to survive the impending attack.

¹³ Colin S. Gray, *War, Peace, and Victory: Strategy and Statecraft for the Next Century* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 171.

An ex-RAF officer commented that “This threat poses the problem the RAF has faced for decades: condemning themselves to low capabilities for a while, and eventually getting better, if they last long enough.”

Conclusion

In this age of uncertainty, flexibility is the key to respond to threats from different areas. But the RAF, along with the other armed forces, have been starved of the necessary resources for even the basic defence of the home nation.

It would appear that many of the limitations placed on UK air defence during a period of strategic certainty have continued into the current age of uncertainty.

Following the apparent success of the Cold War strategies, the idea the ‘teeth’ could be sharpened at the expense of the ‘tail’ persisted, and has now grown to dangerous proportions. Pursuing the business model of ‘efficiency’, the Armed Forces have been cut to very low levels, yet asked to do more. And with the increasing tensions in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and the Pacific, the number of possible threats is increasing.

The overwhelming problem with a denuded air force is the time it will take to recover its capability if, and when, it is needed. Modern equipment is complicated to manufacture, and aircraft cannot be built in the numbers previously seen. Nor, frankly, is there the will to provide such facilities during peacetime for use in the event of war.

War has a habit of appearing without much announcement, and the diminished resources of the RAF would take years to bring up to the necessary levels to defend the UK against a determined enemy, and defending these islands is exactly what the RAF may be called upon to do, before too long.

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