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**The Cold Rules for National Security:**

**History and the Defence of the Realm**

Professor The Lord Hennessy

Peter Nailor was a great servant of all the institutions to which he belonged: the Mercers’ School, Wadham College Oxford, the Civil Service and Gresham College. He also served the Royal Navy, with great distinction, as an administrator in the Polaris Executive during its pioneering days as the British nuclear deterrent, and as a Professor at the Royal Naval College, Greenwich, which is where I first met him in the late-1970s. Peter, I knew from reputation, was a natural teacher. He turned out to be a natural broadcaster too, demonstrated by a documentary I made with Caroline Anstey for BBC Radio 4 in 1988 on the British nuclear weapons programme. Peter was, quite simply, a star in that broadcast, explaining the complexities and vicissitudes of the British bomb, with a passion matched only by his lightness of touch, and all delivered in that beautiful voice. To be a friend of Peter Nailor’s was to be very lucky.

This evening, I am treading on classic Nailor terrain. I hope Peter would have approved, even though our views may diverge a bit by one or two particles of the path we have trodden, and which our country still seeks to tread, exerting a special influence in the wider world.

Ladies and gentlemen, I must declare an interest too: I am a member of the Chief of the Defence Staff Strategic Advisory Panel, but my thoughts and views this evening are entirely my own.

Let me begin with a quotation: “The British and the French are the only countries in the European Union with the instinct to intervene. We are always looking for different playing fields.”

This observation was made by Douglas Herd, who served a long tenure as Foreign Secretary under Margaret Thatcher and John Major (1989-1995), speaking at a gathering in the Travellers Club in Pall Mall last June. He also noted that, at international meetings, people are not bored by what the British have to say – they are interested.

A few weeks earlier, I had heard a highly distinguished former United States Secretary of State say he emphatically did not want the United Kingdom to cease being a nuclear weapons power in the near future. The United States would always wish Britain, and these were his exact words, “…to be part of the conversation” when the world discussed disarmament; without a weapon, the UK would not be part of it.

Three months later, the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, William Hague, summoned a mixture of parliamentarians, journalists, scholars, and old diplomatic hands to the huge and exquisite Grand Lacarno Room in the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, for what the invitation described as “a major address on the role of the Foreign Office”. This was held on the eighth of September, 2011.

The line which set the tone for the whole of the Foreign Secretary’s speech was, “the nation that is purely reactive in foreign policy is in decline.” There it was, undiluted and caveat-free, the special impulse, the authentic voice of a country quite unprepared for mediocrity in the shape of foreign policy quiescence. Mr Hague’s predecessors, Lord Curzon, Austen Chamberlain, Ernest Bevin, Anthony Eden, the great ghosts whose shades one can still sense in that dazzling palazzo of a building, designed by Sir Gilbert Scott and opened by Benjamin Disraeli in 1868 - all of them would have approved of his words. Indeed, they would have thought that he could think and speak no other.

As for Mr Hague’s boss, David Cameron, the words he used a few weeks later, at the Conservative Party Conference in Manchester, would have left those old ancestors glowing with posthumous pride! “Britain,” the Prime Minister declared, “never had the biggest population, the largest land mass, the richest resources, but we had the spirit! Let’s turn this time of challenge into a time of opportunity, not sitting around watching things happen and wondering why, but standing up, making things happen, and asking why not?!” What a busy bee the Prime Minister is.

Aspirational disarmament is, I think, the problem. Generally, this has never been a simple business for Britain during its long slippage from its pre-1914 ‘superpowerdom’; according to present trends and listening to those voices, it is unlikely to become so.

The instinct to intervene is a particularly difficult and important frenzy for contemporary historians to distil. That is Keynes’ phrase, taken from the end of *The General Theory*: “Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back.” Nothing changes, yet this particular frenzy is an interesting one to distil.

It was very evident during a meeting on strategy at the Royal College of Defence Studies, earlier this year. Naturally, given where we were and who we were, this meeting showed a particular interest in Britain’s place in the world, its continuing desire to cut a dash in international affairs, and the mismatch between that impulse and the stretched, though ultimately successful, resources available to sustain it. Libya was vivid in our minds, as was Afghanistan, the previous autumn’s Strategy and Defence and Security Review also, and Iraq still hung heavy over the room.

One senior participant, Vice-Admiral Charles Style, the RCDS’s Commandant, observed that he had been in the naval service for 37 years and that, for all those years (apart from a short, post-Falklands’ boost), he and his colleagues had been managing decline. “In the end,” he said, “it begins to screw up your mind.” Another participant wondered if, in these days of freedom of information, a truly no-holds-barred review exercise could summon up the required levels of realism and candour in Whitehall.

I recalled that evening the absurd line, given the defence cuts in the Strategic Defence and Security Review that accompanied it, in the October 2010 National Security Strategy, which was entitled “A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty”. It declared in its introduction that the National Security Council – the Prime Minister’s great invention, which is working very well – “has reached a clear conclusion that Britain’s national interest requires us to reject any notion of the shrinkage of our influence.” There we are – just like that! A Tommy Cooper style assertion. “No shrinkage of our influence…” - and the very next day, huge cuts to the Armed Forces!

Another participant that evening suggested that the impulse to react - as David Cameron had done when Benghazi was about to fall to Gaddafi’s forces - was hardwired into him and perhaps into the country he led.

Thinking about it, the following weekend, I was reminded of a comparable appetite a century ago, captured in the words of Lord Rosebery, Liberal Prime Minister (1894-95). In 1899, he distinguished between what he called “sane imperialism” and “wildcat imperialism”. However, I do think Rosebery went in his rectoral address at Glasgow University a year later, when he said of the British Empire, “No one outside an asylum wishes to be rid of it!”

If you replace the word “imperialism” in the 1899 quote with the words “liberal and humanitarian intervention”, you will find, I think, the comparator and the impulse behind that hubristic and self-delusory sentence in the 2010 National Security Review. The latter is a classic example of what a friend of mine, a former officer of the Secret Intelligence Service, called “the itch after the amputation”.

I am sure there is much in that, but in some of its aspects, it is almost a divine and laudable itch, a divine discontent. Why? Because one can define patriotism, as I do in my own case, for example, as a desire for one’s country to be greater than the sum of its parts. This wish applies to a wide range of the activities contained within our islands, including punching in the world’s scholarly and intellectual markets heavier than the weight of our accumulated little grey cells – i.e. the universities, my trade. This variety of patriotism, in my judgement, is also part of the impulse to provide a strategy for the UK which increases the chances of this where diplomacy, intelligence, defence policy and weapons procurement, trade, aid, and the instruments of soft power (such as the BBC World Service and the British Council) mingle and fuse. For these reasons, I am a supporter of the practice of publishing regular National Security Strategies and Defence and Security Reviews, and the Coalition has undertaken to do this once every five years now.

Furthermore, one must not be too unkind about the current set of Ministers dealing with Britain’s place in the world. It is hard for a country that was a great power for such a time as ours to alter a nervous system long in the making. As the great Charles de Gaulle wrote, a few years before he became the first President of the French Fifth Republic in the late-1950s: “France is not really herself unless she is in the front rank.”

A British version of this kind of Gaullism plays powerfully still in the United Kingdom. The appetite for being a territorial, imperial power has long abated, but when it comes to being a great power, or a pocket superpower (as that shrewd observer of the Brits, Newsweek’s former man in London, Stryker McGuire, liked to put it), the fires are not entirely banked. Nor should they be. As Jeremy Greenstock, former Ambassador to the United Nations and later Director of the Ditchley Foundation, put it in a lecture to the Order of St Michael and George in June of this year: “It is probably inevitable that we shall continue to lose relative power as others grow. But there is still a lot to play for.” So there is, especially if we take the non-heroic, unflashy approach to diplomatic influence, as prescribed by that arch-realist of the Foreign Office and Number 10, the great Marquis of Salisbury in the late 19th Century. He talked about

“a series of microscopic advantages; a judicious suggestion here, or an opportune civility there: of a wise concession at one moment, and a far-sighted persistence at another.”

That is the perfect definition of diplomacy, I think.

That said, the Strategic Defence and Security Review of last year, October 2010, was, in my view, the least satisfactory of the eleven Defence Reviews that have been conducted since the end of the Second World War. I shall offer a brief reprise of them.

1. **The Harwood Review, 1949** **(Labour).**

This was neither announced nor published – those were the days – and it did not emerge until 1980 at the National Archives, under the 30 year rule. I discovered a file on the fate of the Royal Marine bands and discovered that it was a memo from the Admiralty to the Harwood Review saying that these could not be abolished and put into the Army because they provide the bands for the entire naval service. It would be out of the question! I thought: what is this, the Harwood Review? It turns out to have been the first big defence review since the War, and we knew nothing of it – it had not leaked. It was an attempt to keep the defence estimates at an average of £700 million a year, over the three years 1950-1952, and it was swiftly swept away by rearmament inspired by the Korean War. This, in fact, quadrupled the defence estimates.

1. **The Chief of Staff Report on Defence Policy and Global Strategy, 1952 (Conservative).**

This was not published either. The Chief stressed the overwhelming primacy of the Cold War threat: “The free world is menaced everywhere by the implacable and unlimited aims of Soviet Russia.” It foresaw “a prolonged period of Cold War”, and urged that the priorities of the UK should be a) action required to win the Cold War, b) playing our part in deterrents (plural) against war and c) preparations for war. This too eventually emerged in the National Archives at Kew.

1. **The Sands’ Review, 1957 (Conservative).**

This was published by Duncan Sands, a Conservative Defence Minister. It foreshadowed the end of National Service, substantial cuts in conventional forces and a reliance upon nuclear deterrents, as the country moved from the age of atomic bombs to the immensely more powerful thermo-nuclear weapons.

1. **Denis Healey, mark one, 1964-66 (Labour).**

This is primarily remembered for the cancellation of the TSR-2, the Tactical Strike and Reconnaissance aircraft, which was going to replace the V-bombers, and the planned, alternative purchase of United States made F1-11s.

1. **Denis Healey, mark two, 1968 (Labour).**

This followed the sterling devaluation of November 1967. Harold Wilson, the Prime Minister, announced a planned withdrawal of British Forces from east of Suez and the cancellation of the F1-11 order.

1. **The Mason Review, 1974-75 (Labour).**

This was published by Roy Mason, Labour Defence Secretary. Under this review, the United Kingdom defence effort was to concentrate on NATO’s central front in Germany, anti-submarine warfare in the Eastern Atlantic, home defence, and the nuclear deterrent, with reductions in out-of-NATO-area deployments, RAF transports, and amphibious capability.

1. **The John Nott Review, 1981 (Conservative).**

This specifieddrastic reductions in the Royal Navy surface fleet, including the loss of an aircraft carrier and two amphibious ships, while replacing Polaris with Trident as the carrier of the UK nuclear deterrent. The review was drastically revised in naval terms as a result of the Falklands War of April-June 1982. I was having lunch in June 1981 with a friend of mine from the MoD, on the naval side, and the cuts to surface fleets had already leaked. He was very gloomy. I asked him what could be done and he said, “Nothing – the only thing that can save the surface fleet now is a small colonial war, a long way away, requiring a lot of ships.” Those were his exact words, I wrote them down. In April 1982, I rang him up: “X, I think you’ve gone too far!”

1. **Options for Change, 1990 (Conservative).**

This was a post-Cold War rethink, reducing the size of the Army by a third, announcing the withdrawal of six RAF squadrons from Germany and slimming the Royal Navy’s destroyer frigate fleet down from 48 to 40.

1. **The Defence Costs Study, 1994 (Conservative).**

The study suggested the use of outsourcing and the civilianisation of previously military functions. It also outlined the private finance initiative to shed 18,700 military and civilian jobs by the year 2000. The review also made a priority clear of, as they put it, “frontline first”.

1. **The Strategic Defence Review, 1998 (Labour).**

This involved restructuring the Army, increasing joint capability with a tri-service approach and advocating a greater use of new technology. It spelt out the number of overseas operations that the UK could conduct at any one time, with or without allies.

1. **The Strategic Defence Review, new chapter, 2002 (Labour).**

Following the atrocities of 9/11, this new chapter revised the 1998 review in the light of the huge international terrorist threat.

All of these reviews had a strong element of “cost-push” behind them, and a desire to reduce the proportion of Gross Domestic Product absorbed by defence. Aspirations were perpetually outstripping resources.

But the October 2010 Coalition Defence Review was rushed. It looked and smelt like a fistful of spending reviews, overlain by a thin patina of strategy. It cried out for rethinking and revision from the moment it was published, a view actually expressed in August this year by the House of Commons’ Defence Select Committee in its report on the Strategic Defence and Security Review of the National Security Strategy.

The Force requirements of Libyan operation five months later made this plain for all to see. Talks soon began of its being reopened, as the difficulties of what one insider called, during the early days of the Libyan operation, “a slow war of attrition by inches,” became apparent.

In fact, the most accomplished review of the post-War years lay beyond the standard defence review genre, which is why it does not feature in my list of eleven. It fell into a class of its own. It was called “The Future Policy Study” and it was commissioned, in great secrecy, by Harold Macmillan, in June 1959. It was tasked with a candid assessment of where the UK would be in the world by 1970, in terms of current policies. It shows a fascinating side to Macmillan. In October 1959, he won the smuggest of all General Election campaigns in my lifetime, made famous by that line, “you’ve never had it so good on peace and prosperity.” However, in private, he was deeply anxious and had a great sense of reality and wanted his Ministers’ noses rubbed in this reality. This review was meant to do exactly that.

In fact, this review, which of course was not declassified until 31 years afterwards, remains the model of how to handle that place-in-the-world question for we Brits; it is the only post-1945 example of an all-in approach, covering the range of moving parts and their relationship to one another, in terms of Britain’s security, wellbeing and capacity to influence others, including all the economic and industrial aspects.

If I was Chief Historical Advisor to the Prime Minister, a yet-to-be-created post and to which I do not aspire, I would urge David Cameron to commission a no-holds barred equivalent of Harold Macmillan’s “Future Policy Study.” I would include instructions that it be suffused with the purpose of drawing up “the cold rules for national safety,” which the great historians of Empire, Robinson and Gallagher, in their classic work *Africa and the Victorians*, said each political generation had to compile for itself.

This cannot be done, in my judgement, without a stiff dose of what the American scholars, Dick Neustadt and Ernie May, called “Thinking in Time” and seeing that time as a stream. It means carrying with you, when scanning the horizon and formulating future strategy endeavours, a living sense of those who trod the same path as you along that long road of reviews since Victory in Europe Day in May 1945. It should open by making the case for the UK as a serious player in world affairs, which is no longer an “of course” proposition, and with a burst of candour about what this means in terms of a share of Gross Domestic Product. Its prose should provide an equally vivid portrait of what a less globally ambitious UK would look like, in terms of armed forces, equipment, defence spending and intelligence capability.

Such a review - unless we want a seriously shrivelled Britain as an outcome - would also require a genuine infusion of grand strategy, which is not the same as generating stratagems. This indispensable function, as the House of Commons’ Public Administration Committee noticed in the autumn of 2010, in its “Who Does UK National Strategy?” investigation, is effectively Balkanised. This is not just the case across Whitehall but, to an outsider’s eye, exists even within critical departments like the Ministry of Defence. If the great Clausewitz could somehow manifest himself in London today, he would have a difficult time identifying who was in charge of grand strategy (although the word “strategy” itself is ubiquitous and almost as devalued a piece of linguistic litter as the word “vision” – both now utterly meaningless in Whitehall because of overextended use). A visiting Clausewitz, somehow capable of retrospectively penetrating those committee rooms, intelligence sections and Chiefs of Staff suites where our eleven post-war, Defence and Security Reviews have been crafted, would, I think, see successive generations of our guardians of national security in pursuit of two related Holy Grails.

The first one is this: the careful management and, where possible, disguise of decline, by keeping as many capabilities as possible in being, or, failing that, sustaining a capacity to regenerate them.

Secondly, sculpting from the assets – human, physical and structural – in the Armed Forces, the Civil Service, the diplomatic service and the intelligence agencies, a system whereby the maximum value can be squeezed out of them.

This has been the impulse behind a parallel, though rarely synchronised, series of organisational reports alongside those Defence Reviews. They include: the 1958 review of the Chiefs of Staffs’ functions; the Ismay-Jacob Report on the Higher Direction of Defence, 1963, which led to the creation of a unified Ministry of Defence the following year; the 1984 changes to the Chief of Defence Staff’s role and the abolition of the three service departments; the 2011 Levine Report on Defence Reform; the Trend-Greenhill Reforms of the Joint Intelligence Committee in 1968, which created the Assessment Staff in the Cabinet Office, which flourishes to this day; and a pair of reviews of the Foreign Office by Lord Plowden in 1964 and Sir Val Duncan in 1969; as well as the famous 1977 Central Policy Review Staff’s Review of Overseas Representation, which so irritated the diplomatic service.

There will, I suspect, be a fistful of similar inquiries to come before I find myself in some great celestial archive where no one is ever denied access to any file (which is my definition of heaven, you should understand, being one of nature’s 22 carat nerds!).

If asked, “Can history be any help to the next set of strategic inquisitors?” I would answer, “Possibly, probably even.” If asked in what way, I would ask whether the assumption is that our impulse towards being a pocket superpower is likely to continue unabated? Do we assume that this impulse would continue to the point where we reconcile ourselves to being a medium-sized power with no particular wish to exert ourselves in terms of reach, capability and expense than any other country tucked up inside a big regional grouping (the European Union), and part of a longstanding military alliance (NATO)?

If the answer was no, that we did not want to carry on being a pocket superpower, I would be seriously surprised and, I must admit, not a little regretful. I would, in that case, argue that post-war history offers little help because we would be dealing with a government mentality that I would no longer recognise, having never experienced it.

If the answer was yes, but that a slimmer, better organised and targeted version of the status quo was what was wanted, I would not be surprised. I would say that, as a country, we should not continue to view our place in the world as if we were operating according to the principles of that old Venetian proverb, directed to the fluid precariousness of their city amidst the lagoon: “*Sempre crolla ma non cade* / It is always collapsing, but it never falls down.” We are very Venetian as a country, in that way.

How can matters be so organised in future that we avoid the perils of overstretch and the depressing, often searing recitative of relative decline? First would come an examination of the ingredients that have competed for time, attention, money and capability, both human and physical, since 1945. These are:

1. The permanent demands or “musts”: air defence of the United Kingdom; home defence of the United Kingdom; nuclear deterrent; security of the Eastern Atlantic; NATO commitments. They have been the “musts” of my lifetime, for all Governments.
2. For the years 1945-1980, the military requirements of disposing of the British Empire, with some residuals still exerting demands – e.g. the Falkland Islands and Gibraltar.
3. The occasional need to bring military aid to the civil ministries, as it is called in the jargon, such as Green Goddess fire engines during industrial action by the Fire Brigades Union, or military aid to the civil power, which is what we did in Northern Ireland for so long.
4. Unexpected crises that cannot be met with inaction – such as Northern Ireland in 1969 or the Argentinean invasion of the Falkland Islands in 1982 – without either dereliction of duty, harm to national self-image, and international image, of the UK, or both.
5. Crises that can be met with inaction, but at a price in terms of the factors listed above. Libya could have been an example of this in 2011, but turned out, I am glad to say, not to be.
6. What I call the “wouldn’t it be nice to help if we had the money” questions. The list of these is nearly endless, because of what Douglas Hurd called “the instinct to intervene”.
7. The sustenance of top flight diplomatic and intelligence services, a considerable overseas aid programme, and a substantial investment in soft power, by which I mean the overseas service of the BBC and the British Council (there are others, but they are the two main ones).

So, in the light of our recent, post-1945 past, the test for strategy-making, I think, is two-fold. Firstly, how can its formation be best organised to reconcile or decide between the vectors of forces created by those seven listed functions; secondly, how can it help run a system that sustains a capacity to act, in the words of the 1998 Strategic Defence Review, that is greater than the sum of its parts?

The “capacity to act” impulse became especially acute in the aftermath of the 2010 Defence and Security Review as, in Sir Kevin Tebbit’s words:

“We had a Strategic Defence and Security Review which says we want to continue to do high-intensity things, a long way from our shores, but with less. This puts great strain on both our Armed Forces and on industry. You can’t turn capabilities on and off like a tap. You can lose them. One’s fed up with managing decline, but managing without sufficient resources.”

Sir Kevin is a former Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Defence and is now a leading figure in the UK-based defence industry.

As a country, we have never, in my lifetime, pulled off this pair of requirements, and I think it is high time that we did. As William Hague said in his Grand Lacarno Room speech in September: “The world is not conducting a seminar on foreign policy - out there are nations advancing their own national interests, ideas which promote violent extremism, wars we must prevent, new threats we must anticipate.”

And if we are to seriously increase our chances of doing so, history, and contemporary history especially, will be one of our key levers. At the very least, it will remind the future guardians of our national security, during what will inevitably be the very dark hours of the next Strategic Defence and Security Review, that we have been here before and they are not alone. The ghosts of many of the best that Whitehall, the Armed Forces and the intelligence services have ever reared will be flitting through their committee rooms, emitting sympathetic but inaudible sounds, with more than a touch of irony upon their countenances, as the latest manifestation of our enduring impulse towards great power bumps and grinds alongside our always limited capacity to fund it.

To conclude, allow me to make a quantum leap of the imagination, to a future Prime Minister and Cabinet who collectively decide that the instinct to intervene has to stop, and charges its National Security Council officials, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Ministry of Defence, and the secret agencies, to concentrate on home defence or making the UK a hard target against people, states, factors and actions that could seriously harm the country. What would such an assessment of internal and external threats look like? With the help of my friend Alan Petty and some necessarily anonymous Whitehall insiders, who have long experience with national security matters, I have attempted such an audit in the diagram below – a diagram best read with a stiff drink!



This circle of anxieties and possibilities may strike you as a vastly overdone thing, even verging on the “chill your bones” fictional *oeuvre* begun 106 years ago by William Le Queux, the John Le Carre of his day. In his 1906 bestseller, *The Invasion of 1910*, in which the Kaiser’s armies are successfully put ashore in Norfolk, while England dozes through the small hours. It is a terrific read, but there is one problem with it. It was serialised and commissioned by the *Daily Mail*, so the Germans’ invasion route goes through every town where their circulation needed boosting, which rather detracts from its verisimilitude!

Compiling this two-edged circle on a warm August lunchtime in the House of Lords, Alan Petty said it reminded him of Philip Larkin’s poem, “Aubade”, in which the gloomy sage of Hull writes about waking up at four in the morning, with too much wine in him, thinking about where and when he will die. “The anaesthetic from which none come round,” he wrote. He also says in the poem that most things may never happen, and the greatest threat of my lifetime, our lifetimes, that of the Cold War mutating into World War Three, was avoided. But the point of the cartography of threats above is that some of these events *might* happen, and in particularly malign and simultaneous combinations.

If you accept that, two things stand out: firstly, even with the instinct to intervene curbed, the world and its woes will not ignore these shores, nor is domestic security guaranteed; secondly, finding ways to avert such threats, and/or the resilience to withstand them if they happen, is a costly business, requiring a serious slice of Gross Domestic Product, even if we find ways of keeping the defence spending proportion below 2%, which is too low given current commitments and aspirations.

If I was a William Le Queux style thriller writer, I would have a crack at all this in novel form. I am not, so I won’t – this, at least, you have been spared!

Thank you very much.

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