

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 43
Number 2 *Current Issue: Volume 43, Number 2*
(2013) *Parameters Summer 2013*

Article 6

Summer 6-1-2013

Brithish National Strategy: Who Does It?

Hew Strachan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters>



Part of the [Defense and Security Studies Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), [Military, War, and Peace Commons](#), and the [National Security Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hew Strachan, "Brithish National Strategy: Who Does It?," *Parameters* 43, no. 2 (2013), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.2895.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters by an authorized editor of USAWC Press.

British National Strategy: Who Does It?

Hew Strachan

© 2013 Hew Strachan

Abstract: Since 2010, four Parliamentary committees have criticized Britain's failure to promote its capacity for strategy making. Publicly, this failure is identified with the decisions of 2002-03, and especially with the invasion of Iraq. But the 1998 Strategic Defence Review was in trouble before the 9/11 attacks because it was underfunded. More culpable was Britain's failure to learn and adapt in 2006. The formation of the National Security Council by the 2010 coalition has yet to deliver.

On 10 April 2013, the United Kingdom's (UK) House of Commons Defence Committee published its tenth report of the 2012-13 session, *Securing the Future of Afghanistan*. Few of the 39 numbered paragraphs of conclusions and recommendations could be described as laudatory, and most took aim at the British government and specifically the Ministry of Defence. The overall tenor of the report was evident in its paragraph on strategic communications.

It is vital that the process [of the hand over to Afghanistan of the responsibility for its own security] is seen as transition and not as a 'withdrawal through fatigue.' We have seen little evidence that the government's communications strategy is fulfilling its objectives. The strategy should contain as a bare minimum the following: what we set out to do; what we achieved; what remains to be done including managing the continuing risk, albeit reduced, of UK casualties; and the manner of the departure of UK Armed Forces.¹

Currently, the British government has yet to reply, but it can safely be said that no one is holding their breath. A communications strategy is impossible without a security strategy, and the absence of both has been the subject of comment by parliamentary committees in addition to that on defense. In March 2011, the Foreign Affairs Committee, in its report on the UK's foreign policy approach to Afghanistan and Pakistan, stated it "had gained the impression that the focus on tactical military gains in specific provinces is in danger of obscuring the very real security and other strategic challenges which exist beyond the immediate military campaign elsewhere in Afghanistan." Tellingly, these words appeared under the overall heading "Tactical Rather Than Strategic Success?"² A year later the Joint Parliamentary Committee on National Security Strategy examined the National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA) procedure which had been used to underpin the 2010 National Security Strategy. The latter had said Afghanistan had not been included in the

Sir Hew Strachan has been Chichele Professor of the History of War and Fellow of All Souls College, University of Oxford, since 2002. He is also a Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, and was Professor of Modern History at University of Glasgow. His *The Direction of War* will be published in December 2013 by Cambridge UP and he is joint editor of *British Generals and Blair's Wars*.

1 HC 413, House of Commons Defence Committee, *Securing the Future of Afghanistan, 10th Report of Session 2012-13* (London: The Stationery Office, 2013), 65; <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmdfence/413/413.pdf>

2 HC 514, House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, *The UK's Foreign Policy Approach to Afghanistan and Pakistan*, 4th Report of Session 2010-11 (London: The Stationery Office Limited, 2 March 2011), paragraph 35 <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmfaaff/514/514.pdf>

NSRA as the risk assessment process was designed to address only future security risks, not immediate ones. The committee expressed its surprise:

We remain to be convinced of the Government's reasoning for not including Afghanistan in the NSRA. The Government has said that it is not including "immediate security issues", but terrorism, accidents, flooding and cyber attack are included, though they are all current threats. While the date of troop withdrawal may be a firm policy, we take the view that Afghanistan and the surrounding region remain an area of risk for the UK's security and this ought to be reflected in the NSRA.³

The Joint Parliamentary Committee's comments about Afghanistan in particular were set against a wider worry: that the problem was not confined to Afghanistan alone. Over the last five years a consensus has developed that Britain is not very good at making strategy, and that this represents a fall from grace for a generation inclined to cite Churchill and Alanbrooke as evidence that once it was. The National Security Strategy (NSS) published in 2010 by David Cameron's government, the Joint Parliamentary Committee opined, "does not yet present a clear overarching strategy: a common understanding about the UK's interests and objectives that guides choices on investment across government departments, including domestic departments, as well as guiding operational priorities and crisis response." When the Committee challenged Oliver Letwin, the Minister of State at the Cabinet Office, on this point, he dismissed the need for strategy in this overarching sense, replying: "It is important not to see the National Security Strategy as if it were a recipe book, from which one can draw how to make eggs Benedict." The Committee accepted that a national strategy was "not a 'recipe book' which dictates our response to every event, but we would have expected to see some evidence that it had influenced decisions made since the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) of 2010, including the government's responses to the Arab Spring. We found no such evidence. As the NSS states, 'a strategy is only useful if it guides choices'; it is about thinking in the longer term, and not simply doing what is in the UK's short-term interest."⁴

The report of the Joint Parliamentary Committee referred to an even harsher set of criticisms directed at Britain's perceived lack of capacity to make strategy or to generate strategic thought. In May 2010, after the publication of the NSS and the SDSR, the House of Commons Public Administration Committee set out to ask *who does UK national strategy?* Its answer, published in October of the same year, was simple: nobody. "The overwhelming view from our witnesses," it reported, "was that the UK is not good at making National Strategy and there is little sense of national direction or purpose." The committee came "to the profoundly disturbing conclusion that an understanding of National Strategy and an appreciation of why it is important has indeed largely been lost."⁵ The government's response damned the Public Administration Committee's report with faint praise. As is often the way with such things, its justifications reeked of self-assured complacency, not least through the device of using the

3 HC 1384, HL Paper 265, Joint Parliamentary Committee on the National Security Strategy, *First Review of the National Security Strategy 2010*, 1st Report of Session 2010-12 (London: The Stationery Office Limited, 8 March 2012), paragraph 24, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt201012/jtselect/jtmatsec/265/265.pdf>

4 *Ibid*, paragraphs 39, 41, 46,

5 HC 435, 27-8, conclusion paragraphs 8 and 9

same word, *strategy*, in contexts which clearly differed to such an extent that its meaning was inconsistently applied. The Public Administration Committee responded by promising a further report on the subject. In turn, it condemned the 2010 NSS as “more “review or plan than strategy,” and it specifically highlighted Afghanistan to make its points.

At the time of the Helmand incursion in 2006 only two British soldiers had been killed in battle in Afghanistan. The total is now 349—almost all as a consequence of the Helmand decision. Yet the Government has failed to respond to evidence given to us that that decision was taken in the absence of a coherent strategy at the politico-military level and without any grand strategic sense of our national interest.⁶

Why Has Britain Failed?

If weight of assertion is proof of guilt, then Britain has convicted itself. Within less than three years, four parliamentary committees have detected a British failure to do strategy well and none of them has minced its words in saying so. The obvious question is how and why this has happened. In 1990-91, John Major's Conservative government responded to the end of the Cold War by conducting a review of defense called *Options for Change*. It did not so much represent a change in strategy, as it still needed Russia to be its putative foe, but a reduction in funding. In 1997, when the newly elected Labour government embarked on its Strategic Defence Review, it emphasized that it was strategy rather than Treasury led. Its underlying assumptions were more global than European, and it stressed its ethical basis, as befitted a member of the United Nations Security Council. Its core capabilities were air-maritime and expeditionary: Britain would build two new aircraft carriers, due to be delivered in 2012, and it would aim to project force at a distance, in wars in which British troops would be “first in” and “fast out.” Servicing this resuscitation of what Basil Liddell Hart might have recognized as the “British way in warfare” was the principal defense legacy of the previous government, a new joint operational headquarters located in Northwood, an hour away from the Ministry of Defence in Whitehall. Opened in 1996, the Permanent Joint Head Quarters (PJHQ) was adapted to sustain several simultaneous operations around the world, all of them presuming an expeditionary form of warfare rather than an enduring presence.

The strategy put in place in 1998 was almost immediately undermined, but not as a consequence of the 9/11 attacks in 2001. When the latter occurred, the British government saw them as reasserting rather than threatening the logic of the Strategic Defence Review. The Ministry of Defence, reflecting a similar response to that of the United States, stressed the need to preempt threats from terrorist groups abroad before they manifested themselves as dangers at home, and so confirmed the need for an expeditionary joint capability controlled by PJHQ. In 2002, the government contented itself with producing a new chapter to the Strategic Defence Review. It allowed for preemption through better intelligence and greater flexibility, using more light forces and greater air mobility. It assumed the operational tools were already optimized to fulfill that mission.

6 HC 713, paragraphs 6, 12

What wrong-footed the strategy of 1998 was the fact that, while the review itself was not Treasury-led, its delivery was. Despite fighting two major and overlapping wars since 2002, Britain—unlike the United States over the same period—has continued to cut defence in overall terms. These trends were set long before the travails endured by the British economy since 2008–09. The assumptions of the 1998 SDR were shredded almost immediately by the subsequent Comprehensive Spending Review, and yet they have never been completely abandoned. The two aircraft carriers are still in the program, even if they are now not due for delivery until 2020. In practice, they may never be taken into British service, and could be either mothballed or sold abroad. Since 1998, the strength of the Royal Navy has declined from 32 frigates to 13, from 12 destroyers to 7, and from 10 attack submarines to 7. Many of these units are more capable today than were their equivalents in 1998 and in an equipment-dependent service the argument that the price of sophistication is worth the opportunity cost of losing mass has prevailed.

It is the Army, which is more manpower dependent than the Royal Navy or the Royal Air Force, that is most conscious that mass has a force all of its own. The British Army's key procurement decision at the time of the 1998 Strategic Defence Review, the Future Rapid Effect System, an integrated package of vehicles with interchangeable and networked capabilities, has also not been delivered, despite its becoming the focus of attention after the 2002 new chapter.⁷ One reason for the delay has been that the requirement for air portability, seen as central in 2002, is now secondary to proper protection against improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Meanwhile, the Army's regular manpower strength, which was set at 110,000 in 1998, fell to 95,000 in the 2010 SDSR, and was fixed at a target of 82,000 in 2012. In the latter year, the government maintained that the army's overall strength would remain constant because its reserves would be expanded from their current strength of 20,000 to 36,000. Even if the new target is achieved, it will still be below the established strength of the Territorial Army in 1998, when it numbered 42,000.

Initially, both the Afghan and Iraq wars conformed to the expectations inherent in the new chapter. Both appeared to confirm that British forces would be first in and fast out. The initial success in Afghanistan, in which the Northern Alliance provided the mass that the coalition forces lacked, fed the hubris that underpinned what the British called "Telic 1" in Iraq. Confirming the memories of the speed and operational effectiveness of the first Gulf War, and helped by their deployment to the Shia south, the British army luxuriated in a good news story. Even when coalition forces finally acknowledged they faced an insurgency, the British were slow to digest its implications. Lulled by the army's belief that it was expert in these sorts of operations, too many took comfort in what was familiar rather than wake up to what was unfamiliar. Basra was not Belfast; its levels of violence quickly outstripped those experienced in the latter stages of the Northern Ireland campaign; intelligence flows were not comparable; and Britain was not engaged on its own sovereign territory—it was a junior partner in a subordinate theater of the war.

⁷ Richard North, *Ministry of Defeat: The British War in Iraq 2003-2009* (London: Continuum Publishing Corporation, 2009), 232-3.

The corollary was that the failure to deliver on the capability requirements of the 1998 review, in both the short- and the long-term, began to matter less. Protracted land conflict requiring an enduring presence undermined the strategy of expeditionary warfare. The armed forces, and most obviously the army, reequipped themselves under the need to meet urgent operational requirements at the expense of the Treasury, not the Ministry of Defence, but Defence has since borne the subsequent and unbudgeted running costs.

Less clear have been the intellectual consequences of the two wars, the sense of what lessons have been seen as enduring and transferable, and what as specific and transitory. Protracted land conflict has required both heavier equipment and more manpower, the latter generated either through proxies or through the creation of indigenous forces. At times, operations conducted by coalition forces, with their logistical needs and the temptation to use massed fires given their enhanced ability to acquire targets, seem to have attributes more of the First World War than of counterinsurgency doctrine. The metrics of insurgent deaths and the tactical control of terrain smack of attrition more than maneuver.

From 2006, many commentators began to call for a fresh defense review. When it finally came, four years later, they were disappointed. The coalition government, elected in May 2010, discounted not only the experiences gained after 9/11 but also the fact of an ongoing war. Instead, it used the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review to reset the 1998 SDR. Like its predecessor, the SDR was air-maritime and expeditionary in focus, and its key strategic message was the need for flexibility and agility. By 2013, the Secretary of State for Defence, Philip Hammond, was emphasizing up-stream engagement with the argument that it is better to prevent conflicts in fragile states than to join them when they have become full blown. The cynic could be forgiven for seeing echoes both of the idea of defense diplomacy, first adumbrated in 1998, and of preemption contained in the 2002 new chapter.

2006: A Critical Year

What Britain has stubbornly refused to do is to reflect on the lessons of 2006. This was the year in which British strategic incompetence became evident. Its response to setback in Iraq was not to recalibrate, but to think about withdrawal just as the United States planned a surge. Critics of the Blair government and the British official inquiries into the invasion of Iraq have overwhelmingly concentrated on the decisions taken in 2002-03. In terms of strategy there are important points to be made about the opening stages of the fighting, principally to stress that neither Blair nor George W. Bush was prepared to recognize the type of war they were entering. They and their advisors denied reality for too long. On the other hand, their policies in 2003 were clear, even if they were contentious. By 2006, however, Blair's policy was unclear. His enthusiasm for the fight dimmed. British forces on the ground were not adequately supported at home and often found themselves caught in a command crossfire. Whitehall focused on Basra, not Iraq, and then on Helmand, not Afghanistan. PJHQ continued to be their operational headquarters, and yet the war in Iraq was run from Baghdad not Northwood, and responded to Washington not London. The United States, albeit belatedly, revisited its doctrine for counterinsurgency in 2006-07, while the

British Army—after a succession of false starts—did not do so until 2009. In the same year the joint Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre, prompted by its new director, Paul Newton (significantly a major general with operational experience in Iraq), drafted a doctrine for the conduct of stabilization operations—Joint Doctrine Publication 3-40. This was a belated attempt to articulate strategy from the bottom up and to fill the vacuum at the top by providing shape from the middle.⁸

In 2006, both the British government and the British Army “fled forward,” embracing the “good” war in Afghanistan, rather than confront the conundrums of Iraq. In doing so neither paid much attention to the report submitted on 28 November 2005 by a Royal Marine, Gordon Messenger, who had been sent to Helmand by PJHQ, and Mark Etherington, a former Parachute Regiment officer who had previous experience in the Balkans and had been employed by the Foreign Office as a governor in Iraq. Earlier in the year, Etherington had published an account of his experiences which made clear that “interventions of the kind undertaken in Iraq in 2003 are brutally difficult, and impose the most ruthless of audits on the plans and individuals assembled to prosecute them.”⁹ He and Messenger stressed the need for more research on Helmand before British troops were committed to the province. They urged Britain to start in a small area before expanding, to integrate development with military action from the outset, and to shape a plan to run for ten years, not the three-year window which Whitehall had set. The Cabinet Office was dismissive of their report and the interdepartmental Post-Conflict Reconstruction Unit was stripped of the tasks of overall coordination which it had been specifically established to provide in late 2004. The Secretary of State for Defence, John Reid, sought reassurance from the Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir Mike Walker, that the Army could handle both Iraq and Afghanistan simultaneously, and was given it on 19 September 2005 in words which suggest that one qualification for the making of strategy should be clear prose.

Our ability to fulfill our plan in Afghanistan is not predicated on withdrawal of such capabilities from Iraq and, notwithstanding those qualifications, in the event that our conditions-based plan for progressive disengagement . . . from southern Iraq is delayed, we shall still be able to deliver our . . . mandated force levels in Afghanistan.¹⁰

The accusation that the British government, the British Ministry of Defence, and the British Army were not learning by 2005-06, and that collectively they failed to adapt strategically between then and 2009, is in some respects much more serious than the accusation that it took the wrong decisions in 2002-03. To be sure, the latter was the precondition for the former; the point was that even three, and possibly as many as five years on, nobody had made good either the institutional or intellectual deficit in strategy-making that by then had become abundantly evident. The Chief of the Defence Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup, pointed out the problem in a lecture delivered at the

⁸ On all these themes, see Jonathan Bailey, Richard Iron and Hew Strachan (eds), *British Generals and Blair's Wars* (Aldershot, 2013).

⁹ Mark Etherington, *Revolt on the Tigris: The al-Sadr Uprising and the Governing of Iraq* (Ithaca NY, 2005), 237.

¹⁰ Jack Fairweather, *A War of Choice: The British in Iraq 2003-9* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011), 385 (footnote 11); see also 231-4.

Royal United Service Institution in December 2009.¹¹ He created both a Strategic Advisory Panel and a Strategic Advisory Forum early the following year. Outside the Ministry of Defence, however, there were no serious efforts to join what the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) tautologically calls “military strategy” with policy until after the election in May 2010.

Partial Solutions

When Gordon Brown succeeded Tony Blair as prime minister in 2007, the Labour government had created the National Security, International Relations and Development (NSID) subcommittee of cabinet, and its responsibilities included the updating of the National Security Strategy, the first version of which was published in March 2008.¹² On one level, this was an attempt to take the wind out of the sails of the opposition’s growing criticism of the government’s making of strategy. But NSID did not meet with any regularity, its agenda seems to have borne little relationship to the National Security Strategy, and Brown did not evince much personal enthusiasm for its work. By contrast, David Cameron, on becoming leader of the Conservative Party in 2005, established expert working groups to look at areas of policy for possible inclusion in his party’s manifesto in the run-up to the 2010 election. In 2007, national and international security experts suggested Britain create a National Security Council, a recommendation implemented by Cameron when he duly came to power three years later.

Britain’s National Security Council (NSC) is not the same as the United States’ NSC, and in some respects it owes more to the Committee of Imperial Defence, which Britain established in 1902, and which is the grandfather of both organizations. As with the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) a century ago, today’s NSC derives its authority from the fact that the prime minister chairs it; as with the CID, today’s Britain has no dedicated national security minister; unlike the United States, Britain’s National Security Advisor is a civil servant, not a political appointee, and exercises little initiative in shaping the government’s national security agenda. In 1902, the service chiefs attended meetings of the CID as equals of the ministers who also attended it, not least because the CID was only an advisory committee of the cabinet and presented no constitutional challenge to its authority. Today, both the Chief of the Defence Staff and the intelligence chiefs attend meetings of the NSC, but they are not full members. There is a paradox here since technically the NSC is also a committee of the cabinet. However, in practice, its decisions in regard to security matters have not been revisited by the full cabinet. During the intervention in Libya, it functioned less as a strategic body and more as a war cabinet: it met over 60 times, and focused on the operational rather than strategic level.

The implied criticism in the last sentence is one that has stuck. The NSC has not conducted a dialogue with itself, with other parts of government, or with outside opinion, as it has sought to think about

11 Sir Jock Stirrup, Annual Chief of the Defence Staff Lecture, Royal United Services Institute, 3 December 2009, <http://www.rusi.org/events/past/ref:E4B184DB05C4E3/>

12 Memorandum from the Cabinet Office, published by Joint Parliamentary Committee on the National Security Strategy, 12 April 2010, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt200910/jtselect/jtmatsec/115/10032206.htm>

security over the long term. Neither the restructuring of the armed forces' reserves nor the reform of the Army, *Future Force 2020*, has been referred to the NSC by the Ministry of Defence, despite the clear constraints on political choices in the future which such changes could impose. Instead, the government has argued that both sets of reform have followed from decisions of the SDSR, and so has seen them as implementing government policies. Not only is that not strictly true (the SDSR was predicated on a bigger regular army and did no more than state that it would commission a review of the reserves), but it also obscures the iterative and deliberative process between politicians and the military that needs to shape the development of strategy and support its eventual decisions.

The failure to think through the relationship between policy direction and operational implementation, the institutional and intellectual heart of strategy, is highlighted by the current state of preparation for the next SDSR due in 2015. Since early 2013, work on its component parts has been in full swing in the Ministry of Defence, not least as the single services stake out their positions and as the British Army in particular plans for a world in which its core role ceases to be Afghanistan. Yet these detailed studies lack any overall strategic framework. The National Security Strategy that guides them is that of 2010, written before the Arab Spring. Predicated on a faster economic recovery, it assumed a regrowth of defense capability and asserted there would be no loss of British global influence. In 2010, the NSS followed, rather than preceded, the completion of over 50 detailed studies of defense capabilities for the SDSR which had begun under the previous government. This is the reverse of what common sense suggests: either strategy should precede more detailed study, or—more pragmatically—it should be developed in step with it. In 2013, Britain is doing neither. Instead, it is repeating exactly the same process as that implemented in 2009-10. Strategy is being made from the bottom up. The 2015 SDSR promises to continue precisely those faults which the creation of the NSC was designed to correct.

Nor has the Ministry of Defence been put in a better place to join together these separate elements. In 2010, the Cameron government seized on the criticisms of the Ministry of Defence to announce that Lord Levene, a businessman who had held government appointments, including in defense procurement, would chair a Defence Reform Group to examine the ministry and make recommendations as to its future organization. Perhaps predictably, Levene focused on the story of cost overruns, on the defense management of equipment acquisition, and on the structures appropriate for those processes. In other words, he addressed the Ministry of Defence in its capacity as a department of state, not as a strategic headquarters. When his report employed the word *strategy*, it did so in the business, not in the military, sense; and its proposals for restructuring the Defence Board prioritized the management of defense in peace, not the direction of operations in war nor the need to link the latter to strategy. Indeed, specific efforts to address the strategy deficit within the ministry were quashed at an early stage. In addressing the procurement challenge, Levene failed to address the Ministry's other major problem: troops in Iraq and Afghanistan had found themselves pulled in different directions from Whitehall, and the

latter had not necessarily been travelling in the same direction as the American commanders in Baghdad or Kabul.

The Problems of Junior Partnership

Herein, however, is an excuse for Britain's lack of strategic grip. Since at least 2001 Britain's unspoken strategy has been to service its alliance with the United States and to act as the cement between Washington and NATO. Many of the failings rehearsed above would disappear if that rationale were more openly articulated by the British government. It is not, not least for domestic political reasons. However, even if it were, Britain would not have resolved its dilemmas. Reliance on the United States for strategy leaves British strategic direction vulnerable to three factors, none of them under London's own control.

The first is that the United States does not on the whole consult its allies before it makes its decisions. The tone was set in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Within 24 hours, NATO, guided by its secretary-general, George Robertson (the former British defense minister who had delivered the 1998 SDR) unanimously invoked Article 5 of the Atlantic Charter. For most of NATO's existence, many—if not all—members had imagined they would use Article 5 to trigger US support, not to show their support for the United States. The United States ignored this manifestation of solidarity, fearful after the Kosovo campaign of a war by committee. Tony Blair discovered that even his unconditional commitment to Washington would only be acceptable on America's terms.¹³ In 2005, when the United States did turn to NATO for support in Afghanistan, its surprise that this support was not more forthcoming showed that it had forgotten its own failure to maximize the opportunity it had four years earlier. Nor have things changed much since, despite President Obama's efforts to make the behavior of America appear less unilateral and more consensual. As he sought to formulate a strategy for Afghanistan in 2009, none of America's allies seems to have entered his or his advisors' calculations.¹⁴ In 2010, the President's decision, after the *Rolling Stone* article, to ask for the resignation of General Stanley McChrystal as Commander of International Security Assistance Force (COMISAF) was treated as an American constitutional matter not as an issue for NATO, despite McChrystal holding an alliance command in Kabul.

Second, Britain colludes in its own marginalization in the United States' thinking. Too often it mistakes American flattery for strategic reality, and imagines it has more influence than it does. Americans are very polite people anxious to put others at ease. Britons are reserved and mistake warmth for sincerity. If they are reassured that they matter, they too readily believe it.

Third, and much more seriously, the United States' own strategy has frequently been far from clear. The ambiguity in Washington about its objectives in Iraq and Afghanistan has had profound effects for an ally whose own strategy has been predicated on a presumption that America knows what it wants. The debate about the lack of strategy in Britain has been played out both in similar terms and to greater effect

13 Jason Burke, *The 9/11 Wars* (London: Penguin Global, 2011), 48.

14 A search of Bob Woodward's book, *Obama's Wars*, for a reference to the United Kingdom, or any of the United States' other allies, is fruitless.

in America. This became evident in 2009 over Afghanistan, and it has been even more obvious in the wake of the Arab Spring. Britain and France accepted their roles in Libya in 2011; however, in 2013 the British press, even that on the left, has become frustrated with an administration that has led from behind on Syria. Nor does Britain know how to read the President's strategic directive of January 2012, with its pivot to the Asia-Pacific.

Britain's problems in these respects are for Britain, not the United States, to resolve. But Washington should not be surprised if it then does so in ways which reflect British priorities, rather than American, and which mirror a geopolitical divergence, just as the emphasis on the western Pacific represents a shift for the United States. What Britain has to realize is that those who argue that only great powers do grand strategy are wrong. If strategy is about making choices, and about prioritization, then small states, and especially those with diminished or declining resources, have to be more coherent in its formulation than are unipolar or global powers. The 2010 NSS recognized that principle, even if it manifested little appetite to follow it through. The unresolved big questions of the 2010 process are precisely why Britain's lack of coherence in the making of strategy needs to be resolved by 2015.