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Submission from Campaign Against Arms Trade to the Defence Committee on Flexible response? An SDSR checklist of potential threats

1. The Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT) in the UK is working to end the international arms trade. CAAT believes that large scale military procurement and arms exports only reinforce a militaristic approach to international problems.
2. CAAT is making this short submission, concerned that your Inquiry talks about "the UK and its interests" without defining what you believe these interests are. This is a major omission as it is a prerequisite for informed consideration of threats. Currently, there seems to be no consensus on what the UK's role in the world should be. It is also obvious that different sectors have different interests, for instance those of global companies are not the same as those of most individual UK citizens.
3. The 2015 National Security Strategy (NSS) review should, however, have already done much of the thinking that seems to form the basis of your Inquiry. The NSS should be investigating and assessing all threats to the security of the UK population; including those that are environmental or economic. The Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) should not be seen in isolation; it needs to be informed by the NSS. In these circumstances, it is surprising that your Committee has announced this Inquiry, rather than waiting for the publication of the NSS and considering it fully.
4. It is to be hoped that, as well as looking at threats, the NSS will examine the causes of them. This is vital. To give just one example, many members of the UK public, as well as parts of the media and some politicians, see the current mass migration as a major threat. However, the people crossing into Europe from Syria, Eritrea and elsewhere are, in most cases, fleeing conflict or repressive rule. Their decisions to leave their homelands have not been made lightly - they feel they have no choice if they are to survive.
5. In these circumstances, mass migration is a symptom, it is not a cause. Looked at in this way, fences and security personnel are not the answer; instead the UK government should commit itself to doing all it can to prevent and stop conflict and push for high international standards on human rights.
6. This would require major change since conflict and prevalence of repressive regimes are exacerbated by current UK policy. Military intervention in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya has destabilised a whole region. Arms sales give support to corrupt and human rights abusing regimes such as that in Saudi Arabia. The latter's bombing of Yemen and backing for armed groups in Syria and elsewhere, leads to further instability. The corrupt nature of the Saudi government, as well as arms sales to it, was cited by Osama bin Laden in 1996 as one of the reasons for his adoption of Jihad, while fifteen of the nineteen 9/11 conspirators were from Saudi Arabia.
7. Despite this, none of the lessons which should be informing future conduct are being learnt. Far from promoting human rights, the Permanent Under-Secretary, Foreign and Commonwealth Office told the Foreign Affairs Committee on 15th September 2015 that they were now of lower priority than the "prosperity agenda". The next day Defence Secretary Michael Fallon MP told delegates at the DSEI arms fair in London that his Department would be stepping up its role in arms export promotion.

8. The SDSR ought to take its cue from the NSS. A new checklist is not needed or appropriate at this stage. However, if the NSS latter does not address the causes of the threats as well as the threats themselves, then your Committee should comment on the omission. Your Committee could also usefully ask the UK government why its recent policy announcements seem designed to exacerbate the threats rather than tackle their causes.

October 2015