

U-turn if you want to: Why Cameron isn't bound to pre-election promises on defence

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David Cameron could yet use the next SDSR to roll back his pre-election commitments regarding defence spending, argues [James Strong](#). While flip-flopping can cause political embarrassment, some promises are more easily broken than others, specifically when the public may not particularly care about individual commitments.



One of the problems facing the upcoming Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) is how much of it has been decided in advance. [Andrew Dorman](#) at King's College London highlights a whole range of major promises already made by the government even before the planning process has begun. Britain will bring both new Queen Elizabeth-class aircraft carriers into service, reversing the 2010 SDSR judgement that one should be mothballed or sold. The regular army will remain at least 82,000 soldiers strong. The military equipment budget will rise by 1 per cent each year in real terms. No further regiments will merge. And the Red Arrows display team has new aircraft to look forward to.

These commitments prejudice a proper review process, as Dorman rightly notes. But it would be premature to conclude that David Cameron cannot renege on any of them. Leaders who make commitments and do not stick to them do usually suffer political punishment, so-called 'domestic audience costs' in the technical parlance. But whether and to what extent the public punishes u-turns depends on the nature of the issues at stake.

Specifically, it depends on whether the public particularly cares about individual commitments, and on whether it thought they were a good idea in the first place. President Obama, for example, suffered no domestic punishment for reneging on his 'red line' over the use of WMD in Syria because much of the US political elite and the broader public thought the red line ill-advised and intervention a terrible prospect.

The 2010 SDSR cut the size of the regular army, tried to cancel and then proposed to mothball one of the new aircraft carriers, and retired the Harrier jump-jet, in turn making Britain's previous generation of carriers obsolete. It did this without provoking significant public disquiet. In part this was because the public had other problems in 2010. In part it was because the government had a mandate to impose fiscal austerity, and the alternative to cutting soldiers was cutting teachers or doctors, both things the public cares about more if forced to choose. In part it was because ministers made logical arguments about what sort of force reductions to impose. It made sense to retire the Harriers. They were old. They were useless in Afghanistan. And cutting an entire class of plane was the only way to save any money.

David Cameron could yet use the next SDSR not just to implement but to roll back his pre-election commitments. He should identify and recognise the hierarchy between them in the public mind, and be prepared to sacrifice those the public either doesn't care about at all (equipment budget), thinks unnecessary (aircraft carriers) or thinks less significant than other things (manpower numbers). He should then use the SDSR process itself to justify making u-turns. It is quite embarrassing politically to admit to being wrong, or even to changing one's mind. But it is a different matter entirely to point to a logical, detailed strategic review as a reason for thinking anew. That would not look like flip-flopping. It would look like common sense.

So while Cameron's commitments probably will influence strategic thinking around the SDSR, they need not determine its outcomes. Some promises are easier broken than others. And some can be reversed without embarrassment, if changing course flows logically from an authoritative review.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the

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