

Beyond Contractors: Defence Primes as Part of the Integrated Force Concept

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Introduction

Napoleon Bonaparte famously asserted that "an army marches on its stomach," a principle that has gained renewed urgency following the Strategic Defence Review 2025. The SDR's stark assessment that "the threat we now face is more serious and less predictable than at any time since the Cold War" fundamentally transforms how the Royal Logistic Corps (RLC) must engage with defence prime contractors across Maritime, Land, Air, Space and Cyberspace operations.

The Review's vision of moving to "warfighting readiness to deter threats and strengthen security in the Euro-Atlantic" creates unprecedented demands on military logistics. Central to this transformation is the Corps' relationship with defence prime contractors—those major industrial entities that must now deliver the platforms, systems, and services essential for prolonged, high-intensity conflict rather than the expeditionary operations that have dominated recent decades.

This article examines how the SDR's "Integrated Force" concept, NATO First policy, and commitment to "innovation and procurement measured in months, not years" reshapes the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities presented by defence primes. While the RLC's mission endures—"sustaining Army and wider Defence activity, at home and overseas, as a core component of a global, integrated logistic enterprise" (RHQ RLC, 2020, p.2)—the SDR's assessment that "Business as usual is no longer an option" demands fundamental changes in how the Corps engages with industry to deliver the logistics capabilities required for what the Review calls "the most demanding of circumstances: deterring and preventing a full-scale war by being ready to fight and win."

The Integrated Force Imperative and Industrial Requirements

The Strategic Defence Review moves beyond traditional "multi-domain operations" to introduce the "Integrated Force" concept—"a combination of conventional and digital war fighters; the power of drones, AI and autonomy complementing the 'heavy metal' of tanks and artillery." This represents a fundamental shift from coordinating between domains to truly unified operations where "the breaking down of barriers between individual Services, between the military and the private sector, and between the Armed Forces and wider society" becomes essential.

For defence prime contractors, this creates entirely new requirements. The SDR's vision of an army that is "10x more lethal" through a "drone-centric 20-40-40 strategy where uncrewed systems are deployed for first wave attacks, before tanks, attack helicopters and other crewed platforms arrive" demands integrated logistics systems that can support autonomous platforms alongside traditional heavy equipment simultaneously. Major defence companies must now deliver solutions that integrate seamlessly across the physical-digital divide while maintaining resilience against peer adversaries specifically targeting logistics networks.

The Review's emphasis on the Digital Targeting Web—delivered by 2027—places logistics data at the heart of targeting decisions, requiring defence primes to design systems that contribute to "speeding up decision times for tracking and prosecuting targets" rather than merely moving supplies efficiently.



Credit: UK Ministry of Defence – RLC Officers Handbook CRLO001

NATO First and Warfighting Readiness Implications

The SDR's "NATO First" approach creates specific new requirements for RLC-industry partnerships. Unlike previous alliance cooperation, the Review commits to "leading in NATO" with interoperability standards that must work seamlessly across 32 nations' systems. This transcends the bilateral or small coalition focus of recent operations to demand industrial solutions that integrate with significantly more complex alliance architectures.

The establishment of CyberEM Command by end-2025 and £1 billion investment in homeland missile and cyber defences creates new operational domains where logistics must function. Defence primes must now design systems capable of operating in contested cyber environments while maintaining integration with NATO allies' defensive systems.

Most fundamentally, the shift to warfighting readiness means defence primes must prepare for what the SDR calls "high-intensity, protracted, and costly" conflicts requiring sustained industrial production rather than the surge-and-withdraw patterns of recent expeditionary operations.

Strengths of Defence Primes Enhanced by SDR Priorities

Innovation-Led Capabilities Alignment

The SDR's emphasis on "innovation at wartime pace" powerfully aligns with defence prime capabilities. The Review's commitment to £6 billion munitions investment this Parliament, including "at least six new energetics and munitions factories," plays directly to defence prime strengths in rapid industrial scale-up. Unlike previous innovation cycles measured in years, the SDR's demand for capabilities delivered in months validates the agile development approaches that leading defence primes have pioneered.

BAE Systems' Autonomous Logistics Information System (ALIS), demonstrated during Exercise AUTONOMOUS WARRIOR 2023, exemplifies how defence prime innovation now aligns with SDR requirements. The system's integration of data from all five domains to predict supply chain disruptions directly supports the Digital Targeting Web concept. Major Sarah Thompson reported that "ALIS enabled us to predict supply chain disruptions before they occurred and automatically generate alternative distribution plans," precisely the kind of autonomous logistics capability the SDR envisions for contested environments.

The creation of the Defence Innovation fund with £400 million for UK businesses provides structured pathways for the rapid capability development that defence primes excel at, replacing ad-hoc collaboration with systematic innovation partnerships.



Credit: UK Ministry of Defence 2020 - Autonomous warriors: British Army seeks to integrate unmanned platforms

Industrial Base Transformation Capabilities

The SDR's vision of defence as "an engine for growth" validates defence primes' global reach and manufacturing capabilities. The Review's commitment to building "always on" munitions production capacity requiring rapid scale-up directly leverages defence prime expertise in surge manufacturing and international supply chain management.

Operation FORTIS demonstrated this strength but highlighted gaps against SDR standards. While Babcock International Group's global networks enabled sustained operations across the Indo-Pacific, the operation's logistics networks lacked the resilience and autonomous capability the SDR now demands for peer conflict scenarios. The partnership model succeeded in peaceful conditions but would require fundamental enhancement to support the "prolonged campaigns" the Review anticipates.

The SDR's emphasis on UK-based production creates opportunities for defence primes to demonstrate domestic manufacturing capabilities while maintaining the global networks essential for alliance operations. Rolls-Royce's TotalCare® predictive maintenance capabilities, adapted from civil aviation, provide exactly the kind of technology transfer the SDR seeks to leverage commercial innovation for military advantage.

Weaknesses Amplified by SDR Requirements

Integration Challenges in Warfighting Environment

The SDR's Integrated Force concept significantly amplifies domain-specific weaknesses. The Review's requirement for seamless integration between conventional and digital war fighters means that the incompatible data standards and communications protocols that created friction during Exercise JOINT WARRIOR 2023 now represent fundamental failures to meet warfighting readiness standards.

Lieutenant Colonel Robert Jackson's observation that "different prime contractors used incompatible data standards, communications protocols, and operating procedures" becomes critically problematic when the SDR demands integration with the Digital Targeting Web. Manual data transfer between systems, previously merely inefficient, now directly undermines the "machine-speed decision-making" the Review identifies as essential for peer conflict survival.

The challenge intensifies when considering NATO First requirements. Integration failures between UK defence prime systems pale in comparison to achieving seamless interoperability across 32 NATO nations' logistics networks while maintaining the cyber resilience the new CyberEM Command demands.

Commercial Timelines Versus Warfighting Urgency

The SDR's emphasis on threats requiring immediate response exposes fundamental contradictions in traditional commercial development cycles. The Review's assessment that adversaries are demonstrating "the capability and the will to use sophisticated anti-satellite weapons in all orbital regimes" creates urgency that commercial timelines cannot address. Traditional defence acquisition cycles "which can span years or even decades" are explicitly incompatible with the SDR's demand for "innovation and procurement measured in months, not years."

This tension manifested during the Autonomous Resupply System development for Operation SHADER, where Brigadier Timothy Wilson noted that "proprietary technologies from different prime contractors could not be fully integrated because of commercial restrictions." Such limitations become existential vulnerabilities when the SDR demands systems capable of operating autonomously during communications disruption or cyber-attack.

The SDR's procurement reform promises—including plans for more agile processes—remain to be tested against the commercial realities of intellectual property protection and competitive advantage that drive defence prime behaviour.

New Opportunities: SDR-Driven Transformation

Procurement Innovation at Wartime Pace

The SDR's promise of "radical procurement reforms" creates unprecedented opportunities for enhanced RLC-defence prime relationships. The Review's emphasis on moving from "years to months" for capability delivery enables the kind of responsive development previously impossible under traditional acquisition frameworks.

The planned Defence Investment Plan, replacing the troubled Equipment Plan, offers opportunities for integrated development programmes where logistics requirements shape platform design from inception rather than being retrofitted afterwards. The SDR's multi-billion-pound munitions investment provides guaranteed funding streams that enable defence primes to invest in the rapid prototyping and agile development the Review demands.

The establishment of regional innovation clusters creates geographical centres of excellence where RLC units can work directly with defence primes on capability development. The marine autonomy cluster in Plymouth offers a model for how proximity between military logistics specialists and industrial innovation can accelerate the "wartime pace" development the SDR requires.

Industrial Base Integration for Warfighting Endurance

The SDR's "always on" munitions production concept creates opportunities for entirely new partnership models between the RLC and defence primes. Rather than surge production for specific operations, the Review demands continuous industrial readiness for sustained high-intensity conflict. This requires defence primes to maintain production capabilities that can scale rapidly while the RLC ensures integration with operational logistics networks.

The £1.5 billion investment in new munitions factories creates opportunities for co-located RLC and industry teams, enabling the embedded collaboration that Exercise AUTONOMOUS WARRIOR 2023 demonstrated accelerates innovation. The SDR's vision of manufacturing "up to 7000 new long-range weapons" requires logistics networks designed from inception to support autonomous and semi-autonomous distribution systems.

This industrial integration extends to the Digital Targeting Web, where defence prime systems must contribute logistics data directly to targeting decisions. Unlike previous systems designed for logistics efficiency, SDR requirements demand platforms that enhance lethality through information integration.

NATO Alliance Industrial Cooperation

The SDR's NATO First approach creates opportunities for RLC-defence prime partnerships that extend beyond bilateral UK arrangements to encompass alliance-wide industrial cooperation. The Review's commitment to "leading in NATO" means UK defence primes can leverage RLC operational expertise to develop solutions for alliance-wide adoption.

The Multi-Domain Integration Technology Demonstrator, led by Leonardo in partnership with the RLC and Strategic Command, exemplifies how SDR priorities enable collaborative development of integration standards that transcend individual corporate boundaries. This approach addresses previous integration challenges while creating exportable capabilities that support the SDR's vision of defence as an economic growth engine.

The establishment of forward logistics hubs in Eastern Europe, implied by the SDR's enhanced NATO commitments, creates opportunities for defence primes to demonstrate global reach capabilities while supporting the alliance burden-sharing the Review emphasizes.

Case Study: Operation FORTIS Through the SDR Lens

Operation FORTIS provides both validation of partnership approaches and illustration of gaps against SDR warfighting readiness standards. The seven-month deployment's Support Partnership model—integrating Babcock International Group, Rolls-Royce, BAE Systems, and Leonardo with RLC personnel—offers a template for SDR implementation but requires fundamental enhancement.

Digital Integration Requirements: The carrier group's digital twin must now connect to the Digital Targeting Web and contribute to alliance targeting decisions rather than merely optimizing logistics efficiency. This requires fundamental rearchitecting of the data flows and security protocols demonstrated during the operation.

Warfighting Resilience: The cyber interference encountered during Operation FORTIS highlighted vulnerabilities that become critical in the peer conflict scenarios the SDR anticipates. The joint response by RLC cyber specialists and Thale's security experts provided immediate solutions but exposed the need for systems designed for contested environments from inception rather than protected as an afterthought.

NATO Integration: Future carrier strike group deployments must integrate with NATO Component Commands and alliance targeting systems, requiring interface standards and procedures that transcend the bilateral arrangements that supported Operation FORTIS.

The operation's success in peaceful conditions validates the partnership approach but highlights the transformation required to meet SDR warfighting readiness standards. As Commodore John Peterson observed, the Support Partnership "established a new

benchmark," but the SDR demands capabilities that exceed expeditionary operation requirements.

Implementation Framework: RLC Priorities for SDR 25 Compliance

Digital Integration Priority (2025-2027)

The SDR's Digital Targeting Web deadline of 2027 requires immediate action to integrate RLC logistics systems with targeting decisions. All defence prime platforms must interface with the targeting web from deployment rather than as future upgrades. This demands new contractual arrangements where integration compliance becomes a primary selection criterion rather than an additional requirement.

The establishment of CyberEM Command by end-2025 requires defence primes to design systems capable of autonomous operation during cyber-attack or communications disruption. This moves beyond traditional resilience requirements to demand systems that enhance rather than merely maintain capability under attack.



Credit: NATO – The new NATO Integrated Cyber Defence Centre (NICC) and its Virtual Cyber Incident Support Capability (VCISC)

Industrial Base Transformation (2025-2030)

The SDR's munitions production targets require defence primes to maintain "always on" production capacity rather than surge capability for specific operations. This fundamental shift from reactive to proactive industrial readiness demands new commercial models where continuous readiness is maintained through retainer arrangements rather than production contracts.

The planned six new munitions factories create opportunities for co-location of RLC and industry teams, enabling the embedded collaboration that accelerates innovation while ensuring military requirements shape industrial processes from inception.

Alliance Integration Achievement (2027-2035)

The SDR's NATO First approach requires achieving seamless interoperability with alliance logistics networks rather than merely compatible systems. This demands common standards development where UK defence primes lead alliance capability development rather than adapting to alliance requirements.

Managing SDR Transformation Risks

Pace Versus Integration Challenges

The SDR's demand for "wartime pace" innovation creates tension with the integration requirements essential for Integrated Force operations. Defence primes must deliver capabilities rapidly while ensuring seamless integration with existing systems and alliance networks. This requires new development approaches that prioritize integration from inception rather than retrofitting compatibility.

Commercial Viability of Warfighting Requirements

The SDR's emphasis on contested logistics and prolonged conflict scenarios may not align with commercial market opportunities that typically drive defence prime investment. The Review's financial commitments provide some mitigation, but the specialized requirements for peer conflict capabilities may require new commercial models that share development risks between government and industry.

Alliance Coordination Complexity

The NATO First approach creates coordination challenges that extend beyond bilateral UK-industry relationships to encompass alliance-wide industrial cooperation. Success requires managing the commercial competition between national champions while achieving the interoperability essential for alliance operations.



Credit: NATO Review - Securing Britain's and NATO's digital supply chains

Conclusion: Transformation Imperative for Logistics-Industry Relations

The Strategic Defence Review 2025 creates both unprecedented opportunities and existential challenges for RLC-defence prime relationships. The Review's vision of warfighting readiness cannot be delivered through traditional customer-supplier arrangements but requires the deep partnerships demonstrated in Operation FORTIS, scaled to support sustained high-intensity conflict and integrated with alliance operations from inception.

For defence primes, the SDR represents fundamental transformation requirements rather than evolutionary adaptation. The Review's assessment that "Business as usual is no longer an option" applies directly to industrial relationships that must now support warfighting endurance rather than expeditionary efficiency. Those companies that successfully adapt to the innovation pace, integration requirements, and NATO First priorities will become integral partners in the Integrated Force. Those that cannot, will find themselves marginalized as the RLC seeks alternatives through the new procurement pathways and industrial partnerships the Review enables.

The evidence from recent operations and the SDR's specific commitments demonstrates that enhanced partnerships can significantly improve RLC capabilities when properly structured around warfighting requirements rather than peacetime efficiency. The key challenge lies in implementing the fundamental changes the SDR demands while maintaining current operational capabilities, creating what may be the most challenging transformation programme in the Corps' history.

Success requires embracing the SDR's vision of "breaking down of barriers between individual Services, between the military and the private sector, and between the Armed Forces and wider society" while ensuring that transformation enhances rather than undermines the operational excellence that defines the Corps. The relationship with defence primes becomes not merely a commercial arrangement but a critical element of the national defence capability the SDR seeks to build.

Most critically, the transformation must be implemented on the SDR's timeline—Digital Targeting Web by 2027, CyberEM Command by end-2025, and "always on" munitions production throughout the period. This compressed timeline means that adaptation cannot be evolutionary but must embrace the revolutionary change the Review demands.

As Lieutenant General Poffley noted in the Corps Strategy, "The RLC has a huge amount to offer the Nation, not just because of our size, but the diversity, skills and quality of our people" (RHQ RLC, 2020, p.3). By leveraging this expertise in partnership with defence primes committed to the SDR's transformation agenda, the Corps can ensure it remains master of its logistics realm in the warfighting environment the Review anticipates. The evidence suggests that with the frameworks and funding the SDR provides, the RLC and defence primes have the tools necessary for this transformation. The question is whether both sides have the vision and commitment to implement the fundamental changes that the new strategic reality demands.

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