By Dr Jeffrey Bradford

Today saw the release of The Ministry of Defence (MoD) Defence Plan including the Government's expenditure plan for 2008-2012 (Cm 7385). The document reflects the outcome of the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review where all Government departments make their bid for resources based on needs and performance. A senior group of Ministers arbitrate over these competing demands to determine ultimately who gets what. For the Ministry of Defence, there are a number of interesting nuances in the Defence Plan which illustrate the evolving defence priorities of the Brown adminstration:

Defence Policy (Pages 18-19)
* The Defence Plan suggests a much greater focus on Africa, no reference to America's Global War on Terror (GWOT) and in terms of current commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan "Support work to deliver a downtrend in the number of conflicts globally"

Future Capabilities (Page 23)
* FRES (Future Rapid Effects System) seems to have been renamed (Joint Medium Weight Capability) or else abandoned from the list. A long term threat to the programme?
* Carrier Strike (CVF) remains the only large new platform system on the list which is just entering the manufacturing phase.
* The successor nuclear deterrent is the only significant (in expenditure terms) programme on the list reflecting budgetary pressures.

Defence Industrial Strategy (Page 25)
* The two paragraph discussion draws a line under the valiant efforts of former Minister for Defence Equipment and Support, Lord Drayson and the Ministry is now moving onto a more 'tactical' programe for dealing with its suppliers under the acronym PACE - a take on one of Cabinet Secretary's descriptors for Civil Service ethos.

Spending plans - the numbers (Page 49)
* The blanks in the planned budget for peace keeping and operations reflect a combination of information classification plus no quantum on the likely costs, however 2008-09 is likely to be 50% higher (£2.2bn versus £1.5bn in 2006-07). Extrapolating these numbers, without changes in commitments, suggests that the costs of operations by 2010-2011 would be in the order of £4.8bn which would be unsustainable.

* The budget for Defence Equipment & Support (DE&S) is anticipated to rise through the period with little cuts in the other Top Level Budgets (TLBs) suggesting that either more money is available at a time fo economimc hardship, or it is a political sop, being the only spending category which can be rapidly changed to meet the prevailing political winds