

The House of Commons recently compiled two substantial policy analyses of British defence policy since 1997 and background issues. They can be found at

<http://www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/rp2008/rp08-057.pdf>

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As Defence Viewpoints is seeking to give the main political parties in the UK a platform to explain their policies for their hoped-for next spell in government, these documents are a fundamental foundation for their jumping off points.

The summary of the first of these Commons papers argues that since the Labour Government came to power in 1997 the UK has seen profound and far reaching changes in the realm of defence policy and in the character of modern warfare more generally. Those changes have been largely defined by the shifting nature of the strategic environment since the end of the Cold War and in particular the events of 11 September 2001.

Yet, the shape of UK defence policy during this period has not been influenced by these events alone. The inclination of Prime Minister Tony Blair toward a more multilateral and interventionist foreign policy has had a fundamental impact on both the direction of defence policy and on the role and nature of the British Armed Forces. At the centre of that approach was a commitment to strengthening the "special relationship" between the UK and the US which Blair saw as the key to enhancing the UK's role on the world stage. However, he also believed that Britain could shape the exercise of American power and act as a bridge between the US and Europe.

To that end, he actively encouraged the development of a European military capability, albeit as a means to strengthening the European pillar of the NATO alliance. In part because of British encouragement, ESDP has subsequently gained significant momentum over the last decade. In line with the Prime Minister's general approach, the Labour government came to power with a manifesto commitment to conduct a comprehensive review of defence policy.

That process culminated in the publication of the Strategic Defence Review in 1998. In keeping with the broad theme of the UK's foreign policy priorities that review identified the need to establish rapidly deployable expeditionary forces capable of conducting multiple, concurrent operations. It also made the reform of procurement policy a major objective.

Subsequent white papers were, in large part augmentations to, and refinements of, the SDR's conclusions, although they did introduce new or updated policies in specific areas, mainly as a result of 9/11. Both the Strategic Defence Review New Chapter in 2002 and the Defence White Paper of 2003 continued to support the idea of an expeditionary strategy but also for the first time articulated the concept of 'Effects Based Operations', whereby forces would be structured and deployed in order to deliver certain strategic effects.

Network centric capabilities were identified as central to achieving those aims. The 2003 White Paper also made widespread recommendations regarding changes to the defence planning assumptions and the restructuring of the Armed Forces in terms of both personnel and assets. Concerns were expressed at the time over the ability of the MOD to afford such an ambitious programme of technological change.

Despite the level of operational commitments envisaged in the SDR and subsequent papers, the military operations undertaken during Blair's tenure resulted in the Armed Forces being deployed on contingent operations overseas more times under one Prime Minister than at any point since the end of the Second World War, reflecting Blair's interventionist approach to foreign policy and his belief in the utility of force when required.

However, combined with persistent problems in recruitment and retention and manning during this period, this high tempo of operations led to a consistent breach of harmony guidelines for Service personnel and a breach of the defence planning assumptions in every year since 2002. In light of such commitments, doubts have been expressed over the extent of the UK's reserve capacity should other contingencies arise.

In the last year of the Blair Government the nature of the terms and conditions of Service personnel also rose in the political and public consciousness and prompted allegations that the Government was breaching its duty of care to Service personnel and undermining the Military Covenant between the Armed Forces and society more generally.

At issue has been the standard of equipment issued to operationally deployed personnel, the medical care of Service personnel, the standard of Service accommodation, the level of pay and allowances and the welfare support provided to Service families. This increase in public awareness has, in part, been the result of the willingness by both ex-Service and current Service Chiefs to speak out on these issues.

Defence spending as a proportion of GDP remained fairly stable between 1997-2007, averaging 2.5% of GDP, but having declined markedly from some 5% of GDP in the mid-1980s. Over the same period, there was an average annual 2.1% real terms increase in the defence budget. However, it has been argued that the UK's military aspirations and commitments under the Labour government have not been matched by sufficient funding, leaving a hole in the defence budget and resulting in significant cutbacks and shortfalls incapability.

Gordon Brown came to office in June 2007 with significant legacy issues which have dominated his first year in government. The deployment of the Armed Forces has remained high with ongoing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan dominating the agenda. The biggest questions for Gordon Brown now are whether the Armed Forces can sustain this operational tempo in the future without causing severe damage to the effectiveness, capabilities and morale of the military, and whether the Government's future foreign policy ambitions can or will be met with adequate military capability. The overriding conclusion thus far among analysts, politicians, the media and even the Ministry of Defence, has been that it cannot.

Public awareness of the terms and conditions of Service personnel has also taken on a whole new dimension, in part because of the Royal British Legion's 'Honour the Covenant' campaign which became the theme of the 2007 poppy appeal. Those concerns have been reflected during the last year in the importance that the Brown Government has attached to welfare issues.

The MOD announced in November 2007 that it would publish a Service personnel command paper in 2008 which would make recommendations for enhancing the future level of welfare support offered to service personnel, their families and veterans.

Efforts to address the social gap between the military and the society that it serves have also been evident, most prominently with the announcement in December 2007 of the intention to conduct an independent study into the national recognition of the Armed Forces (since published)

In the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) Chancellor Alistair Darling also announced that the defence budget would rise to £36.9bn by 2010-11, representing 1.5% average annual real growth over the three year CSR period. While the increase has been welcomed, it has been widely considered insufficient to meet the future funding requirements of the Department.

Criticisms of the Government's approach to defence spending reached new heights during a debate in the House of Lords in November 2007, which many analysts regarded as an unprecedented attack on the Government's defence policies. As a result of these significant cost pressures and budget restrictions, further delays and cuts in the MOD forward equipment programme are considered inevitable.

Despite expectations that a new defence white paper would emerge in the first six months of Brown taking office, that re-evaluation of defence policy has not materialised. Therefore it is difficult to have a meaningful discussion as to whether the overall direction of the UK's defence policies is likely to shift under a Brown government in the longer term.

The question of whether the conduct of defence policy under Gordon Brown will be naturally prudent or whether it will be artificially constrained by this situation and the prevailing trend in public perception of the Armed Forces is a vital one. Going forward, these converging dynamics could potentially, and unusually, make defence policy, and the Government's attitude towards the Armed Forces, an issue in any future general Election.