

**International Security Monthly Briefing – May 2010**

## **REVIEWING BRITAIN'S SECURITY**

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The new British Defence Secretary, Dr Liam Fox, has now announced the beginning of the long-awaited *Strategic Defence Review* and the indications are that the process will be completed before the end of 2010. Given Britain's role in the European Union and NATO, and its close links with the United States, the outcome of the review will be watched with interest in many countries.

The incoming Conservative-Liberal-Democrat coalition government believes that a *Strategic Defence Review* is urgently required for a number of reasons, including

- the inability of the UK Ministry of Defence to maintain current commitments and programmes on present-day funding levels;
- the high cost of existing and future programmes;
- the recent experience of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and how far the methods that have been employed, have achieved their goals; and
- serious constraints on UK public spending that are likely to persist for up to a decade.

The new government has also set up a cross-departmental National Security Council that will further develop the trend to a national security strategy established by the Labour government. While this is a welcome move, it comes in the context of recent programme decisions made ahead of the review that, if not reversed, will direct the defence posture in such a narrow manner that a wider and much-needed reappraisal of Britain's security will prove impossible. Instead, questions need to be asked about what is needed to limit conflict and create a more peaceful environment in an era of new global security challenges.

The two most significant programmes are:

- The aircraft carrier/F-35 strike aircraft programme
- Like-for-like replacement of the Trident nuclear system

These are very substantial in terms of costs, but their greater importance is in the manner in which they will dictate a particular role for the UK defence posture - what is in effect a scaled down version of the much larger US global power projection capability. **Essentially, they will determine a role for Britain in international security which is out of date and more related to the Cold War, bearing little relation to the issues of global insecurity and conflict, which will be dominant in the next two to three decades.**

### **Britain's National Security Strategy**

In the last two years of the Labour government, some interesting attempts were made to inject some new thinking into UK defence policy. The first was the *National Security Strategy* of March 2008, and more recently, there was a Defence Green Paper published earlier this year. Following the Green Paper, the Conservative Party, then in opposition, published its own national security Green Paper, *A Resilient Nation*.

While the *National Security Strategy* of 2008 was published in an environment in which the war on terror, Iraq and Afghanistan were hugely prominent, it did seek to look well beyond the immediate circumstances:

“The Cold War threat has been replaced by a diverse but interconnected set of threats and risks, which affect the United Kingdom directly and also have the potential to undermine wider international stability. They include international terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, conflicts and failed states, pandemics and transnational crime. These and other threats and risks are driven by a diverse and interconnected set of underlying factors, including climate change, competition for energy, poverty and poor governance, demographic change and globalisation.” (NSS para 1.3)

This wider approach with its recognition of the underlying trends of climate change, marginalisation and energy insecurity, also comes through to a more limited extent in the recent Green Papers, albeit with more of an emphasis on national security in the Conservative contribution. It goes some way towards the analysis of global challenges, developed in recent years by Oxford Research Group and other organisations that see the need for a radical re-thinking of the approaches of countries such as Britain to international security ([Global Security After the War on Terror](#)).

While ORG is not arguing against the maintenance of defence forces *per se*, it places much more emphasis on long-term conflict-prevention. It argues that the more substantive problems that will be faced in the coming decades, stem from a dangerous combination of severe environmental constraints, especially climate change and energy shortages, and an increasingly divided world community in which the benefits of globalised economic growth have been excessively concentrated in about one-fifth of the global population. In such circumstances there is the very strong risk of societal breakdown as well as desperate responses from within the majority of the world’s people who are marginalised and will be under increasing environmental constraints.

There is the further risk that the main emphasis for security policies will be on suppressing such actions and maintaining the *status quo*, rather than responding to the underlying drivers of insecurity. ORG has long argued that the much more appropriate response is to embark on a transition to low carbon economies to combat the fundamental problem of climate change, while developing a socio-economic system that acts to reverse the dangerous trend towards the marginalisation of the majority of the world’s people. It also argues the need to shift resources to the development of conflict resolution techniques to deal with radical disagreement.

What is significant about some of the thinking in the *National Security Strategy* and the two Green Papers is that the analysis of future dangers, implicit in an environmentally constrained and economically divided world, is present and the risks are acknowledged. What is not done, however, is to follow this through in terms of what it means for an integrated strategy, involving major aspects of economic and environmental policy. **Moreover, the timing of two major military projects that are in the early yet crucial stages of their development means that unless decisions are reversed, the possibility of entering into a genuinely far-sighted strategic security review is greatly diminished, if not rendered impossible.**

The first project is the planned replacement of the Trident nuclear force with a broadly similar system and the second is the building of two very large new aircraft carriers deployed with a maritime variant of the US-produced F-35 strike aircraft. The carriers will be the largest warships ever to see service with the Royal Navy and will give the UK a global strike capability that it has not had for close to forty years, harking back almost to the days of Empire.

The sheer scale of the two projects – the planned nuclear force replacement and the carrier procurement – will inevitably determine the UK defence posture. In essence, the UK’s ability to intervene in conflicts in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere will be much increased, and it will have a nuclear strike capability that could, in extreme circumstances, be available in support of operations in overseas theatres.

However, the cost of constructing and deploying such systems will be so high, especially at a time of financial stringency, that there will be relatively little left for other programmes. **What is more, the whole tenor of the defence posture will be one of maintaining control in a fragile and uncertain world, rather than addressing the underlying trends likely to result in that fragility and uncertainty - a matter of keeping the lid on problems or "liddism" as it has been termed.**

### Trident

Britain's current nuclear force comprises four *Vanguard*-class ballistic missile submarines, each capable of deploying with 16 missiles. While these are usually fitted with three independently-targetable warheads of about 100 kilotons of explosive power (8x the Hiroshima bomb), some are deployed with a much smaller single warhead for what has variably been called tactical or sub-strategic use. Neither term is now used, not least as they give the impression of a willingness to use nuclear weapons in less than extreme circumstances of national survival. – UK governments prefer to avoid acknowledging this aspect of the UK nuclear posture. Britain maintains its nuclear force with at least one missile submarine at sea at any one time – what is termed "continuous at-sea deterrence" or CASD.

The Trident system is due for renewal by the 2020s and current plans involve a broadly like-for-like replacement. Given that the Aldermaston/Burghfield nuclear weapons development and production complex in Berkshire costs around £1 billion a year, and given the cost of the new submarines and the high cost of deploying them with numerous support facilities, the likely life-time cost of replacing Trident will approach £100 billion, much of it front-loaded to the next 10-15 years. The intention of the previous Labour government was to exclude the Trident replacement programme from a post-election *Strategic Defence Review*. That was also the intention of the Conservatives when in opposition and is likely to remain the case, in spite of some Liberal-Democrat concerns over the Trident replacement issue.

Given the commitment of significant world political figures, including President Obama, to the idea of moving towards a nuclear-free world, there are major steps that the British government could take to further progress in that direction. They include:

- **Cutting the UK nuclear stockpile from the present size, estimated at 160 warheads, to under one hundred;**
- **Ending continuous at-sea deterrence and mothballing one of the four submarines; and**
- **Ruling out the hugely expensive like-for-like replacement of Trident and including the options of going for a much more limited nuclear system, or even considering phasing out nuclear weapons altogether.**

Such moves do not in themselves involve the UK giving up its nuclear forces in the short term but they would signal a strong commitment to substantially lower nuclear forces while also leaving open the possibility of going further, should the international and domestic political environments allow. They would also make it easier to have a comprehensive security review which would not be possible if the nuclear question is excluded.

### The Aircraft Carriers

The second major issue is the carrier programme. The two new carriers, the 65,000-tonne *Queen Elizabeth*-class ships, each nearly three times the size of the current *Invincible*-class ships, are large vessels capable of a range of uses, but the reality is that they are intended as force-projection warships equipped with an extremely expensive new strike aircraft. The combined total order for the carriers and the RAF is expected to be 130 planes at a cost per plane of £94 million, although this cost continues to

rise. Along with escorts and support ships, maintaining and deploying the carriers will dominate naval capabilities for the lifetime of the ships.

The Lockheed F-35, in particular, is already a greatly troubled project with substantial cost overruns and long delays. In some ways, the problems facing this project are reminiscent of the Eurofighter project, a Cold War-era plane that should have been cancelled in the early 1990s but had built up too much momentum for politicians to take such a decision. Famously described in 1997 by a former defence minister, Alan Clark, as “essentially flawed and out of date”, he commented on its role in job creation thus: “we must find a less extravagant way of paying people to make buckets with holes in them”. Eurofighter survived - as the Typhoon - in smaller numbers than planned, and was eventually adapted at great cost, to fulfil some new roles. It was, though, very much an example of a project overtaken by events. The US F-35 programme is also essentially a project of the 1990s.

The planned British purchase of F35 strike aircraft in combination with the carrier programme will be more of an imperial throwback than a real contribution to Britain’s security.

**The entire UK carrier/F-35 programme should be cancelled. Replacements might include two much smaller sea control ships utilising the rapidly developing UCAV (drone) technologies, with a much scaled-down purchase of one of the F-35 alternatives currently available.**

**The real problem here is that a serious review of Britain’s security cannot be done if the future defence posture is already dictated by Trident replacement and the carrier/F-35 programme. The right option therefore is to scale down the existing Trident force, review its replacement and cancel the carrier/F-35 programme before much more money is wasted.**

#### **The Issue of Procurement**

Perhaps the most serious financial issue facing the Ministry of Defence is the persistent failure to control the cost of individual programmes. Among current programmes that have hugely overrun their original estimates, the most extreme is the replacement of the Nimrod MR2 maritime patrol and surveillance aircraft with the Nimrod MRA4. This was due to be deployed in 2003, was subject to innumerable delays and cost increases and will not now enter service until 2012. Only 9 aircraft will be procured instead of the original 21, largely because of the huge cost increases currently estimated at around £400 million per aircraft.

Because of many problems with the current MR2, including concerns over airworthiness, these planes were withdrawn from service two months ago, leaving the RAF to try to fill the gap with a mix of other aircraft and helicopters, none of them remotely comparable in the maritime role to the MR2. The MR2/MRA4 saga is one of many examples of delayed programmes and cost overruns that have plagued defence procurement for many years.

Successive governments have sought to bring costs and programmes under control but with very little success, mainly because of the nature of what was described by President Eisenhower, more than fifty years ago, as the military industrial complex. For Britain, one of the key issues is that the complex is essentially self-organising but not self-regulating. Very few companies operate in the advanced defence sector, and there is little competition as well as a pervasive climate of mutual interest. Thus, senior civil servants and senior military, especially those concerned with procurement, are frequently able to acquire lucrative consultancies not long after they retire, and independent oversight of large programmes is effectively absent. Successive defence select committees have had little impact and the National Audit Office concentrates on individual programmes and is liable to be constrained by issues of secrecy and restricted terms of reference.

Any serious defence/security review has to address the procurement issue, even though it will be singularly difficult to come up with any effective measure of oversight. At the same time, there are lessons to be learnt from the evolution of the Police Complaints Authority and, perhaps more significantly, the Financial Services Authority, especially as the latter has recently shown itself willing to take on major financial institutions. A viable option would be to establish a Defence Procurement Authority, outside of the control of the Ministry of Defence, which would provide the continuing scrutiny of defence procurement as a whole which has been so singularly lacking in the past.

### Conclusion

Britain is beginning to embrace the idea of looking at international security in a manner that goes beyond a traditional defence review, with the *National Security Strategy*, the Green Papers and the new National Security Council being evidence of this. In the face of current financial constraints and the carrier/Trident issue, though, there is every sign that the forthcoming defence review will be very limited in its remit, and therefore fundamentally inadequate.

Instead:

- **The review should be inter-departmental and overseen at Cabinet Office level.**
- **It should address the issue of defence procurement.**
- **It should be wide-ranging and able to develop integrated policy on broadly-based global security issues, such as climate change, economic marginalisation and conflict-prevention.**
- **It will not be able to do this effectively, unless the carrier/F-35 programme is cancelled and replaced with a smaller and much more versatile option, and the Trident force and its replacement are substantially scaled down.**
- **Each constrains an effective and far-sighted review - together they make a genuine review well-nigh impossible.**

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