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UK political developments and likely impact on US relations

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Introduction

The British Prime Minister's domestic popularity appears to be in terminal decline. There is growing public dissatisfaction with many of Tony Blair's policies and increasing demands from within the Labour Party that he set a firm date for relinquishing the leadership well in advance of the next General Election (which must be held within 5 years of the last General Election in May 2005, but may be called sooner). It is possible in the British parliamentary system of government for a change in leadership of party and thus premiership, without the necessity of a further General Election.

Most Labour MPs and commentators expect less of an internal election and more of a smooth transition to Gordon Brown as leader and Prime Minister. Following a difficult meeting with Labour MPs after heavy losses in local council elections earlier this month, Tony Blair reportedly told some Cabinet colleagues that he would stand down sometime between the summer of 2007 and before the Autumn 2007 Labour Party Conference. Apparently, Gordon Brown is dissatisfied with the vagueness of this compromise offer and is concerned that without a firm date, Tony Blair could again change his mind and attempt to serve a full third term in office. He will have been Prime Minister for 10 years in May 2007, but that would leave him short of overtaking Margaret Thatcher's premiership by around 18 months.

The Cabinet shuffle

Although the local elections had no direct bearing on arrangements at Westminster, the Labour Party did very badly and many commentators are convinced that this was in large part a reflection of public dissatisfaction with the Prime Minister himself and some of his leading ministers who have not been performing very well. Sweeping changes in ministerial responsibility immediately afterwards confirmed this analysis and suggests that Tony Blair is desperately trying to renew and refresh his administration and is disinclined to announce an early and smooth transition of power.

Significantly Jack Straw unexpectedly lost his post of Foreign Secretary. Rumors abound in London and Washington that he had infuriated the Bush administration with his repeated public statements ruling out military strikes on Iran's nuclear programme. Tony Blair has been publicly much more supportive of the Bush administration (and has

refused to take the military option off the table) and he may have been advised to move Straw to a less prominent position in government. Furthermore, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) under Jack Straw's leadership was making an effort to engage more directly in the internal debate about Trident replacement, something that was unwelcome in the Ministry of Defence and Downing Street.

Margaret Beckett became Britain's first female Foreign Secretary. She is a political survivor having held junior office during the Labour Government of the 1970s and was a vocal supporter of the left of the party in the 1980s. Now considered a loyalist, she has been promoted to cover a brief for which she has demonstrated little interest, although she had some diplomatic experience as Environment Secretary. Her first responsibility was to travel to New York to meet US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, and then to engage in the next round of diplomacy at the United Nations about Iran's nuclear programme. She avoided commenting on either her predecessor's or the Prime Minister's stance on this thorny matter and said that she had chosen her own form of words: that it was "not anybody's intention to move to military strikes against Iran", and she was sticking to them. Her previous post as Environment Secretary was considered an impediment to the drive to secure government support for a new building programme of nuclear power stations. It will be interesting to see if her former opposition to nuclear weapons has any bearing on the FCO's current low profile on Trident replacement.

An almost unknown, certainly entirely inexperienced but ambitious Des Browne became Defence Secretary. He is likely to have a much lower profile and a less antagonist approach than his predecessor, John Reid, who has been moved to the Home Office despite his desire to be given responsibility for Foreign Affairs. Such a change encourages one to feel that Des Browne's job will be partly to see through an agreement on Trident replacement as smoothly and quietly as possible. Interestingly, his constituency is very close to the Trident operational base on the River Clyde in Scotland. On the other hand, in his previous post in the Treasury he steered through spending cuts in several government departments to allow more money for education and health – thus, he might question the cost of Trident replacement.

The new Defence Secretary will also come under pressure to commit to further government expenditure for follow-on contracts for nuclear submarine building in the BAE Systems shipyard in Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria. A substantial lobbying effort has been underway for some time, encouraged and supported by US commercial interests, to secure a long-term future for the Barrow workforce by constructing several more Astute Class, hunter-killer submarines and, most probably, replacement ballistic missile submarines after 2020.

What happens next?

Given the fevered political atmosphere in London about Tony Blair himself, specific issues will receive less considered attention with proposed changes in immigration and deportation, policing and security, education and health provision and nuclear power generation likely to be far more prominent than national defence and nuclear weapons policy.

Tony Blair is widely regarded as wanting to push ahead with a decision to replace Trident. If he tries to do this, we expect the widespread, but as yet, mostly unstated, opposition to his continued leadership to erupt into outright rebellion. There are very many Labour MPs who, for the sake of party unity and remaining in government, have been reluctant to speak out on nuclear weapons. The late Robin Cook, having been removed as Foreign Secretary before resigning later as Leader of the House of Commons (over Iraq) was beginning to assert his considerable influence and argued against replacing Trident. Another long-serving and former minister, Michael Meacher has begun to voice his opposition to replacing Trident. Jack Straw will probably speak against government policy at some stage, possibly, but not likely on Trident replacement – but almost certainly if military action is contemplated against Iran.

Finally, what of the ‘Cameron effect’? Under the leadership of David Cameron many now view the Conservative Party as on the up – and the outcome of the next General Election is in the balance. On defence issues, there are unlikely to be many surprises. Shadow Defence Secretary Liam Fox recently gave a speech at the Heritage Foundation in which he made a strong case for Britain staying close to the United States, retaining nuclear weapons and joining the missile defence programme. However, David Cameron has now pledged that one of his first actions, if he were elected Prime Minister, would be to give parliament the power to decide whether or not Britain goes to war (under the current 'Royal Prerogative' ministers can take some major national policy decisions without consulting parliament). He also argued that parliament should decide on important international treaties.

Conclusion

Politically, we certainly live in interesting times and recent upheavals in the UK may have a significant effect on the leadership and conduct of the Labour Party in government. By 2010 there may be a Conservative government but it may not look too much like its predecessor in the 1980s and 1990s. UK defence and security policy may too be in a state of flux and thrown into the mix is the future of British as a nuclear weapon state.

Over the years, BASIC has made every effort to press for greater FCO and MoD accountability and wider parliamentary and public debate on foreign and security policies. There may be a short window of opportunity to influence a decision on the replacement of Trident. Many commentators have suggested that there is no need to rush to making a decision. But it is likely that industrial drivers, given the long R&D lead time required, played a crucial role in the government’s announcement that by 2010, at the latest, it will have decided what nuclear delivery system it is going for next. BASIC considers that the British government has a duty to have, at the very least, the option of non-replacement on the table. How else can the UK achieve its stated objective of becoming a nuclear weapons-free zone and a Non-Nuclear Weapon State under the Non-Proliferation Treaty?