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MIXED MESSAGES FROM THE BROWN GOVERNMENT

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The first month of the Gordon Brown administration in Britain was marked by a number of decisions that gave mixed signals on defence and security policy. As last month's briefing (*Change in Pakistan and Britain*) indicated, Mr Brown faced an immediate crisis in the form of a double attempted car bombing in Central London followed by an actual attack at Glasgow Airport. The response from the new Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith, and from Mr Brown himself, was to focus on the incidents as examples of potential mass criminality rather than to emphasise terrorism. This was a marked change from the Blair government, especially the responses that had been typical from the combative former Home Secretary, Dr. John Reid. Even so, a series of decisions announced by the government at the end of the parliamentary session gave some mixed indications of the future direction of UK defence and security policy.

One of the most surprising was the decision to phase out the Defence Export Services Organisation (DESO), a government department that has promoted UK arms exports for 40 years. DESO's activities will be integrated into general trade support but the decision was welcomed by groups such as the Campaign Against the Arms Trade which had long argued that it was anomalous that a government department should support private industry in this manner. The government's argument had previously been that DESO was a feature of an era when much of the British defence industry was nationalised, but substantive privatisation and recent controversies over alleged bribery and corruption involving arms deals in the Middle East had made it less easy for supporters to argue for the continuation of DESO.

Missile Defence

Whereas the DESO phase-out suggested a change in outlook by the Brown administration, two other decisions indicated otherwise. One was the announcement that Britain would allow the United States to use its substantial facility at Menwith Hill in North Yorkshire to be part of the ballistic missile defence programme, the other being confirmation of a plan to build two very large aircraft carriers. Menwith Hill is a major signalling station that connects with a number of US surveillance and communications satellites, with one cluster of satellites specifically established to provide early tracking of offensive missiles. Britain also houses one of the ground stations in the Defence Early Warning System (DEWS) at Fylingdales, also in North Yorkshire, where a large phased array radar complex provides direct tracking data on missile flight paths. The two stations will together form a key part of the US missile defence system that is slowly taking shape.

Although the United States is extending its system to involve European states, with facilities planned in Poland and the Czech Republic, there are no current plans for interceptor missiles to be based in Britain. The scheme as it exists is about providing data for the defence of the United States alone, although that could change. The stated aim of the US system is to provide a substantial degree of protection against "rogue states" such as Iran that might be capable, in a few years, of launching a small-scale missile attack on the United States. It involves the interception of incoming missiles when they are in the terminal phase of their flight path and is paralleled by other systems, including the planned deployment of the airborne laser, that would attempt to target missiles early in their flight when they are powered by their rocket motors and quite easily tracked by satellite-based infra-red detector systems. For almost every form of missile defence, such satellites are essential in giving an early indication of a missile launch, so Menwith Hill, as a key receiving station for such data, will be an integral part of the entire US missile defence programme.

From a US perspective an effective missile defence system is seen to add to the country's future security, but to states such as Russia and China it is a destabilising process that must be countered. From their perspective, if the United States becomes the only state able to maintain a large force of offensive nuclear-armed missiles and also has an effective defensive system, whereas they may not have the technical ability to develop workable defences and can only maintain offensive missiles, the United States will be seen as moving towards a destabilising advantage in any future balance of terror. The most obvious way to counter this is to produce more offensive missiles, at whatever the cost, in order to swamp any future US defence system. Russia is currently using some of its recently acquired economic muscle to revive its long-range nuclear missile programme and Chinese officials talk readily, if reluctantly, of the need for massive increases in their small force of long-range missiles to counter the US programme.

Such thinking may seem extraordinary but it is worth remembering that this was a major feature of Cold War nuclear strategy. Indeed the purpose of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) was precisely to prevent such an action-reaction process, limiting each side to protection of either its capital city or a single long-range missile field. Both the United States and the then Soviet Union built crude missile defences that were limited under the treaty, but these were essentially ineffective. With the Bush administration having withdrawn from the ABM Treaty and with technological advances in the United States now making it more likely that missile defence becomes feasible, the risk is that the US programme, with British involvement, sets off a new arms race.

Aircraft Carriers

The second decision of the Brown government was to go ahead with a plan to order two huge new aircraft carriers. These ships, already named as HMS Queen Elizabeth and HMS Prince of Wales, will be very much larger than any warship to be deployed by the Royal Navy. At 65,000 tonnes each they will be substantially larger than the fleet carriers of the 1950s such as HMS Eagle, even larger than the battleship HMS Vanguard and three times the size of the current Invincible-class aircraft carriers. They will be deployed with a new and massively expensive American aircraft, the F-35, and are due to be deployed in the mid-2010s, although it is not clear that the first of the F-35s will be ready for the British carriers by that time, given current development problems and cost over-runs.

The full life-time costs of the two new carriers together with the Trident nuclear missile replacement programme will be around £100 million, and the end result will be to enable Britain to engage in large-scale expeditionary warfare, with a nuclear back-up, at a level which will not have been possible for forty years. The French are planning to build one such carrier and are actually sharing some of the design costs of the British ships, but their existing carrier, the nuclear-powered Charles de Gaulle, is a smaller ship and has been troubled with numerous problems ever since it was first deployed. The end result is that the UK carrier decision will mean that Britain will be the one country best able to deploy alongside the US Navy with its even larger Nimitz-class aircraft carriers.

There are two main problems with the carrier decision, especially when it is analysed alongside the earlier decision to replace the Trident missile submarines. The first is financial, given that the two programmes will together consume substantial parts of the Ministry of Defence's entire equipment budget. This is causing substantial unease in the British Army, with senior commanders complaining bitterly, if mostly in private, about how badly the Army is overstretched with its commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan. Army planners argue forcefully that Afghanistan is much more typical of the kind of conflict that Britain is likely to be involved in. It is not the kind of conflict that requires huge aircraft carriers, whereas amphibious capabilities and smaller carriers such as the Invincible-class may be rather more appropriate for a country the size of Britain.

Perhaps surprisingly, there is also substantial unease within the Royal Navy. The fears being expressed, again privately, are that the carrier/Trident replacement programmes are very much a case of all the eggs in two baskets. Furthermore, there are already indications that Royal Navy budgets are being squeezed. One example is that the full force of the Navy's new Daring-class destroyers is already very unlikely to be built. An even bigger issue for the Navy is that its amphibious warfare vessels, HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark, will both need replacing in about 20 years, with initial planning, design and development starting within a decade. The fear is that this will coincide with the huge costs of buying the F-35 and the peak expenditure on the next generation of ballistic missile submarines. Both will come at a time when the Army may be experiencing continuing stresses and the Royal Air Force will be wanting to replace its own white elephant, the Typhoon Eurofighter, and will be needing to acquire more heavy transport aircraft to support the Army.

What concerns the more far-sighted Navy planners is that they will end up losing one of their three main roles – carrier air power, the strategic nuclear role and the amphibious force – and it will be the latter that will disappear. Large aircraft carriers require a lot of support, in the form of destroyers, frigates and auxiliary vessels. At any one time it will only be possible to field one carrier task group. Similarly, the post-Trident missile force will be designed just to have one missile submarine available at any one time. In essence, in twenty or so years time, the Royal Navy will have the capability of putting just two capital ships to sea, not something some of the more thoughtful admirals are happy to contemplate.

What Kind of Security Policy?

The second problem with the carrier decision is much more broad. This is the way in which it moves the overall thrust of British defence policy in a particular direction – that of being able to mount large-scale expeditionary warfare alongside the United States. The unwritten assumption is that what lies behind the decision is that the key strategic region of the world during the lifetime of these new warships will be the Persian Gulf – host to almost two-thirds of the world's oil reserves and a substantial minority of the world's natural gas reserves. Britain is rapidly becoming a substantial oil importer, not on the scale of the United States and China, but still developing a vulnerability in energy supply that could prove uncomfortable. The United States is configuring much of its defence capability around maintaining the security of the Persian Gulf, and Britain's carrier programme will give it the capability to operate alongside the US Navy in the region. This may be seen as yet another example of maintaining a special relationship with the United States but it also means that Britain will remain heavily committed to a view of the world that may simply be obsolete.

As has been argued by Oxford Research Group and others, the really major security issues in the coming decades are much more likely to be the widening socio-economic divide and a global system that is coming up against environmental constraints on human activity (see the February 2007 briefing, *Environment and Development*). These are likely to come together over the issue of climate change, as the effects on the tropics make far more people desperate as they seek to survive violent and unpredictable weather and, especially, the probable drying out of many of the richest tropical croplands. Responding to the issues of the wealth-poverty divide and climate change requires major policy developments in trade, debt relief, assistance for sustainable development and a curbing of carbon emissions that are far more radical than anything currently planned.

That alone will require a rapid move away from the current oil and gas dependency of countries such as Britain that would itself greatly diminish the strategic importance of the Persian Gulf. While the British government does profess a concern with issues of development and climate change, and government policy on the former has been significantly more positive in recent years, there appears to be no integrated thinking on the issues in terms of defence policy. In the context of what needs to be done to improve prospects for global security, the aircraft carrier and Trident replacement decisions are much

more in line with a mode of thought that focuses on the “control paradigm” of maintaining the status quo rather than addressing the likely causes of future insecurity.

An Indication of Ambivalence

What is interesting is that the Menwith Hill and aircraft carrier decisions appear to have been made when other parts of the Brown government are indicating potential changes in policy. The reaction to the London and Glasgow incidents is one example, and the more recent announcements of substantial government aid for community cohesion and what are described as moderate Islamic initiatives is another. It is also relevant that Mr Brown has appointed his own specialist on the Israel/Palestine issue, Michael Williams, in spite of Tony Blair taking on his own post-prime ministerial role.

Mr Brown’s visit to Washington and New York at the end of July was also significant in that he was careful not to imply that the British presence in Iraq would be indefinite, he avoided the use of terms such as “war on terror”, sought to engage with Congress and, above all, delivered a powerful speech at the United Nations that focused primarily on issues of poverty and international development. On the basis of these developments it is certainly possible to argue that there is scope for a Brown administration to embrace ideas of sustainable security.

The main problem is that there appears to be a serious lack of integrated thinking across government, and this is compounded by two other issues. One is that Labour governments in Britain are traditionally concerned about being seen as weak on defence. This militates against their moving away from core aspects of defence policy such as the close security linkages with the United States and the nuclear issue. In practice it has tended to be Conservative governments that are willing and able to go in for defence budget cuts if economic circumstances demand. One of the ironies of the aircraft carrier decision is that the government of Margaret Thatcher was planning to sell one of the new Invincible-class carriers back in 1982, a decision only reversed by the outbreak of the Falklands-Malvinas War.

The second is that the Brown government inherited a defence posture in which the Trident replacement decision had already been made, and the carrier decision was imminent. It might have been wiser for the incoming government to put both decisions on hold pending a full re-evaluation of British security policy. This would have gone far beyond traditional defence reviews to consider precisely the kinds of major global trends that will most affect security in the coming decades. Such a review might still be possible, but it will certainly not be considered by a Brown government before a general election. From Labour’s political perspective, and its history of being seen as weak on defence, a pre-election period is not the time for a fundamental reassessment of UK security policy. That is a really unfortunate matter of timing, but neither the Trident replacement or aircraft carrier decisions are set in stone, and an election could come as early as the Spring of 2008. Given some of the other signals coming from the Brown government, it is certainly possible that a confident re-elected administration would be willing to engage in a considered response to the new global challenges. If so, it would be markedly different from the latter years of the Blair era.

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