

BRITISH DEFENCE POLICY AT A CROSS-ROADS: EAST OF SUEZ REVISITED?

Britain is embarking on a new Strategic Defence Review. The current operational challenges in Afghanistan as well as the financial slump have created strong pressure for defence reform. The Review will also have to address fundamental questions about Britain's broader strategic interests and the capabilities needed to pursue them. Strengthening its European commitment could help Britain to align its global ambitions with the resources it needs to project a credible international role. Pursuing European ways to achieve global ends however remains a domestically disputed strategic option.



British soldiers in Helmand, Afghanistan, 27th July 2009

REUTERS / Omar Sobhani

The British government has recently announced plans to carry out a new Strategic Defence Review (SDR). The MOD is currently preparing a Green paper, due to be published early in 2010, while the actual SDR would take place after the next general election in spring 2010. That process is expected to take six to twelve months. With the last SDR dating back to 1998, there is a general consensus that it is high time for a revision. It has also been announced that the National Security Strategy will be re-written, offering an opportunity to harmonise strategy and defence planning.

The pressure for defence reform is evident. The military engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan has brought the armed forces to the limit of their capacities. There are mounting operational challenges, equipment deficits, and financial constraints. Moreover, the recent history of operations, from Kosovo and Sierra Leone to the British support for the US in its 'war on terror', have raised fundamental questions about strategy and the future of warfare. The British armed forces are facing the difficult task of having to both adapt to the complexities of civil-military crisis management as well as define their

overall purpose and role in the changing geostrategic environment. Given these fundamental challenges, the current situation has been compared to the East of Suez decision of 1968 when Britain, largely as a result of lacking resources, decided to scale back its global ambitions and adopt a more modest international role.

The Afghanistan challenge

Following the British withdrawal from Iraq in summer 2009, Afghanistan is now the biggest operational challenge and at the centre of the defence debate. There are fundamental questions regarding equipment, troop levels, and strategy. The war in Afghanistan has revealed some severe equipment shortages. There is a marked lack of attack and transport helicopters. These equipment deficits are said to have compromised the safety of British troops on the ground. Moreover, there is a considerable strain on personnel, which has to cope with ever-faster deployment cycles. There have been mounting complaints about insufficient care for returning soldiers and the government is under pressure to take these seriously and provide for adequate care.

The current year has also seen an unprecedented rise in British fatalities in Afghanistan. While military strategists call for a further troop surge, returning body bags raise questions about the purpose of the mission among the British public. Prime Minister Brown has recently authorised an increase of the British con-

tingent by 500 soldiers to 9,500, though this figure is lower than military advisers had demanded. Yet the prospect of failure in Afghanistan has shaken public morale. In a country that is one of the most accepting in Europe when it comes to casualties this is a development which makes it indispensable for the government to engage in a serious public debate about the goals of the military campaign and the feasibility of achieving them.

The deterioration of the political situation in Afghanistan complicates decisions about the future of British strategy. The fragile political situation, compellingly illustrated by the turmoil surrounding the recent presidential elections, begs the question of an appropriate exit strategy for international troops. Furthermore, it is abundantly clear by now that the problem extends beyond the Afghan border into Pakistan. The British are currently involved in training the Pakistani military, but what longer term strategy should be adopted to contain the Taliban is unclear. These developments show that the British maxim of 'Go fast, Go First, Go Home', which seemed to apply to the missions in Sierra Leone, East Timor and initially even Afghanistan, is certainly not working anymore.

For the SDR this implies the necessity to take a truly 'comprehensive approach'. Both Afghanistan and Iraq have demonstrated the vital importance of a cross-governmental policy process, involving not only the Foreign Office and MOD but also the Department for International Development (DFID), the international trade and environment departments as well as the intelligence services. In 2001 Britain already established so-called Conflict Prevention Pools where resources of the FCO, MOD and DFID have been bundled. It has also created a joint civil-military Stabilisation Unit to work in post-conflict environments. But the SDR offers an opportunity to institutionalise and improve these mechanisms further and better align cross-Whitehall objectives.

Financial constraints

Another crucial challenge for British defence policy is the current economic crisis. Britain has been particularly hard-hit by the economic slump due to its heavy dependence on the financial sector and the high levels of public spending in previous years. Chancellor Alistair Darling has esti-

Key British defence figures 2009	
Active forces	Total: 160'280; Army: 95'780; Navy: 30'880; Air: 33'620
Defence spending (% of GDP)	2.14% (1980: 4.95%; 1990: 3.71%; 2000: 2.51%)
Operational deployments (selection)	NATO ISAF (Afghanistan): 9500; International Military Assistance Training Team (Sierra Leone): 50; EUFOR Althea (Bosnia): 10; NATO KFOR (Kosovo): 8
Fatalities in Afghanistan and Iraq	Afghanistan : 224 (since 2001), incl. 87 between January and October 2009; Iraq: 179 (2003–2009)
Non-operational deployments (selection)	Germany: 19'060; Northern Ireland : 4370; Cyprus: 2930; Gibraltar: 280; Asia/Far East: 270; Falkland Islands: 230

Sources: UK Public Spending; IISS Military Balance 2009; Defence Analytical Services and Advice; websites EUFOR Althea, KFOR und ISAF; BBC

mated that government borrowing in the next fiscal year will amount to over £200 billion, which equals roughly six times the defence budget. There is no doubt that defence spending will be affected. Yet it is unclear so far where exactly the cuts will be made.

A particular problem that has emerged in the context of scarce financial resources is the future of Britain's nuclear deterrent. While this was publicly presented as a contribution to the global effort at nuclear disarmament, it is clear that the prime motivation for thinking about reducing the Trident arsenal from currently four to three submarines is financial.

A second problem that has emerged in this context is the prioritisation between current operational requirements and long-term defence needs. In times of empty coffers there is growing competition between the different service branches. There are contending views whether it is the Navy's aircraft carriers or the RAF's Typhoon aircrafts that should be slashed and how many more armoured tanks the Army really needs. Such inter-service rivalry is not conducive to sound defence planning based on an evaluation of likely future needs.

There are plans to reconsider the current practice of defence acquisition. Two commissioned reports dealing with different aspects of the acquisition process have been published in October 2009: the Gray report and the Haddon-Cave report (Nimrod report). Both identify serious shortcomings in the current acquisition system and diagnose an overstretch of the defence budget. Yet their recommendations differ. While Gray argues in favour of greater cost efficiency and outsourcing to the private sector, Haddon-Cave warns

against this kind of economic logic, emphasising safety considerations and accountability instead. The balance to be struck is thus one between budget-driven and policy-driven defence planning. The SDR should be resource-informed but policy-led. The armed forces must have what they need for the short term, whereas ambitions for the medium and long term must take into account what can realistically be afforded.

The future character of war

Current operational and financial challenges notwithstanding, the SDR requires more than a quick fix of pressing operational and financial problems. There has to be a thorough analysis of future threats and a long-term strategy to address them as well as serious consideration of Britain's role in the world and a definition of its strategic interests. British foreign and security policy has a long-standing tradition of internationalism and interventionism. But the question is whether the practice of liberal intervention and a belief in 'go to the crisis before the crisis comes to us' can be upheld in the future.

There are different views on the potential scenarios for future warfare. A number of experts expect the continuation of stabilisation and counter-insurgency operations, which would require flexible and mobile troops as well as civilian personnel for post-conflict reconstruction. Others, however, warn about the potential return of inter-state wars, which would require more conventional armed forces. Finally, there are those who suggest that global power shifts and the rise of actors such as China and India call for enhanced power projection capabilities, such as aircraft carriers, long range aircraft and submarines. It is, of course, impossible

to anticipate the exact nature of future conflict. The task is therefore, as Professor Michael Howard put it, not to be too far off the mark and thus sufficiently prepared once that nature becomes clear.

Transatlantic questions and European solutions

In the context of more long-term strategic thinking, the 'specialness' of transatlantic relations is another issue to be addressed. The experience of the 'war on terror' has made some British politicians and strategists call for a reconsideration of the future relationship with the US. In their view, the war in Iraq in particular has shown that Britain has little influence on US strategy. Alliance obligations and the hope of maintaining British influence in international security have led to military overstretch in two parallel wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

With the Iraq campaign, the British government under Tony Blair moreover chose to engage in a war that has been highly controversial with the public. The involvement of broader segments of civil society in the current strategic debate is therefore indispensable if lasting damage to the legitimacy of British military engagement is to be avoided. The public is likely to be sceptical of any further military support for the US unless British interests and stakes are spelled out clearly. Linking the SDR with a broad public consultation process, as announced by the British government, is thus a step in the right direction.

With the Obama administration focusing more strongly on Asia and not emphasising the special relationship in the same way as previous administrations, another question is what Britain has to offer to the US in the future. The answer will considerably depend on how Britain defines its future role in Europe. Ever since the decision of the Blair government in 1998 to support the creation of a common European security and defence policy (ESDP), Britain has been a pioneer of military modernisation in Europe. British participation in ESDP has clearly never been driven by a commitment to political integration in Europe. It has been the result of sober pragmatism. In the political context of the mid- and late 1990s and the Balkan wars, the British were keen to strengthen European military capabilities so as to maintain Europe's relevance as a strategic partner for the US in global

Key documents

- ▮ [Gray Report Oct 2009](#)
- ▮ [Nimrod Review Oct 2009](#)
- ▮ [National Security Strategy 2008](#)
- ▮ [Defence White Paper 2003 \(Amendment 2004\)](#)
- ▮ [Strategic Defence Review New Chapter 2002](#)
- ▮ [Strategic Defence Review 1998](#)

security policy. This was one of the central reasons why ESDP was created. Moreover, Britain has started adapting its armed forces to new security challenges earlier than most other European states. By setting an example, Britain has become not only an important actor within the ESDP, but also an initiator of military transformation in other EU member states. A favourable British attitude towards ESDP remains a prerequisite for the EU's efforts to develop greater military clout.

While Britain is thus important for the future of European defence policy, Europe is also vital for Britain's role in the world. Without a leadership role in ESDP, and in the EU more broadly, Britain's international position may well weaken. In Washington in particular, Britain's impact largely depends on its ability to pull its weight in Europe. Yet, Euroscepticism permeates the current political debate in Britain. This has nourished concerns in many European capitals that London, especially under a Conservative government, may no longer be willing to play a leading role in European defence co-operation.

Foreclosing a European option would certainly mean turning a blind eye on the opportunities closer European defence co-operation can offer to save costs in times of scarce resources. This could be achieved, for example, through pooling certain military capabilities. More common equipment would allow for greater European co-operation in logistics and maintenance, which are both cost-intensive. Given the growing number of common deployments, this could be a sensible option. The condition for this kind of system to work would of course be that there is an even distribution of the burden.

The British are, understandably, concerned that, as Europe's foremost military actor, they would be contributing to but getting little out of pooled capabilities. There are ways, however, to

avoid such an imbalance. One possible option would be for individual states to develop specialised niche capabilities that they contribute. Working out the modalities of such a system would of course be neither easy nor uncontroversial. This is precisely why a serious debate about Britain's strategic interests and ambitions and about its role in Europe is imperative. Embarking on a new SDR process is a welcome first step on a long road towards defining Britain's role in global security. The next step will have to be to move beyond the current electoral rhetoric about issues like the spectre of a European army and focus instead on a sober analysis of how to arrive at constructive solutions to Britain's defence challenges.

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