

Chris Brown

Academic Foresights

British Defence Policy

How do you analyze the present situation of the British defence policy?

When the Conservative-Liberal coalition came into office in 2010 defence policy demanded immediate attention. Britain was engaged in combat in Afghanistan (albeit its commitment there would end in 2014), defence spending was increasing by 1.5% in real terms per annum, there were a number of very expensive commitments looming on the horizon, including two aircraft carriers (HMS Queen Elizabeth and HMS Prince of Wales), the next tranche of the Eurofighter contract, and the replacement for the Trident- missile based submarine nuclear deterrent – and all this in a context where the Coalition had determined that public spending in general must fall rapidly. In response to these factors the Coalition rapidly instituted a Strategic Defence Review – too rapidly in the opinion of many experts who felt that a more measured response would produce better long term results.

The Review considered cancelling the two carriers, but decided against on the grounds that cancellation would be almost as expensive as continuing with their construction – the previous government had drawn up the contract in this way to protect jobs on Clydeside in Scotland. Instead the decision was to proceed but to immediately ‘mothball’ one of the carriers, and to equip them both with catapult launchers and retrieval nets (‘cats and traps’ in the trade lingo) to allow them to use the cheaper version of the projected US F35 warplane, as opposed to the more expensive Short Take-off and Vertical Landing (STOVL) version favoured by the previous Government. This would have the added advantage of making the carriers ‘inter-operable’ with the French carrier Charles de Gaulle and with US fleet carriers. The F35s would not be available until the 2020s and since, in order to save money, the somewhat out-dated British Harrier jump-jets were to be sold to the US Marine Corps, the one remaining carrier would fly helicopters only for the next decade.

This seemed at the time to be a bizarre set of decisions, and so it has proved. In the first place the Libyan campaign in 2011 demonstrated the value of carrier based aircraft – Britain’s contribution to the no-fly zone had to be Tornado jets flown from Italian bases. Perhaps more damaging, it has transpired that the costings carried out in 2010 were substantially inaccurate, the product of undue haste. Equipping the carriers with ‘cats and traps’ was proving very expensive, eliminating the cost advantage that came from buying cheaper aircraft – moreover, the cost of

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mothballing one of the carriers would probably be almost as great as the cost of operating it (the intention was always to have only one carrier at sea at any one time, and so there was no need for the expense of two complete crews). Worse still, the fate of the \$300 billion US F35 programme is in some doubt given US budgetary constraints. The truth is that two years into the Coalition government we basically don't know what the future of the carrier programme will be.

I have told this story in some (but not enough) depth in order to illustrate a continuing feature of UK defence policy, namely an apparent inability to devise coherent strategies and stick to them, largely because the time scales needed for defence planning do not correspond with those imposed by the Whitehall bureaucracy and the political leadership of the country. Thus, the fate of defence systems that could reasonably be expected to be in service for 30 to 40 years has been decided on the basis of the immediate need of the Coalition to be seen to be saving money as part of their austerity programme.

In your opinion, how will the situation likely evolve over the next five years?

Interesting though the fate of the two carriers has been, the more basic decision of the 2010 Review concerned the future of the British Army. Currently 100,000 strong, the aim is to reduce it in size so that by 2014 it would have approximately 84,000 regular soldiers – not enough to fill Wembley Football Stadium – its smallest size since the late 19th century. And, since that temporal comparison is often made, it is worth noting that in the 19th century the Royal Navy was the largest and most effective such force in the world, and imperial Britain was able to draw upon its Indian Army to carry out most of its (in)famous expeditions – needless to say neither of these factors is present today, with the empire long gone and the navy reduced to barely two dozen ships.

The intention is that this small army will be supplemented by an effective reserve force of ca. 35,000 men, better trained and more readily deployable than today's Territorial Army (TA). What is not clear is how this is to be achieved – employers are under no obligation to release today's TA soldiers for extended periods of service abroad, and with some exceptions (e.g. Medical professionals), most TA soldiers do not have the necessary level of training even compared with, for example, National Guardsmen in America.

If reliance on reserves is one aspect of the new system, another is an increasing reliance on special forces, the British SAS (Special Air Service) and the Royal Marine equivalent, the Special Boat Service (SBS). These forces are, justly, very well respected and largely untainted by the failure of the regular army in Basra, so, on the face of it, it makes sense to emphasise their role. But to expand their numbers is a problematic strategy – their reputation is based on very high levels of training, and a rigorous selection procedure, and it is difficult to see how a much reduced

regular army could provide the necessary extra recruits.

What are the structural long-term perspectives?

The picture that emerges is of a very small, but, hopefully, very well trained army, an air force equipped with a small number of very expensive but, again we hope, very effective aircraft, and a navy that may or may not be focussed on a single carrier group. In addition, the current intention is to replace the existing Trident nuclear deterrent with a new submarine-based system to come into service in the 2020s – but no final decision on this will be taken until after the next election, and many still hope a cheaper alternative will be found.

What does all this mean in terms of Britain's capacity to contribute to future NATO operations such as the current campaign in Afghanistan, and last year's enterprise in Libya? In these matters size isn't everything, and in Afghanistan, for example, Canadian, Danish and Dutch forces have made serious contributions with much smaller military establishments than is envisaged for the UK. Still, in the past the UK has been proud of its ability not just to contribute to, but to take the initiative in such operations, to act as a leader – as Britain and France did with respect to Libya in 2011. Equally, independent action as in the Falklands in 1982 will no longer be a possibility, although perhaps this judgement might be revised if and when one of the proposed carriers is actually operational with a full complement of warplanes.

The lack of an ability to act independently, or even as anything like an equal partner, is something that both British politicians and the British people will take some time to get used to. After three hundred years as a major European actor – and for one of those three centuries actually a superpower – adjustment to minor power status will take time. However, this adjustment is already under way. It is noteworthy – and has been frequently noted – that Danny Boyle's opening ceremony at the recent London Olympics touched on almost none of the usual symbols of great power status; no Churchill, no Spitfires, no Imperial pomp, but rather a celebration of the National Health Service, the Internet, British popular culture and the Queen as the latest Bond girl. 'This is for everyone' was the evocative leitmotif of the ceremony, and perhaps the London Olympics will mark the moment in time when most Britons recognised that in future the national identity would rest on soft rather than hard power.

Chris Brown is Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics, author of numerous articles in international political theory and of several books, most recently *Practical Judgement in International Political Theory* (2010), and *Sovereignty, Rights and Justice* (2002). His textbook *Understanding International Relations* (4th ed. 2009) has been translated into Arabic, Turkish, Chinese and Portuguese. He was Chair of the British International Studies Association in 1998-1999 and taught at Kent and Southampton

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