

Initial comment on ‘Delivering Security in a Changing World’

Defence White Paper – December 2003

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BASIC acknowledges the need for the restructuring of UK armed forces and welcomes many of the initiatives outlined in the Defence White Paper. We will be drawing up a more considered analysis of these initiatives in due course but, in the interests of getting our initial thoughts into print, we offer this short analysis.

Focus on military capabilities

While the Defence White Paper identifies potential threats to international security in Chapter 2 'The Security Challenge', it clearly focuses on new technology and military capabilities while failing to sufficiently promote alternative means of pursuing global security. For instance, the juxtaposition of continued support for the United Nations, NATO and the EU with support for more "coalitions of the willing" is worrying.

Rapid military intervention, referred to as "expeditionary forces", is taking an increasingly central role in our foreign policy response to crises, closing the door to alternative diplomatic or other initiatives. It appears to institutionalise the expectation that our military will be operating under the leadership of US forces, as they did in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Response to Crises

But we do not have, or seek, the defence capability for military responses to each and every risk or crisis. National interest, proximity and responsibility will be among the key factors in determining what, if any, role the UK's Armed Forces should plan to have in dealing with any crisis. (para 2.10, p.5)

Under the term 'Defence Relations', the White Paper outlines the involvement of the Ministry of Defence in inter-departmental efforts to develop conflict resolution capabilities but the thrust is behind developing a rapid and flexible military response mechanism that is inter-operable with US command and control structures. There is no explanation of how decisions over the use of such forces might be improved or how other mechanisms might be developed.

The danger is that with increasingly rapid military capabilities interlaced with global outreach US forces, British forces will more frequently find themselves on the frontline in hot conflicts with little prior analysis of the possible consequences or planning for the post-conflict clean-up and stabilization.

The importance of post-conflict reconstruction

The White Paper opens by pointing to the successful performance of British forces in conducting both combat operations and subsequent stabilisation operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. It was published on the same day as a National Audit Office analysis on the military performance during formal combat operations in Iraq.

While British forces have performed well under the circumstances, the situation in both countries remains highly unstable. Indeed many analysts believe the security situation is deteriorating. There is near universal agreement that the advance post-conflict planning has been inadequate. The particular lessons over reconstruction have not found any resonance within the White Paper, which still focuses on rapid response to immediate military threats.

The Strategic Deterrent

However, the continuing risk from the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and the certainty that a number of other countries will retain substantial nuclear arsenals, mean that our minimum nuclear deterrent capability, currently represented by Trident, is likely to remain a necessary element of our security. (para 3.11, p. 9)

While the renewed commitment to the strategic nuclear deterrence was predictable, the justification for its retention as the "guarantor of the UK's national security" indicates a permanent policy commitment contrary to our international commitments and treaty obligations, none of which

are mentioned in the White Paper.

Although the White Paper states that the UK faces no major conventional military threat, the question that must be answered is: to what threat could nuclear weapons possibly offer a credible response and would such a response be legal under international law? If the threat focuses on proliferation and international terrorism, responses must be relevant to these.

The strategic deterrent is of no relevance in the war on terror, undermines our diplomatic non-proliferation efforts and magnifies the danger of technology and fissile-material leakage. Promotion of the efforts, primarily US driven and funded, for securing WMD material in the former Soviet Union is advisable.

Decisions on whether to replace Trident are not needed this Parliament but are likely to be required in the next one. We will therefore continue to take appropriate steps to ensure that the range of options for maintaining a nuclear deterrent capability is kept open until that decision point. This is clearest indication of a Trident replacement decision timetable. With such an important decision to be made in the near future, now is the time for the government to outline the principles and process behind the decision and to initiate a public and parliamentary debate on its advisability and appropriateness - unlike all former procurement decisions vis-à-vis nuclear weapons.

Missile Defence

It is claimed that "missile defence technology is a growing area of interest following the ending of the Anti Ballistic Missile Treaty" when, in reality, the ABM Treaty was abrogated by the United States in order that an already growing interest in missile defence technology could proceed unimpeded by treaty obligations.

The logic of the government's analysis of the contribution that missile interceptors can make to responding to the perceived ballistic missile threat lead one to conclude that they would be in favour of interceptor batteries being deployed on UK territory.

The government's handling of this issue to date has been roundly criticised, not least by the House of Commons Defence Committee, and with the upgrade work at Fylingdales radar station due to commence in March 2004, it is surely time for openness and democracy to prevail.

Having 'de-classified' the first US/UK Memorandum of Understanding on missile defence after an initial refusal to place the document in the House of Commons Library, a good start would be to 'de-classify' follow-up MOUs on this crucially important issue for 'Delivering Security in a Changing World'.