

Strategic Defence Review

Claire Taylor

Will the forthcoming Strategic Defence Review be threat or budget driven?

At the beginning of Gordon Brown's tenure in June 2007, speculation was rife that a major re-evaluation of defence policy would be undertaken for the first time since the 1998 Strategic Defence Review. A new review was considered pertinent given the scale of operational commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan, accusations that the Government had breached the Military Covenant, and wider discussions over the defence budget (including potential cuts to the three services in order to meet the Government's spending targets).

However, that review did not emerge, which several analysts argued at the time was symptomatic of the Government's general feeling of malaise towards defence policy. Many suggested that affordability was a huge

constraint: a direct result of the Government's unwillingness to dedicate adequate resources. Others suggested the lack of clarity was the result of incoherence in the Government's overarching foreign policies more generally.

FISCAL CONSTRAINTS

In the last few years, pressure on the Armed Forces and the defence budget has increased as a result of the global fiscal crisis and the subsequent constraints imposed on government spending. Although the defence budget has largely risen in real terms in the last decade, the National Audit Office estimates that the MOD's budget continues to have a shortfall of between £6 billion and £36 billion.

The NAO estimates the MOD has a budget shortfall of up to £36 billion

Calls for a new defence review and a re-evaluation of the MOD's spending plans have therefore remained high on the political agenda and in July 2009 the Labour Government announced its intention to conduct a new Strategic Defence Review early in the next Parliament. As a first step, it published in February 2010 a Green Paper entitled *Adaptability and Partnership: Issues for the Strategic Defence Review*. While acknowledging that Afghanistan remains the current priority for the Armed Forces, the paper made it clear that in planning for the future the UK must anticipate a wide range of threats and subsequent requirements. As such, any review "must contribute to decisions about the role we want the United Kingdom to play in the world and how much the nation is prepared to pay for security and defence". Importantly, the paper acknowledged that the MOD cannot proceed with all the activities and programmes it aspires to while simultaneously supporting current operations and investing in new capabilities. The forthcoming review must, therefore, set the UK's strategic priorities for the longer term while establishing a defence programme that is affordable.

Concerns have been expressed, however, that despite best intentions for the review to be threat driven, the review will not be completed in time to avoid demands

that budgetary considerations should take precedence due to the prevailing economic climate. Trevor Taylor, writing for RUSI, has argued that "by the time the review is completed, some major cost-cutting measures may need to be taken [...] if the MOD is required to make significant cuts in the short term, the result is likely to be an incoherent defence effort that the eventual defence review will struggle to rectify". Indeed, the Labour Government had already announced a number of "re-balancing" measures in order to support operations in Afghanistan, including the closure of RAF Cottesmore and the early withdrawal from service of several air and naval platforms.

WHERE FROM HERE?

The extent to which the new coalition Government will embrace the recommendations of the green paper remains to be seen. What is certain is that squaring available spending against the MOD's obligations and aspirations will not be easy, while compromises over the exclusion of the Trident replacement programme from any defence review may need to be made. While the Labour Government and the Conservatives had both indicated their intention to ring fence Trident, the Liberal Democrats have consistently called for a "like-for-like" replacement of the UK nuclear deterrent to be scrapped and for all other remaining options to be considered as part of a new defence review.

The costs of military operations need to be funded in addition to the core defence budget

