

## **A Strategic Defence Review, MoD Leaks, Fox vs. Osborne, Leaving Afghanistan by 2015 and, yes, a Treaty with the “Old Enemy” – So where is UK Defence Policy Now?**

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A week is a long time in politics. Over 8 months in Government is an eternity. This has proven particularly pertinent in the case of the UK's defence policy. Life at the Ministry of Defence (MoD) might be many things, but it certainly cannot be accused of being dull and boring. Indeed, the MoD has consistently been in the media spotlight since the general election staking its claim as the Coalition Government's most controversial department.

To kick things off, there has been the Strategic Defence Review (SDR), the findings of which will have profound implications for the future shape and composition of the Armed Forces. Amongst the key changes, major cuts include the loss of 42,000 MoD and Armed Forces jobs by 2015; the axing of harrier jump jets, the Navy's flagship HMS Ark Royal and planned Nimrod spy planes; and a reduction in the number of nuclear warheads for Trident Number 2.

The SDR sparked off an almighty public spat between Liam Fox and George Osborne, requiring the Prime Minister to intervene. This manifested itself in the infamous leaked letter from Fox to Cameron warning off near meltdown should proposed Treasury cuts of 40% be implemented. Although it is difficult to disagree with the former Defence Secretary, Michael Heseltine's analysis that it looked “like a letter written to be leaked” – adding further weight to the Westminster rumour mill of Cameron vs. Fox tensions – it is also difficult to disagree with the Defence Secretary's argumentation. Absorbing 40% cuts at a time of serious military overstretch would seem dangerous and unsustainable. Although the SDR could have been handled better, the agreed 8% reduction in defence spending over 4 years is a more sensible and achievable outcome.

Perhaps the most significant development in defence policy is the Government's unshakeable commitment to pull British troops out of Afghanistan by 2015. With NATO forces planning to hand over full security control to the Afghans by 2014, international opinion has largely crystallised around the need to find a hitherto elusive “exit strategy”.

However, the debate now centres on whether the highly fluid and uncertain situation in Afghanistan allows for such a definitive, and arguably artificial, timeline for withdrawal. Although nobody wishes to see British troops in combat for a second longer than is needed, the Afghan conundrum – and associated terrorism problems – is complex. Whether we like it or not, Britain's national security is inextricably tied to Afghanistan, which means withdrawal needs to be managed carefully and in line with our own national interest. Moreover, the worst case scenario of Afghanistan falling to terrorist elements would spell disaster, not least given the fragility of neighbouring and nuclear armed Pakistan. The jury remains out on this policy.

Another controversial policy has been the signing of new defence treaty with France. In the new era of *entente cordiale*, the two countries will share training resources and facilities to test nuclear warheads; create a joint expeditionary force; use each other's aircraft carriers; and increase cooperation and information sharing.

Despite dropped jaws, foaming mouths and apoplectic faces from steaming Conservative right-wingers, there is a strong case in favour of this agreement. Of course, the devil is always in the detail, but on the face of it this seems like a practical and pragmatic

arrangement to further British defence capabilities without undermining national sovereignty over defence policy. It also proves that our Prime Minister is not just a pretty face – he is a damn good negotiator.

Another priority area has been the emotive issue of military healthcare. As a Bow Group report highlighted in 2009, there have been significant and persistent problems related to the provision of care to UK ex-service personnel and war veterans.

In Opposition, David Cameron personally committed himself to restoring the military covenant and reversing Labour's miserable record. So far, the rhetoric has been backed up by substantive action. This has been most notably exemplified by Andrew Murrison's (PPS to the Health Secretary) comprehensive review on combat stress and impressive recommendations; a review that included the abovementioned Bow Group report.

Allied to this, the Government has doubled the operational allowance and committed an additional £67m to increase the provision of equipment and supplies to troops on the frontline. This is a welcome and necessary step following the previous Labour Government's unforgivable policy of neglect egregiously personified following Gordon Brown's pusillanimous u-turn at the Chilcot inquiry. This is of little consolation to the families of those that have fallen or been injured, but it is a clear signal of the new Government's intent to leave no stone unturned.

Even after unavoidable cuts, the UK defence budget will remain the 4<sup>th</sup> largest in the world and we will retain 200,000 military personnel; over 340 tanks, 230 fighters, 12 submarines, 7 destroyers and 2 aircraft carriers; elite and special forces; and a nuclear capability. More to the point, budget deficit or no budget deficit the reality is that the UK's defence policy needs to evolve to align itself with prevailing foreign policy imperatives in what is an increasingly kaleidoscopic and disparate world. This is an ineluctable fact, and the Government is right to take action now.

Whatever your view of the SDR, MoD and Treasury spats, leaked letters, and getting into bed with the French, most people should be able to agree on one thing. David Cameron and Liam Fox are incontrovertibly right to point out the disgrace that is Labour's toxic legacy and the mess Gordon Brown left behind. When the annual debt interest being paid by the UK would fund 300 helicopters and 13,000 extra troops, it is undeniable as to where real responsibility for defence cuts rests. Although it will take some time to undo Labour's failed legacy, a strong start has been made.