



# The Road to “Adaptability and Partnership”, the British Green Paper on Defence Policy

*A background review and analysis*

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**Defence R&D Canada**  
**Centre for Operational Research and Analysis**

Strategic Analysis Section



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## **Defence R&D Canada – CORA**

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## Abstract .....

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This paper provides an overview of the Labour government's defence policy since it assumed office in 1998 and up to the February 2010 publication of its Green Paper, entitled *Adaptability and Defence*. It reviews the background to the release of the Green Paper, including the continuing influence of some core assumptions carried over from the 1998 Strategic Defence Review, the ongoing debate over commitments and capabilities, and the growing concern about the state of Britain's public finances. It also summarizes the main arguments made in the Green Paper that the Labour Government believes must be considered in the upcoming review.

## Résumé .....

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Ce document donne un aperçu de la politique de défense du gouvernement Labour entre le début de sa législature en 1998 et février 2010, date de publication de son Livre vert intitulé *Adaptability and Defence*. Il expose le contexte de la publication de ce Livre vert, notamment l'influence continue qu'ont eue certaines hypothèses clés héritées de l'Examen stratégique de la défense de 1998, le débat permanent autour des engagements et des moyens ainsi que la préoccupation croissante à l'égard de la situation des finances publiques de la Grande-Bretagne. Il récapitule aussi les principaux arguments présentés dans le Livre vert qui, aux yeux du gouvernement Labour, doivent absolument être pris en compte dans le prochain examen.

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## Executive summary

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### The Road to "Adaptability and Partnership", the British Green Paper on Defence Policy: A background review and analysis

Ben Lombardi; DRDC CORA TM 2010-144; Defence R&D Canada – CORA; July 2010.

**Introduction or background:** This Technical Memorandum has been prepared in response to the February 2010 release of the British government's Green Paper on defence policy. Entitled "Adaptability and Partnership," the paper was generally viewed as the first step in an upcoming Strategic Defence Review (SDR) that is expected to begin shortly after the 2010 general election. This study examines the context within which the Green Paper was released, including an overview of the principles underlying the Labour Party's approach to defence policy.

**Results:** The research underlying the conclusions of this Technical Memorandum confirms that the next British government, of whatever political complexion, will face very significant questions in the formulation of a future defence policy. The overstretch of the British armed forces, as a result of decisions made about expenditure, overseas missions and procurement programmes, means that in the mid-term the current policy is not sustainable. There is general agreement across the political spectrum and among defence commentators in academe and industry that that is so. Initiating a comprehensive review of the current policy, with a view to balancing commitments and resources, will however demand a rigorous re-examination of the strategic objectives, many assumed, that animate defence and security policy.

**Significance:** Just as similarities to today's situation can be seen in earlier efforts by British governments to align resources and ambitions, the relevance of the upcoming review is obviously not restricted to a British audience. Much of the discussion in this Technical Memorandum will resonate with Canadian readers, particularly those in the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Forces, where concerns about ensuring an alignment of defence capabilities and commitments are often discussed. Like Britain and other key allies, Canada has been actively involved for much of the past decade in large, costly (in financial, but also human terms) and demanding expeditionary operations that automatically invite a consideration of national interests and ambitions. And, as most NATO member-states have discovered, the need to maintain public support for an ongoing operation has become increasingly difficult as a mission's objectives are not readily achieved. There is now in the UK, as in Canada, a new awareness that building and maintaining domestic support for defence policy demands more attention than was previously the experience of both countries. For these and other reasons, as the British government initiates its own strategic review, the process will almost certainly be followed in Canada.

**Future plans:** This Technical Memorandum will be followed by a second report examining the results of the strategic defence review that will be launched following the 2010 general election. The arguments and conclusions of this initial study will be tested against the decisions taken by the next British government when the upcoming SDR is published.

## Sommaire

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### The Road to "Adaptability and Partnership", the British Green Paper on Defence Policy: A background review and analysis

Ben Lombardi; DRDC CORA TM 2010-144; R & D pour la défense Canada – CARO; Juillet 2010.

**Introduction ou contexte:** Ce document technique a été préparé en écho à la publication, en février 2010, du Livre vert sur la politique de défense du gouvernement britannique. Intitulé « Adaptability and Partnership », ce document était généralement perçu comme la première étape d'un prochain Examen stratégique de la défense censé débiter peu de temps après les élections générales de 2010. La présente étude examine le contexte dans lequel ce Livre vert a été publié et passe en revue les principes sous-tendant la démarche du parti travailliste à l'égard de la politique de défense.

**Résultats:** Les travaux de recherche sur lesquels reposent les conclusions de ce document technique confirment que le nouveau gouvernement britannique, toutes tendances politiques confondues, va se trouver confronté à des questions extrêmement importantes concernant l'élaboration d'une future politique de défense. Les contraintes de plus en plus lourdes auxquelles sont soumises les forces armées britanniques et qui tiennent aux décisions prises en matière de dépenses, de missions à l'étranger et de programmes d'acquisition, vont conduire à ce que la politique actuelle ne soit plus viable à moyen terme. La classe politique et les commentateurs des questions de défense, dans le milieu universitaire comme dans l'industrie, s'accordent sur cette vision des choses. Toutefois, une réévaluation en profondeur de la politique de défense actuelle en vue d'établir un équilibre entre les engagements et les ressources va exiger un réexamen rigoureux des objectifs stratégiques qui, de l'avis de beaucoup de personnes, sous-tendent les politiques en matière de défense et de sécurité.

**Portée:** Tout comme l'on peut trouver dans la situation d'aujourd'hui des similitudes avec les premiers efforts consentis par les gouvernements britanniques pour aligner leurs ressources et leurs ambitions, il est évident qu'un prochain examen ne se limitera pas à des acteurs britanniques. L'essentiel des sujets de discussion qui figurent dans ce document technique interpellera également des lecteurs canadiens, et tout particulièrement ceux qui travaillent au ministère de la Défense nationale et au sein des Forces canadiennes et qui débattent souvent de la façon d'harmoniser les moyens de défense avec les engagements. À l'instar de la Grande-Bretagne et de ses autres alliés principaux, le Canada a, au cours de la dernière décennie, participé activement à nombre d'opérations expéditionnaires de grande ampleur, coûteuses (du point de vue financier, mais également en termes humains) et contraignantes qui ont automatiquement suscité l'examen des ambitions et des intérêts nationaux. En outre, le Canada a découvert, comme la plupart des pays membres de l'OTAN, qu'il était de plus en plus difficile de garder le soutien du public envers une opération en cours lorsque les objectifs de cette mission n'étaient pas rapidement atteints. Le Royaume-Uni, comme le Canada, a vu naître une nouvelle prise de conscience qui impose d'accorder plus d'attention qu'auparavant à la mise en place et à l'entretien d'un soutien national à la politique de défense. Pour ces raisons et bien d'autres encore, il est presque assuré que le processus qu'engagera le gouvernement britannique pour réaliser son propre examen stratégique sera aussitôt suivi par le Canada.

**Perspectives d'avenir:** Ce document technique sera suivi d'un second qui examinera les résultats de l'Examen stratégique de la défense engagé après les élections générales de 2010. Les arguments et les conclusions de cette première étude seront alors mis à l'épreuve des décisions prises par le nouveau gouvernement britannique lorsque cet examen stratégique aura été publié.

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# 1 Introduction

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In June 1952, amid a balance of payments crisis and a deepening Cold War, Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden presented the Churchill government with a memorandum on Britain's role in the world. Titled "British Overseas Obligations," the paper sought to "consider the tasks to which the United Kingdom is committed overseas and to examine where if anywhere our responsibilities can be reduced so as to bring them more into line with our available resources."<sup>1</sup> That type of stocktaking would seem eminently reasonable for any government. In postwar Britain, however, advocating such an accounting immediately meant a much broader consideration, for it entailed an agonizing reappraisal of the country's already reduced international posture. Eden was aware of the implications of the argument he was presenting:

The essence of a sound foreign policy is to ensure that a country's strength is equal to its obligations. If this is not the case, then either the obligations must be reduced to a level at which resources are available to maintain them, or a greater share of the country's resources must be devoted to their support. It is becoming clear that rigorous maintenance of the presently-accepted policies of Her Majesty's Government at home and abroad is placing a burden on the country's economy which it is beyond the resources of the country to meet. A position has already been reached where there is no reserve and therefore no margin for unforeseen additional obligations.

Eden's place in history was severely damaged by the debacle at Suez (1956) that suggested an inability to understand the scale of Britain's decline. Nevertheless, that blind spot was not at all evident in the paper he presented four years before. In the 1952 cabinet memorandum, Eden demonstrated a keen awareness, both of the discipline that should always characterize foreign and defence policy-making in a world where challenges to national interests are manifold, and of his country's strategic position in the wake of the Second World War.

Fifty-eight years later, a similar accounting seems about to get underway. In early-February 2010, the Labour government of Gordon Brown released a Green Paper on defence policy, entitled *Adaptability and Partnership; Issues for the Strategic Defence Review*.<sup>2</sup> That same day, the Ministry of Defence also published a report, *Future Character of Conflict*,<sup>3</sup> which attempts to explain the environment within which the armed forces are likely to be operating. Both reports flow from a July 2009 commitment made by the Secretary of State for Defence, Bob Ainsworth, that the government would initiate a comprehensive review of defence policy early in the new

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<sup>1</sup> CAB 129/53, C (52) 202, "Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs: Britain's Overseas Obligations," 18 June 1952. According to some historians, the immediate cause of the crisis Eden described in his memorandum was the "massive rearmament programme agreed to by the Labour government following the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950." The Conservatives under Winston Churchill inherited the programme and its economic costs when they assumed office in 1952. This is discussed in Kevin Ruane and James Ellison, "Managing the Americans: Anthony Eden, Harold MacMillan and the Pursuit of 'Power-by-Proxy' in the 1950s," Gaynor Johnson (ed.), *The Foreign Office and British Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century* (Routledge: London, 2005), pp. 147-149.

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Defence, *CMD 7794, Adaptability and Partnership: Issues for the Strategic Defence Review. Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Defence*, February 2010. Hereafter referred to as the *Green Paper*.

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Defence, *Strategic Trends Programme: Future Character of Conflict*, February 2010.

parliament (i.e., after the 2010 general election). The purpose of the review would be “to ensure that we develop and maintain armed forces appropriate to the challenges we face and the aims we set ourselves as a nation.” The Green Paper, Ainsworth stated, would consider:

- The strategic context for defence, including the lessons learnt from recent operations and the changing nature of conflict
- The experience of working in partnership with other arms of government;
- The contribution defence can make to the projection of soft power, including conflict prevention;
- The technological changes in defence;
- The scope for more effective processes in defence, in particular procurement; and,
- The modern day requirements on, and aspirations of, the UK’s armed forces personnel.

“The government’s current priority for the armed forces,” he noted in his statement to the House of Commons, “is to ensure they have the equipment and support they need for urgent operational requirements in Afghanistan.” However, he added, “in parallel, we must ensure the Armed Forces are fit for the challenges of tomorrow.”<sup>4</sup>

*Adaptability and Partnership* is a thought paper. It does not come to any conclusions or offer any policy prescriptions. Instead, it takes the form of reflections on the limitations of current approaches to defence policy, challenges a number of policy assumptions, and suggests a variety of subject areas that require elaboration and further consideration. Its general purpose is to set some parameters for a serious discussion inside government, and within the country’s security policy community, on defence issues. When he presented it in the House of Commons on 3 February 2010, Ainsworth described the Green Paper in the same terms he had used the previous July: it is paving the way for the completion of a new strategic defence review – the last one dating from 1998.<sup>5</sup> In that speech, he noted that the process of drafting had allowed the government to reach two overarching conclusions that expand upon the document’s title. First, that the process of reforming the armed forces so that they can respond to “new and unforeseen challenges” must be accelerated, an observation rooted no doubt in the British experience in both Iraq and Afghanistan. “We need to be more adaptable,” Ainsworth stated, “in how we structure, equip, train, and generate our armed forces. We need a more agile defence organization, and we need more responsive strategic planning.”<sup>6</sup> The second conclusion is that Britain needs to further develop partnerships with key allies and security organizations. This is, of course, not a new argument: Anthony Eden observed in his 1952 memorandum that partnerships often have a multiplier effect, and that is particularly relevant when resources are constrained and the political environment is far from certain.

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<sup>4</sup> House of Commons, *Hansard*, 7 July 2009, 39-40WS.

<sup>5</sup> House of Commons, *Hansard*, 3 February 2010, Column 303.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

Just as similarities to today's situation can be seen in earlier efforts by British governments to align resources and ambitions, the relevance of the upcoming review is obviously not restricted to a British audience. Much of the discussion will resonate with Canadian readers, where concerns about ensuring an alignment of defence capabilities and commitments are often discussed in both academic and policy-making circles. Like Britain and other key allies, Canada has been actively involved for much of the past decade in large, costly (in financial, but also human terms) and demanding expeditionary operations that automatically invite a consideration of national interests and ambitions. And, as most NATO member-states have discovered, the need to maintain public support for an ongoing operation has become increasingly difficult as a mission's objectives are not readily achieved. There is now in the UK, as in Canada, a new awareness that building and maintaining domestic support for defence policy demands more attention than was previously the experience of both countries. For these and other reasons, as the British government initiates its own strategic review, the process will almost certainly be followed beyond the shores of the "sceptred isle."

## 2 Background

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Why is a comprehensive review of Britain's defence policy necessary? What is the context within which *Adaptability and Partnership* has been released? There are various answers to these questions. First, there are the immediate political considerations of the current government. In the run-up to the general election, scheduled for 6 May 2010, the Green Paper is being presented by the Labour government of Gordon Brown, whose focus has largely been domestic, as a serious commitment to a sound defence policy. Buffeted by funding scandals, a series of challenges to Brown's leadership, and lagging in opinion polling as the election draws near, the Labour Party knows that it is also vulnerable in the areas of defence and security. Broad criticism of its participation in the US-led war in Iraq and the seemingly endless conflict in Afghanistan<sup>7</sup> have undermined the consensus on British defence policy that predated the 1998 SDR.<sup>8</sup> For their supporters, both missions can find ample justification: dealing with a serious terrorism threat and by supporting the US, Britain's chief ally, in toppling a regime threatened the stability of the Middle East region. For their detractors, however, both missions, but particularly the invasion of Iraq, were viewed as wrongheaded from the start. And for some critics, far from advancing British interests, the two overseas missions, again especially Iraq, have worsened the security of the United Kingdom. In a recent article in *Survival*, military historian Hew Strachan has derided the lack of independent strategic thinking in British defence policy:

Many of the side effects of the global "war on terror", the invasion of Iraq, and the folly of undertaking the invasion before the campaign in Afghanistan was over, were anticipated at least by some in London. But they were not given proper attention, not just because of an undue deference to a mighty ally but also because there was no appetite for independent and robust thinking on strategy.<sup>9</sup>

The argument that the government did not carefully consider the likely strategic costs and benefits before embarking on the two most prominent overseas missions, if true, is damning. Such criticism is nonetheless magnified by the damaging claims that the armed forces are over-stretched, cash-starved and significantly under-equipped. The explanation for this situation could well be "structural weaknesses in the defence policy process" that predate current operations, including changes to the Ministry of Defence's accounting rules.<sup>10</sup> Regardless of the source of the problem, ongoing operational demands have certainly exacerbated it and increased the political liability to the government. Recent revelations that

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<sup>7</sup> In one poll, taken in 2007, only 17 percent of Britons supported Tony Blair's policy on Iraq. See "Britons Blast Blair, Bush for Iraq War," *Angus Reid Global Monitor*, 26 May 2007 [accessed at <http://www.angus-reid.com/polls/view/15868>]. Attitudes toward the war in Afghanistan have always been more positive, although support remains far below 50 percent. An increase in support in early-2010, from 35 to 38 percent, might have been due to the initial positive results of the US surge that began in January. See "Most Britons Still Oppose Afghan Mission," *Angus Reid Global Monitor*, 25 February 2010 [accessed at [http://www.angus-reid.com/polls/view/most\\_britons\\_still\\_oppose\\_afghan\\_mission/](http://www.angus-reid.com/polls/view/most_britons_still_oppose_afghan_mission/)].

<sup>8</sup> See Michael Codner, "British Defence Policy – Rebuilding National Consensus," *RUSI Journal*, April 2007, pp. 18-23.

<sup>9</sup> Hew Strachan, "The Strategic Gap in British Defence Policy," *Survival*, Vol. 51, No. 4, August-September 2009, p.52.

<sup>10</sup> I am grateful to Professor Timothy Edmunds and Dr. Jeffrey Bradford for this observation.

the service chiefs threatened to resign in response to defence budget cuts urged by Gordon Brown when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer under Tony Blair,<sup>11</sup> and charges that British troops have regularly lacked necessary equipment,<sup>12</sup> have further challenged the government's claim that it takes defence seriously.<sup>13</sup>

The government has, therefore, been forced to find a means of rebutting the charge that its stewardship of defence policy has been and is fundamentally flawed. The Green Paper, the drafting of which was assisted by a non-partisan Defence Advisory Panel,<sup>14</sup> is its response. It is a calculated effort by the Brown government to reshape the landscape in this crucial policy area in the run-up to the general election. At worst, the report might only minimize the damage that could be created by a bruising debate on defence during the election campaign: at best, it might serve to neutralize the impact of such criticism by referring to the all-party commitment to the upcoming SDR of which the Green Paper is the first stage. Regardless of the document's relevance in the post-election period, and even the parliamentary opposition have been complimentary of its content, the publication of the Green Paper was a canny political move that effectively delays any controversial decisions on defence until after the new parliament has been elected.

It is nonetheless important to recognize that there is more at stake than just the immediate political considerations of a beleaguered government. Given that twelve years have passed since the last SDR, a comprehensive examination of British defence policy is generally acknowledged to be long overdue. As Anthony Eden noted in terms that would be completely understandable to his modern day successors, it is all about securing a balance between commitments and resources, and considering whether or not the current approach to defence policy is sustainable. For many of their critics, the two Labour governments have sought to pursue a champagne policy on a beer budget. The charge of under-funding defence is, of course, old hat in postwar British politics: Winston Churchill claimed the Atlee government was leaving Britain unprotected even when defence spending was near 10 percent of GDP (a record in peacetime); and Margaret Thatcher attacked the commitment of her opponents to maintaining viable armed forces even as she reduced defence spending to levels lower than that of the previous Labour governments. However, by publishing *Adaptability and Partnership*, and indeed committing itself to a strategic defence review, the government has

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<sup>11</sup> House of Commons, *Hansard*, 3 February 2010, Column 306.

<sup>12</sup> This was especially evident to senior commanders when British troops deployed with US forces into combat zones. Lawrence Freedman, "Defence Policy," Anthony Seldon (ed.), *Blair's Britain, 1997-2007* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 631.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Richard Norton Taylor, "British troops 'lack equipment' to avoid friendly fire," *The Guardian*, 1 May 2007, Michael Evans, "Coroners blame soldiers' deaths on an acute lack of equipment," *The Times (London)*, 16 February 2008, and James Kirkup, "British troops being let down by lack of spare parts for helicopters," *The Daily Telegraph*, 13 October 2009.

<sup>14</sup> In acknowledging the need for a comprehensive rethinking of defence policy, the government was assisted in the drafting of the Green Paper by a Defence Advisory Panel composed of three academics (Colin S. Gray, Malcolm Chalmers and Mary Kaldor), two representatives of industry (Sir John Parker and Paul Skinner), a retired civil servant (Sir David Omand), a retired senior military officer (Sir Rupert Smith), a former ambassador (Sir David Manning), a well-known political journalist (Philip Stephens) and two opposition members of Parliament (Sir Menzies Campbell and Nicholas Soames). Officials in the Defence Ministry held the pen and thus determined the document's final shape, but it is clear from comments, by both commentators and parliamentarians, that the Defence Advisory Panel had considerable input.

essentially conceded that there is now a very serious problem that must be addressed. There is “no choice but change for Britain’s armed forces” was the title of a thoughtful article by two prominent Liberal-Democrats that was published in the April 2009 edition of the *RUSI Journal*.<sup>15</sup> The current Labour leadership would now seem to agree, although one can speculate that it might not have been so willing had an election not been looming.

On one level, it is a question of history, and whether the ambitious defence policy that the Blair and Brown governments have followed since the 1998 SDR has obtained an adequate share of government resources. “The critical situation our armed forces face,” Dr. Liam Fox, the shadow defence secretary argued in early-2008, “is the inevitable result of Labour’s failure to match commitments with resources.”<sup>16</sup> The figures for government expenditure would seem to lend credence to Fox’s charge. Projected defence spending put forward by the SDR saw a reduction of £900 million (CDN\$1.56 billion) by 2001-02. Under Labour, and despite the high profile foreign missions for which the armed forces have been deployed, defence has not received the attention other areas of government activity have. Between 1998 and 2008, for example, British defence-related expenditure rose 19 percent in real terms, while spending on social programmes increased by a much larger factor: public order and safety by 50 percent, education by 63 percent, and the health service by 85 percent. However, the figure of 19 percent for defence-related expenditure is misleading since most of the real increase went to funding ongoing operations (£4.5 billion or CDN\$8.9 billion to 2008). The actual real increase to core defence expenditure from 1998 to 2008, which includes training, personnel, infrastructure and capital equipment, was only five percent (or an average of 0.5 percent annually).<sup>17</sup> This is an insignificant sum when the inevitable cost overruns on new equipment are taken into consideration. And, even Labour admits that there were some years when the defence budget saw a reduction in real spending.<sup>18</sup> During Tony Blair’s premiership (1997 to 2007) it declined from 2.6 to 2.4 percent of GDP, which is approximately the amount spent today (i.e., 2.3 percent of GDP in 2009).<sup>19</sup> The small increases in core funding, alongside the frequent annual reductions that Gordon Brown until recently denied, have led to heated public exchanges with the current government by a former Secretary of State for Defence, Geoffrey Hoon, and two former chiefs of the defence staff, General Lord Guthrie and Admiral Lord Boyce.<sup>20</sup> This focus on defence expenditure has certainly damaged the government’s credibility. Perhaps most telling for analysts of British policy, the imbalance in favour of

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<sup>15</sup> Menzies Campbell and Ben Jones, “No Choice but change for Britain’s armed forces,” *RUSI Journal*, April 2009, pp. 42-48.

<sup>16</sup> Iain Martin, “Britain’s defence spending is a disgrace,” *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 February 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Malcolm Chalmers, “Preparing for Lean Years,” *Future Defence Review: Working Paper Number 1* (Royal United Services Institute, July 2009), p.2

<sup>18</sup> The Labour government’s record of defence spending itself has become a political issue following Gordon Brown’s claim before the Chilcot Inquiry into the Iraq War that defence spending had increased in real terms every year that he had been either Chancellor of the Exchequer or Prime Minister. In mid-March 2010, he was forced to issue a retraction in the House of Commons. The reaction by the UK media was yet more scorn for the prime minister. James Kirkup, “Gordon Brown admits: I was wrong on defence spending,” *The Daily Telegraph*, 17 March 2010 and “PM admits his mistake on defence spending,” *The Telegraph*, 24-30 March 2010.

<sup>19</sup> HM Treasury, *Trends in Public Sector Expenditure* [accessed at [www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/5\(5\).pdf](http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/5(5).pdf)].

<sup>20</sup> See Jonathon Oliver, “Now Geoff Hoon savages Gordon Brown over Afghanistan war,” *The Sunday Times*, 10 January 2010, and Helene Mulholland, “Lord Guthrie renews attack on Gordon Brown’s spending record,” *The Guardian*, 10 March 2010.

domestic programme spending occurred while the country was waging two major overseas wars.

On an even broader plain, *Adaptability and Partnership* has been published amid unease about the state of public finances. A late-March 2010 editorial in *The Economist* asserted that “the dire state of the economy is the biggest issue in the minds of disgruntled voters in the run-up to the election.”<sup>21</sup> And if the assessment of Britain’s economic prospects by that venerable magazine was cautiously optimistic, the situation is nonetheless acknowledged as extremely challenging. In his December 2009 Pre-Budget Report, Chancellor of the Exchequer Alistair Darling indicated that Britain could be heading toward a government deficit in 2009-10 of £177.6 billion (or CDN\$307 billion).<sup>22</sup> In the budget he delivered in late-March 2010, he reduced that enormous figure by £10 billion (or CDN\$15.6 billion), and he continued to predict a substantive reduction in public sector borrowing only beginning in 2014. His forecast is, however, dependent on high rates of economic growth that might not be attainable. Such enormous deficits, amounting to 12.6 percent of GDP, would be the highest of any OECD or G20 economy, and more than four times what has been agreed by EU members as acceptable.<sup>23</sup> (By contrast, the Greek government, facing national bankruptcy, has a deficit of 12.2 percent of GDP.) According to Darling, the increase in Britain’s national debt as a percentage of GDP will go from 55.6 percent in 2009 to 65.4 percent in 2011 which is also worrying, as it threatens the government’s long-term fiscal stability.<sup>24</sup> Britain’s public finances have, as a consequence, drawn the ire of the European Commission, and the concerns of Moody’s Investors Service: the former stating that the deficit reduction plans “lack ambition”<sup>25</sup> and the latter warning that Britain’s AAA rating is now in jeopardy unless remedial measures are taken.<sup>26</sup> Given all these pressures, it is generally accepted that severe restraints will be needed to restore the British economy.

Given these pressures, many analysts believe that severe restraints will be needed to restore the British economy. The timing of the restraints is, of course, uncertain, but it seems likely that they will be a common feature of the life of the next parliament. While Brown has declared that government spending must be reviewed, he also already stated that reductions in spending on health, law enforcement and education programmes are off-limits. The Conservative leader, David Cameron, has declared restoring the country’s finances will be a priority should he attain public office. Regardless of which party should form the next government, both Labour and Conservative leaders acknowledge that cuts in public spending must be made. Brown’s stated desire to protect health, law enforcement and education spending will obviously put greater pressure on defence than a Conservative government might be willing to accept, but a substantive reduction in Britain’s defence expenditure will probably happen even if Cameron’s party wins. How large the cuts to defence are likely to be is, at this stage, only guesswork. Unless the government can find savings in other areas, they

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<sup>21</sup> “Out of the ruins,” *The Economist*, 27 March 2010.

<sup>22</sup> HM Treasury. *Pre-Budget Report: The Public Finances*, December 2009, p. 170 [accessed at [www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/prebud\\_pbr09\\_repindex.htm](http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/prebud_pbr09_repindex.htm)].

<sup>23</sup> “Budget 2010: EU calls for faster UK deficit cuts,” *BBC News*, 16 March 2010.

<sup>24</sup> HM Treasury, *Pre-Budget Report: The Public Finances*, pp. 188-189.

<sup>25</sup> Rosa Prince and James Kirkup, “Plan to cut deficit not good enough, says Europe,” *The Telegraph*, 24-30 March 2010.

<sup>26</sup> Matthew Brown, “US, UK Move Closer to Losing rating, Moody’s Says,” *Bloomberg.com*, 15 March 2010.

will probably be substantial, especially as the Defence Ministry's budget is one of the most investment intensive. Malcolm Chalmers, a member of the Green Paper's Defence Advisory Panel, has argued that if defence's current and capital budgets are reduced in accordance with the plans for the rest of the government (as announced in the 2009 budget), expenditure would likely decline by 6.8 percent between 2010 and 2014.<sup>27</sup> Michael Clarke, the director the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), has estimated that defence spending could be reduced by as much as 10 to 16 percent between 2010 and 2016.<sup>28</sup> Such figures would represent an enormous hit that would require a scaling back of both overseas commitments and general capabilities. As one analyst has noted, the size of the deficit means that even if the economy "recovers its pre-crisis growth rate, a prolonged period of austerity in public expenditure (including defence) now appears inevitable."<sup>29</sup>

The impact on defence expenditure is already being felt, although the government is attempting to disguise the cut in spending it has already imposed. The unprecedented decision in late-2009 to provide £900 million (or CDN\$1.6 billion) in funding over three years for the Afghan operation from the core defence budget rather than the Treasury's contingency reserve represents a significant claw-back.<sup>30</sup> Ainsworth has defended that decision as a means of ensuring that the troops in the field have the equipment they need to undertake the mission they are committed to. However, a "robbing Peter to save Paul" strategy for defence spending does little to ensure the long-term viability of the country's overall defence capability. In the long-term, such an approach is quite obviously unsustainable. According to a March 2010 report on procurement prepared by the House of Commons Defence Committee, the Defence Ministry is facing a funding gap of £36 billion (or CDN\$56.2 billion) over the next ten years with an additional £2.2 billion (or CDN\$3.4 billion) in "frictional costs" (i.e., programme delays) annually.<sup>31</sup> Given the large capital equipment acquisitions that have long been planned (involving approximately 14 percent of projected expenditure), and that one analyst has estimated would require an increase in expenditure of up to four percent annually, it seems likely that some if not all of these platforms (e.g., *Queen Elizabeth*-class aircraft carriers, the Eurofighter *Typhoon*,<sup>32</sup> the Airbus A400M transport aircraft, and the *Astute*-class submarine) will be somewhat vulnerable, either through cancellations, reductions or delays. Possibly just as exposed is the budget for research and development where the government already

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<sup>27</sup> Malcolm Chalmers, "Preparing for Lean Years," p. 7.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Clarke, "Defence Cuts: Something is going to give," *RUSI Commentary* [accessed on 9 March 2010 at [www.rusi.org/go.php?structureID=commentary&ref=C4B28AC1602813](http://www.rusi.org/go.php?structureID=commentary&ref=C4B28AC1602813)].

<sup>29</sup> Malcolm Chalmers, "Preparing for Lean Years," p. 2

<sup>30</sup> House of Commons, *Hansard*, 3 February 2010, Column 307. See also the 29 November 2009 testimony of Bob Ainsworth before the House of Commons Defence Committee: "...I think out of a budget of £35 billion we can move some money towards Afghanistan and improve, therefore, the support we are giving to our troops without undermining, I am hoping, any of those big strategic decisions that it would be inappropriate to take outside of the proper intellectual rigor that there needs to be for an SDR." House of Commons Defence Committee, *Readiness and Recuperation of the Armed Forces: looking toward the Strategic Defence Review, Fourth Report of Session 2009-10* (10 February 2010), p. Ev.62.

<sup>31</sup> Matthew Bell. "UK report slams MoD procurement," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 10 March 2010. For example, the cost of delaying the acquisition of the new aircraft carriers "by one and two years respectively was in the order of £700 million." See House of Commons Defence Committee, *Defence Equipment 2010; Sixth Report of Session 2009-2010*, Evidence: Memorandum from the Ministry of Defence, Ev. 99.

<sup>32</sup> It is rumored that the Eurofighter Tranche 3 has a contract that is iron clad (i.e., cannot be broken without severely punitive penalties). I am grateful to Dr. Jeffrey Bradford for this.

announced in September 2009 a cut of nearly 20 percent or £105 million (or CDN\$187 million) over two years.<sup>33</sup> Yet savings are likely to be rather slim with regard to large ticket items, such as procurement, if only because of investment already made and contractual obligations and/or penalties. While it is conceivable that both might still be hit by a range of cuts, a government looking to make rapid savings could turn to personnel, and thereby reduce the overall size of the armed forces.<sup>34</sup> “Given the state of public finances,” a December 2009 editorial in the *Financial Times* stated, “there will be major cuts in military spending in the next few years. But it is essential that Britain decides what kind of defence posture it wants – and with what allies – before it makes long-term spending decisions.”<sup>35</sup>

As a result of these constraints, many analysts, both foreign and domestic, have argued that British defence policy is in a crisis situation. In a recent article, Paul Cornish and Andrew Dorman have described defence policy, planning and analysis in Great Britain as having reached “a state of organizational, bureaucratic and intellectual decay”:

Financially, the government is struggling to reconcile current operational costs with projected expenditure on a range of very large defence acquisition projects and to do so while a deep economic recession looms. [...] Britain’s armed forces are operationally overstretched and there is widespread concern among military professionals that the tempo of commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq might be exhausting the capacity and traditionally indomitable spirit of the armed forces, perhaps causing lasting damage.<sup>36</sup>

Michael Clarke has described British defence policy as “a slow motion road accident, while it waits for the political wheel to turn and give it some strategic direction.”<sup>37</sup> A recent analysis published by the Zurich-based Centre for Security Studies even argues that the upcoming review recalls the situation faced by the Labour government in 1968 when it announced the cancellation of security commitments and the withdrawal of all British forces from east of Suez.<sup>38</sup> Regardless of the precision of such analyses, there is general agreement that British defence policy is at a watershed, and that the policy’s underlying assumptions must now be subjected to a very serious scrutiny. The ability to do so could also be a considerable challenge, according to Cornish and Dorman, due to the downsizing of the Defence Ministry, loss of corporate memory, and the general weakening of the security policy community in Great Britain (similar, one assumes, to what Canada has long experienced).<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Amy Wilson, “Government to cut UK defence research by £100 million,” *The Daily Telegraph*, 6 September 2009.

<sup>34</sup> I am grateful to Professor Timothy Edmunds for this observation.

<sup>35</sup> “UK Defence Policy,” *The Financial Times*, 15 December 2009.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Cornish and Andrew Dorman, “Blair’s Wars and Brown’s Budgets: from Strategic Defence Review to strategic decay in less than a decade,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 2, 2009, p. 261.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Clarke, “Defence Cuts: Something is going to give”.

<sup>38</sup> Aleksandra Dier, “British Defence at a Crossroads: east of Suez Revisited?,” *CSS Analyses in Security Policy*, No. 64, November 2009, p. 1.

<sup>39</sup> The argument has also been made by senior British generals, including a former Assistant Chief of the Defence Staff, that the focus on operational requirements has undermined the capacity of Britain’s officers corps to think about strategy. See Paul Newton, Paul Colley and Andrew Sharpe, “Reclaiming the Art of British Strategic Thinking,” *RUSI Journal*, February/March 2010, pp. 44-51.

If the Labour government is not willing (or is not politically able) to go so far as to agree with an “east of Suez” scenario, both it and the Conservative opposition have nonetheless acknowledged that defence policy must undergo a fundamental re-examination. In a February 2010 speech at RUSI, Liam Fox reasserted his party’s commitment to a broader Security and Defence Strategic Review that will be carried out “ruthlessly and without sentiment.”<sup>40</sup> Labour party leaders seem to understand the situation similarly. “Let us be clear – change is needed,” Ainsworth noted with less rhetorical flourish than Fox in the House of Commons, “and there will be some tough and important decisions ahead.” Interestingly, the wording of *Adaptability and Partnership* is far more stark, asserting that the upcoming SDR must be able to drive radical change:

We cannot proceed with all the activities and programmes we currently aspire to, while simultaneously supporting our current operations and investing in the new capabilities we need. We will need to make tough decisions – based on a clear understanding of our interests and the role of the Armed Forces in protecting them.<sup>41</sup>

It remains unclear, however, if that re-think will be policy- and interest-led or if it will be largely dictated by financial exigencies. In 1998, the SDR was, in theory, foreign policy-led. Today, the pressures imposed by the country’s financial situation and the growing costs associated with technologically advanced modern armed forces is likely to constrain even further any effort to implement such an approach. Indeed, there is a concern that unless it is preceded by a review of Britain’s international policy, a task naturally led by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the SDR could be little more than an exercise to justify reductions in defence expenditure.<sup>42</sup> More to the point, the timing of the SDR’s completion, at the earliest some months after the next election, suggests that budgetary priorities of the government will be established before any consideration is given to strategic defence needs or aims.

Radically changing Britain’s defence policy invites the possibility that the country’s global profile will be substantively transformed. “We must determine the global role we wish to play,” *Adaptability and Partnership* states,

[a]nd the resources we are willing to dedicate to them. This Government believes that the UK’s interests are best served by continuing to play an active global role, including through the use of armed force when required.<sup>43</sup>

That assessment is likely to prevail in some form in the upcoming SDR. And, indeed, neither Ainsworth, nor the Green Paper, addressed the question of whether or not the British public would be prepared to accept a reduced international footprint. And there is some evidence, not entirely conclusive, to suggest that current approaches to maintaining Britain’s global profile might be more elite-driven than is generally supposed. An April 2010 public opinion survey published by RUSI indicates that the public continues to believe that British interests are “best

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<sup>40</sup> Dr. Liam Fox, “The Strategic Defence and Security Review: A Conservative View of Defence and Future Challenges.” Speech delivered at RUSI, Whitehall, London, 10 February 2010 [accessed at [www.rusi.org/events/ref:E4B62C2FEC5252](http://www.rusi.org/events/ref:E4B62C2FEC5252)].

<sup>41</sup> Green Paper, p. 9.

<sup>42</sup> Correspondence with Canadian official, April 2010.

<sup>43</sup> Green Paper, p. 9.

served by maintaining a special relationship with the US,”<sup>44</sup> and that undoubtedly puts some pressure on defence planners to fashion a policy that will allow Washington to continue to see the UK as a valuable and effective ally. And a smaller margin (53 percent) believes that the security benefits of the Trident nuclear deterrent system – that both Labour and the Conservatives support – outweigh the economic costs.<sup>45</sup> Surprisingly, however, a vast majority (87.8 percent) of those asked agreed or strongly agreed that “the UK needs a radical reassessment of the position it wants, and is able, to play in the world.”<sup>46</sup> Some political leaders have already urged a substantive change to British foreign and security policy. The Liberal-Democrats have argued that Britain pursue greater integration in a new European defence community as a solution. “There is a need to start ‘thinking the unthinkable’,” Sir Menzies Campbell and Ben Jones have argued, “and looking at all options no matter how unpalatable they may be to the national psyche.”<sup>47</sup>

Others will have difficulty with that type of change. Britain has never traditionally seen itself as just another European country. The notion of a “special relationship” with Washington (a claim that does not always seem warranted), leadership in the Commonwealth, London as an international financial hub, permanent membership in the Security Council, possession of overseas territories, global trading interests, modern capable armed forces, and an “independent” nuclear deterrent, have all contributed to the national self-image as a leading global Power. It would seem that even if, as Lawrence Freedman argued before the previous SDR, there were good reasons for Britain not to get involved in overseas problems, such thinking is not consistent with the country’s strategic culture.<sup>48</sup> Nor is it restricted to one or the other side of the political spectrum. One finds this perspective not only in government policy statements, but also in the thinking of its Conservative opposition.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, during the parliamentary exchange that followed the presentation of the Green Paper in February 2010, one Conservative member obtained the agreement of the Labour government’s Defence Minister that it was not the time for an “east of Suez retrenchment of the United Kingdom under financial pressures.”<sup>50</sup> Retreating to “the goal line,” to use Ainsworth’s metaphor, would represent for many a repudiation of Britain’s traditional global role. Nevertheless, if Britain does indeed intend to continue to “punch above its weight,” then a new set of guidelines will be necessary. It seems inescapable that the establishment of priorities, entailing a (potentially contentious) alignment of resources and ambitions, will flow from the upcoming review.

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<sup>44</sup> “The British Defence and Security Election Survey,” *RUSI Occasional Paper*, April 2010, p. 3.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, p. 4.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, p. 2.

<sup>47</sup> Menzies Campbell and Ben Jones, “No Choice but change for Britain’s armed forces,” *RUSI Journal*, April 2009, pp. 43.

<sup>48</sup> Lawrence Freedman, “The Defence Review – International Policy Options,” *RUSI Journal*, August 1997, p. 40.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Conservative Party, “A Resilient Nation; National Security Green Paper,” *Policy Green Paper No. 13* (2009), p. 5.

<sup>50</sup> House of Commons, *Hansard*, 4 February 2010, Column 311.

### 3 The Legacy of Tony Blair – the SDR (1998)

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When Gordon Brown assumed the premiership in June 2007, some observers expected that his government would soon after issue a new white paper on defence policy, if only to address budgetary concerns. Confronted by the demands of ongoing operations, the pressures on public spending from new social programmes, and tensions between government and the senior ranks of the armed forces, a new set of defence planning assumptions was assumed to be one of Brown's priorities. Moreover, there was a broad range of commentators urging the government to move in that direction. That expectation was, however, inconsistent with the new prime minister's own set of priorities. Never really interested in defence policy, Brown probably did not fully grasp the armed forces' situation when he assumed the premiership.<sup>51</sup> As a result, no new defence white paper document was released and there is no indication that one was ever seriously contemplated. Instead, in March 2008, the government issued the country's first National Security Strategy,<sup>52</sup> and followed that up in June 2009 with an updated version.<sup>53</sup> Both strategy documents sought to explain the security challenges that Great Britain faced, placing an emphasis on the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the existence of failed states and the threat of terrorism, as well as non-traditional issues such as environmental security. However, neither the March 2008 nor the June 2009 security strategy documents made any linkage between the threats and military capabilities or force structure requirements.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, despite the departure of Tony Blair from public office nearly three years ago, *Adaptability and Partnership* is by default a response to his legacy. His understanding of the role of foreign and defence policy in the post-Cold War era, and the Strategic Defence Review (1998) that gave expression to those views, have guided the approach to defence policy since Labour came to power in 1997.

Indeed, the process that led to the SDR began shortly after the 1997 election. The product of a generally open process, involving broad consultations and expert advice from people outside of government, the SDR sought to modernize British defence policy by integrating the various instruments of national power within a single set of policy guidelines. However, the SDR did not begin from scratch, accepting a number of basic assumptions that were carried over from the Conservative era and that the Labour leadership had, by the late-1990s, come to accept. Britain was understood to be a major global player. NATO remained the key alliance for the country and the foundation of European security. The British armed forces were accepted as a core component of any international policy, and that strong conventional forces (not a gendarmerie) were, therefore, necessary. And, surprisingly given Labour's long-time unilateralist approach to Britain's strategic deterrent, the *Trident* programme had to be retained. These assumptions represented the starting block from which the SDR proceeded: but they also imposed definite limitations on subsequent efforts to revisit the policy in light of international developments and might have constrained any effort by Blair's successor to

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<sup>51</sup> See Andrew Rawnsley, *End of the Party; The Rise and Fall of New Labour* (London: Viking, 2010).

<sup>52</sup> Cabinet Office, *The National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom: Security in an interdependent world* (March 2008).

<sup>53</sup> Cabinet Office, *The National Security of the United Kingdom: Update 2009, Security for the next generation* (June 2009).

<sup>54</sup> Claire Taylor, *Strategic Defence Review Green Paper: Preliminary Observations* (House of Commons Library Research Paper, 11 February 2010), pp. 3-5.

make real changes when he assumed office. Doing so would, after all, have raised serious questions about much of the government's international record.

If the SDR did not begin with a blank sheet, it nonetheless represented a significant departure from what had preceded it. A paper prepared by the research staff at the House of Commons Library noted that Blair's inclination "toward a more interventionist set of foreign policies has had a fundamental impact on both the direction of defence policy and on the role and nature of the British armed forces."<sup>55</sup> Such a conclusion is well-supported by the historical record that saw Blair authorise the deployment of the armed forces on contingent operations more frequently than any other prime minister since the Second World War.<sup>56</sup> The Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major had also mentioned Britain's global responsibilities, and had long asserted that the armed forces were a necessary component in international policy. Under their watch, Britain had deployed forces to the 1990 Gulf War, as well as to UN and NATO operations in Bosnia. But decisions to participate often seemed arbitrary, with Whitehall not becoming involved in Rwanda, Somalia, Zaire or in the 1996 crisis off Taiwan. The Conservative government never established a set of clear guidelines to determine when, where and under what circumstances British forces would undertake overseas missions. During the last years of the Major government, defence policy even appeared to be drifting. The post-Cold War peace dividend had led to significant cuts in the armed forces, with the result that by the late 1990s the "forces were clearly stretched and probably overstretched, with gaps between operational tours too short. Morale and recruitment were low."<sup>57</sup> The Labour Party under Tony Blair took advantage of the fact that for the first time since Thatcher had won the 1979 election, the Conservatives were vulnerable on defence. And, indeed, the absence of any debate on defence in the 1997 election suggested that the public recognized that the sorts of changes Labour was proposing were necessary.<sup>58</sup> In the view of Labour's supporters, therefore, the 1998 SDR was a long overdue response to the challenges of the post-Cold War environment.

When political journalist Timothy Garton Ash asked Tony Blair what the essence of his foreign policy was, the former premier responded by stating that it was "liberal internationalism."<sup>59</sup> Drawing upon an older British tradition that dates from the late-nineteenth century, events of the 1990s reinforced for Blair and his supporters a belief in the rightness and efficacy of such a policy. Its motivations were varied, and many of its assumptions predated the accession to power of Labour under Blair. A perception that globalization permits misery and instability from unstable countries and zones to leak into a broader geography, thereby possibly threatening Western interests, was a basic assumption that informed the policy.<sup>60</sup> Security at home, therefore, logically requires security abroad.<sup>61</sup> The profound

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<sup>55</sup> Claire Taylor and Tom Waldman, *British Defence Policy since 1997* (House of Commons Library Research Paper, 27 June 2008), p. 9.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Colin McInnes, "Labour's Strategic Defence Review," *International Affairs*, Vol. 74, No.4, October 1998, p. 827.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 829.

<sup>59</sup> Timothy Garton Ash, "Commentary," Anthony Seldon (ed.), *Blair's Britain, 1997-2007* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 633.

<sup>60</sup> Lawrence Freedman, "The Transformation of Strategic Affairs," *Adelphi Paper* 379, April 2006, p. 32.

optimism (now largely forgotten) that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Union and the victory of the Western world in the Cold War was another. And the feeling that something had to be done to address the numerous conflicts and gross human rights abuses that followed in the wake of the Cold War and that were receiving widespread media coverage, was a third influence. All such inputs contributed to the development of the idea of humanitarian intervention. The traditional concept of sovereignty that implied non-interference in the internal affairs of other states was set aside. The belief took hold that the armed forces, rather than just an unfortunate necessity, could be a liberating force in global affairs. That military power in the post-Cold War era could primarily do good in world affairs, to right wrongs through wars of choice rather than only engage in wars of survival, was enthusiastically embraced. This was later to be captured in the UN report, *Responsibility to Protect*, but such thinking predominated in the Labour Party of the 1990s by appealing to its traditional internationalism. The influence that this outlook had was probably magnified by the fact that not a single Labour member of parliament had a service background after the 1997 general election.<sup>62</sup> None of the party's leaders had any first-hand experience with the complexity, the costs or the uncertainties that always impacted upon military operations.

Given this worldview, the 1998 SDR's strategic outlook was founded upon three basic tenets that have since characterized Labour's defence policy. First, the traditional distinction between a values-based and an interest-based foreign policy was asserted to be misleading for the two are viewed as inextricably intertwined. "Our values represent humanity's progress throughout the ages," Blair noted in November 1997, adding that "at each point we have had to fight for them. [...] As a new age beckons, it is time to fight for them again."<sup>63</sup> Normative issues, no longer defined by territorial borders, assumed a more elevated position than had otherwise been possible when the threat posed by an aggressive Great Power adversary laid primary claim to the government's attention and resources. When the SDR was first presented in 1998, Defence Minister George Robertson (later the NATO Secretary General) argued that the protection of national rights and interests remained a core mandate of the armed forces, but he emphasized that meeting international responsibilities was an equally important consideration.<sup>64</sup>

Second, it was argued that Britain must use its defence policy to position itself so as to act as a facilitator for the forces of good. In a November 1997 speech, Blair outlined a policy whereby a proactive Britain would use its power and influence to advance the values it shared with the United States, the European Union and the Commonwealth. The role was not only to build consensus, but rather to activate coalitions of likeminded Powers to advance a positive agenda. Alongside using the armed forces to conduct defence diplomacy (i.e., "showing the flag," encouraging security sector reform, as well as operations short of combat to prevent or defuse crises), Britain would use its strength to help mobilize the Western world's resources to meet global challenges.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> This argument is explicit in the SDR's opening pages: "In the post Cold War world, we must be prepared to go to the crisis, rather than have the crisis come to us." See "Introduction," *Strategic Defence Review* (March 1998), paragraph 5.

<sup>62</sup> Hew Strachan, "The Civil-Military Gap in Britain," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 2, June 2003, p. 47.

<sup>63</sup> Clarke, "Foreign Policy," pp. 600-602.

<sup>64</sup> Freedman, "Defence Policy," p. 620.

<sup>65</sup> Clarke, "Foreign Policy," p. 600.

This strategy did not exaggerate Britain's global status, for there was a clear-headed understanding that Whitehall's reach and resources were limited. Instead, there was a recognition that the most challenging global issues required cooperation with other states, and most often active participation by the US. Moreover, Britain's relative international weight could be greatly augmented by effective exploitation of the impact of globalization that was drawing the liberal-democracies of the West closer together and making them "more united in values, means and responses."<sup>66</sup> The 1998 St. Malo Agreement with France that endorsed an independent EU military capability was a means by which Britain could position itself as the leader of a Europe united in a more equal partnership in global affairs with the US. And, with specific regard to Washington, the "special relationship" would be preserved as Britain encouraged much-needed US participation by leading the way. Lawrence Freedman captured this thinking:

Though geography allowed Britain to avoid the most direct consequences of upheavals elsewhere, the consensus view in London was that the country could not stand aside. As one of the five permanent members of the Security Council it had a responsibility to support UN operations, while as a leading European member of NATO it could not easily decide to opt out. If Britain were unprepared to act then in most cases the rest of Europe would not be able to pick up the slack. More seriously, all the arguments that might persuade Britain that it had no reason to get involved, would apply to the United States. Any effort to encourage Washington to remain engaged with the rest of the world would falter if Britain began to disengage as well.<sup>67</sup>

An international order based on values, the promotion of which was now asserted to be a vital interest, required US resources and active leadership. There was nothing particularly novel about Blair's approach, even if the ends were now being transformed. Much of postwar British foreign policy had been predicated on a need to harness US power and resources for the common good, in what one author has termed the "pursuit of 'power-by-proxy'."<sup>68</sup> Indeed, Eden's 1952 memorandum had laid out a detailed plan for just such a strategy to balance Britain's commitments and resources by obtaining Washington's consent to assume some of the former. In the SDR, Blair sought to do likewise, by ensuring that a British commitment to a shared agenda with Washington – that was, in part, a naturally occurring by-product of globalization – would be significantly augmented by US resources.

Third, in order to be "a force for good" in the world, and to confront the emerging security problems abroad, the British armed forces must be capable of undertaking expeditionary campaigns over an extended period of time. In the absence of the Soviet threat, and the ongoing development of the European Union, prioritizing military capabilities for the European central front was no longer reasonable. The SDR established four criteria that the armed forces should be able to fulfill: an international operation, involving major combat and of a similar size and duration as the 1990 Gulf War; a more extended deployment such as Bosnia and a second substantial deployment, neither of which should involve major combat

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p. 601.

<sup>67</sup> Lawrence Freedman, "Defence Policy," p. 620.

<sup>68</sup> See the discussion in Ruane and Ellison, "Managing the Americans: Anthony Eden, Harold MacMillan and the Pursuit of 'Power-by-Proxy' in the 1950s," pp. 147-167.

nor last longer than six months; and an ability to retool to confront a major strategic threat should one arise.<sup>69</sup> To meet the demands of each, greater attention needed to be paid to strategic mobility and the idea that the armed forces would be deployed further away than Europe. Britain had always maintained the ability to project military power beyond the European theatre, and those capabilities had been used to good effect during the Falklands War in 1982. And, indeed, after that conflict, the Thatcher and Major governments had managed what one historian has termed a “limited, but nonetheless significant improvement in out-of-area capabilities.”<sup>70</sup> The SDR concluded, however, that the global transformative role of military power required that those capabilities be greatly enhanced. Consequently, joint capabilities were emphasized. And, although the armed forces had been moving in that direction for several years, the SDR endowed it with a new impetus. Procurement was heavily influenced by this thinking with air- and sealift regarded as essential, as well as platforms such as a new class of aircraft carriers to afford power projection when otherwise unavailable.<sup>71</sup> And given the budgetary demands of Labour’s social agenda, the initial planning called for the Ministry of Defence to achieve these results with less funding. As long-time Labour Member of Parliament Bruce George observed shortly after the SDR was released, it “promises to deliver a military capability relevant for the post-Cold War world, on a budget that is reduced in real terms. To do this, the MOD has to deliver successfully on a range of targets to get more value for money out of each pound spent.”<sup>72</sup>

In many ways, the SDR was more evolutionary than revolutionary. Much of what it proposed for the armed forces built upon the policies of earlier governments, Labour and Conservative, and voiced sentiments that were shared, and continue to be shared, across the British political spectrum. What was novel, however, was the explicit declaration as to what the Labour government saw as a primary purpose of military force in the post-Cold War world.<sup>73</sup> In the years that followed its publication in 1998, international developments demanded that the government review the policy; but the conclusions of such efforts were that, in its general approach, the SDR remained valid. The *New Chapter* (2002) issued shortly after the events of 9/11 re-asserted the SDR’s relevance but noted that there was a need to update the link between defence and homeland security and national defence as a result of the threat posed by international terrorism. The *Defence White Paper* (2003) and *Future Capabilities* (2004) were presented as little more than updates of the SDR. The White Paper drew attention to the growing security challenge posed by socio-economic and environmental pressures with the result that intra-state as well as inter-state conflict could result. And, while the security of Europe remained a paramount interest, Britain would need to continue to work with allies and partners to deal with global threats to national interests. Continued modernization of the armed forces to ensure that Britain had a speedy and precise ability to respond to overseas security developments remained essential. Moreover, any military contribution that was made should

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<sup>69</sup> See “Chapter Five: The Future Shape of our Forces,” *Strategic Defence Review* (March 1998), paragraph 89.

<sup>70</sup> John Baylis, *British Defence Policy: Striking the Right Balance* (MacMillan: London, 1989), p. 35.

<sup>71</sup> The *Queen Elizabeth*-class aircraft carriers were the only equipment commitment made in the SDR, and there is some indication that that commitment was regarded as crucial to the ship-building industry and its workforce. I am grateful to Dr. Jeffrey Bradford for this observation.

<sup>72</sup> Bruce George, “The House of Commons Defence Select Committee Report,” *The Outcome of the Strategic Defence Review; Summary of Royal United Services Institute Seminar with Deloitte Consulting: RUSI Whitehall Paper Series 44*, September 1988, p. 13.

<sup>73</sup> Taylor and Waldman, “British defence policy since 1997,” p. 18.

be of a size sufficient to have an impact on political and strategic decision-making. A year later, when *Future Capabilities* was released, the government provided additional details on the restructuring of the armed forces to support the role the SDR had originally formulated and that subsequent events had, according to the government, validated. That restructuring included reductions in personnel and materiel in areas no longer regarded as essential, and an emphasis on new capabilities and new technologies.

Nine years after its release, when Blair resigned the premiership, the Brown government chose not to challenge the fundamentals of the SDR. Others were not so sure that the new government's endorsement, even if only as a result of inertia as some suspected, was a sound one. By early-2007, the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, not forgetting Kosovo and Sierra Leone, had apparently led some people to a reappraisal of both the validity and the efficacy of liberal internationalism. Lawrence Freedman, a frequent commentator and one-time foreign policy advisor to Blair, indicated that there was a greater awareness within policy circles now of the limitations of an interventionist approach to world affairs:

I think that these days there is greater realism about whether one can project beacons of enlightenment into some of these places that might have been part of the rhetoric a few years ago. There is greater understanding since you have to work more with the grain of local politics than try to put Surrey into Helmand province.<sup>74</sup>

Some critics were far harsher in their assessments. Michael Codner of RUSI wrote that “the war in Iraq removed national confidence in the wisdom of government.”<sup>75</sup> The implication of such a charge was that the government would need to work hard to earn that confidence anew by a fundamental reworking of the policy at hand. And, in a blistering critique published in the 3 June 2007 edition of the *Sunday Times*, prominent political columnist Simon Jenkins assessed Blair's entire approach to be a complete failure. Liberal interventionism was no more than “a verbal backdrop to what was ‘feel-good-with-guns’.” Terming Blair's influence on policy as gangrenous, he added that the effort to use force to do good was little more than a “reversion to the motivation of the Middle Ages” where leaders “must send their forces to fight and die for abstract nouns. What is outrageous is for Blair to claim for the liberal cause what has been random adventurism.”<sup>76</sup> Hyperbole aside, there were probably many people

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<sup>74</sup> House of Commons, *Minutes of Evidence taken before the Defence Committee. UK Defence: Commitments and Resources*, 13 March 2007.

<sup>75</sup> Michael Codner, “British Defence Policy – Rebuilding National Consensus,” *RUSI Journal*, April 2007, p. 18.

<sup>76</sup> Simon Jenkins, “Blair reinvented the Middle Ages and called it liberal intervention,” *The Sunday Times*, 3 June 2007. He did not limit his opposition to Blair's policy to the pages of the *Sunday Times*. In a column in *The Guardian* in January 2006, Jenkins wrote that, if he were the designated commander for British forces deploying to Afghanistan, he would grab the defence minister “by his lapels, ram his head against the ministry wall and scream in his face: “Tell me what the hell you really mean by sending my soldiers to that godawful place?” If the reply is yet more waffle about upholding democracy and combating terror, I would storm out with such a door slam as could be heard the length of Britain.” See “The extraordinary folly of Britain's new opium war,” *The Guardian*, 4 January 2006. Interestingly, Jenkins is identified as a member of the Expert Panel consulted by the government in the drafting of the SDR. See “Supporting Essay One: The Strategic Defence Review Process,” *Strategic Defence Review* (March 1998).

who felt similarly,<sup>77</sup> especially as none of the wars that Britain had engaged in on the bases of ideas found in the SDR seemed to have achieved their purpose.

Other critics focused less on the policy's underlying ideology, and more on the problems of implementing the SDR and its successor documents. In testimony to the Commons Defence Committee, Codner noted, in a trenchant critique of the policy, that there are "no obvious military criteria for the scale and capabilities of British intervention forces for operations of choice." And, he added, that the government's criteria that "significant capability" define Britain's contribution to a multilateral force was equally unclear:

The issue of 'significant capability' is central to Britain's expeditionary military strategy and UK's defence policy. However, it is not an easy matter for government to discuss in the public domain because it relates to international influence – and influence in particular over the behaviour of the US.<sup>78</sup>

Given the limited influence that Britain had on the US in both the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, despite the presence of substantial numbers of British troops, Codner's argument undoubtedly found a sympathetic audience.<sup>79</sup> And, indeed, Lord Wallace, a well-regarded authority on trans-Atlantic affairs testified similarly nearly two years later, after the government's promise to undertake a strategic defence review: "The sentiment of a lot of people in and around the Ministry of Defence is that we need either to spend more on buying influence or accept that we have less than we would like."<sup>80</sup>

A third critique concerned the SDR's drive to modernize the British armed forces, often at the expense of reducing or eliminating capabilities no longer assessed as relevant. The House of Commons Defence Select Committee observed that

[i]t may take another decade before the capabilities to deliver those requirements are in place. In the meantime, equipment withdrawals and personnel reductions may leave gaps in capability. Those gaps, in turn, may create risks. Some of those risks, in our view, need not have been taken.<sup>81</sup>

More frequently, however, people have questioned the ability of the government to run such a policy, which emphasized modernization amid ongoing operations that exceeded what the SDR had envisaged, without substantially increasing defence expenditure and further delaying acquisitions. The December 2009 decision by the government to reduce a number of Royal Air Force squadrons, retire early several naval vessels, and deactivate a number of helicopters, to free up funding for equipment earmarked for Afghanistan operations, is an example of what

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<sup>77</sup> For example, in a March 2009 poll, 72 percent of Britons supported a public inquiry "into the reasons for sending British troops to Iraq." "Britons want Inquiry into Iraq War Role," *Angus Reid Global Monitor*, 22 March 2009 [accessed at [www.angus-reid.com/polls/view/britons-want-inquiry-into-iraq-war-role/](http://www.angus-reid.com/polls/view/britons-want-inquiry-into-iraq-war-role/)]. This level of support probably explains the creation of the ongoing Chilcot Inquiry.

<sup>78</sup> House of Commons, Defence Committee. *UK Defence and Commitments*, "Memorandum from Michael Codner," 17 April 2007.

<sup>79</sup> See Rawnsley, *End of the Party*, pp. 241-247.

<sup>80</sup> House of Commons, Foreign Affairs Committee, *Global Security: UK-US Relations, Sixth Report of Session 2009-10*, 18 March 2010, p. Ev.11, Question 25.

<sup>81</sup> Taylor and Waldman, "British defence policy since 1997," p. 24.

the Committee was referring to. Ainsworth's response, that the reductions are simply an adjustment of the core defence programme, seems unlikely to redress that concern.<sup>82</sup>

And, last, there is the evident strains imposed by what some see as an over-commitment of British forces on operations. In other words, the current policy has led to too many missions demanding too many troops and too much materiel. Even the government has assessed that such a situation is not sustainable.<sup>83</sup> These operational demands have also begun to degrade the country's military capabilities. In the Ministry of Defence's *Annual Report 2007-08*, it was assessed that less than one-half (45 percent) of all military units were ready to deploy on operations in an emergency.<sup>84</sup> A year later, readiness ("a surrogate measure" of military capability) was assessed to have declined further such that only 33 percent of military units reported "no critical or serious weaknesses."<sup>85</sup> A senior British Army officer, Major-General Andrew Ritchie, testified before the Defence Committee that "[i]n very broad terms, the Army is being asked to do almost double what it was expected to do under the defence planning assumptions. [...] I think that we are very overstretched in the Army."<sup>86</sup> For Ritchie, the overstretch nonetheless goes beyond simple accounting of ends and means. It also represents a breakdown of the unspoken pact that lies at the core of the Anglo-American civil-military relationship and emphasizes civilian respect for military professionalism and military advice:

The fact that senior officers have been speaking out is an indication of their worry. But I believe that there is a real issue here to do with the Civil Service. More often, senior commanders do not say they cannot do it but the implications of doing it and its impact on other things will be x, y and z. That impact statement is all too often blandified by the Civil Service, genuinely so, so that performance reports are presented in such a way as not to frighten the horses, frankly.

Criticism of civilian defence officials is an all-too-common refrain for military officers. However, Ritchie's concern extends beyond the inevitable rivalry between the two groups, for it suggests that the implementation of Labour's highly ambitious defence policy lacked the necessary and objective oversight usually provided by defence civilians and even by ministers themselves. "When something does happen and ministers ask why [sic] they were told the response is that it was in a report but expressed in a very benign way," Ritchie told the Defence Committee, adding "I believe that is a real issue."<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> "Defending Priorities," *Defence Management.com*, 23 February 2010 [accessed at [www.defencemanagement.com/print\\_articles.asp?typ=feature&id=13675](http://www.defencemanagement.com/print_articles.asp?typ=feature&id=13675)].

<sup>83</sup> "For some considerable period now, and throughout 2008-09, the Armed Forces have operated above the overall level of current operations which they are resourced and structured to sustain over time." Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report and Accounts 2008-2009 Volume One: Annual Performance Report* (July 2009), p. 12.

<sup>84</sup> Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report and Accounts 2007-2008 Volume One: Annual Performance Report* (July 2008), p. 48. Reports predating 2001 did not use the same approach to measuring readiness as those at the end of the decade. Nevertheless, those earlier reports did not indicate readiness to be a problem, and indeed asserted that readiness status of units in the individual services was being improved.

<sup>85</sup> *Annual Report and Accounts 2008-2009*, p. 13.

<sup>86</sup> House of Commons, *Minutes of Evidence taken before the Defence Committee. UK Defence: Commitments and Resources*, 13 March 2007.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, Question 181.

## 4 Adaptability and Partnership – What it says

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*Adaptability and Partnership* is divided into six chapters. Each chapter addresses a facet of defence policy and sets forward a set of concepts or ideas, as well as basic issues that will need to be considered in the upcoming strategic review. The first two chapters attempt to establish the context within which defence policy of the future will operate, while the three following sections address the possible content of the policy itself. A concluding chapter poses six “key questions” that the government believes must be addressed in the review process.

### 1. Chapter One: Uncertainty and Affordability

- There are no direct state-based threats to the security of Great Britain, but there are a number of developing trends that, if not carefully managed, hold the potential to destabilize global affairs and challenge the rules-based international order upon which the country’s national security depends. These include global shifts in power, climate change, proliferation, and growing inequality within and between countries. Threats that could demand a military response from the UK and/or its allies include terrorism, failed and failing states, international criminal activities.
- Afghanistan, which engages British national security interests by seeking to deny a sanctuary for violent extremists, will likely “dominate our activity” for much of the period covered by the upcoming review. Operations there are among the most demanding undertaken by the armed forces since 1945.
- A future defence programme must prioritize responses to threats and challenges. This is essential in order to accommodate increasing costs of personnel and modern, technologically advanced forces. However, the assumption that more advanced capabilities can offset the consequences of a smaller military establishment is now challenged by the global spread of technology.
- The single most important bilateral relationship is with the United States, with which Britain cooperates in intelligence, nuclear, science and technology fields. Cooperation with Washington increases the influence Britain has in areas important to national security but over which it has limited national influence.
- Globalization remains a positive trend, supporting global economic growth and the spread of political freedoms. “If global political, economic and social progress can be maintained, an increasing part of the world will share interests which are similar to ours, and a stake in enduring international peace and security.”

### 2. Chapter Two: Complexity and the Use of Force

- Many of the assumptions of the 1998 SDR have been confirmed: joint operations

are the norm; expeditionary capabilities have demonstrated their value; networking has multiplied the effectiveness of forces; impressive contributions to COIN and conflict prevention have been made; defence diplomacy works; and special forces have proven very useful in a variety of scenarios.

- A number of important lessons have been learned. Deployments generally last longer than initially planned: “go first, go fast, go home” has been proven false. Legal – both national and international – considerations are impacting upon the conduct of operations. Multilateral operations are far more complicated than was originally envisaged, and limited term deployments have undermined campaign continuity.
- Conflict is becoming more complex, with the likelihood that the future will see a “range of simultaneous threats and adversaries in challenging operational areas.” Asymmetric responses and rapid adaptability by adversaries is a new norm in conflict environments where an intervention will most likely be pursuing a variety of objectives, military and civilian.<sup>88</sup> Social change in Great Britain will magnify the consequences of these developments as there will be a greater public scrutiny of operations conducted by the armed forces.
- Greater speed in adapting doctrine and procurement to respond to operational demands is necessary.
- Advances in modern communications demands greater sensitivity to public relations, better exploitation of new technologies, and additional attention to “hearts and minds” campaigns to influence individuals as well as governments.
- Developments in cyberspace and outer space will impact upon the character of future conflict.

### 3. Chapter Three: Adaptability and Influence

- Regular defence reviews should be required by legislation.
- The Defence Ministry must continue to adapt to be better able to support ongoing operations. The current tooth-to-tail ratio impedes effective use of defence resources.
- More attention needs to be paid to the Strategic Planning Process. The link between high-level policy and force structures must be clearer to increase the

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<sup>88</sup> The assertion that asymmetric warfare is a new norm is, of course, debateable. As General Sir Hugh Beach argued in his comments on an earlier draft, asymmetric warfare is only modern jargon for operations that have “always involved completely disparate adversaries involved in probing for each other’s weak points.”

ability of ministers to effect change rapidly.

- The Strategy for Acquisition Reform (published concurrently with the Green Paper) offers approaches to improve the timeliness and agility of procurement. Greater use of “mature technologies” will reduce cost and delays associated with research and development of new technologies.
- Deterrence remains a viable form of influence in today’s world. The Trident strategic deterrent is “the ultimate example of exerting influence against a specific threat,” and its maintenance is an insurance against an uncertain future.<sup>89</sup> Conventional deterrence, such as within NATO, is also a key element in international influence.
- Defence diplomacy in a variety of activities (e.g., conflict prevention, arms control, confidence-building, security sector reform) has proven very effective. The contribution of defence diplomacy to an international rules-based order has been disproportionate to the modest level of investment.

#### 4. Chapter Four: Partnership

- International partnerships are an effective mechanism for addressing “the range and scale” of domestic and international security challenges.
- NATO remains the “cornerstone” of Britain’s security, and a stronger EU capability to respond to international crises will reinforce the Alliance.
- More attention needs to be paid to how the “comprehensive approach” can be planned and delivered, both within Britain and in the countries where the armed forces are operating.

#### 5. Chapter Five: People, Equipment and Structures

- Necessary skill sets, as well as the expectations, of military and civilian personnel will change over time, requiring different types of additional training and remuneration. Enhanced flexibility of the armed forces might be obtained by greater use and integration of the Reserves.
- An acquisition strategy must be “strategically aligned, affordable and achievable” over the long-term, and should strengthen links with defence industry. While equipment will continue to be purchased from foreign suppliers, there “are cases where specific industrial capability must be located in the UK for operational

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<sup>89</sup> The absence of any disagreement among the three major political parties concerning the “independent” nuclear deterrent likely meant that there was little discussion of the validity of traditional thinking on nuclear deterrence during the drafting of the Green Paper. I am grateful to Sir Hugh Beach for this observation.

reasons.”

- Possible efficiencies and cost cutting will be explored through alternative service delivery, reduction of senior civilian and military personnel, and rationalization (i.e., privatization) of defence property holdings.

## 6. Chapter Six: Key Questions

- “Given that domestic security cannot be separated from international security, where should we set the balance between focusing on our territory and region and engaging threats at a distance?”
- “What approach should we take if we employ the Armed Forces to address threats at a distance?”
- “What contribution should the Armed Forces make in ensuring security and contributing to resilience within the UK?”
- “How could we more effectively employ the Armed Forces in support of wider efforts to prevent conflict and strengthen international stability?”
- “Should we further integrate our forces with those of key allies and partners?”; and,
- “To what extent and in what areas should we continue to refocus our current efforts in Afghanistan?”

In his introduction to *Adaptability and Partnership*, Bob Ainsworth stated that the purpose of the report is not to answer any of the fundamental questions that the upcoming SDR will need to address. “Rather it opens discussion,” he writes, “and sets out our emerging thinking on this and other key issues for Defence.” And wherever possible, it is intended to showcase consensus. To a considerable degree, the Green Paper does do what Ainsworth describes. In some areas, the document reflects thinking that was enshrined in the 1998 SDR, and upholds the Labour Party’s existing approach. The unqualified support for the mission in Afghanistan and the reassertion of globalization as a positive force leading to a new age of shared global values are two very obvious examples. But, it is also to the Brown government’s credit that the report so candidly admits failures – “go first, go fast, go home has proved false” – and identifies areas that demand much more attention.

There is, as was noted earlier, much in the report that the two main opposition parties will find that echoes their own statements. The call for enhanced adaptability of both the armed forces and the Ministry of Defence, greater operational flexibility, and an affordable procurement programme, are all uncontroversial. The need for a prioritization of responses to extant and emerging security challenges is also shared. The Defence Planning Assumptions (Annex B) are unlikely to vary to any great degree with the final outcome of the SDR. The Liberal-Democrats might, for example, demand greater integration with Britain’s European partners, as a reflection of the country’s international status and as a means of rationalizing defence

expenditure. The Conservatives are, for their part, closer to Labour and have gone on record as supporting an independent capacity for effective power projection. That issue is left unaddressed and has been included as a one of the key questions for future consideration. What is missing from the report is any detailed discussion of how defence relates to other government priorities and it is precisely in that sphere that the most heated debates among the parties will take place, especially as the review process gets underway under Britain's next government. That should not at all be surprising. American political scientist David Easton once defined politics as "the authoritative allocation of values," and it is unavoidable that the upcoming strategic review will be affected by political considerations.

## 5 Conclusion

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When it was presented to Parliament, *Adaptability and Partnership* was generally well-received. Nevertheless, it is little more than a declaration of intent and left many observers outside government unsatisfied. One reviewer of an earlier draft of this paper pointedly noted that it was “difficult to see what purpose the publication of the Green Paper was expected to serve.” There is some justification for such uncertainty. Many of the arguments the report makes are remarkably anodyne for a paper that is designed to inform the upcoming strategic review and, beyond their recitation, they do little to address the serious problems that have led all of the parties to endorse the idea of a new strategic defence review. Moreover, and as the previous section noted, the Green Paper did not embed defence in the larger context of government responsibilities and/or priorities. Admittedly, the document itself is an acknowledgement by the Brown government that there are serious problems with the current defence policy, but that is probably making a virtue out of what might have been seen as a necessity for it does not make any commitments other than to review the policy following the 2010 general election. Overall, the Green Paper enables the Brown government to take defence management out of the election campaign and leaves the conclusions of the upcoming review entirely to the discretion of the next government. It is even possible, as another reviewer suggested that *Adaptability and Partnership* is little more than a placeholder: the Brown government might already have begun drafting the broad outlines of the new SDR before the Green Paper was released, hoping that it could quickly launch a new policy after Labour (as it hopes) wins re-election.

That the British government should have adopted such an approach is understandable, for the decision to launch a defence review is a difficult and potentially risky undertaking at the best of times. There are too many uncertainties both at home and abroad that a defence policy must attempt to address and a vast array of contending demands on the financial resources necessary to implement it. In 1981, for example, the government launched a review of British defence capabilities and concluded, among other points, that there should be a significant reduction in the Royal Navy’s surface fleet. The Nott Review was quietly scuttled by an embarrassed Thatcher government after the Falklands War broke out the following year.<sup>90</sup> Gordon Brown and his advisors know this history. For a government heading into an election campaign in which defence might be just another stick with which its opponents can use against it, the release of the Green Paper offered a cost-free means of damage reduction.

It is important to realise that there is no guarantee that the conclusions so much desired by defence commentators will ever find expression in the policy that follows the next strategic review. By all accounts, even after the Falklands conflict, the Thatcher government’s commitment to expeditionary capabilities was never adequately resourced. And, in fact, the 1998 SDR assessed that substantially greater efforts were needed. To some degree, the inability to deal head on with the multifaceted demands associated with defence policy is a function of contending government priorities. But, perhaps, it is also a product of Britain’s political culture. Christopher Coker has argued that there is a national tendency in the UK not

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<sup>90</sup> Lawrence Freedman argued that the juxtaposition of the Nott Review and the Falklands War led to a morbid fear of defence reviews in the Thatcher and Major governments. See Lawrence Freedman, “The Defence Review – International Policy Options,” *RUSI Journal*, August 1997, p. 39.

to make decisive breaks with existing approaches to defence and security affairs:

The British have always found it difficult to arrive at clean-cut decisions without accompanying them with qualifying formulas which have either subverted, or weakened, the line of action they have intended to pursue.<sup>91</sup>

Coker concluded that there is no evidence that British society ever wanted anything more radical than what was ultimately decided. A similar critique might be directed at the 1998 SDR and the policy that flowed from its conclusions: the initial assumptions about Britain's role and of the armed forces that the Blair government accepted probably precluded the type of restructuring that would have likely flowed from a different assessment of the country's interests and resources. So, as a consequence, the most radical change in the SDR was the emphasis on the normative element of defence policy, namely what has come to be known as either humanitarian intervention or, less charitably, wars of choice.

Today, the situation confronting British defence policy planners would seem to demand a broader and more decisive set of changes than was the case in 1998. Many people concerned with defence issues believe that chronic under-funding of defence, exacerbated by the economic crisis of 2009 and the parlous state of public finances, alongside severe operational demands, will push the British government to initiate a reconsideration of even the most sacrosanct policy assumptions. That will require the commitment of considerable political will. The policy implications that would likely flow from such a decision could have very profound implications for Britain's claim to global power status, to its role within the Western Alliance and the European Union, and to trans-Atlantic relations more generally. For these reasons, it remains to be seen if that type of intensive scrutiny will take place in the next year or so. It is certain, however, that the next government will be unable to avoid some very difficult questions. Although more than half a century has passed since Anthony Eden presented his memorandum, the admonitions it stated are still relevant today. Governments must always consider a balance between what they want to do and what resources they can dedicate to achieve their goals. Sometimes, as was the case in 1952, the situation becomes so visibly imbalanced that denial is no longer an option for even the most skilful political leaders: and while the policy that upholds such an arrangement can in the short-term be maintained by calculated measures to avoid difficult decisions ("shaving the ice-cube"<sup>92</sup>), in the long-term it is unsustainable. The British government appears now to be facing that situation.

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<sup>91</sup> Christopher Coker, *British Defence Policy in the 1990s* (Brassey's Defence Publishers: London, 1987), p. 173.

<sup>92</sup> The author cannot lay claim to this phrase. Private correspondence, Canadian official, April 2010.

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This paper provides an overview of the Labour government's defence policy since it assumed office in 1998 and up to the February 2010 publication of its Green Paper, entitled *Adaptability and Defence*. It reviews the background to the release of the Green Paper, including the continuing influence of some core assumptions carried over from the 1998 Strategic Defence Review, the ongoing debate over commitments and capabilities, and the growing concern about the state of Britain's public finances. It also summarizes the main arguments made in the Green Paper that the Labour Government believes must be considered in the upcoming review.

Ce document donne un aperçu de la politique de défense du gouvernement Labour entre le début de sa législature en 1998 et février 2010, date de publication de son Livre vert intitulé *Adaptability and Defence*. Il expose le contexte de la publication de ce Livre vert, notamment l'influence continue qu'ont eue certaines hypothèses clés héritées de l'Examen stratégique de la défense de 1998, le débat permanent autour des engagements et des moyens ainsi que la préoccupation croissante à l'égard de la situation des finances publiques de la Grande-Bretagne. Il récapitule aussi les principaux arguments présentés dans le Livre vert qui, aux yeux du gouvernement Labour, doivent absolument être pris en compte dans le prochain examen.

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