

Strategic Defence Review (Green Paper)

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Bob Ainsworth): Today I am publishing a defence Green Paper that paves the way for a strategic defence review, set in the context of the national security strategy, early in the next Parliament. At the present time, Afghanistan is the main effort for the Ministry of Defence. Where choices have to be made, Afghanistan will continue to be given priority. Our forces there are fighting hard, protecting our national security by preventing Afghanistan from once again becoming a safe haven for terrorists.

Two hundred and fifty three British service personnel have been killed in Afghanistan since 2001. Many more have suffered life-changing injuries. Their bravery in the face of a ruthless enemy has been a stark reminder to us that all conflict is difficult and dangerous. We certainly cannot assume that the conflicts of tomorrow will replicate those of today, but we must anticipate a wide range of threats and plan for the requirements necessary to counter them.

We have come a long way since the last major defence review in 1998, which gave us the platform to modernise our armed forces. Looking forward, we will need to make decisions about the role that we want the United Kingdom to play in the world and about the capabilities that our armed forces need to support that role. We will need to balance those considerations against financial implications in what will inevitably be a resource-constrained environment. The Green Paper does not attempt to answer those fundamental questions. Instead, it is intended to set out our emerging thinking on the future security environment and on other key issues facing defence ahead of the review.

Although there is no external direct threat to the territorial integrity of the UK, there are a wide range of emerging threats for which we must be prepared. We can work to diminish the threat of international terrorism and to counter the proliferation of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons; we can work to prevent emerging threats-for example, by improving our approach to cybersecurity-and to contain and resolve the threat from failing states; and we can work to ensure that the impacts of climate change and resource competition are managed peacefully, but my judgment is that conflict and instability in this new age will be an ever-present risk. In the face of those threats, no nation can hope to protect all aspects of national security by acting alone. We cannot simply defend from the goal line, and our defence posture must reflect that.

In the coming decades, our armed forces must be prepared, if called upon to do so, to protect our interests, often in distant places and, most likely, as part of a coalition of international forces. The Green Paper therefore reaches two key conclusions. First, that defence must accelerate the process of reform and be able to change swiftly to address new and unforeseen challenges as they emerge. We need to be more adaptable in how we structure, equip, train and generate our armed forces. We need a more agile defence organisation, and we need more responsive strategic planning. Today, I am proposing that we should legislate for regular defence reviews to ensure that the armed forces continue to adapt rapidly to changing trends and threats.

The second conclusion is that defence must improve its ability to work in partnership with our key allies and security institutions to make the most of our combined resources. Our alliances and partnerships will become increasingly important and will define how successful we will be in meeting the challenges that we face. We will strengthen our alliance with the United States if we strengthen our position in Europe. We will continue to press our European allies to contribute more to our collective defence effort, but, make no mistake, this is not about Europe taking precedence over the US, or vice versa-the two are mutually reinforcing relationships.

In the UK, we need to improve further our partnerships with key Whitehall Departments and others to ensure that the contribution of our armed forces is joined up with our diplomatic and development efforts. In addition to its conclusions on adaptability and partnership, the paper poses six key strategic questions that the review will need to address. They are as follows. Where should we set the balance between focusing on our territory and region and on engaging threats at distance? How far are future conflicts likely to share the characteristics of our engagement in Afghanistan, and what approach should we therefore take if we employ armed force to address

threats at distance? What contribution should our armed forces make to ensuring security and contributing to resilience within the UK? How could we more effectively employ armed force in support of wider efforts to prevent conflict and to strengthen international stability? Do our current international defence and security relationships require rebalancing in the longer term? Should we further integrate our forces with those of our key allies and partners?

Although the defence budget has grown by over 10 per cent. in real terms since 1998-and not a penny will be cut from next year's budget-the forward defence programme faces real financial pressure. We will need to rebalance what we do in order to meet our priorities. In December, I began that process. I made a series of decisions to ensure that we found extra resources for vital equipment for Afghanistan. This included 22 new Chinook helicopters, which will provide necessary strategic lift capability for Afghanistan and for other military operations in the years ahead. However, our commitment to reducing the deficit resulting from the global financial crisis means that future resources across government will be constrained.

The report of Bernard Gray into defence acquisition set out clearly the pressures facing the defence budget. It also set out the importance of improving our procurement processes and addressing the shortfalls in our acquisition systems. The strategy for acquisition reform published alongside today's Green Paper sets out how we will tackle the challenges facing this major area of defence expenditure. The major reform that it proposes will deliver enduring change by introducing greater transparency. It will ensure that our equipment plans are efficient, strategically focused, affordable and achievable.

But it is not just in equipment acquisition that we will need to do better. We are aiming to deliver efficiency savings of more than £3 billion over the current spending review period. We have a strong programme of work to achieve this, including an independent review into the use of civilians in defence that is being led by Gerry Grimstone.

Our biggest capability is our people. We rely on the ability of people, both military and civilian, to deliver defence. We need to attract the best people-people who are highly motivated and highly skilled. Our people have already shown their capacity to adapt to new challenges. We must continue to ensure that the structures and training that support them are fit for purpose, and that includes continuing to strengthen joint approaches across the services.

There has been a great deal of interest in, and speculation about, whether any major capabilities will be confirmed in the Green Paper, but that is to misunderstand the purpose. I can say that we do not plan to revisit the conclusions of the 2006 White Paper on the nuclear deterrent. We have committed to a wide range of major capability improvements over the past few years including, most recently, signing contracts for two new aircraft carriers. [Hon. Members: "Hear, hear!"] Only two.

Recent operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have demonstrated the importance of being able to deploy and sustain significant numbers of highly trained and equipped troops in a variety of roles, including providing the aviation and air support that they need. Unless the defence review takes a very radical new direction, it is the Government's position that those capabilities are likely to remain critical elements of our force structure. However, we need to know first what roles and missions we will expect our forces to undertake in the future before we can take final decisions about the capabilities that they will need. These will be key issues for the defence review.

Let us be clear-change is needed, and there will be some tough and important decisions ahead. In my view, we must, as far as possible, put aside our special interests, in politics, industry and the services, to take rational decisions that benefit defence and the security of our nation.

In preparing the Green Paper, I consulted widely with academia, across government and with the main Opposition parties, and I am grateful for the help that I received. I would like to thank in this House the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Sir Menzies Campbell) and the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames), and Lord Robertson of Port Ellen in the other place, all of whom sat on my Defence Advisory Forum. Where the defence of the nation is concerned, we must seek as far as possible to reach consensus on the main issues.

I hope that the Green Paper that I am publishing today helps that process and leads to a mature and well-informed debate about the future structure of our armed forces.