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The calm after the storm? Foreign and security policy from Blair to Brown

Richard G. Whitman

Abstract

This article examines the main aspects of the UK's foreign and security policy across the 2005-2010 Parliament. It begins by discussing the highpoint of foreign policy during the period, and goes on to consider the evolution of the UK's foreign policy doctrine, looking in particular at whether Brown established a world view that was distinctive from his predecessor. The analysis then turns to the key foreign policy actors in the period and in particular the extent to which changes of foreign secretary impacted on the UK's foreign and security policy. The article assesses the foreign and security policy issues that predominated from after the 2005 General Election, through Brown's anointment as Prime Minister in 2007 and until the 2010 General Election. The final part of the article considers the minimal role that foreign policy played in the 2010 General Election campaign. There was a considerable convergence of views between each of the three main political parties in their foreign policy platforms. Labour faced criticism for its resourcing of the war in Afghanistan, rather than objection to continuing engagement. The renewal of the Trident weapons system was one of the few substantive issues dividing the Conservatives and Labour from the Liberal Democrats.

If discontent over foreign policy, and more particularly the decision to go to war in Iraq, was the leitmotif of the second half of Blair's premiership, Brown's administration was marked by the need to deal with the global financial crisis. Distinctions can be drawn between the respective foreign policy approaches of the Blair and Brown administrations. The differences were, however, those of style and emphasis, rather than substantive differences in the direction and objectives of the UK's foreign policy. The period from the 2005 General Election until the 2010 election can be characterised as one in which New Labour attempted to 'normalise' foreign and security policy by reducing its salience as an area of widespread public political concern, but then found itself struggling to respond to an unprecedented challenge to the global political economy.

The fire-fighting response to the emerging global financial crisis became a predominant concern for Brown in the final two years of his premiership, overriding longer standing commitments to reform the governance of the political economy to distribute its benefits more widely and to more effectively tackle climate change. There is a curious coincidence in Blair's and Brown's periods as Prime Minister in that both became the hostage of external events that they had initially sought to channel and direct. In both cases - the Iraq War and the global financial crisis - the two British Prime Ministers also sought to play a primary supporting role to that of the United States. Both Prime Ministers were strong trans-Atlanticists, each seeking to act as advocate for the uses of U.S. power for purposes that they sought to shape and influence.

A New Labour foreign policy highpoint: the G8 Presidency

The period immediately following election of May 2005 was characterised by a high degree of continuity in the key foreign and security challenges confronting the UK. This is to be expected as the UK's broad foreign and security priorities had been established in the first two terms of the New Labour government and the strategic reorientation of external relations was not a platform on which the 2005 election was fought. Furthermore, as the timetable for the withdrawal of British troops from Iraq was as yet to be defined, Iraq remained a key focus of political and military resources, and its replacement by Afghanistan as the main theatre of operations for UK forces was yet to be initiated.

The year of the General Election was also one in which the UK enjoyed a high international profile. The UK chaired the G8 and held the Presidency of the EU for the second half of the year. The chairmanship of the G8 provided the government with the opportunity to further two of its long-standing foreign policy ambitions: to focus attention on mitigating climate change and to focus on the lack of African economic development. The government sought to use the G8 presidency as the locus for the mobilisation of publics within and without the UK to support these issues by its active encouragement of the Make Poverty History campaign and the worldwide Live 8 concerts, thereby putting pressure on the G8 members to commit to substantial poor-country debt-relief.

2005 was a high point of the creative aspects of the Blair-Brown partnership on international policy.¹ Brown concentrated for weeks on the details of a debt elimination package for the 18 most indebted countries for which he gained the approval of the G8 finance ministers at their meeting in June in London. Blair appeared to deliver on the leaders of the G8 committing to fully realise the Millennium Development Goals and gaining George W. Bush's acceptance that climate change required attention with the potential for the G8 to play a leading future role.

The centrepiece of the G8 presidency was the Gleneagles summit held from 6-8 July. Blair's attendance was interrupted by the London bombings that took place on the second day of the summit. The summit could be read as a metaphor for New Labour's foreign policy: its aspirations were for the UK to provide active leadership to tackle some of the most intractable global development problems, but instead the government's attention was diverted by the 'war on terror'.

Brown's foreign policy doctrine: continuity over change?

When he became Prime Minister the totality of Gordon Brown's foreign policy aspirations were not entirely clear. As Chancellor of Exchequer Brown had sought to define Britain's foreign economic policy and had established a

clear set of positions on development policy and climate change and the manner in which international financial institutions should be reformed to fit with his interests in dealing with global poverty. This vision for global governance could be expressed as the desire for a global new deal through a modern Marshall Plan.² In other areas of foreign policy the assumption was that he had not demurred from the major foreign and security policy choices made by Blair as this was not an area of active contestation between the government's two protagonists. Once in office Prime Minister Brown broadened the range of foreign policy issues with which he was actively engaged and also sought to differentiate the position of his administration from that of his predecessor, whilst also maintaining the line that Blair's major foreign policy initiatives had been broadly correct. This position was unavoidable, in that as one of the central figures in the New Labour government, Brown was complicit in the key foreign policy decisions of Blair's tenure as Prime Minister. Consequently Brown sought to introduce nuances into the philosophy underpinning the government's foreign policy alongside the presentational changes that came about through his different demeanour from that of his predecessor.

The first few weeks of the Brown administration did, however, appear to represent a change in tone and emphasis. This was most notable in the shift from an emphasis on the 'war on terror' to a more careful and nuanced choice of language. Furthermore, Brown's first meeting with President Bush at Camp David on 27 June 2007 was marked not by the protestations of the importance of the transatlantic relationship (which he made) but rather by the careful attention that was given to stressing the intention to make the Brown-Bush relationship businesslike, rather than the intimate understanding between Blair and Bush.

Transatlanticism was as central for Brown as it was for Blair, but the difference was that for the new Prime Minister there was a clear grand strategy: to harness U.S. power and influence to his ambition to restore and renew the institutions of global governance to allow for a more effective management of global capitalism which would drive the development of the poorest economies.³ The expectation was that President Obama would be a willing partner in this agenda. The Brown government showed the same neurotic preoccupation with the health of the transatlantic relationship as all of Britain's post-World War II administrations. The change of President from Bush to Obama was viewed as an opportunity to renew the partnership after the public unpopularity of the Bush-Blair relationship. From the onset of the Obama administration close attention was given to how the UK ranked in the relative pecking order of European states. Brown's position as the first European leader to travel to the White House and his invitation to address a joint session of Congress, acted to sooth initial anxieties.

A key challenge confronting Brown was to restore the reputational damage caused by Iraq war which was suffered by the UK during the latter half of the Blair administration. However, substantive structural changes in the direction of UK foreign policy were impossible with the UK locked into its existing overseas military commitments and with no major boost envisioned for Britain's wider diplomatic and foreign policy infrastructure. Furthermore, Brown continued Blair's policy of using the European Union to amplify Britain's wider foreign policy objective to remain a globally significant power rather than using Europe as the primary vehicle, or conduit, for British foreign and security policy.

As a heavyweight politician with over a decade in government Brown already had a well-defined political philosophy. Furthermore, in a series of interviews and speeches whilst still Chancellor in late 2006 and early 2007 three broad political priorities were stressed, with climate change and security (alongside economic reform) reiterated.⁴

The importance for the UK in leading the world effort in responding to the challenge of climate change was also a recurrent theme in Brown's pre-Prime Ministerial speeches and statements.⁵ Illustrative of this priority was his commissioning of the Stern Report whilst at the Treasury, and his welcoming of its conclusions. The 2006 Queen's Speech also reported that the government would be publishing a bill on climate change as part of its policy to protect the environment (and, indeed, the 2008 Climate Change Act set clear targets for carbon emissions and saw the introduction of the independent Climate Change Committee). Brown's perspective on climate change was that it was perceived through the prism of development, emphasising the impact that it will have on the world's poorest countries and arguing that the rich countries should put their financial resources at the service of the poor. This emphasis on developing countries was also highlighted at Brown's 2006 Labour party leadership coronation conference speech, in which he stated: 'I make this promise: tackling climate change must not be the excuse for rich countries to impose a new environmental colonialism: sheltering an unsustainable prosperity at the expense of the development of the poor.'⁶

Brown's Lord Mayor's Banquet speech in November 2007 and his Kennedy Memorial Lecture in April 2008 were two further attempts early in his premiership to outline a distinctive foreign policy philosophy.⁷ The Lord Mayor's speech was well received and noted both for its strident emphasis on the importance of transatlanticism and its warning to Iran on nuclear proliferation. Less remarked at the time – but to become of more substantive importance subsequently – was the stress on the need for the reform and renewal of UN, G8, World Bank and the IMF. The Kennedy Memorial Lecture on Foreign Policy struck a different note as it was delivered as the credit crunch was unfolding and focused on the need to create new rules and

institutions for the new global political economy.⁸ Climate change and the need to deal with failed and rogue states were the other two main strands of the speech. The speech knits its three strands together through a central theme of the need for reform and renewal of the arrangements of global governance.

The publication of the British Government's first national security strategy in March 2008 was Brown's attempt to map the full spectrum of threats to UK security and the appropriate policy responses.⁹ The document attempted to chart a distinctive approach to security and counter-terrorism in the post-September 11 context. The security strategy reinforced the linkage between domestic and international threats to national security and most especially in the area of terrorism. It was updated a year later with stress put on the results achieved since the preceding year and a greater emphasis on the need to counter the domestic terrorist threat with its origins in Afghanistan and the border areas of Pakistan.¹⁰

Changes at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office

The hallmark of Blair's premiership was the creation of a foreign policy making process that drained direction and authority for foreign policy away from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.¹¹ The strengthening of the role of the Prime Minister in foreign policy making had been identified under previous prime ministers. However, Blair took this approach to a new level, with Downing Street driving key bilateral relationships. This was marked not just in UK-US relations but also in the 'promiscuous bilateralism' pursued with continental European states.¹²

Across the period of the New Labour government the Foreign and Commonwealth Office was seen to lose, in terms of influence and budget, to the Department for International Development (DFID). This was the Chancellor of Exchequer using his powers of resource allocation to see his conception of the appropriate foreign policy aspirations for the UK realised.¹³

Blair's long-standing foreign secretary Jack Straw, who had provided the Prime Minister with the political support of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office for the decision to go to war in Iraq, was moved by Blair as part of his cabinet reshuffle after the local government elections in 2006. Straw's replacement by Margaret Beckett was met with a mixed reaction. The initial reaction was of the unexpected nature of her appointment and interest as the first female Foreign Secretary, and only the second women (after Margaret Thatcher) to hold one of the great offices of state.¹⁴ Put this within the other endnotes For the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, bruised by its divisions over the war with Iraq, there was a guarded welcome to the appointment

Beckett's appointment as foreign secretary offered the possibility of refocusing public and media attention away from Iraq. However, Beckett had a short honeymoon period with the media, which grew much more hostile as her tenure progressed, particularly over the UK response to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in July 2006 and the perceived lack of UK pressure upon Israel to end hostilities. The failure of the Prime Minister to respond to requests from Beckett to argue more forcefully with the United States for an Israeli ceasefire caused divisions with the Cabinet.

Beckett's successor as Foreign Secretary was one of the more eye catching aspects of Brown's cabinet reshuffle on 28 June 2007. The appointment of David Miliband as Foreign Secretary introduced a dynamism to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office through his attempts to alter the terms of debate on British foreign policy, which were redolent of Robin Cook's early period as Foreign Secretary.

Miliband sought to re-focus the main priorities of the Foreign Office and to reinvigorate the UK's foreign policy by making a case for new thinking about the UK's position in international relations and asserting the need for the UK to be an active internationalist. Miliband set out a New Strategic Framework from which the Foreign and Commonwealth Office was to order the priorities of its operation.¹⁵ Furthermore, he introduced the notion of 'Bringing Foreign Policy Home' by initiating a programme whereby the FCO gave greater attention to explaining the UK's foreign policy within Britain. Miliband used speeches to set out a post-Blair foreign policy and positioned himself as 'big thinker' on contemporary international relations. Notable was his attempt to re-establish the basis by which the UK should intervene in third countries. This was advanced in a lecture delivered in Oxford in February 2008 entitled 'The Democratic Imperative' in which he made the case of a continuing moral imperative to intervene to help spread democracy.¹⁶ Miliband did not, however, enjoy complete latitude to reconceptualise British foreign policy single-handedly. Gordon Brown's intervention to force last minute changes to a speech on the European Union in November 2007 was an indication that the Foreign Secretary's revisionism had its limits.¹⁷

Foreign policy: issues and events

A hallmark of Blair's tenure as Prime Minister was the extent to which it became consumed by foreign policy issues – and particularly by the issue of the use of armed force by the UK overseas. Of the five wars to which the New Labour government committed during its period in power two of these were still being waged when it was re-elected in 2005. The retreat from Iraq and the deepening of the UK's commitments in Afghanistan were the two major foreign policy preoccupations for the government between 2005 and 2010. There is a clear distinction between these two conflicts in that the

military involvement was pursued in Afghanistan on the basis of a cross party support in contrast to party political divisions on Iraq.

Iraq

The UK's role in Iraq underwent a transformation in the course of the Parliamentary term. UK combat operations (under the auspices of Operation Telic since the invasion in 2003) were declared completed on 30 April 2009 and all combat troops were withdrawn from the country by the deadline of 31 July agreed by the British and Iraqi governments. One hundred and seventy eight service personnel were killed during the deployment.

A precise timetable for the withdrawal of troops from Iraq was resisted by the government in the early days of the Parliament. Elections in Iraq in January and December in 2005 paved the way for the formation of an Iraq government in March 2006 and the progressive handing over of responsibility for security to the Iraq army. During 2006 and 2007 the areas of the south east of the country, for which the UK had responsibility since the invasion in its role as head of the Multi-National Division (South East), were handed over to Iraqi control. By the time of the change of Prime Minister in May 2007 British troops had been reduced to a contingent of 5,500. The government was reluctant to describe the force redeployments as withdrawals but when the Four Rifles Battle Group withdrew to Basra Airport from their base in Basra City on 2nd September the local population viewed this as a victory for the Madhi Army militias based in the city.¹⁸ In the summer months of 2008 the four remaining provinces for which the UK had responsibility for security were handed over to Iraq forces and Basra airport came under Iraqi control on 1 January 2009 and following the expiry of UNSCR 1790 the continuing presence of UK troops was on the basis of bilateral agreements with the Iraq government. The UK retains a residual military presence in Iraq on the basis of the bilateral defence Training and Maritime Support Agreement with the Government of Iraq on 6 June 2009, under which UK forces train the Iraqi Navy and Royal Navy have a role protecting Iraq's offshore oil platforms.

The rather ignominious final stages of the UK's military deployment in Iraq ensured that Iraq remained an issue of active political controversy beyond the original decision to go to war. As indicated above the Brown government was keen to develop a new foreign policy narrative, but the ongoing security situation in Iraq and the political instability of the country (even though the humanitarian situation improved) created an ongoing and uncomfortable reminder of the foreign policy controversy of the Blair era.

The Iraq Inquiry (often referred to as the Chilcot Inquiry after its chairman Sir John Chilcot) announced by Brown in a statement to Parliament on 15 June 2009 was an attempt to satisfy public and media desire for a political catharsis on the decision to go to war in Iraq. Brown was quickly forced to go back on his original announcement that Inquiry proceedings

would take place in private, following heavy Parliamentary and media criticism. The composition of the Inquiry, a committee of Privy Counsellors established by the Prime Minister under the agreement of the House of Commons, offered an opportunity to remove the Iraq war from Parliamentary politics in the run up to the General Election. The remit of the Inquiry was broad, covering the period from the summer of 2001 to the end of July 2009 and so encompassing the run-up to the conflict, the military campaign, and its aftermath.¹⁹

Brown's appeared before the Inquiry on 5 March 2010 for four hours of testimony. Following the earlier appearance by Blair on 29 January, the public appearance reinforced the impression that the war was inextricably linked with the successive Prime Ministers. Brown was trenchant in his support for the decision to go to war. There was controversy over Brown's evidence on the financing of the war, and his assertion that all the necessary financial resources had been provided to conduct the war contradicted the evidence of earlier witnesses, including Sir Kevin Tebbit, the former Permanent Secretary at the MoD. Brown wrote to the Inquiry following his appearance to correct what were construed as misleading statements in his oral evidence on levels of defence expenditure.

Afghanistan

Although the deepening of the UK's involvement in Afghanistan did not initially create the same degree of political controversy for the government as the Iraq war it has become an issue of active political debate and public disquiet throughout the course of the Parliament.

Over the last five years the security situation in the country has remained precarious, with the Taliban apparently not being weakened as a military opponent and showing a remarkable ability for tactical and strategic adaptation. The re-election of President Karzai in the Presidential election in the autumn of 2009 through a flawed and corrupt process put the UK government in a difficult position in which it appeared to be sustaining a corrupt regime incapable of reforming itself and developing the country. This was despite the UK increasing its modest troop deployment in the country to the most sustained military engagement since the Korean War of the 1950s.²⁰

The lack of substantive political and economic progress in Afghanistan during the period in which the UK has increased its military involvement has increased the public unpopularity of the UK's participation, especially in the course of 2009.²¹ By late 2009 polling was consistently recording substantial majorities in favour of a UK military withdrawal.

The decision to redirect the UK's major overseas military commitment from Iraq to Afghanistan served a number of domestic and foreign policy purposes for the government. It allowed the establishment of a much clearer link between the terrorist threat faced by the UK and the actions of the UK

military. It also allowed the UK to compensate for the military withdrawal from Iraq by bolstering the U.S.-led NATO military mission in Afghanistan.

However, the government has faced criticism not only for its resourcing of the military commitment (outlined below) but also because the political and security situation in Afghanistan appeared to fluctuate rather than improve. Rising casualty figures acted as grim measure of the difficult environment in which British forces were operating. British casualties increased from a total of five personnel killed between 2001 and 2005, climbing year-on-year to a total of two hundred and eight four by the date of the General Election in 2010. No end date for the campaign has yet been set.

The UK's involvement in Afghanistan went through a key change in April 2006 with the expansion of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operation into southern Afghanistan and the redeployment of a substantially increased British troop presence in Afghanistan to assume responsibility for the security of Helmand Province. Helmand was considered to be a lawless territory and the main location of Afghanistan's opium production but had not been the location of major fighting since the fall of the Taliban. The British involvement in the province is on the basis of a cross-Departmental plan devised by the MoD, DFID and the FCO to improve living conditions and governance in an area around the provincial capital Lashkar Gar designated as an Afghan Development Zone.

The British military presence is to provide the secure environment within which the work would take place. Commentators are divided on whether the rising British casualties demonstrate that these tactics and strategy are correct and if sufficient resources have been made available for the campaign.²² Politically, the government's handling of the war in Afghanistan was not assisted by a ministerial revolving door at the Ministry of Defence with four different Secretaries of State during the Parliamentary term (John Reid, Des Browne, John Hutton and Bob Ainsworth). Des Browne was subject to particular criticism as a 'part-time' Secretary of State for Defence as he combined his role with that of Secretary of State for Scotland under Gordon Brown from June 2007.

The Middle East

The Middle East created additional problems for the government during 2005-2010. Prime Minister Blair's handling of the Israeli military assault on Lebanon in July-August 2006 caused divisions within the cabinet (noted above) and did nothing for the UK's standing with the Arab countries of the Middle East.

David Miliband did attempt a 'reset' on the UK's relations with the Arab world after the Iraq war and the UK's response to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. However, this was complicated by Hamas's takeover of Gaza in

June 2007 and the subsequent Israeli military offensive in Gaza in the winter of 2008-2009. Britain, alongside other EU member states, followed the U.S. policy of seeking to isolate Hamas by withholding recognition and seeking to bolster the position of Mahmoud Abbas in the West Bank.

The UK's contribution to the diplomacy on the Middle East peace process was pursued at one remove, through the EU's membership of the Quartet. However, in the absence of any serious peace initiative for the Middle East the situation remained largely unchanged during the course of the Parliament. The Quartet's appointment of Tony Blair as its envoy in June 2007, only hours after he stood down as Prime Minister, was something of a mixed blessing for Britain's profile in region in that it secured a high profile position for the UK but through a figure attracting divided views in the Middle East.

Britain's bilateral relations with states in the wider Middle East were also complicated by a series of political controversies. UK-Iranian bilateral relations, already poor because of accusations that Iran was supplying the material for improvised explosive devices being used against British troops in Iraq, were further complicated by the seizure and detention of 15 British sailors for twelve days in the waters off Iran in March-April 2007. Sections of the British media described the detained Royal Navy personnel as 'hostages' and accusations and counter-accusations were traded between Britain and Iran. The detainees were publicly released by President Ahmadinejad with live television coverage. Domestic controversy was stoked by the decision by the MoD to allow the detainees to sell their stories to UK newspapers; a move which was strongly criticised in Parliament, although the government's diplomatic handling of the crisis was spared substantive criticism.²³

However, the biggest expected foreign policy crisis in the Middle East did not occur. Iran's continuing nuclear enrichment activity, and the international diplomacy intended to halt the process, continued throughout the Blair-Brown period. The prospect of the use of military force against Iran either by Israel or by the US was a frequently mooted prospect. Being challenged to contribute to political or military support for any such undertaking would have generated a domestic political controversy close on the heels of the Iraq controversy. The UK remained actively involved in a search for a diplomatic solution alongside France and Germany as a member of the EU3 diplomatic dialogue with Iraq, and through its membership of the UN Security Council.

Russia

The UK's most difficult bilateral relationship between 2005 and 2010 was with Russia. Russia's new foreign policy assertiveness under President Putin, buoyed by rising oil and gas prices, made for deteriorating relations between the West and Russia in general. East-West relations took an event

deeper downturn following the Russian military intervention in Georgia in August 2008. The UK's response to these events was largely coordinated through the EU which sought to mediate in the conflict through the French Presidency. For the UK this was further evidence of the unpredictability of the Russian government which the UK had already experienced through the harassment of the British Council's staff in Russia and the demand for it to close its offices outside Moscow.

The UK had already been the subject of continuing criticism from Russia as a favoured destination for Russian exiles and for its unwillingness to meet requests for extradition of business figures such as Boris Berezovsky. Matters came to a head with the poisoning of a British citizen Alexander Litvinenko by the radioactive substance Polonium 210. Enquires revealed that this was most likely administered during a meeting at a London hotel with a Russian Parliamentarian Andrei Lugovi whom the Russian government refused to extradite to allow for questioning. In July 2007 David Miliband announced the expulsion of four Russian diplomats from the Federation's London embassy.

Defence expenditure and the Strategic Defence Review

Political controversy over levels of UK defence expenditure, and more particularly the distribution of resources, were a major theme of the 2005-2010 government. Recurrent stories in the media about under-resourced British troops in Afghanistan, given an extra poignancy by losses of life being attributed to shortages of appropriate personnel protection equipment and suitable blast resistant troop transportation, and an inadequate supply of helicopters in-theatre were a recurrent theme. Despite the government's attempts to hasten procurement and to supply additional financial resources it found it difficult to persuade the media that it had given these issues appropriate priority.

The final stages of the 2005-2010 Parliament were marked by a consensus between the three political parties on the need to hold a Strategic Defence Review – the first since 1998. It was notable that none of the parties gave a commitment in their General Election manifestos to preserve defence expenditure at its current level of £40bn. On the overseas aid budget – the second largest aspect of Britain's foreign and security expenditure – all three main political parties backed the target of raising expenditure to 0.7% of GDP by 2013 from its current level of 0.4%

In the context of the global financial crisis, and with the UK facing a budget deficit of £170bn, or 11 per cent of national income, the review will take on a different complexion. Reductions in defence expenditure will be a crucial consideration in determining foreign policy priorities and the manner in which the UK is able to address security threats. Large procurement

programmes that were initiated under New Labour - and that include orders for aircraft carriers, future tranches of the Eurofighter advanced European interceptor aircraft and the US Joint Strike Fighter - are all identified as areas of cuts by the three main parties.

One of Blair's final actions as Prime Minister impacting on UK defence was to seek approval by the House of Commons for the decision to renew Britain's strategic nuclear deterrent by initiating the process of planning and procurement for the Trident nuclear missile system. The Commons six hour debate and vote on 14 March 2007 was notable as the first occasion on which Parliament had been given the opportunity to consider whether the UK should remain a nuclear power. The Government secured a majority, but only with Conservative Party support, as eighty eight Labour MPs rebelled and with former Ministers and Cabinet Ministers among the rebels.

Foreign policy in the General Election Campaign

Foreign policy was not a significant feature in the General Election campaign as the articles on the parties campaigns illustrate in this issue. The most concentrated focus on foreign affairs within the campaign came in the second of three televised leaders debates held on 22 April which had an agreed theme of international affairs for its first half.

Three foreign policy questions (four if you include a question on the Pope's visit to the UK) were posed by the audience. The first of the questions focused on Europe. The second asked the three leaders if they would participate in another multinational operation in a failed state to remove Al Qaeda or another terrorist threat. Brown and Clegg's answers were an unequivocal 'yes'. Cameron was much more circumspect and avoided directly answering the question.

During the debate - and throughout the campaign - each of the three main party leaders made ritualistic tributes to British troops engaged in military operations in Afghanistan but none of the parties indicated their view as to the duration of the commitment of forces. Both Clegg and Cameron criticised the government for its strategy and for the lack of appropriate equipment in Afghanistan. Brown sought to counter these criticisms by seeking to demonstrate that he was fully on top of a situation which had required an evolving set of responses and different types of resources. Clegg sought to cast the debate on resources more widely by pointing to weapons systems such as Eurofighter and the Trident system as a waste of financial resources. The issue of Trident made for the most heated exchanges in the televised debate, with Brown and Cameron heavily criticising Clegg for what they presented as a nuclear disarmament of the UK (when Clegg's argument was that the decision to renew Trident did not need to be taken now). The third question focused on climate change and provided

the three party leaders with the opportunity to introduce issues of energy security and to highlight the parties' differences on nuclear power.

A striking characteristic of the debate was that none of the leaders sought to establish a distinctive foreign policy philosophy, or to offer a coherent vision as to how they saw the UK located within changing international relations, and especially how to respond to the rise of the BRICs. Another televised debate on foreign affairs was held as the first of a series of five debates between prospective Cabinet Ministers on the BBC programme *The Daily Politics*. This debate was much more low-key and much less publicly reported in the media.

The main parties' manifesto commitments to foreign and security policy were marked by their similarities rather than their differences. For Labour this was covered in a chapter entitled 'A Global Future', for the Conservatives 'Protect our national interest' and for the Liberal Democrats 'Your world'. Each party stressed difficulty of separating domestic from international security. Each committed to seeing through the planned Strategic Defence Review. Each also maintained that Britain has a special responsibility to play an active international role and, in differing terms, that the UK is able to punch above its weight. Areas of difference were to be found on European policy and on the appropriate priorities for the defence budget. The Liberal Democrats manifesto was noticeable for its careful wording on Trident: "We will strive for global nuclear disarmament, showing leadership by committing not to replace the Trident nuclear weapons system on a like-for-like basis."

The Labour manifesto was marked by its differences from its predecessors under the leadership of Tony Blair. In the 2010 manifesto there is less stress on an active and assertive interventionism and much more of a focus on other instruments of British foreign policy such as aid, and an interest in conflict prevention through diplomatic means. There are clear echoes of the same position from the Conservative Party with recognition of the contribution that the UK can make to international relations – but within clear limits. One distinctive aspect of the Conservative Party's manifesto commitments was the creation of a National Security Council. This had been flagged up well in advance of the election, and criticised on the grounds that it is about process rather than the ends of British foreign policy ('Showing the Flag' *The Economist*, April 10th 2010 p.18).

Conclusion

The General Election campaign was marked by the low-key nature of the debate on foreign, security and defence policy. There was minor skirmishing on the resourcing of Britain's military involvement in Afghanistan rather than the substantive question of whether an ongoing military commitment is in the country's best interests. The only marked

disparity between the parties was on the issue of the replacement of the Trident missile system and on which the Liberal Democrats did not place much emphasis in their election campaign. The other area of substantive foreign policy difference between the parties was on the relationship with the European Union (and covered by another article in this issue) but none of the parties sought to devote substantial attention to contrasting their differences on Europe.

With Britain's post-election foreign and defence ambitions being so heavily conditioned by an environment of constrained public expenditure, the lack of proposals for new directions in foreign policy by the three main parties was perhaps surprising. Each of the parties has recognised that the UK is now operating within a rapidly changing global context which has significant implications for the UK's future security and prosperity. None of the parties sought to convey how this might be addressed in a manner that was cogent and comprehensible to the electorate.

On the basis of the debate within the election campaign the incoming coalition government might be expected to demonstrate a high degree of continuity in foreign policy. However, a key aspect of the early stages of the new administration will be to follow through on the commitment to appraise Britain's foreign and security priorities through the Security and Defence Review, and this looks set to be a major political preoccupation during the early stages of the new Parliament.

¹ C. White, 'Brown's World View: Foreign Policy Under Our New Prime Minister' in: M. Rush & P. Giddings (eds.), *When Gordon Took the Helm* Palgrave, 2008.

² S. Lee, *Boom and Bust: The Politics and Legacy of Gordon Brown One World*, 2009. Revised Edition. Chapter 6.

³ S. Lee, *Boom and Bust: The Politics and Legacy of Gordon Brown One World*, 2009. Revised Edition. Chapter 6.

⁴ The 2006 Queen's Speech has been seen as indicative of the policies Brown will continue as PM. See Adams, 'Clues to Brown's agenda emerge'; Queen's Speech, <http://www.number10.gov.uk/output/Page10419.asp>, accessed 15 Jan. 2007; interview with Brown by Andrew Marr, Sunday AM programme, 7 Jan. 2007; Lionel Barber and James Blitz, 'Security is our top priority, says Brown', interview, Financial Times, 25 Oct. 2006.

⁵ G. Brown, Speech by Brown to UN ambassadors, New York, 20 April 2006, http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/newsroom_and_speeches/press/2006/press_31_06.cfm

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"All British Troops should be withdrawn from Afghanistan as soon as possible": 19 July 2009 – Agree 64% Disagree 33%; 23 August 2009 – Agree 60% Disagree 33%;
"All British Troops should be withdrawn from Afghanistan as quickly as possible": 8 November 2009 – Agree 63% Disagree 31%;
"The War in Afghanistan is unwinnable": 23 February 2010 – Agree 64% Disagree 30%.
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