



University
of Exeter

Policy @ Exeter

RESEARCH
NETWORKS

The Labour Party and the 'New Era' for UK Defence

Paul Cornish, Peter Roberts and
Frances Tammer

Policy @ Exeter



In late February 2024, in a speech at Policy Exchange, a (largely) centre-right think tank in London, John Healey MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Defence, removed any doubt as to the possibility of a review of UK defence in the event of a Labour victory in the forthcoming general election. Healey spoke plainly and unequivocally of 'the strategic defence review the next government will carry out in the first year.' The UK has become rather fond of defence reviews in recent years, albeit with often disappointing results. The Labour review will come just two years or so after the 2023 'Integrated Review: Refresh' – a second-rate update of its third-rate 2021 predecessor. While it would be preferable for reviews of national strategy to be relevant for a little longer, and ideally to offer something like a strategic outlook, this 'drumbeat' of reviews does at least allow for inadequate statements of public policy to be given the last rites before they become too much of a national embarrassment. But does John Healey's 'new era for UK defence' offer much of an improvement?

Anticipating a Labour-led strategic defence review (SDR), Exeter's Centre for the Public Understanding of Defence and Security has launched a series of short essays intended to stimulate public debate about the UK's national strategy. In this, the third in the series, we examine the closest thing we have so far to a Labour Party manifesto for national strategy and defence – John Healey's speech at Policy Exchange. In the first part of the essay Paul Cornish comments on the tone of Healey's speech: what indications are given as to his and his party's attitude to national strategy and defence? Peter Roberts and Frances Tammer then offer their analysis, respectively, of Healey's proposals for the leadership, organisation and administration of the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces.

From Old Errors to New Era

Professor Paul Cornish



What is immediately striking in Healey's speech is the first glimmer of a return to something like a bipartisan, cross-party approach to national strategy and defence. Healey is by no means uncritical of the state of UK defence after 14 years of Conservative-led government: there is a compelling need for clearer political guidance; the Ministry of Defence is not good enough at strategic preparation and leadership; UK armed forces are too small in numbers and lack the equipment they need; and no less than the House of Commons Defence Committee and the National Audit Office have made withering criticism of the lack of readiness and resilience. Yet Healey is (a little) more generous when it comes to the bigger picture of global and European security. Thus, when Grant Schapps, the incumbent Secretary of State for Defence, warned recently of a shift from a 'post-war to a pre-war world', Healey believes he should be taken seriously. Schapps 'was right' too about Ukraine and so Healey can promise that there will be no change in the UK government's support – political, diplomatic and military – for Kyiv.

Policy @ Exeter

This is also a speech in which the English language is used as it should be – for the clear communication of shared (or shareable) meaning. Where security and defence and the resort to armed force are concerned there are important moral, constitutional, strategic and budgetary reasons for seeking clarity of expression. But the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces have been keen recently to use English in a pretentious, obscurantist and often bewildering way, using modish expressions that are laden with meaning that is not generally meaningful; a coded language to which few have the key. I have described the outcome elsewhere as a cottage industry of nonsense, in which we are told that national strategy should follow a 'North Star' and should develop defence capabilities that are more 'sunrise' than 'sunset', in which the world is revealed to be one of 'persistent competition' (when is competition *not* persistent?), in which warfare can be described as 'political', 'next-generation', 'grey zone', or 'sub-threshold', and in which the function of armed forces can be both to 'warfight' (*vb*) or 'operate'. Carl von Clausewitz, the nineteenth century philosopher-practitioner of war, observed that the analysis of war can prompt an 'ostentatious exhibition of ideas.' A 'serious menace', Clausewitz suggested, is the 'retinue of jargon, technicalities, and metaphors' that 'swarm everywhere – a lawless rabble of camp followers.' Is it too much to hope that Healey has read Clausewitz and that the serious menace of pretentious defence verbosity will not resurface?

Mercifully absent from Healey's speech is talk of 'grand strategy'. It has become standard practice, as soon as a strategic defence review is announced, for calls to be made for a thorough debate to establish Britain's 'place in the world', as though this is something that is not already well enough known.

“Instead of indulging in grand strategic soul-searching the UK could, instead, accept that it is already in a fortunate position that is worth having and should *act grand strategically* to sustain it.”

Grand strategy has become fashionable – there are even university departments devoted to its study – although it is not obvious that it differs much from mere ‘public policy’. Nor is it obvious that a grand strategy can produce much more than the vacuous hubris of the ‘Global Britain’ slogan that the UK has had to tolerate since 2021, or the limply obvious idea that public policy would be more effective if it can be made more ‘integrated’. The reflexive search for a ‘big idea’ that will not simply describe the state of the world but will also explain how a country can improve its standing internationally is surely superfluous for a country – i.e., the UK – that is a long-established liberal democracy, a major economy, an important participant in global trade, an acknowledged diplomatic and military leader, an internationally respected driving force in science, technology and innovation and one that enjoys an enviable degree of soft power through the arts, education, tourism and the media.

Policy @ Exeter

The Labour Party and the 'New Era' for UK Defence

RESEARCH
NETWORKS

If it can be argued that the purpose of grand strategy is to transform, to enable movement from something less to something more, then it must be asked what such transformation could give the UK that it does not already have. Rather than missing the opportunity to transform, the grand strategic risk to the UK is of losing what it has, by slipping into complacent stasis and beginning to decline in either relative or absolute terms. The UK does not need a new grand strategy to prevent this and could do without a debate that could even hasten decline by fostering the delusion that there is time to pause and deliberate. Instead of indulging in grand strategic soul-searching the UK could, instead, accept that it is already in a fortunate position that is worth having and should *act grand strategically* to sustain it. Healey's speech is encouragingly suggestive of a grounded, open-eyed approach to the state of the world, the UK's place in it and the requirements of national strategic defence, without the histrionics that have been all too evident recently. Acting grand strategically will, nevertheless, require hard decisions to be made, as Peter Roberts and Frances Tammer explain.

Professor Paul Cornish is Professor of Strategic Studies at the University of Exeter, Director of Policy@Exeter, the University's public policy think tank, and founder of the Centre for the Public Understanding of Defence and Security (CPUDS).

Policy @ Exeter

Just Be More Busy

Professor Peter Roberts



In outlining a broad-brush plan for UK defence John Healey lays out yet another set of aspirations for the administration of the UK's military instrument but appears to be less interested in correcting the structural issues within the force itself. The simple ambitions presented by Healey gloss over a multitude of serious issues and imply that more administration and centralisation can solve the challenges being faced by the UK defence community.

That said, Healey does identify the central problem: that the UK Armed Forces do not understand how they will fight. Certainly, the ambition to face all challenges in a 'fused', 'comprehensive', 'integrated' way seems reasonable enough. But the absence of a how will not be solved by a new Levene review (and least of all by the reimposition of the now very dated original version), by a new operating model, by the raft of strategies and policies being issued by the MoD, or by the current Chief of Defence Staff exhorting the heads of service (Royal Navy, Army, Royal Air Force and Strategic Command) to 'be more busy'. The idea that reasonable questions concerning the capability and utility of the services can be answered simply by making the services 'more busy' does seem quite peculiar.

Policy @ Exeter

What is concerning is that Labour's current analysis of the problems and potential of UK defence seems to suggest that a new headquarters will solve many or all of these questions. Here we come to a persistent misunderstanding of the gap between policy and reality, resulting from unfounded assumptions about the credibility and fighting power of the UK Armed Forces. It could reasonably be argued that the UK does not need a Military Strategic Headquarters (MSHQ); that the relative size and modest capabilities of UK Armed Forces do not warrant that kind of control mechanism (even if the defence budget and acquisition projects are of such size and importance as to justify larger structures at the centre of defence). Instead of drafting and issuing yet more strategies on every conceivable subject (likely to be the main activity of a MSHQ), resources could perhaps be better spent on educating senior leaders on how to think strategically and clearly. The UK's defence policy- and decision-making framework might, as a result, become something other than the entangled mess that currently prevents the UK from developing a coherent, credible and sustainable national strategy.

Establishing another headquarters has become a popular military response to any and all challenges, whether financial, doctrinal, intellectual, or geographic. New headquarters are often built at the two-star level (Major General and equivalent) for the higher tactical or operational level of administration. The pattern has been evident in the US for decades, and even NATO has a penchant for recreating costly control and administrative structures in the vain hope that these structures, and the staff that occupy them, will somehow improve or augment capability.

“A much more detailed understanding will be required of the problems that bedevil UK defence, together with a sincere commitment at the top of government to solve those problems.”

Yet instead of delivering credibility, lethality or readiness (particularly as far as adversaries are concerned), new structures usually confuse and weaken already fragile organisations and processes. Any advantages they might deliver usually cost more over the medium term and distract attention and resources from underlying capability demands in the longer term. New headquarters are a popular catch-all solution proposed by consultants and senior officers, yet the evidence suggests that they rarely deliver what they were charged to do.

Whilst UK politicians (of any party) continue to measure the credibility of the military instrument in headline financial terms (with cries of “When we left government in 2010, we were spending 2.5% of GDP on defence”), it seems unlikely that any meaningful improvement will be made to the capability, lethality, and readiness of the Armed Forces.



Policy @ Exeter

The Labour Party and the 'New Era' for UK Defence

RESEARCH
NETWORKS

The depressing record of poor leadership and specious rhetoric, combined with a misplaced belief that technology and industry will solve the core issues of misemployed military forces, suggests that a much more detailed understanding will be required of the problems that bedevil UK defence, together with a sincere commitment at the top of government to solve those problems.

Finally, in spite of the lack of detail, Healey's speech is at least suggestive of a desire for some form of improved accountability. But given their extended time in opposition, and the frustrations felt across the wider national security community at the failures of the MoD, Service chiefs, ministers and civil servants to engage in a more open way, it is surprising that the idea of deeper scrutiny of policy, the Armed Forces, decision-makers, and their decisions has not been addressed more directly and more vigorously. The defence community of the UK has been able to operate without accountability or scrutiny for too long. Perhaps a more empowered parliamentary defence and security scrutiny process would have been a welcome addition to Healey's speech. If politicians really do believe in putting national security at the heart of the state, the solution must be to give the scrutineers of public policy more of a role in the process, rather than invent yet another military headquarters.

Professor Peter Roberts is Senior Research Fellow at CPUDS and Senior Associate Fellow at RUSI, London

Policy @ Exeter

People, People, People

Professor Frances Tammer



The Shadow Defence Secretary, John Healey, has set out what he describes as an evolution rather than a revolution in defence, to be implemented should the Labour Party be elected. A cornerstone of his speech is the creation of a new Military Strategic Headquarters (MSHQ) within MoD to set strategic direction and improve readiness underpinned by better alignment of the Service Chiefs' authorities and accountability. There will also be an enhanced role for Strategic Command with new authorities to direct and co-ordinate beyond its current enabling advocacy. Two other main proposals are the establishment of a new National Armaments Director to overhaul procurement and the extension of the tenure of the Service Chiefs from the current 2-3 years to 4 years.

Putting aside inevitable concern that the 'devil is in the detail', these ostensible reforms hardly even meet the lower bar of evolution. They are insufficient to propel defence onto the path of better operational readiness to meet the multitude of adversary challenges in a technologically focused environment, to provide value for money and to contribute to national prosperity. This is tinkering at the edges.

Policy @ Exeter

“These ostensible reforms hardly even meet the lower bar of evolution. [...] This is tinkering at the edges.”



In essence, the MoD has always been the UK’s MSHQ, so Healey’s proposal would really only reinforce what already exists. The temptation must be avoided, as is often the case in transformation programmes at the MoD, to create lots of new senior military or Senior Civil Service positions as this achieves nothing other than an increase in the salary bill. A proliferation of senior appointments might also not sit well with other staff who may be under recruitment freezes.

Providing Strategic Command with new authorities to properly integrate and co-ordinate the five domains of air, cyber, land, naval and space, will be a welcome step, but will require the compliance of the Single Services, who may be reluctant to forego some of their autonomy. The further and deeper development of Strategic Command may therefore be difficult to achieve.

Over the past two decades, there have been a large number of initiatives to make defence procurement more efficient and to provide more value for money.

These initiatives have largely failed. Appointing a 'fully fledged' National Armaments Director will be woefully insufficient unless business savvy personnel are also recruited who can match the business acumen of the defence industry primes.

It is, finally, disappointing that this keynote speech made very scant mention of the people side of the equation, other than the specific decision to extend the tenure of the Service Chiefs. There was nothing broader on how the requisite workforce, both military and civilian, can be attracted, retained and, above all, treated appropriately. Whilst better aligning the Service Chiefs' authorities and accountability may be a shorthand for this, it is not necessarily implicit that a better people deal is in sight. Much of the speech has focused on institutional and organisational changes without spelling out the metrics for success including the important cultural changes. Without formative action, the constant drip feed of inappropriate and toxic behaviours across the Armed Forces will come to plague a Labour Government, if elected, and illustrate that their vocality in opposition was hollow.

Professor Frances Tammer is Professor of Practice in Strategy and Security at the University of Exeter