

Gordon Brown's white elephants

By Paul Rogers,
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The current media and political attention in Britain is focusing on two main issues. The first is the large-scale flooding [1] across extensive areas of England west of London, which some commentators see as further evidence of the early impacts of global climate change on the daily lives of millions of citizens living in one of the richest countries on the planet.

The second is the announcement in parliament on 24 July 2007 by prime minister Gordon Brown [2] of proposals [3] designed to increase national security, of which the most eye-catching for the media is the creation of a new, specialised border-security

force. The two issues are related, though in ways not immediately obvious. Perhaps the best way to illustrate this is by referring to a third issue, which has received far less attention from the media and political classes: the major defence plans the British government and defence establishment are now implementing, whose effects will - in the best tradition of Atlanticist cooperation - tie Britain even more closely to the United States for the next few decades.

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Britannia rules the waves

The relevant plans were also aired in parliament on 24 July, in two announcements by defence minister Des Browne [4]. Their timing was in the best tradition of British democracy: in a familiar pattern for decisions that governments seek to "bury", they arrived at the end of the parliamentary session as MPs prepare to leave for the summer recess, thus ensuring an absence of debate and (in the main) media discussion.

The first decision is clearly linked to the intimate collaboration between the two leading allies and partners in the global "war on terror", Britain and the United States. This is that Britain is to allow the US base at Menwith Hill [5] in north Yorkshire to become a key component in the new national missile-defence system Washington is now developing. The defence minister offered some soothing words to the effect that involvement in missile defence would increase Britain's security; there was no acknowledgment of the probability that any US technological lead will simply encourage Russia and China (to name only these states) to build more missiles capable of swamping any American defence cluster.

From the perspective of Moscow [6] and Beijing, the idea of the United States having thousands of offensive nuclear warheads in combination with a sophisticated defence capability against incoming attack is simply not acceptable. Since they do not at present have the technological capability to develop their own defences, their response may well be to build more missiles - thus creating a new and dangerous nuclear arms race.

The second decision is equally significant even if ostensibly more "local" in character. This is

that Britain is going to build [7] two huge new aircraft-carriers for the Royal Navy, much bigger than any other ship the country has ever deployed (including the battleship *HMS Vanguard* of the 1940s and the fleet carriers such as *HMS Eagle* of the 1950s-1960s). The military purpose of the two new carriers is to give Britain a global expeditionary strike capability that it has lacked for decades; the problem is that the cost [8] and resources this effort will entail - as well as the strategic thinking that underpins it - will deprive the country of the ability in security terms to do almost anything else.

The aircraft-carrier plans have been explored in earlier columns in this series (see "British sea power: a 21st-century question" [13 July 2006 [8]] and "Britain's 21st-century defence" [15 February 2007 [8]]); there, the argument has been presented that the decision to build would make Britain the only country capable of operating alongside the United States navy with its fleet of Nimitz-class supercarriers (which are even larger than the proposed British ships). The French too may build one such warship to supplement their existing carrier, the *Charles de Gaulle*, which is widely acknowledged to be ineffective; even if they do so, the fact that two carriers are needed for one to be operational means that the French fleet would remain weak compared with the British.

In the event, then, Britain's Royal Navy [9] would become the proud possessor of the only pair of ships capable [10] of even remotely approaching US naval power. But comparison here is less important than combination: the new American F-35 strike aircraft [11] will deploy on the vessels, underlining the core Atlanticist element of the whole proposal.

It may represent a tremendous investment in naval resources, and in the very week when the head of the British army (Richard Dannatt) was revealed [12] to have lamented that there were insufficient numbers of troops at his disposal for the country's military commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan. But a windfall can also be a trap. The heavy expenditure in this area means that the navy will be putting almost all its eggs in one basket - or rather two, because to deploy such valuable ships in any future conflict (in the Persian Gulf, say) would require some kind of last-ditch back-up, and this will be available in the replacement for the Trident nuclear force (see "Britain's nuclear-weapons fix", 29 June 2006 [12]). The post-Trident flotilla will be large enough to keep one nuclear-armed submarine on patrol at any one time, alongside whichever of the two new aircraft-carriers is currently operational.

Welcome, therefore, to the fabulous new "two-ship navy". The overall costs of building and running the carriers and the Trident replacement [13] will be enormous, around £100 billion - even before the likely rapid escalation once the work is fully underway, in the best tradition of British public projects. The result is that there won't be much money around for anything else - a fact that is already causing disquiet in some of the more thoughtful circles in the Royal Navy, to balance the discontent felt in the army about its own burdens.

The mirage of control

The aircraft-carrier and Trident-replacement decisions ensure that Britain will be capable of expeditionary warfare but not very much more; the Menwith Hill decision ensure a further extension of the security and intelligence [14] alliance with the United States. It is highly questionable whether this combination will be sufficient to address Britain's real security needs, which are being increasingly influenced (even reshaped) by global environmental, social and economic problems.

If it is accepted that the unavoidable global issues [17] include the rapidly growing socio-economic divide and environmental

In addition to his weekly openDemocracy column,

constraints such as climate change, then the idea that expeditionary warfare will help - even in the effort to close the castle gates, far less to begin to engage with problems of planetary sustainability, human security and social justice - is fatuous. It also offers scant consolation to the residents of flooded homes [18] in Worcestershire and Gloucestershire (as of south Yorkshire a month earlier), whose experience also connects them to these global realities.

What is really dismaying at this early stage of the Gordon Brown government is the missed opportunity to take a hard look at Britain's defence policy and engage in a fundamental review of the country's long-term security needs. Instead, it seems that in this key area of Whitehall - notwithstanding the rhetoric of change from the new prime minister - it is business as usual.

There is a remote possibility that wiser counsel will prevail, perhaps after the next election (due by 2010, expected in 2009, but increasingly likely in 2008) when a re-elected Brown government might have the confidence and authority to start thinking the unthinkable. For now, though, the moment [18] is lost; and so for the time being is any chance of innovative thinking on the real security issues facing Britain and the world in the 21st century.

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