The government has committed funds to the modernisation of its nuclear deterrent forces and, after much delay, to the construction of two carriers for the Royal Navy. This underpins a continuation of its strategy of enabling the deployment of the armed forces overseas, both to defend the UK’s interests and to contribute to international peace and security.

In relation to Afghanistan, there has been talk of a mission lasting 30 years. Concerning Iraq, references to commitments of 10-15 years seem to have been overtaken by events. Depending on the dynamics of the security situation, UK troop levels will fall to 2,500 by spring 2008 with further reductions likely after that.

Whether foreign and security policy under Brown will be as activist as the Blair decade remains to be seen, although the signs are that public opinion, at least, is cautious.

A key question in all of this is the UK’s ability to recruit and retain enough suitable people to carry out security and defence policy over the coming decades. The signs are not promising.

Notwithstanding the cut in the military establishment of about 30,000 in the early years of the Blair administration, the UK government embarked on an interventionist foreign policy, leading to a sustained period of overseas deployments. This has overstretched units, exacerbated recruitment and retention problems and, more recently, led to higher and significant casualties. These have given rise to increasing public doubts about the human costs of operations relative to the perceived benefits, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The armed services do not have enough personnel for both Afghanistan and Iraq operations and precious little forces (perhaps 500 spearhead troops) left for a contingency such as a domestic terrorist incident. As the reductions in Iraq can be expected to lead directly to increases in Afghanistan, they will provide no relief to overstretched. The Army is about 3,500 soldiers under strength and is short of experienced and senior NCOs. The most serious shortages have been in the infantry.

Even though recruitment is reported to have been more buoyant recently it is still not sufficient to make up the shortfall. The real problem is retention and much the same can be said for the reserve forces, without which the armed forces cannot operate effectively.

There are also gaps amongst specialist trades: the recent National Audit Office (NAO) report indicates ‘88 specialist ‘pinch points’ — areas where there are insufficient trained personnel... [including] doctors, nurses, engineers and bomb disposal experts’.

The SAS, which recently lost its CO to a well-paid civilian position, is suffering losses of personnel to private security companies which can offer far better pay.

The Intelligence Corps offers another example of retention problems, with skilled personnel tempted away by better paid positions and pushed by what they consider to be problematic conditions of service or operations. Consideration is being given to offering up to £50,000 to officers in the Corps to stay on for a guaranteed further three years of service. Similar kinds of financial incentives have been offered to pilots.

Meanwhile, other specialist areas are suffering, including medical personnel, with shortfalls of the required strength running at 19, 29 and 20 per cent for the Royal Navy, the Army and the RAF respectively. Such pinch points and shortfalls can create a vicious personnel circle: worsening overspill in these areas leads to greater discontent, which can lead to further shortages as people leave.

Some commentators are demanding an increase in defence expenditure and funding for a larger military establishment, with a more satisfactory balance between personnel and equipment budgets. Yet, even if the UK were to commit funds to increasing the size of its armed forces, it is doubtful whether the revised establishment could be filled.

We need to put recent events in historical perspective: the services have consistently run below the full manning requirement and the problem of finding enough suitable recruits has plagued the British Army since at least 1815. It is true that the problem largely disappeared during the two periods of conscription (1916-18 and 1939-40) but it returned with the creation of the all-volunteer force. This has caused, from time to time, serious brainstorming on methods of finding enough people for military needs. The MARILYN report of 1989 is a case in point and included some very helpful ideas, including widening employment opportunities for women.

Even with the reduction in the military establishment since the end of the Cold War, finding enough recruits for the armed services remained a problem, aggravated by a strong economy. Attempts to address this have included
increased investment in public relations and marketing, targeting people under 16 to shape their preferences about employment and improvements in pay and conditions of service.

The recruitment difficulties meant that the 'Deepcut problem' had to be dealt with and public perceptions about unnecessarily harsh conditions and bullying, racism and sexism addressed. As a consequence, the armed services have become a beacon of equal opportunities in public service employment. But serious retention problems remain in both regular and reserve forces.

Recent discussions about tensions in the military covenant — of which David Cameron's mention in his conference speech is the most politically high profile — are not wholly new themes. These focus on whether society and government give sufficient honour and care to the service personnel in exchange for the latter's sacrifices, and whether the services' own commitments to the values of integrity and care for others — within the military as well as outside, including non-combatants and prisoners — warrant the respect from society that they ask for.

The question of whether the military covenant provides a sufficiently supportive moral and political framework for the recruitment and retention needs of the armed services is also familiar territory.

Since the late 1990s, the armed services and MoD have become more aware of the interactions between recruitment, retention and the support that is needed from both government and wider society for the armed services as well as how policies might address them.

This awareness is reflected in the Armed Forces Overarching Personnel Strategy (AFOPS). Here the fundamental principle is one of interdependencies between recruitment and retention. This focuses on the processes involved in finding recruits by cultivating the environment in which potential recruits (and those 'gatekeepers' who influence them) are likely to be found, obtaining recruits and processing them through initial training, retaining and sustaining them while they are in service, and remembering and valuing them when they have left the service and are veterans, whether or not they are in receipt of a military pension.

In all of this, military families, in addition to their housing and other conditions of service, loom large as an issue. These conditions include allowances for personnel on deployment, extending to government plans for personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan to obtain a 25 per cent council tax rebate (as the House of Commons Defence Committee has reported).

It is now ten years since the Strategic Defence Review of 1998. It is time for another

As the NAO report confirmed: Armed forces personnel told us that the key reasons they were leaving early included the pressures on their family life. It is therefore vital that, in addition to the financial incentives offered, the Ministry of Defence maintains its focus on longer-term measures. For some years, military officers have felt that the health and wellbeing of service personnel is harmed by overstretching. A recent study has confirmed their judgment.

A team at King's College London assessed information on 2,915 regular UK military personnel with at least one operational deployment in the last three years. Nine per cent (or six per cent allowing for one month's error) reported to have been deployed in total for at least 13 months in the last three years. This level of deployment is above the recommendations in the armed services' harmony guidelines, which recommend that soldiers should be given at least 24 months between operational deployments.

Deployment above the recommended limit in the armed forces is associated with poor mental health and problems at home. This may be more apparent in those with direct combat exposure. Those deployed for more than the average recommended amount were slightly more likely to have symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and more likely to report alcohol problems. The good news is that current harmony guidelines, based on military judgement, have been shown to strike a balance between deployment and other activities — there is no evidence of mental health effects of deployment either below or at the guideline level.

One key lesson of the King's College study is that there is a need for a clear and explicit policy on the duration of each deployment to help reduce the risk of PTSD. We already know that PTSD may be somewhat greater amongst reservists than regulars, and this matter is being attended to by the MoD.

The negative effects of lengthy deployments probably derive less from their duration per se and more from whether the incidence and length of deployments breach expectations of what is normal and acceptable.

Improving financial incentives and addressing working conditions such as operational tempo, better allowances for those on operations — even with all the proposals the Conservatives have set out — will only ameliorate the problem.

In a buoyant economy the Army has always struggled to fill its ranks. Underlining this even more is that the military covenant that provides the moral and political framework for effective service personnel policies is showing signs of fraying, with sections of the wider public indifferent to the hard work and sacrifice, and to the fate of the men and women in the UK military — a point reinforced recently by General Sir Richard Dannatt, Chief of the General Staff.

If the military covenant is breaking then we must expect a greater risk of poor outcomes for the health and well-being of soldiers returning from operations to a society that views them with either indifference or disdain. Is the military at breaking point? If we want an activist foreign policy, albeit at a reduced tempo, the question remains whether, whatever the circumstances, we can find enough people to join and stay in the armed services. It is now ten years since the Strategic Defence Review of 1998. It is time for another.

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