This year's cuts in military spending revealed attitudes towards defence firmly rooted in our super-power past. **Paul Rogers** calls for a security review to bring British forces in line with our real requirements.

The debate over defence spending is one of the clearest indications of the failure of Britain to adopt rational policies in tune with national needs and capabilities. Pushed by an insistent Treasury, the Ministry of Defence last year embarked on a confidential assessment of the scope for cuts, and came up with a plan given the supremely anodyne title of *Options for Changes*. This amounted to modest cuts in equipment and personnel, at least relative to the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, yet it was met with an outcry, especially from the 'old right' in and out of parliament.

As indicative was Labour's efforts to avoid debate, showing an equal unwillingness to address British defence policy squarely. Labour fears that any indication that they accept the need for a major defence review will immediately be pounced upon as evidence of their lack of patriotism, an accusation they dread.

In terms of pragmatic politics, Labour may well be right to avoid any discussion of defence before a general election, but it is the clearest possible demonstration of the state of British politics - defence is well-nigh sacrosanct for with it comes our continuing pretensions to great power status.

For almost the whole of the post-war period Britain has been, proportionately, one of the heaviest defence spenders in the western alliance. It was at its peak in the 1950s when we maintained conscription, armed forces of 800,000 and a global military presence. At the same time, we were developing the A-bomb, H-bomb and a wide range of advanced aircraft and missiles, all consuming vast amounts of money and many of the country's best brains.

A small sense of reality intruded in the Duncan Sandy's defence review in 1957 after Suez, and again under Denis Healey in the late 1960s, but both attempts to curb defence budgets were short-lived as, in each case, the budgets crept up within two or three years as large new projects intruded.

In terms of defence policy, the British disease has been the costly pretension of great power status, reaching its peak with the continuing commitment to nuclear weapons which have always been concerned far more with status than security. It shows itself now with the refusal to entertain any notion of a thorough-going security review.

The ending of the Cold War provides just such an opportunity, and if there were to be a stable Labour government after the next election, it might just take on the task. Any such review should recognise that threats to Britain's security are broadly the same as for most countries, the risk that the past forty years of East-West confrontation will be replaced by an even greater, and certainly more fundamental, North-South axis of conflict.

The long term threat to global security comes from the deep polarisation of the world into wealth and poverty. One fifth of the population, mainly in the North, use and control three-quarters of the wealth. Demographic trends mean that the wealthy will make up barely one-seventh of the world's population during the next century. Maintaining control of the North's huge slice of the cake, in a world in which weapons of mass destruction are proliferating, will be increasingly difficult, made worse by the accelerating intrusion of environmental constraints on human activity.

Regional instability, resource wars and militant migration are likely results, and these problems can only be addressed by wide-ranging international economic and social reform. The developing global security threats could be met by military means, but only to produce a crowded, glowering planet. A British security review would, therefore, have to be concerned as much with foreign and trade policy as with defence. It would represent a radical change from past practice but would be a sign that, at last, the country was shedding past pretensions and seeking an effective role in the real world.

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