House of Commons

Defence Committee

A New Chapter to the Strategic Defence Review: Government Response to the Committee's Sixth Report of Session 2002–03

Third Special Report of Session 2002–03

Ordered by the House of Commons
to be printed 9 July 2003

HC 975
Published on 21 July 2003
by authority of the House of Commons
London: The Stationery Office Limited
£0.00

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Third Special Report

A NEW CHAPTER TO THE STRATEGIC DEFENCE REVIEW

The Defence Committee published its Sixth Report of Session 2002–03 on A New Chapter to the Strategic Defence Review as (HC 93–I) on 15 May 2003. The Government's response to this report was received on 9 July 2003 and is published as an Appendix to this Special Report.

Appendix

1. This memorandum constitutes the Government's response to the Defence Select Committee's report *A New Chapter to the Strategic Defence Review* (Sixth Report of Session 2002-03, HC 93-1, published on 15 May 2003). The Government welcomes the Report as a contribution to the continuing evolution of Defence policy and the effort to respond to the terrorist threat and strengthen the UK's defence and security against it.

2. On 11 September 2001 Al Qa'ida's attacks in the USA gave reality to what had hitherto been largely theoretical discussion about the impact of asymmetric warfare in the post-Cold War world. It demonstrated not a new asymmetry, but that adversaries had developed the will and the capability to be actively hostile on a scale and with a reach we had not previously anticipated; and hence that international terrorism could pose a strategic threat to international security.

3. The New Chapter was the Ministry of Defence's part of the Government's comprehensive examination of its strategies, preparedness and contingency in the aftermath of those attacks. Its focus was the role of military force in meeting that threat. It confirmed that the Armed Forces have an important role to play, but the Government does not believe there is a specific military solution to the wide-ranging problems of international terrorism. There are therefore a number of vital issues which are beyond the New Chapter's scope: the difficulty of ever achieving absolute security; the importance of tackling the causes of international terrorism; the key roles of the intelligence and law enforcement agencies; and the uses and limitations of armed force as an instrument of counter-terrorism strategy.

Producing the New Chapter

We concluded in December 2001 that a widening of the SDR 's geographical and regional assumptions was likely to have significant implications for UK force structures, scale of effort benchmarks and the future equipment programme at the very least. Taken with the terms of reference for the New Chapter work set out by the MoD and the list of questions raised by the Secretary of State, this struck us as requiring a more fundamental reappraisal of the SDR than was implied by the phrase "a new chapter". We see little reason to revise that judgement. (Paragraph 46)

4. The New Chapter deliberately focused specifically on the impact of September 11th on the Armed Forces and their capabilities. This is only one aspect of Defence policy and the

Government will publish a broader White Paper on Defence later this year as it has undertaken to do in each Parliament. Many of the wider issues raised by the Committee will be addressed in that White Paper.

5. Our policy-led analysis did not identify a need for an across-the-board re-appraisal arising from September 11th. We found no basis for believing either that there is a military solution to the challenge of international terrorists—although there is a military contribution to be made—or that the Armed Forces should take over crisis and consequence management tasks from the civil authorities at home.

The discussion paper of February 2002 did not clarify the MoD's understanding of asymmetry and specifically how it related to existing doctrine. Similarly it left unclear how operations against asymmetric tactics might, in practice, be conducted. (Paragraph 50)

6. Most wars have asymmetric characteristics and, in that respect, dealing with asymmetry is not new. However, we have recognised in the New Chapter that asymmetric strategies new in scale and effect require a range of counters, some outside the military domain, to be used in concert.

We understand the arguments for consulting reservists during their summer camps, although we doubt whether it was essential to do so. What is surprising is that the MoD had apparently not considered these arguments when the timetable for the New Chapter work was originally planned. The result has been to undermine the coherence of the process and to contribute to an overall impression that this work has in practice lost out to other MoD priorities. We believe that the two strands could have been better co-ordinated. Given the importance of the issues—which was demonstrated by the early energy and commitment to the process by the MoD—it is surprising that some of the momentum appeared to have been lost in the later stages. (Paragraph 57)

7. It was not clear at the outset whether an increased role for Reserves would be an attractive option. The Government is surprised that the Committee does not regard consulting Volunteer Reservists on potential new roles as essential, given that their personal commitment is entirely voluntary. As for the timetable, it was not necessary to delay the publication of the whole White Paper until we had completed the Reserve consultation and analysed the results. The Government does not accept that the coherence of the New Chapter process was undermined or that the work on the role of Reservists lost out to other priorities. Much detailed planning work was conducted simultaneously with the consultation.

We conclude that the MoD is now engaged in a continuing process of reviewing defence policy, but believe it should be accompanied by appropriate consultation beyond the department. We expect to see the consequent developments in policy translated into practical results for the Armed Forces. (Paragraph 59)

8. The 1998 Strategic Defence Review set in place a robust approach for determining defence requirements on the basis of the UK's foreign and security policy. This is an on-going process which enables the MOD to re-evaluate, as necessary, its planning assumptions to ensure that our Armed Forces have the right structures and capabilities to

respond rapidly to any future changes in the strategic environment. The New Chapter—itself a good example of this approach—was conducted in as open and inclusive a manner as possible, and included a series of consultations with a wide range of interested parties (including other Government departments, civil authorities, the academic community, the Reserves and, indeed, the public). These proved very valuable in developing the New Chapter and, where appropriate, the Department will continue to consult widely as defence policy develops to meet future challenges.

The New Chapter represents a relatively modest development of policy, potentially one so modest that it will not require any change to doctrine. Other concepts, however, may be more significant. One of these is asymmetry, not a new concept but one upon which a striking new light was thrown by the events of 11 September. (Paragraph 66)

9. Although the Committee concludes the New Chapter was only a "relatively modest development of policy", the Government continues to believe that the Strategic Defence Review undoubtedly set us on the right path in 1998. However modest the Committee regards the New Chapter to be, it specifically under-pinned the case for new resources which amounted to an additional £1½ billion pounds for the Armed Forces in Spending Review 2002.

We regret that the document Joint Vision is classified, given its key role in setting out the MoD's understanding of the nature of asymmetry. In the context of the war on terrorism, which involves a great many other agencies and outside bodies, its necessarily restricted circulation may reduce its effectiveness in disseminating the Armed Forces ' understanding of the conceptual basis of the war on terror and how they see their part in it. (Paragraph 68)

10. The MOD position on countering terrorism has been summarised in the unclassified and widely distributed pamphlet 'Countering Terrorism—The UK Approach to the Military Contribution'. However, we hope that future iterations of Joint Vision will not need to be classified.

Home versus Away

That "significant place" for the task of home defence and security translates in the New Chapter only into measures to improve liaison between the civil and military authorities with what is described as a "clearer role" for Headquarters, Commander-in-Chief, Land Forces, as the principal focus for the provision of military assistance to civil authorities, joint regional liaison officers, and more staff in regional Brigade regions. However, in respect of military assistance to the civil authorities the New Chapter does not contemplate a greater role for the regular Armed Forces. Rather, it concludes that "there is a greater role for the reserves to play ". The SDR New Chapter 's assessment of the balance between home and away operations is qualified by the fact that the consultation period on the MoD's proposals for a role for the Reserves in home defence extended beyond the publication of the New Chapter in July 2002. What has emerged therefore has the character of a steady and rather modest evolution of the doctrine of fighting at distance that was explicitly articulated in the original SDR. (Paragraph 72)

11. The Government believes the Committee has under-estimated the importance of an effective military effective chain of command able to take a full part in contingency planning by the civil authorities as well as carry out 24/7 operations if necessary: Military commanders are becoming more closely integrated into local civilian planning. The New Chapter represents a significant human and financial investment and has revitalised an area of activity which had received less attention since the end of the Cold War.

12. The principle of military assistance is that regional commanders will advise Defence Ministers of the best means available to meet a particular request, whether regular or reservist. The establishment of Civil Contingency Reaction Forces provides a means of being able to satisfy more requests. The double-hatting of Reserve personnel was a deliberate decision to exploit an existing resource to best effect.

We welcome the establishment of the Civil Contingency Reaction Forces, but remain concerned that the present approach to their deployment runs the risk of developing a capability which will then not be used other than when all regular resources are already committed and that this may in turn have a damaging effect on the morale of those who have volunteered and trained for the new CCRFs. (Paragraph 78)

13. Given the wide range of contingencies which can give rise to requests for assistance it is not possible to estimate the likely balance of occasions when Regular or Reserve units, or both respond. It is not the case that CCRFs will only be used when Regular manpower is not available.

14. It will be for Headquarters Land Command to determine which is the most appropriate response to a request for assistance from police forces, local authorities or the other emergency services. This will be decided on a case by case basis. The CCRF is an important option and has the potential to bring very useful qualities to a deployment (such as local knowledge). They will also help sustainability in a long-term operation through exchange with other units in roulements. As far as morale is concerned, the effects of being trained but not used are the same for all units, regular and Reserve, and will need to be managed by the chain of command.

We regret that the MoD has not taken the opportunity afforded by the New Chapter process to think more innovatively about supporting home defence. We are also concerned that only an interim communications system will be available for their first three years. We do not believe that the MoD has adequately established the appropriate balance between operations at home and away, an issue that we believe is at the centre of the New Chapter process. (Paragraph 79)

15. The Government is satisfied that it has established a proper and effective balance. It remains committed to the principle that responsibility for crisis and consequence management at home rests with the civil authorities and emergency services, under the Home Secretary's Ministerial lead and policy direction for counter terrorism in the UK. It is making substantial investment in civil capabilities for protection and resilience in parallel with the New Chapter investment in Armed Forces capabilities. The MOD will continue to provide assistance from the Armed Forces under the principles of Military Aid to the Civil Authorities (MACP, MAGD and MACC).

16. The New Chapter has improved the capacity of the Armed Forces to respond to requests for assistance, and their ability to engage in contingency planning with the civil authorities, both by establishing a new capability in the CCRFs and strengthening the regional chain of command. It has quite clearly revitalised this aspect of Armed Forces activity.

17. The timetable for the adoption of the AIRWAVE system by 2 (National Communications) Signal Brigade is determined by the overall Police programme, which is planned to be completed by 2006. Other command and control infrastructure improvements are also being put in place.

If the CCRFs are to be the predictable element for the civil authorities (even if the regulars are likely to be the first to be called upon), the concerns we raised in our Defence and Security in the UK report remain valid. The MOD's list of possible tasks for the Reaction Forces includes "reconnaissance, assistance with mass casualties, site search and clearance, transport and communications, the operation of water and feeding points, control and co-ordination functions, access control, the control of movement of large numbers of the public, guarding or other tasks at the request of the civil police". Some of these clearly require more specialist skills and training than others. We are concerned that accurate data on the numbers recruited, their skills and their availability for call out are still to be provided. (Paragraph 85)

18. The intention has always been that CCRFs would provide a General Duties response and that the requirement for specialist skills would therefore be minimised. The possible tasks outlined in the Report were chosen as they can be performed using residual training conducted for traditional military tasks. Clearly this will be enhanced by the additional training given to those Volunteer Reserves who elect to join the CCRFs.

19. The recruitment and initial training of the CCRFs are proceeding in parallel with the development of doctrine, call-out mechanisms and contingency planning for their employment. The first series of exercises will provide importance guidance on how best to develop them. The chain of command will identify and exploit best practice from around the country. The role of the CCRFs in the Home Office national counter-terrorist exercise programme is currently being examined.

20. A clear indication of numbers, skills and call-out availability will be available after 31 December 2003, which is the declared target for the achievement of Full Operating Capability.

We are also concerned that too little thought has gone into the implications of the establishment of the CCRFs in each region for the normal activities of the volunteer Reserve nationally. (Paragraph 86)

21. By providing additional Man Training Days for CCRF training, CCRF members will still be able to fulfil their full commitment to the parent unit. Clearly, there is potential for parent unit and CCRF programmes to clash but this will be managed by the chain of command. Operational deployment could, of course, impact on the parent unit's normal activities but the unpredictable nature of this means that priorities, particularly set against competing operational requirements, will be decided at the time.

We seek assurances from the MoD in their reply to this report that the Fit For Role figures for the CCRF elements in each brigade region will not be the same as for the volunteer Reserves as a whole. (Paragraph 86)

22. An estimation cannot be made now while initial recruitment and training is ongoing but will be available once Full Operating Capability is achieved in December 2003. However, the Committee should note that currently the baseline for an individual to join a CCRF is lower than that required to be Fit For Role for the full range of military activities. This reflects the domestic nature of CCRF deployments and the likely General Duties tasks that Reservists will be asked to perform.

Overall, we have seen little evidence that the MoD has taken seriously the need to rethink the capacity of the Armed Forces to provide predictable support to the task of home defence in the event of a mass-effect terrorist attack in the UK. (Paragraph 87)

23. The Armed Forces are only one element of the capabilities available to deal with the full range of civil contingencies, including a mass-effect terrorist attack in the United Kingdom. The Government is making substantial investment in those capabilities, both nationally and locally and does not accept there is a need to rethink the capacity of the Armed Forces in the terms suggested by the Committee. UK police forces have a wide range of skills and capabilities to respond to either a conventional or CBRN terrorist incident or hoax. With existing mutual aid arrangements between police forces, a considerable non-military response can be fielded to manage an incident before a Chief Constable might wish to request military assistance. In addition, the ability of police forces to respond to the threat of CBRN terrorism is being enhanced by a substantial programme of specialist training being conducted by the Police National CBRN Centre. The Government's aim is to have 5 per cent of operational police staff trained to work in personal protective equipment by April 2004.

The War on Terror and Military Transformation

For the UK the key challenge raised by the revolution in military affairs is to monitor accurately how the process is altering the structure and operations of US forces, since they serve as the prototype for all the technical trends in new methods of warfare. The MoD also has to assess the advantages and disadvantages that the UK possesses in these regards and balance them against what is firstly feasible and affordable in the evolution of UK forces for the future, and secondly is consistent with the principles set out in the SDR New Chapter (Paragraph 91)

24. We agree that one of the our challenges is tracking how the USA is evolving its military capability, although it is not true that it provides the prototype for all the technical trends in new methods of warfare. As well as tracking events, we shall also wish to continue to achieve a degree of influence on US thinking by exploiting the considerable intellectual capital that exists in the United Kingdom.

We believe that the doctrinal basis for embracing network-enabling technologies needs to be rigorous and clearly understood if the benefits of the network are to be realised by the UK Armed Forces. (Paragraph 97)

25. This is entirely correct. Much has already been invested in trying to understand the conceptual basis for network-enabled capabilities. This currently exists in the form of a draft High Level Operational Concept that has already influenced the research and equipment programmes as well as other lines of development.

We are concerned at the risks created by the potential vulnerabilities of "transformed" military forces and that they may act as a constraint on progress towards realising the full benefits of network-enabled capability. However, in the face of such vulnerabilities, the UK's cautious approach has potential advantages. (Paragraph 101)

26. The MOD recognises the risks and vulnerabilities in network-enabled capability. All military capabilities are developed to be robust and resilient in the face of potential counter-measures. We will take account in particular of the potential for interference and disruption to nodes, sensors and communications systems, and vulnerabilities in commercially developed software such as databases and operating systems.

We accept that the UK now has a reasonably efficient structure to develop and embed doctrines at the various appropriate levels, and translate them into training regimes. We are still concerned, however, that the political and technical novelty of the developments the Secretary of State has outlined, and which other witnesses have elaborated, have taken some time to be addressed in a doctrinal context. Relevant work is clearly underway, but so are the evolving tactics of potential terrorists and those who would employ asymmetric tactics against the UK and our Armed Forces. (Paragraph 105)

27. The Government notes the Committee's observation.

Equipment and Force Structures

The MoD's declared determination to "make sure we really do keep our forces equipped with the most up-to-date technology" does not sit with the lack of urgency in acquiring an effective networked UAV capability. The Secretary of State told us that: "What we want to ensure is that the next generation [of UAVs] available to the United Kingdom provides us with useful capabilities at the best price for the British taxpayer ". It is surely not too much to hope that an effective capability will be available to the Armed Forces of this generation of taxpayers. (Paragraph 112)

28. The Government does not accept there has been a lack of urgency in acquiring a networked UAV capability. It is important to ensure we have an effective capability in service with the Armed Forces as quickly as possible and the Watchkeeper programme has therefore been brought forward to provide an advanced UAV system in 2006. Although based primarily on commercial off-the-shelf aerial vehicles, Watchkeeper represents a significant advance on currently available systems, utilising a common ground station fully integrated into command and control systems such as Bowman (due into service from 2004). Network integration is essential to enable exploitation and dissemination of imagery as rapidly as possible to ensure maximum effect. Delivery of such a comprehensive capability in 2006 remains a challenging target.

The Committee has seen little evidence of the urgency that the MoD has claimed to be devoting to acquiring new capabilities and embracing new technologies—it appears so far at least that pragmatic decision-making is also slow decision-making. (Paragraph 113)

29. The Government does not accept that little has been done to acquire new capabilities and embrace new technologies. The key is ensuring that we develop optimal capabilities which can be effectively operated and sustained within the funding available. Much has been completed within a short space of time; the Watchkeeper programme has been advanced; a Joint UAV experimental unit has been approved and is being established now; and we are re-focusing our research programme on experimentation, in particular through work to enable rapid pull-through of innovative technical solutions. We are also allocating significant funds to investment in a range of information system applications to analyse, exploit and disseminate information across the battlespace.

It remains to be seen whether present equipment programmes, and the pragmatic adjustments that the MoD is still considering, will be sufficient to allow UK Armed Forces to fulfil the realistic but demanding scenarios which will be most relevant in our military relationship with the United States. (Paragraph 114)

30. The Government agrees that the most demanding and realistic future scenarios are likely to be those involving operations with the USA. Improving interoperability with US forces is a priority in the annual equipment planning round and close consultation is maintained at all levels to ensure we can maximise the effect of UK forces in US-led operations. Recent operations in Iraq provided a timely example of how effectively UK forces can operate alongside their US colleagues. The Urgent Operational Requirement (UOR) mechanism was used during Op TELIC to provide key enhancements—many of which advanced programmes already in the Equipment Plan—to facilitate UK/US interoperability. Examples are tactical data-link capabilities and direct US exploitation of UK sensor imagery. The experience from operations in Iraq is being carefully analysed to ensure that interoperability lessons are identified and that the enduring benefits of capability delivered through the UOR process are maximised.

The MoD has not addressed the risk of over-commitment leading to over-stretch in the New Chapter. The Committee believes that these issues need to be urgently considered by the MoD in an open and inclusive manner. (Paragraph 123)

31. The New Chapter was focused deliberately and specifically on the impact of September 11th on the Armed Forces and their capabilities and was thus never intended as a vehicle to consider the wider issue of over-stretch.

32. The Government recognises the problem of asking too much of the Armed Forces: the MOD constantly manages its commitments to achieve a balance and reduce adverse impacts on individuals and capabilities. Commitments are not determined arbitrarily in advance but are subject to specific decisions in the light of circumstances. We aim to commit personnel to operations for no longer than is necessary to achieve the military aim and personnel are withdrawn from operations at the earliest opportunity.

On the basis of the evidence, we remain to be convinced that implementing the New Chapter will not put further strain on the UK's Armed Forces, particularly in those branches that serve as "key enablers" to greater combat effectiveness in an era of rapid technological transformation. (Paragraph 126)

33. Some of the additional resources made available in Spending Review 2002 are being focused on the sort of critical areas the Committee identifies. The level of operational activity required of the Armed Forces over time in countering terrorism remains to be seen but we do not expect implementing the New Chapter to put a further strain on them.

The New Chapter and the Spending Review

The link between the Spending Review and the New Chapter remains unclear. The MoD has yet to set out how the significant increase in the capital budget will be used to reshape the MoD's equipment and infrastructure to reflect the capabilities highlighted in the New Chapter, or indeed to what extent the Spending Review addresses such new requirements rather than rectifying existing and long-standing deficiencies. (Paragraph 129)

We expect the MoD to set out—in its response to this report, or at the latest in the forthcoming White Paper—how the Spending Review settlement will be utilised to secure New Chapter and other capabilities, to address existing strains on Armed Forces personnel and to enable the tempo of operations implied by the New Chapter. (Paragraph 129)

34. The conclusions of the New Chapter working groups were the basis of advice to the Defence Council and of the subsequent bid presented to the Treasury as part of the Spending Review process. The New Chapter elements were considered alongside the remainder of the MOD's Spending Review proposals. Treasury participation in the New Chapter process ensured that in considering the Spending Review they understood fully the basis of the bid.

35. As we set out in the New Chapter, the Spending Review settlement has allowed us to invest in the further development of a network-enabled capability and a range of other capabilities providing better-controlled and precise military effect. For example it has allowed the Watchkeeper UAV programme to be brought forward, the establishment of a Joint Service UAV Experimentation Programme and enhancements to our E3D aircraft. We also expect to invest further in experimentation, which has a growing and important role in developing the NEC concept. Initially we aim to establish an industry-led programme which will enable us to investigate promising technology and concepts in parallel and create options for the rapid exploitation of results through new projects, adjusted priorities and technology insertion.

36. An additional £1½ billion was specifically earmarked in the Spending Review settlement for new equipment and capabilities to respond to the new strategic environment. The Defence White Paper to be published later in the year will lay out how the Defence programme is addressing the requirements identified in the New Chapter.

Policy versus Practicality

We are not persuaded that the robustness of the original SDR is the reason for the modest practical changes to date. We have the impression that too often the practical implications of the policy developments set out in the New Chapter have not been properly thought through. To date virtually all the equipment programmes which have been linked with the New Chapter have been existing programmes, which in a few cases the department has said are being accelerated. We are concerned that this suggests the policy making process and the ability to deliver the implementation of that process quickly enough are out of step with each other, or that the MoD has scaled back its practical ambition from the vision set out by the early stages of the New Chapter work. (Paragraph 132)

37. A key conclusion of the New Chapter was we need a series of adjustments and refinements to existing military means, not a step change in capability or concept of operations. That was a reasoned and legitimate conclusion based on a clear analysis of how the Armed Forces can be used.

38. While the New Chapter was focused on the implications of international terrorism, the Government must also take account of the roles and commitments which drive other core capabilities of the Armed Forces. We must maximise the value of new investment by seeking improvements with utility beyond counter-terrorism.

39. The publication of the New Chapter White Paper was not the end of the exercise. We always intended to use the MOD's normal planning process to determine exactly how best to allocate the additional resources from Spending Review 2002. We were able to begin delivery of some of the improved capabilities very quickly; others which are long-term projects or involve significant expenditure will be pursued through our normal project-management disciplines. No-one received a blank cheque under the New Chapter.

New Warfare and the Allies

The level of consultation with allies during the New Chapter work may be regarded as something less than close interaction since the discussion document of 14 February was produced for general public, rather than detailed private, discussion. (Paragraph 134)

The Government should recognise the potential impact it can have both in providing a model of efficient US-UK technical and doctrinal co-operation, and in helping influence other European allies to embrace the implications of new trends in warfare. We are not so far convinced that the MoD appreciates the potential implications of this role, or is yet prepared for the efforts it would require. (Paragraph 136)

40. The Committee describes as a "role" what the Government perceives as one facet of the normal dialogues at all political and military levels between allies individually and collectively. Nonetheless the Government is and will continue to be proactive in influencing and assisting allies in the face of international terrorism. In the areas of military technology and doctrine there are many international forums and institutions where this will take place. As one example, the United Kingdom is taking a leading role in its development of the NATO Response Force which aims to ensure that inter alia, all NATO

nations can make some contribution to a robust, credible, flexible, technologically advanced and interoperable joint force that is held at very high readiness.

Legal Aspects

We welcome the MoD's assurances that UK military operations will always be conducted in accordance with international law. It is of fundamental importance that our Armed Forces can be confident, whenever we call upon them, that they are operating on the basis of, and within, applicable international law. (Paragraph 142)

The Government concurs with the importance the Committee attributes to operating within international law. We will always act in accordance with legal obligations but also effectively to defend the UK's people and interests and secure international peace and stability. The New Chapter made clear as a matter of policy that HMG is ready and willing to use military force overseas against terrorism when non-military tools failed.

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