



BULLETIN

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Political Debate in the UK on the Mission in Afghanistan

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The two major political powers in the United Kingdom—the Labour Party and the Conservative Party—agree to the continued British involvement in Afghanistan. There is not a lot of difference between the parties, and therefore regardless of the results of this year's election in the UK no change should be expected in the current policy towards Afghanistan. The new government might experience difficulties implementing it due to the falling British public support for the Afghan mission and problems with the public finances.

British forces have been taking part in the mission in Afghanistan since October 2001, when the government headed by Tony Blair decided to join with the USA in its response to the 9/11 attacks. At first, British troops served only in operation Enduring Freedom. Since December 2001 British troops have also been part of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) formed at that time. The British contingent, which currently consists of 9500 soldiers, is second in size only to the US force. Since March 2006 it has been concentrated in the province of Helmand in south Afghanistan, where there are most serious clashes with insurgents and where more than 50% of opium from Afghanistan is produced. Consequently, the control over the province has led to relative high losses for the British forces, especially as the British government has not placed any operational restrictions (caveats) on its troops. Since the operation began to mid-March this year, 275 Brits have been killed, of which as many as 108 were killed in 2009. These figures are the direct cause of the steady fall in support among the British public for the UK's involvement in Afghanistan. As of the end of February this year nearly 65% of Brits said they doubted that the mission would be successful. A similar number of respondents said they agreed that the government elected in this year's elections in the UK—which will probably be held at the beginning of May—should withdraw troops by the end of 2010.

Position of Gordon Brown's Labour Government. The ruling Labour Party has justified the British presence in Afghanistan on the ground that the country is a source of an immediate threat to the UK security. It considers that the overriding goal of British involvement is elimination of the risk arising from the activities in Afghanistan and on the Pakistan's border area of groups linked to al-Qaeda, which could pose a terrorist threat to the UK and other countries. Gordon Brown's government also points out that approximately 90% of the heroine smuggled into the UK originates in Afghanistan. Also, the British authorities see the mission in Afghanistan as a test for NATO's credibility and an opportunity to strengthen the UK's international position as a leading member of NATO and an influential actor in international relations. The presence of British forces in Afghanistan is also meant to enhance relations with the US, whom the UK considers its most important partner. This is one of the reasons why Brown's government's Afghanistan policy is convergent with the current policy adopted by the US administration.

In the Labour government's view, first and foremost it is essential to strengthen coalition forces if the mission in Afghanistan is to succeed. It supports the US's calls for the countries involved in the operation to increase the numbers of soldiers in proportion to their capability. It is critical of some participants in the ISAF that have kept in place their national operational restrictions, leading to an imbalance in the proportions between the allies in undertaken combat activities. In the view of the British authorities the surge of the international forces going on at the moment should lead to an increase in security of the Afghan population and improve their confidence in the coalition forces. For this reason another goal is the speeding up of training for the Afghanistan army and police, so that

those services can take on responsibility for security and public order in the country in the future. At the same time it is meant to make it possible to break up the al-Qaeda-linked groups and help with the implementation of the plan to reintegrate members of other insurgent groups into Afghan society. To bring about stability in Afghanistan it will also be necessary to strengthen rule (on the central and local level)—particularly with respect to the successful fight against corruption—and to ensure that the conditions are in place for the country's social and economic development. Equally important is an improvement in the situation in the region, especially by building good relations with neighbouring countries, guaranteeing that there will be no interference in Afghanistan's affairs.

The British government envisages a gradual handover of control over successive areas to the Afghans, on the condition that Afghan authorities develop the capability to maintain public order by themselves without support from the coalition forces. At the same time, however, in November 2009 Gordon Brown said that responsibility for security in parts of the districts in the province of Helmand could be handed over to the Afghanistan authorities in 2010. But the government has avoided stating precise dates for withdrawal of British troops. According to the government representatives the taking over of responsibility for security by the Afghan forces will not be sufficient grounds for reductions in coalition forces, but rather for a shift in their function—from a combat role to a supportive role for the Afghan authorities.

The Conservative Party's Stance. The Tories, who according to the latest polls are going to win the forthcoming election in the UK, take a similar view to that of the government's with regard to Afghanistan, and say that they are in favour of staying in Afghanistan. Indeed it cannot be ruled out that they seek to avoid open criticism of Brown's government on this issue so as not to risk loss of Labour's support for their own Afghanistan policy should they come to power. It seems, however, that the Conservative Party does in fact share the government's view that there is a direct link between participation in the ISAF and national security. Moreover, the Tories are of the opinion that it is precisely the strengthening of security in the UK that should be Britain's main motive for being in Afghanistan. This is also why they are more likely to be sceptical about the other reasons cited by Brown for participation in the mission in Afghanistan (for example fighting corruption and production of drugs in Afghanistan), in the conviction that referring to these reasons makes the goals less clear for the British public, leading to a drop in the public's support for the ISAF mission. The Conservative Party representatives also believe that Brown's declaration that the first districts might be given over to control by the Afghans is premature. They also oppose setting the troops withdrawal dates, saying that this would only contribute to raising expectations in Afghanistan and the UK that would be hard to fulfil. For this reason they have said that they will keep the contingent at its present size should they come to power in the UK. The Tories are emphasizing, though, the issue of insufficient equipping of British troops. Nevertheless, they have not proposed any specific solutions in this respect, which might partly be due to awareness of financial limitations caused by the UK's considerable budget deficit.

Conclusions. Due to the fact that the two main British parties do not differ very much in their standpoints it can be presumed that the policy with regard to Afghanistan will remain unchanged regardless of the outcome of this year's general elections. The falling public support for the UK's participation in the mission could hinder execution of this policy, but—in view of the country's budget difficulties—ensuring sufficient financing for operations in Afghanistan could turn out to be a greater problem for the new government. During the political debate the subject of financing for the mission was in fact not brought up, which is relatively positive for both of the UK's main parties, given their support for continuing to stay in Afghanistan. Work on the Strategic Defence Review, which both parties have declared they will have drawn up straight after the election, may revive the discussion of the issue of the cost of the operation. At that time there will be certainly a more thorough reconsideration of British involvement in Afghanistan, especially as results of the currently implemented strategy of international commitment in the country should already be visible.