



BULLETIN

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Foreign Policy Platforms of the Main Political Forces in the UK

by Bartłomiej Znojek

The three major political forces in the United Kingdom have fairly similar foreign policy platforms. The most distinctive are the Conservatives' views on the membership of the EU and on the Common Security and Defence policy (CSDP). Yet these differences are not significant enough to warrant expectations of far-reaching changes in a Tory government's foreign policy. Possibly, after the 6 May elections a coalition government will be formed. This would add to the likelihood of a Labour-Liberal agreement leading to the continuation of the present international policy.

A parliamentary election will be held in the United Kingdom on 6 May. According to the latest opinion polls no one party is certain to win a majority needed to govern alone. Foreign policy is not a major electoral campaign topic. In April 2010 only 3% of the British considered European issues as of major importance to the UK, whereas the same view with regard to foreign and defence affairs was shared by 11%. It is only selected foreign policy issues, such as the mission in Afghanistan, or matters relevant in the context of the membership of the EU, such as the prospect of adoption of the euro, that have aroused public interest.

Three main British political forces—the ruling Labour Party and the opposition Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats—differ in their assessments of the UK's current position in the international system. The Labour Party insists that during its time in power the state's international status has been enhanced, as evidenced by what they claim to be the UK's leading position in the EU and NATO. The Conservatives, for their part, point to the relative downgrading of the United Kingdom's ranking in the global economy, in particular against the growing impact of such countries and China and India. The Liberals have highlighted the deterioration of the state's international image in the wake of the UK's involvement in the invasion of Iraq and of allegations of human rights abuse in the war on terrorism (accusations of assisting in the illegal transfer of suspected terrorists and of the consenting to the use of torture on them). Nevertheless, for the major British political groups it is two areas of foreign policy that are of major importance: the security and defence issues and the questions relating to the UK's membership of the EU.

Security and Defence. In this subject, the mission in Afghanistan looms the most crucial for the British political parties. They all support British involvement in Afghanistan and they endorse the basic assumptions underlying the strategy for that country and the ISAF mission, even though they differ in their assessments of the UK's participation in the Afghan operation to date. The Tories and the Liberals take a negative view of the Labour governments' policy, in particular on the issue of the military equipment. They insist that belated decisions on the procurement of suitable equipment have had direct bearing on the level of security of British troops in the Afghan mission. Refuting these allegations, the Labour Party has cited the real-terms increase in the defence budget during its thirteen years in power and the difficulty of anticipating the military's needs given the rapidly evolving situation in Afghanistan.

All the three parties have pledged to launch, after the elections, a strategic defence review to identify the desirable direction of the armed forces' development aligned to the foreign policy premises and to the financial capabilities. However, only the Liberal Democrats have demanded that the review includes the modernization of the British nuclear deterrent. They object to the currently contemplated like-for-like replacement of the Trident system and they point out that alternative and less costly solutions can be employed. For their part, the Labour Party and the Tories hold that

maintaining the system is necessary for the security of the state, in particular in view of the threat from Iran and North Korea. Besides, these two parties argue that the possession of a nuclear arsenal affirms the great-power status of the United Kingdom as a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

The major political forces in the UK see membership in NATO as the paramount security guarantee. It is on the assessment of the merits of the stand-alone EU's military capabilities that differences emerge. The Conservatives believe that the development of the CSDP must not lead to an unreasonable duplication of the Alliance's tasks and responsibilities. In its manifesto the Conservatives pledge to divert funding from unnecessary (in their opinion) EU initiatives to the British armed forces. They also promise to revise the commitments arising from the UK's participation in the European Defence Agency. The Labour Party supports the development of the CSDP, on the grounds that by enabling the military capabilities of European states to be enhanced the CSDP serves to strengthen the transatlantic cooperation and to expand the scope for the European allies' engagement in NATO operations. The Liberals take a similar view, seeing military cooperation within the EU as an opportunity to reduce the military's procurement costs.

The largest political parties' foreign policy platforms include few references to the United States, which has been traditionally regarded as the UK's main partner in the area of security. Only the Liberal Democrats have openly urged a shift away from the present policy which they denounce as leading to British interests being subservient to the US's policy. The Tories and the Labour Party have confined themselves to invoking the close partner-like relations with the US, a reticence possibly prompted by concern that they might be blamed for the unequal nature of the relationship of the two states.

European Union Membership. All British main political parties see the EU as the key platform on which to realise the United Kingdom's interests. They all are in accord on such fundamental issues as the necessity for the enhancement of the position of the state in the European Union, the continued enlargement of the EU, and the strengthening of the EU's global role in dealing with such problems as climate change or global poverty. However, the Conservatives have maintained a conspicuously separate position on some European issues.

The Conservative Party promises an active European policy, but it stipulates that it will reduce the scope for handing over new powers to the EU. It intends to introduce the legal requirement of a referendum on such matters as the approval to any future treaty on the EU, or on the adoption of a common currency. The Tories are against the adoption of the euro, unlike the two other parties which admit such a possibility subject to public approval in a referendum. Furthermore, the Conservatives have pledged to take steps to restore to the UK certain powers formerly transferred to the EU, including in the sphere of judiciary and social and employment policies—yet this promise could prove difficult to deliver on.

The Labour Party and the Liberals hold that the implementation of the Tories' European policy would lead to the marginalization of the UK in the EU. They are particularly critical of the Conservative Party's decision to participate in the group of European Conservatives and Reformers—a small faction (which was established by the Tories in the first place) in the European Parliament—and of the Tories' reservations on the development of the CSDP.

Prospects. Although the Conservative party leads in the pre-election polls, its present support (35%) does not ensure a majority needed to govern alone. The Labour Party has less chances of winning: its support is no higher than 30% and in some polls it has registered below the Liberal Democrats—the third political force's to date—whose support has oscillated between 28% and 31%. All in all, there is a strong likelihood of a coalition government. Given the similarity of programs, the Labour Party and the Liberals have the best chance of forming one. Since foreign affairs are unlikely to figure prominently their possible negotiations, it is to be expected that the present foreign policy directions will be continued. The Tories' dissenting views (not only in foreign affairs) mean that they have less chance of forming a coalition. Yet, should they win a ruling majority, the re-orientation of some elements of the European policy and the increased prominence of NATO in British policy could follow. This, however, is unlikely to bring about a fundamental shift away from the policy course of the previous government.