

Military Strategy

Britain's defense policy: aura of power

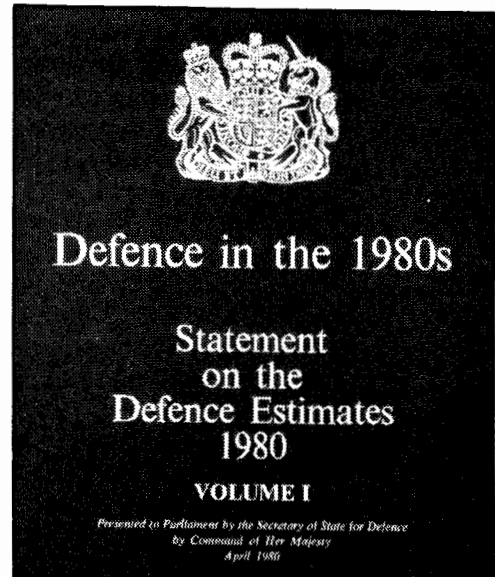
by Susan Welsh

The first defense White Paper of Britain's Thatcher government was published April 2. It provides for a 3.5 percent increase in real military spending for 1980-1981. Military spending will continue to rise by 3 percent or more (in real terms) in each of the following three years, despite the fact that total public expenditure will fall over the same period.

The White Paper is the first phase of a policy review that is due to be completed soon, and will include a decision on the replacement of Britain's nuclear deterrent, the Polaris submarine-launched missiles, when the Polaris becomes obsolete in the 1990s. Pending decision on that controversial issue, the White Paper initiates the "study" of the possible creation of a British "rapid deployment force" along the lines of that being developed in the United States for intervention in world "hot-spots". The British Defense Minister Francis Pym also announced that his government is considering the development of a chemical warfare capability, reversing the policy of seeking an international ban on chemical warfare.

The White Paper's orientation parallels precisely that of the new U.S. defense budget, emphasizing the global "projection of power" through a mobile strike force, cheap and dirty chemical and biological "deterrence," alongside the dismantling of in-depth war-fighting capabilities as represented by conventional forces, ground troops, and so forth.

For Britain, this is nothing qualitatively new, but a variation on the "Aldermaston approach" which has dominated British military thinking since World War II, when Britain was "dethroned" as queen of the waves. British policy has been to devote relatively large resources to the military R & D facilities at the ultra-secret laboratories at Aldermaston, thereby hopefully ensuring that "whatever anyone else has, Britain has one too."



This, combined with political manipulation of the American "dumb giant" both inside and outside NATO, was presumed to be sufficient to guarantee Britain the military leverage necessary to achieve its foreign-policy goals.

The White Paper is emphatic, however, that Britain's independent "deterrent" must be maintained, hinting at the unreliability of the U.S. "nuclear umbrella." "The presence of enormous destructive power in independent European hands" is an important insurance against any "misperception" by Moscow, which might wrongly conclude that the U.S. might some day waver in its determination to defend Europe with the full force of its nuclear arsenal. After all, "the decision to use United States' nuclear weapons in defense of Europe, with all the risk to the United States homeland this would entail, would be immensely grave."

The new White Paper continues to reflect the traditionally high investment in military R&D (taking note of Soviet R&D advances which have "eroded" NATO's technological lead in many areas in the last decade), with about 31 percent of overall procurement spending devoted to it (just under £1.5 billion). But this is now shaped within the broader framework of the Thatcher government's austerity budget and deindustrialization policy, causing what is termed a "redefining of priorities" toward such schemes as the mobile strike force. The White Paper admits that "the scale of our defence effort cannot be divorced from our general economic capability, and we all know that Britain is going through difficult economic times. Within these constraints, our task is to get the balance of priorities right again, to restore our defence effort to the level needed to give the best possible guarantee of safety, using the most economical means available...."

The internal reorganization of Britain's defense

budget "priorities," however, is strictly secondary to the political goal of achieving what is known as a "new division of labor" within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. As viewed from London and Washington, this will force West Germany (and maybe eventually France) to align with the "rapid deployment force" concept of "confronting the Soviets" globally. If successful, this strategy would destroy what remains of détente, fracture the Franco-German alliance which is the foundation of the European Monetary System, and probably bring about World War III.

The NATO "Eurogroup" of defense ministers will meet May 12 to discuss "problems connected with the creation and preassignment of a so-called rapid deployment force and the participation in it of the bloc's [NATO's] European countries," said Radio Moscow April 6, citing reports in the French magazine *Nouvelles Atlantiques*. West Germany has refused to deploy its forces outside NATO's treaty-mandated area, Europe and the North Atlantic. But pressure is growing from London and Washington for Bonn to abandon this position.

The London *Financial Times* in an editorial April 3 admitted frankly that the key to the success of the new White Paper will be the incorporation of continental Europe into its strategic framework:

Britain has more, and more extensive, commitments than any other European member of the alliance: not only the strategic nuclear force and the defence of the UK base, but also the defence of the Channel and Eastern Atlantic as well as the central region of the European continent. The White Paper is now suggesting new commitments outside the NATO area.

Too much?

No doubt that is a good example to set politically, both to the Americans and to the Europeans. Yet with existing forces undermanned and under-equipped, there must also be questions about the money....

The crucial point is that there needs to be yet more alliance consultation about who does what, or what the Germans have recently taken to calling the "division of labour." It may well be that Britain is still trying to do too much or, to put it the other way round, the others too little. That is a further reason why it is essential to settle Britain's other problems with Europe. It is time to move on to more talks about European defence.

While Britain has not yet formally decided to create a "modest" mobile strike force to operate alongside U.S. forces, several steps have already been taken in this direction. Effective immediately, one parachute battalion

will always be ready on seven-days' notice for deployment anywhere in the world. The Royal Air Force's transport force will probably be upgraded so as to improve the armed forces' ability to operate globally, and joint Anglo-American tests will be held during the summer to improve the "reach" of the allied forces by equipping merchant ships to carry antisubmarine helicopters.

Defence Minister Francis Pym announced last week that Britain is considering equipping its troops with chemical weapons such as nerve gas. The main reason given is the allegation that Soviet troops have used chemical weapons in Afghanistan, while the United States recently charged that a leak of outlawed biological warfare toxins in the Soviet Sverdlovsk region led to widespread livestock deaths.

The Soviet press has angrily rejected all these accusations, charging that the United States and Great Britain are using them to bolster their own chemical and biological warfare capabilities. Reports of chemical warfare in Afghanistan derive from Afghan rebel sources which have proved highly unreliable. All are second-hand, and none substantiated by any medical evidence, according to the London *Observer* April 6.

The Soviet embassy in Switzerland issued a statement April 3 claiming that the CIA is supplying poison gas grenades to Afghan rebels. Grenades found in rebel vehicles bore the stamp "made in Carlsburg, Pennsylvania, U.S.A.," the Soviets declared. The new U.S. FY1981 budget calls for \$20 million for the production of nerve gas, and a projected \$1.3 billion will be spent in the next five years to develop a new generation of chemical weapons for U.S. land forces, according to *Newsweek*.

Britain's Chinese mentality

The British government's new Defense White Paper demonstrates that London is suffering from a Chinese syndrome, commented *Pravda's* former London correspondent V. Ovchinnikov April 7.

Citing Britain's intention to spend millions of pounds on chemical weapons and other means of mass destruction, *Pravda* asked: "Where does this sick fascination for nuclear and chemical weapons come from? Could it be that the British Defense Minister during his recent visit to Peking found himself in agreement with the theory there that poor countries have nothing much to lose from war and suffer much less from it than rich ones?" Britain is continually trying to prove to its European Economic Community partners that it is the poorest among them, *Pravda* said.