



Conference Round-up

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Defence appeared a leading issue in the fringes at both the Labour and Conservative Party conferences, although much of the media coverage surrounding the two conferences focused on parochial issues such as potential leadership contests and squabbles about what should and should not be included in conference speeches.

The focus on defence is perhaps unsurprising given that over the last year there has been an increased focus on UK defence as a result of the Government's cost-neutral National Security Capability Review (NSCR) and, after concerns that this would lead to cuts to some capabilities, the separate Modernising Defence Programme (MDP) that didn't rule out spending increases. Check out this [article](#) we published in August for more information on the story of the MDP.

The debate around defence hasn't only been prompted by these government-led reviews, however. Other events have also pushed defence to the forefront of the political agenda:

- The Salisbury nerve agent attack in March committed by Russian intelligence operatives;
- Airstrikes against chemical weapons facilities in Syria in April;
- Renewed pressure by the U.S. to encourage NATO members to spend more on defence;
- An upsurge in British troops to Afghanistan;
- And the ongoing debate about Britain's global role.

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These events have all played a large part in forcing foreign policy and defence issues to the mainstream of British political discourse at a time when it has been difficult to focus on anything other than the 'B' word.

So, how did this renewed focus play out at the party conferences?

Key Takeaways from Labour Party Conference

- A brief flick through the fringe listings showed that defence was an issue Labour *were* prepared to talk about, despite a view that [Jeremy Corbyn won't touch defence](#). This was confirmed when some in the Shadow Defence team argued that defence can—and should—be a vote-winning issue at the next general election. This is based on their view that the Conservative Party's reputation for “owning defence” has [been badly dented over the last year](#).
- On the current threat picture, Nia Griffith, the Shadow Defence Secretary, argued that the UK cannot ignore the rise of state-based threats. However, Ms Griffith was keen to make the point that this did not mean the threat from non-state actors had abated. A point which is largely reflected in the Government's March 2018 [NSCR](#).
- Talking about the UK's international standing, Labour argued that the UK had become “invisible” on the world stage under this Government. It was

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remarked that the handling of the Modernising Defence Programme (MDP)—now reportedly delayed until December 2018—had shifted from the goal of providing a strategic assessment on the nature of the threats posing the UK, to becoming a debate solely about money. It was unclear, however, if Labour would have approached the review process differently.

- The UK should take the initiative to “maximise what we do well” and focus on capabilities that **our allies value**. On this point, the Shadow team acknowledged that it would become ever more prevalent to work in partnerships with other states to address conflict situations in the future. However, they insisted this does not mean that a Labour government shouldn’t do more to invest in UK sovereign capabilities—a position the Conservative Party largely shares.
- In contrast to the Government’s view, Labour wanted were more concerned about the “unconventional threat” posed by a resurgent Russia, rather than the conventional one: for example, they argued, it is unlikely that NATO members would come face-to-face and engage in conventional warfare on an open battlefield with Russia. Nonetheless, Labour remained committed to NATO as a deterrent against Russian aggression.
- In a nod to the Party’s renewed commitment to an ‘ethical foreign policy’, it became clear that Labour saw increased participation of Britain’s Armed Forces in peacekeeping operations as a force for good. In this sense, they

weren't so far removed from the Conservative view that the Armed Forces can be used to exert influence internationally; only, Labour believed this influence would be measured through greater contributions to humanitarian missions rather than by creating knock-on trade opportunities (see comments under Conservative section). Elaborating on a position expressed in her [May RUSI address](#), Ms Griffith said more flexibility may be required when determining the permissions allocated to UK forces deployed on UN peace missions. This was based on the view that many peacekeeping operations would likely require UK personnel to be on the “front foot” (i.e. on the frontlines). To determine who should deploy and the Rules of Engagement, the Labour defence team said each prospective deployment would be reviewed on a case-by-case basis. In practical terms, however, it is not clear if this was simply an alternative expression of what the [government already claims it does](#) with regards to determining if a deployment of troops is designated [combat or non-combat](#).

Key Takeaways from Conservative Party Conference

- A message I heard time and again in Birmingham was that the world is a better place when the UK is an active player on the world stage. In this vein, Britain's Armed Forces were perceived as key to projecting power and influence overseas—an iteration of what the Conservatives have historically referred to as the UK's “[global reach](#)”. A message that I heard in equal measure was frustration about the aversion to risk that shrouds UK engagement overseas—as RWP have explored, this is one of the key factors that [drives the ‘remote warfare’ approach](#). This was expressed most plainly when the Defence Secretary said quite directly that he felt the UK had

become too timid following Iraq & Afghanistan. He argued that the UK should regain its confidence and aspire to deliver change, in order to see the world develop in a way that reflects our values.

- Informal conversations I had with MOD Ministers at the conference revealed that there was a recognition of the challenge when it came to the trade-off between risk to life and risk to mission. From our research, we have shown how this dilemma is very much manifesting itself in the way in which the UK is contributing to the NATO Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan—not only are UK British personnel unable to accompany their Afghan partners on operations, but limitations are even placed on their train, advise and assist permissions.
- Although media reporting on the debate around MOD spending has suggested that the Defence Secretary is taking a hard line against No. 10 and the Treasury, Williamson did not break Cabinet collective responsibility in public. Indeed, Williamson mentioned on several occasions that there was a need to drive “efficiencies” through reforms to the way the MOD does procurement—an issue addressed in the Government’s 2017 Defence Industrial Strategy.
- Partly because of the ongoing debate around the MDP, but no doubt also off the back of the momentum the Labour Party have gained since the 2017 General Election, the Conservatives appear to be under intense pressure to defend their record of austerity and its impact on Britain’s Armed Forces. In

response to provocative questions on the Government's record, the Defence team were keen to make the case that tough decisions had to be made post-2010 in response to the Labour Party's policy on defence. Labour, it was argued, "don't understand defence". It will be interesting to see how the battle lines will be drawn when the MDP is finally published in detail.

- the Defence Secretary made the case that Russia is a serious threat yet, he would not confirm if he regarded them as the greatest threat to the UK. Indeed, Williamson was clear that the threat from terrorism is still a concern for the Government. To this end, he stated that the threat from terrorism doesn't end with Daesh; in fact, more needed to be done to persuade the public about the importance of engaging against terrorist groups. Whether Williamson was suggesting that the UK should contribute more to addressing instability in Iraq and Syria, or if it was a veiled signal about the UK's increasing role in [tackling terrorist groups in Africa](#), was unclear.

Image credit: [Kennan Tynan Bowe/Flickr](#).

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