By Christopher Newton

In 1981 it was naval power. Now thirty years later, it seems that the UK's air assets and the RAF in particular will bear the brunt of the government's cuts in another defence review. If the news reports are right, then the RAF is heading to be smaller than when it was in its infancy in 1918. There could be considerable reductions in the number of Typhoon and Joint Strike Fighter orders, and the Tornado fleet could be withdrawn earlier than planned. Reports also suggest that an aircraft carrier could be the price of the government's policy to fund the Vanguard class successor submarines from the defence budget and not from the treasury, although this now seems unlikely. Either way, the number of aircraft in the Navy looks set to be reduced considerably.

The logic behind cutting aircraft numbers is understandable enough. The war in Afghanistan is largely consuming the energy and resources of the ground forces, so they need to be preserved as much as possible. The Navy will always be required to protect British sea lanes and wider interests abroad, and it will probably be required to conduct counter-piracy and patrolling missions for the foreseeable future. And today Britain faces no threat from an opposing air force. If one of the three services has to face savage cuts, then surely it makes sense that it is the RAF?

Whilst there may be arguments about the extent to which air assets can be cut, it is worth pausing for a moment to examine carefully the implications of any dramatic cuts to the British air fleet, especially since many analysts have provided some good reasons why the government should be cautious. It must be remembered that the RAF and other air assets have been used continuously since 1991. British aircraft policed the no-fly zones in Iraq and conducted bombing operations against Iraq in 1998, and conducted operations in the Balkans in the late-1990s. British airpower also facilitated the invasion of Iraq in 2003. And what is so often neglected is the role airpower has been playing in Helmand Province, providing vital logistical and close air support to ground forces. All of this work has placed many aspects of the fleet under incredible strain, which suggests that any reductions in the numbers of certain aircraft types could be operationally difficult. In addition, the RAF continues to perform its fundamental role in defending our airspace. Quick Reaction Alert aircraft have on several occasions responded to Russian probing near UK airspace. For example, in 2008, Quick Reaction Alert aircraft were launched on 10 occasions to identify Russian aircraft that were flying nearby.

But there is an additional reason why the government seriously need to think through its defence policy. Would these proposals actually fit in with its foreign policy? Defence commentators rightly conduct threat analyses and examine how various strategic assumptions will guide the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR). But what they seldom analyse is how those at the top of government actually view the role of military force.

It would be reasonable for anyone to infer that the new government will do everything possible to avoid another major ground intervention. Partly this is due to the fact that the Armed Forces need to recover from the strain it has been under over recent years. But this is mainly due to fact that the Conservatives have seen how an interventionist approach damaged Tony Blair, and they do not want to repeat that.

This is evident from David Cameron's actions and the political environment he is operating in. Firstly, the Prime Minister wasted no time in announcing a withdrawal date for British combat forces from Afghanistan. Secondly, in opposition the Conservative leadership developed the doctrine of 'liberal conservatism' as a deliberate way of distancing itself from the interventionist creed of 'neo-conservatism'. David Cameron has spoken against the ambitious aims of transforming societies into democracies by military means alone, suggesting that military objectives, and therefore military operations, should become more limited. This could also be seen as a revision to Tony Blair's Chicago speech in 1999 in which he advocated the doctrine of liberal interventionism. It may be the case that David Cameron's foreign policy speech in Pakistan on 3 September 2008 could prove to be just as significant in the future.

Thirdly, it would be extremely unlikely that the Liberal Democrats will agree to any large scale military intervention (and probably a significant number of Conservative backbenchers too). And even if the Liberals back any military action, getting support from an extremely sceptical public will be an even greater hurdle to overcome. The fallout from the controversy over the Iraq War will make it extremely difficult for any British Prime Minister to go to war without incurring the indignation of the electorate, regardless of the justness of the cause. The spectre of Iraq and Afghanistan will haunt British foreign policy, just as the spectre of Vietnam haunted America. When this is combined with the public cynicism towards politicians in general, convincing the public of the merits of military force could prove impossible.

Whilst Afghanistan will continue to occupy a great deal of the Coalition's attention throughout this Parliament, the government must not take its eye off the ball elsewhere. It cannot discount the fact that other crises will come to the fore as well. Whilst the government's response will be for the most part diplomatic, some issues will likely involve the consideration of a military response. If ground interventions are not politically viable or just not appropriate, then the whole idea of using purely airpower to coerce an enemy becomes a serious proposition. Indeed, it seems that we are heading back to the late-1990s where air operations (along with small-scale peacekeeping options) became the favoured option of western governments if it ever came down to a military response. So does it make any sense for the government to dramatically reduce the one military asset it is, by the logic of their own foreign policy, most likely to use post-Afghanistan? And if this really is the government's thinking, we have to ask whether a reduced RAF, Army Air Corps, and Fleet Air Arm can cope with the demands of Afghanistan as well as anything else events can throw at it?

This is not to say that the government should rule out any reductions in aircraft numbers. But it must, nevertheless, consider carefully the scale of any potential reductions and whether this fits into its foreign policy. It must also think carefully about the forms that warfare may take in the future. Since thankfully in Iraq and Afghanistan we have faced relatively minor threats to our aircraft, we seem to take air superiority for granted. The next war may not look like the last one,

and this time our air superiority might be challenged. We should not automatically rule out the scenario that our air forces could face some from opposition from the air as it did during the Falklands War. And there might be a greater chance that our aircraft will come under attack by more sophisticated surface-to-air and anti-aircraft weapon system. Here, numbers could be crucial and this must be factored into the government's policy during the SDSR.

There will be those who argue that it might be possible to reduce manned aircraft numbers due to the increase in sophistication of cruise missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles, and smart munitions. But as the current operations in Afghanistan show, manned aircraft will continue to play a vital role in contemporary operations. And whilst the balance between manned and unmanned aircraft may change considerably as this century progresses, we are not yet at the stage where UAVs can dominate air forces.

How things will actually develop remains to be seen. Official government policy has yet to fully emerge, and it may end up being something quite different to what is being reported. Events may also change British foreign and defence policy just as Kosovo and 9/11 changed foreign policy during the Labour government, and as the Falklands War changed defence policy during the previous Conservative one. But whatever it turns out to be, the new government must ensure that the following two lessons are learned. Firstly, defence policy must flow naturally from foreign policy. And secondly, the government must learn the lessons of the 1981 review. Whilst the logic behind cutting the Navy during that time was understandable, events nevertheless turned in an unexpected direction and this quickly rendered the then Conservative government's policy irrelevant. Letting one component of the Armed Forces bear the brunt of the cuts is incredibly risky. It will be even more risky if you are cutting the one instrument your foreign policy might be particularly reliant on.

Chris Newton is a former defence adviser in the Conservative Research Department.