Britain's involvement in Afghanistan began in the days after the twin towers attacks in 2001. Since when along with its ISAF partners the UK has played a leading role in helping to restore the country to stability. The House of Commons Defence Select Committee (HCDC) has conducted numerous investigations into the progress of this campaign and its members have visited Afghanistan several times since it began. With the drawdown of British troops beginning, Rt. Hon. James Arbuthnot MP the committee chairman recently offered some reflections to Nick Watts, Deputy Director General of the U K Defence Forum.

"The future of Afghanistan is no longer in our hands. The UK has been involved for a long time. It is right that the destiny of their country is in their own hands." This is seen as a natural progression in the counter insurgency campaign, not the international community and the UK washing its hands of the problems which led to the intervention in the first place. The sacrifices of British personnel throughout the campaign have not been in vain in enabling this drawdown to occur.

The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) – both military and police forces— will be capable of addressing the security question post 2014. "Afghans will be able to maintain their own security. Not with the same level of technology that ISAF use. It will be done in an Afghan way." One consequence of which will be that it won't be possible for the Taliban to use the presence of foreign forces as a divisive element. The recent thrust of ISAF activity has been less on operations, and more on mentoring. Afghan forces have been planning and executing missions which were previously undertaken and led by ISAF.

The situation in Afghanistan seemed to be heading towards a shambolic exit, until the US surge in 2010. This meant that the UK forces in Helmand province could concentrate their efforts into a more focussed area. Previously the UK's campaign efforts seemed to be characterized by equipment shortage and inadequate numbers of personnel. This became something of a neuralgic issue for the previous government. This situation has been remedied as new equipment has come into theatre. British forces are now well equipped and operations have been having a real effect locally. Force numbers are now being reduced.

It should be borne in mind that a major part of the solution to the situation in Afghanistan lies in

Pakistan. The key to regional stability lies in the relationship between president Karzai and his Pakistani counterpart. At a personal level things have got better. But the broader picture is not so good. "The stability of Pakistan seems to be reducing. Although there has been a recent peaceful transfer of power, I'm really worried."

The political future of Afghanistan will involve finding an adequate way to integrate the Taliban into the way the country is governed in the future. "There has got to be some level of Taliban engagement in the governance of their country. It is often difficult to work out who the Taliban are." The Taliban may become less of a problem as the situation becomes more an Afghanistan question. The international community must not try to prescribe too much how the Afghans decide to govern themselves. The collapse of Afghanistan after the withdrawal of the soviet occupation and funding led to the rise of the Taliban. This is a lesson that the international community must learn.

Future UK involvement in Afghanistan is still being worked out by the government. "We will have a role in the training of (military) officers. This will be part of an international effort; training the trainers. Other military matters are unclear. It may be that the government is still trying to work this out for themselves." The arrangements for the UK's exit arrangements – "are in hand. It's a good thing that one person Gen Capewell will be in charge of that process from beginning to end. The Merlin fleet has now been withdrawn." All of this is in the context of an increasing effort from the Afghans themselves.

The success of the UK's Counter narcotics effort has been mixed to say the least. "The purpose of the mission has changed from year to year. The primary purpose was to ensure that Afghanistan didn't become a safe haven for terrorists. When we got there we then took on other missions: controlling narcotics, spreading democracy and human rights. We have lessened our ambitions, in relation to narcotics. You can't destroy the livelihoods of many people without pushing them towards insurgency as a livelihood instead." The international community has worked at developing better ways of enabling locals to make a living without recourse to cultivating poppies.

Turning to the question of how to safeguard interpreters who have been working with British forces. "If we don't give support to those who help British forces, we will never again be able to persuade people to help us." Many of the people who have worked with UK and ISAF forces have skills which are needed in the country from which they come. There are many who won't

be under threat unless they have had a high profile. The UK has offered a 5 year re-training package to such people. But where there have been threats issued the UK should offer resettlement.
On the related question of the treatment of Detainees. "If we are fighting in a country where human rights do not add up to the sort of values that we could recognise in this country – that's a real problem for our forces. We would have to bring those detainees back to the UK which would be inappropriate. We have got to work out how we solve this because we won't always be fighting in areas which are sweetness and light."

During the campaign, the British military had to re-learn how it undertook counter insurgency operations. "There hasn't been any clear learning of lessons in the MOD. We went into the southern part of Afghanistan without any strategic notion of what it was we were trying to achieve." The level of political involvement in the decision to expand into Helmand seems to have been minimal. "There wasn't much intelligence about what [the UK] was facing. That's something that must never happen again."

Looking to the future and what equipment choices the MOD should take to "future proof the UK's armed forces: "Our track record of predicting where we are going to be involved has always been bad." The HCDC is currently looking at some of the considerations which will inform the next SDR, and no doubt the experience of the Afghanistan campaign will cast a long shadow over the committee's recommendations.