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Afghanistan threatens Brown's fightback

Over the last fortnight, the country has been shaken by the deaths of fifteen British military personnel in Afghanistan. The ensuing political storm has damaged the prime minister, Gordon Brown, and his government, who were caught off guard by the intense criticism from the Conservatives and the media over troop numbers in Afghanistan and claims that British forces do not have enough logistical support.



First, Gordon Brown was exposed to charges that he is personally responsible for exposing troops to attacks from the Taliban. The Conservatives started the week by mounting an assault on the prime minister over his decision not to commit the extra troops that some senior army figures had requested. In March, Mr Brown rejected a recommendation by military chiefs and the then defence secretary, John Hutton, to send 2,000 more troops to Afghanistan. He chose to send 700 and even then only to provide temporary cover in the run-up to the presidential elections in August. This was reportedly the cheapest of the four options that were put to Number Ten.

Gordon Brown has insisted that he was reassured in recent days by military chiefs and commanders on the ground that they had enough manpower for their on-going operations. During the Commons G8 Summit debate on Monday, Conservative leader David Cameron directly challenged the prime minister to admit that military chiefs had requested more troops. Mr Brown would only say that "in our discussions with the military, of course one talks about the options that are available."

Gordon Brown was then forced into an embarrassing U-turn on troop numbers. He had previously said that they would fall back to 8,300 (from 9,000) by 2010. However, the prime minister told the Commons on Monday that "once the (presidential) elections are over, we will review the numbers on the ground".

The Conservatives achieved another important victory in the row over logistical support. On Tuesday, their shadow defence secretary, Dr Liam Fox, accused the government of a "dereliction of duty", claiming they had cut the army's helicopter budget by some £1.4bn. The budget for buying new helicopters has halved since 2001 when the MoD budget for helicopter procurement was £842 million. By 2006-7 the budget fell to £209 million. For the last complete year, 2008-9, it was £448million.

The Conservatives kept up the pressure throughout the week. David Cameron called the cuts nothing short of a "scandal" and succeeded in focusing public attention on spending levels. Mr Cameron and his team were emboldened by reports that Air Commodore Andy Fryer, commander of the RAF air station in Kandahar, had asked David Petraeus, commander of US Central, to put pressure on British military leaders to supply more helicopters "of all kinds".

On Thursday, the Defence Select Committee joined the fray. Its chair, James Arbuthnot (a Conservative MP) claimed that the small number of helicopters in active service "restricts movement on the ground". The committee added that the problem was not just one of helicopter numbers. There is more general concern over transport logistics and equipment

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such as the controversial use of the Husky armoured vehicle - a light-weight off-road vehicle - which provides little protection from roadside bombs. Training standards is another problem but the committee felt that manpower was the most critical issue that needed to be addressed by the MoD.

At prime minister's question time on Wednesday, Gordon Brown insisted that the lack of helicopters would not have saved the lives of the troops who died in Operation Panther's Claw. This echoed claims by Bob Ainsworth, the defence secretary, that increasing the number of military helicopters would not prevent further casualties. Lt Col Nick Richardson, an army spokesman in Afghanistan, had earlier told Sky News, "you could put as many helicopters as you wanted in here, but sadly at the end of the day, troops have got to go out on the ground".

Yet it was only towards the end of the week that the government's lines of defence became clear. Answering questions from senior MPs at the Commons Liaison Committee on Thursday, Gordon Brown seemed surer that corners were not being cut. He pointed out that some £183m has been spent since 2004-5 on converting Merlin helicopters to adapt to the Afghan terrain. On the same day, the foreign secretary, David Miliband strongly defended the UK's helicopter capacity. He pointed out that the UK is part of an international effort and helicopters are shared by different forces; despite being important for transporting troops, they are not central to operations. In any case, Mr Miliband added, the UK uses helicopters efficiently. Flying hours have increased by 84 per cent over the last two years, he said.



There is little doubt, however, that Gordon Brown and his government have been damaged and destabilised by the clashes over the war. First, as public attention has been focussed on the services for fallen soldiers, Mr Brown has been stung by charges that he does not see defence policy as a priority. Lord Guthrie, the former Chief of the Defence Staff alleged that as chancellor and now as prime minister, Gordon Brown had taken an "unsympathetic view" of defence, encouraging the government to spend the minimum they can get away with.

Critics say that the recent appointment of Bob Ainsworth, hardly a high-flyer, as defence secretary shows that Mr Brown does not take the area seriously enough. Some say that that Mr Ainsworth was promoted almost as an after-thought. He was not in the television studios defending the government this week. Instead, the armed forces minister, Bill Rammell, was left to face the grim music.

Second, the row over troop numbers has strained Number Ten's already fractious relationships with both the Ministry of Defence, which seemed to support the Army's request, and the Treasury, which was quick to deny media suggestions that it was not responsible for blocking any extra troop numbers requested by the Army.

Third, David Cameron gained another important political victory. Once again, a familiar pattern played out: Labour was left looking reactive whilst the Conservatives set the political agenda. The row also had important implications inside the Conservative Party. Dr Fox was able to persuade David Cameron and the shadow chancellor, George Osborne to commit to

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higher defence spending - or at least resist the prospect of savage cuts - should they win the next general election.

The three main political parties have broadly agreed that British troops should be in Afghanistan, ever since they were first committed in October 2001. One reason is that the general public has been consistently supportive of UK involvement in the International Security Assistance Force. Worryingly for the government, a Populus poll conducted on 10 and 11 July for ITV News showed that 59 per cent of voters think British troops should be withdrawn from Afghanistan and just 36 cent think they should stay. Moreover, according to the same poll, 75 per cent of people believe that the troops are inadequately supplied. However an ICM poll also on 10/11 July showed that 46 per cent support the war (with 47 per cent against). According to this poll, support for the war has actually increased 15 per cent since 2006.

The political consensus remains in place despite the fierce exchanges of the last few days. Not since the start of the war, however, has the military campaign in Afghanistan become so politically charged. The war has become another huge test for Gordon Brown and could easily overwhelm his efforts to get back on the front foot following his leadership crisis last month. He will need to demonstrate urgently that he is not cutting corners on providing the necessary resources to support the British campaign. To do anything less would put his position in peril once again.