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20.01.04

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(clean copy)

PM/04/007

PRIME MINISTER

2004: Managing UK Defence Capacity

1. I welcome Geoff Hoon's initiative (his minute to you of 12 January) of looking at our current defence commitments in the round. We need to consider collectively and strategically the policy priorities involved across the range of major operations where we are engaged, and ensure that the heavy burdens on our forces are acceptable.

Iraq and Afghanistan

2. I see the main strategic challenges – and the priorities in resource terms – as Iraq and Afghanistan.

3. I agree with Geoff that we are making progress on our strategic objectives on Iraq and that we can look towards progressive Iraqi-isation of the security capacity. But the test will be the overall success of transition through to 2005. How that goes and how effective the indigenous security capacity proves to be will determine how far and how fast we can reduce our commitment. Whatever the domestic pressures, I judge that the US requirement to avoid strategic failure in Iraq will mean their retaining the leading troop presence there well into 2005. While they do so, they will want to retain the overall leadership of the operation, and we should encourage this. This means that a substantial NATO role in Iraq is unlikely in the next two years. For these reasons, I do not see there being a requirement for keeping back the ARRC for Iraq. Indeed, I would judge that the risk involved in doing so is that the US would take it as an opportunity to argue that they could significantly reduce their contribution and put more on our plate. We need to avoid that.

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4. On Afghanistan,

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Balkans

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Africa

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Falkands, Cyprus and Northern Ireland

11.

Conclusion

12. Overall, therefore I would favour our investing more in Afghanistan, including deploying the ARRC when the conditions are right, to ensure we deliver strategic success there. This may be eased by reductions in Iraq, from next year. It will also require us to look imaginatively and rigorously at other, less high priority tasks.

13. I am copying this minute to OD colleagues, Paul Murphy, Sir Andrew Turnbull, Sir David Omand and Geoff Mulgan.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Jack Straw'.

(JACK STRAW)

Foreign and Commonwealth Office
20 January 2004

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