

British foreign policy and the 2015 general election

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Foreign policy has not featured heavily in the political debates so far, but it does represent a key area of fault lines among the parties contesting the 2015 general election, says [James Strong](#). With a high probability of a hung parliament, we can expect three issues to have a significant impact on coalition negotiations: overall defence spending, the Trident nuclear deterrent and the question of an EU referendum.



On one level the initial build-up to the 2015 general election has involved limited discussion of foreign policy and foreign policy issues. To a degree this reflects the traditional consensus among the major political parties on Britain's external objectives. To a degree, also, it reflects the fact that voters typically do not vote according to the foreign policy options parties put forward.

Lurking behind this apparent lack of interest, however, are three key areas where policy disagreements between the parties offer the possibility of substantially different future foreign policy paths.

Overall spending

The first is the overall level of government spending. The recent [flurry of headlines](#) about Britain's declining willingness to play its proper part in the world, at least as seen through American eyes, reflects the fact that [defence spending is falling](#) as a share of the budget just as the budget is falling as a share of GDP. For many years Britain has shown leadership within NATO by actually meeting [the commitment](#) all members make to spending at least 2 per cent of GDP on defence. With GDP growing and spending continuing to fall, [recent projections](#) indicate it will fairly soon cease to meet that target.

No party proposes to ring-fence defence spending. But the Conservatives have made a number of commitments, most recently in David Cameron's speech to the NATO summit in Wales, that suggest a future Conservative-led government would be willing at least in principle to increase defence spending in real terms. [Cameron committed](#), for example, to bringing both [Queen Elizabeth-class aircraft carriers](#) into service, reversing the decision at the time of the [2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review](#) that one would be sold or mothballed upon completion. Labour has traditionally seen defence as a lower priority than domestic spending, and seems unlikely to match Conservative plans in this area, especially as its commitments in other areas would force any such spending to come from already hard-pressed budgets. This could in turn place the [\(thus far ring-fenced\)](#) foreign aid budget under threat, risking an area, unlike international security, in which Britain actually is a leading power.

Renewing Trident

The second is the question of the UK's nuclear deterrent, artfully kicked down the road by the [coalition agreement](#) in deference to the Liberal Democrats' long-standing issues with it. The 'main gate', the point of no return in terms of a decision about replacing the ageing [Trident system](#), will be reached early in 2016. Both Labour and the Conservatives favour retaining the deterrent, though Labour is willing to countenance a cheaper, pared-down option. Public opinion, as highlighted by a recent [Chatham House-YouGov study](#), favours saving money but prefers to keep the nuclear option alive.

But the SNP strongly [opposes nuclear weapons](#), and the [SNP seems set](#) to be the third largest party in the House of Commons after the election. If Labour wants to govern in coalition with the SNP it may have to give up Trident. If it pursues only a 'confidence and supply' arrangement, by which SNP votes keep a minority government (possibly including the remaining Liberal Democrats) alive without supporting its overall programme, Trident might survive – the Conservatives would still vote to renew it, and Nicola Sturgeon [does not regard](#) it as a deal breaker. Expect the question to play a big part in coalition negotiations and to form the centrepiece of a renewed debate over national

security after the election.

EU Membership

The final area is, of course, Britain's place in the EU. The public is split on the virtues of EU membership. The [Chatham House-YouGov study](#) found 40 per cent of respondents would vote to retain it, 39 per cent to give it up. The major political parties are split, too, especially the Conservatives. With [UKIP likely to retain](#) the two seats it gained in the House of Commons through defections in 2014, and to win at least one more through Nigel Farage's bid for office in South Thanet, it remains unlikely to hold the balance of power. What it will do, however, is shape the terms of the debate on the EU specifically and on the broader, related, issue of immigration. Nigel Farage has already proven himself an accomplished debater. He will make some hay in the leaders' debate. UKIP has already forced the Conservative leadership to give in to its own Eurosceptic wing and [promise a referendum](#) on EU membership in the next parliament.

Questions about the EU (and the related issue of immigration) absolutely will feature during the election campaign. And they will be central to any coalition negotiations. Labour has not promised to hold a referendum on EU membership during the next parliament. But [it has promised](#) that any new EU treaty would be put to a vote. This might be anathema to the pro-EU SNP. And there would be a question mark over which way the Liberal Democrats might go on the issue. They were [early supporters](#) of the idea of a straight in-out referendum, believing (as Cameron does himself) that Britain would vote to remain in. But they were burned by the failed campaign to change the voting system in 2011. No leader, meanwhile, will be complacent after the shock delivered by the unexpectedly close [Scottish independence vote](#) last year.

Watch this space

Foreign policy, in other words, represents a key area of fault lines among the parties contesting the 2015 general election. It has not featured heavily in some of the debates so far, but the question of EU membership in particular will come to the fore as UKIP gets its campaign into gear. After the election, meanwhile, we can expect each of these three issues to have a significant impact on coalition negotiations. Will Labour give up Trident to woo the SNP? What will the Conservatives cut to finance a boost in defence spending? Who will shape the next Strategic Defence and Security Review, and how far will the process be affected by coalition politicking? A great deal remains to be seen. The answers to these questions will shape Britain's foreign policy stance for a generation.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE election blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. Featured image credit: [UK Ministry of Defence](#) CC BY-SA 2.0

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