

John Bew and Gabriel Elefteriu | September 2017

Foreword by Tom Tugendhat MBE, MP  
Chair of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee

# FOREIGN POLICY AND NATIONAL SECURITY IN THE NEW PARLIAMENT

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A Policy Exchange *Britain in the World* Project Report

## Abstract

In the context of a hung parliament, and with Brexit-related legislation likely to be highly divisive, the government will very much hope to avoid a major House of Commons vote on a controversial foreign policy issue before 2022. An embarrassing defeat, such as that suffered in the 2013 Syria vote, could spark an election and potentially even do damage to Britain's international standing. At the same time, however, the Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary and Defence Secretary have consistently emphasised the importance of the UK maintaining an active role on the international stage, working closely with allies. There are a number of challenges looming on the horizon that may put this commitment to the test and that may require closer involvement of both the House of Commons and House of Lords.

Parliament has a vital role in reshaping UK foreign policy after Brexit but this goes beyond occasional set-piece debates on controversial issues (as we have seen on Iraq, Syria and Libya). With the process of leaving the EU expected to dominate much of the business in both Houses, the role of parliamentary committees takes on heightened importance. In particular, the Foreign Affairs and Defence Select Committees, and the Joint Committee on National Security Strategy, can make an important contribution to helping navigate a complex international terrain, identifying threats and opportunities, bringing a greater plurality of voices into the discussion, and setting out a strategy for the UK's place in the world.

The US House Foreign Affairs Committee and the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations provide a useful model. They have sought to build bipartisan consensus on key foundation stones of American foreign policy and national security strategy, such as the commitment to NATO's Article 5. A similar commitment to upholding collective security and the rules-based international order has been at the heart of British grand strategy for more than seventy years. As that order comes under challenge, parliamentarians should explore ways in which the UK can continue to demonstrate its proactivity, constancy and reliability to its international partners.

## About the Authors

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## About Britain in the World

Policy Exchange's *Britain in the World* project was launched in March 2016 by the Defence Secretary, Rt Hon Sir Michael Fallon, and by former Defence Secretary and NATO Secretary General, Rt Hon Lord Robertson of Port Ellen. It aims to bring more strategic foresight and fresh thinking to debates about the UK's place in the world.

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## Foreword by Tom Tugendhat MBE, MP Chair of Foreign Affairs Select Committee

Policy Exchange is at the forefront of new thinking about national security and the UK's place in the world. Over the years, it has challenged perceptions and identified threats. I have contributed some thoughts myself in reports including *Clearing the Fog of Law: Saving our Armed Forces from defeat by judicial diktat* in 2015 and *The Cost of Doing Nothing: The price of inaction in the face of mass atrocities* in 2017. But good ideas depend on good analysis and data, so I am delighted to recommend this new report on *Foreign Policy in the New Parliament*, accompanied by a new parliamentary database on MPs' past voting records. It provides a useful starting point for discussing how the views of elected representatives are shaping our nation's foreign policy.

The world is changing fast and the UK must think strategically and act decisively if we are to continue to exercise the influence we do today. There are two things in this report that strike me as particularly pertinent to challenges we face. First, it stresses the constructive ways in which parliament can help to contribute to making foreign policy beyond set-piece debates in the House of Commons. As the newly elected chair of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, I am delighted to see the emphasis put on committees to provide more strategic direction and to build cross-party consensus on the UK's approach to the world. Second, the report stresses the importance of remembering our international obligations as we navigate Brexit in the heightened atmosphere of partisanship in the House of Commons. We must continue to demonstrate to our allies that we remain a reliable partner to share the burden of collective security that has been vital to our national security since 1945.

As we adjust to an altered international landscape, we need cool-headedness and empirically-led thinking more than ever before. The admirable work done in producing this report, along with the parliamentary database on national security, are in that spirit.

## Executive summary

- **With no overall majority, the British government is likely to have limited margin for error if major issues of foreign policy and defence come before the House of Commons in the new parliament.** Yet at a time of heightened international instability, and with an international order entering a period of epochal change, the UK cannot afford to dodge difficult questions, or encourage the impression that it no longer aspires to be a problem-solving nation, willing to work in conjunction with its allies.
- **While the government will hope to avoid bringing a controversial foreign policy division before the House of Commons, a combination of recent history and a sober assessment of the state of international affairs suggest that it may not be granted such a luxury.** The prospect of some sort of further military deployment by allies on the ground in Afghanistan, the Middle East or North Africa remains entirely plausible. The US government is already in the process of increasing troop numbers in Afghanistan in a campaign that Britain has been closely involved with in the past; and a constant refrain from the White House is the request for America's allies to do more burden-sharing in such theatres.
- **The long-term health of alliances and the very concept of "Global Britain" assume the maintenance of a certain diplomatic and military presence on the international stage.** The UK cannot afford a five-year interlude from the major challenges on the horizon, or a damaging perception that we are in "retreat" from global responsibilities that have traditionally been shared with allies. For many outside observers, the 2013 Syria vote is still regarded as a watershed moment that suggested the UK was less willing to play an active role in confronting matters of shared concern. Should a similar scenario present itself before parliament, these broader ramifications need to be tested.
- **With an estimated eight major parliamentary bills required to deliver Brexit, internal Conservative Party divisions over Europe are the main danger facing the government in trying to avoid a potentially-crippling parliamentary defeat.** The prospect of further opposition to the government's Brexit strategy in the House of Lords – or, at the very least, intensive scrutiny of legislation – is likely to add to a growing burden of business that risks sapping time and energy. But there is no reason why this should detract from serious consideration of other international issues.
- **Recent experience suggests that foreign policy debates over questions of intervention and non-intervention are more divisive than any others (and that these divisions often cut across party lines).** This is both a legacy of the 2003 invasion of Iraq and of a series of subsequent parliamentary debates over interventions in Libya and Syria. Notably, the number of current Conservative MPs who rebelled against the government in 2013 – on the debate on intervention in Syria – constitutes about the same proportion of the Conservative

Party in this parliament, as in the 2010 one. It is also important to note that the DUP sided with the Labour Party and Conservative rebels over the 2013 parliamentary division on intervention in Syria. In addition, the Conservative-DUP confidence and supply agreement, signed after the June General Election, does not appear to oblige the Northern Irish MPs to support the government in a similar vote in the future.

- **The Labour Party can be expected to use both Brexit and broader foreign policy debates as opportunities to challenge the government, as part of its strategy of being on a permanent campaign footing. However, the Labour leadership must also handle such issues with great care because of internal tensions on its own benches.** Despite its newfound post-election cohesion, the Labour Party remains deeply divided over fundamental issues of national security such as humanitarian intervention, NATO and the independent nuclear deterrent. On the issue of Brexit, many Labour MPs are also likely to be highly conscious of the attitudes of their constituents. Of the currently sitting Labour MPs, only a tiny proportion, 3% (nine individuals), publicly supported the “Leave” campaign, meaning that Labour is ostensibly more united on Europe. However, 151 of the 253 pro-Remain Labour MPs, which amounts to 57 % of the parliamentary party today, represent constituencies in which a majority voted for Brexit.
- **In the context of a hung parliament, with ongoing divisions over Brexit, and in an era of heightened partisanship, the roles of the Foreign Affairs and Defence Select Committees and the Joint Committee on National Security Strategy are of heightened importance.** Their first job is to scrutinise, critique and challenge the government where appropriate. However, they can also become hubs for new, cross-party thinking about the UK’s priorities and place in the world. Where possible, they should seek to build cross-party consensus on key issues in UK foreign policy, following the example of the US House and Senate Committees on Foreign Affairs.
- **In keeping with past traditions, parliamentarians should explore ways in which the UK can demonstrate its proactivity, constancy and reliability to its international partners.** A commitment to upholding collective security and the rules-based international order has been at the heart of British grand strategy for more than seventy years. As that order comes under strain, the UK must explore creative ways in which it can preserve its most valuable assets. Both in terms of bringing foreign policy issues before the public, and as a forum of strategic debate, parliament has a crucial role to play.

## Introduction

The role of parliament in guiding the nation's foreign policy is sometimes underappreciated. Political vision and political leadership from our elected representatives have always been crucial in setting the tone for how Britain conducts itself overseas. In the first instance, it is the responsibility of the government of the day to take a lead on defence national security, and not simply cede responsibility for key decisions to the House of Commons. But the scrutiny, guidance and support of parliament on key issues has always been central to the successful conduct of British foreign policy.

The House of Commons and the House of Lords both have a rich tradition of serious engagement with, and high quality debate about, international affairs and Britain's place in the world. Many of the most famous defences or enunciations of British foreign policy have taken place in the context of parliamentary debates, put forth by titans from Lord Castlereagh to Ernest Bevin. But parliament has also acted as the focal point for a healthy and robust dissenting tradition that challenges the core assumptions of the government of the day.<sup>1</sup>

If anything, evidence suggests that the House of Commons has become increasingly more important in the conduct of British foreign policy in recent years. In the post-Cold War era, parliament has arguably had a greater say over key foreign policy and national security decisions. This was something that the previous Prime Minister, David Cameron, put to the test on a number of occasions.<sup>2</sup> In part, this has encouraged the idea that parliament's primary role is to act as a check on government action on foreign policy. Yet this is an unnecessarily restrictive view of parliament's potential role, reducing it to occasional set-piece debates, rather than as contributor to broader strategic discussions.

The various parliamentary committees, such as the Foreign Affairs and Defence Select Committees and the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy have an important role to play. On the one hand, they add another layer of scrutiny, expertise, and discussion. Past experience suggests that they can have a serious impact, shifting the entire foreign policy conversation, as happened in November 2015 with the publication of a report on Syria. On the other hand, given the considerable time and energy that will be exerted on Brexit, there is an opportunity for them to play an enhanced role in providing vision and leadership in seeking to redefine Britain's place in the world.

In all of this, more consideration should be given to the importance of providing a sound basis of public legitimacy for the conduct of our foreign policy. International affairs matter to the British public more than is commonly presumed. According to recent polling data commissioned by the British Foreign Policy Research Group, a significant majority (58%) of the British public declared an interest in foreign policy. Strikingly, though, the same poll found that only 38% of the British public feel informed.<sup>3</sup> Thus, parliament must remain the principal

forum for national debate about Britain's place in the world – and the place that bridges the gap between Whitehall and the public.

## Issues on the horizon

Foreign policy crises tend to be episodic and by nature difficult to predict; but many current problems in international security have become chronic. A high stakes game is currently being played out over North Korea's nuclear weapons and there are many other flash points in the international arena, from the Straits of Hormuz to the South China Sea. It is possible to identify a number of potential challenges on the horizon, which could be brought to the attention of the UK parliament, or even – in some circumstances – force a major vote.

- **First, in the sixteenth year of the war, there are renewed American efforts in Afghanistan.** The US has recently decided on a new strategy that includes a plan to send up to 4,000 additional troops.<sup>4</sup> In May, NATO asked the UK to send more troops to Afghanistan, in addition to the 500 British personnel deployed there to train the Afghan army and police force.<sup>5</sup> Since then, British troop levels have been revised upwards and now stand close to 600, but in August it was reported that President Trump pressed Theresa May for *further* increases<sup>6</sup> as part of a new US request to NATO for an extra 2,500 soldiers overall.<sup>7</sup> For now, the UK is expected to meet the latest American appeal for assistance by committing more Special Forces as well as drones and manned air assets.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the government is trying to support the new US strategy with a combat-oriented contribution that stops short of a formal redeployment of regular British Army troops in a combat role. This is a hard balancing act that is typical of the dilemmas we are likely to see in the coming years. On the one hand, Britain's value as an ally is greater in supporting front line forces in battle than it is in playing an advisory or training role. On the other hand, there is only so much support it can provide for lethal operations without calling on conventional military capabilities, and therefore requiring parliamentary approval. Should American involvement increase, the UK might struggle to “keep up” without triggering a full parliamentary debate.
- **Second, the fall of Islamic State in Mosul in Iraq** – and soon in Raqqa too – is likely to raise questions about the role that the UK is willing to play in the stability operations that are likely to follow. This may be at the invitation of the Iraqi government or in response to a further crisis, such as an escalation of violence between Kurdish separatists and the Turkish state. At the very least, there is a strong security component to building up the resilience of the Iraqi state in a way that prevents the resurgence of Islamic State, or the rise of a successor group.<sup>9</sup> The UK has already played an important role in the anti-ISIL coalition, reportedly conducting around 1400 airstrikes on Daesh targets since Operation Shader began, the vast majority in support of the Iraqi army during its offensive to liberate terrorist-held Iraqi territory. Once again, the US is likely to devote more resources, and possibly troops, to this part of the world. Should the UK be asked



to follow suit, there are likely to be further controversies about sending British troops back into Iraq.

- Third, there is the ongoing question of **possible NATO responses to potential new Russian manoeuvres in Eastern Ukraine, the Baltic States or in the wider Black Sea region**. The exploitation of “grey zones” in places such as Abkhazia, Crimea, the Donbas, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transnistria has become a central part of Moscow’s strategy. Should Russia be perceived to cross a line in any of these areas, then this is likely to be taken as a test of NATO. Shortly after the 2017 General Election, Sir Michael Fallon, the Defence Secretary, told the Commons that, “We need to keep restating the case for NATO, and it is sometimes sad to see the case for it being questioned.” The UK government has repeatedly stressed its firm commitment to preventing Russian incursions into such areas. Thus, Sir Michael Fallon also said “I think that all of us in the House have a responsibility to explain why our troops are being deployed to Poland and Estonia, why our Typhoons are based in Romania this summer, and why we are committing Royal Navy ships to the standing maritime groups this year.” Should there be a major violation of existing treaty obligations or international law in these contested areas there is likely to be a robust British response.<sup>10</sup>
- Fourth, **the situation in Libya remains fraught and may demand more external involvement**. As one of the key actors in the 2011 intervention that removed the Gaddafi regime – and because of ongoing terrorist threats connected to the country – the UK will be eager to be involved in steering Libya towards stability. French President Emmanuel Macron has brought a new impetus to diplomatic efforts to reconcile the two main Libyan factions in the West and East of the country. A summit was held in Paris on 25 July, bringing together the UN-recognised Prime Minister Serraj in the West, and the military commander Field Marshal Haftar, who holds much of the East. In August, the UK Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, travelled in person to Libya, visiting the two leaders in turn. In the meantime, however, Field Marshal Haftar made a high-profile visit to Moscow on 12 August, where he met officially with both the Russian Foreign and Defence ministers. Should the new round of European-led diplomatic efforts fail, there is a scenario in which Haftar feels emboldened to march on Tripoli, particularly since Serraj’s position in the West seems to be weakening. This would likely lead to a new crisis that will inevitably present Britain, France, and Italy with stark dilemmas.
- The fifth consideration to bear in mind is the **potential consequences of the UK’s increased involvement in the Asia Pacific**. That the Prime Minister’s recent visit to Japan coincided with a North Korean missile launch over Hokkaido island was a graphic illustration of how trade and security are umbilically connected in the Asia Pacific – and a curtain raiser on the type of dilemmas that the UK is likely to face as it develops its Asia policy. The planned deployment of HMS Queen Elizabeth in Pacific waters in 2021 is intended to amplify the UK’s presence in the

region. This follows more enhanced security ties with allies in the region. In October last year, for example, RAF Typhoon fighter jets were sent to Japan to take part in the first ever joint drill with the Japanese Air Self-Defense Force. In August this year, the UK joined South Korea and US forces for joint military exercises that came in response to new missile tests by the regime in Pyongyang. The UK has also lent its support to further UN Sanctions against North Korea and urged China to do more to put pressure on the regime in Pyongyang. Should a major war break out over North Korea, the effects are likely to be catastrophic. While it would be very a different conflict than the Korean War of 1950-3, it is worth noting that the Attlee government of the day did seek the support of parliament before joining a US-led, UN-mandated mission in defence of modern-day South Korea. More broadly, the UK has repeatedly stressed its shared commitment to freedom of navigation of the seas and the preservation of international law. However, there are a number of scenarios in which this could lead to friction with China, which has expansive maritime claims in the region. In other words, by styling itself as a security burden-sharer with allies in the region, the UK will be perceived as effectively taking sides in the event of a potential dispute.

### Opportunities for proactivity

On 12 July, the chairs of the Foreign Affairs and Defence Select Committees for the new parliament were elected. They are, respectively, the Conservative MP Tom Tugendhat (who replaces the previous incumbent, Conservative MP Crispin Blunt) and the Conservative MP Julian Lewis (who retained his chair, after defeating a challenge by Conservative MP Johnny Mercer).

As part of their respective campaigns for election, Mr Blunt and Mr Mercer put forward a joint proposal for consideration. The intention behind it was for the UK to be more proactive in re-establishing the international taboo on the use of chemical and biological weapons, flouted by President Assad's regime in Syria. Rather than responding in an improvised fashion to another such attack in the future (or failing to do so altogether), their suggestion was that the House of Commons should consider voting on a **pre-emptive motion that would authorise military action should another serious chemical weapons attack be launched by the Assad regime.**<sup>11</sup>

There are a number of objections to such a proposal. For one, it might tie the UK into a certain course of action, before the exact circumstances of the presumed chemical attack were known. Nonetheless, it does open the door to new thinking about the type of measures that might, in the future, be put forward by the relevant parliamentary committees. As noted above, there are lessons to be learned from the equivalent committees in the US Congress, where bipartisan consensus has been built, at committee stage, for a recent motion that underscores America's commitment to Article 5.<sup>12</sup> Once again, there are potential dangers in bringing such a measure for discussion before the House of Commons – should it be deemed divisive, for example, or spiral into a broader debate about

US-UK relations. Nonetheless, the committees should not discount future opportunities to strengthen the consensus around key pillars of UK grand strategy such as collective security.

## Foreign policy and national security in the Commons since the 2010 General Election

The starting point in understanding the likely balance of political forces on key foreign policy issues within the new parliament is to understand how they have played out so far during the 2010s. There have been five key foreign policy and national security votes (“divisions”) held in the House of Commons since the 2010 General Election - which brought a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition into government - and a further two since the Conservative Party won a majority at the 2015 General Election:

- the vote on intervention in Libya, March 2011
- the vote on a possible intervention in Syria, August 2013
- the vote on commencing anti-ISIL airstrikes in Iraq, September 2014
- the vote on extending the anti-ISIL airstrikes to Syria, December 2015
- the final Trident vote, July 2016

**Policy Exchange has produced a comprehensive parliamentary-data set focused on these divisions, which is available on our website, along with a detailed breakdown of voting habits of individual MPs.** A survey of these voting habits contains a number of key insights across each major foreign policy/national security votes:

### Libya 2011

In the March 2011 vote on enforcing a No Fly Zone in Libya against the Gaddafi regime, parliament voted overwhelmingly (by 559 to 15 votes) in favour.<sup>13</sup> Looking at the totality of the vote across parties, 343 of those MPs who voted for intervention are now back in parliament (202 Conservatives, 126 Labour and 8 Liberal Democrats, representing, respectively, 72%, 59% and 15% of their parties’ original contingents casting their “aye” votes), along with 9 of the 15 MPs who were *against*.

Of the five major divisions – or votes – considered in this paper, the one on Libya was arguably the least controversial since it was backed by an explicit UN resolution calling for the action – imposition of a No Fly Zone – that came before Parliament for a vote. Even the SNP – numbering 6 MPs at the time – voted in favour, the only one of the five divisions under consideration when it did so.

The rump of 15 MPs who went against the majority opinion and voted against the UN resolution, is nonetheless worth mentioning. It comprised of 11 Labour MPs (accounting, therefore, for 73% of the “no” vote), one Conservative, the one Green MP, and 2 SDLP MPs. Of these, 7 Labour MPs, the Conservative MP and the Green MP are back in parliament.

## Syria 2013

The August 2013 vote on a potential military intervention in Syria remains a defining moment in the UK's approach to the world since the end of the Cold War. Following a chemical attack by President Assad's regime against its own citizens in a suburb of Damascus, and in expectation of a US-led airstrike on the regime, the House of Commons was asked to vote on a motion<sup>14</sup>, agreeing "that a strong humanitarian response is required from the international community and that this may, if necessary, require military action". It was not a vote for direct and immediate action; as the then Prime Minister David Cameron explained, the decision to actually launch a military intervention would have required a further vote in the Commons. The Government lost the vote by 272 against 285, a margin of just 13 votes in the context of a large number – 85 – of MPs being absent (many of them unable to return from their summer travels in time for this emergency division).

The Syria vote is notable for the lack of any single Labour rebel: all 223 Labour MPs present voted to reject the motion (giving Labour a 78% share of the "nay" vote, the highest Labour recorded across all the five major votes discussed in this paper), alongside 11 Liberal Democrat and 30 Conservative rebels. Of that Labour contingent, 131 (or 59%) are back in parliament after the 2017 General Election, as are 23 of the 30 Conservatives. However, none of the 11 Liberal Democrat rebels who voted against their party leadership on the 2013 Syria motion have made it into the 2017 Parliament.

Another **distinguishing characteristic of the Syria division was the fact that the DUP sided with Labour against the Conservatives** – the only instance among the five crucial divisions discussed in this paper when the DUP acted in this way. Only five of the eight sitting DUP MPs were present at the vote in August 2013; all of them are still in parliament today.

Of the 240 Tory MPs who voted *for* the motion – supplemented at the time by 31 Lib Dems plus UKIP MP Douglas Carswell – 172, or 72%, have returned to parliament in June 2017. This contrasts with the lower return rate – 59%, as noted above – for the Labour MPs who voted against. 7 of the 31 "aye" Liberal Democrats have also been returned.

## Iraq ISIL 2014

In September 2014, in the face of the rapid emergence of ISIL, which was rampaging through parts of Iraq at the time and rapidly acquiring territory, the House of Commons voted for UK air strikes in Iraq to support the Iraqi army's campaign against the insurgents. The motion<sup>15</sup> before the House made clear that the UK Government was acting "in response to a direct appeal from the sovereign Government of Iraq". It was carried by an overwhelming margin – 525 to 44 – similar to the case of the Libya No Fly Zone in 2011. This was partly because of a

similarly clear and watertight legal case, and partly because of widespread revulsion at the extreme barbarity seen in ISIL methods.

The “aye” votes for this anti-ISIL intervention in Iraq were supplied in a proportion of 53% by the Conservatives, 36% by Labour and 9% by the Liberal Democrats, making for very similar vote shares to the “ayes” cast on Libya in 2011 (when the breakdown had been 50%, 38% and 10% respectively). 201, or 73% of those Conservative MPs voting for intervention in September 2014 have been returned to parliament in 2017, together with 125 (or 66%) of the Labour ones.

At the time, **the SNP was the only leading party (leaving Plaid Cymru aside) that voted *en bloc* against intervention**, though in 2014 it only held 6 seats at Westminster meaning that this decision made little difference to the overall result. Meanwhile, 6 Conservative MPs rebelled on this division and joined the SNP and 24 Labour MPs in the “nay” lobby. While 5 of those 6 Conservatives have been returned to parliament in 2017, only half of the Labour rebels are now back.

Interestingly, this was the only major foreign policy vote – therefore, excluding Trident – in which Labour’s proportion of the “nays” fell under 60% (reaching 55%). This was largely because of the combined Conservative-rebel and SNP votes, which together accounted for 24% of the “nay” contingent.

### **Syria 2015**

Of all the five major votes considered in this paper, the 2nd December 2015 vote on extending anti-ISIL airstrikes from Iraq into Syria – in the wake of ISIL’s Bataclan attacks in Paris the previous month – is arguably the most revealing of the current balance of forces within the UK parliament on questions of intervention and non-intervention.

The motion<sup>16</sup> – carried by 399 votes to 225, a difference of 174 votes – was much more contested than either the one concerning Libya in 2011 (522 votes difference) or Iraq/ISIL in 2015 (481 votes difference). The number of absentees – 21 – was also the lowest across all the five key votes considered in this paper.

The size of the Conservative rebel contingent (7 MPs) was similar in this Syria vote to that of the previous year on Iraq (6 MPs). Notably, the Liberal Democrats, while no longer in the coalition, once again supported the Prime Minister David Cameron in this vote (only two Liberal Democrats rebelled, voting against the motion).

The Labour Party was deeply divided over the issue and Jeremy Corbyn, its strongly anti-interventionist leader, offered a free vote to his MPs. 153 Labour MPs voted with their leader against the motion, with a large number (66 Labour MPs) voting with the government. Overall, the high number of “nay” votes was partly due to the large SNP bloc of 56 MPs who voted together with 153 Corbyn-aligned Labour MPs against the motion. Significantly, 34 of those 56 SNP MPs are now back in parliament, meaning that only one of the current SNP faction at

Westminster – comprising 35 members – *did not* vote against the Syria motion in December 2015. A similarly **high proportion – 90%, or 137 individuals – of the 153 anti-intervention Labour MPs of December 2015 are back in parliament this year, as are 88% of the group of 66 Labour MPs who defied Jeremy Corbyn and voted for intervention alongside the government.** This suggests that Labour divisions on the issue of intervention are likely to run as deep as ever.

Overall, it may be that the 2017 parliament is less inclined toward the interventionist position than the previous one. Of the 315 Conservatives voting in favour of the Syria motion, 45 *did not* return to parliament in June 2017. By comparison, in the recent election Labour only lost 16 MPs of those who voted against the airstrikes in December 2015. The situation is somewhat counter-balanced by SNP’s loss of 24 of its 56 MPs who joined with Mr. Corbyn in voting against the motion, together with the 3 SDLP MPs who in all these divisions consistently voted against all forms of UK military intervention.

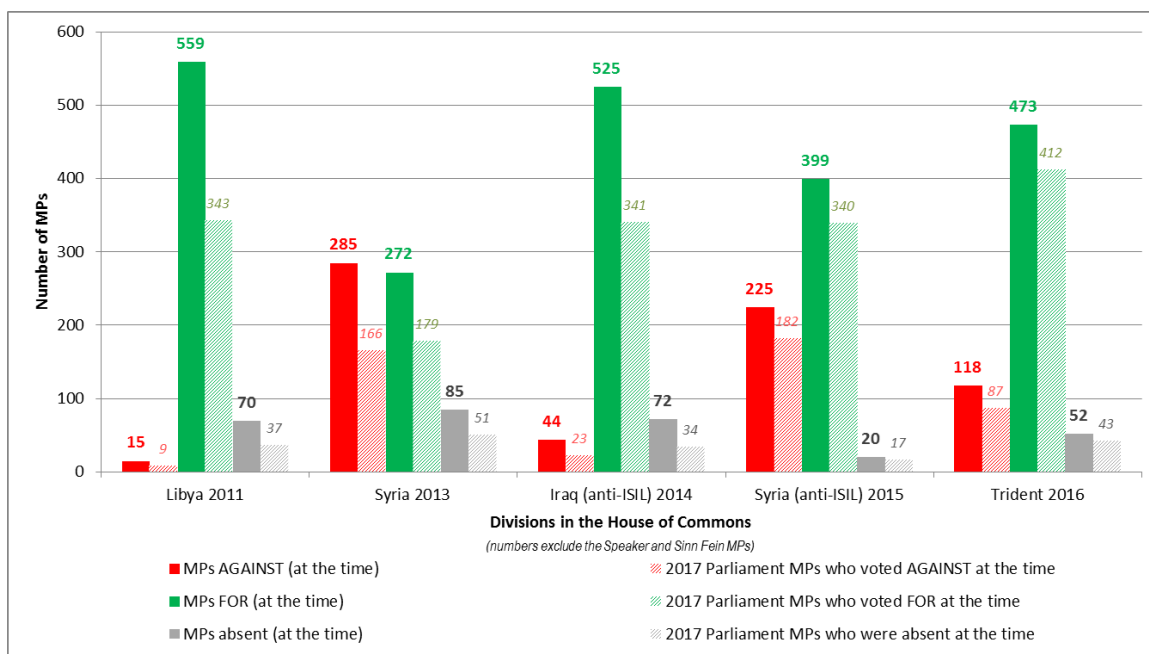
### **Trident 2016**

The July 2016 final vote<sup>17</sup> on renewing the nuclear deterrent was carried by the government by a comfortable margin of 355 votes (473 “ayes”, 118 “nays”). Once again, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn was forced to agree to a free vote, as a recognition of his party’s deep divisions on national security. More than anything, the Trident vote is notable for the large contingent of Labour MPs – 141 members – who chose to side with the government against the wishes of their own party leader.

Significantly, though, as another potential indication of Mr. Corbyn’s increased authority in his party, **the group of Labour MPs who voted against the deterrent, achieved the highest rate of return to parliament – 94%, or 44 out of 47 Labour MPs – of any group from any major party** voting either *for* or *against*, across all the five key Commons votes highlighted in this paper.

This is the only vote considered here where the SNP accounted for a larger share of the opposition to the motion than Labour (56 SNP votes vs 47 Labour votes). 34 of those SNP MPs have returned to parliament this June. This vote was also the only case when the Liberal Democrats voted, as a party, against the motion and alongside the SNP and Jeremy Corbyn’s then minority in Labour’s parliamentary party.





## Challenges facing the government

If trends that were seen in the last parliament continue, there is the potential for serious division *across* the House of Commons and *within* both the government and the opposition benches on foreign affairs and national security. Given how controversial key foreign policy debates have been since 2010, the Prime Minister may be reluctant to bring similar choices – such as a call for intervention in the manner of the 2011 situation concerning Libya or Syria in 2013 – before the Commons. A repeat of the experience of the 2013 Syria vote is one that the government will be particularly careful to avoid.

More than anything, it is the re-setting of the UK's relationship with Europe which is most likely to be the principal issue that threatens the cohesiveness of the government and is expected to consume most of its energy. Over the course of the next 18 months or so, Britain will be enmeshed in the negotiations to leave the European Union on March 29, 2019. Before that date, eight major bills will have to pass through parliament in order to keep the Brexit process on the optimal legislative track. As per the Conservative Party manifesto, all Conservative MPs are now committed to Britain leaving the European Union. Yet the party still contains vastly divergent opinions on the question of what the UK's future relationship with the EU should be.

**Of current Conservative MPs who were in the last parliament, 126 supported Brexit and 158 opposed it. Of those who supported Brexit 25 represent constituencies where a majority supported Remain. Of the new crop of Conservative MPs, 12 are on record as supporting Brexit and 10 as opposing it, with a further 12 undeclared (at the time of writing). As Brexit negotiations unfold, another consideration is the number of Conservative MPs whose position**

on Brexit (stated at the time of the Referendum last year) does not accord with the majority of their constituents, *and* who arguably are in vulnerable seats after the recent election (with majorities of less than 5,000 votes). Among the pro-Brexit Conservatives, eight MPs are in this situation, with the number rising to 23 in the case of “Remainer” Conservative MPs. In other words, in the context of a hung parliament, with so many seats strongly – sometimes surprisingly so – contested in the last election and the prospect of another one being held at any point, MPs are likely to be hyper-sensitive to the views of their constituents. Brexit legislation is likely to be pored over at great length, raising the prospect of amendments and rebellions.

The Conservative Party’s deal with the DUP, struck in the wake of the June General Election, gives the government only a small margin of error. On national security and defence, there is – in most cases – a natural synergy of views between the Conservatives and the DUP. The latter’s manifesto also stresses the importance of the UK meeting its NATO defence spending commitments of 2% of GDP (suggesting there is ‘also legitimacy to the charge that the UK has only maintained the 2 percent target through a new definition of defence spending’) and the party supports a robust line against Islamic State.<sup>18</sup> In 4 of the 5 key foreign policy votes in the last parliament, the DUP voted with the Conservatives. The one exception was the Syria vote of 2013, when it wholly sided with the Labour Party and 30 Conservative Party rebels. One scenario is worth considering here. In the event that there is a significant Conservative rebellion against a government motion – along the lines of the 2013 Syria vote – or a free vote on a major foreign policy issue, it is plausible that the DUP could dissent from the government line (which would not contradict the post-GE2017 Tory-DUP confidence and supply agreement).

NAME	MP 2010-2015	MP 2015-2017	MP now	Libya 2011	SYRIA 2013	Iraq anti-ISIL 2014	Syria anti-ISIL 2015	Trident 2016
Campbell, Gregory	YES	YES	YES	absent	AGAINST	FOR	FOR	absent
Dodds, Nigel	YES	YES	YES	absent	AGAINST	FOR	FOR	FOR
Donaldson, Jeffrey	YES	YES	YES	FOR	AGAINST	FOR	FOR	absent
Girvan, Paul	no	no	new MP	not sitting	not sitting	not sitting	not sitting	not sitting
Little Pengelly, Emma	no	no	new MP	not sitting	not sitting	not sitting	not sitting	not sitting
McCrea, William	YES	no	no	FOR	absent	FOR	not sitting	not sitting
Paisley, Ian Jr.	YES	YES	YES	FOR	absent	FOR	FOR	FOR
Robinson, Gavin	no	YES	YES	not sitting	not sitting	not sitting	FOR	FOR
Shannon, Jim	YES	YES	YES	absent	AGAINST	FOR	FOR	FOR
Simpson, David	YES	YES	YES	absent	absent	FOR	FOR	FOR
Wilson, Sammy	YES	YES	YES	absent	AGAINST	FOR	FOR	absent

*DUP’s voting record in the House of Commons on key foreign policy divisions*

Of the 30 Conservative MPs who rebelled on the Syria vote in 2013, 23 were returned to parliament in 2017. While this group might not self-identify as a rump, the significance of a group that is more sceptical about interventionism is elevated in the context of a hung parliament. Relatedly, there is reason to believe that such sentiments may have increased among MPs in the intervening years, due to ongoing instability in Libya as well as Iraq.



The July 2016 publication of the Chilcot Report into the 2003 invasion of Iraq is a significant factor here. Furthermore, earlier that year, in January 2016, the Foreign Affairs Committee, then chaired by the Conservative MP Crispin Blunt, also delivered a withering critique of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government for its purported failures of post-war planning following the Libya intervention of 2011, which has added weight to the non-interventionist case.<sup>19</sup>

The identity and personal views of key figures at the top of the Conservative Party is also worth considering. Two prominent advocates of these past interventions – David Cameron and George Osborne – have now given up their parliamentary seats, while the former Foreign Secretary, William Hague, has also left the House of Commons. While they voted with the government in the past, neither today's Prime Minister Theresa May, nor the current Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, have previously been particularly vocal in support of such actions.

Having been Prime Minister for over a year, Theresa May has yet to be confronted with a major foreign policy crisis of the scale that precipitated parliamentary votes in 2011, 2013 and 2015. There have nonetheless been some efforts to sketch out what a 'May doctrine' might look like in foreign policy terms. For example, the Prime Minister has repeatedly stressed the importance of the 'national interest' as the guiding principle of her approach.<sup>20</sup> This is a phrase more commonly found in debates about American foreign policy and it normally denotes wariness about liberal interventionism or excessive humanitarianism in the pursuit of foreign policy objectives.

The fullest exposition of the Prime Minister's worldview was in a speech she made in Philadelphia before her visit to the White House to meet President Trump in February this year. When Mrs May called for an end to previous efforts to "remake the world in our own image", many commentators saw it as an emphatic break from the approach to British foreign policy articulated by Tony Blair in his 1999 Chicago speech. This difference was probably overstated. Specifically, the Prime Minister argued strongly against any retreat from dealing with issues of shared international concern. In her formulation, the UK was "by instinct and history a great, global nation that recognises its responsibilities to the world", a friendly burden-sharer that retained its faith in shared endeavours such as NATO and the UN.<sup>21</sup>

There are a number of scenarios in which this commitment might be put the test. Foreign policy debates in parliament are rarely pitched as attempts to "remake the world in our own image". More commonly, they follow requests from allies for support, or efforts to build a coalition to deal with shared security concerns, such as the proliferation of chemical and biological weapons, refugee crises, or terrorist threats. Notably, it was reported in May 2017, following another alleged chemical weapons attack by the regime in April, that the Prime Minister would consider a second parliamentary vote on expanding military action in Syria after the General Election,<sup>22</sup>

While the situation on the ground in Syria has changed since then – particularly with the accelerated rollback of Islamic State – the end of one problem is likely to be, in Henry Kissinger’s memorable phrase, only an “admission ticket to the next crisis”. Policymakers across the West should brace themselves for a new set of complications as some of the main players – Turkey, Iran, Assad, the Kurds, plus the rebels and the Russians – will continue to jockey for power-positions in the aftermath of the campaign.

Appearing before the Foreign Affairs Select Committee in October 2016, the Foreign Secretary also insisted that the UK would remain “a major contributor to the security and stability and economic prosperity of the whole European region.” This implied that Britain would continue to play a significant role in the sanctions regime and other measures taken to deter Russia on NATO’s eastern and southern flanks (an issue that might come before the new parliament in some form).<sup>23</sup>

In a similar spirit, the Foreign Secretary also stated that “Brexit is emphatically not any kind of mandate for this country to turn in on itself, haul up the drawbridge or to detach itself from the international community. In an age of uncertainty, with democracy in retreat in some parts of the world and large parts of the Middle East in chaos, the demand is for more Britain, not less,” he said. While stating that “it is vital that we do not raise false hopes” (on issues such as rescuing benighted groups in Syria through large-scale humanitarian intervention), Mr Johnson also said, “if there is more that we can reasonably and practically do, together with our allies, then of course we should consider those measures.”<sup>24</sup>

## The Labour Party and national security

That the Labour Party performed better than expected in the 2017 General Election has given it a renewed sense of purpose and, temporarily at least, seems to have restored some unity in the parliamentary party. In the short to medium term, Jeremy Corbyn’s position is more secure than at any point since he first won the Labour leadership contest in 2015. Over the longer term, however, Labour will remain arguably more divided on issues of foreign policy and national security than on any other set of issues.

Mr Corbyn has declared his readiness to form a minority government at any point, should the opportunity arise. Under the provisions of the 2011 Fixed Term Parliament Act, if the government faces two successive defeats on votes of “no confidence” – the second within fourteen days of the first – then an election must be called. Should an opportunity arise for Labour to inflict the type of defeat that David Cameron suffered over the Syria vote of 2013, this will prove hard to turn down.

At the same time, however, Labour is also liable to damaging divisions over the same issues that make the Conservative Party vulnerable. On the surface, Labour’s internal divisions over Brexit are less profound than those within the

Conservative ranks. **Of the currently sitting Labour MPs, only a tiny proportion, roughly 3% (nine individuals), publicly supported the 'Leave' campaign. However, 151 of the 253 pro-Remain Labour MPs, which amounts to 57 % of parliamentary party, represent constituencies in which a majority voted for Brexit.**

Labour's stated manifesto position, similarly to that of the Conservative Party, is that the UK has to leave the EU as this is the expressed will of the majority of the British people. Beyond that, however, there is some ambiguity over the party's stance on membership of the Single Market and Customs Union. There has already been a Labour rebellion on this issue, in the form of an amendment to the Queen's Speech, tabled by former shadow cabinet minister Chuka Umunna. 49 Labour MPs joined a group of 52 other opposition parliamentarians, including mainly the SNP and Liberal Democrats who voted in support of the amendment (for a total of 101). Significantly, this included three shadow cabinet ministers – Andy Slaughter, Ruth Cadbury and Catherine West – who were all sacked from their positions and a fourth, Daniel Zeichner, who resigned.<sup>25</sup> While the Shadow Brexit Secretary Keir Starmer has sought to articulate a more coherent position, further divisions are possible.

On the types of foreign policy and national security questions that have been put before parliament since 2010, the Labour Party has proven susceptible to rifts and often acrimonious disputes that run deeper than the Conservative rebellion over the 2013 Syria vote. The most striking example of this is the December 2015 vote on extending anti-ISIL airstrikes from Iraq into Syria. The most memorable speech of the debate was the impassioned case made by the then Shadow Foreign Secretary Hillary Benn for intervention, evoking the Labour Party's internationalist traditions going back to the Spanish Civil War and directly challenging the position of the party's leader, Jeremy Corbyn. Benn kept his job until after the June 2016 EU referendum but in December 2015 the division in Labour ranks allowed the government to win a sizeable majority on that particular vote. Some 66 Labour MPs voted to back the government on bombing ISIL in Syria, compared to 153 against. 137 of the 153 Labour MPs who voted with Corbyn against the airstrikes are now back in parliament. Of the 66 Labour rebels, who voted for the intervention, about 58 are back in parliament following this June's General Election.

Divisions within the Labour Party also continue to run deep on the issue of the independent nuclear deterrent. In the final July 2016 vote on renewing Trident, an even larger number of Labour MPs voted against the position of their leader, with 141 voting to support the government (and therefore in keeping with the Labour Party's agreed position), and only 47 Labour parliamentarians voting, together with Jeremy Corbyn, against.

At one level, it is good news for those concerned with Labour Party unity that the crucial matter of the national nuclear deterrent has been dealt with by parliament. However, the issue of Trident continues to rear its head and cause

divisions within the Labour Party. During his post-election visit to Glastonbury, Jeremy Corbyn is reported to have said that, if he became Prime Minister, he would seek to scrap Trident.<sup>26</sup> For the Labour leader, and a number of those closest to him, this remains a lifelong goal. During his short spell as Labour's Shadow Defence Secretary, Clive Lewis – who was known to be personally opposed to Trident – stated his desire not to 'pick a scab' over the issue, given the party's agreed position of support for Trident renewal. However, at the 2016 Labour Party conference he was reportedly undermined by Seumas Milne – Corbyn's trusted director of communications – who allegedly changed the text of his speech in the autocue room; subsequently, Lewis was moved on from his position. Again, during the 2017 General Election campaign, Lewis's replacement on the Labour front bench, Nia Griffith, reacted angrily when her shadow cabinet colleague, the Shadow Foreign Secretary, Emily Thornberry, seemed to undercut the party's agreed Trident policy again.<sup>27</sup>

There also remains a significant distance between the position of the Labour leader – along with his most important allies such as John McDonnell and Seumas Milne – and a large proportion of Labour's parliamentary party on fundamental questions relating to NATO and the broader Western alliance. During his first leadership campaign in 2015, Corbyn went so far as to say that NATO "should have been wound up in 1990 along with the Warsaw Pact". After the Russian incursion into Ukraine in 2014, Corbyn commented that "the hypocrisy of the West remains unbelievable" and laid the blame at the door of NATO: "It operates way beyond its original 1948 area and its attempt to encircle Russia is one of the big threats of our time." Since he became Labour leader, he has also evaded the question of whether, as Prime Minister, he would act if Article 5 was invoked.<sup>28</sup>

The closer that Labour comes to the prospect of forming a government, the more that these tensions are likely to come to the fore. Labour Party policy is to have a new national security and defence review as soon as it enters government, thereby bringing all of these issues in play. Party strategists may feel that there is still ground to make up when it comes to public confidence on key issues of national security, on which Labour has polled consistently badly under Corbyn. Alternatively, the Labour leadership may feel that its new mandate extends to a more radical approach that breaks with some of these established Labour traditions in terms of support for the nuclear deterrent or NATO.

Finally, there is the question of cross-party cooperation on issues of humanitarian concern. Setting aside manifesto commitments, and military intervention, there are legislative matters that may come before the House in the new parliament on modern slavery, humanitarian relief or international development. There remains the potential for serious cross-party collaboration in the spirit of the late Labour MP, Jo Cox, and others who are willing to work across the aisle on such issues.<sup>29</sup> Yet, the limited extent to which the Labour leadership is willing to tolerate dissent on the Labour benches on key issues of foreign affairs suggests that any such efforts need to be framed carefully.

## Conclusion: government business and operating principles

The Conservative manifesto contained no specific legislative proposals relating to national security and foreign policy, so much as general operating principles and key commitments (such as spending 2% of GDP on defence, as NATO commitments demand).<sup>30</sup> In the Queen's Speech, only two proposed pieces of legislation are likely to have a significant bearing upon foreign policy and national security:

- The International Sanctions Bill

The purpose of the Bill is "to enable the UK to continue to impose, update and lift sanctions regimes both to comply with our international obligations and to pursue our foreign policy and national security objectives after the UK's exit from the EU." This will ensure that "as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, the UK continues to play a central role in negotiating global sanctions to counter threats of terrorism, conflict and the proliferation of nuclear weapons, as well as bringing about changes in behaviour."

- The Critical National Infrastructure Bill

The purpose of this Bill is "to consolidate and strengthen government's powers to protect national security. This will ensure that foreign ownership of companies controlling important infrastructure does not undermine British security or essential services." The proposals will enable the government "to scrutinise significant foreign investment only for the purposes of protecting national security and will give the UK government powers to intervene in those transactions which raise national security concerns".

Neither of the proposed bills are expected to cause much controversy. Beyond these, a supporting document written by the Prime Minister at the time of the Queen's Speech offered some general operating principles for her government's foreign policy. According to Mrs May, the government would "ensure that the United Kingdom's leading role on the world stage is maintained and enhanced as it leaves the European Union." As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, committed to spending 0.7 per cent of national income on international development, the government would "continue to drive international efforts that increase global security and project British values around the world ... work to find sustainable political solutions to conflicts across the Middle East ... tackle the threat of terrorism at source by continuing the United Kingdom's leading role in international military action to destroy Daesh in Iraq and Syria ... [and] lead efforts to reform the international system to improve the United Kingdom's ability to tackle mass migration, alleviate poverty, and end modern slavery."<sup>31</sup>

At one level, the lack of specificity implies that there are no immovable objects when it comes to how the government manages its relationship with parliament on issues of foreign policy and national security over the next five years.

However, the commitment to maintaining the UK's international standing, retaining its status as a "problem-solving" nation and reliable ally, in recognition of the changing international order, are all things that could be put to the test by unforeseen developments. The way the North Korean crisis has developed in recent weeks is a case in point.

Rather than hiding from unwanted dilemmas, the UK should demonstrate its proactivity, constancy and reliability on general principles such as collective security. Instead of waiting for the UK to be forced to respond to events, the Foreign Affairs and Defence Select Committees, and the Joint Committee on National Security Strategy, should take the lead in setting out guiding principles for the UK in a changing world.

## ANNEX: Statistics on the five key foreign policy and defence votes in the House of Commons, 2011-2016

	Libya 2011 AGAINST				Libya 2011 FOR				SYRIA 2013 AGAINST				SYRIA 2013 FOR			
	AGAINST (no. of MPs)	Party share of the original vote	Back in Parliament (number)	Back in Parliament (share of original set)	FOR (no. of MPs)	Party share of the original vote	Back in Parliament (number)	Back in Parliament (share of original set)	AGAINST (no. of MPs)	Party share of the original vote	Back in Parliament (number)	Back in Parliament (share of original set)	FOR (no. of MPs)	Party share of the original vote	Back in Parliament (number)	Back in Parliament (share of original set)
total count	15		9		559		343		285		166		272		179	
Conservative	1	7%	1	100%	280	50%	202	72%	30	11%	23	77%	240	88%	172	72%
Labour	11	73%	7	64%	212	38%	126	59%	223	78%	131	59%	0	0%	0	0%
LibDem	0	0%	0	0%	55	10%	8	15%	11	4%	0	0%	31	11%	7	23%
SNP	0	0%	0	0%	6	1%	3	50%	6	2%	3	50%	0	0%	0	0%
Green	1	7%	1	100%	0	0%	0	0%	1	0%	1	100%	0	0%	0	0%
DUP	0	0%	0	0%	3	1%	2	67%	5	2%	5	100%	0	0%	0	0%
SDLP	2	13%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	3	1%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
PC	0	0%	0	0%	3	1%	2	67%	3	1%	2	67%	0	0%	0	0%
NI Alliance P	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	1	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Respect	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	1	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
UUP	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Independent	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	1	0%	1	100%	1	0%	0	0%

	Iraq ISIL 2014 AGAINST				Iraq ISIL 2014 FOR				Syria ISIL 2015 AGAINST				Syria ISIL 2015 FOR			
	AGAINST (no. of MPs)	Party share of the original vote	Back in Parliament (number)	Back in Parliament (share of original set)	FOR (no. of MPs)	Party share of the original vote	Back in Parliament (number)	Back in Parliament (share of original set)	AGAINST (no. of MPs)	Party share of the original vote	Back in Parliament (number)	Back in Parliament (share of original set)	FOR (no. of MPs)	Party share of the original vote	Back in Parliament (number)	Back in Parliament (share of original set)
total count	44		23		525		341		225		182		399		340	
Conservative	6	14%	5	83%	276	53%	201	73%	7	3%	6	86%	315	79%	270	86%
Labour	24	55%	12	50%	190	36%	125	66%	153	68%	137	90%	66	17%	58	88%
LibDem	1	2%	0	0%	49	9%	8	16%	2	1%	1	50%	6	2%	3	50%
SNP	6	14%	3	50%	0	0%	0	0%	56	25%	34	61%	0	0%	0	0%
Green	1	2%	1	100%	0	0%	0	0%	1	0%	1	100%	0	0%	0	0%
DUP	0	0%	0	0%	8	2%	7	88%	0	0%	0	0%	8	2%	8	100%
SDLP	3	7%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	3	1%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
PC	2	5%	2	100%	0	0%	0	0%	3	1%	3	100%	0	0%	0	0%
NI Alliance P	0	0%	0	0%	1	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Respect	1	2%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
UUP	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	2	1%	0	0%
Independent	0	0%	0	0%	1	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	2	1%	1	50%

	Trident 2016 AGAINST				Trident 2016 FOR			
	AGAINST (no. of MPs)	Party share of the original vote	Back in Parliament (number)	Back in Parliament (share of original set)	FOR (no. of MPs)	Party share of the original vote	Back in Parliament (number)	Back in Parliament (share of original set)
total count	118		87		473		412	
Conservative	1	1%	1	100%	324	68%	279	86%
Labour	47	40%	44	94%	141	30%	128	91%
LibDem	7	6%	4	57%	0	0%	0	0%
SNP	56	47%	34	61%	0	0%	0	0%
Green	1	1%	1	100%	0	0%	0	0%
DUP	0	0%	0	0%	5	1%	5	100%
SDLP	3	3%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
PC	3	3%	3	100%	0	0%	0	0%
NI Alliance P	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Respect	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
UUP	0	0%	0	0%	2	0%	0	0%
Independent	0	0%	0	0%	1	0%	0	0%



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