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Delivering security in an age of austerity

Global austerity is driving radical re-thinking as to how nations deliver security and defence in the future. The First Sea Lord and Head of the Royal Navy explains why maritime power provides part of the answer.

Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon and thank you Lord Lothian for your kind introduction.

[Future Security Environment]

Perhaps I might begin by answering a question that I'm often asked, "What form will our future global security environment take?"

A question that many here will be familiar with.

For understanding our future environment is the first step to establishing how – particularly in these straitened times – we might wish to shape it and how we might have to engage with it.

For me, I believe it will be an environment that is – as it always has been – dynamic. One that is complex, multi-dimensional and uncertain.

It will be an environment in which wealth and opportunity will increasingly be in the hands of the minority. Less equitably distributed.

An environment in which competition for scarce resources will continue to intensify.

An environment which – largely because the conveyor belts of globalisation are accelerating us closer together – will lead to nation states' economic, political and security interests being affected, both more rapidly and more unpredictably by world events. Events over which we shall have little direct control.

Indeed, who would have anticipated the sweep of insecurity across the Maghreb and Levant?

Who would have thought that the global economic crisis would acquire such magnitude? – and start to raise issues of national security and alliance solidarity.

And reflect too, for a moment, upon the kaleidoscope of world events over the last 12 months:
- the crisis in Libya,
- the massacre in Norway,
- famine and piracy around the Horn of Africa,
- the earthquake in Turkey last October,
- the Iranian nuclear challenge,
- the rise in the flow of narcotics from Latin America,
- the destabilising behaviour of North Korea,
- and the internal unrest in Syria,

– to name but a few.

It's little wonder that – together with a number of other countries – the UK's National Security Strategy concludes that, "the risk picture is likely to become increasingly diverse".

Given this common strategic context, as well as the, largely, shared experiences of fiscal restraint – necessarily placing difficult demands at many Defence Department doors – it strikes me that, like it or not, many nations are sailing through the same strategic storm.

Keeping on course through that storm is the challenge. A challenge which requires us to reconcile this breadth of uncertainty with the depth of fiscal reality.

Most of us here would recognise that national security and economic prosperity are two sides of the same national interest coin.

Which is why the UK's Secretary of State for Defence is very clear that, "Restoring sound public finances is a Defence imperative as well as an economic one, and Defence must make its contribution to delivering them."

MOD organisational reform and capability re-balancing for the future is, of course, part of it.

But so too is working more closely with other nations. For what ever the political rhetoric of the past, no country has the capacity, nor the political appetite, to respond to every conceivable threat.

[Collective Defence]

In an age of austerity Collective Defence – educating, training, procuring and operating with other nations – is, as the Secretary of State puts it, "the only practical response to the world we live in". And it's a response to which maritime forces are well-suited. I suppose I would say that wouldn't I.

So some evidence. It's principally because our high seas – our global commons – necessitates, by its shared nature, an inherently collective mindset.

Consequently, interoperability is instinctive to maritime forces – founded on a legacy of years of global operations, building and servicing partnerships, within NATO, the EU, the FPDA, and with a plethora of key allies, most notably the United States and France.

Take, for instance, in the Middle East region, the 25-nation Combined Maritime Force which provides maritime security for the benefit of all. A good example of where global problems are being addressed by global solutions.

Or last year, where the 16-nation maritime element of NATO's Operation Unified Protector helped liberate Libya. Indeed:

- Royal Navy submarines conducted coordinated strike operations with the US;
- our frigates and minehunters integrated instantly into NATO Task Groups;
- HMS OCEAN's operations were coordinated with NATO and French forces;
- and OCEAN's Air Group – of Sea King, Lynx and Apache helicopters – was also fully integrated into NATO's air operations.

Collective Defence certainly makes good sense. It always has done.

But I think it is our approach to how the UK wishes to exercise its individual or collective influence around the world that merits closer examination.

[Flexibility in thinking]

Indeed, a more imaginative, proactive stance on security should be within our fiscal means, provided we are prepared to think again at how we deliver it.

Flexibility in our thinking is the vital precondition to achieving a more realistic response to the speed and unpredictability of events which characterise the security environment of our modern world.

In this regard, the National Security Strategy's 'whole of government' approach is a welcome restatement of strategic principles. And the establishment of the National Security Council to provide prompt, coherent and co-ordinated decision-making on all aspects of national security is a positive step.

After all, if we are to truly balance resources with commitments – power with interests – it certainly makes sense to be more prepared to employ all the levers of national power in addressing the security challenges we face. And, if consensus can be achieved, to join with others – state and non-state.

But as commentators such as Joseph Nye observe, whilst military power will always have its place, the networked world potentially allows us to achieve outcomes through more subtle use of all the levers.

The academic and author Parag Khanna goes a step further perhaps, suggesting that, "when government, business and NGOs work together, real progress can be made".

Because the networked world has the potential to truly galvanise dot.gov, dot.com and dot.org into generating a more dynamic and innovative response to the challenges presented by the future security environment.

I believe Whitehall shares that intent as well.

Indeed, the increasing demand for smarter inter-agency planning and delivery – be it for humanitarian assistance, capacity building or law enforcement, for example – whether nationally or as part of an international effort, is the consequence of a growing shift towards thinking in much broader terms about what security means and how it can most effectively – and efficiently – be delivered.

The introduction a few years ago of what was called the 'Comprehensive Approach', and now referred to in the UK as the 'Integrated Approach' is, in my view, receiving a well-deserved reinvigoration. An approach where the levers of power and the many associated actors are considered as individual melodic lines weaved into a complex counterpoint.

Such an approach is at the heart of the emerging thinking behind 'Smart Power'. The ability to create – to compose – more enduring outcomes and effects with the more elaborate employment of both soft and hard power assets.

But it's an approach that needs constantly working at. After all, complex counterpoint isn't harmonious – isn't musical – by accident.

And yet, that all said, I do believe that there is scope for the military line to be weaved into the counterpoint more imaginatively – to help deliver, in these straitened times especially, the same effect with less.

[Flexibility in employment]

There is a tendency to understand the UK Armed Forces' activity only in terms of their engagement in conflict. This is perhaps an inevitable consequence of the focus on the Campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. But the range of operations undertaken by the component elements of the Armed Forces is actually much wider than simply operations as we might know them.

So in Afghanistan for example, considerable effort is being placed upon providing advice and training to the Afghan National Security Forces through our Brigade Advisory Group.

And as we move towards 2015 the focus will shift almost exclusively onto a Train, Advise and Assist role to the Afghan National Security Forces.

Indeed, through next year and beyond, the Flagship project of longer-term UK military involvement in Afghanistan will be our support to the development of the Afghan National Army Officers' Academy in Kabul.

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There is also a tendency to view the deployment of the military as a last resort. But I think that the military can, and should, be part of a more nuanced first resort – to better understand the security situation so that we can improve our ability to anticipate tension, as well as to do something to contain it.

Which is why in a world that, for economic and security reasons, is beginning to 'look seaward' again – in terms of threats, opportunities and interests – the recently established UK cross-Government National

Maritime Information Centre for example is a real asset. Good intelligence allows us to be more judicious with the assets we have.

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I also think that we can do more in the coming years to shape our Armed Forces so that they can be used more effectively to help address security risks, earlier on, as part of our commitment to conflict prevention.

For instance, 'upstream prevention' as part of the emerging Defence Engagement Strategy which is complementary to cross-government efforts. A strategy to which, in my view, maritime forces are uniquely equipped to make a significant contribution – be it multinational exercises, training, port visits and so on.

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Such recognition that Defence is as much about preventing wars as it is about winning them, also places an increasing premium upon the role of deterrence.

In this regard, the value of persistent presence in regions of interest – whether to signal national intent, gather intelligence and form insights, contribute to capacity building or to reassure others – can not be underestimated.

The need therefore to maintain a credible war-fighting capability, able to operate and be maintained at range, is crucial.

Why do I say that?

Because you cannot deter effectively unless it is understood by those whose behaviours you seek to influence that you can intervene militarily with confidence.

Because you cannot keep the peace unless you are physically there, and prepared to be able to stay there.

In my view, the more one deploys, the less one needs to be kinetic.

To return to my musical metaphor, maritime power is the 'leitmotif' in the counterpoint of future compositions.

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All this means that navies need to be at sea and at readiness – with the capabilities to respond swiftly across the 'spectrum of uncertainty'.

Doing so allows navies to deliver maritime power – effect from the sea – with the greatest expression:
- by maintaining confidence in sea trade;
- by building trust with an ever-widening circle of international partners;
- by bringing hope to fragile states;
- by preventing the consequences of illegal activity reaching our shores;
- and by deterring potential aggressors from challenging our national interests.

That's why last year, for example, some 8000 sailors and marines – around a quarter of the Royal Navy's trained strength – were deployed.

That's why the Submarine Service had its busiest year since the second Gulf War, with SSN deployments averaging some 263 days, 90% of which was at sea.

That's why, in early October, around 45 of the Royal Navy's 62 available vessels, nearly 75%, were underway or forward-deployed.

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In many ways, such a notion of 'upstream prevention' is not new.

The Royal Navy has been operating in the Arabian Gulf, ashore, afloat, in the skies and beneath the waters since 1979.

During the Tanker War of the mid-1980s, we were there providing escort protection to tankers laden with oil through the Strait of Hormuz while the Iran-Iraq war was being waged around us.

We were still there for the first Gulf War in 1991, when our ships and aircraft rapidly defeated the Iraqi Navy.

We stayed to enforce the UN's economic sanctions against Saddam Hussein's regime before supplying and landing the amphibious forces that took control of the Al Faw peninsula, the gateway to Basrah, in 2003.

Until recently, the Royal Navy devoted resources to passing on our expertise in training the fledgling Iraqi Navy and Marines as well as facilitating détente between Iraq and Kuwait.

And today, the Royal Navy remains there:
- conducting mine-clearance preparatory operations in the Gulf;
- deterring the illegal and damaging smuggling of weapons and drugs across the region;
- as well as countering piracy and terrorism whilst protecting the vital sea lines of communication.

Consider how things might have developed had we not, over the last 30 years, been in the position to – by building partnerships and understanding the environment – shape and influence events in the region. To deter, contain and ultimately engage in decisive combat operations against our foe while supporting our friends – all in order to assist the delivery of UK national interests.

The fact of our being there, and our wide utility, gave the UK choice in peace-time, and options in crisis. It continues to do so now.

Consider these other examples:
- the operation to evacuate British nationals by sea from Lebanon during the Israeli-Hezbollah conflict in 2006;
- and, last year, from Benghazi;
- the response to Hurricane Irene in the Caribbean last Autumn;
- the ongoing counter-piracy mission in the Indian Ocean and off the coast of Somalia;
- the interception of drugs in the Caribbean Sea and Atlantic bound for British streets;
- the protection of our fish stocks;
- and the conventional defence of the South Atlantic Islands and their associated resources.

All of these are examples of forces being employed flexibly. Not fighting wars, but 'influencing without embroilment', being there doing their business in order that Defence contributes, in that harmonious counterpoint with all the levers of national power and other actors, to deliver security for the UK.

All are examples of this more elaborate application of both soft and hard power – they are, if you will, the epitome of 'Smart Power'.

After all, as Colin Gray observes, "the…greatest value of the Navy will be found in events that fail to occur because of its influence".

Which at a time when value for money is uppermost in our minds, the small marginal cost of operating ships with their organic aircraft and submarines at sea, rather than being garrisoned in naval bases, is an attractive benefit of maritime forces.

[Conclusion]

To briefly conclude.

In an age of austerity, working more closely with other nations remains paramount. Collective Defence is crucial.

As is introducing greater flexibility in our thinking. Thinking that will truly galvanise government, the military, NGOs and business. Thinking smarter to deliver a more networked and more nuanced response in our future security environment.

And in our complex and unpredictable world, maximising the utility and employment of our forces – especially in terms of 'upstream prevention' – offers a real opportunity to be smarter.

As the Prime Minister has put it, "this country has always been at its best when it projects its influence". It will not surprise you that I consider maritime power to be a compelling expression of this country's influence.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, means being at sea and being ready.

Thank you for listening and I look forward to your questions.