

# GLOBAL STRATEGY FORUM

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*The 30th in our series of expert comment and analysis, by our regular commentator, General Sir Richard Barrons, Commander Joint Forces Command (2013-2016), now Co-Chairman of Universal Defence & Security Solutions, and GSF Advisory Board member. As always, the views expressed are those of the author and not of Global Strategy Forum unless otherwise stated.*

## A New Model Army For The 21st Century

The UK Government's Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development, and Foreign policy now in the crescendo phase has some spirited discussion about the future roles and equipment of the Royal Navy, Army, and Air Force. As usual, the spectrum of debate spans from we need none of these any more (as the world has sensibly grown out of any urge to fight) across to strident demands for the more, bigger and busier armed forces needed to stave off foreign powers visiting great evil upon us. In the middle ground the struggle to balance the nation's books in a deep recession, at a time when Defence is polling below 'don't know' levels of national concern, is competing with the news that state v. state conflict back in fashion and the UK is just not properly dressed for it.

The Army is particularly caught in the crosshairs, buffeted by a confluence of

factors. It cannot continue as it is, yet what it needs to be is not clear - and certainly not yet provided for in the Defence budget. There are stentorian voices (in ties and brogues, highly polished) protecting long-established and honourably cherished organisations and their traditional equipment, and squeaky others (in shirts without collars and colourful sporting footwear) claiming the future for bytes not bayonets. This is not just a UK debate, the same discussion is occurring in many European and other countries. If the UK can find the way, there is a market to be had in influencing allies and selling them new stuff that is Made in UK.

The starting point for the Review has to be principled recognition that the present core equipment of the British Army is in poor shape. The three main constituent elements of the 3rd (UK) Armoured Division promised to NATO (the Challenger 2 tank, the Warrior Infantry Fighting Vehicle, and the AS90



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artillery gun) had all entered service by the early 1990s and have changed little since then. Few of us rely on cars that are 25 years old, certainly not to fight in with our lives at stake. In comparison, the German and US tank equivalents have had four upgrades and, arguably far more important, Russia has stepped well ahead with its new T-14 Armata tank, as seen in Syria. There is important detail to note: Challenger 2 has a rifled 120mm barrel which spins a shell accurately to beyond 2km, the T14 Armata has a smoothbore 125mm barrel that shoots faster and better with 32 rounds in the auto-loader of an unmanned turret and can launch a missile down the barrel that goes 5km. That could matter a lot.

The second point for honesty is that all the money needed to recapitalise the British Army's core equipment is not in the defence programme that entered the Review, which for very clear reasons is heavily committed to modernising the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force. What money there is for the Army constitutes a useful but selective modernisation, including 589 of the new Ajax family of armoured vehicles, but far fewer upgraded Challenger tanks. The Army had 800 tanks at the end of the Cold War and now owns 227 of which only 148 are programmed for any upgrade. If the tank still is the dominant land platform there will not be that much dominating going on in future, but if it is no longer the vital thing to have what should succeed it?

Part of the reason behind the Army's present 'capability holiday' is the way

commitments turned out to be different for 20 years. The sequence of campaigns in the Balkans, Iraq and Afghanistan consumed quite a lot of money and almost all the leadership and acquisition bandwidth in order to provide things like heavily protected (from explosions, not tank shells) wheeled vehicles, body armour and more helicopters. The era of 'discretionary' interventions like these has passed, at least for now, and the equipment they required in such a rush is largely not relevant to dealing with the military capability of potential state-level opponents. Fighting ISIS and the Taliban is a very different job to being prepared to fight Russia. The Army now sees the stuff it had mastered for hard duty in Afghanistan being sold off as redundant, knowing that its core armoured warfare inventory is profoundly obsolescent as it returns to focusing on NATO work with Russia in mind.

The Army's challenge in the Review is about a lot more than just equipment. Since the end of the Cold War the Army, like the other Services, has not been required to exist in a state of more or less general readiness. In the absence of a sense of existential peril the Army has been shifted on both policy and affordability grounds from (in 1990) almost all of it being ready to fight almost all the time, to a programme (from 1997) of *graduated readiness*. In 'graduated readiness' about a third is routinely brought to a high state of preparedness, another third is behind it training to take its place, and the remainder is doing a lot of PT and small jobs abroad. Iterative rounds of savings-driven



hollowing-out since 1997 means that the equipment, stocks, and training capacity to bring the whole Army to full readiness does not actually exist. The obsessive focus on regular Army manpower, currently and only nominally 82,000, tends to skip over this absence of anything like enough stuff to give to people if the whole Army is needed at once.

Along the path from the end of the Cold War to today the Army has lost the capacity to *mobilise* as a combined Regular and Reserve force. For understandable reasons the Army became focused by Iraq and Afghanistan on how many full-time regular personnel it required. It fell into the habit of dipping into its Volunteer Reserve for small handfuls of individuals to augment enduring deployment cycles. This broke the ability of the Reserves to deploy formed units for general mobilisation, emasculating the cadre of Volunteer Reserve officers who no longer found development through a hierarchy of field command opportunities and were limited to 'force generation' duties. The short-lived attempt post 2010 to suggest to the Volunteer Reserve that they might spend a year in uniform with a 2 year gap received short shrift from employers, the Reserves and their families – planning for regular use of Volunteers at scale is not what a Volunteer Reserve is for, a national emergency is.

Today, the equipment to mobilise the Reserve as a whole doesn't exist, nor is there a national mobilisation plan, nor the means to protect the Army in the face of hostile

action as it mobilises in the UK. We have had three decades of being able to assume that war is only ever an away match, one that starts when we are ready having deployed in safety to somebody else's country. This doesn't matter if there was no great prospect of general mobilisation, which is the case today, but it is still a major hostage to fortune if the capability to strike at UK clearly exists (which it does now in the form of long range precision missiles and cyber-attack) and the world ahead is potentially so much bleaker.

So the future of the Army really is about so much more than tanks. We need to decide what we want an Army for, where we might need to use it, and what *capability* (defined as manpower, equipment, training and support) it will need to be competitive. The answers will include reconsidering the balance between Regular and Reserves, rethinking the requirement for mobilisation, and making sure that, if necessary, the army can be brought to readiness at home despite being attacked as it does so. The same dilemma applies to all our European allies.

In looking for the way forward it is tempting to latch onto a point of certainty, but if the point of certainty is what the Army needed to be in 1990 this is a temptation to be avoided at all costs. When the Cold War ended so the character of that confrontation was consigned to history. The war we thought we might have back then was about very large conventional forces manoeuvring and fighting for the control of territory in a way that traced its lineage back to the



Second World War. Indeed, the Cold War was exhaustively rehearsed with the equipment that would have been ideal in 1944, plus nuclear weapons. The military challenge the UK faces today is very different in terms of the opposition's intent and the capability with which they may pursue it.

In the case of Russia and its confrontation with NATO, the ambition to seize large swathes of NATO territory has receded and been replaced by the risk that Russia could very quickly attack and hold limited areas which it considers vital to its interest and most likely populated by Russian speakers (even if they hold no particular candle for Mr Putin). The smaller, better equipped and more rapidly deployable land forces that Russia now maintains are just not the same as the Third Shock Army that menaced across the Inner German Border from 1(BR) Corps in the Cold War.

As technology changes so too does the character of a modern army. Unlike during the Cold War, it is now virtually impossible to move and manoeuvre a large armoured force undetected to a 'Line of Departure' by dawn, before sweeping down from a very large wood to strike the opponent's immobilised tank fleet in the flank - as was practised about once a fortnight 1947-1989 on the Hannover Plain.

Space-based surveillance and the ubiquity of many other sources of information mean that the modern battlefield is effectively transparent. This can be a shame as the

extending range and enhancing precision of missiles and artillery means that once detected any large armoured force is very much easier to destroy, perhaps from hundreds of kilometres away. This was exactly the experience of the two Ukrainian Battalions in lightly armed vehicles that were found by Russian drones and destroyed by long-range Russian artillery in somewhere between five and 20 minutes. Just as horses were not ideal for charging at tanks in 1939, so tanks are not ideal for charging at missiles (short and long range) in 2020.

The trend towards greater range, precision and the use of unmanned and autonomous equipment is being propelled by the rapid advances of technology developed for civil purposes, such as 5G, the Internet of Things and driverless cars. The future for any Army's capability will be built on the potential of data in secure cloud, AI, powerful and secure networks, robotics and autonomy - as well as enough good, hard human soldiers.

The latter is an important point: seeing the way equipment will change is entirely congruent with the continuing need for outstanding people who know how to fight hard. For all that technology has changed and will change how any army is equipped and operates, it is still essential to maintain a clear eye on what lies at the heart of soldiers' business. The kit may be different, but where it is necessary to take physical hold of somewhere or to protect it from others intent on seizing it, the fight will still be brutal and feral. We have seen this in spades



in all recent conflicts: the imperative to fight with shells, bullets, bayonets, grenades still very much alive – and with it the need to protect people with the right vehicles and personal equipment as they go about it. The question now is how to do that, not to ignore it, and not persist with having outstanding people who can fight hard being resolutely equipped with their parents' vehicles and weapons.

It is increasingly the case that the point of decision in state versus state conflict isn't primarily a battle for the control of wilderness, or even agricultural land, but much more likely to be about large urban or semi urban areas where most people live, where power and wealth reside. This is a trend that galloping urbanisation around the world will accentuate. Urban conflict is a quite different challenge for an army than romping relatively freely across a plain or desert. It requires far more people and firepower per square kilometre, and equipment that is suitable and sustainable in a complex urban setting.

The optimum formula for balancing firepower, mobility and protection that a tank encapsulates is likely to be different than 75 tons of Challenger 2 offers: probably a lighter but still armoured vehicle fleet, whether on wheels or tracks, and perhaps shorter barrelled for street fighting. An army optimised for sweeping across European farmland could be something of a disappointment if the core issue is to be able to fight in the urban sprawl of a large

capital city. Nonetheless, even after decades of trying, technology has not yet squared the ambition to field a new army with 'medium weight' equipment (say vehicles at 40 tons) so that it is fleeter and more useable, with the reality that such a vehicle is still easy prey for a heavy tank if caught out. So it may now be far more vulnerable and less dominant but the tank is still a big player. Having fewer is different to having none at all.

This points to the great danger in arguments about military reform of lurching to extremes or clinging to the magic of a new Silver Bullet. It seems to happen a lot in military history that a new weapon appears and is touted as the complete replacement for everything that has gone before. We see this in the arguments about Air Power in the 1930s, about the submarine since WW1, and today about the magic of drones and cyber. What is really at issue is a change in the balance of capability rather than the total eclipse of anything. Drones, for example, are very easily shot down by an opponent with a modicum of modern air defence – it's just that the opposition in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and parts of Syria had none at all.

The point was made when Iran shot down a US Global Hawk drone (the size of a Boeing 737 and costing \$220m) in June 2019. Cyber warfare is now a daily part of how nations confront and conflict yet played no part at all in the fight for Aleppo and is only supporting cast in the stand-off between Chinese carrier killing-ballistic missiles and US aircraft carriers over access to the South China Sea. It



is tempting, not least because it's cheaper, to assert that one particular new thing is now all that's required but the truth is almost invariably more nuanced. Failing to recognise the need to match a complex span of threats with an *intelligent* (not necessarily mirror image) *complex response* is dangerous.

Resolving this complexity in the Review requires acknowledging that organisations like an army have to do many different things, so they either have to be flexible enough to transition quickly between roles or - far more likely - they need to be able to do several different things at once. In the case the British Army of course it is important to settle what it is it will provide to NATO as the centrepiece of its capability. It must also be capable of contributing to other missions that really do matter.

One of the principal legacies of the difficult interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan is a clear understanding of the value of partnering with countries that face significant challenges from instability and terrorism which may bring harm to the UK if not dealt with. It is obviously much better and much cheaper to help allies deal with these challenges than to deploy the British Army there to do it ourselves. This is essentially the formula adopted, albeit in a fragmented way, in the UK contribution to removing ISIS from Syria.

The mantra of 'Train, Advise, Assist, and Accompany' is going to be a core feature of any future Army, not an aberration and quite likely to be the most significant part of its

routine employment. Doing this well means deploying not just a few spirited young officers and some rations, but a systemic solution that fields intelligence, command and control, planning, fire support, logistics and medical capability. That sounds a lot, but it's still a lot less than taking the whole fight on and doesn't mean tanks. It does mean doing the whole job too: training, advising and assisting but not going out to accompany at the fight is very rarely effective enough. Few wars are won by waving your partners off at the camp gate.

An aspect of partnering lies in making a more conspicuous contribution to UN peacekeeping roles, especially where leading edge equipment and expertise developed elsewhere in a highly demanding circumstances can be brought to deliver far more decisive effect in what can be unnecessarily protracted UN operations. The UK, still a P5 Member, can add significantly to its international stock and to aggregate global stability by allowing the Army (and other Services) to be more useable and used in this way. The contribution of only 250 reconnaissance troops to Mali is a good first step, but hardly decisive.

Drawing all this together what should be the framework for settling the future British - and indeed any other - Army? We should start with the roles that it is most likely to be required to fulfil.

**Russia.** Foremost amongst these we can be pretty confident will still be playing its part



in deterring and, if necessary, defeating Russian assertiveness on the periphery of NATO. As described above, this will be an Army that needs to manage today's military capabilities and methods not yesteryears. This means resetting defence against air and missile attack, so it can mobilise at home, deploy to where needed, and fight when it gets there. It means having access to the surveillance and reconnaissance ability to see the battlefield at least as well as the opponent. It requires its own very long-range precision missiles to deal with enemies before they can strike. And it will still require a 21st century mix of networked manned, unmanned and autonomous mobile, armoured forces able to fight for terrain or to destroy an opposing force – and most likely in an urban setting. This is not Challenger 2, Warrior and AS90 as formed up in 1990, but nor is it without mobility, firepower and protection.

**Readiness.** How much of the Army do we want at readiness at once, and do we envision being able to guarantee having the whole thing got ready in reasonable time in a crisis? The answers to this will drive not just overall size but also fleet numbers, stocks and investment in resilience such as hardened infrastructure.

**Intervention in a More Challenging World.** We should also expect this new Army to be ready for essential military intervention outside NATO (with allies) to secure UK vital interests when in real jeopardy. These would be very different from the discretionary

interventions of the last 20 years against the opposition that fielded such a very limited band of capability, albeit in some cases to sharp effect. So the future Army will need to be expeditionary-minded again, setting aside the widespread current aversion to thinking about this. Just because we grew weary in Afghanistan does not mean our future security and prosperity will not need protecting – or our values.

**Capacity Building and Stability.** Building capacity on an enduring basis with our partners around the world, so that they look after themselves better and in so doing buttress our own interests, will be a standing requirement. This needs to be manned, equipped, trained and sustained as a vital output and not some sort of distraction between turns in first division work. Fielding appropriate contingents to support the UN or other coalitions in order to make, keep or support peace and stability will also be important, and each will be different and will need to be calibrated as such in terms of capability, rules of engagement and longevity.

**Resilience & Mobilisation.** A different approach will be needed to resilience in the UK homebase. This includes how the Army supports a national response to natural or man-made disaster, or to terrorism on the occasions when it slips the control of the police and security services. It will certainly involve resetting the capability to protect the UK from the risk of long-range precision conventional missile attack. As we restore the capability to protect our daily way of life



from physical, digital and cognitive attack the Army will have a part to play.

**People.** This reordering will require a fresh approach to the mix of Regular, Reserve, Civil Service, industrial and robotic manpower. Any army should only have the full-time regular personnel that it needs to do things that are: required every day, deployed permanently abroad, so complex that they require full-time expertise, support mobilisation, or are needed at very high readiness. If something is only needed occasionally, or only needed at mass with reasonable notice, there is a very strong argument for it being held in a rejuvenated Reserve force. Technology will enable this as more military equipment is immensely complicated in terms of its manufacture but also by design extremely easy to learn to use and to operate. For example, it seems unlikely that defending the UK against Air and Missile attack will be a very regular requirement – though when it's needed it will be needed to be done well

– nor is it likely that our power stations and water supplies need guarding daily. These are the sort of task a modern Reserve should be given to do.

So the future of the British Army is so much more than about the future of tanks. If what is needed today is certainly not a Challenger 2 in the form or numbers needed in 1990, what is needed is still equipment that provides the necessary mobility, firepower and protection for contemporary settings. It may still walk like a duck and quack like a duck, but it has to be a different, better duck.

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