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The fourth in our series of expert comment and analysis, by 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.

Beyond Shooting At Our Feet: UK Strategy For A Harder World

The shock of COVID-19 is profound, touching almost every aspect of how the UK lives, works and plays. There is a long way to go to defeat the virus, the economic price already eclipses the bill for the 2008 financial crisis and will rise. To say that this is a lot to deal would be epic understatement, of course government and public discourse is dominated by the immediate and direct consequences. It will make us even more uncomfortable and uncertain when we are reminded about the other huge challenges to the UK's security and prosperity that existed before the virus struck and that these have not diminished one jot.

As the virus recedes (for now), setting the best course for the UK demands a lot more than addressing just the effects of the pandemic. We are already campaigning against a combination of tough, enduring and concurrent challenges, not just one disease. We need to re-acquire the virtues of governing ourselves with greater strategy and statecraft, no longer relying on the agile event management we have preferred for some time. Our future is not secure if we can only shoot at what happens to be at our feet.

First, we should take detached stock of the strategic shock that COVID-19 has brought to our economy and society, and examine our response. At the time of writing UK deaths are approaching 30,000, schools and universities are closed, and commercial life is severely impeded: we are already in a more difficult place than any in living memory. Nonetheless, it is not such an existential risk that it really equates to the threat of invasion and destruction that was felt in the Second World War and to lesser degree in the Cold War. COVID-19 has exposed both how comfortable and how fragile our way of life is, but this really should not be a revelation. We have

seen the veneer of civilisation shattered extremely rapidly in other prosperous and developed places, for example by war in Sarajevo in the 1990s or New Orleans by nature in 2005, and we see millions of fellow citizens on this planet existing daily on the edge of sustainable life. If we have mistaken decades of comfort as a guarantee of future immunity from harm we were being naïve.

We know that the risk of a pandemic was at the top of our national risk register, so we were good enough to recognise what could happen, and yet not good enough to invest in sufficient preparations. We could have managed COVID-19 without resorting to a considerable degree of crisis management on the hoof. There is something to celebrate in how our national response has come together, but we could have made it easier by laying in the stocks and equipment that had been recommended, and by investing in greater public awareness of the generic risk and how to respond to it. We have chosen to maximise effort to save lives at the price of breaking the continuity of activity and investment in our economy, education and community life, financing the bill with massive additional debt. The public and private financial bill is already huge (perhaps £200bn so far) and we know that as soon as the first wave of infection is contained we really will have to manage risk differently. It's just not sustainable to trash our social cohesion, education and prosperity as the price of containing this particular disease, and that includes the high likelihood of a second wave. We are going to need a different strategy for the long haul.

We can also see the global response to the pandemic has illustrated the limits of multilateralism and of relying on international organisations. Each country has determinedly taken its own path in how it responds to the disease. Similarly, having enjoyed the many advantages of globalisation for decades we are now acutely aware of the limits of long, monopolistic supply chains and the vulnerability of much



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reduced sovereign independence when things fall apart. This may be at odds with how we think the world would work better, but we need to recognise how it is now – preparing accordingly as well as aspiring to improve.

It is understandable that almost all the bandwidth of our government has been absorbed in getting on top of the needs at the moment. It is also explicable that in thinking about what happens next the conversation has been focused on recovering from the specific effects of the pandemic in all its many dimensions. The problem for us all is that limiting our national thinking and endeavours to just this task will not deal with the much harder world that we are already in and must anticipate getting worse in the years to come. Nor should this be a surprise: there are many significant, strategic challenges on our plate before COVID-19 struck and we were talking about them.

If we lift our eyes off our shoes we will quickly be reminded that we still have to settle the terms of our departure from the European Union, and we are now going to do this in the different financial and political circumstances created by the pandemic. What does this really mean?

We also were quite focused on a difficult relationship with an assertive, ambitious and disobliging Russia as it postures against NATO, pokes about in our national affairs - particularly our cyberspace and social media – and tries to sow weakness and discord. Russia is still building influence in the Middle East and Africa where the West (in the absence of the US leadership we had grown used to and our strategic weariness following the struggle to succeed in Iraq and Afghanistan) has ceded the field. What are the consequences going to be?

There are still two strategic capability conundrums concerning Russia that have to be resolved: its developing conventional military edge and its capacity for 'hybrid' or 'grey space' confrontation. None of our recent Defence Reviews have closed decisively on how to manage Russia's military advantage in: precision long range conventional missiles in attack and defence; modern submarines; offensive cyber forces; space-based capability; and the rapidly deployable conventional forces designed to seize key bits of NATO or other territory well before an Article 5 response either deters or deals with it. The March 2018 Fusion Doctrine articulated very well how the UK is vulnerable to states like Russia that combine all their levers of power short of military force in order to confront and undermine on a rolling basis. Yet we have yet to build the national capability to identify, deter, defeat and if necessary attack in this 'space' beyond some pretty good event management such as in the Skripal incident. We can see that what is still required is the fusion of our own public and private sector power on an enduring campaign footing to protect our interests. COVID-19 has not changed this.

Immediately before COVID-19 struck we were very focused on the manifestations of mankind bumping into the limits of our planet's ability to manage our demands and abuse. It was not so long ago that floods in the UK, wildfires in Australia, and rainforest depletion in Brazil were filling our minds. We are still fairly sure that we have about 10 years to change how we live, in a world where population growth and expectations will substantially exceed the supply of even water and clean air, or we should instead plan to live with the consequences of rising sea levels, the irrecoverable loss of many species, and desertification. COVID-19 illustrates that (to paraphrase Harari) 300 million tons of mankind, 700 million tons of domesticated animals, and 100 million tons of wildlife have to come to a different arrangement because the planet is neither inexhaustible nor disposable.

The origin of the pandemic in Wuhan has brought the issue of China as the major strategic driver of our age much more sharply into focus. The emerging truth that we now live in the Asian century, no longer in the world dominated by the post-World War 2 US-led consensus and its associated 'Rules-Based International Order', should not be a surprise. As we have struggled with the disease, we have also seen the first rail traffic from China reaching Europe in 18 days rather than 30 by sea - and we should take seriously the prospect that with high speed rail the journey time to Rotterdam could be just four days. The flexing of Chinese military power in the South China Sea, which despite the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea is becoming the sovereign water that China has claimed since 1947, also illustrates that China is through with its policy of 'biding its time'.

Whilst we cannot predict the precise path China will take nor how the US will respond, we can be sure that our future prosperity and security is now bound up in a complex relationship with China. This relationship will be unequivocally one-sided unless the UK can make common cause with like-minded states – even though the response to COVID-19 has just undermined general faith in multilateralism. We are outside the EU but stuck with geography, so there is a lot to Zoom about with Brussels.

As an adjunct to the emerging economic dominance of China we had also begun to see how profound the effects would be of the AI driven 4th Industrial Revolution. We know how we live, work and play is being transformed by combinations of digital age technology. Some of this we have seized on with alacrity: the advantages conferred by Uber, Amazon, Facebook, and Airbnb. Some of it we may be a little nervous about, such as the privacy of our personal data and the scope for the manipulation of what we think we know from social media. Other aspects we have hardly begun to examine: the significance of gene engineering and the implications of AI and robotics on employment and the role of work in our society.



We do know we are about to see the displacement of millions of people, white and blue collar, from the employment that they regarded as the secure, golden thread in a useful and prosperous life. Unlike previous industrial revolutions, the displaced in this case have a vote, political confidence and the voice and organisation conferred via their smart phones. We might prefer to restore what we saw as the normality that existed before COVID-19, but the world was already going to change profoundly. What do we think about this? What are we going to do about it?

As we pick ourselves up after the pandemic all these challenges will be there as ineradicable features of the strategic context in which the UK has now to survive and prosper. It will not be sufficient to address just one of these, or just one at a time. In fact, the *combination and concurrency* of managing Brexit, Russia, the planet, China, and the AI industrial revolution will set the bar for what counts as competent government. This is not going to be managed successfully by relying only on resource agility, debt, deft crisis management and a dollop of hope communicated with polished chutzpah. The UK will find that it is a modest voice in this more fragmented and turbulent world, our economic and political clout will still matter but it will rarely be decisive unless well-orchestrated with others. Our reliance on the rest of the world for around 40% of our food and energy, for the trade in services and capital that drives our economy, means that isolationism is simply not an option.

We need a national conversation about our place and progress in the world that recognises the essential fragility of how we like to live. We need to discard any sense that our comfort and security is somehow inalienably guaranteed and accept that unless we are prepared to act, with others, to protect our values and interests we are very likely to be trampled upon by accident or design. Some of this means being quite forceful about what we must protect, but a great deal will rely on forging an international consensus that supports the durable operation of trade and relations across a stressed and turbulent planet.

Can our politicians and officials find the ability and space to think about the full complexity that we face and offer us policy choices that are realistic and balanced? Many in office do seem to find it tiresome to have to think about the balance between ends (the outcomes we would like), ways (the routes to getting there), and means (the resources, plans and activities needed to deliver). But we are not going to succeed if we just make lists of desirable outcomes and hope for delivery by combining rhetoric and small tokens of effort. If our politics is entirely consumed by responding to a well-tuned sense of what the majority of people reckon at any particular moment, and a fixation with managing that sentiment hourly towards the most imminent election, then we deserve the poverty and insecurity that will ensue. We can choose to recognise that we

now live in a different time that requires different treatment, and that means some strategy and acting on it in ways that are necessary even if hard and not immediately popular.

Perhaps top of this list will be the requirement to reset national resilience. This will obviously be so in terms of dealing with challenges to public health such as pandemics, now we have experience of one, but it will not be enough. Our daily life needs to be secure from the malicious depredations of states who would prefer to see us weak and divided. A priority is to protect the cyber and physical security of the critical national infrastructure that supports how we live: power, water, fuel, food distribution, traffic control, banking, telecoms, and much more.

We also need to accept that by accident or in confrontation or conflict we may actually lose at least some of this for periods of time. Uninterrupted broadband is not yet a divinely guaranteed human right. As citizens, institutions, local and central government we need to build back the ability to maintain essential continuity of life and government and be more resilient to adversity. An element of this lies in educating and organising citizens, especially as they leave school, about how the world really is and how they should respond on a tough day. It will not be enough to think that we can all continue to lead our lives in great liberty and happiness, assuming that when anything bad happens the government will sort it out.

The conversation we now need to have about our defence and security is not the conversation we have been struggling to conclude for about the last 15 years. We are still inclined to think of defence in terms of a battle for territory by massed conventional armed forces. We seem to think that war only happens abroad, where our participation is now entirely discretionary and that if we choose not to participate there are no adverse consequences. The fact is that the risks to the UK homeland has already fundamentally changed and we have not kept up with them. There is no risk of a Russian invasion of UK, Russia neither has the means to accomplish this nor the will to manage the price of occupation. The same applies to most of NATO, except for those areas which Russia believes are ethnically supportive or strategically vital – and here Russia has some of the means for rapid and effective action. So deterrence and the capacity for credible intervention in Europe still matters, but it is different in form from the 1980s.

On the other hand, the military capability risk to the UK homeland is now potentially much higher. This is the result of a combination of: new generations of nuclear and conventional missiles, offensive cyber capability, and the direct route available to the minds of almost every citizen through their mobile phone. Breaking the will of the UK (or any other developed European country) does not require conventional invasion when it can be accomplished by the destruction of



daily life and public will through an assault on government, critical national infrastructure, and the mobilisation of the Armed Forces by a combination of missile and cyberattack, well amplified by the manipulation of public morale through misinformation on a grand scale - but not 'boots on the ground' other than agents and proxies. We need to be able to defend ourselves against this sort of 21st century attack by now transforming our armed forces for confrontation and conflict in the Digital Age.

This certainly does not mean that we only need to think about protecting the homeland. In the world that lies ahead challenges to our vital interests (security, prosperity and values) abroad will arise from a complex combination of instability, accident and aggression. These will not be discretionary issues in the way that we wrestled with Iraq and Afghanistan, these will be existential: civil society afraid or outraged, demanding the government acts. We will need to be able to act abroad in a sophisticated way: a combination of effective diplomacy (skilled people with money to spend); military and civil military capacity building so our friends can do a better job at looking after themselves; rapid and quite likely forceful intervention to shore up stability in very fragile and significant circumstances; and the will and means to fight - alongside others - if vital matters reach a violent impasse. And when we have to fight in someone else's homeland, we cannot in future assume our homeland is somehow still inviolate. Military alliances like NATO that have had a defensive purpose defined by territory will need to be reset not just to deal with new forms of capability but also new risks defined by interests more than geography, or they will rightly wither and need to be replaced.

Simply filling in the current holes in our Armed Forces or, more likely in the circumstances we now find ourselves in, just having a debate about how to trim further to fit a lower budget will fail to meet the risks we face. Fortunately, the route to building effective UK Armed Forces at a sustainable price has already been defined by the thinking in the MoD around the coming 21st century military transformation through the application of combinations of digital age technology. Just as the AI industrial revolution is transforming how we live and work, it transforms how we confront and fight. When it does so it will unlock the same degree of savings in people, equipment, support and activity that other industries have made. We know Navies, Armies and Air Forces built as a mix of manned, unmanned and autonomous capability are coming, what is currently missing is the political will, engagement, leadership and investment to drive and support making these fundamental changes in organisation, equipment, and method. Of course this means substantial disruption to long-established institutions, industrial policy, and acquisition - and this is unavoidable in the world where the benchmark for competitive defence capability is being determined by others, not our history or preferences.

So we have some choices to make. We can focus all our energies and resources on containing COVID-19, managing just the consequences of this, and aspire only to go back to the normality of February 2020. Or we can recognise that life as we knew it then was already under assault and things were going to change anyway. The biggest choice ahead is to be good enough as a society and our government to come to terms with a new strategic context, to manage complexity and concurrency, to make good strategy to address it, and commit to seeing through the hard choices this will entail. This is a tall order, but the price of just looking at our toes will be far steeper.

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