

## **Edward Heath Memorial lecture**

**“Is Britain Safe?”**

**By**

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Thinking of Edward Heath in the context of today’s fragile world one cannot escape the current similarities with his time as Prime Minister in the early seventies.

As you might expect he was preoccupied with strengthening European cooperation on defence. As is our Prime Minister.

He had to manage tense relations with the US. Just like our PM.

He refused the US the use of its British bases for action in Israel in 1973. Spot the similarity.

He supported publicly President Nixon in the war in Vietnam but continued Harold Wilson’s refusal to send troops to fight with them.

In a world burning again from fires in the Middle East, one can easily reflect on times changing but not changing that much.

But the stakes today are higher. The proliferation of nuclear weapons makes the dangers of miscalculation and misunderstanding much more potent and the current major great power competition much more deadly.

I spent the best part of a year working on the Government’s Strategic Defence Review and I can tell you now the blunt conclusion of all that work.

We are underprepared. We are under insured. We are under attack. We are not safe.

The current conflict in the Middle East has to be a rude wake-up call to this country. On top of what we have seen in Ukraine it should have reminded us in the United Kingdom of our own vulnerabilities.

There are many. The Defence Secretary's announcement last week about the activities of Russian submarines around our under-seas cables highlights just one of the serious risks to the homeland we face today.

95% of all the data we use today comes in undersea cables and over 70% of the gas we use in Britain comes in one pipeline from Norway. That is just a few of the formidable vulnerability for this nation.

That Strategic Defence Review (SDR) where I was lead reviewer last year made the situation crystal clear in its opening paragraphs. **“The UK and its allies are once again directly threatened by other states with advanced military forces.”** These words and the whole review were endorsed by the prime minister and by the government. It became a government document and a serious commitment.

Keir Starmer went even further in his speech to the Munich Security Conference a few weeks ago: **“Nato has warned that Russia could be ready to use military force against the Alliance by the end of the decade”**. That, I remind you bluntly, is in three years' time. It should scare us all.

Keir Starmer went on: **“Time and again, leaders have looked the other way, only re-arming when disaster is upon them. This time, it must be different. Because all of the warning signs are there”**. True enough, but what was missing in that striking call was the money to actually do the re-arming.

In the Chancellor's Budget speech last year she used a mere 40 words on defence in over an hour. In the Spring Statement she used none.

Despite the Prime Minister making another strong case for defence in the Guardian last week, where he promises to **‘forge a new path for Britain’** he failed to commit to the promised 5% of GNP, a target which would add £80billion to the defence budget.

Acknowledging the need **“for the war in Iran (to) become a line in the sand”** **“which will make us strengthen our energy, our defence and our economic security in this new age”**, the wherewithal to make this happen was absent.

The Strategic Defence Review is a detailed blueprint for what needs to be done to make the country safe. It involves a wholesale transformation of how we guarantee homeland defence and simultaneously deter any adversary from even thinking of attacking us. But it needs money to deliver it.

There is a corrosive complacency today in Britain's political leadership. Lip-service is paid to the risks, the threats, the bright red signals of danger but even a promised national conversation about defence can't be started. The cold reality of today's dangerous world is that we cannot defend Britain with an ever-expanding welfare budget.

Britain's welfare budget is now five times the amount we spend on defence. Are we certain that this is the right priority, jeopardising people's future safety and security whilst maintaining an increasingly unsustainable welfare bill?

The SDR was specifically designed to be a UK review and not a Labour one. That's why I asked Sir Jeremy Quinn, one of the last Government's best defence Ministers to be one our six expert non-partisan advisers. We deliberately did not seek to make capital, which we could have, out of the previous governments' record in hollowing out of our forces. We pulled that punch.

I have already briefed the Leader of the Opposition on what the SDR says and means. I have to say depressingly that although I have offered briefings to the Leaders of the Liberal Democrats and Reform UK, neither have taken up the offer.

How we defend Britain and make its people safe has to be a national endeavour. There is an urgency about the threats which renders political point scoring a dangerous luxury. An all-of-country approach to defence is the only way to ensure that we are resilient against the kind of attack we face at the moment and prevent those we might face in the future.

The threats indeed are now no longer theoretical nor distant from our shores. What Iran has shown in the Middle East and what the wanton violence of the Russian occupation of Eastern Ukraine illustrates in

technicolour is what we face in today's world of war. And as John Healey said last week, we are under attack already – with cyber attacks, organised sabotage, the kind of targeted assassination that manifested itself here in Salisbury short of a decade ago. Add to that massive disinformation campaigns and interference in elections which Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee warned two years ago, and you have all the signs of hybrid declared war.

We three reviewers, a former defence secretary, a former general and a current foreign policy guru, were hired by Keir Starmer and John Healey to look at every aspect of UK defence, which we did with the aid of more than 150 experts and an unprecedented public consultation. We said, as we were tasked, that if our recommendations were implemented then we might be prepared for a peer opponent, a Russia or a China, in 10 years' time.

But what is happening in the world of today does not give us anything like 10 years. The PM is quoting NATO—and thereby endorsing it—giving us a three-year period to face an attack. That is sobering and frightening by any standard, and a bright red warning to all of us.

But the current debate about money and the overdue Defence Investment Plan however important, misses another point. It will, if it survives vandalism of the non-military experts in the Treasury, show where the existing money will be spent and how the SDR will be carried forward. What it will not do on its own is make that fundamental transformation which the review proposes.

We can't do business as usual. Our adversaries don't think that way, and we can't afford to. Public attention is focused on the planes, tanks and ships we are short of—but they are the important baubles on the Christmas tree. We also need to focus on the tree itself.

We are simply not ready, and we need to rebuild war readiness to deter any possible adversary. Deterrence is less expensive than war—as Vladimir Putin, whose war economy is consuming huge money and lives, will eventually find out. Our country made its last payment for the Second World War in 2016. And unlike Putin in Ukraine, we won that war.

Building deterrence will not be quick nor cheap. The public need to face that uncomfortable fact or suffer the consequences of not being safe in a very turbulent world.

In the review we proposed an integrated force (with all four services acting in crisis as one) with connected digital systems, maximising their lethality. We have to urgently address not just the shortages of kit but crises in logistics, engineering, cyber, ammunition, training and medical resources.

There is a political consensus that that our present military is hollowed out. The fact that we could only deploy one Royal Navy destroyer to the Mediterranean, clearly illustrates the parlous state of our current defences. Too many ships are in constant, lengthy maintenance and this dilemma is replicated in the other services as well. Although the review will rectify that, it cannot do so quickly even as a serious start has now been made.

But since others are modernising and rearming we need to abandon the lethargic thought processes of the post-Cold War period. We must move like the Ukrainians at wartime pace. As the review says, **“More broadly, the West’s long-held military advantage is being eroded as other countries modernise and expand their armed forces at speed.”**

Recent days have shown that the role and priorities of the United States have shifted, and will never be the same again.

The President calls NATO – the world’s most successful defence alliance in history, a **‘paper tiger’**. He says that withdrawal is **‘beyond reconsideration’** and he implies that the Europeans and Canada leech on American generosity. Well, let’s nail that lie.

NATO is a grand bargain for the United States. For the author of the “Art of the Deal”, NATO provides in a turbulent world the best deal for America it could possibly have.

Of course, he is right to point to the inadequacy of the European and Canadian contribution to their own security and he is not the first to ask why America should care more for the future of European children than their own nations.

But the on the other side of the coin, NATO has formidable advantages for the US.

NATO amplifies American influence in the world and the half a trillion dollars of European and Canadian defence expenditure a year multiplies what America spends. And it's rising.

Having thirty-one allies sitting round the North Atlantic Council table each week considerably exaggerates US world power – and given that Europe is America's single largest economic partner, it keeps that economic partnership protected.

And would the others be there if America was attacked? The President suggests – without evidence, that they would not.

Speaking as the person who read out the 2001 invocation of Article 5, that foundation principle of NATO – an attack on one country is an attack on all, I can verify that allies mean allies.

In the defence of the United States all eighteen non-US Allies invoked Article 5 following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, sent AWACs planes to protect the Winter Olympic Games and committed over 50,000 troops at its height to the twenty year-long operations in Afghanistan. 11,000 non-US service personnel died in that fight which followed the Al Quida attack on America.

I am reminded finally of what Denis Healey said in 1976 – not long after Edward Heath had left Number 10, **“Once we cut defence expenditure to the extent where our security is imperilled, we have no houses, we have no hospitals, we have no schools. We have a heap of ashes.”**

Eighteen months ago, a national conversation about defence was promised by the new government. It is about time to get it started.

Britain's national security and safety is in peril, and we need the whole country to wake up. The clock is ticking.