

‘UK Defence Strategy: can it still be delivered?’

General the Lord Guthrie of Craigiebank

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“Defence to most people in the united Kingdom has become what might be called a peripheral activity. It is not that they are against it but they have become indifferent. They know very little about it. It is almost as though it becomes a spectator sport which appears briefly on the TV news and in documentaries and does not really affect their own lives as Government policies on Health, Education, the Social Services and global warming do. The number of defence correspondents has shrunk over the years so there is less debate which probably suits many in Whitehall as does the downgrading and weakening of the Services public relations staff.

Many of the general public today know nobody serving in the Navy, the Army or the Royal Air Force and perhaps have to rely on the views and opinions of a grandfather who did his National Service which may not be very relevant to today’s Forces. The British public are quite prepared to say that although very small the British Forces are the best in the world and leave it at that.

But are the British Forces prepared for today’s world and threats? Should we be doing more to ensure they are trained, equipped, accommodated and recruited for today’s challenges? Defence planning is notoriously difficult and having been involved in a number of Defence Reviews, the last being the one initiated by New Labour and led by George Robertson which got it mostly right but was under-funded in the event. What makes it so difficult is that perhaps more than any other Department of State the future challenges are harder to predict and Harold MacMillan’s remarks about “events, dear boy, events” more applicable. One has to note that almost without exception every major emergency involving the British Services in the past twenty-five years was almost completely unforeseen. I include the Falklands Campaign in 1982, the Gulf in 91, Bosnia, Kosovo, Sierra Leone, East Timor, Macedonia, Afghanistan and Iraq. This is to say nothing of the emergencies at home from the fuel crisis, the foot and mouth emergency, fire fighting and the terrorist attacks of July. The ill-intentioned can today wreak havoc in a way which only a short time ago would have been unimaginable.

Is the world going to become a safer place? I know of no serious commentator who thinks it will and there are indications that there is every likelihood that the Services will be required to do rather more rather than less over at least the coming decade. The tempo of operations and requirements for combat, peace enforcement and peace support, humanitarian relief and policing missions has increased steadily since 1989 and the end of the Cold War. In the longer term the growing threat from phenomena such as climate change and sudden environmental disaster will have to be considered.

Scarcity of resources and changes in the environment will accelerate shifts and balances in population and thereafter stability of governments and states. There will be further opportunities for non-state actors such as major terrorist groups and international cross border crime syndicates.

I do not go along with the view that wars between nation states, industrial states are never likely to happen again although they may not seem very likely today nor do I feel there could never be a nuclear war somewhere in the future. I think there may be an inevitability about proliferation so I do think those who feel – and there are some still in Whitehall – that once Iraq and Afghanistan are over, and we do not know when that will be, there can be a return to a notional “status quo ante” of normality where demands on defence will be less intense must be disabused. It is wrong, irresponsible, very risky and dangerous.

I also think those who feel we are too ready to send expeditionary forces to far away places need to be careful and understand that our security does not depend on fortress UK. We live in a globalised world and what happens in Pakistan or in the Middle East or the Horn of Africa does affect us. I know the argument about whether or not we should be in Iraq or Afghanistan and I do not intend to talk of the pros or cons of our policies and the likelihood of success; but – and I generalise - governments do not have as much choice about whether to participate or stay out as they think they do – particularly whilst they were still in opposition. I well remember John Major’s Government having to deploy to the Balkans. Having considered every reason why they should not they still had to go. It is so easy to say we will avoid involvement but one does not always have the luxury of choice and it would be very unwise to predicate our policy and budget on avoiding trouble.

Of course the Forces cannot prepare for every scenario or threat and instability currently imaginable. There is no equivalent of a geopolitical comprehensive insurance policy in today’s world. This makes it necessary to have a balanced force that can adapt quickly to the demands of a new crisis. But allotting resources is extremely difficult for the reasons I have spoken of. To many outsiders the budget seems enormous. It is in comparison to many but certainly not all spending departments. It is also said that today we should be spending money currently spent on Defence on the Police, Intelligence Services and Aid Agencies. I am all for giving additional funds to them but at times when demands on the Services are increasing I think this a superficial view and unrealistic. And if aid is to be delivered satisfactorily it has to be done in a secure environment.

Undoubtedly the Ministry of Defence can be criticised for some of their procurement policies. Large sums of money have been wasted. This does nothing to help MoD with the Treasury and other competing Government departments. Serious problems have arisen from over-optimistic cost estimate and overruns. Huge long term and lengthy programmes still give pause for thought. Long terms programmes are perceived as aggravating the Services shortages of certain type of equipment and spares for current operations. Equipment such as medium-light helicopters and spares for Bowman, the communications system, which we are still desperately short of.

As an example, it does seem astonishing that a programme such as the Army's Future Rapid Effect System (FRES) takes so long to introduce. It is the Army's highest priority future procurement programme. It has been talked about for years. If it had been in service, the FRES system of vehicles would have saved lives in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is desperately needed and yet many in the MoD believe that the earliest date it can come into service is 2017 or 2018. Bureaucracy and a laborious process are largely responsible. Lord Drayson, the Minister, has decreed that it must be in service by 2012 and is determined to see that it will happen. But the MoD have launched a competition which will almost certainly delay the in-service date and, from past experience, will make FRES more expensive.

Industry could make 2012. The MoD has said the vehicle must be a variant of an off-the-shelf vehicle. Existing vehicles may not precisely meet the bill today, but they can be integrated with proven systems and adapted. This sorry tale has been well reported but one is bound to wonder whether it is not in some people's interest to delay. We know there are suitable vehicles in the market place today. Why does not the MoD go for them now?

Procurement is not all gloom. The Services do acknowledge that some of its equipment is world beating but they do find it infuriating that for budgeting reasons certain equipment is not issued or not procured until very late in the day and sometimes after battle is joined. Why on earth does it take so long to produce life-saving equipment and replacements for equipment long overdue to be replaced?

The New Defence Industrial Strategy, driven by Lord Drayson, is an important step in the right direction, but he has a huge task and previous attempts to improve Procurement have had only mixed results. The results of the 1998 exercise SMART PROCUREMENT and SMART ACQUISITION have been disappointing.

I think all those involved in Procurement in the Defence Budget should be constantly reminded what Field Marshal Carver, whose MA I once was, said about affordability: "Can you afford it or can you afford to give up what you have to give up in order to be able to afford it?"

Operations are being conducted successfully today but they cannot be maintained at their present tempo on current human and equipment resourcing and funding for much longer without inviting a dramatic deterioration in capability and performance in the not too distant future and risking operational failure. The Services are now suffering from years of under-investment. It is not my task today to talk about why they feel taken for granted or to list the areas which particularly concern them. There has been much discussion elsewhere anyway. But today I think they do feel undervalued and taken for granted. The last time they felt like this was in the days of the Callaghan Government.

What should be done because it is quite obvious we cannot afford today everything or everyone that we would like to have. The sums do not add up. To my mind the Government is faced with three choices or directions to go. Each has variations.

Firstly, to do very little: to muddle through. To count on the world becoming a safer place. To get Iraq behind us and return to muddling along. To rely on our allies, to burden share. But there is little evidence that this would be sensible. Our European allies seem reluctant to pull their weight and after the Iraq experience there will be many who will question the wisdom of automatically operating alongside the United States. Let us hope attitudes to the United States will soon change and they will be seen as an easier partner.

Second, to keep the Defence Budget as much the same size but change the priorities on how it is spent. This would lead to directing more money to the Army (which is too small by several thousands) as one must conclude that it is where, because of the current threat, it is more urgently needed. But this would be devastating for the Navy, which is already too small, and bad for the Royal Air Force. It does seem that since the end of the Cold War there seems to have been a whole host of savings exercises. The Peace Dividend was too high and, for instance, reducing the Army from 156,000 to 104,800 in 1991 under Options for Change, was astonishingly unwise and cost driven as opposed to the operational needs of the United Kingdom.

Today operations are manpower intensive. Post conflict resolutions in many ways are much harder than actual conflict. Conflict can be dangerous and uncomfortable but the resolution phase usually goes on for far longer and ends up being far more expensive tying down troops in many cases for years. Look at Cyprus, the Balkans and now Iraq and Afghanistan. As an aside, far too many people were taken in by MoD claims that the cuts imposed on defence would be compensated by clever new technology, the Revolution in Military Affairs, and Network Enabled Capability. Tell that to our soldiers and marines in Iraq and Afghanistan. Conflict resolution depends on people.

Thirdly, there could and should be an uplift to the Defence Budget to produce balanced forces appropriate for the times we live in. The Army may well be the service who most urgently needs the uplift now but because of uncertainty and the importance and likelihood of joint service operation in the future, defence as a whole needs a financial injection. Since I retired I do not know the detail of the Defence Budget but my guess would be provided that the uplift was accompanied by the resolve to make a few very difficult decisions in the equipment fields we could produce a much better package than we have at present. What I do know, though I am retired, is that currently the sums do not add up and we will find ourselves being too weak everywhere if nothing is done.

Can this be achieved politically? Unfortunately the situation is not explained to the country as it should be and what the risk is. The case for increased defence spending can be made but one sometimes wonders whether the Government, the opposition or even the MoD want to make it.

Of course we should not be deluded to think we are a great power but neither should we become like most Europeans who spend even less on Defence than we do and in certain cases seem to have lost the will and have not the wherewithal to defend themselves or to play a useful part in an alliance when things get serious.

You cannot create defence forces at short notice when a new threat suddenly appears as it could and history indicates it often does. Currently, there is precious little we could do with the forces still available if a serious new and unexpected crisis arose at home or abroad.

Now I know there will be those among you and elsewhere who will say what I am saying is overstating the situation and things are not as bad as all that. After all the Services always deliver in the end. They certainly have a can-do attitude and pride themselves on having one which may not always be to their advantage. For the first time one is hearing informed commentators talking about operational failure. Once or twice recently last year, we have come close to it tactically.

I do not remember the concerns of the Military being so great since the last days of the Callaghan Government and in those days the world was a safer place. I do not, in principle, like the idea of serving officers speaking out. I believe in political control for the Military and discussions and argument should take place in private.

I, myself, can recall some very fraught conversations with the Prime Minister and the Chancellor, behind closed doors, but it is now happening more in the open because more and more senior officers feel they have come to the end of their tether.

To conclude, tragically war has been a reality of the human condition throughout history. It is difficult to see why it will not remain so. We need to recognise this and be prepared. That is not to say that Defence should become an unreasonable burden on the country and we should hanker after becoming a great Military super power. That would be ridiculous and unaffordable. But nor should we fail to recognise or admit that this world is more dangerous than it was and the need to have and to fund the Defence we need.”

End

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