

12th Annual Chief of Defence Staff Lecture

Speech delivered by Chief of Defence Staff at the Royal United Services Institute, London on Wednesday 14 December 2011.

Introduction

Thank you Lord Hutton for your kind introduction. It is always a pleasure to be here at RUSI and a great honour to be delivering this, the second of my annual CDS lectures in this fabulous place. It hardly seems just over a year ago that I took over from Lord Stirrup. It's been a busy, challenging but rewarding year.

Like all good soldiers, I am a great believer in the KISS - Keep It Simple Stupid - principle. With an eye on the clock, I intend this evening firstly to examine the Global Environment, then to look at our Response to it and some of the particular Challenges we face including transition in Afghanistan, before drawing some conclusions and then taking your questions.

The Global environment

First of all, like most of you I am clear that the single biggest strategic risk facing the UK today is economic rather than military. Over time a thriving economy must be the central ingredient in any UK Grand Strategy. This is why the euro zone crisis is of such huge importance not just to the City of London but rightly to the whole country, and to military planners like me.

Seen through my prism the world looks especially unpredictable and unstable. Let's look at just some of the factors in our Grand Strategic analysis...

Greater US military focus on the Pacific meaning less emphasis on Europe and her problems. For the first time the Pentagon has specified that its Main Effort will be South East Asia. I know this does not mean it will turn its back on Europe and NATO but countries this side of the pond need to think through what this means to us.

A hugely complex transition and withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The destabilising effects of Iran's nuclear ambitions in the Middle East; The risk that the Arab Awakening leads to fissures and internal conflict that could be

exported, including militant Islamism. They have diasporas reaching back to this country as does Pakistan, another state struggling with instability.

What is happening in Syria is in many experts view becoming a proxy conflict between Shia Iranians and Sunni Arabs. In the process of protecting its borders, a key NATO ally, Turkey, is intimately involved

How do we respond to China potentially becoming the world's dominant economic power over the next 40 years? What impact will China's need to keep its population content have on us? Equally what will the rise of the other BRICs mean for us? Natural allies or hostile competitors?

What impact will fiscal restraint and slow recovery have on European defence capabilities? Just 5 out of 28 NATO allies spend the target 2 percent on defence.

However much we rightly seek to accommodate each other's legitimate aspirations, all this will lead to greater competition for raw materials and the risk, at a minimum, of 'bumping into other states' as they too seek to sustain economic growth. Then there is population growth and, in some countries, decline; what does this mean? Add global warming; terrorism; piracy and international crime to list just some, as the late and much lamented Richard Holmes might have said, of the 'problemettes' on my plate. And that is before another Holmesism 'Bastards HQ' inevitably intervenes to further complicate our calculations!

Oh and on top of all that, the Armed Forces will, with great pride, play a role in ensuring the security of the Olympic Games.

Our Response

So how do we respond to this unstable, unpredictable future? The Secretary of State said only last week: "In this volatile age it would be a bold man who would plan for military idleness."

To the contrary, as he inferred, we expect persistent and varied challenges to our national interests to continue and have planned accordingly. The SDSR rebalanced British Defence and Security for the next decade. Those decisions, which did reduce capability in some areas albeit in part to build up capability in others, will still leave us powerful relative to our allies. We were the first to accept the implications of the global economy. We clearly won't be the last.

All Western nations, including now the USA, are changing their defence structures. We may have to prioritise more ruthlessly now that we have fewer ships, men and planes but we will still be, in comparative terms, a front rank player in the NATO Alliance. In global terms we spend the fourth largest amount on Defence. And the Alliance will remain the most powerful military pact the world has ever known; far ahead of its nearest comparable potential adversaries.

And as the SDSR anticipated, in part for this reason, alliances will be increasingly important. NATO is the bedrock of our security. It has guaranteed peace in Europe for 60 years and, as Libya and Afghanistan demonstrate, enables us to project power efficiently in concert with others to pursue our national interests. NATO provides the structure for joint and combined operations. Those who wish to participate can do so using existing protocols and command establishments. It is impossible to replicate this quickly.

And as the world evolves, so new groupings will emerge. The most obvious is our alliance with the French. In November 2010 Prime Minister Cameron and President Sarkozy signed a treaty that has this year has already demonstrated its worth. It is much more than the Entente Cordiale of a century ago. It is a vehicle for positive joint action. Libya sealed this for us and demonstrated the benefits to Britain, Europe and NATO of having a solid Franco-British core.

I look forward to continuing to work closely with my good friend Admiral Edouard Guillaud and I know my officers and men look forward to building-on the already solid contacts they have with their French counterparts.

The UK will require other carefully chosen alliances over the coming decade through which to influence the strategic landscape and help determine the outcome of fast moving crises. Already our collaboration with countries in the Gulf and Africa has delivered results in the region, for surprisingly little cost. Perhaps we should be focussing our defence relationships on these regions rather than competing for influence, with many others, in for example, China or India? The Foreign Office and MOD are working on a new Defence Engagement methodology to help us answer some of these questions.

This strategic evaluation of our alliances will have to include a proper review of not just the Arab world and Africa but also of Russia and other countries. Where do they sit amongst our interests? Indeed are we really certain what

those interests are? To help us I have argued that we need a strategic handrail to guide our interactions and focus our efforts.

Without such a handrail we risk spreading the jam too thinly, annoying our natural allies for failing to support them properly while wasting our efforts investing in others when they are already well supported by others, often our close partners. I will return to this theme shortly.

Alliances not only have the benefit of extending our reach and providing us with allies in times of need, they can also assist with the government's Prevention strategy. Treating the causes of instability and terrorism at source is better and cheaper than dealing with the consequences, as Somalia's piracy demonstrates. The non-traditional skills sometimes needed mean reserve forces could add value to this task in a way regular units may find harder.

Reserves would also allow us to enhance the flexibility of our forces through the concept of readiness. In order to prioritise for the most likely, we must accept that some capabilities will be held at different levels of readiness. Readiness in my judgement is a very useful defence planning discriminator and discipline.

Under the VCDS's guiding hand, the MOD and single services are working through the implications of all this for the Royal Naval Reserve, the Royal Marines Reserve and the Royal Auxiliary Air Force as well as the Army.

As we reduce in size we must put greater emphasis on education. Countries which lose the ability to think lose the ability to plan and evolve. Armies that maintain their intellectual flame can adapt to new technologies even though they may be unable to acquire them immediately. The increasingly complex and networked world in which we will operate for the rest of our lifetimes demands ever more educated and flexible people.

Adopting tactics to fit the kit we have rather than the kit we wished we had will be a duty of commanders at all levels. Constantly pushing for the highest level of technological capability can distort priorities when a "good enough" solution may in many areas be sufficient. Balancing the feasible against the useable is the First Sea Lord, CGS and CAS's job and I look forward to their creativity being freed by the Levene reforms which have put them much more firmly in charge of their Services.

The new Joint Force Command will champion cyber and ISTAR while the Armed Forces Committee will help shape our forces in line with the reforms former-Secretary of State Dr Liam Fox initiated. Together this will go towards shaping military strategy, balancing desired ends with acceptable ways and affordable means.

Many of you will have heard me talk about strategy before. I will not apologise as I think this is an essential part of what a strategic military headquarters does. I know that some in the UK hold the view that the Grand or National Strategy that should inform subordinate strategies is not something government needs to do.

They say instead that national strategy comes naturally from national and individual webs of interest. Things like terms of trade, ethnicity, culture, and so on, not something to be stated but rather allowed to emerge.

You will forgive me for finding this wishful thinking. It is not strategy but tactics: the essential - and honourable - art of momentary advancement and advantage. What it is not is an assessment of the issues beyond any government's control, in order to inform a strategic handrail to guide policymakers as they navigate a country through the vicissitudes of the unstable world I described a moment ago.

In financial terms, if you'll excuse a contemporary analogy, a state that lacks national strategy leads to day trading, not fund management!

I know I am not alone in arguing that strategy matters. The government's National Security Council demonstrates clear intent while the Foreign Office has reinvigorated a post to oversee strategy, while in the MOD Lord Levene sanctioned the post of DCDS Military Strategy and Operations, properly supported by an ACDS Military Strategy.

Some esteemed members of this very institution have been very helpful in developing understanding of the place of strategy in the national dialogue and perhaps I could single out your director general, Michael Clarke, for his support in arguing the need for strategic literacy across Whitehall.

The Prime Minister has led the way in much of this, beginning the process by putting in place the structures to debate national strategy.

At the National Security Council he chairs a debate with interested parties arguing properly for their perspective. The ability to have this discussion allows us to conclude with a clear understanding of what we in the military term 'Commander's Intent'; in this case, Prime Ministerial Intent. It is vital to have this common understanding of what is required or sought. It unifies our actions and allows subordinate commanders, or ministries, to test and adjust their sub-plans.

The recent operation in Libya demonstrated this as the National Security Council was essential in achieving coherence. I welcome the greater focus it has given to strategy. I know that it's secretariat is now turning their attention to longer term strategic challenges in the way the Chiefs of Staff Committee, ably marshalled by a civil servant, albeit one with a fine military pedigree, did so well in the 1920s and 30s.

It was largely work produced by the Chiefs' Committee that convinced the government that the Treasury's famous 10-year rule - presuming peace for a decade into the future - had to end as a resurgent Germany was clearly rearming. Whilst today this work would rightly be coordinated by the NSC Secretariat, I know the National Security Adviser - and we paid a fond farewell to the present incumbent Sir Peter Ricketts earlier today in No 10 - would be the first to say that the Chiefs of Staff Committee remains vital in informing its work.

We must remain vigilant in ensuring developing threats are recognised and balanced appropriately. It is no good, for example, planning for a perfect force in say 2030 if we cannot protect our vital interests in the interim. And, as we look out at the world of 2012 and 2013, it would be perverse if we were not to keep this constantly under review.

Such an assessment would offer the strategic handrail I mentioned. It would guide our planning assumptions and test our ideas.

Within the military strategic sphere, the challenges that remain are considerable. I have emphasised the importance of Alliances if smaller national militaries are together going to compensate for individual shortcomings. But do we have the confidence to rely on others for complete capabilities? This will be an acid test. Progress in NATO's Smart Defence initiative will be an early indicator. To succeed, we need to design mechanisms that oblige other nations to provide what is vital in a crisis and it won't be easy.

Linked to this is the need to inject agility into a generally sclerotic acquisition process in which nations find themselves locked in to programmes that, as operating environments change, no longer answer the exam question. How do we find the headroom to equip our forces better with ISTAR and cyber capabilities, for example? To reassure you, this is top of the Secretary of State's and his new Defence Board's agenda.

I am sometimes asked if the professional military really can think and plan jointly and strategically. Well the Armed Forces Committee provides the Chiefs with the mechanism to do so and the opportunity to get out of perceived single service straightjackets. I can tell you that they are determined to exploit that opportunity and to date I am delighted by what the Committee is achieving.

The Armed Forces Committee also prepares me for the Defence Board. Whilst this may change, I am currently the only military person on the new Board. The Committee allows me to understand the different perspectives of the single Service Chiefs. It is my duty to record their views but then to give my own professional advice, which may not be based on a consensus.

Afghanistan

But the time has now come to describe the Defence's Main Effort and my greatest challenge today - Afghanistan.

The UK will be out of the combat role by the end of 2014. My key role over the next three years is to ensure that British forces leave in good order, enabling the decisive elements of an enduring campaign - those based on effective ANSF, governance and development - to continue over the coming decades...

This is not a change of strategy but a change in ownership of that strategy. As it 'transitions' to Afghan leadership, the international community will remain four square behind the Afghan people, in our interests and theirs. Those amongst some of the TB leadership, and no doubt the few surviving members of AQ core, who hope they can wait us out and that a rotten fruit will fall back into their laps will be proved wrong. Bonn sealed that and Chicago will build further on it.

The Afghan National Security Forces will shortly reach a total strength of 352,000 - if only I had an Armed Forces of that size! Already, the ANSF are leading some 50 percent of conventional and Special Forces missions and they have taken over lead security responsibility from ISAF forces for more than 25 percent of the population. That will soon increase to 50 percent.

As this continues, the insurgency is reducing. Attacks in Afghanistan are down 28 percent on last year. And for the ninjas amongst you, the real measure of Taliban competence - the number of complex attacks - over the last 12 weeks is 41% down on what it was in the same 12-week period in 2010. Generals McCrystal and Petraeus had good reason for believing the surge would work and they are being proved right.

The operation is on track. We are succeeding and the population supports our efforts, as the latest Asia House analysis shows. Still the Taliban can play one card. They operate in the world of perceptions and convince many in the UK and elsewhere to see the operation as it was, not as it is. Perception lags reality by some 18 months. While we are, like a chess player, planning three or four moves ahead we cannot signal our plans openly. That leaves the media frequently, and understandably, to look only at what has happened. They frequently draw the wrong conclusion. If you want to see how those on the ground perceive the situation, and have a view on the commitment, resolve and optimism of the Afghan people, I commend this excellent Asia House report.

Of course the picture is not all rosy. Risks to the strategy remain. In a technical military sense what we have to do is complex and demanding. And despite Pakistan's efforts to address the problem, which have resulted in many casualties in the Pakistan Army and in the Frontier Force - casualties that are too often overlooked by outsiders - TB safe havens remain in the FATA. It is important to recognise that Pakistan shares this burden with us. And I know that Pakistan will continue to do all it can to assist in bearing down on the insurgency both militarily and, more importantly in many ways, politically, in both their and our interests.

Finally it is always worth remembering, a few months on from 9/11's 10th Anniversary, that our own national security underpins what we are doing in Afghanistan. Ten years ago I would have felt no need to mention it. It is interesting to note how quickly many outside government forget that the ungoverned, unstable space that was Afghanistan became everyone's problem on 9/11 and the UK's own home-grown 7/7 bombers were trained in Pakistan.

Libya

Many of the lessons we learnt in Afghanistan have since been applied to Libya. Operation ELLAMY was a cross government operation in which the military protected the population to allow them to shape their own future.

Problems remain, of course, not least in assisting the new administration to unite fully and establish a legitimate government in the country, and in the eyes of the region. But, with allies, our Foreign Office - and our excellent ambassador in Tripoli in particular - is working to help them achieve that.

At heart this operation was a success because of the constructive and synergistic role played by a number of nations, principally but not exclusively under NATO guidance and leadership. This was the SDSR's emphasis on the importance of allies playing out in front of our eyes. Our cooperation with the French could not have been closer while our ability to use existing NATO structures allowed us to act quickly and effectively avoiding confusion. The role played by the United States of America was fundamental to success.

Integrating the Qataris, Emiratis and Jordanians into the operation was also vital. Without them and their defence chiefs' leadership, especially the huge understanding they brought to the campaign, it is unlikely that the NTC's militias could have successfully acted as the land element without which the right outcome would have been impossible.

Libya has been sold as an air operation. Certainly our Tornados and Typhoons performed brilliantly in repeatedly striking targets with no collateral damage. Indeed the Royal Navy, British Army Apache pilots and Royal Air Force all performed to their usual exemplary standard.

But our mandate was civilian protection and enforcement of a No Fly Zone. The Libyan people, operating on the ground, made the decisive changes to the future of their country. That could not have been, should not have been, and was not done by a Coalition operating from the air.

They were the land element. An 'army' was still vital. As this was delivered by our Arab partners, both from Libya and the Gulf.

Libya is not a template but one key lesson for us is this need for partners. Our alliances, formal and informal, established and new, will help shape our military actions over the next decade.

As we find it harder to maintain large armies or politics make it more difficult to employ them in isolation from others, partnering will become more vital. We will increasingly operate alongside local, more culturally acceptable forces. And the British Army's role in building these partnerships in advance of combined

operations or pre-emptively will be crucial. Yet the credibility of our overseas training teams and UK-based courses is built on battlefields around the world.

While we were essentially able to rely on Arab partners and the NTC in Libya and can assist for example AMISOM's vital mission in Somalia indirectly, it would be foolhardy indeed and against all the lessons of history to imagine that we will never deploy combat troops again. When our vital national interests are threatened or the case for a humanitarian intervention becomes overwhelming, we cannot rely on others always to fight our battles.

In sum, the ingredients to every campaign will always be the same but the formula one uses to mix them will depend on the unique circumstances confronting us on the day. Air, land and sea components will have to be balanced in different theatres in different ways just as will the blend of diplomatic and economic activity.

Conclusion

As I conclude, it is worth recapping on some of the essentials of the past year and what it means.

The country's main effort must be the economy. No country can defend itself if bankrupt.

It is for this reason that I and Ursula Brennan, our PUS, are working hard to control our spending. Future Force 2020 is the essential vehicle for this exercise. It seeks to maximise our military effectiveness and maintain our relative military standing.

But we need to combine realism with imagination. We must be content with the good enough and ensure training and relevant tactics make up for the exquisite technology we may have aspired to. It will require us to accept that some capabilities will be kept at lower readiness or, (horror of horrors!), sometimes provided by others. It will mean taking risk. But managing risk is ultimately what we do and none of us in the Armed Forces are discomforted by the challenge.

At the same time, we must constantly check that spending on future capability is not at the expense of something vital we need today or that we cannot respond to fresh demands; we must ensure it remains an agile process.

While there are no templates and each security challenge will be different, we will require allies, not only established ones like our NATO partners but also non-traditional countries which will challenge our interoperability but offer opportunity and reach.

Innovative thinking and most importantly retaining a warrior ethos will prove decisive in staying ahead.

We are excellent at this which is one reason why I am confident that we are broadly in good shape and will have a seriously capable Joint force in 2020. Indeed, the principal reason for my confidence is not the equipment but the quality of the men and women who serve.

As the Defence Secretary said in this very room: “the quality of our people is a force multiplier.”

I couldn't agree more. Throughout the 40 years I have had the honour to serve I have never failed to be impressed by the quality, drive and ingenuity of the men and women alongside me. Like no doubt all my friends, I never expected to be their professional head but it is a sheer delight and great privilege to be so.

Before I finish I would like to thank all those who have supported the Armed Forces in whatever capacity this year. A family's forbearance; a cheering crowd at a homecoming parade; those standing silently as a cortege passes by; or those on Remembrance Sunday standing shoulder to shoulder with so many around the country; are all things that I would like to thank both the families and citizens of the UK for. They are essential in the fighting capability of Britain's Armed Forces and we are most grateful.

Thank you.