

Defence has taken the hit for too long

Equipment for all three Services is rigorously designed to meet the requirement, but more money is urgently needed

Telegraph Lord West 21 Dec 2013

Defence is in urgent need of extra funding, as we are perilously close to having a hollowed-out Royal Navy. Such was the stark warning by Gen Sir Nicholas Houghton, the Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS), in his annual lecture at the Royal United Services Institute last Wednesday. His concern about the lack of national will to commit appropriate military force was absolutely correct. So, too, was his snapshot of a fragmented world with growing asymmetric threats and vulnerabilities beyond the traditional state-on-state paradigm.

Regarding the employment of the Army post-Afghanistan, we should not bow to the "use them or lose them" principle. I was left feeling that the Army was searching for a future role. This can be dangerous if it means we get involved in areas that are not of primary interest to the UK. The nation needs an Army, but it doesn't have to be fully employed on operations all the time.

His point on "hollowing out" seemed to suggest that the military, particularly the Navy, is prioritising spending on new equipment over the manpower and training necessary to operate that kit. Indeed, he referred to "exquisite" equipment, which I found bizarre. Our military equipment is complicated and sophisticated but not exquisite. Perhaps he meant "extravagant". I cannot think of any current naval platforms that are profligate in that sense. Lessons have been learnt after cases in the past where more was demanded than required. Nowadays, military equipment for all three Services is rigorously designed to meet the requirement.

U
TRC
Card

The CDS also said there are too many "major" projects under way and that these are ordered to bolster British industry rather than to meet our military needs. At best, this is simplistic. Our country needs a sovereign capability in a number of defence procurement areas and therefore we have to support national industries. We all want our procurement system to function better, but if the nation needs new frigates then by definition that will be a "major project". In my view, it is vital to maintain a national warship design, update and build capability. It has to be ordered in the United Kingdom.

it

General Houghton is right, however, that the Royal Navy has looming manpower problems that are structural. If we run the second aircraft carrier, as all now agree should be done, we must address that issue and increase our numbers. All this demands an increase in money. We have too few ships as it is. Crew sizes have been pared down to ensure an efficient operation with the smallest number of men and women on board. There is simply no room for gaps in the ship's company. There has to

W

West - Need more money

be enough funding not just to meet those manning levels but to have crews of the right specialisations who are fully trained.

Did the CDS suggest that putting fewer ships to sea would resolve the hollowing-out issue? That is an appalling prospect, and I am sure it is not really what he meant. For a great maritime nation like the UK to have only 19 escorts is a disgrace. We need more ships and they must be properly manned with fully trained crews of the correct specialisations. The Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015, which is being drawn up now, must ensure that future spending can implement the Force 2020 manpower levels. Right now there is not enough money in the pot. It is extremely disappointing that since the badly conceived SDSR 2010, we have consistently failed to spend the money that Parliament voted to our Forces. Even allowing for the Treasury agreement to roll money forward to the next year, defence has been losing in the region of £500 million in under-spend a year. The reasons for this are complex but the impact is significant.

In the year 2020, a Royal Navy of 29,000 men and women is too small. When one takes out of the equation Royal Marine manpower, it means we have approximately 22,000 blue jackets – less than most Premier League football crowds.

The CDS has shown that he has a clear understanding of the problems facing defence, but I am not sure that some of the ideas he floated in his recent lecture are correct. Moreover, there is a need to grow defence spending, not necessarily as an increase to overall government expenditure, but to come out of other departments' budgets. Although he cannot say it in his non-political role, I am sure he acknowledges that defence has taken too big a hit for too many years.

Admiral the Lord West of Spithead was First Sea Lord from 2002 to 2006, and minister for security 2007-2010