

Annual Chief of the Defence Staff Lecture 2013

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Lecture by General Sir Nicholas Houghton GCB CBE ADC Gen, Chief of the Defence Staff, UK Ministry of Defence.

Thank you (John Hutton) for your very kind introduction. Can I say what a genuine pleasure it is to be here. I am very happy to continue what is now the established pre-Christmas tradition of giving a Chief of Defence Staff talk to the Institute.

But if the fact of this talk is now something of a tradition; I am not as certain whether or not the style of the talk is yet so established. Is this meant to be an 'Armed Forces State of the Nation'; a stare into the Defence and Security Crystal Ball? Or is it in my case the assessment of the challenge six-months-in? Or is it merely some pre-Christmas entertainment?

Well my own view is that an opportunity such as this should not be wasted on some rosy reflections or some self-indulgent congratulations. It is an opportunity. It is an opportunity to inform, to enlighten, and to challenge. In doing so it is not my intention to be critical, radical or rogue. But it is my purpose to inform debate, because I strongly believe that, given the emerging security challenges of the age, Defence has more to do to be fully fit for purpose in all respects.

If I were to offer a thesis for this talk, then it would be that the current paradigm which informs the funding, structure and employment of Defence and the Armed Forces will need to evolve in order to meet the emerging Defence and security challenges of the age. We are in a situation which thoughtful people should pay attention to; and that the Ministry of Defence and government more widely will need to respond to in the years ahead.

Now, in many respects this audience is not the target of this talk. You are here to pay witness to an outing of professional conscience – which I hope will guide some of the activities of Defence over the next few years.

I will structure what I have to say in four parts. The first will cover the International Security Context; the second will cover the UK national context; in the third I will briefly outline what I see as the current UK paradigm for funding, force structure and employment of military power; and finally I will set out some of the things I believe we need to do to respond to the situation I portray.

I am humble enough to recognise that the situation I describe will not be a wholly accurate one; and that the responses I suggest will not necessarily be sufficient nor wholly appropriate. My thesis is borne of individual observation and experience; not of exhaustive research and analysis. Let me make a start.

What I have to say about the International Security context will, to many or most of you, not be revelatory. I capture it in four observations. They are uncertainty; instability; the advent of threats which are more diverse, less existential and less symmetric than hitherto; and, fourthly, the increasing mutuality of nations and the interdependence of the world in general.

The uncertainty is partly a product of both economic and demographic change in the current world order. Old Europe is in relative economic and demographic decline; the Asia-Pacific is in the ascendancy; and the United States is somewhere between pivot and rebalance. It is also, in part, a

product of policy shifts and diplomatic initiatives which, in many parts of the world, and specifically in the Middle East, will alter a status quo with which some nations have become comfortable.

The instability is also most obviously evident in the Middle-East, but also North Africa, where the so-called Arab Spring has not necessarily liberated the forces of democracy. But the potential for instability spreads much wider: it is the primary internal concern of both Russia and China; and manifests itself in increasing areas of ungoverned space in the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and, potentially still, astride the Afghan-Pakistan border. And instability is a maritime as well as land based phenomenon, as witnessed in the Gulf of Guinea, the South and East China Seas and the Indian Ocean.

The advent of more diverse and less state based threats has become an increasing feature of the age. Most mature Western democracies no longer face existential state-on-state threats in classic force-on-force terms. Rather the challenges are more insidious. There are threats which relate to terrorism, to international crime, to energy resources and critical national infrastructure. There are challenges to our human security, our way of life; there are hazards which derive from the dangerous conditions attendant on a warming planet. And these are threats which have emerged in the rising domain of warfare: cyberspace.

And my final condition of the international security scene is the phenomenon of mutuality. The world is increasingly inter-dependent. Nations depend on other nations. The nature of the way power interacts between countries has become far more diffused.

What are the implications of all this? Well I think it is possible to derive some quite clear conclusions. The first is that countries such as our own, which derive their relative power and prosperity from the maintenance of a stable world and an international rules based order, are confronted by the twin challenges of change and instability. So the Grand-Strategic challenge of the age could be seen as "how to accommodate change whilst maintaining stability."

A second conclusion is that the content of much of the current military inventories of Western nations, optimised as they are for symmetrical, state-on-state conflict, at scale, is in need of review.

And my third conclusion is that the dangers to the homeland which derive from novel threats, widespread instability and the diffusion of power beyond state monopoly begs a re-examination of homeland security and national domestic resilience.

Can I next move to the UK domestic scene where the military instrument of national power is increasingly confronted by challenges in respect of funding, utility and societal support.

I am not tonight going to say that Defence immediately needs more public funding. In part this is because I buy into the narrative that there can be no strong Defence without a strong economy. I also believe that Defence needs to continue to improve its financial competence, both in reputational and real terms, if it is going to win the argument for more funding.

But what I will say tonight is that the leadership of the Armed Forces are bought into a wider narrative that speaks to the real-terms growth in Defence Funding that should accompany the nation's recovery from austerity. This is a narrative which the Prime Minister has acknowledged. Defence will need real growth in the next parliament if the reality of the force structure set out in the last SDSR is to be realised.

But, and this is my second point, Defence is also going to have to better prioritise its money towards things which are most relevant to the security demands and capability needs of the future. This point links to the absence, for the moment at least, of state-based symmetrical threats at scale.

My third point relates to the state of domestic support for the use of military force. And, in-truth I could extend this point to that of political anxiety about its beneficial use and incremental legal constraint on its employment. My prevailing view is captured in the assessment that the UK's Armed Forces have never, in the forty years that I have known, been held in such popular high regard. But the purposes to which they have most recently been put has seldom been more deeply questioned. As a nation we have become a touch sceptical about the ability to use force in a beneficial way.

Such a combination of tight national resources, concerns regarding utility and political and societal reservation about the beneficial use of military force does not create a benign environment for Defence funding.

And my stark conclusion is that, when you combine the International Security Context to the UK Domestic scene, then one of my great challenges as CDS is to help to re-validate the utility of the military instrument of National Power in the minds of government and the wider public.

The third part of what I want to say is just to pause a moment on what I call the current paradigm of Defence in respect of funding, force structure and force employment. We are, in truth, already making considerable progress to change this paradigm, but I will tell it as starkly as I can to make my more general point.

Defence has for many years, certainly since the successful end of the cold war, and in strong international company within Europe, been managing the decline of military hard power. Defence funding has been reducing and we have enjoyed reduced manoeuvre room in how we spend Defence's money. Increasingly we have spent it on large capital equipment programmes often with an eye on supporting the United Kingdom's Defence industrial base.

Our approach has been through an equipment lens which has emphasised technical overmatch in force-on-force conflict. And, whilst exquisite technology has been protected as the key to operational superiority, manpower has been seen more as an overhead and activity levels have been squeezed.

Indeed, the one bit of Defence's future funding that has political commitment to real growth is the equipment programme. But the dawning reality is that, even if we maintain the non-equipment budget in real terms, rising manpower costs raise the prospect of further manpower and activity cuts. Unattended our current course leads to a strategically incoherent force structure: exquisite equipment, but insufficient resources to man that equipment or train on it. This is what the Americans call the spectre of the hollow-force. We are not there yet; but across Defence I would identify the Royal Navy as being perilously close to its critical mass in man-power terms.

Elsewhere in the paradigm we remain too platform focused and insufficiently concerned about enablers. The historic service-centric, major equipment focus has left us with relatively strong environmental components, but devoid of senses and a central nervous system. I exaggerate, but you get the point. We are critically deficient in the capabilities which enable the joint force. Such things as intelligence, surveillance, compatible communications, joint logistics and tactical transport.

Next I would observe, as we enter our final year of combat in Helmand and revert to a contingent posture; the paradigm continues to fund Defence's capability primarily to hold forces at readiness; not to fund them for pro-active activity in this uncertain and unstable world. And so, much of a 33 Billion Pound insurance policy could sit awaiting the next crisis, because it is only funded for contingency and not for engagement. And if the government wants to use it, it has first to have a discussion about who is paying.]

And the final part of the paradigm has the potential to become the most damaging of all. It is the creeping aversion to risk in the employment of our Armed Forces. This aversion has multiple origins – politics, society, the media and the Armed Forces themselves.

I have recently observed with some admiration the relative ability of French Forces to operate with a mindset of aggressive risk management. We must be careful as a society and as a professional military not to lose our courageous instinct since it is one of the things which keeps us in a class-apart.

The final part of what I want to do is to offer some thoughts on how we should respond to the circumstances I have described. I will cover three areas briefly. Funding, structure and employment of Defence capability.

As far as funding is concerned, again this is not the moment to ask for more. But we must, as we go forward, protect what we have and ensure that there is a balanced investment in our people as well as our equipment. I would argue most strongly that it is our people that give the United Kingdom's Armed Forces our qualitative edge; so we must protect our ability to recruit and retain the best. . . in both our Regular and Reserve Forces.

We must also be careful that the Defence Budget is not disproportionately used to support British Defence Industry. There is a strong strategic case to retain specific sovereign capabilities in national hands; and there are very sound reasons to husband the ability to re-constitute specific capabilities nationally. But the Defence budget does not exist primarily to subsidise the Defence Industry or promote Defence exports. It exists to maximise Defence capability. And it should do so in a way that recognises that our national defence industry does have a part to play as an element of our national hard-power.]

And finally on funding, we must find better ways of resourcing activity that sits in the grey area of conflict prevention and upstream stabilisation; or we will fail to monetize a huge national asset which can considerably assist the delivery of developmental benefits. u

As far as force-structure is concerned we must exploit the advent of the Joint Forces Command to champion the enablement of the force. This command is now the proponent for C4ISR, for Cyber, for Special Forces, for Joint Logistics and Defence Medical Services. It owns those things which represent the nervous system of capability. And its age has now come.

A second consideration on structure, especially as the United States rebalances, is our use of Alliances and Coalitions. We must start to be braver in recognising that the European pillar of NATO has to start to genuinely share capability rather than indulge in some reductionist alchemy which leaves everyone doing less of the same.

Finally on the employment of Defence capability. If the United Kingdom wants to stay in the Premier League of smart power then it must invest in Armed Forces that can generate hard power capability that is credible in respect of conventional coercion and deterrence.

But having done that, government must not, given the security challenges of the age, keep that capability at home awaiting the next intervention. Rather it must exploit it pro-actively in meeting the challenges of stabilising an uncertain and dangerous world; helping to prevent conflict; and to build the security capacity of other nations.

In this context I would suggest that we need to be far more pro-active in our investment in United Nations Operations. After all such operations come pre-funded and with the benefit of an extant legal mandate which confer legitimacy. And I also think that the time has come to dramatically professionalise the career stream of the international officer. The days of defence attaché appointments being a reward for a career well-spent cannot continue.

In adopting a strategic posture of engagement we can better add to the country's influence on the world stage; support national security and policy objectives; and be more proactive on the national prosperity agenda. We will also sustain the potential for attractive and fulfilling careers for those who do not want to live ordinary lives. But most importantly of all we will understand far better areas of potential conflict. Because, to misquote Antonio Giustozzi, arguably one of the follies of our current age has been an unmatched ambition to change the world without bothering to understand it first.

Lastly, we must recognise that the domestic dimension of security threats, rather than merely being terrorist related, could impact on national critical infrastructure such that a national domestic response is needed at large scale. We must re-evaluate, from a defence perspective, the nature of our approach to homeland security and domestic resilience. And we should be mindful that the prospect of state sponsored asymmetry could change many of our calculations about the security of the United Kingdom in the years to come.

Well that is all I intended to say. As I said at the outset I may be wrong in some of this; but it makes sense to me. You can be reassured that some of this is already in hand. And if some of what I have said seems unduly alarming it is because I do not think it is the job of a CDS to pamper to a comfortable state of negligence in matters of our nation's security.

I remain convinced that the provision of such security cannot be wished away; and will remain one of the defining duties of government. But the Armed Forces will need to evolve to ensure that they remain appropriate to the demands of the age in which they live. And the country must sustain the appetite to use them appropriately in the national interest.

Thank you. Have a very Happy Christmas. And can I on your behalf extend that greeting to the many thousands of UK Servicemen and women serving in Afghanistan and around the world this Christmas. I am sure you would join me in thanking them and their families and friends at home for all they do on our behalf; especially at this time of year.

And now a few minutes for questions.

The Chief of the Defence Staff Lecture is held annually at RUSI, covering key topical defence and security issues.