

RUSI Land Warfare Conference 2016

Transcript

Opening Address: 0900-0945hrs Tuesday 28 June 2016

General Sir Nicholas Carter, Chief of the General Staff

Welcome to the 2016 Land Warfare Conference and thanks in particular to RUSI and Karin von Hippel for assembling an absolutely stellar cast of speakers this year. Thanks to Guy Swan, as ever, and the Association of the US Army for your support and of course to our sponsors, but importantly thank you all for coming.

I cannot remember seeing this auditorium as full as it is today so that is most impressive and we are, as Karin suggested, looking for a rich debate this week, but it is also particularly reassuring seeing so many of our international friends given recent events.

As far as we are concerned there is absolutely no change to our army-to-army relations and indeed to our many operational commitments and defence and security relationships. But we live in tumultuous times; it is difficult to remember a moment when the strategic context was more complex or dynamic and as I said last year we live in an era of constant competition, warfare short of war, or what some are calling now the 'grey zone'.

Since I spoke last year the government has pegged defence expenditure at 2% of GDP and published the quinquennial SDSR. Our Army emerged from that SDSR with a stated ambition to invest in the divisional level; a commitment to the concept of Strike; a firm intent to deliver information manoeuvre through our ISR brigade and 77 Brigade; a second division orientated towards persistent engagement overseas and meeting our standing operational commitments; an unprecedented emphasis on international partnership, a theme we shall develop tomorrow; and a very strong validation of Army 2020, with SDSR describing persistent engagement overseas as force driving, a clear recognition of the overlap between home and away; and an emphasis on homeland resilience.

Now throughout the debate leading up to the publication of SDSR I think the defence community wrestled with the challenge of what was the most likely threat we should be structured to fight. The existential threat to the UK is probably not from Islamic extremism, nor is it the threat from imminent invasion, rather it is probably the incremental erosion of the rules based global architecture that has assured our freedom, prosperity and enviably open way of life since 1945.

Of course the one thing we can be sure of is that we cannot predict the future and, as Colin Gray wisely observed, there are probably people writing today who have a clear and accurate vision of future warfare but we do not know who they are, nor do they.

The trick is to be less-wrong than one's opponent while making sure one is able to recover quickly from the inevitable mistakes. As Sir Michael Howard once said, whatever doctrine the armed forces are working on they have got it wrong. I am also tempted to declare that it does not matter that they got it wrong, what does matter is their capacity to get it right quickly when the moment arrives and this conference and its theme is about unpacking that capacity in all its guises and particularly adaptability. This really matters for us as soldiers, for in the land environment there are many, many more variables than there are in air and maritime.

Now, as the CGS my immediate priorities today, short of 'fight tonight' as our American allies would describe it, are readiness and manning, but I am going to focus now on the future and the force structure that we will have by 2025 is a pragmatic answer to that challenging strategic context and the remarkably diverse range of possible threats.

We have attempted, in designing that force structure, to provide a foundation that is both adaptable and versatile, i.e. the ability to adjust to new circumstances as well as having a reasonable range of capability. We intend to deliver two brigades at readiness from four, rather than one from three as today, partly because it is more productive but also to provide more policy choice and more options to policy makers.

Now a significant change from the SDSR is that our Defence Planning Assumptions no longer require the Army to be structured to meet an enduring operation at medium scale in perpetuity. Rather they now structure the Army to fight and re-organise as necessary to meet the less demanding tasks. We war-fight at the divisional level, so the division is at the heart of this adaptable structure.

This is important, because I think we have a tendency to disregard the command and control hierarchy and the increased wisdom that there is at each level. We tend to over-complicate and to confuse accountability. We forget, I would suggest, that command and control is a capability in its own right and in an era of campaigning we bent our brigade structure out of shape. I think it is worth reflecting on that structure, and that hierarchy of wisdom contained in it, to give emphasis to this point about the divisional level.

It starts at the battle group level, the all arms grouping in the British Army. At the brigade level it is the level where we assure operational stability and we task organise to produce these battle groups. It is designed, through the career structure, our education system and the experience of the staff and commander, to be an organisation that manages a single tactical action at a time. We want it therefore to be agile and responsive.

The division though, sits above it in that hierarchy of command and control wisdom, because of the additional training and experience of its staff and its commander, and is where the full orchestra, as Field Marshal Slim described it, comes together. It is the lowest level where operational art is practiced, where several tactical engagements are planned and executed in a potentially unlimited decision-action cycle.

Increasingly it is where the expertise from the full joint, inter-agency and wider non-kinetic areas are routinely integrated and it is where the enablers that allow manoeuvre to be executed within an operational framework by more than one formation are routinely commanded and integrated.

Hence, our headquarters for 3rd (UK) Division is designed to be integrated, scalable, modular and capable of distributed command and that is increasingly possible given the nature of the information and it provides adaptability for a range of different contingencies. But importantly the idea behind this division is that it also brings 'reference customer' status, both for our allies but importantly also for our potential enemies; it underpins the creditability of an army.

In the UK I emphasise it is the lowest level where we would war-fight and indeed take the risks associated with that, but it also provides the framework in which we are able to integrate other nations, like our Joint Expeditionary Force partners and I will return to that.

That said it is debatable, I would suggest, whether our division at the moment is sufficiently versatile given the evolving character of conflict and the need to rebuild capability after a decade or so of campaigning. We are currently reworking its structure around a ground manoeuvre element of two armoured infantry brigades and an Ajax-equipped Strike brigade. Along with many other armies, I would suggest, that in being committed to counter-insurgency recently we have some obvious capability shortfalls.

We are doing much on protection. Our Warrior upgrade programme and our Challenger 2 life-extension programme will deal with some of those challenges but in fires and counter-fires I think there is much that we need to do.

During counter-insurgency we emphasised precision over the ability to neutralise and I suspect the mass of fires is something we need to reflect on. Air Defence is an area where we have an acknowledged weakness. I think if we were lucky we might get air parity and the Falklands in 1982 was instructive, where some one-third of our sentries and our machine guns were pointed upwards rather than outwards.

We have got work to do on mobility and counter-mobility and we have got work to do on cyber and electromagnetic activity and the extent to which, as an army, we understand the reversionary skills which are necessary in the event of all of that information space not being available to us. And of course we have had a generation of people who have grown up in counter-insurgency and have not been educated or trained in the concept of Combined Arms Manoeuvre; it is not a question of forgetting, it is a question of never having done it.

Now, we acknowledge these deficiencies and these capability shortfalls and this weekend, for example, Headquarters 3rd (UK) Division will wargame our evolving structure and test it thoroughly against two demanding scenarios, so that we understand the shortfalls. But I think, like all western armies at the moment, we would acknowledge that mass or a lack of mass is probably the greatest challenge. How do we deal with that problem?

I think it is quite instructive we will commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the battle of the Somme on Friday and I think it is helpful because it reminds us that we have to be prepared to fight the war we might have to fight and not necessarily for the war that we would like to fight, because in so doing and in being prepared to do that there is a reasonable chance that we might deter it from happening.

A big deduction one would draw from that is this issue of mass and resilience, hence it is vital that we understand how we would regenerate and reconstitute and that is why our Army Reserve and our Army Regular Reserve are important to us and one of the advantages of these new Defence Planning Assumptions is it allows us to think more from first principles about what the role of the Army Reserve should be.

You recall that a year ago, given the Defence Planning Assumptions, it was there very much to backfill and integrate a regular structure which was designed to manage enduring operation in perpetuity. Now it is there for reconstitution and regeneration. It is there in the event of a nationally recognised emergency. Now that's not to say that the reservists are not able to take their part if they can afford the time and effort to be able to deploy alongside the regular components but they are there in true obligation terms for the worst case. Now that is proving to be easier to recruit for.

The other thing I think we must not lose sight of, if you need to regenerate or reconstitute, is the importance of your generating force. We used to think of this as an overhead but if you are going to regrow an army the extent to which your training organisation is able to regenerate the army is absolutely vital.

We also, I think, need to think hard about how we squeeze the maximum utility out of all of our manpower and increasingly I am convinced that we should be thinking about end-strength, not just being about the output of our regular full-time forces but rather all of those in uniform.

That is particularly relevant when you think about how much the reserve supplies us in the way of specialist capability. Arguably some would say 75-80 per cent of medical capability is contained in the reserve and there are huge numbers of other specialisms which we draw from the Army Reserve because we cannot afford to have them on the full-time strength.

So simply thinking about our output on the basis of it being 82,000 Regulars I sense is not as productive as it should be and indeed one of the announcements in the SDSR is this idea of a flexible engagement system, where one would look at the degree of commitment across the spectrum, from full- to part-time service and therefore think

increasing about an end-strength of the Army as probably being nearer to 120,000 rather than the way it is currently being specified.

And of course this allows us to think long and hard about what we call 'Type B' reservists. 77 Brigade is a very interesting model where you can draw-in some quite interesting capabilities from the outside world to help you in social media and information warfare and so on and that, I suggest, might provide us with an 'offset strategy' given that it is really challenging for us now to buy that in ourselves permanently; rather that network that goes into the outside world provides us with the capability we need.

I think we also, and I keep saying this but I mean it this time, need to open the aperture of our imagination on Sponsored Reserves. We need to think about it in more of a capability-based way, not just talk about an Whole Force Approach for example.

There is a lot more I think we can do in terms of the generating force in training, in partnership with industry. And when we look in terms of the capabilities that will enter service over the next ten years, the replacement for our logistic platform known as DROPS, the palletised load system, that is an area where, if we think about it more laterally with industry, I suspect we can come forward with an innovative solution that sees not just the vehicle but the support solution, the infrastructure and, in particular, the people – the drivers of this equipment – perhaps being produced from industry in a Whole Force Approach that encourages innovation and possible automation as well.

Now, as an offset strategy to this lack of mass we should be in no doubt that it is being international by design, as our SDSR described, where we will find the mass that we need. That is partly about being engaged overseas but also where we go with interoperability.

With the British Army we look for interoperability through the ARRC; increasingly we look to our Expeditionary Force for interoperability, that club of northern European nations that have come together under our framework: Norway; the Netherlands; Denmark; and the Baltic states. Through that, my sense is that we will be able to invest in real interoperability that will produce over time secure voice, a common operating picture and importantly the ability to share digital fires, and we will do this bilaterally with the US, France and Germany. It is really important in the future that we give real meaning to interoperability and achieve the sort of output that we eventually achieved in Afghanistan.

Now that brings me onto information manoeuvre, another outcome of the SDSR, and it seems to me that the pace of change in the information environment forces constant adaptation. Integrated Action is now the Army's core doctrine. I talked about this last year but we should remember that it recognises first and foremost that success is now easier to achieve through the integration of soft through to hard power and that is how it will happen.

Rarely is there a purely military solution; victory is invariably defined by the triumph of the narrative and the audience often has the decisive vote. Now, 77 Brigade is an evolving capability and is beginning to change the way that our Army thinks about manoeuvre. Its mission is to take forward this idea, this core doctrine of Integrated Action, to maintain or change behaviour through non-kinetic means and it has now corralled all of our non-kinetic force structure into a coherent whole in order to achieve this out-put.

With it 1 ISR Brigade is designed to bring coherence to a range of capabilities that were previously organised into tribal groupings. It has driven modernisation and improvement and it has provided a docking point for our joint and interagency capability.

But these two formations are really only the first steps towards the establishment of a new information manoeuvre formation that will include our two signal brigades as well. Information services need to be delivered differently; we need to think more about how we look at it functionally; the distinction between, on the one hand infrastructure and networks, as distinct on the other from information management, applications and cyber and electromagnetic activity. This I think will open up the opportunity for us to think very differently about how we man this increasingly specialised area and there are also weak signals that we need to think about how we man our signals brigades.

Now the SDSR also identified defence engagement as a force-driving task – in other words one that resources will be applied to – and it recognised the reducing distinction, therefore, between home and away. Now this builds on the Army 2020 deduction that persistent engagement contributes to insight and understanding. It shapes events, it provides deterrence and reassurance and, if targeted effectively, it can enhance our national prosperity.

But importantly, what it also does is it enhances our readiness and our adaptability, as the French demonstrated a few years ago in Mali; if you have got a feel for what is happening you can respond effectively and you can take what appears to be greater risk. Hence the role of our 1st Division, with its brigades aligned to specific regions and countries, and last year alone some 26,500 foreign troops were trained in some thirty-nine countries by British soldiers from the 1st Division.

But we have learned, I think, over the last three years that we need bespoke structures to do some of this overseas capacity building and hence the announcement in the SDSR of five Specialised Infantry Battalions. That title is a place-holder that may become something different in due course, but for the moment it is recognition that our conventional infantry achieved significantly more than might have been expected during Afghanistan and that we need to give them the opportunity to continue to deliver something well above the conventional task.

These battalions will be smaller, some 300 strong, and they will be designed to Train Advise Assist, and where appropriate to accompany indigenous forces, thus taking perhaps greater risk than conventional infantry might have to take and, of course, they will major on language and cultural expertise. They will be rolled out from next year through a series of pilots and the goal is that they should be able to deliver capacity building at a higher end than conventional infantry.

Now I do not want to 'situate the appreciation' in terms of what we will conclude in the course of the next couple of days, but I suspect that we will deduce that adaptability depends hugely on institutional agility and organising for it.

I talked last year about the importance of the Army being 'match fit' to run the business and I talked about defence reform giving the Army significant financial autonomy. This opportunity has required us to reorganise our operating model to ensure we run the business better and become a better customer of our many interlocutors both within defence and outside defence.

However, it is also a model that is designed to make us more institutionally adaptive and agile, to force decision-making on the right horizon, not close-in but further out. The challenge we found – and I guess it is the same in a number of major institutions – is how to ensure that decision-making is informed with the right input, supplied with the right human capacity.

So I suspect that we will also conclude during the course of the next couple of days that adaptability can only be achieved through privileging the conceptual component of fighting power. It is about brains, it is about culture and

it is about how we maximise available talent, and I would encourage you, when you get a moment outside this hall, to visit the adjoining halls where some of this is explored.

Importantly, I hope that we will examine what all this means and that we will draw some conclusions about the importance of learning, particularly from our mistakes – hence the establishment of our Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research – but also about the value of experimentation and concept demonstrators being available on the shelf when you need them. It is about decentralisation, timing and tempo and about where the cursor should sit between training and education as Eric Hoffer put it the other day.

Education should implant a will and a facility for learning; it should produce not learned but learning people. In times of change learners inherit the earth while the learned find themselves equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.

I hope we will also deduce the importance of a command-led culture which leads to more agile decision making; about creating the environment in which we allow honest mistakes in pursuit of calculated risk taking on the battlefield and above all about the importance these days of leadership.

So I much look forward to these couple of days, I shall pull it together at the end and take questions at that point after lunch tomorrow, but in the meantime I look forward to what I really do think is a stellar gathering of speakers and I very much hope that all of you from the floor will participate, particularly giving the encouragement that Karin gave us earlier, so thank you very much.

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