

RUSI Land Warfare Conference

Chief of the General Staff's Keynote, Wednesday 28 June 2017 General Sir Nicholas Carter

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. It was a high-risk strategy running this conference on until this late in the day but I am much encouraged to see that the room looks very nearly as full as it did yesterday morning.

Unusually, I am also going to make some remarks about General Ben Hodges. I suspect I go back a little further with Ben Hodges than Patrick Sanders does, but this will be his last conference as the USAREUR commander and he has been a huge friend.

I can honestly say that our contribution to southern Afghanistan in 2009 and 2010 would have not been the same if it had not been for him making us all Americans and he did that tremendously.

I cannot think of a finer example of a multinational officer and I know he will know what I mean when I say that I suspect he is a better multinational officer than he is a joint officer, as US Marines are not necessarily the flavour of his month. Ben, thank you for everything you have done for the British Army – it has been hugely well-received.

I would like to thank RUSI and AUSA, our sponsors, and all of you for your contributions during the last couple of days. I think we have had a very high standard of panels and speakers and the chairmen have remained, helpfully I think, in lane. Thus, I think the conference has been coherent and it has followed the pattern that we hoped it would. I think we are on a high. We have now raised the bar and that will be a challenge for what we must do next year, I suspect.

I have found it a very rewarding experience and for me there are many highlights, but the one I would single out was getting the four Chiefs of Staff on the stage yesterday just before lunchtime.

As I said at the end of that, it was reassuring, I think for all of us, to see that we are all wrestling with similar problems and that multi-nationality and alliances are at the forefront of what we do. We have to be careful of the echo chamber, but I still think it is reassuring to see the four of us committing in that way.

The exam question that we posed was 'how do you use land power decisively in this era of constant competition?'

I said yesterday this recognises that the security environment is increasingly complex, dynamic, and unstable. I said that the international rules-based architecture that has assured our prosperity and our stability, and of course our security, since the Second World War is being increasingly challenged.

I said that the pervasiveness of information is driving a rapidly changing character of conflict. As it has been exposed to us clearly today, by many speakers, our rivals are now using new tools to seek advantage. They are exploiting the ambiguity in the blurring of distinctions between war and peace.

I think we have concluded during the last couple of days that there will always be a decisive role for land power, regardless of this evolving character of conflict. Many speakers have talked about the nature of war and have emphasised the fact that it does not change. It is always visceral, it is always violent, it is always characterised by friction; it is about people, and it is about politics.

Those things happen on the land and that is where people live. As we heard graphically from General Milley yesterday, stand-off fires simply do not cut the mustard. We must evolve and there are many themes that I have picked up which I shall talk to.

First and foremost, we must recognise that this is all underpinned by hard power, but our hard power must be adaptive and agile. We must fight smarter and we need to get 'ahead of the bang' where we can.

We need the support of the population at home. Then we must recognise that our most important asset is our talent. We must unlock its potential. We lead a generation who want to be empowered and we must find ways of doing just that.

What of our hard power? The first thing I would stress from a British Army perspective is the importance of the divisional level. That is important whichever army you look at, if it aspires to be a reference customer, because the divisional level is the level where the full orchestra of capability comes together.

It is the level where manoeuvre is genuinely multi-dimensional. It is the level where the framework of the battle can be visualised in terms like deep, close, and rear, with brigades fighting within it focused on a single tactical activity; I think that was the point the General Hix made this morning.

It is also the level where we would warfight. There is a hierarchy of wisdom and experience that comes together at that level, which gives policymakers the confidence that, when it is deployed, risk can be effectively managed. We saw this in 1989 and we saw this in 2003.

I think it absolutely plays to the Defence Secretary's observation this morning about deterrence. You must be willing to use your conventional deterrence for that deterrence to be effective. That, in the final analysis, means you must be prepared to put boots on the ground. We are, as an army, resetting our understanding of the divisional level and the corps level, following some fifteen years or so of counterinsurgency.

We are clear that we have a number of obvious capability gaps, such as air defence, general support engineering, electronic warfare, or CEMA (Cyber and ElectroMagnetic Activities) as it is increasingly being called, and areas like logistics lift.

We need to fill these capability gaps and it is encouraging to see some progress is being made. The Secretary of State singled out Morpheus this morning, which will be the means through which we will link it all together, in CIS terms. Also, the new Attack Helicopter and it was good to hear him talk this morning of his expectation that MIV, our Mechanised Infantry Vehicle, will be on contract within the next couple of years. I banked that one, I can tell you.

I think we also learned today that we must get cleverer about the deep battle. The pre-lunch session illustrated some of the threats that we could be up against. We have only got one of these divisions and we cannot afford to lose it on day one of combat. That means we must think hard about how we fight it and the extent to which the close battle is the early move where the decisive engagement occurs is not necessarily practical.

We see Strike as a transformational opportunity. I talked yesterday about our ability to project land power at reach and to get under the Anti-Access Area Denial challenge and to project over significant distances.

I talked about the need to decentralise and to concentrate rapidly on what I think will be a more spacious battlefield. In order to realise this, we are establishing an experimental group, which will be under 1 Armoured Infantry Brigade, under the command of Brigadier Zac Stenning.

It will be there to provide coherence, first and foremost, to the fielding of Ajax. It is also important to test the proposition of Strike; to examine the force structure that we want to put into the field and how you task organise to test the idea of decentralised command and control; the notion of smaller all-arms groupings being available on this spacious battlefield; testing propositions like the ability to reduce our logistic need, modular logistics; what is the CIS that we need to exploit the network enablement these platforms offer; how does the air-land dimension fit into it to realise its full potential?

I think this also alerts us to the fact that we must be sensible about getting the right balance between ‘fight tonight’ and fight tomorrow. We are so busy at the moment, I question the extent to which we are aiming-off for the future and thinking about what the future needs to look like.

There has been much discussion today about numbers. Quantity, of course, as we have heard a lot during the course of the last couple of days, has a quality all of its own. How do we mitigate an almost unprecedented lack of mass and indeed aim-off perhaps for the war that we might have to fight?

That is where I feel strongly that we need to understand how we can maximise the full potential of all of our manpower, post formal mobilisation at, say, a hundred and eighty days readiness.

We understand that we have a regular component of around eighty thousand. We have some five to seven and a half thousand in trade training. We have a Reserve Component that last week broke the thirty thousand barrier, in terms of reservists on the books.

What we are now doing is looking hard at how we could mobilise the Regular Reserve. This is something we did very well during the Cold War and there are probably around thirty thousand in terms of potential there. Clearly, we wish to start with critical capabilities like Attack Helicopter pilots.

We should also recognise that some fifty per cent of the Army leaves it, in regular terms, before the age of thirty. Hence, as General Milley suggested yesterday, there is a large cohort there of young people who are critically current in terms of their skills. Why would you not turn to them if you had to mobilise for the war that you might have to fight? I think this plays to the point that Mark Sedwill made about the effect we want from our manpower.

The second way we will mitigate that lack of mass is through multinational interoperability. I talked yesterday about the importance of our systems being ‘extrovert not introvert’. This plays to our relationships, which take time to build, and that is why defence engagement must be conducted strategically and done over time.

We must work much more closely with industry. We are beginning, I think, at last, to make some progress with a Whole Force Approach. We have some good initiatives that are capability driven rather than manpower driven. For example, the palletised delivery system, deployable logistics. We are looking at the full solution from support, through personnel, through infrastructure, as well as equipment.

Clearly that will have an impact upon the numbers in our regular component because if you can use Sponsored Reserves in conjunction with industry that may mean that some Regular numbers are not as vital as they might be.

The key thing is to focus on the output of this and the way in which you can deliver that capability in a more productive way. I shall return to it in a moment, but the other way I suggest that we mitigate the lack of mass is through upskilling our existing components.

My second observation, which I think has fallen out of the last couple of days, is that we must fight smarter. Our core doctrine of Integrated Action, with its focus on all of the audience – including allies, indigenous partners, the population and not just the enemy – is now increasingly understood within our army.

I think more broadly it forces you to have a decent understanding of your opponent as well. We heard this morning from Igor of Russia's military strength. We also need to ask ourselves, I think, about what are the weaknesses that were not described this morning because understanding them might help us manoeuvre in a subtler way than perhaps we would automatically.

I think Integrated Action encourages the exponents of land power to insist when land power is used on the ground that there is in place an effective local political strategy because without that in place on the ground it is very difficult for land power to be used effectively.

I think a big lesson for all of us is that the next time our army is used it must be successfully. This of course requires us, as Rupert Smith would observe, to understand the sort of war that we are getting involved in.

Brigadier Tom Copinger-Symes' study, which he talked about yesterday afternoon, will seek to identify the synergies between our information-facing formations. Those are our two signal brigades, our ISR Brigade and our 77 Brigade, the Information Warfare brigade.

I think this will lead to us distinguishing between infrastructure and networks, as opposed to the clever stuff like applications and data management. It will see a doubling, as the Secretary of State announced this morning, of our CEMA capability; we will have two regiments doing this rather than the one today. I suspect it will also lead to a closer relationship between G2, the intelligence function, and G6, the communication function.

I also hope it will lead to a modernised Land Warfare School capable of training modern warfare officers where the appropriate wings within it can focus on the modern skills that we need and that in itself will be an engine for adaptation and for change.

There was a bit this morning on modernising command and control and the ideas of reach-back with a much smaller forward deployed headquarters has to be a sensible direction of travel. We already have that with 3rd (UK) Division, through Project Picton in Bulford, and it is encouraging to see the ARRC's ideas and the experimentation that they are conducting.

All of this will lead to us having much better information exploitation. It is time, is it not, for our decision-making to be better informed by data and real evidence – not simply military judgment, which is what we teach in Staff College – and I think that was very clear from Peter Apps' excellent session yesterday afternoon.

Now, when you combine this with modern career structures, something I shall return to, we will see what Fiona Almond called the 'digital T. E. Lawrence', particularly as we use reserve service to exploit talent at no cost, as Peter Apps observed, rather ironically, yesterday afternoon.

But fighting smarter also requires us to train smarter. We did become very centralist in terms of the way that we deliver training during the era of counterinsurgency.

Training was done to you, as Karen Peek observed a moment ago. So what we must do in our processes is to make the time and the policy framework for leaders to allow their subordinates to make honest mistakes in the pursuit of learning.

Soldiers want to be able to fail, to reflect on that failure, to try again and then to succeed. Surrogate warfare, the last session we have had, must be a sensible way of looking at this because it is the means through which we will assure the combat ethos that we learned the hard way during fifteen years of counterinsurgency.

Training has got to become more adversarial. We must recognise that the nature of war needs to be represented within it. It is to become more urbanised. We must use modern simulation to bring it to life and it must be the laboratory of adaptation and innovation.

Picking up Eliot Cohen's point, leading from Michael Howard, about the importance of adaptability and the ability to change your doctrine quickly when you realise it is going wrong. And, of course, it must be used to deter, to reassure and to assure our alliance cohesion.

That means it must be visible and we have set in train a collective training review which we will get after all of this and will position us better for how we need to deliver collective training in the future. We need help and Alex Alderson's presentation revealed the sort of help that we will need from industry if we are genuinely to maximise its potential.

As an institution, we must also accept challenge and we must find a way of institutionalising it. Our Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research is a first step in this direction, but we must bring the younger generation on with us.

The idea of 'guided anarchy' through websites like the Wavell Room or BrAIN (British Army Intrapreneurs Network), which Kirsty Skinner talked about a moment ago, is fundamentally the way that we will unlock their potential to innovate to use their imagination and to help us change at the pace that technology is requiring us to change.

The next point I think, in terms of using land power decisively, is getting 'ahead of the bang' to use Counter-IED language. This is the idea of being persistently engaged overseas to understand and to shape, to deter and to protect, and to enhance our prosperity.

It involves, in our case, a first echelon of Specialised Infantry Battalions, with the first two being stood up as I speak, and effectively a second echelon of regionally aligned brigades, which will not necessarily have to work with the first echelon, although they can be deployed up-front, but it is easy to visualise them as such.

These regionally aligned brigades, equipped with light infantry and light cavalry; capabilities which are proving to be remarkably effective in that upstream capacity-building task.

We also need to think about this idea of 'beside, with, and through' and using our headquarters like the ARRC Headquarters and our 1st Division to act as 'beside, with, and through' headquarters that can deal with institutional level capacity building to help indigenous organisations improve themselves.

There must be a different way of thinking of it and getting greater utility from those standing headquarters. All of this, I think, recognises that this era of constant competition is not linear; the decision is far better if it can be achieved in what we used to call Phase Zero.

I think my final point on using the Army decisively is that we cannot forget we must improve the connection at home. That is why one of our objectives as an institution, is to be an army that is engaged and connected positively at home, so that we have a better chance of assuring our own enduring resilience and our license to be used, which means conveying the understanding of what we do because this demonstrates our broader utility.

It is worth reminding people that I cannot think of any other institution which is available at such short notice, whether on a Friday afternoon to deliver ambulance drivers or tanker drivers, or to backfill the police to relieve them to do other things with the terrorism threat. The Army is always available and people should never lose sight of that final insurance policy that we provide.

I talked about maximising talent because we will not deliver any of those things that I have described unless we do maximise that talent. That is why we have underway now a rolling review of career structures, education and training, and talent management.

I use the word talent advisedly because I think we must move on from what we currently do, which is career management. I want everybody in the Army and those outside if they wish to be part of the community of interest to be involved because this is going to be a project for the coming generation. It is not for my generation or the soggy centre beneath me, it is for the coming generation.

It is going to ask three questions. What is the future career structure? What training and education intervention does this structure require? What talent-based management system is needed to deliver it?

The first question needs to explore a career to sixty years of age for officers and for soldiers. We have to become more age agnostic where we can; probably not in the combat arms but certainly there will be many other parts in the army where we can be age agnostic. This perhaps plays, to Fiona Almond's point, about 'Major Mark Zuckerberg'.

We must examine the balance between generalists and specialists. We are going to have to have more specialist career streams and we are going to have to work out how we remunerate and reward people and provide them with status in these specialist career streams because at the moment we are not maximising our investment from those specialisms, or indeed stimulating those who are genuinely specialists.

This will ask questions, I suspect, about our late entry commissioning system. It will ask questions about our ability to enact lateral entry into specialist career structures, which I think we must do as well. We must also think hard about how we maximise the potential of Warrant Officers, who have so much more to offer than what we perhaps allow them to do at the moment. If we do not do this, there is no doubt in my mind that Brigadier Copinger-Symes' 'clever, curious, and crafty' soldiers, will quickly become cynical.

We need to think hard about what this flexible engagement system will do, which I think will be a piece of legislation that will survive contact with the next couple of years of the legislative programme. That will develop and build the opportunity for us to run portfolio careers, which is the way people want to work in the future. It will allow for a more permeable career structure and I think it will make life simpler and more transparent for people.

It will have to be underpinned by civilian competence frameworks, but it will enable us to become less insular and to maximise people's potential in a different way; recognising that with all of this we will have to be clear-eyed about the cost of it.

But what about the training and education interventions? I was struck by Harlan Ullman's observation about the need for a revolution in military education. At the moment we spend a huge amount of time on long courses. We send some four hundred Majors away every year on the Intermediate Command and Staff Course, some ninety Lieutenant Colonels away for a year on the Advanced Course, and we educate our Captains for long periods of time at Warminster.

Can we afford to continue doing it like this? I suspect we are going to have to wake up and deliver distributed training and deliver training over the lifetime of the career in a very different way.

We need new ideas to develop modern skills. We have just started a programme that will form up in August in the Army Headquarters called the Army Advanced Development Programme. It will have the McKinsey 'kite brand' on the top of it and some twenty officers and civil servants will get the opportunity, over either a year or two years, to develop the sort of business skills that are necessary to run the business in the future.

This is a fallout of Lord Levene's defence reforms; what we need to do to become smarter at running that business. We need to avail ourselves of the opportunities that industry offers us for placements and for academic opportunities.

We need to make it quite clear that it is not going to be an 'MS risk' [career foul] to go into a placement or to go on an academic placement. It must be good to do in the way that the US Army has invested in the notion of a 'soldier scholar' for many years. It has to be something valued and our system must change to respect that.

We have got to think hard about how we deliver trade training in the future, particularly in the light of our redefinition of what a trained soldier is and the adjustments we will probably make to training governance. We can maximise the junior entry in doing this, something that provides huge opportunity for people to better themselves.

We should remind people that we offer some 16,000 apprenticeships every year; more than any other employer in Europe. We must become smarter about STEM training; science, technology, engineering, and mathematics – we are in the same competition as everyone else.

Wither Welbeck College in the context of that and how do we form closer relationships with the civilian sector and what of course the Department of Education is doing with its new tech levels?

But what about the talent-based management system needed to deliver this? How do we stream because we are going to stream if we want to maximise people's potential? At what point in the career do we do this? What assessment is going to be needed to achieve that sort of effect? What tools are needed in support of talent-based selection and promotion? Is our existing reporting system fit for purpose?

It is interesting that many of the criteria that are focused on, in terms of the box you tick on the existing officer or soldier report, are tri-service ones. Do they scratch the itch from a land perspective? I doubt it.

I think we need to think hard about what criteria we are assessing and how we do it. The notion of '360 degree assessment' is gathering momentum in the higher levels of the Army and it probably needs to find its way right down into the bowels of the institution.

What delivery system do we need for this talent-based management system and does it involve people applying for jobs? That is something that does not happen at the moment, but I suspect it probably is needed.

How could it involve an integrated personnel management system with key industry suppliers, linked to our idea of a Whole Force Approach so that we can share the talent to achieve a common output?

How do we remove the unnecessary hurdles that mean that we haemorrhage so much of our female talent, in particular mid-time in the career? How can we change the constraints and the rules to make it possible for diversity to be a feature at Chief of Staff level, not just simply at the lower levels? How can we embrace the idea of embedded mentoring and career counselling?

There is a lot that must happen there and we want people to be involved in this debate because it is only by listening to the generation that matter that we have a reasonable chance of answering the question in the right way. It is not going to be done in one go, it is going to be a rolling process and we want to identify early gains as they become obvious to us.

Elsewhere in Maximising Talent, we must continue the momentum of broadening our recruiting base. We know we are too insular, too bottom-fed and we must reach out to new communities to sustain our talent and our manpower and we must make it easier for females. Although I think we might surprise Alexandra Altinger, who spoke yesterday afternoon, that actually we are quite an open-minded organisation and we are winning some prizes for our attitude towards this sort of stuff. It may surprise people but we are making progress.

We must work out how we empower our leadership at every level. It is clear to me, and it comes up every time we have an Army Conference, that people want to apply the principles of Mission Command in peacetime as well as they do in wartime.

This involves removing the impediments to empowerment. The culprits are risk aversion, over-assurance, a reporting system that encourages leaders to look upwards and not downwards.

We must reinforce the legal and moral framework that will make our leaders confident to take the risks they must take on the battlefield to seize those fleeting opportunities which are often the distinction between winning and losing.

We must remind ourselves that the strategic to tactical level compression can be managed by robust command and control. We also have to recognise that we are commanding a generation who genuinely want to be empowered and have the imagination, I sense, to be empowered.

It was impressive seeing those Officer Cadets on the stage yesterday afternoon. You might not have agreed with what they said about WhatsApp, but it was certainly good to see them performing. I would not have dared do that myself forty years ago.

This empowerment also has the potential to unlock the full potential of defence delegation, what I think Lord Levene expected when he initiated his work. Within this incentivisation is critical; if you make an efficiency saving it will not incentivise you if it is nicked by somebody else.

We must recognise that in so doing there is a sporting chance that we can also be more productive and if we do this right it will lead to a virtuous circle of improved capability.

From the Army's perspective, I have no expectation of additional resources, but I have an expectation of being incentivised to use what I have to achieve more capability.

That is why we have run, during the last year, some empowerment pilots. One of the best examples took place at the Royal School of Artillery, which has been up and running probably as long as the British Army. It costs me around £100 million a year but, incredibly, I only delegate around £1.7 million to the Commandant of the Royal School of Artillery.

What we did last year was to give the Commandant the tools to be able to 'live the dream' of that hundred million, looking forwards over the ten-year programme, and through having those tools he was able to identify opportunities to deliver his output more productively, but also to make efficiencies which he could then bid back to us to recycle, in order to improve the capabilities of the Royal School of Artillery. He saved some £12 million in the first year and we gave him, I should think, about forty per cent of that back immediately to invest in simulation and other things for the betterment of the school.

It is that sort of culture which will create the virtuous circle which the private sector has understood forever, but the public sector perhaps does not understand so well, and we intend to drive that out into the Army from September onwards through a new programme which will develop and build on these pilots.

Critically, we will have to work out how we get the decisions made at the right level because we are not going to delegate all the finance staff and all of that gobbledygook. We are going to have to find a way of the decision being realised at the right level without over-facing the bandwidth at the decision-making level; that is the trick we must finesse, but I think it is an exciting prospect.

As Richard Susskind reminded us yesterday, the best way to predict the future is to invent it, and of course the very best leaders shape events rather than waiting to be shaped by them.

I hope you have enjoyed the last couple of days and what I hope you will now do, is to involve yourselves in the exploitation of this conference, centred on the four themes: information and warfare, information and people, the future of combined arms warfare, and training.

Thank you for your attention.