

THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

UK AIR POWER

Before I talk specifically about UK Air Power in the next 5 years, I think it would be helpful to talk about Air Power more generally and some issues which affect most western nations; I hope this will assist in reviewing our national problems.

Air Power is much more than putting bombs on target, or keeping the skies clear of hostile air however important these functions remain. Natural disasters, of which there seems to be an increasing number, require rapid response which normally only air power can provide - Air transport, Helicopters and so on. Famine relief from the air is a vital element of international response. Search and Rescue for lost airliners, ships in distress, stranded individuals and teams, all require the rapid and wide area capabilities that air power brings to bear.

ISTAR (Intelligence Surveillance, Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance) and Early Warning are all crucial, and in much demand in an unstable world and all highly dependent on airborne vehicles; this is Air Power in action. Air to Air Refuelling speaks for itself. So, please appreciate that air power, and I include space in these considerations, is a seamless entity embracing a variety of capabilities.

It is a fact that since the end of the cold war, air forces have been cut back relentlessly. Most western Air Forces are about a third of the size they were; less in some cases. These cuts extend to equipment, weapons, manpower, support functions and to the training machine. It follows that the ability to prosecute lengthy campaigns of any magnitude has been largely eroded.

The paradox of this situation is that over this period many Air Forces have been engaged almost non-stop in mainly small scale but often lengthy operations. And against this background the remaining aircraft fleets have been flown almost into the ground and badly need replacing or require major upgrades. But, because the numbers of platforms are so low, the cost of doing so has risen. It is pretty obvious that if a replacement order or upgrade is now one third of that envisaged 10-20 years ago, the unit costs go up. Many air forces now have token numbers of aircraft, and limited numbers of crews to operate them.

As an example, we have been led to believe that Europe conducted a successful air campaign in Libya. Indeed, some excellent work was done by European air forces. But, the day 1 taking down of the Libyan Air Defences was conducted principally by the United States and thereafter the US provided 70% of the supporting sorties to the campaign. Think about that should Russian adventurism in Ukraine or the Baltics extend to hostilities. And think about the miserable sums of money now spent on defence by many of our European allies, weighed against the American contribution to NATO which pays at least 70% of the NATO budget. Is this sustainable? The Prime Minister last September in Wales at the NATO summit would appear to think not in the light of his remarks on 2% minimum GDP for Defence.

So, let's turn to the UK. It seems likely that in the next 5 years, in this troubled world, that probably along with allies we will need to resort to force somewhere or at a minimum to deploy armed forces to deter aggression. In that case, air power will be an early and most likely first choice for Government.

When the Conservative government cut defence in the 1990s when I was CAS, we reduced our manpower from close to 90,000 to 57,000 and cut the front line by some 35%. We closed many bases and restructured the service, privatising many functions. In Gulf War 1 we had some 30 combat Squadrons; today the Air Force numbers about 32,000 personnel and has 8 such Squadrons. And three of those are the 30 plus year old Tornado which has given such non-stop service on operations as I have described. The world is by any reckoning a more dangerous place today than it was in the 1990s and indeed than in 2010 when the last SDSR was completed based on assumptions which lasted barely a year. And, the cost of our fleet of Typhoons has gone up considerably, as the orders have reduced, whilst F35 costs are a source of concern. **So, the First Challenge** is numbers of combat aircraft for land and at sea operations and their cost.

Challenge No 2: Loss of capabilities.

In the follow up to SDSR 10 we as a nation lost, discarded actually, Maritime Patrol, carrier borne air, and key aspects of Electronic Intelligence. Moreover we have no MSAM capability. We have been embarrassed by most of these deficiencies subsequently. Our Nuclear deterrent has been put at risk by our inability to sweep the seas for Russian submarines and we had to ask for help from allies. The loss of the whole Harrier force at its peak of capability affected our operations in Libya and in Iraq and reduces our options for the future. We have now one replacement Electronic Intelligence aircraft - Rivet Joint; it is working tirelessly but one aircraft is a token capability. We urgently need the two others planned. Our AWACS needs upgrading very soon or it will not be synchronous with the NATO fleet. And Sentinel which has given almost non-stop invaluable service is currently planned for disbandment in 2017/8. In the light of the world situation, these are not capabilities that we can continue to ignore.

Challenge 3: Cyber warfare.

There is a lot of concern about this and there should be. The RAF is much involved in this work. But, I worry that there are some who believe that giving ourselves a counter to this form of warfare could enable kinetic capabilities to be yet further reduced. In my view this is nonsense. It is an adjunct to warfare, possibly a crucial one, but those nations practising it have massive conventional capabilities for very good reason. Possibly the best counter to cyber warfare is a bomb through the front door of the offending building from where it emanates. What is vital is the Intelligence surrounding the enemies capabilities.

Challenge 4: Preparing for the Unknown.

We should surely know by now that we will be surprised by world events. We have failed on just about every count to predict our various engagements both after the Cold War and in the preceding decades. Since SDSR 10, the Arab Spring, IS and Russia and events in the Far East involving China, all unforeseen, are now firmly on the radar screen. The only safe way to prepare for the unknown is to retain balanced forces, with adequate conventional numbers to underpin our deterrent posture and to train them alongside allies in peacetime; moreover, to look to engage such training in areas of the world where instability is the norm. Soft power use of credible armed forces, in conjunction with education and properly focused aid, must surely be a first choice means of preventing armed conflict and human rights abuse.

Challenge 5: Balancing the Fleet

The decisions this Government makes on defence will be the armed forces with which our successors will operate in 20 years time. I have mentioned combat air; we were short of helicopter lift in Afghanistan but this has largely been solved. We are short of attack helicopters which are hi tech machines needing the necessary support and spares backing. Our AT and AAR capabilities are increasingly modern and impressive - whether we have got the right balance in AT with A400 M and C17 and for support of Special Forces remains to be seen, and the numbers of the excellent A 330 Voyager are down from the original requirement. RPAS will have an increasing part to play in intelligence gathering and operations. The RAF very sensibly is intending to retain a balance of remotely piloted systems and piloted systems.

Challenge no 6: The SDSR.

I am afraid that I have to disagree fundamentally with Mr Fallon that " 5 years ago the Conservative - led coalition Government conducted the first truly comprehensive defence and security review, SDSR 10." The only such review that I can remember was conducted by the Labour Government in 1998. Everything else has been treasury led with no clear strategic guidance. So this SDSR has to be properly conducted and whilst I am encouraged by Mr Fallon's further recent statements in this regard, the cut imposed already of £500m and earlier treasury leaks to the media are worrying omens. Moreover, there are those in this house who fear that the SDSR will be yet another charade like that of 2010.

The next 5 years for UK air power is largely set by decisions made a number of years ago. The world has got more dangerous in that time and the west has reduced its military capability significantly. Options to deal with the unknown are now limited. The decisions this Government makes beginning with the SDSR, will determine the security of the next generation. I hope this is sufficiently appreciated by those who will make the decisions.

But let me say that the Chancellor's commitment to a minimum 2% of GDP for Defence is indeed welcome. As of last week I had written that **"when it is possible to commit to . 7% GDP for overseas aid, it defies understanding to fail to commit to a minimum level for the First Duty of Government"** His Budget statement will certainly give heart to the armed forces, to our allies, particularly the United States, and will send an important message to the Russians. I believe that the strong, consistent and united pressure from parliamentarians, the media and yes, even retired senior officers has had an impact. But let us also be clear, it is a minimum figure and the acid test will be that it is free of creative accounting and that the SDSR is properly conducted, consultative and transparent and crucially addresses the gaps and weaknesses in our armed forces that are apparent to any objective analysis.