

THE MODERNISING DEFENCE PROGRAMME

AN OPPORTUNITY TO BREAK THE MOULD

The Conservative Party, presenting itself as the champion of Defence, has 'form' with Defence reviews. In the '90s it slashed budgets and capabilities; in 2010 it carried out a Strategic Defence and Security Review which removed great swathes of capability, some of which have now had to be restored. Hardly strategic, it was a simple cost cutting exercise. In 2015, another such review made more commitments than it was prepared to fund whilst setting highly ambitious efficiency targets, in practice unattainable without further reduction in capability.

So what is different about the latest review entitled UK Modernising Defence Programme (MDP)? It has been separated from the National Security Capability Review (NSCR) and will report in the summer. The new Defence Secretary has said frequently that more money is needed for Defence and has stated that MDP is not aiming to be financially neutral.

The Defence Secretary will have recognised that the world is more dangerous now than at any time since the end of the Cold War; in that period we were spending roughly twice what we are now spending on Defence and today this cannot safely continue. This has been obvious to serious analysts for a decade and in the light of recent events, mostly involving Russia, denial, the default stance of most western governments, is slowly giving way to realism. It is accepted that state threats are now back. Russia, it appears, is now the No 1 threat, to which we can add China whose long-term ambitions will affect us in many ways. North Korea adds to these state-based concerns, whilst extremist Islam will be with us in one form or another for a long time yet. Mr Williamson may well feel the tide has turned.

But there are obstacles to a smooth landing. He will know that the Treasury dislikes the MOD - a wasteful department to its thinking - and will cite the 2% of GDP figure for Defence as meeting our obligations to NATO. He might reflect that this figure is widely recognised as being achieved by creative accounting, that the 2% is a floor, not a ceiling, and that far from the UK being up with the angels on Defence spending, SIPRI (2016) lists us as No 7 in the world ranking, spending \$48bn whilst Russia spends some \$69bn. And he should consider, for Russia, just how much the effects of plentiful and cheap energy, vast raw material supplies, and very low rates of pay distort this figure. It would not be fanciful to suggest that a more realistic Purchasing Power Parity figure for the Russian budget would be at least twice the stated figure, perhaps \$140 bn, roughly equivalent to that of the UK, France and Germany combined. Just look at how many combat capable aircraft, tanks, ships and people are listed for Russia in RUSI Military Balance 2017.

Other obstacles to the realistic funding of Defence include the view that new forms of warfare, such as cyber, asymmetric, and surrogate, make conventional

defence outmoded. Now that State threats are back on the menu, it would be the height of folly to reduce our conventional forces. A serious study would recognise that the new forms of warfare are not new but just being applied more actively as supplements to conventional war and require additional resource to counter.

If fraught relations with Russia do nothing else but jolt the Whitehall machinery out of its stupor, we should expect an assessment that current capabilities are woefully short on mass, on breadth and on resilience and that, focused on limited expeditionary warfare as we have been for some 25 years, we are inadequately structured for today's state challenges.

What about the wider opportunities that this study offers? If the Government really is to modernise defence, it must surely address matters long neglected which would give a sound basis to its conclusions. Every politician on this globe was born into a world order fundamentally set by the victors of WWII. The power of the West, residing in its hard economic and technological strength, as well as its soft power values, allowed it to set up a global system with more or less global compliance. Our long held Western assumptions are now under threat; the old tools don't always work, and it is not clear what new tools are now required. At such complex times, muddling through may be the easiest approach and the market for Grand Strategy is weak; yet it is precisely at times of muddle and change that a Grand Strategy comes into its own. The MDP should say so.

Two, possibly three, interconnected challenges suggest we are not facing change within existing systems, but challenges to the very systems themselves. These are: political (liberal democracy in retreat, even within the EU, an institution with this as its founding political rationale); technological in the unsettling anarchic nature of the digital revolution; and economic (the level of global debt and wealth distribution between nations and people). A study into Modernising Defence must consider these challenges.

On the security challenge, Islamic terrorism (AQ, IS), Russia and China are worthy of special note.

Islamic Terrorism

In simplistic terms, AQ was a revolt against the globalising pressure of the West; it posed an ideological challenge to the global state system. We should recognise that our western defence and intelligence and indeed our security focus became fixed on what Professor Sir Michael Howard described as a police matter, not a military one. Defence became a supporter of internal security; as reflected in cuts in the defence budget (2010). This ideological and terrorist threat remains, but needs to be kept in proportion.

Russia. The long term planning assumption in 2010 was that Russia was no longer a threat, and a 'defence holiday' was in order. Putin's leadership has been a reaction

to the humiliation of Russia by the West. He has described the collapse of the Soviet Union as the greatest geo-political tragedy of the 20th century. He has overturned the assumptions of the 2010 SDSR by deliberately making Russia stronger, albeit with a nationalistic rather than ideological rationale, - arguably a stronger foundation. He has joined the anti-globalisers by promoting the right of states and peoples to have and assert their own cultures-witness Crimea, a precedent he might equally apply in the Baltics. Russia's intent to oppose the Western way of life has been clearly elaborated by General Gerasimov in his doctrine which lays out how Russia will conduct asymmetric warfare, far short of all-out conflict, in pursuit of its national interests, through cyber, disinformation, corruption and subversion, as well as with more conventional military weaponry as used in Syria. All are seen as legitimate tools of this policy. In that sense, the current physical threat from Russia is not the territorial invasion of Western Europe but rather to its neighbouring states with large Russian diasporas. We see daily Russia deliberately undermining western values in an effort to affect the coherence of the west and diminish liberal democracy. The Russian threat therefore is mainly to our values and this plays into our Article V commitment to the Baltics. If the leading members of NATO are to be seen as true to their word, there is no choice but to stick to the commitment to Estonia; our values are at stake. The study should emphasise that Defence assets have a primary role in delivering on that promise.

China

China is using every tool on every aspect of society to catch up on a hundred years of humiliation and exploitation by the West and to become a dominant player on the world stage. It has no ambition to inherit the US global responsibilities; it is focused on feeding the Middle Kingdom, whilst steadily challenging US military supremacy in the Far East. In keeping with Sun Tsu, China is likely to bide its time until military success in that area is both obvious and inevitable. Early signs of this are already evident in the building of artificial island bases in the South China Seas. With these 'facts on the ground', loyalties are shifting in the region, as with the Philippines; power attracts. A post-Brexit UK is likely to be more reliant on trade in the Far East, and our security treaty commitments in the region are still in place. We cannot neglect, too, the probability that this whole challenge will distract the US from European affairs. The MDP should identify that the threat from China to the UK is likely to be to our values-the democratic model, the rule of law- and to our access to resources.

An MDP which reviewed these matters could well conclude that, whereas the Cold War was about the potential for warfare, ie something that might happen in the future, Islamic terrorism, Russia and China are engaged in continuous competition with the West right now; this competition has a hard edge to it that makes it best described as 'conflict. Syria presents a clear example of where this conflict could

escalate into very bloody inter-state fighting. So we should stop talking about preparing for a threat; rather, we should talk about how to conduct and win this current long term conflict using all the means at our disposal in a coordinated and timely way. The MDP study can propose certain key steps towards this end.

In this light it could suggest the setting up of a permanent strategic operations centre with cross government representation, attuned to campaign management and capable of making decisions 24/7, rather than rely on periodic crisis management as now; in effect, COBR in permanent session. It would deal with all the elements of international power broking, soft as well as hard. Its focus would be on how we use all we have rather than just the hardware of Defence, creating a command and control system fit for the nature, immediacy and longevity of the challenges we face. If HMG needed any encouragement along these lines, it should look no further than Putin's forthcoming new cabinet. On 7th May, he is setting up a Stavka that will be a war cabinet to coordinate pan-government efforts to manage the current conflict. Essential to this important step will be a clear national foreign policy, the start point of any coherent long-term strategy without which we are adrift in a turbulent sea.

These are some core elements of a study which could define Mr Williamson's time as Defence Secretary. They will require intellectual honesty and political courage to present, but he cannot ignore them if the study is to have sound foundations. He cannot ignore, for instance, clear thinking on what constitutes effective deterrence if we are back in Cold War territory. He should recognise that most politicians and military personnel are largely ignorant of this doctrine of the Cold war period. This can be quickly addressed and possibly modernised, not least by understanding the part that conventional forces play in credible nuclear deterrence.

So, the MDP presents both challenges and opportunities. Not all of them need be fully considered but the study can initiate follow up work which will present to both allies and enemies alike our national intent for the future. If, however, it does no more than rearrange the deck chairs, it will have failed to repair the serious damage to defence inflicted over many years and miss the chance to signal a new beginning in our thinking, with a path to the future that will bring greater assurance to the security of our children and grandchildren.

Authors:

Vice- Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham - Former Deputy Chief of Defence Staff

Air Chief Marshal Sir Michael Graydon- Former Chief of Air Staff

Antony Hichens Esq- Former Chairman LASMO

Air Commodore Andrew Lambert- Former Director RAF Defence Studies

Major General Jonathan Shaw- Former Assistant Chief of Defence Staff