



UKNDA COMMENTARY

UK NATIONAL DEFENCE ASSOCIATION

Founder President: **Winston S Churchill** (Deceased 2 Mar 2010).

Patrons: Rt. Hon. Sir Menzies Campbell CBE QC MP,
Field Marshal the Lord Guthrie of Craigiebank GCB LVO OBE DL,
Admiral the Rt. Hon. Lord West of Spithead GCB DSC PC.

UKNDA Founder & CEO: Cdr. John L Muxworthy RN.

DETERRENCE IS NOT JUST ABOUT NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Time for serious strategic thought

By Vice-Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham

A UKNDA COMMENTARY

Introduction

This is the first in a new series of commentaries from the United Kingdom National Defence Association (UKNDA), the only independent and strictly non-party political organisation seeking to stimulate public debate about the role – past, present and future – of Britain’s armed forces, and to make the case for strong, effective, national defence. The work of the UKNDA ranges across all three services – the Royal Navy, the Army and the Royal Air Force – but each of our new regular commentaries will tackle a specific topic each time. The focus of this commentary is on a key aspect of our nation’s defence – and one in which important capability gaps have begun to open up as a result of reductions in defence funding, threatening to place the defence of the UK at serious risk. (Our next commentary will look at the financing of defence.)

These commentaries, as with all the papers published by the UKNDA since our establishment in 2007, aim to provide constructive advice and recommendations on how to meet the current and future defence needs of our country in a troubled and increasingly dangerous world. Our purpose remains to help the nation’s elected representatives to achieve the necessary defence and security of the nation, our borders, our overseas territories, our global interests, our trade and energy supplies, and the safety of our citizens. This can only be attained through the provision of sufficient numbers of well-trained and highly motivated servicemen and women, with the most appropriate weapons, equipment and support services, to deter potential threats, and to meet those threats that do materialise. Nearly all wars appear ‘out of the blue’, and this certainly applies to the seven in which the armed forces of the UK have found themselves involved during the last thirty years – from the Falklands to Libya.

We are grateful to Vice-Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham for the commentary published here, which addresses the vital subject of deterrence and the vital need for the United Kingdom to continue to invest in a powerful and comprehensive deterrent capability.

Cdr John Muxworthy RN
CEO UKNDA

DETERRENCE IS NOT JUST ABOUT NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Time for serious strategic thought

By Vice-Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham

This UKNDA Commentary examines the correlation between conventional and nuclear capabilities in the pursuit of a credible deterrent strategy. It flows naturally from our recent report on ‘The State of the Nation’s Armed Forces’. In that short summary we highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of the individual services. Some fine equipment is in service, or entering service, and there is excellence in many things we do. However, the complete loss of certain important capabilities and the overall reductions in numbers of personnel and equipments present major challenges to the coherence of a convincing conventional defence posture.

The Present Position

The Royal Navy is at its lowest level of personnel and ships for several centuries; the Army at its lowest level of manpower since the 18th Century and the Royal Air Force personnel and aircraft are on a par with the 1920s, a period from which the recovery for the Second World War was too close for comfort. Of course equipments today are of a different order from those of the past. The Type 45 Destroyer is astonishing; there are however just six of them. The Typhoon is a quantum jump in capability over its predecessors; but only some 30 could be sustained in a prolonged conflict. Equipments and personnel can only be in one place at any one time, and as our ‘State of the Nation’s Armed Forces’ report reminded us: “Quantity has a quality of its own.” It is also worth remembering that one reason why we have to have much more capable kit today is that our potential enemies do too. **The issue is not whether our equipment is very capable but whether it is more capable than that of our opponents, and whether we have enough of it and sufficient trained manpower to use it.**

There are those who believe that the days of ‘force on force’ engagements are over and that intervention and conflicts of the future will be limited and more concerned with nation building, general stability and anti-terrorism support for allies and friends. Despite the lamentable record of history, they may be right but our ability to forecast accurately events in the last 65 years has also been lamentable and there is no real evidence that it will get better. Moreover they must surely acknowledge that deterring war and conflict is the goal. **We are not debating ends, but ways and means, and we believe strongly that for this a credible conventional capability underpins all other deterrent tools, soft or hard.**

The Weakness of Present Government Policy

In April 2013, Prime Minister David Cameron made an important speech on defence. In it he firstly reaffirmed his strong commitment to the full replacement of the UK’s strategic nuclear deterrent as the ultimate guarantee of the UK’s security. Secondly, he said that the armed services were receiving the best conventional equipment (virtually all of which was ordered by the previous government). However, he ignored some highly significant capability gaps created by the 2010 SDSR which, together with depleted equipment numbers and reduced manpower, have unbalanced our force structure, and for which no solutions are yet fully identified, let alone funded. These weaknesses seriously undermine his major premise.

There is a dangerous and potentially misleading paradox here. The replacement nuclear deterrent is likely to pose a far more severe challenge to the shrinking UK defence industry than did either Polaris or Trident; and it is very difficult to believe that the full costs, infrastructure and timescales have yet been firmly identified: moreover most of them lie outside the current financial planning period. So without new money, the risks to the remaining conventional programme appear to be considerable. **Conventional force levels are again at risk and so therefore is the credibility both of the nuclear deterrent and of deterrence more generally.**

The highly dangerous, and surely incredible, doctrine of ‘Nuclear Tripwire’ which envisaged early and possibly massive use of nuclear weapons in the event of Soviet or other national aggression was sensibly abandoned in the 1960s. The more persuasive, although still dangerous ‘Flexible Response’ which followed and importantly included a variety of nuclear escalation options, assumed that use of nuclear weapons was a last resort. NATO members signed up to this strategy and its consequences for defence spending. It has been UK policy that nuclear weapons would never be used against non-nuclear states party to the Non Proliferation Treaty, although during the Cold War first use was not actually ruled out. But the cardinal point is that the nuclear deterrent is not a substitute for conventional capabilities. **The credibility of flexible response depends upon deferring any decision to use nuclear weapons until the very existence of the nation is at stake.** This requirement means that conventional forces must always be of sufficient capability to deal with any lesser threat; and that one’s potential enemy must believe this to be so. The matter at issue must be of such severity that the risk of nuclear obliteration is worth accepting. And one’s opponent has to believe that too.

The Transition to Nuclear Use

If the conventional means at our disposal are weak, the point of transition to nuclear use may be lowered to levels at which the risk of nuclear obliteration is self-evidently disproportionate to the issue at stake. At that point, it is likely that deterrence through the threat of nuclear use becomes incredible and can be so perceived by an opponent – a bluff waiting to be called. Thus, through conventional weakness, the nuclear deterrent is compromised, whether it is a rogue state or a major power that is involved. **To be credible, the nuclear deterrent must be underpinned by strong conventional deterrence.** The idea that nuclear deterrence is synonymous with strong defence is to assume ‘big bang’ is ‘big defence’. It isn’t; quite the reverse.

Moreover, there is little evidence from the past 50 years that a nuclear deterrent is particularly effective at deterring non-nuclear nations’ actions for precisely the same set of reasons. It is not credible to suppose that nuclear weapons would be used against such nations. Indeed the UK has specifically ruled that out.

The Need for Strong Conventional Deterrence

Conventional military action, by far the most likely threat, must also be deterred. The key here is that deterrence is a broad continuum; conventional deterrence also deters. The threatened use of conventional force, at a lower level of intensity, is genuinely credible because it is usable. Any potential adversary is likely to believe in its use but only provided that it is also clearly sufficient for the particular purpose or operation to hand. And in so doing it can snuff out dangers before they escalate.

That is the key point of conventional deterrence – to prevent bad things happening and getting worse so that escalation towards ‘nuclear territory’ does not occur. There may be those people who believe that bad things are never going to happen. But this demands a very eccentric view both of human nature and of the whole of human history. **If you remember nothing else from this article, remember this: When bad things don’t happen, it is because they have been deterred. Nuclear deterrence is simply the most extreme example of this deterrence spectrum.**

That is the missing link in David Cameron’s speech. But who can correct it? In two condemnatory reports, the Public Administration Select Committee has concluded that there is no coherent strategic vision in Westminster or Whitehall, nor understanding of how and why our force structures have evolved. Lord Stirrup, whilst Chief of the Defence Staff, thought that the Ministry of Defence had lost the ability to make strategy. This is a significant failure, but we are not alone in lacking strategic vision, to the despair of the United States. Most European countries show similar defects whilst, ominously, strategic geopolitical thinking is alive and well in, for example, Russia, India and China. This kind of strategic ignorance and detachment seems to have been a hallmark of recent government practice in defence under any party. Serious strategic policy making is trumped by expediency. Budgets trump military credibility; and so we are at risk of being trumped by events. **In Britain today ‘defence policy’ appears to be merely to have a nuclear deterrent and then buy whatever else can be afforded, with no informed consideration of how the whole strategy fits together.** This is certainly not to argue that the UK should not possess a nuclear deterrent but rather that, if such deterrence is to be effective and credible to friend and foe alike, it must be part of a coherent overall defence strategy.

The Need for a Coherent Defence Strategy

All this matters. Without national strategic principles how can there be any real stability in the defence programme? How can any particular part of our force structure be accorded a consistent cross party and cross service priority? Lacking this, a coherent and consistent defence industrial strategy cannot be formulated. One inevitable consequence of this lack of agreed strategic vision is inter service in-fighting which also makes the task of the defence industry very difficult to identify. This is the minefield which we have to negotiate. Without clear, coherent and comprehensive and realistic strategy a clear sense of direction is impossible and military commitment becomes even more dangerous and uncertain.

“Without vision, the people perish.” If ever there was a time for serious strategic thought and vision, surely it is now?

© Copyright UKNDA 2013



UK NATIONAL DEFENCE ASSOCIATION

UKNDA Ltd, PO Box 819, Portsmouth PO1 9FF
Tel: 023 9283 1728 Email: secretary@uknda.org

Press Contact: Andy Smith
Tel: 07737 271676 Email: pro@uknda.org

www.uknda.org

Limited Company Number 06254639