

Introduction & Overstretch

Thank you all very much for coming, and thank you Caroline and Sir Geoffrey for inviting me. First Defence has done sterling work in recent years to keep defence as an issue alive in the body politic. This has not been an easy task in a political environment increasingly obsessed with personality and trivia. Even the threat of global terrorism does not seem to have shaken some out of their complacency about our future security. It is essential that we keep defence and security issues up the political agenda, and that is my task in the coming months.

I'd like to begin with a few facts and a quote.

First, the facts. This year we will spend only 2.2% of our GDP on defence. This is the smallest proportion of our national wealth that we have spent on defending our country since 1930.

By the time we finish the new Wembley Stadium, we will be able to seat the ranks of the whole of the British army inside it. The Royal Navy will be smaller than the French navy. And the RAF Museum at Hendon will have more attack aircraft than the RAF does now.

And now the quote: “A strong defence capability is an essential part of Britain’s foreign policy ... By 1999 defence spending will have fallen to 2.6% of GDP ... The people who have had to bear the burden of these cuts are our servicemen and women, overstretched and under strength as never before. The strain on our Armed Forces is huge. We have a continuing commitment in Northern Ireland. Our forces operate in the Gulf, the Balkans, Africa, the Falklands, Cyprus, Hong Kong, Gibraltar, Germany and other parts of the world all at once.” This was Tony Blair in February ’97, in full pre-election flow.

And what have we had from the same Tony Blair in government? Further commitments overseas in Sierra Leone, Iraq and Afghanistan with cuts in our armed forces of almost 40,000. The Army down 9,000. The Royal Navy down 10,000. The RAF down 16,000.

And yet there is little focus on Labour’s neglect of our defence forces. The lack of general debate about defence and security policy – rather than domestic affairs – is doubly strange given the varied locations in which British troops are currently serving. Afghanistan and Iraq are the two most notable deployments, but British forces can still be found in the south Atlantic, the Balkans and West Africa. Our global commitment amounts to some 15,000 troops – not including those permanently stationed in places like Cyprus and Germany. Their task, wherever they serve, is not an easy one and as a nation, we are rightly proud of them.

Yet our armed forces have equally never been under such a strain. They have never been asked to do so much with so little of the national wealth at their disposal. Therefore there is an urgent debate for this country to have. Do we reduce our commitments to match the size of our defence budget or do we increase our defence budget to match our commitments?

Part of the problem is that there is little strategic thinking about our foreign policy and so our defence policy has constantly to play catch up to overseas commitments that respond to the latest summit. An ad hoc foreign policy based on the latest summit communiqué is no basis for a sound defence policy for the United Kingdom.

Under David Cameron's leadership William Hague and I are determined that the Conservatives will have a properly integrated foreign and defence review so that the size and shape of our armed forces will properly reflect the strategic interests and defence requirements of this country. That is what our policy group on national and international security, and the work we will do once it reports, is designed to do.

Just look at the size of the task.

A report from the Public Accounts Committee just the other week makes clear just how overstretched our armed forces are. The level of defence spending is designed to provide for, at most, no more than one small-scale operation and two medium-scale operations at any one time. Since 1999, though, British armed forces have been operating over and above the Government's own Planning Assumptions in every year but one. Gordon Brown has trimmed the defence budget time and time again as the Government has asked our soldiers to do more and more.

Worse still, £310 million has been diverted last year from the Royal Navy to the Army and Royal Air Force to make up the gaps. It may have kept the Army moving and Air Force flying, but the Navy's operational ability has been compromised. Our drugs operations in the Caribbean, for example, are being reduced despite some headline-grabbing successes for the Navy in the region. In the 2005 NAO Report on Military Readiness, the Government actually confessed that "the material state of the fleet will degrade, along with its ability to undertake high readiness tasks". What an appalling indictment.

Iraq

But the existence of overstretch does not mean that we can avoid our commitment to deploy troops in theatres such as Iraq. Undoubtedly the war in Iraq provoked controversy. I resent the way we were misled, in my view wilfully, over the non-existent weapons of mass destruction. And I greatly regret some of the post war mistakes, not least the lack of planning, and especially the premature disbanding of the police and army. Our government and the American government have certainly made mistakes there, mistakes many readily admit to.

But I still believe it is right to want people to determine for themselves who governs them. It has to be right to help people to enjoy free speech and a legal framework that they themselves design. It has to be right to free them from a vicious and bloody tyrant who used chemical weapons against his own people. And it has to be a good thing to see the end of a regime that had started two wars, a regime that was almost certainly sanctions busting and attempting to gain nuclear technology.

Those who take a contrary view need to explain why Iraq, the Middle East and the rest of the world would be better off with Saddam still in control.

Like everyone else here I want to see our troops come home as soon as possible, but that can only be done when we are confident that the Iraq we leave behind is a functioning, stable nation. To depose a brutal dictator only to leave behind a failed state would be a terrible legacy. Worse still, it would see Iran left standing as the regional superpower – a situation US and British foreign policy has spent almost thirty years trying to avoid. If we leave Iraq prematurely the answer to the question “who won the Iraq war?” will be: Iran. That would be the worst answer of all.

Afghanistan

Our deployment to Afghanistan also remains essential, therefore, in a wider regional strategic context. The failure of the Karzai government would both strengthen Iran further and turn Afghanistan once more into an incubator of global terror. In any case, the invocation of the mutual defence clause of the NATO Treaty obliges us to support the Americans in the first place, something we willingly did for our closest ally.

But whilst we support the deployment, this does not mean our support for the Government is unqualified. Many are rightly fearful of the problems this deployment will face. The devil, in Afghanistan, is more than ever in the detail. We are expected to be able to manage Helmand province, a territory twice the size of Wales with just 3,300 troops. They will be engaged in a wide range of tasks, not all of which are clearly defined. The Government themselves admit the security situation in Helmand is very tough. They seem to me, and many of the Military I have spoken to, to be dangerously complacent about the lack of back-up. We may be part of a NATO force, but who is going to come to the rescue of British troops if the need occurs?

It is a source of great worry that our deployment is under-strength for the many and varied tasks assigned to it. We are asking our troops to patrol one of the most dangerous provinces in one of the most dangerous countries in the world. Yet we lack the manpower and the lift capacity to guarantee success.

For example, you might recall a few weeks ago UK troops coming to the aid of some Norwegian troops attacked in Afghanistan in protests against the Danish cartoons. Because the British were so short of aircraft, two round trips had to be made to deliver the troops required. We should be grateful the situation did not become more critical, as we would have been overwhelmed.

To add to the burden, I also believe we are facing a strategic mismatch in the mission which could have grave consequences. We are seeking to assist the Afghan government in poppy eradication, at the same time as seeking to pacify the province and expunge any remnants of the Taliban. Both aims are valid – though questions over the precise details of both could keep me here all night. However, in the recent past, the Taliban and the poppy warlords have been in opposition. What we are now doing is giving these two a common cause for the first time. By joining up against us, the complexity of our task is all the greater. And because we are only supporting the Afghan government's poppy eradication and stabilisation programmes, rather than directly executing the measures, we are unable to guarantee the success of either anyway.

We strongly support British participation in the war on terror in Afghanistan as it is strategically in our national interest, and our membership of NATO commits us to it. But it is highly questionable given the security situation and a mismatch of strategic goals between stabilisation and poppy eradication, whether we are sending enough troops to meet the Government's ambitious success criteria, or to guarantee their own safety. Only time will tell. And if it does go wrong, who is there to back us up? That is the question.

The Changing Nature of War

One fact rarely alluded to in all the discussion on Afghanistan is that the stabilisation mission there is likely to last another decade in some form or other. Given our Army's skills, we are likely to play a role throughout this period. This demonstrates how the war on terror has changed the nature of military deployments. We had become accustomed to interventions being sudden, short, using overwhelming force and usually airborne. No longer. Instead, they have become expeditionary in nature, and thus more lengthy.

The strategic goal of most operations now is not solely to correct the behaviour of another state, or punish it for some transgression. Increasingly, the goal is to replace the vacuum of a failed state with a stable, functioning and representative government. The boundaries are rapidly blurring between military and civilian activities, meaning deployments become more lengthy in any case.

Whilst we do not seek to deprive nations of their sovereignty in an imperial manner today, the ability of under-developed states to manage and enforce their sovereignty in an age of global terror is open to question. That these states may collapse through internal conflict, and thereby become breeding grounds for terrorists, is a genuine security threat.

The recent Australian mission to its neighbour Papua New Guinea is a thought-provoking example of the future direction military deployment might need to take. This Pacific nation has been teetering on the brink of collapse for almost a decade due to civil unrest. It has developed an international reputation for money laundering at the same time. A failed Papua New Guinea would risk becoming a terrorist haven, since it adjoins Indonesia which has already seen many incidents. 260 Australian police and legal mentors are now helping to rebuild civil society in the country by ensuring peace and stability and then working to build an economic and legal framework to underpin that.

This may sound similar to the work of ISAF in Afghanistan, but the great difference is that the security environment in PNG is much safer. Additionally, the decision was taken as part of Australia's own strategic needs as expressed in their foreign and defence policy – precisely the approach I am calling for in the UK.

Such interventions may be less military in scope than the 'traditional' models of intervention, since they are less militaristic, and more focused on the building, or rebuilding, of civil infrastructure. But they seek to achieve the same goal which is that of security.

An Uncertain Strategic Posture

Although this may be where we are now, there is no certainty that a strategic environment which focuses on the war on terror and state stabilisation will endure.

“Vae victoribus” or “Woe to the victors” was the warning that French intellectuals sent to Bismarckian Germany in 1870, reminding them that the seeds of France’s defeat and collapse in that year was sown in its triumphs of the Napoleonic era. A similar warning could have been issued to the United States, the UK and other western powers in the aftermath of ‘victory’ in the Cold War. The era of globalisation has brought the era of global threat. No-one seriously expected or indeed predicted the attacks of 9/11. It is nigh on impossible to predict the challenges we may face in the years to come.

The strategic direction of China is hard to fathom, for example, but we can be certain it will become a major regional force at the very least. The Asia-Pacific region will be central to world economic growth but also central to potential conflicts. The tensions between North Korea and Japan and between China and Taiwan are the most prominent. We must ask ourselves whether a China which seeks to act with growing confidence at a regional level is a potential threat or a genuine one or, indeed, whether it is a threat at all.

Even now, we should be developing better links with Japan as part of an over-arching global security package. Indeed, I was in Japan earlier this month discussing this very issue in a country ever more awake to both its dangers and responsibilities.

There are potential dangers nearer home too. We may express concerns about the state of democracy in Russia under President Putin, yet we may find he is succeeded by presidents even more inclined to re-assert Russia's position on the world stage, using its natural resources as a weapon in foreign policy, as it has already done with the Ukraine. What is very clear is that Russia has been developing new ballistic missiles and nuclear capability with a defence budget that has quadrupled in the past four years.

Those who misguidedly keep thinking we have reached the 'end of history' find themselves proved wrong time and time again. Why, then, do we not now make allowances for the unexpected in our strategic thinking? Might it be because there is little or no strategic thinking within government?

Iran

One looming potential crisis is, of course, Iran. Much is still unclear. But uncertainty is never an excuse for inactivity, when dangers on this scale threaten. To permit a state in this volatile region to develop a nuclear weapon which it has the evident capability to deliver against a range of targets would be to take a huge risk. When that state is under the control of a regime whose leader has called for Israel to be wiped "off the map" - a regime which is already destabilising neighbouring Iraq - that is a risk too far. Iran is already finessing the Shahab-3 rocket which can reach Turkey and Israel, and developing a longer-range Shahab 4 and 5 with North Korean help.

Clearly, the diplomatic route must continue to be pursued. It is right for Iran to have been referred to the Security Council. Every pressure must be brought. But it was wrong for the European Union's foreign affairs spokesman, Javier Solana, to rule out the use of force. It is wrong for Britain's Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, to echo him. Frederick the Great once observed that diplomacy without arms was like music without instruments. And though the methods of Frederick the Great are not otherwise to be commended, he was certainly right about this. We must keep all options open if we are to stand any chance of achieving a diplomatic solution to the Iranian crisis.

Nuclear Deterrent

Whilst Iran proceeds to construct a nuclear arsenal, at a time when the North Korean nuclear arsenal remains in existence, and when we cannot predict what new threats we may face by 2025, we cannot afford to leave ourselves exposed and vulnerable.

Given such uncertainty, it is a strategic imperative that we replace our nuclear deterrent, Trident, when the time comes. I remain to be convinced that any alternative to a submarine-based system is a credible option but it is an issue that we will consider in our policy review.

All history tells us that the outbreak of conflicts is seldom accurately anticipated. Therefore, the onus must be on the nuclear abolitionist, not on the believer in deterrence, to explain why one can be confident that no nuclear, or major chemical or biological threat will be posed to the United Kingdom during this long period so far ahead. I doubt if any such explanation will carry much conviction.

The identification of a potential enemy once shaped the nature of our armed forces – the two power standard for the navy, for example. With our nuclear deterrent, we enjoy a much greater degree of versatility. Intercontinental ballistic missiles like Trident are sufficiently flexible, given their range and invulnerability, to deter any state which may seek to use or threaten the United Kingdom with mass-destruction weapons at any time in the future. In short, it would not have mattered which was the real threat out of the three different potential enemies identified in the 1920s. Each would face unacceptable retaliation from a modern strategic missile system like Trident.

The versatility of a policy of minimum strategic nuclear deterrence makes up for our inability to anticipate future enemies or predict future threats. Conversely, any decision to deprive ourselves of the deterrent would leave the country open to future aggressors whom we would be able to identify only when it was too late to try and rebuild our nuclear forces so recklessly discarded. Needless to say, any attempt to re-acquire a nuclear deterrent once a threat was beginning to emerge, would immediately generate storms of protest on the basis that it would constitute an arms race and make a tense situation even more febrile.

Conclusion.

In Britain today we are weakened by the fact that the current Labour Government does not have a coherent foreign and defence strategy. With an increasingly threatening international environment the response of Blair and Brown has been to spend the smallest share of GDP on defence since 1930, cut the size of the army, navy and airforce while

overstretching our service men and women, their families and their equipment. When soldiers die in battle because their government failed to give them the protection they needed, we are witnessing the most grotesque failure of the duty of care. And if Blair and New Labour have failed our service personnel so they have failed this country. As Tony Blair himself once said “Britain deserves better”. At least he got something right.