

Memo to an incoming Prime Minister Defending our country from harm is the first duty of government

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has alerted us to the need for stronger defences. The Ukrainian army has shown us how quickly they get through munitions and smart weapons in a real conflict, and have needed substantial parts of our stocks as we and other allies have supplied them. We will need to replace those as quickly as possible and increase our own stocks should another need arise.

The problems of getting things out of Ukraine by sea given the mines and other threats to shipping in the Black Sea should also remind us as an island nation that we need to have sufficient home capacity to produce weaponry at home should war create dangerous conditions for shipping in imports. Twice in the last century Germany sought to starve and blockade us out of supplies of many kinds by a submarine and aerial campaign against supply shipping. In the more recent NATO era we have come to a mutual dependence with allies in Europe and the USA which might be a vulnerability should war break out. The UK needs to secure the intellectual property to the weapons and munitions we use, and ensure we have some capacity in the UK to make and assemble. We need to be ready to scale up these activities in the event of serious war.

It is not good that the MOD is still considering reducing our troop numbers by more when we have additional NATO commitments to fulfil in Eastern Europe in this atmosphere of more tension with Russia. We need to get better at procurement. Too many programmes overrun in time and budget and produce too few weapons, ships or vehicles at too great a cost. We need to see the best can be the enemy of the good, and frequent changes of design and capability after the contract has been entered are costly and breed delays.

Defence is a prime area for spending money better. Instead of debating what percentage of our GDP we should spend we need to ask what force capability we need and then go about finding the most efficient and effective way of supplying it.