

Strategic thinking for defence

As the UK moves on from substantial military interventions in the Middle East we need a new statement of why we have armed forces and how we wish to use them. Past Secretaries of State for defence have tended to be preoccupied with day to day battles over budgets, with defence reviews that have been budget exercises in the main, and until recently with a series of difficult interventions in Middle Eastern wars alongside our allies. They have not set out clearly what our longer term aims as a country are and how well trained and equipped forces can help us achieve them. It would be a good task for the relatively new Secretary of State to set out what our forces should be and what they can do in the years ahead.

We need to look to history to see what we have needed in the past. The UK has been an active and engaged country with interests around the world. We have used our forces to back up our trade and diplomacy. We have stood in recent years for democracy, freedom and self determination of peoples, intervening against aggressors in places like Kuwait and the Falklands.

Today we do not see any threat of invasion and are enjoying a peace which has been long and enduring with our nearest neighbours. Over the longer haul we have stood against any single dominant military power emerging on the continent, where such a dominant power proceeds by conquest and eclipses liberties and self determination for smaller countries. This has required substantial forces to overcome Spanish aggression in the sixteenth century, French aggression in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and German aggression in the twentieth. We had to defeat a seaborne armada that got close to our coasts in 1588 from Spain, had to defeat the combined Spanish and French fleets at Trafalgar to prevent their seizing the channel to allow an invasion to cross the narrow seas, and had to win the battle of Britain in the air in 1940 to avoid a German invasion. Defence of the home base mainly required seapower, boosted by airpower in 1940. Control of the Channel was a successful first line of defence in each case. Only once since 1066 have we been successfully invaded. This was in 1688 by the Dutch when much of the British establishment welcomed the invading force and accepted William and Mary's claim to the throne.

The first duty of our defence forces must be to prevent invasion of our home islands, Fortunately we live in an age when a planned invasion from a nearby continental European country looks impossible. This should not, however, lead to complacency as history has taught us that a threat can emerge swiftly and needs countering and in a mobile age can come from further afield.

History also shows us that the UK has in the past intervened in large wars with land forces. Here our experiences have been more mixed and often marred by bitter and large loss. Usually government commits the country to a war which our available forces cannot possibly win as they are too small. During the war there has to be a massive investment in personnel and weaponry to scale the forces to the task in hand. In 1914 a small highly professional army was committed to the continent ill prepared for contemporary trench and

machine gun warfare, only to lose a large proportion of the force. The next four years were spent recruiting a massive citizens army and training it to modern realities to go on to win with our allies. After the US joined in 1917 the mass killing stalemate at last started to move in the direction of an Allies win. In 1939 again a small professional force was committed to the continent, only to be forced into rapid and dangerous retreat, losing much of its equipment and requiring the miracle evacuation of Dunkirk to save most of the people. Thereafter a larger army was recruited and the continent successfully retaken once the US and other forces joined the cause. We should learn from this experience that we need enormous flexibility of supply and recruitment should a national emergency arise.

The second duty of our forces is to be available to handle any national emergency where they can assist the civil power. Great Britain has a long tradition of not wanting a standing army, and resisting interference from the military in politics. Today we have a very professional army that keeps to its clearly understood constitutional role, and is available and willing to help in flood relief or disaster response if needed. As the armed forces have heavy lift helicopters, other military vehicles, and fit and well trained personnel available it makes sense in extreme conditions to ask them support the civilian services that normally handle these matters.

The third duty of our forces is to be available for intervention abroad. If a dependent territory or ally needs military help, or if we need to contribute to a UN mission as members of the Security Council, we need to have flexible and responsive forces that can be taken to a trouble spot or war promptly and effectively. To do this we need the ability to project force by air and sea, and the capacity to lift troops and equipment quickly to where they are needed. This requires carrier groups of ships, air cover and air attack capacity, and heavy lift to take battalions and their vehicles and equipment over long distances.