

Regaining the initiative: General Sir Patrick Sanders sets out the future of Strategic Command

On the night of 28 June 2007 at a junction codenamed Orange 13, I watched the deceptively slow flight of an RPG-7 heading our way before it ricocheted off the road and streaked over our heads. Moments before and yards away, four soldiers had been caught in a blast bomb as we secured a route for a vulnerable logistics convoy. Our attention was desperately focused on the missing soldiers. But at the back of our minds we had another concern, which would have consequences beyond a bad night in Basra: we had lost the initiative. The UK and the West risk a similar fate. We are ceding the strategic initiative to our rivals. For all we herald the return of great power competition, the truth is it has never ended. While we drained our strength in interventions like Iraq, others used the time and space to further their interests more strategically. China has pursued a strategy of winning without fighting, changing the terms of the international order; Russia has combined military and non-military means to alter the map, attempting to change the balance of power and undermining the cohesion of our societies through disinformation. Both are gaining a decisive advantage in information age military technologies.

The consequence has been a succession of strategic surprises, the erosion of strategic advantage and the loss of initiative. Unchecked it is not unthinkable that we will find ourselves vulnerable in time to a fait accompli, where as a nation we have capitulated without a shot being fired. This all matters because it coincides with a moment of reckoning for the UK. Our departure from the EU means we are a sovereign actor in this competition, so our strategy matters more than any other point since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The Government's Integrated Review will set out a competitive strategy for regaining the initiative. The clue is in the name. It will better integrate our national levers of power to regain strategic advantage, leveraging the formidable international influence we can exert with our allies. It will preserve the best aspects of the old while shaping the emergence of a new order, and defence and the armed forces have a critical role to play. The announcement of a £24.1-billion uplift in spending is an emphatic statement of intent. Alongside investments in modernisation of our conventional fighting force – our ships, armoured vehicles, aircraft, all so critical to our commitment to Allies and partners – we will be guided by a laser-like focus on tackling the emerging threats of the future, shaping different armed forces. We will sharpen our competitive edge, particularly in space and cyber and fields like Artificial Intelligence. The UK Armed Forces will be more active, more dynamic and more global, contesting incursions in the so-called grey zone. And they will be more integrated.

The three traditional services will have a critical role operating in this

grey zone as well as providing the foundations of our fighting power. But at the heart of this modernisation lies the more discreet organisation I head, known as Strategic Command. From our headquarters in Northwood, Strategic Command brings together everything that integrates the armed forces – the enabling information age technologies, cyberspace, space (with the RAF), Intelligence, Special Forces, our force design brain and the underpinning support base.

This starts, first and foremost with Defence Intelligence – the expert assessment of intelligence and risk that allows us to identify long term opportunities for competitive advantage, whilst mitigating vulnerabilities, and further strategic surprise. We won't always get this right, so our approach will be guided by constant experimentation and rapid prototyping of new ideas.

Secondly, we need to compete in Information Age warfare. Eric Schmidt, the former CEO of Google, told the US Senate that 'the sources of battlefield advantage will shift from traditional factors like force size and levels of armaments, to factors like superior data collection and assimilation, connectivity, computing power, algorithms and system security'. Our rivals agree and are investing accordingly. In the UK our research sector gives us an edge. So we are building a digital backbone for Defence and exploiting cloud computing. And we will deliver on the PM's vision of an AI Centre to exploit the advantages of increasingly autonomous systems.

Third we will grow our grey zone capabilities to defend ourselves and our allies and regain the initiative. We are growing the National Cyber Force with GCHQ to become a world class responsible cyber power while securing our own networks and data and regain the edge in electronic warfare. This year for example we are providing cyber defences and cyber effects for HMS Queen Elizabeth's global deployment. And we will transform and expand our special operations forces, maintaining their counter-terrorism skills while growing their ability to work with and train reliable partner forces around the world.

Our ambition is to be the leading integrated force in the world. We have long been among the most effective when it comes to combining our forces – air, land and sea. To these we must now add cyberspace and space, both growing our capabilities in these new domains and designing the force to be seamlessly integrated. A soldier on the battlefield will be able to instantly draw on space-based surveillance, cyber defences and sensors, to craft the precise response needed, whether that's ordering a swarm attack by drones or a long-range precision strike from a ship or aircraft – all without skipping a beat. The ability to pose multiple dilemmas for our adversaries and radically increase our speed of action and decision making, through AI, will make us a respected competitor a more effective ally and will deliver modern deterrence for our nation.

Sooner or later, soldiers, sailors or air force personnel will find themselves in the sort of ugly gritty fight we were caught up in on 28 June 2007. It is an article of faith for all of us leading defence that we must do better to make sure that at the strategic and the tactical level we have

given them the tools to seize the initiative. The Integrated Review sets us on that path.

Resolution enables AMISOM continue vital security support to Somalia

The United Kingdom welcomes the unanimous adoption of this resolution, which enables AMISOM to continue its vital security support to Somalia in 2021, whilst creating the space for a constructive conversation between all partners about the shape of a future mission.

The longstanding deadline at the end of 2021 for the Somali authorities to take on greater security responsibility from AMISOM represents an important step forward in our shared objective to build long-term security and stability in Somalia. It is an opportunity to recognise the success which AMISOM has had in helping to rebuild Somali capacity, whilst acknowledging the continued need for the African Union to provide security support.

The United Kingdom thanks Security Council members for their engagement on this resolution, which is a product of extensive consultation with all members of the Council, Somalia and the African Union. On the central issues, the resolution is balanced, takes into account a wide range of views and reflects consensus. It sets out a timeframe for the next ten months to build on existing efforts towards achieving security transition objectives, including the development of a revised Somali Transition Plan and the publication of the United Nations-led Independent Assessment on future support to Somali security. In addition, it clearly outlines what more is required, including the importance of a clear steer from the African Union on its objectives for a future mission.

Our role as penholder is to consult and to bridge gaps where they appear in order to achieve consensus. We consulted widely and inclusively while drafting the resolution and throughout the four-week negotiating process. We acknowledge that the issue of United Nations assessed contributions has proven challenging to find consensus on. We emphasise that the resolution does not rule anything out and creates time and space for all Council members to continue discussing this issue.

Somalia is, as we all know, at a critical juncture. For fourteen years, AMISOM has played a central role in enabling peace and security in Somalia. We commend the brave troops and police of AMISOM for their work. Today, the Security Council has come together to adopt a resolution which sends a strong signal of support to Somalia.

Addressing food insecurity in the 21st century

Thank you, Madam President, and thank you also to the Secretary-General. And may I put on record our thanks to both Mr Beasley and Ms Bucher for briefing us so comprehensively.

As we've already heard from many colleagues on the Security Council today, it is undoubtedly a tragedy of epic proportions. But here we are in 2021, here we are in the 21st century, that we still need to confront famine and that our tasks – and let us be clear about that – is so much harder by those who pursue division, those who pursue conflict. And we must work together to address this immediate priority.

And that is why, Madam President, the United Kingdom wholeheartedly welcomes the United States' initiative to bring this vital issue of conflict and food security to the Council today.

The situation is grave. There are no other words for it. Listening to your words, you talked of the raw humanity of the situation, the human suffering unfolding in front of us. I assure you that resonates with us all.

Right now, famine is likely occurring in many parts of the world, but it's self-evident to us all, in places such as South Sudan. In Yemen, more than 16 million people face a very, very blight future in terms of starvation, likely death in the first half of this year and, as the Secretary-General Guterres has warned us, likely we are on the brink of the worst famine the world has seen in decades.

Many of the countries on this Council's agenda we know that conflict, as has been said this afternoon, is a primary driver of food insecurity and famine risk. We know that people affected by conflict are less able to source food and less able to buy it.

We also know tragically that armed groups use starvation bluntly as a weapon of war and see humanitarian assistance as fuel for their enemy. They wilfully disregard their obligations under international humanitarian law. They regard humanity as insignificant.

We know that COVID and climate change compound this desperate situation.

So this Council must redouble our efforts to break the cycle of armed conflict, which drives and sustains humanitarian crises around the world. And together, as the United Nations, we must do all we can to use the full range of tools at our disposal to prevent and end conflicts.

UN Security Council Resolution 2417 focuses the Council's attention on

conflict-induced food insecurity in countries both on and off our regular agenda. Many of us, as we've heard from colleagues today; many of us, including myself, of the United Kingdom; most recently our Special Envoy on Famine Prevention and Humanitarian Affairs have visited these countries directly. We've spoken to people about the brutal realities they face on a daily basis.

Naming a few conflict situations or country situations, in South Sudan, where famine is likely to take root in Western people, 60 percent of the country's population face severe levels of food insecurity. Fundamentally, the Government of South Sudan must do more to foster peace and stability and to de-escalate subnational conflict. And across the United Nations system, we need to work harder, we need to coordinate better if we are truly to remove the barriers that stop us getting food to those who need it.

In northeast Nigeria, over a decade of conflict has left more than 1.2 million people unable to access basic humanitarian assistance. The horrifying recent attack by armed opposition groups in Dikwa that affected civilians and targeted humanitarian workers is utterly and totally unacceptable. Attacks like these have made the food situation, the humanitarian situation, so much worse, and therefore we need to work together to improve humanitarian access on an urgent basis.

As Mr Beasley highlighted – indeed, Madam President, you yourself mentioned – across Ethiopia, around 18 million people will require humanitarian assistance in this year alone. In Tigray, humanitarian access remains hugely constrained. Four months of violence has resulted in forced displacement, human rights violations, sexual violence allegations and the collapse of essential basic services. The risks of extreme food insecurity are significant. An estimated 4.5 million people, 80 percent of the region's population, will need emergency aid over the coming months. Urgent action is needed to avert a major catastrophe.

And these are just a few of the many tragic situations currently faced around the world.

UN Security Council Resolution 2417 needs to be implemented more effectively. Colleagues, famine is not, as we've heard today, inevitable. In line with UN Security Council Resolution 2417, the United Kingdom stresses three immediate actions that we can take to prevent famine and the suffering caused by food insecurity.

Firstly, we need to improve reporting and evidence of food insecurity and famine risk, including on who is blocking humanitarian access and, importantly, how they are blocking. Reporting needs to be swift and timely so that this Council can take action before it is far too late.

Secondly, this Council must act on the reporting it receives. Words are simply not enough. Despite the provisions in Resolution 2417, the Council has failed to encourage any independent state investigation into the use of starvation of civilians as the of warfare.

And finally, and importantly, we also join the voices of those who say that the Council must hold to account those responsible for driving conflict-induced food insecurity, and that includes the use of sanctions against those who restrict humanitarian access.

In conclusion, Madam President, conflict is escalating famine and millions upon millions are suffering. If we are truly to prevent the starvation of more innocent women and men and of course, tragically, children, it is vital that the UN reporting on this situation leads to Council action. We therefore welcome the announcement of the Famine Task Force today to more strongly coordinate the aid effort on famine protection. And we therefore look forward to working together with all of you – our colleagues, our friends, our fellow Council members, and across the UN family of nations – to bring about the actions that can properly respond to the harrowing evidence we have heard today from our expert briefers.

The question often asked is why. Put simply because it matters. Lives literally depend on it. Thank you, Madam President.

[Hong Kong: G7 statement on Hong Kong electoral changes](#)

Press release

G7 Foreign Ministers have issued the following statement on China's decision to erode democratic elements of the electoral system in Hong Kong.



We, the G7 Foreign Ministers of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States of America and the High Representative of the European Union, are united in expressing our grave concerns at the Chinese authorities' decision fundamentally to erode democratic elements of the electoral system in Hong Kong. Such a decision strongly indicates that the authorities in mainland China are determined to eliminate dissenting voices and opinions in Hong Kong.

The package of changes approved by the National People's Congress, combined with mass arrests of pro-democracy activists and politicians, undermines Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy under the "One Country, Two Systems" principle. The package will also stifle political pluralism, contrary to the aim of moving towards universal suffrage as set out in the Basic Law. Furthermore, the changes will reduce freedom of speech which is a right guaranteed in the Sino-British Joint Declaration.

The people of Hong Kong should be trusted to cast their votes in the best interests of Hong Kong. Discussion of differing views, not silencing of them, is the way to secure the stability and prosperity of Hong Kong.

We call on China to act in accordance with the Sino-British Joint Declaration and its other legal obligations and respect fundamental rights and freedoms in Hong Kong, as provided for in the Basic Law. We also call on China and the Hong Kong authorities to restore confidence in Hong Kong's political institutions and end the unwarranted oppression of those who promote democratic values and the defence of rights and freedoms.

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[Response to media coverage on National Audit Office report on the Culture Recovery Fund](#)

Contrary to media coverage of a recent report by the National Audit Office, over 80% of grants awarded in the first round of the Fund have been paid to successful organisations with the final instalments scheduled to be paid in early April. 85% of loans to the value of over £149 million have also been paid to successful organisations since February. This means that the funding designed to support organisations up until April has now gone out.

Responding to recipients' needs

We designed the fund to respond to the changing needs of recipients against what has been an unpredictable public health picture. Organisations across the sector asked us for this flexibility and we have given them the freedom to spend their awards in a timeframe that works for them.

Grant awards were structured in instalments to give sustained support throughout the financial year to help recipients cover covid-related costs as they arose.

Some money was held back for a second round so that we could reflect the

latest public health position. Where organisations have needed to, we have allowed them to delay their award to the spring or early summer to cover reopening plans that have been pushed back.

We have always been clear that no eligible organisation will be allowed to fail as a result of the payment schedule and none have. We acted quickly to save grassroots music venues with emergency funding to help them survive until the first Culture Recovery Fund grants were awarded.

Throughout, any organisation at risk of imminent collapse and other severe financial risks has always been able to contact the delivery bodies about emergency payments.

Safeguarding public investment

Whilst funding has been distributed at pace, it is right that we have put in place the safeguards that taxpayers would expect to see in such a huge investment.

DCMS and our arms length bodies, Arts Council England, Historic England, the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the British Film Institute, overseen by a high calibre independent board, have worked flat out with rigorous but proportionate assessment and due diligence processes to pay organisations as soon as possible whilst stewarding public money on behalf of the taxpayer.

We have been clear throughout that funds should only be for organisations at risk of financial failure, so that taxpayers money is not used to support organisations that can manage without it.

We have also put in place other eligibility criteria and checks to target funds and to mitigate the risk of fraud or error. To ensure the time spent on checks did not lead to any eligible organisation failing, we created a fast track 'Organisations in Distress' route for those needing urgent support.

More support still to come

Since the National Audit Office's report was compiled, hundreds of millions of pounds more in support has been made available to the cultural sector. Applications are being processed for a £400 million second round of grants and loans and decisions on these awards will be made imminently. An additional £300 million announced at the Budget will help the hardest hit reopen and recover. This brings direct support for the culture sector during the pandemic to almost £2 billion.

Whilst more help is coming to see our cultural sectors through reopening and recovery, organisations have also benefited from other support measures since the beginning of the pandemic. We have announced that the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme will continue until September, with a fourth and fifth grant. This provides certainty to business as the economy reopens and continues to be one of the most generous self-employment income COVID support schemes in the world. Through this crisis, the government will spend over £33 billion supporting those in self-employment through this scheme.

The clear payment schedule of Culture Recovery Fund awards gives recipients the confidence to plan for the future and reopening. It is thanks to this unprecedented package of support that thousands of organisations and institutions, both big and small, have been saved so that the thriving cultural life of our nation will still be here after the pandemic.

The London Theatre Company has received a loan from the Culture Recovery Fund.

Nick Starr, co-director of London Theatre Company and the Bridge Theatre, said of the support:

The grants made by the Culture Recovery Fund have been an essential intervention in the crisis that has befallen the performing arts. The CRF Repayable Finance Scheme is a further vital infusion of cash into a sector struck hardest by Covid, and we are very grateful to be included amongst these loans.

We're determined to do all we can to generate employment for the freelance community and joy for audiences. People are going to need ever more the stimulation of live performance and we're determined to make our contribution as energetically as we can.

We have a strong and constructive working relationship with the NAO, as was the case during the drafting of this report. We look forward to continuing this as we work hard to support our cultural, arts and heritage institutions in the weeks and months ahead.