

What do we want our army to do?

Listening to those who lead and manage our armed forces, I have been struck by the significant change in the army as we detach ourselves from Middle Eastern conflicts. During the Blair/Brown/Cameron years the UK made a substantial military commitment to Iraq and Afghanistan, as allies of the US and as part of a wider coalition of the willing. The UK accepted the US analysis of the need to respond to the atrocity of 9/11 by seeking to root out terrorists from some parts of the Middle East, and sought to assist in defeating terror groups in the interests of establishing more stable democratic states. Over the years of these conflicts the army had to direct its training to the difficult task of counter insurgency, to fighting with restraint in troubled urban environments. It required a change in equipment as well, with arguments over the number and effectiveness of armoured personnel carriers, and over the best style of military policing of areas with a terrorist presence or threat.

The nation rightly remained strongly loyal to our armed forces, who usually showed bravery, restraint and professionalism in difficult circumstances. The political nation was more divided and unsure about the remit given to our armed forces, and over the wisdom of these military interventions. It was one thing to support troops who did succeed in moving terrorists out or in stabilising an area. It was another thing to be able to assist in the creation of a stable democratic system, a good government and a more flourishing economy to replace the terror ridden troubles of many communities. The interventions did not create stable prosperous democracies quickly, and maybe could not do so. If there was a failure it was a failure of politics, or an over reach by the West who may not be best placed to transform the domestic politics of the area. I was one who thought we intervened too much. I also thought we asked a lot of our young soldiers on the front line, who had to show great restraint when afraid of attack, unable to speak the local language and finding it difficult to identify who the enemy might be amongst a civilian population they were trying to protect.

Today we need to ask what do we want our army to do now? To be ready, seems to be the answer. It needs to be ready in case danger or need arises. That makes training difficult, as you cannot be sure what you are training to do. Some in the army think it makes managing the army more difficult. Providing a positive and exciting career if you all you do is train is a challenge. Whilst most of us like peace and are pleased to be spared the risks and dangers of war, some who join and train to be soldiers do so to be placed into dangerous situations where their actions can make a difference.

The last thing we should want to do is to find a dangerous situation to put our troops at more risk. It is the highest success if having an army there are no wars for it to fight. I am one who thinks the main reason we have a good professional army is as an insurance and deterrent. What do I most want the army to do? To persuade any adversary that it is not feasible to take military action against our home islands and protectorates. My second wish is to have armed forces that are strong enough and professional enough to be

able to intervene many miles from home should need arise. That capability means our diplomacy has teeth, and makes negotiated solutions more likely. At the end of any war you need to sit down and organise the peace, establish a new rule of law, and allow self government where you have intervened with force on the ground. If you can sort things out like that without the war, we are all better off. As a member of the Security Council of the UN and a country with interests around the world, we do need to be able to project and use force away from home.

So I invite you to tell me what you want our army to do.