

What kind of defence policy do we want?

Under Labour and the Coalition the UK made frequent use of its defence capabilities in the Middle East, alongside Presidents Bush and Obama. In the last couple of years the UK has been rightly more cautious about using military force in tense and difficult civil wars, as has the USA.

There has been a general shift in western thinking away from sending in troops to police war torn territory on the ground. Instead smart western weaponry has been used in support of other local and regional forces attempting to influence the outcome of these conflicts. The West has used a variety of manned aircraft, smart bombs, missiles and drones to kill people on the ground and damage property in support of ground forces provided by others.

This development of western policy towards the Middle East is leading to new thoughts about what kind of forces the West will need in future, as the weapons designers and manufacturers are placing more emphasis on unmanned systems, remote control and robotics. I wish to explore how the UK can respond to these changes.

The first question to answer is what should be the UK's policy aims.

First and foremost must be home defence. By a combination of our diplomacy, foreign policy and military deterrence we wish to keep our islands from military threat. We also need to make sure we have the force needed to defend ourselves in the unlikely event of a threat materialising.

Second comes our contribution to NATO. NATO remains the West's prime mutual defence alliance. The UK wishes to contribute properly to this, and to benefit from the protection the offer of mutual support gives us.

Third, the capability to go to the aid of territories and countries within the UK family, as we had to for the Falklands in the 1980s.

Fourth should be the ability to join international coalitions of the willing in pursuit of UN aims. There will be times when the UK should join forces to resist an invader or to counter the illegal use of force somewhere in the world. As a member of the Security Council the UK has to be willing to contribute to missions where we have the resources and interest to do so.