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Transcript

Twenty-first Century Armed Forces – Agile, Useable, Relevant

2009 Annual Defence Lecture

General Sir David Richards, Chief of the General Staff (2009-)

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General Sir David Richards:

May I start by thanking Paul Cornish and Chatham House for inviting me to give this prestigious address. I have only been in role for 2 and a half weeks so whether I am qualified I am not certain – but it is a great pleasure to be here. When I joined the Army early in 1971 I did not anticipate being CGS and being in a position to do such things. Neither, incidentally, did my friends!

I make no apologies for the fact that this speech is a development of others I have made on the same subject. I sense we are slowly winning the argument and getting there but key elements bear repetition. Before I get into the meat, let me give you the headlines:

The character of war in my judgement is fundamentally changing:

- Globalisation is increasing the likelihood of conflict with non-state and failed state actors, and reducing the likelihood of state on state warfare.
- State on state conflict will not disappear – but its character will change, becoming more asymmetrical, complex and mosaic.
- Our armed forces and other national security instruments across government must get better at tackling the challenges of this new security environment.

  This includes re-engineering non-military means to be relevant and effective security tools and:

  Ensuring our armed forces are relevant to emerging security challenges and the increasingly sophisticated adversaries we will face.
- To succeed, we must examine rigorously what capabilities we need and where we must rebalance our investment in Defence – and rebalance we must, not from one service to another but from one type of conflict to another, for we simply can't afford to retain a full suite of capability for all eventualities.
- I also want to speak about Afghanistan, for the outcome there will have a profound effect on future conflict and geo-politics. And whilst not a blueprint for the future – and it must not be seen as such – Afghanistan does offer a signpost to the future, which we must heed.

Successful armed forces adapt and transform at a pace faster than their potential enemies. Cromwell, as an example, unlocked the synergy of

discipline, training, new equipment and new tactics in a manner that left the Royalists looking like barely gifted amateurs. This process can be found throughout history although rarely is it accelerated with the vision and drive of a Cromwell.

In the 1920s, as an example, Basil Liddell-Hart and Boney Fuller struggled to persuade soldiers everywhere that the era of the horse had been replaced by that of the tank and aircraft, even though both had been in service for a number of years. It was during this period that Liddell-Hart noted ruefully that 'there is only one thing harder then getting a new idea into the military's mind and that is getting an old one out!' We must not be accused of having fallen into this trap by the soldiers of 2109.

Self evidently, although not yet culturally internalised, there has been a radical change in the way wars are fought. We cannot go back to operating as we might have done even 10 years ago when it was still tanks, fast jets and fleet escorts that dominated the doctrine of our three services. The lexicon of today is non-kinetic effects teams, Counter-IED, information dominance, counter-piracy, and cyber attack and defence, to give you just a feel for the changes. Our people are used to operating in a complex combat, joint, interagency and multinational environment in which success is measured in terms of securing people's confidence instead of how many tanks, ships or aircraft are destroyed.

The pace of technological change is bewildering. It has left every nation's mainstream procurement process struggling to deliver equipment that will remain relevant against more agile opponents satisfied with cheap and ever-evolving 80% solutions. Too often, we still strive for hugely expensive 100% solutions – 'exquisite solutions' as Secretary Gates calls them – relevant only in a traditional hi-tech state on state war but that risk being out of date before they are brought into service. In sum, tactical, operational and strategic level success in today's environment is beyond that of a military that draws its inspiration from visions of traditional state on state war, however hi-tech in nature.

But what of the next era, assuming success in Afghanistan gives us the confidence and moral authority to get there? And be quite clear that success in Afghanistan is truly a grand strategic issue for our nation. Why? Well fundamentally, as the Prime Minister argued persuasively recently, it is vital to our domestic security that we do not allow Afghanistan to once again become an exporter of AQ inspired terrorism or give such people a 'victory' that could inspire a much bigger threat still.

But let me elaborate:

- First of all, a word on the long-suffering people of Afghanistan. Incidentally I returned from Afghanistan and Pakistan only yesterday morning. For two generations they have been through hell and back. This, their reward for playing a key role in the collapse of communism and the liberation of millions of people in Eastern Europe; something for which they got precious little credit then or since. Not enough to go to war over, certainly, but a reinforcing factor nevertheless.

- The Taliban, who range from hard line militant Islamists through to drug barons and alienated tribal chiefs, compose a very small part of the population; with their supporters, around 5% at most. This is not some Che Guevara-like band of popular freedom fighters. Their leaders are ruthless fanatics who will stoop to anything in the pursuit of power, readily killing by design men, women and children in order to terrorise communities into submission.

- Over 80% of the Afghan population still doggedly want their government and the International Community to succeed, although their patience with our failure to meet the expectations of progress we ironically have done much to create is undoubtedly beginning to flag.

- Militarily, and despite a myth propagated by some, this war is being fought by 41 nations under a UN mandate, in concert with a democratically elected Afghan Government, and with the vast majority of Afghans not against them.

But many I know are sceptical that we can succeed. I am an optimist: why? First of all, let me remind you that most of you only 18 months ago had written Iraq off: a disaster, about to implode. Yet today, most are cautiously optimistic. We knew the ingredients for success but it took us time to discover the correct formula.

The ingredients for success in Afghanistan are similar, but we have not yet confirmed the correct formula for that country. I believe, under the catalyst of President Obama's leadership, and with General McCrystal doing the detailed work in Kabul for him, that we will soon get the formula right in Afghanistan too. US Secretary for Defence Bob Gates recently said that America cannot afford not to succeed there.

We should be part of that process, preserving our relationship with the USA but, more importantly, seeing through this thing we started courageously and meeting the expectations of the vast majority of Afghans who, despite their frustrations with the speed of progress, remain doggedly supportive of our effort and universally opposed to the hope-less future offered by the Taliban. It is for this reason that the people of the Swat valley, once exposed to Taliban rule, have so enthusiastically welcomed the Pakistan Army into their Valley.

There are some that question whether a victory for the Taliban would lead automatically to a resurgence of AQ inspired terrorism in the UK and other western countries. I ask you this, can you be certain that it would not? Historically it happened, the relationship between the two today is just as strong, and we should not be naïve about favours being called in and granted enthusiastically in the heady aftermath of victory. And add to that the hugely intoxicating impact on extremists world-wide of the perceived defeat of the USA and NATO, the most powerful alliance in the history of the world and the debilitating impact on these countries. Anything might then be possible in the extremists' eyes and that's what we should expect, despite the skill and courage of our police, intelligence and security services. Add to this the dangers inherent in the spread of further instability to a nuclear armed Pakistan. Plus the alienating and potentially catalytic effect on millions of Afghans who have placed their trust in the West only to have that trust shattered.

On a different note entirely, factor in the enduring grand strategic impact on the UK's authority and reputation in the world of the defeat of the British Armed Forces, and its impact on public sentiment here in the UK.

Our Foreign Secretary David Miliband recently summarised his views on Afghanistan with these words: 'What we are doing in Afghanistan is incredibly important. For the next 3 to 5 years it will dominate our foreign policy. It will be the defining issue for the next government. It is the laboratory of so much that we will be doing in the future'. For this reason, the Defence Secretary and the Chief of Defence Staff have made it very clear that Afghanistan is to be our Main Effort. We in Defence, and I sense across Whitehall, are going on a Campaign Footing, determined to deliver the success we all know is so important.

Yet, despite this, a natural caution sometimes constrains excellent people from full-bloodedly seeking to meet clear strategic intent. Why?

Drawing on the Foreign Secretary's judgement - his laboratory point - let me return to the broader issue of generic future conflict to try and shed light on this conundrum. There is a collective belief that historically most wars have been primarily inter-state in nature. Clear-cut victory was feasible and frequently achieved. It is this thinking that still too often dominates the development of armed forces. Now this may not be so wrong, in principle, if one believes that traditional state on state warfare is what it is all about and that the type of operations we are conducting in Afghanistan are aberrant. In fact, history suggests that such wars are the norm, certainly in the post-Westphalian era; whilst hugely important when they occur, state on state conflict is far less frequent.

Whether one chooses to accept this or not, I for one believe that our generation is in the midst of a paradigm shift, is facing its own 'horse and tank' moment if you like, born in our era chiefly but not exclusively of the global revolution in communications and associated technology. The result is that the way even state on state warfare will manifest itself has changed fundamentally.

If I am half right, those of us charged with the design and equipping of our armed forces need to do three things. Firstly to decide whether we believe conflicts with dissatisfied and violent non-state actors are here for the long term or an historical aberration?

Secondly do we believe that, despite globalisation and greater mutual inter-dependence, state-on-state warfare remains something for which we should prepare? And thirdly, if it is decided that our armed forces need to be capable of succeeding in both, would not the two types of conflict look surprisingly similar in practise.

If they were, and I believe tendentiously that there is a good case for thinking they might be, it would make the issue of preparing our forces much easier to agree on.

First of all, whilst globalisation has reduced the likelihood of inter-state warfare it has increased the likelihood of conflict with non-state or failed state actors. In today's environment, given the risks associated with the spread of weapons of mass destruction, climate change, and international crime, this is something that responsible countries have to confront more convincingly; both once engaged in such conflict but also in much more assiduously seeking to prevent them from occurring in the first place given the implicit threat to our national security. Only yesterday, the US Ambassador to Kenya

sombrely reminded us of the risk in not doing so in countries abutting Somalia.

So, Point One, while we are not bad at it, our armed forces need to become better still at this type of warfare.

I emphasise that to succeed this is Joint/Inter-Agency/Whole of Government business. Today it's a land-focused affair in Afghanistan. Tomorrow it will be in or just off the coast of a rogue state. Maritime and amphibious forces will play the dominant role. Or it could be in a central African state in which well trained indigenous forces are dependent for success on air support from other nations. But regardless of these scenarios, how we deal with the threat posed by violent extremism, often embedded in dangerously radicalised states, will be an issue that will dominate our professional lives. And while succeeding in that, we must concurrently and actively exploit the precepts underpinning the Comprehensive Approach to prevent copycat conflicts arising out of cultural and economic alienation in large parts of the world. Some are sceptical about the risks of such conflict developing and whether they will affect us. They are already occurring: I draw to your attention the bloody Naxolist insurgency spreading across parts of India.

This is an insurgency that has a sense of hopelessness and economic envy at its core, powerful instincts that today can be inflamed and communicated to other similarly dispossessed groups across the world at the touch of a button. It is this that makes the importance of winning the battle of ideology, of hearts and minds, so important. Only genuine improvements in the lot of the dispossessed and viscerally envious, will prevent such conflicts eventually affecting our own lives. And substance - not spin - is key to winning this vital information operation.

To achieve this, while placing much more emphasis on conflict prevention in the design of our armed forces, non-military activities must be given much greater weight. But they must be re-engineered as security instruments and properly integrated into strategy. Marriage allowances could be a more effective means of turning young Moslem males away from violence than bullets.

Jobs would prevent dispossessed African communities, with their Diasporas already reaching into the heart of our own societies, from responding to violent agitators and the attractions of international crime. And given the reach of dispossessed extremists, it is no good today a nation adopting what has been referred to as a 'defensive crouch' to deter or contain violence in other nations from affecting one's own. The case in principle for engagement

and prevention is stronger today than ever it has been and accords with most politicians natural tendency to ‘make a difference’ on their watch. Our statesmen need credible choices, both in preventing and in winning inevitable conflicts in the future.

But, Point 2, if I am right and non-state opponents should be our principal defence and security focus, inconveniently we cannot dismiss the possibility of state on state warfare either.

But what would such warfare actually look like? Would it really be a hot version of what people like me spent much of our lives training for? I wonder; why would China or Russia, for example, risk everything they have achieved to confront us conventionally? The social and economic costs of creating the scale of military capability required plausibly to succeed, even assuming we do not start to respond in like manner, are enormous. The presence of nuclear weapons reinforces a likely caution.

If such countries really want to cause us major problems surely they will first seek to employ other levers of state power: economic and information effects, for example? They have seen the Holy Grail. Attacks are likely to be delivered semi-anonymously through cyberspace or the use of guerrillas and Hezbollah style proxies. After all, it was Sun Tzu who famously reminds us that ‘supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy’s resistance without fighting’.

In other words, what I am suggesting, is that there is a good case for believing that even state-on-state warfare will be similar to that we will be conducting against non-state groupings.

So if I am right, Point 3 and the heart of my thesis, the golden lining to all this is that our armed forces can focus, not exclusively but focus, on a single version of conflict.

Whether one is fighting non-state actors in Afghanistan or proxies sponsored by a disgruntled major power there or somewhere else, the skill sets and weapon systems required will look usefully similar: in the past I have described it as a virtuous congruence, between non-state and inter-state war.

Some will respond by arguing that we cannot afford the ultimate risk of a return to traditional state on state conflict; that our capability and military culture should remain primarily based on such a possibility, while seeking to build a capability in new areas too. There are a number of flaws to this approach. Firstly, it seeks to bury the fact that we have to find the courage to

accept risk in the way we prepare for future conflict for one obvious reason: it is simply not affordable to do otherwise.

Secondly, those focused on hi-tech but traditional inter-state conflict often confuse their case by asserting the need to be seen for power projection reasons to possess impressive amounts of traditional combat power, failing to appreciate that an intelligent opponent will not be impressed by capabilities which can readily be made irrelevant through the adoption of asymmetric tactics or technology. It is an approach that we too must understand better and invest in more, if we are either to thwart such aims or succeed in achieving our own foreign policy goals in a highly complex international environment.

Those who seek to continue investment in traditional forms of conflict at the expense of the new fail to understand the degree to which inter-state dynamics have changed since the Cold War. Whilst reluctant to acknowledge the huge pressure on belligerent states to find cheaper and less risky routes to achieving their goals, and the concomitant ability of new technology to help deliver this, perhaps they will at least be persuaded that countries like the UK need only possess a deterrent scale of traditional war-fighting capability; one that reflects our stated policy of only going to war as part of the NATO alliance or, in a regional context, with the USA. I will return to this in a moment.

I must emphasise that I am not advocating the scrapping of all our aircraft and tanks to the point that traditional mass armoured operations, for example, become an attractive asymmetric option to a potential enemy.

With our allies, we need to retain sufficient conventional air, land and maritime forces to ensure tactical level dominance in regional intervention operations or enduring stabilisation operations and to deter, with allies not by ourselves, potential state adversaries.

The key point is that the scale of employment and the context in which conventional weapons systems may be used in the future will be quite different to what may have been the case in the twentieth century. Accepting this logic will free up resources needed for investment in other more likely forms of conflict. And because many of the skills are transferable, it will also go a long way to finding the money needed to allow our armed forces to contribute to important stabilising activity in fragile and failed states as well as to that Cinderella activity to which President Obama has drawn our attention recently, that of peace-keeping.

So are our Armed Forces geared up properly for future conflict? In one sense I am not as concerned as perhaps I have given the impression. The essence of a good navy, army or air force is that they have fighting spirit, and can impose their will on a skilled and violent enemy. Armed forces of this quality, with the agile and innovative leaders they breed, can with good training turn their hand to any type of conflict relatively quickly. I am in no doubt at all that our navy, army and air force is very firmly in this league. If you do not possess such fighting spirit, however good or hi-tech your equipment, you will not win against opponents who do, whether they are part of another states' army or Taliban style insurgents and however shoddy or out of date their equipment. So, from one key perspective, our fight in Afghanistan is the best possible preparation for any future conflict, whatever its nature. It is on this basis that, as General Martin Dempsey has written recently, armies will 'build leaders competent and confident in the joint, interagency, intergovernmental and multinational environment' too.

Much of what we need for the future is in today's inventory, but the scale and context in which it may be required must be rigorously examined. If technology and globalisation has materially altered the way inter-state and non-state wars will be fought, we need to change our historical priorities, especially if we are also to afford vital preventive stratagems. I will emphasise again that I am not suggesting for one moment that the UK should get rid of all its more traditional military capability. Far from it, but its scale should reflect the context in which it might be used or have value.

Importantly, in whatever operation in which we are engaged, we still need to be able to fight hard but cleverly so; within the context of a Comprehensive Approach whose constituent elements are viewed and resourced as the security instruments they should be. Crucially, we need to fully understand and exploit the tools of information superiority. And when procuring new equipment, we should exploit the agility and timeliness symbolised by the Urgent Operational Requirement (UOR) process. As many of you will have heard from the Secretary of State two days ago, much of what I have discussed here will be addressed in the Green Paper that will feed into the Defence Review.

If this, arguably at least our generation's horse and tank moment, is not gripped, our armed forces will try, with inadequate resources, to be all things to all conflicts and perhaps fail to succeed properly in any. The risks of such an approach are too serious for this any longer to be an acceptable course, if ever it has been. And as we look to how we must rebalance between types of conflict and reorganise our other national instruments of power to meet these

future challenges, we must remain absolutely focussed on delivering success in Afghanistan. This is our near future war, it is non-discretionary, and its outcome will have profound effects on what will follow. With the right formula, that puts the Afghan people and their security at its centre, I am confident that we will succeed.

And finally, but importantly, I am delighted to have been given the great honour of leading the outstanding men and women of the British Army and their families at this critical time – they are committed to the fight and to getting it right in the future - and I urge you to continue to support them.

Thank you.