

The Future of the British Army: How the Army Must Change to Serve Britain in a Volatile World

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James de Waal

Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon. Welcome to Chatham House. My name is James de Waal, I'm a senior fellow in the International Security Department here. The meeting today is going to be divided into two parts. We are going to be on the record for General Carter's opening remarks, and then for the question and answer session we are going to be under the Chatham House Rule. You are welcome to tweet during the first part of this – the part which is on the record – under #CHEvents.

Looking at what's going on in Britain at the moment, sometimes one gets the feeling that we are going through a quiet but actually quite significant period of change. A lot of the ways in which we run our country – healthcare, education, pensions, public finance, the employment model – is going through a period of quite significant change, including also a discussion about Britain's place in the world, its relationship with the EU and other things. The British Army is, of course, a great national institution, and is not immune from these changes and is affected by them – at least as much, perhaps, as some of the other things that are happening in the more strictly military sphere (the changes in the character of conflict, for example, that we've seen in Libya, the Middle East and now in Ukraine).

The man in charge of adapting the British Army to dealing with these changes is General Carter. He has spent much of the last 30 years engaged in Britain's various combat operations around the world, but also importantly – in an outbreak of logical planning in the Ministry of Defence – he was first asked to design the shape of the future army and then given the job, as Chief of General Staff, of implementing these changes. He's going to talk to us now about how things are going and where he thinks the Army might be ending up.

General Nicholas Carter

Thank, James. Good afternoon, everybody, it's a great privilege to be here in Chatham House. Not something I've done before so you'll have to excuse me as I break my virginity in here. The answer is that I'm going to do just that – I wasn't proposing to spend a great deal of time talking about the strategic context, because you can all read about that. I think for me it's encapsulated in one word: uncertainty. What I'm really going to do for the next half an hour or so is give you a sense of how the British Army is going to adapt in order to be able to deal with what I think is going to be that uncertainty in the future.

We started this journey – and my predecessor, Peter Wall, deserves a huge amount of credit for this – with a project called Army 2020, back in 2011. It was a project that necessarily started with a financial envelope and very much got after a structure. Much of that structure is underpinned by a concept, but what we now have the opportunity to do is to see it through to its more logical conclusion in terms of the concept with it, and learning some significant lessons from Afghanistan and Iraq as we do that. I'm going to talk to you about that journey, where we've got to on it and how I see it evolving over the course of the next two or three years.

I think the most important priority I have right now though is to restore our Army's readiness after Afghanistan. We bent ourselves significantly out of shape from 2007 onwards to be able to deal with the challenge that we were confronted with in Helmand. We learned a great deal from it and we've bred a generation of combat-hardened veterans. We've learned a lot of new skills. We've got a very interesting counterinsurgency equipment programme. But our sense of combined arms and our ability to integrate in that way, our ability to conduct expeditionary operations, our appetite perhaps to take the risks that come with some of the unlimited liability associated with that, and some of our core equipment programme, I suspect need attention as we look to new threats looking forwards. There are also concerns, I think, in

terms of what people are perhaps calling 'lawfare' and the extent to which we set the legal and political context in which we can release the potential of commanders at every level.

Britain's course though now I think is rather more nuanced than it was when I grew up in the Cold War. That's where I think this idea of defence engagement – or as we call it in the Army, persistent engagement overseas – is really important. We're piloting this as we come out of Afghanistan. It may surprise you to hear that some 93,000 troops were involved on some 300 commitments in some 50 different countries during the course of 2014, doing this very task of persistent engagement overseas and all that that means. This was a big lesson for me from Afghanistan: the sense of having insight and understanding before you arrive in a theatre of operations is fundamental. As Antonio Giustozzi puts it very well when he talks about the need for this and the fact that every generation has its follies, perhaps the folly of our generation has been to try and change the world without first studying and understanding it.

This business of being persistently engaged overseas provides you with the basis that you can then operate with agility and with precision. I think a lot of us looking in on what the French did in Mali have great respect for the insight and understanding that they developed over many years in that part of Africa and then were able to respond with agility and precision. It looked like they were taking significant risk but they weren't, because they knew what they were doing.

It also provides you with the ability to strengthen alliances and to build partner capacity. It provides you with the opportunity to enhance security, stability and prosperity. Of course, what has struck me significantly as I've taken over this job as CGS of the British Army is the extent to which we are a referenced customer, as industry describes it. A lot of people look to see what we're doing and then seek to copy it. A number of visiting chiefs of staff come to my office to see what we're doing and want us to help them and be involved. That's a really important part of our reputation, I sense.

What you also, of course, get from this is you prevent conflict, one of the four core purposes of our Army. You also demonstrate political commitment. I think it was the Polish chief of the defence staff who said the other day that a platoon of American soldiers to him is worth far more than a squadron of F-16s, provided they're based on his soil. A sense of political commitment is important.

But I think the other thing that's interesting about readiness is the relevance of us being ready at home now as well, whether it's being at short notice to deal with a commitment like the Olympics in 2012, or whether it's to deal with flooding, a fireman's strike or an ambulance driver's strike. We need to be ready for a range of different eventualities.

I also think at home we have an increasing role to play in terms of trying to integrate our society. I'll come back to that, because I think the relationship that the Army can have with ethnic minorities and all of that is really important.

The way we're looking at this is we believe we need to revisit our doctrine. We are espousing a new doctrinal approach that we're calling 'Integrated Action'. This recognizes that the character of conflict has changed in this information age in which we find ourselves. Manoeuvre is now multidimensional. It started being two-dimensional, with fire and movement. We introduced the third dimension, from air and artillery. I think we moved through manoeuvre in the electromagnetic spectrum. We now find ourselves, I sense, in an era of information manoeuvre. As Olivier Grouille put it very well the other day, Britain's enemies at the moment are fighting her by using a franchise of ideas. It is a truism that war is about minds, not stuff. It's much harder now to distinguish between defeat and victory. It's much more about the perception of those who are involved in this.

What our doctrine of Integrated Action seeks to do is once you've identified the outcome that you're seeking to achieve, you then go through a process of analysing the audiences that are relevant to the attainment of that objective, whether they're actors, allies or adversaries. You then take a view on what effect you need to achieve on those various actors. Then you look into your locker of methodologies, which will arrange all things from soft through to hard power, and you work out the best method of synchronizing and orchestrating those range of effects to impart effect onto audience, to achieve the outcome.

Commanders at all levels need to do that, but of course the full range of effects are probably going to be found at a higher level, in terms of our chain of command. We've bred a generation of people who instinctively understand that, through what they've had to do in 'armed politics' (as Emile Simpson puts it well) in Afghanistan over the last three to five years.

I think this also plays to why it is that we've introduced this formation that got a bit of a splash in the media a couple of weeks ago, called 77 Brigade. It's not new, it was a feature of Army 2020 when we announced the structure back in 2011. But what 77 Brigade does is it pulls together much of our force structure that's involved in employment of soft effect, whether it's the security-stabilisation group, the linkages we have through that to DFID, or whether it's psychological operations or the media operations group, who are increasingly learning much about how they apply social media to achieve an effect. But the point about 77 Brigade is it's going to advocate this approach of Integrated Action. In a sense, it is a new way of operating.

I think it plays into this idea of constant competition, which is my take on how the world is at the moment. It's what's been written a lot about over the weekend: *maskirovka*, as expressed by the Russians and espoused by my opposite number, General Gerasimov. I think at the tactical level, 77 Brigade is absolutely about getting the British Army to think laterally about how it achieves the effect I've described. But it is fundamentally optimized for the tactical level.

But we're also trying to think very differently about intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance. If you want to feed an effective process of integrated action, you need to have different information and you need to understand it in a different way, and it needs to contribute to this notion of fast power. That's why we've created a brigade called 1st ISR Brigade (standing for Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance Brigade). Again, a brigade that doesn't necessarily have a lot of force structure underneath it, but it is a method of corralling the other services and anybody else who may have the capability that will play to this idea of thinking about information differently. We need to breed a new generation of staff officers who instinctively understand that if you remove the weaponry from a Reaper platform, you'll get an additional 12 hours of endurance for an ISR task. That's a new yardstick. It's not the sort of thing that necessarily we'd been brought up to understand.

All of this bears on the structure of the British Army as well and, for me, the importance of the divisional level of operations. I'll explain that, because it's quite a technical term. To my mind, the divisional level is the lowest level where operational art is practiced and where this doctrine of Integrated Action will genuinely happen. It's where we plan and execute simultaneous tactical engagements, in a framework of often deep, close and rear operations. Importantly, it's the level at which I think, as an army, we would be prepared to war-fight. It's no coincidence that in 2003, when we invaded Iraq, and in 1990, when we dealt with Saddam Hussein in Kuwait, that was a division that went to war. The reason we do that is because it's commanded at a grown-up level, by a 50-year-old major general, and his staff are trained and educated to the right sort of level to understand the challenge that they have.

It's a spectrum. At one end, you have the full orchestra – the full orchestra as Slim described it, which is made up of a number of different sections. Of course, what happens is that the whole adds up to far more than simply the sections. To my mind, it's the standard whereby a credible army is judged. Americans have about eight of them and most of our peers in NATO probably have one or two of them. But it is the standard by which you are judged.

Increasingly though – this point about a spectrum – it is a capability as a headquarters in its own right, that is scalable, it's modular, and it's where this notion of integration will occur. If you look at what a British Army headquarters has achieved on the ground in Sierra Leone, it is just that. It is integrated. DFID, NGOs, medical capability and a range of other soft-ish effects, given the nature of the context in which it's been operating – and organized it to achieve a very successful operation on the ground in Sierra Leone. To my mind, it was one of the big lessons from Helmand, because what it also does is it provides the interface between the pressure you're going to get from the political space with what you need to do at the tactical level. In Helmand, where we deployed a brigade headquarters, it was very challenging for the brigade commander to manage the input from Northwood and London, the NATO chain of command, whilst at the same time having to fight a tactical battle on the ground.

Understanding the way in which you command and control these things at the divisional level, I think is fundamental to the credibility of our army, because that credibility as well is what is necessary if you want to be a credible deliverer of overseas capacity-building (this idea of persistent engagement). Those who are going to invite you to do that expect you to come with credible hard power at the back of what you do.

I think the next thing I would stress in terms of structure is the importance to us of NATO. I'm sure many of you have heard CGS say that before. But Headquarters ARRC (our ace rapid reaction corps) is now under command of the Army again. It provides us with a really important opportunity here: to be able to integrate effectively (in land terms) into NATO, in much the same way as our other NATO corps headquarters do it. It provides us with the opportunity to get stuck into the very high readiness JTF-Land, which the secretary of state announced we are going to step up to the plate for in 2017, and bring together a range of different partners to achieve the reassurance and deterrence effect that is necessary in the NATO readiness action plan over the course of the next two or three years.

It plays to an interoperability agenda which we need to press hard on. Again, big lesson that I learned from Afghanistan, when I took over my divisional headquarters there in 2009: in order to speak to the seven or eight task forces I had under my command, all of which were multinational, I needed seven different telephones. We moved on from that and we created something called the NATO Mission Network in Afghanistan. That means sharing data and communicating in interoperability terms. That's really fundamental to the future of our Army and to the future of NATO.

I think we also have an important complementary role to play in relation to the United States. That starts from being very interoperable with them but then, as a result of that, we are able to offer a framework into which our smaller NATO partners can plug effectively.

I think the other thing we need to think hard about is reconstitution and regeneration. That seems to me entirely sensible, given the nature of the uncertain world in which we're operating. I think it also plays to the importance of a word that I have not used for a long time: productivity. Given the nation's circumstances, it's important that we do deliver a productive outcome. That's why the Army Reserve is important to us. We should be clear though about what it is there for. What we've done is to pair it with our regular force structure. We've done that because our regular force structure is slimmed down in

certain parts of the Army and it will draw its resilience from the pairing relationship it has with the Army Reserve.

The point about the Army Reserve though is that the obligation if you join it is only for training, less some specialists. We are not going to use it regularly and routinely, as perhaps was suggested a couple of years ago. Rather, it is there in the event of a national emergency. That means it's much more straightforward, I think, for an individual to be a member of the Army Reserve. If you're a reservist, what you have to do is to try and balance an equilateral triangle between the employer, your family and your own thoughts on life. If that becomes an isosceles, you won't retain or recruit the reservist. So it's important to keep that in balance, and that means that it is sensible to talk about the obligation being for training only, unless you can afford the time as an individual to deploy with your regular counterparts. So it's there for a national emergency. The effect of us explaining it like that is beginning to have an impact out there in the countryside. The figures that were announced last week were positive in terms of the direction of travel.

But we do need to attend to the officer corps, and it is a fact that over the course of the last 15 years of campaigning, we've used the Army Reserve as a collection of individuals to back-fill our regular gaps. That has not been positive for the officer corps. A lot of work is going on at the moment to see how we can encourage reservist officers and how we can develop a career structure that is meaningful for them.

We have, importantly, reinvigorated the Army's regular reserve. Many former soldiers in the audience will remember that they have a statutory liability when they leave regular service, for up to 10 years, to be available in the event of a national emergency. Of course again, coming back to the point about productivity, we put around 7,000 people back into society every year. There's a lot of skills in there which are important to keep a handle on.

I think we've got to become smarter about our relationship with industry. There's been a lot of talk in defence circles about the idea of whole force, total support force, all of that. But the reality is that we can deliver military capability differently if we do so in partnership with industry. There's much more that we should be doing and it's a key aspect of what I want to do in terms of changing the way the Army operates over the next two to three years.

My number-one priority though as CGS, as it should be, is essentially about talent management. I acknowledge upfront that we have a manning challenge. Demography is changing. The traditional cohort whence we recruited – 16 to 25 years old, white Caucasian – is shrinking. The plain fact is to replace that, we will have a challenge in about five years' time that probably 25 per cent of our recruits will need to come from the black and Asian minority/ethnic communities. That requires us to think much harder about the way in which we embrace the consequences of diversity and the way in which we change the organization to be one that reaches out to all types of British society. Because if we don't do that, we won't have the necessary talent to be able to deliver what the nation requires in the future.

That plays also to women. We have a career structure at the moment which is fundamentally a male career structure. It has a number of break points which sadly encourage women to leave rather than encouraging them to stay. What we've got to do is to have a career structure that genuinely provides women with the opportunity to pull right through to the top of the Army, so that we maximize the talent that is available in 51 per cent of our society.

That requires us to get after our culture as well. It's not good enough that we still have significant number of complaints on bullying, harassment and discrimination. These are areas we've got to attend to if we are

genuinely going to be able to embrace the talent that I've described and get after our manning challenge looking forwards.

We also have a great opportunity. Defence reform has, for the first time ever, provided me, as a single service chief, with the opportunity to run my £9 billion budget (or my £90 billion programme, depending on which way you look at it). But that brings with it a great responsibility to operate differently. Again, you will have read in the media two or three weeks ago this idea of creating a modern general staff – not in the Prussian model, but about embracing, in a sense, the top end of the Army, training it and educating it differently, providing it with skill sets that may often be found outside rather than inside the Army, giving it a sense of being imbued by something that really matters for the ethos of the Army. It's the corollary of one of our great strengths, the so-called regimental system, which means so much at unit level and below. One of the great risks of the British Army is how that manifests itself beyond regimental duty. What I want to achieve is this effect where we have a general staff which absolutely understands its first loyalty to the corporate aspect of it, and that requires us to have a different approach to how we career-manage that cohort and how we maximize their potential.

That's one of the reasons why we have recently created something called our Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research in the former Army Staff College building at Sandhurst. We want to get after this idea of linking to Chatham House but also more broadly into think tanks, strategic studies institutes and into academia, so that we recreate this idea of soldier-scholars. I referred to Emile Simpson – he's an example of this. Wrote a tremendous book called *War from the Ground Up*, which I would commend to you, which analyses very clearly some of the key lessons about armed politics in Afghanistan. But encouraging more individuals to do that and to contribute to the debate is something that fundamentally will lead to greater rigour in our general staff and to better decision-making, which is absolutely at the heart of what we should be doing.

I think we're also learning much about leadership. We're leading a very different generation to the generation that my generation grew up with. They're more inquiring. They have a far greater expectation that the top of the Army will live by the same values that they live by. That's important too, because we shouldn't be applying our values and standards as a tool to encourage behaviour at the lower level – we should all be living in that way, and that is fundamental.

So these are some of the things that we're seeking to get after as part of the Army 2020 journey. It's going to see the headquarters at Andover operating in a different way. Importantly, it's going to get after the sorts of challenges that this uncertain world produces for the Army. It's being done fundamentally in a joint and defence context.

I see the Army's core purposes being about protecting the nation, fighting the country's enemies, preventing conflict (which I mentioned) and dealing with disaster. But of course, I think the point that people need to keep reminding themselves is that the same soldier who produces the answer to those four purposes is the same soldier who will rescue Mrs Jones when her house is flooded; it's the same soldier who will willingly give up his summer leave to protect people and guard them at the Olympic Games. It's the same soldier who will be there on a Friday evening when he's told that on Monday morning he's not doing what he thought he was doing, and actually he's going to go and drive an ambulance. It's the same soldier who will go and deal with the threat of Ebola without having any idea of what the risks are when he goes there.

That, to my mind, demonstrates absolutely the utility and the productivity of the British Army, whether it's regular or reserve. It fundamentally demonstrates the extent to which this institution is indispensable to the nation. Thank you very much.