

By Chris Newton
It has been a long, strenuous, and difficult summer in the Ministry of Defence. As part of the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR), it and the entire defence community has been grappling with two fundamental questions about the future. What will the future strategic environment look like? And what does this mean for our Armed Forces? There are those commentators who can, with a remarkable degree of confidence, say that they can predict what the future character of conflict will look like. Future conflict will be similar to the wars we have fought in Afghanistan and Iraq, and 9/11 was a significant date that heralded a new kind of warfare.
But is this certainty in predicting the future justified when history always teaches us to expect the unexpected? History does not follow a linear, pre-determined path; it is about men and women making choices between alternative futures and scenarios. A gunshot in 1914, for example, completely destroyed an entire European and world order. So we should at the very least be open to alternative scenarios and future pathways. Moreover, there is another significant date that has passed us by that could signal the change the world is about to face, and we could risk harming our future security and prosperity if we choose to ignore its significance.

The post-9/11 World
We have been living in what many commentators and analysts described as the 'post 9/11' world order. Its characteristics can be defined as follows: the main threat to 'the west' comes from non-state actors, mainly terrorist and other groups. The supremacy of the sovereign state is gradually being eroded; some analysts even predict their demise. And wars rarely take a conventional form. In order to be successful in the new evolving kind of 'irregular' warfare, western Armed Forces need to adapt and change radically.

The post-8/8 World
But the international system is evolving at a rapid pace. Two events have particularly struck me in recent years. The first was the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics. The spectacular display confirmed that China had truly arrived on the world stage and the rest of us could do little else than watch with fascination. The second event was the Russo-Georgian War of 2008. As Russian tanks rolled into Georgian territory, and as Russian aircraft pummeled the port of Poti, the West could do little else but watch. The world was changing. The US, Britain, and Europe would no longer set the international news agenda; other world players had now made their presence truly felt.

The Olympic Games opened on 8 August 2008. It became clear that Russia and Georgia was engaged in a serious conflict on 8 August 2008. Therefore, the date 8/8/08 could provide us an alternative indication as to how world affairs will develop in future. Some clarification is needed here. This article is not suggesting that a conflict with Russia or China is inevitable or even likely. But what is being argued is that these two events to explain more general trends in the international system.

The trends that characterises the 8/8 world are as follows: whilst non-state actors will continue to play an important role in the world, the supremacy of the sovereign states will not only remain intact, it will actually be reasserted. Competition between states will increase and take on a number of forms, especially economic competition and competition over resources. Much of this competition will be peaceful or diplomatically confrontational, but some of it will likely escalate into armed conflict which may take on 'conventional' characteristics.

The key threat to democracies will come from, as the academic Azar Gat and others have called them 'authoritarian capitalist powers', or 'pragmatic authoritarian states'. Like dictatorships in the past, many of today's authoritarian powers retain a degree of ideological motivation. They tend to be nationalistic and they would like to see the idea of democracy undermined through the promotion of what they see as the virtues of their regimes in parts of the world barely touched by liberalism. What makes them different is that

they remarkable possess a degree of pragmatism. They allow some degree of economic freedom or hold (albeit controlled) elections in order to gain some legitimacy in the eyes of the world. In short, they know how to play the game.

In this world order, as the events on 8/8 illustrated, western powers will have to contend with serious competition to their status, and this could lead to a loss of self-confidence. By contrast, the confidence of authoritarian regimes is increasing. North Korea has already tested two nuclear bombs, whilst Iran is still defiantly pursuing its own nuclear programme. And confidence is increasing to such an extent that some powers are starting to use force or have threatened to use force as a means of achieving their goals. Russia has attacked Georgia. In March 2010, North Korea sank the South Korean corvette ROKS Cheonan and stepped up its rhetoric against its neighbour.

9/11 v. 8/8

There are those in the 'post-9/11' camp who would argue that this is premature. To be sure, the threat from terrorism has not abated. US-Russian relations seem to be improving, despite the recent spying controversy. Moreover, Russia has its own problems with terrorism and separatist militias of their own, as the attack on the Moscow Metro in March illustrated.

It must be acknowledged that the international system is at a crossroads and events could proceed in any direction at the moment. Indeed, the course of history could change again if Al Qaeda takes control of a state such as Pakistan, just as history changed unexpectedly when the Bolsheviks took control of Russia in 1917. But all this uncertainty only serves to reinforce the central argument of this article. No international analyst is clairvoyant. And if some analysts can come up with plausible doubts as to why the 8/8 world won't materialise, others can make equally plausible arguments as to why the next war may not be like the Afghan War.

Implications for the Fox Review

This dilemma between planning for a post-9/11 or post-8/8 world lies at the heart of the SDSR debate. Those who believe the future will continue along the lines of the post-9/11 world say that that the Armed Forces should be configured only to fight 'wars amongst the people'. They argue that the defence review should recommend a radical reconfiguration of our Armed Forces which would include considering scrapping key conventional weapons systems and platforms as well as the nuclear deterrent.

But events in Iran and North Korea, for example, illustrate that the 8/8 thesis is something that defence planners cannot ignore and must be factored into policy making. Moreover, the likelihood that Britain will engage in another Afghanistan in the near future is reduced by its domestic political situation. The new government wasted no time in announcing a date for the withdrawal of combat forces in Afghanistan. From this, we can make a reasonable inference that the government will do all that can to avoid getting embroiled in another protracted insurgency.

Given this, we must really reconsider whether ditching capability 'we do not currently need' is sensible. Whilst it is absolutely essential that the mission in Afghanistan is successful, the defence review must also provide our Armed Forces with the resources to deter against any potential authoritarian state who wish to harm our interests. If the government truly believes there is life after Afghanistan, it must ensure that the country is prepared for what comes next.

So will SDSR ensure that the country is prepared? We will have to see. In an interview with Defense News Liam Fox said 'we must retain flexible, generic capability, able to adapt to the sorts of changes in the nature of conflict that we might have'. But he is also sceptical to any option that involved a balanced approach to cutting the three services. Cutting whole defence functions whilst at the same time ensuring that the Armed Forces maintains generic capability to combat a range of threats is going to be quite a challenge and it will be interesting to see how it will be achieved when the Defence White Paper is published.

The purpose of this article has been to

not necessarily argue that the world will definitely evolve into the 8/8 world order, but to merely to remind those who believe that the future is so certain that, actually, it is not. There is a realistic alternative to the post-9/11 pathway. For any government undertaking a defence review to discount the possibility that we are following the road towards the post-8/8 world order would be taking an enormous risk with our national security. This is not the time to be making potentially irreversible judgements that we may come to regret later. For by the time we come to the next war, the present war in Afghanistan will have been the last war; and in a potential post-8/8 world the world might have moved on.

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