

General Sir Nicholas Carter, the Chief of the General Staff is having a 'Condor' moment. Readers of a certain age will remember a 1970s tv ad for a certain brand of cigar.... The British Army is no longer involved in the all-consuming business of operations in either Iraq or Afghanistan. The process of reform set in train by the 2010 SDSR is still working its way through both the MOD and the Army. General Carter is determined that the British Army should be ready for its next challenge, wherever it comes from. To do so it must pause and reflect.

The headline for this year's RUSI Land Warfare Conference was 'The importance of adaptability'. It could be reinterpreted as 'continuity and change' (enough media references!). CGS has developed a reputation as a thinking fighting soldier as befits his heritage as a Rifleman. Now that he has assumed the top job, he wants to ensure that the Army looks hard at its business. The Land Warfare Conference was an opportunity to do just that, writes Nick Watts.

The themes explored at this event were the changing international arena, developments in technology and their combined impact on a large organisation. Speakers addressed the future character of conflict as well as the way organisations learn and adapt. Carter is determined that the lessons learnt the hard way in the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns are absorbed by the up-coming generation of leaders. The Chilcott report will no doubt criticize senior leaders involved in the Iraq campaign; Carter's response will be to show that the army has already begun the process of applying those lessons.

The nature of the challenge should not be underestimated. One speaker, reflecting on the lessons learnt so far from the recent campaign in Eastern Ukraine is that any future conflict will be "untidy, uncomfortable and unsettling." Another speaker referred to armies misunderstanding the kind of war they are fighting : A failing that befell both US and British armies in Iraq and Afghanistan. The ability of the US to adapt faster than the British Army is a reflection of the capacity in the US to draw upon both serving officers and academia to reflect on the campaign whilst fighting it. The much smaller British military lacked both the manpower and the intellectual horsepower to respond swiftly. It was observed that the Russian army retained its ability to think and plan even during times of economic difficulty, something which is now becoming very evident.

Once lessons are identified, they need to be transmitted throughout the organization. There was much learned discussion of group-think, feedback loops and loss aversion. It was agreed, however, that there was no easy way to predict the future with absolute certainty. The challenge for the emerging generation of leaders in the army will be to avoid becoming trapped by comfortable certainties. For the modern army this will mean relying on its tradition to supply the resilience to face future threats, but to embrace the spirit of past pioneers who encouraged the thinking fighting ethos.