

This year is redolent with anniversaries. The start of the First World War, D-Day and let it not be forgotten that 22nd June marked the 70th anniversary of the lifting of the siege of Kohima. A propitious year, it might be supposed, to consider the future of land warfare. The annual RUSI Land Warfare Conference held in central London, on 24 ♦ 25th June, addressed 'The British way of War' as a means of considering how the British Army will adjust to life after Afghanistan. Nick Watts was there and reports on the issues

The unspoken threat which needs the attention of senior military staff is not the increasingly turbulent world, but the impending Strategic Defence and Security Review in 2015. Additional uncertainty lies in the likely outcome of the General Election in May next year, with opinion polls predicting an uncertain outcome. It is always a dangerous time to be ending a campaign, just as the politicians decide to take a fresh look at things. The precedents are not good; the end of the Cold war produced 'Options for change' and 'Frontline First'. The result in both cases was reduced numbers and budgets. The 2010 SDSR was conducted in an atmosphere of intense inter-service rivalry in the face of acute economic austerity. The inevitable result was reduced numbers and budgets. The most immediate challenge facing the British Army, therefore, is its traditional foe ♦ the Treasury.

The conference theme was well chosen; how will the British Army fight future wars? The short answer seems to be as it has done since the Napoleonic era, in a coalition. Both Wellington and Montgomery understood this. The academic input from a panel of eminent historians and strategic studies professors gave the audience a good grounding in some of the concepts under discussion. A recurring theme seems to be the tendency of British governments down the ages to spend what they can get away with, as compared to the U S approach which has thrown money at the problem. Both approaches have their draw backs.

The current pre-occupation of the British Army is to recover from operations in Afghanistan, and to ensure that the Army 2020 structure is established. This is still work in process with units disbanding to 're-size' the army. The personnel and equipment challenges will both need careful management. Paradoxically an army that is making people redundant still needs to recruit. Moreover as the economy recovers and the lure of active operations declines, the army will need to exert considerable effort to stand still. The pressure to recruit ethnic minorities, given the army's recent history in this area, will also require careful management. Recent discussion about the role of women in the front line will also require subtle handling.

The outgoing Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Peter Wall, will shortly hand over the baton to the current Commander Land Forces Lt. Gen Sir Nick Carter. He comes with a wealth of senior command and staff appointments. He will also be responsible for the army's budget, under the new regime imposed as part of recent defence reforms. Alongside personnel the equipment programme will need managing. If the army is going to prepare for contingency operations, and possess battle winning capability, equipment will be key. The army still needs armour; both Challenger and Warrior will need up-grades. The equipment purchased under the Urgent Operational Requirement regime for Iraq and Afghanistan will need to be absorbed into the 'core' equipment programme for continuing maintenance. There will be a need to renew tactical communications, the medium weight armour programme, and Apache helicopters will also need up-grading.

If the army is going to fight as part of a coalition, it needs to be capable of sustaining an effort at a level that is useful. Recent pronouncements have indicated a divisional headquarters within a corps level, most likely with the US. The Franco-British Joint Expeditionary Force has been practising at company level, and seems to be bedding down well. Training for Brigade and Divisional level operations will require training exercise and this creates opportunities for defence engagement with friends and allies

to enable soldiers to work together. And then there is NATO. At a time when Russia poses a threat to European stability, conventional capability will need to be credible; but so will NATO's planning staff. This might pose a strain on British staff numbers as a call may go out for additional resources to beef up NATO HQs.

The 'British' way of warfighting will be a lot different from how it trained during the Cold War. Studies of how Russia acted during both the Georgian and Ukrainian crises shows that they are using the 'Maskirovka' tactics that were anticipated in the Cold War era. Operations will require information warfare and cyber experts both to project messages and to protect allied communications. Specialists such as these are likely to be drawn from the Army Reserve, a new kind of army. The support and depth maintenance needed to sustain heavy equipment will come from industry but operational support may come from sponsored reservists. This will not be 'dad's army' as the old style TA was often characterised, but a smarter more nimble force ready to fit into the new 'adaptable' brigades.

There is much for the new CGS to do. There will be many challenges for commanders to grapple with; personnel, equipment and budgets. But before the army can deal with these challenges, it will need to emerge from the 2015 SDSR unscathed.

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