

During the Peter Nailor Memorial Lecture on defence, Sir Richard Dearlove, former head of the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) gave a terse but incisive assessment of the Afghanistan situation from the UK point of view.

The British Armed Forces have been under-resourced, as a result of an eight year squeeze on defence spending by the Treasury.

This country's leadership has failed to explain satisfactorily what we are trying to do. Until recently, it has been at best half hearted. This is now changing but seems to be more a reaction to perceived domestic political damage.

The Taliban will up the pressure if they think the West is wavering, to force withdrawal.

For a satisfactory negotiated political exit, the military and political positions need to be secure. If this is done from a position of weakness, the consequences and costs to this country are likely to be far greater than those currently being borne by this country.

He differentiates between the Taliban, a militant Pashtun nationalist movement seeking a Pastunistan (which might incorporate parts of Pakistan, and reflects a plan considered by the British before Partition in 1947 but discarded under pressure from Jenna) and Al Qaeda, a nihilistic group with no realistic political aims (radical; uncompromising; unrestrained).

Pakistan is both part of the problem and part of the solution. But some Pakistan military officers still see India as a bigger threat than radical militant Islam.

This is a good moment for the UK to start correcting the deficiencies, and almost all of this can be done at a political level.