

An Analysis of the Chief of Staff of the United States' Air Force Speech to the 2010 RAF Air Power Conference, 18 June 2010

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The United Kingdom Government's Strategic Defence and Security review ("SDSR") is nearly upon us, and although rightly the Review will be mostly inward-looking, we no longer operate in isolation but in coalitions, primarily with the United States. What might this most important ally be looking for from us? In terms of the RAF we might have some clues. At this year's RAF Air Power Conference, held in London on 17 – 18 June 2010 under the overall heading "Meeting the Challenge", General "Norty" Schwartz, the present Chief of Staff of the United States' Air Force (CSAF), gave the keynote address under the title "Adaptable Air and Space Power for the 21st Century" . A review of his speech, looking for pointers as to what the USAF might be looking for from the RAF in the future is instructive.

The General's speech contained, in my analysis, three core themes: the character of the present conflict; the need for coalitions; and the roles of Air and Space Power. Before considering each in turn and what it might mean for the RAF, it is worth examining his opening comments. He started by drawing a distinction between what is effectively the nature of Air Power, that which is unchanging ("speed, range, flexibility and versatility") and its present employment, which is subject to the vagaries of the nature of the conflict and the technology of the day ("tailorable, timely and precise effects"). This, Schwartz suggests, requires military strategists to always be attuned to current realities and trends. Herein lies, I suggest, a hint that the view presented of the conflict in Afghanistan will set the template for some time; if that is indeed his intent then this has marked implications for the USAF and (potentially) hence for the RAF. The CSAF then highlighted the present fiscal constraint and suggests that all air forces face a particular challenge at present due to the confluence of complexity, uncertainty and austerity – an analysis with which few would disagree.

In the next section labelled "Strategizing for the 21st Century", General Schwartz more explicitly makes clear the suggestion that the present style of fighting will endure. He refers to the idea of "smart power" (a blending of the levers of national power that goes beyond the construct of Hard and Soft power) and calls for a whole-of nation rather than a whole-of government effort to surmount the challenges we face. Throughout the remainder of the speech he used extensive references to Afghanistan to reinforce these points; my personal analysis is that he is very much looking towards the Afghanistan-model of conflict predominating. If we in the UK were to subscribe to that same view it would have strong implications for the future force structure and capabilities not just of our Air Power capabilities, but broader across our Defence and Security capabilities.

The second theme that I have identified is one of coalition. Here he addresses not only the

obvious – coalition as we understand it from a purely military viewpoint – though coalitions in a wider and more nuanced sense. To gain understanding of the complexity of today's world and the style of conflict we presently experience, he calls for greater co-operative understanding of the contribution that Air Power can make, with the hint that we should share ideas, critical analysis and academic understanding better between air forces. He reinforces this suggestion later when he calls for frank and open exchanges, such as those at the Conference. The theme of coalition also encompasses his views on working more closely with Industry, not least in an era of decreasing budgets. But for me his most telling comment on coalitions is when he states that shortfalls can be met through teamwork. Here is, in my analysis, a transparent suggestion that the RAF still has a major role to play, but that we should seek niche capabilities that complement the incredible capabilities of the USAF (despite the CSAF's modest suggestion that the US cannot do everything by itself). When setting out our future direction as a Service, we perhaps may wish to dwell on this point.

However, it is the third of the themes I have identified that I suggest deserves the greatest attention: General Schwartz's analysis of the future roles of Air and Space Power. Within the UK we undertook some considerable analysis in 2008 and 2009 to re-evaluate what the RAF (?) saw as our core Air and Space Power roles and identified four roles that we saw as enduring: Control of the Air and Space, Air Mobility, Intelligence and Situational Awareness, and Attack. To what extent does the CSAF subscribe to this list, and what might that mean if we wish to remain capable of operating alongside the USAF?

The positive news is that the CSAF identifies the same four core roles, saying: "The United States Air Force, for example is particularly, suited, capable, and postured to perform with our Joint and Coalition partners in four particular areas: control of the air and space domains, as well as maintaining a substantial ability to operate in cyberspace; global precision attack; rapid global mobility; and worldwide intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance...". While we might initially be relieved, even flattered, that the USAF has the same analysis of the enduring roles as we do, there are a few pointers in this section of his speech and later, where he goes into each role in more depth, that warrant further scrutiny. The General makes specific reference to both space and cyberspace. The UK increasingly lags behind not only the US but also direct peers (France for example) in its space capabilities. We are heavily beholden to the US for our space-based enablers, without which we could not undertake present operations or aspire to an expeditionary posture. Against all the other challenges to the budget it is likely that space will again have to be placed low down the priority order, but our growing reliance on this domain and our high dependence on the US should give us cause for concern. Meanwhile, the US in general and the USAF in particular are forging ahead with their work on cyberspace. As we continue to exploit all the advantages of networking, we become ever more vulnerable in the cyber realm; while this has been recognised it is nevertheless significant that the CSAF should explicitly highlight this domain as one in which he believes his service is well "suited, capable and postured". Are we, or are we, as with space, going to become reliant on American good will?

That the CSAF refers to performing "with our Joint and Coalition partners" is pleasing, but also carries with it a burden. For while the USAF may be happy to operate with us, are we capable of operating alongside them? With American technology forging ahead at a seemingly

unstoppable rate, are we able, can we afford, to retain that advanced suite of technological equipment and skills that will truly allow us to operate fully integrated with the USAF across all four of the roles? Or is that time here when we admit that we cannot do so and either seek niche capabilities within the broader construct of each role (and thereby lose some sovereign capability in that field) or accept that we cannot operate at all in that area and rely on American generosity? Such thoughts would undoubtedly cause numerous long-dead Foreign Secretaries to turn in their respective graves, but I suggest that we should think very carefully about the implications behind the CSAF's invitation to continue to operate as a "Joint and Coalition partner..." with his Service.

There is, then, much about the CSAF's speech that is both pleasing to hear and more than a little flattering. In that respect, the links between the UK and the US clearly remain strong, and the relationship between the USAF and the RAF equally so. However his themes and the language he has chosen deserve careful scrutiny. Is the present operation in Afghanistan the correct model for future conflict on which we should base our long-term plans? Are we over-reliant on the US for our space and cyberspace capabilities? And above all, can we afford to keep up with the Americans in technological terms if we aspire to operate alongside them as full members of a coalition? Can we afford not to? Or should we seek some other contribution, such as seeking out niche capabilities that play to our strengths? Food for thought, not least against the backdrop of the Strategic Defence and Security Review, for if we cannot play our full part in terms of delivering effect, at what point does our military weakness outweigh our political usefulness? What price then the "Special" Relationship?

About the author:

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A copy of the text of General Schwartz's speech can be found at:

<http://www.au.af.mil/au/aunews/archive/2010/0513/0513Articles/CSAFSpeech0513.pdf>

i See either AP3000, Edition 4

([http://www.raf.mod.uk/rafcms/mediafiles/9E435312\\_5056\\_A318\\_A88F14CF6F4FC6CE.pdf](http://www.raf.mod.uk/rafcms/mediafiles/9E435312_5056_A318_A88F14CF6F4FC6CE.pdf)), or the 2009 Future Air and Space Operational Concept

([http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/8373350E-6958-4928-A409-E9C24F2226FF/0/20090901FASOC\\_2009UDCDCIMAPPS.pdf](http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/8373350E-6958-4928-A409-E9C24F2226FF/0/20090901FASOC_2009UDCDCIMAPPS.pdf)) for a further discussion on the four roles. It is worth noting, however, that these are not necessarily new: an examination of RAF doctrine of the 1920's reveals (albeit in the language of the time) an identical list.