

In an era of austerity, many are beginning to question whether the UK still has the ability to be a "force for good" on the global scene. One observer qualified to comment is Sir Malcolm Rifkind MP, who has previously held both the offices of Secretary of State for Defence and Foreign Affairs, and who is currently Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee. Addressing the level of defence expenditure, Sir Malcolm noted in conversation with Nick Watts of Great North News Services that it is best to keep a sense of perspective: "the adequacy of expenditure shouldn't be seen in a vacuum. It is a response to real or imagined threats to our security."

Armed forces are only one tool in a spectrum of Options. Quoting Frederick the Great Sir Malcolm notes that "diplomacy without arms is like music without instruments." The UK's capability to fight wars with UN approval where appropriate, must match the military capability of potential opponents. The UK with a population of some 60 million represents a small percentage of the world's population. Yet the UK still has third or fourth defence budget in the world. Taken together with a deployable capability, this gives Britain an influence disproportionate to its size.

Considering potential risks, the most commonly cited is the UK's ability to defend the Falklands. Sir Malcolm notes that the nature of the threat is now different. With an extended runway at Mount Pleasant the garrison can be reinforced "in hours not days." Moreover Argentine military capability was reduced, as a result of the collapse of the Junta. Argentina's armed forces are using much of the same equipment that they had in 1982.

Looking at state versus state security threats, Sir Malcolm notes that: "the area of the world which is most dangerous is the Far East." That is why the US is concentrating on that region, because Europe is relatively peaceful for the first time in its history. By contrast, looking at the Pacific Rim there are potential risks from North Korea, the China - Japan dispute over territorial waters and competing sovereignty claims, as well as the China - Taiwan question. In the same Asiatic region there is also the India - Pakistan dispute over Kashmir.

The UK's Five Power Defence arrangements with Malaysia, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand were not comparable to the security undertakings of, say, NATO. Sir Malcolm doesn't believe that there would be any call on a NATO operation in this region. The NATO operation in Afghanistan arose from the country becoming an Al Qaeda sanctuary. When there is a threat to its interests the UK needs to be able to respond "to the unknown and unpredictable."

Sir Malcolm's attention is drawn to the Middle East, North Africa and Levant through to Iran and Pakistan. This region is "hugely important to our security. Because there are governments here which sponsor terrorism." Considering the lessons of Libya, Sir Malcolm remarks that "When it came to precision bombing Britain and France had to go to the US. This is not remotely surprising. The assumption has always been that in this kind of military operation (using mostly airpower) the UK would be part of a coalition. Why would the UK and France develop capability which would be a distortion of their defence capability requirement for most of the time?"

Looking at the potential for future operations, one consideration has to be budgetary constraints and capability gaps. "Defence is expensive. The UK is one of the few countries that have state of the art capability. When the economy is under pressure difficult choices have to be made. The UK no longer aspires to the sort of global role we had in the past. We're not in that game. We don't see a permanent reduction in our role but we do have to make decisions which temporarily reduce capability. I would rather have egg on our faces because we have carriers without aircraft than if the contracts (to build the carriers) had to be cancelled, which would have been the end of our capability altogether. This way we have a few years of embarrassment but that capability will be restored."

Does this leave the UK exposed? What if rearmament were needed?

Sir Malcolm breaks this question down into its component parts. "What sort of threat are we talking about?" In the longer term, what threats might there be to our interests. For the present there is no direct threat ♦ but what of the foreseeable future? As a member of the Global zero campaign, Sir Malcolm believes in the multilateral reduction in nuclear armaments. This would include the UK in time, but would start with the nuclear superpowers. Russia remains a serious nuclear power. It is not a direct threat ♦ "but Putin has set back the democratic process and the rule of law. There are no proper political parties or civic society. A future Russia could have a right wing xenophobic Kremlin which controls nuclear weapons. We're talking within the next 30 ♦ 40 years; similarly the US might become isolationist and withdraw its nuclear umbrella from Europe." On this basis a renewed nuclear deterrent for the UK makes sense.</p> <p>
The relationship between the UK and US remains central to future strategic considerations. Sir Malcolm sees this relationship as being built around three pillars. The first is a credible and useable military capability. This will enable us to have a level of influence which our own interests benefit from. Apart from the US, the UK and France are the only powers which have both the budget and capability of using forces over strategic distance. This has not been seen from India or China; nor any country in South America or Africa.</p> <p>
The second part of this triad is intelligence, where the UK adds value. The third is political ♦ Britain is an Atlantic as well as a European power. "We are often likely to come to the same judgement as the US, as happened over Afghanistan."</p> <p>
With regard to the UK's involvement in security arrangements with its European neighbours, Sir Malcolm is adamant: "there isn't an institutionalised European defence capability. Most of the countries concerned don't have defence budgets worth worrying too much about; they are too small to be credible." Noting that former French President Sarkozy was very supportive of greater involvement in the Atlantic Alliance, Sir Malcolm notes: "Don't reinvent the wheel, we already have NATO."
Britain's approach to its international involvement has long been characterised as being both utilitarian and pragmatic. This is reciprocated by our partners. It is what Britain brings to the table that matters.</p>