

NATIONAL SECURITY IN THE 21st CENTURY – Part Three

By Paula Jaegar

British Army's Chief of the General Staff General Sir Richard Dannatt's proposed revision of the British Army falls divides three interconnected strands: Procurement; personnel; brigade structure.

Given what is politely referred to as the current economic climate, a new concentration and seriousness of purpose must be

brought to bear on the procurement process. Fundamentally, the big issue is: Do we aspire to ultimate capabilities, supertoys and dream weapons, or do we sign up for a route which is evolutionary, incremental and pragmatic, choosing platforms which are simpler, to which adaptations and upgrades can be added over time ? Dannatt comes out in favour of the latter.

His message is: We can live with the givens; budgetary constraints, flawed legacy projects, wavering learning curves. But no more delays or pursuit of fantasy. Decisiveness and sobriety are demanded. In return, the Army directorate has applied creativity and imagination to come up with solutions which might otherwise be provided by cash injection.

UORs have delivered very fine new equipment to the frontline; but on return from active duty, soldiers are required to hand over their new kit to troops on pre-deployment exercise, and to pick up again their old armaments, thereby losing facility and having to retrain for battlefield use of the newer equipment. It's an example of the inherent wastefulness and hidden expense of applying contingency measures on a continuous basis. Crisis has become the norm. The practice is also, says Dannatt, psychologically damaging to the individual affected.

At around 98 000, falling short of the 102 000 target, the Army is technically undermanned; and that number doesn't factor in those service people not immediately available for regular duties. Recruitment traditionally falls off at times of rising casualties, and the numbers reported from Afghanistan of late are on the increase. Goodwill has been stretched, divorce and family breakup are more common.

Welcomes Home for the troops have been very much appreciated, and provide a sense of connectedness and integration between Army and populace. Dannatt mentions the streets of Belfast crowded with wellwishers on the return of the Royal Irish; not a sight he might have predicted during his time on the streets there, and some token of the possibility of sectarian rapprochement in the most hopeless-seeming stalemates.

There is a role for the media to play in bridging the gap between the public's sympathy for our lads, and their understanding, or lack thereof, of the mission. Dannatt wants the media

on-message. He pointed at a journalist in the IPPR event audience during a discussion of media access to front lines, and said, "You are a part of this". Quite where this leaves the concept of a free and independent Fourth Estate is a debate for another day.

Overstretch has been a function of the present setup of 10 brigades revolving between two theatres, a pattern designed for eight. Dannatt proposes restructuring the brigades into, not two groups of five in cycle, but one group of six. These would comprise a tank battalion and one of armoured reconnaissance, an armoured and two mechanised infantry battalion, a mechanised infantry battalion and two "light role" infantry battalions. A reduction in heavy tanks and artillery would be balanced by an increase in light/medium weight manoeuvrable pieces. And instead of deploying for six months in every 24, the Army would deploy 6 months in every 30.

An important innovation would be the creation of specialist units, including linguists and experts in local and regional cultures and custom, which could move freely on attachment as required. These might be staffed by reservists, and Dannatt, a proponent of One Army, would like to see work done on creating a database of reservists with desirable skills, identified as current pinchpoints. His ideal overall number is up from 102 000 to 130 000, irregulars included.

Dannatt's reference to the British Army being consumed in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future is a striking and doubtlessly considered use of language. He elaborates on the timeframe; not 20-30 years, but the next 3-5. An original estimate of an Afghan army of 70 000 has been revised upwards, to around 120 000. Given his definition of success in Iraq as the culminating handover to British mentored native forces, this increases substantially the task of ISAF and its British component; who also, most importantly, must maintain security while their mentoring goals are being achieved.

The Army needs a breathing space; now, on the eve of our likely departure from Iraq, and before an irrevocable move to increase troop numbers in Afghanistan, is the moment in which to resolve how best to use it.

Our experiences since 2003 have taken us into new terrain, but cannot altogether abandon older lessons. Major land ops must be factored into planned capabilities. Recently Dannatt took a new generation of officers round the phantom battlefields of the (cold) War that Never Was; not a trip down memory lane, but an important dimension unfamiliar to young men and women whose experience was grounded in counter-insurgency and reconstruction projects. If we are in Afghanistan for the long haul, the lesson of Northern Ireland, of strategic patience, must not be overlooked.

The tantalising unasked question, harking back to the General's introductory remarks, concerns the period of accelerated change which is ahead of us, and which will outstrip the phase we have just been through in its pace and demands. Why does the Chief of the General Staff think this is likely, and given our present commitments, is it likely to happen to us in the next few years in Afghanistan ?