By Chris Newton

The various news reports over the past weeks and months have suggested that the government has been locked in a heated debate over the future of British strategy. On the one side it appears that David Cameron and George Osborne believed that future British force structures should be geared towards the war in Afghanistan, and therefore the Army should take priority. Liam Fox on the other hand suggested that the future force structure should take a more long term view, prioritising the Navy to ensure that Britain's maritime and trading interests are protected.

The field of strategic studies is at a similar crossroads. During the first few decades since its conception, the prime concern of strategic theorists was nuclear strategy. In the 1990s, their attention primarily turned to 'peacekeeping' and peace support operations. After 9/11 the principal interest has been counterinsurgency operations. The key question now is should strategists continue to focus of COIN theory or should they now look to other forms of warfare post-Afghanistan?

Learning the Lessons of Vietnam

In Britain, supporters of the Army in particular have argued vigorously that we have entered a new epoch in warfare. Western superiority in conventional warfare means that state-on-state or 'industrial' warfare is either at its last gasp or already dead. Therefore, strategists should continue to focus on counterinsurgency, stabilisation, and peacekeeping operations, and 'wars amongst the people'.

There might be an additional reason why strategists might want to continue its focus on 'irregular' war. After Vietnam, the Americans sought to avoid getting entangled in another similar situation by focusing on developing new doctrines in what it did best – conventional warfare. They developed new manoeuvrist doctrines such as AirLand battle. And they developed new political doctrines such as the Weinberger doctrine designed to help politicians avoid getting involved in protracted, guerrilla warfare. For a time, this appeared to be a recipe for success, as the Gulf War and the 'combat phase' of the Iraq War illustrated.

But sooner or later, the United States unwittingly found itself involved in the kind of protracted insurgency warfare it spent so long trying to avoid. Part of the explanation as to why the US found it so difficult in dealing with the insurgency in Iraq can be found in the foreword of the 2006 US Counterinsurgency Field Manual:

'This manual is designed to fill a doctrinal gap. It has been 20 years since the Army published a

field manual devoted exclusively to counterinsurgency operations. For the Marine Corps it has been 25 years'.

The lack of doctrinal interest in the years after Vietnam meant that the US was totally unprepared for COIN. It took them several years and many lives before it found the right strategy and doctrine to control the insurgency in Iraq. And it remains to be seen whether the US have developed the right formula for Afghanistan. Therefore, surely this presents us with a clear lesson? If we listen to those who say that strategists should now focus on other forms of war, then aren't we making the same mistakes as those American strategists made after the Vietnam War?

Snapshots from the Year 2000

I have a lot of sympathy with this view, and we must ensure that we never take our eye off the ball on COIN again. But there is also the danger that our focus on counterinsurgency over the past few years is making us neglect other forms of war and conflict. There is the possibility in the future that we could face a different form of war to the one we are fighting today, and we should therefore be prepared for a broad spectrum of conflict.

A brief examination of defence journals show how different the world can change in just ten years. In February 2010, RUSI Journal featured a series of articles on Afghanistan and Pakistan. At the beginning of 2000 RUSI Journal featured a series of articles on Kosovo, KFOR, and digital warfare. At that time, the main focus for strategists was not counter-insurgency operations, but the utility of airpower and expeditionary operations.

Fast Forward to 2020

Given the differences between what defence analysts were writing about in 2000 and 2010, can we say with any certainty that the defence journals of 2020 will still be dominated by the same articles on counterinsurgency and Afghanistan? This short exercise illustrates just how fast the world can move on within a matter of years. So, whilst it is very useful for the National Security Strategy to rank the threats the government perceives the UK is facing, we must not take our eye off the ball those issues listed under tiers two and three.

So what should defence analysts and strategic theorists be focusing on then? The National Security Strategy does a good job in listing the issues that we should focus on. Ultimately we need to keep the interest and the debate going in all forms of war – whether it is 'conventional', 'unconventional', maritime, air, land, cyber, nuclear, 'old' or 'new'. It may be tempting, especially for academics who want to get their work published, to write about the domineering issues of the day. But it is vital that none of the other elements of war are forgotten also.

To be sure, we must continue the interest in counterinsurgency warfare. The lessons of Vietnam must be learned. And we should continue to monitor developments here too. The UK's shortcomings in Iraq and Afghanistan, wasn't necessarily that it had neglected COIN, but that it initially failed to see that the nature of insurgency had evolved. Nevertheless, we must not take our eye off conventional warfare either. None of the major defence reviews in the world of the

past few years have totally ruled out the possibility of state-on-state warfare in the future. Although Russia would always be too powerful for Georgia to handle, Georgia's experience during the 2008 war illustrated that it had focused too heavily on counterinsurgency warfare at the expense of conventional war, and that it was caught by surprise.

The future agenda of strategic studies must also extend to that old favourite – nuclear strategy. It is ironic that the one item that was supposed to have been exempted from the Strategic Defence and Security Review, the replacement of Trident had come to dominate the public debate surrounding it. Unfortunately, many commentators have resorted to the tired old arguments that the nuclear deterrent is 'too expensive' and 'irrelevant'. The debate could have benefitted from a serious discussion about the role of nuclear deterrence (and conventional deterrence) in contemporary strategy, and how it works in relation to the authoritarian powers that are emerging.

Contrary to those who believe otherwise, it appears that nuclear weapons will remain a central feature of international politics. Firstly, there will always be the threat of nuclear terrorism and we need to ensure that we develop measures to prevent such an attack in the future. Secondly, is the proliferation of nuclear weapons to hostile authoritarian powers such as North Korea and potentially to others. Strategic theorists need to consider whether pre-emption is a viable strategy for the future, given the experience of the Iraq War. If military pre-emption is such a disastrous policy, what is the alternative? These questions are crucial as we have a choice between pre-emptively (either diplomatically or militarily) dealing with such threats today, or face a graver threat years down the line.

In addition, strategists must keep ahead of the curve in examining new developments and new forms of warfare. This includes 'hybrid warfare' and combating militia groups with sophisticated weapon systems, the impact of attack helicopters and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, as well as cyber security, space security, energy security, environmental challenges, and the development of new weapons such as electromagnetic pulse devices.

The Future of Defence and Strategic Studies in the UK

The future agenda for strategic studies is therefore huge and diverse. These are also issues that the SDSR had to grapple with. But with issues of such enormity, the Defence Select Committee's observations that the 'startling' speed that the review is being carried out and that there has been 'a lack of general consultation' is deeply concerning. It is unknown that whether the various submissions that people have been sending in were seriously considered or whether they have just been subjected to the delete button of some Whitehall computer.

But another failing in this particular defence review include the tenuous link between the government and the wider policy community, and the even weaker link between the defence policy community and the public. For example, very few general think tanks have defence specialists within them, and only the IPPR and Policy Exchange have made serious contributions to the SDSR debate.

Why is this important? At the end of the day, the more intellectual effort that is being put into

these issues, the greater the likelihood that informed ideas and policy will emerge. The experience in the UK is in deep contrast to the United States. Washington can draw upon extensive intellectual resources. Frederick Kagan's American Enterprise Institute paper on Iraq helped shape the US government's thinking on the surge in Iraq. Moreover, as many commentators have remarked, few people inside and outside government devote their time to serious thinking about 'grand strategy'.

Currently, the public defence debate in this country has been more or less limited to 'what we should cut?' This is an intellectually lazy way of debating the defence of this country. What should have been discussed is what is in the national interest, and what should British strategy be in dealing with these threats. Unfortunately it is too late now, and all we can do is to learn from this defence review. Next time, the government and the defence community must ensure that it has the time and the intellectual infrastructure to consider all of these issues thoroughly.