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Most of what I believe about Britain's Armed Forces and their role – past, present and future – can be summed up in just three concepts and about half a dozen words. They are : "Deterrence", "Containment" and the "Unpredictability of Future Conflicts"

Trying to encapsulate the third of these notions, many years ago, for a thesis on Defence planning, I came across the following wise words:

"Dictators, bent on aggression … are masters of their own timetable. They are free to decide when to strike, where to strike, and how to strike, and to arrange their armament programmes accordingly … Their potential victims, the democracies, with their inherent hatred of war … do not know when or where the blow will fall or what manner of blow it will be."

That was Lord Ismay, first Secretary General of NATO, writing in 1960, just two years before the Cuban Missile Crisis at the height of the Cold War. Since then, one crisis after another has reinforced the point that wars break out, more often than not, entirely unexpectedly. The Yom Kippur War in 1973 took even hyper-sensitive Israel by surprise. The Falklands War, nine years

later, took Britain by surprise. The invasion of Kuwait in 1990 took everyone by surprise. And the attacks of 9/11 took the world's only superpower by surprise. Such examples can easily be multiplied.

As Professor Colin Gray has stated:

"we know nothing, literally zero, for certain about the wars of the future, even in the near-term".

And, in evidence to the Defence Committee, Dr Christopher Tuck and Dr Deborah Sanders concluded that

"history suggests that the futures that we predict most confidently are those that are probably least likely to emerge … our best bet to meet the future is to focus our efforts on increasing the flexibility of our Armed Forces to adapt, rather than chaining them to a contestable, and likely mistaken model of the future."

That is why the central message of the Defence Committee's first report after the 2015 General Election was that the Armed Forces of the future must have the versatility to meetÂÂÂÂÂ *anyÂ ÂÂÂÂ*
combination of potential threats which are currently identifiable, because if they actually materialise we will probably fail to predict them.

This may seem like a statement of the obvious, but politicians and their advisers constantly assume that future threats will be similar to current ones – no matter how many times experience disproves it. We have, for example, a National Security Strategy based on a 'risk assessment' which unhelpfully divides potential threats into three 'tiers'. The first tier includes terrorism, cyber-attacks and UK involvement in conflicts between other states. These are deemed to be high probability threats.

The second tier includes chemical, biological and nuclear attacks which, if they really happened despite their lower probability, would dwarf anything in tier one. Finally, a conventional military attack on the United Kingdom, or its overseas territories or bases, is considered to be only a tier

three threat. Yet, if that were to occur, all other priorities would be put to one side as the nation mobilised the totality of its resources to fight for its very existence.

Until quite recently, little attention was paid to a possible threat from post-Communist Russia. Counter-insurgency campaigns in third world countries were thought to be the principal role of the British Armed Forces for several decades to come. Now, on current operations of that sort, we spend just £0.4 billion out of an annual Defence budget of over £35 billion.

From a budget of this size, the Ministry of Defence expects to fund, by 2020, 82,000 soldiers, over 30,000 sailors and marines, and almost 32,000 RAF personnel, plus another 35,000 reservists overall. To these must be added some 41,000 civilians, many of whom – like those in the Royal Fleet Auxiliary – are Service personnel in all but name. Finally, in addition to our Special Forces units, new ones have been added in the cyber-security and counter-propaganda fields.

Then there is all the equipment: currently comprising over 4,000 Army vehicles, including tanks and artillery; about 75 Royal Navy ships and submarines, including the nuclear deterrent; and over a thousand RAF fixed-wing and rotary aircraft. And, as a portent of things to come, the Services also operate a mixture of large and small surveillance drones and ten unmanned hunter-killer aerial attack vehicles.

All in all, therefore, a fairly full spectrum of military capability has been preserved in the face of successive and relentless financial cutbacks – and it is to the question of Defence expenditure that we need to turn our attention.

Now, in absolute terms, £35 billion a year is no trifling sum; but, set in historical perspective, this level of investment in Defence falls far below the efforts we have traditionally made when confronted by danger internationally. The Committee’s Report on Defence expenditure was entitledÂÂÂ *Shifting the Goalposts?*ÂÂÂ It attracted attention for highlighting the inclusion of costly items like war pensions and MoD civilian pensions while Messrs. Cameron and Osborne were scrambling to meet the "2 per cent of GDP" benchmark set by NATOÂÂÂ
as a minimum – not a target – f
or its members.

The Government was quite entitled to include such items towards its 2 per cent, but we had never chosen to do so previously. It was clear that, by resorting to "creative accountancy" we were no longer strictly comparing like with like in overall expenditure terms. However, our Report was especially revealing in its tables and graphs – meticulously researched by Committee staff – showing UK Defence expenditure as a percentage of GDP, year by year from the mid-1950s to the present day, and then comparing this data with the corresponding figures for Welfare, Education and Health.

What we found was this: in 1963, we spent similar sums (about 6 per cent of GDP) both on Welfare and Defence.ÂÂÂ *Now we spend six times as much on Welfare as we spend on Defence.ÂÂÂ* In the mid-1980s, we spent similar sums (about 5 per cent of GDP) on Education, on Health and on Defence.ÂÂÂ
Now we spend two-and-a-half times as much on Education and nearly four times as much on Health as we spend on Defence.

At the height of East-West confrontation, in every year from 1981 until 1987 we spent between 4.3 and 5.1 per cent of GDP on Defence. From 1988, when the Cold War began to evaporate, until 2014, when we pulled back from Afghanistan,ÂÂÂÂ *Defence spending almost halved as a proportion of GDP.ÂÂÂ* Yet now, when we face a newly assertive Russia and a global terrorist threat, those who advocate investing even 3 per cent of GDP in Defence to keep our country safe, are looked upon as though we are mildly, if not completely, deranged.

There are three main ways in which Armed Forces can deal with a country’s potential enemies. The first is to deter them from starting a conflict by threatening to inflict unacceptable consequences in response. The second is to contain their aggression by the selective use of force, short of all-out conflict. The third is to fight and defeat them where such conflict needs to be initiated or cannot be avoided.

When considering Deterrence, we have to distinguish between nuclear and conventional threats. By deciding to renew our Trident submarines and maintain "continuous, at-sea deployment", the United Kingdom will definitely be able to retaliate in kind to a nuclear attack, even if launched without the slightest warning. For once, the consequences will be entirely predictable – an attacker will suffer devastation on a scale which is not onlyÂÂÂ *unacceptable*, but also wholllyÂÂÂ
unavoidable
. That is why, almost certainly, he will not attack us with nuclear weapons in the first place.

When the Commons voted, by a majority of 355 on 18 July last year, to build the Trident Successor submarines, Theresa May was challenged to say if she would launch a retaliatory nuclear strike. Her answer was clear and unambiguous: “Yes”, she replied, “The whole point of a deterrent is that our enemies need to know that we would be prepared to use it, unlike the suggestion that we could have a nuclear deterrent but not actually be willing to use it which seemed to come from the Labour Front Bench.”

However, as the voting figures later showed, most Labour MPs disregarded their own Leader’s stance, with 140 supporting renewal and only 47 opposing it.

In contrast to the nuclear stalemate, which helped us survive fifty years of the Cold War, conventional Deterrence is much harder to guarantee. This is because even when two countries in a conflict have evenly matched conventional forces, the outcome may still amount to total victory for one side and total defeat for the other. All we can do to maximise the chance of deterring potential enemies from mounting conventional attacks is to make our Armed Forces as strong as possible and - crucially -ÂÂÂ *to forge and maintain alliances with militarily powerful friends.*

This year is the hundredth anniversary of America’s late entry into the First World War, and last month was the 75th anniversary of America’s late entry into the Second World War. We should ask ourselves whether either or both of those terrible conflicts might have been avoided, if Germany had known that attacking Belgium in 1914 or Poland in 1939 would have brought America into the war at once. In my opinion the answer to that question is "yes": a trans-Atlantic alliance could have preserved the peace of Europe in the first half of the twentieth century, as it went on to do in the second half despite the intensity of the East-West confrontation.

It is as true today as it was when NATO was founded in 1949, that the only reliable deterrent to conventional war on the Continent isÂÂÂ *the message, broadcast loud and clear, that an attack on any NATO state means war with America right from the outset.ÂÂÂ*
That is why moves by the European Union to create a separate ‘Defence Identity’ – a duplicate of NATO, but without the United States – are hazardous in the extreme. Such a body would be strong enough to provoke, but too weak to deter, in the absence of a US guarantee. At a stroke it would take Europe back to the risks, the gambles and the uncertainties which plunged the Continent into conflict twice in a generation.

It is no answer to assert that Europe will need to mount its own defence if Donald Trump's America turns its back upon NATO. If America turns away, Europe will have little chance of deterring anything other than a nuclear threat from Russia. And why is Mr Trump considering such a radical and reckless move? It is because the European NATO states – especially those which call most stridently for an EU Defence Identity – are investing nowhere near as much in their own Armed Forces, in GDP percentage terms, as either our principal ally in Washington DC or our principal adversary in Moscow.

The incoming US President prides himself on being a shrewd negotiator and also the political heir to Ronald Reagan. Those of us who remember President Reagan with admiration and respect need no reminding of his commitment to the North Atlantic Alliance and his appreciation of the central role of NATO in preventing the Third World War. Perhaps we need to document this for the benefit of Mr Trump; but it seems to me far more likely that, by confronting the 'free-riders' within the Alliance, he actually aims to strengthen NATO by ensuring that all its members properly fund their Armed Forces in the future.

One brief final point about NATO: during the Christmas Recess, an obviously planted story appeared in a tabloid newspaper suggesting that our most recent former Prime Minister should be the UK's candidate as next NATO Secretary General. It was duly taken up by the wider media, with heavy hints suggesting that No.10 was actively considering the proposal. David Cameron is a man of charm and ability. He deserves to find a role commensurate with his talents, and I am sure that he will; but those talents do not include wisely judging strategic issues, whether when toppling Arab dictators in places like Libya, increasing military commitments whilst cutting the Armed Forces, predicting a Third World War in consequence of Brexit, or dangerously delaying the renewal of Trident for the sake of Coalition politics – as he did.

Securing the future of our nuclear deterrent; securing the centrality of America in NATO; and ensuring the versatility of our own Armed Forces whilst encouraging our allies to do more, should maximise the prospects for future stability in Europe. But what of the more immediate, if lesser threat of totalitarian Islamist extremism and the terror networks it promotes?

In the Cold War years, we faced a hostile totalitarian creed which inspired a minority of extremists within our own society. Today we also face a hostile and similarly pervasive ideology, but one with a notable difference. When we used to investigate the spread of Communist ideology, it invariably led back to our Soviet and Chinese opponents. Yet, now, when we investigate the ideology of Islamism, it often leads back to countries like Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and – at least until recently – Turkey, which are supposed to be our friends.

Just because some of these countries – though not all of them all the time – are at loggerheads with Russia or with Russian-sponsored Middle Eastern states, that is no justification for our being drawn into their factional battles. Nor should we blind ourselves to their promotion of Islamist extremism throughout the Muslim Diaspora, including here in the United Kingdom. The enemy of one's enemy is not necessarily one's friend.

This is where Containment comes in. It is a policy that recognises the difficulty of defeating an ideology by conventional military power. Instead of trying to eradicate the problem, one exercises power selectively, to frustrate the enemy's objectives, whilst waiting for its failures to corrode it from within. Containment requires patience, and periodic interventions from carefully chosen strategic bases. But it also requires something else: a recognition that we cannot successfully impose our values and our versions of democracy on societies which are not yet ready for them.

Until the poison of religious supremacism and internecine hatred within the Muslim world slowly evaporates – and that isn't going to happen any time soon – we must keep our distance and reject the illusion that removing dictators will necessarily lead to something more benign. Describing the Arab Uprisings in the terminology of the Prague Spring was incredibly crass and dangerously naive.

There is now a general consensus that Saddam Hussein should not have been removed, despite the fact that, at last, after huge expenditure of blood and treasure, there may be some light at the end of the tunnel for Iraq. Yet, some of the same people who accept that removing that dictator made matters worse, were content to do the same thing in Libya whilst telling Members of Parliament that we were voting simply for a "no-fly zone". And only a Parliamentary rebellion prevented a similar intervention in Syria – where there has been little evidence of the 70,000 "moderate" fighters whom we were still being told, only a year ago, offered a third way between Assad's dictatorship and Islamist extremists. Such compulsive behaviour by successive Governments puts me in mind, Mr Speaker, of one of your favourite lines from Kipling: the one whereÂÂÂ *"the burnt Fool's bandaged finger goes wabbling back to the Fire"*.

So the question arises, how can we avoid using our future Armed Forces in ways which defeat our own strategic interests? The answer may well be organisational. Strange as it may seem, you can rise to be head of the Royal Navy, or the Army, or the Royal Air Force, in 21st century Britain, and have no direct input into the making of Grand Strategy by the Government. That may well explain why so many of our military policies seem to be neither grand nor, indeed,

strategic.

Earlier, I mentioned Lord Ismay, who before becoming the first head of NATO was Churchill's personal Chief Staff Officer and the linchpin of his relationship with the wartime Chiefs of Staff Committee. Possibly as a result of his Gallipoli disaster in the First World War, Churchill did not seek to overrule the Chiefs of Staff Committee in the Second. There were many disputed issues, but if the Service Chiefs warned him against some pet project, Churchill reluctantly but consistently gave way. There was, in short, a creative tension between the Prime Minister on the one hand and the Chiefs of Staff on the other.

That has now disappeared with the downgrading of the Service Chiefs. The attendance of the Chief of Defence Staff at the National Security Council is insufficient compensation. In 2015, the Defence Committee, under the chairmanship of Rory Stewart, adopted a suggestion by Major General Mungo Melvin – one of our specialist advisers – that the Chiefs of Staff should be reconstituted as the Military Sub-Committee of the National Security Council. This elegant approach to restoring the synthesis between politicians and the military was ignored in the Government's reply. But, I can assure you and the Government that it has not heard the last of it.

In drawing conclusions about the future of our Armed Forces, we should recognise, first, that much depends upon the behaviour of our potential enemies. We cannot reliably predict it but we can try to influence it and, sometimes, we may need actively to interfere with it.

Secondly, we are on course to retain our protection against nuclear blackmail and attack. This underpins our overall security but cannot deter every type of threat.

Thirdly, to counter other threats, our conventional Armed Forces remain as vital as ever, and we are not spending nearly enough on them.

Fourthly, in Europe, we shall continue to depend on the collective security provided by NATO, but that, in turn, cannot survive without the indispensable contribution of the United States. Political leaders in every NATO member-state must show the Americans that we will do what is needed to keep them fully engaged,

Fifthly, where we cannot deter, we must strive to contain – until societies at stages of development different from ours find their own salvation. Our interventions must be selective, targeted, and based on hard-headed assessments of the options actually available, not on wishful thinking at odds with reality.

Finally, as international politics is not a zero-sum game, we should not get too close to one side or the other of the age-old division in the Muslim world – particularly, if our allies in one theatre behave like our enemies in another.

Defence, we are constantly told, is the first duty of government. It is our insurance policy against dangers that arise with little or no warning. All insurance policies require premiums to be paid, and in the context of Defence that means funding our Armed Forces more than we have been and giving their Chiefs the access they need at the centre of our decision-making process.

Yet, even with a bigger budget and a sensible system for strategic planning, there will be no future for the Armed Forces without enough sailors, soldiers and airmen prepared to serve in front-line roles. In the past, this was never a problem – however great the danger; but recruitment will suffer, and suffer severely, unless we end the mischief of applying the Civil Law to the fog of war.

The Defence Subcommittee, under Johnny Mercer, will soon be reporting on the thousands of allegations against Iraq war veterans, now shown to have been spurious. Any country which allows its Legal Aid system to be used as a weapon against its own Service personnel in this way has surely taken leave of its senses. Unless the Government urgently gets a grip, the same thing will happen to hundreds of veterans of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, decades after they came to an end; and this while amnestied terrorists – including mass-murderers – freely walk the streets of Ulster.

A Statute of Limitations, covering everything that took place before the Belfast Agreement, must now be enacted to restore some semblance of justice and fairness to the process.

Unless we are foolish enough to let down our guard; unless we are weak enough to abandon

our values; unless we are clumsy enough to let go our allies, there is every reason to expect our democracy to survive and to prosper. One thing is certain: we can rely on the men and women of our Armed Forces. The question is, can they rely on us?

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