By Guy Birks

After the fall of the Soviet Union the large-scale decommissioning and scrapping of heavy armoured units, carried out by the Russian Federation, symbolised the end of a reliance on heavy armour capabilities. It also represented the cessation of a theoretical and practical era based on planning scenarios centred on large-scale tank formations fighting on the plains of Germany. A conventional focus on plans for armoured encounter in Europe shaped and defined the dominant approach of both NATO forces and the Soviet Union to land warfare. The core tactical asset of this approach was the most powerful and versatile armoured weapon – the tank. For many analysts however, the decline of planning scenarios based on tank-on-tank engagement in Europe represents the beginning of the end of the declining utility of tanks as a tactical asset.

The changing nature of conflict post Cold War or what also might seem to be the ascendancy of other forms of conflict that were prevalent during the Cold War, gives rise to the notion that the tank is on the way out. For many, the tank's utility as a weapon has outlived the scenario it was designed for. Further to this, the mode of warfare it was framed around is seen to be dwindling. However, the scrapping of tanks in the aftermath of the Soviet Union was not indicative of the end of its use as a weapon. The Gulf War and the large-scale deployment and employment of tanks in 1990-91, illustrated that the decline of the tank as an effective tactical asset was not inevitable. The liberation of Kuwait and the left-hook into Iraq could not have occurred without armour mobilisation and large-scale tank manoeuvre. The use of highly mobile and heavily armed units helped the Coalition to decisively overcome dug-in infantry positions and opposing armoured columns. The Battle of 73 Easting, in particular, was a decisive armed encounter that helped shatter Iraqi resistance and enabled the Coalition to achieve an affective victory. The Gulf War was thus a conventional state-on-state war entailing relatively large-scale tank battles. It gave an indication that tank-on-tank engagements and armour engagement could still occur, even outside Europe.

It is therefore necessary to bear in mind that before today's speculative analysis, concerning the utility of tanks, the 'decline' and 'obsolescence' of a military capability can be changed and sometimes reversed. This is primarily because a use may be found for it in a different environment and alternate context – away from the arena it has increasingly been framed to fight in. Before the Falklands War, the 1981 Nott Review, enacted by the Conservative Government of the United Kingdom, envisaged the reduction of an out-of-area or expeditionary warfare capacity. The Carrier programme was abandoned and replaced by the Invincible Class through-deck cruisers, one of which was in turn scheduled for cutting. Two amphibious ships were also earmarked for scrapping.

However, the sudden occurrence of the Falklands War, signalled the prevalence of 'out-of-area' operations and the need to retain a strong expeditionary element within the armed forces of the United Kingdom. The deployment of a carrier-based task force accompanied by an amphibious

invasion force definably showed that a military capability that was deemed to be not fit within a particular strategic viewpoint, was vitally important in securing other key national-strategic objectives. With regards to tanks, although the Cold War had ended, a new use was found for them in the contextual environment of the Gulf War. Furthermore, in terms of today's debate, although wars are increasingly counter-insurgency operations, and are plausibly going to continue in this manner, examples abound whereby large-scale units, such as tanks could still find a use. In fact, they may be imperative for the success of operation; possibly even as vital as carriers were for the Falklands War.

The central thrust of the argument that the tank is on the way out points out that in complicated and messy counter-insurgency campaigns, the desire to win over the 'hearts and minds' of the local population will not be best served by deploying large and heavily armoured units. The present conflicts that dominate today's strategic environment, and the most likely future land-based conflicts, are said to be indicative of a trend whereby war is increasingly fought in areas where the use of tanks would be counter-intuitive. It is deemed that tanks would not be suitable for taking on irregular resistance from fighters clothed in civilian attire who are frequently concealed amongst the population in densely packed urban areas or who hide from view in mountainous and hard to access regions. A previous UK Defence Forum Grey Paper 28, 'Thinking the Unthinkable', also identifies the high costs associated with heavy armour procurement and the incapability by most armed forces to transport and rapidly deploy tanks. Insufficient means of transportability are also key to understanding the tanks limitations as a tactical asset. This factor is arguably compounded by involvement in the hostile terrain of Afghanistan, for example.

Taken from this view therefore, the war in Afghanistan and the counter-insurgency operation being conducted in the country by NATO forces in conjunction with Afghan forces is deemed to be symptomatic of the need to move aware from heavily armed units engaged in kinetic-based operations. Instead, the preference in Afghanistan and the focus of defence in general should be placed on what the Chief of the General Staff, General Richards terms, 'non-kinetic effects teams, precision attack teams, Counter-IED, combat-logistic patrols, information dominance, counter-piracy, and cyber attack and defence'. For Richards, the speed of technological transition has left mainstream procurement processes struggling to deliver equipment that will remain relevant against more agile opponents satisfied with cheaper solutions.

For Richards, a country like Brtiain simply cannot afford to plan and equip for the likely future conflict scenarios that he envisages and still retain a capacity ready to engage in traditional state-on-state conflict. Richards does not advocate the scrapping of all tanks, but posits instead that working alongside Britain's allies, there is a need to retain sufficient conventional air, land and maritime forces to ensure tactical level dominance in 'regional intervention operations or enduring stabilisation operations'. Britain should therefore not countenance a large scale operation in which it acted alone to combat a traditional threat posed by a state. It should ultimately focus on framing its forces around the new strategic environment in which threats emerge and arise out of unstable states in volatile regions – and frequently fight amongst the civilian population.

' Boots on the ground' are therefore essential to supplying and ensuring the security the civilian

population needs and are pivotal to ensuring the separation of the militants from the people. Tanks – weapons with a heavy footprint and designed for kinetic, movement based operations – are not deemed to be of long-lasting use in crowded and volatile urban streets or in hazardous and hard-to-access mountainous regions. A large armoured unit hurtling and busting through streets or rampaging through the countryside with little regard for the wellbeing of the civilian population and the environment, would simply be a detriment to an operation in which capturing the support of the people is key. The tank, it is also pointed out, is also just as vulnerable as any other armoured unit to the dominant insurgent weapon of choice – the improvised explosive device. The 1997 Grey Paper also further points out the advantages that attack helicopters have over tanks.

However, if one examines the use of tanks in the first ten years of the twenty-first century, it can also be seen that the early period of the new century were not the nadir of the tank as an effective tactical asset. In Iraq, tanks played a key role. They were pivotal in ensuring the swift invasion of the country in 2003. In 2005 an estimated 1,100 M1 Abrams had been used by the US Army in the course of the war. Tanks were also used to protect the households and livelihoods of defecting insurgent leaders who had switched over to the US-backed government.

Tanks have been widely used in Afghanistan by Canadian, Danish, and German forces – with some notable successes in key operations. True, tanks have not been widely deployed in urban areas in Afghanistan, but they have had utility in operations in open areas. Tanks have been affected by large improve explosive devices and they do arguably have a large footprint. However, they have also been key to engaging Taliban fighters from afar while infantry units move in closer to take positions. Tanks cannot interact and engage with people and they can't in themselves separate the population from the insurgents. But for NATO forces tanks have helped to save the lives of troops and reduce the onslaught of Taliban attacks and defences so infantry units can move up and take areas, so a truly effective establishment of a counter-insurgency approach can be initiated.

In response to the notional ascendancy of attack helicopters, Grey paper 28 further shows that in 'any military conflict ground has to be occupied and defended in order to guarantee its ownership and this is not achievable with an aerial vehicle, even with air superiority and favourable weather conditions. If tanks were used for crashing and blasting through streets in search of individual insurgents it can be debilitating. But, they can act as key enablers in open areas – allowing infantry units to take positions, drive the Taliban back, and hold and stabilise an area.

The tank can thus arguably be perceived not to be on the way out completely. Conventional state-on-state conflict is in decline, although it may re-emerge. Persistent grievances and historical enmities remain, as well as sectional, resource, religious, and political cleavages – the drivers of state-on-state conflict have not disappeared – they still linger on. However, this is unlikely in the immediate future. The current strategic focus of defence - counter-insurgency operations - centred on winning the support of the civilian population of a volatile state or region, does not mean that the tank is a redundant and obsolete military asset. Operating with a large armoured vehicle in an urban environment could potentially be overly impactful and potentially counter-productive.

However, tanks can still be deployed in a supporting environment. They can enable and open up for a 'boots on the ground' approach to take place, through support of operations which are in the open and where civilian casualties are ideally zero. What we may in fact be seeing in the early twenty-first century is the re-adaptation of the tanks' use. In the current global financial situation, governments seeking to reduce their military budgets will inevitably make cutbacks in hardware that is not deemed to be vital. The number of tanks will therefore decrease. However, the rationale for having a large armoured capability will remain.

Tanks may be returned to their early, original and possibly first use – to break infantry deadlock. Tanks were developed to break the stalemate of trench warfare in the First World War and justifications for their use in Afghanistan have drawn on a similar note. The new focus on counter-insurgency will potentially still require large armoured assets and the nature of contemporary warfare is not the end of the tank's tactical use. It presents an alternative context and different environment, it does not represent the nadir of a versatile, and mobile strike weapon that can break a stalemate, support open operations, and decisively swing the balance of forces in favour of one side in a conflict.