

As the Strategic Defence and Security Review gathers pace, the annual RUSI Land Warfare Conference held in London, presented an opportunity for the Army to remind a wider audience what it is for in the post-Afghanistan era. A string of senior military figures lead by the Chief of the General Staff took part in a series of panels to consider how the army will occupy itself post-Afghanistan. Nick Watts was there for Defence Viewpoints.

The international landscape looks challenging. Commentators have remarked that the UK is losing its will to be involved in international matters following the parliamentary vote on Syria in 2013, and what appears to be some maladroit handling by Whitehall of perceptions of the UK's role in recent international developments.

More significantly the advent of the SDSR presents the central government apparatus led by Oliver Letwin in the Cabinet Office, with an opportunity to reduce defence expenditure or at least not to increase it by the amount required to reach the totemic 2% of GDP figure required by NATO. Unlike in 2010 the three services are not seeking to out manoeuvre each other. The Land warfare Conference is an opportunity for the Army to set out its stall.

Many will have got used to the mantra put out by the services, that after the draw-down from Afghanistan they will be postured for 'contingent' operations. The Army's approach is to apply 'Integrated Action' as the capstone doctrine around which to build its new posture. This will involve Persistent Engagement via Defence Engagement. The challenge will be to ensure that this terminology doesn't result in the smaller numbers envisaged in Army 2020 being spread too thinly.

General Sir Nicholas Carter the CGS has clearly been thinking of how best to address the recruitment challenge posed by the lack of operations and an improving economy. He rightly recognises that to maintain both recruitment and retention, the Army has to be attractive as an employer. This has led him to consider the utility of offering career breaks to service personnel and considering how best to engage with Britain's ethnic minorities and women. The recruited strength of the Army currently comprises only 9% women and 10% of personnel drawn from ethnic minorities.

This initiative combines with the return of forces from Germany to the UK, to paint a picture of the Army based largely in the UK, apart from overseas garrisons such as the Falklands and Cyprus. The reality is that with 46,000 soldiers deployed in 40 countries the Army is far from working from home in the 'part time' sense implied by some unkind commentators.

The challenge for the short to medium term facing the CGS and his people is to make a success of 'Persistent Engagement' with the Treasury.