In July of 1914 General Douglas Haig warned his officers that the only way to discern accurate information about enemy dispositions was by use of the cavalry. He cautioned them against the use of aircraft. By the autumn of that same year aircraft were spotting enemy dispositions as the British Expeditionary Force undertook the opening moves of the Great War. Such was the changing nature of both technology and doctrine 100 years ago.

Today, as the bienniel Farnboorough International Air Show starts, the way the British look at airpower is also changing. Speaking at the RUSI Airpower conference in London last week, the Chief of the Air Staff (CAS), Air Chief Marshal Sir Andrew Pulford, drew attention to the need for the RAF to shift its focus from operations in Afghanistan, to a wider global horizon. He warned against a 'Cold War' generation of officers who had served through the 12 years of the Afghan campaign, who would be unready for the next challenge. Nick Watts, Deputy Director General of the U K Defence Forum, reports further on the next page.

Each of the three armed services in the UK is setting out their stall ahead of the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR). The emphasis of this year's airpower conference was on partnerships, and on providing politicians with choices. A list of recent events involving airpower is illustrative: the Baltic Republics Quick Reaction Alert (QRA) force provide by NATO, Libya, Mali, relief in the Philippines and the use of RAF jets to monitor flooding in the UK. In addition RAF Sentinel aircraft have been deployed to Nigeria to assist in the search for the kidnapped schoolchildren.

Additional RAF equipment including the Voyager tanker / transport, additional Chinooks, the Rivet Joint RC 135 which has just begun to arrive in RAF service and additional Reapers was listed by the Secretary of State, who also spoke. He also mentioned work underway to develop a new generation of unmanned combat air vehicles, such as the Taranis and a joint project with the French. Keeping to the theme of partnerships, he referred to the F 35B Lightning II which is due to make an appearance at Farnborough this week.

Airpower can only offer choices to politicians if the services are aware of the changing world around them. Bearing in mind the remarks by CAS some time was given at this conference to understanding the forces which drive change in the world. What exactly is it that the RAF and allied air forces will be expected to react to? At the top end of the spectrum is state on state

warfare, such as broke out in 1914. The recent events in Ukraine have made those who try to see into the future more wary about how they express the likelihood of any state on state clashes. There is a risk of inadvertent clashes, which could escalate if not checked. More likely is the outbreak of intra-state conflict, as is happening in Syria and Iraq. In this case the ability of the international community to intervene is limited by the wish of the protagonists to see outside intervention – as eventually happened in Bosnia.

One area of concern which was highlighted was the fragility of international institutions. The inability of organisations such as the UN and NATO to adapt swiftly to changing circumstances risks creating a vacuum of legitimacy which can be exploited by terrorists and other non-state actors. In this case the military are often called upon to make space for the politicians – offering them options, as the conference theme suggested.

The NATO summit at Newport in September will enable the politicians to demonstrate that they understand the changing dynamic at work in 2014, just as their predecessors had to respond to events in 1914. The situation is less fraught than a century ago, but as has been demonstrated in North Africa with the Arab Spring, matters move at a faster pace than previously.

The RUSI Airpower conference took place ahead of the annual air tattoo at Fairford and Farnborough. Its significance was indicated by the large number of foreign chiefs of air staffs present. A panel with senior US and Chinese air force officers was illustrative of the way in which international power is changing; China is now more willing to be represented at events such as this.

Alongside all of this is the persistent challenge of budgets. The UK's armed forces are now at a level where further reductions in expenditure will materially affect the ability of the services to remain credible. Remaining at the top table is a strategic priority for UK governments of all political persuasions. The SDSR next year must weigh in the balance the need for prudent stewardship of the nation's resources and the ability of Britain to secure peace and prosperity, not only for ourselves but also for our allies.