

Nick Watts, Great North News Services, reports on the reflections of two Chiefs of Staff

As the year draws to an end, defence chiefs are looking forward not back. Recent speeches by the Chief of the Air Staff and the Chief of the Defence Staff are redolent of pre CSR positioning. Both speeches addressed past achievements and future challenges. The chief of the Air Staff delivered the Trenchard memorial lecture at RUSI last week. He spoke of the risk a country runs if it does not invest in the intellectual capital which can be drawn on in times of crisis. From this comes the adaptability and innovation needed to respond to circumstances as varied as the advent of radar and the campaign over Iraq in the early 1990s. The challenges of the future mean that aircraft, or unmanned air vehicles (UAVs) will be needed to confront perils as yet unknowable and they will need to adapt to accommodate technologies as yet uninvented.

In a similar vein the Chief of the Defence Staff, also speaking at RUSI, addressed the challenges facing defence as a whole in the years following the drawdown from Afghanistan. His message was that the UK's Joint Expeditionary Force will be busy deterring future conflicts in regions of the world at risk of instability. His message was that the clear political intent from the Prime Minister is that the UK should be doing more in the Middle East and the Gulf region. The clouds on the horizon include Iran and Syria and the de-stabilizing effects of policies being pursued by their respective regimes. Also Somalia and the Indian Ocean were areas to be kept in view, as is Mali in West Africa.

The not so subtle message to the politicians from both speeches is that defence is a necessary expenditure in an increasingly uncertain world. The lessons from history pointed out in the Trenchard Memorial lecture show the price to be paid for being unprepared. The Chief of the Defence Staff underscored that both the MOD and the armed forces were undergoing difficult reforms. Whilst the funding cuts announced in the Chancellor's Autumn Statement can be managed, anything further would need a re-appraisal of the MOD's plans for Force 2020. Having just set out at length how the armed forces will be re-structuring to meet the Prime Minister's clear political intent (a phrase used three times in his speech), CDS was putting down a clear marker.

The next Comprehensive Spending Review will be upon us shortly. The defence chiefs are getting their message out early; if the UK wants to continue to play a worthwhile role on the world stage there is a subscription charge. Not only that, but investment in defence industry is an export earner. There is more to a defence relationship than just selling arms, however. Exercises are proof of a capability which reassures allies in sensitive regions. It also develops political reach for any future coalitions. Each of the services can expect to do more overseas exercising post 2014, in their respective domains. This will keep them sharp. And there is always the Deterrent.

To enable this to come to pass the services will need both personnel and money. What CDS

called "the talent" has been through the wringer lately with continuous operations and diminishing numbers. Retaining sufficient experience and recruiting the requisite numbers will be a job in itself. To ensure that defence is not seen as a declining business, like coal mines in the 1980s Government will need to offer attractive terms of employment. An increased reliance on the reserves will impact on employers while the economy is still recovering. Whatever transpires operationally in 2013, it looks like being another busy year for defence.