

Nick Watts, Great North News Services, reports from the RUSI land warfare conference

Whilst British forces are still engaged in operations in Afghanistan, the Army has begun to turn its thoughts to how it will operate after the drawdown of forces there after 2014. This is sensible for two reasons. Firstly the army needs to adapt to life after Afghanistan, and look at the training and capacity building it will need to fit into the landscape envisaged by the National Security Strategy and the SDSR. Secondly it needs to do this thinking now, so that it can defend itself against the depredations of the Treasury, who will no doubt be casing covetous eyes at the defence budget after 2014. In the run up to a future SDSR due in 2015, the army will need to build its case for resources and prove its worth in an as yet uncertain environment.

The Land Warfare conference is one of the showcase events organised by the Royal United Services Institute. This year it provided a platform for the Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Peter Wall and his US counter part General Ray Odierno. The Secretary of State Phillip Hammond also gave a key note speech. The over arching message from each of these three speakers was the need to operate in an economically constrained environment, while facing as yet unknown threats. This means using resources more creatively and engaging more constructively with partner agencies and allies, to achieve the desired outcome.

From the UK perspective the big question in everybody's mind was what shape the army will adopt under the MOD's Army 2020 plan, part of the Force 2020 structure. Philip Hammond was able to set the broad outline and provide some insight into the government's thinking. The final shape of the army will be announced to parliament "in the next few weeks" but he was able to provide some guidance. The strategic goals for the army are guided by the principles of: Sustainability, Capability, Integration and Interoperability.

Sustainability is taken in a budgetary sense to mean having the funds to pay for the kit and the welfare of the troops needed to man Army 2020. This reflects a £4.5 bn investment in new armoured vehicles, mostly the FRES scout and Terrier engineering vehicle, as well as a £1 bn Warrior up-grade programme. The army will also have to think about how it absorbs the vehicles acquired under the UOR process to provide mobility in Afghanistan.

Capability refers to the way the army uses its personnel. This is in the context of an army which is due to reduce its regular strength from 102,000 to 82,000. The bulk of these reductions will come after the drawdown from Afghanistan i.e. in the period 2014 – 16. Just in time for the next elections! Already the various regimental factions are briefing their favourite media correspondents about the loss of historic cap badges. Looking beyond this, however, the army needs to think about what shape it will adopt. The reserve component will increase in importance, as it will probably be used to provide back up enablers and home defence troops.

For his part the CGS, General Sir Peter Wall was able to add some colouring to the Secretary of

State's remarks. He hinted strongly that there was a lot of work to be done in preparing the infrastructure for the army within the UK, as troops return from Germany. This means that the army could well find itself "running hot" after 2014 as it starts to disband units; relocate other units and seek to train yet other units to prepare for the unexpected. A staff officer's nightmare!

Recruitment will be a challenge in what might by then be an improving economy. Efforts to reach out to ethnic minority communities will need more effort, as will recruiting a new generation of reserve forces. The TA will need to manage a more demanding role as it will be required to provide formed sub – units to fit into regular units' order of battle for operations. This will need careful attention to terms of service and to the way the army deals with employers. Whether these reforms will go down in history alongside the Cardwell and Haldane reforms remains to be seen, but Britain's Army in 2020 will be very different from the one it had at the end of the Cold War. Perhaps it is just as well – but history has a funny habit of interfering with politicians calculations.