

Delivering on the Frontline: Operational Success and Sustainable Armed Forces - Speech delivered by Secretary of State for Defence, Rt Hon Philip Hammond MP, at the Royal United Services Institute, London on Thursday 8 December 2011.

Thursday, 8 December 2011 13:36

INTRODUCTION

It is now just over a year since the publication of the Strategic Defence and Security Review. It was long overdue, and undeniably necessary. Overdue because it represented the first thorough review of Defence for well over a decade - a decade during which the international environment had evolved dramatically, and Britain's Armed Forces were operating at a consistently high tempo. Necessary to set a sustainable course for the transformation of Britain's Armed Forces - to ensure they are structured, supported, and equipped to effectively protect our national security in the face of the threats they will encounter in the decades to come rather than for the challenges of the past. Necessary, too, to tackle a forward defence programme that had been allowed to grow way beyond the resources available, particularly at a time when the overriding strategic requirement was, and remains, to bring order to the public finances. So it has been a year of transition in Defence, as we begin the difficult process of making the SDSR a reality. Meanwhile, in the midst of all this change, we must never forget that, since the publication of the SDSR, around 30,000 members of our Armed Forces, including many from the Reserves, have risked their lives for this country on operations in Afghanistan and in Libya. And today, I want to focus on the success of our Armed Forces during this year - protecting our national security by projecting military power far beyond our shores.

AFGHANISTAN

Because protecting this nation and our dependent territories against those who threaten our security is the primary purpose of Defence - whether it is standing operations such as defending the skies above Britain, protecting our trade routes or maintaining our continuous nuclear deterrent. Or whether it is on high intensity operations alongside allies and partners as in Libya and Afghanistan. The National Security Strategy set out clearly how Britain's security and interests can only be defended by taking an active role in the world. Such a role includes maintaining the capability and political will to intervene militarily - with law on our side, and alongside partners wherever possible - tackling potential threats to our own security at their source with diplomatic, development and military tools, rather than waiting for them to manifest themselves on the streets of our cities. And that is precisely what the enduring campaign in Afghanistan is all about. In Afghanistan today, the operations of Britain's Armed Forces, as part of a wide NATO-led coalition, are directly related to our national security. Today our mission is to ensure that Afghanistan does not again become a safe haven for international terrorism as it was under the Taliban before 9/11. We are fighting there to diminish the threat on our streets here at home. So our goal is not a perfect Afghanistan, but one able to maintain its own security and prevent the return of international terror groups. We are not there to impose a western liberal democracy, but we do recognise that an enduring solution in Afghanistan must embrace all its people. So this is not just a military campaign but as a comprehensive strategy linking progress on security with that on development and governance. Achievement of our goal requires us to build the capacity of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and the Afghan Government, so that Afghans themselves can be responsible for their own territory, their own security and their own affairs. The process of the transition of lead security responsibility to the Afghan Government is on track, and set to complete by the end of 2014. President Karzai recently announced the second tranche of transition so the Afghans

are now beginning formally to take on responsibility for provision of security to over half the Afghan population. This includes Nad 'Ali in Helmand Province - a place which, as the Chief of the Defence Staff reflected recently, was effectively a no go area when he was Commander of ISAF a few years ago. This represents very significant progress. The experience in Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand, which entered the transition process in the first tranche in July, provides an increasing degree of assurance about the Afghan capability to manage security after 2014. Since then, the ANSF have dealt with all security incidents in Lashkar Gah city, without the need for ISAF support. That has been a source of considerable pride, both to the Afghan security forces and to the civilian population. But we should be clear that Afghanistan will need continued support, albeit not combat support, for many years after 2014. And as we made clear on Monday, at the Bonn Conference, the UK stands ready, as part of the international effort, to provide that support. On the ground in Afghanistan, as I've now had the chance to see for myself, there is clear evidence that the ISAF troop surge has brought security gains, limiting the insurgents' ability to prosecute their campaign. In the UK area of operations in Central Helmand the number of attacks by insurgent forces has decreased considerably. This has encouraged something like normal life to return to many areas. Bazaars are opening. Schools are operating. Basic healthcare is being delivered. After decades of war, the population is understandably cynical, but through these small steps the Afghan Government is beginning to win the trust of the people and the power of the insurgency over hearts and minds is correspondingly waning. Maintaining that momentum will be the challenge of the transition process between now and the end of 2014. But let us be under no illusion - the progress we have seen this year has been hard won and not irreversible. The insurgency may be diminished and under considerable pressure but it remains a nationwide threat. And the sectarian-inspired bombs this week demonstrate the complexity of the situation in Afghanistan. So, there is no room at all for complacency and much work needs to be done to maintain momentum and support the ANSF. And as they take a greater share of the responsibility for their own security, and bear more of the brunt of operations, so they bear a greater share of the sacrifice too. But even with the improvement in security in Helmand, between October last year and October this year, British Forces serving with 3 Commando Brigade, and before them 16 Air Assault Brigade, had an average of 14 significant contacts with insurgents every day, and uncovered around 900 Improvised Explosive Devices. I want to pay tribute today to the 390 members of Britain's Armed Forces who have lost their lives over this last ten years, fighting for our national security in Afghanistan, and also to the many, many more who have sustained life-changing injuries. It was a sobering and humbling experience for me to pay my respects to the dead, not only at the Cenotaph on Remembrance Sunday, but also at the memorial at Camp Bastion on Armistice Day itself. There could be no more poignant reminder that the sacrifice we commemorate each year is not just a historical fact, but a current living reality. I want to be crystal clear about one thing - our Forces will get the support they need to succeed in the task they have been set. However great our difficulties, nothing will be done that would compromise current operations. The successful conclusion of the combat mission in Afghanistan is my first priority and the first priority for the Ministry of Defence.

**LIBYA**

Much is talked about the pressure that Afghanistan places on our Forces and their capability to deal with contingencies. Much scepticism has been

expressed about our ability to do anything else simultaneously. But this year, our Armed Forces have shown that - even with the enduring campaign in Afghanistan - they have the capability and the capacity to respond when the national interest requires. We could, of course, have stood aside as Gaddafi made good on his promise to cleanse Benghazi house by house, street by street. But thousands would have been killed; and a festering rogue state, with a grudge against Britain and all we stand for, would have emerged on Europe's borders. None of this would have been in our national interest. None of this would have served our national security - indeed it would have diminished it. As a result of the leadership shown by the United Kingdom and France, we had the authority to act through the United Nations; we had the power to act through NATO; and we had the support of the Arab League and neighbouring countries to do so. So the action in Libya was necessary, legal and right. The response of our Armed Forces to the crisis in Libya was outstanding - displaying the very best of British military skill and equipment. Let me just highlight a few of the milestones that Operation ELLAMY represented. It was the RAF Typhoon's first multi-role contribution to operations - flying over 3,000 hours - proving the aircraft's versatility, endurance, and, crucially, its reliability. The Army Air Corps Apache Helicopters were flown over contested territory from HMS Ocean for the first time in an amphibious strike role. It has proven the Royal Navy's Response Force Task Group concept - with the Navy's ships clocking up 100,000 nautical miles in support of operations while undertaking separate, yet simultaneous, missions in different theatres. It has proven the efficacy of the UK's arsenal of precision guided weapons, and intelligence, surveillance and targeting systems in minimising civilian casualties and collateral damage, while maximising effect. These are all significant British achievements, but of course are just a part of the overall effort - an effort undertaken by a wide coalition, focussed on political, diplomatic and humanitarian as well as military effort. I am pleased to be able to announce today that our final estimate of the net additional costs of operations in Libya is £212m - made up of £145m of operating costs, plus a further £67m million on replenishing munitions. This is almost a third lower than the estimate my predecessor provided to Parliament in October - this is due to the speed with which operations were concluded and a re-assessment of the cost of replenishing munitions used. A successful outcome in every respect. And I want to take this opportunity to thank Liam Fox for the decisive leadership he showed as Secretary of State - not just in relation to Libya, but also for not shirking the difficult decisions taken as part of the SDSR.

**THE NEED FOR REFORM**

The adaptable posture set in place by the SDSR is an effective answer to the volatile nature of the current international security environment. It may not have mentioned Libya by name, but the National Security Strategy placed an international crisis, drawing in the UK and its allies, in the top tier of risks over the next five years. The force structure set down in the SDSR provides the capability for us to continue to play our part in an international response to events during this period of transition. Our vision for Future Force 2020 is a strategy-led, resource informed blueprint for powerful, formidable and adaptable military forces configured for a new era - for the real world we live in and the real threats we face. But implementing that vision requires bringing the defence budget into balance in order that Future Force 2020 is sustainable. And it requires reform of the way the MOD does its business - and indeed the way that the political leadership engages in the process - so that the same problems do not arise again. That means taking the tough decisions now to build for the future. In opposition, when I was Shadow Chief

Secretary to the Treasury, I worked closely with Liam Fox as the then Shadow Defence Secretary on our Party's approach to the management of the MOD budget, to protect and enhance the capability of our Armed Forces.

It was clear then, and even clearer now with the books open in front of us, that the way the Defence budget was managed over the last decade by the Labour Government was hugely damaging to our national security.

Labour Ministers were ordering equipment they had no money to pay for and forced the military to live a hand to mouth existence in consequence.

As the budget spiralled out of control, and as the room for manoeuvre on individual projects was ever more constrained by contractual arrangements, decisions were increasingly taken on the basis of short-term cash management, not on military priority.

Now I am a budget-balancer by instinct.

But the purpose of the MOD isn't simply to balance the books; it exists to ensure the defence of the country.

And by allowing the budget deficit in Defence to reach such unsustainable levels that it threatened the entire Defence Programme, the last Government betrayed the Armed Forces and utterly failed in its duty to the country.

So the situation we face now - after the years of political failure to grip the problem - is that eliminating the black hole in the Defence Budget is the only way to sustain military capability over the long-term.

If we don't reshape now we won't be in a position to order new equipment and capability for the future.

**FIRM FOUNDATIONS**

Our challenge is to move from the from fantasy budgets of the past to a firm foundation for the future.

This is a transition that is essential to the future of Defence - but no-one should be under any illusion that it will be easy or that it will be pain-free.

Future Force 2020 must be a force fit for the challenges of future warfare and the real world risks we are likely to face.

But it must be built on a Defence programme that is affordable now and sustainable into the future.

There are siren voices, in the wake of the Libyan operation, calling for another wholesale rethink of Defence and Security - to have another SDSR.

The Opposition carps over the tough decisions we have had to take - decisions that they ducked because they were too difficult and politically uncomfortable.

It is their legacy that constrains our ability to invest in new capabilities.

They promised new Chinook helicopters, yet they had no money for them.

They committed to Trident replacement - but omitted to include the cost of it in their budget plan.

They tied up their unaffordable shipbuilding programme in unbreakable contracts.

They in effect had a fantasy defence programme.

Now they agree that the MOD's budget needs to be put on a stable footing, but refuse to say what they would cut.

Of course there are many valid and finely balanced arguments about the utility and necessity of individual capabilities.

But if the decisions that were made in the SDSR had been easy, they would have been taken years ago.

And I know that as we work through the consequences of the strategy the SDSR put in place, we will continue to face those finely balanced choices.

But let's be under no illusions - unpicking the SDSR piece by piece is simply not an option.

I am clear that the end point the SDSR sets out for our Forces is the right one to meet the threats we face.

I regret in particular, the cuts in personnel that are required.

But I have no doubt that the Armed Forces that will emerge from the implementation of the SDSR will be formidable, flexible and adaptable - structured to defend the country and project power abroad - equipped with some of the best and most advanced technology in the world - a superbly trained and disciplined Force that will punch above what will anyway be a very considerable weight.

This is not a vision of retrenchment; it is an ambitious programme of renewal after a decade of continuous operations and budgetary incontinence - a

blueprint for a sustainable future as one of the world's most capable fighting forces.

So let me be clear about my approach.

I am determined that we neither compromise current operations nor constrain future Defence capability - that means we will not remove critical skills and capabilities that are irrecoverable - so that we retain the ability to scale up in the future if the threat demands it and the means permit it.

My first rule is that whatever our current constraints, we must not preclude our successors from doing more.

And my second is that our future strength lies in partnership and we must guard those assets, capabilities and competencies that allow us to add value to our most important alliances.

So we will not carelessly throw away core competencies that may be essential to our Defence in the future or which make us attractive alliance partners today.

But operational effectiveness has to remain the watchword for everything we do and we will continue to learn from our experience.

We will change and adapt with the evidence and the circumstances.

We will value our history and traditions - but we will not be slaves to them.

In that spirit, I can announce today that I have accepted the recommendation of the First Sea Lord that women should be allowed to serve in submarines in the future.

Female officers will serve on the Vanguard Class submarines from late in 2013, followed by ratings in 2015.

Women - officers and ratings - will also be able to serve on the Astute class submarines from about 2016.

**CONCLUSION**

Ladies and Gentlemen, as difficult and challenging as it will be, the transformation programme is essential to balancing our books and modernising our organisation - and that includes implementing both the blueprint of the SDSR and the Defence Reform agenda set out by Lord Levene.

But this is not a book-keeping exercise, or a management consultancy game.

The point of what we are doing is to create the ability to deliver standing military tasks sustainably and project our formidable power when our national security requires it.

I may have come into the Ministry of Defence with a reputation as a numbers man, but I have quickly understood that Defence is a very human endeavour.

And that is not, I hasten to reassure you, me going soft.

It is a recognition that the quality of our people is a potent force multiplier.

Our cutting edge, high-tech equipment only comes to life with the skill, professionalism and commitment of those people.

The men and women of our Armed Forces are the greatest asset we have.

That is why we are committed to rebuilding the Armed Forces Covenant.

And that is why it is my firm belief that when the Government asks our Armed Forces to put themselves in danger in pursuit of our national security, it is our duty to make sure they have the proper support and the best tools we can give them to do the job.

In Defence, we now have a clear programme to deliver on this pledge.

Our future Defence will be secured by the partnerships we make and the platforms we invest in.

But above all it will be secured by the people who serve in our Armed Forces.

Over this last year, on operations in both Afghanistan and Libya, and on standing tasks at home and around the world - our Armed Forces have reminded us yet again why we value them so highly.

As we look to the end of combat operations in Afghanistan in 2014, I hear people asking what we will do to keep our Armed Forces occupied.

It would be a high-class problem to have.

But in this volatile age I think it would be a bold man who would bet on a period of military idleness.

But whatever the future brings; whatever the challenges they are faced with - I do know that the men and women of our Armed Forces will rise to them magnificently.

Rt Hon Jim Murphy MP, Labour's Shadow Defence Secretary, said in response to Philip Hammond's speech at RUSI today: "Philip

Hammond needs a plan for Britain's defences beyond cutting them. His job is not only balancing the books but defending the country and our interests overseas.<br /><br />"The Defence Secretary needs to do more than manage decline in our defences and tell us how Britain can meet major global security challenges.<br /><br />"Savings must be made and reform is necessary, but the Government's plans have left capability gaps and funding uncertainty.◆ It is deeply disappointing he has not decided to change course.<br /><br />"The whole Service community will be worried and will want to know what his plans for further reductions are and where they will fall."</p>