

Much achieved – much to do: Nick Watts reports on the RUSI land warfare conference June 2013

The remarks by the Chief of the General Staff (CGS) at last week's land warfare conference summarized the way the British Army was beginning to move its perspective beyond the end of operations in Afghanistan next year. He was speaking the day after the announcement of the latest Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) which left the MOD comparatively unscathed: at a time when the army is making more personnel redundant; when it is drawing down troops and equipment from both Afghanistan and Germany. "Much achieved – much to do" just about covers it.

The land warfare conference is one of a series of events organized annually by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) that enables an in-depth look at each of the three services and their respective domains. It is a good opportunity to take stock of where things stand. The challenges facing the British Army range from the effect of budgetary restraint, re-structuring and emerging security challenges such as cyber and the unforeseen. The likelihood that 2015 may yet be another year like 1968, when no British servicemen were lost on operations is tantalising, but dependant on no contingencies arising.

Contingency seems to be the new buzz word. For many years the British Army has dealt with a recognizable threat; the Soviet Union and the Cold War. Concurrently it managed a series of counter insurgency and internal security operations as the Empire was unwound, and the Northern Ireland "emergency" dragged on. Now for the first time in a long time it will face no known enemies after 2014. That is not to say that risks and challenges have gone away. The question is how to prepare for the unknown.

Part of the answer lies in "upstream" threats; areas of potential instability. Engaging with these regions may enable emerging security challenges to be dealt with before they become full blown crises. As yet the outcome of the Syrian debacle is unclear and the likely need for land forces equally so. Iran also remains something of an imponderable, despite its new government. Studies into the Future Character of Conflict undertaken by the MOD's Defence Concepts and Doctrine Centre (DCDC) based at Shrivenham have identified future security challenges arising from the stresses created by globalisation, resource shortage and the consequent humanitarian crises. Add to this mix the risk of un-governed or weakly governed states, and the future begins to look very volatile.

Unlike the international situation one hundred years ago, circumstances now resemble the high summer of the Victorian era in the latter half of the 19th century. The immediate future will see British Army training and mentoring teams spreading out around the world, building local partnerships. Perhaps young officers will be encouraged to go on "shooting leave" – the euphemism used for spying out remote territories. This of course led to the army being humiliated by the Boer farmers, which was a precursor to a much greater conflict.

An event such as the land warfare conference enables the Army to indulge in some public crystal ball gazing. This is a process shared with American and French allies; the latter were complemented for the élan shown in dealing with the recent Mali operation. The premium is definitely on equipping service personnel with the right intellectual framework with which to address the future, as much as it is about the right equipment and an adequate budget.