IISS Strategic Survey 2013: Nigel Inkster, its Director of Transnational Threats and Political Risk spoke to Nick Watts, DDG at the U K Defence Forum

In the anticipation of the drawdown and eventual cessation of operations in Afghanistan, the MOD and the UK's armed forces have begun a transition process to prepare for "contingency" operations. Exactly what sort of operations this might involve is obviously open to question. The recent publication by the London based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) of its annual Strategic Survey may help to provide some clues.

Despite the recent terrorist attack in Nairobi the past 12 months have been dominated by events in Syria, almost to the exclusion of other developments: British and NATO forces are still involved in a campaign in Afghanistan, the wider Middle East is still tense and territorial disputes involving China and her neighbours also rumble in the background. How then is the UK to prepare its forces for contingent operations when there are so many potential flash points around the world? What kind of operations will these be – anti piracy operations, or the kind of interventions that were seen in Libya and Mali?

Nigel Inkster started to address these questions by saying that one needs to begin by understanding what has been referred to variously as the 'arc of crisis or the arc of radicalisation.' "For the foreseeable future, an area which begins in West Africa and the Sahel and ends in Kashmir will be a source of instability and violence." For western policy makers and their armed forces, Inkster believes the immediate question, following the drawdown from Afghanistan will be what kind of capabilities will be needed amid a growing inclination to avoid any involvement. "Humanitarian type interventions will continue, but are likely to be undertaken on a more thoughtful basis than has been seen recently. In any case for the UK the expeditionary capability is a sine qua non. If we are fighting in our own territory we have already lost!"

"Across the globe if you look at the way armed forces are re-configuring themselves there is a general trend away from the old style heavy formations towards a more agile configuration with armed forces being seen as one actor in a landscape populated by a greater variety of actors. A National Security Strategy is needed of which the armed forces are one part." 14 or 15 militaries are doing this – National Security Councils are being established as a response to a more

holistic approach to defence and security.

In the UK there has been talk by senior military officers of "upstream engagement" which is understood to mean more preventative action to maintain stability in areas at risk of de-stabilisation. "Upstream capacity building is part of the strategic approach outlined by Barak Obama in May this year. In tackling Counter Terrorism missions the US will be moving away from direct engagement to relying on partners. Policy makers like this approach as it delivers significant returns for small input. The risk is that once you start this process you own their subsequent behaviour: a Malian army which at the first encounter with any opposition turns and runs and becomes part of the security problem." It is not a quick fix, even if it delivers electoral advantage.

Capacity building enables militaries to maintain capabilities which might otherwise wither. Navies and Air forces will be involved – which enables them to use their high end capabilities. "A key trend in the maintenance and development of modern capabilities is the area of intelligence capacity, which plays a much greater role than it has done previously. In the Falklands C4ISR was what the company commander could see through his binoculars! Now there is a whole suite of very sophisticated intelligence capabilities which provide the commander with much greater situational awareness." These capabilities have been honed through operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the case of the UK Inkster notes that in the recent reorganisation of the British Army one thing which has been maintained is a substantial intelligence capability. This kind of capability will enable NATO militaries to retain their edge.

Turning to developments in the Gulf: "the US aren't pulling out of the gulf: it remains the case that some of the US's principal allies in Asia are heavily dependent on Gulf energy supplies." The Europeans are seeing the Gulf as an area which they need to help stabilise for their own reasons. France has recently positioned naval assets in the region. The UK has a long historic relationship "which doesn't translate to a substantial military presence in situ, but there are strong ties which link the UK to the region. This is a region with potential for instability. Iran is close by and there is a general feeling that effort needs to be made with these states as they confront internal pressures for political change." Western countries are trying to nudge Gulf States down the path towards greater democracy.

Gulf States are becoming significant actors in their own neighbourhood as has been seen with developments in both Libya and Syria. "Qatar is a wealthy country with ambitions on the world

stage and a nimbleness that comes from having a small governing elite in the decision making process. They are beginning to punch above their weight. Saudi Arabia is more directly involved in regional security matters. They have seen developments in Egypt and how Mubarak was deposed with US acquiescence and they are doing more to take security matters into their own hands."

Looking to South East Asia: "both Singapore and Brunei are interesting cases of small countries which are really having to think about their national strategy in what is becoming a challenging neighbourhood. They have a continuing involvement with the UK. Singapore has been witnessing with some dissatisfaction what they regard as a continuing UK withdrawal from the region. The UK has been absent recently – being preoccupied with campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. They would like to see the British back, provided the UK has something to contribute." Having a partnership with what remains a global power enables a spreading of risk; not being entirely dependent on the US. France has also been looking for defence sales in the region.

Addressing the question of "Top end" capability Inkster believes that there are no imminent threats. "For the immediate future it is difficult to see a situation where the UK will be involved in full spectrum state on state conflict. The only possible exception might be the Falklands – but the Argentines are pursuing a diplomatic strategy to isolate the UK." However the UK's ability to advance its national security interests is enhanced by having a credible expeditionary capability.

As well as homeland defence the UK needs to maintain a capable navy "the global commons of sea lanes of communication do not police themselves. It remains in the interest of the UK to ensure that these commons are policed. A broad spectrum of air and naval capability remains essential." The UK retains capable space cyber and intelligence capabilities. Massive quantities of armour and heavy artillery are no longer needed. Future operations will most likely be as part of a coalition, so the UK must be able to make a valid contribution. UK forces have got to fit together with other coalition partners and they have got to work on the day.

Inkster believes that the advent of the cyber domain is a significant leveller. "In today's world any country that has a national telecommunications agency in effect has a national signals intelligence agency, which was previously the preserve of a few countries." The Anglosphere retains a very significant advantage in this arena. "Modern systems are vulnerable to remote access attacks countries like China and Russia have significant capabilities in this area."

UK networks are constantly under attack. "Cyber criminality is a strategic threat – if a criminal group takes out the banking sector this has a strategic effect comparable to a bombing campaign. Last summer in the US there was a series of cyber-attacks against the banking system almost certainly conducted by criminal gangs operating on behalf of Iran." "In the cyber domain you can achieve a lot by getting into networks which have not traditionally been seen as sensitive, sucking out data which you can aggregate up. This is a new contestation."