

10 years after the start of the Iraq war, referred to by the MOD as Operation Telic, there have been many reflections on the lessons learnt. The Chilcott report is still awaited, which will offer the definitive view on the rights and wrongs of the decision to go to war. This anniversary has prompted Michael Ancram (Lord Lothian) in conversation with Nick Watts to consider where Britain stands in the world, and what lessons from the Iraq debacle can be applied as Britain seeks to play a role on the world stage. Ancram can draw on his experience as a minister in Northern Ireland and as Shadow Foreign Secretary.

"I've been worried for a very long time that since the end of the Cold war our default position has been US foreign policy," he says. The Iraq campaign was of no value to British interests other than Blair's wish to remain on good terms with the Bush regime. An unflattering comparison has been drawn between Blair's relationship with Bush and that of the late Baroness Thatcher's more robust but friendly ties to the Reagan administration. The ending of the Cold War has created a world where the choices of whether to undertake intervention operations has become more nuanced. Following the Iraqi and Afghanistan operations, there is a decidedly weary attitude among British and American voters for further foreign interventions. However, "events" such as Libya and Mali will keep occurring.

The Conservative led coalition's approach to US-UK relations as "Supportive not slavish...." In practical terms the relationship is heavily weighted in favour of the US, given its financial clout. To be a useful partner the UK must bring something to the party. Ancram is worried that this adversely affects the way the UK prioritizes its military spending and determines the resultant military capability.

The current debate on funding constraints in the current CSR discussions only highlights how difficult this policy aspiration is proving. The House of Commons Select Committee on Defence is about to begin a study into the next SDR in 2015, so [Ancram's] considerations will move into sharper focus in the months ahead.

The UK wishes to retain a full spectrum military capability, from nuclear deterrence to Special Forces. The Coalition's avowed policy stance is best summed up by Foreign Secretary Hague "no strategic shrinkage...." Capability "holidays" mean no aircraft carriers, and the confusion

surrounding whether the new ships will be equipped with the catapult launched or STOVL version of the F35 only highlights the doctrinal dissonance in Whitehall about how Maritime Strike capability is to be delivered. The absence of any Maritime Patrol Aircraft following the demise of Nimrod is a real worry.

The US remains the world's predominant military power, as the current Military Balance published recently by the London based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) attests. But it shows a decreasing gap between US and Chinese military expenditure. IISS estimates that Chinese defence expenditure could equal that of the US by 2025. 2012 saw nominal defence expenditure on defence in Asia surpass that of NATO Europe for the first time. IISS believes that 'Europe no longer exports security' to Asia. How then can Britain expect to play an influential role in this region through its involvement with the Five Power Defence Alliance?

If the US is pivoting its efforts towards the Pacific then [Ancram] believes "the UK will not be required in the Pacific; what will be needed is to back fill the missing US capability in Europe and the Mediterranean." The strategic vision of the UK government appears to be confused and contradictory. There are no hard and fast answers, but Ancram is prepared to offer some food for thought as the debate ahead of the next SDR due in 2015 gathers pace.

"We need to be able to show that we can defend our homeland." This relates more to the 21st century threats of cyber-attack than perhaps to the old fashioned naval blockades. But it is noticeable that "the Shape of the Royal Navy is not configured to defend the UK." Britain is investing in large expensive ships, which reflects an evolving doctrinal debate in the RN. The choice seems to be between power projection through aircraft carriers or a more flexible fleet of smaller frigates.

One consideration Ancram is keen to explore is the whole question of the utility of Hard power, which he sees as a diminishing asset. Iraq and Afghanistan are examples of where it has not produced the optimal outcome. Not only is it expensive to maintain, but the context for its application is changing. For example, the US is intent on achieving energy independence through the exploitation of shale gas and exploiting its own resources. What does this mean for its future involvement in the Gulf? And how would this affect the UK's role there?

One way of giving effect to "soft power" is through the use of Special Forces. As [Ancram] points out these are "trained in hearts and mind exercises as well as military power. In the world we are facing that combination is going to become more important." Any future campaign will be preceded by a thorough assessment of the people and terrain amongst which we may have to operate. It is notable that in the current US budgetary negotiations, the appropriations planned for Special Forces are increased, even as those for the individual services are proposed to be cut.

The UK is planning to rely more on Reservists. Ancram agrees with an emerging strand of opinion that "there is no reason to believe that employers are going to look kindly on giving expensive employees time off, to the extent that they will be needed to replace regulars."

Looking at an area of concern and instability; the Gulf, Ancram is of the view that the US's aim of achieving energy independence will mean a diminishing interest in the region over time. This may have an effect on how the UK uses its forces in the region. "I would think that the likelihood of our becoming involved militarily in the Gulf is becoming increasingly diminished." This does not indicate a diminution of the UK's role in the region; rather it will become more diplomatic and less military.

Ancram thinks it would also be useful to examine how best to make use of the NATO Alliance. Once its mission in Afghanistan draws to a close, careful consideration should be given to employing it in any role which does not have a direct bearing on European security interests. Alliance members are pledged to maintain a minimum level of defence expenditure at 2%. The problem is that this is meant to be a floor, but it looks like becoming a ceiling. The UK could wind up "carrying the burden of Allies who won't pay their share". On this as with our future defence and security posture the UK needs to think outside the box.