

The Prime Minister's speech on DEFENCE & SECURITY– given onboard HMS ALBION at HM Naval Base Devonport on Friday 12th January 2007. The event organised by and the speech reproduced here with the permission of RUSI



Ten years into Government, we are presently conducting a review into every major aspect of policy to set a unified platform and policy direction for the future. Recently, we debated around the Cabinet table, the paper on Britain's foreign policy over the past decade. Essentially there have been three defining aspects to it.

First, it has been governed as much by values as interests; indeed has attempted to suggest that it is by furthering our values that we further our interests in the modern era of globalisation and interdependence.

Secondly, it has had, at its foundation, two major alliances, with America on the one hand and Europe on the other. And thirdly, it has combined, almost uniquely, "hard" and "soft" power.

In other words, Britain has been at the forefront of the fight against terrorism: in defeating Milosevic; to help prevent Sierra Leone falling into the hands of gangsters – all of which have required military action; and have also been leaders in the fight against poverty in Africa, for action to combat climate change, in debates over world trade or the MEPP – all of which have required diplomatic and financial commitment of a different kind.

But it is fair to say that the "hard" power has been considerably more controversial than the "soft".

It has also involved our Armed forces in some of the most difficult and intractable fighting they have seen since WWII or at least since Korea. We have suffered casualties, each one of which represents not just a life lost, but a family bereaved, a unit of comrades mourning their loss; and a nation, concerned and questioning the cost.

Over these past years I have visited our troops in Iraq, in Afghanistan and many other places. I have always come away inspired by their buoyant determination, professionalism and extraordinary spirit. I am aware that visiting Prime Ministers can often get a false impression. But the morale of those carrying out their assignment has been high; their sense of mission, strong; their pride, palpable and contagious.

Indeed, very often those with the most dangerous task are those most up for it, most resolute.

But away from the front line, their families wait. And at the front line, as the enemy switches tactics, so there are all the understandable but still vital issues of logistics. In general the British Armed Forces are superbly equipped. But talk at any length to serving soldiers and there will be amongst the pride, some anger at faulty weapons or ammunition; boots and body armour; the right vehicles or the wrong ones; and the problems of transport to and from the battlefield and home. Single living accommodation, in particular and also a minority of family accommodation is below standard, though being improved.

In the times of 10 years ago none of this would have mattered so much. In times in which men and women are being asked for so much more, they do. They are not just about the conditions they live and work in; they symbolise the respect and gratitude for the nature of what that work now entails.

Today, 5 years or more since September 11th, we can be clearer about the new situation we face, and clearer too about the choices for the future.

In this lecture, I shall argue that today's security threat is qualitatively new and different; that the combination of hard and soft power is still the right course for our country, indeed more so than ever; but that if we want our Armed Forces to be confident of their place in that future, we, all of us, Government, military and public, need to know what is expected of us.

There are two types of nations similar to ours today. Those who do war fighting and peacekeeping and those who have, effectively, except in the most exceptional circumstances, retreated to the peacekeeping alone.

Britain does both. We should stay that way. But how do we gain the consent to do it?

Our Armed Forces in 1945 were geared for an era of inter-state conflict. With the US demobilised after its war effort, the UK possessed the largest Armed Forces in the West. Though British troops were withdrawing from Palestine, they were stationed in West Germany, Austria, North Italy, and Libya. In the decade after the war they were deployed in Malaya, Korea and Kenya.

With such extensive commitments overseas, the Government was left with little choice but to reintroduce conscription in 1946. In 1948, there were 1.5 million military serving personnel.

The strain on the UK Armed Forces was exacerbated by Suez. The failed invasion, undertaken with France and opposed by the US, forced a reassessment of our place in the world and reinvigorated the relationship with the USA.

As a direct consequence of Suez, deterrence, rather than direct deployment, became the pivot of policy. Nuclear weapons did a lot of the work. Manpower and conventional forces were trimmed. The Armed Forces reduced from 690,000 to 375,000 by 1962 and conscription was ended.

Even the low-intensity operations of the time - preventing the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1961, the Indonesian aggression in SE Asia from 1963 to 1967, assisting the governments of Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika to put down rebellions in 1964 – were proving hard to sustain.

Colonial wars, again a part of our recent history, also declined dramatically following the demise of the European empires in the period from 1945 to the 1970s. In 1947, the UK had granted independence of India, Pakistan and Ceylon and handed over financial responsibility for Greece's security to the US.

We subsequently withdrew from Aden, Borneo and Rhodesia and, a few years later, Singapore and Malaysia. By 1970, service manpower was cut by a further 75,000 and defence estimates were reduced drastically. Small garrisons remained only in Hong Kong, Gibraltar, Belize and the Falkland Islands.

Of course the demands on British troops grew again in 1969, in Northern Ireland where, at its highest point, 30,000 troops were based.

There was a sharp decline in inter-state conflict. No two democracies have ever been to war. There has been a dramatic increase in the number of democracies. In 1946, there were 20 democracies in the world. In 2005, there were 88.

The Cold War froze military conflict and allowed the ideological battle to play out. Britain's main strategic interest for 45 years was the need to protect Europe against the Soviet threat. Indeed, the UK was so entirely focused on the two dimensional Cold War stalemate, that the Argentine invasion of the Falklands came as a complete surprise. Three months before the invasion, the Defence Secretary, had announced a massive reduction of the Naval Fleet. Many of the proposed cuts were repealed just in time.

The collapse of the Berlin Wall acted as a catalyst for a reappraisal of the type of Armed Forces that the UK would require to meet the security challenges which emerged to fill the vacuum of a post bipolar world. The peace dividend from the end of the Cold War was announced in the 1990 review "Options for Change", which sought an 18% reduction in manpower.

Yet already a new strategic reality was upon us: the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait later that year confirmed that there were situations further afield which might require a military resolution. Closer to home the former Yugoslavia disintegrated into civil war and ethnic cleansing.

This new security context was articulated in the 1998 Strategic Defence Review. It called for expeditionary Armed Forces that were deployable, agile and adaptable.

Throughout this time since the war, the proportion of defence spending to national income, with some ups and downs, has declined. If we add in the extra funding for Iraq and Afghanistan, then since 1997 it has remained constant at roughly around 2.5% of GDP, incidentally one of the highest levels still in the world. But in the ten years prior to 1997 it fell by over a quarter.

In 2004, the Chancellor announced a £3.7 billion increase to the defence budget for the following three years, an average annual growth of 1.4%. This settlement represented the highest sustained growth in 22 years and the longest period of sustained real terms growth in planned defence spending for over 20 years.

The army has only declined in size by a very small amount since 1997. Numbers in training have risen by 15% since Sep 05. At 1 Oct 2006, the Regular Armed Forces were 96.6% manned.

But it is true that operational commitments are at a higher level than originally planned. Service personnel are working harder and for longer than intended.

There has been a lot of publicity about reported cuts to the Royal Navy.

We did, of course, need to modernise the Navy. The era dominated by anti-submarine patrols requiring large numbers of frigates was over. Today's Navy needs to be versatile. It does different things. It supports expeditionary forces, in Sierra Leone, Iraq and elsewhere. It helps in disaster relief, in counter terrorism, in evacuating UK citizens from the Lebanon.

So we have made a huge effort to equip the Navy for this task. We have made a massive boost to Britain's amphibious capabilities, such as this extraordinary ship on which we are standing now. We have a generation of new ships, all far more capable than their predecessors: the helicopter carrier HMS Albion, the four Bay Class landing ships, the strategic sealift ships, new equipment for the Royal Marines, including the Viking vehicle like the one behind me.

And there is a further, massive ship-building programme ahead, a programme that is likely to be worth some £14 billion over the next 10-15 years. The Type 45 destroyers – a generation ahead of the Type 42; new aircraft carriers – twice as big as our existing vessels; new attack submarines now being built.

Of course service housing is a prominent issue. We have 49,000 houses and 150,000 single living units, making us Britain's largest property manager. Last year we spent £700m on housing and accommodation. MOD expects to spend £5bn in the next decade on housing and accommodation.

Over the last five years we have upgraded some 11,000 family homes, nearly double the target rate. This financial year we aim to upgrade another 1,200 houses.

But all that said, we know there are real problems. The extraordinary job that servicemen do needs to be reflected in the quality of accommodation provided for them and their families, at home or abroad.

So much of what is written distorts the truth or greatly embellishes it.

But what is true is that the context for all these issues has dramatically altered.

Today we face a situation, which yet again changes the paradigm within which military, politics and public opinion interact with each other.

Put simply, September 11 2001 changed everything. Three thousand people died on the streets of New York. They did so as a result of a terrorist, suicide mission. The mission was planned and organised by the Al Qaida group out of a failed state, Afghanistan, thousands of miles away. The state was run by a fanatical, religiously motivated dictatorship, the Taliban. Even now, the bald facts of what happened are utterly extraordinary.

But though September 11 did indeed change the way we look at the world, the profound nature of the change for our armed forces was not immediately apparent.

In October 2001, the Taliban in Afghanistan was subject to military action. Within two months by the use of vast airpower, they were driven from office. In military terms the victory seemed relatively easy. The cost to our forces was minimal.

Eighteen months later, with Saddam consistently refusing to abide by UN Resolutions and with alarm at the proliferation of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons, Iraq was invaded. This time it was more difficult and more costly. Nonetheless, Saddam was removed within 3 months, again by the exercise of overwhelming military firepower.

What was unclear then but is very clear now is that what we were and are confronted with, is of a far more fundamental character than we supposed. September 11 wasn't the incredible action of an isolated group, a one-off strike masterminded by Osama Bin Laden. It was the product rather of a world-wide movement, with an ideology based on a misreading of Islam, whose roots were deep, which had been growing for years and with the ability to mount a radically different type of warfare requiring a radically different type of response. What we face is not a criminal conspiracy or even a fanatical but fringe terrorist organisation. We face something more akin to revolutionary Communism in its early and most militant phase. It is global. It has a narrative about the world and Islam's place within it that has a reach into most Muslim societies and countries. Its adherents may be limited. Its sympathisers are not. It has states or at least parts of the governing apparatus of states that give it succour.

Its belief system may be, indeed is, utterly reactionary. But its methods are terrifyingly modern.

It has realised two things: the power of terrorism to cause chaos, hinder and displace political progress especially through suicide missions; and the reluctance of western opinion to countenance long campaigns, especially when the account it receives is via a modern media driven by the impact of pictures.

They now know that if a suicide bomber kills 100 completely innocent people in Baghdad, in defiance of the wishes of the majority of Iraqis who voted for a non-sectarian government, then the image presented to a western public is as likely to be, more likely to be, one of a failed western policy, not another outrage against democracy. In the months after 7/7, we had a debate in Britain as to whether foreign policy in Iraq or Afghanistan had "caused" the terrorism by inflaming Muslim opinion. The notion that removing two appalling dictatorships and replacing them with a UN backed process to democracy, with massive investment in reconstruction available if only the terrorism stopped, could in any justifiable sense "inflamm" Muslim opinion when it was perfectly obvious that the Muslims in both countries wanted rid of both regimes and stand to gain enormously, if only they were allowed to, from their removal, is ludicrous. Yet a large part, even of non-Muslim opinion, essentially buys into that view.

So our enemy will see their strategic advantages as terrorism and time. They are not a conventional army. They can't be defeated by conventional means. This is the enemy our Armed Forces face today. The enemy knows something else also. That when they kill our soldiers, it provokes not just understandable grief and anguish, but resulting from that, a questioning of why we are "there"; what it's got to do with "us"; how can the struggle be worth the sacrifice in human terms.

Yet to retreat in the face of this threat would be a catastrophe. It would strengthen this global terrorism; proliferate it; expand its circle of sympathisers. Given the nature of it and how its roots developed, long before any of the recent controversies of foreign policy, such retreat would be futile. It would postpone but not prevent the confrontation.

So from the perspective of our Armed Forces, how do we define this new situation? The battle will be long. It has taken a generation for the enemy to grow. It will, in all probability take a generation to defeat.

The frontiers of our security no longer stop at the Channel. What happens in the Middle East affects us. What happens in Pakistan; or Indonesia; or in the attenuated struggles for territory and supremacy in Africa for example, in Sudan or Somalia. The new frontiers for our security are global. Our Armed Forces will be deployed in the lands of other nations far from home, with no immediate threat to our territory, in environments and in ways unfamiliar to them.

They will usually fight alongside other nations, in alliance with them; notably, but probably not exclusively with the USA.

Hardest of all, in fighting terrorism embedded in failed or failing states, against terrorists indifferent to their own lives as well as the lives of others, our forces will suffer casualties. Their families will be back home, anxious, worried, never knowing whether it will be them who receive the dreaded call.

The battle will be conducted in a completely new world of modern communication and media.

Twenty-five years ago, media reports came back from the Falklands irregularly, heavily controlled. During the first Gulf war, the media had restricted access and we were

mesmerised by footage of cameras attached to the end of Cruise missiles. But now war is no longer something read in dispatches. It comes straight into the living room.

Take a website like Live Leak which has become popular with soldiers from both sides of the divide in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Operational documentary material, from their mobile phones or laptops, is posted on the site. These sometimes gruesome images are the unmediated reality of war. They provide a new source of evidence for journalists and commentators, by-passing the official accounts and records.

The combination of all these different dimensions, as I said earlier, transforms the context within which the military, politics and public opinion interact. For their part, the military and especially their families will feel they are being asked to take on a task of a different magnitude and nature. Any grievances, any issues to do with military life, will be more raw, more sensitive, more prone to cause resentment.

Public opinion will be divided, feel that the cost is too great, the campaign too long, and be unnerved by the absence of “victory” in the normal way they would reckon it. They will be constantly bombarded by the propaganda of the enemy, often quite sympathetically treated by their own media, to the effect that it’s really all “our”, that is the West’s fault.

That, in turn, impacts on the feelings of our Armed Forces. They want public opinion not just behind them but behind their mission. They want the “people back home” to understand their value not just their courage.

And the politicians? I believe the risk here is quite the opposite of what most people would think. The parody of people in my position is of leaders who, gung-ho, launch their nations into ill-advised adventures without a thought for the consequences. The reality is we are those charged with making decisions in this new and highly uncertain world; trying, as best we can, to make the right decision. That’s not to say we do so, but that is our motivation.

The risk here – and in the US where the future danger is one of isolationism not adventurism – is that the politicians decide it’s all too difficult and default to an unstated, passive disengagement, that doing the right thing slips almost unconsciously into doing the easy thing.

Many countries are already in this position. But the consequences for Britain are hugely significant. Before we know it and without anyone ever really deciding it, in a strategic way, the “hard” part of British foreign policy could be put to one side; the Armed Forces relegated to an essentially peacekeeping role and Britain’s reach, effect and influence qualitatively reduced.

The irony is: the one group of people who I am sure do not want this to happen, are the men and women of our Armed Forces. They would be horrified by such a thought. The important thing for public opinion and therefore for politicians is at least to comprehend the choice.

There is a case for Britain in the early 21st Century, with its imperial strength behind it, to slip quietly, even graciously into a different role. We become leaders in the fight

against climate change, against global poverty, for peace and reconciliation; and leave the demonstration of “hard” power to others. I do not share that case but there is quite a large part of our opinion that does. Of course, there will be those that baulk at the starkness of that choice. They will say yes in principle we should keep the “hard” power, but just not in this conflict or with that ally. But in reality, that’s not how the world is.

The reason I am against this case, is that for me “hard” and “soft” power are driven by the same principles. The world is interdependent. That means we work in alliance with others. But it also means problems interconnect. Poverty in Africa can’t be solved simply by the presence of aid. It needs the absence of conflict. Failed states threaten us as well as their own people. Terrorism destroys progress. Terrorism can’t be defeated by military means alone. But it can’t be defeated without it.

Global interdependence requires global values commonly or evenly applied. But sometimes force is necessary to get the space for those values to be applied: in Sierra Leone or Kosovo for example.

So, for me, the setting aside of “hard” power leads inexorably to the weakening of “soft” power. This is especially so given the very purpose of the threat against which today, force is exercised. This terrorism is an attack on our values. Its ideology is anti-democratic, anti-freedom, anti-everything that makes modern life so rich in possibility. When the Taliban murder a teacher in front of his class, as they did recently, for daring to teach girls; that is an act not just of cruelty but of ideology. Using force against them to prevent such an act is not “defence” in the traditional territorial sense of that word, but “security” in the broadest sense, an assertion of our values against theirs.

So my choice is for Armed forces that are prepared to engage in this difficult, tough, challenging campaign, to be war fighters as well as peacekeepers; for a British foreign policy keeps our American alliance strong and is prepared to project hard as well as soft power; and for us as a nation to be as willing to fight terrorism and pay the cost of that fight wherever it may be, as we are to be proud champions of the causes of peace in the Middle East, action against poverty, or the struggle to halt the degradation of our environment.

However, if we make that choice, then, recognising this is a new situation for our Armed Forces, there are new commitments necessary to make it work and make it fair. The covenant between Armed Forces, Government and people has to be renewed. For our part, in Government, it will mean increased expenditure on equipment, personnel and the conditions of our Armed Forces; not in the short run but for the long term.

On the part of the military, they need to accept that in a volunteer armed force, conflict and therefore casualty may be part of what they are called upon to face.

On the part of the public, they need to be prepared for the long as well as the short campaign, to see our participation alongside allies in such conflict not as an atavistic, misguided attempt to recapture past glories, but as a necessary engagement in order for us to protect our security and advance our interests and values in the modern world.

Indeed, for Government, domestically and internationally, our commitment has to go beyond our Armed Forces. In truth, this is a hearts and minds battle as much as military one. Reconstruction and reconciliation, development and governance are every bit as crucial in Iraq or Afghanistan as military might. Indeed the might is only effective as a means of making possible the political progress. We do this better than most countries, perhaps better than any. But even we have immense challenges to overcome; and in terms of international institutions capable of helping build a nation, the international community woefully short of where it needs to be. The answer to this should be the subject of another whole lecture. But here is where hard and soft power have to combine within one country or situation, so that the one reinforces the other. Military alliances, forged in circumstances of urgent danger, tend to work. Nation-building alliances are altogether harder; but completely critical to the military success.

It is not easy to have this debate with the swirl of recent publicity about the conditions of our Armed Forces – however wrong or exaggerated it might be; or when we are in the middle of two deeply controversial engagements of our troops. Yet this is the right time to debate and decide it precisely because of such stormy argument.

The reason for the storm is not this or that grievance or conflict. Its origin is the new situation we face. The post Cold War threat is now clear. The world has changed again. We must change with it. I have set out the choice I believe we should make. I look forward to the debate.