



UKNDA COMMENTARY No.7

Who Will Speak for Defence and Security?

**By Air Chief Marshal Sir Michael Graydon, Dr Andrew Roberts
and Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham**

In the closing months of 2014, Boris Johnson, in his Residents' Survey for the Uxbridge and South Ruislip constituency, posed the question – “Which issues are most important for the country as a whole?” Fifteen subjects were offered for consideration – not one mentioned Defence or Security, despite the threatening global scene.

An ‘Ed Miliband moment’? Sadly, no. It is more likely a reflection of a political generation, a number of whom are quick to voice their admiration for the Armed Forces when the cameras are on them, but at root have little concern for military matters. There is an election due in May. The major parties are competing in the great NHS give-away whilst showing every sign of wishing to bury Defence until well after the election, using the expected Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR-15) as the convenient touchstone for evasion.

What is the evidence for this? Let us start with the Conservative Party. In September, the Prime Minister used the NATO Summit in Wales to chide Britain's European allies and set the challenge to achieve Defence Budgets equivalent to the NATO minimum of 2% of GDP by 2020. Many expert observers already suggest that by 2018 Britain will be heading in the opposite direction, spending only 1.7% of our GDP on Defence. Moreover, the ring-fencing of certain favoured departments for the post-election period means that all the other departments will have to take the pain; Defence is one of them. If articles are to be believed, the Chancellor already has his vultures circling MOD. Mr Hammond, the last Defence Secretary, left the MOD with major capability deficiencies and two consecutive years of underspend, as much as £3.4bn according to reports. He will not wish to raise the subject. Those shaping policy for the Conservative party, Messrs Letwin and Maude, believe, it is said, that “there are no votes in Defence”. Only the present Defence Secretary, Michael Fallon, has, to his credit, stood up for the Armed Forces' share of government funding – but one wonders how much attention he will get as ministers battle it out for their departments, and their careers

What of the opposition? Given their half-hearted support for Defence, both in and out of office, the Labour Party will certainly not want to highlight military deficiencies in the coming months, although, surprisingly, on a recent Radio 4 Today programme, Shadow Chancellor Ed Balls suggested that Britain's Defences “needed attention”. What a pity he didn't appreciate that before. Ed Miliband in his conference speech talked briefly about “our brilliant, heroic Armed Forces” and then forgot them

in all that followed, along with the deficit. Will the Shadow Defence Secretary, Vernon Coaker, get much air time in the election run-up? It is highly unlikely. Burying Defence until after the election will suit the Labour party too.

The Liberal Democrats – whose enthusiasm for spending on everything except Defence was a major contribution to the disastrous SDSR in 2010 – will not want to talk about Defence and Security if the 2014 party conference is any guide. Nick Clegg in his conference speech paid tribute early on to the Armed Forces – and then, like Ed Miliband, said nothing thereafter. Danny Alexander, no doubt pleased to see the move of Typhoon aircraft from Fife closer to his constituency in the far north (at great cost to the Defence budget) will certainly not want Defence issues on the election agenda. And the SNP, whose interest in Defence, as demonstrated during the Referendum campaign, is largely confined to removing the Nuclear deterrent from Scotland, are unlikely to have anything worthwhile to say. UKIP alone wishes to raise Defence spending.

Does it matter that Defence and Security will not figure in May 2015? Yes it does, and not just because so many credible correspondents are highlighting the risks we are running by our neglect of the nation's Defences. The daily evidence is on our TV screens, with news reports from as far afield as Ukraine, Crimea, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Nigeria, Somalia, and North Korea. Indeed, our politicians in recent years have all recognised the growing dangers of the global situation.

Tony Blair, as he departed, David Cameron and Nick Clegg on assuming power, and more recently William Hague have all publicly acknowledged the state of the world in which we are living, and the responsibilities this brings for governments. Defence is, as David Cameron has several times reiterated, ***“The first duty of government”***. Even the Chancellor, George Osborne, when questioned on Defence cuts by Andrew Marr immediately after the NATO Summit in Wales, replied ***“We can afford whatever it takes to provide adequate security. Defence comes first”***.

This last sound bite is particularly revealing because it confirms what the UK National Defence Association and others have been saying for several years now – that sound Defence *is* affordable. It is a matter of choice. But, the choice made for over two decades by successive governments has been continually to relegate Defence in the list of funding priorities. The result is that the UK Armed Forces' fighting power has been massively reduced. Indeed, the staff of the House of Commons Defence Committee have suggested that there has been a halving of fighting power since 2010 – and this without considering the losses before this date.

Until recently the Government's response to criticism of the actual state of the Armed Forces has been to argue that Britain still spends the 4th largest amount on Defence in the world; as if this answered the question. Now, after compelling criticism from UKNDA, ministers have resorted to saying that it is the 5th largest amount; other commentators suggest it is 6th and on its way to being 7th. However, Defence budget ranking is not the issue. It is what you get for the expenditure that matters. And here there are big questions to answer in the light of the politicians' earlier statements.

The Government's default position is denial. There was some hasty juggling of the front line in October 2014 when it was revealed that there were only 3 Squadrons of Tornado combat aircraft left to carry out the additional task of operations against ISIL in Iraq, that these 3 Squadrons were already operating in Afghanistan and Nigeria, and that one Squadron was due to be disbanded early in the new year. This, and the many other capability gaps, the Maritime Patrol Aircraft a glaring example, and the loss of combat power in the Royal Navy another – should indeed be on the agenda for this and every election if Defence really is “the first duty of government”.

Most critically, we cannot continue to deny our loss of credibility with the United States following our failures in Basra and Helmand. The evidence is there in books and in interviews from our own

people, and increasingly from the Americans. The recent book by Jack Fairweather reviewed by Max Hastings makes sad reading for those brought up in the period of mutual respect and co-operation. These failures arise mostly from a lack of fighting power and the mind-set that goes with it.

A more recent response to these concerns, given voice in the Chief of Defence Staff's Christmas 2014 RUSI lecture, is to state that there is a new warfare at large where the metrics of firepower are no longer the dominant factor. Cyber, data fusion, information, robotics will, it is prophesied, all spawn a new way of warfare. This will impact capabilities with the implication that kinetic force is now less important.

Certainly a better understanding of what is actually happening at sea, on the ground or in the air, and what an enemy might do in the future, would be very helpful. Used wisely, this appreciation and the active employment of non kinetic force such as cyber might deter aggression. It can also ensure that when required kinetic capabilities are employed at the right time and in the right place. This might allow force level reductions if such technology were guaranteed to work all the time. But the study of history suggests this is far too risky. For every technological breakthrough, another arrives to negate it. Potential enemies are not standing still, and any technical edge is only transient. We should recall that although the RAF had radar for the Battle of Britain which enabled our smaller fighter force to be best deployed, what ultimately decided the outcome was the gearing up of our fighter production which outpaced that of Germany enabling the RAF to absorb the loss rates better than the Luftwaffe. And just think if we had reduced our fighter force because radar had changed the metric!

The evidence points strongly to the likelihood that these new modes of warfare are adjuncts, useful certainly, occasionally crucial, but adjuncts to hard kinetic fighting power in sufficient strength. And never forget that those nations most involved in developing cyber weapons continue to see necessity in possessing massive conventional forces.

There are therefore good practical and statesmanlike reasons for Defence to figure in the lead up to the next election. It is a matter of intellectual honesty for which moral courage is required. The public has a right to know what a prospective Government intends to do not solely about Defence, but in the context of how it sees our place in the world and what are the likely consequences to us of changes in that place.

So who then will speak for Defence? Not it would seem many of that generation for whom peace is somehow the natural order of things in the 21st century, although how they came to believe that is not clear. Nor those who appear to believe, as an article of faith, that soft power can substitute for hard power, and that history has no lessons to teach us. Try telling that to Mr Putin and ISIL; just look at the impending lease of Russian fighter/bombers to Argentina.

There are now many commentators of note who will try to raise the debate away from cosy short-termism and its giveaway culture, and set it in reality. Honest debate will be difficult in the face of a wall of silence, and it is only politicians who can respond. Perhaps the former Defence Equipment Minister, Sir Peter Luff, may have something to say. In a recent article he set out the situation in stark terms:

“The coalition plans to cut defence spending still further... despite the world being more dangerous than it has been for decades. At a time when we should be more open than ever with the British people about the scale of the dangers we face, a behind-the-doors SDSR driven once again by the importance of the deficit reduction risks the state turning its back on effective security almost by accident.”

Who really will speak for Defence in 2015? Answer came there none.

ABOUT THE UKNDA

UKNDA's objectives are:

Promoting the effective and efficient Defence of the United Kingdom and the UK's worldwide interests;

Advancing public awareness and understanding of the history and role of the Armed Forces in the life of the Nation;

Commissioning research into the threats faced by the United Kingdom and the military capabilities required to meet these threats;

Seeking to inform debate on all aspects of National Defence and Security.



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