

Deterrence in the 21st Century

A Discussion Note by the CA Chairman

Introduction:

For most of us, Deterrence was an essential element of our service in the Cold War. However, since the early 1990s, when the Soviet Union collapsed and NATO nations refocused on expeditionary warfare, the concept has been largely parked as only relevant at the nuclear strategic level. However, recent events, especially the bellicose stances taken by Russia and China, have resulted in the concept of Deterrence being reignited and refreshed at military, government and academic levels.

Discussion:

Whilst Deterrence has always been a tool in conflict prevention, the advent of nuclear weapons made its effectiveness crucial in avoiding Armageddon. Various theories emerged as a result, most recognising the need for graduated capabilities and the political will to use them to ensure a credible deterrent posture. Thus, by the early 1990s, it was universally recognised that both conventional and nuclear (tactical and strategic) options were essential to deter and, if necessary, manage high level conflict. Moreover, a clear and declared intent to draw on a range of responses to aggression ensured potential adversaries were left in no doubt that any possible gains would be far outweighed by the likely consequences. Such thinking served us well during the Cold War.

So, what has changed? I suggest three things:

- Firstly, I contend that western democracies are weaker now than at any time in recent history; this is especially so in the United States, where divergence in politics is self-evident. But in Europe also, key failings in government, especially dealing with mass immigration, are destabilising societies and driving the electorate towards extreme right-wing solutions. The resultant loss of political cohesion signals to adversaries that intent is diluted and in consequence deterrence is undermined. This is particularly evident in European NATO nations, where it is questionable whether Putin perceives the majority as sufficiently resolute to deter further aggression.
- Secondly, the landscape of conflict has expanded, becoming multi-faceted and more complex: Space, Cyber (including what we called in the past Psy Ops and Info Ops) have gained significant importance, yet remain underfunded and vulnerable areas, with consequences to integrated deterrence.
- Thirdly, the western nations, especially the European ones, have reduced their overall defence capabilities, leaving significant gaps in the rungs of

escalation – most notably in Integrated Air Defence (IAMD) and Tactical Nuclear. Should Putin elect to deliver a low-yield nuclear weapon on the UK MBDA site producing Storm Shadow missiles being employed in Ukraine, how would or could we respond? Would USA wish to get involved at this level? Is the Trident so-called sub-strategic capability a credible option in such a scenario? I suggest not.

So What Needs to be Done?

There is already some thinking going on around modern deterrence, and with a Defence Review likely in the near future, I suggest that the following should be priorities for consideration:

- Greater investment in Space and Cyber, focussed especially on protecting essential assets but also on considering offensive/retaliatory capabilities.
- Re-establishment of a national sub-strategic nuclear capability.
- Progressive development of a comprehensive IAMD capability, fully integrated into that of European colleagues.
- Introduction of a range of measures to improve national resilience, belief in democracy and especially in its leadership.

As with all these short papers and discussion periods, please join in the debate by sending your thoughts to me at sirchriscov@gmail.com

Regards

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