

# Chief of the Defence Staff Speech to the Royal United Services Institute



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It really is a distinct pleasure to be here with RUSI for my first speech as Chief of the Defence Staff. But it is also slightly daunting, just seven days into the job as you've heard and with a cast of defence A-listers before me. I can't help wondering who is most surprised. Me, or some of my old bosses in the audience!

I am going to resist the Twitterati pleas to announce that beards will be allowed for soldiers in the British Army. Instead, I want to reflect on a few simple but dominant themes:

A real sense of 'Back to the Future', with the return of the state as the central, indispensable feature of the international system.

A return to the traditional notion of British national interest, in all its guises, as the guiding principle underpinning and leading policy.

And some early thoughts about what I think these features will mean for both me and David Williams, the Permanent Secretary, so that we can best support the Defence Secretary and the Prime Minister.

## Back to the Future

I am perhaps symbolic of that sense of 'back to the future'.

The last time an Admiral was appointed to this role, we were on the cusp of interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I was at Staff College around the same time. We studied Francis Fukuyama's 'End of History' and Samuel Huntington's

‘Clash of Civilisations’; and the political backdrop was the optimism of Tony Blair’s Chicago Speech and the moral and intellectual rationales for liberal interventionism.

I was even a product of that with three tours in Iraq on land and at sea. And we must learn from the lessons of that campaign, and those that continue to emerge from Afghanistan, including the extraordinary commitment for the withdrawal earlier this year.

But it is now clear that the last twenty years weren’t the end of history. At best, it was a pause. And now the play button – or perhaps fast forward – is activated. The state is back with a vengeance. Indeed, for our competitors, it never went away. Classic geopolitical theorists are in vogue once again: Mackinder’s World Island competes with Mahan’s World Oceans. Autocracies confront democracies.

In the Cold War, we were adversaries. Now we are closer to Kissinger’s view of co-evolution. We compete. We co-operate and try to trade like crazy. We contest. And we even confront. But frequently we are doing all at the same time, in the same place and even with the same state.

We are undoubtedly more prosperous today than when the Cold War ended. Life expectancy has risen. Extreme poverty is falling. More girls and women are in education. More people live in democracies than ever before. And yet our security outlook is far more complex and dangerous than at any time over the past 30 years.

Russia’s behaviour is a threat to our values and interests. Iran could soon join North Korea in posing a nuclear and ballistic missile threat to the UK and our allies. Instability in the Western Balkans is surging again. China is challenging international norms of behaviour: whether freedom of navigation, economic intimidation or wolf-warrior diplomacy. And whether we like it or not, our withdrawal from Afghanistan is grist to the mill for those who subscribe to a narrative around the decline of the West.

Our response to these challenges and risks lies at the heart of the Integrated Review. It confirms the need to: deter and

defend against state-based opponents, to strengthen our technological and scientific base; and modernise every aspect of our armed forces. It also acknowledges the need to address broader aspects of security – climate change, population pressures and resource competition – as well as supporting the Government's prosperity agenda.

The task for David Williams and me is to respond to this direction and lead the Department to deliver it.

We have the resources. The four-year spending settlement provides financial stability and allows us – with the need for some flexibility and need for ingenuity – to deliver the programme outlined in the Command Paper.

### The Pursuit of British Interests

So, instead of the traditional 'we want more cash or more people' the pitch that you may be expecting, or elaborating on the geo-strategic position, my focus this evening is much more tactical, and deliberately so.

The Integrated Review provides us with a mission to work for and with the rest of government to advance – my second point – the pursuit of national interest.

And it must be recognised that our interests at home and abroad are linked. Global Britain. Levelling Up. Strengthening the Union. These aren't campaign slogans or catch phrases. They are the policy of the Government and are bound up with our defence and security.

If you are in any doubt you only need look to Barrow-in-Furness.

It's a community whose very identity is rooted in a sense of purpose that comes from building nuclear submarines – and the feelings of pride and accomplishment are palpable inside and outside the factory gates.

Our air stations and garrisons, our dockyards and training schools, are the life blood of so many communities. We invest billions into aviation, shipbuilding and other high-tech

industries, in every region and every community across all of these islands. We're the experts at levelling up. We've been doing it for centuries and we'll be doing it long into the future.

But that bond between the country and its armed forces rests on more than jobs and investment. It's about our place in the world, our values, and our sense of worth as a country. We should be proud of Barrow, and the many communities that supply and support us -because of what it allows us to achieve. We're a country that takes our national and collective security seriously.

The rest of the world see us for who we are. A permanent member of the UN Security Council. A nuclear power. A trading power. The world's fifth largest economy. A strong, powerful country but outward looking, cooperative and generous too. The country that has cut carbon emissions faster than any other. One of the largest donors of overseas aid. A science and education superpower.

The one thing our competitors lack is the one thing we have in riches - real friends, all around the world, who share our interests and values. NATO, Five Eyes, AUKUS, the Joint Expeditionary Force, the Commonwealth, the Five Powers Defence Arrangements, and with France, the Combined Joint Expeditionary Force.

And then there's our people. The Armed Forces are the largest sponsor and provider of youth organisations in the country. We are the largest employer of apprentices. We take young people, some of whom have few prospects, and we put them on a path of opportunity. Our veterans are some of the most qualified and capable individuals that any employer could ask for. We have an extraordinary array of skills within our Reserve Forces. Be the Best. Rise Above the Rest. Made in the Royal Navy. Again, these aren't just slogans. They are social mobility in action, and the lived experience for generation-after-generation of servicemen and women.

That is not to say we will rest on our laurels. We are striving to do better in every aspect of our leadership. That includes reflecting the diverse nation we serve. Because if we don't,

then quite simply, we risk looking ridiculous. This is not about wokefulness. It is about woefulness. The woefulness of too few women. The woefulness of not reflecting the ethnic, religious and cognitive diversity of our nation. And the woefulness of not following our own values, whether respect for each other or the simple integrity of claiming expenses. This affects our culture, our fighting power, our prowess. And it is not an 'Army thing' or a 'Navy thing'. It's a challenge to the whole of Defence.

What do we plan to do? The Priorities

So how do we shape the Department to address some of our weaknesses; and to ensure that we can respond to the threats and fulfil the Government's direction?

I would like to share five emerging priorities that might form an agenda for David Williams and me to drive the Department on behalf of the Secretary of State.

I say 'might' because it is Week One. And whilst I might be enthusiastic, I am not so naïve as not to know that we need to get others onboard to enable a Departmental and National agenda to emerge.

The first priority – unsurprisingly – is delivery, delivery and delivery.

We need to be absolutely focused on playing our part to turn the Integrated Review into a reality, and to deliver the changes outlined in the Command Paper to specification and on budget.

That means more clarity and prioritisation. The Department totted up its draft set of priorities recently and they numbered 118! Not a great way to focus an organisation. But perhaps reflective of an 'all things to all people' and an 'everything and nothing' culture.

As First Sea Lord, the Navy Board and I benefitted from the Defence Secretary's direction to simply 'get our ships and submarines working and at sea'. We need to adopt that urgency and focus across the whole of Defence. The Prime

Minister has specifically directed the Defence Secretary to:

- \* ensure the long-term viability of our nuclear deterrent;
- \* modernise Defence;
- \* improve procurement and project management;
- \* deliver the National Shipbuilding Strategy;
- \* and deliver the Armed Forces Bill.

We will. And alongside that clarity, we will define clear lines of responsibility and accountability, and a culture of consequence.

The second priority is around the ugly words of Transforming, Reforming and Integrating. They are ugly words to get after an ugly truth: Defence's structures, processes, and pace, are too large, too hierarchical, and too ponderous for the threats we face and our need to embrace technology much more strongly. The Department still operates in silos and is too flat-footed. We know everything is too slow and we are too resistant to change. For every person trying to get things done, it can feel like there are four or five other people standing in the way or looking over your shoulder.

That could mean a much leaner Head Office and supporting organisations. More reliance and trust on the Front Line Commands and StratCOM. Much more Integration. We are often accused of being 'buzzword central'. The real buzzwords for all of us as Chiefs are 'win' or 'lose'. We will win because of our ethos, spirit, the real mass that comes from alliances, and the fighting edge that digitization, AI, cyber, automation all provide. There is not a technology debate. This is about:

Just Do It;

And do it in 5 months and not 5 years;

And to do it quickly might mean more focus on time and less on money.

And absolutely focus on Outcomes....

That leads me to a potential third priority which is clunky, but fundamental. It is about having formations, units, platforms, systems and people that are both more deployable and deployed more, whether at home or abroad. This follows from our conclusions about constant strategic competition. We need to be more active and engaged to achieve the deterrence, stability and prosperity at the heart of our national strategy.

This is a very significant change from the Armed Forces I joined where we talked of defence almost as if it were an insurance policy, and our focus was predominantly on 'contingent forces'. But the simple demarcation of peace and war is less prevalent today. Our forces need to be out in the world supporting British interests, deterring and shaping on a continuous basis. This is what our politicians demand, and it gets after the frustrations felt by our people when they find themselves stuck in barracks or delayed by training or equipment when they should be deployed as ambassadors for Global Britain – shaping, training and influencing. 'Winning the war before the war...' as my French opposite number calls it.

There are risks with a shift from 'contingent' to 'active and engaged'. But it makes us potentially a much stronger contributor to the National Security Architecture, to be harnessed all the time rather than 'just' called for in a crisis. And there are opportunities too, through joint projects and defence sales as well as supporting communities at home.

The fourth potential priority is the need to be far more lethal. We have to up the punch we bring across all domains. Increasingly, the need is for 'high impact and low footprint' operations. That is not to be interpreted as everything will become 'SF-tastic'. But it is to recognise that our aim must be to provide the right military tool, in the right place at the right time for just as long as it takes to complete a task.

To be more lethal, we must innovate. The answer cannot be 'more people' and 'more cash'. It means upskilling and shifting from the areas where we will need less to those where we need more. We must be willing to dispose of older equipment even earlier or adjust our existing programmes to

generate the cash to take advantage of rapidly emerging and radically transforming technology. We have to overcome our risk aversion that dominates when we are in the business space and infuse some of the confidence in risk taking we always have when we are on operations. Not easy.

General Nick Carter was eloquent about the need to sunset some capabilities in order to focus on better sunrises. Let me also pay tribute to him for his work to drive a more integrated Defence that embraces cyber and space, and within NATO for an updated strategy to meet emerging risks.

As Chiefs, we all need to recognise that our risk in letting the nation down involves continuing as we are. This is not about change for change's sake. It is an imperative: to be even better; and to contribute even more in the pursuit of British interests, whether levelling up, trade, prosperity, health security, climate stability, the advancement of science, as well as defence and security.

This leads me to my fifth and final point, and probably the most important, which is why I touched on it earlier: people and culture.

We have world-leading Armed Forces, full of high-quality women and men, regulars and reservists, backed by their ever-supportive families and our civil servants, and with a precious and privileged position in the heart of the nation. We need to retain that special place.

We are making progress to better reflect society, particularly in terms of more ambitious targets, more diverse recruitment, more women in senior roles, talent programmes, uniform changes, complaints reform and so on. But we will do more, do it more quickly and more openly.

And my most passionate point about our culture is about unlocking the potential of these talented and skilled people, who are so committed they're prepared to risk injury or worse for their nation. All of them play at international level for their country. And our bureaucracies, processes, hierarchies, infrastructure, speed of response and leadership need to match their commitment across the board. We need to unlock



the potential energy of the whole Department and fully exploit it in every aspect of what we do.

## Conclusion

I want to conclude by reflecting what a pivotal time this is for Defence.

We are returning to a more classical model of persistent inter-state competition.

We have the clarity, ambition and increased resources of government, despite a pandemic.

And we have the obligation to fulfil that ambition in the pursuit of British national interests, with allies and partners who also share those values and aspirations.

And we have the opportunity to unlock the potential of UK Armed Forces; to be more deployable and more effective; to modernise; to be more lethal; and to be more diverse. And to become Global Forces for Global Britain.

Thank you.

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