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Hearts, minds and guns: the Role of the Armed Forces in the 21st Century

By: UK Chief of Defence Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup

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Air Chief Marshal Stirrup was educated at Merchant Taylors' School, Northwood and the Royal Air Force College Cranwell, and was commissioned in 1970. After a tour as a Qualified Flying Instructor he served on loan with the Sultan of Oman's Air Force, operating Strikemasters in the Dhofar War. Returning to the United Kingdom in 1975 he was posted to No 41(F) Squadron, flying Jaguars in the Fighter Reconnaissance role, before taking up an exchange appointment on RF-4C Phantoms in the United States. He then spent two years at Lossiemouth as a flight commander on the Jaguar Operational Conversion Unit, and subsequently attended the Joint Service Defence College in 1984. He commanded No II(AC) Squadron, flying Fighter Reconnaissance Jaguars from Royal Air Force Laarbruch, until 1987 when he took up the post of Personal Staff Officer to the Chief of the Air Staff. He assumed command of Royal Air Force Marham in 1990, just in time for Operation GRANBY, and then attended the 1993 Course at the Royal College of Defence Studies. He completed No 7 Higher Command and Staff Course at Camberley prior to becoming the Director of Air Force Plans and Programmes in 1994. He became Air Officer Commanding No 1 Group in April 1997 and was appointed Assistant Chief of the Air Staff in August 1998. He took up the appointment of Deputy Commander-in-Chief Strike Command in 2000. At the same time he assumed the additional roles of Commander of NATO's Combined Air Operations Centre 9 and Director of the European Air Group. He spent the last few months of his tour, from September 2001 to January 2002, as UK National Contingent Commander and Senior British Military Advisor to CINCUSCENTCOM for Operation VERITAS, the UK's contribution to the United States led Operation ENDURING FREEDOM in Afghanistan.

Air Chief Marshal Stirrup was appointed KCB in the New Year Honours List 2002 and took up the post of Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff (Equipment Capability) in March 2002. He became Chief of the Air Staff, on promotion, on 1 August 2003, and was appointed GCB in The Queen's Birthday Honours List 2005. Air Chief Marshal Stirrup became Chief of Defence Staff on 28 April 2006.

Air Chief Marshal Stirrup is married with one son and enjoys golf, music, theatre and history.

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By: UK Chief of Defence Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup

I'm delighted to be with you today, and to have this opportunity to talk about some security issues that I hope will be of mutual interest. It is a particularly pleasure for me to be back in Norway. Our two countries have a strong and long-standing defence relationship. But for me there's a special and very personal dimension to this. I spent a considerable amount of time during my early years in the Air Force flying from bases in Bodø and Bardufoss, so my memories of your country are very strong and, I have to say, very warm – well, in the mental and emotional sense, at least, if not always the physical!

In those days, that now seem so far off, NATO was very concerned about its northern flank, and we payed a lot of attention to the Arctic. Well things have changed a lot in the intervening years. We have moved from a cold war to some hot ones, and the challenges to our security have become more diverse and in many ways more unpredictable. But one thing that has not changed is the strategic importance of the far north, even if not everybody appreciates that sufficiently today. I can tell you that we in the UK certainly do. And we are both delighted and grateful that Norway is keeping its eye on this particular ball. In addition to that shared interest, our armed forces continue to work with one another in a number of important ways. Our partnership on operations is, of course, the ultimate expression of our defence relationship, and we're very proud to be contributing along with Norway and many other NATO partners to the alliance's important mission in Afghanistan.

But we do much else together besides this. The training that UK forces are able to carry out in Norway, for example, helps to strengthen our mutual understanding and interoperability. And it's often proved its wider value to us in sometimes quite dramatic ways.

Let me give you just one practical example: On the night of 20. March 2003, Lt Cdr Finn, a senior pilot on 845 squadron, was leading 9 sea king mark 4 helicopters in an opposed assault on the Al Faw peninsula in Iraq. It was a tough proposition. The ambient light conditions and the general mayhem seriously reduced the effectiveness of the crews' night vision goggles. Junior pilots referred to the resulting disorientation as "the green hell". But Finn and his colleagues had trained extensively in the demanding conditions of Norway. Now the connection between the Arctic and the desert may not seem obvious. But snow and sand can have very similar effects for aircrew. And it was the skills acquired in the most testing of environments in Norway that saw 845 squadron through the night of the 20. March in Iraq.

So it's good to be here. It is good to be able to look back; to relive old memories and to express my appreciation for all that we do together. But also to look forward, and to say a few words about the UK's approach to some of the security challenges that we face in these early years of the 21st century. I'm not about to offer my nostrums for the world's problems, nor put forward any easy algorithms that one might apply to derive answers to the challenges we face. Such things simply don't exist. But what I would like to do is to stimulate thought and spark discussion. If I can achieve that I'll be well satisfied.

As a starting point I'd like if I may to go back some two and a half thousand years in time. Back to the Peloponnesian war, and in particular to the embassy that the Athenians sent to the islanders of Melos. You may recall that the Mellians were neutral in that conflict, but this didn't satisfy the Athenians. They reasoned that all the while the island stayed neutral, there was a chance that it could go over to the Spartans. The only safe course was to make the Melians subordinate to Athens. And so they sent an embassy to Melos to explain to the inhabitants that, will they or nill they, they must acknowledge Athenian sovereignty. Now the Melians were a proud people, and didn't take kindly to this ultimatum. They deployed various arguments to try and dissuade the Athenians – you can read them in Thucydides. But the Athenians were having none of it. "Who are you to tell us what we can and can't do?" they asked the Melians. And then

they said something that philosophers have debated for two and a half thousand years since, and that remains the basis for what we know today as realpolitic. They said that in this world: "the strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must". The Athenians were strong, and the Melians weak. And so the Athenians prevailed. Now lest you think that this is a rather depressing confirmation of the doctrine that might is right, we should remember that Athens was eventually defeated in the Peloponnesian war, and never again reached the heights from which it fell. But that probably wasn't much consolation to the Melians. They were weak, and suffered for it. The fact that Athens did not profit in the long run was, I suspect, rather cold comfort.

This is all very interesting, but you might be wondering what it has to do with us. Quite a lot, actually. You see, it may well be true that in the 21st century the strong do not necessarily do what they can, just because they can. It may be that in some instances loftier considerations direct their actions. It may be that they're constrained by the need for a degree of approval. It may be that international institutions have a bearing on their behaviour. But these are pretty uncertain factors, and it would be unsafe to bet on them. What remains true, however, is that the weak suffer what they must. Which leads me to my first proposition: better not be weak. In the profession of arms, in particular, strength matters. There are of course many ways in which that strength can be applied, and choosing the right one for a particular set of circumstances is no easy matter. But let's be clear. The absence of strength means that the choices are few and far between. And I for one wouldn't want to be without choices in the world that we'll face over the next several years. It will in many ways be a dangerous and unstable place. 9/11 highlighted, as nothing else had done, the shifting global security dynamic that was already evident before 2001. We'd seen the trends, and indeed reflected them in our strategic defence review of 1997.

But suddenly we had to refocus urgently on the strategic risks we faced. The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; the existence of failed and failing states; and the spread of international terrorism: all of these would challenge even further our security and prosperity. And subsequent events have only served to bear out that analysis.

But the world doesn't stand still. Since 9/11 we've developed a better understanding of the factors which might complicate the global security environment in future. To an extent these exacerbate the challenges we already face. But worryingly, they also pose potential risks in themselves. None of them comes as any surprise, or is particularly new. But the scale of the various factors, and the ways in which they could interrelate, paint a worrying picture.

Climate change and growing competition for scarce resources are together likely to increase the incidence of humanitarian crises. The spread of Desert regions, a scarcity of water, coastal erosion, declining arable land, damage to infrastructure from extreme weather: all this could undermine security. The areas most at risk – the Middle East, South Asia and the Sahara belt – are already prone to instability; and they are strategically important to the UK. So we will need to act where we can to prevent such crises developing. But we will also have to consider our response should prevention fail. And that response will itself be increasingly challenged. Alongside the bleaker physical environment that I've depicted will come wider availability of commercial technology with military applications. So those who have a stake in instability, those who feed on chaos and suffering, will be more capable than ever before. Our Armed Forces will face growing sophistication not just amongst other militaries but also amongst non-state actors. And we'll be operating in an environment where our opponents are increasingly likely to have access to weapons of mass destruction. I know that the case of Iraq has made some people suspicious of such claims. But to my mind it would be foolish – I would go so far as to say irresponsible – to let the particular cloud the issue of the general. The fact is that maintaining our technological edge over potential adversaries will become ever harder. In parallel with today's threats - and alongside this evolving physical and technological landscape – we expect social, economic and demographic trends to exacerbate the spread of international terrorism and insurgent activity. A growing global population under the age of 30 is likely to continue its migration to urban centres. But it seems unlikely that it will in all cases thereby satisfy its social and economic aspirations.

And as I've said, these trends are not independent. We expect them to interact in complex ways to change the strategic context in which we operate. To take just one example, we've already seen that more effective and more widespread communications technology has dramatically increased the opportunities for disaffected and insurgent groups to spread global propaganda. Now all of this is reasonably apparent from an analysis of current trends. But we should guard against thinking that tomorrow will always be like today, only more so. Our vision of the future strategic context is not simply of existing threats set against a steadily more challenging physical, social and technological environment. The future is inherently uncertain. And the speed with which powerful trends are developing, the range of unpredictable ways in which they could interact, and the vulnerability of an increasingly interdependent international system to potential shocks serve to increase both complexity and uncertainty.

Of course, it need not be all bad news. There are opportunities as well as threats. The powerful forces of globalisation, technological advancement and the rapid development of emerging economic powers should help drive sustained global growth, and thereby create new levels of relative wealth in the world. And amidst this, I suppose it's always possible that the lion will lie down with the lamb, and that everyone will beat their swords into ploughshares. But for my part, I'd want to be prepared in case they don't.

So for the UK some developments provide valuable opportunities. But our increasing dependence on others within a globalised world also presents new vulnerabilities, and underlines the wide geographic range of our strategic interests. The UK has long had to look well beyond its borders to secure its future. Our prosperity was built on trade, commerce and the rule of international law. But in an increasingly tightly knit global community, in which people, goods, services and information circle the planet as never before, our success and security are ever more closely tied to that of our interconnected world.

So our Security is not a matter of borders. We cannot separate threats within the UK from those overseas – both are of strategic importance to us. Challenges to the global system are challenges to our own prosperity and security. As a country with one of the world's five largest economies; as one of five permanent members of the united nations security council; as a leading member of the EU and the world's most successful military alliance – NATO; in short, as a major player in the international system, we have both rights and responsibilities. We must act where our own interests are challenged – as we did for example in Afghanistan. But we also must discharge our responsibilities to defend the rights of others, where we think we can make a difference. In Pakistan after the earthquake, in sub-Saharan Africa, in the Caribbean and in the Lebanon, we've played our part as a force for good.

And we've very often done so through active and effective Armed Forces. Our military capabilities have enabled the UK to play a part in shaping and protecting the international system. By building security around the world, we create a space within which our Government can deliver its wider objectives.

But I want to stress that the Armed Forces alone cannot secure the UK's place in the international system. The challenges we face today – and will face in the future - are complex. And complex problems rarely permit of simplistic solutions. There are cases where, even though we may greatly regret it, armed forces are of limited or no utility. And where they have an important role to play – as I believe they often do – it's usually as part of a wider and united effort.

Those of us in the military are the first to acknowledge that military power on its own can seldom deliver strategic success in the face of complex international problems. And this has always been so. A year or so ago Adrian Goldsworthy published a new biography of Julius Caesar, and I was particularly struck by what he said at the start of one of the chapters dealing with the Gallic campaigns.

He said: "successful imperial powers have always relied as much – or even more – on diplomacy and political settlement as on military force. Armies could and can smash formal opposition, and were and are capable of curbing guerrilla warfare, although they may not be able to destroy it. Yet

if military actions were not to be constantly repeated, then a settlement needed to be reached which was acceptable to enough of the occupied people, and in particular those with power and influence. This principle was as true for men like Wellesley in India or Bugeard in French North Africa as it was for Caesar in Gaul. Now Goldsworthy is talking here about imperial campaigns. But the point he's making is applicable to many of the situations in which we find ourselves today.

The key determinant, for me, is not that one is trying to incorporate territory into an empire. Rather, it's that one is dealing with a group of people whose identity – be it national, cultural religious or all three – is different. Any approach that fails to recognise this, and to put in place a political and social framework within which those concerned are prepared broadly to live and co-operate, cannot in the long term succeed.
This shouldn't surprise us. After all, in many ways it's pure Clausewitz. His dictum that war is the pursuit of politics by other means must, of course, work in both directions. The resolution of conflict is very rarely possible other than in the realm of politics. But that's not to say that one can rely just on soft power. Caesar would certainly not have achieved the results he did without some pretty effective fighting legions.

Having touched on these issues in rather a theoretical way, let me now try and draw them together in a practical context. And I'll choose one that's of very topical interest to all of us – Afghanistan.
I'm sure you'll have read the many reports that have been published on that subject recently: By the Centre for the Study of the Presidency, The Atlantic Council and so on. There's much that I'd agree with in those assessments. But I do take issue with one statement from the Atlantic Council. Their report says: "Make no mistake, NATO is not succeeding in Afghanistan." This is simply not true.

NATO is a military organisation, and is responsible for delivering the military line of operation in Afghanistan. And despite having insufficient forces at its disposal, it's done this well. The Alliance has decisively defeated insurgent forces in every significant engagement. If I look at the province with which we in the UK are most closely concerned, Helmand, we started

2007 essentially confined to the area around the capital, Lashkar Gah. Thanks to the outstanding courage, determination and professionalism of our armed forces, we've now spread up the Helmand river to Gereshk and on to Sangin, with a commanding presence at Kajaki. Meanwhile, many significant Taleban leaders, some of them highly capable and charismatic, have departed the scene over the course of 2007. Not, I might add, by accident. And their replacements have, in the main, been of lesser quality, and this has had a noticeable effect on the morale of the insurgents.

So, in the south in particular, the Taleban had a really bad year in 2007. Their vaunted spring offensive failed to materialise – as a result of NATO's success, rather than a lack of Taleban desire. Their strategic coherence has been badly damaged, and their objectives are further from their grasp than ever.

Does this mean that they're defeated? Of course not. Are they entirely without successes to their credit? I make no such claim. They've resorted to asymmetric tactics which have, on occasion, tested the afghan government and alliance nerve. And – perhaps in part because of their setbacks in the south – they've been more active in the west. But they're under significant stress, and the fault lines are showing.

The problem of course, is that the Taleban do not constitute the key battleground in Afghanistan: The ordinary Afghan people do. We need to succeed with them if we're to achieve strategic success in our mission. So it's worth taking a moment to reflect on what ordinary Afghans want.

Our experience points to three things: Security; The ability to provide for themselves and their families; and a sense of confidence in the future. For most Afghans, security is as much or more about criminality as it is about military activity. Providing for their families means a functioning economy and the provision of basic social services. And confidence in the future is underpinned by employment and education.

You'll recognise, of course, that few if any of these things are the provenance of the military, or of NATO. But the Afghan government cannot deliver them without the determined and sustained support of the international community – of the governments who are party to the

Afghan compact. And this is the area in which we're not yet succeeding. It's here that the international community needs to articulate its wider strategy much more clearly. But even more important, it's here that it needs an effective mechanism for translating the strategy into action on the ground.

I've used the word success several times now. So I ought to be clear on what I think that looks like in Afghanistan. And it's not about turning Afghanistan into some kind of Asian Switzerland. That's a worthy aspiration, but there are two major problems. First, it's something that only the Afghans themselves could do – if that's what they wanted, which of course is another question entirely.

Secondly, it's well beyond our time horizon. It's worth remembering that even if Afghanistan maintains today's good rate of economic growth, it will take fifteen years to get to Bangladesh's present level.

No, our objective has to be much more tightly defined. And it has to be focused on getting the Afghans to a stage where they can plan and sustain progress by themselves; albeit supported by extensive international engagement. We have to see success in Afghanistan more in terms of a journey continued that a destination reached.

So my contention is that the military is doing its job in Afghanistan. It's creating opportunities for the delivery of the non-military effects that are the key to strategic success. And it's doing it through activities that span the full spectrum operations. Through high-intensity war fighting by both conventional and special forces; through training and mentoring of Afghan security forces; through engagement with key local leaders and the planning and implementation of short-term stabilisation projects. Through the application of both hard and soft power – often in the same place on the same day – with a degree of sophistication that's unparalleled in my forty years of military experience.

Where do these capabilities come from? They come from top quality people. People who have the inherent traits of endurance, determination, courage and mental agility. People who've developed their capacity through extensive, demanding training. And people who are equipped with and able to exploit the advantages of modern technology. They come

from armed forces that are in the premier league. Nothing else will do. But they also come from people who have the flexibility of mind, flexibility of doctrine and equipment and flexibility of employment to respond quickly to the demands of what is always a complex and dynamic environment. That's one of the reasons that I believe caveats are so damaging: They reduce the flexibility that's so necessary to military success.

Our experience in the US is that the requirement for balanced military capabilities is greater that ever. One just needs to look at the scale, range and complexity of what we're asked to do. Over the past six years we've faced challenges across the full spectrum of conflict; high-end war fighting, peacekeeping, reconstruction and development, capacity building, humanitarian assistance, and more besides – it's all been there. This wide spread of capabilities is what's serving us so well in Afghanistan. And it's this wide spread of capabilities that will enable us to face an uncertain and unpredictable future with confidence.

But we can't face that future alone. Just as in Afghanistan, the scale and complexity of the likely challenges are such that they can only sensibly be addressed through collective action. That's why NATO remains of vital importance to the UK. And that's why our bilateral defence relationships are so important. We tend to see certain things in different ways; in ways that are affected by our histories, by our national priorities, and by our geographies. If we're to operate together effectively, we need to understand and accommodate those differences. And we achieve that by working together closely on an enduring basis.

Let me leave you with this thought. No matter how well we work together as military organisations, that's usually going to be insufficient. As I've said, the military of itself cannot deliver strategic success in the majority of complex security crises. It's the delivery of civil effect that will make the difference. But if that's true, how good are we at co-ordinating that delivery both nationally and internationally?

The honest answer is not very good at all. We see what needs to be done. The Afghan compact, for example, sets out some clear aims. But we lack the mechanisms to give practical effect to our vision on the ground where it counts. We spend a lot of time and effort agonising over NATO

performance and military force generation. They're not unimportant issues. But if we don't, as an international community, get a grip of the non-military aspects of modern security challenges, then we'll be failing those armed forces that do so much for the societies they represent. And we'll be failing those societies more widely. That, I suggest, is the challenge towards which we should be bending our thought and our effort.

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