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Global strategic context and a return to great power competition

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Introduction video ([Watch here](#))

This time a year ago the Cheltenham Festival was underway and none of us realised quite what was to come. But even before we were hit by Coronavirus, I would have described the strategic context as uncertain, complex and dynamic; with the defining condition being one of chronic instability.

Whether it is great power competition or violent extremism the sources of instability are more varied and more significant than they have been at any time in our lifetime.

COVID-19 has brought all this more sharply into focus. It has exposed some stark choices as historian Yuval Noah Harari (the author of the bestselling book Sapiens) presciently observed at the beginning of the crisis:

“We face two particularly important choices. The first is between totalitarian surveillance and citizen empowerment. The second is between nationalist isolation and global solidarity.”

The **absence of global solidarity** and shared responsibility has been particularly striking.

- Countries have turned in on themselves as have many alliances. IISS noted recently that the pandemic had accelerated the atomisation of international society.
- There have been some examples of global cooperation – notably the COVAX Gavi Vaccine Alliance – but in general the multi-lateral global system has not unified nations as positively as it once did. Indeed, in some institutions - the WHO for example - it has been actively undermined.

The Coronavirus has revealed the nature of **global competition and conflict** very starkly.

- We saw some extraordinary international behaviour in the race for PPE and ventilators in the early stages of the crisis.
- We have seen misinformation which confuses and undermines trust and disinformation which deliberately polarizes public debate on topics related to COVID-19.
- Russian efforts to undermine the Oxford AstraZenica vaccine as a ‘monkey vaccine’ for economic and reputational purposes.

Which of course reveals the importance attached to the **moral authority that can be wielded through science** to persuade others to gravitate to your ideological sphere of influence.

What we have also seen more clearly is the **evolving Digital Great Game** that is playing out.

- China’s Digital Silk Road will probably be the most influential element of the Belt and Road Initiative.

- The online financial newspaper Nikkei Asia observed that BeiDou (or Big Dipper as it translates), China's recently launched alternative to GPS, provides more accurate coverage than the American version in 165 of 195 capital cities around the world.
- Given that much of the smartphone economy is built to be compatible with a specific location service, there is an obvious connection with all the other services needed within smart cities, and **the potential for totalitarian surveillance** as Yuval Harari implies.

As the internet risks fragmenting, China is trying to draw much of the non-rich world into its sphere of influence by providing the digital infrastructure that companies and services are built on.

- Location services are only one aspect. Huawei is being shut out of 5G only in the rich world. Nikkei Asia also says that China has overtaken the US to become the country with the most data crossing its borders.
- And the Financial Times recently reported that China has used its growing influence at the UN to shape technical standards for facial recognition and surveillance tech through the International Telecommunication Union, a UN body. A sign perhaps of what is to come in the China Standards 2035 plan when it is released.

And to Yuval Harari's point about **citizen empowerment**, it has been striking how many so-called democracies have used the pandemic as an opportunity to enhance their power in authoritarian ways. This trend was evident even before the virus hit. According to Freedom House the democratic downturn was particularly steep in the last five years which was the first 5 year period since 1975 in which more countries transitioned to autocracy than to democracy.

I'm sure we will deduce a **number of other lessons from this crisis**. There will be lessons for all in how risk registers are treated, in how health care is delivered; I suspect stockpiles will no longer be a dirty word and supply chain resilience will be something to be proud of. And we should expect greater emphasis on climate, the environment, net zero and green renewal.

Our **Armed Forces** have made a significant contribution to the crisis, delivering innovative solutions to complex problems, supporting those on the front line, and providing a sense of reassurance at key moments – and all of it done with humility and positive energy. As well as delivering a high intensity of operational activity without a break in step.

Our support has been largely delivered along four lines: planning, outbreak management, the Vaccine Task Force, and community testing.

- We maintain a network of military people plugged in to other Departments engaged in strategic planning to tactical delivery out on the ground around the United Kingdom.
- We are contributing to the resilience of the NHS across all our home nations – taking on roles that free up those with clinical and medical skills to focus entirely on where they are needed. From stacking medicine trolleys, cleaning and doing laundry, porters and driving ambulances, to large numbers of military medics bolstering the medical capacity.
- Our young soldiers have struck up a rapport with many of the older COVID-19 patients through their shared experience of military service.
- Many of our medics were already embedded in the NHS across the United Kingdom before COVID-19 struck.
- Although a small contribution by comparison to the size of the NHS' medical staff, our medical deployment is the largest since the second Gulf War in 2003.
- We have been supporting NHS efforts to vaccinate priority groups with military planners embedded in the Vaccine Task Force, enabling the roll-out of the vaccine and establishing vaccination centres, and

with small teams of Vaccine Quick Reaction Forces who can vaccinate people when needed by the NHS in a surge capacity.

- Support to vaccinations is now where the majority of our people are deployed – logistic planning. We have also helped to deliver vaccines to overseas territories, including to Gibraltar, the Falkland Islands and Ascension Island.
- Our involvement in testing has included the early mobile testing teams (scrapheap challenge), clearing the huge backlog of hauliers from Kent in the pre Brexit moment, and being involved in the first community mass testing pilot in Liverpool.
- Behind the scenes we have around 200 scientists and technicians contributing to our collective scientific understanding; our medical intelligence analysts in Defence Intelligence are helping to identify the factors which lead to COVID-19 spreading.
- We remain alert for misinformation and disinformation.
- We are now turning our minds to how we might help the NHS staff to recuperate, including with our experience of mental health and wellbeing initiatives following the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But returning to the context - **what we have seen this year with COVID-19 is a reminder that the threats to our national security, our values and our prosperity have evolved and diversified markedly.**

Our assertive authoritarian rivals (I use this term to make the point that this is not necessarily about 'enemies') see the strategic context as a continuous struggle in which non-military and military instruments are used unconstrained by any distinction between peace and war.

These regimes believe that they are already engaged in an intense form of conflict that is predominantly political rather than military. Their **strategy of 'political warfare'** is designed to undermine cohesion, to erode economic, political and social resilience, and to compete for strategic advantage in key regions of the world.

Their goal is to win without going to war: to achieve their objectives by breaking our willpower, using attacks below the threshold that would prompt a war-fighting response. These attacks on our way of life from authoritarian rivals and extremist ideologies are remarkably difficult to defeat without undermining the very freedoms we want to protect. We are exposed through our openness.

The pervasiveness of information and rapid technological development have changed the character of warfare and politics. We now have new tools, techniques and tactics that can be used to undermine political and social cohesion, and the means to make the connection to an audience ever more rapidly. Information is now democratised.

Our adversaries have studied our 'Western way of war', identified our vulnerabilities and modernised their own capabilities to target them. The campaigns of the last 30 years have been played out over global media networks. From the first Gulf War in the early 1990s to the air strikes in Bosnia and Kosovo, the response to the terrorist attacks on embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and the campaigns in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya - all have been watched closely by our rivals.

They saw that air power could penetrate deep into hostile territory and learned that we preferred to find and strike targets from afar. They saw that this enhanced our natural aversion to putting people in harm's way. They watched how casualties, financial cost and length of time swayed domestic and public opinion and the effect that had on the legitimacy assuring the use of armed force.

So, they learned how to improve their own resilience to absorb strikes; they developed air defence systems that deny our freedom of action; they improved their maritime undersea capabilities; they developed long range missile systems; they integrated Electronic Warfare, swarms of drones connected

digitally to missile systems and used these to defeat tanks; they invested in space and cyber, recognising the importance we attach to global positioning and digitisation.

And in Ukraine and Syria Russia has created battle laboratories from real life situations to develop tactics and battle harden a new generation of soldiers. And they proliferated many of these new systems to proxies.

The US Department of Defence's latest annual report to Congress on military and security developments involving the People's Republic of China highlights that they have grown the largest maritime surface and underwater fleet in the world; deployed ground launched cruise and ballistic missiles, with markedly longer ranges and lethality; developed one of the world's largest forces of advanced long range surface-to-air systems; and expanded the PRC's overseas military footprint (over 100 port projects in over 60 countries - eg. Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantata in Sri Lanka, Piraeus, Djibouti and Khalifa in UAE).

They have also harnessed **technologies and tactics that have outpaced the evolution of international law** to avoid their actions being classified as conflict under the definitions of international law. China's new Strategic Support Force is designed to achieve dominance in the space and cyber domains. It commands satellite information attack and defence forces; electronic assault forces and Internet assault forces; and cyber warfare forces.

Western states draw legitimacy from respect for the rules, conventions and protocols of war. Where we see morals, ethics and values as a centre of gravity, authoritarian rivals see them as an attractive target. The idea of 'lawfare' becomes a helpful tool in their inventory.

The term 'lawfare' covers different meanings. In this context it entered national security parlance when it appeared in 'Unrestricted Warfare' - a book written on military strategy in 1999 by two PLA officers who used the term to refer to a nation's use of legalized international institutions to achieve strategic ends.

But 'lawfare' from our perspective also applies to the challenge we have encountered in recent campaigns where the phenomenon of vexatious claims-chasing lawyers has been prevalent.

We need to update our legal, ethical and moral framework to properly hold our forces to account if they break the law, while ensuring they have appropriate freedom of action to seize opportunities on the battlefield. We also need to win the competition with authoritarian rivals to define the right legal and ethical framework for emerging and disruptive technology, not least autonomous weapons and cyber, but also the threat, which I'll come back to, from digital authoritarianism and totalitarian surveillance.

Russia has used cyber and information attacks against its opponents regularly in the last few years. Notable examples included Ukraine's financial and energy sectors in 2017 and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in 2018. And more recently, the planned cyber-attack on the Tokyo Olympics as called out by our National Cyber Security Centre as well as the recent attack against US Government systems. Iran and North Korea are following suit. And the online national security forum 'War on the Rocks' in their 'Digital Authoritarianism' series highlight Russia's hack-and-leak, 'kompromat' operations and the St. Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency troll farm which engages in sowing division abroad.

'**Digital Authoritarianism**' also explores how the Chinese Communist Party is forging a future of mass surveillance and 'social credit scores' and is rapidly exporting these tools to other parts of the world. The recent Netflix documentary – A Social Dilemma – describes the way in which online interaction is subliminally influenced leading to the audience becoming unwittingly controlled.

Proxies, mercenaries and militias are back in fashion as well. The recent report by the US Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) on the expansion of Russian mercenaries into security vacuums in parts of Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia is worth a read. It reveals how mercenaries, like Moscow's Wagner Group, can be used to support state and non-state partners, extract resources, influence foreign leaders, and do so with plausible denial. CSIS estimates that operations like these are underway in 30 countries across 4 continents.

There is a clear trend towards toward **military action that uses the cognitive or mental elements of war with arms-length instruments like drones and mercenaries to provide a plausible degree of deniability and strategic ambiguity** – thus enabling intervention without the risk of entanglement. Their way of warfare is synchronized, systematic and it is strategic.

But the stakes are high, the traditional diplomatic instruments that have provided some measure of arms control and counter-proliferation have all but disappeared, with the last arms control treaty, New START only being extended at the last moment last month by the Biden administration. The upshot is that the **threat of unwarranted escalation and therefore miscalculation** is clear and present.

Our response must be strategic, it must integrate all of the instruments of statecraft - ideology, reputation, diplomacy, finance, trade policy and military power – if it is to be effective. Hence the importance of the cross-cutting nature of the Government's Integrated Review. It is also encouraging to see that the recently published NATO Independent Reflections Group recommends expanding NATO engagement to include Ministers of Finance, Interior, Infrastructure and Research.

Next I would say as a military officer that alongside Sun Tzu's observation that *"the supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting"* we should remember our Clausewitz. *"The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgement"*, he wrote, *"that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature."*

I'm not suggesting we are about to go to 'war' however **we need to define the nature of this contest, what victory looks like, and then match the ways and means to achieve the ends**. And I suggest that - the **means to control others through their ideology – principally through the application of technology - is the crux of the matter**. Because control of digital technology allows our rivals to take over our way of life. Defending it will likely require the creation of an alternative digital sphere of influence, alongside the terrestrial one.

What's needed is a catalyst somewhat like George Kennan's 'long telegram' in which he observed that peaceful coexistence with the Soviet Union in 1946 was unlikely to work. This led to the Truman Doctrine of containment and which provided the basis of US and Western strategy throughout the Cold War.

Maybe what last November's important NATO Reflections Group's report had to say about China could stimulate our thinking:

"NATO must devote much more time, political resources, and action to the security challenges posed by China – based on an assessment of its national capabilities, economic heft, and the stated ideological goals of its leaders. It needs to develop a political strategy for approaching a world in which China will be of growing importance through to 2030."

The complex geostrategic context I have described is already having a significant impact on our Armed Forces.

We have to **update our thinking about deterrence**. Developing the point about our opponents seeking to win without embarking on a 'hot' war, we have to acknowledge that we cannot afford to be passive in an era of persistent competition.

This recognises that competition below the threshold of war is not only necessary to deter war, it is also necessary to prevent one's adversaries from achieving their objectives in *fait accompli* strategies as we have seen in the Crimea, Ukraine, Libya, the South China Sea, with Taiwan and Hong Kong for example – boiling frog analogy. Would the outcome in Crimea have been different if we had been conducting an exercise with the Ukrainians the week before?

We need to think for the long term about where and how we apply the ways and means we need – like our assertive authoritarian rivals do, and can do, given the persistence of their political leadership – we need to be very clear about our interests, e.g. it's no coincidence that Russia has deployed his Wagner militia to Central African Republic where significant quantities of rare earths are to be found.

It also requires us to think in several dimensions, perhaps escalating in the cyber dimension while toning down our posture in the air or maritime dimension, while messaging a tone of reduced aggression in the information dimension, nowadays it's not so much a ladder, but a spider's web of multiple ladders.

Because escalation dominance is now much harder to manage given the complexity of weaponry – long range conventional missiles, space and cyber for example.

We must expect our rivals continuously to refine and improve their methods for promoting mischief and political disarray in our societies, while seeking to lure our traditional partners into their sphere of influence. Our Defence Attaches embedded alongside our FCDO missions abroad provide us with the insight and understanding, and intelligence and warning we need to adjust our posture and out manoeuvre our rivals.

This posture will be **engaged and forward deployed** – to defend ourselves and our allies, our armed forces must expect to spend far more time deployed and based abroad training and exercising in the regions most exposed to the threat.

It will involve capacity building of all kinds – civil and military – building close relationships with nations that seek our support. Much of it will be about our soft power – training, education, doctrine and accreditation - underscored by our military credibility and expertise.

This could include partnered operations against common threats – particularly violent extremism - and this may involve combat operations. And it will form an element of the Government's broader regional strategies. For example, the current deployment of a battle group to Mali as part of the MINUSMA mission is but part of a broader West Africa strategy as well as a UK desire to help reinforce UN peacekeeping.

We field and manage requests from other countries for this sort of activity through our network of attaches and - in the Caribbean and the Gulf - through annual meetings of Chiefs of Defence to ensure we are meeting the local requirement.

Using the Gulf to illustrate this posture, we have the Royal Navy's HMS MONTROSE forward deployed alongside our Mine Counter Measures Force. We operate in partnership with the Gulf countries as part of the Combined Maritime Force and the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC) that maintains freedom of navigation for commercial ships throughout the region.

In the Air we are contributing to the air defence of Saudi Arabia and we are currently exercising Typhoons with the Qatari Air Force, which has pilots embedded in the RAF's 12 Squadron. We have a Joint Defence Agreement with Oman where Army battle groups train alongside the Omanis at a new Joint Training facility on the coast at Ras Madrasah. The neighbouring Duqm port has become an invaluable logistics base that will facilitate Royal Navy deployments in the Indian Ocean and its dry dock facility is capable of supporting our two new aircraft carriers.

This **posture for our armed forces also addresses state threats**. The most serious of these in the Euro Atlantic area is of course Russia and we have seen recently that Moscow is determined to test Britain and our NATO allies. The Russian regime's increasingly assertive activity is almost certainly influenced by problems at home. They are wrestling with their own sense of 'imperial overstretch' as their near abroad becomes increasingly restive.

Last autumn Russia assembled ten or so warships and combat aircraft from the Northern, Baltic and Black Sea fleets in a show of force in the waters off the British and Irish coasts. They are flexing their muscles in our own back yard within an ostentation they have not displayed since the Cold War.

Deterring these threats, signalling to the Russian regime that we shall not tamely acquiesce should they escalate requires conventional hard power – warships and aircraft – as well as less conventional capabilities like cyber. And it requires us to hold their backyard at risk whether that's in the Barents Sea, the High North, the Baltic or the Black Sea – elaborate ...

Hence our campaign posture emphasises strengthening relations with our friends, constantly improving the readiness of our armed forces to operate alongside allies, with compatible weapons, communications systems and procedures. Being 'allied by design' is a key advantage we have over our rivals.

NATO is at the heart of this – and it is evolving significantly from its original Cold War role – e.g. first new Military Strategy since 1967 (Russia and terrorism – 360 degree view etc.)

Next week HMG will publish its Integrated Review of Foreign, Defence, Security and International Development Policy – this will set out HMG's ambition for a post Brexit world. It will talk about a tilt to the Indo Pacific – but it will also reinforce the importance of the UK's security being assured through Europe – as it has always been.

It will also talk about our need to **modernise**, and this is where the multi-year financial settlement we received recently is particularly helpful, because for the first time that I can remember, we now have a stable 10 year budget. This will allow us to chart a direction of travel from an industrial age of platforms to an information age of systems.

Warfare is increasingly about a competition between hiding and finding. It will be enabled at every level by a digital backbone into which all sensors, effectors and deciders will be plugged (think iPhone). This backbone will enable all of Services and the new operational domains of space and cyber to be linked together and integrated with each other from the strategic level down to the ship's captain or the platoon commander.

Software will be as important as hardware in determining what our armed forces will be capable of in the future. And it's all about data - put simply the internet of things will collect it, the cloud will host it, robotic processing will automate it, and artificial intelligence will apply it. Hence one of the most important additions to our Defence inventory is a new digital foundry that will provide the technical know-how to allow rapid adaptation.

This direction of travel means that some industrial age capabilities will have to meet their 'sunset' to create the space for capabilities needed for 'sunrise'. Pursuing this analogy a bit further - the trick is how you find a path through the night as you develop capability from sunset to sunrise.

We know this will require us to embrace combinations of information-centric technologies. But predicting the right mix will be tough. We shall have to take risks, seek a right sometimes to fail. We need to experiment by allocating resources, force structure, training and exercise activity to stimulate innovation. We need to work more imaginatively with commercial companies that make our systems and with centres of learning and industry at large, utilising the billion pound investment in R&D that is part of our financial settlement.

Throughout - we must recognise that the nature of war does not change – it is always about violence, guts and people.

We also need to recognise that we are in a period of phenomenal change – more widespread, rapid and profound than humanity has experienced outside of world war. And it is more sustained than the two world wars of the last century combined - and the pace is forever quickening. Our fundamental and long held assumptions are being disrupted on a daily basis.

As our most eminent military historian, the late Sir Michael Howard, put it:

"No matter how clearly one thinks, it is impossible to anticipate precisely the character of future conflict. The key is to not be so far off the mark that it becomes impossible to adjust once that character is revealed."

So, we have to place a premium on adaptability. And this in turn emphasises the importance of our Servicemen and Servicewomen – who have always been, and always will be our adaptive edge.

So I hope you'll also support this amazing charity as generously as you can – it provides a service for our veterans that gives our people the confidence that the nation cares about their well-being.