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The latest , and very good, report from the Commons Foreign Affairs Committee on the work and expenditure of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office records the Foreign Secretary as saying that the distinctions between military capability , intelligence agency capability , diplomatic capability and capacity building –through development budgets and progress are ‘becoming more blurred at the edges’.

I find that statement depressing. I had hoped that by now Whitehall, rather than watching this almost accidental blurring, would have knitted together its strategy and purposes across these fields, clarified the distinctive roles of the different branches of government and set government on course to meet and address the totally new conditions in which our nation has to operate.

After all, the signals for change have been there long enough. None of what has actually happened is very new. For example, first it has been obvious for two decades that power was shifting in the world, both away from the Atlantic hegemony of the 20th century and away from government hierarchies of power generally.

Second, it has been equally obvious that military size and big spend were going to be challenged everywhere by small and agile methods, and that the whole scale of power and influence deployment had been changed.

The micro-chip age has, amongst many other things, miniaturised weapons force dramatically. The Davids have been vastly empowered against the Goliaths. Almost any small organization, tribe or cell can operate a lethal drone. An inexpensive shoulder-launched missile can destroy a hundred million dollar plane or disable a billion dollar warship.

More carrier fleets, missiles and high-tech weapon wizardry may not only have become less effective. Its display or deployment may actually have an inverse effect repelling support, and increasing grass-roots hostility. Something of this can be seen in the decline of American influence in the Middle East and Asia, and the sheer lack of success in American foreign policy despite its overwhelming defence spend. This is the new military paradox – that countries that are clever enough to focus on smart , subtle and coordinated use of softer means of persuasion and influence – whether to maintain trade access, help build stability,

uphold human rights or stamp out vicious violence and terrorism – may be more successful in their aims and protection of their interests than the massive defence spenders.

Not every American general seems to understand this, although many deep-thinking people across the Atlantic are beginning to see what has occurred. We knew that the old Soviet imperium was finished when there was a headline in Pravda ‘Soviet microchip – largest in the world’. Let’s hope the mighty USA does not make the same error.

Third, it is clear that in the digital age military engagement has to accept new rules. The battle may no longer be on the battlefield. The ubiquity of the web and total connectivity mean that infinitely greater audiences have to be persuaded and influenced. There are no clear decision points between victors and vanquished. Trust becomes the new essential weapon and subtle new mixtures of force and friendship have to be the aim if permanent instability is to be overcome and any kind of settlement reached.

As I already said, none of this is very new and indeed our own military thinkers and leaders have responded with growing vigour over the past years. Right back from the days of Frank Kitson’s low-intensity warfare, the practice of which I personally experienced in Northern Ireland in the ’seventies, profound and innovative ideas have been on parade.

Amongst the military there has been a veritable frenzy of new thinking and activity. Sometimes as the jargon proliferates, new bodies sprout up and acronyms cascade. The rethink almost seems to be acquiring a life of its own, beyond public comprehension - which of course is the opposite of what is needed.

Everything, we learn, is to be integrated and coordinated. There is to be a new doctrine of Integrated Action. A newly named 77 Brigade is to pull military soft power activities together. There is the 1st ISR Brigade to do even more corraling and pulling together. There are cohorts to be managed, full orchestras to be coalesced, whole force approaches to be established, new doctrines for integrating the reserves to be implemented, rapid reaction force HQs to be re-integrated, plates to be stepped up to, high readiness forces to be in place, everything to be inter-operable, army training spread to twenty other countries – all very impressive if a bit hard to follow.

And on the civilian side the same commendable swirl and buzz. There is the Conflict Pool, housed in the FCO, which brings together funding for conflict prevention, stabilization, peace-keeping, influence building. Or was, because that is now ‘built on’ by the Conflict, Stability and Security organization to do even more of the same thing with a billion pound (one thousand million pound) budget. Then there is the Building Stability Overseas Strategy which draws on the Conflict Pool.

Oh, but wait a minute, that’s gone and been superseded by the new Stability and Security body. But not to worry because along comes the National Security Strategy to pull it all together, and that of course will be swept up in the Strategic Defence Review coming along behind. Go it clear?

All very impressive, if a little bewildering. No-one can say that isn’t plenty going on.

Yet it seems to me that there is one colossal piece missing from this plethora of activity, all this dedication to new forms of power deployment in a radically transformed international milieu.

The missing point is motivating purpose and cause. What exactly is it all aimed at? What is the central story, the truly coherent, graspable, definable strategic narrative which should be the common and impelling theme right across this landscape of seething restructuring?

Knitting together is the essential, but, as we all know, knitting, unless aimless, requires some pattern. To say that there are no certainties, that there must be readiness for anything, that flexibility must be total to meet all eventualities, is true but it is not enough. The word 'multi' becomes the universal escape word from focussed aims –we have to be multi-tasked for multi-outcomes with multi-purposes. Anything could happen. Fair enough, but at some point the merry-go-round must be halted and some message which points all these activities in a common over-arching and unifying direction has to be proclaimed.

A central lesson from our House of Lords soft power report two year ago , and from the many experts who gave us evidence, is that for our power to be effective, and our interests protected and promoted, there have to be some focussed and specific policy targets . There has to be a national purpose and goal behind it all. Not everything can be vaguely 'multi-purpose', prepared for - well, we're not quite sure what.

In our case this has to start from - to adapt a phrase from General de Gaulle, 'a certain idea' of the United Kingdom in the altered modern world. From that flows an agenda to be captured, international priorities to be clarified and a binding and inspiring theme for all these commendable initiatives, military and civilian and for personnel at all levels and in all ranks.

So what is this 'certain idea' now in this age of turmoil?

Is it simply 'not to reason why', to carry on as before, Britain in the Atlantic Alliance, the good soldier and compliant member of a US-dominated West? Surely that phase is over.

Is it simply to be good Europeans, with Europe our destiny? Surely we have to look wider than that, when in the 21st century so many of the prizes, and the dangers, clearly lie elsewhere.

Is it a Britain of limited, down-sized ambitions – as some American commentators keep saying that we are signalling? Or are they reading the signals wrong. They can hardly be blamed when they see that we are now spending less on our diplomacy through the whole FCO budget, now about £700 million, than we blow for example on cavalier aid dispersals to international agencies, or on subsidising one new low-carbon, and so far unsuccessful energy technology (CCS), amongst many other pet projects, draining away much large sums still.

[I don't often agree at all with much of the advice coming from Charles Grant and the CER – advice not to touch EU 'fundamentals' which has led straight to our precarious present negotiations impasse. But when he describes as 'madness' that FCO expenditure, and the all the associated expenditure with our soft power cutting edge agencies such as the British Council and the BBC World Service , should be left unprotected and diminished I am 100 percent with him.]

Or should the strategic and unifying vision be a quite different and more confident Britain, agilely operating in a network world, making full use of its extensive friendships, or relationships, of trust and common understanding and of brilliant connections across the globe?

Is not the best inspiration a resourceful Britain wonderfully woven into the Commonwealth network of 2.3 billion people using the same working language of English, the ultimate conveyor of complex ideas and common understanding and trust?

In all the military rethinking going on I see very little of this inspiring vista. The rest of the world marvels at how little use we make of our Commonwealth potential. Not only is this one of our biggest soft power assets, there is also a crucial military dimension, which again one hears barely acknowledged.

The mounting horrors of terrorism remind us that a globally connected response is required. NATO membership is vital but not nearly enough. Commonwealth military chiefs and security experts already work quietly but closely together. The South East Asian Five Power Defence Arrangement (FPDA), which includes Britain and four other Commonwealth powers, is just one example. Another is that Britain and Commonwealth countries increasingly train together, exercise together, plan together.

Besides, victories are secured nowadays not just by force deployment but by winning the narrative, by using so-called ‘soft’ as well as hard power methods to safeguard and gain grass roots support for our values, and reject and defeat nihilism and anarchy. For deploying Britain’s undeniably immense, but still underused, soft power assets the Commonwealth is the ideal network and platform, even though it has some backsliders.

To see things through this lens demands a changed mindset amongst policy-makers and those in all branches of government, civil and military, who are charged with safeguarding Britain’s security, its global business, its brand and its reputation –namely the combat troops of our immense, but under-used, soft and smart power.

We are talking about nothing less than a grand repositioning of the UK in a world utterly transformed by the digital age. For this we need a new strategic synthesis, articulated by our leaders but implemented in a variety of ways by all the arms and agencies of government, with our brave and resilient military to the fore and all our departments of state working together.

Our armed forces have to fight the good fight with all their might – and with all their ingenuity, of which they have plenty. But they also have to know, every man and women of them, what they are working for and fighting for, be it coping with disasters, fighting and outwitting ugly terror, deterring outright aggression or rebuilding shattered communities.

The Army speaks rightly of its core purposes. But whatever form power deployment and projection takes nowadays, soft, hard or smart, one purpose above all others needs to be clear, inspirational and a source of commitment at every level – to uphold the nation’s changing role and interests in an age of global turmoil, and provide its security with a rock-solid base. That is the unambiguous message which our society and its leading voices need to send to all three branches of our armed services, so that they can perform at their best, with a clear sense of direction. We owe them nothing less.
