

# Defence Secretary Speech at RUSI Land Warfare Conference 2022

Can I thank Dr Sarah Ashbridge and RUSI for hosting this event. Obviously RUSI is an incredibly old institution, almost as old and esteemed as the British Army.

I'm delighted that Dr Rob Johnson, has recently been appointed Director of my Office for Net Assessment and Challenge, and that's exactly the task that he's going to be put to, which is challenging many of you in this room about choices you make and challenging me I hope, about the political or policy decisions as well. So, I'm delighted to welcome you to the Ministry of Defence, and definitely don't hold off on the challenge.

Ruthless challenge and self-criticism is one of the things that should make our Army world leaders. It certainly does in some of our units and I think it's something that we should really embrace. There's nothing wrong with hearing criticism or critique. Indeed, a young platoon commander is always foolish to ignore the old guardsman in the back of his TAC HQ across the country telling you you're going in the wrong place. Some of my colleagues used to ignore those guardsmen and are probably still there.

So, for many years this Land Warfare Conference has been pondering on the "utility of land power in the 21st Century" and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014 as a "harbinger for the future of warfare in Europe". So many previous events with such similar titles have obviously passed through these walls.

Well, we can no longer afford to just ponder. Together, we must act, and fast.

And General Sir Patrick Sanders is the right man to 'mobilise' the army in order to do so.

It was a (much younger) Lt Col Patrick Sanders lecturing at RUSI in 2008, after a particularly demanding tour in Iraq commanding 4 Rifles Battlegroup, who emphasised the importance of combat cohesion, the realities of attrition, implications of the media environment, and the "remarkable morale of the British soldier, which only grows higher the closer they get to danger".

And in 2015, as a 'lowly' Major General at that stage, he was back to stress the Army's core purpose as "protecting the national interest on land, where all conflicts are ultimately resolved." and that "politicians need and expect sovereign political choice and options, with the division one of the cornerstones of UK hard power, without which soft power is simply bluff."

As one of those politicians I agree and here is what I need from you today.

'My mission and your role in it', if you will.

Our job is to protect people and that will always require a presence on land, so long as that's where people live.

And just as you always have to 'go to war with the army you have, not the army you would like' – because even today we can't predict where or when it might be – so must we mobilise to deter and contain with the forces that we have now.

The odds of it being a war in Europe have shortened almost as much as the timeline, so we must act.

We can't protect the British people, or our allies, with just transformation strategies and glossy equipment brochures.

And while it is true that the Army must not become blinkered, fixated on a single priority, countering Russian aggression is neither a uniquely European challenge nor solely for armoured formations.

The Army must contribute to the defence of our values and interest – manifested as the international rules-based system that has kept us safe and prosperous for three quarters of a century – and do so wherever it is threatened.

The threat is global, multi-domain, above and below the threshold of open conflict.

So, I take the mobilisation of 'Op MOBILISE' to be the ruthless prioritisation of readiness and relevance.

And to be relevant you must be modern, forward looking, and prepared to challenge the often deeply held doctrines, too often bordering on the nostalgic.

Too many times in the Army of recent years we have seen 'form before function' and knee jerk reactions to change.

We have also forgotten the premium of being forward and present in the world.

My determination to shift from an emphasis on warfighting contingency to persistent presence for containment – a positional strategy of deterrence-by-denial, for both geographic and influence spaces – must not become another false choice of one approach over another, but a deliberate rebalancing.

We must always be ready to fight, wherever positioned, and in whichever domain, and in doing so contain the Kremlin's aggression, because it is increasingly clear that President Putin cannot be 'deterred' by threat of punishment or the costs imposed upon his people.

As Minister Shoygu told me himself, while I was in Moscow earlier this year, "no one can suffer like the Russians".

There is almost a perverse pride in that suffering, and I believe that is what distinguishes us and our allies from the Putin regime – we serve our

people to protect and prevent suffering, while they exploit innocent people's suffering in the service of their imperialist ambitions.

Putin must be contained, sealed-off from their sources of influence, funds, and technological capability.

But he and his government must also be made utterly transparent, a light shone through them and every one of their lies, every corrupt practice, every immoral deed, exposed to the world and to the Russian people. As they too suffer from this tyranny.

We will not be able to deliver this unless we are honest about our own historical failures. In Army leadership, in the MOD, and yes in political leadership.

And I have seen it from all perspectives.

It was a summer morning in July 1991 when me and my fellow young officers on the Platoon Commanders Battle Course were summoned onto the drill square to be told the details of 'Options For Change'; the Government-of-the-day's response to the end of the Cold War.

I was lucky, while my regiment was losing a battalion it was not disappearing altogether. Some of those around me – fresh out of Sandhurst, with new regimental berets – were not so lucky.

In 1991 the world had reason to be optimistic. The Soviet Union had collapsed, Al Qaeda was just a glimmer in the eye of a small religious cohort and China had not yet appeared on the world stage.

So, it was right for the government of the day to review their defence spending and defence postures. And yes that meant also the Treasury seeking a 'peace dividend' in exchange for the decades of investment in large, static formations in Germany.

The problem was and is, that successive governments, both Labour and Conservative, have kept coming back for that dividend. They have gone from being investors to corporate raiders. Which is why I was pleased that this Prime Minister reversed that trend by investing £24 billion in a record settlement.

I have now been both Security Minister and Defence Secretary for over six years. I have been 'read-in', briefed and informed of our adversaries' intentions, their plots and their capabilities on an almost daily basis.

I have read thousands of Secret or Top-Secret documents over the last few years and so I am intimately aware of the threat we face and the direction of that threat.

Security prevents me from sharing the details of such documents and intelligence reports, but I can say, however, that we have consistently underestimated Russia's appetite for aggression; almost forgotten Al Qaeda (wrongly); missed the rise of China; and comforted ourselves that cyber is at

least out of sight and therefore out of mind for the average voter.

Outside the world of Security and Defence that could be true by too many people not in the circle of reading. We have done our best to meet some of our National Cyber Security Centre investments and new defence capabilities, but not in resilience across government as you've seen Covid has exposed.

While we meet our commitments, we have also made some good decisions in order to maximise our outputs, we are – like many in Europe – treading a fine line.

Defence has become a constant competition between capabilities and mass – between one domain or another. And commitments have been made without any real honesty as to the costs twenty years down the line.

Take for example the aircraft carriers. Announced with fanfare by Gordon Brown in 1998 and completed twenty years later.

In the early stages there was no honesty as to the financial costs, opportunity costs, or 'required enablers', and what they would mean for the rest of Defence in the long term.

Like so many projects there was an inherent culture of 'someone else will pay.' That lack of realism has impacted right across our Armed Forces.

In Land, too many Army leaders and politicians focused on platform numbers while meeting rising costs by hollowing out force elements and their readiness.

At sea the cost of overruns was met with sacrificial dry docks and maintenance facilities.

What use is boasting about how many tanks or ships you have if you have no spares or no ammunition?

What is the point of demanding more brigades if the ones you have possess no Electronic Warfare or sufficient air defence?

How long do we think our reformed armoured brigades will last when their enemy's artillery out-range them by tens of kilometres?

There are many lessons from Ukraine and there will be many more to come. Some of the lessons in-fact prove many of the Defence Command Paper's assumptions.

For example, helping countries with their own resilience by not only training but assisting or equipping.

It was the new Ranger Regiment that we sent to train Ukrainians on NLAWs just a week or two before Russia's invasion.

And 'Future Soldier', while reducing infantry units invested in more deep fires and EWSI.

When the PM took the strong decision to invest an extra £24 billion in

Defence in 2020, he broke with convention and recognised the need to reverse the decline.

It was a strong start, and we now we investing over £43bn in the Army's Equipment Plan over the next decade.

The next challenge is to ensure that we spend such an investment in the right places and use the resulting equipment in the right ways.

There are too many examples where wargaming has exposed our vulnerabilities only to be ignored because the results presented an inconvenient truth.

I am delighted that Patrick is in post at this critical time. I know he is the right leader at the right time for the British Army.

And as I have always said, as the threat changes so must the funding.

If governments have historically responded every time the NHS has a winter crisis, so must they when the threat to the very security that underpins our way of life increases.

Sometimes it is not about what dividend you can take out, but about what investment in people and equipment you can put in.

For too long Defence has lived on a diet of smoke and mirrors, hollowed-out formations and fantasy efficiency savings, while in the last few years the threat from states have started to increase.

And right now, Russia is THE most direct and pressing threat to Europe. To our Allies and our shores.

I am serious when I say that there is a very real danger that Russia will lash out against wider Europe. And that in these days of long-range missiles and stealth, distance is no protection.

As the Chief of the General Staff so correctly pointed out this morning, the threat has changed. And as the Prime Minister and his fellow NATO leaders are addressing in Madrid today, so must our response.

Russia is not our only problem. An assertive China ready to challenge the rules-based system and democracy. Terrorism on the march right across Africa. And Iranian nuclear ambitions, to date still unresolved.

The threat is growing and is global and multi-domain. It is now time to signal that the peace dividend is over, and investment needs to continue to grow.

Before it becomes too late to address the resurgent threat and the lessons learned in Ukraine it is time to 'mobilise' – to be ready and to be relevant.

Thank you.