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Transcript

Military Strategy in an Unpredictable World

Lord Garden Memorial Lecture

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Chair: Robert Woodthorpe Browne

Council, Chatham House

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Robert Woodthorpe Browne:

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I'm afraid outside is beautiful weather, but you're very welcome to the rather gloomy lecture hall of Chatham House. My name is Robert Woodthorpe Browne, I'm a council member of Chatham House and former chairman of Liberal International British Group, who are our co-sponsors tonight, and also currently head of international relations of the Liberal Democrats.

This is the sixth lecture in a series of memorial lectures to Lord Tim Garden, whose widow is with us today and has been a great sponsor. She always works out who should be the speaker next time, so we know we're in safe hands. If you recall, our first speaker, for those of you who might not have been there, was Lord Robertson, the secretary general of NATO. Paddy Ashdown followed him, Shirley Williams after that. Peter Hennessy after that, and last year we had a very interesting talk on Iran by Jon Snow.

So this is the first time that we have had a serving military officer doing the lecture. He is Air Chief Marshal Sir Stuart Peach, as you all know, because you will have seen it in the programme. Since last month he has been the vice chief of the Defence Staff. Like Tim, who admired him, he is recognized as a thinker. Hence his appropriate topic: 'Military Strategy in an Unpredictable World'. This meeting is on the record, it is not the Chatham House Rule. Thank you.

Sir Stuart Peach:

Baroness Garden, ladies and gentlemen, members: it's a great honour for me to be asked to do this, and a privilege. It is very much in memory of Tim, who I did know well. We both did the master's of philosophy course at the University of Cambridge as serving officers, where we were both tutored by Dr Philip Towle, who has recently retired. We were both directors of defence studies of the Royal Air Force, and Tim very much influenced me in my thinking in that role.

Perhaps more importantly for tonight, we were both what I would like to call – and I will explain this later – joint officers. I've now completed seven joint appointments, including the chief of joint operations, the head of military intelligence, the commander of the Joint Forces Command, and now the vice chief of Defence Staff. I know Tim was also a joint officer and I think he was always very fresh in his thinking, prepared to embrace new ideas and to try and move with the times we're in rather than – as often the military are accused of – looking backwards. Of course, later in his life Tim was very

distinguished both in academia, at this place – which he loved – and of course in politics. He would be delighted to hear I'm not going to talk about politics tonight.

But of course Tim was always, as a junior and as a senior officer in the Royal Air Force, and as a defence officer and a joint officer, interested in the world. Geostrategically, the world, of course, is changing. You can see it on the TV screens; you can see it on the internet. You can see it in your own travels. As our secretary of state, Philip Hammond, said in the Shangri-La Dialogue – by another organization in London – last week in Singapore: the shift to Asia is now real. Much predicted, probably, in this room, maybe by some of you – but it's now very real. Comes with that, all sorts of issues in Asia which may well yet have security implications, including potentially issues between states. It was rather fashionable for a while to talk about those state-on-state type issues, even in places like this and the Royal College of Defence Studies and RUSI, that these issues may well have diminished – but probably not.

Of course, we see before us the sectarian nature of many conflicts and the ferocity of those conflicts literally unfolding before us in Syria and elsewhere. We also see the sub-state group, the group that doesn't really play by the rules – a theme I will return to – that doesn't abide by any known norms but is quite happy to embrace technology as presented. We also see the breakdown of cohesion that both sectarian conflict and these sub-state groups can cause and can inflame, often in places in the world where people have lived cheek-by-jowl, side-by-side, as neighbours, for hundreds if not thousands of years.

So the shifts and the changes are very real. We've seen it across the so-called Arab Spring and we've seen it elsewhere. So even if the number of conflicts are reducing, the ferocity and the nature of them is still very violent.

The 'so what?' from all that is, of course, if you then fold in the resource competition aspects of our world, be it for minerals or resources or water, and all the competition around technology access and use – the use that, for example, international extremists and terrorist groups use the internet frequently, if not totally – then this is a very uncertain time. Tim, in his time in the military, wrote about this. I have both of his books and they are still very well written and very taut, both his first book – which was influenced by his tutor when he was doing the MPhil at Cambridge – on deterrence, and his second book, which I will actually talk about in a little more detail at the end, called *The Technology Trap*, published by Brassey's in 1989. It's a surprisingly refreshing read but also very topical.

Here the ‘so what?’ from the world we’re in. I think Tim would have approved of us now having a National Security Council. It’s a good thing. We now have a structure in the heart of the British government that deals with security at the national level. We have a National Security Strategy, which we in the Ministry of Defence contribute to, where we use all of our national capabilities to build UK prosperity, to extend our influence and to strengthen our security.

These are not just words. I can say one thing on the record: as the operational commander during the NATO operation in Libya two years ago, the National Security Council – then very new and young – was very active in managing that crisis, or managing that situation. We’ve developed further strategies; again, I think Tim would have liked them. The one that is finding its feet quickly is the International Defence Engagement Strategy, which I think would chime with Chatham House, which is the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office working closely in countries, through embassies and high commissions, on engagement and on upstream capacity-building and on how to engage with the militaries of other countries, and so on. Building Stability Overseas, with a DFID element, is another example of a subordinate strategy to the overall National Security Strategy.

The word ‘strategy’, perhaps – I do agree with Hew Strachan – we need to be cautious about. It is an overused idiom these days. There is a risk it loses its meaning. But the National Security Strategy certainly justifies that word.

What else we are doing that is a change from former times is we now engage in defence diplomacy, guided by country plans, guided by the ambassador and the high commissioner. But it is a real thing and we are getting better at it. We’ve still got a long way to go. We still need to do better at language training and cultural awareness, but we are doing that.

One thing I would say, and I speak now as a former commander – the first commander of the Joint Forces Command – is the UK Defence Academy – which I know Tim would have approved of, where we’ve concentrated the staff colleges and subordinate courses, the higher command course and the excellent library, in a lovely location down in Shrivenham – now a decade old, has definitely found its feet. My contention, certainly here at Chatham House, will be we don’t actually perhaps value it enough as a national asset, which it is. If the enthusiasm of others to join us in the Defence Academy of the United Kingdom is any measure, then we would be absolutely overwhelmed with overseas students. So maybe we’re getting something right. So I think professional military education in this uncertain world is a very important point.

Which leads me to my theme for tonight really, which is: I am, as the vice chief of Defence Staff, the first to say that the UK armed forces have to modernize and learn for the world we're in. We have a great deal of operational experience now. Our young men and women, be they soldiers, marines, sailors or airmen, have served extensively around the world. You only have to visit them and see them on parade to understand that. They have at times a humbling level of operational experience and a great deal of experience of the uncertainty of conflict in the world. Some of the things they do are very brave, very courageous, and are equally as brave and courageous as their illustrious forebears in their units, be they ships, regiments or airplanes. You see that in the citations for bravery on the annual Operational Honours List.

But perhaps more importantly for a strategic discussion, we are very serious about learning and applying lessons. Some of you may well be familiar with the phrase 'our way in war' – I don't think it's a particularly useful one nowadays, but there is certainly something about the British approach to the world we're in, and the engagement opportunities our armed forces represent.

So in my job as the commander of the Joint Forces Command, we have been working on the 'so what?' from that statement and we've been working on a discreet paper – not necessarily highly classified but not necessarily on the public record either – about how to adapt to that world. We are now working on a new Defence Joint Operating Concept. The big idea in that is to use the UK military instrument – the armed forces – as a contribution to the whole-of-government effort. That's such an obvious thing to say, isn't it? But of course we have come from a background where we were either subordinate to a grand strategy of NATO or another international body, but now it is very clear that that is what we are doing: contributing to a whole-of-government effort.

We do this in a number of ways. The ones that I'll gloss over quite quickly, because they are pretty easy to explain, are our standing commitments. We also have, and I'm sure this is well understood at Chatham House, we now have an Overseas Territories White Paper, the first one for many years. Of course the armed forces are part of that, in order to defend the Overseas Territories.

Perhaps more exciting in a way, and perhaps a little bit different, is we now have within the Defence Joint Operating Concept the forward engagement approach: to go to countries at their request – not at our insistence, but at their request – to assist in capacity-building and training and so on. Again, the brand, if you like, of the UK armed forces is strong and a lot of countries want

that support. It might be as simple as border surveillance activity, training police forces, or coast guard training – that's quite a high-demand signal at the moment. You might think this is all pinprick activity; some of you may challenge me on it. But my word, if some of these countries had a better coast guard, had better border surveillance, had a better ability to understand what is going on around their borders, then obviously they are in a better place to guarantee their own national stability. So forward engagement is an important part of our construct and we will do that by the use of our adaptive forces, be they Royal Navy, Royal Marines, Army or Royal Air Force.

Things go wrong though, and as we have seen in the last decade, things go wrong sometimes quite quickly. So we still need to retain the harder edge, the ability to respond quickly and react. We are very keen to do that in an international sense. This scene is changing quite fast.

One of the things Tim taught me when I was a young officer – we call it flight lieutenant, the Navy call it lieutenant and the Army call it captain. I was flying an airplane called the Canberra, as Tim did, and we operated all over the world. Tim, as a great internationalist, would have been pleased to hear me state that one of the things we are working on and are very passionate about is putting NATO at the heart of UK defence. We have over a thousand British personnel serving in NATO, in addition to those units that we allocate to NATO. That's important. NATO's demise may even have been predicted in this room following the end of the Cold War, and other various ideas and crises have been and gone. But I was at the major NATO event last week and I can assure you that NATO is alive and well.

We have very traditional allies. We all know who they are, the United States in particular. I will return in a minute to the other thing I think Tim would have heartily approved of, which is our very close relationship now with the French, which we are working on. I am leading on the military segment of that and it's real. It's different in the sense of its depth, its automaticity and this sort of strengthening of our sharing activities.

But we also need to reflect, in this uncertain and ambiguous world, that we need new partners as well. We need other people to explain what is going on, to deepen and help us with our understanding. We saw during the Libyan operation the Royal Air Force flying with Arab air forces for the first time in that sort of way. We've seen, in Afghanistan, 50 nations in the International Security and Assistance Force in Afghanistan. So you can see the core of our activities still residing around NATO, but adapting the core alliance to meet the needs of other crises and crisis response.

The way we do that, which is perhaps a bit different to other nations, is – I'm not going to say we're the world leaders, that would sound a bit too confident. But we're certainly very serious in Great Britain about joint action and joint activity. That's why I say I think Tim would have been very pleased with the fact, as a joint officer – I am very much a joint officer – that that is automatic. It's very easy for copywriters and armchair generals to highlight differentiations between the single services but if you go to Afghanistan and other operations where one of the services is maybe the dominant force, they actually work together, and we're always stronger when we work together. We all rely on each other. We all are integrated at the right level. We deeply admire the tribes and the backgrounds, the ethos we come from, and that can be as competitive as you need it to be, in an appropriate setting. But we are joint by definition. Many of our allies often quiz me and my colleagues and friends as to how we manage to do that.

The Joint Forces Command is a good example of that, where we now have 40,000 people under one command doing all the enabling for operations, from the special side, the intelligence side, medical, cyber and so on. We are working closely with the French, as I said. The Combined Joint Expeditionary Force will go live in a year, couple of years' time. We are also working on an idea that David Richards, as the chief of Defence Staff, launched at RUSI at Christmas: to embellish that and create a Joint Expeditionary Force with other nations. That is very topical and very active work. I'm not going to tell you which nations they are yet because we are still in negotiation with some of them.

But we are very serious about finding and working with new partners. With one of those partners, for example, which I know would be welcomed in this sort of audience – I work, for example, as the vice chief, as the commander of Joint Forces Command, as the chief of joint operations, very closely with DFID and the Stabilisation Unit. So the idea that there are all these little silos in the security sector in the UK – we are now very much integrated. We're always looking for new ways to work closer together and develop our depth of understanding.

If there's one lesson from the last decade or so that we need to be really honest about, and I think this would chime with Tim too, it's understanding what you're doing, where you're going, what is going on. Easy to say in an environment like this, on a warm evening in London, but quite difficult in a tribal militia environment where people – several hundred groups in Syria at the moment – who is who in that terrible situation? So trying to develop those ideas, put meaning around them, work with friends and allies, and share

information is exactly what we're trying to do with those adaptive forces, and through being true to our friends in the world and engaging on a persistent basis – which we do and continue to do.

I think if there's a way of me trying to bring this to life, I'd say in my operational experience – continuous operational experience since the mid-1990s – operations are now defined by complexity and not by scale. Anywhere there are conflicts, there are so many complications and complexities that we need to understand, both the issues and indeed the constraints, before we do anything. Have we always been good at that? I'm not sure. We're definitely learning and we're getting better at it.

The constraints under which we operate are also important to be honest about. The relative power – I mentioned Asia at the beginning – the relative shift in balances is changing quite quickly. We must pay attention to public support, and public support is a very hard thing to measure. In a coalition, multinational environment, it may be very different between the members of that coalition, which becomes quite hard to manage in an operational setting.

Many people like to talk – and I did listen quite carefully, when I was the head of operations and in my last job, to organizations which I have the highest regard for, such as the ICRC – about the changing nature of international law. It's also very true to say, and I think it's an important point, that the sub-state groups that wish us harm and other extremist groups that wish us harm pay no respect for symbols. That's a very important point and it's something, for those who are interested, the ICRC has quite a lot of writing on this. It has been a terrible time for the ICRC. They have lost a lot of people who are just trying to do the right thing and brave things. So disrespect for symbols in an area where the disrespect for international law by sub-state groups is a very interesting and difficult situation.

Also the media – I know some of you are here tonight. All I'd say about that is the 24/7 nature of media is one issue. Another issue is if you are in a coalition environment or a complex environment and you're a long way from home, whose media are you dealing with? Dealing with your own is one thing, but dealing with the media of those 50 nations in ISAF, as I think every commander of the ISAF would tell you, is another matter. I think a couple of people with a lot of operational experience in the room would agree with me. You have to take all this into account, which is precisely why professional military education, university education, and thinking about what you're doing and reading history is very important.

The other thing I would now like to turn to, which is equally at times a constraint and at times an opportunity – and you can quiz me on this, because Tim wrote this very fresh book called *The Technology Trap*. We went through a phase in my military career, now spanning 40 years, where technology was always going to answer the difficult problem, wasn't it? But it always turns out to be a bit late, a bit more expensive than we were promised, and not quite as good. That phenomenon, which Tim wrote about in his book – he set himself the challenge in his preface of answering that, he thought, rather cynical phrase, and at the end he concluded in this excellent book that we needed to do more to improve the technical knowledge of policy-makers. What a fresh remark that is. I would strongly associate myself with that remark. We need to do more to integrate science, R&D, in a more sophisticated and mature way. We are working on that right now in the Ministry of Defence.

We also need to accept that pursuing exquisite technology to a sort of almost ridiculous extent will take you down the route to fewer and fewer platforms and the ability to do very much at all. Tim wrote that in 1989 and it's true today. Equipment which is good enough is exactly what I'm sort of advocating and working on in my job, and I think Tim would agree.

The other thing I think we should do more of in this complex, ambiguous and uncertain world is be prepared to experiment. If you were to go and see the training we now undertake for the brigades deploying to Afghanistan, you would be really struck, all of you, by how sophisticated it is, by how complicated it is, in order to prepare our boys and girls for what they're about to discover in Afghanistan. That's not by accident. It's taken us a while to get there but it is now – looking through the lights, many of you have experienced it – it is a very sophisticated operation in and of itself. Therefore, that is an important point. But if you're going to do all that, you've also got to be prepared to be challenged and prepared to get it wrong and change. Again, I think Tim would agree.

Well, so what? The UK armed forces reflect the society we're in as well as the world. We are changing quite quickly. We are very serious about defence reform. My former new command was very much a testament to that, through the wisdom of Lord Levene and his report two years ago. That now is going well. We are adapting. We are coping with that uncertainty and we're also dealing with the austerity challenge. That of course, in my current post, is very topical.

It's very clear to me, and a very serious comment too, that Tim's legacy is very real. I can feel it. Tim's freshness of thinking, his positive energy put into both the international scene and his time in the Ministry of Defence – and my own service – has endured. That, I think, is a tribute to the man, and a great privilege to be asked to remember him. Thank you.