

Challenges and Choices for the UK: Defence and Security

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Ritula Shah

Hello, and welcome to this special edition of *The World Tonight*. We're discussing the future of defence at Chatham House in London, with an audience and a panel. More about them in a moment. Chatham House is, of course, more formally known as the Royal Institute for International Affairs. It's famous for its expertise and influence and, of course, its Rule – which, roughly, is that what's said in a meeting can be repeated but not attributed. We won't be invoking that today; this discussion is definitely on the record and on the radio.

Syria, Iraq, Ukraine, Libya: conflict, instability and danger seem to be growing all around us. Yet we're also in a time of spending cuts. Looking at the budget, if there's another Conservative-led government, the UK's armed forces won't be exempt from their share of austerity. Although defence has surfaced on the election agenda, probably for the first time since the 1980s, the pleas of senior military figures lining up to tell politicians to spend 2 per cent of GDP on defence appear for now to be ignored. Could that be because most politicians believe there are no votes in defence?

Well, to discuss why we should be thinking about defence, I'm joined now by General Sir Peter Wall, chief of the General Defence Staff from 2010 to 2014. Lord Robertson, George Robertson, who was NATO's secretary general from 1999 to 2003 and also the UK defence secretary from 1997 to 1999. Mary Kaldor is professor of global governance at the London School of Economics and CEO of the Justice Security Research Programme that's funded by the Department for International Development. Lord Hennessy is also here, Peter Hennessy, who's Attlee Professor of Contemporary History at Queen Mary, University of London. Welcome to you all.

I'd like to begin by asking each of you the same question: what do you think is the biggest security threat that faces the UK right now? General Sir Peter Wall.

Peter Wall

I think it's a close call. There's a number of threats out there that you've just listed. I would say by a close head it's the fallout from the first sort of state-on-state confrontation in Europe we've had since the Second World War.

Ritula Shah

So Russia and Ukraine.

Peter Wall

Yes, and the potential fallout from that, in terms of what's going on at the moment but also in terms of what could be a doctrine that's going to be pursued over time.

Ritula Shah

By which you mean?

Peter Wall

I think that if you accept the proposition that what Mr Putin would like to do is have more control over his near abroad, as it's called, then places like the Baltic states (which are within the NATO boundary) might start to come under the sort of influences that have been applied in Crimea and Ukraine.

Ritula Shah

Okay, we'll hold on to that thought. Mary Kaldor, what do you think is the biggest security threat facing the UK?

Mary Kaldor

I would say that our security very much depends on security in the rest of the world, and the tragedy that's going on in Syria, the continuing violence in Libya which is affecting Mali and Chad, the situation in Ukraine is really alarming – all of these very much deeply matter to the UK. They're not merely security challenges. To me, they're first and foremost political challenges. They arise from the fact that in all these places, there are dysfunctional states. In Russia and Ukraine, the cause is criminalized oligarchies. The ISIS problem is the result of sectarian and kleptocratic governments in Iraq and Syria. The Libya problem is the absence of any kind of government. So I think we have to first and foremost think about the political problems that we're facing globally.

Ritula Shah

Lord Robertson?

George Robertson

I think the biggest threat to our security is us. I think it's complacency. The tiny audience that will listen to this programme tonight –

Ritula Shah

It's not too tiny.

George Robertson

Well, by any standards, it's tiny, even with the podcasts and the rest of it. The fact is therefore there is a degree of complacency, despite the fact that some obvious threats are out there and being reported every day. The fact is that we're not focusing enough attention, not just on the defence budget but on the Foreign Office budget, the intelligence budget and the very essential elements that will allow us to deal with threats, both the ones that we have today, the ones we know we might face in the future and the surprises that over the years have just constantly caught us off guard. So actually the biggest enemy that we've got is ourselves.

Ritula Shah

Lord Hennessy?

Peter Hennessy

I share much of George's instinct. I think the first people we have to defend ourselves against are ourselves in many ways, for reasons he's just outlined. But I am worried about Russia. I dug out this week the November 1962 Joint Intelligence Committee assessment in the weeks following Cuba, entitled 'Escalation: The Dangers of Unintended Escalation', which was the great fear in the Cold War – the misreading of intentions, one side or another trying it on in an area where they thought they could get away with it but turned out to be of primary anxiety and importance to the other. It almost fits exactly what we're worried about today. Of course, it's not the Cold War. The anxiety then, which had been in place for a very long time, was Berlin. All the focus was on Berlin and suddenly it turns out to be Havana. Those missiles. Came out of the blue, that crisis, and nearly did in for us out of the blue.

But I don't think that Mr Putin is anything other than what I am, which is a child of the Cold War. I think it was Joe Nye, the great Harvard professor, who said that what distinguished the Cold War from all previous great power confrontations is that everybody knew what the endgame would be, what the showdown would be: absolute cataclysm. I think Mr Putin is as much a child of the Cold War as we are on this panel, and that he will be very wary of touching a NATO Article 5 country.

But the problem with that is – I was just thinking it's almost exactly 66 years to the day that Mr Bevin, the magnificent Ernie Bevin, signed the NATO treaty for us. If you'd said to Ernie that Article 5, which was critical to the NATO treaty then as now, would be tested in 2015 (or might be) in the Baltic states, which would be part of NATO, and perhaps even Poland, and that the test would be to do with something called 'ambiguous warfare' or cyber, he would have been absolutely baffled. It would be beyond his imagination. History doesn't repeat itself, as Mark Twain said, but sometimes it rhymes. It's these rhymes that really worry me.

Ritula Shah

Article 5 is, of course, under which all NATO members will defend any attack –

Peter Hennessy

An attack on one is an attack on all, yes.

Ritula Shah

Well, there's the start. I hope we'll come back and discuss all of those things in more detail. So as we think about those challenges facing the UK and indeed the rest of the world, let's remind ourselves of some of the threats and conflicts of the recent past. Our world affairs correspondent, Nick Charles, has been looking back.

[news report]

Nick Charles reporting. Plenty to think about there. It's been reported today that around 30 British military personnel have arrived in Ukraine to provide medical and tactical training to the country's troops. So General Sir Peter Wall, we've talked about Russia a lot already, but do you think Ukraine and Russia – is this the most likely scenario then, which could draw us back into, if you like, a recognizable war, a traditional war?

Peter Wall

I think it will be, if you like, sort of post-traditional. I think there will be potential scenarios where a deterrent posture requires us to use the capabilities we've evolved since the Cold War – ships, aircraft, ground formations – but in a very different context from the way that they were probably originally procured. If you look at the combination of levers that are being used by this Russian doctrine, which has been clearly articulated as a deliberate proposition by people like General Gerasimov, the head of the Soviet forces – Russian forces. Freudian slip there, sorry. Cyber, forms of subterfuge, deniable use of, effectively, military security companies, combined with threats to turn off people's energy and that sort of thing. Cleverly tuned to the fact that unlike the days of the Cold War, where it was a very clear-cut situation and just about every nation in Europe had a very similar standard sort of relationship with the Soviet Union, now every nation has a relationship with Russia that's calibrated slightly differently, depending on their economic relationship, internal/external investment, energy dependency, that sort of thing. So the chance of easily finding a sort of consensus are very, very difficult, and therefore doesn't really chime very easily with the sort of narrative that we have been promoting in the last few years since our last defence review, and in the run-up to this forthcoming election.

Ritula Shah

Lord Hennessy, what difficulties does that pose then, to have to think of this in diplomatic terms rather than military terms?

Peter Hennessy

You've got to think of it as a seamless response really. The Cold War lesson was that you can't isolate little bits of Britain's defence posture from its foreign policy and all the rest of it. It's integrated. Indeed, David Cameron's great innovation, in terms of machinery of government, is the National Security Council, which attempts to do that. I think it's an idea whose time had come and I think it will endure. But having the capacity to think about it and having the means to do something about it are very different things indeed. One of the problems we face – I think we're going to be very shortly in the 12th defence review since World War II, by my calculation. There's no iron laws of history but there's one non-ferrous-metal law about defence reviews, which is that they're always underfunded by the Treasury and they're always rapidly overtaken by events, usually within two years. It's going to be very difficult to do that because we've had an impulse, looking back over the postwar period, to sustain what Stryker McGuire, who was *Newsweek's* man in London for a long time, said was our desire to be a 'pocket superpower': we want to remain across the peace, with small amounts of very highly sophisticated equipment, a top-of-the-range power even though we haven't got the money necessarily to do all that properly. Maybe we're facing, with the financial circumstances we're in, a moment when we can no longer aspire to be a pocket superpower. We might have to look at losing some capabilities.

I'm one of these people who doesn't want that to happen. I'm a 'punching heavier than our weight in the world' bloke, if we can – if we've got the allies, the kit, the finance and the legal cover. But I think we may be facing a circumstance where we might have to.

Ritula Shah

Professor Kaldor?

Mary Kaldor

I don't think it's a choice between defence and diplomacy. I'd like, again, to emphasize the political. If you take the so-called Gerasimov doctrine, what he's talking about is the kind of thing where you get the local opposition, the Russian separatists, to take over administrative buildings and assume political control, and then help them with special forces. The key thing is to strengthen local governance and to prevent that from happening. Strengthening the state, whether it's in Ukraine or the Baltic states, because the whole aim really is to undermine the stability of Ukraine so that it can't become more democratic. And ISIS follows the exact same sort of strategy. It walks into an area where administration is extremely weak, takes over the administrative building, and kills, beheads, rapes anybody who opposes them.

So the key thing is to think about what you do on the ground. I think the idea that we can somehow match Russia conventionally or even imagine a conventional war is, I think, inconceivable. We've got to think of ways in which to prevent that. That means strengthening authority but it also means strengthening international agreements.

Ritula Shah

Lord Robertson, you were in the Labour administration that advocated a more humanitarian approach for the armed forces. But is it possible in the current context to really think there's no way we can challenge Russia militarily, it's got to be a whole different approach?

George Robertson

What is important in dealing with today's threats and future threats is deterrence. As General George Marshall once said, the best way to win a war is to prevent it. Actually what the bully-boys in the world today need to recognize is that there is a deterrent force out there. We are one country out of 28 in NATO. We've got this nasty habit of simply doing ourselves down all the time. NATO may not be as good as it should be or as it could be, but it's better than anything else in the world today. It's a military alliance that is respected and in many ways feared. We've got to have that combination of deterrence, right from nuclear weapons through conventional weapons and diplomacy, to make sure we're not going to be caught out by what we see today and what we might see in the future.

Ritula Shah

You can see how deterrence might work in a European context, in a Russian-NATO context. But how does deterrence work in the Middle East as it is panning out now? How does it work against IS, against the chaos which is unfolding in Libya – which, of course, is on our doorstep?

George Robertson

Well, if the House of Commons had made a different decision two years ago when a red line had been crossed, then I think some of the problems we're facing in Syria today would be certainly less than they are. But if the West or the civilized, stable part of the world says that there's a red line beyond which you will not go, IS, and that is using chemical weapons – and then does nothing about it – then we're asking for trouble at the end of the day. That's why I think deterrence actually matters. I'm the only one in NATO's history actually to invoke Article 5. If Ernie Bevin would have been surprised by what's happening today, the senators in the United States Senate who bitterly opposed Article 5 because they said, 'We know what you Europeans are going to do, and that's get another civil war and expect us to fight it for you'

– they would have been amazed that actually Article 5 was used to defend the United States of America against an external threat.

So I come back to the fact that we need to have robust political unity in NATO and that is in danger at the moment. We need to have the right capabilities, and we need to get a message to adversaries we face today and any other potential adversaries that we mean business, and that we don't do defeat.

Ritula Shah

General Sir Peter Wall, deterrence backed by the possibility of threat – is it effective? Could it be effective in the Middle East now, as it stands?

Peter Wall

I think, taking Lord Robertson's point, we are in a post-deterrence situation in the Middle East. So we're trying to do a regain, which is altogether more difficult than it might have been had we had a slightly more assertive approach in the first place. Therefore, I think we've got to be very careful in the Middle East now, because the last thing we want to be doing is exacerbating the situation and turning what is essentially an inter-factional struggle in Islam – which is set to be enduring for quite some time, a multi-generational struggle – to turn that into something that's yet again focused directly against the West, which is where extremism kind of kicked off if you go back to 9/11. We have a role in the periphery of the Middle East, supporting, containing, perhaps training and assisting indigenous forces to do the job themselves. But I absolutely support Mary's view that all of this is about driving better governance and it's eventually about political outcomes. All military operations are cast in that light.

Mary Kaldor

I'm very sceptical – an argument I've had for a very long time with George Robertson – about the value of deterrence. We have no idea whether deterrence works or not. The only proof we could ever have is if it didn't work. The risk is that we're spending money on very expensive weapons systems instead of doing the kind of thing that actually needs to be done. So if you take the situation in Syria, I think it's absolutely alarming that it looks as though Assad at the moment is using chlorine dropped out of barrel bombs. He's just signed the Chemical Weapons Convention. Nobody seems to be responding. Surely this is something we do have to respond. But I don't think deterrence is the way to go. We need to mobilize international opinion.

Ritula Shah

I want to pick up on that, and something that Lord Hennessy said. Who is the 'we' in that sentence? Who is it that mobilizes international opinion? It could be argued, as I think has been pointed out, that during the talks over Ukraine, Britain was not at the table. Discussions were led very much by France and Germany. There are other instances too where we've taken a backseat, Syria being a key point. I'd like to ask the audience for a minute: who here thinks it's time for the UK to step back from the international stage? My goodness, there's one hand that's gone up. Perhaps two, half a hand went up there. So we have an audience that very much sees the UK as being front and centre on the international stage. Let's think about that some more. We considered some of the threats but let's look at the thorny question of how much capacity we have to deal with the new and emerging challenges. There's been a clamour of voices pressing the government to maintain its spending at that target that's set by NATO, at 2 per cent of GDP. So will any of the political parties, regardless of who's elected in May, spend anything like that? Our

political correspondent, Chris Mason, has been finding out what the politicians are planning and what's driving them.

[news report]

Chris Mason there. You're listening to a special edition of *The World Tonight*, recorded in front of an audience at Chatham House in London. Tonight we're discussing defence and specifically that 2 per cent target. Mary Kaldor, does it matter how much our defence budget is and whether we stick to this rather arbitrary figure, in a way, that's set up by NATO?

Mary Kaldor

I think what really matters is what we spend on defence and how we spend it. I think we should be spending much more on our ability to get engaged in crises, for UN missions, for EU missions. We're very good at that. Our soldiers are very good at it on the ground and that's where we really make a difference. I think it's a waste of money to spend on very expensive Cold War weapons systems that actually take up a large part of the defence budget. Also, if we were to be integrated much more in the European Union – the European Union as a whole spends something like 200 billion on defence. The problem is the lack of integration, it's spent on the wrong things. I don't think the exact amount matters, I think the content matters.

Ritula Shah

General Sir Peter Wall, you've been one of those who have made an impassioned plea for a bit more money.

Peter Wall

Well, 2 per cent is the Wales pledge. It's the one that we were trumpeting to the rest of Europe as recently as six or seven months ago. It's a sort of level of ambition. I'm not suggesting that that sort of money should be dumped at the door of the Ministry of Defence to be spent without every pound being justified on something that is relevant to a modern mode of deterrence or defence, integrated with all of the other aspects of government capability and probably, in the future, other economic tools that might be played out in the commercial world. I also think that it's best done under the banner of NATO, which is after all set up for this very purpose. I know for sure that the level of capability ambition set in the Future Force 2020 programme in the last defence review won't be fully delivered unless we have something that's very close to 2 per cent, the way it plays out, spent out to the end of the decade. Some of the decisions that were taken in 2010-11 probably, retrospectively, will be invalid if those sums of money are not provided.

Ritula Shah

Peter Hennessy, the MOD has a rather bad reputation for spending money badly, doesn't it?

Peter Hennessy

Yes, it does. But also there is what the economists call the relative price effect in weapons procurement. It's always more expensive than the normal level of inflation but it's very difficult to get this right. I don't think any advanced nations have managed to get their weapons procurement into the condition they would want to be.

I accept that it can be absurd to fetishize a statistic, 2 per cent, but it is a talismanic thing. It's a signal. But also, the reason why I'm a 2 per cent bloke is that I think we need 2 per cent of GDP to fund the STSR last time, the one we all signed up to in 2010. Indeed, there are some dreadful gaps left by the STSR 2010 – the Strategic Defence and Security Review. The lack of maritime air cover – if you're going to be a serious underwater nuclear deterrent nation, you've got to have proper maritime air cover. You can't just rely on the Norwegians or the Americans to turn up on the days when you think you might need them, because an Akula has lurked out past the North Cape. I mean, the world isn't like that. We are a very funny country. We will these capacities but we have this perpetual reluctance to pay for them, which is why I'm a 2 per cent man.

Ritula Shah

Lord Robertson, I suspect you're definitely a 2 per cent man.

George Robertson

Well, you shouldn't assume that. No, you shouldn't, because I spent four years in NATO going round banging heads and saying to people: you need to spend more on defence. But I was actually quite cautious about not saying just 2 per cent. It depends, as Mary has said, on what you spend it on. Extra money spent on the wrong things actually does not increase your capability at all. We've got far too many Cold War toys. We have something like 2 or 2.5 million people in uniform in the European armies, navies and air forces, and 2 per cent of them are deployable outside of national boundaries. That's a ridiculous waste of taxpayers' money.

So what I believe in at the moment is that we should have a proper strategic security and defence review – a proper one, thoroughly done, like we did in 1997 – and that the parties going into the election commit themselves to funding it. So we start off with the threats, you build up what the capabilities are that are necessary, and then you promise to actually spend that money. It might be 2 per cent, it might be more than 2 percent. But I think a fetish of 2 per cent, when now the Ministry of Defence is going around scrabbling to see whether they can include pensions, whether they can include part of the intelligence budget – they haven't yet discovered that the Department of Defense in America has the blood transfusion service in its budget. When I mentioned that to somebody recently, their eyes glowed. This is nonsense, we need to have the right capabilities for the future.

Ritula Shah

But to go back to your idea of defence review, is there a danger, whenever we have one of those reviews, that actually what everybody considers is the threats that we're facing in that given moment? Nobody projects forward and thinks about cyber warfare, perhaps something we might look at now. What does the rise of China mean to our defence?

George Robertson

That is exactly why you need to have a review and get the capabilities. It includes the Foreign Office, the Home Office, it includes the intelligence services, because they're all part of the country's security.

Ritula Shah

General Sir Peter Wall, George Osborne in that clip that we heard said this morning that we will be well defended. Does that worry you, that there is no real commitment to numbers? Just 'well defended', whatever that means.

Peter Wall

Taken at face value, it's a very encouraging sentiment. What he was suggesting was that there would be a growth in the capital parts of the defence budget, the capital equipment part of it. Something like 1 per cent compound from next year onwards, I think. Which certainly is very helpful, but until someone crunches the number and sets that against the level of ambition we want to set in something like a national security strategy, we shan't precisely know. But I suspect there will be difficult choices to be made. Picking up Lord Hennessy's point, this could well be not just about a sort of haircut, skimming something off the top of all of our capabilities, trying to maintain a sort of critical mass from insufficient resources, but we would have to take some stark choices about which capabilities either to suspend or disband altogether. We've got a gap in maritime patrol. We've got a gap in carrier strike at the moment.

Mary Kaldor

The 1997 review was an excellent review, but it excluded from the terms of reference both Trident and the Eurofighter. Although you may well be right that the cost of the Trident is only going to be £2 billion a year, it has its knock-on effects. We just heard about maritime air cover. I just think that should be put into the review and we should really seriously consider whether we still need Trident, and whether we still need such an expensive weapons system as the Eurofighter when our real role has to be in a global framework.

Ritula Shah

Lord Hennessy, the review of Trident comes up in 2016. It's going to be –

Peter Hennessy

Well, the main gates, the decision whether or not to proceed. We are the most reluctant nuclear power in world history. We anguish more about this than any other nuclear power. It's to our credit that we do. What it is really, is it's a 'don't even think about it' weapon. The notion of a last resort, that when everything else that might protect us is gone, you say to a potential adversary who's nuclear weapon-tipped: don't even contemplate it. We've got a boat out there which you can't find, which has got more destructive power on it than all the bombs' explosive used in World War II by all the combatants from end to end – don't even think about it. Inside that inner safe are the prime minister's wishes from beyond the grave. Now, you can strip away all the rest of the argument about nuclear or not, but you have to put yourself in the frame of mind: if you were prime minister, is this the moment to give it up? I think not.

Mary Kaldor

But would you use it? We're against human rights violations. If you think –

Peter Hennessy

The whole point is not to use it, it's to deter.

Mary Kaldor

But by having it to deter, you legitimize the possession of nuclear weapons. I think it's totally immoral ever to use nuclear weapons. I don't understand why we believe in international humanitarian law, we believe in human rights law, but we somehow exclude nuclear weapons. That, to me, is one of the most bizarre aspects.

Peter Hennessy

What do you think saved us in the Cold War, Mary? What do you think held the line in that great confrontation?

Mary Kaldor

I think neither side wanted another war. And I can't prove it and you can't prove it. The only way we could have proved it is if deterrence had failed and then we'd have all been dead.

George Robertson

So you'd take the gamble.

Mary Kaldor

I would take the gamble because I think as long as we went on – I don't think it's a gamble. I think there's nothing we could do if we were – I don't think this stops anything.

Ritula Shah

Lord Robertson, briefly. I'm going to have to wrap up.

George Robertson

Trident is not a military weapon, it's a political weapon. It is, as Peter said, in last resort. If you look back to 1994, Ukraine signed up to doing away with the third-largest nuclear arsenal in the world in return for security guarantees given by Russia, America, the UK and France. Their territory would be guaranteed and they would be freed from any economic or political pressure. So as Peter said, the question is: is this the moment where you take the gamble that Mary actually says is involved in doing it? It's not the time.

Mary Kaldor

I think it's a gamble in the opposite direction. I think as long as we legitimize nuclear weapons, other countries in the world want to acquire nuclear weapons. I'm not just saying us, I'm saying everybody. I think sooner or later there will be a nuclear war. I think the gamble is holding on to nuclear weapons, not getting rid of them.

Ritula Shah

That's all we have time for. I'd like to thank our panel: Professor Kaldor, Mary Kaldor; Lord Robertson, George Robertson; Lord Hennessy, Peter Hennessy; and General Sir Peter Wall, chief of the General Defence Staff from 2010-14. Thank you all very much indeed. That's *The World Tonight*. I'm Ritula Shah. For now, from me and everyone here, good night.