Navigating a Contested Age: Chiefly Reflections of Admiral Sir Tony Radakin

Institute for Government, 15th September 2025

Thank you Hannah,

It's a pleasure to be back at the Institute for Government for my first speech in my new role as a 'former CDS'.

There is a fitting symmetry about being at the IFG at the end of my tenure. I spoke here back in March 2022, near the start, alongside David Williams, the Permanent Secretary, to lay out some of our thinking on leadership and reform of Defence.

That was barely six weeks after President Putin launched his full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The siege of Mariupol was underway and just a few days later the first images emerged of the atrocities in Bucha.

The events in the intervening time have been extraordinary.

On the minus side: Over three more years of grinding attrition in Ukraine. Thousands of North Koreans fighting in Europe. Iran attacking Israel. Israel attacking Iran. Houthi attacks on international shipping. Lapsing arms control treaties. And earlier this month that extraordinary meeting of Putin, Xi and Kim in Beijing.

On the plus side: Ukraine is defiant. NATO is larger and stronger. Pax Americana is giving rise to a potential new Pax Europa: through the Coalition of the Willing, and through the NATO Hague Summit. Statecraft is returning. Atlantic-Pacific partnerships are flourishing. The democracies of Europe and Asia, and the responsible monarchies of the Gulf, are coming together to buttress and defend the global order.

What we are seeing is an era shift. From geo-economics to geo-politics. From counter insurgency back to state-on-state. From wars of choice to constant competition. The peace dividend is over. Finito. Ended.

Taking stock against that backdrop seems appropriate. The risk is that we think that's it. It's not and I have 4 prescriptions:

- The first is self-congratulatory: the military instrument is working; we have a plan; our politicians take things seriously. We are safe for now.

- The second is more demanding: the need to deliver the plan. Invest and follow through. Properly.

- The third is more sobering: even if we have a plan and follow through, it may not be addressing some of our most serious risks. The nuclear international safety blankets are slipping away. What it reveals is very ugly and very dangerous. We need a new call to arms control.

- The final point is more profound and a familiar one for the IFG: the State is not working as it should. Fix it or everything fails. We must reform.

The Military Instrument is Working. We are Safe for Now.

Orthodoxy has it that departing Chiefs are supposed to rail against their political masters. And that now is the time to tell it as it really is.

So, I am going to disappoint this morning.

I have served four Prime Ministers and three Defence Secretaries, and each has taken their defence responsibilities with the utmost seriousness.

Perhaps more remarkable might be the revelation that Prime Ministers, Chancellors, Defence Secretaries and their Service Chiefs have frank and tough conversations. John Healey made a point that he felt 'challenge' had been one of the hallmarks of our time together.

Throughout my four years my refrain was that Britain is safe because we are a nuclear power, a member of the world's largest and strongest defensive Alliance, and because our closest ally is a superpower called America. That has held true for the last 75 years and needs to for the next 75 years.

I briefed successive Prime Ministers to expect more of the Military Instrument than 'just' keeping us safe. When we get it right, the Military Instrument enhances the authority and agency of the Prime Minister.

This requires a maximalist approach to the military instrument. It is not the military as an 'insurance policy' or 'break glass in an emergency'. It is about maximising the benefit of £60 billion a year in the service of the nation; largest

employer of apprentices; largest provider of youth services; exports of between £10bn to £15bn a year; representing the nation for the Queen's funeral and King's coronation; leading on Ukraine, leading the Joint Expeditionary Force, developing a sixth generation fighter, collaborating on AUKUS and being the reference armed forces for much of the world. All as well as keeping us safe.

This doesn't sound like the 'department of waste' as we are sometimes characterised. And I am pleased we may have reached a highpoint under this administration where the Prime Minister declares 'defence and security as a guiding principle for his government' and the Chancellor speaks of us becoming 'a defence industrial superpower'.

We contribute to society, the nation, trade, diplomacy. We are safe. And the good news is we have a plan for the next decade. It's called the Strategic Defence Review. It recognises that the world is getting more dangerous and our Armed Forces are not as strong as we would wish. It sets out how we will put that right.

Invest and Follow Through.

That leads me on to my second point: the need to follow through on that plan. This gets to a regular IFG theme: delivery. Whitehall agonises about whether it has taken the right decision. But the secret to effective decision making is not whether you have made the perfect decision: it is about investing and following through on the decision you have taken.

The Strategic Defence Review provides us with the Plan and the commitments made at the NATO Hague Summit provide the Means: 5% of GDP on defence and security by 2035 – with 3.5% on core military purposes. That is a momentous decision.

The 2020s will continue to be tough. The SDR predominantly had up arrows and increased demands, and very little in the way of down arrows. That means difficult decisions, including potentially further cuts, are likely to be required in the short term.

But over the next ten years Defence spending in this country will grow by over 50%. Future Chiefs will have the ability to invest in new capabilities, greater readiness, more resilience, better support and increased mass in a way my immediate predecessors could only dream.

That's quite the step change for the mindset of the Department. We are familiar with managed decline and steady retrenchment. We now need to develop the instincts for growth and acceleration, despite the short-term difficulties.

And we need to recognise and have confidence that this is an international commitment to more investment and one that is at the heart of our security construct. It is a promise to the other 31 nations in NATO. It is a promise to our closest ally, America. It is a response to the security situation and the dangers we face. It is not a budget or treasury 'thing': it's a national security and first duty of government thing and the Prime Minister is to be congratulated on taking such a profound decision.

Following through also means having the courage to embrace technology and innovation and our industrial base in a much stronger way. It is often characterised as the willingness and ability to take more risk. It's the opposite: all the risk is vested in doing the same old thing and failing to adopt the technological opportunities. The Chiefs have forged the ideas that came out of the SDR and are the strongest advocates in being able to put those ideas into practice. But it also means turning the investment into production.

That might mean looking at Planning Rules: where and how quickly are the 6 ammunition factories going to be built? It also means incentivising industry: are government profit rates high enough above the cost of capital to attract investment?

It might mean adjusting procurement and competition legislation where the rules are working against the outcome. Same with ESG rules. There has to be something profoundly wrong when UK pension funds struggle to invest in UK defence, but international pension funds do. And what is it that we are really trying to achieve?

Is it about creating a new 'Arsenal of Democracy'? If so, that requires the West to overcome national competitions and harness its collective might. Mario Draghi is right when he pillories Europe for having so many national variations of every piece of military kit.

And I've spoken before about the race to Artificial Super Intelligence. That might require another level of cooperation, pooling our most precious technological expertise with allies, and extending the shield of safety to others, just as we did through the nuclear umbrella.

So, we have the necessity. We have the Plan. We know the Means. Follow through. Follow through. Follow through. But that requires more than just money. It's domestic and international rules and planning and collaboration and risk-taking and all laced with a stronger technological edge. That is really hard. But make it happen. And understand that security is the greatest public benefit of all.

A Call to Nuclear Arms Control

My third point is a sobering one and is too little spoken about. Most people my age grew up expecting nuclear proliferation. That never really happened. It has been managed for the large part very successfully. That now risks unravelling. It is one of the most dangerous aspects of our current global security architecture.

We all know that technology is transforming the nature of both war and domestic security. In the 1950s and 60s, policy makers faced similarly uncertain terrain. Out of this period came the recognition that in an atmosphere of strategic competition and 'competitive armament' there was a need for continuous dialogue to manage potential escalation and miscalculation.

And from that dialogue, came an architecture of frameworks and agreements that help keep the world safe and led to reduced nuclear arsenals; eliminated entire classes of weapons; and established clear protocols to aid de-escalation crises when they arose.

We all recognise we are in a new era of increased risk of state-on-state competition and technological exuberance. This new era and third nuclear age includes the increasing prominence of nuclear weapons in the policies, doctrines and approaches of our adversaries. And that also means the need for a continuous dialogue remains true today.

But it is in short supply.

Long-standing agreements such as the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty, Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces, and Open Skies have fallen apart because of Russian violations. This is despite their offering the conflict management, confidence building and transparency that Moscow claims to seek.

And in some regions of the world, such as the Indo-Pacific, such arrangements have never existed. The absence of formal arms control agreements between the United States and China is a glaring gap in the global nuclear regime.

Given the complexity of modern nuclear dynamics, now is the time to be renewing those elements of the security architecture that still exist and remain vital.

And now is the time to be investing in the people and relationships that will produce the new arrangements to help us manage the crises that could occur in the future.

Tackling this challenge is likely to be more complex than before. There are more states with more nuclear weapons. There is an increased risk of proliferation of nuclear and disruptive technology. And we have seen rhetoric and allegations weaponised as part of the new contested age.

But it is something we must do. We need to step up our approach to arms control and especially nuclear. It needs to rise up the international agenda. That remains the global danger to address.

The State's Not Working as it Should. We Must Reform.

My final point is probably the most profound and it speaks to a personal failure. Successive Prime Ministers rightly talk of the need for Defence Reform. It is probably true of the whole of government. But it's not happening as strongly and as quickly as it needs to. We need to understand why and we need to put it right. Because if we don't, we will: squander the additional investment; not look after our amazing people or unlock their potential; miss the technological opportunities; and not keep the nation as safe as we could.

There is something wrong when the Government spoke of the need for a National Armaments Director when in Opposition in February 2024 and we are unlikely to get one before February 2026.

There is something wrong when successive governments profess the nuclear Continuous at Sea Deterrent is our highest priority. But our sailors are having to put to sea for extraordinarily long patrols in some of the most complex machines on the planet that are beyond their original design life.

There is something wrong when men and women in uniform make the extraordinary commitment to be willing to put their lives on the line. But we don't trust them to hire a car. Or even worse, when they are allowed to hire a van, we then insist on them taking an additional driving test.

The reasons are various but have common themes. There is a focus on process over outcome. We struggle to take long term decisions. We lack real accountability. We fail to take risk. And we would rather waste money than risk money.

We can overcome these weaknesses, but only with radical change. I have tried and failed and this is my last throw of the dice. My concerns are not a reflection on the superb men and women whom we have serving in defence, both in and out of uniform. But it is a critique on 'the system' and those that seek to protect 'the system' at all costs.

So, a better way forward will involve adopting processes and procedures and protocols that are anathema to much of what the Centre of Whitehall seeks to impose:

- Reduce the levels of control… and risk public money so as to be more effective and to go faster.

- Reduce the levels of hierarchy… we have increased senior civil service numbers in defence by about 85% since 2018 even as defence has got smaller and the military star count has remained largely static.

- Reduce the power of anyone and everyone to say 'no' and impose the power of 'yes'. If the person leading a project and one other are willing to say 'yes' and are comfortable they can justify their decisions to the Public Accounts Committee and the Secretary of State for Defence, then let the programme move forward…

- If you are not responsible for the outcome, especially individuals in other government departments, then you should not have authority in decision making. By all means allocate the budget and set the demand for the policy outcome. But then delegate and step back…

- Seek 'alignment' through senior appointments and not 'balance'. Balance sounds attractive. All sides will be taken into account and so on… But it leads to everyone and anyone having a vote. Put one person really in charge. Create teams that are aligned and obsessed about the outcome.

- You are much more innovative if you think you are about to be shot. Whitehall is too remote and lacks the incentive to do differently. Delegate. Empower. Mix tacticians with technicians. Preference the front line not the back room. Again, it's about outcomes and not coherence and tidiness and control.

- And finally adopt the first Principle of War: Selection and Maintenance of the Aim. If the aim at a time of increased concern about our national security is to make our nation safer, then use all the levers of the State to bend to that purpose.

Fortunately, we adopt much of what I say for Ukraine through our Project KINDRED. We spend billions at pace to equip Ukraine with drones and other technology and enable much more innovative approaches. We have even achieved that rarity in Defence of a complimentary NAO report and recognition that we are achieving increased value for money for the taxpayer. We do that by having fewer senior people in charge, a small team, less control and the willingness to take both operational and financial risk. The bad news is that the same does not apply for our own Armed Forces.

So what? Force the State to work to the Government's outcomes. Not the State working to and for the State. Accelerate change. Be less compromising. De-layer. Restructure. Do less. Reduce numbers overseeing. Empower. Delegate. Scrape the barnacles from the hull to go faster.

Conclusion

I will wind up there. Both for now and for longer. A man I hold in great esteem, the late Admiral Mike Boyce, once said the role of a former CDS is to support the one on watch. So that is now what I intend to do and is probably best done by being quiet and allowing the Chiefs to speak for themselves.

Thank you to the IFG and to everyone who has worked with me and supported me these past four years. It has been a remarkable privilege.

And I have been fortunate throughout to stand on the shoulders of giants: our servicemen and women, and all the civilians who support them. We are safe for now. Defence is not broken. But we can and need to be even better and even stronger.