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Understanding the UK's Transition to Warfighting Readiness

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Foreword

As the Strategic Defence Review (SDR) has made clear, the challenge for this new era for defence and security in a world beset by volatility and deep uncertainty – notably, as Russia wages war on Ukraine – we must strive to meet impending dangers head on. The UK faces multiple, direct threats to its security, prosperity, and democracy.

I have been saying that the UK is under prepared and under attack.

Building on the Strategic Defence Review, this report helpfully starts by highlighting the urgent need to recognise this, demonstrating that the experience of warfare is being transformed in Ukraine and that we must learn to adapt our armed forces and our defence industry. The report itself highlights that today's rapid and drastic change means that preparing for and winning a war depends on adaptability – the Ukraine war is demonstrating this attribute to be the essential quality for victory.

In present times, we must learn that states are seeking to reshape the rules-based international order that has governed national relationships since the Second World War, exemplified by the recent shifts in US defence and security priorities which are changing the way we manage strategic competition.

Abroad, the UK must, where it can, work with its allies, especially those in NATO, to be ready to deal with difficult circumstances, so that we can deter, and prevent, a full-scale war. For that, we must be ready to fight and win. At home, we must consider the shifts necessary to renew our emphasis on home defence and resilience. This is why the Strategic Defence Review called for a 'national conversation' about this.

With fast-changing advances in technology precipitating change in how wars are fought, the UK must pivot to new ways of doing things, again set out in this study. It discusses the way in which we can restore the armed forces, reinvigorating their readiness to fight, and reversing past phases, which allowed them to be hollowed out. An emphasis on developing our capacity at wartime pace will mean creating a tech-enabled defence power, so that we can deter and win through rapid innovation at wartime pace.

Following the SDR, this study sets out the way forward.

The Rt Hon Lord Robertson of Port Ellen
House of Lords
15th January 2026

Executive summary

- In the context of today's accelerating geopolitical instability, this strategic study, *Understanding the UK's Transition to Warfighting Readiness* examines how the United Kingdom and indeed other Western democracies need to transform politically, economically, socially and militarily in order to achieve warfighting preparedness. Given Russia's war against Ukraine, and shifting assumptions about long-standing security arrangements, the authors argue that warfighting readiness is not a military problem alone, but a state and whole-of-society challenge.
- Against the backdrop of the Government's National Security Strategy (NSS), Strategic Defence Review (SDR), and Defence Industrial Strategy (DIS), this report by Sir Bernard Jenkin MP, Derek Twigg MP and Chris Donnelly sets out the most urgent practical challenges for a country moving from a peacetime footing toward warfighting readiness.
- The report draws out principles which it considers essential to this transition:
  - The rules-based global order is disappearing, and the West faces an existential threat from autocracies. An immediate, radical response is required.
  - Governance models which evolved during peacetime are now inadequate for the current era of rapid change and threat. Democratic societies must modernise and upgrade their practices.
  - Western democracies are unprepared for both hybrid and kinetic warfare. Governments and societies must learn to recognise and counter sophisticated adversary techniques.
  - Adaptability is the most important characteristic for survival and success. All institutions must be capable of rapid change.
  - Even without the growing threat from Russia and other autocracies, Western democracies already face the need to evolve their current peacetime governance model to one resembling war preparedness because of the challenges posed by rapid global change. Transformation is urgent and must not be delayed.
- The UK and other Western democracies need to move from peacetime complacency to warfighting readiness. This requires a whole-of-society mobilisation, adaptable governance, resilient financial systems, and sovereign control over defence capabilities and critical national infrastructure. This immediate and radical transformation is necessary to meet the existential threats posed by autocratic adversaries in an age of global insecurity.
- The report highlights the geopolitical drivers behind the need for warfighting readiness. Russia's war on Ukraine is both a kinetic conflict and a wider confrontation with the 'Collective West' demonstrating to us how large-scale conflict unfolds, involving not just armed forces but our economies, societies, information systems and political resolve.
- Russia's view of a desirable world order is one based on 'spheres of influence' and the right of big countries to impose their will on smaller neighbours, a very different vision from that which has inspired Western liberal democratic thinking since the end of the Second World War. Russia's war on Ukraine is a manifestation of this. It is not a territorial conflict, but a clash between competing visions of world order, the nature of society and what strong countries have a right to do to weaker ones.
- The war in Ukraine has forced Western governments to confront uncomfortable truths about the readiness of their own defences. While some countries (Finland, Sweden, Poland) have responded rapidly, most Western democracies have been slow to learn the broader lessons of war, which require whole-of-society mobilisation, not just military reform.

- Changes in US policy also mean that the rules-based global order which our democracies drove to establish after 1945, and which we believed had been permanently assured after 1990, is fast disappearing. The West now faces a truly existential threat from a loose but strengthening alliance of autocracies which the Ukraine war has exposed. This is an urgent and drastic threat which requires an immediate, far-reaching and radical response.
- The US National Security Strategy makes clear that there is a move away from strategic competition to a policy affirming that great powers have spheres of influence. Russian aggression is no longer seen as a central threat and there is no longer a focus on deterring Russia. There is now a clear aversion within the White House to what it sees as undesirable developments in Europe which threaten the continent with 'civilizational erasure'.
- If the UK is to move in a timely and effective manner from its current defence structure to whatever new structure can provide critical mass, innovation and permanent adaptability, it cannot do so whilst the government, economy and society remain on a peacetime footing. That peacetime footing would be too slow, too costly, too inflexible.
- We must reconceptualise and restructure NATO to take account of an uncertain commitment from the US and the significant differences between the threat perceptions of its member states.
- There are two main problems with defence and security industrial systems which are based on a peacetime, rather than a wartime, footing: time and cost.
- Defence industrial systems developed on a long-term peacetime footing have been designed around the regular, planned replacement and upgrade of a known and stable number of major weapons systems. However, a peacetime system can be compensated to some extent by:
  - Maintaining large stockpiles of ammunition, reserves of equipment and reserves of trained military personnel. In many cases, it is easier, cheaper and quicker to upgrade older models of equipment than build new from scratch, especially as weapons tend to become obsolete more rapidly than the platforms on which they are mounted. Stockpiling will provide a breathing space whilst the transformation to warfighting preparedness is undertaken, or to provide insurance in a period of uncertainty;
  - Increasing research and development (R&D) and experimentation, so that capabilities can be constantly improved, even if these capabilities are never turned into military utility by producing them in serious capacity;
  - Educating and training a surplus of workers capable of undertaking the skilled work necessary to produce high-technology equipment and weapons;
  - Specifically designing equipment so that it can be made by a less-skilled workforce;
  - Investing heavily in intelligence so as to give the maximum possible warning of all impending threats.
- Peacetime defence industrial systems are adequate only as long as investment in maintaining reserves and in R&D is not neglected, and so long as there is no sudden change in the geopolitical situation.
- Major war requires the mobilisation of all elements of society, not just the military. The critical mass of moral, physical and conceptual fighting power is essential for robustness, resilience and adaptability.
- Western democracies have also lost the distinction between war and crisis, treating all conflicts as manageable events rather than existential struggles. This mindset undermines readiness and resilience, as war demands sacrifices and a commitment to victory, not simply compromise or negotiation.
- Putin's strategy relies on outlasting Western resolve, leveraging hybrid warfare, and exploiting vulnerabilities in Western governance and alliances.
- European countries must invest in their own capabilities and reconsider reliance on shared assets. Collaborative defence projects will become more difficult, and national self-reliance will be increasingly important.

- There is a sense of rapid and drastic change which requires new forms of management and leadership, prioritising effectiveness over efficiency, and embracing risk taking and trial and error. Peacetime norms must be replaced by modernised thinking, with realistic training and a willingness to accept risk. Failure to adapt will result in defeat against our peer adversaries.
- Deterrence is not only about military capability but also willpower, societal resilience and the ability to adapt to hybrid threats. The West must rethink its approach to deterrence, integrating conventional and non-kinetic tools, and understanding adversary psychology.
- Effective warfighting readiness begins with government. Parliamentary democracies face challenges in mobilising national power and maintaining consensus in times of crisis. We recommend urgent practical steps such as educating ministers (in government and opposition), reforming media rules to counter disinformation from foreign powers, and fostering cross-party cooperation. Trust in government is essential for societal resilience and acceptance of painful but necessary measures. All governance structures must be adaptable to the pressures of war.
- National strategy requires integrating all forms of state power, informed by coherent thinking and clear objectives. The UK's National Security Strategy provides a framework but still requires mechanisms for strategic thinking and implementation across government.
- Education is crucial for war readiness, not just in military skills but in international affairs and technical expertise. There is potential for waiving tuition fees for students in key subjects and restructuring higher education to support defence. The current dependence on foreign students – and influence – from hostile states must be addressed to protect intellectual property and national security.
- Resilience involves anticipating shocks, surviving initial blows, enduring pain and recovering to a new state. The vital core of society must be protected, even at the expense of peripheral comforts and rights. We should consider Nordic models of 'total defence' and integrating resilience into all aspects of governance and society.
- War necessitates significant changes to financial systems. Government revenues decline, and new mechanisms such as war bonds and capital controls become necessary. Financial system resilience and stability must be prioritised, with plans for incremental, medium-term and long-term financing. The unsustainable debt burdens facing Western economies suggest we the need to consider creating financial headroom, impacted by modern spending decisions on pensions, health and welfare.
- The importance of sovereign control over defence procurement is clear and the need to diversify sources of equipment and technology is essential. Wars drive rapid social, technological and political change, but military evolution is often incremental. New technologies do not instantly render old ones obsolete; large wars are fought with a mix of old and new systems. The 'measure-countermeasure' cycle drives innovation, and lessons from Ukraine have highlighted the importance of drones, electronic warfare, and adaptability.
- The justification for critical mass, in terms of having sufficient manpower, equipment and ammunition, is essential for resilience and victory. Western democracies have neglected the need for mass, focusing on *capability* over *capacity*.
- The UK faces challenges in recruiting volunteers and must consider new mechanisms for expanding the armed forces.

Introduction

In June 2025, the UK Government published its long-awaited Strategic Defence Review (SDR) and National Security Strategy (NSS). These were followed in September by the Defence Industrial Strategy (DIS). Together, these documents cover the Government's strategic intent about the defence and security of the UK.

The Government's approach is to address foreign and domestic policy together, rather than as separate issues. The NSS focuses on the country's strategic objectives and the SDR on what is needed to build armed forces able to contribute to achieving these objectives. The DIS, an element of the Government's Industrial Strategy, addresses the industrial base that equips and maintains the defence and security establishment, including the armed forces.

Underlying all these reports is the understanding that the UK is not as ready for war as it needs to be in the current situation of global instability and uncertainty. The documents begin the process of defining how the UK might move towards war readiness. It is the purpose of this study to explore in greater detail where the pathways outlined by the three documents should lead, the nature and extent of the transformation which will be necessary for the UK to achieve war readiness, and why the country needs to make that journey.

The official documents provide an initial indication of where we need to go, but not how to get there. It is the 'how' that our study will now begin to address. It is to be hoped that our work will help to ensure that this journey of transformation will be a success. The preliminary indications tell us that this is likely to be a long, quite difficult and painful journey. But it is already clear that the cost of not making the journey of transformation will be even more painful and difficult, and that the sooner we start moving to war readiness, the better.

The major limitation which affects all these policy documents is that they are all based on peacetime norms and assumptions; on an expectation of stability for the next 10 years, uncomfortably reminiscent of government attitudes in the 1930s. There is no sense of real urgency, no account taken of the fact that our enemies might interfere with our comfortable stability, no preparation for the possibility we may have to move very much more rapidly and drastically to war readiness to cope with a sudden threat. The documents do not acknowledge the fact that we need to prepare not just to go to war, but that in many respects we are on the potential cusp of war and that kinetic war may come to us when we least expect it; sooner rather than later.

It is now clear that our adversaries are ahead of us in readying themselves for war. We need to catch up, and quickly.

Chapter 1: The Imperative for moving to war readiness – a rapidly changing geopolitical and geostrategic environment

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was the first unequivocal declaration that the 'international rules-based order' – which had defined our security and shaped our national defence for the past three generations – was under existential threat. We should have read the signs when Russia invaded and occupied Crimea in 2014, but for a variety of reasons the West chose to downplay that event and the running war with Ukraine which followed it.

Russia's view of a desirable world order is one based on spheres of influence and the right of big countries to impose their will on smaller neighbours, a very different vision from that which has inspired Western liberal democratic thinking since the end of the Second World War. Russia's war on Ukraine is a manifestation of this. It is not a territorial conflict, but a clash between competing visions of world order, the nature of society, and what strong countries have a right to do to weaker ones.

The fighting in Ukraine is only the manifestation of a much larger conflict now taking place. After 2022, as the war grew in extent and ferocity and it became clear that Russia viewed the West as a whole as its enemy, it became increasingly difficult to claim that this was a local crisis which could be resolved and that the world would then get back to normal, although that view persisted in the White House under President Biden and was adopted in a somewhat different form by his successor. The destabilisation of the old global system exacerbated latent frictions and exposed enmities elsewhere. Countries which had insisted on seeing China as a benign trading partner are now having to face up to the very uncomfortable fact that China is not simply a challenge and that the intentions of the Chinese Communist Party towards Western democracies are not at all benign. China's support of Russia and the support given by North Korea and Iran established a *de facto* alliance of autocracies seeking to overthrow Western global dominance.

It is somewhat ironic, therefore, that the final nail in the coffin of the post-Second World War order should be placed there by the USA. The US commitment to defend Europe was at the core of the international rules-based order. As soon as that commitment was put in doubt by President Trump, the security guarantee it had provided for seven decades was no longer valid and the international rules-based order was effectively dead. That it has been difficult for many in Europe to accept the reality of this situation because of the magnitude of change it implies does not make the fact less true.

The very speed with which the old system – which had seemed so immutable – dissolved, and the difficulty which many European governments have had in acknowledging and adapting to the new security situation, exposed significant vulnerabilities in Western democracies. Those three generations of stability, prosperity and security had made us complacent. We had forgotten what a nasty place the world can be; we had forgotten what *war* is and that it can affect us.

This is not just an international change which is engulfing us; it is a truly global paradigm shift. No country is immune from its impact. Instability has spread to the Middle East, to Latin America, to Africa, to the Indian subcontinent. In what the Western world today calls 'the Global South', countries whose allegiance we had taken for granted are now hedging their bets, waiting to see who will be on the winning side in a standoff between liberal democracy and autocracy. The wider war which Putin's attack on Ukraine has exposed will also be fought out with hybrid and kinetic weapons on their territory. That we may not want this war is irrelevant; we need to prepare for war not because we wish to go to war but because war is coming to us.

Russia's war on Ukraine

Putin will see our failure to respond robustly to his assault on Ukraine as an invitation to exploit our weaknesses with further naked aggression. This reality has until recently been largely ignored in Europe, save in countries on Russia's border. That we should need, as a matter of urgency, to move the UK and other countries of Western Europe at least in some degree towards warfighting readiness is so painful to contemplate that for most officials it is still unthinkable. Some senior figures in relevant positions have been calling for such a move for some time, but frequently comment that their warnings do not attract the attention they deserve.[1] The UK parliamentary defence committee addressed the issue some two years ago in a report[2] about the armed forces' readiness for war, but this too attracted little attention. It is to be hoped that the very recent comments by senior officials[3] will elicit a more active response from government and society.

To contemplate the possibility of war is certainly unpalatable. To make adequate preparation for that war so as to help deter it, and to enable us to fight it effectively should it happen, will certainly be painful. But, when the very survival of our democratic way of life may be in jeopardy, 'unpalatable', 'difficult' and 'painful' are not valid excuses to justify our failure to address this patent threat seriously.

On the plus side, the Ukraine war has set the alarm bells ringing and there has been an increasingly positive response in much of Europe. Finland and Sweden set a good example by rapidly bolstering their defences and choosing NATO over neutrality, and Poland has also shown a lead in moving rapidly towards a war footing. The war itself is being studied closely in military quarters. But most Western analyses have focused on the challenges of the land, sea and air battlefields, on how Ukraine has learned the lessons of battle, and what relevance these lessons might have for Western armed forces.

Beyond the lessons of battle, however, there are also the wider lessons of war and their implications for democracies. Lessons of battle and lessons of war are, of course, intertwined. But these wider lessons of war tend to have been much less thoroughly studied in the West for two main reasons: there are so few people with experience even of the preparations made for war during the Cold War; and many of the lessons are very unpalatable to Western governments due to the degree of radical change which they imply will be necessary. War demands the total participation of the whole population attacked, not merely of those armed.

Consequently, governments – as opposed to just armies – must learn the lessons of war. This requires political leaders not only to perceive and understand the threat, but also to understand that the cost of preparing to meet the potential threat will be far less than the cost of ignoring it. As a minimum, they will need to understand how to evolve the governance and structures of countries they have been elected to govern so as to ensure that the cost of victory is lower than the cost of defeat.

1 See, for example, Merrick, J. (2025) 'Britons told to prepare for 'widespread' war in Europe within three to four years', in *The i Paper*, 19th October 2025. Available at: https://inews.co.uk/news/politics/britons-told-prepare-war-europe-three-four-years-3984047 (accessed: 23/12/25). Also: Gray, B. (2025) 'Former Nato chief warns Russia is at war with UK', in *The Observer*, 14th October. Available at: https://observer.co.uk/news/opinion-and-ideas/article/former-nato-chief-warns-that-britain-is-being-portrayed-as-hostile-nation-in-russia (accessed: 23/12/2025).

2 House of Commons Defence Committee (2024) *Ready for War? First Report of Session 2023–24*. London: House of Commons. Available at: https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/43178/documents/214880/default/ (accessed: 23/12/25)

3 Secret Intelligence Service *et al* (2025) 'Speech by Blaise Metreweli, Chief of SIS, 15 December 2025' on GOV.UK, 15th December. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/speech-by-blaise-metreweli-chief-of-sis-15-december-2025 (accessed: 23/12/25).*'We all continue to face the menace of an aggressive, expansionist and revisionist Russia, seeking to subjugate Ukraine and harass NATO … Alongside the grinding war, Russia is testing us in the grey zone with tactics that are just below the threshold of war. It's important to understand their attempts to bully, fearmonger and manipulate, because it affects us all.'* Ministry of Defence and Knighton, R. (2025) 'Chief of the Defence Staff speech – 15 December 2025' on GOV.UK, 15th December. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/chief-of-the-defence-staff-speech-15-december-2025 (accessed: 23/12/25). '*… the situation is more dangerous than I have known during my career and the price of peace is rising. Our response needs to go beyond simply strengthening our armed forces. It needs a whole of nation response that builds our defence industrial capacity, grows the skills we need, harnesses the power of the institutions we will need in wartime and ensures and increases the resilience of society and the infrastructure that supports it.'*

Putin's war has exposed the need for urgent and profound transformation, not just in how our armies should prepare to fight, but also in how our democracies are governed. This transformation is necessary not just to meet the immediate demands of this war and to enable Ukraine to win, but to repel Russian aggression and to deter Putin from extending the kinetic war further westwards. It is also necessary if democracies are to adapt successfully to cope with the current rate of global change. In many ways this is as challenging as war and is just as much an existential threat as is 'the axis of autocracy' – that is, Russia and the wider axis of authoritarian, anti-democratic, illiberal states with which Russia is aligned.

Important though learning the lessons of battle most certainly is, it is on a country's ability to learn the wider lessons of war that the performance of its armed forces on the battlefield ultimately depends, as the government in Kyiv has had to learn. In this respect, the Ukraine war is a litmus test. The outcome of the war depends as much, if not more, on the ability of Ukraine's Western allies to learn the wider lessons of the war as it does on the ability of Ukraine's armed forces to learn the immediate lessons of battle.

In this study, we will also, therefore, try to tease out some of the lessons of the Ukraine war as they might apply to Western countries in striving to move to warfighting readiness. In doing this, the authors' aim is not so much to provide answers, solutions or advice as it is to identify a series of pertinent questions. The role of these questions is to help stimulate the discussion which Western governmental institutions and corporate bodies now need to hold as a matter of urgency so as to establish what must be done to enable their organisations to play their part in a national and international war effort.[4]

The list of issues raised in this study will not be exhaustive. Some are contentious, some may be superfluous, others may have been omitted. But the list should at least be indicative and should help give a general idea of how much work is yet to be done for the UK and other Western countries to learn and implement the lessons of war, just as their armed forces are striving to learn the lessons of battle.

Trump's revolution and its impact on the 'international rules-based order'

If Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine was the first lethal challenge to the old order, then the revolution ushered in by the election of President Trump has delivered the *coup de grâce*.

With the signing of the Washington Treaty and the foundation of NATO in April 1949, the US assumed the mantle of leader in the defence of the democratic countries of the world, a journey it began in December 1941 with its entry into the Second World War. Eighty-four years later, the publication of the new US National Security Strategy[5] outlines the Trump administration's intent to relinquish that role and move to being an independent player, on the grounds that the US needs to focus on its own perceived interests if it is to survive and flourish in today's very different, hostile world.

A significant element of this dramatic shift in US policy is the transformation of the US domestic, political and social systems. This is proving to be nothing less than a revolutionary shift, the final outcome of which will have a profound impact on the US' relationships with democratic countries.

In the course of this transition, the USA is now restructuring its relationships with its allies and with the institutions through which that alliance was managed.

4 It must be assumed that our Russian and Chinese adversaries have already made an assessment of Western national and international institutions to establish any vulnerabilities which they can exploit.

5 The White House (2025) *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. Washington. Available at: https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf (accessed: 02/01/26).

The first problem is that, despite their economic strength, most of these allies – especially the UK and certain other European countries – have allowed themselves to become militarily weak and dependent on US protection. Consequently, as a matter of great urgency, these countries need to strengthen both their individual capabilities and capacity for defence more rapidly, and to reorganise the structures which they have created for their collective defence. In doing this, they will need to pay greater attention as to how they strengthen their relationships with each other and how they manage their relationships with a rapidly changing, more volatile USA.

This will therefore put the governance of the democratic countries involved to a test greater than many of them have faced since 1945. To prepare to defend themselves without the certainty of an unquestioned, guaranteed US military umbrella, and in a world where hard power is once again the most important currency of diplomacy, all democratic countries – like it or not – will now have to move with a greater degree of urgency and determination towards warfighting readiness, a move which will affect every aspect of their social, political, economic and military systems.

With the exception of those few countries which have lived in the close shadow of a threatening larger neighbour, European democratic political leaderships are finding it difficult to realise, acknowledge and act on this new and unwelcome challenge with the speed and seriousness which it demands. There are several reasons for this reluctance, not least, the sheer cost. They are overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problem; there is insufficient acknowledgement of the undeclared hybrid warfare already being waged against them by hostile countries; and there is no clear vision of how this hybrid attack might evolve into a shooting war, as it has for Ukraine.

As a result, all democratic countries now face the need for a very urgent and drastic transition. It is the purpose of this study to explore what that transition is likely to involve and the steps by which it might be achieved. This will be done with special reference to the UK and to the opportunities, as well as the challenges, which the transition presents.

The second problem is that the volatility of the Trump administration, the perception of its assault on democratic values within the USA, President Trump's personal relationship with Putin, as well as some of his other foreign policy initiatives (such as with Greenland) have persuaded many people in Europe – particularly in Northern and Eastern Europe – that the US is moving away from Europe (or, more broadly, from the West) and – at least for the moment, it would appear – towards accommodation with Russia.

This has already significantly reduced trust in the US amongst its allies, and thereby undermined NATO. The certainty of an Article 5 response by the US to a Russian incursion into countries on Russia's border no longer has credibility within those countries most at risk.

Many people in positions of power have been expressing the hope or expectation that President Trump himself, or a future US President, will reverse recent defence policy decisions and return to an unequivocal support of NATO and commitment to the defence of Europe, so that the problem goes away and that they can return to the comfortable *status quo ante bellum*. But it is becoming ever clearer this is little more than wishful thinking. It would be unwise in the extreme for any country to base its national security and defence policy on the naive assumption that this is likely to happen.

One good reason for not making such an assumption is that, from a US national perspective, the factors underlying much of President Trump's policy are based on a rational assessment:

- The US economy is in serious trouble and the mounting national debt cannot be ignored;
- China is clearly the most important long-term challenger to US power;
- It is unreasonable to expect the US to pay more to defend Europe when European countries will not spend the money needed to defend themselves.

Whilst there are, of course, oft-used arguments as to why the US should spend money to defend Europe because it is in national and security interests, these arguments do not change the above facts in American eyes.

As it is, the political leaders of America's allies – some currently facing serious domestic problems themselves – have been surprised by the speed of events in the US. Wishful thinking and denial have produced inertia in some countries. But even in those countries which have been quicker to realise the impact of the shift in US policy, it has been difficult to come to terms with the scale and urgency of change which will be needed to compensate for the US reducing its commitment to its traditional Western alliances.

If they wish to preserve what we currently understand as 'The West', countries which consider themselves part of the West will need to take dramatic measures very quickly, acting independently but increasingly in concert, before hostile countries can exploit the West's disarray. These measures will inevitably create domestic upheaval in many countries. International institutions such as NATO and the EU will need to be reconceptualised and restructured if they are to remain effective to cope with a rapidly changing economic, political and military future for which they were not designed.

The dilemma which the US' allies face is that they must act now in response to a US policy which is undermining the assumptions on which their defence plans have been based for many decades, rendering these plans – and with them, much within their armed forces – largely obsolete. At the same time, it would be prudent for allies to do their utmost to try and keep the US engaged within the Atlantic Alliance, not to push the country further into isolation by an emotional response, tit-for-tat retaliation and excited rhetoric, and not to preclude the possibility of an unforeseen act or strategic error by a global third party which disrupts the best laid plans of President Trump and his team. The US remains the most important country in the democratic community, and we should do our utmost to keep it there.

But, whilst we may hope for the best, we cannot afford to base our national security on hope alone. We must prepare for the worst; that is, we must prepare for the fact that the US may no longer be a reliable ally and may well become a separate actor, pursuing a narrow understanding of its national interests. Today's US is not only no longer acting within the framework and constraints of its traditional alliances; it is already acting in a manner which can be perceived as being contrary to the interests of some of its allies. President Trump, it seems, is even looking towards Russia as a potential business partner;[6] the Kremlin and the White House appear to be quietly normalising commercial and diplomatic relations.[7]

The UK faces a particularly acute dilemma. For the past few decades it has closely aligned its defence policy with that of the US and has accordingly structured and equipped its armed forces to act as an adjunct of the US Armed Forces. Consequently, the UK now relies on US support to deploy many elements of the British Armed Forces effectively. Breaking that dependency will be difficult, painful and costly.

At the same time, the shift in position of the US away from traditional Western alliances presents the UK with an opportunity – perhaps better expressed as a responsibility – for leadership. Many countries in Northern and Eastern Europe already look to the UK for leadership. They see that leadership expressed in the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) and understand the UK has consistently taken on support for Ukraine. Leadership of this sort does not amount to control or giving orders; it means 'follow me'. It involves providing an example, generating ideas and solutions, and understanding that actions speak louder than words.

6 See Hinshaw, D. *et al* (2025) 'Make Money Not War: Trump's Real Plan for Peace in Ukraine' in *The Wall Street Journal,* 28th November. Available at: https://www.wsj.com/world/russia/russia-u-s-peace-business-ties-4db9b290?msockid=2e1d31f119c96a82161123f318916b6f (accessed: 02/01/26).

7 Petriv, L. (2025) 'US Temporarily Lifts Sanctions on Russian Banks for Nuclear Energy Projects' on United24 Media, 17th December. Available at: https://united24media.com/latest-news/us-temporarily-lifts-sanctions-on-russian-banks-for-nuclear-energy-projects-14366 (accessed: 02/01/26).

To conclude, those developing UK and European defence and security policy would be well advised to give serious consideration to the following:

- There are deep-seated, long-term economic, strategic and social reasons underpinning the thinking/ideology which is driving the current defence shift in the US which predate President Trump and are likely to persist after he goes. Whoever is in power In Washington, these problems need to be addressed urgently and will require drastic changes in US policy and expenditure.
- The impact on the US' reputation abroad of President Trump's actions to date is such that, even were the current policy trajectory to be reversed, restoring confidence in the US as an ally would take a very long time, and the speed of events in the world will not allow Western countries to 'wait and see'.
- The changes being imposed on domestic institutions in the US continues apace and the process will make those institutions difficult to restore to their original capability and purpose.
- The strength and cohesion of the current presidential team and the replacement in office of the leaderships of key institutions by presidential loyalists argues for a more permanent change in US policy than is frequently assumed.

The US National Security Strategy makes clear that this change involves a move away from strategic competition to a policy affirming that great powers have spheres of influence.[8] Russian aggression is no longer seen as a central threat and there is no longer a focus on deterring Russia. There is now a clear aversion within the White House to what it sees as undesirable developments in Europe which threatened the continent with 'civilizational erasure'. Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, praised the changes in US strategy as 'Largely consistent with our vision'.[9]

Whilst the US Congress' recent National Defence Authorization Act (NDAA)[10] is not aligned perfectly with the Security Strategy, denoting not only that there are differences of opinion within the US military and political leadership, but also that US commitments to NATO – to supporting Ukraine and to maintaining US troops and infrastructure in Europe – are unlikely to be abruptly cut off within the current financial year, the direction of travel proposed by the Trump administration is clear: Europe must be prepared to be on its own and to defend itself. An expeditious ceasefire in Ukraine is seen as preferable to pushing for a decisive battlefield outcome. Europe is expected to shoulder the burden of its own defence costs within the next few years, the US steadily reducing its commitment.

Reforming NATO

The areas in which the UK could play a particularly important leadership role are:

- Understanding and demonstrating how to move the economy, society and military of a significantly sized democratic country with a mature economic system towards warfighting readiness;
- Reconceptualising and restructuring NATO to take account of an uncertain commitment from the US and the significant differences between the threat perceptions of its member states.

There is a compelling argument for moving the UK and other Western countries onto a footing akin to warfighting readiness not only to prepare for the possibility of imminent violent conflict or the need to break a nation's dependency on the US for its defence, but also because the speed of change in the world today is tantamount to being engaged in war, and requires national institutions to be able to adapt to wartime rates of change if they are to stay relevant and be effective.

8 As this study was going to press, news came in of the US attack on Venezuela and capture of President Maduro. This is a strong confirmation of how central this policy is to the thinking of the Trump administration. It is also confirmation the NSS, not the NDAA, best reflects that policy.

9 Muller-Heyndyk, R. (2025) 'New US security strategy aligns with Russia's vision, Moscow says' on BBC News, 7th December. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cpvd01g2kwwo (accessed: 02/01/26).

10 Congress.gov. 'S.4638 - National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2025'. Available at: https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/senate-bill/4638/text (accessed: 02/01/26).

Like a nation's currency, deterrence depends on trust, but the trust that the US would honour NATO's Article 5 and come to the rescue of a Europe attacked by Russia is now in question. NATO as it was originally conceived is also, therefore, now on shaky ground.

But that does not mean that NATO is dead or useless, far from it. NATO is not only the proven foundation of Europe's ability to use military force; the Alliance has amassed decades of experience building a political consensus process and a military integration mechanism between democracies with widely different but passionately cherished traditions, structures, military and political systems. This has enabled NATO to create highly effective, adaptable, living policy instruments which can be turned to good use in restructuring and repurposing the organisation.

These instruments have already proved their worth in enabling groups of NATO members to create 'coalitions of the willing' to undertake specific military functions which would not attract the support of every member nation. It is these instruments which will make it possible to build a renewed alliance from the roots of the original NATO. That could be a restructured NATO without the US, or one with which the US has, in practice, a different relationship. Or it might be a series of separate but linked organisations representing the interests of different groups of NATO's current member nations and partner nations, based on combating the main perceived threat shared by members of those groups. Or it may be a blend of these two concepts, or nations might develop a wholly new concept.

Furthermore, whilst originally limited only to Euro-Atlantic countries, NATO now has meaningful partnerships with Australia and Japan as well as many North African and Middle Eastern countries. If NATO is to be adapted so that it can continue to be the core of the West's defence and security system, it would make great sense for it to formalise what is already becoming an increasingly global role.

Whatever path the development of NATO and of the West's defence and security structures takes, it will not just happen; it will have to be created. That will require a great deal of intellectual effort and the expenditure of political capital by all the nations involved. It will also require courage because nations need to begin to act now, before Europe's future relationship with the US and the US' future relationship with Russia can be clearly foreseen. Such a significant project would be greatly facilitated by leadership, and that leadership could be provided by the UK.

Reforming the EU

Meanwhile, the EU will also need a significant degree of reform if it is to meet the challenge of the US reducing its commitment to the defence of Europe. Although it does not always choose to acknowledge the fact, the EU has been able to develop as it has only because it has been able to rely on NATO and the US for its external defence.

The first reforms will need to be political. It was difficult enough for the EU, as an organisation based on an ideology, to accept that one of its members would choose to leave. It is even more difficult for the EU to cope with the fact that several of its members are repudiating the organisation's ideology and moving away from its old, institutional ideals. As the EU's democratic mechanisms have never been adequately developed, the political reform of the organisation to cope with this internal challenge is likely to be a bumpy journey.

The structural reforms needed will also be complicated, as the EU structure reflects the culture on which it was founded. The EU was designed to use policies of economic integration to prevent war between its member nations, not to address external threats. To that end, its structures make it more difficult for its members to adapt their economic and financial systems to prepare for war. At the same time, it was never envisaged by the founders that the EU as an entity would need to go to war. The Lisbon Treaty mutual defence clause was an afterthought. NATO had been created to bind the US into Europe to defend against the Soviet threat, and that allowed, indeed enabled, the EU to develop without the need to prepare for its own military self-defence.

Consequently, the organisation's structures and procedures developed in a way which did not make it easy for Brussels to create effective defence and security mechanisms. This can be seen in the decades of inertia, or unwillingness, to establish an effective European military system to defend a United Europe, likely based on the differing interests within the Franco-German axis, which otherwise encouraged greater European integration.

The UK, having for the past two decades tied its military and defence systems closely to those of the US rather than Europe, faces a particularly acute problem if the US is no longer seen as its major ally. It would appear logical that, in the current geopolitical climate, the UK – even as it attempts to shore up its relationship with the US – should now strive to develop stronger defence and security cooperation with the EU as well as with other non-EU European countries such as Norway.

Indeed, if the UK is going to exploit immediate opportunities for leadership within NATO so as to help reinvent the organisation to cope with the changing world order, the UK will have to work closely and inter-governmentally with the EU. At the same time, the EU will need to recognise that it is not the totality of Europe and that NATO is a broader alliance than the EU. This means working readily and positively with non-EU members of NATO. The EU also needs to accept that it is not the totality of the West and needs to reinforce its relationship with democracies across the globe. All countries considering themselves to be part of 'The West' now need to reaffirm and strengthen their mutual links and to come to terms with the fact that the US is on a trajectory that may soon take it out of 'The West' and make it a separate and independent player.

The immediate dilemma for the EU and for those European countries which are not member states, such as the UK, is that the EU's existing mechanisms for defence collaboration and defence industrial collaboration are entirely peacetime mechanisms designed for a different age which is now gone. With the shift in the position of the US away from Europe, the temptation for the UK in particular to see a solution to its national defence problems in rejoining these existing EU peacetime structures is likely to be great.

But those structures themselves are now already obsolete. The main preoccupation with EU defence has been about collaboration on major long-term defence projects and the development and support for the EU's defence industries. The operation of armed forces and the deployment of military force are not EU activities but reserved to the member states. Nor should the EU attempt to replicate NATO's multinational military planning capabilities at the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE); this would waste resources and create confusion. If the EU cannot adapt to reflect wartime rather than peacetime requirements, it could actually hamper Europe's rearmament.

Unfortunately, the auguries for the EU being able to act in a robust, war-ready manner are not good. The failure of member states on 19th December 2025 to agree to seize the immobilised Russian Central Bank assets to fund Ukraine for fear of provoking a Russian financial response demonstrates just how far the EU is from being able to deliver a united front. The EU has shown that it is indeed susceptible to Russian pressure and influence, a weakness which will certainly invite increasing Russian pressure in all the domains of hybrid warfare.

Reforming the UK's warfighting structure

There are two main problems with defence and security industrial systems which are based on a peacetime, rather than a wartime, footing: time and cost.

Defence industrial systems on a long-term peacetime footing are designed around the regular, planned replacement and upgrade of a known and stable number of major weapons systems. That means the defence industry can maintain a steady rhythm of manufacture, limiting production facilities and keeping manpower to a minimum to maximise efficiency and profit for shareholders. Fleets of weapons systems and stocks of spares, ammunition and stores are replaced slowly to avoid mass obsolescence in the face of an opponent's technological developments.

The consequent reduction in defence industrial capacity makes it very difficult to expand production rapidly in time of need, unless some compensating investment is made specifically in an expansion capability. Long-term major weapons programmes are also difficult and costly to adapt or to shut down, even when battlefield developments threaten the viability of those weapons systems and platforms. As a result, defence budgets in peacetime tend to be driven by the economics of large equipment programmes and the commercial/social interests of industry, rather than by the potential needs of a war which might be imminent, but which might equally never happen. There is a lot of vested interest in maintaining such systemic inertia which resists the drastic change needed to prepare for actual war.

A peacetime system can be compensated to some extent by:

- Maintaining large stockpiles of ammunition, reserves of equipment and reserves of trained military personnel. In many cases, it is easier, cheaper and quicker to upgrade older models of equipment than build new from scratch, especially as weapons tend to become obsolete more rapidly than the platforms on which they are mounted. Stockpiling will provide a breathing space whilst the transformation to warfighting preparedness is undertaken, or to provide insurance in a period of uncertainty;
- Increasing research and development (R&D) and experimentation, so that capabilities can be constantly improved, even if these capabilities are never turned into military utility by producing them in serious capacity;
- Educating and training a surplus of workers capable of undertaking the skilled work necessary to produce modern high-technology equipment and weapons. Without this workforce reserve, expanding production quickly becomes impossible;
- Specifically designing equipment so that it can be made by a less-skilled workforce;
- Investing heavily in intelligence so as to give the maximum possible warning of all impending threats.

Peacetime defence industrial systems are adequate as long as investment in maintaining reserves and in R&D is not neglected, and so long as there is no sudden change in the geopolitical situation.

When there is such a drastic change, as is the case today, then the key issue is not just a question of how much a country has been investing in its defence systems, but how appropriately that investment has been spent. If the investment has not been maintained in a high level of R&D, in weapons, munitions and equipment stocks to provide military mass (that is, capacity as well as capability), and in an effective reserve system, and if there is a shortage of skilled workers, then the transition to wartime readiness will be slow, difficult and painful.

Unfortunately, this is the situation in the UK today. The long-established UK practice of maintaining small regular forces has been tailored to fighting minor, discretionary wars far from home. The system which has evolved to create and support these forces is not a system which can be easily adapted to deal with an imminent threat to the UK homeland or to UK interests from a peer enemy.

The policy of the last two decades has been to structure the UK's armed forces as small, entirely high-end forces which can only be effectively deployed with US support or as an integral element of a US force. It was argued that this would buy the UK political influence with the US. This was, however, based on the assumption that the US commitment to the defence of democracy and of the West was permanent and immutable. This assumption is no longer valid, so not only does the policy no longer make sense, but developing and implementing a new policy is a matter of great urgency. It is precisely this that requires the drastic action which will be very painful and costly.

The model on which our armed forces will need to be reconstructed if the UK is to be able to defend itself in today's world without reliance on the US was outlined briefly by the then Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Patrick Sanders, shortly before his retirement in June 2024.

Referring specifically to the Army,[11] General Sanders envisaged a regular, fully professional army whose prime function would be to train large reserves, backed up by a system of rapid mobilisation and a commensurately large stockpile of weapons and equipment. This would require the ability to mobilise not only people but dual-use equipment, coupled with the ability to modify civilian equipment rapidly for military use. Unable to rely on the US to provide weaponry and equipment, the General argued, the UK would have to develop self-reliance and increase domestic manufacturing capability and capacity.

The General Sanders' comments were criticised at the time as calling for conscription. But in fact, traditional conscription is only one way of raising a military force. A Nordic model of societal mobilisation might well be more suitable under current circumstances. Finland and Sweden perhaps provide the best extant models.[12]

One thing is certain: the UK's current model of defence structure is no longer appropriate to today's circumstances and needs urgent, drastic reform. A new model needs to be able both to generate mass and to achieve a state of permanent rapid adaptation. This applies to the armed forces themselves, to the political and military command and control systems which will lead them in war, and to the societal and industrial base from which they will draw their personnel and equipment.

If the UK is to move in a timely and effective manner from its current defence structure[13] to whatever new structure can provide mass, innovation and permanent adaptability, it cannot do so whilst the government, economy and society remain on a peacetime footing. That peacetime footing would be too slow, too costly, too inflexible. Today's national governance processes are inappropriate or inadequate and would not permit, let alone facilitate, the necessary scale and pace of change. To begin to move towards warfighting readiness, the UK needs to make that change.[14]

Lessons from past experience

In these circumstances, the experience of defence reform in Central and Eastern European countries during the 1990s offers an important lesson. To become effective members of NATO (and, ultimately, of the EU), these countries were faced with a similarly drastic and painful transition – the need to move from a Soviet system to a democratic system as a prerequisite for joining the West. These countries too had unbalanced military forces because they had been dependent for many essential military functions on the Soviet military system.

The particular lesson to be learned from this transition was that, as a general rule, when funding for reform was made available to the armed forces before the reform had been implemented and the core of the obsolete system dismantled, the funding actually hindered the transition process because it effectively reinforced the old system, strengthening resistance to the new.

11 Beale, J. (2024) 'Britain must train citizen army, military chief warns' on BBC News, 24th January. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-68086188 (accessed: 22/07/25).

12 Finland's defence system is based on a comprehensive national 'total defence' model that combines a large, conscript-based reserve army with a modern, professional military, cyber defence, and a society-wide preparedness. Key components include border minefield defences, a powerful artillery and air force, strong cooperation with NATO and allies, and robust civil defence, which includes a nationwide network of nuclear shelters and preparedness measures such as food and water reserves for households.

The Finnish active-duty force comprises about 24,000 personnel, consisting of the Army, Navy, and Air Force, plus a strong militarised Border Guard. In addition, Finland maintains a system of universal male conscription, with about 20,000 men annually undertaking military service up to a year. This creates a large, well-trained reserve force of approximately 870,000 individuals, more than six times greater UK armed forces including reserves. The population of the UK will soon pass 70 million, whereas that of Finland is approximately 5.6 million.

Sweden's defence system is likewise based on the model of total defence, but it differs from Finland's in that, whereas all men and women are registered and assessed for military service, conscription at the moment is partial, taking into service only the most capable and best motivated. There is also a parallel civilian service for those well qualified to do necessary tasks but perhaps less suited for the physical demands of the military.

13 Lavelle, D. and Courea, E. (2024) 'More than 10,000 members of UK armed forces 'not medically deployable', in *The Guardian*, 24th December. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/dec/24/uk-armed-forces-not-medically-deployable-figures (accessed: 22/07/25). The UK Armed Forces Are reported to have only 99,560 personnel medically fit for deployment, almost exactly the total number of reported Russian casualties in Ukraine in the 78 days between 3rd February and 21st April 2025.

14 Recent organisational innovations such as the Quad in the UK MOD – a senior leadership body overseeing the defence reform programme – may prove to be a step in the right direction but is most unlikely to be sufficient to stimulate the necessary degree of change.

A second lesson which had to be relearned was that defence reform could not be limited to military and Ministry of Defence (MOD)/national security institutions alone. It had to encompass the whole of government and include every governmental department. It also had to include the private sector and the whole of society.

This will be as true for the UK today as it was for these countries 30 years ago. Although there is a growing recognition of this fact in some parts of Whitehall, this understanding is not shared across all areas of government, nor does it yet have any resonance within wider UK society.[15]

Yet this situation offers not only pain and risk but also great opportunity for the UK. The UK is not constrained by the EU processes referred to above which create an obstacle to preparing a country to move towards defence readiness. If the UK can embrace this transition and identify the path to implement rapid change and move to greater self-reliance and a new form of defence structure, it could provide the lead for other European countries which need to make a similar fundamental cultural and practical change in order to move towards greater defence preparedness. Again, the existing model of Nordic countries – which never abandoned their traditional 'nation in arms' structure – may point the way forward.

If the UK can become a leader in defence transformation, then it will be able to establish the essential defence relationship with Europe on a new footing. It will also be able to make a significant contribution to the restructuring of international institutions necessary to accommodate the dramatic changes in US policy. NATO and AUKUS (a trilateral security partnership between Australia, the UK and the US) are the most obvious vehicles for transforming the UK's defence relationships.

Just as important and even more immediate is the need for the West to guarantee support to Ukraine to compensate for any reduction in or withdrawal of US support. The building of European countries' self-reliance and the continued defence of Ukraine against Russian aggression are both absolute prerequisites for the preservation of Western civilization.

None of the above assumes that the US will inevitably shift away from its traditional Western alliances, that the US will pull out of NATO, or that the US will in future side with Russia. It is in all our interests to strive to prevent this from happening. We must hope for the best and prepare for the worst, while also showing the US that Europe and a wider NATO can contribute much more than before.

15 For a comment on this, see the posts from Armed Forces Minister Al Carns: Carns, A. (20th April 2025) Available at: https://x.com/AlistairCarns/status/1913980943083143562 (accessed: 02/01/26). Carns, A. (21st April 2025) Available at: https://x.com/alistaircarns/status/1914367573338050756 (accessed: 02/01/26).

Chapter 2: Warfighting readiness: what does it mean?

Armies fight battles; countries fight wars

Armed forces are so frequently criticised for 'preparing to fight the last war rather than the next' that this statement has almost become a truism. Unfortunately, it tends to obscure the fact that it is not *armies* which fight wars, but *countries*. Armed forces and defence ministries alone cannot shoulder the burden of a major war; nor can they alone make all the preparations needed to fight such a war. Fighting a major war requires the collective efforts of every element of society working towards the same end. It would be invidious to blame military and defence establishments for failures in peer-on-peer war that lie elsewhere in government and are beyond their control.[16]

It is, consequently, *the ability of government to make national strategy, to mobilise the support of the population and to provide strategic leadership and direction* which drives the preparations that a nation's armed forces are then able to make, within the constraints of the funding that the government allocates.

As far as the armed forces of democratic countries[17] are concerned, that they prepare to fight the last war rather than the next is (a) almost inevitable in societies which have enjoyed peace for a long time, and (b) may not prove to be a decisive issue.

What *is* decisive is that, whatever their state of training and readiness, the country's armed forces still have a 'critical mass' of the three essential, mutually reinforcing components of fighting power: moral, physical and conceptual. They need enough physical and moral strength to withstand an initial surprise attack (robustness), and then they can recover by reacting quickly to the harsh realities of the war which has been sprung upon them (resilience) and go on to seize the initiative by learning and applying the new ways of fighting which the war demands – the conceptual capacity which enables adaptability.

Likewise, as it is *countries* which fight wars, when the country is prepared 'to fight the last war rather than the next', the same requirement applies to the country as well as to its armed forces. All other things being equal, if the initial onslaught fails to achieve immediate total success because of the defenders' robustness, victory will then go to the side (be that a country or a coalition):

- Which has political will and can make and implement strategy;
- Which has the resilience to bounce back from the initial damaging blow and can continue to maintain that resilience in the face of repeated attacks;
- Whose armed forces can learn to adapt more rapidly than the opponent and maintain their lead in adaptation;
- Whose society is cohesive and is prepared to support the war;
- Whose economy can mobilise quickly, can be developed to be at least as strong as its opponents' – ideally enabling greater warfighting capability and capacity, and can adapt continuously to support the burden of war.

After nearly four years of intense warfare in Ukraine, we have a good and accessible example for us to study and to test the above thesis as it applies: (a) to the Ukrainian armed forces and to the country as a whole; (b) to Russia and its armed forces; and (c) to our own Western armed forces' preparedness for war as well as our national preparedness for war.

16 At this point, we are using the term 'war' in the old-fashioned, classic sense, excluding from this definition wars of national liberation/insurgencies, wars fought by religious or ideological movements, and some forms of colonial war, although certain of our comments could be applied in these cases also.

17 The Wehrmacht developed *Blitzkrieg* because the German Government drove development and doctrinal change in order to be able to start and win wars of conquest. Governments that do not have expansionist military policies will only react to a patent threat, and then only when they are forced to acknowledge one. Until then, their military forces are funded and structured on the basis of the established *status quo* (which is likely to include a great deal of looking back to 'the last war').

Technical and tactical experience from the Ukraine war appears to be the easiest material for Western armed forces to extract lessons. For example, the use of drones, especially aerial and naval, is an object of great attention, as is the success of precision weapons. Defensive fortifications; landmines; the utility of helicopters, given the proliferation of increasingly effective air defence; electronic warfare; the survival of logistics; the size and structuring of headquarters – all are areas which are providing valuable experience for study.

Less easy lessons for Western armed forces to extract and act on are the organisational lessons of battle, as these require radical changes to established behaviours, command and control processes, standard operating procedures and training. The past year has seen extreme examples develop which Western armies will find very difficult to absorb and emulate. This will be discussed in greater detail later in the study.

But even harder for Western armed forces to learn and implement are lessons where the domains of battle and of war overlap, lessons which overturn long-established peacetime practices – such as those which govern selection for command and high office, or those which challenge peacetime constraints, such as may be imposed on military training.[18] Many of these constraints are beyond the control of the military themselves and require a national governmental, economic or societal response, which may be hard to achieve if a peacetime culture prevails. Hence a nation's ability to learn the lessons of war has a fundamental impact on the ability of its armed forces to learn and apply the lessons of battle, and on the ability of its other institutions to learn and apply the lessons of the non-kinetic 'hybrid' battlefield.

From the Kremlin's perspective, modern warfare is a continuum which embraces everything as a weapon, from disinformation through economic warfare to conventional and nuclear weapons. The various weapons will be used in concert, in ways which interact. A sensible set of principles guide their use. But many Western governments, particularly those far from Russia's borders, fail to recognise the nature, the sophistication, the extent, the strategic coherence or the impact of the non-kinetic elements of hybrid warfare. They underestimate these, seeing them as an annoyance and a distraction, and fail to appreciate that, for much of the time, the non-kinetic realms form the main battlefields in the war with the West.[19]

From our study so far, it is beginning to appear that, whilst Western armed forces are studying – with varying degrees of application and enthusiasm – Ukraine's experience in battle, Western governments are not making sufficient progress in studying, learning or in implementing the lessons of war, either in the kinetic or in the non-kinetic realms. It seems to be easier for armies which are 'prepared to fight the last war' to study Ukrainian military experience and to prepare to fight the next war than it is for the governments and societies of Western countries – which are no longer prepared to fight *any* war – to come to terms with the unpalatable[20] fact that war, as described by German military theorist Carl von Clausewitz as a 'tool of policy', is back in fashion and that they now need to learn to prepare for war anew. This is especially so when the costs of that preparation will by necessity reduce government expenditure on other programmes which attract votes.

18 A good example would be the regulations restricting UK military training for Ukrainian troops on Salisbury Plain. Despite the crucial importance of drones in modern battle, peacetime Civil Aviation Authority regulations prevented their use in a realistic manner for safety reasons; troops could not replicate Russian trench systems due to regulations protecting possible unidentified archaeological remains or protected animal species.

19 A serious element of this problem is the lack of an appropriate terminology and convention for discussing hybrid warfare. We are using the term 'hybrid' simply because it is the most widely accepted; 'grey zone' is also widely used but excludes large-scale kinetic war. We urgently need to develop a lexicon of agreed terminology. Hybrid warfare is actually threatening our current model of democracy, and our discussion needs to embrace new concepts of democracy which can resist hybrid attack more effectively

20 One reason that these preparations are unpalatable at a governmental level may be because, until now, politicians have calculated that there are votes in funding health, welfare and education, but none in funding defence and resilience in an electoral environment in which there is no perception of threat. Even those that may recognise the need will find it unattractive.

War is war – it is not a crisis

In many European countries distant from Russia, the difference between war and crisis is not understood at all, as it was not understood – at least until recently – by many in the US Government, who for a long time insisted on seeing Russia's attack on Ukraine as a crisis. It could be argued that this loss in many Western countries – that is, the loss of an understanding of what war is, of what it involves, of how it differs from a crisis – is the most fundamental lesson we need to learn from what is happening in Ukraine. A crisis, after all, can be managed – ideally in a way that all concerned can win – whereas a war must be fought, and it will be won or lost.

Indeed, Western democracies today have a serious problem. For three generations, the US, NATO and the EU together have created a secure, stable environment, something historically exceptional but which the citizens of Western democracies have long taken for granted. The EU was founded on the ideal – one might almost say the ideology – of making war between the member states unthinkable. So successful has this project been that this is now fundamental to European thinking and has evolved into the idea that war is not only impossible within Europe but for Europe. Our publics in the west and south of Europe or in the US, watching on television fighting in the Middle East or in Ukraine from the comfort of their armchairs – even when these include Western armed forces – have learned to understand war as something which happens elsewhere, in which our involvement is optional, and the consequences of which are limited; failure and defeat are unpleasant and undesirable, but not intolerable.

As a consequence of this entrenched thinking, many West European countries have not yet had to acknowledge that war as a tool of policy is back on the geopolitical menu, notwithstanding several statements by Putin that Russia is at war with the West. Despite nearly four years of intense war in Ukraine, over a decade since Russia's occupation of Crimea, and a general agreement across Europe that the situation is serious and merits supporting Ukraine and sanctioning Russia, there is still a great deal of resistance in some countries to accepting that this war really involves us and that the fighting may spread to other European countries, whether they like it or not. The challenge now is to move from talking about the possible danger of, to the hard action of, preparing for war. Unlike recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, this is not about our going to war, but about war coming to us.

War must be won, or more than the war will be lost; warfighting readiness prepares the country to win the war

Putin started the war in Ukraine and, in his own words, is at war not just with Ukraine but with the 'Collective West'. We have engaged in the war in support of Ukraine. Consequently, we must understand that if we, with Ukraine, do not win the war, we will lose it. If we do not have victory, we will not have a draw and we will not return to the *status quo ante bellum*; we – the UK, the West; not just Ukraine – will have been defeated.

Part of the problem is that there still does not seem to be a proper recognition that, when we deal with Putin and his *siloviki*, we are not in a struggle with a competitor. We are in a struggle with an absolute enemy who is focused on destroying NATO and the EU and weakening our societies by undermining democratic institutions. The Kremlin's goal is to redefine and reorder international relations according to a new set of rules not designed by the West. We in the West are not a threat to this group of people because of what we *do*, we are a threat to them because of what we *are*. Ukraine, too, is a threat because of what it is and what it will become if allowed to choose its own path. If it refuses to deviate from this chosen path, Putin has decided that it must be destroyed.

There is no territorial deal that will assuage this *implacable* enmity on the part of Russia. This is not simply a challenge; it is a *threat* which we will have to confront, however unpalatable it is to have to do so. Ukraine is merely in the front line of the 'kinetic' aspect of this war. Those who are still urging Ukraine to negotiate a ceasefire and to accept Russian occupation of Ukrainian territory do not understand that a ceasefire is not peace and they are not proposing a compromise or a 'draw'; they are proposing that Ukraine and the West accept that they have lost this stage of the war to Russia. This is but a new manifestation of the kind of appeasement[21] which led Europe into war in 1939 and would inevitably lead to further direct conflict as soon as it is in Russia's interest and power to return to the battlefield.

Ukraine now understands this, having not fully understood it before February 2022. Poland, the Baltic States and Finland have understood this for years. Whereas many Western countries have been shocked and horrified by Russian brutality in Ukraine, European countries geographically close to Russia have merely been horrified; they are not shocked because this is what they have learned to expect from Russia. Consequently, preparations for war are much more advanced in some Eastern and Northern European countries than is the case in the UK and the rest of Europe.

Fortunately, an increasing number of European leaders are coming to understand the nature and seriousness of the Russian threat and the consequent need to support Ukraine. Most important now is that our leaders make a direct and unequivocal statement that we will support Ukraine to win the war. Several leaders from countries in Eastern Europe have made such a statement; we now need to see the same from other democracies, but particularly from the US.

Making a clear statement that our aim is victory – that is, to enable Ukraine to expel Russia from its territory – is essential for several reasons. Firstly, until we do this, Putin will continue to believe that he can win, and Russian elites and Russia's allies will continue to support him in power. To be seen to 'win', Putin needs at a minimum to freeze the battlefield with some form of ceasefire, leaving him in *de facto* possession of the lands he has so far overrun. Ideally, he also needs to bring about a leadership change in Kyiv and a radical shift of Ukrainian foreign and defence policy away from its westwards trajectory.

Secondly, Putin's allies will believe him and will continue to support Russia's war with weapons. The world is watching, and on their assessment of the outcome, the Middle East and Global South will choose whom they will befriend in the future. Depending on outcomes, countries we have considered Western allies may more and more offer their allegiance to Russia rather than to the West. Whoever wins this war will grasp the lion's share of opportunities to influence and direct the course of the post-war world.

Thirdly, unless and until our political leaders show that our aim is victory, our armed forces and defence establishments will have no firm basis on which to plan, no authority to force through the radical reforms required, and insufficient funding to implement any plans. If our military leaders are to develop the nation's warfighting capability and capacity, they need to know what to plan for and to be given the authority to make those plans. This will have not only resource implications of the most serious kind but will impinge on all aspects of government and society, including on the private sector.

21 In a worst case, attempting to appease our enemies or to pretend that they are not enemies can be used to rationalise cuts to our armed forces. Winston Churchill defined an appeaser as 'one who feeds a crocodile, hoping it will eat him last'.

Fourthly, only a clear statement that the aim is victory in Ukraine, and that the unpleasant alternative is a real threat that war will engulf us too, will mobilise our societies and inspire them to make the commitment and sacrifices that war will demand. The tens of thousands of Ukrainians who have died in defence of their country have died with the aim of a Ukrainian victory, not to support the limited ambition of building a firmer foundation for negotiating some form of unjust truce. When Winston Churchill addressed the House of Commons on 13th May 1940 on being appointed Prime Minister,[22] few people in Britain believed that the country could win the war against Nazi Germany. The Soviet Union had a non-aggression pact with Germany and US involvement was still 18 months in the future. But Churchill understood the absolute need for an unequivocal commitment to win.

With certain exceptions noted above, Western democracies do not yet understand that they may soon face the existential threat which the UK faced in 1940. But Ukraine does; and the long-term survival of democracy may well depend not just on Ukraine's surviving, but on its winning this war. It may indeed be difficult at this moment to predict just how Ukraine will drive Russia out of the territories it has occupied. In a worst case, we and Ukraine may have to accept the reality of failure and be forced to negotiate in the face of a Russian victory, just as the UK might have faced defeat in the Second World War. But if Ukraine and the West are not to be defeated by Russia, our aim must be to win and our national leaders must articulate that aim now, just as our military leaders must plan how to achieve it, no matter how long that will take.

How do our adversaries see war and what does war readiness mean to them?

If the fundamental lesson which we need to learn is about war itself, about what it means to us and about the unpleasant fact that we may now have to fight a war whether we like it or not, then we really need to understand how our enemy understands what war is and what it means.

A most important question we should ask ourselves in seeking to learn lessons from the Ukraine war is: what were the faults in our methods of analysis, and/or the dissemination of the results of that analysis, which allowed such a widespread failure of understanding that led (a) to the war itself coming as a surprise to so many countries, when other countries did correctly predict it; (b) to a general overestimation of Russia's capabilities; and (c) to a serious underestimation of Ukraine's ability to resist Russia's attack?

Whilst a long, deep Russian disinformation and influence campaign certainly played a large part in misleading Ukrainian leaders, and their false perception in turn influenced Western countries that did not have advanced intelligence coverage of Russian preparations, the general Western belief that Russia would rapidly overrun Ukraine actually reflected Putin's personal perspective. He really did expect the war to be over in a few days.

This misperception was certainly due to a combination of Putin's own distorted view of history and Moscow's inability to understand how Ukrainian society had evolved so differently from Russia's over the previous 30 years. But it may also have been strongly influenced by the success of Russian military operations in Syria – something which influenced the Western assessment too. In truth, both Russia and the West were surprised by the poor Russian military performance when matched with a peer enemy.

22 International Churchill Society. 'Blood, toil, tears and sweat'. Winston Churchill's speech on 13th May 1940. Available at: https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/blood-toil-tears-sweat/ (accessed: 02/01/26). *'I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat. We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many long months of struggle and of suffering. You ask, what is our policy? I can say: It is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us; to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy. You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival. Let that be realised'.*

There is a lesson here for those Western countries whose armies have spent the last generation fighting discretionary wars exclusively against non-peer opponents. Those wars, moreover, were lost; we were defeated.[23] Yet those wars have shaped our armed forces – and especially the thinking of our officers – about battle and war. They have also shaped public perceptions about such things as the acceptability of casualties, treatment of the injured, usage rates of ammunition and so forth. None of these enemies had air power, permanent drone surveillance, effective electronic warfare and so on – all crucial weapons in the Ukraine war.

If we are talking about learning lessons, then it seems that Russia learned the wrong lessons of war and battle in Syria, a problem exposed when it came to their facing a peer opponent in Ukraine. As a matter of urgency, it is important that we ask ourselves frankly if our armies too may have learned the wrong lessons of warfare for the conflict with a peer opponent which, potentially, they now face.

However, Putin's view of his war on Ukraine has been shaped by much more than just Russia's experience in Syria, Georgia and Chechnya. Russia may have outwardly abandoned the ideology of communism, but the deep-seated thinking of Putin and the entire Russian leadership has been shaped by the Marxist, and particularly the Leninist, way of thinking and acting. They understand how to seize and hold power; they are good psychologists and understand the West's vulnerabilities; and they have made the tradecraft of the KGB (the former main security agency of the Soviet Union) the model for the statecraft of the Russian state, including the ability to exploit their influence networks of sympathisers and supporters in the West.

In addition to this heritage of tradecraft – and most important for our current thesis – Marx and Lenin were very clear thinkers about war[24] and some of the most important tenets within Marxist-Leninist thinking are deeply embedded in how Putin and his colleagues understand war. For example:

- The effort which a nation will put into a war is in direct proportion to the importance of that war for the nation concerned. This is manifest in the all-important 'will to win'.
- All other things being equal, if two states or blocs engage in a protracted war, ultimate victory will go to the side with the stronger economy.
- If a war is won, the victor will not count the costs; a pyrrhic victory is still victory; what matters is not a side's ability to bear the cost but its willingness to do so.
- War has a revolutionising effect on societies because it puts institutions under immense strain; institutions (governments, armies) unable to withstand that strain, or to adapt and cope with it, will collapse.

These four tenets provide the basis for Putin's assessment that he can win; but they also outline the constraints he faces, and which should tell him that his victory is by no means certain.

On the one hand, it is clear to Putin that Russia's economy is stronger than Ukraine's, and in a straightforward bilateral contest, Russia would be certain to prevail; but when the weight of the West's economy is added to Ukraine's, the balance tips dramatically against Russia. To overcome this fundamental disadvantage, Putin had to win the war quickly before his opponents could mobilise their economic potential and turn it into a warfighting asset. Having failed to win quickly, he has had to move the Russian economy and society ever more onto a defence-ready footing whilst simultaneously seeking support from allies such as North Korea and China. At the same time, a great effort is being put into dissuading Western countries – especially, of course, the US – from increasing their support to Ukraine and from themselves moving to that state of war preparedness necessary to provide that extra support.

The war does not yet threaten the existence of the US, of the UK, or of any EU/NATO country, but it most directly and obviously threatens the very existence of Ukraine. So, whilst Putin believes that he can continue to intimidate the West and deter us from making sufficient effort to ensure victory, he knows that he must expect Ukraine to fight to the bitter end.

23 Unfortunately, some of our politicians and senior military officers have not truly acknowledged that we lost these discretionary wars. Admitting that we have a problem is the first essential step in addressing it.

24 For a thorough explanation of this, see P. H. Vigor (1975) *The Soviet View of War, Peace and Neutrality.* Routledge.

Although this war is existential for Ukraine, it is not existential for Russia, but it could be so for Putin and his cronies. No one is seeking to occupy Russia nor to seize Russian land: Russia will not disappear from the map if it loses the war. Russia is also not likely to collapse or disintegrate as a state if it is defeated.[25] If the war is lost, Putin, either with or without his team, may be ousted from power; but that is far from being the same thing.

The stress and strain that war puts on governmental institutions is something that applies very much to Russia itself, a factor which Putin knows he cannot ignore. Neither can President Zelensky and his Government and Parliament ignore this fact. Both Moscow and Kyiv have to measure the demands they are making of their population and be careful not to exceed their breaking point.

Were Russia being invaded by NATO countries it would be different. But neither NATO nor anyone else is invading Russia, nor are they in any way likely to do so. It is this same fact, coupled with the West's ability to respond effectively with either conventional or nuclear weapons, which makes it less likely that Putin would be allowed by the Russian military to resort to the use of nuclear weapons if defeat looms for him.

Nevertheless, from early in 2025, the sense that Western resolve was weakening, and particularly the ambivalent and frequently fluctuating policy decisions emanating from the White House, coupled with the perception of political tensions between the military and political leaderships in Kyiv and the reduction in the flow of Western weapons supplies, encouraged Putin to ramp up the ground attacks on the battlefront and the drone and missile attacks across Ukraine, to increase aggressive Russian hybrid activity in Europe and to renew the diplomatic and hybrid offensive in the Global South. The aim of doing this was to increase pressure in a way which Putin hoped would tip the balance in the minds of Western leaderships to accept the thesis that a Russian victory was inevitable. The continued failure of major Western leaders to promise Putin unequivocally that he will be defeated in Ukraine encourages him to go on believing that his determination to win will outlast the West's.

However, it is now clear that Russia does not have an immediately available bottomless pit of functioning weaponry; their army is burning up artillery[26] weapons and armoured vehicles more rapidly than these can be replaced, and Russian personnel casualties have been appalling. If Putin can win, these losses will be forgotten. But, if Ukraine can fight on with the same level of intensity, this casualty rate may soon bring Russia to culmination. The specific military meaning of this term is discussed in the next section.

Militarisation of Russian industry has been proceeding as fast as it possibly could without moving the economy almost wholly onto a war footing. But, given that Putin cannot yet bank on successfully dissuading President Trump from cutting off the flow of US weapons to Ukraine permanently, that Europe is ramping up its military support to Ukraine, and that the Ukrainian defence industry is increasingly capable of manufacturing the high-tech equipment which Ukraine needs, this level of mobilisation and militarisation will not be enough on its own to provide Putin with all the tools needed for victory.

To get more weapons quickly, the most effective way has been for Russia to source these from abroad and through sanctions breaking. But essential though these foreign supplies are, they are not enough on their own. To maintain even the current level of the offensive campaign, let alone to step it up to a level which might bring him victory, Putin needs a significant step up in mobilisation and militarisation. Achieving this without destroying the economy in the process and without upsetting the delicate political balance in Russia – which until now has been more or less stable – will be no easy task. It is no longer obvious that, even if Putin does take the dramatic step of extending mobilisation to the western Russian heartland, the resultant increase in manpower will still be unable to guarantee a decisive Russian victory.

This is because Russia may be approaching culmination in its land battle in Eastern Ukraine.

25 For a detailed, forensic examination of this issue, see paper by Earendel Associates (2024) *A Guide to Leadership Change in Russia.*

26 Their dependence on artillery especially means that, as they run out of weapons, they will soon have to amend their overall tactics.

Culmination, and its implications for the direction that the war in Ukraine will take

The famous German military theorist Carl von Clausewitz's definition of a 'culminating point' describes that point in a campaign or war at which combat and other losses result in the residual offensive power available to an attacker being no longer sufficient to allow for victory to be achieved. To put it a different way, culmination can be seen as a point beyond which the attacker cannot win as long as the defender can maintain the strength of the defence. In this sense, it marks a critical military point of diminishing returns.

It is often difficult for commanders to recognise when they – or the enemy – are reaching a culmination point. A commander's failure to assess the situation accurately can make the difference between victory and defeat. This failure of assessment might well happen, for example, when the attacker still has a significant numerical advantage over the defender but cannot bring that advantage to bear in any meaningful way.[27] In such a case, to continue the attack beyond the culminating point could be counterproductive because any battlefield successes will become increasingly futile, serving to shift the balance of combat power away from the culminated force in favour of their enemy.

Clausewitz's definition has been significantly developed and expanded by later military theoreticians,[28] who have stressed that culminating points occur at every level in war and are not necessarily comprehensive or conclusive. An attacker might also escape from a culmination point because the defenders' resistance might suddenly collapse, or a sudden, significant augmentation of the attackers' forces (for example, by the intervention of an ally) might bring about a step change in the balance of the forces.

The slow, attritional style of campaign that Russia is waging in Eastern Ukraine is due to a lack of available materiel and personnel, and low morale at a tactical and operational level. These deficiencies might be overcome in time if there remains capacity at the *strategic* level in terms of continued political will to continue; more societal support for the war; and improved industrial and economic mechanisms to reconstitute the culminated force, as long as all this can be achieved before defeat is imposed by the defenders.

In the current situation, Russian ground forces may actually have passed their culminating point. Notwithstanding the fact that they have developed tactics which allow them to seize small tactical objectives in succession, these successes cost them huge losses with no sign of the ability to make a breakthrough in depth on a significant scale.

If the kinetic battlefield were the only battlefield in this war which mattered, we might reasonably conclude that Russia cannot win the current war decisively. As Russian withdrawal from Ukraine would be an admission of defeat which would be perilous for Putin domestically, he must therefore push on in the hope that circumstances will change. Or he must find a way to escape culmination on the land front.

If this is indeed the case, what are Russia's options?

One option is to move the main focus of the attack into the air and into strategic depth. Both Ukraine and Russia are currently targeting each other's infrastructure, particularly energy infrastructure, in the hopes of bringing about strategic stress and economic failure. Putin still appears to be convinced that if he keeps up the pressure, Ukraine will collapse because the West will get fed up of supporting it. But that does not seem to be happening, not least because Ukraine has now built an enormous amount of resilience into its energy and transport infrastructure.

27 A famous historical example which resonates today was the Great Siege of Malta in 1565, a turning point in world history. Forty thousand Ottoman troops with 200 ships under the command of Suleiman the Magnificent laid siege to Malta, which was defended by 500 Knights Hospitallers with fewer than 6,000 foot-soldiers and ancillaries. When the Turks withdrew after huge losses, they still had many more troops than the defenders had possessed at the start of the siege. Before the battle, Europe had been in great fear, convinced of overwhelming Ottoman superiority. The Turkish defeat destroyed their reputation for invincibility and enabled the formation of a European coalition which convincingly defeated the Turks at the battle of Lepanto, 7th October 1571.

28 A good, relatively modern study of culmination is to be found in Vego, M. N. (2000) *Operational Overreach and the Culmination Point*. Available at: https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA519538.pdf (accessed: 02/01/26).

On the Russian side, the economy is in nowhere near as good as shape as the Kremlin likes to pretend. But Western sanctions, damaging as they are to Russia, have not had anything like as much effect as they could have because the West has not understood that sanctions, like any weapon, need to be adapted constantly to compensate for Russia's ability to evade them. Russia's economy is likely to continue to decline, but it is less likely to collapse precipitately or, of itself, to bring about a societal revolt.

Unlike the economy, Russian societal stability may not just decline gradually but, when the pressures on it reach breaking point, is likely to shatter irreparably and without warning. There are no signs yet that this breaking point is imminent; but the Kremlin will be watching for those signs within Russian society every bit as intently as is Kyiv.

This relative equilibrium on the land battlefield and Russia's failure so far to achieve decisive success in the strategic war in depth could presage an increasingly long and painful war which would give the lie to Putin's claim that a Russian victory is inevitable. There are real reasons, therefore, why Putin might try to maintain pressure on the front line whilst identifying a new point or method of attack where the defence is not so formidable and progress could be made more rapidly. This would fit well with Putin's understanding of strategy, which reflects his expertise in the Asiatic game of 'Go'.

This new focus of attack could be on a NATO member state. If the US commitment to defend NATO allies is no longer seen as absolute by the Kremlin, then given that no NATO armed forces have anything like the expertise in drone warfare that the Ukrainian and Russian armies now have, and that NATO has still not built an effective air defence belt along its eastern border, it is no longer unthinkable that an attack on NATO may become politically advantageous for Putin.

For most of 2025, Russia has been launching an increasingly intensive hybrid assault on several NATO countries, using drones, cyber, overflights, and what are assessed to be covert attacks on infrastructure. These have tested both NATO's military response capability and capacity, and the Alliance's ability to call out the attack and make a robust political response. In both the military and political capability, NATO nations' responses have been patchy and far from impressive. If Putin is tempted to consider an attack on NATO, he will now have a much better understanding of where the vulnerabilities lie.

As to why he should risk attacking NATO, there may come a point when Putin thinks that an attack might not trigger a decisive US intervention in response. President Trump's very public attitude – which has called into question the reliability of the US commitment to Europe's defence – and his frequent vacillation of policy, favouring Russia and criticising Ukraine, has made a previously unthinkable risk somewhat more attractive for Putin, who might need to be able to point to NATO's entering the war as the imperative reason for moving to a complete mobilisation of Russian society and industry.

But President Trump's attitude to Russia is nothing if not volatile and changeable. Consequently, an overt kinetic attack on a NATO country may not be Putin's chosen method of escalating and moving the focus of the war. Yet another option could be by other covert forms of hybrid warfare; it could even be by the use of a nuclear weapon in some way, although for many reasons this seems to be the least likely option. Also, there may be ways open to Putin that we have not yet thought of. Putin's KGB upbringing will have taught him that if he bungles an operation, the best thing might be to cover that egregious mistake with an even bigger mess which would obscure it, and he could escape blame in the resulting confusion. This is yet another argument which points to the increasing urgency of NATO member states improving their war preparedness in all domains of modern warfare.

But it is indeed on the diplomatic battlefield that Putin may still hope to win this war decisively. He has always maintained that Russia's political strength will overcome the West's economic strength on that he will simply outlast us because Ukraine is more important to him than it is to us. The more the White House moves towards seeing Russia as a potential commercial partner rather than an adversary, and the more Putin can drive a wedge between the US and Europe, the more attractive this particular route to victory appears.

From this perspective, the Russian campaign to influence and intimidate EU member states, leading them on 19th December 2025 to decide not to seize frozen Russian assets for Ukraine for fear of Russian financial retaliation, must be considered a significant strategic success. Putin has well understood both psychology and the political processes of the EU and of its member nations. As the UK must now, given the likely future trajectory of US policy, consider how to restructure its alliances so that they no longer absolutely depend on US support, the UK will also need to have this understanding and work more closely with its former EU partners.

Understanding our allies and how our alliances affect our war readiness

The two main alliances uniting Western democracies are NATO and the EU, both now organisations with global reach, notwithstanding their regional origins. The EU is an economic giant but, as we explained above, the EU was not designed to structure itself politically or economically in such a way as to be able to raise armed forces and, despite strenuous efforts over many years, has still failed to achieve this. This structural limitation is very deep-seated, a feature which was exposed by the EU response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Overcoming this limitation will be an immense task because it essentially requires nations to revisit the fundamental assumptions of the organisation.

NATO, in contrast, has always understood the reality (and the difficulty) of an alliance going to war as an entity. The US has always played the key role within NATO, both as a leader and as the largest supplier of military power to the collective endeavour, and a key essence of the alliance has, until now, been to keep the US engaged in the defence of Europe. But, unlike the Warsaw Pact, which obliged its members to model their armed forces on the Soviet military system, NATO/the US never attempted to create a uniform military system to fit all NATO members. NATO limited itself to creating an interface organisation to enable national armed forces – with all their national idiosyncrasies – to operate effectively together.

Furthermore, NATO's founding North Atlantic Treaty does not actually commit its members to go to war at the behest of any member. The famous Article 5 merely states that:

> *The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognised by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties,* ***such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force,*** *[author's emphasis] to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.*[29]

It is really important that these realities are understood, as Western democracies must now face up to the real possibility of a physical war in Europe. Winston Churchill once quipped that 'There is only one thing worse than fighting with allies, and that is fighting without them'. Countries within an alliance must be hard-nosed and acknowledge the weaknesses of their allies. In military terms, alliances are only the sum of their constituent parts. For a country to neglect an important military capability or capacity on the grounds that this will be available from an ally in time of war may seem a clever way to save money in peacetime, but it can be fatal when war looms.[30]

What is more, alliances need to adapt to changing circumstances just as countries and armies do. During the Cold War, NATO cohesion was based on a common threat perception which overcame the wide difference of interests, capabilities and capacities between allies. But allies today face competing threats, some of which for them loom larger at this moment than the threat from Moscow. In Southern Europe, the Russian threat seems a lot less immediate than do the problems coming from North Africa. But most significant are the facts that (a) the USA sees its main threat as coming from China, and (b) it holds Israel's security to be more important than Ukraine's. Consequently, as we stress elsewhere in this study, Ukraine and its European allies now have to take very seriously the fact that the US may significantly reduce the military and economic assistance it is currently providing to Ukraine.

29 NATO (2025) 'Collective defence and Article 5', 12th November. Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_110496.htm (accessed: 02/01/26).

30 For example, all NATO nations now recognise the importance of producing more artillery ammunition. The UK can produce 155-millimetre shells but has no on-shore capability to produce a propellant to fire those shells at the enemy; BAE Systems' propellant factories are in the US, and the US needs all their production to restock its own ammunition depots and to supply Israel and Ukraine.

Furthermore, that US tendency will be exacerbated by the fact that allies tend to contribute to an alliance in direct proportion to the extent to which they expect the alliance to support them against what they see as their major threat. If the US does not consider that NATO can materially help it in a confrontation with China, US enthusiasm for supporting NATO will diminish even further. Nor is this uncertainty about US support just a temporary phenomenon. It is now quite possible that the next US President may well increase America's trend towards isolationism and focus on the Pacific, rather than on Europe and the Middle East.[31] Whoever is next elected to the White House in 2028 will at the very least demand that European countries bear a fairer share of the NATO defence burden; US voters will accept nothing less – why should they?

But this is not the end of the matter. The combination of a now uncertain US commitment, plus the differing threat priorities of European countries and the pro-Russian orientation of Hungary, all compound the need for NATO and EU members to re-evaluate the extent to which they can rely on allies for military capabilities and capacities, and the extent to which they need to invest in those capabilities and capacities themselves as individual states. This in turn requires the alliance organisations, led by their headquarters in Brussels, to put a lot of effort into rejuvenating the organisations, amending their internal mechanisms to reflect this new reality and to enable the necessary adaptation. Put succinctly, they will not just have to reinvent themselves but rebuild themselves anew.

Unless NATO and EU member states invest quickly in redesigning the mechanisms of alliance cooperation, any rebuilding of defence in Europe is almost certainly going to encourage the allies themselves to invest much more in ramping up their own national defence industrial and military capabilities and capacities rather than relying on being able to share the capabilities and capacities of other allies. Collaborative defence industrial projects will become more difficult. It will become more difficult to achieve economies of scale. Costs will rise commensurately.

Former Ukrainian Commander in Chief, General Zaluzhnyi, recognised this in his recent paper[32] as one of the main challenges which Ukraine now faces, and that Ukraine itself must improve its defence industrial capability and capacity. European countries wishing to support Ukraine need to devise ways of working with and investing in Ukraine that will help build Ukraine's capability and capacity to defend itself. This will not be easy, (a) given that Ukraine is working to wartime imperatives whereas EU and NATO countries are not, and (b) given the acknowledged deficiencies of Ukraine's governance processes. But the solutions to that problem could provide excellent models for helping European countries to improve collaboration between themselves and to redesign the internal mechanisms of the two alliance organisations accordingly. The national process of moving to war readiness and improving the war readiness of NATO and the EU as organisations are actively interconnected and need as far as possible to move in step.

Today's rapid and drastic change means that preparing for and winning a war depends on adaptability

As we repeatedly stress in this study, war inflicts such a terrible strain on societies that to survive this strain and go on to win the war requires fundamental changes from peacetime norms in national attitudes, priorities and practices. These changes in behaviour need to run throughout society from top to bottom; the top leading by providing not only direction but also a good example, without which there will be no buy-in by the whole population. The whole national system of politics and governance at every level and in every sector – governmental, non-governmental, corporate – not only has to work well, but it must constantly adapt to the new circumstances and continue to work well.

31 See Section 3 of this study and the Earendel Associates report (2024) *America, NATO & the Transatlantic Relationship.*

32 Zaluzhnyi, V. (2024) 'On the modern design of military operations in the Russo-Ukrainian war: In the fight for the initiative'. Available at: https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/24400154-ukraine-valerii-zaluzhnyi-essay-design-of-war/ (accessed: 22/07/25).

Take, for example, management. In times of slow change, we can *manage* everything. Heads of government departments or of companies can give in to the desire to *control* everything. But at times of rapid change, we cannot do that. We need to find a way to reduce the amount of management we rely on and increase the amount of *leadership*. Of course, we will always need management. But the kind of management we need is one requiring fewer orders and supervision, and which instead educates and empowers subordinates to manage themselves.[33] 'Wartime' governance must empower those at the grassroots to do things for themselves.

Essential to changing the style of management is to bring in strong leadership. *Leadership* understands that in a period of tumultuous change you cannot *control* everything, you have to *command*. To 'command' means to trust and to delegate, because when the situation is rapidly and constantly changing there is never time for the person or team in charge to monitor and check up on everything.

To make leadership and new forms of management function effectively needs a new attitude to risk. In peacetime we have become increasingly risk averse. Everything has to be 'failsafe'. But in times of war or in times of rapid change, we need a system that encourages us to take risks; a system that allows us to make mistakes and learn from them. We have to create an environment for people at every level of authority in which it is safe to fail and try again. This means we must move away from 'error and trial' back to embracing 'trial and error'.

The aim of adopting new forms of management and leadership and of accepting the need to take risks is to achieve *effectiveness*. Peacetime forces us to be *efficient*. It teaches us to plan long term; to tie everything up for a long time so we have no reserves. But in wartime, that leads to disaster, because it means we cannot be *effective* as we are no longer flexible and cannot respond in time to a nasty surprise or to exploit an unexpected opportunity.

It is much the same in business and government trying to cope with today's rapid global change. Think of investments tied up long term. Think of just-in-time delivery, which gives supermarkets and filling stations only two days' reserves. In peacetime or times of stability and predictability, efficiency may be the key to success, but in wartime the inflexibility efficiency brings with it will result in failure. It is more important to seek effectiveness, even if at the expense of efficiency and perfection; to move from 'just in time' to 'just in case'.

In contrasting all these qualities, it is not a simple, straightforward question of either/or. Efficiency and effectiveness, for example, are not irreconcilable opposites. It is merely that, to meet the imperative demands of war, we need to adapt our behaviour and prioritise different things. This means we must apply this new system throughout all levels of any organisation for which we are responsible, however large or small, and we must identify appropriate measures to reward the behaviour we want. Implementing such a change will not simply require a new policy; it will mean changing a deeply embedded culture.

Armed forces of themselves are by no means immune to the influence of peacetime thinking. The comments from Ukrainian sources that newly conscripted Ukrainian troops given basic training in some NATO countries had been trained only in peacetime conditions and to peacetime safety standards, not preparing them at all for the realities of battle, are very worrying. It implies that these NATO armies have been so constrained by unrealistic peacetime regulations and misguided/inappropriate health and safety rules that they simply cannot provide realistic training – they have lost touch with what war against a peer enemy is really like. They have ceased to be learning organisations.

If Western governments, armies and societies cannot understand and differentiate between desirable peacetime standards and the realities of wartime necessity, and reflect these differences in their armies now, then our countries will pay heavily in blood the first time our armies are committed to battle against a peer enemy, be it on our own soil or in defence of an ally. After such a long period of peace in Europe, it is understandable that many NATO countries and armies should have come to accept that following peacetime norms and regulations is 'normal' and 'right'. It also reflects decades of low-level counter-insurgency operations in which Western military operated to the norms of human rights law and health and safety legislation, rather than to the laws of armed conflict.

33 For an in-depth explanation of this, see the work of Rensis Likert. He categorised various forms of management and leadership in the 1960s, promoting the desirability of *participative management* and the *self-managing organisation*. Much of his work was based upon the experience of an emergency programme to build cheap, effective merchant ships very quickly during World War Two – the 'liberty ships'. By adopting new management techniques, it proved possible to reduce the time needed to build these ships from over 6 months to less than 6 weeks.

Understandable, however, does not mean acceptable. In many NATO militaries today, health and safety regulations so constrain the commander that realistic training is impossible; it is considered too dangerous. But, whilst there is no excuse for accidents caused by an unjustifiable lack of care, it is also important to realise that realistic training will be dangerous and that some level of casualties must be accepted. Failing to accept risk in training transfers that risk to operations. If we are not training as hard as possible (which in 'war' rather than 'battle' terms means focussing entirely on the elimination of the threat, either through active defeat or pre-emptive deterrence), then we are almost certain to lose against an enemy who is.

The Ukrainian comments actually tell us that our training methods (and therefore, perhaps, our soldiers) are not fit for war as they have been experiencing it. In other words, we are failing to adapt sufficiently. We are fortunate to get such warning. We should take heed of it.

Preparing for war as a key element of deterring war

Throughout this study we make many references to deterrence because the principal aim of being ready for war is actually to deter war. Planning and preparing for war does not mean that wartime mechanisms have to be implemented. But having them thought through and ready to implement will allow a more rapid reaction in time of need, greatly increasing national robustness and resilience. Whilst *not* preparing for war makes war more likely, making preparations not only contributes to victory, but it is actually a powerful consideration in making it less likely that an enemy will dare to attack.

Understanding ourselves, understanding our allies and understanding our adversaries is particularly important to our success in deterrence, because deterrence depends on our understanding of how our actions are perceived. We cannot deter an adversary if we do not know how they think. Neither will our efforts to persuade our allies to stand by us be successful if we do not understand how they think and what motivates them.

The other intangible but essential ingredient of deterrence is willpower; demonstrating the will of the leadership and the population to fight to defend what they hold dear. This will is Ukraine's best weapon in ensuring that it can continue to fight Russia. Confidence and trust in Western help to sustain Ukraine in that fight are in themselves as important to sustaining Ukrainian resistance as are weapons and financial support.

When the war in question was principally conceived as a kinetic military struggle, the focus was naturally on pure military capability and capacity. Today, 'The Deterrent' usually refers to strategic nuclear weapons which, in the UK, are carried in nuclear-powered submarines to provide what is known as Continuous At-Sea Deterrent (CASD). The key word in this title is 'continuous', which means that the nuclear deterrent is always available without the need to prepare it publicly for use in the event of necessity, a move which might in certain circumstances actually aggravate a crisis rather than defuse it.

But deterrence is a truly complex thing and involves far more than simply raw military power or nuclear weapons. Our nuclear deterrent requires considerable conventional capability and capacity (intelligence, anti-submarine warfare and so forth) to protect it and to make it effective and reliable. It is also highly desirable that we should have sufficient conventional forces – a 'conventional deterrent ramp' – so that we can deter conventional military aggression without having to resort to nuclear weapons.

These 'kinetic' aspects of deterrence must be maintained at a high level of capability and capacity because if their effectiveness is called into question, the deterrent will lose credibility in the eyes of both defender and potential attacker.

However, in today's war, whilst classic 'kinetic' weapons are still a big player, they are no longer the only player – perhaps not even the main player. In the modern world of hybrid warfare, where anything and everything will be used as a weapon, deterrence must also apply to non-kinetic attacks, for example information, malign influence or economic warfare. Here we are into much more difficult territory, territory where there is overall inadequate understanding of how these weapons are currently being used against us in democracies, and consequently we have not developed effective mechanisms either to defend against them or to deter them.

This is now one of our most significant vulnerabilities. Autocracies can make concerted use of all weapons and tools of power, whereas democracies in peacetime cannot. We have not even been able to concert our political and commercial interests in our defence. We discuss in the next chapter the significance of the recent hacking of the Jaguar Land Rover company as an example of this problem. Drone incursions and the cutting of undersea cables or the attacks on telephone masts are other notable current examples. Our most urgent need is to rethink and redefine what constitutes 'war' and provide for defence and the currents against attacks below the classic military threshold.

The difference between *fighting* and *deterring* is less clear cut with hybrid warfare than it is with classic kinetic war. Indeed, there are good grounds for considering that deterrence is itself a weapon of hybrid war. Deterring or fighting hybrid war is impossible without the capability for strategic thinking and acting, and without understanding the adversary's psychology and political system.[34] Response to a hybrid attack will often need to be asymmetric because a democracy may well not wish to engage an adversary on the same terms for fear of compromising its core values. Just as with kinetic weapons, success in a hybrid engagement is likely to go to the side which is most able to adapt more rapidly than their adversary.[35]

Furthermore, in hybrid war, just as in kinetic war, the deciding issue may be that victory will go to the side most ready to bear losses. This is certainly Putin's philosophy as he spends thousands of Russian lives for very little territorial gain on the land battlefield in Ukraine. He uses this fact to 'prove' that Russia has endless resources so will outlast Ukraine, making 'Russia's ultimate victory inevitable'.[36] In fact, Russia's victory on the kinetic battlefield is anything but inevitable; indeed, as we discuss elsewhere in this study, if Ukraine can maintain its current defence and level of technological improvement, Russia may well run out of steam. But on the hybrid battlefield, Putin's demonstration that Russia is prepared to suffer endless losses in the field, coupled with Russia's threat to retaliate with financial measures affecting some EU member states, has been an important factor in deterring the EU from seizing frozen Russian assets to support Ukraine.

Unfortunately, many Western countries have lost key elements of the structure they had built to deter the Soviet Union during the Cold War. They have lost the understanding that deterrence is itself a weapon. They have lost the deterrent ramp of conventional military power which delayed the defenders' need to resort to nuclear use. They have lost the understanding that deterrence is not a single-use tool for preventing war; it is crucial to the ability to control and manage the war once it has been unleashed.

Putin has not lost that understanding and, to date, it is Russia which has been most effective at deterring the West, either by threatening the use of nuclear weapons to deter the US or threatening financial reprisals to deter the EU from using frozen Russian assets. This brings us back to the fundamental need for Western governments to acknowledge the nature of war today and that we are under attack, and to explain to our population the realities of the situation and of the painful measures which are going to be necessary to transform our democratic societies to protect themselves against this threat.

But making ourselves ready for war has a much wider utility, as we discuss elsewhere in this study. As the pace of global change faces democracies with a situation tantamount to war, thinking through how to adapt or create new mechanisms for dealing with a time of instability and uncertainty will stand the country in good stead even if no war occurs.

34 As we note elsewhere in this study, Putin's strategic style is perhaps best exemplified in his enthusiasm for the game of 'Go'. This game is characterised by rewarding the skill of a player who can cope simultaneously with the many small subgames which develop during the play whilst at the same time maintaining control of the board with a single unifying play. Putin is also a poker player, so risk, bluff and opportunism form part of his strategic style too.

35 A good example would be sanctions. Once these are applied, they will need to be adapted and upgraded constantly to prevent the adversary from finding ways to evade them. It would appear that Western governments have not truly understood this point. In today's hybrid warfare, everyone has to have a fighting mentality, not just the military.

36 DRM News (2025) 'Putin Declares: "Russian Forces Hold Initiative, Victory Is Inevitable" Amid Ukraine Conflict | AC1B'. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6DaQVde1Sqc (accessed: 02/01/26).

Lord Toby Harris, Chair of the National Preparedness Commission, has long[37] pointed out that preparing for war is not just preparing against a Russian threat. Preparing to make our political system, our economy and our society more resilient will be equally valuable in protecting us from all the other potential threats which now face us. From hybrid warfare and pandemics, through to terrorism and to extreme weather events, more and more it seems that we will need wartime thinking and acting to enable us to cope with peacetime challenges.

Lord Harris has also been strong and consistent in calling for successive governments to launch a national conversation to create wider awareness, and to educate the population, about the need for preparedness and how to achieve it. Preparing for war, and indeed for any serious emergency, must be a national endeavour involving all elements of society. As such, it is incumbent on the government to lead and enable that conversation and to ensure that our national governance processes enable, rather than hinder, that preparation.

37 See, for example: Harris, T. (2019) 'Modern Deterrence and Societal Resilience' on RUSI, 10th January. Available at: https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/modern-deterrence-and-societal-resilience (accessed: 02/01/26). And National Preparedness Commission. Available at: https://nationalpreparednesscommission.uk/ (accessed: 02/01/26).

Chapter 3: Government as the fundamental basis for war readiness

War necessitates a new kind of politics and new forms of governance

Traditionally, studies addressing how a country needs to move to war readiness tend to start by focusing on the armed forces and defence industry. But in fact, the most fundamental requirement is that a country's governmental structure needs to have the confidence and trust of the population and to be capable of adapting to the stresses and strains of war.

For clarity of discussion we have broken this down into the following key areas: political process; improvements to that process; national governance; enhancing government bandwidth; focusing our strategic mindset; reviewing key security and defence strategy; the role of education and civil society; and understanding why state and society require resilience. Making sure that these key areas of activity can function well in peacetime and are able to adapt to prepare for war is a national imperative. A strong political and governance process is our first line of defence.

The development of a war-capable political process

Everything starts with politics. The various forms of parliamentary democracy all face problems when it comes to fighting wars. The process of confrontation between government and opposition, and the separation between the government as the executive body and parliament as the legislative body – a process which works very well in stable and more predictable times – does not always work well when faced with a serious national threat which demands ultra-rapid reaction and necessitates that all sectors of society work together if the threat is to be survived and overcome.

The challenge to democracies facing the threat of war (or indeed facing other forms of threat or even facing any huge, fundamental decisions imposed by the need to make drastic changes affecting the whole nation) has two facets: (1) how to maintain the democratic process on which popular support of the government depends, without that process hindering the mobilisation of all national power to defeat the threat; and (2) how to maintain democratic debate whilst at the same time ensuring the collaboration of all political points of view to achieve a single end.

At the moment, the UK, in common with many democracies, is facing a particularly acute challenge in that the electorate appears to have lost confidence not just in the government but in all in the main 'traditional' political parties, transferring their support to what they consider alternatives, frequently single-issue parties or those offering radical (if unsubstantiated) solutions.[38] Indeed, it may be that the concept of a political party which has been at the heart of the British political system for the last couple of centuries may itself need to adapt under the pressures of global change.

This is especially important because it is on the stable functioning of our political system that the effectiveness of the government process on which our ability to fight and win a war – and indeed to deal with any other national challenge – depends. Ensuring the health of our political system so that the population have faith in it when the country is put to the test must become a national priority.

38 For example, in a by-election on 23rd October 2025 for a seat in the Welsh Senedd in the Caerphilly constituency (formerly a Labour stronghold), 47 per cent of the vote went to Plaid Cymru, 36 per cent to Reform. Labour's vote fell to 11 per cent; Conservatives and Liberal Democrats getting only two and 1.5 per cent, respectively.

Subsuming party-political interests to national interests is difficult even when the country is fully engaged in war and the bombs are falling. When it is only a matter of preparing for a potential war, with all the uncertainties that involves, it is particularly difficult and painful even to contemplate, let alone to implement. Yet in the 21st century, where the boundaries between peace and war are blurred by hybrid warfare, how to do this is now the most important task facing our politicians. In many Western democracies which have become accustomed to spending a large part of their national income on health, education, welfare and pensions, finding political consensus to change that spending pattern is the first serious hurdle in any move to put the country on a footing of warfighting readiness, complete with wartime priorities.

In the course of this study, there have been several occasions where we have compared the situation today with that in the run up to the Second World War. Nowhere is this exercise more instructive than in our efforts to understand the difficulties that our political system today has in facing up to the need to prepare for war. Most histories of this pre-war period are written by historians and informed by the wisdom of hindsight. However accurate their facts, they fail to get across an understanding of the human dynamic fundamental to the political process. There are two books[39] which we recommend because, taken together, they do provide this understanding of politics in the 1930s and of the institutional slowness to recognise the seriousness and imminence of the threat, an understanding which is of considerable help as we try to appreciate the workings of our political system in today's period of uncertainty and instability.

Guilty Men was written and published just after the fall of Dunkirk in 1940 by three London journalists, Michael Foot, Peter Howard and Frank Owen, using the pseudonym 'Cato'. Very influential in its day, it is a bitter polemic denouncing appeasement; it attacks the 15 politicians (Conservative, Liberal and Labour parties) and senior officials considered most culpable for promoting this policy. In doing so, it gives a vivid and informed contemporary insight into the workings of politics during the 1930s, and particularly of the collusion between the leaders of the political parties and the resulting damage to national interests.

The Glamour Boys by Sir Chris Bryant MP tells the story of the 17 MPs (of different parties) who made up the anti-appeasement faction in Parliament during the late 1930s. Most reviews of this book focus on the fact that 10 of these MPs were gay, and indeed the insight into their experience of life and politics forms a major part of the story told. But, more important for our current topic is the fact that the author, being himself a politician, can tell the story of the run up to the Second World War based on his deep understanding of how politics and Parliament work. This understanding enables him to explain the mindset of politicians in the 1930s through the eyes of his 17 subjects in a way which admirably avoids the common problem afflicting many historians – the wisdom of hindsight.

Whilst the authors of both publications successfully expose the working of the political system of the 1930s with all its flaws, their insight reminds us uncomfortably that all political systems are flawed, including our own current political system. Whether in the 1930s or today, there is no reliable template for enabling your governmental system to adapt and become ready to fight a major war. Every generation faced with this problem will have to find its own, new way to adapt and cope.

During the Second World War, the UK coped by moving to a 'grand coalition' system – known at the time as the 'National Government' – where the political parties shared the main ministerial roles in government. Parliamentary debate still operated but was on less party-political lines; competition between the political parties still continued, but mostly below the political surface. This suspension of some of the basic democratic practices, accompanied by the suspension of certain civil liberties – especially those regarding freedom of speech, information and travel – was tolerated by the population because the restrictions made sense in the circumstances and there was a strong trust in government that these rights would be restored at the earliest possible opportunity, as indeed they were.

39 Cato (1940) *Guilty Men*. Republished by Faber and Faber in 2011. And Bryant, C. (2020) *The Glamour Boys: The Secret Story of the Rebels who Fought for Britain to Defeat Hitler*. London: Bloomsbury.

Given the national challenges we now face, not only in defence but in such areas as the need to reform health and social security services, our Second World War experience not only suggests that such cross-party cooperation will be essential to coping with huge, complex, and potentially contentious issues, but also points very firmly to the importance of popular trust in government as a prerequisite for society's acceptance of the painful measures that preparing for war necessitates.

Practical steps to improve the situation

Meanwhile, there are several practical steps which could be taken without prejudice, and which would also greatly improve the transition of power following a general election in the current circumstances of rapid global change and uncertainty. At the moment, whereas government ministers have access to all available information on issues of national security and can also draw on the civil service and professional experts (such as the military) to help inform them so that they make the correct decisions, the 'shadow' ministers in the opposition parties have no (or only very limited) such access and no such informed staff on whom to draw.

As a result, when a change of government happens, the incoming ministers are often inadequately informed of the key issues and have not been able to build their relationships with expert staff. Maintaining the continuation of a coherent government therefore becomes difficult; this could be a crucial flaw at a time of acute national threat. It should be possible to move now to create a statutory mechanism where opposition shadow ministers can be given the means to educate themselves for the roles they may suddenly find themselves appointed to.

Likewise, contingency measures need to be prepared so that the rules governing the freedoms and responsibilities of the media can be amended to make these appropriate to dealing with a national threat. This is already an issue which needs serious attention because of the widespread use of disinformation by our adversaries, an important element of hybrid warfare designed not only to distract, delude and dismay the population but also to destroy confidence in our institutions and in the very existence of accurate analysis.

In the past, it was possible to address this by informing commentators, journalists and educators, and by providing a disciplined framework for them within which to operate. Today, given that most people get over half their information not from the press or TV but from social media or across the internet, such measures are inadequate. Not only do social media and the internet give credibility to uninformed opinion and provide an uncontrolled vector for disinformation, but they also make the individual vulnerable to direct influence by hostile state or ideological actors. Furthermore, they enable the collection of a huge amount of data about those individuals who use them, data which could be of extreme interest to a foreign power or other agency wishing to manipulate public perceptions.

Again, it is clearly going to be more difficult to address this problem in a situation such as the one presented by today's rapid change than it would be if the country were actually fighting an existential war as, for example, is Ukraine. Whilst there have recently been some serious efforts to get to grips with this issue, these have so far been ineffectual. Western democracies are already under informational attack and, in the Ukraine war, the information battlefield is at the moment as important as, and at times more important than, the physical one.

A very practical reason why war needs a different form of politics – one that includes a different approach to information – is that in war it is essential to tell the population bad news. In a democracy, a war cannot be run on propaganda alone. Wars for national survival will at times not go well. Honesty is always better than spin, but with discretionary wars in far off places, the temptation has been to believe that bad news can be minimised and become less important. It is human nature not to like hearing bad news and there are times when the population will collude with the authorities to condone its suppression, preferring to hear a comforting story. But in wars that touch us at home, this must not be allowed happen. People need to face up to bad news and to have the resilience (see 'Why state and society require resilience' section) to cope with it and recover. The absolute need for the population to have faith in the political system, the issue with which we began this section, is crucial in this situation.

Ensuring that national governance is war ready

The multiple and complex mechanisms and procedures through which a country is governed change constantly over time under the influence of internal and external pressures. Major war can provide sudden, extreme and continuous pressures which put a country's governance under great strain, rapidly exposing faults and imperfections. But, more than that, the rapid and profound changes (political, economic, social, technological), which invariably accompany a major protracted war, demand different political processes and forms of governance from those which have evolved to suit stable peacetime conditions.

If the country's structures and procedures of governance fail to change to meet the demands of war, they are likely to collapse under the intolerable pressure which war imposes on them. This ability of governance structures to adapt and evolve rapidly under the pressures of wartime conditions is one of the most important requirements for victory in war and for the survival of the state.

However, the speed and extent of change throughout the world over the past three decades has been so great that, in many places, it has produced pressures tantamount to those of war. Countries with obsolete mechanisms of governance, or whose governance processes have been unable to adapt and cope with this change, have experienced state collapse or societal revolution overthrowing the old order. The Middle East's 'Arab Spring' and Ukraine's 'Maidan Revolution' are but two examples.

Western countries have not been immune to the impact of these global changes. In many democracies, the governance processes have not collapsed because they have not been faced with intolerable pressures. But they have not adapted adequately to the profound changes and have become less effective at meeting the needs of their populations. Furthermore, in the complacency created by decades of prosperity and security, governance mechanisms have been allowed to degrade over time. But the cumulative effect of that degradation has not been recognised, and it has rendered many governmental institutions both ineffective and incapable of further evolution.[40]

This has resulted in governments becoming less competent to make and implement policy to deal with important and urgent issues. Where the (quite common) governmental response has been an attempt to increase centralised control of economic and political decision-making, the political class has become more remote and alienated from the grassroots. This has resulted in a corresponding loss of people's faith and trust in their democratic governmental processes and their national political systems. More extreme and populist leaders have become more attractive to voters because, amongst other things, they have promised a quick and radical solution to the failures of government.

A particular aspect of governance which has come under intense scrutiny in recent times is that of law. It appears in several guises. There is the contentious issue of the extent to which military personnel should be subject to the application of international human rights law. There is the perception that hostile actors can use the law in democratic countries to protect themselves and attack those countries. There is a very blatant way in which some countries ignore international law with impunity. To these factors must be added the major domestic failures of law such as, in the UK, the unjust prosecution of sub-postmasters by the Post Office. All this undermines popular trust in the law and in the rule of law which is the cornerstone of a democratic system.

We can recognise this situation today in many Western liberal democracies. Firstly, this situation does not bode well for the future of democracy if countries are suddenly faced with a war for national survival. Secondly, the hybrid warfare which Russia (along with other countries) has been waging against Western democracies in recent years has succeeded in identifying and exploiting the vulnerabilities which this gradual failure of governance has created within Western countries. The economic warfare which China has been waging, for example, has been particularly successful in cornering the market in solar panels and in gaining control of a large proportion of the globe's rare earths. At what stage clever, legitimate competition becomes an aggressive economic weapon is a moot point. The tipping point is often only recognised with the wisdom of hindsight.

40 In the past 25 years the UK, for example, has suffered seriously from this problem, as is discussed below.

A recent example of hybrid warfare would be the August to September 2025 cyber-attack on the UK's Jaguar Land Rover company, which forced a 5-week shutdown costing nearly £2 billion to the economy. Although the perpetrators have not been firmly identified at the time of writing, suspicions that this may have involved a hostile state sponsor have been raised because of the strategic importance of the attack. In a run up to any potential war, Jaguar Land Rover would be producing military vehicles; to make artificial, legalistic distinctions between military and civilian in such strategic national companies in wartime would be concerning. Yet the peacetime mentality prevalent today means that such important civilian companies simply do not have, and cannot acquire, the ability to protect themselves and their vulnerable supply chains against an attack by hackers with a level of competence equal to that of a hostile state.

The problem that Western democracies now face is not so much how they would cope with a sudden war forced upon them, as Ukraine has had to cope (although countries on Russia's borders do face exactly that problem), but how they can transform their current governance processes, which 70 years of security and stability have rendered sclerotic and totally inappropriate for waging war. How today, in 2026, can they create adaptable governance processes appropriate to fighting a war when their populations do not believe that there is a threat or that war is possible, but are still living in an illusion of permanent security and invulnerability?

Due to a large number of complex reasons, the societies of today's democracies are significantly different from what they were in 1939. It would be dangerous to assume that the measures which governments could take in 1939 to move their countries onto a war footing will work today. Indeed, it is very difficult to envisage just how a modern Western democracy would move onto a war footing; to calculate what that situation would require in all its important detail.

This is a problem which, in a democracy, governments alone cannot solve. They need the participation of society, and that in turn requires both the education of society in the important issues involved and the participation of all sectors of society in debate to establish an acceptable way forward. Countries such as Finland have moved a long way on this path; their experience may be valuable to other countries which have still to begin the journey. It will not be a quick or easy journey, and prudence dictates that it should be begun well before a latent threat becomes patent.

Government in wartime requires more bandwidth

As Marx pointed out 180 years ago, and as Ukraine is discovering on a daily basis, war puts all government processes under immense strain; there is just so much to do, increasingly little time, and a constant shortage of resources. This is also true, even if to a lesser extent, of countries preparing for war or – as with liberal democracies today – coping with rapid and profound change tantamount to being at war. The received wisdom in many Western democracies is that government needs to shrink and that more should be left to the private sector and to 'market pressures'. It will be difficult to change that culture when we need to rapidly increase government bandwidth to cope with the extra pressures of war. It will be even more difficult to change it if there is no widespread understanding in society that war is imminent.

How to meet this challenge in today's circumstances needs some careful thought; thought that – as with other issues which an imminent threat brings with it – would be better done well before rather than just after a catastrophe has hit. So much expertise and intellectual capital is now outside government that simply increasing government departments in size may not be an adequate answer. It may be quicker, easier and cheaper to find a way to harness expertise from the private sector and to use IT, as long as that does not introduce a technical vulnerability. Estonia has a great deal of experience in developing e-government, experience from which other governments might learn.

This intense pressure which war and preparation for war brings, it must be noted, applies not just to ministries of defence but to all departments of government. Not only the conduct of war, but also preparation for war, demand that all aspects of government and society be changed, adapted to optimise the contribution they can make to the national war effort. All elements of government, business and society must be capable of being mobilised towards this national effort because war sets different priorities on just about every activity of a country and of its people.

It is hard enough for people and institutions to accept and implement this very painful change, even when missiles rain down on them as they are in Ukraine. How much more difficult is it for governments and societies to accept the need for such painful adaptation when the threat of war seems distant and intangible, even unimaginable? This is the essence of the distinction we need to make between 'our armed forces learning to fight battles' and 'our country learning to fight war'.

In the UK, however, for the last 25 years or so governance has been developing in a direction which will make it more difficult for the Government to mobilise all its departmental assets and to focus them on working together to prepare for an imminent national emergency. Successive governments, frustrated by the increasing difficulty of 'getting things done' and not understanding the reason that this is so, have actually increased the centralisation of power and policymaking under the illusion that this would give them greater control. In fact, the centralisation of power has begun to afflict democracies with the same problem that Putin has created for himself by drawing all power into his hands. It creates a bottleneck which stops things happening because it removes initiative and authority from subordinate levels of society.

Simultaneously, the UK, for example, has seen its formerly very expert civil service lose much of its domain expertise, especially at the most senior levels, as senior civil servants have prioritised their skills as managers rather than becoming experts in their field. Non-expert ministers appointed today can no longer expect the support of expert senior civil servants to provide them with the domain knowledge they need to complement their political skills and common sense if they are to implement effective policies. The US has a system and a tradition for bringing in external expertise to provide this knowledge; the UK does not. This has greatly reduced the UK Government's ability to cope with rapid change.

Over the same period, it has become more and more difficult for UK Government departments to work together, a regrettable situation highlighted by repeated futile attempts to enforce cross-departmental collaboration, evinced by a string of failed policy initiatives going under exciting new titles such as 'All of government working', the 'Comprehensive approach', or 'Fusion doctrine'.

Coupled with this, further governance changes in the UK have decoupled policymaking from policy delivery, creating effectively independent agencies to deliver policy previously delivered by civil servants within ministries. This has destroyed the learning process within government and removed the feedback loop which used to allow the rapid and effective amendment of policies that had failed when encountering reality at grassroots level. The grassroots – where the causes of problems and their solutions are well understood – have been disempowered and are now actually prevented from addressing policy failures on their own initiative.

In a country which is in a situation of rapid and unpredictable change tantamount to being at war, or which is faced with preparing for a shooting war – as liberal democracies now are, having a competent and adaptable system of governance which facilitates rapid mobilisation and can make and implement essential new policies is most important. The challenge for the UK and other liberal democracies today is how to reverse the trends of the last generation so as to create a system which will not only cope with the current rate of societal change but also be able to transform the country towards a phase of full defence preparedness, whatever that looks like in modern terms, to prepare it to deal with a looming catastrophe, rather than having to wait until catastrophe strikes before it can respond.

A lot more work will be needed before we can say exactly what such a system of governance would look like. But lessons from the past coupled with current experience indicate that returning responsibility and authority to grassroots communities is likely to be the most cost-effective – and perhaps the only – way of achieving this essential transformation at the scale and speed required. Empower farmers to deliver food security; encourage ethnic communities to identify and prevent the rise of extremism within their own ranks.

We can gain some sense of the problem by looking at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, which UK Government risk registers had high on their list of threats, but for which no effective preparation had been made. In one sense, the experience offers some considerable consolation because the UK and other liberal democracies managed to cope, each in their own way, not least because of the high degree of social cohesion generated by a clear perception of the danger. But it is certain that better preparation and a more effective system of learning from mistakes and sharing the knowledge would have saved a great deal of money, economic upheaval and suffering. Unfortunately, public inquiries into the pandemic seem to have been focused more on apportioning blame for mistakes rather than on learning the more important lessons of how to cope with catastrophe.

The need for a strategic mindset and a process for making and implementing strategy

Strategy is a much-overused term, and one which means different things to different people. Nowadays, it is frequently applied in trivial circumstances, and it is often misused simply to mean a large-scale plan. But strategy is a most important tool for implementing policy in the face of unpredictability and rapidly evolving circumstances caused, for example, by drastic change over which we have no control or by the active intervention of an opponent. That opponent can be an enemy in wartime, or it can be a natural disaster such as an epidemic.

In the opinion of these authors, strategy-making is best understood as: *an interactive process of adaptation to deal with a challenging situation created by a proactive opponent which – by accident, incidentally, or by design – will prevent us from achieving our set aim by obstructing or disrupting our plans.*

If we accept this definition, then, at the national level, strategy requires the bringing together of all forms of state power to deal effectively with the sudden onset of challenge, threat, adversity or opportunity. The role of strategy is to turn policy into effective action. Consequently, strategy must be driven by coherent thinking appropriate to the circumstances, well informed by verified facts, and guided by clear policy objectives shared by all involved.

The interaction between strategy and policy is crucial. Policy is needed to set the aim; but strategy (by which the aim is implemented) should also determine whether the aim *can* be implemented. Are resources sufficient? Are the plans feasible? Policy needs to lead, but it should not be allowed to trump strategy. A political leader will sometimes try to enforce an aim which strategy advisors calculate is not achievable.[41] Furthermore, because strategy imposes conditions which must reflect, for example, national interest, having a national strategy process will naturally constrain the activities of politicians in power, making it more difficult for them to pursue policies which reflect their personal or party interests rather than the interests of the state they are elected to serve.

Strategy and politics are also inextricably intertwined, and wartime strategy requires the same conditions to be created as does wartime politics. Democracies do strategy in wartime but tend to abandon it in peacetime, because for a country to do strategy effectively implies a degree of societal discipline and possibly the consequent suspension of some civil liberties. It needs a cooperative political process rather than the confrontational process common to parliamentary democracies, and this is very difficult to achieve except in times of great national emergency.

Wartime strategy does need to be top down, with a leader supported by a governmental system that will bring together effectively all forms of political, economic and military power. But strategy should not be the preserve of an individual or a small clique; in a democracy it also needs to be bottom up and to have the mass voluntary consent and active participation of the people. Whereas autocracies can enforce societal discipline through autocratic rule – at least up to a point, as we are currently seeing in Russia – democracies need to inspire societal participation through good governance, leadership and appropriate forms of management.

41 A classic example is the German military High Command warning Hitler not to invade the Soviet Union in 1941. Their objections were based on logistics, overstretch, the unfinished war with Britain and the underestimated strength of the Red Army. Hitler ignored their warnings, convinced that the Red Army would collapse and that he could win a quick decisive victory.

Whilst Putin acknowledges that the West is economically stronger than Russia, he claims that Russia is politically stronger than the West because of his strong centralised rule, and he sees the Western system as offering vulnerabilities which he can exploit through hybrid warfare attacks coordinated through a coherent strategy process. There is a certain degree of truth in this assertion. In historic periods of 'peace' – that is, stability, security, predictability and low rates of societal change (political, economic, technological, social) – strategy in democracies tends to be replaced by management, control, risk aversion, and efficiency (long-term investment, just-in-time delivery, no reserves).

However, once democracies have managed to ready themselves and to mobilise their populations, they have demonstrated that they can become immensely strong and can outmatch autocracies in political as well as economic strength and resilience. But that does not just happen; it takes effort, determination, courage – and, of course, leadership – to do it.

To reiterate some of the points made previously, achieving this transformation at times of rapid change, as is experienced during large-scale wars, requires management to be adapted to suit the exceptional circumstances and supplemented by leadership; control needs to be supplemented or replaced by command (which requires delegation and trust); risk aversion must be replaced by rewarding risk takers (trial and error must replace error and trial); efficiency supplemented by or replaced by effectiveness, which necessitates maintaining large reserves to deal with the unforeseen and unexpected. Countries, organisations and individuals must be prepared to adapt rapidly and frequently – to change behaviour so as to cope with the unexpected and unforeseeable.

The need for strategy is very clear in a major war, the main characteristics of which are indeed rapid change, constant disruption, and unpredictability. However, today our countries face these challenges as a matter of course because global change has speeded up to wartime rates. As we have noted several times in this study, this puts us in a situation which is tantamount to war, but without the sense of emergency which in wartime makes it possible for governments to introduce the drastic political, economic and social changes necessary.

We will take the UK as our example, but our assessment could be applied in some measure to most liberal democracies. Today we face active threats from hostile actors through terrorism and hybrid warfare attacks. Added to this, we now face the threat of classic 'kinetic' war from Russia, and we also face threats from other causes, such as climate change and infectious diseases, for example Covid-19. So, even without the urgent need to move Western countries onto a defence-ready footing to cope with the war in Ukraine, a very strong argument can be made that we should already be adapting our national governance in this direction and rebuilding our ability to think and act strategically.

Our immediate challenge, therefore, is how do we create a systemic process of strategic thinking now, in peacetime, to support our strategic action; and how do we communicate that to our populations to get their voluntary – and ideally enthusiastic – participation?

The UK's National Security Strategy (NSS) 2025[42]

The National Security Strategy (NSS) is not strategy as we have defined it above, but it does provide an adequate framework on which to base a strategic approach. It identifies the main challenges the UK faces in an era of radical uncertainty and sets out a new Strategic Framework covering all aspects of national security and international policy. The starting point for the document is that the world is rapidly becoming a more uncertain and dangerous place and that defending and promoting UK national interests in today's world is becoming more difficult.

42 Soon after the UK's general election of July 2024, the newly elected Labour Government made a commitment to undertake a strategic defence review. This review was completed and published in June 2025, soon to be followed by reviews of the UK's National Security Strategy and Defence Industrial Strategy. See: HM Government (2025) *National Security Strategy 2025 Security for the British people in a dangerous world.* London. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/685ab0da72588f418862075c/E03360428_National_Security_Strategy_Accessible.pdf (accessed: 02/01/26).

Having assessed the current national and international security situation and likely trends for the future, and having evaluated the specific strengths and skills that the UK can bring to bear, the NSS describes its guiding framework under three 'mutually reinforcing' pillars:

1. The first pillar of the Government's Strategic Framework is: **Security at home**

> *'... to protect our people, bolster the security of our homeland and strengthen our borders against all types of threats, both in the physical and online space.'*

- Defend our territory;
- Make the UK a harder target;
- Build resilience to future threats.

Achieving this requires the UK Government to do three things:

i. Strengthening the defence of UK borders and territorial waters. To do this the Government is, for example, 'investing in new technology to enable front line personnel to carry out more targeted interventions, and increase detections and seizures at the border.'

ii. Take 'new measures to frustrate and deny hostile actors who seek to take advantage of our openness as a democracy' – including increasing cyber and economic security defences – to 'Make the UK a harder target'. The Government therefore state one such thing it will do is bring 'forward the recommendations of the Independent Reviewer of State Threat Legislation, and will draw up new powers – modelled on counter-terrorism – to tackle state threats.'

iii. Become better prepared for potential future threats – like pandemics, disruption to the energy or supply chain, and threats caused by climate change. One action the Government will take to ensure this is investing over £1 billion to create a new network of National Biosecurity Centres – which will strengthen the UK's defences against biological incidents, accidents and attacks.

2. The second pillar focuses on achieving: **Strength abroad**

> *'... by using (and combining) all the levers of state and national power including defence, diplomacy, trade, intelligence, law enforcement, science, technology, education and our cultural reach.'*

This requires three actions to be undertaken by the Government:

- Bolster collective security;
- Renew and deepen our alliances;
- Develop new relationships in new domains.

i. Ensuring collective security remains 'the foundation stone of our strategy to deter and defend against aggression.' For example, since Ukraine's future 'is a vital part of collective security in the Euro-Atlantic area', the UK will continue 'to stand with Ukraine in its self-defence – now and in the future', in order 'to prevent further Russian aggression.'

ii. 'Renew and deepen our alliances'. One way in which the UK will achieve this is by:

> *'... building a new strategic partnership with the EU based on closer cooperation in order to grow the economy, boost living standards, protect our borders and keep the UK safe.'*

This will be supported by the new UK-EU Security and Defence Partnership. Additionally, 'Our science collaboration adds another level to the strategic depth of our relationship.'

iii. 'Develop new relationships in new domains'. The Government will therefore, for example, 'seek a genuine strategic partnership' with India – a country which the UK already has negotiated a free trade deal with.

3. The third pillar aims to: **Increase sovereign and asymmetric capabilities**

- Rebuild our defence industrial base;
- Identify, nurture and protect other sovereign capabilities;
- Pursue asymmetric advantage.

For the UK to increase its sovereign and asymmetric capabilities:

> *'... means reducing our dependence on others, including the ability of adversaries to coerce or manipulate us. But it also allows us to increase our value to allies and to strengthen our hand when we transact business with those who have sovereign assets that we seek access to.'*

The UK must therefore:

i. 'Rebuild our defence industrial base'. One way the Government will do this is to preserve the '"triple lock" commitment, ensuring a continuous at-sea presence, building new submarines and upgrading the fleet.' This will be supported through a £15 billion investment this Parliament into the Sovereign Warhead Programme, plus a £31 billion investment in the Dreadnought programme.

ii. 'Identify, nurture and protect other sovereign capabilities'. Accordingly, for example, the Government's Trade Strategy will put forward:

> *'... plans for more robust trade defence tools to tackle unfair trading practices and ensure that businesses are better supported in a more challenging and geopolitical global trading environment.'*

iii. 'Pursue asymmetric advantage'. The Government will therefore, for example, 'drive innovation in our frontier industries and invest in technologies that will underpin our future economic and military competitiveness.' This will be done through an £86 billion R&D commitment.

The NSS is a mix of assessment, aspirations, proposals and some specific commitments. What it does not do is establish a mechanism for doing strategic thinking and implementation across Whitehall. Only once that is done will the government have the strategy process it needs.

The Strategic Defence Review 2025 (SDR)[43,44]

This SDR has five main pillars:

1. A 'NATO First' approach to deterrence and defence

- The UK will transform its aircraft carriers to become the first European hybrid air wings. They will have fast jets, long-range weapons, and drones.
- Through almost £1 billion in funding, the UK will deliver the first European laser-directed energy weapon in service.
- Up to 7,000 new long-range weapons will be built to provide greater European deterrence. This will support approximately 800 jobs.

2. The need to move to 'warfighting readiness'

- The UK will create a 'New Hybrid Navy'. This will build Dreadnought and SSN-AUKUS submarines and cutting-edge warships and support ships, plus transform the UK's aircraft carriers and introduce new autonomous vessels.
- The British Army will become '10x more lethal'. Full-time troops will increase to at least 76,000 into the next Parliament, combined with greater armoured capability, air defence, communications, artificial intelligence, software, long-range weapons, and land drone swarms.
- The UK will create a 'next-generation RAF'. It will have F-35s, upgraded Typhoons, next-generation fast jets through the Global Combat Air Programme, and autonomous fighters.
- The Sovereign Warhead Programme will receive a £15 billion investment this Parliament. This will support in excess of 9,000 jobs.
- Up to £1 billion will be invested in homeland air and missile defence. A new Cyber and Electromagnetic Command will also be created – which will defend Britain from attacks in the grey zone.

3. Defence as an engine for growth

- This Parliament will see £6 billion invested in munitions – including £1.5 billion in an 'always on' pipeline. Plus, there will be at least six new energetics and munitions factories built, generating more than 1,000 jobs.
- The Government has committed to continuous submarine production. A submarine should be able to be produced every 18 months, due to investment in Barrow and Raynesway. And the AUKUS programme will enable the UK to grow its nuclear-powered attack submarine fleet to up to 12.
- The Government will establish UK Defence Innovation, with £400 million to fund and grow UK-based companies.
- A Defence Exports Office will be created in the MOD.

43 Ministry of Defence (2025) *Strategic Defence Review Making Britain Safer: secure at home, strong abroad*. London. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/683d89f181deb72cce2680a5/The_Strategic_Defence_Review_2025_-_Making_Britain_Safer_-_secure_at_home__strong_abroad.pdf (accessed: 18/07/25).

44 Ministry of Defence (2025) *The Strategic Defence Review 2025 – two-pager*. London. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/683dbe63d23a62e5d32680de/The_Strategic_Defence_Review_2025_-_two-pager.pdf (accessed: 18/07/25).

4. UK innovation to be driven by lessons from Ukraine

- UK export potential will be boosted through doubling the investment in autonomous systems this Parliament.
- Over £1 billion will be invested to integrate the Armed Forces through a new Digital Targeting Web, which will be delivered in 2027.
- There will be a new 'Drone Centre'. This will accelerate the use of autonomous systems across the British Armed Forces.

5. Home defence and resilience: A whole-of-society approach

- A minimum of £7 billion will be invested this Parliament to renew military accommodation. This includes £1.5 billion to repair forces' family housing.
- More opportunities will be created for young people. There will be a 30 per cent increase in cadets by 2030, plus a new voluntary 'gap year' scheme.
- A new UK Strategic Reserve by 2030.
- The Royal Navy will have the responsibility of protecting critical undersea infrastructure.
- A new Defence Readiness Bill will be created, which should give the Government the power in reserve to respond effectively if there were an escalation towards a war involving the UK or an ally.

Just as with the National Security Strategy, this review was also a mix of assessment, aspirations and proposals, although with rather more specific commitments.

The Defence Industrial Strategy 2025 (DIS)[45]

The DIS – also more 'a review' than 'strategy' – redefines the industrial base underpinning the armed forces as including universities, the financial sector and the trade unions.

The key targets of the DIS are:

- To improve the national pool of relevant skills;
- To foster the growth of defence industries in the UK, especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs);
- To increase technological invention and innovation;
- To enhance defence industrial resilience;
- To enable greater international collaboration;
- To fix defence procurement. The DIS acknowledges the serious failings in this area in recent years and places great stress on the need to create an effective national acquisition and procurement system.

45 Ministry of Defence (2025) *Defence Industrial Strategy: Making Defence an Engine for Growth*. London. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68bea3fc223d92d088f01d69/Defence_Industrial_Strategy_2025_-_Making_Defence_an_Engine_for_Growth.pdf (accessed: 02/01/26).

To enable the Government to effect improvements in a crucial sector, the DIS establishes levers of change which include:

- Five regional defence growth clusters with local structures modelled on Team Barrow, the organisation set up to support the improvement of Barrow-in-Furness;
- An Office for Small Business Growth inside the MOD, modelled on the US Department of Defense's Office of Small Business Programs;
- Five Defence Technical Excellence Colleges, aimed at remedying the shortfall in specialist Further Education (FE);
- An Office of Defence Exports, which moved from the Department for Business and Trade into the MOD;
- UK Defence Innovation, replacing the existing ineffectual structure to encourage invention, innovation and commercialisation of ideas;
- A Universities Defence Alliance to structure science and technology research explicitly towards national security goals;
- The Defence Industrial Joint Council, designed to bring together all relevant interested bodies, including strong representation from SMEs.

To complete the DIS process, a National Armaments Director has been appointed to centralise procurement across all services, and it will require the agreement of a Defence Investment Plan, yet to be fully actioned.

Where next?

These policy documents, it must be emphasised, are the beginning rather than the end of a strategy process. They have been criticised by commentators as being strong on rhetoric but light on specific plans for implementation and funding. Whilst that is not an inaccurate comment, it should not be allowed to obscure the point that they are important milestones: they are definitive, even if not decisive.

It should also be recognised that the studies and their recommendations or proposals were, of necessity, limited in scope, scale and detail because the authors' teams appear to have been operating under political constraints. They were dissuaded from raising public alarm or recommending the more radical and drastic changes which the situation demands. They could not make recommendations which would commit the Government to significant increases in spending. They could not question the assumption that the US would continue to remain a dependable ally.

Despite these constraints, the authors' teams were able to flag up clearly the important issues in these documents. These documents represent only one step in the process of transformation now facing the UK's armed forces, security and industrial institutions, but that transformation has begun.

There is, however, still a lot of work to be done. It is encouraging to see the MOD setting up a serious economic warfare team and the work being done to stimulate the development of drones. However, the understanding of the need to move to war readiness is still, in the main, confined to that one government department, and even within the MOD there are many areas where the essential transformation of thinking has yet to take hold. Until there is the same degree of understanding an action in all other government departments, there will be only limited progress towards war readiness.

The role of education and civil society in preparing the country for war

Education is the domain of government absolutely crucial to any national war effort. This is the prime means by which a country's intellectual capital is nurtured and through which it can be harnessed to deal with a national emergency, such as war. It is rightly flagged up in the Government's recent National Security Strategy and Defence Industrial Strategy.

This is *not* about teaching children military skills, but the national curriculum must provide the basis by educating pupils in international affairs, in defence and security issues, and in how to use the implements of the democratic process. As disinformation and other aspects of hybrid warfare distort facts and strive to destroy the concept of truth, everyone – even primary school children – need to be taught discernment, how to check facts, and when and whom not to trust.

To move to war readiness, higher education needs to be restructured so that it supports the UK's defence needs through its courses, educating students in the disciplines important to defence. Governments are already alert to the fact that rapid changes in technology and the rapid evolution of society require young people to be better trained and educated in core subjects such as maths and language skills. Government departments and private companies in the defence sector can already identify a serious shortfall of graduates in specific technical degree subjects, even at current levels of defence requirements. This is already hampering our national ability to ramp up the production of essential military equipment to supply Ukraine and re-equip ourselves. If we now accept that, in the near future, we may have to expand our defence and national security systems rapidly to ensure our own national survival in the face of foreseeable – perhaps even imminent – threats, then it is important that means are found now to encourage young people to study the key subjects, rather than choosing other university courses.

A straightforward way to do this could be to waive tuition fees for well-qualified students who are prepared to sign up to do degrees in the key subjects. Doubtless there are other ways in which this could be done. The important thing is that the issue needs to be tackled *now* because building up expertise takes time.

A more difficult issue to tackle is that in UK universities, fees paid by foreign students are much higher than those paid by UK students. Consequently, many universities have become reliant on the funding stream that comes with foreign student enrolment. As the world moves closer to confrontation between democracy and autocracy, we cannot continue educating those who do not wish us well and who would wish to replace our system with theirs.

Furthermore, dependence on foreign students makes it very difficult for government and industry to contract with university departments to work on sensitive issues of importance for national defence and security in case the Intellectual Property (IP) is stolen by a foreign power. Again, this is a problem which needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

China has bought a considerable degree of influence in the UK and other European academic research establishments. This works at every level, from actively sponsoring the research establishments themselves, funding research, sending Chinese nationals to study as undergraduate and postgraduate students, where they have access to sensitive data and, most worryingly, attempting to constrain criticism of China in university teaching and research.[46]

There is an even more fundamental problem that moving to war preparedness will expose in our education system. Preparing for war requires mobilising not just troops and defence industry; all aspects of the nation will gradually find themselves directed to work based on the priorities of winning the war rather than on pre-war priorities which they may have identified is their own personal interest. A country facing war cannot afford to educate a large percentage of its population in subjects which do not contribute to the war effort in some way.

46 Margolis, J. (2025) 'China and the truth about the stealth takeover of UK universities' in *The Independent*, 8th November. Available at: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/china-education-universities-influence-takeover-b2860919.html (accessed: 02/01/26).

We should expect to see many university courses close down, perhaps some universities closing, for lack of students. Universities will need to operate on much lower administrative overheads. Further to the point made above about free tuition for those who enrol on courses crucial to our defence effort, the government may have to reconsider the entire mechanism by which universities are funded.

Beginning during secondary education, it will be necessary to expand courses and apprenticeships in those technical skills and trades which war will demand. We will need (indeed, we already need) many more engineers, welders, electricians and so forth to build classic weapons and equipment of war. We are likely to need even more people trained in IT and electronic engineering skills for the electronic and drone warfare which dominates today's battlefield. Computer-aided design and 3D printers are likely to be key weapons in any future conflict. We do not know what new weapons might emerge in the near future, but they are likely to require operators with a good educational basis in science and technology.

The transformation of our education system will need to go further. The more the UK moves into war preparedness, the more everyone must expect to have to do work of some sort to contribute to the war effort. The need to make the most of the country's human resources means that all parts of society must expect direction in what they learn and in the work they do. Our educational system will have to change to make this possible and to increase the capacity for robustness and resilience in our society. At the moment in the UK there are almost a million young people not in employment education or training, only a third of whom are registered as job seekers.[47] People in this situation, plus those currently employed in non-essential service jobs, must expect to find themselves drafted into war work[48] if the war becomes a long war.

Why state and society require resilience

As the Covid-19 pandemic provided us with a good example of societal participation and resilience, it is worth exploring this quality in more detail because, like strategy, the term is bandied about without people really thinking through exactly what it means for a country. Indeed, it is sometimes seen as an acceptable compensation for a country's lack of preparation to withstand catastrophe.[49]

Resilience[50] is a vital quality. It is the ability to withstand a brutal blow and to 'bounce back' – to recover either partly or, ideally, fully. It is the emergency response to shocks or pressures that penetrate a system, disrupt its normal functioning and threaten its existence. It involves three phases:

1. A severe, existential shock, threatening vital life systems;
2. A period of debilitating, painful damage;
3. A partial or full recovery.

47 ONS (2025) 'Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), UK: November 2025', 20th November. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/bulletins/youngpeoplenotineducationemploymentortrainingneet/november2025#:~:text=3.,-June%202025)%20%5BNote%201%5D (accessed: 02/01/26).

48 We have referred elsewhere in this study to the example of women being drafted into factories to build Spitfires or onto farms to grow food during the Second World War.

49 For an excellent exploration of Resilience in all its aspects, see: Hall, R. (2023) *Building Resilient Futures.* London: Austin Macauley.

50 For a detailed explanation of resilience in a practical setting, see Ries, T. (2016) 'Forward Resilience: Protecting Society in an Interconnected World Working Paper Series', John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. Available at: https://archive.transatlanticrelations.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/resilience-forward-article-15-ries-final.pdf (accessed: 02/01/26), from which this summary is drawn.

Resilience is thus dangerous, and it hurts. It involves shock or extreme pressure that penetrates and rattles the system. It also involves suffering and sacrifice to absorb, survive and endure the pressure.

To be resilient, one must meet four conditions:

- Anticipate and prepare, so that any response will be coherent and will avoid a knee-jerk reaction;
- Survive the initial shock, protecting the vital core of the system while sacrificing system peripherals as needed;
- Endure a period of pain and handicap, sacrificing whatever is necessary in order to keep the vital core of the system alive as long as abnormal and debilitating conditions prevail;
- Recover and reanimate the vital core and some or all of the peripherals of the system.

Recovery is more than bouncing back to the *status quo ante bellum*. After such a blow, the situation will have changed so much that going back is not an option. It is about bouncing forward to a new state which requires readjustment and adaptation whilst preserving vitality.

A crucial factor in recovery is the ability to distinguish between:

- The vital core of the system, which includes the function of the system, and the Vital Life Systems that sustain it. For instance, the core life-sustaining systems in the head and torso of the human body;
- The peripherals of the system, consisting of the services it provides and various secondary support functions and their surface manifestations. For instance, the arms and legs and other body parts which one may lose but still survive.

The vital core must be protected and sustained at all costs. Peripherals can be sacrificed. When these consist of the comforts, rights and lives of ordinary citizens it is hard for leaders of democratic societies which have enjoyed several generations of peace, security and prosperity to recognise this brutal fact.

If a government chooses to assume that the only thing needed is 'resilience', rather than investing in preparations (a) to ensure robustness and (b) to deter an aggressor, that government must be prepared for the consequent pain and explain this to voters. Resilience is beneficial and life sustaining. But it is not *on its own* an optimal approach to security. Nor is it cheap. It should be understood as only one element in a holistic approach to achieving national security.

The fact is, most leaders and citizens of our affluent democratic societies are not prepared for that kind of shock to the state which would trigger the resilience process described previously, either mentally, operationally or financially. It would be very instructive for the UK to study the model of how Nordic countries approach resilience as part of their total defence concept which combines all elements of state and society, including the private sector.

Chapter 4: Financing our defence

War necessitates significant changes to the financial system

Economics is the basis of any country's ability to wage protracted war. Financing war is a large and massively important topic to which this study cannot do justice. But it is worth reviewing the interaction between war and finance as a basis for beginning the discussion as to how we should now begin preparing our financial systems to adapt so that they can support a national effort to shift the economy towards coping with warfighting readiness. In any move of the country towards a wartime system, the private sector will have a huge role to play and its relationship with government will be crucial. Nowhere is this truer than in the financial sector. There is also the very serious issue of how best we spend our money to maximise our fighting performance. Ukraine is providing us with a model for dealing with many aspects of this issue. But mature democracies such as the UK will face this challenge just as much as Ukraine.

Maintaining government revenues is of prime importance. The first financial casualty of war is the nation's taxation system. Excise duties shrink due to the lower volume of trade. VAT falls significantly and the luxury goods sector collapses. Ground transport, ships and aircraft are transferred to military duties. Capital gains tax becomes irrelevant. Profits can be capped. Income tax increases across the board, something which particularly affects lower incomes; the current income tax profile (where 25 per cent of taxpayers pay around 75 per cent of the tax paid) is quickly inverted. The government has to raise money in a significantly different way.

One such way in past years has been to issue domestic war bonds (in effect, loans to the government) in the national currency, and to get pension funds, institutional investors, banks and so forth to buy into this measure. As take-up will be seen as a barometer of support for the government, government is likely to announce that the bonds are 'oversubscribed'. But in fact, as was the case in the First World War, they may well be undersubscribed and therefore need to be underwritten. Their success will depend on the combination of trust in the government and the government's skilful handling of their issue.

Financial system resilience and stability must be another primary consideration, on the assumption that the system will be attacked. Plans need to be put in place to transform and protect the financial sector, plus a planning mechanism which can adapt those plans when events or enemy interference disrupt them. It is most important to keep the system working and to take pre-emptive action to manage volatility (capital controls, closing exchanges, trading and so forth). But in today's world it is much more difficult to do so purely on a national basis because the existence of so many grey markets and off-market trading means that the government will find it difficult to control.

Based on precedent, the (sequential and overlapping) stages to achieving this resilience and stability might be as follows: (i) stability and liquidity; (ii) early incremental financing (within the first 12 months); (iii) medium-term financing (1 to 3 years); and (iv) longer-term financing (over 3 years).

When to implement the changes necessary to the financial system for a move towards warfighting readiness is a very delicate decision. At some point, governments will be forced to grasp the nettle and address their levels of debt, amend their current national economic structures and cut down long-established government spending patterns so as to increase defence expenditure. Today, the key issue for sovereign bonds in all major economies is the yield curve, which should tip down as the rate declines. Currently in the UK this is 4.43 per cent.[51] But, due to the welfare debt burden of Western economies, that curve will rise in the longer term because of the cost of the debt.

51 As of 7th January 2026. World Government Bonds (2025) *United Kingdom Government Bonds - Yields Curve*. Available at: https://www.worldgovernmentbonds.com/country/united-kingdom/ (accessed: 07/01/26).

Sovereign debt is a serious problem for all the leading Western economies; we are experiencing the almost inexorable growth of debt as a percentage of GDP. This is unprecedented since the end of the Second World War. The US gross debt burden has reached 124 per cent of GDP.[52] If the US simply maintains its existing commitments, by 2050, the Congressional Budget Office calculates that this will have risen to 195 per cent of GDP.[53] Even to service this level of debt load will take 10 to 15 per cent of the national budget – an unsustainable situation.

The UK is also in a similarly difficult situation.[54] The UK's Office for Budget Responsibility's reports on the *Economic and fiscal outlook* for the country project that public debt will almost triple from under 100 per cent of GDP to over 270 per cent of GDP over the next 50 years.[55] Even without the pressures of preparing for war, this trend is unsustainable in the long term.

So, whether they face a war or not, the big challenge for established Western democracies is that, if there is no change in the level of state-delivered services, they will not be able to sustain those services; the state will be bankrupted and the services will collapse. Since the 1976 International Monetary Fund crisis it has been unthinkable that the state might be unable to manage its debts and go bankrupt; it no longer is. There is no new paradigm that says governments can borrow limitlessly. This crisis faces not only the US but all G7 countries within the next 20 years, especially Italy, France, the UK, Germany and Japan. Younger democracies in Central Europe are not in such a difficult situation as they have not yet amassed such levels of debt.

The only way so far devised for countries to escape this problem is to create financial headroom in the public sector, that is, spend less on pensions, health, welfare. This of course presents a huge political problem, even without considering the extra strain that war and even preparation for war will put on national economies. Those economies can weather a short crisis, but a long-term war will make things very difficult indeed.

With the heightened awareness of the danger of war, the Baltic states, Scandinavian countries and Poland are all now trying to find spare money within their public budgets to spend on defence. Yet even these countries are finding it difficult to get their populations to engage whilst the war has not actually spread to their territory.

Consequently, it is very important for all democratic governments to begin now to consult with their financial industries to work out a 'war finance plan', detailing how they will finance (a) preparing for (b) waging and (c) recovering from future war. These are all different things with different requirements that need to be met.

As we have noted elsewhere in this study, preparing for war requires both the government and private sectors to focus on how to scale up the industries by which the armed forces will be equipped, and how to finance equipment production and national mobilisation on a sustainable basis – we cannot assume that any war will be short.

A truly sensitive moment is when the government considers that it needs to transfer from merely preparing for war to actually being ready to fight it. That is the moment when market chaos is most likely, exacerbated by enemy efforts to precipitate it. There will be a rush to withdraw foreign investment, and domestic investors will likely try to withdraw cash and assets. The classic prescription to counter this is to act quickly to prevent these withdrawals, freezing assets and closing banks before a meltdown. However, internet banking makes it so quick and easy to withdraw or transfer assets that there is a technical problem for governments in how to apply such a freeze, and they may be significant opportunities for an enemy to exploit this situation.

52 As of 7th January 2026. Fiscal Data (2025) *What is the national debt*? Available at: https://fiscaldata.treasury.gov/americas-finance-guide/national-debt/ (accessed: 07/01/26).

53 Congressional Budget Office (2020) *The 2020 Long-Term Budget Outlook*. Available at: https://www.cbo.gov/publication/56598#:~:text=Term%20Budget%20Outlook (accessed: 07/01/26).

54 Office for Budget Responsibility (2025) *Economic and fiscal outlook – November 2025*. London. Available at: https://obr.uk/docs/dlm_uploads/OBR_Economic_and_fiscal_outlook_November_2025.pdf (accessed: 02/01/26).

55 OBR (2024) 'Public debt projected to exceed 270 per cent of GDP by the mid-2070s', 12th September. Available at: https://obr.uk/public-debt-projected-to-exceed-270-per-cent-of-gdp-by-the-mid-2070s/ (accessed: 07/01/26).

If a country faces the situation of a direct and unambiguous physical attack, as Ukraine did in February 2022, then there would be no constraints at all on the government acting quickly and robustly. The difficulty comes during a long period of heightening tension, when it is difficult to know when to act and when not to act. It would be prudent for governments to wargame this situation frequently, as used to be done during the Cold War with WINTEX (an exercise for political and military leaders responsible for making the key decisions to go to war),[56] to keep practising responses, monitoring the likely impact and amending plans accordingly. In the UK, the City does quarterly resilience checks, especially of IT, to guard against systemic breakdown, and the already weekly cyber-attacks on financial institutions and communications networks do serve the purpose of keeping staff alert to this danger. Regrettably, the UK Government has withdrawn legislation to require a 'Resilience Statement' from large corporations.

Economic warfare means that these financial preparations need to be supplemented by plans to sustain the economy in the event of damage; energy and food security will be particularly important – both are a specific UK vulnerability. The UK's energy infrastructure is susceptible to physical and cyber sabotage. The UK produces only 58 per cent of the food it needs,[57] the remainder being imported. Before 1939 this domestic production figure was only about 30 per cent.[58] We have forgotten that blockade of food supplies was a serious problem in both world wars, complacently assuming that today we will always be able to buy food from abroad.

As hybrid warfare attacks become more prevalent, the issue of national economic security becomes more acute. Fortunately, at least within the MOD in the UK, this is understood and a strong team has been established to address both the defensive and offensive aspects of economic warfare. But, once again, this is an issue which needs to be addressed by many government departments in collaboration. It is legitimate to ask: 'What are the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' plans for moving to war readiness?'

In planning for recovery, it will be important to take into account that this is likely to be more difficult and costly because, with modern weapons, economic infrastructure can be destroyed more effectively, at less cost to the aggressor. The specific targeting of energy supplies is now a major feature of the Ukraine war. Moreover, there will be no 'sugar daddy' on whom Europe can rely, as we relied on the US after 1945.[59] Indeed, in the event of any potential US-China conflict, the US may have to look to Europe as its sugar daddy to help restore a badly damaged North America.

The ramifications of all this are considerable. They touch directly on the need for a new form of politics addressed previously, because the issues facing the state would be so severe that it would be a disaster if the search for solutions was complicated or even prevented by issues of politics.

But note, this latent threat will become patent even without the added burden of preparing for war. It may in fact be that if we grasp the importance now of preparing for war, it will also prepare us to deal with the problem of rapid change which has already overtaken the ability of many democratic governments to adapt and stay fit for purpose.

The other side of this coin is that, today, when hybrid warfare uses everything as a weapon, our financial sectors will themselves be battlefields well before any war starts. The war itself could actually start with a financial crisis, which might change many of the assumptions to be addressed. The UK Office for Budget Responsibility's *Economic and fiscal outlook* report of November 2025[60] concluded that UK public finances are vulnerable to future shocks. Both our enemies and our competitors are already attempting to exploit our vulnerabilities. We must expect this to increase dramatically in the run up to any war.

56 English Heritage. *Cold War*. Available at: https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/story-of-england/20th-century/cold-war/ (accessed: 23/12/25).

57 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (2025) 'Food statistics in your pocket', 9th April. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/food-statistics-pocketbook/food-statistics-in-your-pocket (accessed: 23/12/25).

58 See evidence presented here: UK Parliament (2011) 'House of Commons Oral Evidence Taken Before the Environmental Audit Committee. Sustainable Food', 11th May. Available at: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmenvaud/c879-i/c87901.htm (accessed: 02/01/26).

59 It is perhaps worth noting that the Marshall Plan (1948 to 1951) which did so much to help European recovery was not as altruistic as it is sometimes presented. It went a long way to helping the rapid civilian reorientation of the US economy and enabled the dominance of the US dollar by facilitating dollar payments for reconstruction, especially in machine tools, where the US no longer faced competition from Japanese and German manufacturers.

60 Office for Budget Responsibility (2025) *Economic and fiscal outlook – November 2025*. London Available at: https://obr.uk/docs/dlm_uploads/OBR_Economic_and_fiscal_outlook_November_2025.pdf (accessed: 23/12/25).

We must therefore be aware of the weaponisation of finance. But, just as finance can be used as a weapon against democracies, it can also be used by democracies. In the circumstances of the Ukraine war, for example, it could be used both to disrupt sources of finance for Russia (for example, to drive down the price of oil and gas through promoting non-Russian supply and substitution) and to deny Russia access to key resources by buying up the market commodity futures.

Insurance (that is, backstop financing) is a very important tool to protect the stability of markets, especially against risks which are difficult to quantify, such as damage inflicted by a malign actor in war or by natural causes in peacetime. Structures to guarantee and backstop items which would become difficult to price privately assume great importance, and London is the global leader of the insurance world. The key issue here is defining what constitutes a war risk in the light of today's hybrid warfare. The traditional definitions of war are now inadequate. Updating these definitions is crucial to maintaining access to insurance: the recent attacks by the Houthis have shown how important this is, especially for shipping, but it applies equally to other critical assets. The cyber-attack on Jaguar Land Rover in autumn 2025 is another example, as we noted in Chapter 3.

The existing model for this is Catastrophe Insurance, good UK examples being Pool Re (to respond to terrorist attacks) and the more recent Flood Re (to respond to climate change). By putting in place a large backstop facility which insurers can access for a fee subject to conditions being fulfilled, these government-backed examples have created a viable private sector market. The attraction of such guarantees is that they absorb less of the government balance sheet as, even in war, there is a probability weighting to insurance being triggered and conditionality reducing the risk of claims.

Other factors will come into play in any future war, factors which the UK, for example, did not have to face during the 20th century. These are factors which are not purely financial but in which finance interacts with other key issues such as weapons supply. For example, who is fighting? If the US is involved and under threat, then there is a risk that the requirements of the US will crowd out others who currently rely on the US to supply them with weapons or ammunition. Again, to which countries at risk does Britain have alliance commitments? Quite a few NATO combatants do not have the resources to stand alone and would have to be supported financially.

And how might we deal with sovereign creditworthiness? The above considerations point to the desirability of seeking wider sources of finance in the event of war or of the need to prepare for war, rather than relying on London and New York alone. Once China is ruled out, the Global South will probably become the focus of attention. Any major war is likely to give an impetus to the development of the Global South and to see a transfer of power across the globe, because the Global South sits on a wealth of natural assets, much of which is not yet exploited, which war will make desirable and therefore more valuable. This is yet another area where preparations can be made now which would facilitate the development of new relationships, if and when the time comes for these to be necessary.

Funding defence for war rather than for peace

One of the lessons of the Ukraine war which Western countries can and should study now is how they can provide a better funding framework to support the development of their national defence capability and armed forces in peacetime to enable those bodies to prepare better and more effectively to defend the nation when war threatens.

The first consideration – which does not appear to be the case today in many Western countries – is that, whilst funding is obviously a limiting factor, the first thing that a country (not only its armed forces) must establish is what it actually *needs* for its defence. Only when that assessment has been made can the country look at what it can afford now, given the potential availability of funds. On that basis, a country can decide on its priorities and plan the stages by which it will acquire necessary capabilities and capacities, depending on the evolving assessment of the threat.

All too often, countries procure equipment and capabilities without having an overall plan based on what is needed to adapt and fight a future war. Instead, plans are constrained by what is considered to be affordable, based on peacetime assumptions. This is often reinforced by internal pressures to maintain the existing military structures, and by what defence industry wishes to offer. Those plans – rather than a careful consideration of the real needs of national security and defence – then dictate policy. The system becomes inflexible because vested interests prevent the plan from changing. The ability to adapt is lost.

The problem is that, in peacetime, the priorities of national defence tend to be sidelined in favour of other programmes and policies. This is despite the fact that, unlike other elements of the national economy, defence – even in peacetime – is subject to external factors beyond the prediction or control of the national treasury, factors to which it will need to respond.

One of these factors is scientific and technological innovation. This develops at varying speeds and in different sectors of the economy over time, often unpredictably. As concerns defence, it generates new weapons which armed forces must keep abreast of and which require significant investment through procurement and through amendments to training, logistics and organisation.

Failure to keep pace with rapid technological change may render a country's armed forces obsolete and a waste of national investment. Worse, if that failure is not recognised, then government and commanders tend to have an inflated illusion of their national power, which can lead them astray in their decisions. Armenia's failure to keep pace with Azerbaijan's development of drone technology (which led to the former's defeat in the Nagorno-Karabakh war of 2020) is a good example. It is a failure not unknown in many NATO countries.

A second external influence is the presence of a potential enemy whose actions will pose a threat and over whose behaviour the country in question has little or no control. The ability of any such enemy to wage war must be taken into account and prepared for, even though the assessment of that enemy's intentions may fluctuate over time and may defy prediction.

Calls for increased spending to improve defence capability and capacity too often ignore the two other critical factors because they are rather more difficult both to articulate and to implement. One factor is to improve the way the available money is spent. The other is to improve the way it is provided.

Addressing the latter issue is particularly difficult when the government calculates its finances on an annual basis. That makes it awkward to plan and budget for large-scale, costly projects spread over many years. But when those large projects change significantly within their lifetime, often growing in cost, that planning can seriously disrupt a government's efforts to balance the books.

Treasury controls on stock holdings pressurise defence ministries to get rid of older equipment and spares – which military common sense says should be kept as a reserve – and perversely also rewards the decommissioning of that equipment which is *newest and most capable* (since it is worth the most and will consequently add the most to the financial value of the held stock). As an example of perfectly serviceable older equipment retaining its value, note that Ukraine is using 3,000 Maxim machine guns (a First World War design) taken out of reserve stock. They are proving very effective in the counter-drone role.

Peacetime thinking rewards the military for concentrating the maintenance of a specific important item of equipment, such as an aircraft type, in one place to create the maximum efficiency. But that efficiency becomes a vulnerability because the enemy then only has one target to destroy to render the fleet unserviceable. A UK National Audit Office report of 16th July 2007, *Transforming logistics support for fast jets*, once praised the MOD for shedding a number of decentralised sites and concentrating all the deep maintenance and refit of jet engines in a single location, RAF Marham.

The less effort invested in R&D at a time of rapid technological change, the more likelihood there is of major weapons projects developing unforeseen problems and incurring extra costs during the later stages of their development. This leads to accusations of waste and incompetence in procurement, which undermine the reputation of defence in the eyes of government accountants and makes them less sympathetic to helping defence cope with its budgetary shortfalls.

The immense effort required to bring a large defence project from concept to production makes those involved very loath to amend radically (and particularly to cancel) projects, even when technical or battlefield developments change suddenly. This can result in the equipment being no longer appropriate for doing the task for which it was designed.

The fundamental lesson is that a country's defence establishment should have a significant degree of control over its money supply. It needs to be able to plan its expenditure over many years, allowing it to save money in one year but to spend more in subsequent years so as to meet fluctuating requirements. The armed forces need to be able to cancel equipment items when technological or other developments render these no longer necessary. As the most desirable quality is adaptability, the MOD must be able to identify and fund sources of invention (small companies, university departments and so forth) safely, directly and easily.

We need to be able to entrust our national defence procurement process to those who can assess what our armed forces need and buy the essential equipment which will provide for that adaptability which the Ukraine war is demonstrating to be *the* essential quality for victory. For example, we are currently seeing Ukraine integrating scientists and small company technical inventors directly with frontline troops, bypassing both defence ministry bureaucracies and major defence industry producers. This is enabling Ukraine to adapt equipment much more rapidly so as to maintain its technological edge over Russia and to produce new types of equipment created from advanced technology acquired through unorthodox means and used in ways very different from those intended by the manufacturer.

The growing problem of investment

Major investors are increasingly demanding that companies in which they invest must comply with stringent Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) criteria. These ESG criteria provide a set of standards by which the behaviour of the company the investors are interested can be measured. This screening is most commonly used to check a company's green/climate change credentials or spot their risky and unethical practices.

In the UK, some smaller or medium-sized defence industry companies (that part of the defence industrial sector which generates most of the invention and innovative ideas) are now finding it difficult to attract investment on ESG grounds, making weapons being seen as in some way 'unethical' by some investors. Unless and until this issue can be dealt with robustly by the City and by the Government, our ability to rebuild our much-diminished defence industry will be gravely compromised.[61]

Another aspect of investment is the extent to which, in today's circumstances, countries that are potentially hostile are permitted, even encouraged, to buy into areas of the economy important to national security, such as critical national infrastructure, or are allowed to buy companies producing crucial components for defence equipment, such as machine tools and microchips. In many democracies, belief that war was unthinkable resulted in governments permitting these investments and purchases on the grounds that they were economically desirable and constituted no more than 'inward investment'. Fortunately, the dangers of this attitude are increasingly being recognised and, in some places, steps are being taken to protect key national economic assets. But in other places, the problem still persists.

61 For a wide-ranging article covering this point well, see Hague, W. (2023) 'British complacency over defence has to end', in *The Times*, 20th November. Available at: https://www.thetimes.com/world/russia-ukraine-war/article/britains-been-complacent-about-defence-for-too-long-f8tj0tfqk (accessed: 23/07/25).

Sanctions are also being put in place to deny Russia and other hostile states access to key Western technology. But Russia has made strenuous efforts – and has been very successful – at evading these sanctions with the connivance of other states, and probably even of some Western companies. Part of the problem here resides in the fact that Western officials in government departments not immediately concerned with national defence fail to recognise that sanctions used as a weapon are affected by the same 'measure-countermeasure' principle of warfare which apply to tanks and other battlefield weapons. We build a tank; the enemy builds an anti-tank weapon. We improve the tank's armour; the enemy improves the anti-tank weapon, and so on. We must expect Russia to evade sanctions, and we must adapt and improve the sanctions accordingly and be prepared to continue that adaptation to keep the sanctions effective.

So successful has been the penetration of Western financial and economic institutions that we are now seeing serious clandestine Russian attempts to acquire key Western assets behind a false front. This is, moreover, not a situation which we face only with Russia. In terms of investment, many Western democracies, such as the UK, are very vulnerable because of their reliance on China. This is not only a question of China buying technology companies, stealing IP and investing in our Critical National Infrastructure (CNI). We have already referred to the importance of lucrative Chinese fee-paying students to many of our universities, which imperils the safety of our national IP as well as making it very difficult for defence contractors to use the university as a source of talent. Chinese investment in other sectors of the economy is also very significant, and the private sector would be very reluctant to forgo that investment.

For democracies to move more onto a defence-ready footing requires us to take these issues more seriously: to find ways to increase investment in defence industry and relevant technology,[62] making it easier and more attractive for private investment; to pursue breaches of sanctions assiduously; to put a stop to Russian money laundering in the West, particularly in London; and to increase our efforts to protect our key economic assets and intellectual property. IP is often forgotten when measuring national defence assets, but it is the key to the innovation and rapid adaptation that wins wars.

For our governments, societies, and business communities to understand and deal with the fact that not just Russia, but also China and other countries, may pose an existential threat to us, and that we need to deal with this accordingly, significantly increases the weight and complexity of the burden they need to carry as they move towards undertaking the transition to a more resilient and adaptable system.

62 The UK's National Security Strategic Investment Fund, a joint government-business organisation, is a good start in this direction. British Business Bank. *National Security Strategic Investment Fund*. Available at: https://www.british-business-bank.co.uk/national-security-strategic-investment-fund/ (accessed: 23/07/25).

Chapter 5: Staying abreast of military, economic and technological change: Implications for military organisation, training and equipment

Despite rapid change, some things in war stay the same

In reporting the Ukraine war, many journalists have found themselves focusing on the impact of new technology on the battlefield, but at the same time expressing astonishment that at times the battlefield resembles the First World War. They refer to articles appearing in recent decades about the impending revolution in warfare and wonder when this will actually happen. In fact, a more important question is: what might that technological revolution look like, and can we indeed foresee how it will develop?

Wars can be *revolutionary* in the Marxist sense of the term, that is, because they bring about rapid social, technological, political and economic change which overwhelms the ability of societies to adapt, causing the collapse of obsolete and sclerotic governmental structures. But in military terms, wars tend to be *evolutionary* and, although that evolution can sometimes be pretty quick, it is rarely discontinuous.

If the war is on a small scale in terms of time or space, then technological advantage can allow one side to gain total victory quickly, as Azerbaijan did over Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh war of 2020. This can lead to observers and analysts drawing the lesson that the overwhelming advantage conferred by that technological advantage is normal and can be applied in all phases of future wars. But if victory is not so quickly achieved and the defender has sufficient resilience to survive the initial period of war and respond, then this calculation changes fundamentally.

The scale of the war will grow until it engages all the states' economic and societal aspects as well as all their military ones. Front line armies become refurbished with mobilised troops using perforce older weaponry. This means that, in practice, all large wars are likely to be fought with a mixture of old and new weapons (and associated tactics) and show clear features of the past, the present and the future. It is the outcome of fighting battles, not pre-war theorising, which delivers the verdict on what is obsolete and what is not, and what are 'sunrise capabilities' and what are 'sunset capabilities'.

New technology, however effective, does not automatically make old technology obsolete. This has to be learned from the reality of armed conflict. It is this intense, lethal measure-countermeasure cycle which drives invention and innovation on the battlefield and in the research laboratory. In practice, that often means very large losses of personnel and equipment when the old meets the new for the first time.

So intense had the political agonising been in Western countries about whether to give Ukraine main battle tanks or not, that when these weapons finally made their way onto the battlefield the political exhilaration was somehow transformed into a military expectation that these weapons would 'make all the difference' because they were somehow innately superior to the Soviet-designed tanks already in use on both sides. Surely, they would enable Ukraine to achieve a quick victory? Such was the level of disappointment when this illusion was dispelled that it became clear that not only journalists but also many Western political leaderships lacked an understanding of military realities.

In fact, all current tanks are vulnerable to new weapons which can attack them vertically from above; all tanks will be disabled by a direct strike from a large quantity of high explosives, whether delivered by a landmine or a heavy artillery shell. As the measure-countermeasure (in this case armour to anti-armour) cycle continues to roll with the introduction of new weapons or the innovative use of old weapons, both the Russian[63] and Ukrainian armies must expect to continue to lose a very large number of tanks and armoured vehicles.[64] In every war between peer combatants since they were first used in the First World War, all sides have lost huge numbers of tanks and armoured fighting vehicles. But this has not rendered the tank obsolete yet, and both Russia and Ukraine are keen to have more tanks to put into the field. New precision artillery weapons and precision attack systems using drones have played a very important role in the war, especially when it comes to engaging armoured vehicles which need an almost direct hit; but old-fashioned cannons firing unguided shells have also remained important, for example delivering 'area effect' against troops in the open.

The measure-countermeasure cycle at the moment seems to be moving in favour of anti-aircraft weapons over manned aircraft and cruise missiles. If that remains the case over the next few months, Western supplies of F-16s and other fast jets to Ukraine may on their own make little immediate difference to the battle, despite all the hype that has accompanied this political decision. Much will depend on the cleverness with which the aircraft are used in conjunction with other weapons systems in the constant measure-countermeasure competition.

Other areas where the measure-countermeasure cycle is moving very quickly are in the use of drones and electronic warfare. That both of these technical areas are fields of intensely rapid development has been widely understood and appreciated for some years. But what is emerging from the battlefields of Ukraine is that the combination of these technologies is producing particularly dramatic effects on the battlefield and their impact together is even more important than has been realised to date. At the time of writing, it is estimated that something like 70 per cent of fatalities and injuries endured by the Russian forces on the battlefield are being inflicted by Ukraine's drones,[65] despite the fact that, in electronic warfare alone, Russian capabilities are slightly ahead of Ukraine's.

As the war in Ukraine continues, we are likely to see more such lessons emerging, where the interaction of different technologies produces an impact greater than the sum of the technologies taken separately. At this point, that impact begins to spread beyond the battlefield and into the realms of military organisation[66] and national industry. To put it crudely, armies may need more technical nerds as much as they need fighting soldiers, or they may need to learn how to combine the two qualities. National education systems will need to provide those technically competent people. Industry may have to produce certain specific items of equipment in vastly greater quantities than had ever been envisaged before the war started.

In 2024 we had the drama of Ukrainian President Zelensky sacking his Commander in Chief, General Zaluzhnyi.[67] In a recent paper,[68] the General sought to draw out the lessons of battle and to propose what needed to be done to learn from these lessons and beat Russia. But, inevitably, the lessons of battle lead to the lessons of war, and it is here that the General's comments infringed on the political territory of his President, one of several causes of friction between the two men. But the lesson was clear: Ukraine needs to learn the lessons of war if its armed forces are to implement the lessons of battle.

Nowhere is this more true than in the need for Ukraine to generate mass. This is addressed in the following section.

63 As of 25th January 2025, Ukraine forces had destroyed/captured: 9,859 tanks, 20,545 armoured fighting vehicles, 22,309 artillery systems and 1,263 multiple launch rocket systems, plus 1,050 anti-aircraft warfare systems. Ukraine defenders have also brought down 369 planes and 331 helicopters. See West, L. (2025) 'CORRECTED - Russia estimated to have lost almost 10,000 tanks in Ukraine' on UK Defence Journal, 26th January. Available at: https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/russia-estimated-to-have-lost-almost-10000-tanks-in-ukraine/ (accessed: 23/07/25).

64 For a good illustration of this, see: Biddle, S. (2023) 'Back in the Trenches' in *Foreign Affairs*, 10th August. Available at: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/back-trenches-technology-warfare (accessed: 23/07/25).

65 Adams, P. (2025) 'Kill Russian soldiers, win points: Is Ukraine's new drone scheme gamifying war?', on BBC News, 18th July. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c80p9k1r1dlo (accessed: 23/12/25).

66 Ibid. This article describes a revolutionary new command and control method whereby Ukrainian higher command rewards battlefield fighters with points based on the enemy equipment destroyed (for example, on a certain day, destroying a fuel browser may earn the drone operator many more points than destroying a tank, whereas on a different day the reverse could be true). The operators use their points to order replacement drones from an online supply system. This both effectively rewards success and enables higher command to reprioritise targets quickly across the whole front.

67 For details, see the Earendel paper (2024) *Zelensky and Zaluzhnyi*.

68 Zaluzhnyi, V. (2024) 'On the modern design of military operations in the Russo-Ukrainian war: In the fight for the initiative'. Available at: https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/24400154-ukraine-valerii-zaluzhnyi-essay-design-of-war/ (accessed: 22/07/25).

The crucial importance of mass in war

Armed forces are studying intently the tactical lessons of battle in Ukraine. One of the clearest lessons to emerge so far is the importance of mass: having enough manpower, equipment, weapons and, above all, ammunition to sustain warfighting until victory is achieved. Governments and armies sometimes make the mistake in peacetime of evaluating the military power on the basis of capability, especially technological capability – for example, technological superiority over the potential enemy. But *capability* needs *capacity* to make it militarily useful. Capability, without capacity, is nothing more than potential.

In Ukraine itself, in Russia, in the USA and across Europe, every military is having to acknowledge the lesson of mass. But there is less evidence that Western governments in particular are extrapolating these lessons of battle and drawing from them the larger lessons of war[69] as they apply to a country as a whole, not just to its military and industrial institutions.

Recording a lesson is one thing. Learning the lesson in the sense of being able to do something about it – that is, to rectify the shortfalls and deficiencies and make it possible to generate the necessary mass – is quite another and is proving very painful and difficult for Western democracies.

Almost all NATO nations today face the same specific challenges when it comes to ensuring that they can generate the mass necessary to fight both the kinetic and non-kinetic/hybrid elements of a war. These challenges are:

- To provide people to populate the armed forces and their supporting organisations, to mobilise the human resources necessary to engage in both the kinetic and non-kinetic aspects of the war, and to maintain the flow of people in the face of large-scale casualties;
- To equip those people with appropriate weapons and equipment, including the means to fight disinformation and other hybrid weapons;
- To militarise or mobilise necessary elements of national infrastructure so that these can be harnessed for war, as well as protecting that infrastructure from enemy attack. This includes mobilising:
  - industry, both to convert to the production of war-needed equipment and to continue driving the economy in its new war-ready or wartime form;
  - the financial sector, to fight economic warfare;
  - academia, to provide brainpower for the kinetic and non-kinetic battlefields, as well as to educate people in the skills that war readiness demands;
  - society, to protect the country from all forms of attack and to support all aspects of fighting the war.
- To provide an appropriate organisational structure so that the collective power of these elements of mass can be effectively harnessed.

Countries which cannot meet these challenges risk sustaining armed forces and national security structures which are hollow and which would soon fold under the sustained pressure of major war because they are incapable of expanding and providing the capacity necessary to make their vaunted capability militarily effective. This is not only a waste of national investment, but it also risks giving their governments a dangerous illusion of power and security.

69 This is true for all fields of modern warfare, not just for the kinetic battlefield. At the moment, Russia is conducting a huge hybrid warfare campaign against the West as well as against Ukraine itself. The scale of this effort, the careful research and organisation which goes into the conduct of this form of warfare, and the range and breadth of the threat, are simply not understood and appreciated by Western governments and societies generally. Nor is the sophistication and continuing rapid evolution of this very insidious form of war. There is no Western response, either by active defence or retaliation, to information warfare and other hybrid weapons of war in a way comparable in scale to the pure mass of the Russian attack, let alone its sophistication.

Part of the difficulty is that, for many democracies, it is three generations since they last went through this process and there is no living repository of memory and experience on which to draw. Furthermore, the issue of generating the mass needed to fight a war is extremely complex and so many strands are inextricably intertwined within it. We have chosen, therefore, to separate the issue into three sections – organisation, people and equipment – to make it easier to address. But it is important to understand that all these factors are in constant interaction and that a change in one will necessitate a change in the others.

Climate change and war preparedness

In recent years much attention has been given to, and serious sums of money spent on, making armed forces compliant with climate change regulations. To the extent that this can be done for defence establishments overall, as well as elements of national infrastructure and without burdening armed forces with extra costs or performance limitations, this approach can be justified. But not only has the Ukraine war seriously damaged net zero goals across a large area of Europe, it has shown that the very idea of trying to take carbon emissions into consideration when striving to win a war is totally unrealistic. It makes a mockery of spending defence budgets on trying to produce an electric-powered tank at our current level of technology. It is yet another example of our falling into the trap of producing armies for peace, not war. It shows that we need to relearn military realities.

The reorganisation of nation-wide functions and structures that war will necessitate

The unfortunate heritage of peace

Democracies are now faced with the daunting task of finding ways to prepare their armies, economies and societies for war before the war actually affects them. However, there is now so much vested interest and societal expectation in maintaining national spending patterns (for example, on health, welfare, education and pensions) that have evolved over several generations of peace and security that changing those patterns to meet the new priorities imposed by the need to be ready to fight a war will be exceptionally difficult for democracies. Indeed, it may be politically impossible to change national spending patterns until war is upon us, and that could be too late. Our own government has published policies about this but does not like to talk about them, let alone campaign for the understanding of war and to prepare society for a possible war.

Being ready for war, in its turn, has always been[70] one of the main elements of deterrence. Whilst Western countries have been congratulating themselves on the coherence of their response to Russian aggression, Putin's perception is that much of the West has lost the will to make the painful transition necessary to prepare for war. This has encouraged him to prosecute the war in Ukraine. If he is not disabused of this perception, he will be encouraged to continue his aggression and to expand it westwards beyond Ukraine.

It is important not to underestimate the problem that democratic societies – which have experienced security, stability and prosperity for two or three generations – will have in making the transformation necessary to prepare for war *before that war actually hits them.* We cannot go back in time to recreate a system which we had in the past – for example the system of mobilisation which the UK had at the beginning of the Second World War – because the circumstances which brought that system into being no longer exist. We have to create a new system which both recognises the realities of today yet also prepares the country for what it might have to face in the future – perhaps the near future – however unpleasant that may be. This is an absolutely fundamental issue which demands our immediate attention.

70 *'Igitur quī dēsīderat pācem, præparet bellum'* (translation: 'Therefore let him who desires peace, prepare for war'). Publius Flavius Renatus (Vegetius) (1473) *De Re Militari.*

In today's world, the range of threats that may face Western democracies is so wide and varied that neither the UK nor any other country can afford to create and maintain a standing force fully capable of defending against all possible threats. On 24th January 2024, the then UK Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Patrick Sanders, made headlines[71] by suggesting in a speech that the UK now needed to raise a 'citizen army' as a matter of some urgency, drawing attention to the system by which, for example, Nordic countries prepare to mobilise their national populations in the event of imminent war. It is unfortunate that many of those commenting on his remarks chose to criticise them as simply pleading for a larger Army at the expense of the other services, or misquoted the General as calling for the re-introduction of conscription.

In fact, the former Chief of the General Staff was the first senior UK officer to propose such a radical change to the structuring of the Army, and perhaps the most radical since the move from a national service army to a fully volunteer army in the early 1960s. Whilst he was speaking specifically about the land forces, his suggestion could be considered equally applicable to all branches of the UK Armed Services, although it might be expected to manifest itself differently in each service.

Principles on which to reorganise modern forces

As a basis for the discussion on how to build the forces we need to ensure our security and defence, we would be advised to agree on a set of principles to guide us. The following might provide the starting point for a national discussion as to what this set of principles could be:

- Investing in a very capable intelligence system to give us as much warning as possible of any impending threat, or of opportunities which can be created or exploited in the national interest;
- Expanding our understanding of armed forces to include the concept of 'disciplined forces' (that is, not just 'armed' but also other kinds of forces such as Cyber, Information, Civil Emergency), competent to deal with a wide range of threats;
- Ensuring that, for all these forces, we can: (i) determine the essential minimum core capabilities ('critical mass'), both intellectual and physical; (ii) recruit, prepare and maintain that core; and (iii) continually adapt the core to keep it fit for purpose;
- Devising a system which will enable us to: (i) expand any capability rapidly in the areas of potential or actual threat so as to attain adequate capacity to neutralise the threat; (ii) maintain that capacity for as long as necessary; and (iii) shrink the capacity to the level of the critical mass as soon as the threat has passed or been dealt with;
- Accessing all national talent and resources to achieve the above result, drawing on academia, industry and the rest of society to do so.[72]

As we have noted elsewhere in this study, given the speed of change in today's world, the rapid development of new technologies, the fact that modern warfare uses everything as a weapon, and the fact that threats by hostile actors can be accompanied by pandemics, natural disasters and climate change, it is essential to understand that the defence of the realm is not just the responsibility of the armed forces and MOD. If the above principles are accepted, then they should also be applied not just to defence institutions but to other sectors of government and society on which we rely for our national security.

71 ITV News (2024) 'Britain needs to train and equip a "citizen army" to prepare for war, says Army chief', 24th January. Available at: https://www.itv.com/news/2024-01-24/britain-should-train-and-equip-a-citizen-army-ready-for-war-says-army-chief (accessed: 02/01/26).

72 A classic UK example from the Second World War would be the establishment of the highly successful Bletchley Park code breaking organisation.

Principles for reorganising the direction and management of national security and defence

If we need armed forces which can be expanded rapidly to fight a major war and then reduced in size once the threat has passed – something which must therefore be reflected in their organisation, training, reserves, procurement systems and so forth – then we also need a national health/medical system which can likewise be expanded and contracted, with appropriate organisation, reserves and so forth, just as we need a food security system capable of the equivalent reaction in time of need. This is because it is not just armed forces which fight the war but the whole country, and all national assets will find themselves needing to change significantly.

The health services, for example, will find themselves denuded of expert staff who will be deployed to support the fighting. At the same time, they must expect to be able to cope with much greater number of casualties, both from the battlefield and from attacks on civilian targets. The UK currently sources over two-fifths of its food from abroad[73] and relies on supplies of fertiliser from abroad to grow food in the UK. War may jeopardise these foreign supplies, as it did during the First and Second World Wars.

Policing forces and domestic security services will see a massive rise in their roles as war approaches, and many of the functions of the police will have to change under the pressures of war. During the Cold War, the police training colleges in England and Scotland took this very seriously and conducted 'War Duties' courses to this end.[74]

Focusing on defence, for the MOD to ensure that the nation's armed forces are capable of doing their job whilst constantly adapting to stay abreast of developments in warfare, requires:

- Political leadership knowledgeable in defence and security affairs and well exercised in the skills of collaboration with the military and other forms of power;[75]
- Cabinet-level mechanisms of governance with the competence to assess all aspects of national security and with the authority to demand coordinated action from all government departments;
- A military establishment which is focused on the need to prepare for wartime effectiveness, not driven solely by the need for peacetime financial efficiency;
- All other government departments and, to the extent possible, other sectors of society (academia, business, media and so forth) to be aware of their wartime role and well-practised in the exercise of it, rather than being limited to managing assets according to peacetime standards, and which can cooperate with other government departments to ensure the coordinated employment of all forms of power with the use of kinetic force;
- Civil servants who are technically competent from the bottom to the very top in all aspects of the domain of their department, so that they can turn their department towards supporting and enhancing the warfighting ability of the country;
- A governance system for armed and disciplined forces with the capability and capacity both to adapt to the rapid and drastic changes in warfare and to manage the need to expand and contract those forces rapidly, whilst always maintaining core competences;
- A procurement system for equipment and services which can support such a flexible and adaptable governance system in all its aspects, which is under national control, and which is not vulnerable to the disruption of its supply chain or the compromise of its secrets.

73 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (2025) 'Food statistics in your pocket', 9th April. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/food-statistics-pocketbook/food-statistics-in-your-pocket (accessed: 23/12/25).

74 It is instructive to note that, unlike many European countries, the UK has no 'Third Force' for domestic security, such as the French Gendarmerie or the Spanish Guardia Civil. The UK has always relied on the armed forces to provide 'aid to the civil power' in time of emergency. But the UK armed forces are now arguably too small to be able to provide this function on the scale which a major war would require.

75 For a good explanation of this, see: Cohen, E. A. (2012) *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen and Leadership in Wartime*. Simon & Schuster.

We might envisage four categories of disciplined forces (including both armed and non-armed forces):

- The core standing force: comprising all the essential capabilities for national defence and security. The functions of this core are:

    i. to educate and train the other three categories of force so that the essential capabilities can be expanded in the capacity needed when the threat moves from being latent to patent;

    ii. to provide the structural and intellectual basis for this expansion;

    iii. to maintain a fully prepared and ready cadre for immediate deployment in event of an emergency (which may include a civil emergency, such as flooding). It must be large enough to exercise all these functions simultaneously. It must also be capable of continuous adaptation to stay fit for purpose.

- The auxiliary force: a small, fully trained, ready reserve which can be called upon quickly to fill out the core standing force so that it can perform immediate, essential defence tasks whilst at the same time working to implement the expansion of the forces in the face of a patent threat;
- The reserve force: a large, partially trained force which will allow for serious expansion of capacity in specific areas in response to the perceived need;
- The mobilisation force: the identified and designated, but not yet adequately trained, elements of the population who will be called to service if the threat expands to threaten the country's existence.

Those final two forces play a key role in that they could have other functions in peacetime to cope with, for example, natural disasters and pandemics. They break down the barriers between military and civil emergency requirements and provide a way for non-military and charitable organisations to contribute to widening national security.

Mobilising and deploying national assets in preparation for war

A key feature of the Cold War was that, in addition to keeping significant stockpiles of equipment and ammunition, most NATO countries maintained extensive mechanisms for mobilising not only their populations but all their other national assets in time of need. These included: several kinds of policing forces for maintaining societal security and public order; critical national infrastructure being designed and designated for military use; civil defence organisations; monitoring and command systems for nuclear war; procedures for mobilising land, sea and air transport; coordinated energy supply grids, and so on.

NATO itself provided a source of expertise that its members could draw on to prepare and develop these mechanisms, and a set of standards by which to measure their effectiveness. This had made it possible for NATO members to move their forces rapidly across Europe to reinforce one another, and particularly to reinforce the defensive line across Germany in the event of a Soviet attack.

This whole system has largely been abandoned, and no equivalent system has been maintained and extended to enable NATO members to provide support easily to more recently joined members in Central and Eastern Europe now facing a potential threat from Russia.

Manpower and skills

Alternative concepts for manning national defence

How to increase the manpower of the armed forces in a democracy today is now a crucial – perhaps *the* crucial – question which must be answered. The answer, of course, depends on what kind of system a nation has chosen so that it can provide itself with the ability to expand its forces when needed. The classic system as established in the 19th and 20th centuries is by conscription. An alternative, favoured by Nordic countries, is the 'total defence' model providing a 'nation in arms'. In both those cases, a full-time professional military cadre is essential to form a core (a) for maintaining and developing military expertise and capability; (b) for training the conscripts or volunteers; and (c) for command and control of the total force in wartime. France has also recently set up a programme for engaging younger (aged 15 to17) members of its population.[76]

The UK, US and several Central European armies have fully professional forces which do not rely on mobilising conscripts, reservists or volunteers before they can be used effectively. The disadvantage of such 'regular' armed forces is they tend not to have built-in mechanisms for rapid expansion in time of need. Most countries with the regular forces of this sort provide for expansion with a strong partially or fully trained reserve, backed up by some form of paramilitary organisation (for example, US National Guard and Coast Guard, French Gendarmerie, or Spanish Guardia Civil), often with a primary or dual function of policing in support of an armed civilian police force.

The UK, with this strong tradition of regular armed forces originally designed to control the British Empire, is in a very difficult position in this regard. As previously noted, the UK has no paramilitary policing force, relying on an unarmed police service and, since the end of the Cold War, has rundown its regular standing military forces and their active reserve to a very low level. UK reserves now effectively constitute only an auxiliary force, necessary simply to flesh out the regular standing forces should these need to be employed, rather than to expand them. The statement by the then UK Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Patrick Sanders, in 2024 that the country urgently needs to explore some mechanism for expanding its armed forces[77] is an important and very welcome wake up call.

But even to devise, let alone implement, such a mechanism will require a significant national effort as it will have far-reaching ramifications. Conscription – as increasingly few people can now remember it from the 1950s and early 1960s – is not an immediate and quick option because it would require a huge and fundamental transformation of the entire UK military system before it could be implemented.

Furthermore, in a democracy, conscription which is not universal risks becoming a social catastrophe. The Russian model of volunteers reinforced by selective conscription and privileged exemption would be unsustainable in any democracy in the long term. For conscription on a total scale to be attempted and to be publicly acceptable would require the threat to be much more palpable and imminent than is currently the case for the UK.

European countries are therefore now exploring models which bridge the gap between conscription and voluntary service. Sweden's selective conscription model is run with popular consent and includes the option for rapid expansion. Germany is just beginning the process of developing an analogous model.

The closer a country is to Russia's borders, of course, the less unthinkable a model of universal conscription becomes. Rather than look backwards, therefore, the UK will need to devise a new system, perhaps drawing on the experience of Nordic countries, to build a practical mechanism that best suits the UK's current circumstances.

76 Service National Universel. Available at: https://www.snu.gouv.fr/ (accessed: 23/07/25).

77 ITV News (2024) 'Britain needs to train and equip a "citizen army" to prepare for war, says Army chief', 24th January. Available at: https://www.itv.com/news/2024-01-24/britain-should-train-and-equip-a-citizen-army-ready-for-war-says-army-chief (accessed: 02/01/26).

It is instructive, as General Sanders indicated, to look at the experience of Poland, the Baltic countries and Scandinavia, where awareness of the Russian threat is much higher than it is in the rest of Europe. Despite that awareness, and the consequent greater level of government preparations, citizens there are not flocking to join the armed forces – quite the contrary – and raising military salaries has not proved an effective incentive. Their armed forces are finding that they do not have a sufficient cadre of competent officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) to train a mass of raw conscripts quickly; nor do they have sufficient training infrastructure (a problem that the UK will also face when the time comes).

In the UK, where there is a long tradition of fully voluntary military service, there is now such a shortfall in volunteers across all armed services that it is having a seriously negative impact on combat readiness and deployability. In planning the expansion of armed forces in preparation for, or in the event of, a major war, both military leaders and politicians alike now have to consider how the modern societies of democratic countries will react when called to arms to defend their country and the values for which it stands.

Yet, difficult though such a decision will be, failure to take this step will encourage potential aggressors.

Will our citizens be prepared to fight?

In 1933, Oxford University students held a debate on: 'Would this house in any circumstances fight for King and Country?', voting two to one that it would not. Many of those who then voted 'no' could be found signing up for military service six years later. So, concerns expressed in the UK press following the Chief of the General Staff's 24th January 2024 speech – that today's younger generation might not have the patriotic spirit to fight for King and Country – may be misplaced. However, this is yet another issue in urgent need of serious objective study.

The question needs an answer now because the Ukraine war has demonstrated (a) the sensitivity of the Ukrainian and Russian governments and populations to the issue of conscription, a sensitivity which is currently preventing both countries from implementing the level of conscription which they need; and (b) the overwhelming importance of the quality of troops at all levels as a component of victory. This quality is measured not only in the levels of training, but in commitment to the cause and willingness to fight; in the ability to use initiative; and in the ability to adapt equipment, repurposing both military and civilian equipment to be used in ways for which it was never designed.

It is also clear that the recruitment and training of new soldiers, sailors and aircrew must be consonant with the values and perspectives in the society from which they come. Commentators have noted how the differences that have developed between Russian and Ukrainian societies since the collapse of the Soviet Union have had a significant impact on the attitudes and behaviour of their respective soldiers, particularly in terms of their ability to show initiative and act independently when necessary.

But society today in the UK and in many other Western countries has evolved to include features not seen or acknowledged in the past. How will these affect the willingness of our peoples to fight and the unity and strength with which they will do so? Most European countries face challenges of a similar nature. It is highly desirable that we should have some answers to these questions *before* a possible war engulfs us. It is part of the development of a deterrent stance.

First, British society has made great strides in recent years in the direction of respecting many forms of diversity, and the UK's armed forces have made great efforts to integrate this diversity into fighting forces, but the results so far have been only moderate. The RAF tried to raise the proportion of female aircrew over decades, but with limited success. It is possible for women to join the infantry, and Ukraine now has more than a few female infantry soldiers. But British Army recruiters have found no great enthusiasm in the UK female population for serving in the infantry, and many are challenged by the physical demands. How should this be addressed? Rooting out sexual harassment is essential and it would help if issues like body armour were addressed; body armour is not designed to fit women.

Second, how will our modern society react to a call to fight for King and Country? The Royal Navy finds it hard to recruit for the submarine service because young people do not like to be cut off from social media and so forth. Most people in society are now a long way from having had a familiar relative or close friend serve in wartime. The less society understands that there is a risk of war and what war actually means, the more the UK's regular volunteer forces are wholly dependent on an offer of excitement and adventure, reasonable pay and conditions.

Armed forces recruiting for a possible war are not offering a good time but asking for service and sacrifice in the defence of our country and its values. How much of this is discussed in schools? Should it be part of a child's education to understand how the UK has remained free and democratic, particularly in the last century? One of the authors of this study has had a long and fruitful experience of working with ethnic communities within the UK, *at their request*, to provide education to their young people both in what used to be called 'civics' – that is, how the state works and how to use the levers of the democratic process – and in the military tradition of people of their ethnicity serving within the UK Armed Forces during the Second World War. Education in these topics is no longer considered sufficiently important to include in the modern school curriculum for British children.

Third, in a world where many people today are strongly influenced by social media and increasingly bombarded by disinformation, we can no longer take for granted which cause British citizens might prefer to fight for. Propaganda is not new. The problem of our citizens being seduced by the ideology of a hostile state actor is one which we have faced before in our history. Perhaps the clearest examples from the Second World War are those of the British Union of Fascists (which was only finally dismembered in May 1940) and of British communists opposing the national war effort because the Soviet Union was effectively Germany's ally, until June 1941 when Hitler launched his surprise attack on the USSR.

Citizens from all backgrounds have the right and the duty to defend the realm. It will be more difficult for them to exercise this right and duty if they face prejudice. Prejudices within any society are natural, but prejudices must be overcome through knowledge, understanding and respect.

Disinformation, whether from hostile state actors or extremist political groups, often seeks to exploit popular anxieties; in recent months, one such anxiety has been illegal migration into the UK. Disinformation can quickly exacerbate societal tensions and destroy the social cohesion necessary for an all-of-society response so important to preparing for war.[78]

Fortunately, the British Armed Forces have a strong tradition of including citizens of different ethnicities, as well as non-British citizens, within their ranks very successfully. Currently, about seven per cent of the UK Armed Forces as a whole are not British citizens. Gurkhas are the best-known example, but many volunteers come from Commonwealth countries. Suggestions that the Army could create units of British citizens on an ethnic basis have so far not been taken up.[79] Is that something that we should consider, or is that incompatible with the values of an integrated society?

In the UK, the armed forces have always been seen as the school of the nation and have been one of the real engines of integration and social mobility, although this point is rarely acknowledged. It is wholly appropriate that our armed forces should seek to reflect the diversity of UK society in all its aspects. This includes recruiting specifically to that end, not least to provide a model of integration for the rest of society. That model, if well built in peacetime, will provide a firm basis for expanding the armed forces in war, enabling them to draw on all sectors of society and to get the support of all the communities that make up UK society today.

78 See, for example: Press Room (2024) 'Online Disinformation Fuels Far-Right Violence in the United Kingdom' on Disinformation Social Media Alliance, 23rd December. Available at: https://disa.org/online-disinformation-fuels-far-right-violence-in-the-united-kingdom/ (accessed: 02/01/26).

79 See, for example: Allison, G. (2025) 'Minister open to British Army Sikh regiment proposal', on UK Defence Journal, 9th July. Available at: https://ukdefence-journal.org.uk/minister-open-to-british-army-sikh-regiment-proposal/ (accessed: 02/01/26).

But wartime brings a somewhat different priority into play. It does not do away with the value of diversity, but it subsumes it within a more immediate need. Not everyone makes a good soldier.[80] In war, armed forces need to identify and recruit first and foremost those people – whatever their background – who are willing, fit and able to fight, as well as those who have the technical skills necessary to support the fighters.

Furthermore, as we have noted elsewhere in this study, all other things being equal, victory will go to the side best able to adapt, to innovate, to outthink and outsmart the enemy. That means that armed forces also need to achieve *variety*[81] in thinking. They need people who can cope with high levels of complexity and uncertainty, people who can think differently, creatively, imaginatively, and who are encouraged to apply those qualities to the way they fight. Today, that means on all the battlefields of hybrid warfare, not just in a shooting battle.

Diversity and *variety* are not synonyms. But diversity (differences in gender, appearance, sexual orientation, race or culture) should help to drive variety (differences in ways of thinking). If prejudice is tolerated and those who are different are ignored, excluded, repressed or even persecuted, then the different perspectives and ideas which are needed to enable institutional and behavioural adaptation will be lost; *variety* will be lost.[82]

It is relatively easy for organisations to address the issue of diversity and to measure success or failure.[83] It is much harder for them to achieve and measure variety in an effective way, not least because variety is likely to give rise to internal challenge. Armed forces need to pay particular attention to this because discipline and the freedom to challenge have to sit uncomfortably together, and it needs good leadership – leadership appropriate for war – to reconcile the two and give each of them their rightful place.

Disagreement and friction between colleagues are inescapable in war. So much is at stake that war becomes a passionate business and generates heated arguments and bitter differences of opinion. It is crucial for political leaders and military commanders to create an atmosphere that contains and harnesses the energy of such inevitable internal conflict, yet at the same time encourages the expression of different points of view and allows for that free thinking, coupled with a willingness and ability to speak up, which is so often the source of new ideas.

Our societies are already struggling with a situation tantamount to war. We need new ideas, different ways of thinking and acting if we are to survive this degree of change and challenge.[84] US President Abraham Lincoln put this well in his Annual Address to Congress in 1862, at the height of the American Civil War:

> *The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew.*[85]

Coping with casualties

The high rate of casualties to be expected in a war against a peer enemy are a major cause of loss of fighting power and the consequent need for mass to replace that loss. The experience of many NATO armies fighting discretionary wars in the Middle East in recent years has taught them exactly the wrong lessons when it comes to dealing with the level of casualties that we are seeing in the Ukraine war, which is by no means exceptional as far as peer-to-peer wars are concerned.

80 For a vivid illustration of this, see, for example: Marshall, S.L.A. (1947) *Men Against Fire*. Morrow. And Holmes, R. (1985) *Firing Line*. Random House.

81 For a scientific explanation of this, it is instructive to study *Ashby's Law of Requisite Variety.*

82 H G Wells explored this problem graphically in his short story, *The Country of the Blind.*

83 NB. This is not synonymous with meeting unrealistic diversity targets.

84 Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to address in detail, if this argument is accepted then the implications are that we may need to investigate changes in the very ways in which our democracies function. Estonia provides a good model, using technology to improve democratic participation.

85 Abraham Lincoln Online. 'Annual Message to Congress -- Concluding Remarks.' Lincoln's 1st December 1862 speech in Washington. Available at: https://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/congress.htm (Accessed: 23/07/25).

The first problem is accustoming our publics, who have become used to seeing individual or small groups of bodies being repatriated from Afghanistan or elsewhere, to levels of casualties we have not seen since the Korean War. Our publics and our media will require a very clear understanding of why the war is worth such loss, and of the fact that lives are not being thrown away by incompetent generals and admirals.

Secondly, our serving personnel will also have to become accustomed to the loss of large numbers of their comrades. The wounded cannot expect to be helicoptered to medical care within an hour, as has been the case in Afghanistan. The volume of casualties is likely to overwhelm military medical services which, like the rest of the military, has become organised to suit wars of a completely different tempo and scale. Civilian health services – already diminished by the need to send doctors and nurses into the armed forces – must expect to be overwhelmed dealing not only with civilian casualties but with large-scale military casualties with complex injuries. This will call for a rethink of both our military and civilian health systems if they are to prepare realistically for a future war.

Thirdly, large-scale loss will place great demands on leadership and on command-and-control systems, which will have to compensate for those losses in soldiers, ships, aircraft and so forth in tactics and operations, as well as maintaining the reserves to fill the gaps created. In some recent defence reviews, the UK MOD has not allowed the Armed Services to make allowances for major war losses in planning its needs. A more unrealistic approach to war cannot be imagined.

The design, manufacture and supply of equipment

The demands of war against a peer enemy

The need for mass quantities of equipment has been the most evident of the lessons of the Ukraine war to date. War against a peer enemy demands vast quantities of equipment: weapons; ammunition; supplies of every conceivable sort – boots, bandages, body armour and bulldozers, to name but a few. Ukraine's artillery ammunition shortage in 2023 was a very obvious manifestation of this problem, and the inability of Ukraine's Western allies to provide this ammunition was a good example of how this lesson of war had been forgotten almost everywhere.

Yet, little more than a year later, as Ukraine and its supporters were beginning to build factories to produce the precious artillery ammunition, drones had become the key weapon and the focus needed to switch to producing drones on a scale not seen before. The very things which constitute 'mass' – that is, the things we need lots of – in modern war are constantly changing and are likely to continue to change with very little notice. So, we must understand 'mass' as not only *having* large quantities but also being able to *produce* large quantities of things we have not previously imagined might be necessary, be those types of equipment and/or people with special skills.

This makes it pointless today to define 'defence industry' as something distinct from industry generally. In a world where everything can be a weapon, all industry is defence industry. To think of defence industry as being *only* tanks, guns, ammunition, warships and warplanes is an obsolete definition. Ukraine's key defence industry production lines at the moment are those making drones and microchips. This is not to deny the importance of guns, ammunition, warships and the like; it is just to point out that our whole industrial base must move to war readiness and that we should be ready to expand any element of it at short notice as the war develops in directions we cannot predict.

The conflict between peacetime and wartime standards and procedures

There are good reasons why the military acquisition/procurement process in democratic countries developed the way they did during the Cold War. But the peacetime conditions of the Cold War are over, and we do not face the return of a new Cold War; we face a completely different situation in which we have to prepare to fight a hot war. To take the UK as an example, the need to expand our forces requires us to introduce a completely new system for producing weapons and materiel with which to equip them and to replace losses.[86]

Many countries, having at last begun to understand the need for mass, are now trying to increase their domestic military production. But they are making this effort on the basis of existing peacetime procedures, processes and costs. This is well meaning, but the effort is bound to be slow and expensive because it is being made within a social, economic and governmental system working to peacetime norms, regulations, procedures, processes and costs. In the long run, this will be unsustainable because it will be unaffordable. Finding a way to change now, before we are in a full-scale shooting war with a peer enemy, and move towards wartime methods and standards is one of the biggest challenges which liberal democracies currently face.

During major wars, one of the main drivers is to produce equipment more and more cheaply without reducing effectiveness. Ukraine's experience reminds us very forcibly of this fact – not only is equipment and ammunition required in huge quantities, but the rate of losses and expenditure also require it be cheap to produce. The result is that weapons and equipment produced to wartime standards will often appear 'rough and ready' when compared to equipment intended to provide a similar capability produced during peacetime.[87]

Yet within the peacetime procurement systems that have evolved within democracies, there is no drive to cheapness; there is no incentive to cut costs to the extent that large-scale war will demand. Instead of procuring a weapon system that delivers a 'best available' performance by a prescribed date, and from which innovative adaptation can then take place, there is considerable pressure to provide 'perfect' equipment and to 'gold plate' equipment under the illusion that this somehow improves its 'quality' and will provide an advantage over the enemy.

There are indeed some areas where small performance improvement can be decisive (quietness in submarines; manoeuvrability in missiles; greater simplicity in operation or maintenance), so extreme high performance is worth paying the cost of the exquisite engineering needed to achieve it. In these cases, and particularly where only a small number of items of a particular equipment will be produced, we need to bear in mind that each item produced will effectively be a prototype and is consequently likely to require more maintenance, modification and experiment to maintain its combat performance during its lifetime. A relevant procurement model from the civilian world is more likely to be found in Formula One than in Ford or Vauxhall.

But there are many more areas where the difference is not worth the extra cost and delay, where 'better is the enemy of good enough', or the fact that higher specifications will mean reduction in the number of equipment or weapons procured. Drone warfare in Ukraine is an excellent example. This is where 'Wright's Law'[88] comes into play, positing that for every doubling of units produced, manufacturing costs fall by a consistent and significant percentage.

86 For a thorough discussion of this issue, see: Jenkin, B. (ed) (2015) *Defence Acquisition for the Twenty-first Century*. London: Civitas. Available at: https://www.civitas.org.uk/content/files/DefenceAcquisition.pdf (accessed: 02/01/26).

87 A good Second World War example would be the Sten sub-machine gun (SMG). The original requirement was that it should be produced at a cost of less than a Guinea (£1.05). It ended up costing £2 in 1940, whereas the US Thompson ('Tommy') gun it replaced cost 20 times more to produce. The original version of the Sten was disliked and was criticised for inaccuracy and unreliability, and certainly would not pass safety standards today. But it was *adequate* and almost 5 million were produced. It was copied by Nazi Germany, which had produced a quarter of a million by the end of the war. A version with improved safety and reliability, the Sterling SMG, was widely used by the British Armed Forces until the 1980s.

88 Quickonomics (2024) *Wright's Law*. Available at: https://quickonomics.com/terms/wrights-law/ (accessed: 02/01/26).

It is the legal duty of commercial companies to make a profit for their shareholders; defence companies are not exempt. If we are taking the UK as an example, then add to this the fact that the more the civil service within the MOD loses its domain expertise, the less able that civil service is to exercise the necessary expert supervision over the defence industries to which it is contracting. In the UK, this problem has been exacerbated because the procurement system has been put in the hands of foreign commercial companies. The system has become unbalanced in favour of commercial industry operating in a peacetime environment. The system has lost the ability for wartime thinking and acting. As we have already noted, it has lost the all-important ability to adapt.

The Russian system, it is true, had also to a significant degree lost the Soviet practice of producing military equipment in peacetime to wartime standards, in wartime numbers, and at wartime costs. But, driven by Putin, Russia is really relearning this crucial lesson of war much more rapidly than are NATO countries.[89] Even with the limited rate of militarisation that Putin had imposed on Russia up to November 2025, Russia has been outpacing the West in rebuilding its defence sector and has been able to produce equipment more cheaply (as has its European ally, Serbia). A standard 155-millimetre artillery shell is now costing the European taxpayer about $3,000 each. An equivalent Russian 152-millimetre shell costs only about one quarter of that amount.[90]

An example of the difference between procuring weapons on a wartime rather than on a peacetime basis is provided by a comparison between the time taken and costs incurred in integrating modern complex missiles onto aircraft. The ongoing £41 million process to integrate the Meteor air-to-air missile system onto the UK F-35B fleet will not be completed until 2027 or 2028 at the earliest. In comparison, with the pressures of a live conflict, the no-less-complex problem of integrating the UK Storm Shadow air-to-ground missile onto the Ukrainian Su-24 fleet was achieved in a matter of weeks. Similar examples can be cited from the experience of British forces preparing rapidly to deploy for the Falklands War 40 years ago, and from the procurement of Urgent Operational Requirements (UOR) equipment during operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

Yet another problem which hinders the rejuvenation of the procurement system in the UK is that Whitehall has lost its understanding of the long-term planning process necessary to turn scientific discovery and invention into technological innovation as a weapon. This process can take decades, which is why it needed formal structure and process within the UK's R&D establishment to track and direct the exploitation of emerging technologies. But with the shrinking of that R&D establishment and the consequent loss of coherence within the defence scientific community across the UK, this process has been lost. Until it is restored, the UK will be very limited in its ability to turn new technology into advanced weapons for its future forces.

Many commercially convincing reasons can doubtless be devised as to why we cannot move to a wartime acquisition process producing large numbers of equipment very cheaply or finding alternative solutions to exquisite engineering problems. These reasons will prevail as long as the criteria on which acquisition is judged are based on commercial interests and peacetime spending controls rather than on the national interest – perhaps even national survival.

Experience tells us that part of the answer at least lies in the design of the equipment itself. In weapons design, simplicity is genius. But it takes a lot of effort to design or to redesign an effective piece of advanced engineering so that it is simple to assemble. When only a relatively small number of items of equipment is proposed, and there is no urgency in their production, no certainty that the production rate will need to be increased rapidly, then there is no incentive to spend money on redesigning the equipment to reduce its complexity.

89 The Soviet Union was good at producing high-quality weapons very cheaply as well as in large quantity. A study undertaken by US Department of Defense Office of Net Assessment in the 1980s subjected many major items of Soviet equipment to an in-depth reverse engineering analysis. The conclusion was that, with the exception of electronics, the Soviet Union was able to produce equipment equal or almost equal in performance to its US/Western counterparts for approximately one third of the cost of the Western kit.

Subsequent to this project, the then recently retired US tank designer, Joe Williams, who had led the study of the T-72, redrew his design of the M-1 Abrams following the design priorities of the Soviet tank (mobility, firepower, armour, habitability, automotive reliability and so forth) and entirely using existing widely available components, allowing the prototype to be produced within 2 years. The resulting tank was a private project which became the ROKIT – Republic of Korea Indigenous Tank – now known as the Black Panther. It is now being purchased in large quantities by Poland as the best tank available.

90 Haynes, D. (2024) 'Russia is producing artillery shells around three times faster than Ukraine's western allies and for about a quarter of the cost' on Sky News, 26th May. Available at: https://news.sky.com/story/russia-is-producing-artillery-shells-around-three-times-faster-than-ukraines-western-allies-and-for-about-a-quarter-of-the-cost-13143224 (accessed: 23/07/25).

Two UK examples at opposite ends of the scale spectrum might be submarines and missiles. For somewhat different reasons, it would be good if the manufacturers could speed up the production rate. One of the major obstacles to that is their inability to find the sufficiently highly qualified workers to do the jobs. Improving our vocational training system is certainly one solution to this shortfall, although it will take some time to implement.

But another solution would be, wherever possible, to redesign the equipment so that it can be assembled by less-skilled workers. The Spitfire was a very complex aircraft by the standards of its day, initially more time consuming and expensive to produce than its German rival, the Messerschmitt Bf109. But soon, the pressures of war required a massive increase in the rate of production as well as constant improvements in the aircraft's performance. At the same time, the Southampton Supermarine factory became a major target for the Luftwaffe, so Spitfire production had to be dispersed to multiple small, hidden sites in Southern England where the aircraft were assembled mainly by intelligent but heretofore unskilled women conscripted for the task. This forced the designers upgrading the performance of the aircraft to make each more potent version of the Spitfire easier to assemble, standardising parts, simplifying assembly processes and redesigning specific components allowing for lower tolerances.

That we *can* adopt wartime procurement procedures in peacetime is evinced by the UK MOD's current drone acquisition programme for Ukraine. This recognises the short life expectancy of drones on the modern battlefield, the need for vast numbers and the need for cheapness. It is an excellent example of an appropriate response. This programme runs parallel to long-standing defence procurement programmes taking many years to acquire very expensive drones which, Ukraine's experience tells us, will not survive long.

Adapting civilian equipment for wartime use

When it comes to urgent and serious preparations for war, mobilisation of civilian assets is one of the most obvious routes for armed forces to follow as it enables them to increase their capacity quickly. The Ukraine war is providing an extremely important example of this in the massive use of drones, both taken straight from civilian use or appropriately modified. The Ukrainian Army is using about 10,000 drones a month. The majority of those are civilian drones which the Ukrainians modify. Many are bought from China or are built in Ukraine using Chinese components. These are proving far cheaper, more reliable and effective than drones specifically designed for the battlefield by US manufacturers. US manufacturers are simply not adapting their drones quickly enough to keep pace with the battlefield developments in electronic warfare.[91]

Manufacturing items of relevant civilian equipment so that it can be quickly converted to military use would be a very sensible and cheap way for government to create a valuable reserve of equipment. It would be necessary to provide subsidies to cover the cost of the technical adaptations built into the equipment to enable it to meet wartime requirements. One solution might be to reduce corporation tax on companies which are prepared to put in place processes which facilitate the re-purposing of equipment for military use when necessary.

Adopting this approach could go a significant way towards facilitating the rapid expansion of defence forces in time of need. This would be relatively cheap and simple for major items such as ships. Navies rely heavily on 'taking up ships from trade', converting suitable merchant ships for military use. The Royal Navy did this very successfully in the Falklands War.[92] The Soviet Union built all its merchant fleet to be ready for wartime use, as it did for many of its road transport vehicles and civil aircraft. Interestingly, British-flagged merchant ships which were taken up from trade for the Falklands War in 1982 were sent to British yards for retrofitting with features to help them survive in battle. Those ships which had been built in East European yards were found to have been fitted, when built, with the very wartime adaptations which had to be retrofitted into UK-built ships.

91 See: Somerville, H. and Forrest, B. (2024) 'How American Drones Failed to Turn the Tide in Ukraine', in *The Wall Street Journal*, 10th April. Available at: https://www.wsj.com/world/how-american-drones-failed-to-turn-the-tide-in-ukraine-b0ebbac3 (accessed: 23/07/25).

92 A more modern example would be HMAS Jervis Bay. A fast catamaran car ferry built in 1997 for the Melbourne to Tasmania run, she was taken up from trade from 1999 to 2001 to support the Australian peacekeeping force in East Timor. On being decommissioned, she served for 20 years as a British cross-channel ferry before being sold in 2023 to Spain.

If military equipment and weapons were modularised, for example around standard shipping containers, and the ships prepared accordingly, merchant ships could be turned into effective warships quickly and cheaply.* Such ships might not look warlike and would not be suitable for every naval function, but they would be adequate for many, and it would allow for a much larger navy, which is what we are going to need in event of war.

Furthermore, not only would the modularisation of weapons and equipment help to facilitate the rapid conversion of civilian equipment for wartime use, but it would also increase the potential for greater standardisation across the different armed services of appropriate weapons and equipment, contributing significantly to reducing cost.

In this regard, the news that the UK fleet of militarily useful merchant vessels is shrinking is very serious.[93] Again, this is a lesson of war which is beyond the power of the MOD and armed forces alone to address. It requires governmental action across several ministries.

Meeting the challenges of defence transformation

The inability of Western countries – the US included – to generate the mass needed to support Ukraine in its war sufficiently quickly for that support to be decisive exposes the whole problem that democracies have today in transforming to an economic, political and social system which will enable them to fight a major war. Yes, Western countries are rich; but given the extent to which their wealth is committed to domestic-social programmes, there is a limit to the amount of wealth available at short notice to spend on military power without a complete restructuring of their societies and economies. Yes, it is a question of political choices and yes, the West can afford to spend more on defence. But making the political, social and economic changes required before the latent threat becomes patent will not only take quite a long time, but also a lot of effort and political willpower, and it will require involving all elements of national power to accomplish. The corporate world will have an especially important role in this process of transition.

Another important factor impacts upon the kind of weapons needed when armed forces expand rapidly by taking in less well-trained conscripts or volunteers on a large scale: the equipment with which they are equipped needs to be simpler to operate, more robust and reliable, and easier to maintain. Again, there are some high-performance exceptions, but they are exceptions, not the rule. This reinforces the attractiveness of simplicity in design imposed by the requirements of mass production to which we referred to previously.

Similarly, the tactics which less well-trained troops are capable of executing will need to be simpler and more straightforward. Thus, the way a force is structured (regular, professional, conscript, total defence) will determine every detail of how it needs to be equipped and how it can be used.

For European countries with fully regular professional forces, such as the UK, to move to a military system which will allow them to expand those forces quickly and on a significant scale will require not only organisational changes but a massive shift in culture, whereby the ethos of the regular professional component changes from one of purely achieving military excellence in its service personnel to one where the principal requirement of the professional soldier/sailor/aircrew is achieving excellence in training their conscript reservist or volunteer colleagues.

The nature of the leadership, command and control employed in directing this force, as well as the tactics which it can accomplish, will need to adapt accordingly, at least until the time when the new conscript or composite force has reached a level of training and professional competence equal to the regular force.

Yet awareness is now growing that this monumental change will have to be tackled somehow within the foreseeable, possibly even the near, future. We are going to have to do things differently in a big way, and

93 Allison, G. (2023) 'Huge drop in 'Militarily Useful' British vessels', on UK Defence Journal. Available at: https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/huge-drop-in-militarily-useful-british-vessels/ (accessed: 23/07/25).

* For a comprehensive analysis of how this can be done at scale, see the ground-breaking work of Dr Simon Reay Atkinson, Captain RAN Reserve and Associate Professor at the University of Sydney Business School.

we need to start the process of working out exactly how we will need to change *now,* before we are actually engulfed in a war which overwhelms us and leave us no time or space to change.

Stockpiles and reserves

One of the most telling lessons of the Ukraine war has been the value of maintaining large stockpiles of equipment, and especially of ammunition, and of the wisdom of mothballing and maintaining reserves of older equipment. Serious armies (navies, air forces) have always known this; but only those which have maintained a good institutional understanding of the needs of war against a peer enemy – and have invested in educating their political masters to understand this too – have been able to overcome financial pressures to liquidate stockpiles of older equipment as being 'obsolete, therefore a waste of money'.

In fact, at a time of rapid technological change, platforms do not age as quickly as the weapons, sensors and so forth with which they are fitted. It is usually cheaper, easier and quicker to update old platforms by the retrofitting of new systems than it is to manufacture completely new platforms. Given that all large wars are won by using a mixture of old and new equipment, this puts a high premium on deciding which are the best items of equipment to stockpile.

The knock-on effect of the value of keeping large reserves of older equipment is the importance attached to design continuity so that soldiers trained on new equipment can also operate older equipment and *vice versa*. The Soviet Union was good at designing its weapons in adherence to this principle.

The massive importance of being able to draw on reserves applies to manpower as well as to equipment. Unpalatable though the lesson is, the Ukraine war reminds us that we may need to be able to expand our forces in capacity very rapidly to ensure our national survival. The UK is one of the worst offenders in getting rid of its reserve capacity and now, like many NATO nations, needs to consider urgently how our armed forces should be restructured to enable them to expand when needed – that is, designed so that the standing force can train the mobilised force effectively and on a meaningful scale. As it is, we are now being outcompeted in generating military power by even small states with poorer economies which are not constrained by democratic practices.

Mines: Where peacetime ideals and war time realities clash head on

Another, very striking, equipment lesson of the war which is most uncomfortable for some Western governments and societies has been the importance of landmines for defence. The move to ban landmines and cluster munitions which resulted in the Ottawa Treaty can be easily understood in the light of the humanitarian tragedies caused in local wars, especially in Africa and Asia, by the profligate, irresponsible and unmapped use of anti-personnel mines. These are very difficult to find and to clear, a fact which has blighted the lives of civilians for decades after the wars end. It was noted at the time that many countries, including some with impeccable humanitarian credentials, would not sign up to the treaty. But this inconvenience was brushed over as regrettable or simply irrelevant.

It is now clear that this was far from irrelevant. Geographical scale, coupled with the increasingly low density of the battlefield necessitated by the increasing range and lethality of weaponry, means that countries with no geographical barriers – such as Ukraine, the Baltic States and Finland[94] – simply cannot defend themselves against attack without mines. No practical alternative to mines as a defensive weapon has been invented. In those countries which have foresworn mines, their armies, in practice, also seem to have lost much of their capability and capacity to defeat minefields. (Note the inability to supply Ukraine with adequate mine clearing equipment to defeat Russian minefields.)

Unpalatable and controversial though it is, it is now both urgent and important for NATO countries to revisit the landmine issue; to understand and to explain to populations the difference between, on the one hand, the irresponsible use of landmines by autocratic regimes that drove the Ottawa Treaty and, on the other hand, the need to revive the practice of responsible mine warfare as an essential element in the defence of Europe.

94 YLE News. 'Finland formally withdraws from Ottawa landmine treaty'. Available at: https://yle.fi/a/74-20172189 (accessed: 02/01/26).

Scaling up battlefield adaptation and technical innovation

We have noted the importance of a soldier's ability to adapt equipment and tactics on the frontline more quickly than their opponents. But another important factor in a military's ability to adapt is whether it possesses its own technical-industrial institutions which can take the lesson of adaptation learned at great cost in battle and quickly scale it up, adapting large quantities of equipment and turning the new capability into the capacity needed for victory.

Experience shows that, to be effective, there needs to be an immediate and very close interaction between the frontline soldier (sailor, aircrew) and the technical-industrial institutions, and the latter need to be able to respond directly to the soldiers' requirements without the need to seek either permission or resources from higher authority.

If we were able to go back to the levels of spending on defence research that we enjoyed 40 years ago, so that defence research led civilian technology and we had spin-off, that would change the equation completely. But trying to go back in time is rarely a sensible option. Given that now the most advanced research in many areas is firmly within the private sector, the way forward is likely to be found in a new form of relationship between the private sector and government for the purpose of preparing for and fighting war.

In some NATO countries, the UK included, the dedicated in-house defence research and experimental establishments that had developed this capability during the Cold War have been drastically reduced or closed down altogether on cost grounds and on the assumption that their function could be fulfilled by commercial industry alone. But in such a case, if the military's ability to draw on industry's support is constrained by the peacetime need to draw up contracts or put requirements out to tender and so forth, then the system will lack the immediacy and flexibility necessary for a timely response and effective adaptation. The companies also need staff with essential military experience and the consequent ability to build close links with the soldiers on the battlefield if they are to provide effective, rapid response. If a country relies on private defence industry alone to fulfil this function, then that country must find a way in peacetime to empower the system to operate to wartime procedures, wartime standards and wartime urgency. Once war is underway it is a bit too late to start this transformation.

Further obstacles to adaptation can arise when equipment is procured from abroad or from the civilian sector. If the producer is not prepared, for example, to give the buyer the right to access and to change software, or otherwise change the performance of the equipment, the user's ability to make essential adaptations will be significantly limited, to the detriment of their fighting ability. Drone operators in Ukraine now need to amend their software on a daily basis, sometimes even several times a day, to survive the rapid advances in Russian electronic warfare techniques. In the current war, we have also seen countries unable to pass on equipment to Ukraine as they would wish because the foreign equipment manufacturer has withheld permission – a strong argument for countries to have sovereign control over important weapons systems.

The problem of reliance on the United States

At the root of this issue has been the steadily increasing reliance of Western democracies on the US to provide them with major items of equipment. But, just like the UK and the rest of Europe, even the US can no longer afford to produce weapons at peacetime costs. The structuring of the whole Western defence acquisition system to suit peacetime requirements, including overreliance on the US for the supply of weapons, must change if we are to meet the needs of supplying Ukraine and of rearming ourselves.

An element of this, somewhat unpalatable to consider, is that the US, by applying the normal conventions of competition for the past 50 years and more, has consistently sought to take over, compete, outcompete or undermine the defence industries of allied countries, including the UK, in its own commercial interests – a policy supported by the US Government. The very success of this competition now creates a problem in that it has reduced Western defence industrial capacity, resulted in less innovation and greatly increased the cost of weaponry.

When the US complains that allies should spend more on defence, the implication has been that this should be through buying American equipment rather than by producing their own.[95] But now that allies do want to buy US equipment, the US cannot increase production rapidly enough to meet the demand. What has to be done to return the US to the position of being the arsenal of democracy? Or would it be better to diversify the sources?

A further lesson of this war, therefore, would seem to be that having control over one's defence equipment procurement process has now become a very clear and important aspect of national sovereignty. This is a much more complex issue today than was the case in the past because of globalisation and the development of multinational defence industrial corporations to replace the national defence manufacturers which dominated the world wars of the 20th century. But it is an issue which must be tackled as a matter of urgency.

A recent Earendel report[96] on political and societal developments in the USA concludes that:

> *European governments now face an immediate crucial and potentially painful decision; whether to continue to rely on purchases of American conventional military equipment … or to expand their own production. Constraints on the American defence industrial sector, looming fiscal concerns, and growing doubt amongst many in the US and Europe about American willingness to embrace its NATO commitments in future suggest that European nations would be wise to depend henceforth largely on self-help.*

The implications of this statement are truly profound. They question the fundamental assumption that has underpinned Western security and guaranteed the global order for the last seven decades – that the US would always be there to bail out Europe when the threat of war loomed. If we can no longer rely on this support, then Putin's declared threat to overturn that global order is truly existential for the West, and it now faces a fight for its life. It is high time that we acknowledged this and prepared ourselves for that fight.

It is appropriate that the last word on this should be given to HE Valeriy Zaluzhnyi, former Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and now Ambassador of Ukraine to the United Kingdom. In an article entitled 'Strategy to avoid war', published on 20th October 2025 by the Eastern Flank Institute,[97] a Polish-sponsored Brussels-based think tank focusing on Central and Eastern European security issues, the ambassador laid out his concerns about the general unwillingness of Western democracies to face up to the need to prepare for war and to ensure the defence of Ukraine and of themselves.[98] This is a sobering analysis in which the ambassador enumerates the difficulties Western countries face in coming to terms with today's reality, including the 'problem of our former leaders … postponing unpopular moves for short term popularity and following populist promises.'

95 As a key, long-standing element of US policy is that the country must always keep at least one generation ahead of its competitors in technology, any weapons sold to allies will always be inferior to the weapons which the US itself deploys.

96 See report by Earendel Associates (2024) *America, NATO & the Transatlantic Relationship*.

97 Zaluzhnyi, V. (2025) 'Strategy for avoiding war. Gen. Zaluzhnyi for the EFI', on Eastern Flank Institute, 20th October. Available at: https://easternflank.org/jak-uniknac-wojny-gen-zaluzny-dla-instytutu-wschodniej-flanki/ (accessed: 23/12/25).

98 Mukhina, O. (2025) 'Europe's fears of losing comfort may cost it true independence, former Ukrainian army chief Zaluzhnyi says' on Euromaidan Press, 21st October. Available at: https://euromaidanpress.com/2025/10/21/eu-has-no-military-command-structure-for-autonomy-leaving-it-dependent-on-us-security-guarantees-former-ukrainian-commander-zaluzhnyi-says/ (accessed: 02/01/26).

Conclusions and recommendations

Britain and other Western democracies have been slow to acknowledge and learn the lessons of war from Ukraine because their implications are so far-reaching, and a truly appropriate response would be painful and difficult. This short study brings us to the following conclusions.

The first conclusion is that the rules-based global order which our democracies drove to establish after 1945, and which we believed had been permanently assured after 1990, is disappearing. The West now faces a truly existential threat from a loose but strengthening alliance of autocracies which the Ukraine war has exposed. This is an urgent and drastic threat which requires an immediate, far-reaching and radical response. It would be foolish to expect that this response could be quick, easy and painless.

The international political, financial and security mechanisms set up to maintain that global order have so far been unable to produce an adequate and convincing response to this patent threat. If we wish to preserve and protect what remains of our vision for the democratic world, we need a serious and collective effort to reassert that vision, to acknowledge the magnitude of the threat, and to consider how we can restructure our national and international tools to help us to tackle it.

The second conclusion, which in some ways is an extension of the first, is that many of the widespread models, practices and procedures of national governance – which have evolved during the past three generations of peace, stability and security, and which are largely common to democratic countries – are no longer appropriate or adequate to cope with the speed and scale of global change and the threat of war we now face.

To preserve the democracy which we cherish and which is at the basis of our Western way of life, we now need to modernise and upgrade the practices and procedures of governance which sustain that democracy. We in democratic societies have not only forgotten what war is, what it is like, and that it must be won; we have also come to believe that, in the modern world, war is unthinkable, impossible. It is something which happens to others, but not to us. This unpalatable, unthinkable, but unfortunately real and possibly imminent threat of war now demands that we move from a peacetime footing to a wartime readiness; that we adapt structures, procedures, laws, attitudes and domestic spending patterns suited to stability, security and predictability so that they become suited to instability, uncertainty and constant drastic change. This will be very difficult in a pre-war situation; and the further a country is geographically from the physical destruction being wreaked in Ukraine, the more difficult it will be.

The third conclusion is that very few Western democracies have governments, societies or armed forces which are in any way ready either for the hybrid warfare in which they are already engaged or for the kinetic warfare which could spread from Ukraine sooner or later.

Governments and societies are nowhere near to grasping the extent and sophistication of Russian hybrid warfare techniques which are being increasingly unleashed against them. The Director General of the UK Security Service notes[99] a 35 per cent rise in investigations of individuals involved in state-sponsored threats during the past year. But hostile state actors can also exploit terrorism which arises from the purely domestic root of discontent, and they are known to work closely with organised crime groups to exploit the criminal networks across Europe. Learning how to recognise our vulnerabilities and to protect from and respond to hybrid warfare attacks now needs to become a greater priority in democratic countries.[100]

Armed forces may well be trying to come to grips with the lessons of battle from Ukraine, but unless they are supported by all-of-government measures to provide them with the people, equipment and resources they will need on a huge scale to fight war against a peer enemy, they will not be able to implement their learning.

99 See: MI5 (2025) 'Director General Ken McCallum gives threat update', 16th October. Available at: https://www.mi5.gov.uk/director-general-ken-mccallum-gives-threat-update (accessed: 02/01/26).

100 See, for example: *Financial Times* (2025) 'The Russian spy ship stalking Europe's subsea cables', 25th September. Available at: https://www.ft.com/content/0b351091-3f82-4f2f-bef2-a52a35f009f2 (accessed: 02/01/26).

The fourth conclusion is that, although the war in Ukraine is ushering in some very dramatic technological changes which will require armed forces to re-examine and refine concepts, tactics and doctrines for the battlefield, the principles governing the use of armed forces do not seem to have changed much, if at all. At the most, new technologies may give greater significance to some principles than in previous wars. Interestingly, the principles that were developed from the experience of fighting earlier kinetic wars also seem to be applicable to the other weapons of modern hybrid warfare.

Whilst the impact of new weaponry has produced a lot of commentary claiming that many traditional weapons systems – such as aircraft, tanks and ships – have been rendered obsolete (for example, by drones and missiles), a longer-term perspective shows that rarely has a new technology instantly made older technology completely obsolete. It simply makes the battlefield more complex. What happens is that large wars tend to be fought with a mixture of old and new weapons systems. Ukraine is no exception. This puts a high premium on countries keeping good reserve stocks of older weaponry (something few democracies do).

The fifth conclusion is that most democracies have forgotten the importance of mass as a prerequisite of their ability to fight war against a peer enemy. Decades of fighting discretionary wars against non-peer enemies has allowed us to forget this elementary fact. Resilience on the battlefield means the ability to absorb casualties and fight on. That needs mass.

Our armed forces are not geared up to cope with mass and our countries are not geared up to provide it, either in terms of people, equipment, or other resources. Sovereign national defence procurement systems can now be seen to be the most important structural element in enabling mass. An appropriate balance of regular and reserve forces may help achieve affordable mass.

The sixth conclusion falls out from all the previous conclusions: that the most important characteristic which we need if we are to be able to fight, survive and win the war which is already knocking at our doors is the ability to adapt quickly.

People need to adapt their way of thinking about virtually everything if they must move from a peacetime to a solid defence-ready footing. Governments need to adapt all their institutions, not just the ones concerned with defence, as it is the whole country which fights the war, not just the military. Speed of adaptation is crucial because we need to adapt constantly more rapidly than our enemies if we are to win.

Armed forces need to adapt tactics, training, concepts and equipment; to innovate by using old equipment in new ways. That adaptation includes the need to expand capacity rapidly and on a large scale. Unless equipment and services can be procured to support and enable that adaptation, it will not be possible to achieve it, no matter how flexible the soldiers prove to be.

Regardless of how efficient a country's armed forces are by peacetime measurements or for fighting small wars, if they cannot adapt to deal with existential threats, then they will have been worse than a waste of money; they will have provided a dangerous illusion of security and power.

The final conclusion of this study is not drawn specifically from the war in Ukraine. It is drawn from the assessment that Western democracies are already at war, but not merely the war which Putin has insisted that he is engaged in against the West. More insidiously, we are experiencing a situation tantamount to war brought about by the extent, depth and speed of global change – a degree of change which societies have only previously experienced during major wars or natural catastrophes.

Even without the threat from Putin or his autocratic allies, the speed and extent of today's global change require that our countries, if they are to survive and flourish, need to move in some measure towards a more agile and outcome-focused footing so as to be able to cope with the instability, uncertainty and turmoil which that rapid change will inevitably bring. This transformation is extremely urgent and must not be delayed; we have no time to lose.

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The rules-based global order which the United Kingdom and other democracies drove to establish after 1945, and which we believed had been permanently assured after 1990, is fast disappearing. The West now faces a truly existential threat from a loose but strengthening alliance of autocracies which the war in Ukraine has exposed. This is an urgent and drastic threat which requires an immediate, far-reaching and radical response.

Report authors, Sir Bernard Jenkin, Derek Twigg and Chris Donnelly argue that if we wish to preserve and protect a vision for the democratic world, we need a serious and collective effort to reassert that vision, to acknowledge the magnitude of the threat, and to consider how we can restructure our national and international tools to help us to tackle it. There is a general understanding that the UK is not as ready for conflict as it should be in the current situation of global instability and uncertainty. Ministers and officials have set out ambitious defence, security and industrial strategies as to how the UK might move towards 'warfighting readiness'. So, we appear to have an idea of where we need to go, but not necessarily the vision of how to get there.

It is already clear that the cost of not making the journey of transformation could be even more painful and difficult, and that the sooner we start moving to a position of readiness, the easier life might be for British society, government and economy in the long run. This report resets the narrative by carefully setting out the imperative for moving to warfighting readiness in a rapidly changing geopolitical and geostrategic environment, drawing on observations from Russia's war on Ukraine, President Trump's revolution and its impact on the international rules-based order, reform of NATO and the EU, while asking what the UK's warfighting structure should look like and what we might learn from past experiences. This state of readiness, the authors argue, requires politicians and defence experts to acknowledge that 'war is war, not a crisis' and to develop and implement a concept of war fighting which ultimately prepares the country to win the wars forced upon it. The UK must consider how both our adversaries and allies see war, exploring the 'culmination point', the need for adaptability, and how preparation itself becomes a deterrent for war. New forms of governance and the development of a war-capable political process are well overdue. The report also focuses on the role of education and civil society in preparing the country, given both state and society require resilience. There are practical steps that should be taken to ensure that government has the necessary bandwidth, a strategic mindset, a process for making and implementing strategy and can ensure we properly finance our defence.

Setting out strategy also means staying abreast of military, economic and technological change, which has strong implications for military organisation, training and equipment. The authors argue for recognising the crucial importance of mass in war and call for a reorganisation of nation-wide functions and structures that war will in any event necessitate – we must not only rethink manpower and skills but the design, manufacture and supply of equipment. Fundamentally, to preserve the democracy which we cherish and which is at the basis of our Western way of life, we now need to modernise and upgrade the practices and procedures of governance which sustain that democracy.

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