



# “You have to treat the public as more intelligent than the government appears inclined to do”

Sir Hew Strachan, one of our foremost thinkers on defence, talks exclusively to *Pennant*.

Successful military operations require more than just skill and bravery on the battlefield. Around them there is a complicated structure of training, logistics, planning and tactics. And, over all that, there must be a broader political and strategic context so that our forces go into battle knowing that they have a sensible strategic purpose which is defensible, enduring, has public and Parliamentary support, and which is regarded as actually going somewhere the country wants to go.

Sir Hew Strachan, professor of international relations at the University of St Andrews, has been thinking about these issues for almost half a century. No one has written more, or been more influential. And his interest in defence has been lifelong.

“The relationship I have with the army in particular and the Armed Forces in general goes right back. But when I was at school I wanted to go to university and then it did not seem to be possible to do this and to be a soldier. So I decided I could not be a soldier but I definitely did want to be a military historian. I was not turning my back on an engagement with the Armed Forces though I did not imagine it would be as intense as it has become. I lectured at Sandhurst in the late 70s. But the principal reason it has been so intense was my move to Oxford in 2002, at a time when the army was the focus of interest and debate. There was certainly an expectation there that I would engage very closely with the Armed Forces, and then came Iraq and Afghanistan”.

## A Critical Friend

He now frequently works with the top of the Armed Forces and with the Government, and this requires him to be a critical friend. “If you end up saying what you think the Ministry of Defence wants you to say it’s no good. There is no value in telling the three services what wonderful chaps they are and what great jobs they are doing. You have to be critical. But you also have to be constructive. I have to be jolly careful not to be compromised. It can be difficult because some of my best friends are in uniform. I have family members who have served

the opening phases were, quite frankly, catastrophically badly run. But of course it ended victoriously. And then by the end of the 20th century the Armed Forces had built for themselves a pretty good narrative in the waging of war – built on successes in the Falklands, Yugoslavia and Kuwait.”

But he feels it is possible to be too starry eyed about this golden age. “Has there ever been a time when we have felt confident and robust about British defence? I can remember Suez; the Balkans looked terrible at first but turned out well in the end; the Falklands the same: yes we have

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## Our political masters have not allocated the funds to match their ambition.

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and are still serving. My challenge has been to get funding for the support of the study of war without at the same time losing independence. It is important not to be overly dependent on government funding. There is no virtue in a university just giving the party line.”

## “Catastrophically badly run”

So how does recent history look? How have the British Armed Forces acquitted themselves? Sir Hew, not surprisingly, takes a long view. “There was a not very good early 20th-century. The First World War ended victoriously but bits of it do not do the British Army or the Royal Navy much credit. In the Second World War

had our successes but if we ask whether these successes were the consequence of prior planning and serious thought – the answer is no! They turned out all right on the night and it is because they turned out all right on the night that we thought we could always do it. Tony Blair assumed that war was a perfected political instrument.”

## Which of course brings us to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Here Sir Hew is more measured than some. “We now find ourselves well into the 21st-century and we are struggling to create a good narrative. That is not necessarily the Armed Forces’ fault, but it is perhaps too easy to say that it is entirely the fault of our



political masters for getting us into wars that we cannot win, or for underresourcing us for interventions that we did not ask for. Certainly, they have used the rhetoric of major war, but not allocated the funds to match the ambition of their phrases. But alongside their appetites have been those of the armed forces themselves, keen to be used and possessed of a 'can do' approach. Yes we are in a bad place now in terms of public support for intervention but we must not forget – in relation to Iraq and Afghanistan – that having gone in we are still part of the solution.

I feel very strongly – particularly in relation to Afghanistan – that we have a continuing commitment, and that we should not conclude that it is all 'gone to hell in a hand cart'. War evolves, and there are downsides as well as upsides and you need to fight it through to find out what the outcome is. How you judge any war depends exactly on where you sit and when. For example, how the First World War was seen in 1919 was very different from how you might have seen it in 1939, and then how you might have seen it again in the mid-1960s: now there are many people who would see the First World War in a more positive light (there are certainly many historians who are ready to do that).

So what you are doing is looking at events in the context of your own times rather than the times in which the conflict was

actually fought. And how does that relate to Afghanistan and Iraq? Well, the argument presented in 2009 that we were leaving Iraq with our heads held high does not look quite so good now; but we have still no idea how it is going to look in 2025, and it may be difficult to draw a final judgment even then because these things do not stand still."

### Fear of the Media

One crucial element of all of this is to make sure that public discussion of military operations is mature and informed. Sir Hew feels that things are not what they once were here, not least because of the political fear of what the media might say. "When I taught at Sandhurst the army put on a 'Northern Ireland Week', and it included training to enable the young subaltern to stand up in front of the television cameras and explain what he and his men had just been doing when patrolling the streets of Belfast. The MoD does not want to do that anymore – their priorities are governed by fear of the media and they are focused on damage limitation, control, and sticking to a consistent story. This means it is failing to engage properly with society. I really do fear there is a democratic deficit there."

The public is involved in the debates on defence and international relations but not given the insights which enable them to grapple with complex situations. Nowhere is this more apparent now than over Syria.

"The public hears two totally different stories about Syria: the first is that this is absolutely terrible, that the Syrian people are suffering, and that there is a refugee crisis. The obvious question is why cannot the international community do something.

But the second narrative is that we must not get stuck in a long protracted intervention. Both of those stories are entirely valid, entirely logical, and well-founded on experience. So our national leaders need to be able to explain to the public how complicated the issues are and so help them to look beyond the day's headlines, explaining that if you do act then you need to think about how the second and third order consequences might turn out.

You have to treat the public as more intelligent than either the government and media appear inclined to do. The MoD and the Armed Forces can sometimes seem keen not to get pulled into what might be construed as a political debate, and so it does not enter the discussion at all, which is very damaging."

### Pessimistic about public debate

So he is pessimistic about the general state of public debate around issues of the very highest importance. "Take Trident. People ask why we have a nuclear deterrent. To me there is a strong and straightforward case for saying that it has been a force for stability and has produced international



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order. I know this is an unprovable proposition but it seems to me not entirely coincidental that since we have had it there has been no major inter-state war.

So I am broadly in favour of our having a nuclear deterrent and certainly against its unilateral renunciation at this stage.

But when I make this point people say it is an argument they have never heard. Instead we have the true but fatuous argument that we do not know what will come round

spending too much time looking inwards, to the implications of the UK tearing itself apart domestically and now the consequences of Brexit.

Externally we have been guilty of a failure to engage adequately with international institutions. We are not doing nearly enough about UN reform because we are on the Security Council, and so have a vested interest in the status quo; we are coming out of the EU and so now cannot participate

decided to pull out of Europe!” He feels it is no coincidence that the French President, in responding to recent terrorist attacks on that country, invoked a response within the context of the European Union, rather than of NATO or of the Anglo/French structures created by the Lancaster House agreement.

### But it's not all doom and gloom

The quality of the forces we can put in the field is as high as ever: “our men and women are more carefully chosen, tend to be brighter, and do quite a lot of original thinking if they are given the opportunity to do so. And some show a readiness to draw on their experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan for more mature reflection. So we have the quality. In 2015 the Government produced a good national security strategy, coherent and well argued, even if stronger on aspiration than substance.

The problem is that it was written without taking either the strategic or financial implications of Brexit into account.”

Sir Hew feels that many building blocks are in place, but just how effective we are in the years to come depends upon the complex interplay of politics, the media, public opinion, and the Armed Forces themselves. And Sir Hew will continue to be there to document and advise on this world. 

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the corner in 50 years' time or the equally fatuous argument that says nuclear weapons will not stop a suicide bomber. Both these arguments are true but they miss the point.

The Trident debate has become so enmeshed in party politics that it has become semi-detached from our defence policy. It should be at the heart of our national strategy. If we see it as a free-standing political argument then we will miss the point.”

As to the future, Sir Hew sees the framework of our operations being our membership of international institutions. But here our record is not as good as it might be. There is a catalogue of missed opportunity – “the problems are that we are

in its reform, as it runs the risk of collapse; and we are not good NATO members.

Back in 2006 NATO said if it did not do well in Afghanistan then it would collapse (you do not hear that argument now), Today it seems as though success in Afghanistan lay in the fact that NATO did not fall apart. And finally there is the problem of the US which is now going through an election that could mean it is less engaged. We seem not to know how to act in the world without the US – indeed the reverse. We are committing ourselves more and more to working with them yet we are not sure if the US is going to be there. And that is at a time when we have



Photo: Cpl Neil Bryden RAF

HMS Victorious returning to the Clyde. ‘It seems to me not entirely coincidental that since we have had the nuclear deterrent there has been no major interstate war’