

ANDREW MARR SHOW, 11th November, 2018

General Sir Nick Carter

Chief of Defence Staff

AM: A former Chief of the Defence staff said recently that Britain stands at a crossroad and might now have to accept that we are no longer a world military power. That's a stark thought on Remembrance Sunday. The current Chief of the Defence Staff, Sir Nick Carter spoke to me just before we came on air and I asked him for his reflections on this the most special of anniversaries.

NC: Yes, I mean it is hugely special. I can remember sitting back in 2013 wondering how we were going to commemorate the anniversary of the hundredth of World War One and we wondered whether it would capture the public's imagination. And I think what's been extraordinary about the last four years are the personal connections people have made.

AM: I suppose the imagination is the key thing because these days we tend to see the First World War very much through the eyes of the poets. We'll be talking about Wilfred Owen later in the programme, and that kind of very, very critical kind of angry view of the First World, lions led by donkeys, dulce et decorum est, the old lie and all the rest of it, has persuaded a lot of people that the First World War and by definition war generally was an unqualified bad thing.

NC: Yes, and I think what's been helpful about the last four years is that people have recognised it's about remembering and honouring the self-sacrifice of our forebears. But also it's about learning lessons. And I think given the strategic context these days with threats that have changed, great power competition, things that probably resonate with a hundred years ago actually remembering that war is horrific and that we have to try and manage and avoid it happening is fundamental.

AM: Coming onto those threats, you yourself have said that Russia provides a threat to our way of life in this country. What do you mean by that?

NC: Well I think that what we see in this great power competition that's underway at the moment is that the character of warfare has changed and that gives states and those people who might wish to compete with us the chance to use a lot of different tactics and techniques. And we saw that in March with the attack on the Skripal family. We see it with fake news, with disinformation. We see it in cyber. And these new tools are I think great vulnerabilities for all of us.

AM: But nobody really thinks that modern Russia, unlike the Soviet Union in the Communist days actually wants to invade the west and tanks rolling across the German plain and so forth. That age does seem to many people to have gone.

NC: Yes, but I think the great danger is the sorts of tools and tactics that I've described are no longer regulated. And I think if you go back when we were growing up in the Cold War there were some very sensible diplomatic systems and mechanisms to manage arms control, but also to make sure we understood each other and that we have behaviours that we all understood. I think the risk these days is one of escalation inadvertently which might lead to miscalculation. Because you're absolutely right, I don't think anyone's got any intention to go to war in the conventional sense of the term but with those calculations.

AM: Fake news, assassinations and then things run out of control.

NC: And particularly with cyber, which is totally unregulated.

AM: Can it be regulated do you think?

NC: Well I think we have to think about it. I think you know the noble institutions that we created for noble reasons in 1945 were not necessarily created to deal with some of these challenges.

AM: So we need a new world order which looks at the cyber world, looks at fake news, looks at destabilisation using the internet?

NC: Well I think if you want to protect the multilateral system that has really secured our security, stability and prosperity we need to make sure that it's fit for purpose in the modern world.

AM: Do you have the kit and the tools and the money to do what you need to do?

NC: Well we had a huge fillip from the government in the Budget and I'm very grateful to the Prime Minister showing a great personal interest in our matters.

AM: You had a modest fillip, if I may say so. You had a billion and the Ministry of Defence says there is a potential up to a £15 billion black hole in the military budget looking forward, and other people say it's even bigger than that.

NC: Yes, but I think what we had was a great statement of intent and I can't tell you how well that's gone down in the Armed Forces. It's been very good for people's morale, particularly for those who've worked hard to make the case and explain why defence needs the money it needs. So it's been very positive. And what it now gives us I think is a platform in which we can make some choices.

AM: Some of your predecessors have said that we are really not fit for purpose in terms of taking on the threats that you've talked about. When it comes to the Army your predecessor, Lord

Dannatt, as Head of the Army says this morning in the papers that if you look at the Russian threat, if you look at their new tanks and their new kit we are nowhere near being ready for them. We've got the smallest Army, Navy and Air Force since modern records began.

NC: Yes, I think we have to remember though that we tend to fight in alliances and I can't think of a set of circumstances when we would go to war without it being in the NATO construct. And when you look at the aggregate capabilities of all of our allies, we're pretty well up to speed, I would have thought.

AM: So that is one predecessor. Here's another one, Nick Horton, the former Chief of the Defence Staff, formerly doing your job, and he said: "We've got to come off the fence. We're living a lie when it comes to the amount of money we're spending on defence. He says, we've got to come off the fence one way or another and it might be and it's a wholly worthy opinion that the United Kingdom should cease to be a world military power." A doleful thought perhaps on this morning particularly, but perhaps a realistic one.

NC: Not necessarily. I think it depends upon what place the government wants us to play in the world, and I think that that's a conversation that is ongoing and my personal opinion is that we still have remarkable servicemen and servicewomen and what gives us our adaptive edge, which is why I think we are a reference customer for so many states who would like to be trained by us, is we have really impressive people still.

AM: As an Army man what do you make of President Macron's suggestion that Europe needs its own army now?

MC: Well again, I think that we absolutely are committed as a country to securing Europe through Europe. We're also committed

entirely to the NATO alliance and that's the way in which we think in which Europe should be protected. But it's absolutely important in alliance that people burden share. So if this is about burden sharing then that's got to be good news.

AM: But Lord Robertson who's a former head of NATO has said that the British/French connection in particular is looking a bit fragile at the moment on the military side.

NC: Well that's not how I see it. Françoise Lecointre, who's my opposite number and I are close personal friends. I've never known our relationship to be closer since the Lancaster House Treaty in 2010. We now exchange officers at very high levels and that is something that is adding I think to our bilateral military relationship.

AM: What preparations are the military making for a no deal Brexit?

NC: Well, what we always do of course is to make sensible contingency plans for all sorts of eventualities, whether it's a terrorist attack or whether it's a tanker drivers dispute, industrial action or whatever else it might be. And you'll be not surprised to hear that we make all those sorts of plans all the time.

AM: So what have the government asked you to do for a no deal Brexit?

NC: At this stage I think people are confident there will be a deal. If here's not one then we stand ready to help in any way we can.

AM: But in specific terms. I mean there's been talk about stockpiling of medicines and so forth and the Army stepping in to make sure that they get to the right place. Is that the kind of thing?

NC: We're not involved in that, no.

AM: So what are you involved in?

NC: We're involved in thinking hard about what it might involve. But we've been asked specifically to do anything at this particular stage.

AM: Okay. Can I turn onto the problem of recruitment? Is there an Army recruitment problem at the moment?

NC: I wouldn't call it a problem. I mean the answer is that we're not doing as well as we could do and there are all sorts of good reasons for this. And actually that resonates on a day like today when, you know, people like veterans are always being thought about. But if you look at it the Navy and the Air Force are manned at 96%, the Army is manned at around 94%. The Army has never failed to deliver an operational output and if you look back over the last 30 years it's actually only been fully manned a couple of times.

AM: But we're beginning to recruit people who were not born here into the British Army for the first time.

NC: That's true, but it's not for the first time actually. If you look back over the last 20 years we've always recruited a lot from the foreign and Commonwealth. Indeed we recruited about 5,000 a year during the Afghan campaign.

AM: And looking at the soldiers we've already recruited is it true, as widely reported, that there are 18,000 members of the British military who are obese?

NC: Not that I've noticed.

MARR SHOW, GENERAL SIR NICK CARTER

AM: But there are very very large numbers of soldiers, sailors and airmen who are too fat.

NC: I think if you look at the extent to which we're able to manage the physical assessments that are put in front of them we don't fail that badly.

AM: One other issue. You served in Northern Ireland yourself. Is it not right that historic crimes are investigated properly, including crimes that may have been committed by serving members of the British military?

NC: It's a complex issue this and as a military officer and somebody who's done a number of tours in Northern Ireland, it obviously make me uncomfortable to see people being investigated for what actually we all thought was an extraordinarily good effort in helping with the security of Northern Ireland. But I think looking forwards, that's the bit that worries me more, because frankly what we don't to do is to end up with a legal framework in which our leaders at all levels are not able or prepared to take the sort of risks that are necessary to take on the battlefield. And we need to secure that for the future.

AM: Do you think there should be some kind of statute of limitations on these things?

NC: A lot of things are being looked at the moment but these are very much political matters. All I can do is put the military case which is to explain very firmly that what we need is the sort of context in which our soldiers and their leaders are able to take the risks they need to take on battlefields.

AM: Sir Nick, you have to go and stand in the rain, let's hope it's not raining then, thanks very much for talking to use.

Ends