

Smaller armies and better defenses in a new world- Japan Times 15.04.21

Concern has been raised that the United Kingdom is once again reducing the size of its armed forces. A chorus of complaints has come from retired generals, from defense experts and from politicians, all bemoaning the planned reduction in military manpower and in tanks and other equipment, as well as in warships.

Voces have also joined in from the United States expressing doubts about the U.K. continuing as a military power. What these critics all find it hard to grasp is that a fundamental change is taking place in defense requirements, in the whole gamut of security concerns and in the very nature of warfare itself.

Indeed, as one military authority put it “wars are no longer declared,” meaning not that threats of conflict and invasion are over but that, on the contrary, they were becoming continuous conditions of enmity between states and extending into areas such as space and cyberspace. They are also moving into the vital arteries and inner nerve systems of societies, on a scale and in a manner never before experienced.

Two huge new building blocks have been heaved into place in the founding structure of modern and future defense thinking.

The first is that the whole of society is under attack and must therefore be defended in all its dimensions, be they economic, infrastructural, social, political, diplomatic, scientific, educational, health-related or almost anything else. This means that areas far outside military organization have to be involved both in heading off constant threats and dangers, and in mounting counter offensives.

In this wired-up world island states have special vulnerabilities — an aspect which both Britain and Japan would be wise to share closely. For instance, a key worry for the British is the threat to their undersea cabling links and energy supply links. A key threat to Japan is that most of their vital raw materials and supplies come through the South China Seas where China is extending an increasingly possessive grip, with its artificial island and missile testing ranges.

The second block of understanding is that actual people are going to be increasingly removed from the new kinds of warfare. In the foreground the battlefield has already been transformed from ground hostilities to armies of drones and unmanned aircraft (UAVs), becoming faster and more devastating and accurate all the time. Small drones can now do what spies and sniffer dogs struggled to do, by entering buildings, finding out who is inside and what they are up to while also spotting booby traps and other hazards. Artificial intelligence has an increasing place in this sort of remote-controlled conflict, meaning fewer, but very highly skilled personnel working with technology that is advancing in leaps and bounds.

These are certainly not new insights. It has been obvious for at least a decade that warfare was going this way and that old types of traditional military engagement, while some continued, would feature less and less. This writer’s 10-year-old

grandchild was explaining to him long ago how future battles would look like this. It was all there in the computer games.

But it seems to require specific real-life events and demonstrations to bring home the hard, new realities to policy makers. Forward thinking military planners have been very surprised by what has been going on recently in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, where conventional Armenian soldiery and tanks proved no match at all against Azerbaijan's heavily armed drones, which have wiped them out by the dozens. But even that type of armed combat, in this case over territory, may now belong to the past.

Meanwhile, in the deep background and beneath the visible surface, information distortion and faking, system-hacking, psychological pressure, devious financial manipulation, covert acquisitions and control — all these and more are the new instruments to bring about a nation's subversion and inner weakening. This pattern of fighting for the mind is becoming established in stages — with first demoralization — often operating most effectively on young minds — then destabilization, crisis and civil breakdown, and then later, outright intervention.

In all this new kind of warfare landscape, aspects of daily life, and certainly all aspects of mutual trade and travel, have become weaponized. And then there is the ever-present terrorist threat, whether state-sponsored or lone operators. This is neither hot war nor cold war but permanent war, sourced both from the fanatical left and the ultraright. To combat this, you need highly advanced intelligence and surveillance capabilities, as well as the closest possible international security cooperation. But what you do not need are massive military forces; they were for yesterday's conflicts.

There may be one further and still deeper transformation in defense thinking that strategists with minds confined to the past find especially hard to accept. Much of the international security discussion and analysis continues to be in terms of great power competition, with Russian forces seen as the main threat in Europe and Chinese military expansion being the immediate Asian challenge. Admirals and generals, along with Cold War warriors, like to warn about the next world conflagration.

The vision here — of large-scale invasion forces, shelling and missile attacks — with the whole scene potentially escalating into nuclear devastation — could belong to a disappearing era. It's true that Chinese sabre-rattling over Taiwan, with airspace intrusions, major maritime exercises and the like, all aimed at sending threatening signals, may still conform to this pattern.

But the real threats to democracies and the values of liberty are seeping into the foundations of free societies in new ways, against which military might and manpower, big battalions and heavy weaponry are no longer effective counter forces. The war is here already, but in a different form to anything that went before.

Hence the change of focus being planned in U.K. defense priorities, which may alarm some but has to be the right way forward.