

**The Changing Character of Conflict – Synopsis of Presentation by  
AVM Paul Colley to OSCE Conference 24-25 May 2011**

This presentation indicates one way of looking at military capability, describes the difference between the nature and character of warfare, says something of what we may know about the future, but cautions that there is much that we cannot know. It offers some potential implications.

The nature of warfare – the violent human contest that is a mix of chance, risk and policy – has not changed down the centuries. But its very nature makes its character inherently unpredictable, so the character inevitably changes. The evolving Defence and security challenges concern us most, namely what the future operating environment will look like and where conflict is likely to occur. But that is being driven ever-more by the dynamics of the human environment: the demographic, social and technological changes, which will affect the way that people live and interact. These are becoming as dominant as the more traditional dynamics of global power. This suggests a changing balance of power globally, which may affect how events unfold and how some alliances and partnerships will evolve.

Whatever we think about future trends, we cannot predict events with accuracy. One way to test the resilience of our ideas about the future is to consider shocks and their potential impact. The idea is to imagine as many shocks as possible and to test concepts and capabilities against them. The implications of strategic trends are a changing battle space. Rather than a sterile, open battle space, future conflict will see all environments as more *congested, cluttered, contested, connected and constrained*.

One obvious implication is that the traditional spectrum of conflict, with discrete activities ranging from major combat operations to peace keeping, is now very fractured, with many operations occurring simultaneously rather than discretely or sequentially. Also, complexity and not scale is probably one of the most defining features of contemporary and future conflict. New doctrine for one of the most complex contemporary operations – security and stabilisation – mirrors both the nature and the character of conflict, because on the one hand the principles have essentially endured for many years. Yet on the other, this doctrine tries to refresh those well-know principles in its contemporary context and character. That has allowed doctrine to keep making sense as the character changes.