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Look through the lens of lessons – Ukraine – not a war we ever want to fight, must learn

Intro

The foundations of how we war fight – how we sense, decide and act – are being re-written.

The realities of modern conflict are very clear in Ukraine – the most data rich, digitally contested and intensely observed war to date. So we can see what a modern, high intensity war looks like.

Our adversaries are aligning, working better together than ever before, combining low and high tech to give them numerical and even capability advantage in some areas.

The modern battlefield has expanded – the frontline runs through fibre optic cables, cloud servers and millions of lines of code. The geography of a Joint Operating Area now stretches from the seabed to the geo-belt and reaches across the globe.

We see a systemic shift in how command and control, sensing, decision-making and execution interact.

Especially against an adversary that is adaptive, resourceful, and technologically-enabled. Not to mention one that does not bat an eyelid at sacrificing millions of its own population.

This does not mean that traditional domains and military hardware do not matter – they do – tanks, artillery, fighters, warships and munitions still matter – we need them all, we need more of them.

But I think we can see that they will not be decisive on their own – they need to be enabled with investment into the cloud, data and Command & Control architecture and systems.

Technology and technological innovation are redefining warfare – autonomous systems, information operations, electronic warfare, space and cyber – are the new languages we must be fluent in.

We need to be able to rapidly exploit digital technologies - the tempo of adaptation and iteration – coupled with the right people, data and technology - have become a decisive measure of combat power.

And that is at the heart of why Stratcom has become Cyber and Specialist Operations Command – CSOC. The 4th Military Command alongside Navy, Army and Air & Space Command.

1. CSOC – Purpose – Lead Command

CSOC aims to be the critical enabler for defence. It is the **Lead Command** for Intelligence, Cyber, EM, Targeting, C2, Communications, Information and Specialist Capabilities

Helps to drive coherence across the military commands, eradicate duplication, and accelerate progress in the way we fight and the way we develop our capability.

Ultimately helping to deliver the Army's ASGARD, the Navy's Atlantic Bastion and the RAF's Hybrid Air Wings, all of which rely on seamless integration across multiple domains.

Our first job is to ensure that our combat power is underpinned by a common digital foundation, shared data – a common data fabric and digital backbone that brings together a currently fragmented collection of systems and networks into a coherent ecosystem.

We are developing a **Digital Targeting Web** – a connected, data-driven set of digital services designed to seamlessly link sensors, decision-makers and effectors – both human and uncrewed. A unifying central nervous system.

The Digital Targeting Web will help us sense, understand, decide and act at a pace that surpasses our adversaries, enhancing precision and lethality, while providing greater choice of effects and speed of action.

But this is not enough.

The digital backbone and targeting web do not just enable the fight – we have seen in modern warfare that they often are the fight – the primary target of the adversary.

Ukraine showed us that it is contested before the first shot is even fired and throughout the conflict continues to be relentlessly targeted, often at a tempo beyond human cognition.

Both sides struck communication nodes, data link, command posts, satellite connectivity, power, cooling, cloud infrastructure and commercial service providers – with persistent, layered attacks – cyber and electronic, as well as kinetic.

2. So we need to increase our resilience – freedom of manoeuvre

We need to this firstly by design – move away from systems and networks that have been engineered around efficiency, coherence and enterprise optimisation – move towards systems that have redundancy, layers and can be rapidly modified.

We also need to improve our ability to withstand adversary action in the cyber and EM domains. Which is why at the end of 2025 we stood up the **Defence Cyber and Electromagnetic Force** (DCEMF)

The DECMF will unify previously fragmented and in some cases nascent capabilities from across the breadth of Defence and enable us to accelerate progress in defensive cyber (both at home and deployed) and mastery of the electromagnetic domain.

We will hear more about the EM domain tomorrow – but suffice to say, the EM environment is arguably the place where advantage is gained or lost, sometimes before any shots are fired.

3. One of the most striking lessons from Ukraine is the **speed of adaptation**.

Targeting algorithms, sensor fusion tools and data workflows cannot just be fielded and forgotten. They are reconfigured, re-trained and re-purposed – often in hours, certainly within days.

Algorithms are updated mid-mission, digital workflows are adjusted after every contact; they fix, learn, update and deploy – continuously.

In a rapidly evolving battlespace, there is a simple truth – the side that adapts, iterates and innovate faster has the advantage.

To get after this, within CSOC we are establishing a **Digital Warfighting Group** – another recommendation from the SDR.

The digital warfighting group is a collection of highly skilled experts from across defence, the reserves, industry and academia.

They will be able to deploy alongside conventional warfighters if needed, and work in the rear, to facilitate rapid learning, the analysis of battlespace data in real time and provide the ability to exploit technology and design solutions while in contact.

Something we see being used to great effect in Ukraine.

The synergy between the military (regulars and reserves), civil servants, industry, academia, allies and partners is key. Success requires shared data, shared understanding, shared purpose and shared resilience.

Perhaps a shift from partnership to integration.

4. Another lesson from Ukraine shows us that data is moving faster than humans can think.

The modern battlespace generates more data than any human can consume, whether from drone feeds, satellites, acoustic and electronic sensors, open-source intelligence or anywhere else.

The volume, velocity and variety of data simply out paces human cognition. Therefore machine augmentation is non-discretionary.

AI will materially change warfare, not by replacing human command, but by accelerating military functions – intelligence, planning, logistics, targeting and decision support – to machine speed – to give us comparative advantage.

We must embrace AI so we can compress days and hours into minutes and seconds; allowing commanders to see further, decide faster and act ahead of the adversary at all levels.

And of course this compression of time presents problems – not just how we deal with it in the battlespace – decisions will need to be decentralised and taken at the edge.

But also how we deal with it technically - I can only imagine the amount of compute power needed to support targeting on the scale we see in Iran.

Conclusion

As we try to make sense of the modern battlespace, I think we know what good looks like.

To achieve battlespace advantage, a force needs to be integrated across all domains, resilient, interoperable, seamless.

It must be able to sense, decide and act faster than the adversary.

It needs to adapt, interate and innovate.

And it needs to do it at machine speed.

Cyber and Specialist Operations Command was stood up in September 2025, very deliberately as a 4th military command.

We are not simply delivering cyber and specialist capabilities for defence

As a 4th military command we are warfighters – we lead the cyber and electromagnetic domains

We are operationalising digital capabilities and driving integration between domains and into the way we warfight, so we can achieve and maintain Battlespace Advantage.