

Army gets equipped for the digitised battlefield

Defence Secretary Ben Wallace has announced a reorganisation of the Army to address new threats. Robert Fox assesses the Future Soldier programme

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ROUGHLY £4.6 billion will be invested in the Army over 10 years providing new equipment, training techniques and barracks. The aim is to equip forces for the era of the digitised battlefield, for managing information operations to combat fake news and propaganda, to master the new world of cyber and artificial intelligence.

The Army will be lean, and cut to 73,000 regular soldiers — possibly its smallest total for a century and a half.

An eye-catching new unit is being formed called the Ranger Regiment. This will be made up of small units with a range of specialist equipment prepared to go into danger zones to assist and guide friendly forces. If necessary the Rangers, based on the US Green Beret rangers made famous in Vietnam, will go into battle alongside the allies.

In this there is something of the Back to the Future Soldier about the new concept. The Rangers seem readying for the wars of yesterday — Afghanistan in particular. Tomorrow's enemies are not necessarily going to be like today's or yesterday's.

Over-emphasis on technology, the concentration on new space and cyberspace kit over numbers may become a problem. Environmental change, global warming and the accompanying weird weather is likely to produce uncontrolled migration — now emerging as one of the main drivers in violence and unrest in the decades to come.

This will require robust security forces, in numbers and at a level that can be reinforced. The new Future Soldier plan does offer unparalleled opportunities in education and training in the history of services. Young men and women should grab these with both hands and then adopt more flexible plans for securing the future. The Future Soldier plan, like most plans of battle, probably won't last much more than the first few minutes of contact with adverse reality.