Planning for Future Operations: Learning Lessons from Remote Warfare

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Introduction

Conceptual force development faces a bind when deciding how to prepare troops for the next threat to the UK: should force design focus on confronting the most dangerous threat on the horizon, or the most likely? In recent years, with a resurgent Russia and rising China, the UK government is ever more focused on the former – with threats posed by near-peer competitors leading much of the nation's defence debates. Yet, while these threats are real and preparing for them is vital, it is a mistake to allow national debates to be skewed too much towards large-scale peer on peer conflict, to the detriment of understanding recent campaigns.

In particular, our own work highlights the need to better understand the shift towards light footprint expeditionary warfare. In an approach we refer to as "remote warfare" Western forces play an increasingly supporting role alongside local and regional troops, who are currently doing the bulk of frontline fighting against shared threats in places like Iraq, Syria and Somalia. This approach has allowed the UK to engage abroad without too much pressure on squeezed budgets and risk averse politicians. However, it also poses unique challenges which have been misunderstood and underappreciated by decision-makers.

This style of operation is likely to dominate British military engagement in the foreseeable future; the prevailing domestic climate of political risk aversion, financial constraints, and enhanced public and parliamentary scrutiny

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continues to place restrictions on large-scale interventions. Internationally, adversaries continue to have a strong strategic interest in confronting our armed forces off the open battlefield, with the UK still more likely to find itself confronted by a Russian contractor in a country like Syria than with a conventional engagement in the Baltics.

It has often been assumed that it will be easier to 'scale down', to fight unconventional and counterinsurgency campaigns, than to 'step up', to confront a near-peer aggressor. However, recent experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan were a painful reminder that this is often not the case. The same is also true with the shift towards remote warfare, which also requires a skillset that is distinct from – rather than a scaled-back version of – major warfighting operations. Thus, pulling lessons from contemporary campaigns and feeding them into force design, doctrine, concepts, and training remains as important as ever. No more so than for the Royal Marines, who – as a force trained for rapid deployment worldwide – are likely to continue to play an important role in undertaking light footprint operations abroad.

Are we learning the right lessons?

By maintaining a light footprint, some of the risks of exposing British troops to another series of gruelling wars appear to have been kept to an acceptable minimum. There have been no high-profile anti-war protests on the streets of London, and – bar the embarrassing defeat in Parliament of a government motion on the principle of military action in Syria in 2013 – the UK has been able to lend support to its allies relatively unhindered. The high-profile liberations of Mosul and Raqqa from so called Islamic State (IS) control in 2017 have done much to reassure critics that through this model, some British

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objectives can be achieved abroad with minimal loss of blood and treasure for the UK.

However, despite the military successes in degrading IS, recent campaigns also raise serious doubts over how prepared we are for the particular challenges of this approach. In our report “Remote Warfare: Lessons learned from contemporary theatres”, we argue “a cocktail of low risk appetites, poor expertise in working with local forces, and limited international footprint in contemporary theatres is presenting practical challenges for British forces” undertaking contemporary military engagements.

To illustrate, let’s take the topic of risk. Because remote warfare allows governments to engage abroad without consulting Parliament, it can be an attractive option for risk averse governments that fear losing a vote. Whether claims of public and parliamentary aversion to deploying British troops abroad are overblown or not (and we have argued elsewhere they may well be), it is clear that there is a prevailing climate of risk aversion that is permeating British overseas missions and – potentially – impacting their ability to operate and achieve UK objectives.

We were told during interviews in Kabul in March 2017 that stringent restrictions on troop movements was having a huge effect on the ability of troops to get out and build relationships with the people that they are meant to be training. Similarly, while interviewing recent returnees from the British training mission to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), it was clear that troops were very aware that if anyone had got shot the mission could have been ended as a result. This led to a dilemma on the ground for those that wanted to have a meaningful effect and saw that they wouldn’t be able to do so on their current permissions. Some recounted how they had operated outside of their authorities in order to do their jobs – obviously a high risk considering the potential implications had anything had gone wrong.[1]

It seems clear that risk assessments that prioritise 'risk to life' appear to be winning over those that emphasise 'risk to mission'. While protecting troops against harm is rightly a priority, it must be acknowledged that allowing these concerns to outweigh assessments of mission success can be counterproductive. Troops on deployment are at far greater risk than when they are in barracks across the UK. There is little to no point putting them there if they are unable to do their jobs. Nor was this the only area in which soldiers felt the current UK approach could be undermining the effectiveness of their operations. As we write elsewhere, there are a number of unique challenges posed by operating on a light footprint and with partners, including handing over strategic control to forces which may be less capable or have differing long-term objectives. Many of these are not fully appreciated by those developing strategy but can have a huge impact on those operating on the ground.

Listening to those on the ground

Our research points to a disconnect between those developing strategy in Whitehall and those tasked with implementing such strategies in the field. Our interviews with soldiers operating in Kenya, Mali and Nigeria raised concerns that troops are "operating in a political vacuum" where they lacked clear direction from London.[2]As one senior soldier put it – echoing the complaints of many more – "We have no overarching strategy… We just throw some men here and some men there." It is not just our interviewees who are picking this up. A 2018 assessment of the Conflict Stability and Security Fund by the Independent Commission on Aid Impact (ICAI), flagged "weak results management and insufficient learning" as a key problem for delivering British objectives abroad.

Even when bold objectives were set, many were left unsure with how they could be achieved given the restrictions and reality of the operations in country. For example in Nigeria, where CSSF documents highlight the clear objective of "support[ing] the Armed Forces of Nigeria (AFN) operating in the North East" (where the threat of Boko Haram is most prominent) one said that, given the nature of the training activities currently being undertaken, "it is hard to show that [our activities are] having an impact."[3]

Many felt that their ability to address this was hindered by a poor system for feeding back lessons learned. In Mali, soldiers complained that they have not been given clear priorities to cover in their situation reports, leading to a situation where they report on everything – despite feeling it is not that useful and may not even be read. Similar views were held by troops we interviewed in Kenya; one soldier said that the "MOD is not as good at using people that are on the ground", while another said: "our experience isn't leveraged to generate that sort of knowledge."[4] On occasion, many felt that this led to decisions being made in London that would have run counter to the advice of local troops, if their lessons had been fed into the strategic process.

Conclusion

Remote warfare looks set to be an enduring feature of contemporary campaigns. Even with a resurgent Russia and a rising China, UK operations will likely still be characterised by constrained budgets, strong parliamentary and public oversight and a focus on working with partners rather than unilaterally. If it continues to be treated as a secondary task to major warfighting – lacking sustained debate about its opportunities, challenges and risks – it is unlikely that British forces will ever excel at it.

A failure of British forces to perform well at these tasks will invariably have knock-on effects. At home, declining confidence in UK defence is unlikely to yield the sorts of resources or permissions that the armed forces need to sustain their operations. Abroad, dents in the UK's reputation as a reference force for partners and allies could have long-lasting consequences for British influence overseas.

Drawing lessons from contemporary campaigns, then, is as important as ever. Achieving this requires more substantial and systematic communication between decision-makers and those delivering the strategy on the ground. Doing so will improve the chances that the UK can achieve its national objectives, deliver for its partners and improve prospects for peace and stability in the places it intervenes abroad.

[1]October 2016 Interviewee

[2]September 2018 Interviewee

[3]October 2018 Interviewee

[4]September 2018 Interviewee

Image credit: Defence Images/Flickr.

About the Author

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