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QUESTIONS FOR THE INTEGRATED REVIEW:

#2: HOW TO ENGAGE: DEEP AND NARROW OR WIDE AND SHALLOW?

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Questions for the Integrated Review #2: How to Engage: Deep and narrow or wide and shallow?

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Oxford Research Group (ORG) held a series of online roundtables to understand the risks and challenges remote warfare could present over the next five years and how the Integrated Review could address these.

These highlighted three key questions:

1. *How should the UK define its national security?*
2. *How should the UK respond to threats?*
3. *How should the UK measure the success of military interventions?*

This briefing seeks to address the second of these questions, [you can read the first one here](#) and the third will be out soon.

Introduction

Near-peer threats are likely to be a key part of discussions leading up to the UK's 'Integrated Security, Defence, Development and Diplomacy Review' (or 'Integrated Review') in 2021. In recent years, UK policy has shifted away from counter-terrorism operations, which have defined international intervention since 2001, towards threats posed by states like Russia, Iran and China. This shift is evident in policies, strategies, doctrine, multilateral training exercises, and structural changes within the UK and among its allies. For instance, it was a key driver behind the UK's Fusion Doctrine, which was announced in 2018 to "strengthen our collective approach to national security."[1]

For the UK military this has meant examining how to engage in "operations below the threshold of armed conflict."[2] One way it is considering doing this is through a strategy of "persistent engagement", where it stays in a country (perhaps with just a few soldiers) working with partners in the region to build influence and knowledge.[3] For instance, it was reported that Royal Marine commandos

would be deployed east of Suez, with a recommendation that "more ships [should] forward [deploy]."[4] The objective of such engagements is to build influence and relationships in partner countries, partly to ensure that adversaries cannot.

This strategy looks a lot like remote warfare. A shift over the last two decades towards light footprint operations where, instead of deploying large numbers of their own troops, states like the U.S. and the UK focussed on supporting local, national and regional forces to do the bulk of frontline fighting.[5] This same strategy now appears to provide a useful tool against a new threat. As one expert we spoke to said: "Partnered operations can play a role in combatting grey zone warfare" by providing access to local and regional forces and decision makers. In this sense, they "give you access and leverage and fill a vacuum that Russia and China may fill."

To try to understand the implications of this approach, we convened 20 experts from a variety of backgrounds to discuss the UK's

approach.[a] In general, these experts agreed that potential adversaries, like Iran, China and Russia were playing significant roles in global affairs. But many argued that the current approach risks misunderstanding or oversimplifying the threat for two reasons:

1. For some, the UK risks underappreciating the importance of a political strategy grounded in British values to unite military and non-military approaches.
2. Many felt it underappreciated the importance of the UK and its allies carefully coordinating national strategies, to ensure that some do not undermine the efforts of others.

The best way to address near-peer threats is often through national strategies which unite military and non-military activity with an overall political aim, grounded in British values and not contradictory of the efforts of allies.

The potential threat

Concern about the potential threats posed by Russia, Iran and China were already clear in the UK's 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review, but the last few years have seen this concern increase. Most dramatically, in 2018, a former Russian spy and his daughter were poisoned in the UK by a nerve agent, in an attack "almost certainly" approved by the Russian state.[6] Internationally, Russian proxies and mercenaries in the Middle East and Africa have been a huge concern for UK policymakers.[7] Russia has also used non-military means – such as election interference and energy infrastructure – to gain leverage and influence.[8]

The last five years have also seen worsening tensions with Iran. From the U.S. pulling out of the Iran nuclear deal;[9] to increased tensions between the UK and Iran over the

arrest of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe (a dual British-Iranian citizen who is imprisoned in Iran on charges of spying);[10] to the UK impounding an Iranian oil tanker bound for Syria and, in retaliation, Iran seizing a UK-flagged tanker in the Strait of Hormuz in September 2019.[11] Iran has engaged extensively in places like Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Mali.[12] One roundtable participant said: "On the spectrum of Iranian activities, you're talking everything from medical training, to cultural protection."

Practitioners, policymakers and experts (both in the UK and internationally) have also been split over how to approach the rise of China.[13] There were a number of splits within the Conservative Party and between UK allies over the decision to include the Chinese telecoms company, Huawei, as part of the roll-out of the UK's 5G network.[14] There are now some MPs emerging within the Conservative party as part of the China Research Group, which are becoming increasingly hawkish towards the Chinese state.[15] In fact, most recently, the UK Government announced that Huawei 5G kits "must be removed from UK by 2027."[16]

There are also concerns over China's Belt and Road Initiative, which spans from "South-east Asia to Eastern Europe and Africa [and]… includes 71 countries that account for half the world's population and a quarter of global GDP."[17] This has expanded its influence and international reputation and led many to accuse China of "debt-trap diplomacy", where debts are written off in exchange for, say, political support, or land assets.[18]

This appears to pose significant risks to the UK Government's promises to be a "force for good in the world."[19] The UK Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, spoke to the UK's values recently when he said:

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[a] Including the military, the UK Government, Parliament, and civil society

"…this government is absolutely committed to the United Kingdom being an even stronger force for good in the world: on climate change…, as we champion 12 years of education for every girl in the world…

"And on human rights, we will defend media freedoms, protect freedom of religion."[20]

Unfortunately, there has often been an assumption that these democratic values put the UK at a disadvantage against near-peer threats. In our own roundtable participants described how the UK and its allies are often on "the backfoot" because they are "open societies" and are uncomfortable with deception.

This assumption requires careful consideration. Not only because, as one participant said, the UK at times risks "playing lip service to values and ethics" without living up to them, but also because embracing these values, in rhetoric and reality, may strengthen the UK's approach. In fact, it may be that the best way to respond to such threats is through a strategy which unites military and non-military means behind a clearly articulated vision of what the UK wants to be in the world and the values it wants to promote.

A strategy for engagement

The UK appears to have acknowledged the need to unite military and non-military efforts behind a common strategy. When announcing the Fusion Doctrine, the Government said: "Many capabilities that can contribute to national security lie outside traditional national security departments and so we need stronger partnerships across government and with the private and third sectors."[21] This was reiterated in its new approach to Africa which emphasised that, to accomplish its priorities, UK government departments, private

companies and investment needs to be mobilised behind united goals.[22]

Similarly, when announcing the decision to merge the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Department for International Development (DfID), Prime Minister Boris Johnson stated: "This will unite our aid with our diplomacy and bring them together in our international effort."[23] However, improving coherence across government does not mean departments should merge and, potentially, lose their individuality and unique skills and contributions. If this point is lost through the Government's ambitions to shake up Whitehall, it will likely undermine the UK's future responses to conflict abroad. Certainly, without a strategy for how reform can improve policy delivery in the areas the UK intervenes, such an approach may do more harm than good.

More effective than homogenising departments, then, may be uniting them behind a political strategy for international engagement. As one participant said, Iran's effectiveness comes from "an overarching intent that everyone knows and … can work towards." Unfortunately, some respondents felt that the UK currently has a "negative foreign policy", where it is clearer on why it will not act abroad than on what it stands for.[24] This view is held across the political spectrum. For instance, Dr James Rogers from the Henry Jackson Society said in evidence to the Defence Committee: "What Britain lacks is a vision of where it wants to be in the world, what it wants to achieve, and with what instruments."[25]

This has a clear and detrimental impact on international engagement abroad. As one roundtable participant said: "There is a lack of a Middle East strategy, which undermines the UK's ability to have a vision… this is obviously counterproductive." Another noted that, even where the UK does have regional strategies, "they don't link up, so we don't have the sum of our parts … there is no overall goals." A

strategy built on British values – and "what we stand for" – would do a lot to fill this gap.

Certainly, military means are only useful if they are built into a political strategy based on our values. If short-term military training activities are not part of such a strategy, the UK may well end up training predatory state forces without building any meaningful influence.[26] As one participant said, it "comes down to how aligned we are with the partner. If there is a gap, it does leave us open to insecurity." This reflects the findings of a recent Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) report which argued that:

> *"Security partnerships are only one important tool for competing …, but they are often overused and emphasized in allied strategies…when non-security tools may be better fit for purpose. In fact, an integrated campaign approach that elevates information, diplomacy, economic incentives, and private-sector and civil society engagement tools will be far more effective than using security tools alone in countering rivals' … activities."[27]*

In this sense, an approach which truly embraces the democratic values highlighted in speeches such as Raab's may be more effective. If only meaningful political relationships can build influence, it may be that providing military support to states who do not share these values will never result in lasting influence in the country anyway. If this is true, the UK should stop the narrative that striving for such values is a weakness. In fact, Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam recently argued in *Foreign Affairs* that, "[c]ontrary to popular beliefs, democracies are more effective in responding to various crises…[and] democracies are more likely than autocracies to win their wars."[28] Similarly, Western experts often see the way that Iran acts militarily as one of its great strengths, and

therefore underestimate the extent to which this is dictated more by weakness (lacking a conventional army or sufficient funding).[29]

This feeling was echoed in our own roundtable. One participant noted that: "Our values have historically been a source of strength and legitimacy, so that should really be the base of how we're approaching partnerships." In fact, the same CSIS briefing argued that: "Focusing on a selective and principled approach to security capacity building will help identify targeted opportunities to buttress this broader, integrated campaign approach."[30] Doing so, would, as one participant noted, repair the UK's reputation "internationally as hypocrites" by demonstrating true commitment to democratic values. It would also reaffirm the importance of building alliances with nations who stand for freedom, democracy and human rights.

Working with allies

One roundtable participant said of the upcoming Integrated Review that, "it strikes me that this review will have to deal with how it engages both when it comes to allies and adversaries." Indeed, what have been regarded since 1945 as the two permanent pillars to UK security have come under increased pressure since 2016.

On the one hand, there have been frosty relations between the UK and other European leaders since the result of the EU referendum. Added to this, one participant noted in the roundtable that the UK's tendency to side with the U.S. on a number of global issues, such as Iran, has caused even greater rifts between the UK and the rest of the continent (although it does not appear to have made this decision lightly).

On the other hand, the election of President Donald Trump has created challenges for UK-U.S. cooperation. Defence Secretary Ben Wallace said in evidence to the Defence

Committee that the UK was not informed before the U.S. announcement that it would pull its troops out of Syria, something that was regarded as unusual practice between two close allies.[31] Wallace later said the UK "must be prepared to fight wars without the U.S."[32] This may be even truer following the U.S. response to the COVID-19 outbreak. Some have said it will "no longer be seen as an international leader because of its…narrow self-interest and bungling incompetence." This will have lasting implications for the Euro-Atlantic relationship.[33]

The UK and its allies may need a more internationally focussed strategy to begin to address these problems. Regrettably, as we identified in previous research, there is evidence that the UK has not always been a natural coalition operator. At a force development conference in March 2018, the UK and allies from the Netherlands, Germany, Canada, Australia, and the U.S. each presented their future force concepts. The UK and the U.S. were the only two that didn't place working in coalition at the heart of their concepts.[34] More recently, many have criticised the UK's "Global Britain" agenda as poorly defined and often seemingly more based on building international reputation than on a genuine belief that its objectives are better served through pooling capabilities with allies.[35]

Yet, failing to coordinate properly with allies could be hugely destabilising for the places the UK engages in, and make it less able to tackle near-peer adversaries. For the areas the UK is engaged, it can lead to the fragmentation and ineffectiveness of international efforts. This already appears to be the case in some parts of the Sahel and the Horn of Africa.[36] Paul D. Williams highlights how many nations pursuing contradictory objectives in Somalia led to a counterproductive international peacebuilding effort.[37] International Crisis Group also note that beyond poor coordination, some countries have actively side-lined international organisations and other countries operating in the same region.[38]

Not only can this make the international effort ineffective, but also harmful. Peter Albrecht and Signe Cold-Ravnkilde note that, in the Sahel, many nations pursuing short-term, national objectives can lead to a de-prioritisation of protecting civilians.[39] Similarly, numerous countries seeking influence and reputation rather than a strategy for peace and stability can see them prioritise military support because this is what will achieve political access and influence, even though regional stability would be better served by a greater focus on, say, poverty or corruption reduction. For instance, one participant at a previous ORG roundtable said of the international effort in Niger, "it is one of the poorest countries in the world, but the focus on food security has fallen on deaf ears, while at the same time there is a whole list of countries queueing up for providing more military support."[40]

This could have serious implications for the UK's own national security. It may create the very instability and chaos in which countries like Russia (and their mercenaries) thrive and Western countries struggle to engage. As a CSIS briefing noted: "As competitors seek to discredit, corrupt, and alienate security actors that do not accord with their interests, partner legitimacy will be an important source of resiliency."[41]

More generally, to compete against significant investments from countries such as Russia and China, the UK and its allies must work harder to coordinate efforts and align their approaches with others if they are to have a real, tangible effect. One way the UK can help to do this is to focus more on international coordination when developing national strategies. In some areas it has already adopted such an approach. The UK's last major UN deployment – in UNMISS in South

Sudan – provided a field hospital and, with it, a context in which troop contributors felt happier to commit, knowing that their troops could receive appropriate medical care in an area known not only for conflict violence but tropical diseases.[42] This was effective at both improving the UK's international reputation *and* the effectiveness of the international effort.[43]

Conclusion

Our roundtable participants indicated that the UK military's persistent engagement strategy is here to stay. One said that the "army is going to go all out on persistent engagement", while others noted that such a strategy may be inevitable because of the economic and political climate in the UK. One participant said plainly, "we have no money after Brexit and even less after COVID." The last five years in the UK have seen markets hit during Brexit negotiations, businesses struggling because of COVID-19 responses and the UK Government under Boris keen to cut costs.[44]

Yet, small military deployments will still have a minimal, and potentially negative, impact unless they are tied to a political strategy. As it recognises in its Fusion Doctrine, the UK must utilise and unite all the levers of power. More pivotal, is that it does so under a strategy that truly understands the long-term consequences and costs of international engagements.[45]

This could not be clearer when it comes to responding to potential threats from Russia, China, and Iran. Their increased power comes from an ability to utilise and unite military and non-military efforts through a clear and coherent strategy. In response, it is likely that military means will form part of the UK's strategy, but it must be politically led and focus on our values and democratic ideals.

To see these ideals as a weakness, misunderstands their strength. They provide the basis for a strategy based on "what we stand for" and help us to define who our true allies and partners are, based on who strives to uphold these same values.

The UK must acknowledge that it cannot respond to the significant investments from countries such as Russia and China alone – and nor should it. Protecting national interests and national values lies in us working with others to strengthen things like international law, human rights, democracy, and freedom of speech. If we do not, then we have already lost.

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