



The Government's Defence Review: An Incomplete Picture

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The Secretary of State for Defence released the Ministry of Defence's (MoD) long-awaited Modernising Defence Programme (MDP) this week, after an almost six-month delay. It is promising that the MoD decided to publish the [MDP as a report](#) rather than a Written Ministerial Statement as speculated, but at 28-pages long—bulked out with 10-pages of graphics—the report appears to reinforce the government's shifting strategic focus towards countering state-based threats (aka Russia) despite the fact that remote warfare is likely to dominate British military engagement in the foreseeable future.

This approach to warfighting is often regarded by decision-makers as a cheap, clean, and effective way of engaging overseas. [We had hoped that the MDP would have provided an opportunity to test what we regard as flawed assumptions and lead to a broader review of the cost-effectiveness of remote warfare.](#) It seems for the moment this is unlikely.

Expanding Debate?

The Remote Warfare Programme has long called for a better understanding of the cost of current military operations. The [“mobilise”](#) aspect of the MDP report focuses around improving the “readiness and availability” of key Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance platforms (ISR). These capabilities are frequently used as part of British remote warfare, where the UK supports local forces and invariably builds partner capacity, provides military equipment and non-combat capabilities. That is why we have called for a more thorough analysis by the government on the cost-effectiveness of activities such as

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capacity building; drone technology; UK Special Forces capabilities; and intelligence sharing. While the proposed [Transformation Fund](#)—a measly £160m line of funding—looks set to focus on “modernisation” in cyber and Artificial Intelligence (AI), there is minimal discussion in the report about current remote warfare operations or capabilities other than ISR.

This is probably linked to the fact that the MDP seems to focus largely on the challenge posed by Russian resurgence, and the threat from state-based actors more generally rather than the areas where the UK is currently engaged. For example, there is little reference to the types of tasks that the British military are undertaking to counter terrorism and build partner capacity in places like Somalia, Kenya, Nigeria, Mali or in the counter-IS campaign in Iraq and Syria.

Instead, the Secretary of State spoke in general terms setting out how the MoD would Britain’s armed build Britain’s armed forces’ capabilities that expand its “lethality, reach and mass”, terms that echo past commitments without explaining how this is different.

The MDP has been titled: Mobilising, Modernising and Transforming Defence but the MDP only talks in vague terms about what exactly that means. The fact that the introduction of the report “describes how we **intend** to invest the significant additional sums the Autumn Budget provided to Defence” suggests that the MoD has not moved far beyond its headline conclusions of July 2018—at the time, I described them as “**inconclusive conclusions**”—where it set out its intent but omitted any concrete deliverables.

This suggests that the MDP process has not offered any closure around the issue of spending or that the MoD is willing to engage in a debate around the cost-effectiveness of key areas of current UK military operations. However, the

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2019 Spending Review—despite the additional £1.8bn promised for this year—may mean that these issues will become hard for the MoD to kick into the long-grass.

Defence Policy Board

There were parts of the review that should be welcomed. Foremost, the fact that the MoD did agree to publish a report rather than a Written Ministerial Statement. We have long argued that releasing more information about current UK deployments is essential.

That is why the planned introduction of a permanent Defence Policy Board is also promising. This, Mr Williamson announced, would provide a forum for external experts to challenge defence strategy and policy plans, which has the potential for improved debate around the effectiveness of contemporary campaigns.

This is welcome because there are currently limited opportunities to scrutinise UK strategy, judge the success or failure of policies, evaluate the needs of military personnel, or suggest alternatives when there is little official information in the public domain about what the government is doing.

In fact, the Defence Policy Board is similar to a recommendation we made in our recent report, *No Such Thing As A Quick Fix: The Aspiration-Capabilities Gap in British Remote Warfare* for the introduction of a shadow National Security Council (NSC). We envisaged this as a body of external experts who would feed into the policymaking process to check fatal assumptions and short-term thinking that we identified in analysis on British military contributions to campaigns in Libya, Iraq and Syria.

Refusing to be transparent about the UK's military action overseas, even when there is reasonable information in the public domain, may serve to fuel the popular feelings of distrust and risk-aversion that the secrecy surrounding much of remote warfare seems designed to circumvent. For that reason, the Defence Policy Board could be an effective means to deliver a more strategic debate about the UK's remote warfare approach.

Fighting Old Battles

The MDP has been a long-drawn out process and on the whole does not appear to address the need for a broader debate around the cost-effectiveness of remote warfare—an approach that is likely to dominate British military engagement for the foreseeable future. Given that the MDP process was put in place as a means to resolve the issue of spending, this seems an oversight.

For that reason, it is likely that the 2019 Spending Review will lead to officials, MPs, journalists and civil society fighting old battles on what capabilities the MoD should defer, delete or scrap. Perhaps that will provide a greater opportunity to review British remote warfare if the MDP process doesn't. However, the prospect of a Defence Policy Board suggests that the MoD is taking on board concerns shared by some external stakeholders that there needs to be more active engagement. It will be an initiative RWP will follow with interest.

Image credit: [DVIDSHUB/Flickr](#).

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