



UK General Election 2019: Time for a New Approach to Security Partnerships?

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This general election is an opportunity for UK political parties to commit to a review of the UK's approach to security partnerships to ensure that they are consistent with UK strategic objectives to reduce conflict and build peace abroad.

Growing Strategic Importance of Security Partnerships

Despite major drawdowns in combat deployments in both Iraq and Afghanistan over the last decade, Western states like the UK have continued to prioritise the threat posed by instability in fragile states abroad. However, squeezed defence budgets, deep public and political scepticism about foreign interventions overseas and lessons learned from the costly nation-building projects have led the UK to adopt an approach that relies on fewer British troops being deployed overseas.

From the counter-IS fight in Syria and Iraq, to capacity building efforts in the Horn of Africa and in the Sahel, the UK has increasingly focused on building the capacity of partner state (and non-state) actors. In doing so the UK has sought to help them take a lead for their own security, create stability and, ultimately, prevent future conflicts. This often sees the UK performing a supporting role, providing non-combat capabilities such as training and equipment, intelligence and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance to partner forces.

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We call this *remote warfare*.

Signs of this shifting approach were first seen in the UK's 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR)¹, which prioritised capacity building and security sector reform as a means for the UK to promote “regional stabilisation” and reduce the “risk of conflict”. This was reinforced in the 2015 SDSR² with a further pledge to establish what is now the Specialised Infantry Group³, or ‘Spec Inf’: military units specifically focused on providing “an increased contribution to countering terrorism and building stability overseas”.

Partner capacity building has become a major UK strategic endeavour. However, our research shows that while remote warfare is often presented as low risk, a national security policy which fails to systematically acknowledge, identify and mitigate the potential risks of security partnerships may in fact exacerbate instability overseas rather than address it.

Risk-free warfare?

While the costs of the UK's contribution to the counter-IS fight are comparatively lower (in both funds and British lives) than previous operations, the intense urban battles in Raqqa and Mosul in 2017 show that remote warfare is not low-cost for civilian populations. Independent estimates for the 9-month battle of Mosul alone put the civilian death toll at over 9,000.⁴ Beyond the direct loss of life, damage to civilian infrastructure will affect people's livelihoods for the medium- to long-term.

Lessons learned from NATO operations in Afghanistan demonstrate that, in addition to the humanitarian challenges this poses, there are also significant

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military-strategic implications such as the potential loss of legitimacy among civilian populations.

Civilian casualties are tragically an inherent consequence of violent conflict. However, remote warfare presents distinct risks to protecting civilians. With fewer Western troops on the ground it becomes more difficult to provide accurate pre- and post- strike assessments. This challenge was acknowledged during the counter-IS fight, and identified by UK Armed Forces Minister, Mark Lancaster, during a Defence Committee hearing in April 2019.⁵ This underlines the need for a clear and frank communications strategy to develop a more realistic public understanding of the difficult conditions facing deployed British service personnel.

To date, such a strategy has not been reflected in the UK government's approach.

For instance, it is incredibly problematic that on one side you have British ministers arguing that there is only evidence enough to prove British military action was responsible for one civilian casualty over the course of a five-year military campaign.⁶ While on the other side, senior military officers are on the record comparing the battles of Raqqa and Mosul to the devastation of Stalingrad and the Fall of Berlin during the Second World War.⁷ This approach undermines the UK's credibility and could put the government at a disadvantage when trying to persuade less democratic states to incorporate the protection of civilians into their military operations.

We're not making an argument about British culpability here. Instead, our focus is on ensuring that the next government adopts a more honest approach to civilian casualty recording. Now, more than ever, there is an even greater

imperative for the UK government to do so in order to live up to its commitment to NATO's 2016 Policy for the Protection of Civilians.⁸ Which sets out that:

“ By being first with the facts, NATO can counter false information, demonstrate transparency and strengthen...the credibility of the operation or mission. *NATO Policy for the Protection of Civilians* ”

Reforming OSJA

As the UK improves its response to the protection of civilians on the ground, it must also make changes in Whitehall. This is particularly true when it comes to assessing the potential risks involved with providing security force assistance to failed or fragile states with poor human rights records.

There are already some mechanisms in place to address this. In 2011, the UK government published its human rights guidance on Overseas Security and Justice Assistance (OSJA), also known as the OSJA assessment. The purpose of this assessment is to set out what International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and human rights risks must be considered prior to approving the provision of assistance overseas. Depending on the level of risk identified, either a senior civil servant (medium risk) or minister (high-risk) is required to sign it off. However, there are several flaws in the current process.

The first is that the OSJA assessment is primarily a compliance-based tool to assess the legal risks of providing support to partners (though it does not include separate advice on assistance provided to non-state groups).⁹ This itself is no bad thing, but it fails to account for the fact that the assistance provided may be simultaneously compliant with IHL but still present significant political and reputational consequences for the UK.

Perhaps the most striking pitfall of the OSJA process is a total lack of external scrutiny, especially of high-risk cases that require ministerial approval. There have been some signs of progress on this front since November 2017. For example, following the Joint Committee on National Security Strategy's (JCNSS) scathing critique of the government's Conflict, Stability and Security Fund the senior officeholder at the Cabinet Office has attended committee hearings to give oral testimony.¹⁰ This gives JCNSS members an opportunity to direct any concerns about OSJAs filed as part of CSSF projects to a Cabinet minister.

However, specific details have only been provided in private sessions with the minister and on an ad hoc basis. Without formal security clearance being provided to members of the JCNSS, its members are unable to give a full assessment on the overall effectiveness of the OSJA process. Moreover, because the JCNSS' mandate is largely limited to reviewing OSJAs in the context of the CSSF, it does not necessarily have a mandate to oversee OSJAs filed for non-CSSF activities.

Effective accountability is not simply about ensuring taxpayers money is spent responsibly. But as CSIS argued in a recent report on US Security Force Assistance, it's about being "in a position to better direct, track, and calibrate" assistance to partners so that it remains consistent, in this instance, with the UK's strategic objectives.¹¹

The optimal word here is “*calibrate*”.

As it stands, there is little evidence OSJAs – or any other formalised process – provide a full assessment of the legal, strategic, political, and military risks of working with partners. To address this, the next government must prioritise a review into the OSJA process and explore how it could build a more holistic approach to safeguards applied to UK security sector assistance. This should take into account broader government policy on arms exports and its roll out of the conflict sensitivity marker.^{12.13.}

It’s time for a new approach

Despite a growing focus on the rise in state-based threats, capacity building is likely to remain a key part of the UK’s national security strategy. Regardless of whether that will be on the scale of the counter-IS fight, or smaller deployments in countries like Kenya, Nigeria and Mali, recent British military campaigns demonstrate that the UK needs new guidelines on responsible security partnerships.^{14.}

This will ensure the UK lives up to its reputation as a global defender of the rules-based international order and delivers a defence and security policy that contributes towards reducing conflicts and building sustainable peace abroad.

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