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Discussion Paper

The Hard Choices Twenty Questions for British Defence Policy and National Military Strategy

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The British contribution to operations in Afghanistan in terms of troops on the ground is about 80 per cent of that of the United States in relation to their respective populations. If this proportion is adjusted to take into account the relative scale of Gross Domestic Product expressed as purchasing power parity, the UK contributes 110 per cent in troops to national resources. Of the contributors above company size, only Denmark at 106 per cent and Bulgaria at 161 per cent, match this contribution. The mathematical formula does not, of course, represent human and financial contribution to the security of Afghanistan in the widest sense, but it is quite useful in explaining to an electorate the scale of a nation's commitment to a coalition operation led by the United States.

This contribution unquestionably meets criteria for Robin Cooke's 'Force for Good' and Douglas Hurd's 'punching above our weight'. The questions to be answered are 'Why are the British Armed Forces the one, and why are they expected to do the other?' The purpose of this

note is to provide background discussion and some questions as a stimulus for debate on the nature and evolution of the United Kingdom's defence policy. It does not attempt to speculate on the evolving security situation nor does it make any specific recommendations.

The Pragmatic Approach

British governments are typically not comfortable with the sort of hard analysis founded on basic premises in relation to national security that is needed now if the nation is to have a robust military strategy to cope with the demands of the present security situation as well as the longer term. The 'empirical' or 'pragmatic' approach is more about finding tools to deal with problems, challenges and 'shocks' than identifying longer term goals, the ways to bring these about, and the means that will be needed. The 1998 Strategic Defence Review (SDR), admirable as it was in many ways, was about identifying the tools to get out there and do stuff and come back home if necessary to do stuff. The premises, such as they were, were implied

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rather than stated, and the only longer term objectives were to create some expensive tools to get out there to do... etc. Indeed the very idea of a national military strategy is alien – literally. It is what the Americans and French do.

There is a lot of sense in the British way. National vision smacks of national ideology and that is not good for international co-operation. The world is complex in a technical sense and there is only so much predicting that can be done. Chaos theory may link the flap of a butterfly's wing in the Amazon rain forest to a tornado in Texas, but does not reassure that the tale can be told in advance. Coping with an uncertain future is as important a premise as it was ten years ago, but other premises must be defined as well.

The Challenge

The present dilemma for the British Government, and indeed for Parliament and the nation, is to cope with embroilment in Iraq and Afghanistan on the one hand while trying to build a force structure for the longer term in which there is likely to be a national reluctance for these sorts of intervention born of conclusive expectations but doomed to long commitments. And the future is not a simple choice between a greatly expanded capability for counter-insurgency on the one hand, and a sea-based concept on the other, permitting subtle and tentative toe-dipping but with no obvious justification for expenditure in terms of positive outcomes. The financial context is:

- An Equipment Plan launched by SDR that has proved earlier evidence of unaffordability, in part because Smart Acquisition did not deliver envisaged efficiencies
- The costs of current operations and the need for Urgent Operational Requirements (UORs) and their longer

term sustainment which from a national and pan-government viewpoint must be paid for by the taxpayer regardless of whether the expenditure is from central contingency funds or the defence budget

- The beginnings of a very large investment in a replacement for the nuclear deterrent capability provided by the Trident system and its submarine platforms. It is government policy that this capability has no military purpose but it must still be funded by the taxpayer and clearly not from the health budget
- The inevitability of defence inflation and rising unit costs with the consequence that a defence budget that is not increased above national inflation levels will deliver diminishing returns in capability
- The present economic crisis and uncertainty as to its duration.

The Need for a National Military Strategy

What is to be done? There is still much to be said for the pragmatic approach. SDR was not a bad basis for coping with the uncertainty in the security environment that has followed the end of the Cold War and 9/11. But its expectations are unaffordable and there will be a general election in the next year. I for one would not vote for a political party that did not have a very clear view in advance of the election as to the relation of the military instrument to national security in the medium and long terms as well as in the immediate future. It will not be sufficient for a party merely to promise a defence review after the election when the questions will be answered, as the Labour Party did in 1997. Armed forces engaged in large and dangerous campaigns abroad would and should expect continuity of a clear purpose with national support regardless of the profile

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that 'defence' may have on the day of the election. Voters will need to have a clear understanding as to why the nation's defence budget is proportionally larger in relation to GDP to that of most wealthy nations in Europe and beyond. In geostrategic terms, the United Kingdom might be one of the safest nations on the planet if it just looked after its own borders and did not use lethal force to meddle beyond them. So there is a need for clarity over ends and ways to justify means and therefore for a national military strategy that is coherent with the National Security (grand) Strategy such as it is. Indeed, the military strategy needs to be more visionary because of the long lead time for developing military capability. And herein is a paradox. The National Security Strategy should be the capstone document from which a national military strategy should be derived. But it is the military strategy that must set the timelines for the longer term.

Insights from Recent Experience

There are some useful insights that can be drawn from recent experience. None of these is new but the British security system, which has much history, does not actually do history much. Among these insights are:

- It is possible to distinguish constabulary roles for the military from combat roles but it is not possible to separate them in any operation. On the one hand effective constabulary operations require the perceived capacity to dominate escalation through overwhelming violence; on the other hand, once ground is gained through combat, the security of the civilian population becomes a legal and moral responsibility. All war is 'amongst the peoples'
- The organised use of violence is a catalyst for great uncertainty and should always be the last resort
- Much of the unpredictability lies in the cognitive domain. This problem can be ameliorated by good intelligence and understanding, but cannot be solved. In this domain there will be many more consequences than desired effects
- 'Compellence', the use of coercive violence to change minds, is very unpredictable in its consequences
- Deterrence is more effective than compellence although it will be for historians to validate the effectiveness in particular cases
- Once overwhelming violence is used (in combat mode) by any party, the perpetrators are likely to be perceived as part of the security problem rather than of the solution – restoring acquiescence, if not assent or consent
- It is not sufficient for military intervention to be legal and moral by international standards. It must be perceived to be legitimate and appropriate in particular by the communities in which it is perpetrated and by those which are supplying the troops and funding them. Disparities in risk to protagonists affect these perceptions as do types of high technology weapons and surveillance systems and the status of forces such as private security agents
- The military instrument is only one of the instruments of security alongside the diplomatic, economic, informational and, perhaps, others – but a 'comprehensive' inter-agency approach must accept that there may be no more than spectra of overlapping objectives among parties rather than a single clear common purpose even among the agents of national governments
- The 'hearts' bit of 'hearts and minds' is a bad metaphor implying affection for

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intervening military forces. The majority of communities will make pragmatic choices relating to self-interest modified by culture. Acquiescence, acceptance and assent are useful preliminaries to consent and may be the most that can be achieved. Gratitude is likely to be ephemeral

- Asymmetric war is the historic norm. If the 'normal' options are excluded, foes will look for unusual ones. There has always been asymmetry of means (legitimate and prohibited weapons), of purpose (limited and total wars); of target entity (government, military, people, etc), and of consequences (proportionality and mass destruction)
- For many operations, particularly those which are predominantly diplomatic or constabulary in their intention, the ability to disperse capability is important. So numbers matter whether it is boots on the ground for stabilisation or hulls for maritime security
- Broad international assent and co-operation are essential for military effectiveness in the longer term.

Sadly two classic insights have not (yet) been reinforced by the recent past:

- If you want to win a war, have Britain as an ally – but it may take a while
- The side with the most elephants always loses.¹

Questions

The following sample questions are designed to expose the issues that need to be addressed in

any process of review of British defence policy and design of a national military strategy:

- 1. How does and should an expeditionary military strategy serve the national interest and, in particular, enhance national security?** With the exception of evacuation of non-combatants, most expeditionary interventions have in the recent past been discretionary at least at the outset. Interventions may indirectly affect Britain's security but is there a generic argument that links discretionary intervention to national interest? Is it essentially about influence abroad in particular over the behaviour of the US; is it an expression of perceptions of international status; is the motivation primarily moral – the duty of a rather wealthy and fairly safe country; or is it a bit of all three?
- 2. Has the Expeditionary Strategy had its day?** There will be national reluctance for some time to come to embark on ground interventions of the scale of Iraq and Afghanistan involving factors such as regime change that bring legal and moral obligations for continuity. Setting aside the problem of seeing Afghanistan through, should the Expeditionary Strategy be abandoned in favour of something more focused directly on national interest, either more homeland focused or more 'contributory' to multinational organisations in a set of specific capabilities and expertise?
- 3. Should the United Kingdom place more emphasis on hard security and the military instrument than other medium powers and for what reason?** Is defence a 'strong suit' for Britain in which case should the UK offset greater than average defence

¹ Student observations drawn from the Strategy and Policy Trimester at the US Naval War College 1988–91, echoing countless other staff courses back to Alexander the Great's time and before.

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spending against reduced spending on international development, particularly in the context of the European Union?

4. **What is the significance of the relationship with the United States now and in the longer term?** Is there any real substance to the 'special relationship'? Does the UK really influence US governments in a benign way that is in the British national interest? Is there genuine cultural affinity? And will it survive time (indeed many decades with respect to the nuclear relationship), a shifting geostrategic focus and economic challenges for the US?
5. **Does the United Kingdom need a replacement for Trident?** What are the real arguments for the replacement? Is it a genuine hedge against uncertainty or is it about national status and influence? Is the France issue important and do the Americans really care? Is there not an obvious cost saving to be had albeit in the medium rather than short term?
6. **Should there be further constitutional change in strengthening Parliament's role in the commitment of forces?** Is the recent extension of a convention to engage Parliament sufficient or is there a need for legislation? Would this be an issue for a minority government or one with a very small majority? Would the inability of government to make proactive decisions to commit armed forces to interventions undermine an Expeditionary Strategy?
7. **Should the role of central government be strengthened in delivering security?** Should a Prime Minister not show much stronger leadership in banging departmental heads together to implement a 'comprehensive approach' supported by a

more powerful and authoritative central staff with greater executive rather than co-ordinating functions? Should the mission of the Department for International Development be related more clearly to British national interest and security in particular?

8. **What should the United Kingdom's relationship be with the European Union?** Do President Sarkozy's initiatives towards greater integration into NATO permit the UK to show firm leadership alongside France and the new US government (administration and Congress) in rationalising the relationship between NATO and the EU, in defining clear roles for the two organisations with respect to the economic and diplomatic instruments of security, and in integrating military force and operational planning?
9. **Should the possibility of inter-state war be a factor in national military strategy?** Should conventional combat between significant states remain a principal force driver for British military capability or should there be a formal refocusing on 'hybrid' operations with implications for funding of large platforms such as tanks, warships and fighter aircraft?
10. **Is there a need for conventional deterrence?** Is inherent or existential deterrent capability important when there is no obvious nation to be deterred explicitly? To what extent is it important that capability for sustained large scale combat against a significant power be retained and developed to dissuade an emergent major power from developing and using the military instrument to bully or blackmail? Is so, what should the British contribution be? Is it not important for

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Europe (in the context of NATO force planning) to retain and develop coherent capabilities to complement those of the US in this respect because bullying and blackmail may be directed specifically against European interests?

more so in this respect? How much is enough? Will increasing the size of the British Army merely provide for government more options for discretionary intervention and have no effect on overstretch?

11. Should the British contribution to Afghanistan in numbers of troops be increased, remain the same, or reduced? Is the UK doing more than its share or should it reinforce to show leadership in delivering success?

12. What would be the implications for the United Kingdom of an outcome that was widely perceived as failure in Afghanistan or withdrawal without success? In public and international perceptions the UK has not had a major military failure or ignominious retreat since Suez in 1956. There has been no Vietnam or Algeria. Reputation is an important element of effective inducement. Can the UK countenance compromising its reputation?

13. On the presumption that there will be few significant interventions abroad which the UK would undertake alone, how should the contribution of British forces to multinational operations be defined? Should the contribution relate to influence (in particular over the US) in which case operational autonomy is important to strategic leverage? Does this imply balanced expeditionary capability with minimal dependencies?

14. What should the context be for this contribution in terms of scale and force structure? Would a range of specialist capabilities in particular for agile, proactive specialist infantry intervention be as effective or

15. Is it time to review the benign roles and functions of the military instrument? Are they necessarily secondary purposes or should there not be broad intellectual acceptance that there are many dangerous and urgent situations in which armed forces are the only option for delivery of services that are essential to the grand strategic 'security' mission? There is a presumption in other government departments and elsewhere that there are things that the military should not do abroad or at home. Militaries reinforce this presumption because they do not want to be distracted from what they see as their defining roles. Should the roles of armed forces not be reviewed with no presumptions on the bases of risk management; cost effective delivery of services; absolute control by government; and 'contingent' capability?

16. What should the military contribution be to the security of the UK's homeland? Should this process not be taken forward particularly with regard to homeland security setting aside cultural, historic, legal and constitutional constraints?

17. What should the British military contribution be to maritime security? To what extent does the government of a very significant island power with a huge economic dependency on the sea have an obligation to show leadership in contributing to security in ungoverned

waters in which the military is typically the only constabulary force available?

18. Has the process of integration of the British Armed Services gone far enough or are there further positive steps that should be taken? What are the penalties in terms of skills, ethos and culture if the Services are integrated more closely and organised more functionally? Should the Chief of Joint Operations be promoted to be a four-star commander with responsibility for all expeditionary operations and overseas garrisons with Single Service Commanders-in-Chief solely as Supporting Commanders?

19. Should a truly joint headquarters be established with responsibility for all aspects of the military contribution to security of the homeland, territorial seas, the UK's Exclusive Economic Zone and UK airspace? Could the same model be applied to the homeland? A parallel 'homeland' four-star command to the Permanent Joint Headquarters could contribute an important co-ordinating function to inter-departmental activity particularly for response to rare and unexpected events?

20. Should the principles of funding for the UK's military instrument be rationalised and presented to the nation in a form that is easily understandable to the person on the Clapham bendy-bus? Should there not be clear rules available to the public that explain the extent to which ongoing operations are funded from central government funds and the continuity of central funding that should be expected? Should there be a significant element of central funding to reflect the premium on

sustaining personnel numbers when operating levels are high?

These rules could include more precision in matters such as the premium for incorporation of Urgent Operational Requirements into the Equipment Plan to avoid waste and the stage at which enduring operations such as Afghanistan become 'garrison' commitments to be funded from the Defence Budget.

Conclusion

Fundamental to the present situation and future changes to defence policy and national military strategy is the defence budget. The crisis over defence spending predates the current economic crisis and relates on one hand to the longer term programme costs of the original SDR and on the other implications for the defence budget of current and enduring operations.

Continuity of the present defence policy will require a substantially increased defence budget. At existing levels or reduced levels of investment in defence change to defence policy will be in the direction of more strategic focus in terms of:

- Theatre (home and abroad)
- Obligation *versus* discretion *ergo*
- Nature of operations *ergo*
- More specialised combat capability
- Number of discretionary commitments
- Duration of discretionary commitments (which influences nature)
- Context for more specialised capability planning (NATO/Europe, 'autonomy', US adjunct?).

Discuss.