The Integrated Review: Rebuilding the UK’s Hard Power

Peter Roberts

The upcoming Integrated Review gives the UK an opportunity to reconsider the role of its armed forces and its international strategy.

Robert Kagan once remarked: ‘when all you have is a hammer, all problems start to look like nails…When you don’t have a hammer, you don’t want anything to look like nails’. As the UK embarks on the Integrated Review of defence and security capabilities and requirements, the UK seems to be missing its hammer.

In January 2017, then Prime Minister Theresa May repudiated the idea of liberal interventionism that had shaped Britain’s approach to the use of its armed forces since 1997 when Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair came to power. Since May’s volte-face, UK intervention policy has been defined in the negative: ‘the days of … intervening in sovereign countries in an attempt to remake the world in our own image are over’.

Pretending that future war will be bloodless, limited to creating virtual or cyber casualties, makes the carnage of real war more likely.

It is also noticeable that the language coming from the recently elected British government (and the MoD) appears to emphasise competition in a virtual world of information advantage and cyberspace, rather than hard power. One MoD official has asserted that ‘the side that wins the next war will be the side that manages its information best’. Perhaps intended to elevate and centralise the role of information that the MoD believes it needs in order to compete against adversaries in an ‘information age’, and reflecting the current obsession with sub-threshold/grey zone/hybrid threats, the focus on these facets does not address the enduring nature of warfare that remains a core part of the contemporary experience of warfare. Even the sub-threshold forms of state competition seen today still involve the use of armed force in a tailored fashion alongside other tools in a complex blend that makes responding difficult. The use of hard power to inflict pain on an adversary in pursuit of national political objectives remains at the heart of a state’s power.

Hard power is a function both of a state’s military capability and its will to use it. Yet even while British armed forces are fighting ISIS, the UK has conspicuously shied away from the use of armed force. This is most evident recently in the muted responses to events in Syria, Ukraine, and even the use of chemical weapons on British soil by a hostile state. The message an observer is left with is that Britain regards traditional military capabilities as less relevant than before.

Yet this is not what the recent US killing of Iranian military leader Qassem Soleimani teaches us: ‘hard power’ still counts. Hard power is a key tool in setting the deterrent threshold, below which adversaries seek to manoeuvre, and it reinforces and gives weight to soft power – there is no merit to restraint when inaction is your only choice. However, the marked lack of interest in military and security topics during the 2019 election might suggest that the British public is not interested in hard power. If so, and assuming the UK government still sees a need for the ability to assert UK national interest, through force where necessary, then the case needs to be made in the Integrated Review for the UK’s willingness to use hard power and to ensure the means are available for maintaining credible forces.

An Intervention Doctrine

Post-Brexit, Britain must reconsider its role in the world. The new government, with its substantial parliamentary majority, has the opportunity to do this in a way more reminiscent of 1997 than the Defence and Security Reviews of 2010 and 2015. An important part of this should be to provide clarity on whether, and under what circumstances, the UK would be willing to use the military instrument in support of UK national interests, and what these might be – a Johnson Doctrine? This doctrine needs to deter adversaries and reassure allies that Britain is serious about its commitments (NATO’s Article 5 mutual security guarantee, the permanent membership of the UN Security Council etc.) and willingness to use the armed forces it spends billions equipping.

Having left the political structures of the EU, the UK needs to invest in reassuring its allies that this is not a retreat from the burdens of upholding
European security. In this case, the government’s current language is right, but it will require a determined and sustained effort, backed up by action, to convince allies, some of whom feel bruised and let down by Britain’s departure from the EU.

Hard power is a key tool in setting the deterrent threshold, below which adversaries seek to manoeuvre

A declaratory policy, such as that recommended by the Foreign Affairs Select Committee could provide a sense of the UK’s commitment to the use of military hard power whilst preserving political freedom to respond to events. Paul Cornish, Nigel Biggar and other contemporary commentators argue for a helpful set of principles on which the doctrine might build to create a UK approach to intervention that learns the lessons of the last 30 years. These go beyond humanitarian objectives and consider the question of force in support of wider national interests in what they describe as ‘systemic’ intervention. Whether this expanded conception of intervention would be used to preserve (or slow the decline) in Britain’s privileged global position or to shape a new order that offers longer term value to the UK would be a good indication of the new government’s ambition.

If, as some believe, the UK role is as a bridging or shaping power around which others can coalesce to maximise their influence, there still needs to be sufficient mass to create the gravitational pull that will bring others into the UK’s orbit. However, there is evidence that the UK’s attractive mass has been in decline. The failure to secure support from other UN member states in relation to the Chagos Islands and the International Court are indicators of a reduced global standing (as well as a commentary on its position in each case). Rebuilding the UK’s power, and history proves that even soft power can be rebuilt, is important, but the challenge is in how. Soft power is given by others, so the only measure that the UK controls directly is its hard power.

Military Capability

The ambiguity in the UK position on the use of armed force is surprising because the UK remains one of the largest spenders on military equipment, including investing large sums in replacing its nuclear weapons and the submarine delivery system. It also has armed forces active around the world, but it does not talk in terms that convince adversaries that these capabilities will be used to fight. Unlike the US and France where nuclear weapons are more explicitly seen as military instruments, the UK tends to talk about them primarily as a deterrent. But such weapons can deter only if there is a credible likelihood of them being used, and describing them as effective merely by existing is not convincing.

Moreover, the UK has traded away its conventional capabilities to afford its strategic nuclear deterrent, so it lacks conventional hard power – the kind of hard power that the US exploited in suppressing the Iranian reaction to
the killing of Soleimani. Where a wide gap exists between capability options, the escalation ladder becomes difficult to climb. Not merely are the highest rungs isolated, but even starting the climb through existing capabilities can become less attractive for fear one may be called on to take the final leap to get to the top. Nuclear weapons, therefore, work in deterrence only the extent that the non-nuclear escalatory steps are in place below it. The Enhanced Forward Presence operations in Eastern Europe may be similarly isolated; it reflects a return to the Cold War’s tripwire, but without the same credibility in the capabilities (military power and clarity of intent) that sat behind it. The absence of serious debate on the use of hard power does not send the message that the UK will fight to defend its allies and NATO commitments forcefully enough.

**Hard power is a function both of a state’s military capability and its will to use it**

A strong commitment to NATO in the Integrated Review by investing in the conventional capabilities NATO needs for its military strategy would be a start. This needs to consider mass and rebuilding this would put the UK’s money where its mouth is. Knowing what the UK needs as sovereign capability and what it is willing to leave to allies is a crucial question for the Integrated Review because mass needs to be considered in association with allies. The ability to deploy battle-winning forces quickly, with sufficient lethality and sustainability to secure British interests and compete across the spectrum of competition is, in Europe, a collective endeavour. Beyond Europe, it becomes more difficult as the list of allies is less assured. However, it is unlikely that the Integrated Review will provide enough resources for independent UK action in any but the most limited conflict.

An option might be to become an ‘exo-skeleton’ of small but technologically advanced forces into which other nations provide mass, a kind of Defence ‘gig-economy’. The UK would create a deliberately hollow force that offers the structure and capabilities to enhance the strength and sustainability of partners’ force by taking national risk on what those partners can be expected to provide. The UK’s national capabilities would need to be flexible to offer choices against whichever threats present themselves. The Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) could become a prototype for this, but the framework concept would need to be further to allow a wider range of nations to participate. It could also provide a role for the UK’s two aircraft carriers and F35s; as JEF capabilities, there would be no policy requirement for the UK to generate all the surface escorts were the Carriers the maritime core of an exo-skeleton force, and the limited numbers of F35 would give way to less capable but more ubiquitous platforms once the counter air threat was reduced. The UK Armed Forces would have to prioritise investments in high-end capabilities others cannot provide, with particular focus on stand-off strike, intelligence, command and control, special forces and logistics, with interoperability a critical requirement using NATO standards and open systems architecture. A UK role in training would be vital for the operational standards achieved by the Royal Navy’s endorsement whereby the Royal Navy’s endorsement of the operational standards achieved by other nations’ navies is perhaps worthy of wider application in Land and Air domains.

An ‘exo-skeleton’ approach would pose significant cultural challenges. A strategy that relies on partners creates mutual dependencies by assuming that the UK will always be able to depend on allies, which has been questioned. Understanding the degree to which the UK wishes to preserve autonomy for sovereign action is a crucial first step. There are also questions about how sustainable an exo-skeleton approach might be where the UK lacks expertise in critical areas and on which it depends on successfully integrating the contribution of others, who may have different ethical standards for waging war. Within the MoD and HM Treasury, it would also require a fundamental shift in the debate around people, because it is likely to result in forces that although potentially smaller are likely to cost more per person than today.

The armed forces are extremely versatile instruments of state power, but there is a difference between why they exist (to deliver lethal violence to Britain’s enemies in support of UK’s national interests – i.e. armed force) and how they are routinely used. The difference is between armed force and the armed forces because, fortunately, for much of the time the armed forces are not called on to deliver armed force. Homelands resilience, aid to the civil powers, and ‘Defence Engagement’ are all important, but that is what the armed forces do when not fighting, it is not why they exist in the first place. There are cheaper ways of delivering the same effects, but not for winning the country’s wars, which may not always be discretionary.

The Review, MOD and government need to consider cyber, information and sub-threshold warfare and the UK needs to be ready and able to engage in this, but it should not hide behind euphemisms or think that all conflict can be fought in the sterile space of data. Pretending that future war will be bloodless, limited to creating virtual or cyber casualties, makes the carnage of real war more likely. As does being unclear about what behaviour is unacceptable or the consequences of behaving badly.

The Integrated Review needs to provide the right sized hammer for the government’s toolbox and clarity on how it will be used.

**Peter Roberts**

Peter is Director of Military Sciences at RUSI.

*The views expressed in this article are the author’s, and do not represent those of RUSI or any other institution.*