



The True Cost of Defence Engagement?

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This is the second of five blog posts on cost of remote warfare. To see the first instalment, [click here](#).

When it comes to defending the UK and exerting influence abroad, British policy makers face a challenging paradox. On one hand, politicians worry that their electorate has become war weary after prolonged engagements in both Afghanistan and Iraq; consequently, they are unwilling to support “boots on the ground” deployments of armed forces. On the other hand, some of the most pressing challenges facing the UK – [terrorism, extremism, and the resurgence of state-based threats](#) – tend to mature in fragile- or conflict-stricken regions before reaching the UK. The [2015 National Security Strategy](#) emphasises that it is a priority for UK to work with allies to pre-empt these challenges overseas before they fully develop.

One consequence of this paradox has been [an increased reliance on remote warfare](#). This includes working “by, with, and through” local forces, who are fighting on the frontlines against groups like IS, al-Qaida, al-Shabaab and the Taliban. Defence Engagement (DE), which became a core activity in the [2015-2016 Ministry of Defence Budget](#), forms part of this work and encompasses some of the training, advising and assisting that UK forces are doing in these theatres.

However, at a time when defence is under extreme pressure to show value for money, much of Defence Engagement remains shrouded in secrecy. Very little information is released to the public about the type of engagements that are

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considered Defence Engagement, how effective these engagements are, or how much they cost. As a result, the British taxpayer – who is indirectly funding these engagements – cannot possibly hope to understand how much the UK's Defence Engagement costs or whether projects obtain strategic objects. In the context of the ongoing Modernising Defence Programme, this opacity appears particularly problematic.

What is Defence Engagement?

The first step in addressing whether Defence Engagement is cost-effective requires us to untangle it from the vast array of activities that the UK engages in overseas. According to the *UK's International Defence Engagement Strategy*, Defence Engagement is defined as “...the use of our people and assets to prevent conflict, build stability and gain influence...[it is] the non-combat use of military power...” The five strategic objectives of Defence Engagement are presented as: “...develop understanding of national security requirements; prevent conflict; develop capability, capacity and interoperability; promote prosperity; and build and maintain access and influence.”

This is a wide definition, and more clarity is not obvious from looking at the range of previous activities designated as Defence Engagement which range from participating in the global response to Ebola, to training over 2000 members of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, to intercepting drug-smuggling vessels off the coast of Scotland.

Despite the lack of a clear mandate, it is an increasingly funded area. While MoD funding for Defence Engagement currently stands at £80m, this budget is set to rise over the next four years. Additionally, Defence Engagement programmes that support the wider government strategies set out by the

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National Security Council can be funded by the [Conflict, Stability and Security Fund \(CSSF\)](#), a fund that currently holds nearly £1.1bn and is set have an annual budget of £1.3bn by 2020. While not all projects supported by the CSSF are classified as Defence Engagement, there are no clear guidelines on where Defence Engagement ends and other activities begin, and Defence Engagement is not a specific branch in the CSSF budget.

Why so little scrutiny of Defence Engagement?

Defence Engagement is classified as a non-combat engagement, even when training may be taking place in fragile contexts and in close proximity to front lines (for example [British training of Kurdish Peshmerga forces in Iraq](#) during the anti-IS campaign). This designation has a significant impact on the level of oversight. While the [War Powers Convention](#) usually gives Parliament a vote on military deployment in combat roles, [no such oversight exists for non-combat missions](#). As such, it is significant when an activity is designated as Defence Engagement, as it is then exempt from the oversight and transparency mechanisms that would usually surround warfare.

This split between combat and non-combat missions seems particularly unhelpful in today's complex operations to counter terrorist groups. The recent [deaths of four Americans](#) engaged in training activity in Niger, plus a further [American soldier involved in training in Somalia](#) just last week shows that declaring a mission "non-combat" does not necessarily reflect the risks that personnel are undertaking. Training and advising in non-permissive environments is a dangerous business and should be considered and scrutinised accordingly.

There are two institutions which are tasked with overseeing Defence Engagement when delivered through the CSSF. The first is the Joint Committee on National Security Strategy, which released their [review in January 2017](#). Although they found that the CSSF was an improvement on its predecessor (the Conflict Pool), they concluded the following:

Joint Committee On the National Security
Council
January 2017

"...Parliament does not have sufficient access to the information that we need effectively to scrutinise the CSSF...we cannot provide parliamentary accountability for taxpayers' money spent via the CSSF"

Similarly, the Independent Commission for Aid Impact [review](#) published in March 2018 concluded that they had been given insufficient access to programmes and documents to be able to evaluate whether CSSF supported Defence Engagement activities were consistently successful. They conclude in

their report:

Independent Commission on Aid Impact
(ICAI) Review
March 2018

"We found that the CSSF had inadequate results management processes, with basic information on what the programmes had achieved either missing or inadequate in almost all the programmes we reviewed ... The lack of meaningful results data means that neither the CSSF or external reviewers such as ourselves can ascertain whether CSSF investments are effective and achieving good value for money."

Why is this important?

Only a [partial list](#) of the countries in which the CSSF operates is released, and there even seems to be internal disagreement about where the CSSF works: the [2016/2017 annual report of the CSSF](#), published in June 2017, reported that the trust covered 70 countries. However, in March of that year, Home

Secretary Amber Rudd insisted that CSSF operated in 40 countries. In addition to this confusion, only a partial list of these countries is presented in annual reports, along with a brief description of select projects.



The lack of public information about Defence Engagement may undermine some of the reasons why it exists in the first place: namely, that investing in upstream conflict prevention is of better value than responding to crises as they emerge.

Dr Andrew Rathmell
January 2017

"...if you can find a way of investing more upstream in conflict prevention, you will get more bang for your buck ... if you prevent a conflict it is much cheaper than having to do something afterwards."

The vague definition of Defence Engagement, the lack of clarity on budgetary commitments, and the lack of details on specific projects and programmes make it incredibly hard to estimate how much the UK's collective Defence Engagement activity actually costs, and which programmes are showing the greatest signs of success. This not only hurts the external accountability of the UK's military engagement overseas, but also the internal process of improving programmes by learning lessons from past programmes. If defence wants to show true value for money, it must be more transparent about how that money is being spent.

Image credit: [Defence Images/Flickr](#)

About the author

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