



# **Inconclusive Conclusions: The Modernising Defence Programme So Far**

## Liam Walpole

6 August 2018

**This is the final blog to wrap up our series on the Costs of Remote Warfare, following the publication of the headline conclusions of the government's Modernising Defence Programme. To read our latest instalment, [click here](#).**

Over the past two months, the Remote Warfare Programme have been running a series on the *Costs of Remote Warfare* in anticipation of the publication of the Ministry of Defence's (MOD) Modernising Defence Programme (MDP).

This has included blogs looking at four of the UK's favoured capabilities when adopting a remote warfare approach to warfighting:

1. [Military aid](#) (funding that comes from the MOD & Conflict Stability and Security Fund (CSSFF),
2. [Spending on UK Special Forces \(UKSF\)](#) in comparison with the UK's allies,
3. The hidden costs associated with [the UK's drone programme](#),
4. The cost of [the UK's intelligence sharing with partners](#) in conflict. There is one common theme that runs through each of these areas: a lack of financial transparency.

At a time when the MOD is under increasing pressure to show value for money, in our view, it doesn't make strategic sense for the government to continue to advocate either a policy of [blanket opacity](#) (as is the case for [UKSF](#)) or extreme censure over the costs of these capabilities (as is the cases of [drones](#) and [intelligence sharing](#)).

### Latest

[An Update on the Security Policy Change Programme](#)

[Chances for Peace in the Third Decade](#)

[A Story of ORG: Oliver Ramsbotham](#)

[A Story of ORG: Gabrielle Rifkind](#)

### Related

[PS21 Event Podcast: What Does "Security" Mean in 2020?](#)

[WarPod Ep #21 | Dissecting the Overseas Operations Bill](#)

Ultimately, financial accountability is closely linked to understanding the effectiveness of deploying these capabilities. For example, UKSF units can be deployed on short notice and directly target adversaries on the ground, but what are the costs associated with this application of force? Currently, it is very difficult to get answers to questions like this.

### **MOD releases MDP ‘Headline Conclusions’**

The whole purpose of the MDP when it was separated out into a MOD-led programme—after being extracted from the National Security and Capabilities Review (NSCR) at the start of this year—was said to be about “deliver[ing] better military capability to meet the increasing threat environment and value for money in a sustainable and affordable way.”

On July 19<sup>th</sup>, in a written statement to the Houses of Parliament, the Secretary of State for Defence announced the so-called "headline conclusions" of the MOD-led review. This fell short of publishing the full review by the summer recess (as Gavin Williamson had previously promised) or the preliminary findings in time for the NATO summit on July 11-12.

No doubt Mr Williamson was conscious of the political ramifications of the delay and had a choice of two options: 1) Delay until after the summer recess and face criticism for doing so, or 2) Publish an anodyne statement that serves as a "holding document" in the hope that, by the end of summer recess, MPs would have forgotten all about it. He took the gamble and opted for the second.

What becomes clear after reading the statement on the MDP is that it is not in any way conclusive. And instead of reading as a list of action points, it reads more like a set of objectives.

### **WarPod Ep #20 | Incorporating the Protection of Civilians into UK Policy**

### **Questions for the Integrated Review #3: How Should the UK Measure Success?**

#### **Most read**

### **The Role of Youth in Peacebuilding: Challenges and Opportunities**

### **Making Bad Economies: The Poverty of Mexican Drug Cartels**

### **ORG's Vision**

### **Remote Warfare: Lessons Learned from Contemporary Theatres**

In fact, it seems that after seven months working on the MDP nothing has been decided. In the opening paragraphs the statement sets out how the MOD has concluded that the UK must be able to face up to threats in a "sustainable and affordable way". It goes on to conclude

- firstly, that UK military should be able to match the pace of its adversaries
- secondly, that the fighting force should be fit for the 21st century.

But this only repeats similar aspirations that featured in the 2015 and even 2010 SDSRs, and without a radical change in meaning. For example, in 2010 the review argued that the MOD would have to address unaffordable defence commitments before being able “to put Defence on a sound and sustainable footing for the future.”

Under point three of the MDP’s headline conclusions—*transforming the business of defence to deliver a robust, credible, modern and affordable force*—one might have expected to receive greater clarity on how the MOD would be creating a more sustainable and affordable programme for defence. But there is little information about how exactly this will be delivered or how it is different from what has come before.

For example, on implementing greater efficiencies across defence it states: “We are re-setting and re-energising the way MOD is led, organised and managed, with clearer responsibilities and **accountabilities to deliver better value for money...**[and] *we will consider how to deliver greater efficiency by adopting ambitious, digitally-enabled business modernisation.*”

And on addressing the need for a fresh re-think on Britain’s suite of capabilities the statement says: “We have reviewed our existing capability plans, and begun

to shape new policy approaches and identify investment priorities, and through workstreams, we have developed a blueprint for a major programme of top-down transformative reform to defence.”

The statement is a perfect lesson in how to say a lot without saying anything at all.

What the MDP does tell us, however, is that the prospects of us being in a better position to engage in a more strategic debate about the costs of remote warfare remain poor. While it is positive that the MDP recognises the need for delivering cost-effective defence, the statement falls short of discussing this in strategic terms. For example, it does not appear that the MDP will necessarily improve our ability to compare the costs (i.e. inputs) of remote warfare with its overall effectiveness (i.e. outcomes).

### **A Call for Greater Clarity**

Despite the increasing threat posed by state-based actors, the emphasis on state-on-state competition within the MDP perhaps underestimates the extent to which British confrontations with, for example, Russia will happen outside of Europe—through a war of information and through proxies in regions like the Middle East. A point RWP address in this article [here](#).

For that reason, it is likely that the UK—with limited resources in a current risk-averse political environment—will continue to favour the capabilities identified as part of our *Costs of Remote Warfare* series, in the belief that this will secure its position as an influential player on the world stage; while also deterring threats posed by the world’s ungoverned and poorly governed spaces.



That is why the government must provide greater clarity on how much individual programmes—such as the Protector drone programme, UKSF investment, military assistance and intelligence sharing with partners—actually cost. Without that transparency it will remain difficult to conduct useful assessments on the overall effectiveness of investing in these capabilities; analysis that could otherwise contribute toward improving the government’s understanding of whether remote warfare is achieving what it was designed to do.

---

Image credit: Image credit: [Harland Quirrington/MOD/Wikimedia Commons](#).

---

## About the author

**Liam Walpole** has been Senior Advocacy Officer at Remote Warfare Programme since July 2017. Previously, Liam worked for two Conservative Members of Parliament at the House of Commons, supporting them in carrying out their duties in Parliament and their respective constituencies. Liam studied Politics and History at Brunel University and wrote his undergraduate thesis on President Barack Obama’s foreign policy in Afghanistan and the effectiveness of the then-President’s troop surge. Liam is currently studying a part-time Masters course in Diplomacy & Foreign Policy at City, University of London.

## Share this page



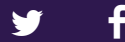
## Contact

Unit 503  
101 Clerkenwell Road London  
EC1R 5BX  
Charity no. 299436  
Company no. 2260840

Email us

020 3559 6745

## Follow us



## Useful links

[Login](#)  
[Contact us](#)  
[Sitemap](#)  
[Accessibility](#)  
[Terms & Conditions](#)  
[Privacy policy](#)