



Remote Warfare: Cost-Effective Warfighting?

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First in a five-part series on remote warfare and the MDP.

Remote warfare is often presented as a lower risk, lower cost alternative to the large-scale deployment of British combat troops. However, despite current pressures on UK Defence to demonstrate good value for money, there is little information in the public domain about how much this approach is actually costing the UK. In this five-part series, the Remote Warfare Programme will be examining what we do know about the financial costs of remote warfare in anticipation of the release of the Modernising Defence Programme.

What is remote warfare?

Following major drawdowns in Iraq and Afghanistan the UK has shifted away from large-scale military deployments towards light-footprint interventions. This approach places the bulk of fighting in the hands of local front-line troops in places like [Iraq](#), [Somalia](#), [Libya](#) and [Nigeria](#) with British support.

Many aspects of remote warfare are not new. Wars have been fought alongside and integrated with allies and partners since antiquity. The arming and supporting of rival factions reached fever pitch in the Cold War, when proxy wars enabled great powers to clash indirectly. However, contemporary British operations have moved on from these past templates of waging war – not least in terms of the UK’s own restricted reach and influence over the forces it fights alongside, who are partners rather than merely ‘proxies’. Political, legal, and ethical landscapes have also shifted. This raises a number of new challenges that need careful attention.

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Research conducted by the Remote Warfare Programme shows this approach is driven in part by growing risk-aversion among politicians concerned about public attitudes towards ‘boots on the ground’, as well as advances in technology. Crucially, the argument that remote warfare is a cheap, clean, and effective way of engaging overseas has proven popular among politicians—albeit hard to prove given the lack of official information in the public domain.

Budgetary Constraints for UK Defence

The UK is one of only five members of NATO who spend 2% of GDP on defence. However, the UK’s current defence budget is the lowest in modern British history with overall UK defence spending down by 22% in real terms between FY 2009/10 to 2014/15.

The National Security Capability Review (NSCR) set up in July 2017 was supposed to be a routine review of threats facing the UK—it was not a pledge to increase spending. But growing pressure from backbench MPs; threats of ministerial resignations; a scathing Defence Committee report criticising proposed cuts to the Royal Marines; and open criticisms among British service personnel over anticipated cost-cutting exercises, appear to have forced the government to broaden the review.

British Defence Secretary, Gavin Williamson MP in a bilateral meeting with U.S. Defense Secretary, Jim Mattis (Image credit: Wikimedia Commons)

In February 2018, Williamson told members of the Defence Committee that the MDP would not be fiscally neutral. But what that means in practice is

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unclear, particularly since The Secretary of State has avoided making explicit commitments:

While it would be “incredibly tempting” to commit to increased spending commitments it would be inappropriate to prejudge the review’s conclusions, he said.

The Risks of an Unstrategic MDP

The UK’s strategic focus has shifted dramatically away from countering terrorism (CT) towards countering Russia. This may mean that remote warfare gets little consideration in the MDP – which would be a mistake. So often, militaries get drawn into focussing all of their effort into preparing for what they see as their ‘most dangerous’ threat. This is based on a clear but flawed assumption when it comes to defence planning and budgets that it will be easier to ‘scale down’ than to ‘scale up’.

The prevailing climate of political risk aversion, financial constraints, and enhanced public and parliamentary scrutiny over UK warfighting suggests that remote warfare is likely to dominate British military engagement in the foreseeable future. This means that debate should be encouraged around this area of the UK’s defence budget.

Instead, the NSCR process has been a subject of frustration for UK parliamentarians who have described the process as being completely “shrouded in secrecy”. In an era of enhanced pressure on defence to demonstrate value for money, it seems reasonable to suggest that external oversight could add an additional layer of protection against short-term thinking and damaging budget cuts.

Leaked parts of the MDP process suggest that incoherent decision-making is a real risk. For example, in October 2017 [the Daily Mirror published reports](#) that the UK's special forces had been understaffed by about 100 troops for years, and funding to bring them up to strength would reportedly be found by reducing the costs of regular military units. However, one week later [the Telegraph published a report](#) claiming that the MOD planned to downsize the Royal Marines, which provide about 50% of the recruiting pool for the special forces, presumably putting them under more rather than less strain.

A FOI request by Drone Wars UK in February 2018 revealed that [the cost of Operation Shader has amounted to £1.76 billion](#)—almost 5% of the annual total defence budget.

These estimates do not cover “[additional costs in terms of training opportunities cancelled or deferred and equipment wear and tear that will eventually have to be met](#)”. This suggests that remote warfare can have a significant upfront cost before you even begin to factor in the less visible costs that training, advising, assisting, and sharing intelligence can incur.

Conclusions

Without clear information about the costs of remote warfare, it is unclear how informed strategic decisions can be made about defence spending going forwards. This five-part series will examine different aspects of remote warfare and what we know (or, more often than not, what we don't know) about how much they are costing the UK.

Over the next few weeks, we'll be writing on the financial costs of:

- *CSSF: Working with partners;*
- *The deployment of the UK's Special Forces;*
- *The British drone fleet; and*
- *Intelligence-sharing with allies in combat.*

This series will complement research reports covering the political, legal, and military costs of remote warfare as a strategic option for the UK, to be released between May-July 2018.

Look out for Part 2: The true costs of defence engagement

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.

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