

Putting people first: the way forward for the UK armed services

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The UK's Armed Forces are facing overstretch and under-resourcing as a result of current policy trends in Government. These trends have the capacity to seriously undermine the morale and the capability of the UK Armed Forces. Increasing concern is being voiced from both military and civilian sources. Many of these concerns could be positively addressed if the UK Government were to:

- **pull back from expensive, high-tech major war-fighting projects**
- **concentrate on properly resourcing its serving personnel**
- **invest in the UK's exceptional skills for conflict prevention, peacekeeping and post-conflict reconstruction**

Informed commentators point to a looming crisis within the UK Armed Forces.¹ It has been variously described as a crisis of morale, a crisis of identity and a crisis of resources.

Max Hastings, the respected historian and journalist, recently cited a senior military source who said that the UK is facing “the worst defence budget crisis since the 1970s”.² Some argue that this crisis arises primarily from the fact that the UK's military budget is too low, particularly when set alongside substantial recent increases in military spending by key allies. However, at \$37.1 billion in 2003, the UK still has the third largest military budget in the world (only the USA and Japan spend more), and this would remain the case even if the UK military budget were to be reduced by as much as 5%.³

Others argue that the crisis arises, not from the total size of the military budget, but from the way in which the money is spent, and that even substantial budget increases would not necessarily address core problems. Problems are said to be caused by confused policy-making, poor procurement decisions, negligent project management, and under investment in essential resources (including body armour and medical services) and training for service personnel.⁴

On the one hand, serving military are finding themselves under increasing pressure. Personnel on the ground often have to work with inadequate and outdated kit, and there are shortages of basic equipment.⁵ On a recent visit to Iraq, members of the House of Commons Defence Committee were told by serving men and women that operational requirements “had placed unsustainable and unreasonable burdens on them and their families”.⁶ These conditions are beginning to have damaging consequences on the morale of service men and women. For example, a Ministry of Defence (MoD) survey conducted in early 2002 found that over a third of Army personnel believed morale to be “low”.⁷ More recent data from government agencies shows that since the start of 2004 the Army has witnessed the sharpest increase in non-officer rank applications for Premature Voluntary Release for over a decade. Similar trends apply to the RAF and Royal Navy.⁸ The latest House of Commons Defence Committee report on the Defence White Paper 2003 considers compliance with ‘harmony guidelines’ (the frequency, duration, scale of effort and length of time troops should be asked to serve away from home each year) to be “top of the list of priorities” for MoD.⁹

On the other hand, several recent official reports have pointed to huge wastage and overspend on expensive projects of questionable military worth, such as the Eurofighter Typhoon.¹⁰ Other delayed and increasingly expensive projects include the F-35B Joint Strike Fighter, the Nimrod MRA-4

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reconnaissance aircraft, the Astute class submarine and the Brimstone anti-armour missile. Project management in the UK defence industry is often poor, and rather than punishing inefficiency, the government frequently bale out major defence contractors such as BAE Systems (who alone accounted for 87% of the £3.1 billion overspend on MoD major projects in 2003).¹¹ The British arms industry consistently fails to provide to the UK at cost and on time.

In this context, budgetary pressures could be seen less as a threat, and more as an opportunity. If current policies are allowed to play out, this may result in Britain's Armed Forces being lumbered with equipment which consumes too many resources for too little return. If, on the other hand, the Government were to take decisive leadership and draw back from major equipment projects before too much momentum gathers, opportunities for addressing and resolving elements of the looming crisis could be to hand.

Pulling out of problematic procurement commitments would allow efforts to be concentrated on properly supporting people at the front line with training, equipment and adequate leave, allowing them to develop and consolidate their internationally recognised skills in counter-insurgency, nation-building and peacekeeping. The UK could feasibly become the world leader in conflict prevention and resolution, helping to bring real security in troubled areas of the world, and achieving the official defence aim:

“...to act as a force for good by strengthening international peace and stability.”¹²

The UK intervention in Sierra Leone is an acknowledged example of what the UK is best at. Similar successes have been achieved by Australia in East Timor, and France in Côte d'Ivoire. In contrast, the UK's involvement in the US-led attack in and occupation of Iraq has caused significant damage to the UK's reputation abroad,¹³ and has led to the deaths, injuries and trauma of many service personnel¹⁴ and Iraq civilians,¹⁵ in pursuit of goals set by an element within the US administration whose aims for reforming the “Greater Middle East” in particular, have been widely recognised as carrying great risks for global peace and security.

British Armed Forces deserve clarity of purpose at all times, but especially during times of international uncertainty and instability. Only government can articulate that clarity. The choice is between high-tech interoperability and interdependence with the USA's war-fighting capabilities on the one hand, and excellence in counter-insurgency, nation-building and peacekeeping, as part of an independent foreign policy, on the other. As several experienced commentators have argued with cogency, the UK cannot do both within realistic budgetary constraints:

“... if the full spread of capabilities continue to be deemed unaffordable, we believe a key choice must be made.”¹⁶

It follows that government must choose one or the other. By avoiding that choice, the government could be committing itself to under investing in our service men and women – the single most important resource available to the MoD.

For many years, Oxford Research Group (ORG), alongside many other non-governmental organisations, has been researching and promoting effective solutions to conflict, which do not involve offensive military action, and have been proven to achieve peace and stability at a fraction of the cost of full-scale war. Description and analysis of these methods has been provided through a number of ORG publications, including *'War Prevention Works'* and *'Cutting the Costs of War'*.¹⁷ The proportion of the UK defence budget spent on building capacity in these areas remains very small. There has never been a more opportune juncture for a fundamental re-focusing of UK military policy. Oxford Research Group associates itself with the call, expressed from every shade of civil society opinion, that we learn quickly from the mistakes of Afghanistan and Iraq, and put human life and well-being at the heart of our military strategy, thus safeguarding the pride and morale of our serving military.

Notes and References

¹ In relation to the decreasing rest and training time between operational tours: “If this degree of unremitting pressure is maintained, it is bound to have an effect on retention. That, in turn, is bound to have a longer-term effect on the levels of experience, and therefore operational capability. That is a problem to which no responsible government should close its eyes”. (Garden, T. and Ramsbotham, D. ‘About Face: The British Armed Forces, Which Way to Turn?’ *RUSI Journal*. April 2004, Vol. 149, No. 2. pp. 10-16.)

² <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/economics/comment/0,11268,1249570,00.html>

³ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), 2004:
http://wen.sipri.org/contents/milap/milex/mex_major_spenders.pdf

UK is ranked 3rd in the world for military spending; only US (1st) and Japan (2nd) rank higher. Since Sept. 11, the MoD budget has increased considerably.

USA	\$417 bl	\$1,419 per capita	world share: 47%
Japan	\$46.9 bl.	\$367 per capita	world share: 5%
UK	\$37.1 bl.	\$672 per capita	world share: 4%
France	\$35 bl.	\$583 per capita	world share: 4%
China	\$32.8	\$25 per capita	world share: 4%

According to the HM Treasury, the estimated out-turn for UK Defence during 2003-04 is £32.3 billion.
http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/C9A10/pesa04_chapter02_190404.pdf (table 2.4, p. 29).

⁴ In relation to training, in July 2003 the MoD Directorate of Operational Capabilities reported that “...resource constraints... continued to dominate the initial training organisation and affected morale, ethos, motivation and the welfare of both staff and trainees”.
<http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm200304/cmselect/cmdfence/uc620-i/uc62002.htm>

⁵ The Select Committee on Defence in its 2004 report entitled ‘*Lessons of Iraq*’ criticised the MoD for “failing to provide service personnel with the clothing and boots which they required and expected” (para 257) and notes that “...some two weeks after the start of the combat phase 60 per cent of the additional clothing requirement that had been ordered was not available in theatre”.
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200304/cmselect/cmdfence/635/63502.htm>

⁶ House of Commons Defence Committee. ‘*Defence White Paper 2003*’. Fifth Report of Session 2003-04, Volume 1 (HC 465-1). p.47. 1st July 2004. Para. 77. See <http://www.parliament.the-stationary-office.co.uk/pa/cm/cmdfence.htm> for full report.

⁷ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/low/uk/2705771.stm>

⁸ Defence Analytic Service Agency (DASA) Tri-services Publication 05 (TP05) contains information on Premature Voluntary Release. This data demonstrates that the beginning of 2004 witnessed a steep increase in the number of non-officer Army ranks taking Premature Voluntary Release; the sharpest for a decade, if not longer (see <http://www.dasa.mod.uk/natstats/tsp5/tsp5graph9.html>). There has been an even greater number of people applying unsuccessfully for Premature Voluntary Release. Since 2000, the number of non-officer applicants for Premature Voluntary Release from the Royal Navy has increased steadily too. The latest data on Premature Voluntary Release from the Royal Navy (non-officer ranks) shows that the number of applicants is the highest level for over a decade.

But, as an article in the *Scotsman* (25th April 2004) revealed, the loss of officers is a major problem too:

“Scotland on Sunday can reveal that the number of officers requesting Premature Voluntary Release has soared since Saddam Hussein was ousted. Some 350 senior soldiers have applied to leave in the past six months alone, compared with the previous year’s total of 499... The army - which is already struggling to maintain numbers - can ill afford to lose so many officers in such a short period. MoD bosses recently approached ex-servicemen running many of the private security firms in Iraq and asked them not to recruit from among serving soldiers.”
<http://news.scotsman.com/archive.cfm?id=465802004>

⁹ “*The White Paper is depressingly short on detail about how the challenges of excess stretch and the tempo of operational commitments will be addressed and we believe that this crucial failing in the implementation of the original SDR continues to be the area of greatest weakness in the MoD policy... MoD must place this issue at the top of its priorities.*” (para. 164). The Volunteer Reserves are also increasingly under pressure, and the same Defence Committee report urges the MoD to “*avoid exploiting the commitment and dedication of the reserves through overuse*” (para. 154). <http://www.parliament.the-stationary-office.co.uk/pa/cm/cmdfence.htm>

¹⁰ The Armed Forces Minister, Adam Ingram MP, recently acknowledged that some of the Eurofighter aircraft which are due to be delivered to the UK, will in fact be sold on to other countries. http://www.publications.parliament.uk/cgi-bin/ukparl_hl?DB=ukparl&STEMMER=en&WORDS=J0norman+J0lamb+&COLOUR=Red&STYLE=s&URL=/pa/cm200304/cmhansrd/cm040524/text/40524w15.htm#40524w15.html_wqn9

¹¹ The National Audit Office (NAO) reported in ‘*Ministry of Defence: Major Projects Report 2003*’ (released January 2004) that spending on major MoD defence projects went over budget by £3.1 billion in 2003. This represents over 15% of the total MoD budget. The NAO found that the MoD’s 20 largest projects were now a total of 144 months behind schedule and 6.1% over budget. http://www.nao.gov.uk/publications/nao_reports/03-04/0304195.pdf.

Among the worst offenders were the Nimrod MRA-4 reconnaissance aircraft, the Astute Class submarine, the Brimstone Advanced Air-Launched Anti-Armour Weapon and the Eurofighter Typhoon. All four projects were awarded to BAE Systems before the introduction of Smart Acquisition, and accounted for £2.7 billion (87%) of the in-year cost increase and 113 months (79%) of the in-year time slippage. Projects approved under Smart Acquisition are demonstrating better cost and time control than older projects, but there are warning signs that some projects may be continuing to follow the historic trend of cost increase and delay as they mature.

Delayed Projects

Nimrod Maritime Reconnaissance and Attack Mk 4 aircraft (Nimrod MRA-4)

British Aerospace was selected as the prime contractor in December 1996 to upgrade 21 Nimrod MR-2 maritime patrol aircraft to the Nimrod MRA-4 (originally named Nimrod 2000) with a £2.2 billion contract. By 2002, there had been a substantial programme cost escalation to an estimated £2.8 billion, and a two-year time slippage. An overlap of development and production activities led to further scheduling difficulties, and in February 2003 BAE Systems and MoD agreed on a revision of the programme. The in-service date has now been delayed by four years, from March 2005 to 2009, and the number of MRA-4 to be procured has been reduced from 21 to 18. The capital procurement cost of the programme is now estimated to be £3.4 billion.

Eurofighter Typhoon

The Eurofighter can trace its roots back to the early 1970’s. The project has been dogged by political problems from the start and was originally scheduled to enter service in the late 1980’s. Following earlier incarnations, Eurofighter was born as a collaborative project between the UK, Germany, Italy and Spain in June 1986. After German threats to pull out of the project, the Eurofighter 2000 (now known as the Eurofighter Typhoon) was given the go-ahead in December 1992. Initial orders have been placed for 148 aircraft, with 55 for the UK to replace the Tornado F3 fighter and Jaguar fighter-bombers in front line service (contracts for the second batch are under negotiation and the third batch is due to be ordered in 2007). The first series production aircraft have been delivered to the partner nations, initial operational capacity for the RAF is due in 2006/2007 and final deliveries are now scheduled for 2015. On a resource accounting basis, the cost to the UK is estimated to be some £20 billion. In March 2004, it was reported that the MoD had to borrow £500 million from the Eurofighter budget due to the need to pay out unexpected sums on the Hawk training aircraft and Nimrod reconnaissance aircraft, as well as substantial overseas deployment and extra equipment needed for the Iraq War.

Astute Class submarine

The Astute is a new Class of nuclear-powered attack submarines which will progressively replace existing Swiftsure and Trafalgar Classes (from which it was developed) later this decade. The prime contract was placed with GEC-Marconi (which subsequently merged with British Aerospace to form BAE Systems) in 1997. Due to problems introducing the first comprehensive application of computer aided design, by February 2003 an agreement had to be reached by BAE Systems and MoD to delay and restructure the project, and the contract was amended in December 2003 (with the government agreeing to increase funding by a further £430 million). The entry into service date of the first submarine is now 2008 and the initial order quantity is 3 (with a second batch of 3 planned).

Brimstone Advanced Air-Launched Anti-Armour Weapon

This is the next-generation Anti-Armour Weapon, based on the US Army Hellfire missile, for use on Tornado, Harrier and Eurofighter aircraft. The staff target for an Advanced Air-Launched Anti-Armour Weapon was originally endorsed in 1981, but was cancelled in 1990 as a result of Treasury intervention. The programme was then reinstalled in 1992 following a study into the entire UK anti-armour capability. Following bid assessment, GEC-Marconi (later BAE Systems) was awarded the contract in November 1996. The contract was for development, production and in-service support to the weapon system, which has a through life cost in excess of £1 billion. As of April 2004, ground-firing trials have been completed successfully and aircraft integration trials are underway using Tornado aircraft. The project has experienced technical difficulties, and trials were rescheduled due to the prioritisation of Storm Shadow for operational reasons, which led to increased costs as resources are tied up in the project (and the Eurofighter) for longer than planned.

Joint Strike Fighter (F-35)

The Joint Strike Fighter (JSF, designated F-35) is being developed by Lockheed Martin for the US Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps and the UK Royal Navy and RAF. It is single-seat, supersonic multi-role fighter, incorporating stealth technology. The UK will use a short take-off and vertical landing (STOVL) aircraft (designated F-35B), with different versions being developed for the US. The UK F-35B – STOVL strike fighter will replace the Sea Harriers currently used by the Royal Navy and RAF. In October 2001, an international team led by Lockheed Martin (and including BAE Systems) was awarded the contract to build JSF. The UK is expected to order 150 aircraft with a total procurement cost estimated to be £10 billion. In April 2003, JSF completed a successful Preliminary Design Review, but the Critical Design Review has been postponed from April 2004 to 2005. The UK's F-35B is now expected to enter service in 2012.

Smart Procurement

In 1998 the Government introduced the Smart Procurement Initiative, which later became known simply as Smart Acquisition. The introduction of Smart Acquisition is, amongst other things, intended to auger in “a better and more constructive working relationship between MoD and industry” through the MoD/industry Commercial Policy Group (CPG) (Defence Contracts Temporary Memorandum 04/2002).

Though the financial savings made through this programme are welcomed, the benefits are severely limited. A deeper problem for the Armed Forces is the distorting influence major British defence contractors have on MoD procurement decisions, equipment expenditure, and ultimately the moral of the people who constitute the armed forces. Savings made through Smart Acquisition are potentially off-set by cost over-runs, poor service for the armed services, substandard equipment, and under-trained, under-resourced and under-rested men and women.

The summer 2003 decision by MoD to buy Hawk Trainer jets from BAE, despite protestations from the Treasury and a number of MoD, is a clear case of the MoD and No. 10 making decisions which benefit BAE's coffers and the electoral prospects of some MPs, more than the UK's national interest. As stated in *Jane's Defence Weekly*: “The deal secures BAE Systems jobs and throws weight behind renewed efforts to export the winning Hawk lead-in-fighter trainer” (6th August 2003). In other words, the MoD was supporting BAE's efforts to sell Hawk jets to the Indian government. BAE Directors and staff sit on “at least 16 out of 19 identifiable Task Force groups affiliated to the DTI and MoD advising government on military policy” (*CAAT News*, Issue 184, 2004, p.10). In his autobiography, Robin Cook MP notes how “the Chairman of British Aerospace appeared to have the key to the garden door to Number 10”. The manifest conflict of interests undermines the benefits to the UK's Armed Forces and taxpayers derived from Smart Acquisition.

¹² http://www.mod.uk/linked_files/publications/whitepaper2003/volume1.pdf (page 4)

¹³ See the letter to Prime Minister Blair from 52 former UK diplomats: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/3660837.stm

¹⁴ <http://www.operations.mod.uk/telic/casualties.htm>

¹⁵ See Iraq Body Count for data on Iraqi civilian deaths (<http://www.iraqbodycount.net/>)

¹⁶ Garden, T. and Ramsbotham, D. “About Face: The British Armed Forces, Which Way to Turn?” *RUSI Journal*. April 2004, Vol. 149, No. 2. p. 15.

¹⁷ For more information about ‘War Prevention Works’ see <http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/wpwhome.html> and for ‘Cutting the Costs of War’ see <http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefings/cuttingcosts.htm>.