

China, South Korea, Australia and Russia are all investing heavily in amphibious capability right now. So why is ours under threat?

The great strategist Basil Liddell-Hart once said that a self contained and sea based amphibious force is the best kind of fire extinguisher because of its flexibility, reliability, logistic simplicity and relative economy. Is that still true?

Currently the UK maintains 2 formations which have historically constituted the conventional element of our Response Force: 16 Air Assault Brigade and 3 Commando Brigade. The critical difference between these formations lies in the way they deploy to a theatre of battle / influence, the former by air and the latter by amphibious shipping. Traditionally the argument has been that a nation seeking to have global influence must maintain both. However, as financial pressures compel the Armed Forces to economise and assess ambition, it seems increasingly unlikely that a Response Force consisting of 2 Brigades is either plausible or necessary.

There are three options; keep both, amalgamate them, or scrap one or the other. The UK armed forces will be operating in a post-Afghanistan/Iraq era where the political, social and military appetite for conducting enduring stabilisation operations – in the way they have been conducted - will be significantly reduced. The 'selected option' would have to be resourced fully. Specialist Brigades need specialist equipment, people and training. This analysis considers what capability the UK needs from its Response Force, demonstrating via the components of fighting power that the Royal Marines provides the UK with the best, single Brigade option and that resources are already in place.

Composition of the response force

The Response Force, described as the Early Effects Force in the paper on Transformational Army Structures published in Defence Viewpoints on 7th October, could be defined by the need to respond quickly to non-discretionary threats to national interests. It should be capable of delivering both 'fire prevention' through up-stream engagement and 'fire extinguisher' through limited / focused and non-enduring intervention.

It has been suggested that the Response Force will sit between the Committed Force and the Adaptable Force, and that it will be composed of the UK's special forces units, naval and air elements together with either 1 or 2 Brigade formations making up the conventional bulk, in terms of numbers and firepower. Wider support will be provided through the attachment / association of other Government departments, so that in some cases, tasks allocated to the UK's Response Force will be partly or completely achieved by employing the wider defence enablers without resorting necessarily to committing the conventional (Brigade) elements at all.

In a post-Afghanistan environment where direct military engagement is less likely to be

sanctioned - and even when it is, it may not necessarily require the bulk of a complete Brigade, and so 2 specialist Brigades could be seen as extravagant. A key feature of the Response Force is that it will be a single national joint asset, and it should be scaleable to task. The deduction from the latter point should be that while a force given to air-mobile operations offers options for tactical engagement it could not form the totality of the conventional Response Force on the basis that to be truly scaleable there must be inherent ability to deliver a force with sufficient firepower and protection, and then sustain it.

Political value of amphibious forces

The utility of a Response Force is much wider than simply the range of effects it can achieve once deployed on foreign soil. Just holding a Response Force 'in-being' provides a credible conventional deterrence. As General Colin Powell noted in 1991 'Lying offshore, ready to act, the presence of ships and Marines sometimes means much more than just having air power or ship's fire, when it comes to deterring a crisis. And the ships and Marines may not have to do anything but lie offshore. It is hard to lie offshore with a C-141 or C-130 full of airborne troops.'

The more credible the force, the more credible is the deterrence. And by adjusting the readiness and location of the Response Force a much broader range of effects can be achieved upstream of the requirement to commit boots on the ground. It is this ability to 'poise'; to influence and if required coerce, that sets amphibious forces distinctly apart as a strategic conventional deterrence. Air mobile forces can of course threaten from the air, but such a move requires immediate over-flight permissions and benign landing sites. And once committed there is no further political leverage to be gained, it can't poise. It is also logistically fragile, reliant on expensive air-bridges and mortgages the good will of coalition / host nation partners which aren't always forthcoming (e.g. Turkey's refusal to allow passage rights for the invasion of Iraq). Meanwhile, maritime forces, with amphibious and carrier strike groups working together can provide a statement of intent without commitment and a demonstration of capability without actual aggression. Further it can be used to prevent conflict, or at least create time and space for decision making or the creation of a consensus for action around which a coalition may be assembled.

Alongside scalability and utility, the Response Force must be deployable. This is not a matter of portability. The strategic movement of men and equipment by sea, or by air, is a task that is done 'to' a force not 'by' it. Tactical deployment into a new theatre of operations and be ready to fight - and win - on arrival is a specialist business. The deployment options for amphibious forces are much greater than those offered by air mobile forces. The UK's amphibious forces may make use of other sovereign airspace and host nation support, but they can operate without them. Regardless of deployment vector, sea or air, it requires specialist planners, specialist equipment and a special mind-set/ethos. The latter point is particularly worthy and probably least understood. Nowhere is Napoleon's maxim that the 'moral (ethos) is to the physical, as three is to one', more apposite than in the isolated business of theatre entry.

Why not amalgamate 3 Cdo Bde and 16 AA Bde

Superficially, an amalgamation of the current 2 Brigades looks to be a 'neat' answer, offering a

lifeline to both. But the real question is why would you want to do this? If the UK needs both – keep both. But if the requirement is only to have one such Brigade, then we should pick one! An amalgamation of the two forces delivers an uncomfortable compromise of people, equipment and culture which is likely to weaken both and ultimately deliver neither well. It also does not deliver real savings.

Unique capabilities of amphibious forces

The Defence Concepts and Doctrine Centre has assessed that the future character of conflict will be complex with a battle space that will be increasingly congested, cluttered, contested, connected and constrained. In this environment the Response Force must have the organic ability to make sense of the complexity and provide timely, discriminative, precise and effective targeting; hard and soft. The amphibious task force and carrier strike task force have all-domain ISTAR (Intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance) capability, which together with the unique 'Information Exploitation Group' delivers unparalleled understanding to the task force commander. This enables a maritime strike group to deliver the required land effects from the sea.

The Littoral Manoeuvre concept

The Littoral is the area along or adjacent to the sea. As a military concept, Littoral manoeuvre (LitM) is the means of gaining relative advantage over a shore based enemy by integrating activity across the land and sea interface. It fits clearly within the British 'manoeuvrist approach' which directs forces to attack an enemy's will and cohesion, his weakness rather than his strengths, through a combination of focused tempo and surprise. It is not about isolating light forces on foreign beaches or attacking defended hard points with all the associated 'Saving Private Ryan' imagery. As the Commander of the UK Amphibious Forces told RUSI in July 2010, Littoral manoeuvre is about 'manoeuvre not attrition, nimbleness not mass, adaptability not fixity and discrimination not prescription'.

The Amphibious Task Group (ATG) is the joint force structure that facilitates manoeuvre in the littoral. It includes; the Landing Force (LF), specialist amphibious shipping (including landing craft for shore delivery) and a Tailored Air Group (TAG). Together these elements have the capability to tactically deliver, sustain and recover the LF to achieve operational or strategic objectives. The ATG is best employed alongside a Carrier Strike (CS) group that provides close air support, air interdiction and air denial. This wider Maritime Strike Group, providing surface and sub-surface protection and support, securing the lines of communication is a potent weapon whose existence is a deterrent to aggression against UK interests. When tasked, the Maritime Strike Group is able to deliver precision and tempo in a way that air mobile forces are not able to match. Tempo is more than a question of simple arrival in theatre, it is a matter of sustainability, re-deployability and firepower. Operating in this way CS and LitM are separable but not separate capabilities; they complement each other and used in concert are far more potent than the sum of their parts.

A conceptual advantage of LitM operations is the capability they deliver to act unilaterally. There is no requirement to obtain any measure of accessing, basing and over-flight (ABO) prior

to arrival in theatre. This allows early commitment of the LitM force into a region, such a move can create political space and enable partnerships and coalitions to be formed while maintaining the capability to act unilaterally if required. Unless an operation is within flying range of the UK no such option exists for the employment of air mobile forces; where ABO is a pre-requisite for deployment. While flight time for an air mobile force into theatre might be short, political time to generate ABO within sufficient range is uncertain and potentially long. The slow force build up is exacerbated by limited volume of equipment that can be moved by a limited number of aircraft, any advantage gained by early arrival is therefore negated. It takes 95 x C-17 equivalent loads (EL) and 124 x Antonov AN-124 EL to deploy a small scale light force to a theatre and a further 28 days to configure and be ready to operate. This force would then need to be sustained requiring further aircraft that are simply, neither available nor affordable. In contrast, amphibious shipping, enabled by the LPDs, can deliver a more capable force tactically balanced and therefore - critically - immediately ready to fight.

Successful interventions by an armed force require the rapid deployment to a region, the swift build up of sufficient fighting power and the ability to sustain it. The ATG can move 345 miles within a 24hr period either way along a coast line and project over 80miles in depth of the shore (total radius of 130 miles) while remaining beyond view 'over the horizon' . To prevent such a strike would require an opposing force to defend over 27,000 square miles. Pulled forward by organic ISTAR this allows the amphibious commander to choose an unopposed or lightly defended landing point. Command and control is delivered through specialist command centres present on the Landing Platform Docks (LPD) HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark and the Landing Platform Helicopters HMS Ocean, providing dynamic planning and management of operations from a protected sea base. As the situation demands the ATG is capable of swiftly re-embarking the LF to international waters. As such there are always options to rheostat the political posture, up or down, without being constrained by the requirement to amass and protect semi-permanent safe areas ashore. Effectively providing influence through presence and / or focused intervention without commitment to occupation and 'boots (permanently) on the ground'. Moreover, a Naval Task Group can poise indefinitely from international waters, providing the persistence and key leadership human interaction required to build trust and coalition. This is particularly supportive of wider UK activities and interests. By way of example, in 2009, the TAURUS exercise involved a Royal Marines Battle Group deploying and engaging with 12 countries over a 4 month period throughout South Asia.

Equipment

All the key specialist equipment required to deliver the ATG are all already in-service; bought and paid for. This contrasts sharply with almost every other area of Defence. Moreover, the entire amphibious specialist shipping is planned to be in-service until 2032, with the exception of HMS Ocean which will require a major refit in a couple of years time. Why would we plan to not use a capability hard fought for over generations and which offers some of the greatest utility across Defence? By way of contrast, current tactical air transport is due to be replaced by the A400 project, which will require upfront spending and incur significant running costs associated with the maintenance of multiple airframes. Meanwhile the Amphibious shipping delivers more and costs less.

Our enemies, current and future, will have noted the effectiveness of IED and mining in general as a means of limiting our freedom of manoeuvre, we can therefore anticipate that IED will be a feature of any future conflict. A key capability for a Response Force must therefore be the ability to deploy protected mobility into theatre. Modern combat vehicle design must balance protection against firepower and manoeuvrability with each being compromised if another is to be favoured. The requirement for the Response Force is for a vehicle that can be deployed in the assault wave; this means that the high protection options provided by the Mastiff genre of vehicles are untenable. Due to their bulk these vehicles can not be carried in the numbers required by the ATG and once near the objective they are too heavy to be under-slung and too large to be surface off-loaded at tempo. Similar, but greater limitations apply to Air Mobile operations. In contrast, the Viking ATV(P) is ideally suited to be used by the Amphibious Forces it was designed for. Sufficiently armoured to continue to be successfully used in Afghanistan, but able to cross soft snow, jungle and desert, even swim ashore, they can also be underslung from CH47 helicopters. Their (tracked) all terrain ability means the force is not fixed by having to use roads or stable ground. Effectively providing protection through avoidance. Later on, it is acknowledged, that in an enduring intervention, follow on forces would need to deploy with greater protection where pattern setting and the predictability forced by holding ground increases risk – such as IEDs in Afghanistan. The capability to deliver a Company Group in protected mobility in the first assault wave of a small scale Amphibious Assault significantly sets amphibious operations apart from Air Mobile Operations where no such option exists.

The totality of the landing force in the LitM environment is fundamentally joint. The core of the UK's traditional landing force; 3 Cdo Bde RM, has recently been engaged in the land-locked battleground of Southern Afghanistan. Deployment in such an environment has meant that many of the unique capabilities and TTP of this formation have been masked and it appears to be analogous to other formations. However when constituted as a Landing Force, 3 Cdo Bde has more organic firepower, more mobility and access to a much greater range of non-organic fires than an equivalent Air Mobile or 'light' formation. The Combat Support and Combat Service Support elements of the LitM landing force are similarly specialist and optimised for expeditionary operations. This is not a capability that can be replicated by a non-specialist formation or worked into a roulement of forces.

Ethos

Ethos – sometimes called the moral component of fighting power - is perhaps the most difficult to measure but it is accepted as the essential, perhaps fundamental, ingredient for success. As Professor Anthony King wrote in 2004: 'Military organisations with poor ethos will suffer defeat – often disastrous defeat – while those with a functionally sound ethos will triumph; successful organisations will have a clear role and an effective means of fulfilling it if their ethos is strong.' Professor King went on to describe how the very clear link between their expeditionary / amphibious role and their ethos made the UK's amphibious force compellingly successful : 'The ethos developed at Achnacarry and Lymptstone is detectable in [Commando] operations. In training, Commandos try to develop an ethos of unity, adaptability, humility, high professional standards, fortitude and humour'.

This view was endorsed by the Directorate of Operational Capability (DOC) in a 2003 audit of

Operation JACANA . 'It was also apparent that the rigorous physical and mental hardening regime associated with Commando training had produced tough, self-reliant and adaptable specialists who were able to match the local conditions'.

The age of the 'Strategic Corporal' is well upon us. The UK's Armed Forces must embrace this reality and seek to select the very best individuals for service within the Response Force; and then give them the best training. Describing one formation as having higher quality soldiers than another runs the risk of bias. However one should consider that 46% of the Special Forces Group are Royal Marines. This benchmark of quality assurance is not a function of heritage or beret colour. It is a product of the ethos and training described above and of a 'brand' that attracts a non-commissioned intake to Commando Training Centre where, on joining, more than 40% are qualified for Officer entry and 7% have degrees. This compares to Army basic training where 47% of non-commissioned entrants are below the standard required for an 11 year old child. This more discerning selection is further 'prepared' through the only military training establishment in the UK graded 'Good' across all three metrics used by OFSTED and regarded by DITC as having "exemplar practices". The resultant Marine is subsequently well placed to deal with the complexities of post-modern warfare and 50% less likely than the UK Defence average to suffer from PTSD. It is noteworthy that this output is achieved at a lower cost than the Army equivalent. With such quality the LitM landing force is ideally placed to be at the heart of the future Response Force able to intervene intelligently and adapt to whatever contingency is required.

Conclusion – the value for money option

In 2009 the average cost to train a Royal Marine was £50.2K, Army Phase 1 and 2 training costs £56k per man. On average a Marine will serve 11.2 years making the cost of 'training / against service delivered' £4.3K per year, whereas an Infantry soldiers training costs are split over an average of 7.9 years, or £7.09k per annum. In broad figures, the running costs for 3 Commando Brigade is £250M, plus £150M for all the associated shipping. The Commando Brigade will deploy for its third Afghanistan mission in 2012: over the next 2 years 64% of the entire Royal Marines will on operations. The estimated annual costs for maintaining the Territorial Army is £450M; and it has delivered 1600 reservists on to operations over the last 7 years.

Having identified the requirement of the UK Response Force, we need only to properly use what we already own in order to deliver the vision. There will be 'winners and losers'. The Air Assault Brigade will need to be employed elsewhere in defence because an amalgamation offers no increase in capability yet risks undermining the effectiveness of both.

A maritime strategy is best placed to deliver the UK's foreign policy objectives and that the Response Force should enable and support these wider 'operations' as much as it should prevent conflict and deliver focused intervention. An island nation can only deliver military mass via the sea – and Littoral Manoeuvre offers the most rapid and effective method of influencing land operations without occupation. Littoral Manoeuvre doesn't offer the perfect option in all circumstances – but if the UK can no longer retain all of its sovereign military capabilities then this provides the least incoherent package. To do this it needs a balanced force of specialist

amphibious shipping based around the offloading capability of the in-service LPDs. Littoral Manoeuvre can deliver military mass quickly without recourse to ABO permissions and can force entry from the sea, providing unparalleled political choice.

In 1803 Napoleon remarked of the UK's Royal Marines: "How much might be done with a hundred thousand soldiers such as these." Plus ca change.....