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Although it is important not to jump the gun and draw conclusions about what the Strategic Defence Review process will recommend for the future of the Armed Forces, nevertheless there are some early smoke signals emanating from Whitehall that are worth commenting upon. The most important seems to be the fact that, while all the Services face hefty cutbacks, the Government is going to protect the Army first and foremost; in other words, that the ground forces are to have primacy in how the UK military of the future is shaped.

Again, precisely what is going on behind the scenes is still unknown; so judgements are provisional. But it is evident that the Navy and the Air Force face the most severe swings of the axe. There have been multiple newspaper reports that where the Prime Minister has intervened it has largely been in ways that prioritise and protect the Army. On 11 October, for instance, the Times reported that David Cameron has 'signalled his desire' to save the Territorial Army from the cuts in it that were mooted; specifically, to 'resist' cutting the size of the reserves. On 16 October the Daily Telegraph revealed that, the previous day, Cameron personally intervened to quell a revolt by senior military figures – including the Chief of the General Staff – who made clear they 'would not accept' cuts to the defence budget that might hinder the Army's mission in Afghanistan. Cameron apparently overruled the Treasury's demand for a ten percent cut in defence spending in order to protect the size of the Army. These and other, hints from the Prime Minister strongly imply that the SDR will seek a slimmed-down military in which 'boots on the ground' receive the most support from the politicians.

There may be two forces at work here (or both could be playing a role). The first is that the Prime Minister has peered into the crystal ball and concluded that, in the coming years and decades, the gravest threats to UK interests will require a response shaped around land forces; and that the Navy and Air Force will both be of rather lesser importance. This almost certainly fits into a popular – if controversial – vision of future warfare in which conflict will take place 'among the people'. Counterinsurgency (COIN), low-level violence, and perhaps nation-building will be the tasks facing the Armed Forces. The second possible calculation in the Prime Minister's mind is more political: Britain is probably going to be committed in Afghanistan for most of Cameron's time in office. The under-resourcing of the mission in Central Asia became a major weapon with which to beat Gordon Brown; Cameron will be desperate to shield himself from the charge of failing 'our boys' at a time when the defence budget is going through major cuts. The last thing he wants is to be blamed for lots of deaths or, worse, an embarrassing withdrawal. More body bags are inevitable, and – as always – many will seek to attack the Government on the matter. Hence, short-term calculations of Mr Cameron's own political fortunes could be just as significant in shaping the future of Britain's Armed Forces as considered strategic judgement.

Whatever is driving this, the question must be asked: is the future of warfare really more conflicts like Afghanistan? If so, then configuring for COIN will probably be the right decision. And, with the intellectual rise of the war 'among the people' paradigm, many think that Western forces will, in future, wage precisely these kinds of conflicts over and over again – due to the

spread of failing states and a 'responsibility to protect'; because of Islamist terrorism; and because weaker adversaries will seek to fight us in asymmetrical ways.

However, scepticism is in order before we decide that the current war is necessarily the challenge that we should prepare for in the future. Making that assumption may actually be dangerous. After all, most of the irregular/COIN conflicts entered into since the fall of the USSR have been wars of choice – for instance, the American intervention in Somalia, the British intervention in Sierra Leone, and the decision to try to keep the peace in the former Yugoslavia in the mid-1990s. The most significant low-level conflict of choice was the American decision to stick around during the Iraqi civil war, rather than evacuating and blaming it on the inhabitants (which was, of course, also the truth). Instead the US committed itself to the long-term work of stabilising Iraq. Only the Afghanistan conflict was really a low-level war which the West had no choice but to wage. The other conflicts in which the West has engaged since 1991 – the Gulf Wars of 1991 and 2003, the repeated bombing of Iraq in the intervening period between those struggles, and Kosovo in 1999 – were not COIN but conventional operations centred upon attrition. Therefore it is nothing short of ridiculous to conclude from the recent evidence that the future is somehow 'inevitably' going to be based around COIN. If anything, there is rather more evidence to suggest that the future will require conventional warfare of the standard sort.

This is especially the case if we look at the problem another way. Yes, there has been a marked increased in low-level violence, and insurgencies, across the world. However insurgency is nothing new and therefore does not pose the kind of conceptual problem that some academics and defence specialists seem to think. It should also be pointed out that insurgencies are very difficult indeed to wage successfully. When confronted with a functioning, competent state – like the IRA versus Britain, or the Palestinians versus Israel – insurgencies are typically a dismal failure. It was not an insurgency that won in Vietnam, but a transition to conventional warfare after the US withdrew. And though the Americans retreated from Lebanon and Somalia, the insurgents themselves were not the 'winners' of the struggles there either.

In addition – and this point is important – despite the prevalence of low-level conflicts, Western states have been very discriminating in selecting where to get involved – let alone how to fight. As indicated above, they have been fairly successful in the last two decades at managing to wage war in conventional ways, despite doing so in a world supposedly ready to suck them in to endless low-level violence. There is no reason to think that they will become less skilful (or, alternatively, unwilling to get bogged down) in the future. It seems more likely that wars such as Afghanistan will be the exception, not the norm.

Anyway, will democratic politicians, with their focus on the electoral cycle, want to go and do another inconclusive, protracted Afghanistan anytime soon? They won't, and this should be critical. COIN requires patience and commitment, above all else. It is largely a psychological matter – centred on willpower to stay the course, and, actually, on the question of whether we can be bothered engaging in it in the first place. Retaining public support for a protracted conflict is very difficult; democratic publics demand quick results. There is also a potential problem for liberal values in this type of warfare. In a minefield as dangerous as this, the natural inclination is surely to say 'why bother?'

Often the charge is made that the US cannot 'do' irregular war; specifically, that its military culture privileges firepower and therefore does not breed the necessary patience for COIN. However this assessment is problematic. We must bear in mind that areas where the US has withdrawn from COIN and low-level operations – Vietnam, Lebanon, Somalia – were all far from the US homeland. Arguably there were few American national interests at stake, certainly not great enough to warrant bearing the costs of victory. When the US has been minded to do so, its military has performed admirably in this kind of warfare. Most recently, their performance in defeating Al-Qaeda and other insurgents in Iraq was a textbook model of COIN; and in the nineteenth century the Native Americans –located not thousands of miles away but in the continental United States – were crushed. The lesson, then, is that when it matters the US has stayed the course and won; hence, by extension, that the key issue in low-level, protracted conflicts, is old-fashioned willpower.

If the big issue in successfully fighting insurgencies, securing 'the people', and nation-building is a matter of political resolution, then we need to ask whether the will to wage this kind of war is really going to be there; whether public support can be retained; and – more strategically – whether vital national interests will even be regularly threatened in ways that necessitate protracted interventions. If the answer to these questions is no, then we need to think long and hard before concluding that 'insurgency' is the future model of warfare and that the British military should be structured around it.

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