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# The United Kingdom and the War on Terror: The Breakdown of National and Military Strategy

WARREN CHIN

*Terrorism cannot be defeated by military means alone, but it cannot be defeated without it.* (Tony Blair Speech on HMS Albion, 12 January 2007)

The United Kingdom has fought various iterations of terrorism for the better part of 100 years. More often than not this threat manifested itself within the context of colonial campaigns against nationalist and or Marxist insurgent groups seeking to gain independence. Within these small wars terrorism was a tactic used alongside other asymmetric means to bring about political change. More recently, during the troubles in Northern Ireland (1969–1998), the British faced a direct threat to the homeland from the Irish Republican Army (IRA), which relied almost entirely on terror to achieve its political goals. Perhaps not surprisingly then, in the aftermath of 9/11, the British, whilst not being complacent about the nature of the threat posed by Al Qaeda, believed that its previous experience in counterterrorism provided it with a solid foundation upon which to develop a counterterrorist strategy to tackle this new threat.

In spite of this experience, the fortunes of the United Kingdom in the current war on terror have deteriorated. The most obvious evidence can be seen in Iraq, where British efforts to stabilize the southeast of the country proved ineffective. This failure was criticized by the Americans who had been led to believe the UK had the situation under control when clearly they did not.<sup>1</sup> The UK's failure was amplified in March 2008 when Iraqi forces ignored British forces in the region and launched their own offensive – calling on the Americans for support – which was partially successful in breaking the hold of the militias in Basra, something the British never achieved themselves.<sup>2</sup> These events led one journalist to comment that: 'the war in Iraq has been one of the most disastrous wars ever fought by Britain. It has been small, but we achieved nothing'.<sup>3</sup>

The British are also experiencing significant problems in the second front of the war on terror in Afghanistan. Both the UK's strategy and operations to secure Helmand province were heavily criticized by the Americans and others for surrendering the initiative to the Taliban and failing to attack the most important Taliban centres of gravity. The Afghan government also voiced its concerns over the conduct of UK operations and Karzai even went so far as to blame the resurgence of the Taliban on the UK's flawed strategy.<sup>4</sup> Most interesting is the view held by some senior officers in the UK that this is not a winnable war, which begs the question how did we get into this situation?<sup>5</sup> Perceived military failure is also having a detrimental effect on the UK's alliance with the US and the Americans are now expressing

serious doubts about the effectiveness of the British armed forces and their contribution to the war on terror.<sup>6</sup>

The purpose of this article is to explain why the UK's strategy and operations in the war on terror have so far failed to produce the desired strategic effect. In theory at least, the most important character trait of the UK's strategy is that it is multifaceted and relies on a range instruments of power: diplomatic, economic, and military.<sup>7</sup> As such it is comprehensive in approach and provides sufficient flexibility to ensure success. However, it is the contention of this article that the military instrument is undermining the effectiveness of the other two levers of power, and this has caused the wider strategic plan to unravel. Not surprisingly then, my aim is to critically assess the military dimension of what is supposed to be a holistic strategy.

The article begins by setting out Britain's strategy to counter Al Qaeda and then explores the reasons why the national and military dimension of this conflict has been plagued by a series of challenges which can be divided into five broad areas. The first deals with the nature of the enemy and in particular the emergence of what has been termed the new terrorism. Given the influence exerted by past experience on UK strategy, it is important to explore whether that response is still relevant. The remaining challenges all focus on the endogenous environment which surrounds the UK policymaking process. Within this domain the second challenge focuses on the ability of the UK to articulate a coordinated counterterrorist/counterinsurgency strategy. The third examines the goals adopted to fight this war and the fourth looks at the resource challenges created by these operational and strategic objectives. Finally, the article examines the resource constraints within which the war has had to operate and explains how this has affected the conduct of military strategy and campaigns.

In sum, the central argument developed in this article is that British national and military strategy is fundamentally flawed because the UK has failed to pay sufficient attention to the basic preconditions required to generate a successful strategy. There is little evidence that an effective analysis of the goals of this conflict was undertaken or that interventions in Iraq or Afghanistan were assessed realistically. Because of this failure at the highest political level, the armed forces have faced the challenge of trying to reconcile a profound mismatch between resources and commitments and this has led to the adoption of a strategy and doctrine which are not ideal in terms of dealing with such a range of asymmetric challenges.

### **The UK National and Military Strategic Framework**

It is recognized that the term terrorism is an essentially contested concept and that there is no universal agreement on how to define it. However, for the purposes of this article, the current definition used by the armed forces of the UK provides a relatively uncontroversial description of the phenomenon. Viewed from this perspective terrorism is defined as:

(T)he unlawful use or threatened use of violence against individuals or property in an attempt to coerce or intimidate governments or societies to achieve political, religious or ideological objectives.<sup>8</sup>

Although this presents a simple explanation of the concept, addressing the threat posed by Al Qaeda has proved anything but simple for the British. Indeed one analyst observed that he could see no evidence of a British strategy for defeating Al Qaeda or global jihad.<sup>9</sup> In truth, this judgement is rather harsh and in fact the government articulated its broader strategy in *Countering International Terrorism: The UK's Strategy*<sup>10</sup> and its military strategy in two key documents: *The Strategic Defence Review: The New Chapter*<sup>11</sup> and *The 2003 Defence White Paper*.<sup>12</sup> The most recent statement on this issue came out in March 2008 with the publication of the *UK National Security Strategy*, which set out a range of threats facing the UK including international terrorism<sup>13</sup> In essence, since 2002 the UK has been trying to implement a long-term strategy for countering terrorism. Analysis of this strategy can be divided into two areas: the national strategic and military strategic levels of war.

According to the most recent statement, national strategy focuses on:

(T)he coordinated application of the instruments of national power . . . in the pursuit of national policy aspirations. Accordingly it lies within the political domain, principally the Prime Minister and Cabinet, with advice from the most senior military officers. The Government's political intentions, in relation to a specific campaign, may be articulated as a national strategic aim or end-state, based upon the outcome required and accompanied by associated strategic objectives.<sup>14</sup>

At the national strategic level actions are articulated through a framework called *CONTEST* (Counterterrorism Strategy). This construct sets out the effects that a counterterrorist strategy must achieve if the threat is to be contained. *CONTEST* is divided into four areas: the *prevention* of terrorism by tackling its causes; *pursuing* terrorists and those who sponsor them; *protecting* the public and key services; and *preparing* for the consequences of a terrorist attack. Referred to as the *Four Ps* the armed forces contribute to the UK's national strategy for counterterrorism predominantly in prevent and pursue phases and in specialized elements of protect at home.<sup>15</sup> The national strategic aim set by the government is: 'to reduce the risk from international terrorism, so that people can go about their daily lives freely and with confidence'.<sup>16</sup>

This brings us to the military strategic domain of the war. For the British:

Military strategy links political aspiration, expressed in Government policy, and military feasibility. It is derived from national strategy and determines how the Armed Forces should be configured and employed, in conjunction with other instruments of national power, to achieve favourable outcomes.<sup>17</sup>

UK military strategy operates within a conceptual framework that is designed to ensure it achieves strategic effects that support the political and economic dimensions of the campaign. To this end, military strategy and operations are guided by the following tenets. First, all military operations are sanctioned and under the control of the legitimate government. Second, the terrorist must be defeated within the rule of law. Third, there must be a clear political aim and the military must be given clear political

direction throughout. Fourth, the delivery of a successful strategy depends on a coordinated response between government departments and agencies. Fifth, both the government and the military need intelligence so that threats can be detected and acted upon in a discriminate military campaign that limits innocent civilian casualties. Finally, strategy and operations must aim to isolate the terrorist from the civil population both physically and psychologically.<sup>18</sup> Clearly, terrorist attacks on the UK homeland since 2005 and problems experienced in the military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq suggest that current strategy is not working, but why has this happened? The rest of this article attempts to address this question.

## Five Problems with UK National Strategy and the War on Terror

### 1. *The Obsolescence of CONTEST?*

The implementation of Britain's national strategy has been affected by five problems. The first of these concerns the extent to which the UK's current strategy, shaped as it is has been by historical experience, remains relevant in a war that many believe represents what has been termed 'the new terrorism'.<sup>19</sup> In contrast to the old terrorism which was largely national in focus, was usually driven by a secular political ideology, and used violence as part of a carefully calculated campaign in which the 'The terrorists want a lot of people watching, not a lot of people dead'.<sup>20</sup> The main characteristics of new terrorism are:

- terrorists act transnationally and operate in loosely organized networks;
- the terrorists are inspired by religion and are perceived to be fanatics;
- suicide is often part of the terrorists' operating procedure;
- they seek weapons of mass destruction and to kill as many people as possible;
- targeting is indiscriminate.<sup>21</sup>

On paper at least the difference between old and new terrorism appears stark. However, before examining these differences it is also important to recognize that there are also some striking similarities between old and new terrorism. As Duvyesteyn explains old terrorists also operated transnationally and both the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Hizbollah employed loose networks which extended across state boundaries.<sup>22</sup> Mockaitis has also shown that old terrorism has a long history in terms of its international range and connections. Thus the Irish-American community provided support to the Irish Nationalist cause from the nineteenth century until the end of the troubles in the 1990s. Terrorist organizations also assisted other groups. For example the IRA was linked with Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) and trained in Libya. Germany's Red Army Faction (RAF) units also joined up and received aid from Palestinian organizations. Support from the American-Jewish community also helped the Irgun and Haganah against the British. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) also receive money from the Diaspora community abroad.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, suicide terrorism also has a history that precedes Al Qaeda, the LTTE being one example of a movement that employed this strategy against the Sri Lankan

government. It has also been argued that Anarchist attacks in the late 19th century were coloured by a sense of martyrdom as those who carried out such attacks rarely sought to escape but accepted arrest, trial conviction, and execution as the price they paid to promote the justness of their cause.<sup>24</sup>

One very important difference between old and new terrorism is new terrorism's actual and potential lethality. Most disturbing is Al Qaeda's supposed obsession with acquiring weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Although the evidence linking Al Qaeda with WMD is sparse, some documents explaining how to make chemical weapons were apparently discovered by the Americans during their operations in Afghanistan in 2001 and there are rumours that Al Qaeda was given a quantity of low-grade uranium 238 which was supplied by Chechen separatists and which could be used as a dirty bomb.<sup>25</sup> In truth, it is not clear that Al Qaeda possesses the means or wherewithal to conduct such an attack, but there is a consensus that the organization does aspire to gain possession of such a capability.<sup>26</sup> What is very clear is that the UK believes the threat is real and that proliferation of WMD is likely to increase the chances that Al Qaeda will get access to this technology.<sup>27</sup>

A fundamental problem with the debate on new terrorism and by implication Al Qaeda is that there is a very real danger that we see this phenomenon as an exotic existential threat rather than a rational strategic actor using force to achieve specific goals. Such a debate is important because it has shaped our strategic approach to Al Qaeda. For example, Roy has argued that: 'Osama bin Laden has no strategy in the true sense of the word.'<sup>28</sup> He also suggests that bin Laden's plan is devoid of political objectives, 'his aim is simply to destroy Babylon'.<sup>29</sup> Byman points out politicians in the US also tend to sell the threat of Al Qaeda in these terms.<sup>30</sup> This problem is also evident in the UK. Consider for example the view of the House of Commons Defence Committee: 'al Qaeda's objectives are not only grandiose and extreme, but also incoherent and incapable of forming the basis of any rational dialogue. They are non-negotiable'.<sup>31</sup>

In truth, the available evidence does not support the perception that Al Qaeda is 'irrational' as Roy's analysis implies. Thus, Scheuer believes that 'bin Laden has a clear strategic goal- defeating the United States – and the most important issue for him is attaining that goal. He has not, however, scripted that tactical means for accomplishing the goal'.<sup>32</sup> According to Burke, Al Qaeda has a clear strategy based on four basic pillars. The first is to build an extensive anti-US coalition. The second is to instigate as many terrorist incidents as possible to prevent the United States having the time and space to focus their resources on the destruction of Al Qaeda. Third, through military action, Al Qaeda hopes to raise the political consciousness of the Islamic world and through this action cause a rejection of the United States and the West. Finally, Al Qaeda wants to launch more attacks against the US and its allies both as part of the broader struggle to defeat the US and, in the short term, to encourage recruitment and fundraising.<sup>33</sup> It is also argued that Al Qaeda has a clear political manifesto which envisages the toppling of 'apostate' regimes in Islamdom, forcing the withdrawal of the United States from the Middle East, resolution of the Arab–Israeli dispute and the restoration of the Caliphate.<sup>34</sup> This view is echoed in more recent studies by Mockaitis and Byman.<sup>35</sup>

It is also important to note that until 2001 Al Qaeda was not the decentralized network that it is today. According to Hoffman, until 9/11 Al Qaeda had a bureaucratic hierarchy and committee system and was a fairly orthodox terrorist organization providing obvious centres of gravity that could be targeted by the US during Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). Post 9/11 the organization went through a process of transformation and has now become more like a concept or an idea rather than organization.<sup>36</sup> What organization there is relies on a loose network of confederated groups which adhere to the principles of the movement.<sup>37</sup>

It is in this sense that Al Qaeda represents a new and novel challenge for counter-terrorist experts. Underlying this transformation has been the exploitation of technology in the form of the Internet. Thus, although the transnational linkages between terrorist groups is nothing new in itself, the speed, low cost, and easy access to this communications technology represents an important force multiplier, which has transformed terrorism. As Mockaitis points out, today over one billion people use this facility to communicate and download information. Virtually all the world's 40 active terrorist groups have at least one website. Terrorists use the Internet in a variety of ways. They publicize their cause, raise money, and recruit members. The World Wide Web provides information on possible targets and some have used Google maps to plan their attacks against British targets. Organizations can also share information on practical measures like bomb making. According to one source Al Qaeda now has a virtual university which teaches electronic jihad.<sup>38</sup> However the capacity and capability of Al Qaeda's electronic training is disputed.<sup>39</sup>

Ironically, the exploitation of the information revolution has allowed Al Qaeda to circumvent Western military success and turn Western victory on its head. Thus, while Operation Enduring Freedom was a great military success for the Coalition, resulting in the defeat of the Taliban and the loss of Afghanistan as a safe base for Al Qaeda, this conquest failed to bring the threat to an end. Similarly, a great deal of success has been achieved in terms of targeting the leadership core of Al Qaeda and, in 2004, the Bush Administration claimed that they captured or killed 3,000 terrorists during OEF. The administration also claimed that 75 per cent of Al Qaeda's leadership had been neutralized by the counterterrorist campaign.<sup>40</sup> However, in spite of this reversal Al Qaeda was able to respond in three ways to mitigate the effectiveness of US-led attacks.

The first of these changes saw a Diaspora of Al Qaeda agents across 'Islamdom'. The loss of Afghanistan as a safe base forced the leadership to send their supporters back to their home countries to recruit and train local people to continue the war at the local level.<sup>41</sup> The important point is that command and control of this terrorist Diaspora was possible because of the information revolution.

Second, Al Qaeda has also found new safe havens. Gunaratna and Nelsen demonstrate how successfully Al Qaeda has been in creating a new sanctuary for its operations in the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan.<sup>42</sup> But, as they explain, the need to preserve security and the physical remoteness of their location makes it unlikely Al Qaeda will be able to create another safe base on the scale that existed in Afghanistan under the Taliban.<sup>43</sup> This has had important implications for training personnel and Rabassa

notes that to get over some of these problems Al Qaeda has placed key training manuals like the 11-volume *Encyclopaedia of Afghan Jihad* on the internet. Al Qaeda has also increased its use of urban training grounds in countries like Saudi Arabia, the UK, and France. The wave of terrorism in Morocco, Indonesia, and elsewhere shows that the organization is still capable of carrying out a sustained campaign, albeit on a reduced scale. Most important is the impression created in the mind of the target that Al Qaeda remains a global phenomenon.<sup>44</sup>

Third, Al Qaeda has expanded its earlier efforts to grow 'teams in country, close to the target, using target country nationals rather than dispatching highly trained insurgents to the target'.<sup>45</sup> This is being achieved through the use of intermediaries, web-based propaganda, and the subversion of immigrant expatriate populations; the 2004 Madrid bombing, the attacks on the London underground in July 2005, and the failed plot to cause explosions on commercial airlines leaving the UK in summer 2006 are cited as evidence of this change in strategy. In the case of the attacks in the UK there is also evidence that the leading members of these groups met with representatives from Al Qaeda in Pakistan before proceeding with their plans.<sup>46</sup> Mackinlay believes this development presents the greatest challenge to the security of the UK because it is clear that Al Qaeda's propaganda has impacted on the Muslim community living in the West which makes states like the UK, with a large Muslim population, vulnerable to attacks from within.<sup>47</sup>

On balance then the strategy adopted by the British appears to represent a sensible approach in terms of fighting the new terror as epitomised by Al Qaeda. It permits the conflict to be viewed in terms that reject the perception that this is 'a clash of civilizations' or an attack against the values of the West. Clearly, the Internet and the threat posed by WMD represent challenges but it is the political message being carried by the Internet that is winning the hearts and minds of the global Muslim population and it is the same message that justifies and legitimizes mass casualty terrorism.

## 2. *Uncoordinated Implementation*

This then leads on to the second potential problem affecting UK national strategy and that is the British system of government has proved ineffective in creating a coordinated approach that allowed the smooth delivery of the *Four Ps*. In theory at least, the process of combining various policy streams seems relatively straightforward. At the pinnacle of this process are the Cabinet and its plethora of subcommittees. Directly beneath are the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), which takes the lead on the international fight against terrorism and the Home Office which leads on domestic protection against terrorism. In the UK policy is formulated by these lead departments under the political direction of the Cabinet. Within this framework the MOD liaises with these departments of state and is to some extent subordinate to them.<sup>48</sup>

However, in reality competition rather than cooperation are the order of the day in this triad. This reflects the fact that structural and political drivers make meaningful cooperation extremely difficult. In terms of structure it is clear that each department of state guards its domain jealously and resents any encroachment by another government department in its affairs; a problem that is even more complicated because the Department for International Development (DfID) was originally part of the FCO, but

has since become the dominant agency in British nation-building and reconstruction policy. A classic illustration of such a turf war concerns the introduction of the NATO-inspired Comprehensive Approach; a strategy intended to achieve greater coordination between government departments in the stabilization and reconstruction of failed states. This was originally a Ministry of Defence (MOD) construct, but when they had the temerity to suggest that the FCO and DfID adopt this strategy their proposal was rejected. What became clear was that each department had its own vision of how prosecute this conflict and resented the MOD trying to take the lead. The result was a strange bureaucratic battle over what this construct should be called and precisely what role each department was to play within it.<sup>49</sup> This divisiveness between departments is compounded because there is little institutional incentive to cooperate, especially when funding flows directly from the Treasury to each of the departments of state and cooperation could mean loss of money to another department's activities. An additional complication is that the political fortunes of secretaries of state and their ministers are inextricably linked to the performance of their respective government departments and this undermines the spirit of cooperation between senior politicians within the Cabinet.<sup>50</sup>

The Prime Minister has the power to enforce cooperation through the Cabinet Office, but political conditions and the need to maintain a broad base of support for his or her policies sometimes means tolerating dissent even within Cabinet. For example, Tony Blair was forced to accept Claire Short's refusal to allow DfID to cooperate with the MOD and the FCO in developing a Phase IV reconstruction plan for Iraq once hostilities ended, and this is believed to have hampered British efforts to quell the insurgency that arose in their area of operations after the war.<sup>51</sup> This happened because Short's support for the Prime Minister was vital in presenting a united front to the wider public on the decision to invade Iraq in 2003.

Lack of coordination between government departments at the national strategic level extended into Iraq and Afghanistan and this had a profound impact on reconstruction and development. In the case of Iraq getting British agencies to deploy and then coordinate with the military proved challenging. To succeed it was imperative that government departments were willing to support the army in its efforts to stabilize Iraq. Although in theory these departments of state should have been directed and controlled by a Cabinet subcommittee under the chairmanship of the Foreign Secretary, in reality no leadership was forthcoming. The committee met infrequently and was therefore unable to build a cross-departmental consensus on how to approach problems being faced in southern Iraq.<sup>52</sup> The experience of Iraq led to a series of new doctrinal, procedural, and organizational initiatives to promote greater coordination on the ground in post-conflict states, but this came too late to make a real difference in Iraq. For example, the UK Stabilisation Unit, which coordinates post conflict reconstruction, began operating in Iraq only in 2006 and the first Provisional Reconstruction Team was set up later that year.<sup>53</sup> Ironically, in spite of the best efforts of the British to address this breakdown in cooperation exactly the same problems erupted in Helmand in 2006. In spite of the existence of a comprehensive strategy involving all departments this aspiration failed to materialize once the operation was underway and as a result promised

reconstruction and development in the province did not happen. This failure was blamed on the military which it is argued deviated from the plan and failed to liaise with the other government agencies.<sup>54</sup>

### 3. *Over-ambitious Goals*

The third and potentially more damaging problem is that the goal selected by the government at the start of the war was incredibly ambitious. For example a Cabinet Office report listed the objectives of the UK as: first, to protect the United Kingdom and its overseas territories and prevent further terrorist attacks; and second, eliminating terrorism as a force in international affairs.<sup>55</sup> The same objectives were set out in more detail in the Government's Campaign Objectives document, which was published on 4 October 2001. The overall objective was to eliminate terrorism as a force in international affairs. This meant not only stopping terrorist movements but also deterring state sponsorship of terrorist groups.<sup>56</sup> However, in reality the need to eradicate the causes of terrorism has caused UK national strategy to open a Pandora's Box.

The most obvious way of suffocating terrorism is to remove the cause, which entailed dealing with perceived corrupt and nepotistic regimes and promoting the spread of better governance which is usually equated with democracy. As Biddle explains, the logic underlying this strategy is that action of this kind will remove authoritarian regimes that use economic surpluses to reward loyal clients, whilst denying access to basic social and economic amenities for the majority. In those countries with fast-growing populations these problems compound the predicament of poor governance. Many of these regimes have been happy to redirect their anger against perceived external threats like Israel and the West. This process of state-sponsored radicalization became something of a problem when bin Laden began to channel this into a general anti-Western campaign.<sup>57</sup>

It is important to note that this is not just an American dream, but was also at the heart of British policy. Thus, when asked in 2006 whether the insurgency in Iraq represented a distraction from the war on terror, the Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, argued that a military commitment was justified on the grounds that the only long-term solution to the problems of the Middle East lay in the creation of democracy, which was precisely what they were trying to do in Iraq.<sup>58</sup> As he explained: 'what I am saying is we are seeing the beginnings of a movement for democracy which I believe is the only sure way of eliminating terror'.<sup>59</sup>

### 4. *Resource Implications of the UK's National and Military Strategic Goals*

The fourth potential problem is that current strategy assumes that failed states or 'ungoverned' spaces are ripe for exploitation for the purposes of training and preparation of terrorist attacks against targets in the West.<sup>60</sup> As the then Secretary of State for Defence, Geoff Hoon, explained in 2003:

Afghanistan demonstrates that a failed state, providing a harbour for terrorist organisations, means that the threat can strike us or our close allies from huge distances. Therefore we need to recognise that global environment in

which we accept in almost every other respect that we have to face up to dealing with threats as far afield as they can come.<sup>61</sup>

If the threat of failed states is accepted then contesting control of these ungoverned spaces is a resource and labour intensive process; by the end of 2008 the UK had spent over £13 billion on operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>62</sup>

Not only does it require forces to be deployed over the long term, equally important it also requires the UK to sustain a military capability that can operate on a global rather than regional scale, which is so costly that only a handful of nations possess such a capability.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore it undermined the government's previous efforts to impose a limit on the scale and scope of UK military operations. When the government first came to power in 1997, their manifesto on defence declared a commitment to deal with a perceived fiscal crisis in this area of public policy, to tackle the problem of overstretch as units rotated in and out of conflicts without sufficient time for rest, recuperation and training, and bring about a new equilibrium in the ends and means of strategy. To this end the *Government's Strategic Defence Review* imposed a geographical boundary on where UK forces would deploy and a limit on the size and number of military operations the UK's armed forces would undertake concurrently.<sup>64</sup> Prosecution of the war on terror made it necessary to breach all these self-imposed restrictions.

Regime change and nation building also required a temporal adjustment in UK strategy in that forces were committed to operations extending over years and potentially decades, which is perhaps why in 2007 the British Army's Chief of the General Staff described the war on terror as a 'generational conflict'.<sup>65</sup> The military play a central role in the process of nation building, as Freedman explains, whilst the military cannot resolve the problem of failing states on their own, they are vital in terms of generating the security needed for this process to take place. How long they remain will depend on a political resolution between the various factions within the state concerned. However, conflict resolution is typically a protracted affair.<sup>66</sup> Not only does this activity require a prolonged deployment of forces, ideally it also requires a force structure that is manpower intensive so that security can be provided to the population.

##### 5. *The Imbalance between Resources and Commitments in the War on Terror*

The final problem facing national strategy relates to the constraints imposed on defence spending. During the Cold War, Britain's ailing economy was perceived to have imposed a significant limit on defence spending.<sup>67</sup> In contrast, during the war on terror, the UK's improved economic fortunes created the capacity to spend more on defence, but political circumstances imposed a different, but equally effective limit on defence spending. Before the credit crunch in 2008 the UK experienced 15 years of consecutive economic growth, which was an unprecedented achievement in the UK's economic history. GDP for the first half of 2007 was 3.25 per cent, inflation was low, falling to 1.8 per cent in August 2007, and employment reached a new high of over 29 million.<sup>68</sup>

But whilst there has been a sustained increase in defence spending since 2002, the sums involved have not been generous and defence spending since 9/11 increased on

average by 1.4 per cent in real terms per annum.<sup>69</sup> To put this in context, inflation in the equipment programme, which consumes 44 per cent of the budget, is on average between 7 and 11 per cent per annum.<sup>70</sup> In the wider context of public spending, current government expenditure for 2007–2008 was £589 billion, with investment in the NHS standing at £90 billion.<sup>71</sup> Today, the UK now commits only 2.2 per cent of its gross domestic product (GDP) to defence compared with 2.8 per cent in 1996–1997 and approximately 5 per cent of GDP during the Cold War, which means defence spending as a proportion of GDP is now at its lowest since the 1930s.<sup>72</sup> By mid 2008, the UK economy had moved into recession. The government's response was to launch an ambitious programme of public spending in an effort to prevent the economic downturn becoming a depression. However, it is interesting to note that defence has not benefitted from the government's support for public works and public capital projects. Instead, big capital projects such as the £3.5 billion aircraft carrier programme have been delayed and the army's planned £7 billion acquisition of a new fleet of armoured vehicles was cancelled, producing a technical saving of £20 billion to fill a hole created in the MOD's budget, caused in part by a 50 per cent increase in the cost of operations in 2007.<sup>73</sup>

British national strategy demonstrates a fundamental mismatch between the object of the war and the means available to achieve the stated aim. The fundamental explanation for this classic error in higher strategy is that in the UK defence is not a national priority. Even the newly elected Labour government, which came to power in 1997 with a declared commitment to strong defence, recognized that defence spending was not a vote winner. As such, they were content to impose tough spending limits which resulted in defence expenditure falling in real terms by £917 million between 1997 and 2000.<sup>74</sup> In theory at least 9/11 changed this mindset and suddenly defence became important once more. For example, according to the Foreign Affairs Committee:

The events of 11 September demonstrated clearly that a narrow definition of 'national interest' is no longer sufficient. The international terrorist threat from organizations such as al Qaeda may be directed most immediately against the United States, but such attacks affect British interests and security, and may in future be directed against the United Kingdom . . . The war against terrorism is an unplanned and unsought conflict. But when the first hijacked airliner struck the World Trade Center, war became necessary and, once entered upon, war must be pursued vigorously and with all appropriate means.<sup>75</sup>

However, it is not clear the electorate ever shared this enthusiasm, especially once the UK and United States invaded Iraq. According to one poll, Blair's support for Iraq cost him dearly and his popularity fell to 20 per cent in some surveys, his lowest poll rating ever. Similarly, support for the Labour Party also fell to a new low in 2003. Overall 52 per cent of people surveyed declared their opposition to the war in Iraq.<sup>76</sup> Equally important, in 2005, a survey organized by Chatham House found that 75 per cent of respondents believed that the UK's frontline position in the war on terror and its decision to invade Iraq increased the chances of a terrorist attack against the UK and played a direct role in causing the attacks in London 7/7.<sup>77</sup>

The absence of strong public support for the war and the government's own political priorities which focused on maintaining a stable economy, health, education, and effective welfare provision served to ensure that the war on terror operated within a tight budget.

An important symptom of the failure to balance ends and means has been a pronounced increase in over-stretch of forces deployed on operations. In January 2007, General Dannatt, the Chief of the General Staff, urged the government to reduce the army's commitments. Fighting two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan had almost exhausted the army, which was configured to fight only one medium and one small conflict simultaneously.<sup>78</sup> According to Major General Ritchie, the army was being asked to do almost double what was anticipated in the defence planning assumptions.<sup>79</sup> In practical terms this meant that many units were not having the recommended two-year break between operations, but current tour intervals are under ten months on average and in some cases this is as little as two months.<sup>80</sup> When asked, two former service chiefs expressed the view that unless commitments were reduced in 2008 hard choices in the defence budget would have to be made.<sup>81</sup> The delay in the carrier programme and the cancellation of the army's armoured vehicle fleet at the end of 2008 demonstrate how prescient these comments were. Lack of domestic support, financial stringency, and poor planning at the national strategic level had a profound impact on the conduct of British military strategy and operations.

### **Problems of Military Strategy**

In the case of the war on terror, Western and in particular American military strategy has been heavily criticized. This debate has focused on two related themes. The first is a generic problem confronting regular armed forces fighting irregular wars. As Gray explains:

Most of the world's armed forces are not well designed, doctrinally prepared, trained and equipped to wage war against elusive handfuls of religious fanatics. Rather, they are raised and maintained to fight regular enemies who would be approximate facsimiles of themselves.<sup>82</sup>

The early efforts of the United States to deal with the insurgency in Iraq have been cited as proof that conventional military forces struggle to deal with irregular opponents.<sup>83</sup> This failure to adapt was attributed to the institutional culture of the organization and its preference for regular warfare.<sup>84</sup>

The second criticism made of US military strategy was that it failed to understand that Al Qaeda was not just conducting a terrorist campaign, but is also fighting a global insurgency. As such US forces needed to do more than simply kill Al Qaeda terrorists.<sup>85</sup> The distinction between such forms of irregular war is important because each requires a different counter-strategy. As Morris explains, terrorism, irrespective of how powerful it is in a destructive sense, does not command extensive support and so in political terms terrorist groups are generally weak because they are not connected with the society of which they are a part and negotiation is rarely

desirable or necessary. In these circumstances, military action should focus on protecting the population and hunting the terrorists down using national and international police resources, the military, diplomatic, and economic actions.<sup>86</sup>

A very different strategy is required to deal with an insurgency, because it represents both a political and a military challenge. In this context the war of ideas is just as important as the war between forces. However, ideology alone, no matter how persuasive the message, will not result in victory by itself. Most important, when making an assessment of the effectiveness of an insurgent group, are the means available to them and the strategy they use to coordinate and orchestrate their resources to achieve their political goals. In practical terms, this means engaging and mobilizing the population to support a group's political agenda, institutionalizing that base of support through the creation of a shadow government and initiating a campaign of violence, which may also embrace terrorism, in an effort to erode the will of the opponent through a protracted guerrilla war. According to Morris, Al Qaeda appears to be tapping into two insurgent strategies. The first is based on a Maoist based model of revolutionary war and the second relies on Che Guevara's concept of Foco theory.<sup>87</sup>

### Constraints on Operations

However, in the case of the UK, problems in military strategy, which were similar to those of their American counterparts, had little to do with the philosophical failings of the UK military and/or a failure to understand the nature of the enemy. In truth, it is clear that the British possess a good understanding of the demands of irregular warfare. It is also clear that the UK military do not see counterterrorism and counterinsurgency in such stark and opposing terms as critics of US strategy. For example, in the case of Northern Ireland the British exploited techniques from both domains in what was essentially a counterterrorist campaign. Most important however was the fact that the British maintained a security force that was in excess of 30,000 soldiers and police to secure control over a population of just over a million people and approximately 300 IRA terrorists. An important lesson learned is that force to population ratios do matter.<sup>88</sup>

Instead, British military strategy has been shaped by fragile domestic political support for the war, a lack of money and manpower, and a lack of capability in campaigns such as Iraq and Afghanistan. These constraints created an imbalance between ends and means, and in an effort to address this deficiency, a great deal of emphasis has been placed on the exploitation of technology as a substitute. In essence, British military operations shifted from a labour-intensive model of irregular warfare to a capital-intensive model. Thus, although the initial response of the MOD to 9/11 was sold in terms of a mere extension or enhancement of existing policy,<sup>89</sup> in reality, the government's policy response to 9/11, the *The Strategic Defence Review: The New Chapter* was to have a profound impact on the size, scale, deployment, cost, and endurance of the UK's armed forces.<sup>90</sup> It declared that the full spectrum of military capabilities would be required to deter terrorist attacks. Interestingly, this included the retention of Trident nuclear weapons. Although designed to deal

with a major strategic threat to the UK, it was believed that the possession of this weapon could deter rogue states from either using or providing chemical, biological, radioactive, or nuclear (CBRN) materials to terrorists determined to make a weapon of mass destruction (WMD).<sup>91</sup>

*The New Chapter* also reaffirmed a commitment to create and sustain an expensive capability to project military power on a global basis which had been made originally in SDR.<sup>92</sup> It was also deemed important for the MOD to invest in the development of a range of new technologies that provided UK forces with an extensive surveillance capability over potentially vast areas of land and sea, and the ability to conduct rapid and decisive attacks against fleeting targets using a variety of new weaponry.<sup>93</sup> Substituting manpower with technology was intended to save money by ensuring that a small force could punch above its weight.<sup>94</sup> The importance of technology to future defence capability was noted by the Defence Committee:

UK forces have the advantage of extensive experience in handling low intensity operations, where networking can be highly effective. It can help relatively small numbers of troops or platforms to cover large tasks or geographical areas through rapid and flexible deployments.<sup>95</sup>

Of critical importance here was the investment made in Networked Enabled Capability (NEC):

NEC is crucial to the rapid delivery of military effect. The SDR New Chapter recognised NEC as being fundamental in countering terrorism abroad, with its ability to deliver precise and decisive military effects, with unparalleled speed and accuracy through linking sensors, decision makers and weapons systems. Clearly, its applicability and utility is much broader than that and will involve effective integration of military capability. When implemented, it will allow us to prosecute the full range of contingent operations with greater awareness, confidence and control.<sup>96</sup>

In general, current military strategy operates on the assumption that the introduction of new technology will allow smaller forces to do more in terms of: 'responding quickly and decisively to achieve maximum effect and should also act as a force multiplier, allowing the same military effect to be achieved with less'.<sup>97</sup> In essence, we appear to be moving towards the Toffler's vision of a 'demassified' battle space.<sup>98</sup> However, the Defence Committee was sceptical of the merits of this approach. In their view, the obsession with the mass effects being produced via non mass forces was going to limit what the military could do.

The Committee suggested a rather cynical reasoning for these changes:

The suspicion has grown that the focus on agility without mass and the move away from a platform focus has less to do with an intellectually coherent strategy of effects based warfare than with a need to 'cut our cloth' as best we can.<sup>99</sup>

They were also rather concerned that cutbacks on the number of systems already in service whilst waiting to acquire new, but unproven capabilities, was a risky strategy. There was no guarantee that those capabilities would be provided or that they would

work.<sup>100</sup> Moreover, in their view, the demands of the changing strategic environment seemed to suggest that more manpower and equipment, rather than less, was needed.<sup>101</sup> Most important is the fear that whilst Al Qaeda is fighting an insurgency which aims to wear down the forces ranged against it in a war of attrition, British forces are not configured so that they can endure significant casualties and the relatively small pool of infantry in the British Army has proved vulnerable to attrition inflicted by insurgent groups. In the case of Afghanistan, it is estimated that infantry battalions have suffered casualty rates of almost 11 per cent, which is comparable to the casualty rates experienced during the Second World War.<sup>102</sup>

Lack of troops and/or resources has made it very difficult for the UK to achieve its goals in either Iraq or Afghanistan. In the case of Iraq it was clear that the UK did not have sufficient force to control the six million Iraqis under its control. Overall, troop levels fell drastically during the summer of 2003 from 26,000 to 9,000 to cover four provinces and in 2005 there were only 7,200 British troops in the region. This meant that forces were stretched thinly on the ground. In 2003 the British deployed a force of 1,000 men to provide security in Maysan, an area the size of Northern Ireland which included the city of Ammara with a population of over 400,000. This also entailed deploying a force of just 70 soldiers to secure a 200-mile border with Iran.<sup>103</sup> In contrast, in Northern Ireland the ratio of soldiers to civilians was approximately 1:50, in the case of Iraq that ratio was 1:370.<sup>104</sup> Similar problems arose in Afghanistan when the British took control of Helmand province. Although there were over 3,000 troops in the brigade only a single battalion of 600 troops was available to secure control over a population of one million people. Since then the UK's military commitment to Afghanistan has increased to over 8,000 troops, but this is still not enough to secure control in area strongly contested by the Taliban. So badly overstretched were UK forces that the Chief of the General Staff warned the government in July 2007 that the army had only a reserve of a single battalion of 500 men to respond to a national emergency such as a terrorist strike in the UK.<sup>105</sup>

It is important to note that under-resourcing of UK stabilization operations extended beyond the military realm and compounded the UK's difficulties in terms of containing the insurgencies it faced in both Iraq and Afghanistan. In the case of Iraq even though the British made promises to support reconstruction in the southeast (Multi National Division South East [MND SE]) of the country it proved reluctant to provide the money needed to achieve this goal. Sadly it was the riots on 9–10 August 2003, caused by the failure of the British to restore basic services to the population, which made the British government realize how tenuous their hold on the region was and how desperate was the plight of the people. As a result the government accepted that it was going to be responsible for orchestrating the reconstruction and stabilization in their area and, equally important, providing significant funding to facilitate this process. In response, the UK finally approved £500 million for reconstruction, but five months were lost before this money became available. Moreover, although that sum was subsequently increased in 2007 to £700 million<sup>106</sup> it was still short of the estimated \$7.2 billion engineers believed was needed to repair the region's physical infrastructure in 2003.<sup>107</sup> Similar problems also arose in Afghanistan. In this case the British prepared a detailed plan for its intervention in Helmand in

December 2005, but the plan was extremely ambitious and was shaped more by the aspirations of Tony Blair rather than the reality on the ground. Although the Post Conflict Reconstruction Unit believed the concept needed to be scaled back, the political pressure from the Cabinet ensured that the scale and ambition of the plan remained intact. However no additional resources were allocated and government departments remained concerned about the feasibility of the operation.<sup>108</sup>

But even if more soldiers were available for operations this would not necessarily result in a reduction in the UK's dependence on a capital intensive mode of warfare. In part this is because some of this technology is actually very useful. For example, all Taliban communications via mobile phone or radio are monitored by NATO forces which means the Taliban have to rely on more basic forms of communication which has made their efforts to coordinate large-scale attacks above the size of a company almost impossible. Similarly aerial surveillance systems have played a critical role in protecting UK forces from ambushes and booby traps, which has kept military casualties to a minimum. It is this last goal which makes technology such an important force multiplier for the British. As a result, operations and tactics have been shaped by a heavy reliance on modern firepower to kill the enemy at a distance so that they cannot engage British forces.

A good illustration of this is the deployment of the Multiple Launch Rocket System to Afghanistan in 2007. This weapon can fire salvoes of 12 rockets up to a distance of 70 km with each rocket delivering death and destruction over an area the size of an American football pitch. Similarly when fighting in villages and district centres it has not been uncommon for British soldiers to use Javelin surface-to-air-missiles against Taliban snipers hiding in mud-brick buildings. The British have also demonstrated a great reliance on air support to defend its positions and assist in offensive operations. This has entailed a cocktail of munitions ranging from 540-pound unguided bombs, 1,000-pound guided bombs and occasionally Maverick guided anti-tank missiles. The combined effect of this 'kinetic effect' has saved the lives of British military personnel, but tragically it has become a principal cause of death for innocent civilians in Afghanistan. The UN estimate nearly 400 civilians were killed by air strikes alone in the first eight months of 2008, a 21 per cent increase compared to the same period in 2007, and accounted for nearly two-thirds of 577 non-combatant deaths attributed to pro-government forces.<sup>109</sup>

Such action, whilst limiting the UK government's exposure to the domestic political fallout caused by casualties, has produced political problems for the Afghan government. Not only does this demonstrate its inability to control its Western allies, which undermines its credibility in the eyes of ordinary Afghans, the use of air power in this way also demonstrates that NATO/ISAF care more about its military personnel than the people of Afghanistan. As a result Hamid Karzai has been extremely critical of the counterinsurgency campaign being waged by the West in Afghanistan.<sup>110</sup> Not surprisingly, the Taliban's media machine has exploited the civilian casualties caused by bombing in an effort to turn the population against the Afghan government and Western intervention.<sup>111</sup>

Finally and rather ironically the UK's current strategy to prevent terrorism has been undermined by its military campaign to pursue and disrupt terrorist groups

and it appears that the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan have served to convince a tiny fraction of the UK's two million Muslims that they have a responsibility to defend fellow Muslims in 'Islamdom' against perceived indiscriminate violence of Western and especially UK forces prosecuting the war on terror. Although Blair always maintained such animosity predated British intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq, the available evidence does not support this view. For example the video message of Siddique Khan, one of the suicide bombers in the 7/7 attacks, justified his actions on the grounds that:

Your democratically elected governments continuously perpetrate atrocities against my people all over the world. And your support of them makes you directly responsible, just as I am directly responsible for protecting and avenging my Muslim brothers and sisters. Until we feel security, you will be our targets. And until you stop the bombing, gassing, imprisonment and torture of my people we not stop this fight. We are at war and I am a soldier.<sup>112</sup>

It is also interesting to note that CONTEST acknowledged a connection between radicalization of British Muslims and the 'presence of Western forces in Muslim countries' – 'even though this is at the request and with the permission of a country's host government'.<sup>113</sup> It was estimated that there were more than 30 terrorist plots in the UK involving as many as 2,000 people under surveillance for their suspected involvement in these activities in 2007.<sup>114</sup> Equally important, Al Qaeda has also exploited the anger and resentment caused by the West's military adventures in Islamdom to rally support for its cause, raise money, and recruit to reinforce resistance to this perceived occupation and more importantly in terms of exploitation of Muslim communities in the West, waging war on the UK homeland.<sup>115</sup>

## Conclusion

The British have always understood that the solution to the problem of terrorism lies not in military action, but rather using the other levers of power that address the social and economic ills that are feeding the conflict. On paper at least, the current UK national strategy operates entirely on this premise. However, whilst the broad principles underlying the British approach to the war on terror remain sound, national and military strategy has been undermined by a series of problems which have caused it to depart from this framework. First and foremost has been the lack of a rigorous analysis concerning the aims and objectives of this conflict and what is particularly striking is the tension that has emerged in the government's relations with the military over the failure to relate ends and means. As a result of poor decision-making and a failure to heed the advice of the military, academics, and other experts, the UK has become committed to a series of wars that have proved costly and which ironically play to the strengths of the opponent who is committed to a long and protracted struggle. Even more frustrating has been the inability of the government, because of a lack of coordination within the system, to exploit the national levers of power, political, economic, and military, to concentrate the UK's national power and influence in this war. Instead conflicts like Afghanistan and Iraq have

become weeping sores, which has exacerbated the drain on scarce resources. Additional investment has been made, but only grudgingly which reveals a more deep-rooted problem caused by the government's failure to persuade the domestic population that the war on terror is necessary. Unfortunately, as the current recession bites, the pressure to limit defence spending looks set to create new challenges in the ends and means debate. It is also important to note that British withdrawal from Iraq in 2009 is unlikely to reduce the pressure on the military if the UK increases its force levels in Afghanistan from 8,000 to over 10,000 troops.

This failure to relate ends and means has also impacted on the military strategic domain. In an effort to redress the ends–means gap, the UK military has had to place a greater reliance on technology acting as force multiplier than was desirable in a war of this kind and it is clear that the British have experienced significant problems in Afghanistan and Iraq because of their reliance on technology to compensate for an absence of manpower. Lack of money for wider stabilization and redevelopment has also been a problem. In the case of Iraq the lack of financial support to all the levers of power: political, economic, and military, meant that the British failed to stabilize the southeast of the country. In the case of Afghanistan, whilst a coordinated plan and money were available, the lack of an effective military capability made it impossible to create a secure environment in which development could begin and as a result the campaign became dominated by 'kinetic' as opposed to 'hearts and minds' operations. Indeed a profound and unintended consequence of the war so far has been the way that military operations have come to dominate the public's perception of the war on terror. In 2007, Tony Blair claimed that: 'we could have chosen security as the battleground. But we did not. We chose values'.<sup>116</sup> That may well have been the intention, but ironically the UK's military strategy has caused the security battlefield to dominate this war.

It is important to realize that there is no strategic 'silver bullet' that will result in a quick and decisive victory in the war on terror and perhaps the best that can be achieved is the development of a strategy which limits the UK's vulnerability and provides the means to fight a war that does not bankrupt the state politically or financially, but ensures that the UK is protected adequately from terrorist attack. Of fundamental importance in the creation of such a strategy of limited military engagement is the need to recognize that we do not have the wherewithal to contest ungoverned spaces that might be exploited by Al Qaeda and its affiliates, which means moving away from a policy of heavy-handed military intervention and nation building. The bankruptcy of our current strategy is highlighted by the simple fact that although we have made a heavy investment in Iraq and Afghanistan the principal threat to the security of the UK is actually Al Qaeda's operating base in Pakistan which has been linked to several terrorist attacks in the UK.<sup>117</sup> In contrast, Moqtada al Sadr in Iraq and even the Taliban in Afghanistan do not represent such a direct and obvious threat to the security of the UK homeland, and yet our strategy has come to be dominated by these wars.

In essence not only have we hit the wrong target, but we have expended a lot of money to do this, which has entailed a high opportunity cost to UK strategy overall. The challenge in the military domain is to develop a more flexible range of military

tools that can supplement and reinforce the other levers of power. One possible solution might be to use the benefits of NEC to monitor those ungoverned spaces that are deemed a real security risk. This is entirely feasible and in fact the United States carried out such action against Somalia in 2002. Fearing that Al Qaeda would try to escape from Afghanistan and Pakistan into this failed Islamic state, maritime and airborne surveillance was set up to impose a *cordon sanitaire* around the country. Interestingly, Al Qaeda showed no interest in redeploying to this area.<sup>118</sup>

In essence, what is being proposed is the rejection of an offensive strategy by the UK. This will lead to a significant reduction in the numbers of troops deployed on operations, which achieves three benefits. First, it denies Al Qaeda and other Islamist groups the opportunity to lock the UK into a protracted guerrilla war, which we do not have the will or resources to see through to victory. Second, it denies Al Qaeda valuable propaganda showing innocent Muslims dying at the hands of the British military, which is then used to radicalize British Muslims. Third, it will reduce the overall cost of the war to a point that is bearable and is more appropriate to the conditions that prevail in what is likely to be a 'long war'.

### Disclaimer

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not reflect the official position of the MOD or the British government.

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