

**IN FOCUS**

**THE INTEGRATED REVIEW:  
LESSONS LEARNED FROM  
REMOTE WARFARE**



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## Introduction

In February this year, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that this year's defence and security review will be "the largest review of the UK's foreign, defence, security and development policy since the end of the Cold War."<sup>1</sup> The 'Integrated Security, Defence, Development and Diplomacy Review', or 'Integrated Review' for short, is going to cover all areas of the UK's international policy.<sup>2</sup> The Review is an important opportunity to set the tone for the UK's foreign policy at a time when its place in the world is undergoing substantial rethinking - with its departure from the European Union and in the midst of a renewed concern about the rise of state-based threats.<sup>3</sup>

Such an extensive and timely review is likely to have implications for many aspects of UK foreign and domestic policy. Remote warfare is no exception. Faced with economic, military and political constraints following wars in Iraq and Afghanistan yet concerned about perceived threats emanating from places like the Middle East and Horn of Africa, remote warfare has become the "go to" response of the UK and many others.<sup>4</sup> In such engagements, states support local national and regional forces to do the bulk of frontline fighting, providing assistance including intelligence, small deployments of Special Forces, air support and training, instead of deploying large numbers of their own military forces.<sup>5</sup> While these amount to small-scale, tactical efforts they can have large strategic implications if undertaken without a clear cross-government strategy.

Looking forward, the military, political and economic constraints that initially led to the dominance of remote warfare continue and will likely be exacerbated by financial pressures brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>6</sup> Even with a changing global landscape, remote warfare is therefore likely to continue to define the UK's approach. However, as noted in much of our research, many government and military officials have persistently failed to acknowledge the distinct risks and challenges that a poor strategy surrounding remote warfare presents.<sup>7</sup> As a consequence, there is a danger that this kind of engagement will not be as fundamentally rethought as the rest of the UK's security apparatus. This would be a mistake. As our own work has noted, remote warfare is not low risk; its risks are merely poorly understood.

If done right, the Integrated Review could be an opportunity to address this. To understand how, Oxford Research Group (ORG) convened a closed-door roundtable with a wide number of experts and practitioners from across the military, government and academia to understand the risks and challenges remote warfare could present over the next five years and how the Integrated Review could address these. As the roundtable was held before the consequences of COVID-19 were more fully understood this briefing does not go into its implications. Instead, it examines two key themes from the day's discussion.

1. **The Government's focus on value for money may pose risks to a values-led foreign policy:** Remote warfare is often seen as a "cost free" way to engage abroad so may appear to be an attractive option - but it can also

undermine a values-based approach to foreign policy.

2. **The UK military is considering having soldiers “persistently engaged” in key regions, in small numbers; however, this has several risks:** This strategy would see the UK militarily engaged in small numbers around the world to maintain influence and knowledge – but, again, recent campaigns have shown such deployments are not risk free.

This briefing will unpick each of these themes, and then explore how the Integrated Review should take them into account. This briefing is the first of two aimed at understanding the challenges of remote warfare and how the Integrated Review can account for them.

### *1. Values-led policy v value for money*

Many of the experts in our roundtable warned of the risks of the Review focussing on financial costs to the detriment of the UK promoting its values abroad. This may be even more likely given the financial pressure on the UK Government after the outbreak of COVID-19.<sup>8</sup> As Malcolm Chalmers and Will Jessett CBE, of RUSI, recently argued “the post-2008 stagnation in productivity ..., and the combination of Brexit disruption and the impact from the coronavirus pandemic seems set to drive the economy into a new recession.”<sup>9</sup>

Even before the pandemic brought the UK to a standstill, there were signs that UK foreign policy may be focussed on value for money. Dominic Cummings, the Prime Minister’s Chief Adviser, has been highly critical of Ministry of Defence procurement costs and has indicated a desire to use technology to find “innovative ways” to increase the effectiveness of UK decision-making and bring costs down.<sup>10</sup> This imperative also seems to be driving efforts to make the Department for International Development (DFID) more

aligned with foreign policy objectives and, potentially, to merge it (if not completely, at least to a greater extent) with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO).<sup>11</sup> In this context, one participant said it “would be unreasonable for us to assume that there won’t be pressure on defence to make the most out of its budget.”

Such pressures can incentivise the use of remote warfare since these engagements are often perceived as a lower-cost way of delivering on British objectives without asking too much of national resources. As one roundtable participant said, given the cost-saving focus, “partnered operations could become attractive.” However, as it stands, it is difficult to make the argument that remote warfare is low-cost. The transparency of remote warfare is often insufficient to allow external experts to assess this assumption effectively; at the same time, decision-makers within government do not accurately account for the full cost of remote warfare, particularly in terms of the consequences it may engender.

It is difficult to get a clear picture from the outside of how much remote warfare actually costs. The Ministry of Defence (MOD) and Conflict Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) annual reports provide a snapshot of training activity in some countries, but these countries are not reported on consistently over time, making it hard to track changes and assess the value of defence investments.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the continuing opacity of some aspects of remote warfare – such as intelligence and special forces – restricts any meaningful analysis of their overall cost. This makes it hard to estimate how much remote warfare actually costs and which activities show the greatest signs of being good value for money.

Internally, there is a danger that decision-makers do not accurately account for the full cost (both political and economic) of remote warfare. Take the anti-ISIS coalition. While providing training, equipment and air support

to local forces in the fight against ISIS enabled Western forces to lose very few of their own soldiers while pushing ISIS back, the costs on the ground have been significant. For instance, three-quarters of Mosul's roads, all its bridges, and most of the electrical network have been destroyed. In western Mosul, the final stronghold of ISIS in the city, around 15 neighbourhoods (which once housed some 230,000 residents) have been completely destroyed.<sup>13</sup>

These costs need to be accounted for. Mirek Dušek and Maroun Kairouz, of the World Economic Forum, argue that "reconstruction and reconciliation will be indispensable to avoid another war or the emergence of an extremist outfit that may exceed even ISIS in brutality."<sup>14</sup> They estimate, however, that the cost of such efforts will amount to "\$100 billion for Iraq and at least \$200 billion for Syria – which doesn't include the costs incurred by neighbouring countries suffering from spillover effects."<sup>15</sup> To truly understand the cost of remote warfare, costs such as these need to be considered as well.

This speaks to the need for a more values-led foreign policy. The anti-ISIS coalition has also brought with it political costs that risk sowing the seeds of future conflict. While the Western footprint was relatively small in these campaigns, the anti-ISIS coalition worked with certain groups – like the Peshmerga in Iraq, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Syria, or Misratan militias and General Haftar in Libya – who have real or perceived ethnic, geographical or community bias which has undermined the legitimacy of these groups among local and regional actors.<sup>16</sup> By working with them, international forces have exacerbated local and regional tensions and, arguably, created more fragmentation and instability for the future.<sup>17</sup> More violent conflict in these areas is likely to be devastating for the populations trapped in the middle and financially very costly for those in the region and those further away

feeling the direct and indirect spillover effects.

Many in the roundtable were concerned that the UK was focussing too much on prosperity and short-term national interests and was minimising the importance of defending British values. For them, if the UK believes it is fighting for "our way of life, then we have to commit to defend the values" (such as free speech, democracy and human rights) that form this way of life. One said: "we should not give up to this narrative of the enemy being so massive, there is nothing we can do" because, if the UK does not stick to its values, it will "become something totally different." Another argued that the UK needs to defend itself in a way that does "not tear up our values for short-term goals."

Some participants felt that it is important to recognise that defending our values is also a way of defending our national security. Several highlighted the "real threats" of not addressing issues like inequality and climate change. For instance, one said "if you look at statistics about what brings insecurity, there is real data showing that instability rises with abuse of human rights." As such, defending our values is also part of defending our national security.<sup>18</sup> A focus on "financial incentives" may undermine these longer-term efforts and considerations. For example, they may allow groups like ISIS to reform and, eventually, create the very instability and chaos that help countries like Russia to thrive while Western countries struggle to find successful ways to engage.<sup>19</sup>

Addressing these issues is not a small feat and goes well beyond military activity. The Review is an opportunity to consider the UK's place in the world and, as part of that, decide which values it prioritises and how to ensure these shape British action abroad. In doing so, it needs to decide how remote warfare fits into a broader cross-government strategy which sets the ground for peace and stability in the

places it intervenes (and at the very least does not make things worse).

## *2. Persistent Engagement*

In response to the re-emergence of state-based threats, the UK military has looked at how to engage in “operations below the threshold of armed conflict”, with the objective of building influence in partner countries, partly to ensure that adversaries cannot.<sup>20</sup> One way the UK is doing this is through a strategy of “persistent engagement”, where it stays in a country (perhaps with just a few soldiers) working with partners in the region to build influence and knowledge. As one roundtable participant said: “Partnered operations can play a role in combatting grey zone warfare”, in that they “give you access and leverage and fill a vacuum that Russia and China may fill.”

It is certainly true that Russia and China are playing an increasingly active role in world affairs. For instance, China is “the largest single creditor nation” to Africa, “with combined state and commercial loans estimated to have been \$132bn (£100bn) between 2006 and 2017.”<sup>21</sup> As Chalmers and Jesset argue, China is also incorporating new technologies into its defence capabilities.<sup>22</sup> At the same time Russia has expanded its presence in many parts of the world through arms sales, an undeclared – yet seemingly significant – presence of mercenaries, as well as capacity-building programmes for local forces.<sup>23</sup> One roundtable participant said Russia had two goals: “building influence” and “undermining Western influence.”

It may, then, seem reasonable to spread out UK forces to build influence in as many places as possible. However, recent engagements raise important questions about the effectiveness of building influence by simply being present, if this doesn’t fit into a wider strategy. Many current engagements are already focussed on building influence. As one soldier in Kenya told us: “As an embedded

security adviser, am I making these people any better? Probably not. However, I am sending a political message.”<sup>24</sup>

This belief that small-scale, tactical engagements can send a political signal and help build regional and international influence was echoed in many of our conversations with policymakers. One roundtable participant with experience of CSSF programming said that, each year, when policymakers were presented with the option of investing more in a few countries or having more small operations they chose the latter “just in case”. This reflects conversations we have had with soldiers in Kenya and Mali, with one soldier referring to the UK’s approach as one where we just “throw some men here and some men there.”<sup>25</sup>

However, we were often left with the sense that the UK did not have a clear idea of what it was attempting to do with this influence. Some respondents felt that the UK currently had a “negative foreign policy”, where it is clearer on why it will not act abroad than on what it stands for and why it would act. This criticism reflected recent comments by Foreign Affairs Committee chair Tom Tugendhat and Chalmers and Jesset, who said defining “what do we want Britain’s place in the world to be?” should be an essential part of the Review.<sup>26</sup>

Seeking influence without a clear strategy and end goal can become deeply problematic for two reasons. First, it can hinder international cooperation. This is already an issue in many parts of the world – such as the Sahel and the Horn of Africa - where international engagement tends to be defined by numerous actors engaged in parallel and often disjointed activities, which end up duplicating, and even contradicting, the efforts of others.<sup>27</sup> It is clearly difficult for countries like the UK to have a meaningful impact in such environments; however, it may be better to focus on fitting national contributions into broader international efforts – rather than on

building international or regional influence. Failing to do so risks the worst of both worlds: where the UK fails to build lasting political access in the places it intervenes and adds to the ineffectiveness of international efforts.<sup>28</sup>

Second, prioritising influence through military support could lead to a de-prioritisation of issues pivotal to peace and stability. For instance, one expert we spoke to said of international engagement in Niger, “it is one of the poorest countries in the world, but the focus on food security has fallen on deaf ears, while at the same time there is a whole list of countries queueing up for providing more military support.” This cannot be addressed by the military alone; it requires training and military support to be placed within a wider cross-government strategy which utilises all the UK departments with the ultimate aim of building peace and stability – not just influence and reputation.

Solely focussing on military support, without a clear cross-government strategy, will fail to address the true drivers of instability and conflict in the countries the UK is engaged. These drivers are invariably political – including things like predatory state forces, corruption and poverty – and require political solutions. Without this, governments may use international assistance to strengthen their own security forces without addressing any of the real drivers of conflict, which could create more instability in the future.<sup>29</sup> For instance, in some conflict areas, predatory states have further alienated the civilian population and pushed them towards extremist groups. For example, an International Alert study on young Fulani people in the regions of Mopti (Mali), Sahel (Burkina Faso) and Tillabéri (Niger) found “real or perceived state abuse is the number one factor behind young people’s decision to join violent extremist groups.”<sup>30</sup>

Some in the roundtable argued that this was the cost of competing with countries like Russia but, for others, this argument misunderstood both the threat posed by

Russia and the nature of the competition. It over-emphasised Russia’s ability (as one said: “seeing the threat as this 20-foot-tall thing behind you is useful for some things but is not always the case”) while, in other ways, over-emphasising the UK’s ability to tackle the threat simply by being present. Many pushed back on the idea that places in Africa and the Middle East are “vacuums” that will be filled by other states if the UK is not present. In many cases, this is not true, not least because - as one participant said – countries like Russia and China are not waiting to “fill the vacuum. They’re already there. But if we come in and reinforce approaches that do not respect our values, they still win.”

## Conclusion: Remote warfare and the Integrated Review

Lessons from recent campaigns highlight the fallacy of the notion of low-cost engagement in conflict and the need to be extremely cautious when putting cost efficiency or narrowly defined national security interests at the forefront of UK foreign policy. Instead, the Integrated Review should:

Recognise the true cost of conflict, even on a light footprint, and prioritise protecting civilians and working to alleviate the drivers of conflict above financial incentives.

Have a sensible debate about state-based threats and not allow fear to diminish British values. Instead the Review should set out the UK’s values and how it intends to unite the whole of government behind ensuring they impact UK actions abroad.

Commit to having a frank and open debate about its priorities, problems and plans with external experts to ensure that the Integrated Review has been checked for fatal assumptions and is more likely to succeed.

To do this in the Integrated Review, policymakers must learn (and implement) lessons from recent campaigns. The UK Government has recognised the need to do

this and has dramatically improved its approach in recent years.<sup>31</sup> However, participants noted that several problems remain with measuring the success of remote warfare. In particular, the fact that it is a tactic rather than a strategy often leads to lessons being learned at a tactical level but not in conversations about how we make and develop British strategy. This may be a mistake.

Relatively small or not, poorly planned or poorly coordinated activities can still have a lasting and detrimental impact on peace and stability. As such, the strategy surrounding remote warfare needs to be improved to ensure that the UK protects civilians and alleviates – rather than exacerbates – the drivers of conflict in the places it intervenes.

One way to do this is through better utilising expertise from outside of Whitehall. The Government has said, in the Integrated Review, it “will utilise expertise from both inside and outside government for the review, ensuring the UK’s best foreign policy minds are feeding into its conclusions and offering constructive challenge to traditional Whitehall assumptions and thinking.”<sup>32</sup> This is extremely positive; however, for the Government to undertake wide-ranging consultation across government, Parliament and civil society (in the UK and elsewhere) they will have to be realistic about timelines.

Even before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, commentators were sceptical that meaningful consultation could be conducted before July 2020. Roundtable participants said, if the strategy is about getting “ends, means, and capability aligned”, “that is not going to happen on the timelines that the government have set.” Since the consequences of the outbreak have become more apparent, Lord Stirrup (former Chief of Defence Staff) and Lord Ricketts (former National Security Adviser) have said that, with the pandemic, the timelines to do this before July are now “impossible”.<sup>33</sup> Roundtable

participants also noted that meaningful consultation was more than just asking people their opinion. Some, with experience of the 1998 UK review and the 2015 Canadian review (both of which involved wide engagement with key stakeholders), said that to make the process useful it needs to be given sufficient time and consideration and cannot be treated as a tick-box exercise. Instead, extensive consultation needs to be carefully thought through if it is to have “any relevance into the final product.”<sup>34</sup>

The current system – which sees civil servants with tight deadlines and many priorities faced with a need to show some level of external engagement – sees “external experts consulted rarely and, when they are, asked specific questions about a region or theme rather than being engaged in a meaningful discussion.”<sup>35</sup> It would be a mistake if the Integrated Review fell into the same trap.

The way the UK interacts with its partners over the next five years will have huge implications for national objectives, international reputation and long-term prospects for peace and stability in the places the UK engages abroad. Recognising the lessons from remote warfare over the last decade will be essential for making sure Johnson and his advisers make the right decisions about the UK’s future and truly contribute to British and global peace and prosperity.

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