The Highs and the Lows: Peacekeeping and Peace-Building from a British Perspective

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Introduction

The uses of armed force by the Western powers since 1990 have drawn the attention of researchers in Europe and the United States to the difficult issues involved in the maintenance of peace and stability. The associated military operations are not "war"—at least in the conventional, declared sense of the term—yet often involve savage and difficult combat. Since the end of the Cold War, all the militaries in Europe have focused on various aspects of these types of operations: the fundamental nature of armed conflict, the difficulties associated with the reconstruction of states after conflict, and the nature of the all-volunteer Western professional militaries, such as those of Britain. The history of such operations over many decades demonstrates that their complexity and lack of clarity on the ground poses serious and often confusing issues for the soldiers charged with their prosecution. These impacts surface in areas as disparate as military effectiveness and doctrine, interpretations of international law and the law of warfare, the sociology and psychology of armed forces, and the relations between armed forces and their parent populations. The British example has been one of embracing these activities with confidence and enthusiasm during the 1990s, only to encounter difficulties and disappointments during the last decade.

The Problem

All the operations in which British forces were involved over the last two decades were not "war-fighting" in the conventional sense, although they varied in intensity, duration, environment, risk and lethality, involvement with the civilian population, acceptance and support at home, and the suitability and flexibility of rules of engagement. The anomaly faced by the United States and partners in a coalition, he continued, is that while victory in the sense of defeating the enemy's military power is comparatively easily gained, broader campaign aims—for instance, to create a self-sustaining pluralistic democracy in Iraq—may be not only more challenging than the

military aim, but also best served by the nature of preceding military operations.

As for the impact on the soldiers, sailors and airmen who undertake these non–war-fighting operations, the risks are very real, and mean that a career in the Armed Forces is now markedly different from one in the Cold War, where lethal operations were exceptional, and peace-keeping implied that there was a peace to keep.

These operations affect recruiting, public perceptions of the operations and the feedback from the front line. Reservists are increasingly drawn into peace-support operations. In addition to training, effective support of the front line is essential. Governments must ensure that equipment works and is capable enough for the tasks in hand—always. Stores must be available in the quantity required, when required, wherever required. Shortfalls in support can fester, and the morale of deployed forces can swing in large oscillations with little notice and with little cause.

The media, fearless in the pursuit of viewing and circulation figures, also have a vital role in monitoring good governance. They can drum up effective pressure on governments when support for the front line seems sloppy. However, inaccurate reporting may affect service people in a negative fashion. Those in the front line may see the media output and react to it, perhaps giving excess credence to the journalists' wisdom. Families, upset by pessimistic forecasts and damning assessments, or weakened in resolve by community response to the output, may pass on their doubts to the front line.

The changing nature of conflict in the past several decades has involved the Western world in a series of operations aimed at keeping the peace or, more problematically, maintaining "stability" in the search of a peace to maintain. Though these operations are very removed from the objectives and spirit of military enterprises associated with the previous era of colonialism, they still necessarily involve soldiers from one culture engaged in operations involving combat conducted in the midst of a very different culture.

Moreover, these operations are faced with shadowy enemies or quasi-enemies whose only viable military options are those associated with guerrilla warfare. The way in which an occupying force conducts its operations also has repercussions on the individual soldier. Armies must combat resistance without replacing the local police. In peacekeeping operations, soldiers are confronted with a paradox: They are trained for warfare but must react passively.

The British Response

Britain had been involved in almost continuous counterinsurgency operations throughout the 20th century, most notably in South Africa, Palestine, Mesopotamia (Iraq), India, Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus, Borneo, and Aden. And throughout the Northern Ireland campaign that began in 1969, the British were also involved in high-intensity conflicts in the Falklands, the Gulf War, and Operations Iraqi Freedom (not to forget Korea and Suez in the 1950s.)

Nevertheless, throughout this period, the British military continued to train and equip itself for the "worst case." In other words, the maxim remained that war-fighting is the most demanding activity and all other operations are seen as "stepping down." This, the British believed, allowed them to be ready for every eventuality; since war-fighting is undoubtedly highly demanding, the skills acquired by training for this possibility provided useful tools for meeting the challengers of counterinsurgency and operations other than war.

The core principles underpinning UK stabilization and reconstruction doctrine is founded on these post-colonial operations, and was applied to the numerous interventions undertaken since 1990, including Bosnia, Kosovo, Sierra Leone, and Afghanistan.

Briefly put, the British consider the early development of a domestically and internationally recognized political end-state to be an essential part of any S&R operation. Three outcomes are pursued:

- an honourable withdrawal after a limited but positive effect has been achieved;
- the restoration of stability before handing responsibility for the reconstruction effort over to an international agency;
- or, if possible – but certainly not essential, the complete transformation of a society

Underling the British approach is the belief that, for any operation to be successful, the intervening force's legitimacy must be established. This legitimacy is derived from three key sources: domestic support for the intervention (in this case, the British people); support from the international community; and most important, the support – either tacit or, preferably, explicit – of the community which is being rebuilt.

The British military understands that asymmetric conflicts are likely to be

protracted undertakings in which patience is a virtue. This patience has to be demonstrated at all levels, both to the adversary and the local population, who must be able to trust both their government and the intervening force to "stay the course."

British doctrine also recognizes that the centre of gravity in any operation is the people, who must be persuaded to reject any insurgents who may oppose peace. The population can only be won over by a combination of soft and hard power: force alone is insufficient for this task. So, the real "battle" is primarily concerned with the struggle for men's minds." Operations require engaging in effective dialogue with key segments of the local population, waging an information campaign that challenges the propaganda deployed by the insurgents. And, because the words and deeds of individual soldiers and marines can have far greater effect than even the most sophisticated and well-executed information campaign, all personnel must be adequately prepared for their role in the Coalition's information campaign.

Because of their colonial inheritance, the British need no reminding of the importance of cultural awareness, as many of their earlier failures resulted from a lack of understanding of the communities and countries in which they were operating. It is not so much that the British military is particularly culturally attuned but that it is culturally pragmatic, acknowledging the importance of cultural understanding and at least appearing to be culturally sensitive. Its current doctrine can be seen in its military education, training before deployment and, most importantly, organizational culture. For more than 100 years, the British military have been trained to work in unison with political, civilian commanders. The typical structure of any British colony was that of the Governor, or the Political Agent (depending on the circumstances) a man who was responsible to the political authorities back home in London, but who also had control over the military operation inside the colony. So, both the British military and its politicians had a long tradition of working together at all levels; this is, as far as the British are concerned, almost second nature.

The High Water-Mark of Britain's Operations

For most of the last decade, the British military was directly involved in repeated operations in the Balkans, on the territory of the former Yugoslav state, which started disintegrating in 1991, and continued to disintegrate, with much bloodshed, until the NATO-led war in Kosovo in 1999. During this period, the British deployed to peacekeeping operations in Croatia, to the subsequent skirmishes in Bosnia,

preventively in Macedonia and, ultimately, in a war-fighting capacity in Kosovo in 1999.

A detailed analysis of conduct of these operations is beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that, despite the various mistakes committed along the way, the British involvement in the Balkans during the 1990s can be characterised as a success. Not only were the Serb forces obliged to withdraw all their presence from other rebel province (all military equipment and the civilian administration), but the United Nations resolutions which governed international operations allowed the British and their allies a complete blank cheque to do as it pleased. In the case of Kosovo – the most intense of all the Balkan operations - the Security Council framed the resolution under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, permitting "enforcement measures" against any party to the conflict which refuses to apply the peace accord. The allies, therefore, were not shackled by any legal restrictions; no sophisticated (or frustrating) interpretations about "peacekeeping" or "peacemaking" applied to most of their key actions. Furthermore, the peace deal concluded in 1995 over Bosnia and the agreements concluded at the end of the Kosovo war in 1999 contained no strict timetables, no milestones which had to be crossed on the way to administering the provinces. The UN has decreed a timetable for elections, and had provided indications as to the civilian institutions which may be established, but the interpretation of these resolutions remained in the hands of the occupying powers, NATO and the British included. This ambiguity was deliberate. The European members of NATO prevailed upon the United States government in their determination to avoid repeating previous mistakes, where hasty elections resulted in the triumph of extremist nationalist politicians, and a highly prescriptive allocation of responsibilities between various institutions - from NATO to the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and UN High Commissioner for Refugees - created havoc with the administration of the republics. Very often, NATO remained the supreme arbiter of events, the only body which allocated responsibilities, on the basis of needs rather than political calculations and according to its own leisurely timetable.

That is not to say that everything went well. NATO failed to protect ordinary ethnic Serbs, who may have been the chief aggressors in the Balkans, but were also its top victims. The British, together with their allies, have also failed to preserve the multi-ethnic character of the former Yugoslav republics, despite the fact that this was meant to be one of their top priorities. The Serbs expelled from Croatia in

1994 and 1995 have not returned. Bosnia remains divided, with a semi-autonomous Bosnian Serb mini-state still in existence. Macedonia avoided a war, but relations between its majority population and the sizeable ethnic Albanian population remain tense; the two communities seldom act together. And Kosovo is being divided along ethnic lines as well. The situation is even more worse with the Romany population (or Gypsies), who have sided with the Serbs in Kosovo during the war and who were openly victimised by the Albanians. Up to 120,000 Romany people were ultimately evicted; although nobody will admit it publicly, they have no future in the province. NATO has done a great deal to prevent this from happening, but ultimately failed. The Alliance – including the British - was also slow in planning for the disarmament of the various militias, despite the fact that this was also one of its original aims. Little was done to plan for this, and subsequent agreements to disarm militias were patchy. And, just as significantly, no planning existed to administer the provinces after the war. Returning ethnic Albanian refugees in Kosovo have helped themselves to most of the property left by the Yugoslav administrators and ethnic Serbs, and self-appointed committees – often dominated by thugs - now run the villages. The key to the restoration of law and order in Kosovo was the creation of a local police force which was envisaged in the UN Security Council resolution of June 1999. But, until today – a decade after these events, local police forces are still under strength, and the training is proceeding even more slowly. Finally, and in their traditionally disgraceful way, European governments, which are the main financial donors in the Balkans, wasted precious time in meaningless disputes about the nationality of the provinces' civil administrators. The absence of a clear timetable for the political process in was originally touted as a great achievement: the British and their allies were not bound by any unrealistic promises. But this decision carried its own dangers, for it also meant that European governments dragged their feet, while the international institutions tasked to administer the funds multiplied and, with them, also the bureaucratic turf battles. A year after the war ended in Kosovo, no less than 422 non-governmental organisations were registered as operating in the province. Some performed sterling work, while others were there because they feel that they should be there. Many engaged in overlapping or mutually contradictory projects, but few were either ready or capable of helping with what Kosovo needed most: a civil administration and the forces of law and order.

Yet, when all is said and done, the 1990s were still considered as the good days for Britain's operations, for the following reasons:

- The operations in the Balkans enjoyed strong popular support. Indeed, in Britain it was usually left-wing politicians – those who are not usually supporters of the use of military force – who argued most fervently for the dispatch of troops;
- Although the problems of the Balkans were hardly resolved, stability returned to this southern part of Europe; wars are now inconceivable there;
- The chief culprit for the war, Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic, was ultimately overthrown by his own people; the British and all other countries which contributed to operations in the Balkans felt vindicated;
- Europe – and particularly the British – took the lead in the Balkans and ultimately managed to persuade the Americans to contribute as well. Although the US provided the bulk of the firepower and, initially, the bulk of the soldiers and although relations between Europe and the US were tense in the earlier part of the 1990s, and these difficulties were ultimately forgotten, as the West found a unity of purpose;
- The operations in the Balkans may not have been neat, but they were effective: the violence stopped, and it was relatively easy to show that hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians were saved as a result;
- The problems of the Balkans remained, but they were not sufficiently intense to worry military planners in European capitals;
- Very few British or other Western soldiers lost their lives in the operations;
- The Balkans operations included both high intensity and low intensity warfare at various times, thereby vindicating the British belief that their military must remain prepared and equipped for all eventualities;
- Because the Americans always believed that the Balkans were ultimately Europe's problem, Washington was not unduly concerned with influencing the post-conflict reconstruction phase. So the Europeans, and particularly Britain, had plenty of opportunities to decide the pace of this reconstruction, without suffering too much pressure from the US.

These were the reasons why the British felt vindicated as the 21st century begun: they have performed relatively well, earned the admiration of others (including that of the US) and managed to influence the conduct of the most important operations in which they were engaged.

And the Low-Water Mark

Yet matters took a turn for the worse in the 2003, as a result of Britain's involvement in the Iraq war.

From the start, the Iraq operations lacked the essential ingredient of the Balkan wars: public support for what the British forces were expected to do. British Prime Minister Tony Blair dispatched troops into a conflict which most of his people opposed, in pursuit of an objective which few understood. And, despite the fact that Britain was America's most vociferous international ally during the early stage of that conflict, the British remained merely a junior partner, and were therefore unable to have a serious impact over the pace of the operations, or the policies which were pursued after the intensive phase of the fighting was over. In short, the British suffered from all the mistakes committed by the US, but never enjoyed any of the successes.

And the mistakes were both big and painful, effectively overturning all the principles which the British believed were important for a successful operation. The British always believed that a local government must be accepted as legitimate by a significant proportion of the population. Clearly, establishing such legitimacy in an ethnically divided country such as Iraq was always difficult. But a succession of errors had undermined the Coalition's efforts to establish the legitimacy of the Iraqi authorities, including the promotion to powerful positions of Shia émigrés and opposition spokespersons who had little support within Iraq, continued attempts to install leaders acceptable to the US, promoting a democratic system that favoured the Shia majority, and focusing on national rather than local and regional governance. Responsibility for the failure to plan for and prevent the government's succumbing to pre-existing ethnic, tribal, and religious divisions cannot be laid on Britain, but the British contingent in Iraq suffered from this failure, as well as a persistent inability or unwillingness to control the corrupt parts of the Iraqi government, such as the Ministry of Interior. As a result, Iraqi governments lacked sufficient legitimacy to prevent the country from descending into civil war.

Furthermore, the Coalition never secured sufficient support from the Shia community, let alone the much more disaffected Sunni. Iraqis still lack sufficient confidence in their government, and by extension in the Coalition, to be sufficiently emboldened to reject the insurgents and militias. Many Iraqis believe that the Iraqi government and the Coalition have failed them. They do not feel safe, essential

services are intermittent at best, their standard of living has declined and, worse still, many still see parts of their government as a threat to their well-being.

And the "battle for the hearts and minds", so essential to previous British operations, was largely a failure in Iraq. Too much of the effort was connected to abstract concepts such as democracy and citizenship that have little or no relevance to Iraqis; most Coalition campaigns were aimed at a non-existent "generic" Iraqi audience without specifying who is to be addressed and for what purpose, and there was a failure to monitor and counter enemy propaganda.

To make matters worse, in March 2003, at the time of the Iraq invasion, cultural understanding about the realities on the ground was woefully inadequate, and it may remain so. More cultural training was provided, but this was usually simplistic and inadequate. The education program was also not reinforced in the field.

And, while the major mistakes belong to the US military, the British military system – which made its own sustained effort to develop institutional cultural awareness - was not particularly successful either.

Furthermore, in the rush to exit Iraq, the Coalition handed far too much power back to the Iraqis far too quickly. As a result, some elements of the police, the military, and most notoriously the Ministry of Interior security forces promptly divided along ethnic and tribal lines. Some have even become instruments of repression and sectarian violence, thereby undermining public confidence. The Coalition might have thought that not handing over control would foster Shia resistance. However, had realistic expectations regarding the timetable for the handover been set from the outset, had good governance and security been provided immediately, and had Sunnis been included in the transitional process, most Iraqis would probably have accepted a slower transition in return for peace and prosperity. The British had far too rapidly handed over authority to local leaders, who had then used that power to consolidate their own positions and to confront and attack their traditional rivals. This transfer of control had also allowed the Iranians to significantly increase their influence in southern Iraq. As a result, the British sector has divided down ethnic, tribal, and political lines, with two powerful militias now vying for control of this key region, leaving the British with little option but to use force to reassert control, thereby becoming one of the protagonists in the conflict.

The British effort in southern Iraq to try to drive a wedge between the people and the insurgents and to isolate the population both physically and psychologically enjoyed some success, but overall, there is no question that the British have done

a poor job of using all their available tools to separate the local population from the insurgents and extremists. Throughout, the Coalition had failed to achieve any meaningful degree of population control, partly because of inadequate troop levels, partly because of a force-protection obsession that encouraged seeing all Iraqis as potential threats, but also because of poorly targeted cordon-and-search operations. The Coalition's inability to control the population has allowed the insurgents to train, organize, and operate with relative impunity.

The British have managed to extricate themselves with honour from Iraq. Yet they have not managed to mask the severe knock to their reputation. Although the US was, as suggested above, responsible for most of the initial mistakes in Iraq, the American military was quick to learn from its previous errors, and able to provide the necessarily huge resources in order to improve performance on the ground. The British, however, did not; however unfair this may seem, their old claims of superiority in dealing with policing or peace-making operations were exposed as hollow in Iraq. That, coupled with the high casualty rate, the enduring unpopularity of the operation, the over-stretch created by the parallel operations in Afghanistan and the change of government in London in 2007 meant that the biggest British preoccupation turned out to be how to withdraw from Iraq, at almost any cost. The British did not have either a realistic objective, nor the popular support, nor the adequate strategy in Iraq. They broke all their self-imposed rules for these kind of operations. Unsurprisingly, therefore, although the British withdrawal was elegantly managed, the Iraq adventure will not be considered by history as one of Britain's most brilliant moments. In short, the British military suffered a knock to its reputation, and politicians in London have grown much more cautious about any future operations.

The Way Ahead

That is not to say that Britain will not remain engaged in overseas operations; indeed, a high-intensity operation is unfolding in Afghanistan, and London remains committed to its success, despite all the current difficulties. Furthermore, it is still the case that the British continue to enjoy some very notable advantages in mounting foreign operations:

1. The British public is habitually used to seeing its forces overseas; that has been the fate of the British military for centuries. So, the dispute in London

is not so much whether forces should be deployed around the world but, rather, in what conflicts and for what purpose;

2. The British continue to devote a higher proportion of their wealth to their military than most other European countries. This may not be enough, but it still provides London with a much wider reach;

3. Training and discipline remain superb;

4. The interaction between the military and civilian authorities is still a strong British asset;

5. Popular support for the British armed forces remains high: even at the height of the dispute over operations in Iraq, it was not the armed forces but the politicians who were criticised by the media;

6. And, finally, the British are committed to retaining a global reach. Britain's permanent seat in the UN Security Council requires it, and Britain's residual colonial responsibilities – be these moral, historic or practical – also demand it.

So, for all these reasons, one cannot envisage a complete disengagement from peacekeeping or peace-making operations. The UK has long played a committed role in international peacekeeping, and demand for its participation remains high. Its significant defence commitments both at home and around the globe, have given British troops valuable peacekeeping and, indeed, war-fighting experience. The British will continue to make troops available to UN peacekeeping operations, including operations on the African continent. But, at the same time, the most useful contribution the UK will make is guaranteed to be smaller in the years ahead. It may concentrate on specialised areas, such as the provisions of logistics teams to UN operations, or limited contributions to other activities. Yet caution will be the predominant reaction. The days when the British rushed into leading such operations are over. The British military is tired, troubled, and over-worked. It needs a pause, and it is certain to get one.