

# Briefing Memo

## Quality of Decision-Making

### Implications from British Political-Military Relations

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This brief think piece is to stress that the quality of decision-making is no less important than decisions taken, drawing on James de Waal's *Depending on the Right People: British Political-Military Relations, 2001-10*. While his paper covers a range of issues around political-military relations in the UK, especially one on the use of force, it is noticeable that de Waal calls the British practice of political-military relationship "of disorder." This remark should be rather surprising to some (or even many) of Japanese, who have appeared to regard the UK as a model of well-functioning political leadership. In fact, his argument suggests that the British way of decision-making itself inherently involves downside risks which could lead to failed political-military relations. By thinking about how this is so, we can have a lot to learn.

The analysis of de Waal is mainly focused on two of the relatively recent decisions the UK made to use military might. One was to take part in a ground invasion of Iraq in 2003, the other to deploy to northern Helmand, Afghanistan in 2006. British policy toward Iraq and Afghanistan has been subject to public attention. A variety of inquiries have been conducted to examine the policy rationale and process, including information handling, and the preparation and conduct of military operations. Among such body of work, de Waal's is particularly relevant to our discussion in this essay since he points to a potentially systemic failure of decision-making in Britain. The emphasis is system, rather than strategy formulation or leadership. He eloquently discusses more general, consistent features of decision-making which have brought about the two decisions seeming to have resulted in human and financial costs far more than expected (the description of the two cases here is adopted from de Waal with the reference to other sources cited below, and any errors and misunderstandings are attributable to the author of this essay).

In the case of the Iraq war, there were three policy options on the table at the time of October 2002. Package 1 was a small contribution mainly consisting of intelligence support, access to UK bases and limited numbers of special forces; Package 2 a naval and air contribution plus the elements of Package 1; and Package 3 a significant ground invasion force in addition to the elements of Packages 2 and 3. Senior advisors at the Prime Minister's Office (Jonathan Powell and David Manning) seemed to view Package 2 enough, concerned at the possible impact of Package 3 on domestic and international opinion. On the other hand, the military pressed for a ground invasion which in their view would help the UK have more influence over America's policy and avoid being integrated with the US force to be involved in post-conflict reconstruction. Downing street advisors, however, recognized that the US did not count on a British military contribution, and the Foreign Office and the Treasury saw undertaking the responsibility of an occupying power as a risk instead of as a desired role. Tony Blair, the then-prime minister, said in his autobiography that he had agreed with his chief of the defence staff (Michael Boyce) on that there would be "a real problem with the army if they were not fully involved" and that a ground contribution would give

Britain “far greater influence” on the American plan. However, Mr. Blair does not mention why he took the military’s view, but not that of his own principal aides, even when the matter was of political purpose. Package 3 was the final choice. Although it took only about a month for the initial combat phase to come to an end, the UK had to engage in a counter insurgency campaign for six years until they left the country in July 2009. Nevertheless, it is yet to be clear why and how the Package 3 decision was made.

In summer 2006, UK forces moved from the provincial capital, Lashkar Gah, to the northern part of Helmand, such as Sangin and Musa Qala, responding to Afghan requests. This deployment was carried out soon after Defence Secretary John Reid, leaving for the Home Office, was replaced by Des Browne in a cabinet reshuffle early May. Then, British “platoon houses” thinly spread across the region came under Taliban’s attacks to fight heavy battles. The troops number swelled as three times as initially planned. Withdrawal was originally expected to happen in 2009, but was actually done October 2014. The statistics of the Ministry of Defence (MoD) shows British fatalities have reached a figure more than twice the toll for the Iraq war. Reid testified that he had approved the original deployment into Helmand but not the move to the north, while Browne stated that he was briefed about this retrospectively. The military did not see the move to the north as a change of mission but that of tactics, a presentation that the decision was within their competence.

The two cases well exemplify two of the characteristics of British political-military relations. First, informality refers to a characteristic that rules and procedures for decision-making are not much codified in an official and formal way. Informality may produce quick and flexible decisions. At the same time, the process depends on the individuals involved, which may undermine transparency and coherence, or even worse, invite arbitrariness. In any case, political leaders are supposed to make final decisions on the basis of national interests after assessing expected effects, benefits, costs and risks from various angles of consideration. It is not certain that such a process of decision-making took place in the case of Iraq war. As to the decision to move to north Helmand, it seems doubtful whether political leaders had a chance to judge and decide at all.

A second feature we notice is a division of responsibilities. It is among the most basic principles of modern organization, not necessarily uniquely British. Yet, for British policymakers, it seems to function as practical guidance too. Then we can expect a greater sense of responsibility—morale, diligence, energy, effort and other virtues—from the office in charge. On the other hand, inter-organizational checks and cooperation will be weak especially when indifference or competition between relevant offices is excessive. In the UK, military officers have the big say on military operations and political leaders respect that. Likewise civil servants seem to understand that operational issues are within the competence of the military. Civilian officials in the defence ministry mainly assume political and financial functions while leaving operational issues to military colleagues. The Foreign Office, though concerned about prewar and postwar phases, did not care about the combatant phase. However, as were in the both Iraq and Afghan cases, decisions on the use of force, if “operational” ones, may go beyond the military domain to cause broader consequences than expected.

It is a matter of balance to take advantage of informality and the division of responsibilities. Both have benefits and risks. At least, however, we can be sure that individuals in charge will have to bear a great deal of burden when the two features work in tandem. To the extent that there is room for maneuver, they have to control and coordinate on substance and process. Decision-making is thus considerably influenced by personal factors. The title of de Waal’s paper seems to come from a phrase “decisions are well made if the right people are in the room” in Mr. Powell’s

book. In practice, however, rooms are not always filled with the right people, and the right people can be defined only in a general term. Moreover, it is often post hoc judgement whether or not they are the right ones. Therefore, it is worthwhile or perhaps necessary to ensure that decisions are well made regardless of whoever is in the room.

That would be one of the major reasons why de Waal proposes to formulate a formal code to regulate decision-making on the use of force. This code is intended to define the process of making decisions, into which military-operational discretion will be incorporated. The code will also provide the roles and responsibilities of people involved in the process. Importantly, de Waal asserts that participants to decision-making on the use of force are not limited to politicians and military officers but include civil servants. The functions of those policy actors should not be regarded as mutually exclusive but as interconnected with each other. By the same token MoD's policy should not be separated from, but linked with, that of relevant departments such as the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development. Thus, he may advocate that decision-making should integrate different and diverse expertise, knowledge and perspectives and that the process for this should be codified. If so, his proposal can be understood as one of overcoming the downside risk of the division of responsibilities, both vertical one between political masters and armed/civil servants and horizontal one between the armed forces and the civil service.

It should be emphasized that de Waal seems to view the two cases problematic not so much because of the unexpected, undesirable consequences of the decisions as because of the failure (or absence) of a system of decision-making. In the regard, the two cases raise a lot of questions about how decisions be made. When can political leaders use military power? Who should participate in decision-making on the use of force? What role can civilian officials in defence and other departments play? What would political leaders be able to rely on the military and to what extent? What if political advice and military advice do not go along with each other? More generally, how should the different views or positions of policy actors be selected or coordinated? Should military action be planned and carried out together with relevant areas of policy? If so, how can we achieve such cross-cutting policymaking and policy implementation in a coherent manner? Political-military relations are faced with the need to address those questions in order to work effectively. We would have to conduct a systematic review of lessons learned from the past experiences on one hand, and to develop some baseline thought on ideal decision-making on the other, for a higher quality of argument. How much have we tried to accumulate such knowledge and philosophy?

Since we have to mind the consequence of a decision, we also have to mind how the decision is made. An appropriate decision requires not only appropriate decision-makers but also an appropriate decision-making system. Of course there is no such thing as the one and only appropriate system. Decision-making may depend on the idea or method of government as well as socio-economic conditions of the time. The right solution at one time would not always be the right one at another; the right solution of one country not necessarily the right one in others. Moreover, since decision-making involves choice of values, it is sometimes difficult for governments to decide how decisions should be made. Thus, pursuing better decision-making will be an endless quest, in which an assessment of decision results or policy outcomes needs to be connected with an analysis of the process and system of decision-making/policymaking. It is not too much to say that de Waal's argument aptly reminds us of this important but often forgotten requirement.

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