



The role of defence in preventing overseas conflict

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Introduction

The UK's defence budget, like many departmental areas, has recently been subject to serious cuts. The Coalition has committed to withdrawing combat troops from Afghanistan by 2014 and, post-Iraq and Afghanistan, there may be little public or political appetite for future 'boots on the ground' intervention overseas. At the same time, the UK's relative power in the world continues to decline – though its reputation and influence allow it to 'punch above its weight'.

Given this context, what should the UK's international conflict prevention role be, and what contribution can the defence community make?

This briefing argues that a concerted, coordinated approach to preventing violent conflict 'upstream' (addressing the underlying causes and long term drivers of conflict) would play to the UK's strengths. It looks at what the contribution of the UK's defence community might be to such an approach, relevant Coalition commitments, and how Labour could use its role in opposition to set a proactive agenda on conflict prevention, sharpen HMG's approach to 'building stability overseas', and encourage the Coalition to successfully complete negotiations towards an international Arms Trade Treaty.

'Upstream' conflict prevention and the role of defence

Preventing violent conflict may sometimes involve peacekeeping interventions that physically prevent violence, or at least shield civilian populations from its worst effects. But, crucially, 'conflict prevention' can also be understood as the process of supporting longer term societal change – helping countries to become more cohesive, resilient and able to manage conflicts without resorting to violence.

This kind of long term, upstream conflict prevention requires a coordinated range of activities, tailored to individual contexts. The UK's defence community has a central, positive role to play in such an approach, in partnership with development and diplomatic actors. For instance:

'Defence transformation' that helps countries to right-size their defence assets and transition towards civilian control and oversight of the armed forces

Over 20 years of conflict has left southern Sudan with a large army and a range of armed militias. If future conflict is to be prevented, the state must be supported to provide its population with security, the currently excessive level of military spending reduced to a more appropriate level, and the role of security actors within society brought under civilian control. In 2005, an 'International Military Assistance Team' (IMAT) was established to 'support the security elements of Sudan's Comprehensive Peace Agreement [by] developing regular, professional and non-partisan armed forces that will respect the rule of law, civilian government, democracy, basic human rights and the will of the people.'¹ The IMAT comprised military and civilian advisors from the US, UK, NL and Norway and – although political difficulties caused the project to be disbanded before it could complete its work – provides an illustration of one role the defence community might play in such defence transformation at the strategic level.

¹ OECD DAC case book on conflict, peace and security activities: <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/27/21/39967978.pdf>

Support for the development of ‘security and justice services’ (such as the police, armed forces and judiciary) that are not only capable but also democratically accountable, transparent and responsive to those they serve

It is important to recognise that promoting security and justice sector development should be designed and implemented as a civilian intervention, led by civilian agencies. Equally, such interventions should not only focus on the ‘supply side’ of reforms (supporting the development of capable, accountable security services), but also on the ‘demand side’ from the perspective of the ‘users’ of security and justice services – encouraging and empowering local populations to be active and engaged in the way their security services are provided.

However, the reality is that, in many contexts where the armed forces enjoy privileged access to power or influence, UK defence representatives may enjoy greater traction in working to support democratic reforms than their civilian counterparts. By working jointly across different arms of government, to one common strategy, HMG can ensure it is matching its approach to the needs of the context.

At the same time, the UK already provides training for the armed forces and civilian defence figures of other countries. The UK should ensure that such trainings successfully embed genuine respect for such issues as human rights, democratic principles, gender equality, and conflict sensitivity as well as providing practical skills. The UK could also leverage maximum value from such trainings by using them to identify progressive champions for change and developing an ongoing relationship with these individuals.

In its training of both UK and foreign defence actors, the UK should also ensure that it looks at how the armed forces engage with local populations – recognising both the benefits to be had from close, constructive engagement but also the reality of how armed forces may be perceived by communities and the implications this has.

The successful ‘disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration’ (DDR) of ex-combatants into everyday civilian life, or the security services

After fighting has ceased and a peace settlement been agreed, what do the combatants who were actually prosecuting the conflict do with themselves?

In Nepal, there are currently tens of thousands of Maoist ex-combatants living in cantonments awaiting a government led process to either ‘rehabilitate’ them back into civilian life (providing vocational training and financial support, for instance) or ‘integrate’ them into Nepal’s security services (such as the Police, Armed Police, and Army). The successful completion of this process is critical to Nepal’s prospects for future peace.

The majority of DDR initiatives should be civilian led and developmental in character. But providing technical assistance to the integration of combatants into national security services is an area where the UK’s defence community could potentially play an extremely useful role.

Measures to control the proliferation of illicit arms within conflict prone countries

Readily available small arms (SALW) not only exacerbate the risks of violent conflict, but may also facilitate human rights abuses, terrorism and other forms of armed criminality (such as piracy in Somalia, for instance). The defence community could contribute to measures to control SALW by, for instance, providing support to countries introducing ‘marking and tracing’ programmes to keep track of legitimately held firearms; or providing advice on securely managing or destroying stockpiles of arms so they do not find their way into the illicit market. However, to make a meaningful difference to the impact of illicit SALW proliferation on ordinary people’s lives, this type of technical intervention needs to come as one element in a coordinated package of measures implemented by a range of actors. The armed forces may also have a valuable contribution to make in supporting de-mining efforts or the clearing of other explosive remnants of war, such as cluster bombs.

Monitoring arms transfer control arrangements

Defence representatives posted overseas, such as defence attaches, can play an invaluable role in monitoring countries compliance with arms transfer control agreements – such as international arms embargoes, or the standards of the international Arms Trade Treaty due to be negotiated at the UN in 2012. Defence attaches are also a vital link in the UK's export control regime in terms of assessing the risk associated with potential UK arms exports to the country where they are posted. With the increased focus on UK overseas staff promoting UK commercial interests and bilateral trade, it is important that this role is not neglected.

Even this, definitely non-exhaustive list, represents a wide array of potential interventions and it is vital that the UK does not apply a 'template' approach to conflict prevention, but looks at the individual characteristics and realities of each context it is working in and uses these as the starting point for its efforts to prevent conflict. Afghanistan is not Yemen and neither of these places are Somalia. For this reason, any conflict prevention initiatives should always begin with the context and involve the people they affect.

Begin with the context

All long term conflict prevention efforts should be based on a thorough understanding of the context, gained from in-depth analysis which is continually updated and shared between relevant actors. This contextual understanding should look at several levels – it is not enough to understand the high level political dynamics or international diplomatic issues in isolation, though these are important. We must also understand what the perceptions of ordinary people and communities are. This is a lesson neatly captured by the former head of ISAF, US General Stanley McChrystal:

"In Afghanistan, things are rarely as they seem, and the outcomes of actions we take, however well-intended, are often different from what we expect... If you build a well in the wrong place in a village, you may have shifted the basis of power in that village... If you build a well and contract it to one person or group over another, you make a decision that, perhaps in your ignorance, tips the balance of power, or perception thereof, in that village. Therefore, with a completely altruistic aim of building a well, you can create divisiveness or give the impression that you, from the outside, do not understand what is going on or that you have sided with one element or another, yet all you tried to do is provide water."²

A range of actors can bring different competencies and comparative advantages to context analysis, including the armed forces – who may often have access to areas / information that other parts of HMG do not. But bringing together all these various analytical elements into one comprehensive context analysis, shared across government, will be crucial to ensure that UK interventions are most effective.

Ensuring local ownership and participation

Closely related to understanding what local people really think is ensuring that they are involved meaningfully in the decisions that affect their lives. This is not just a moral issue: conflict and insecurity is a product of people's choices and, to a large degree, plays out at the local level. Neither the UK nor any other part of the international community can 'provide' security or 'deliver' stability – we cannot simply turn up with governance (or security, or development) 'in a box'.

Instead, the UK can use its resources and influence to *promote* peace and security, but achieving lasting stability and sustainable security will rely on not just the consent of local people, but also their active input and ownership³. As the MoD's February 2010 green paper suggested, "... *local*

² General Stanley McChrystal Address, IISS, October 2009

³ The 2008 conflict in Georgia, for instance, was at least as much a product of local level conflict dynamics as it was of high level 'real politik'. Many analysts were surprised that this conflict centred around South Ossetia rather than Abkhazia and it has been suggested

people must be at the centre of our policy. Only local people will determine whether, in the long-term, a country or region will establish self-sustaining stability.”⁴

What has the Coalition committed to?

Saferworld made a submission on the above model of upstream conflict prevention to the Coalition’s recent Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) ⁵. Our submission built on a dialogue begun with the MOD during the development of its February 2010 green paper.

When the SDSR was published in October 2010, it contained a number of welcome commitments – including to significantly increasing support to an ‘integrated approach’ to conflict prevention. Inter alia, these commitments included:

- ‘Directing more non-operational defence engagement overseas towards conflict prevention, security sector reform and capability building in priority countries, including through: establishing new training teams; running joint exercises; attaching senior civilian policy advisors to foreign defence ministries, and increasing our arms control engagement so as to promote regional stabilisation and reduce the risk of conflict.’
- Developing a ‘Building Stability Overseas Strategy’ (BSOS) to be published in Spring 2011 which will set out the detail of governments approach to overseas conflict
- Earmarking £300 million for the Conflict Pool (to fund both upstream conflict prevention and post-conflict stabilisation)
- Expanding the remit of the Stabilisation Unit to include upstream conflict prevention
- Creating a cross-government board to oversee the development and implementation of the BSOS.

However, these commitments are currently at the stage of headline announcements – officials and ministers are now working, through the development of the BSOS, to elaborate the details of this overall approach.

Beyond stabilisation, beyond Afghanistan

Much of the public and private discussions around the UK’s role overseas have drawn from recent experience in Afghanistan and highlighted an ambition to enhance the UK’s capacity for ‘post-conflict stabilisation’. Saferworld would support a more coordinated and effective approach to post-conflict stabilisation, but we must be clear about what we are trying to achieve.

If ‘stabilisation’ in this context is to mean a relatively short-term activity with a strong military involvement (such as recent engagements in Afghanistan, Iraq, Sierra Leone, Bosnia and Kosovo for instance) then we would stress that this must be complemented by a coherent and effective long-term preventative approach designed to promote the development of more resilient, peaceful societies. Helping to stabilise the patient must not come at the expense of helping to treat their ailment.

Similarly, whilst there are certainly lessons to be learnt from the UK’s engagement in Afghanistan, it is not the case that these lessons will be applicable across all conflict-affected countries, or that they alone will be sufficient to inform the UK’s overall approach to addressing overseas conflict.

‘UK Plc’ and the strategic use of defence and security exports

The SDSR was welcome in referencing the Coalition’s commitment to continuing UK support for the international Arms Trade Treaty initiative, which the UK has championed at the UN since 2005.

that this may be, in large part, down to the years of sustained and concentrated peacebuilding efforts that have been undertaken in Abkhazia.

⁴ MOD, Adaptability and Partnership, Issues for the Strategic Defence Review, February 2010

⁵ <http://www.saferworld.org.uk/smartweb/resources/view-resource/466>

As mentioned above, the SDSR also talks of increasing defence engagement on arms controls, which is very welcome.

However, questions remain about whether HMG can successfully balance these ambitions against a concurrent desire to dramatically increase UK defence exports, and to more overtly use defence and security exports as a tool of foreign policy⁶.

Conflict prevention and national security

As Saferworld set out in our submission to the SDSR, we believe that coordinated and effective efforts to prevent violent conflict 'upstream' by supporting the development of resilient and peaceful societies *can* make a significant contribution to the UK's own national security – as part of promoting a more benign global environment, increased respect for the rule of law, and addressing people's genuine socio-economic and political grievances.

But we must be sure to get the causation right when thinking through our approach to conflict prevention. Upstream conflict prevention may have knock on benefits for the UK's national security, but must not be *led* solely by national security concerns which may risk the UK taking a perspective that is too short term, or focusing only on a small selection of countries that the UK currently deems to be in its immediate strategic interest.

What can the Labour defence team do?

Labour has a proud record on many areas related to upstream conflict prevention – including a statement of ethical foreign policy, the development of the 2002 Export Controls Act to regulate the export of UK arms, leading efforts to establish an international Arms Trade Treaty at the UN, establishing DFID and publishing a 2009 White Paper outlining a world class approach to doing development in conflict-affected and fragile countries, recognising in its National Security Strategy that responding to the threat of global instability 'has to be rooted in helping states and the societies within them become more secure, with a capable and responsive government, and the rule of law'⁷, and setting public spending targets on conflict prevention (PSA 30).

There are a number of ways in which Labour generally, and Labour's defence team specifically, can continue this work in opposition – ensuring that the UK's approach to overseas conflict always has a concern for those people affected by conflict and insecurity at its heart.

- **Setting a proactive agenda on conflict prevention**

Using the range of contacts within the defence community developed over the last 13 years of government to unpack and explore the contribution defence may play in upstream conflict prevention and setting a proactive, positive agenda on this area. There is currently rapidly growing interest in this area from many within the defence community, partly inspired by the question of what role the UK's armed forces will play 'after Afghanistan'. With combat troops due to withdraw from Afghanistan by 2014, this would be just within the life of the current Parliament.

- **Sharpening HMG's approach to 'building stability overseas'**

Working closely with civil society groups to provide a forensic level of scrutiny to HMG's developing plans for conflict prevention. For instance, calling for parliamentary involvement in the development of the BSOS strategy and providing oversight to HMG's performance in meeting its objectives, or pushing for the Defence Select Committee to hold an inquiry into the role of the UK defence establishment in overseas conflict prevention. It will also be important for Labour to ensure its shadow teams are appropriately coordinated – effectively addressing overseas conflict will require effective cross-departmental working: and so will providing

⁶ SDSR, page 66: "...working with the MOD and Home Office, specifically to promote defence and security exports for good commercial reasons and where this will build the capacity of our partners and allies..."

⁷ Security for the next generation, Cabinet Office, June 2009: Page 11

effective scrutiny to this policy area. Labour could consider setting up a 'shadow National Security Council' to provide oversight of the Coalition's strategic decision making, for instance.

- **Encouraging the Coalition to successfully complete negotiations towards an ATT**

The UK has championed the ATT at the UN since 2005 and, thanks in large part to this contribution, an actual treaty will be negotiated in 2012. But the period between now and then will be critical in ensuring that the final treaty negotiations produce a robust and comprehensive treaty. Labour could provide proactive scrutiny of HMG's support to an ATT in the run up to the negotiations. On a related note, as the official opposition, Labour could ensure it is vigilant for any signs that standards may be slipping in the implementation of strategic export controls, and raise any instances of bad practice for public examination.

Saferworld would welcome further opportunities to work with the Labour party on these and other ways of helping to ensure that the UK plays the most effective role it can in effectively addressing overseas conflict and fragility.

About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent, international NGO that works to prevent violent conflict and promote cooperative approaches to security. We believe everyone should be able to lead peaceful, fulfilling lives free from insecurity and armed violence.

Through our work in the Horn of Africa, South Asia and Eastern Europe we aim to understand what causes violence by talking to the people it affects and then bringing together communities, governments, civil society and the international community to develop solutions. Using this experience, we also work with the UK, EU, UN and others to develop ways of supporting societies address conflict and insecurity.

We always seek to work constructively with others and do not usually engage in public campaigning. While we are not a traditional development agency, we seek to understand and influence the relationship between conflict, security and international development.

We have over 60 staff based in London and abroad – with registered offices in Brussels, Colombo, Juba, Kampala, Kathmandu, Nairobi and Pristina, and a permanent staff presence in most of the countries we work in. Our funding for 2008-2009 was around £4.7million – mainly in the form of government grants from Canada, the EU, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, Norway and the UK.

Useful contacts:

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