

BRIEFING | NOVEMBER 2021

Different strategy, same mistakes? The UK persistent engagement strategy

Outlined in the UK's Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy,¹ and the Defence Command paper,² the persistent engagement strategy will see 'armed forces overseas more often and for longer periods of time, to train, exercise and operate alongside allies and partners across all our priority regions'.³ The objective of such engagements is often to build influence and relationships in partner countries, partly to ensure that adversaries cannot.⁴

Yet, while the emphasis may be new, these deployments look likely to mirror the counter-terrorism operations of the last twenty years. Small deployments of UK forces will provide training, equipment and advice to host nations, while partner forces, rather than the UK, do the bulk of any frontline fighting. However, recent experiences of military-to-military training in the Middle East, the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and elsewhere have shown it can exacerbate the drivers of conflict abroad, and erode systems of oversight and accountability at home.^{5,6}

The rollout of the persistent engagement strategy, therefore, represents an important opportunity to learn from the past and ensure we don't make the same mistakes again. To understand how, 50 experts from a variety of backgrounds⁷ were brought together at eight online roundtables. This briefing aims to capture the discussions of the group, and so may not reflect the views of their organisations or Saferworld. They agreed that, at the strategic level, military-to-military training needs to be informed by – and accountable to – a Conflict Strategic Framework (something which is currently being developed).⁸

Once this strategy is in place, each deployment can potentially be measured against a robust theory of change that frames the intended impact of the military engagement, identifies assumptions and risks, and is informed by – and accountable to – people in the affected context. Ideally, this would be shared by (not just coordinated with) international allies and partners who also operate in the same context. Parliament and civil society should provide oversight to ensure each deployment is positively contributing to longer-term peace and stability and mitigating the risks of reinforcing or exacerbating existing tensions and problematic behaviour.

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'Persistent engagement' strategy: Making the same mistakes again?

The 'persistent engagement' strategy

'To pursue our foreign policy objectives and shape conditions for stability, we will rebalance our force to provide a more proactive, forward deployed, persistent presence. This will ensure our armed forces are more in use whilst maintaining the deterrent effect that comes from being ready for managing crises at scale ... Our persistent engagement will increase the UK's ability to pre-empt and manage crises before they escalate and minimise the opportunities for state and non-state actors to undermine international security.'

Defence in a competitive age⁹

Over the last two decades, the US, the UK and others have undertaken campaigns to enhance the institutional and security capacities of states to, for instance, counter violent non-state groups or curb migration.¹⁰ This approach has regularly failed to reduce violence, improve governance or build sustainable peace. In some contexts, it has reinforced state capture by abusive, corrupt and exclusive elites whose desire to maintain power has perpetuated conflict, protracted crisis, exacerbated inequalities and stymied development.¹¹ This has been documented in research on UK engagements around the world, including arms sales to Saudi Arabia,¹² training of security forces in Yemen,¹³ the Horn of Africa and the Sahel,¹⁴ and broader military support to Egypt.¹⁵

In many places around the world, delivering technical support – while not properly accounting for the political context – has perpetuated violent conflict. For instance, while the UK delivers extensive training in gender equality, human security, and international human rights and humanitarian law, experience has shown that this training will be ineffective unless it addresses the drivers of harm to the most vulnerable members of society, such as corruption or beliefs and systems rooted in patriarchy and racism.¹⁶ Failing to address these drivers can also increase recruitment by violent non-state groups. When citizens see their own government as corrupt, predatory, and unable to provide security or basic services, non-state groups can fill the gaps left by the state.¹⁷ Military-to-military security assistance in the absence of a realistic long-term inclusive peace strategy may make things worse, shutting down the prospects for conflict resolution and peace processes¹⁸ and allowing elites to shutdown dissent by labelling opponents 'terrorists' or 'aggressors'.¹⁹

The consequences of this can be seen now in Afghanistan. After twenty years and US \$88 billion (£64 bn) spent, Afghan security forces were unable or unwilling to stop the Taliban retaking large swathes of the country, including the capital, after the US's withdrawal.²⁰ One reason for this was, arguably, a failure to grapple with systematic problems such as 'deep-rooted corruption',²¹ including the endemic problem of "ghost soldiers and police" who existed merely on the payrolls of the Afghan Defense and Interior Ministries'.²²

It is therefore worrying that approaches from past military operations appear set to be recycled under the persistent engagement strategy.²³ The Defence Command paper argued that the UK's 'ability and willingness to commit hard capability to fighting wars is a fundamental foundation of our influence and deterrence'.²⁴ However, there are dangers of focusing too much on UK influence as an end in itself rather than 'a means to other ends'.²⁵ UK foreign policy could focus too much on influence and maintaining power and status to the detriment of more meaningful objectives, such as preventing conflicts by encouraging locally led democratic transitions.²⁶

There is also a danger that, in prioritising reducing the influence of Russia and China, the UK and its allies – once again – build relations with partners with a poor record of human rights.²⁷ Dr Jack Watling, of the Royal United Services Institute, predicts that the UK's focus on state-based threats will see a 'cutting back of some of the red tape around [military-to-military training], which is a bad thing in the sense that ... support will go to groups who will conduct some unpleasant activities'.²⁸ This could see the UK inadvertently stepping up its empowerment of potentially abusive, corrupt and exclusionary partners by providing increased coercive capabilities, and the implicit or explicit political endorsement that comes with it. The result of this may be not only increased conflict and human suffering, but also an undermining of the UK's own policy objectives.²⁹

Supporting predatory state forces risks reinforcing the very instability and chaos in which countries like Russia (and their mercenaries) thrive and Western countries struggle to engage. For this reason, Paul Bisca, a security and development adviser, recommends 'the advancement of security sector governance and the rule of law' as a means of 'counter[ing] the influence of geopolitical competitors'.³⁰ Melissa Dalton and Hijab Shah, from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), argue against militarily empowering partners without a political strategy for the same reason. They state that '[a]s competitors seek to discredit, corrupt, and alienate security actors that do not accord with their interests, partner legitimacy will be an important source of resiliency'.³¹

Improving the Theory of Change

It is essential, then, that the UK learn from recent campaigns. The development of a new UK Conflict Strategic Framework is positive. It could provide a policy framework to assess whether UK support is contributing to addressing the drivers of conflict, including how and when it can do so and the assumptions and risks that need to be considered and/or mitigated.³² Those implementing the new persistent engagement strategy should be informed by this strategy and ensure that military-to-military training deployments are framed by these same considerations.

For military decision-makers, one way to avoid past mistakes and ensure that military deployments reinforce rather than undermine broader UK foreign policy goals, is to improve the theory of change which persistent engagement and military training deployments fit into. This theory of change should:

1. serve a clear end goal, compatible with promoting sustained peace beyond any immediate military/tactical imperative
2. be built on the broad, inclusive local ownership necessary for efforts to be just, effective and sustainable
3. build international ‘buy-in’ rather than simply coordination
4. have sufficient transparency, accountability and learning structures to ensure it serves a clear end goal

Despite some progress in each of these areas, significant problems remain. Addressing gaps in each, and learning from some potential good case examples, would go a long way in improving the UK’s approach, and the impact of the persistent engagement strategy.

Avoiding a militarily-focused theory of change

A number of initiatives (from the development of the National Security Council (NSC),³³ to the use of Joint Analysis of Conflict and Stability (JACS)³⁴ Guidance or the Overseas Security and Justice Assessments)³⁵ have brought different strands of government together to debate and discuss the risks of international engagement. In fact, one expert said during a roundtable in 2018 that “every major country in the world is trying to do a whole of government approach and ours is comparatively quite good”.³⁶ However, there are still a number of enduring problems.

In particular, there is a limit to how much these initiatives can address mistakes of the past if UK strategy continues to be too militarily-focused. A preoccupation with threats, and the development of military might as the best way to address them, can ‘short-circuit and distort both deliberative and political processes, preventing us from thinking genuinely and realistically’ about how to improve UK foreign policy.³⁷ In 2017, when the Oxford Research Group (ORG) interviewed UK and other international soldiers in Afghanistan, some bemoaned the emphasis on hard security approaches. One said, “if all you’ve got in the toolbox is kill/capture … are you going to do it forever? Kill all the people?”³⁸ This same concern, that militarily-focused strategies were going to have a minimal and even counter-productive impact on peace and security, were also reflected in our interviews with UK and international soldiers in Iraq, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria and elsewhere.³⁹

Yet ‘hard’ security options are often framed by policymakers as more effective than ‘softer’ approaches. For instance, while past leaders in the UK have been overly optimistic about the potential impact of a limited number of Special Forces in deployments such as Libya,⁴⁰ the Department for International Development routinely saw the effectiveness of its programming called into question by politicians and press despite more established processes of charting change in conflict and instability.⁴¹

The Integrated Review was a missed opportunity to change this flawed thinking. Just before the Review, the Government announced the ‘biggest programme of investment in Britain’s armed forces since the end of the Cold War and a dramatic decrease in aid spending’.⁴² While some of this defence spending ‘could be “swallowed” by a funding black hole in the department’s equipment plan’, the contrast between investment in defence and cuts to development is stark.⁴³ It suggests the UK Government is readying itself to reach more routinely for military tools in conflict settings and relying less on developmental approaches designed to address root causes. In fact, Prime Minister Boris Johnson said the huge investment in defence was ‘driven by our need to protect the British public and keep the world as safe as we possibly can’.⁴⁴ This ignores the fact that neglect for root causes of conflict has been a key aspect of strategic failure in conflicts in the Middle East, the Horn of Africa and the Sahel in recent years.

Following the release of the Integrated Review, the Government has said that a number of implementation strategies will now be developed. These may be a way to seize some of the opportunities missed during the writing of the Integrated Review. Certainly if, in developing these strategies, the UK doesn’t develop a stronger theory of change – in which the contributions all departments can make to successful promotion of national security, conflict prevention and open societies are recognised and fully funded – it is likely that the persistent engagement strategy will fall into many of the same traps as previous initiatives. The US Global Fragility Act (see textbox) may well serve as a useful guide for how to do this.

Global Fragility Act

In December 2019, the US recognised the benefits of a cross-government commitment to conflict prevention in the development of the Global Fragility Act (GFA).⁴⁵ The GFA recognises the importance of local leadership and mandates the US government to develop its Global Fragility Strategy in consultation with local civil society and national and local governments, among other partners.⁴⁶ The GFA calls for all parts of the US Government to work out a coherent strategy and repurpose foreign assistance toward averting conflict. Importantly, this commitment was backed by funding: to achieve these goals, the GFA dedicates \$1.15 billion over a ten-year time horizon for programmes in five countries or regions. Moreover, at least two need to be of a preventative nature to pre-empt any problems that may emerge down the line.⁴⁷

Speaking to the right people

As has been well documented elsewhere, people affected by conflict often have the most effective and sustainable solutions for addressing its drivers.⁴⁸ Their views are vital for informing what works, as well as highlighting the way in which women, youth and other marginalised communities experience conflict and post-conflict situations.⁴⁹ State-led or internationally led efforts which do not engage with those impacted by conflict rarely work because they are not accepted or owned by the people most affected. Nor are they anchored by societal support, which can be vital to generating and sustaining political will.⁵⁰

Unfortunately, the usefulness of meaningful consultation and engagement is rarely recognised by those developing strategy. Roundtable participants decried the use of jargon in discussions around foreign policy, with one noting that “familiarity with western military strategy is a ‘passport’ into the hallowed corridors of conversations about ‘strategy’”. Worse, people in conflict-affected countries are often seen as biased or framed ‘in terms of risk’.⁵¹ Researchers Roanne van Voorst and Dorothea Hilhorst found in their work on international humanitarian efforts that international staff often wondered whether ‘it is ever possible for local staff to be completely “neutral” in a conflict’.⁵² Of course, such a belief ignored the fact that intervening states and multilateral organisations come with their own biases.

At the same time, as one roundtable participant said, multilateral organisations “assume that people speak for all those of the same gender and religion”, which can perpetuate power imbalances and lead to fatal assumptions. The people consulted ‘tend to be only a few like-minded, state-level, predominantly male members of the security and political elite who are likely to accept the decisions reached previously by external actors’.⁵³ For instance, between 1990 and 2017, ‘women constituted only 2% of mediators, 8% of negotiators and 5% of witnesses and signatories in all major peace processes’⁵⁴. What’s more, when engaged in consultations women have highlighted that it is often tokenistic and disempowering.⁵⁵

In fact, many roundtable participants noted that international consultation systems are overly technical and “not conducive to listening … [or] sincere feedback”. There is ‘a technocratic, output-based approach with little incentive for learning, adaptation and innovation’.⁵⁶ People are ‘approached (sometimes repeatedly) for information, and there is little transparency or feedback to them about the process, it can be experienced as extractive, disrespectful and disempowering’.⁵⁷

The UK also needs to ensure that security sector reform includes elements of community security (see textbox), and that security forces continually engage and respond to the demands and priorities of communities themselves. This may also require properly funding such activity, and funding civil society organisations based in conflict-affected countries directly, not through third-party international beneficiaries such as UN bodies.⁵⁸ Such funding should be long-term, core and flexible to support their activities in a sustainable manner. This is especially true for women’s rights organisations and organisations working with minorities (such as refugees, internally displaced people and people with disabilities), which tend to be underfunded.⁵⁹

If these problems in consultation are not addressed, the persistent engagement strategy risks doing more harm than good in the places UK forces are engaged.⁶⁰ It can create ‘a gulf between how people on-the-ground and people in positions of power see peace and change’.⁶¹ This can fail to deliver people’s true needs and can exacerbate existing tensions and conflicts. Addressing complex challenges of instability is dependent on understanding and recognising obstacles to achieving human security for all

the populations of unstable contexts. This requires meaningful engagement with the people who live in these countries, including women and marginalised groups.

Community Security

Saferworld’s own work has shown the importance of ensuring efforts to improve security are connected to the needs of the people they are meant to help. It has invested in community security processes in over a dozen contexts around the world. In doing so, Saferworld works with partners to engage communities to ensure that people take the lead in developing their own security solutions together with relevant authorities. The approach, which is outlined in the **Community Security handbook**, connects communities, local leaders (for example, religious leaders, clan leaders and elders), the media, informal security providers, police, authorities and government officials to find joint solutions, ensuring a gender-sensitive approach.⁶² Often with opposing views, these groups work through conflict, overcome divisions, and build better relations between communities and authorities.⁶³

‘Buy-in’ rather than coordination

UK operations in regions such as the Middle East, the Sahel and the Horn of Africa are one small component in a complex network of overlapping unilateral, bilateral and multilateral efforts.⁶⁴ Despite the potential for collective good,⁶⁵ these multiple efforts tend to be at best poorly coordinated and at worst actively contradictory.⁶⁶ Coordination between countries is hard even at a departmental level and even among close allies, like the UK and the US. For instance, British soldiers ORG spoke to in Mali said that “between militaries there is a mix of opinion on desired end-states before you even get to civilian aims”. This is particularly true given the rise of light-footprint military operations where a number of entities contribute personnel and resources on a small scale to international efforts.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that many experts, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and practitioners have called for more cooperation; however, too often ‘collaboration and convergence among international organizations and intervention frameworks [is treated] as a policy objective in itself’.⁶⁷ Many roundtable participants warned against “coordination for the sake of coordination”. As one noted, everyone has called “for better or increased cooperation as a recommendation” but no one has “present[ed] ideas on how to do that differently”.

Nor do many efforts overcome the reasons countries are not coordinating. In fact, ‘the sheer number of coalitions and initiatives aimed at improving coordination and collaboration … seems to make clear that very few actors … are willing to be coordinated’.⁶⁸ In particular, many nations have contributed a limited numbers of forces to ‘be present’ or ‘be a good ally’.⁶⁹ For instance, Nina Wilen, Director for Africa at the Egmont Institute, suggests it was not ‘happy accidents that led several European states … to contribute troops to the [Sahel] ahead of the vote for a non-permanent UN Security Council (UNSC) seat’.⁷⁰ Similarly, regional powers in the Sahel (such as Chad) and the Horn of Africa (such as Ethiopia and Kenya) have engaged in peacekeeping missions ‘to gain international recognition, fund their militaries, promote norms and values, or build an identity for their armies’.⁷¹

Getting representatives from different states in the same room will have a limited impact unless there is genuine buy-in for decisions; states will leave the room and continue to follow their own national objectives. As one roundtable participant said, all intervening states “have different masters who operate in different timeframes with different electoral agendas”. For example, many officials and experts mentioned the importance of informal meetings in generating concerted approaches; in the Sahel some states used these to develop a shared approach for raising human rights abuses by security forces. However, such meetings have no accountability mechanisms and so are only as effective as states make them. As one roundtable participant based in Nigeria said, officials “all get in the same room and talk and discuss the need to coordinate but in the field it is a completely different thing”. Without addressing these dynamics, ‘[a]ny new externally initiated coordination platform will … not improve the situation on the ground, but rather increase the confusion, bureaucracy and risk of duplicating efforts.’⁷²

If coordination with partners and allies is a flawed starting point, a more useful one may be building buy-in for a long-term peace strategy and theory of change (built on meaningful consultation with people in conflict-affected countries) in areas the UK considers priorities. It may also mean being realistic about what the UK on its own can and, more importantly, should offer. If others are willing to invest in long-term, locally owned strategies it may be best for the UK to follow. Failing to do so may undermine the UK’s reputation if it is seen to be overpromising or assuming an unwelcome leadership role.

There are some examples among NGOs of coordination around a shared objective, such as the Protection Cluster in Mali (see textbox), which could inform the UK’s approach. These are not perfect examples and there is no easy answer of how to coordinate better, but it is clear that to deploy first and attempt to coordinate later risks postponing the identification of contradictions which could turn out to cause harm and undermine the UK’s objectives.

Protection cluster in Mali

‘Clusters’ are groups of humanitarian organisations, both UN and non-UN, in each of the main sectors of humanitarian action; for example, water, health and logistics. They are designated by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee and have clear responsibilities for coordination. Some roundtable participants suggested that there was a lot to learn from these systems for how to coordinate other aspects of international intervention more effectively. For instance, the Protection Cluster in Mali, which hired an analyst to track trends and identify the most pressing problems for civilian protection, was focused on a well-researched strategy. It is not perfect – as one participant said, it “does not change overall dynamics though [it] can lead to localised improvements”. However, it highlights the advantages of uniting invested parties behind a well-defined, well-researched objective.

Sufficient oversight and learning

Even if persistent engagement fits within a well-formulated theory of change on paper, it can fall apart when it is confronted with reality. Avoiding this means ensuring there is sufficient transparency, accountability and learning so that military deployments are feeding into (rather than going against) stated objectives. The UK Parliament,⁷³ international media and other independent experts (based at think tanks, charities or universities) have a long history of providing oversight of UK military deployments abroad. None is without its problems,⁷⁴ but investment in research, and timely and honest discussion about UK deployments, would allow each type of institution to better play their role overseeing UK strategy.⁷⁵

Currently, oversight mechanisms have not kept up with the changing character of military interventions. The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Drones and Modern Conflict told a parliamentary inquiry that ‘Britain’s growing military capabilities and commitments are far outpacing the existing procedures for parliamentary scrutiny and oversight.’⁷⁶ While committees have a long history of overseeing British action abroad, a number have expressed concern over their ability to scrutinise contemporary conflict.

Since January 2019, British troops have been deployed to, among other countries, Afghanistan,⁷⁷ Mali⁷⁸ and, reportedly, Yemen,⁷⁹ but these deployments are exempt from the War Powers Convention and so were not debated by Parliament. Some were ‘train and assist’ operations and so were not designated as ‘combat missions’. This is despite the fact there is no official definition of, or a set list of criteria for, combat and non-combat operations.⁸⁰

Others involved Special Forces which, despite the remit of their operations increasing since 9/11, have continued to lack sufficient scrutiny because of the government’s long-held blanket opacity policy that precludes any form of external oversight.⁸¹ While intelligence agencies are overseen by the Intelligence and Security Committee, there is no similar system for UK Special Forces and information about their use is specifically exempt from the Freedom of Information Act.⁸²

The Integrated Review and Defence Command paper indicate that this may get worse. For instance, the Defence Command paper announces a new UK Special Operations Brigade, which will ‘undertake roles traditionally carried out by Special Forces, [including] collective deterrence such as training, advising, enabling and accompanying partner forces’. There is a risk that these units will be shrouded in the same level of secrecy as UK Special Forces.

Even when Parliament has approved military operations, there has been insufficient information available to parliamentarians. For instance, successive governments have pledged (in correspondence with the Joint Committee on National Security Strategy) to release unclassified versions of the NSC’s country strategies but have failed to do so. Ministry of Defence (MOD) annual reports and Conflict Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) country reports are limited to snapshots of activities in a selection of countries where the UK is deployed.⁸³

The UK government has been widely criticised for its claims that there is no proof of UK airstrikes against Islamic State (IS) causing more than one civilian casualty.⁸⁴ Airwars and others have argued that with more than 3,700 bombs and missiles dropped,⁸⁵ this claim ‘stretches credulity’.⁸⁶ The US military has stated that there is ‘credible’ evidence British airstrikes against IS ‘killed civilians in Iraq and Syria’ – something that the MOD continues to deny.⁸⁷

It is only through making ‘data available openly’ that the UK and others can understand ‘the effect of existing policies’ and begin ‘implementing a coherent foreign and development policy’.⁸⁸ Such data should be disaggregated by gender so that the differing effects that conflict has on women, girls, men and boys are all taken into account. Attempts to learn from external expertise in Afghanistan were greatly undermined by the ‘unprecedented’ shielding of data which started in 2015. As Bryan Bender and Paul McLeary note in *Politico*, ‘[t]he Pentagon’s secrecy, while perhaps defensible on security grounds, left a misleading impression of just how swiftly [Afghan] forces might fold under Taliban pressure’.⁸⁹

Transparency is most useful when structures are in place to help us learn from the available information. Development Monitor notes that greater transparency ‘would need to be complemented by effective use of data across government, and cross-departmental accountability mechanisms’.⁹⁰ Parliament, the media, academia and think tanks are all drawing lessons from the data in this way (see textbox). The MOD, and wider UK Government, should support the work of these groups through honest debate and investment, to ensure that the data can generate useful lessons. This is especially important when it comes to experts attempting to understand the impact of conflict on those most vulnerable, such as women, religious or ethnic minorities and the young.

As it stands, the current posture – remaining broadly allergic to thorough scrutiny and debate – will have a significant bearing on how effectively Parliament, the media and other external experts can scrutinise UK strategy, hampering their ability to judge the success or failure of policies, evaluate the needs of UK personnel, and suggest alternatives to ensure that the UK prioritises an approach to national security abroad that serves national interests (including conflict prevention and the promotion of open societies) effectively.⁹¹

The Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network (EPON)

There have been a number of rigorous reports by external experts assessing international engagement, highlighting the standard of evaluation that can come from independent review of military operations. For instance, the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), together with over 40 partners from across the globe, has established an international network to jointly research the effectiveness of peace operations. Each EPON case study focuses on a specific peace operation using a common methodology. In their own right, these case studies provide unique insights into specific operations. Jointly, however, the case studies also create a comprehensive resource on peace operations and their effectiveness.

Conclusion: Operating in imperfect conditions

It might seem unrealistic for some to recommend that persistent engagement should only be used as part of a long-term peace strategy and theory of change, grounded in meaningful engagement with people in conflict-affected communities, including women, and properly accountable to external observers. This is especially true at a time when UK strategies, such as the Stabilisation Unit's *Elite Bargains* report, indicate a shift within government *away from* ambitious strategies which bring together security investments with transformative peace and human rights aims. They instead seem to be guided by the mantra 'all good things don't come together'.⁹² The same was argued by a number of roundtable participants who said the UK may need to act quickly with an approach that is "good enough".

Certainly, idealistic strategies that promise all things to all people with no leverage, capacity, or rigorous thinking are a route to repeated failure. However, this does not mean the UK and its allies should just concentrate on immediate interests such as counter-terrorism or counter-migration. Past experience has shown that shortcuts to security routinely backfire. There are very few examples (if any) where operating without a clear, well-thought-out and realistic strategy has achieved positive change in the long term – and there are many examples where such engagement has made matters worse. Former UK Ambassador Sir Mark Lyall Grant noted in 2014 that, '[a]t times, our eagerness to "get something done" means we do more harm than good, and contribute to further instability.'⁹³

There is, of course, a balance to be struck 'between addressing short-term goals, such as immediate security, and long-term objectives, such as institution building or reform'.⁹⁴ However, for many roundtable participants, the UK has focused too much on the former, while simply paying lip service to the latter. Past campaigns in the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, the Sahel and elsewhere have shown that unless the UK and its allies actively prioritise longer-term objectives, "[t]here's no proof that eventually everything falls into place".

Instead, it is likely that the 'good enough' will take resources away from longer-term efforts.⁹⁵ As one participant said, "if all the funding available is for training and equipment rather than more resource and time-intensive programmes, such as institutional reform, this results in an emphasis on increasing militarisation". Past campaigns have clearly shown these risks, and if persistent engagement is to avoid falling into the same traps it must learn these lessons and avoid the same short-term thinking.⁹⁶

Recommendations

Repeating past mistakes is not inevitable. At a strategic level, if the UK's new approach to conflict is truly cross-governmental, grounded in a commitment to conflict prevention, open societies and based on the needs of people in conflict-affected areas, it will provide an important framework for military deployments.⁹⁷ Similarly, those implementing the persistent engagement strategy should be informed by this process and ensure:

- **meaningful engagement (and participatory governance) with people in conflict-affected countries**, including women and women's rights organisations. This should build on work already done within government and by NGOs, such as Saferworld's community security model
- **when working on international strategies for countries or regions**, there is:
 - a focus on the long-term drivers of conflict using the different levers of diplomacy, development, trade and defence
 - meaningful buy-in and investment from key partners and allies engaged in the same country or region
- **when deployments do not clearly work towards long-term peace, the UK considers not engaging at all**

The UK Government should also improve the transparency, accountability and learning surrounding UK military deployments, specifically:

- releasing public summaries of NSC country and thematic strategies
- releasing timely, accurate and gender-sensitive information on 'non-combat' operations
- re-evaluating the 'no comment' policy over UK Special Forces (and not extending the same policy to the Special Operations Brigade).
- developing/strengthening procedures and allocating necessary resources to independent experts (including gender experts) for effective monitoring, evaluation and learning processes

Notes

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- 2 HM Government (2021), 'Defence in a competitive age', March (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/defence-in-a-competitive-age/defence-in-a-competitive-age-accessible-version>) (Defence Command paper)
- 3 Integrated Review
- 4 Watson A (2020), 'Questions for the Integrated Review #2: How to Engage: Deep and Narrow or Wide and Shallow?', Oxford Research Group, July (<https://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/questions-for-the-integrated-review-2-how-to-engage-deep-and-narrow-or-wide-and-shallow>)
- 5 See for example: Saferworld (2017), 'We need to talk about Egypt', October (<https://saferworld-indepth.squarespace.com/v/international-support-for-the-regime>); Aliaga L and Tricot O'Farrell K (2017), 'Counter-terror in Tunisia: a road paved with good intentions', Saferworld (<https://saferworld-indepth.squarespace.com/counter-terror-in-tunisia-a-road-paved-with-good-intentions>); Attree L (2016), 'Blown Back: lessons from counter terror, stabilisation and statebuilding in Yemen', Saferworld, February (<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1033-blown-back>); Suri S (2016), "Barbed wire on our heads": lessons from counter-terror, stabilisation and statebuilding in Somalia', Saferworld, February (<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1032-barbed-wire-on-our-heads>)
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- 7 Including former and serving military personnel, civil society representatives from the US, the UK, West Africa, the Middle East and the Horn of Africa, parliamentary researchers and academics.
- 8 Attree L, Dumsay T, Egan J (2021), 'Ensuring the UK's New Conflict Framework Successfully Promotes Peace', Foreign Policy Centre, 14 July (<https://fpc.org.uk/ensuring-the-uks-new-conflict-framework-successfully-promotes-peace/>); Ahmad T (2021), 'Armed Conflict: Children', Written Answer House of Lords, HL1371, 24 June (<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-06-24/hl1371>); Integrated Review
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About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity. We are a not-for-profit organisation working in 12 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

A British soldier, deployed in support of Operation Inherent Resolve, briefs security forces before training in Erbil, Iraq, 10 January 2018. This training is part of the overall Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve building partner capacity mission which focuses on training and improving the capability of partnered forces fighting Islamic State. (Public domain)

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This briefing aims to capture the discussions of the group, including their key conclusion, and so may not reflect the views of their organisations or Saferworld.

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