

## **ARMED FORCES OVERSTRETCH - A 'CRAB'S' PERSPECTIVE**

The easy answer in establishing where the blame lies for 'Armed Forces Overstretch' is to say "The Government is to blame". However, defence spending in relation to defence commitments is a far more complex issue and one that requires much forthright honesty if the problem is to be addressed in a meaningful way. Whilst the current Government certainly has a major responsibility in setting the budgets and formulating foreign policy, previous governments, and the services have also played their part.

It may be unfashionable to say so, but we, former servicemen and women, constrained by feelings of loyalty and confidentiality, looked on as the last conservative administration cut the armed forces budget. They gave us 'Options for Change' and 'Front Line First' and the assumptions upon which the new look armed forces would be funded, manned and equipped. For our part, we planned on the basis of these assumptions and accepted the Uniform Regular Core Manpower Requirement (URCMR), 'Just in Time Logistics', reduced stockpile planning and weapons platform reductions with only internal murmurs of discontent. At the time, with few major overseas commitments, it seemed only right and proper that the services should do their part to assist the exchequer and reorganise to meet the new assumptions against which British forces would be expected to operate in the 'New World Order'. However, given the radical nature of the reorganisation, not least alone the significant reduction in uniformed personnel, support systems and weapons platforms, it was surely incumbent on the heads of service to lay down a marker that the British Forces in their reduced state were no longer capable of concurrent major overseas operations. If this was done how did we end up fighting in two major conflicts on two separate fronts in addition to supporting several minor operations?

At this point it would be as well to examine the major 'Assumptions' which underpinned the 'Options for Change' reorganisation. The principal assumption being that the UK armed forces would operate in conjunction with other armed forces, primarily within the NATO command structure. To that end, the UK would provide forces and a command structure for the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps (ARRC) including a joint logistics HQ. United Nations operations were also envisaged along with several established standing roles commensurate with UK national interests. In order to ensure that these commitments could be met the URCMR was predicated on the following:

- a. Only one major operation, Contingency Force (CF) level, could be undertaken at a time. The force would be capable of six months high level war fighting at which point it would either be replaced by another nation or, job done, return to UK for recuperation, retraining and rearming. It was not expected that the force would conduct another major operation within 2 years. (For the RAF this equated to up to 100 aircraft and 12-15000 personnel.)
  
- b. Alternatively, a medium sized operation, Formation Level (FL), could be undertaken on a continuous basis. The force would be rotated every 4-6

months and could be sustained in a theatre of operations indefinitely.(For the RAF this equated to up to 72 fast jets and 9000 personnel.)

- c. A contingency force and a formation level force could not be deployed concurrently.
- d. Several, (2 or 3), smaller forces, Unit Level (UL), could be deployed concurrently with a formation level force but not a contingency force. (For the RAF this equated to 4-8 aircraft and 50-250 personnel per unit level op.)

At first glance, it might appear that a CF operation, (divisional size) would present the greatest potential for overstretch but in fact this is not strictly true. A FL force operation (brigade size), with its open ended commitment, requiring at least twice yearly rotation of the full force alongside a continuous need for pre-deployment training, R and R for the troops and equipment replacement due to wear and tear, poses the greater drain. When a FL operation follows a CF operation without the necessary recovery period, as happened in Iraq, the resource drain becomes unsustainable.

In 2003 The Government produced a paper entitled 'Delivering Security In A Changing World' from which the following is an extract: "...Ability to support 3 simultaneous small to medium scale operations...one an enduring peace-keeping mission (e.g. Kosovo)" and "The ability, at longer notice, to deploy forces in a large scale operation while running a concurrent small scale operation".

It appears that the 2003 paper is out of kilter with the assumptions made by the previous government and upon which the then heads of service signed off. Of course any government is within its rights to re-evaluate its defence posture, that is not at issue, but, aspirations are not reality and changes of this nature must be costed, funded and established. Given that prior to 2003 our troops were already in Afghanistan and Kosovo and that a major war fighting operation in Iraq took place that year, was this paper written to plan for the future or defend a position already taken? Knowing the assumptions upon which their current forces were structured did the heads of service have any input and if so, given that forces manpower was being reduced still further from the levels agreed in 1997, (RAF URCMR 52200 down to 41000), did they accept that the revised manning state was adequate for the task as detailed? If they did not, did the Minister of Defence know or understand the implications?

It is possible that in 1997 the planners got it wrong and that the tasking as outlined above was manageable with the reduced establishment, but current press reports tend to indicate otherwise. A succession of senior service chiefs, past and present, have gone on record to publicise the chronic overstretch they see every day within our armed forces. Urgent operational requirements (UOR's) not being implemented, old weapons platforms having their in-service life extended, operational capability gaps occurring (e.g. lack of fleet air defence), insufficient rest between deployments, poor personnel retention rates, lower recruitment, reduced training opportunities (e.g. aircraft not available for Para wings jumps), the list seems endless.

If the service chiefs now believe it necessary to speak out when in the past those feelings of loyalty and confidentiality, mentioned earlier, prevented their predecessors from doing so, the situation must be dire. Either the tasking must be reduced to meet the resources allocated or the resources increased to meet the task. Doing nothing is not an option.

Therefore, UKNDA must educate the Government in the cold mathematical reality that, as good as the British armed forces are, they will always be limited by manpower and resources.

“Give us the tools and we will finish the job.” (WS Churchill)

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