Deployment is Fundamental to Capability

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Experiences of past conflict tell us much about force deployment, and militaries understand these lessons. However, popular perceptions around force design continue to get in the way.

In recent months there has been extensive discussion and commentary on the French Army's Operation Serval, conducted to defeat Islamic extremists in Mali. Much of that discussion examined whether the UK should develop a capability that would offer policy-makers the ability to deploy faster than existing forces can, and that can additionally be sustained at greater range.

Oddly, these discussions largely ignored previous French operations such as Leopard (1978) and Manta (1983–84) which bore strong similarities to France's activities in Mali. All these cases were essentially light force deployments into Francophone Africa in areas which had strong existing links with French foreign policy. As a result, these forces concerned were, in general, deploying into areas that they understood very well.

This article suggests that effective deployment, both in terms of speed and distance, is probably the greatest contemporary challenge facing the British Army. As such, it may be useful to consider how the rapidity of a force deployment serves the policy objectives for which armed force is needed. As a general rule, rapid deployment capability is expensive: weighing the costs involved in obtaining this capability against the benefits it accrues is therefore crucial.

It could even be asked why any part of the current British Army exists if it cannot be deployed overseas in such a way that is not only practical, but also credible in the eyes of potential adversaries. In order to obtain this credibility, this author suggests that deployment overseas must be relatively easy to do, and the forces involved must still be capable of inflicting harm upon enemies at acceptable levels of risk. From this viewpoint, deployment capability has significant implications for deterrence.

Language

Much of the discussion on mobility has been hampered by the way the concept has been understood. Western military doctrine and academic studies have tended to address mobility in three categories: strategic; operational; and tactical. In other words, conventional conceptual understanding of mobility is strongly aligned to the levels of war. This way of thinking is not fit for purpose. As such this article proposes four alternative categories; transportability, marching, obstacle-crossing and protection as a more appropriate lens through which to understand the idea of mobility.

Transportability is defined here as the ability to move a unit, formation or force in or on other vehicles, such as ships, aircraft, rail or road vehicles (transporters). Marching is the ability to move long distances by road at an effective speed and with relative security. Obstacle-crossing is the ability of individual vehicles to surmount a set series of obstacles, or move over various surfaces and inclines. That may include amphibious capabilities.

The fourth category has been mostly overlooked: protection. In general, a better-protected vehicle has greater freedom of action and mobility than one that is not. For example, if a logistics fleet comprises vehicles protected by Level 1 or 2 armour – designed to resist NATO 7.62x51mm ball and Russian 7.62x39mm armour-piercing ammunition at close range, grenade blasts/fragments and small mines – then it can continue to use routes routinely subject to small arms fire. If they have no protection then someone with an AK-47 can effectively interdict or degrade the main supply route.

It is worth noting that during Operation Gothic Serpent in Mogadishu in 1993, eight US soldiers were killed moving in unprotected vehicles, five died as a result of helicopter shoot downs and five died fighting dismounted. Even popular accounts such as the film Black Hawk Down (2001) make it clear that lack of protected mobility meant unskilled and untrained opponents were able to effectively fix the force. While this point might be obvious, it is similarly apparent that protection has rarely featured in discussions or doctrine as the major enabler of tactical mobility. Rather than specific tactical or strategic lessons learnt, own-force casualties were the major driver of the reversal of US policy that followed Gothic Serpent. Thus protected mobility bears strongly on the policy discussion.

3 Commando Brigade recognised that its lack of protected mobility limited the types of operations which it could perform. As a consequence, it acquired the ATV(P) Viking BVS10 to address this concern. 16 Air Assault Brigade appears to currently lack a similar option. Clearly a discussion predicated on the idea that supposedly heavy or armoured forces are slow to deploy relative to a light force with no or little effective protected mobility is simplistic because it does not consider the nature of what is deployed as defining effectiveness. Deploying 'something' may actually be worth little or nothing. The case of Task Force Smith, which was deployed to slow advancing North Korean forces in 1950, may be an overstated and overused example. Nonetheless, the fact remains that – given the inadequacies of the deployed force structure and of equipment provision – higher headquarters assigned the force an impossible task.

The Art of the Possible

A force must be both deployable and also sustainable, ideally by the same means. The categories used to develop the understanding of mobility are therefore equally applicable to sustainment. Different parts of the planet require different sustainment models in terms of what size of force can be effectively sustained over what period and at what frequency of resupply. Again, this article suggests that there may be merit in examining a 'sustainment-configured force structure', rather than seeking to merely sustain the force of choice built on conventional combat power models.

Helpfully, there are very few variables that are insufficiently understood when it comes to the mechanics of deploying an armed force. Physically counting the number of vehicles in an armoured brigade will enable one to exactly calculate the physical space required on board any form of transport. The exact levels of sustainment required for a given number of hours of combat operations are also known because models exist, or can be obtained. How to sustain a force at a given distance over a given period of time should, therefore, be a relatively straightforward calculation because of data generated from experience. However, this experience can only be reliably gained, as it was in the British Army of the Rhine (BAOR), by regular field training, which should include rehearsing the embarking of the force, even if such exercises are limited to the unit level.

In large part, deployment, and the speed at which it can be conducted, is a detailed modelling, physics and mathematics problem. How a military obtains, trains and sustains a deployable force has cost implications – which are the overriding factor. It also seems fair to ask: Why pay for a force that cannot be deployed? Moreover, why pay for a deployable force unable to defeat the enemy in line with policy objectives?

Just as critically, if a deployable force does not exercise repeatedly and realistically, then it may be impossible to gather the sustainment and equipment support data (such as the mean time between failures) needed to administer formations in the field. As such, more refined costing and sustainment models will never be developed.

The issues the deployment discussion raises strike at the heart of what the British Army should/could look like, and is able to do.

The Legacy

Much of what the British Army knows and understands about conventional warfighting is derived from the BAOR. This was not an expeditionary force and its attempt to generate one in 1990–91 for Operation Granby – as part of UK activities in the First Gulf War – was less than elegant. Vehicle serviceability was low, parts were in short supply and essential equipment and sustainment materiel frequently had to be begged, borrowed or stolen from US forces. Arguably the 1930s were the last time the UK had to consider truly expeditionary force models and that was in the context of the British Empire.

The 1956 Suez Crisis, specifically Operation Musketeer, and losses incurred during the British military response following Argentina's invasion of the Falklands raised serious questions about force projection. More recently, the character of operations the British Army has fought and sustained itself on while deployed since 2003, offers no guarantee that the necessary understanding and insights have been created to generate a force able to operate in a highly dispersed and high-threat theatre of operations against an enemy possessing capable systems – whether peer or near-peer. However, those insights are obtainable given sufficient objective experimentation and rigorous examination of current conflicts and operations.

One of the most significant obstacles to an open examination of deployment capability is the defence budget which has, for whatever reasons, failed to recognise the desirability of rapid effects as on overall land force structure concern. As a consequence, the Army 2020 model of a reactive and an adaptive force was the outcome of a process that had to be delivered within very tight (perhaps impossible) timelines and financial constraints. A force that can react and then adapt is, at least by implication, suited to expeditionary operations. However, if priorities not directly associated with expeditionary and deployment aspects have gained ascendancy in terms of the size and composition of those two forces, then the outcome may well fall short. No army starts with a clean sheet of paper.

Conclusion

What an effective and deployable force should or could look like should be well known and well understood. There are no major gaps in knowledge. The current conduct of modern warfare does not suggest that there are large areas of ignorance with regards to force and equipment capabilities.

If given clear guidance and constraints, particularly cost, as to what force best serves the policy options the UK government desires, it is comparatively simple to construct a force in line with those requirements. Should that guidance be lacking then it is almost impossible.

Where, when and against whom a military may fight is mostly unknowable. How it will fight should be well known and well understood. It is this question of 'how' which, in large part, informs what is needed.

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