

The British Army and its Preparedness for Expeditionary Operations

Military theorist *William F Owen* considers whether the British Army's post-SDSR configuration of permanently formed Multi-Role Brigades will enable the British Government to prosecute overseas operations with confidence

The announcement in the recent UK Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) that the majority of the British Army would be reconfigured into five Multi-Role Brigades (MRBs) has raised surprisingly little comment. The overall belief seems to be that this is a good thing. Another view would be that these brigades seem predicated on convenience and cost savings, more than anything else.

To quote from fact sheet number five – one of 21 that accompanied the review: “The new Defence Planning Assumptions envisage that British Armed Forces in the future will be sized and shaped to conduct:

- an enduring stabilisation operation at around brigade level (up to 6,500 personnel) with maritime and air support as required, while also conducting:
 - one non-enduring complex intervention (up to 2,000 personnel), and
 - one non-enduring simple intervention (up to 1,000 personnel);
 OR alternatively:
- three non-enduring operations if we were not already engaged in an enduring operation;

OR:

- for a limited time, and with sufficient warning, committing all our effort to a one-off intervention of up to three brigades, with maritime and air support (around 30,000, two-thirds of the force deployed to Iraq in 2003).”

In simple language, this means that the UK aims to be able to perform, in the first case, an enduring brigade-sized operation, while having the option to conduct two other Battle Group-sized operations that are “non-enduring”. As reasonable as this may seem, it begs a large number of questions. Firstly, the enduring operation is described as “stabilisation”. This makes it distinct from “combat operations”. The assumption behind the description would seem to suggest that the brigade would be expecting only a very low casualty rate, and thus three brigades, each deployed for six months at a time, could sustain the operation indefinitely. Clearly, the ability to deploy only one brigade for an enduring stability operation means the UK risks being militarily irrelevant to situations where sustained combat operations are required.



Challenger II Main Battle Tank numbers may come under significant pressure if the UK is involved in simultaneous ground operations in the future



A British Army soldier from the Royal Dragoon Guards on patrol in Helmand province, Afghanistan

The idea that combat operations are “non-enduring” is problematic. However, a more tricky assumption is that neither of the two non-enduring “complex” and “simple” operations will become enduring or require reinforcements. It would be negligent to assume any operation the UK commits forces to does not become enduring or would require only stabilisation-type operations. What makes an operation complex or simple probably defies useful description, but history tells us there is simply no way of knowing the eventual scale or duration of any operation to which one commits.

The structure of a Multi-Role Brigade

A Multi-Role Brigade is supposed to contain:

- 1 x Formation Reconnaissance unit
- 1 x Main Battle Tank (MBT) unit
- 1 x Armour Infantry unit
- 1-2 x Mechanised Infantry unit
- 1-2 x Light Infantry unit
- 1 x Artillery unit

It seems odd to make the assumption that the three brigades committed to a one-off intervention will not result in a situation requiring three brigades for an enduring stabilisation effort.

It has to be assumed that any brigade deployed on combat operations would be mission-tailored. That said, the proposed structure should be able to generate two armoured Battle Groups (BGs) of two armoured infantry companies and two MBT squadrons each, with a battery of guns in support. This would leave one battery to support an infantry BG. Indications from non-UK operations, such as the Lebanon and Gaza, are that additional MBT and artillery support would be required, so these resources would have to be found from other brigades. While the UK is cutting numbers of MBTs and AS-90 155mm self-propelled guns, the point requiring attention is the possible need to provide the MBTs and AS-90s from the two non-deployed brigades to the three brigades deployed, in order to prosecute an all-out effort.

It has to be conceded that the current MBT and artillery holdings within the proposed brigade structure might be enough for three infantry BGs each with an MBT squadron and artillery battery in support, with one remaining infantry BG and MBT squadron in reserve, and thus not requiring a dedicated battery. However, the performance of infantry BGs would vary because of the nature of the major equipment involved. For example, a Warrior company possesses substantially more combat power than a light infantry company.

If Multi-Role Brigades are really just a collection of sub-units to which additional supporting arms may be attached as and when required, then they may be fit for purpose. The assumption that one brigade conducting

an enduring operation requires two additional brigades to maintain the operation would also seem reasonable. But after that, the assumptions begin to look like justification for the reasons previously stated.

The wrong question

It is not the Army's job to predict when, where and how it will fight, or even to have an opinion of the "future character of conflict". It is the Army's job to be able to destroy, defeat and deter any armed group that the government tells it to, with the only constraint being the costs imposed by policy. Generally, these costs would be the money spent and casualties taken. This being the case, the army's sole concern is the conduct of warfare, with the aim of being able to confront and defeat both regular and irregular armed groups.

Funds are limited, and the UK will be required to have the Army it can afford, not the Army it wants

Therefore, at the very least, it seems fair to ask: if the UK has the fourth largest defence budget in the world, why can it commit only three brigades to combat for only six months, and do nothing else if it had to?

If three Brigades – limited to six months in the field – are seen as potent enough, then the current thinking would seem to be based on a perception that the armed threats the UK will face will be ill-equipped and ill-trained.

The right question

Funds are limited, and the UK will have to have the Army it can afford and not the Army it wants. Permanently formed MRBs, based on largely evidence-free assumptions about the nature and duration of operations, are probably an unnecessary constraint on fielding the most effective force for the money. The UK has a fit-for-purpose picture of the type of threats it will face. Their equipment and their methods of operation are known and knowable. What the UK can never predict is where, when and why it would be required to fight.

This would suggest that the UK should configure its forces to fight sustained and enduring combat operations of whatever size the budget allows, as this represents the most demanding scenario. In real terms, this means having one-third of the armed forces committed to combat operations, with the other two-thirds preparing or recovering. The size of the overall force is dependent on the money available, but regardless of size, the force required should probably be judged in terms of sub-units within a division, that can be organised into BGs and formations as and when required. Battle Group and Formation HQs would be permanently formed as sub-units themselves. This approach is not radical, and it is one that history and operational analysis tend to support.

The training requirement for whatever size of force can be afforded has to be able to account for battles against competent regular forces, as well as fighting poorly equipped irregulars such as the Taliban. This should easily account for fighting a well-equipped irregular force fighting in a fortified region, as partially demonstrated by Hezbollah during the Second Lebanon War of 2006. This is a fairly simple requirement, and should not represent a conceptual challenge. There is no excuse for being confused in this regard.

Given this, it would seem fair to at least challenge the efficacy of permanently formed multi-role brigades as the best and most sustainable method of generating combat power. It certainly seems fair to suggest that Land Forces should not be configured to save money, but to ensure they gain the greatest amount of combat power for whatever funds are available. ■



British Army stocks of AS-90 155mm self-propelled guns were reduced in last year's SDSR