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An Analysis of Two Key Security Challenges Facing the United Kingdom Over the Next Ten Years

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Abstract

This paper looks into two disparate challenges to the British government over the next decade; terrorist attacks on British territory and the implications of state failure in Zimbabwe, and examines how the UK Ministry of Defence may need to respond to these as strategic challenges. The paper discusses the UK's experience with terrorist attacks on home territory, and explains how the Ministry of Defence can and should respond to this in a more effective manner. The Ministry will also need to consider its response to the potential for serious state collapse in Zimbabwe, not least due to obligations to the country, but also due to the number of Britons which may need to be evacuated.

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Introduction

In his first speech to the Labour Party Conference, Britain's Prime Minister, Gordon Brown spoke of the challenges that lay ahead for the British people including '... the terrorist and security threat...' and of his determination to '...stand up for the British national interest.'¹ These words provide context for this paper which analyses two strategic level security challenges which may confront the United Kingdom (UK) Ministry of Defence (MOD) in the next 10 years - terrorist attacks on the UK mainland, and state collapse in Zimbabwe. For the purposes of this paper, 'strategic challenges' are considered to be challenges to UK national interests which may drive military force structure, posture and capability adjustments. The paper will focus on the nature of the challenges and their implications for the UK MOD. The potential consequences of inaction will be outlined briefly, as will the impact on UK Defence Policy formulation and capability development.

The paper contends that further terrorist attacks on the UK mainland are highly likely, and that state failure in Zimbabwe probable. It suggests that in either case, MOD assets would be employed as part of any response, although a degree of discretion exists in relation to Zimbabwe. Moreover, each challenge poses a subtly different test for the MOD when set against the resource constraints it faces and current operational tempo.

Terrorist Attacks on the UK Mainland

The Al Qaeda attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001 (9/11), and subsequent attacks on UK mainland targets, have lent a significantly greater emphasis to counter-terrorism (CT) in UK strategic thinking. Terrorism on UK soil is not a new phenomenon and in meeting today's challenge, the UK can draw on 30 years experience of conflict with the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and other paramilitary factions. As a result, UK resilience to terror attacks is perhaps stronger than many other developed countries. For example, while acknowledging the difference in scale, the shock effect from the attacks in London on 7 July 2005 (7/7) lasted days, rather than months as was the case with 9/11. The UK experience of, and reaction to, terrorist attacks has consequently influenced the shaping of its CT response.

However, the terrorist challenge is becoming increasingly complex and interwoven as its nature has evolved. Today's terrorist threat is truly international and attacks seek to target a country's core values and way of life, rather than simply its infrastructure and institutions. Moreover, it makes use of the cover of the freedoms associated with liberal democracies, and originates from a diversity of groups, networks and

¹ Gordon Brown, *Strength to Change Britain*, Speech to Annual Labour Party Conference, 24 September 2007, Labour Party Website, available at: <<http://www.labour.org.uk/conference/brown_speech>>, accessed 9 February 2008.



individuals. Attacks are often driven by violent or extremist beliefs, are indiscriminate, and, unlike the IRA, today's terrorist is willing to become a martyr to his or her cause.² Furthermore, attacks are increasingly planned to coincide with events in the media spotlight in order to maximise exposure and global impact. For example, the 7/7 London bombings came the day after London won the 2012 Olympic bid, and on the first day of the G8 Summit in the UK. Finally, 'home-grown' and 'self-starter' terrorists, drawing on open-source technical information, add a further sinister and unnerving edge by posing a threat from within the target state. This further complicates the processes of prevention, detection and response.³

In November 2006, the then head of the UK's counter-intelligence and security organisation, MI5, surprised many when she spoke of '200 groupings or networks, totalling over 1600 identified individuals [in the UK] who are actively engaged in plotting, or facilitating, terrorist acts here and overseas.'⁴

The growing diversity and scale of the threat is being matched by continued evolution of terrorist tactics, in step with (or ahead of) changes in the CT response.⁵ Furthermore, the UK's continued military engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan, and its special relationship with the USA, adds fuel to anti-British feeling around the world and has thereby intensified the risk of terrorist attacks on UK soil.⁶ Therefore there is every indication that further terrorist attacks on the UK mainland remain a credible and serious strategic challenge to the government, including the MOD.

Under the homeland CT lead of the Home Office, the security and civil emergencies services provide core counter-terrorist capabilities for 'detection' and 'response'.⁷ However, in developing a robust CT capability, the Home Office requires extensive support from other departments. The MOD's homeland CT focus is on post-attack support to the civil powers (police, fire and ambulance services), although some standing military activities and capabilities, such as signals intelligence, contribute to CT efforts.⁸ This 'on request' support is not a force driver for the MOD, although there

² Edward Oakden, 'UK Puts Long-Term Perspective on Countering Terror Attacks.' *RUSI Homeland Security and Resilience Monitor*, Vol.4, No.5, June 2005, p. 8.

³ Aidan Kirby, 'The London Bombers as "Self Starters": A Case Study in Indigenous Radicalization and the Emergence of Autonomous Cliques.' *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol.30, No.5, May 2007, pp. 415-428.

⁴ Eliza Manningham-Buller, 'The International Terrorist Threat to the UK.' *Speech to the Mile End Group*, 9 November 2006, available at the MI5 website at: <www.mi5.gov.uk/print/Page374.html>, accessed 30 January 2008.

⁵ Since 9/11, terrorist attacks in the UK alone have included use of suicide bombs on public transport, car bombs in London and against Glasgow airport, threats to trans-Atlantic flights, plots to use Sarin poison gas, and a plot to kidnap and execute a muslim British soldier.

⁶ 'Security-United Kingdom.' *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment - Western Europe*, 3 April 2008, Jane's online, Defence Library Service, 2008, available at: <<http://www4.janes.com/subscribe/sentinel/>>, accessed 2 June 2008.

⁷ Frank Gregory, 'National Governance Structures to Manage the Response to Terrorist Threats and Attacks.' in *Homeland Security in the UK*, Paul Wilkinson (ed), Routledge, Abingdon, 2007, pp. 117-124.

⁸ Paul Wilkinson, 'International Dimensions of Homeland Security.' in *Homeland Security in the UK*, Paul Wilkinson (ed), Routledge, Abingdon: 2007, p. 375.



is a strong popular and political expectation that it would be available to respond to an attack. However, the UK's CT strategy seeks, wherever possible, to fight the terrorist threat as far as possible from the UK homeland, and it is in this regard that the MOD plays a more significant role as it has the specialist surveillance, power projection and firepower capabilities to prosecute such a strategy, in concert with diplomatic and economic levers.⁹

The potential impact of failing to respond to these challenges has been demonstrated graphically in the past few years. In economic terms alone, the cost of a successful attack can be very significant at the local, regional and global levels.¹⁰ The disruption caused to travel, costs associated with tightening security, and the fundamental undermining of national confidence have serious long-term impacts.¹¹

The challenge for the MOD is to continue to support standing CT activities, to support the Civil Powers following an attack, and to be prepared to take the CT fight to the terrorists. The UK's Strategic Defence Review 'A New Chapter', highlights the proliferation of terrorist capabilities and attacks, and sets out ways in which the MOD can enhance national CT capabilities and capacities.¹² However, CT funding remains based on the principle of Home Office lead, so the MOD faces stiff inter-departmental competition for resources. The MOD mantra has therefore become 'maximising the utility' of military capabilities to support CT while minimising the impact of the defence budget.¹³ Organisational and force structure changes such as the MOD CT focus¹⁴ and regional re-brigading of reserve forces have enhanced the MOD's contribution at marginal cost. However, if the MOD is to be able to take the fight to the terrorist, it will need to expand its pool of specialist forces and improve its surveillance and mobility capabilities. Costs are significant, and securing additional resources will be especially difficult while the UK remains so heavily committed to operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and while the MOD is still required to maintain significant conventional force structures as a safeguard against the possibility of a major regional conflict in the future.

9 Ministry of Defence, *The Strategic Defence Review - A New Chapter*, (Defence White Paper), British Government, 2002, Section 5, Paragraph 77.

10 In the two weeks following 9/11, an estimated \$2 trillion was lost on world equity markets. See Farzana Noshab, 'Global Economic Implications of 9/11 Attacks.' *Institute of Strategic Studies*, Islamabad, Vol. 22, No. 3, Autumn 2002, available at: <http://www.issi.org.pk/journal/2002_files/no_3/article/10a.htm>, accessed 4 June 2008.

11 Jonathan Stevenson, 'Securing Territory Against Terrorists.' *Adelphi Papers*, Vol. 44, No. 367, November 2006, p. 35.

12 Ministry of Defence, *The Strategic Defence Review - A New Chapter*, (Defence White Paper), British Government, 2002, Section 5, Paragraphs 79-88.

13 Ministry of Defence, *Delivering Security in a Changing World*, (Defence White Paper), British Government, 2003, Chapter 4, Paragraph 4.8.

14 The Directorate of UK and Counter-Terrorism Operations coordinates MOD efforts in support of homeland defence and CT activities.



State Collapse in Zimbabwe

In a continent rich in natural resources, the ravages of prolonged civil wars, political unrest, ethnic tensions and environmental challenges have brought many African states to the brink of collapse. Zimbabwe, once considered the continent's first 'tiger economy', has undergone a spectacular economic decline since gaining independence in 1980. This is despite a succession of aid packages from individual sponsor countries, and International Monetary Fund and World Bank support to land reforms, all of which have been effectively squandered by Zimbabwe in the increasingly desperate struggle by President Robert Mugabe to retain his stranglehold on power.¹⁵ By all the routine social indicators, Zimbabwe is already in the throes of a humanitarian crisis - life expectancy has fallen from 62 to 40 years in the past 20 years, infant mortality has doubled, and around 40% of the population are infected with HIV/AIDS.¹⁶ In addition, inflation is now running at 100,000% and 80% of the population are unemployed.¹⁷

There are up to 22,000 UK nationals living and working in Zimbabwe – a significant 'national interest', which the UK Government has made an obligation to support in the event of crisis.¹⁸ Moreover, the UK has affirmed the importance of Africa in its strategic foreign policy formulation, noting that the continent offers every prospect for human suffering and displacement, environmental degradation and, highly influentially, for providing 'opportunities for international criminal and terrorist networks to exploit.'¹⁹ Perhaps less rationally, there is a strong moral obligation felt by the UK - borne of its former colonial role and as leader of the Commonwealth - to be prepared to support Zimbabwe, notwithstanding the increasingly vitriolic anti-UK rhetoric of Zimbabwe's president.²⁰

There is also some concern that any power vacuum in Zimbabwe, should Mugabe step aside or die, could be exploited by malevolent groups, posing a long-term risk to regional and even global security. Some commentators have pointed to the heavy investment by China in Zimbabwe as a worrying development, although Chinese engagement appears purely economic rather than ideological. Nevertheless, Zimbabwe, and much of Africa, is regarded as a significant security risk by both the US and a number of European countries due to its size, porous borders and diverse populations. Indeed, there is even evidence of Al Qaeda activities in Zimbabwe,

15 Gideon Maltz, 'Zimbabwe After Mugabe.' *Current History*, Vol. 105, No. 691, May 2006, pp.214-215.

16 Tony Hawkins, 'Crisis in Zimbabwe.' in *Global Challenges and Africa (Report of the 2004 Tswalu Dialogue)*, Richard Cobbold and Greg Mills (eds), RUSI Whitehall Paper No. 62, pp. 31-32.

17 BBC, 'Zimbabwe Inflation Hits 100,000%.' available at: <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/7255588.stm>>, accessed 30 January 2008.

18 Foreign and Commonwealth Office, *Better World, Better Britain*, British Government, 2008.

19 Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 'The UK's Approach to Conflict Prevention in Africa.' British Government, available at: <<http://www.fco.gov.uk/servlet/Font?pagename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c>>, accessed 8 February 2008.

20 Robert Mugabe, Address to 62nd Session of the UN General Assembly, 2007, available at: <http://www.finalcall.com/artman/publish/article_4014.shtml>, accessed 30 January 2008.



which provides 'a safe haven, a place for money laundering', and a conduit for transnational criminal activities.²¹ It has therefore become an area of special intelligence focus and the subject of military contingency planning.

The most immediate challenge for the UK and MOD from Zimbabwe is to be prepared to conduct the evacuation of UK nationals should it be necessary. Such an operation, to a land-locked country with limited infrastructure, in a region of general instability, and over a distance of over 8,000 kilometres from the UK, would be a significant undertaking. While the number of potential evacuees would favour an overland exodus, there would inevitably be a requirement to airlift some personnel. The time pressure in either case would demand use of some MOD assets to provide secure passage, communications and logistics and/or medical support.

Maintaining forces at a sufficiently high readiness to effect an evacuation directly impacts the management of force elements and their training programmes. The potential for a deepening of the current humanitarian crisis, and the scars of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, suggest that the international community, including the UK, will likely have to intervene in Zimbabwe at some point in the future.²² Once again, experience suggests that military assets would be called upon to support at least the initial aid effort while Non-Government Organisations mobilise, with the potential thereafter for a longer-term commitment in support of stabilisation and reconstruction efforts.

Beyond Zimbabwe, the deeper strategic challenge for the UK and MOD is to contribute to capacity-building, and economic and social reform throughout Africa. Recent events in Chad and Kenya expose the volatility of the continent and the scope for internal political unrest to develop into more serious crises and spill-over into neighbouring states. The UK is a strong advocate of efforts to strengthen African countries' capacity to handle their own problems. Yet, while several interrelated initiatives have begun under the auspices of a variety of regional and global fora, the reality is that African institutions lack capability and capacity to cope with major crises. Indeed, while Zimbabwe has spiralled downward, its closest political ally, South Africa, has sat largely idle despite the comforting words of President Mbeke; South Africa's 'quiet diplomacy.'²³ Much, therefore, will depend on the response of the international community.

Maintaining the capability to respond to short-notice crises, including the ability to evacuate UK nationals from distant locations such as Zimbabwe, and the potential for

21 R. W. Johnson, 'Zimbabwe: The Case for Intervention.' *Current History*, Vol. 106, No. 700, May 2007, p. 234.

22 Cary McClelland, 'Political Capital Deficits in Zimbabwean Famine: National and International Responsibility for Prevention Failure.' *Journal for International Affairs*, Vol. 59, No. 2, Spring/Summer 2006, p. 315.

23 Greg Mills, 'Regime Change or Change within the Regime?' *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 150, No. 3, June 2005, p. 35.



a long-term peace support commitment represent significant challenges for the UK MOD. Although it possesses the right sort of capabilities to prosecute expeditionary operations of this nature, capacity is limited, particularly in logistical terms. Moreover, it has taken almost 20 years of direct military engagement in the Middle East for the UK to build an effective understanding of the regional culture and therefore leverage maximum military effect. Embarking on prolonged operations in Africa would not be an easy transition for the UK to make, even if commitments to Iraq and Afghanistan reduce sufficiently to allow it to happen.

Conclusion

The threat of further terrorist attacks against UK mainland targets is both credible and likely; it is a matter of when, not if. Failure to respond adequately to the terrorist threat would be an abrogation of government duty and would undermine the confidence of the populace. The impact would also be felt globally, even so there seems no prospect of entirely eradicating the threat. Rather, counter-terrorism efforts can best hope to reduce the possibility of attack, minimise the impact and enable a swift recovery.

Similarly, the government is committed to safeguarding the security of UK nationals abroad and will be compelled to respond should the security situation in Zimbabwe warrant it. Further, the very real prospect of a major humanitarian crisis in Zimbabwe would likely lead to a UK contribution to any multinational support effort. And, in a deeply unstable continent, it is in the UK's national interest to arrest collapse and to ensure that fragile states do not become the breeding grounds for the proliferation of more terrorist threats.

The security challenges set out in this paper require a coordinated 'whole of government' response and the UK MOD has a significant part to play in its delivery. The MOD must strive to ensure that its force structures, posture and capabilities remain agile and adaptive. The analysis supports the emphasis being placed on surveillance, special forces, long-range mobility and utility. Achieving these goals against a backdrop of resource constraint and continued commitments in the Middle East and Central Asia will require some delicate re-balancing of force structures and, without doubt, some hard decisions to be made regarding both policy and capability.

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