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Influence without power? Reframing British concepts of military intervention after 10 years of counterinsurgency

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British attitudes towards military intervention following the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan have undergone what appears to be considerable change. Parliament has voted against the use of Britain's armed forces in Syria and the public are unenthusiastic by overseas engagement. Conscious of the costs and the challenges posed by the use of British military power the government has been busy revamping the way it approaches crises overseas. The result is a set of policies that apparently heralds a new direction in foreign policy. This new direction is encapsulated in the Building Stability Overseas Strategy (BSOS) and the more recent International Defence Engagement Strategy (IDES). Both BSOS and IDES set out the basis for avoiding major deployments to overseas conflict and instead refocuses effort on defence diplomacy, working with and through overseas governments and partners, early warning, pre-conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction. Developing a number of themes that reach from across the Cold War to more contemporary discussions of British strategy, the goal of this special edition is to take into account a number of perspectives that place BSOS and IDES in their historical and strategic context. These papers suggest that using defence diplomacy is and will remain an extremely imprecise lever that needs to be carefully managed if it is to remain a democratically accountable tool of foreign policy.

Keywords: defence diplomacy; influence; intervention; counterinsurgency; stabilisation; defence engagement

British attitudes towards military intervention following the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan have undergone what appears to be considerable change. Parliament has voted against the use of Britain's armed forces in Syria and the public are unenthusiastic by overseas engagement. Conscious of the costs and the challenges posed by the use of British military power the government has been busy revamping the way it approaches crises overseas. The result is a set of policies that apparently heralds a new direction in foreign policy. This new direction is encapsulated in the Building Stability Overseas Strategy (BSOS) and the more recent International Defence Engagement Strategy (IDES). Both BSOS

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and IDES set out the basis for avoiding major deployments to overseas conflict and instead refocus effort on defence diplomacy, working with and through overseas governments and partners, early warning, pre-conflict prevention, and post-conflict reconstruction. Reflecting a change in emphasis following a decade of counterinsurgency (COIN), the strategies appear to offer a new way to achieve the UK's interests without the pain of enmeshment. However, what emerged out of a two-day conference (*Life After Counterinsurgency? Engagement, Stabilisation, Proxies*), held in May 2013 and summarised in this special edition, was more the recognition that *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*.

British thinking about intervention is stuck between an ambition to participate and a recognition that the country does not have the capacity to undertake operations everywhere and all the time. Confronting a global war against terrorism, where national interests need to be subordinated to international cooperation, the process of policy formulation has struggled to relate the concerns of British citizens to the challenges posed by political Islam. The result has been a paradoxical break in civil–military relations as the public continue to think favourably of the armed forces but, at the same time, have little interest in, or commitment to, the wars being pursued by the policy elite. Whereas such disengagement may previously have afforded the UK government the opportunity to pursue what it thought best without domestic interference, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have now created the conditions in which public discourse has retreated behind the Channel and left voters openly challenging the Whitehall consensus on multiculturalism, globalisation, and Europeanisation.¹

In this respect, the embedded nature of the Whitehall foreign policy consensus has made reframing British national interests – especially in relation to the United States – extremely difficult.² Whether the initial phases of the War on Terror were explained in terms of justice or eradication, Britain's involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan has exposed the fracture lines both in British society and in Whitehall strategy-making and left some commentators talking of a military failure and grand strategic defeat.³ In these circumstances it is difficult to see whether BSOS and IDES does anything more than concede defeat by papering over the cracks or instead properly represents a new approach to British overseas engagement. Either way, if as appears to be the case, containment is now the de facto US strategy then the effect of BSOS and IDES is to support the US exercise of global power rather than offer an alternative to it. If this is true then Whitehall's suggestion that defence diplomacy represents a break with the past is patently untrue. For as this special edition shows, throughout the Cold War successive British governments have used defence diplomacy and proxy forces as a lever to influence overseas governments and maintain the status quo. Indeed, what comes across strongly in the articles contained here is just how longstanding this policy has been and how difficult it is to manage this lever of state.

Reimagining twenty-first century wars in terms of a Cold War containment strategy does, then, pose some considerable challenges for the British government. The immediate threats facing the West have yet to manifest

themselves in a manner that lives beyond the world of the intelligence and counterterrorism communities. Britain's armed forces are consequently going through a process of tailoring their capabilities to match this unconventional threat and, in times of austerity, seeking ways to shoehorn themselves into foreign policy interventions as part of an international alliance structure. In many respects this re-gearing of conventional forces reproduces the 'use it or lose it' mentality that led to strategic failure in Helmand and suggests there has yet to be a proper reckoning by the military and policy-making elite on the effects of the last 10 years. Indeed, as Huw Bennett argues in this special edition, it would appear that more is being done to try to optimise interventions rather than to think through whether such adventures makes strategic sense.

An approach that emphasises forward containment does therefore need to be prudently managed. This is especially the case given the state of British civil-military relations, voter behaviour, and a public discourse that is increasingly framed in terms of an island mentality. Britain's policymakers are, therefore, presented with both opportunities and threats. The opportunity is to try to re-engage the public and re-energise the Clausewitzian trinity with a view to producing a reaffirmation of Britain's commitment to a democratically informed foreign policy. The threat is that the public does not see the benefits of even a containment strategy, does not recognise the value of foreign aid, and grows tired of constantly being held in high states of readiness in anticipation of a terrorist attack. Should the latter possibility dominate the public discourse then it is likely that the policy elite – whose impulse is for Britain to punch above its weight as a global player – becomes further alienated from broader sections of society.

If this is an accurate interpretation of the strategic predicament Britain's policymakers are faced with then a number of deep concerns arise, concerns that have informed the articles contained within this special edition of *Small Wars & Insurgencies*. Developing a number of themes that reach from across the Cold War to more contemporary discussions of British strategy, the goal has been to take into account a number of perspectives that place BSOS and IDES in their historical and strategic context. Huw Bennett and Geraint Hughes kick off this edition by framing the strategic debate. Bennett explains Britain's part in the maintenance of a world order and questions the coherence of a strategy that sought to eliminate terrorism through an expeditionary counterinsurgency. Questioning the decision to remain in Afghanistan even as the strategy was not working, Bennett shows how policy-making communities have become trapped by modes of decision making that were not fit for purpose. By way of contrast, Hughes focuses on questioning what a proxy-war strategy might look like if applied to the recent civil war in Syria. Arguing that proxy wars create unintended strategic and ethical consequences, Hughes picks up Bennett's argument and observes that this sort of activity poses significant questions for a democratic government.

Having set the strategic context, the next five articles explore defence diplomacy across a number of historical and comparative case studies. The first

of these examines the bureaucratic politics associated with rationalising Britain's intelligence machinery in the 20-year period after the Second World War. Taking the perspective of the Colonial Office (CO), Gregor Davey argues that Whitehall centralised its intelligence organisation because it was overly obsessed with countering communism. This meant that communist threats might be found in places that CO administrators otherwise reported as run of the mill political agitation. Representing a clash of cultures between the CO and the rest of Whitehall, when it came to counter-subversion the intelligence reorganisation did not smooth away the challenges of these conflicting worldviews.

Interpreting events according to preconceived perspectives and in ways that overemphasise the influence of the intervening party forms the basis of the next three articles by Michaels, Ford, and Bachmann. Drawing on the US experience in Vietnam, Michaels observes that even when a partner is bankrolling a client government, the ability to influence events directly can be limited. In the case of Vietnam, the US could not prevent a series of coups d'état occurring. Reframing South Vietnamese coups from the perspective of the military leaders themselves, Michaels paints a completely different perspective on the effectiveness of US foreign policy. This suggests that the US was a helpless bystander in successive South Vietnamese leadership struggles, struggles that significantly undermined the US attempts to defeat the communist insurgency.

Taking this theme further, Ford considers the effectiveness of British defence diplomacy across three case studies: Uganda, Rhodesia–Zimbabwe, and Sierra Leone. Exploring the political settlements and the nature of civil–military relations in these countries, the article puts the indigenous actors back into the story and maps them to British foreign policy ambitions. What emerges is the way that diplomatic efforts to shape the internal politics of a target country can produce unintended consequences. At the same time, the article asks whether the particular conditions that made defence diplomacy and Security Sector Reform (SSR) in Sierra Leone a success are reproducible in a post-9/11 context.

Bachmann also seeks to examine the misapprehension of indigenous politics in relation to SSR but within a francophone context. According to Bachmann, francophone Africa's armed forces maintain the trappings of the European armed forces that they were modelled on but are inappropriately understood in terms of Huntingtonian civil–military relations theory. A more accurate representation of francophone Africa's political military culture, by contrast, would recognise that the military has formed the 'armed wing of the ruling elites' and is not the product of a social contract between citizen and state. Consequently, interventions that aim to introduce governance reforms that reproduce Western conventions in civil–military relations are in effect working against a political–military culture that seeks to maintain the existing structure of power relations. If this is the case then, as Bachmann observes, SSR policies primarily serve as a vehicle through which indigenous actors exploit Western donors.

By way of contrast with the preceding three articles, Clive Jones offers an example of a successful proxy intervention by the UK, one that was aimed at

providing an intelligence capability suitable for supporting the Omani armed forces in their prosecution of a robust counterinsurgency in the 1970s. The deployment of British Army Training Teams as cover for SAS intervention has largely been credited with providing the military means for achieving COIN success in Oman. However, little has been said about the way in which seconded British intelligence officers took over and reorganised Oman's intelligence machinery so that military capabilities could be employed effectively. In this article, Jones argues that these officers not only filled the intelligence deficit but were also particularly valuable for re-forging a relationship between the Omani Sultanate and the tribes, reaffirming the legitimacy of the existing political settlement, and creating the conditions for stability in the country after the insurgency had been defeated.

Whether it would be possible for Britain to apply such approaches in the twenty-first century remains to be seen. As Douglas Porch observes, however, the tools for undertaking similar activities by proxy have existed in various guises for some considerable time. Foreign legions and Private Security Contractors (PSC) potentially offer the state a more effective means for intervening overseas. Whereas foreign legions may be more culturally sensitive in difficult human terrain, PSCs offer plausible deniability and could allow states to prosecute the kinds of Omani campaign without having to intervene directly themselves. In both cases, a state might conclude that it can achieve its foreign policy goals without the need to embroil a casualty-averse domestic population. According to Porch, however, in both cases there is a great potential for praetorian blowback, blowback that comes from privileging these types of military capabilities at the expense of those armed forces that have emerged directly out of the social contract between the citizen and the state. For even as the political costs of overseas assistance are reduced, policymakers may find it too easy to over-indulge in the use of such proxy forces, offering the false hope that success will be easy and require little commitment.

Porch's argument, then, asks whether a government's overreliance on the support of legionnaires or PSCs is indicative of a failed social contract between a state and its citizens. In Rob Johnson's article this question is addressed directly. For if reliance on overseas forces indicates a citizen's lack of allegiance to the state then one potential way to shape and develop a legitimate political culture is by training a national army. As Johnson notes, this poses the question as to what this national army ought to look like. Should overseas training teams privilege military efficiency along Western lines at the expense of indigenous cultural practices or should cultural differences be encouraged for the sake of forging allegiances and creating new identities? If the objective is the latter then how will an army cope with the stresses of war? Inevitably more questions emerge with the complexity of the scenario. In the case of the Afghan National Army, will a professional force subordinate itself to the Afghan civil power or will it become a political actor in its own right? In these circumstances, as Johnson notes, the

intentions of an intervening training force may well be sound. Nonetheless, the potential pitfalls are great.

Given the range of considerations that have so far been outlined in this special edition, then, what might the reader conclude about defence diplomacy? Although clearly not new, is the tool capable of producing successes and if so can it be used to reframe British concepts of military intervention after 10 years of COIN? In the final article of this special edition, John Stone examines the prospects from the perspective of strategic theory and deterrence. After all, if it were possible to deter terrorists or insurgents by threatening the use of conventional capabilities such as drone strikes or the deployment of Special Forces then appropriate diplomatic solutions might be crafted that prevented a slide towards conflict. Here, however, we come back full circle to the challenge that 9/11 posed policymakers when deterrence appeared to have failed. For how do we key deterrence accurately into the beliefs and values of our potential adversaries – especially when they are non-state actors? How do we develop an appreciation for those values and beliefs when target audiences are by definition working covertly? How ought these deterrence messages to be conveyed, and what happens when multiple audiences interpret these deterrence messages in contradictory and unintended ways? These sorts of questions sound more a matter of strategic communications than strategic theory and point to the difficulty of shoehorning the military into the spectrum of pre- and post-conflict responses. Unfortunately from the perspective of reframing British conceptions of military intervention, Stone observes that military conventional deterrence may well have some utility but only in a limited number of situations and only as part of a range of tools designed to deal with overseas stability. Like the other articles in this edition, this suggests that using defence diplomacy is and will remain an extremely imprecise lever that needs to be carefully managed if it is to remain a democratically accountable tool of foreign policy.

Notes

1. [Barkawi and Brighton](#), 'Brown Britain'.
2. [Strachan](#), 'British National Strategy'.
3. [Porter](#), 'Why Britain Doesn't do Grand Strategy'.

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