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*The 5th in our 2021 series of expert comment and analysis, by **Lieutenant General Sir James Bucknall KCB CBE**, Deputy Commander Coalition Forces Afghanistan (2010-2011) and Commander of NATO's Allied Rapid Reaction Corps (2011-2013). As always, the views expressed are those of the author and not of Global Strategy Forum unless otherwise stated.*

The Defence Command Paper And The Army - Who Do We Think We Are Fooling?

'If this Defence Command Paper is anything, it is an honest assessment of what we can do and what we will do.'

The Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP, Secretary of State for Defence, House of Commons, 22nd March 2021.

Let it be said upfront: the Armed Forces are in dire need of investment. There is no question of the requirement to embrace the challenges and opportunities of the information age, and the Government deserves credit for the additional funding it has provided for Defence. But the Defence Command Paper has filleted the Army. The decision to reduce the size of the Regular component by 9,500 personnel represents a severe loss of capability and it is anything but 'honest' to suggest otherwise. We should be clear that in the grander scheme of Global Britain, this measure is neither a virtue nor

a necessity. If the Government is in the least bit serious about its analysis of the threats facing the Nation and ensuring that its Armed Forces are manned, trained and equipped to deal with them, these disastrous cuts must be reversed.

Defence reviews are generally tough for each Service and always require compromise. They are rarely threat driven and few survive contact with reality. The starting point is not the Nation's potential adversaries nor the strategic requirement, but money. That is far from the ideal, but it is an inescapable reality. Such an approach requires, however, that everyone is clear on the basis upon which decisions have been made and knows where the bodies are likely to be buried when the Armed Forces are next put to the test. We should, therefore, take with a huge pinch of salt the Defence Secretary's claim that *'we will ensure defence is threat-focused... ready to confront future challenges.'* And we should be equally sceptical when we are told repeatedly by the well-drilled chorus



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of military leadership that size no longer matters. As far as the Army is concerned, it is money – or the lack of it - which has driven a cut of 11.5% of its regular manpower, and it is technology, often itself brittle, which is being used as the fig leaf to disguise it.

In recent reviews Defence has treated Army manpower as an overhead, something to be cut in pursuit of 'efficiency', in lockstep with the rest of Whitehall. This approach may work, up to a point, when applied to the other two Services which man increasingly capable platforms, but it does not work for the Army. Manpower for any land force is a capability in its own right. It remains the key determinant for the delivery of enduring effect on the ground. Simply put, you cannot cut Army manpower, certainly not to the degree proposed, without cutting capability. It has been convenient for Whitehall to persuade itself otherwise in recent years, but the result has been a cut in Regular Army strength from 101,000 in 2010 to the now proposed 72,500, a reduction of nearly one third in less than a decade and a half. Does anyone genuinely believe a reduction of that magnitude matches our understanding of the threats facing the Nation and its interests today?

For the Defence Secretary, the Defence Command paper *'marks a shift from mass mobilisation to information age speed, readiness and relevance for confronting the threats of the future.'* If *'mass mobilisation'* is his start point, a concept and capacity that disappeared in any sense with the end of the Cold War more than three decades ago, it can be no surprise that the end state of this review is so hopelessly wide of the mark. The start point is in fact a Regular Army of just

82,000 personnel out of a total population of nearly 70 million. And the first casualty of his proposals will be *'relevance'*: relevance to the threat – the Russians probably had more soldiers in the Donbass region alone than the entire British Army – and relevance to our allies. As Admiral Mullen, former US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, delicately observed, following these cuts the British Army will be about the same size as the US Special Operations Forces Group.

Nor is this a deficit which can be plugged by the Reserves, which notably failed even to get a mention in the Defence Secretary's statement to Parliament. Despite the best of intentions, the Reserves as a construct has consistently demonstrated that in the 21st century it is insufficiently manned, trained and equipped for all bar the provision of individual reinforcements for pre-planned deployments, and the provision of specialist capabilities such as medical and some logistics.

So, how can technology help? In the Land domain, technology is an enabler, a facilitator. It can enhance situational awareness, response times and response itself. It can destroy an enemy, but it cannot replace *'boots on the ground'* - the ability to seize and hold ground, to win hearts and minds, to separate warring factions, to restore law and order, to deliver humanitarian relief, to respond to natural disasters, to assist the civil authorities (Covid-19?) and to carry out the countless other, diverse tasks which an army is required to fulfil. The Nation rarely has the luxury of picking which it will undertake and when; and they have an irritating habit of coming when you least expect them and simultaneously. It is naïve to imagine you



can choose your own wars - or pandemics; they generally choose you. It is equally naïve to imagine you can dip in and out. We have all lived through the flawed doctrine of 'fast in, first out.' Just look at Afghanistan. More often than not, if an intervention is to have enduring effect, it requires an enduring security presence which can only be sustained if an army has critical mass. Numbers count. And it is equally flawed to imagine that you can neatly package your combat power into a capable intervention force with less capable follow-on forces. There can be no such thing as a 2nd XI force in the age of hybrid warfare. You must always have the wherewithal at hand to overmatch your opponent, both symmetrically and asymmetrically.

New technology is essential to enhance the capability of the Army but to claim that it can compensate for an 11.5% reduction in the force as the Defence Secretary asserts (*'the Army's increased deployability and technological advantage will mean greater effect can be delivered by fewer people'*) is simply the pursuit of fools' gold. It is foolhardy to mortgage off manpower to this extent in exchange for a technological advantage which in the worst case may only be fleeting. As students of military history will be only too aware, technology is a continuously swinging pendulum. Every technological advance is checked in time by a countermeasure (JFC Fuller's Constant Tactical Factor). And it generally comes as a surprise when it happens.

But all this is to presume that there has been some science or design behind the decision to reduce the Army by 9,500 – a considered

calculation founded on a concept of operations and an agreed force structure, all calibrated against a common understanding of the threat. No such luck. Even now, a month after the publication of the Defence Command Paper, the Army is scrabbling around trying to work out the implications of this arbitrary cut for its establishments. The Defence Secretary has compounded the error by refusing to cut the numbers of units to match the loss of manpower. As he himself proclaimed in his statement to the House of Commons: *'there is no point in boasting about numbers of regiments...'* Why then has he cut only one unit, 2nd Battalion The Mercian Regiment, from the Army's Order of Battle, when he has removed 9,500 personnel from its establishment, equivalent to 17 units? It would seem the Government lacks the political cojones to give full expression to the extent of its under-the-counter hatchet work.

But such 'smoke and mirrors', hardly the *'honest assessment'* which was headlined, come at a hefty price. The Infantry is to lose just one battalion but will suffer a cut of 4,000 personnel, the equivalent of 7 battalions. We can all do the maths. The hollowed out structures which, with no sense of irony the Defence Secretary was bemoaning from his time in the Army (*'I was part of an Army that....was, in truth, a hollow force'*), will have to be hollowed out even further. But this time the knife is a hacksaw and it is cutting bone, not flesh. As many as 20 battalions may lose a rifle company, one third of their 'bayonet strength', and one third of their support company (snipers, anti-tank missiles, mortars, heavy machine guns). This is to accommodate a reduction in battalion



strength from c.550 personnel to c.420 – a 20% loss of manpower and a reduction in combat power of more than 30%. How does technology compensate for that?

And with these lower numbers as a backdrop, one has to question the Army's ability to generate an ever-greater percentage of its strength as Special Forces. The number of SF units has remained largely unchanged over recent decades and yet the pool from which they must recruit has declined by nearly 30% in the last decade alone. At some stage, concerns must be raised about quality. The introduction of a 1,000 strong Ranger Regiment exacerbates the pressure to deliver more from less. If the direct impact is not felt within the Special Forces units themselves, it will surely impact on the quality of the rest of the Field Army.

But even when it comes to reporting the numbers, the Defence Secretary has not been quite able to play with a straight bat: *'I have taken the decision to reduce the size of the Army from today's trained strength of 76,500 trade trained personnel to 72,500 by 2025. The Army has not been at its established strength of 82,000 since the middle of the last decade.'* As all soldiers know, any manning shortages against establishment are always made good prior to a unit's deployment on operations. But by reducing establishments themselves by 20%, Mr Wallace has chosen to deepen the hole and then to concrete over the top – all this at a time when Army numbers are on the up.

It is, of course, largely a result of the Government's own decision to outsource

recruiting to a civilian entity that the Army has been unable to meet its established strength in recent years. No one has ever been held to account for this debacle, nor within the Army itself which actively embraced the concept. But you can rest assured that the Defence Secretary's proposed remedy for the Infantry, *'Intelligent Recruiting'*, which is intended *'to ensure that there is a balanced allocation of recruits'*, will do huge damage to highly valued regimental identities and to a Regimental System which is itself the envy of other armies.

'Intelligent Recruiting' is code for directing English recruits into Scottish, Welsh and Irish regiments which, for reasons as much to do with the Government as with the Army, find it more difficult to man their battalions than their English counterparts. Not only will this dilute the identities of regiments with strong regional links, damaging the moral component of fighting power in the process, it is also likely to reduce the numbers actually wishing to join. There is a strong tradition of English recruits joining the Infantry's Celtic regiments, but they do so because they decide to, not because they are forced to.

Worse, *'Intelligent Recruiting'* will create a manning 'welfare state' under which those regiments with the poorest records of recruiting and retaining their soldiers will simply be rewarded with ever greater numbers of recruits – good money being thrown after bad with no one being held to account for poor performance. At a stroke, any incentive for those regiments which work hard on recruiting and retaining their soldiers will be removed; they will cease to reap any



benefit from the fruits of their considerable labours and resources. And we all know what happens next - the Infantry will be engaged in a race to the bottom.

Reinforcing failure in this way is alien to military doctrine, nor is it instinctively Conservative. But it is also papering over a more deep-seated problem – that is that people in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland identify less and less with their Army. This is the problem that the Government must address not paper over with the diversion of yet more English recruits into Celtic regiments. That outcome is neither good for the British Army nor for the Union. *'Intelligent Recruiting'* should start with Government-led initiatives in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast, not with gerrymandering in Newcastle, Doncaster and Exeter.

The issue for the Army is not just about numbers, it is about equipment, too. The Defence Command Paper asserts that our forces will still be able to warfight as their primary function. According to the Defence Secretary, *'3rd Division will remain the heart of our warfighting capability, leading NATO with two modernised heavy brigades.'* But the cancellation of the Warrior Capability Sustainment Programme and Warrior's consequent withdrawal from service and replacement by Boxer marks another significant reduction in capability. It replaces an Armoured Infantry Fighting Vehicle with a turret and a 30mm cannon, with an Armoured Personnel Carrier which, however well protected, is simply a battlefield taxi. No other country is using this version of Boxer to replace its Armoured Infantry Fighting

Vehicles. It is not clear how you will manoeuvre and fight a formation which mixes upgraded Challenger 3 tanks and Ajax armoured reconnaissance vehicles with a downgraded infantry capability. In conceptual terms this is nothing less than a reversion to the Army of the 1970s. Again, you would have hoped that a concept of operations to account for this mismatch had already been trialled and tested before taking such a decision – but apparently not. Yet further evidence that it is money, not capability, which has driven this ill-judged review.

In the words of the Defence Secretary: *'the success of this Defence Command paper should not be judged on the sophistication of its words, but the implementation of its reforms.'* By either measure, the omens for the Army look grim. The Defence Secretary proclaims that *'our people are truly our finest asset'* – fine words, indeed, but not matched by actions. The measures contained in the Defence Command Paper represent a substantial reduction in Land capability. There may be good arguments for such an outcome, although it is difficult to fathom them, but by dressing these cuts up as anything else, the Government is fooling only themselves – and down that route lies extreme danger.

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