

Reassessing the UK's potential role in UN Peacekeeping:

As British forces eagerly – and naively - joined the US in the invasion of Iraq in 2003, UK military commanders boasted about Britain's experience in nation-building, counter insurgency and peacekeeping compared to that of the US.

After all, Britain had the experience of the colonies and Northern Ireland. And just three years earlier, in a high profile operation, British forces had intervened to stop rebels and stabilise the government in Sierra Leone. A Guardian sub-editor wrote a headline, A Good Man in Africa, over an article I wrote about Brigadier David Richards, commander of the British force in Freetown, later appointed chief of the general staff and then chief of the defence staff. (Though he of course unilaterally extended his mandate.)

By contrast, after a Black Hawk helicopter, was shot down and 18 Americans were killed in an otherwise successful operation in Somalia President Clinton in 1994 issued presidential directive 25 restricting future US involvement in peacekeeping operations.

For Britain, it all went wrong in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In one of his first speeches after the coalition government came to power in 2010, the new defence secretary, Liam Fox, said British soldiers were not in Afghanistan “for the sake of the education policy in a broken 13th century country”. We were there, he said, “so the people of Britain and our global interests are not threatened”.

Two years later, after the loss of more than 400 British troops in Afghanistan, and long after Britain's own security and intelligence agencies agreed that the danger to Britain of any al-Qaida presence there had evaporated, Fox's successor, Philip Hammond, told the Guardian: “We have to be clear why we came here in the first place...We can ask troops who are here to help build a better Afghanistan, but we cannot ask them to expose themselves to risk for those tasks.”

Hammond continued. “We can only ask them to expose themselves to risk for Britain's national security, which is what they signed up to do.” Britain had “not come here to defeat the insurgency”.

In 2006, thousands of British troops were deployed to Helmand province in an operation the government desperately wanted to downplay, suggesting it was little more than a peacekeeping operation.

John Reid, defence secretary at the time, said he would be “perfectly happy” if they left “without firing a shot”. Senior Nato officials privately pleaded to me not to mention the possibility of their troops ever getting involved in battles with al-Qaeda or insurgents so worried were they, even then, about political and public opinion in the member states.

The lines between war-fighting, counter insurgence operations, stabilisation operations, and peacekeeping have been blurred. In Basra in 2003, the same group of British soldiers at the

front were fighting the remnants of the regime , in the middle were peacekeeping, and at the back were engaged in providing the inhabitants with water and electricity.

British commanders were deeply frustrated. The army was engaged in tasks it thought the International Development Department or the FCO, or other agencies, should be doing.

The historian Sir Hew Strachan has made a broader point. He has written in *The Direction of War*: “All armies worth their salt fear the threat that they will become a gendarmerie. A decision to prepare and sustain armed forces specifically for what have come to be called stabilisation operations, or even for counter-insurgency warfare, looks to those opposed to such ideas like an acceptance of an inability to fight and win what they would see as real war”.

Perhaps this explains why the Ministry of Defence now seems to take a very restricted view on the purposes of intervention. Not so long ago there was much talk of a “comprehensive approach”, a conflict resolution fund, and stabilisation fund. Now the MoD has adopted a limited approach to intervention.

The protracted conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, for which British forces were not prepared, has led to deep distrust and even opposition, according to opinion polls, about any kind of future military intervention by British forces.

Sir Peter Wall, the chief of the general staff, recently, has spoken about a sense of “moral disarmament in the west”.

The Commons defence committee recently noted that the MoD said it now defined “intervention” as “the projection of military force...to achieve an effect in securing, protecting or promoting UK national interests through the use or threat of force”. The committee observed: “This definition seems to us to be very narrow as it takes minimal account of the UK’s wider responsibilities as a UN security council member...”

The committee went on: “The government should set out in detail in the next iterations of the National Security Strategy and the Defence and Security Review the principles of its legal position, including its relationship with the UN Charter, international law and the concept of the Responsibility to Protect , on the UK deployment of UK armed forces for intervention operations. This would assist with providing the public with greater information on, and understanding of, the government’s position on the use of UK armed forces rather than waiting for the heat of debate immediately prior to potential deployment”.

The 2010 National Security Strategy hardly mentions UN and peacekeeping operations.

With the withdrawal of British combat forces from Afghanistan, with the army in particular looking for new roles, and a new Strategic Defence and Security Review due soon after next year’s general election, we are presented with a tremendous opportunity to face up to the question of what kind of future military operations UK armed forces would participate in.

Recently, British forces - not many, but in well-publicised interventions - have been

deployed in Mali, and in a very limited role, Nigeria, against militant, extremist, groups. But in Mali peacekeeping operations after France's intervention was carried out by indigenous and regional forces. In Nigeria we don't know what's going to happen.

Then there is a danger that peacekeeping as well as humanitarian operations will be seen as a cover for regime change and even as a tool in a new “global cold war”.

Much to the chagrin of military chiefs who were concerned about the legal implications, Cameron made it clear in 2011 that for him, the downfall of Muammar Gaddafi was the ultimate objective of the campaign of air strikes on Libya. However, the air strikes were not followed by any stabilisation or peacekeeping operation.

I could add that Putin chose to use Libya as a stick to beat the west over Syria where western leaders, and notably Cameron, insisted Assad must go before deciding on any thought-through intervention.

To return to FUTURE potential roles of Britain's armed forces. Sir Peter Wall has himself pointed to new priorities for the British army, including the importance of forging bilateral relations “ahead of, during, or after periods of conflict”, and better ‘hearts and minds’ operations against unconventional enemies motivated by ideological extremism. “We should empower local forces to deal with local situations...this approach calls for bilateral relationships whether ahead of, during, or after, periods of conflict because, like it or not, we seem to be in a period of enduring confrontation with extremism”, he told a RUSI conference a year ago.

Sir Peter thereby suggests that British forces should be deployed to help pre-empt conflict - in essence, peacekeeping - something his designated successor, Sir Nick Carter, has made clear he, too, fully supports.

I am far from optimistic but this could be the future - the use of British armed forces in peacekeeping - and peacemaking - operations. That, by the way, would also provide a useful function for the two large aircraft carriers being built for the navy. And for the helicopters and drones - unmanned aircraft – they could take on board.