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Turning to the Territorial Army: implications for the operational effectiveness of the British Army

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MARK PHILLIPS, AUG 1 2011

The Ministry of Defence has undertaken an extensive amount of work in recent months to close the gap between the ambition for the armed forces outlined in the Strategic Defence and Security Review (Future Force 2020) and the resources available to meet that ambition. This has involved an examination of the best mix of manpower to undertake future tasks and operations. As part of this, the Prime Minister announced that the government would assess whether the Reserve Forces are 'properly structured for the type of conflict we envisage undertaking in future so that we make best use of the skills, experience and capabilities of our Reservists while at the same time moving towards a more efficient structure'.

The UK has never had a coherent policy for the Reserve Forces. Reservists have never been attributed formally to the Defence Planning Assumptions and Military Tasks, and as a result their use has tended to be reactive and ad hoc. Their development has also languished: in the absence of identifying how the reserves should contribute to defence outputs, it was difficult to specify force development and generation requirements. The Future Reserves study (FR20) was therefore intended to be an open-minded, fundamental review of the Reserve Forces' role and place in the Future Force 2020.

FR20 calls for a greater role for reservists across all defence tasks and, as part of this, outlined a significant rebalancing of the future structure of the armed forces by 2020. This rebalancing affects the land force in particular, partly because of the size of the Regular Army and Territorial Army compared to the other Services, but also because the Royal Air Force and Royal Auxiliary Air Force have already made significant progress in recent years by integrating chains of command, being collocated, having regular commanders direct reserve output and using reservists to meet defence tasks. The Royal Navy and Royal Navy Reserve have also been moving in this direction. The Army will now have to undertake a similar transformation as a result of FR20: the ratio of regular to reserve personnel by 2020 will be 70:30 which, with an expected total land force number of 120,000, means a further reduction in the size of the Regular Army of approximately 10,000 from 2015 on top of the reductions already resulting from SDSR and the MoD's own "three-month exercise". By 2015, the Regular Army strength will be around 90,000, and by 2020 82,000.

Why rebalance the Army?

Many have interpreted this as a cost-saving measure and perhaps even as cynical compensation for cutting regular numbers, but the drivers are in fact two-fold.

First, as a result of reductions to the regular Army announced in SDSR and follow-up work such as the "three month exercise", and the need for long-term sustainability of Future Force 2020 in the context of a Defence budget which will not increase by the required level after 2015,^[i] it was always inevitable that the Army would have to rely increasingly on non-regular forms of manpower. Indeed, this is also a codification of how the Territorial Army has been used operations in recent years: regular forces have not been able to meet the demands placed on them and therefore needed to rely on other manpower; this trend is likely to continue in the future. It is also the case that the

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emphasis on the reserve will not result in immediate cost-savings: there has to be a period of significant upfront investment to increase their capability through improved training and equipment before they will provide the government with a cost effective way of contributing to Future Force 2020.

Secondly, and more importantly, the future character of conflict will demand greater specialist skills. It has been difficult to develop these skills in regular structures because of the continuous demands of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past decade (and combat operations in Afghanistan will continue to 2015). Although the Army recognises that it has become mission-specific and bespoke as a result of these operations, it will nonetheless be expensive and take a significant lead time to develop specialist skills in areas such as cyber, culture, linguistics, police, intelligence and others. There is also a question about whether the regular Army is best suited to providing these skills, as opposed to providing more general, organised manpower for a range of different tasks. Reservists can already have specialist skills from their civilian lives, but the Ministry of Defence and Army have tended to be poor at exploiting these to date.

FR20 is therefore right to call for a rebalancing. The old assumptions that the regular Army will only need to be reinforced or augmented by other sources of manpower (usually when the Defence Planning Assumptions are exceeded), or that alternative manpower should provide specialist skills on an infrequent basis, no longer hold. Non-regular forms of manpower have become – and will remain – integral to achieving defence outputs.

However, a key gap in FR20 is the lack of clarity about the proposed roles for the Territorial Army manpower. What these roles are, and whether non-regular manpower is suited to them, will affect how successful the rebalancing is. As the Army (and government in general) approaches the task of defining in detail the roles and tasks, two considerations should be borne in mind:

- Achieving a balance between an operationally effective reserve component that is integrated with the regular forces, and one which 'connects with the nation' and undertakes homeland tasks, will be challenging.
- In determining the balance between formed units and the use of individuals, it is important to bear in mind the general principle that the reserves should build capability packages that can be sustained at higher levels of readiness in an inactive duty status and deployed with a minimum of pre-deployment training. This points towards non-complex platforms and systems, specialist capabilities that draw on civilian skills and are not held within the regular component (and can be combined at unit level as necessary), and use on enduring tasks.

Overall, the Army should remember that what is required is adequate force development and an intelligent and flexible force generation process that meets the specific requirements of different tasks by effectively integrating regular and non-regular manpower.

Challenges with rebalancing the Army

There are a number of challenges with this direction of travel. Revolutionary in vision and strategic in nature, FR20's evolutionary timetable implies the challenges that will be faced. It is clear the reserve will be integral to Defence structures and outputs and must be integrated with regular components. But this will involve significant cultural change – requiring leadership – as much as organisational and structural changes.

In particular, what level of risk will the armed forces be willing to take in relying on non-regular manpower to provide (possibly entire) capabilities or services, in the Army's case as a component of Multi-Role Brigades (MRB)? The MRB construct should provide an opportunity for integrating reservists with regular force structures, with reservists – whether as individuals or units – fulfilling specific functions as part of an integrated deployable force. The challenge will be in ensuring the reliable and ready deployment of those components alongside regular parts of the MRB, particularly as their inclusion in MRBs will make them intrinsic to the Army's operational construct. The regular Army will need to feel confident about relying on reservists to provide what will in effect become core capabilities. In this respect, FR20 is honest about the current state of the reserve components: particularly in the land environment, very

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few are trained and deployable (approximately 14,000 out of over 30,000). A 'training surge' to make the entire component operational, with associated upfront investment, is proposed. FR20 also alludes to improving the readiness of reservists, including through revised terms and conditions of service, improved mobilisation, training and deployment times, and the ability for people move between different categories of service through career, but more detail is required and the Army will need to think through its requirements in these areas to influence emerging policy and legislation.

Indeed, the approach the individual Services take, particularly as the Defence Reform agenda gives each Service greater control over how they spend money on manpower, equipment and training, will be telling. With greater autonomy as a result of the Defence Reform work, the regular Army should now take a greater interest in improving the state of the Territorial Army than hitherto. Lessons from the land component in other countries suggest that the regular Army should define what training levels the reserve should meet and oversee that training, and ensure that training is undertaken jointly between regular and reserve components.

However, risk is not just a function of readiness. It is also a function of numbers: numbers give greater flexibility and predictability in the force generation cycle. However, there have always been well-documented problems with recruitment and retention in relation to the reserves. FR20 should go some way towards addressing these problems by being clearer about roles. Welfare is also a unique issue for reservists. Reservists suffer worse mental health compared to regulars. The reasons for this are not primarily due to traumatic experiences on deployment but a range of wider factors, including poor unit cohesion and lack of support and understanding from family, civilian and employer networks. Reservist families themselves also receive a lack of support. Innovative solutions will need to be found to address these issues to sustain the proposed force numbers; to what extent this is a task for individual Services like the Army, versus the MoD overall, is a question that needs to be answered.

Roles for the private sector

Unfortunately, it cannot be assumed that even if these steps are taken that there will be a large enough increase in the size of the Volunteer Reserve through better recruitment and retention to meet all possible demands. Private sector support will remain important and potential industrial involvement in future force structures should be explored more, including:

- Combined MoD and private company training;
- Developing joint employment contracts or career plans with companies;
- Extending Sponsored Reserves schemes and contractor support. Contractor support is largely limited to the support area at the moment and MoD thinking about what capability areas to extend contractor support to is immature. Greater work is needed to determine those areas in which the government and companies are willing to allow the extension of contractor support – not just at home but on deployed operations. The question of where the boundary lies between governmental and core military roles on the one hand, and the potential contributions of industry on the other, has not been answered satisfactorily to date.

With greater autonomy for the single Services following DRU, the Army should take a lead role in exploring private sector support.

Conclusion

The strategic direction of travel outlined by FR20 is the correct one for Defence overall. The benefits of integrating non-regular forms of manpower will be significant in meeting the demands of future conflict and ensuring that the Future Force 2020 is met and sustainable in a difficult resource environment. These benefits have already been seen in the Royal Air Force and Royal Navy.

However, while the potential for maintaining operational effectiveness in the land environment exists as a result of FR20, achieving this will ultimately depend on the exact roles that are defined for the Territorial Army and whether members of the TA are suited (or can be made suited) to those roles. The regular Army also needs to have

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confidence in the ability of reservists to provide capabilities. To create this confidence, it must take a key role itself in ensuring a successful rebalancing: it must include reservists as key components of the Multi-Role Brigade construct and take a lead in improving the state and readiness of the TA on a long-term basis.

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[i] The government has announced a real-terms increase year-on-year of 1 per cent from 2015, but to meet the ambition of FF20 this figure should be closer to 4 per cent.