
Written evidence from Oxford Research Group (UKA0010)

The Foreign Affairs Select Committee Inquiry – Beyond Aid: The UK’s Strategic Engagement in Africa

Remote Warfare Programme (RWP) Submission, September 2019

About Us

The Remote Warfare Programme (RWP) is a project of the Network for Social Change and part of the Oxford Research Group. We examine changes in military engagement with a focus on remote warfare: the recent shift away from boots on the ground deployments towards light-footprint Western military interventions abroad.

We produce evidence-based research and policy recommendations to raise public awareness and to facilitate debate amongst military and policy practitioners. Ultimately, our aim is to help effect positive policy change to improve prospects for long-term security.

Summary

Since the publication of the 2015 National Security Strategy and accompanying Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR), UK’s strategic focus on the African continent has increased. Both the NSCR and MDP referred to the strategic importance of the UK’s engagement across the continent and in August 2018 then-prime minister (PM), Theresa May, embarked on a political tour of Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa. While the tour focused largely on efforts to boost post-Brexit trade opportunities, Mrs May also used the trip as a chance to set out the UK’s role in addressing conflict. While there have been important changes to improve UK efforts to support peace and security across the African continent, there is still confusion between the UK’s stated aims and the reality on the ground.

In this submission we will focus on the UK’s military contributions, specifically its capacity-building efforts with partner militaries across Mali, Kenya, Nigeria and Somalia, and examine how well the priorities set at the National Security Council are being translated into activities on the ground. Our evidence will be split into two sections, each focusing on a specific area of interest identified in the inquiry’s terms of reference:

- **Section 1:** How effective is the FCO’s ‘New approach to Sub-Saharan Africa?’ Is it clear what this approach is trying to achieve? Is it an effective means of delivering UK influence on the continent?
- **Section 2:** How realistic are the UK’s ambitions, as defined in their ‘New approach to sub-Saharan Africa’, and the reality of the UK’s engagement on the ground?

SECTION 1

1. STRATEGIC UPLIFT BUT NO STRATEGIC DIRECTION?

- 1.1 Our research shows that there has been a significant uplift in the UK military's strategic attention across several countries on the African continent.ⁱ In part, the British armed force's increased focus on the continent reflects the growing importance of defence engagement (i.e. promoting the UK's influence through the non-combat component of defence) as a core Ministry of Defence (MOD) task following the 2015 SDSR and the UK's national security objective to project the UK's global influence.ⁱⁱ But it also forms part of broader UK efforts to develop a "more strategic approach to [HMG's] work in conflict-affected states", through initiatives such as the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund and the Government's Fusion Doctrine.ⁱⁱⁱ
- 1.2 In 2018, Theresa May's government made a series of demonstrable commitments in a sign of renewed strategic interest in this part of the world (see table 1 below).

Table 1: UK commitments to strategic engagement in Africa

<p style="text-align: center;"><u>MARCH 2018</u></p> <p>The National Security and Capabilities Review (NSCR), published in March 2018 described how the UK's contributions towards the African continent "will change and expand...".^{iv}</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>AUGUST 2018</u></p> <p>Then-prime minister, Theresa May used a trip to South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya to champion "a new partnership between the UK and our friends in Africa".</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>DECEMBER 2018</u></p> <p>The MOD's report on the Modernising Defence Programme (MDP) celebrated the UK's military presence in forty African countries, remarking that this "gives [the UK] a platform to develop the institutions that will deliver peace and security in the region."</p>

- 1.3 **Despite aspirational policy documents and public statements, however, a strategic disconnect still appears to exist between the stated ambition of British contributions to security across the continent with the reality on the ground.** There also remains confusion about how priorities set at the National Security Council (NSC) are being channelled into separate departmental strategies. For example, it is not clear to what extent the FCO's so-called 'New Approach to Sub-Saharan Africa' derives from the NSC's Africa strategy, or how the FCO's policy focus sits with the broader work of government, at the MOD or DfID, for example.¹

2. RELYING ON A LOOSE FRAMEWORK

2.1 The FCO's 'New Approach to Sub-Saharan Africa' represents a list of objectives and does not provide any concrete examples of how HMG plans to achieve these objectives. Nor did the former Minister for Africa, Harriet Baldwin, appear to provide any clarity during the evidence session the FAC held in March 2019.^v For example, how the New Approach intended to meet its objectives, such as "tackling...shared threats by supporting African countries' and communities' efforts to address the underlying drivers of fragility and conflict".^{vi}

2.2 The ambiguity of these aims will make it difficult for the FCO to make a meaningful measure of effect analysis. This is especially true when it comes to measuring the success of the British military on objectives such as Point 6, bullet point 2 of the New Approach:

Security and stability as the essential foundations for growth and prosperity, tackling our shared threats by supporting African countries' and communities' efforts to address the underlying drivers of fragility and conflict.^{vii}

2.3 It seems reasonable to predict that the FCO – and by extension, HMG – could point to examples of where it is supporting African countries in addressing shared threats, for example, through tactical activities such as training partner forces (an area discussed at greater length in Section 2). It will prove more difficult, however, demonstrating where these activities make a positive contribution to tackling the underlying drivers of fragility and conflict, which should be regarded as one of the overarching strategic aims.

2.4 That is not to say that funding training activities will not serve to fulfil objectives set out in the FCO's New Approach. Point No. 10 of the New Approach, for example, identifies the priority being placed on building relationships:

Strengthening our partnership with African nations is a key element of our Global Britain vision. Global Britain is about reinvesting in our relationships across the world, expanding and deepening our overseas network, working with others to face challenges and advance common interests, including support for the rules-based international order.^{viii}

2.5 Since 2015, the UK has made improving political access and influence a key priority of its National Security Strategy. However, what is unclear is how far activities that prioritise relationship building (which are largely tactical activities) can simultaneously drive forward efforts in addressing the underlying drivers of conflict (i.e. those which require transformational /strategic change). There is no clear analysis on the extent to which prioritising relationship building as a means to gain influence and leverage, comes at the expense of longer term efforts, such as delivering transformational change that will be necessary if the HMG hopes to tackle the underlying drivers of conflict through its engagement on the continent.

¹ Our research has found there are several overlapping policy networks and strategy development processes across government, including the Whitehall Africa Group and Africa strategy being devised at MOD.

2.6 Service personnel we interviewed in Kenya questioned whether UK training activity should in fact be viewed as tactical and transactional – rather than strategic and transformational – when it came to its impact on partner behaviour. **As one soldier put it: “As an embedded security adviser, am I making these people any better? Probably not. However, I am sending a political message.”**^{ix} More than one interviewee, for example, pointed out that offering the Kenyans peace support training – to prepare them for deployments with AMISOM in Somalia – might be one way to offset the fact that the British rely on a facility in Kenya (British Army Training Unit Africa (BATUK)) to train the British infantry in expeditionary warfare.^x

3. LIMITS OF MILITARY TO MILITARY PARTNERSHIPS

3.1 Given the importance of political access and influence, in principle, focusing on building military to military relationships is no bad thing. After all, Mark Lancaster, UK Minister of State for the Armed Forces, has defended this approach on the basis that these partnerships were often more durable. At a recent evidence session convened by the defence committee political relationships, Mr Lancaster explained that political relationships “can go up and down between nations, and the level of trust in governments comes and goes [whereas] one consistent factor...is normally the positive military to military relationship”.^{xi}

3.2 But there are risks involved according to Daniel Benaim and Michael Wahid Hanna who argue that, while such an approach may “yield warm relations and tactical gains for a time” in the long-term it might be wiser to invest in diplomacy over “hyperpersonalised...militarised diplomatic engagement”.^{xii}

3.3 Our own research provides evidence that there are risks that if UK military activities do not address structural weaknesses in partners’ security sectors, that the UK could in fact do more harm than good, undermining HMG’s commitment to ‘do no harm’. Since 2007, a depressing 23% of the violent incidents against civilians recorded were perpetrated by state forces rather than anti-regime groups.^{xiii} Building the capacity of predatory armed forces, then, can feed a self-perpetuating cycle of violence and conflict that currently sees almost half of all post-civil war countries relapse within 5 years.^{xiv} In a recent article for the RUSI Journal, co-authored by Emily Knowles, non-resident fellow at the Oxford Research Group, and Jahara ‘Franky’ Matissek, a Major in the US Air Force and an Assistant Professor in the Department of Military and Strategic Studies at the US Air Force Academy, they argued:

“[I]n many cases poor host-country behaviour and non-compliance with IHL standards are not a result of a lack of training and will therefore not be fixed by technical SFA [security force assistance]. Fragmentation, sectarianism, corruption and the normalisation of violence by a regime or within a state shape how security forces behave towards civilians and inform their responses to conflict and insecurity. An alternative vision for SFA is needed that is more adequately prepared to meet the challenges of how politics and violence are intertwined and exercised in a weak state context.”^{xv}

3.4 This chimes with ICAI’s 2019 report, which followed up on their original 2018 review of the CSSF, which reinforced the imperative for “all departments and funds that deliver UK aid” to be provided with the “necessary knowledge, skills and procedures...to assess and mitigate against

the risk of doing harm to vulnerable individuals”.^{xvi} Furthermore, it suggested that this would require:

“[C]areful analysis of the drivers of conflict and human rights risks, and the design and implementation of sophisticated theories of change and strategies for mitigating the risks of harm.”

- 3.5 Risk mitigation must be implemented so that building relationships with partner does not lead to unintended consequences, such that the UK would undermine its hope of addressing the underlying drivers of conflict.

4. A WHOLE-OF-GOVERNMENT APPROACH

- 4.1 With the UK Government increasing its focus on this area of the world, it is imperative that there is unity of effort across HMG for NSC priorities to feed into departmental policy and plans. In its current form, the New Approach does not represent a strategy nor is it clear how it sits within broader HMG priorities. This is, in part, owing to a lack of transparency at the NSC.
- 4.2 Our research also shows how this is impacting those operating in the field. Service personnel we interviewed told us they felt “their ability to understand and respond to the UK Government’s priorities [was] hampered by the fact that the NSC strategies are classified in their entirety.” Effectively creating a situation where implementers are building projects without understanding the UK’s theory of change or strategy in the region in which they are operating in (see Section 2 below).
- 4.3 A RUSI Whitehall paper noted in 2010, that, by failing to improve transparency over its military operations, the UK Government reduces the “dissemination of many lessons” and prevents “a wider audience of the balanced assessments needed to inform debate”.^{xvii} Nearly a decade later, the Government risks repeating past mistakes by failing to turn identified lessons into effective policy change.
- 4.4 It was poor practice on the part of the Government, for example, that the FCO’s policy document on Sub-Saharan Africa was only made publicly available following a request by the APPG on Africa for the FCO to release it. This is consistent with the UK’s current approach to preclude any public dissemination (even as a redacted document) of the NSC’s strategies.^{xviii} In doing so, governments undermine Parliament’s role in holding the executive to account. As an example, it is very difficult to consider if the HMG’s current approach in Africa reflects sophisticated theories of change and strategies for mitigating the risks of doing harm. In response to these challenges, we have suggested the following policy recommendations in order to address this accountability gap.

5. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS²

² These policy recommendations are drawn from a report we published in July 2018, see here: Emily Knowles and Abigail Watson, ‘No Such Thing as a Quick Fix: The Aspiration-Capabilities Gap in British Remote Warfare’, Oxford Research Group, 30 July 2018, <https://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/no-such-thing-as-a-quick-fix-the-aspiration-capabilities-gap-in-british-remote-warfare>.

- The Government should provide a publicly accessible version of the NSC’s strategy on Africa so that this can be cross-referenced with Government policy documents, such as the FCO’s New Approach. This would provide a more meaningful criteria on which progress can be measured, while also fulfilling the Government’s previous commitment to publish unclassified versions of its NSC strategies.
- The Government should facilitate greater external input into NSC strategy-making. For example, our research on the NSC notes that external experts are rarely consulted and even when they are consulted “this is usually done on an ad hoc basis in response to specific questions put by the NSC membership about a region or theme”. This precludes any positive contribution that external experts could make to this process.
 - The recent announcement by the Canadian Government to launch a National Security Transparency Advisory Group (NS-TAG)^{ix} is a model the UK Government may wish to emulate to incorporate greater external input into National Security strategy and policymaking.
 - This would be consistent with the approach that the UK’s MOD appears to already be taking. As part of the MOD’s MDP report it announced that a Defence Policy Board (DPB) would be established to improve how external experts input into Defence policy and strategy making.^{xx}

SECTION 2

6. STRATEGIC PRIORITY: IN WORDS, NOT DEEDS

6.1 The overall message we got from our field research in Kenya and Mali, as well as interviews with soldiers rotating in and out of Nigeria, was that current military activities are far too short-term in their approach, with aspirations way out of step with the reality on the ground.^{xxi} While the UK Government recognises the need for “better strategic direction” for those in country, soldiers we interviewed lamented the fact they felt like they were “operating in a political vacuum” despite the stated strategic importance of African partnerships.^{xxii} Rather than taking a decision on what areas hold the most strategic importance and commit the political and military resources required to address the problems of instability and conflict, one soldier described the approach as one where “we [the UK] just throw some men here and some men there”.^{xxiii} In their view, there was no overarching strategy driving these deployments.

6.2 This view was largely consistent across Mali, Kenya Nigeria and in Somalia with the soldiers we interviewed:

MALI

- In Mali, soldiers complained that they have not been given clear criteria by Whitehall on what indicators they should be reporting on in their situation reports. Consequently, they would report on everything even if they felt this was not necessarily useful – or more importantly – wouldn’t be read by those in London. Similarly, many felt they had too few resources to achieve what was being asked of them.
- One soldier described the current training mission in Mali to a builder that “just turned up at your house and started fixing things you hadn’t asked for.”



KENYA

- In Kenya, the expansion of the then-British Peace Support Team East Africa (BPST-EA) to cover the whole of the continent – thereafter renamed British Peace Support Team (BPST) – had only come with an uplift in capacity of a handful of British service personnel. This approach was described by one soldier as the UK doing enough to stop things getting worse, while another said the UK was doing just enough to look like it was doing something.



NIGERIA

- In Nigeria, one soldier that we spoke to felt that the UK was “treating the symptoms not the causes of the problem [when] the whole defence structure here needs institutional reform.”
- When we asked about the strategic join up between an expanding British focus on the Sahel and ongoing support to countries like Nigeria – where the UK are contributing towards countering instability and terrorist groups operating around the Lake Chad Basin – the response was that work was beginning to integrate those strategies, but that coordination remained personality-driven rather than institutionalised.



SOMALIA

- In Somalia, political will was derided by many as “a yoyo”. Soldiers were worried about the “limited ability to maintain budget and interest over the long-term,” and the fact that political interest tended to wane “if immediate improvements aren’t seen.”



7. STRATEGIC UPLIFT IN MALI POST-2018

- 7.1 Since 2018 there have been significant signs that the UK is increasing its focus on the Sahel. The reason for this renewed focus is likely to be threefold. It’s good for its bilateral relations with France (a priority in recent years, especially since the vote to leave the EU) who already has around 3,500 troops deployed to the country; it demonstrates its commitment to UN peacekeeping missions (strengthening the UK’s identity as ‘Global Britain’); and builds the British armed forces’ reputation as a willing and able partner in the fight against international terrorism.^{xxiv}
- 7.2 Some soldiers we interviewed raised concerns that the UK’s shift towards the Sahel had not been combined with a more detailed analysis of what among the many and complex problems^{xxv} facing the region was of most importance to the UK. This is complicated further in Mali because a few troops are scattered across multiple international military initiatives in the country, which are being run by the EU, the UN and the French **without a clear sense of how these activities – in aggregate – might lead to a sustainable improvement in the capacity of their Malian partners.**
- 7.3 The EU is currently training large numbers of local troops in basic soldiering in Mali. But this does not include exerting pressure on the government in Bamako to introduce structural reforms that might remove some of the underlying factors that are weakening the armed forces.^{xxvi}
- 7.4 It remains unclear how well the UK’s broader strategy on the continent can adapt to this shift towards the Sahel. One soldier we interviewed in Mali, told us that there was a need for “an adult conversation about what [our partners] need and what we can deliver.”^{xxvii}
- 7.5 The Sahel is not easy region for the UK to provide automatic added value, especially with what is, in comparison with other international efforts, a modest deployment. The reality is that the Sahel is already a complicated space of disparate efforts by international and regional contributors, many of which are facing serious difficulties.^{xxviii} Nor is the UK’s job being made any easier, according to a number of British soldiers already deployed in Mali, owing to the fact the British Army is seriously lacking in proficient French language speakers and has limited operational experience in the Sahel region.^{xxix}
 - 7.5.1 Without clear strategic direction, the UK deployment to the Sahel risks the same as other deployments such as that in Kenya where soldiers reported that: “We just end up training people, sending them out, and never hearing anything again”. A number of soldiers were carrying out legacy training courses, not because they had been directed

to do so but “because no one told [them] not to.” While others, believed that activities were largely “dictated by funding”, rather than careful analysis of partners’ capability gaps and requirements.^{xxx}

- 7.5.2 Instead, what should be prioritised is ensuring that the UK’s deployment forms part of a coherent regional and continent-wide strategy. Ultimately, overall success – i.e. helping to reform partners’ militaries into effective, accountable and legitimate security sectors – will be determined by how far the UK Government is willing to prioritise the activities required to meet its aspirations.

CONCLUSION

Progress has been made since the roll out of the Fusion Doctrine in March 2018 NSCR, but more strategic direction is required to ensure that operations across the African continent feeds into national objectives, which complement non-military activities in-country. Clearly, military efforts rarely occur in isolation. A multitude of other forms of cooperation, assistance, trade and diplomacy (many of which are referred to in the FCO's New Approach) happen at the same time.^{xxxi} For UK military activities – and particularly Security Sector Reform (SSR) and defence engagement where the military is rarely the dominant actor in a country – to be truly effective, these efforts must be united on policy documents in Whitehall and, perhaps more importantly, with the reality on the ground.

As the UK military continues to look at ways to improve its own contribution to British efforts with partners on the African continent, it is problematic that so many soldiers appear to agree that the courses that they are offering partners do little to deal with the real problems affecting stability in the countries in which they are deployed. As the UK looks to develop and improve its cross-government efforts in places like Kenya, Mali and Nigeria, lessons drawn from soldiers delivering the military contribution to these efforts are important. Certainly, it highlights that while progress is being made, more strategic direction is required to ensure that these operations feed into national objectives and complement non-military activities in country. **Only when bold rhetoric is matched by resources and sustained planning will the UK be able to improve its contribution to peace and stability** in the countries it chooses to intervene.

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