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Conference Report

The Warfighter in the Twenty-First Century

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The Warfighter in the Twenty-First Century

MUCH OF THE discussion over military matters, including future warfare, revolves around equipment, with some attention being paid to the concept of fighting – particularly in non-Western states. In much of the West, relatively little attention is paid to those who fight and their part in force design.

To highlight this facet of future warfare, RUSI convened a conference on 23 November 2017 that sought to examine three factors that affect the human dimension of those in uniform over the coming decades:

- How future conflicts might shape the requirement of the constituency of armed forces personnel.
- The measures needed to recruit such people.
- What measures might be necessary to successfully retain such people, or indeed if retaining skills will be essential.

The conference took place under non-attribution rules.

The Future Combat Environment

Given the current Western narrative over liberal interventions and the low loss levels experienced by NATO forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, there appears to be an evolving belief that war and warfare can somehow be more humane in the future. Participants were reminded of recent lessons of combat in Ukraine, Syria, Iraq and across Africa: the feral, brutal, disturbing nature of conflict that saw a warrior–ethos as critical to success on and off the battlefield. Furthermore, the conference was told that it was clear from lessons in modern conflict that deterrence could be achieved only by a high-readiness force capable of inflicting massive damage on adversaries. Key to this was the state of mind of those in the armed forces.

It is clear that modern conflicts have had greater connectivity between the home and deployed forces, as well as the actions of adversaries. Battlefields can no longer be clearly defined and bounded, but one rather geographically spread. This has had an impact on civilians, soldiers and their families alike. The implications for those previously considered ‘non-deployable’, or in safe areas, has changed from the post-Second World War Western orthodoxy.

The impact of the increasing urbanisation of global populations has been demonstrated in the conflicts in Chechnya, Georgia, Syria, Ukraine and Iraq. Urban warfare requires many more people and a far higher presence than Western assumptions for force design allow, and this undermines many of the West’s founding concepts for fighting. The idea that an indirect

approach or manoeuvre can balance out the requirement for scale does not appear to match the reality of the nature of today's urban conflict.

Participants learned about the implications of today's high-tech industrial revolution. It appeared that any revolution or transformation would be unlikely to come from innovation in technology per se, but rather by the combining of technologies. It is likely that civil society will lead and drive change, and that the armed forces will succeed where they can determine the most appropriate militarisation of combined technologies.

Advances in autonomy were likely to have the largest impact on military force designs and, potentially, personnel requirements. Combining human control with multiple autonomous drones offered the potential not only to simply mitigate for a lack of people, but also to offer a competitive edge at a cheaper cost. However, the challenges to fielding such a force are not being widely discussed or embraced in the West. The contrast with Chinese, North Korean and Russian plans is marked.

It appeared that, intellectually, Western militaries were not considering these future changes. The reaction to changes in the use of long-range weapons, hybrid warfare doctrines and the democratisation of sophisticated weapons may have been discussed in Western military concepts. However, there has been no meaningful discourse on the subject or adaptation of the force design to deal with these changes.

The conference discussed the implications of such changes on the people needed to fight – or be prepared to fight – in the future. The centrality of a combat–ethos throughout the military, perhaps much more deeply than currently exists within the UK armed forces, appears to be critical. Yet there were voices that considered such virtues destructive, potentially leading to a break in the connection between society and the military – making it impossible to recruit key skills into uniform. If the basic building block of the armed forces is the infantry soldier, particularly in urban conflict, does this mean that some of the people available for recruitment would not be suitable?

The military would not only need a fighting spirit, but also people with the intellect, character, education and training to thrive in the chaos of combat, unplugged from centralised control. Potentially, the most critical factor could be a combatant willing and able to challenge conventional wisdom and break the rules. This means that a military with these kinds of people has a greater chance of success than one with merely superb equipment. Participants observed that conversations about this sort of force design were a long way from the current dialogue regarding a future military workforce.

Recruiting New Warriors

A future working environment is likely to be markedly different from today's. It has been forecast that within a decade, robots will replace 54% of current jobs, and this is likely to grow as machine learning and artificial intelligence are increasingly embraced. Cost-benefits and

efficiencies in decision-making will shift management responsibilities lower and will benefit those who are willing to adapt early, specifically in areas where there is a high proportion of repetition or where actions rely on customary behaviours and codified results. Given such themes, participants learned that jobs related to lawyers and those in manufacturing would likely be among the first to be hit.

The conference heard how, when it comes to employment, financial recompense is not a deciding factor for many millennials (born between the 1980s and mid-1990s) and Gen Z-ers (born between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s). Rather, they seek a variety of employment, value and worth from work, and greater mobility and flexibility. Yet this group is also unprepared for the challenges of modern life away from home, is less physically fit, and is more demanding of employers. These breaks with conventional recruiting models would appear to demand a new offer from military forces.

Much of the discussion about future employment trends and expectations appeared to be driven by the relationship between society and technology. Yet the Scandinavian model of conscription offered a reversal of this discourse, with participants noting that selective national service had served to alter societal expectations, aspirations and behaviours there. Military service in Norway and Finland appeared to also reinforce a clear national identity and reinvigorate the relationship between young people and the state. This is a clear departure from the global pattern of identity politics that appeared to be breaking down such relationships between the individual and the state.

Participants drew broad and somewhat selective conclusions from these discussions. While the future recruiting pool is likely to be small, the requirement for the British military to recruit solely UK nationals will increase the challenge presented by demographic patterns. A perceived desire to have a force made up of the excellent rather than the satisfactory could be increasingly problematic. Such policy decisions were contrasted with those of other militaries. In discussing other countries, the US and Australian models of recruitment, lateral entry and service-for-citizenship were all largely glossed over.

Retaining Skilled People

Bio-enhancements, automation and training costs could lead to a change in the employment model that would make lateral entry, secondments and inflow/outflow models far more dynamic and attractive in terms of retention. The focus of retaining trained and older people might need to be amended beyond the ambition of the new employment model. A more flexible approach to individual contracts and packages works within both overseas militaries (notably in Australia, New Zealand and Saudi Arabia) and in commercial organisations. A less stringent and more flexible personnel and reward policy might be a key requirement, removing the barriers imposed by the current desire for an egalitarian system within the British military.

There is, however, an argument that says that competing industries do not offer the costly benefits packages (specifically housing) that militaries do. There is no expectation among

millennials and Gen Z-ers beyond what might be offered in a competitive market. This might mean more guarantees of connectivity and flexible employment, but less requirements to provide perks, such as permanent accommodation.

Unquestionably, the current dissatisfaction of the military family in the UK is a cause of lack of retention. While Ministry of Defence policy might be to seek to address this, there is a clear gap between words and action, and measures designed to mitigate problems related to military family welfare and allowances require much greater focus. It is worth taking account how other militaries deal with similar problems.

Conclusions

The conference returned several times to two key issues: first, the nature of the relationship between the armed forces and society; and second, whether future warriors will all need to be 'life-takers', or – to paraphrase George Orwell – to recruit those who allow 'people [to] sleep peaceably in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf'.[1]

Discussions on the interlinked concepts saw stark division over the need for a deep-seated combat ethos in future soldiers, sailors and airmen that is not reflected in Western societal trends. This would be critical if the forces have to continue to form a credible deterrent to potential adversaries. There seemed to be an appreciation that splitting the persona of warriors from recruiting would be essential in attracting more skilled people from an ever-decreasing demographic pool. However, emphasising the softer side of military life would also be detrimental to the perception of military forces by competitors. There will need to be a greater consideration of the potential use of auxiliaries, rather than reserves, in terms of exploiting skills in people who lack the physical fitness and endurance required by core uniformed staff.

It was clear that maintaining the broad status quo on recruiting and retaining personnel, even with minor amendments, would not meet the challenges of societal and demographic changes, or the evolving nature of competition and conflict. Radical change will be required, even if one acknowledges that the offer of employment by military forces is theoretically attractive to Millennials and Gen–Z. The two alternative models (Scandinavian conscription and autonomy) would require a radical change in the military and in the Western concept of the use of force. However, militaries appear not to acknowledge this, nor are they prepared to accept the transformational nature of soon-to-come changes.

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1. This quote is based on 'Those who "abjure" violence can do so only because others are committing violence on their behalf', which appears in George Orwell, 'Notes on Nationalism', *Polemic* (Vol. 1, October 1945).