Conference Report

Strategic Command Inaugural Conference

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Strategic Command Inaugural Conference

ON 18 FEBRUARY 2020, RUSI hosted the inaugural conference for the UK's new Strategic Command. Strategic Command had been formed in December 2019 from Joint Forces Command, which itself had only been created in 2011 as a result of the previous year's Strategic Defence and Security Review. This conference, therefore, sought to introduce Strategic Command to the public, to explore what it is and why it is needed, before considering three aspects of its mission: strategic integration; countering hybrid activity; and seeking opportunities in technological disruption.

Strategic Command retains the Joint Forces Command responsibility for operations through the Permanent Joint Headquarters and Directorate of Special Forces, and for strategic enablement of the UK armed forces. The enablement role covers responsibility for: intelligence; logistics; medical; Defence Digital; and the Permanent Joint Operating Bases. It also includes leadership of the conceptual component, delivered through Joint Force Development, comprising the Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre, Defence Academy and Joint Warfare. Strategic Command will also continue to sponsor the jHub, which seeks to bring innovative technology into Defence rapidly.[1] To these existing functions, however, it adds a new responsibility for strategic integration as a critical activity, especially in countering hybrid activity that blends military and non-military means. The conference sought to unravel what strategic integration might and ought to mean.

Key Themes

Strategic Integrator

A new Defence Integrated Operating Concept (not yet available outside Defence) identified a need for improved 'strategic integration' if the UK was to compete effectively today and in the future. Strategic Command's focus on this was widely welcomed and timely. However, while the need for integration was recognised and agreed, it was not clear from the discussions that there was a consensus about what was to be integrated, by whom or how this was to be achieved. Discussions highlighted that to counter hybrid threats, integration would be needed at multiple levels: international allies and partners; industry; government departments; across Defence; and even within individual Services. There was also a perceived need to integrate the Defence narrative: it was noted that the Defence message lacked clarity and failed to convey the value of Defence. The conference felt that the messaging was too focused on inputs (equipment and personnel numbers) rather than outputs (what Defence delivers for the country).

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1. jHub Defence Innovation, 'jHub: What We Do', last updated 27 February 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/jhub-what-we-do>, accessed 6 May 2020.

Responsibility for integrating at all the different levels could not sit wholly with Defence. It was not clear what authority Strategic Command would have in relation to the UK Fusion Doctrine or engagement with the public, compared to that of the MoD Head Office. Moreover, the Services individually retain responsibility for homeland operations in their own domains and thus contribute to national resilience independent of the Permanent Joint Headquarters. In relation to working with allies and partners, and especially the US and the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force, thinking about Strategic Command's role in multi-domain integration and how this would work with allies and partners in combined operations was still maturing.

Even where the integration task was internal to the MoD, it was not clear that this was or should be Strategic Command's responsibility. Despite strong challenge from the audience, the Services presented a united front to welcome the development of Strategic Command. However, it was clear that the supported/supporting relationships between the Services and Strategic Command were still not clearly defined. The crucial questions revolved around whether Strategic Command should be: a conceptual leader, setting tasks for the Services to deliver; a coordinator and arbiter of the various capability needs; or whether it should provide the command and control for UK multi-domain operations.[2] Obtaining clarity and agreement over Strategic Command's accountability, authority and responsibility for integration at the different levels would be crucial to success.

The idea of Strategic Command as a Design Authority for Defence capability was raised by a number of speakers.[3] This included the technical components needed to integrate across the five domains (space, maritime, land, air and cyber) and the digital backbone that would allow the storing, sharing and processing of data. It also included acting as the design authority for the joint force, taking the trained force elements from the single Services, combining them with the joint enablers and delivering a coherent force package. While this vision provides some aspects of a design authority, it is not authority at its fullest level. The current division of responsibilities in Defence – with the MoD Head Office (Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff Military Capability) responsible for capability coherence, and the requirements and budgetary authority residing with the Commands (including Strategic Command for joint enablers) – means that Strategic Command has to integrate force elements designed in Service siloes rather than shaping the design from the outset. There is a significant difference between designing an integrated force that can operate seamlessly and integrating disparate elements that can be made to work together across the seams. Even in the more limited (intra-Defence) integration task, Strategic Command may lack the necessary authorities and resources to deliver an integrated force capable of succeeding in the complex operating environment of the future.

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2.   Multi-domain operations are those drawing on the outputs of the five domains: space, maritime, land, air and cyber.

3.   In this context, a Design Authority is a body that provides assurance that solution designs are fit for purpose. It works to ensure that each component meets requirements and integrates and works within the complex enterprise architecture. See, for example, Naomi Stanford, 'Could We Use a Design Authority?', 24 September 2018, <https://naomistanford.com/2018/09/24/could-we-use-a-design-authority/>, accessed 6 May 2020.

Future Operating Environment

The conference restated the broadly accepted consensus that the character of conflict is shifting to one where countries are challenged at a broader range of levels and below the self-imposed threshold for combat operations. Speakers typified this as presenting a threat where people are influenced/attacked via cyberspace, leaders are disorientated by information, and that small autonomous platforms overmatch traditional platforms. The new Integrated Operating Concept, which is being circulated within Defence, reflected these challenges and prioritised integration across the five domains and the information layer to enable better decision-making informed by thorough analysis. However, several challenges and frictions emerged.

The oft-repeated mantra of data as the critical capability was frequently stated, but without a clear description of how it will have to integrate with a traditional force delivering hard power that it needs to support. There was clearly work going on to explore this, but no firm conclusions were available. Similarly, the relationship between the physical and virtual world was discussed, such as the nature of proportionality between the two and the balance between cyber attacks and physical challenges. It was felt that there needed to be a clearer declaratory policy on our responses – although no model was offered.

The abundance of data was likely to generate a shift from privileged information provided by traditional espionage and reconnaissance towards a greater dependence on freely obtained information. The balance of investment would probably also move from securing sources of information towards developing systems that can sift through large quantities of data quickly and extract relevant information that can be presented to decision-makers. Traditional approaches will, however, remain important both for cueing intelligence analysis towards specific areas, and also to explore areas where interest has been piqued as a result of open source analysis. This will demand a greater focus on the effects required of intelligence and understanding, rather than a need for more general information – a question of 'what does our knowledge mean?' rather than 'what do we know?'.

Decision-making would be affected in multiple ways. Increased information flow will empower incremental decision-making, but the need to focus data gathering on specific and new areas at speed is likely to remain. New ways of handling and extracting value from the vast quantity of data would be needed, but the impact would go beyond technology into new processes, governance, organisational design, and mediated by how people respond to and interpret the data. Commanders, in particular, would be tested by the presentation of apparently convincing information earlier in the conflict, which will need to be balanced by the expectation of greater refinement of their understanding with time – a classic dilemma brought into sharper relief.

Dependencies on Others

Even as an integrator, Strategic Command would still be dependent on other elements of Defence. Activity in Defence Equipment and Support was vital to delivering solutions in Strategic Command's focus areas as well as in achieving the transition between innovative development

of new capabilities and subsequent full-scale implementation. A particular challenge was seen as the MoD's commercial processes. These had struggled to reconcile the often competing demands of absolute responsibility for appropriately investing taxpayers' money on the one hand, with the risk-taking needed with rapid experimentation where the prospect of 'failure' was a constant companion on the other.

A disconnect between authority, responsibility and accountability, while a Defence-wide challenge, was particularly felt in Strategic Command. This drove a desire for consensus in Defence, if not an absolute need for it, which was highlighted throughout the conference. As already mentioned, with relatively few levers wholly under Strategic Command's control, its progress would depend on its ability to convince other parts of the Department of its ability to add value. This was likely to be particularly challenging in the context of integration, where the best Defence outcome may require one Service to accept a lesser capability for the greater good. It was not clear how this tension would be managed, or if indeed it could.

Risk

A recurrent theme was the need for an amended risk appetite for the way the UK does business in a number of areas. Speakers were consistent in their view that to deliver integration and achieve genuine multi-domain manoeuvre, the Command will need greater freedom to operate in a risk environment than is currently provided by the MoD. Several areas were singled out:

Culture

Throughout the day, speakers highlighted that the MoD's current culture needed to change. The change required was more fundamental than the traditional evolutionary approach that has been taken (although 'permitted' may perhaps be a more appropriate term as it captures the passivity that some speakers felt reflected the current approach). The change was not required everywhere, and indeed it was felt unhelpful to attempt to apply it everywhere in one go. Rather, Defence should identify a few areas in which a consciously new culture would deliver the greatest effects and build out from there. It is to these priority areas that leaders should devote their attention and rely on bureaucratic inertia to continue delivering in the other areas, including the continuous adaptation needed to maintain their outputs.

New Approaches to Operations

Faced with new challenges in proxy and hybrid warfare, improved sensors that could end tactical and operational surprise, autonomy, swarms and hypersonic systems, the current approaches to operations were seen as unlikely to deliver the results required. Strategic Command would be crucial to helping Defence respond effectively. While there was no consensus on what the alternative ways of operating would look like, speakers suggested a number of areas in which non-traditional approaches would be essential. Rather than traditional physical capabilities, these included better access to commercial resources that would need to be integrated with Defence, new ways of thinking around problems to find new methods of power projection, as

well as adopting a more proactive posture to challenging adversaries. It also included the need to better engage society to strengthen it against attempts to erode the UK's resolve; to improve its understanding of the threats and Defence's role; and to harness the country's talent.

Technology

Innovation speakers suggested that adoption of technology will need to be increasingly emergent, reflecting the civilian market model of multiple offers from which one achieves consensus. Usability will remain the key arbiter of success rather than sheer technical excellence. Effective behaviours will be best driven by incentives. All of this depends on establishing the right culture, not just in Defence but in government more widely, including in relation to reputation and the – perhaps inevitable – media accusations that unsuccesful innovative projects represent a misuse of taxpayers' money. The government needs the confidence to assert that the learning that comes from such projects is a value worth paying for.

People

A consistent theme throughout the conference was the ability to access the right people, liberate them to deliver amidst complexity and empower them to seize emerging opportunities. This would require Defence to reach beyond its traditional workforce, and it was regularly highlighted that many of the skills Strategic Command needed existed in the commercial world, perhaps even to a greater degree than in Defence. Accessing those skills, including through the Reserves, would be an important part of the talent pool into which the Command would need to tap. A significant limiting factor, therefore, was that Strategic Command did not actually own many of the people. It was dependent on the single Services to provide them with military personnel, where the Services retained responsibility for their recruitment, training and career management. Moreover, the pace of technological change meant that skills would change quickly. Predicting the future skills requirement would be very difficult and existing personnel systems would struggle to keep up with the rate of change needed.

Strategic Command's needs were often different to those of the Services, and while a trial was underway looking at unified career management for a few cohorts, including medical personnel, this would not cover all Strategic Command's responsibilities. Strategic Command would need greater authority over people, not just for those areas where the Command was the lead organisation, such as medical or cyber, but also in driving new behaviours that support strategic integration at a Defence level. Professional military education is one vehicle for this, but of greater significance would be an ability to shape rewards and behaviours that move beyond the needs of the single Services to prioritise those of Defence. New personnel practices and greater workforce flexibility would be needed by Strategic Command, as well as by the Services, if it were to succeed. It was noted that a new Defence People Strategy had prioritised greater flexibility in managing the Defence workforce to ensure better use of talent, including lateral entry, repurposing skills to emerging needs and greater differentiation in the treatment of people across the Whole Force.

Conclusion

The creation of Strategic Command sought to build on what was seen within Defence as Joint Forces Command's success in providing a Defence focus on key enablers. The new mission, that of integration, is hugely important and the emphasis given to this is welcome. There are still, however, important questions to be addressed about how Strategic Command will deliver its new mission. While the rationale for its creation is sound, Strategic Command is probably better seen as a statement of intent and a first step on the journey rather than the destination. How it adapts to its task as the nature of threats change and institutional barriers are laid in its path, and how it is able to get the rest of the MoD to change, is crucial. But to have delayed its creation longer, in the belief that further delay would have resulted in a better solution, would have been unwise and made the UK military less competitive. To that end, and despite the challenges identified above that the Command will undoubtedly have to navigate, the formation of Strategic Command represents a sensible response to the security situation the UK faces. To meet the expectations of those who created it, it will need to focus on a few areas that will deliver the most important changes, agree and align its authorities with its responsibilities, and be prepared to adapt, fail and learn, just as it advocates through its jHub.

About the Author

Paul O'Neill is a Senior Research Fellow in Military Sciences at RUSI. Previously, Paul was a Royal Air Force officer working in strategy and human resources roles across Defence including in the Ministry of Defence Head Office. His career included leading the military team in Defence Strategy and Priorities during the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review, the Head of Defence People Strategy and commanding the Defence School of Personnel Administration. He has undertaken operational tours in Iraq, Northern Ireland, Oman, Turkey and Afghanistan where he was the Senior Advisor on Strategy and Policy to the Afghan Ministry of Interior.