

REGENERATION AND RECONSTITUTION: REFLECTIONS FOR PLANNING

This short paper reflects on the second CHACR warfighting at scale study day, covering reconstituting mass or compensating for its absence. Its aim is not to summarise each of the wide-ranging contributions, but to draw conclusions for Army planning.

Definitions are challenging and very much a work in progress. Many at the study day seemed to agree that the most useable concepts were to view regeneration as replicating the force structure and capability required to meet unchanged outputs; reconstitution as growing the force structure beyond current norms. Also that some form of strategic shock will be the catalyst for reconstitution; while regeneration is more routine – a consequence of the myriad ways in which demand could exceed planned supply. Therefore, regeneration is the business of Defence; reconstitution of the nation at large.

Tackling reconstitution first, the front end of a strategic framework for it is not too hard to conceive. Warnings and indicators cue decision points left of, or at least as close as possible to, the ‘bang’ thereby initiating funded and rehearsed contingency plans. Together they create a national demand signal which results in institutional mobilisation of targeted elements of society and industry that are already fully bought into the plan. Presumably, if the bang is loud enough to warrant reconstitution, the rules of the game change too, resulting in some form of complementary and compelling legislation in areas such as enlistment, industrial prioritisation and military use of the national estate.

Of course that’s easy to write; just planning any part of it will prove extremely demanding and must involve many national actors. But it shouldn’t be a leap of faith; the main reason we think we might be able to do it is that there is ample historical precedent (that said the challenge to like-for-like reconstitution posed by procuring ever more complex equipment and then training on it from a standing start is just one of many that might temper the utility of historical yardsticks). Much harder to envision is the culture of popular support that history tells us is a prerequisite: underpinning what is fundamentally an act of political will. It will be important when generating forces to sustain an enduring operation; vital when moving up the spectrum of ambition to transformative ways of delivering military effect – be it innovative capabilities, fluid force structures or something we haven’t yet imagined.

Positive and oft-cited military approval ratings and the increasingly sophisticated measures evident in our strategy to better connect the Army to society are obviously important. But it seems unlikely healthy crowds at freedom parades and an upturn in recruiting are adequate indicators for

national will as it would relate to reconstitution. Again, it’s easy to note that a sense of war of the people is critical to commitment – perhaps from a high of the British Volunteer Army in 1914-15 to a low of the US in Vietnam by 1969 – but harder to judge how even that unifying sense would resonate today with a diffuse and diverse audience. All the more so in an era when the most comprehensive and hard-won shaping campaign can be undone in seconds by contrary opinion-formers. So, while we must have a plan, we shouldn’t presume to understand the context in which we might have to enact it.

Defence policy directs the Army to plan for regeneration and reconstitution now in response to a Strategic Defence and Security Review which recognised a changed security context and, consequently, demands forces capable of responding to all likely threats. Any analysis of that review would suggest it’s most likely we would execute that plan either in the event of an enduring operation in excess of Defence planning assumptions, or a major war as a consequence of renewed state-based aggression – but one which falls short of representing an existential threat to national survival. Without the commitment derived from historical levels of engagement and accepting the UK will remain post-conscription, it is not plain to see what incentives and controls exist to exert political will and how effective they might be. Therefore, it’s hard not to share in the conclusion that reconstituting a mass army supported by a mobilised Defence-industrial base is simply not a credible contemporary concept.

Of course we would all hope the outlook is not as bleak as that, and perhaps the start point is to define a more modest form of reconstitution, in the context of multiple threats. Notwithstanding the intent of the current concurrency sets, ultimately warfighting at scale is a binary output. More conceivable is a reconstituted force being required to meet a simultaneous, but different and probably lesser, threat. Of these perhaps most likely for the UK is a dramatic change in the form of domestic terrorism – be it as a consequence of Islamic extremism, dissident republicanism or anything else.

Noting the outreach to society in France following the recent atrocity in Nice, homeland resilience does seem to be a more credible pretext for national engagement than far-away wars. Clearly, a force structure able to counter multiple threats without denuding the expeditionary forces capable of, and ready to, conduct warfighting at scale is also central to a truly deterrent posture. So, while history encourages us to think of reconstitution in terms of providing the resilience for a return to warfighting at scale, perhaps we need a plan for it more as a consequence of that policy choice.

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Whether or not these assertions around reconstitution are deemed to be valid, the most tangible point for the Army to start planning would seem to be with limited goals for regeneration. Some will legitimately observe that planning and investment must prioritise existing capability gaps – this being the lowest form of regeneration. But, in the context of new Defence policy, a plan for regeneration would be enacted if the Army is required, at notice measured in months, to flex its strategic outputs from concurrency to enduring intervention. So it seems reasonable to set the level of ambition at a framework of a second division, albeit one which could not reasonably be structured and equipped exactly like the 3rd (UK) Division conceived by Army 2020 Refine (representing as it does the head mark for capability development). By setting the aiming mark there, like the division itself, the plan will be scalable and modular.

Step one might be not forgetting what we know already. Albeit at smaller scale, our recent operational planning is defined by endurance and the implications for sustainment back as far as our supply partners are well understood. Step two might be identifying the irreducible minimum capabilities and components of force structure which represent the seed corn of divisional outputs, assessed in the context of the most likely scenarios. Most seem to agree that

upper tactical and operational command and control would be a good place to start.

Clearly going any further than that paper contingency plan begins to cost money – be it modest additional stockpiles or selective and specialist over training of Reserves. The exhortation to think imaginatively is a reasonable one, but it's still hard to see any element of regeneration coming cheap. That brings it into competition with readiness for operations at smaller scale and modernisation and, obviously in discussion with Defence, we should expect a dose of realism as to where it fits into the current strategic balance of investment. Nonetheless, and Chilcot notwithstanding, it would be nothing short of negligent not to plan now, not only for the war we might have to fight – but for the second-order effects of doing so.

The conclusions of the CHACR study day shine a light on the specific areas within the force structure and offset capabilities on which we might focus our efforts. But it also identified many other areas that the Army must bring forward into its planning, perhaps chief among them that it is our allies in a NATO context who will first compensate for our lack of mass, and the pressing need to re-examine the demand signal for the Regular Reserve.