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RETAINING OPERATIONAL BALANCE IN WESTERN EXPEDITIONARY FORCES

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Exercise Solo Flight

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EXERCISE *SOLO FLIGHT* – EXERCICE *SOLO FLIGHT*

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RETAINING OPERATIONAL BALANCE IN WESTERN EXPEDITIONARY FORCES

Fresh from operations in the Balkans, Afghanistan and Iraq, NATO and allied forces have continued through a series of ongoing transformations. Generally speaking, these transformations have seen a reduction in the size of Western militaries due to a combination of budgetary constraints and the ever-increasing costs of military technology, which far outpace the rate of inflation. This is not a new challenge, as militaries around the world, but particularly in the West, have often grappled with this challenge at the end of periods of conflict. In fact, during the interwar period of the Twentieth Century, the United Kingdom, while trying to meet its imperial defence commitments through more advanced weapons and technology to replace large formations, had to grapple with service estimates equal to those of 1914 in order to meet its peacetime requirements, which the government sought to (and did) reduce under the Ten-Year Rule, and the period immediately thereafter.¹

Instructive from earlier forays into the realm of austerity, coupled with attempts to simultaneously integrate new technology and capabilities (“effects” in the modern parlance), have been changes made to the structures of forces that would ultimately be employed on expeditionary operations. The course of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s saw reductions in the establishment of the, generally uniformly organized (in terms of manoeuvre units), division and brigade (or equivalent) structures within Western militaries, and those of several of their peers. In the 1920-1930s, these reductions were normally for the sake of cost savings, while those of the 1940s were often caused by

¹ Ferris, Dr. John R., *Men, Money, and Diplomacy*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 187

manpower shortages resulting from losses in combat. In both instances, there emerged a certain threshold, below which the reductions in establishments created unacceptable reductions in operational, and tactical, flexibility and (thus) combat capability. Either, the nations forced to adopt these measures generally had to reverse them, or were not in a position to do so and were ultimately defeated.

This issue has relevance in the modern day as, since the end of the Cold War and the draw-down in the scale of Western expeditionary commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan, there has been a relative curtailing of military expenditures (particularly on the conventional forces) as nations struggle with debt issues at home while also seeking their peace dividends. As has been mentioned, there have been significant increases in military technology, both in terms of capability and cost, and Western militaries have also been emphasizing non-kinetic capabilities. These include Influence Activities (IA) and Cyber operations, in order to better prepare Western military forces for the broad spectrum of (often irregular or asymmetrical) operations that recent history suggests will be the norm moving forward. Former NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen had proposed a pooling of capabilities amongst nations working together, to eliminate redundancies within the alliance, while retaining core capabilities during a period when only 3-4 NATO nations are meeting the unofficial targets for military expenditures of 2% of Gross Domestic Product.²

However, the result has been for the force structures of brigades, the level of formation upon which most major armies base their expeditionary operations today, again being reduced to levels that have been found to be historically unworkable (which is to

² Anders Fogh Rasmussen, "Why it is more important than ever to invest in defence of democracy", *The Daily Telegraph*, (6 April 2014)

say below what is effectively a ‘triangular’ organization) and which have proven awkward at the end of the most recently conducted low-intensity operations in Southwest Asia. This process has been further exacerbated by the fact that NATO-led operations in Afghanistan have shown a propensity for nations to issue national caveats that limit the employability of their forces – particularly in offensive operations. Thus, some nations, such as Germany, may retain combat capable forces, but are reluctant to employ them due to political or constitutional considerations (being restricted to defensive operations by Article 87 of their constitution). Meanwhile those nations with capable ground forces that do not impose a large number of restrictive national caveats – such as the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia, the Netherlands (prior to its relatively early withdrawal) and France (particularly in the latter stages of the deployment)³ in Afghanistan, are generally witnessing reductions in their combat force structures.

Taken together, the pool of forces capable of effectively participating in U.S.-led expeditionary operations is diminishing. It is the position of this paper that the structure of these NATO / Western combat formations were / are being reduced to non-operationally viable levels, in the pursuit of more broad-spectrum effects and the associated advanced technology, in an environment where budgets and personnel levels tend to be capped. Further, and building on the proposed integration and pooling of assets (in order to reduce redundancies within the alliance) that was proposed by then Secretary-General Rasmussen, it is suggested that the pooling of these assets take consideration for the national trends (caveats) regarding the employment of their forces. That is to say that those nations that are politically or militarily unable, or unwilling, to

³ Stephen M. Saideman and David P. Auerswald, “Comparing Caveats: Understanding the Sources of National Restrictions Upon NATO’s Mission in Afghanistan.” *International Studies Quarterly*. Volume 56, Issue 1 (March 2012)

carry out an active role in expeditionary operations, look to provide deployable supporting capabilities (such as civil liaison [CIMIC] and other IA, field hospitals, and policing support from military police units).⁴ Meanwhile the ‘hawks’, recently the “Five Eyes” nations and France, should concentrate on maintaining their combat formations / units at levels that have been proven to be viable.

In both instances, nations would have to retain combat forces at home, in order to ensure their national sovereignty. However, the reorganization of field formations along ‘binary’ lines (two of the three brigades within the Royal Netherlands Army have effectively adopted this, for example)⁵, while by no means ideal from a combat/operational standpoint, would at least seem less problematic if it is unlikely that those formations would ever be employed in mid-to-high-intensity expeditionary operations – and NATO still retains a pool of fully combat capable formations, to mitigate these reductions.

Admittedly, the United States, which will tend to be the lead for most modern expeditionary operations in the pursuit of collective security, has the capacity to maintain significant combat and effects-based capabilities. However, budgetary constraints have seen significant reductions to the U.S. Order of Battle, while its embrace of high technology weaponry on command and control apparatus, to off-set personnel reductions and minimize the scope for (politically unpalatable) heavy casualties, have simultaneously reduced the number of allied formations that could potentially retain

⁴ Colonel Douglas V. Mastriano, *Faust and the Padshah Sphinx: Reshaping the NATO Alliance to Win in Afghanistan*, (Carlisle Barracks, PA: US Army War College, 2010), p. 8. Colonel Mastriano indicates that some ISAF contributing nations were unsuited to counter-insurgency operations, but provided niche capabilities.

⁵ Netherlands. *Royal Netherlands Army units*. (www.defensie.nl)

interoperability with them. Thus, while the U.S. experiences with force reduction will be explored, the provision of non-kinetic capabilities by other members of the alliance will prove to be the most applicable to the other four nations comprising the “Five Eyes” (Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) and France. In fact, the freer passage of American intelligence to Britain, Canada and Australia through the “Four” or “Five Eyes” ‘club’ caused a (not beneficial) feeling of exclusion to the other members of ISAF in Afghanistan, but reflected greater U.S. comfort in dealing with these nations (who were more likely to act on the intelligence provided).⁶

In the historical record of operations over the past century, the structure of field formations (amongst technologically advanced militaries) has tended to be largely consistent and the composition of British brigades (and divisions) might be taken as illustrative. At the beginning of the Great War, these formations consisted of four battalions (a ‘square’ structure) – permitting three forward and one in reserve – and with it considerable flexibility for the formation commanders. Manpower shortages by the end of 1917 saw the reduction of the brigade to a ‘triangular’ concept of three battalions – permitting two up and one in reserve – and setting the minimum standard for such a formation as flexibility while reduced, was not eliminated, as there was sufficient scope to retain two manoeuvre units and a viable (unit-level) reserve which could also manoeuvre.⁷ This flexibility was facilitated by retention of the triangular concept at the division-level (three combat brigades) and at least that structure within the subordinate combat arms units (which ideally had four combat sub-units, plus combat support elements).

⁶ Ibid., p. 16

⁷ Spencer Tucker and Priscilla Mary Roberts, *Encyclopedia of World War I*, (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2005), p. 504

Where problems were encountered was when there were deviations from the 'rule of 3s', i.e. when an element of these organizations dipped below the 'triangular' structure. During the Second World War, the British armoured divisions, standardized in 1942 on a two-brigade structure, which reduced manning pressures, were found to be too deficient in infantry and overall flexibility when operating in more complex terrain encountered in southern Europe in 1943-4, which necessitated the reversion to a three-brigade structure on the initiative of the Eighth Army Headquarters.⁸ This consideration has relevance to the modern day as the West's current opponents seek asymmetrical operations, ideally in complex terrain, to offset our advantages in the Command, Act and Sense functions.

Similarly, when it is remembered that in the concept of proper combined (or joint) operations, a combat formation's capabilities are derived from the capacity to fully support and enable its constituent units, it is necessary to ensure that unacceptable reductions at the tactical level (i.e. within the units) do not have an operational impact. This issue was also encountered by the British during the early stages of the Second World War, where artillery regiments had been reduced to two gun batteries (albeit of a greater number of guns) as a cost- saving move during the Interwar period, with the result that there were insufficient batteries within a regiment to support each of the three constituent manoeuvre units within the brigades.⁹ This shortcoming was incrementally

⁸ Douglas E. Delaney, *The Soldiers' General: Bert Hoffmeister at War*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006), pp. 164-165

⁹ Shelford Bidwell and Dominick Graham, *Fire-Power: British Army Weapons and Theories of War 1904-45*, (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1985), p. 253

rectified as soon as the losses sustained in France began to be made good – in early 1941.¹⁰

As part of a great alliance, the British at least had the potential to regain balance within their formations, although they had to reduce the overall number of formations in order to do so, but this luxury was not available to the over-taxed *Heer*. The effectiveness and flexibility of the German combat forces declined as available manpower dwindled and the bulk of their infantry formations (regiments) were ultimately reduced to a ‘binary’ structure of two battalions – limiting their effectiveness and reducing them to largely static defensive and occupational/security roles.¹¹ This had disastrous operational consequences in Normandy in the summer of 1944 as they did not have sufficient reserve forces that could manoeuvre in response to Allied penetrations, nor could they fully practice their doctrine of defence in depth.¹² Here, ‘the decline in quality was the result of declining quantity (in the force structure)’.¹³

In the modern day, U.S. ground forces (especially the U.S. Army) have sought greater strategic responsiveness and operational manoeuvrability (in more financially straitened times) by embracing lighter formation structures, the “Modular Army” having only two manoeuvre units in each of its Armored and Infantry Brigade Combat Teams.¹⁴ The lack of sufficient weight within the formations might partially explain the cessation of large-scale active operations in SW Asia at a point short of total victory – there were

¹⁰ Ibid. This reorganization took months to implement with the British TO&E reflecting this change as of April, 1941.

¹¹ Captain Jonathan M. House, *Towards Combined Arms Warfare: A Survey of 20th-Century Tactics, Doctrine and Organization*, (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1984), pp. 125-126

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Outlined at length by Dr. Williamson Murray, ed. *Army Transformation: A View From the U.S. Army War College*. Carlisle Barracks, PA: US Army War College, 2001, pp. 159-163

simply too few troops to hold the ground gained in successful tactical engagements.¹⁵

The deficiencies of this organization might be seen in the recent reduction of 10 BCTs (specifically the Brigade HQ and supporting units) from the Army Order of Battle, both as a cost saving move and, as General of the Army Odierno announced, as a means to find the third manoeuvre units for the remaining (32) BCTs.¹⁶

In a related move, the U.S. artillery battalions, which will support these BCTs are returning to three ‘fires’ batteries (after experimenting with only two, larger ‘fires’ batteries) to better support the three battalions in the BCTs, but the overall number of artillery battalions will be reduced by up to 26.¹⁷ Nor are these reductions limited to the U.S. Army; in the search for greater Intelligence Surveillance Target Acquisition Reconnaissance (ISTAR, i.e. Sense) capability within a fixed personnel establishment, the regular Canadian Mechanized Brigade Groups retain only two gun batteries (on a reduced establishment of four guns each) for their four integral manoeuvre units. As shown in the historical record, this is an arrangement that has been proven to be tactically (and, thus, operationally) unacceptable every time it has been attempted during combat operations.

Simultaneously, the Army 2020 reorganization being forced on the British Army has seen the field forces reduced to three well-equipped and balanced brigades, kept at high readiness, within 3 (UK) Division, while seven ‘adaptable’ (regional) brigades are retained (under the auspices of 1 (UK) Division) for (specialized) security duties and

¹⁵ Further to Dr. Williamson Murray, ed. *Army Transformation: A View From the U.S. Army War College*, p. 166, only the “Interim” (Stryker) BCTs, in the “Interim Armored Vehicles” (Strykers) retained the three manoeuvre unit structure to bridge the gap between the elite light forces and the Armored and Infantry BCTs, i.e. for exactly the type of Counter-Insurgency mission that developed in Afghanistan.

¹⁶ United States. “BCTs Cut at 10 posts Will Help Other BCTs Grow”, *Official Homepage of the U.S. Army*, 25 June 2013 (www.army.mil)

¹⁷ Andrew Feickert, *U.S. Army’s Modular Redesign: Issues for Congress*, (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 2006), p. 23

employment in lower intensity operations.¹⁸ While this reorganization seems to make the best of the financial constraints facing the British Army, the adaptable brigades (while still highly professional) are no longer optimally organized or equipped for expeditionary deployment across the full spectrum of operations. But there is allowance for an increased Cyber force, amongst other enablers.¹⁹ In essence, the British Army has been forced to eschew the capacity for the (potentially independent) large-scale expeditionary commitments recently observed in Southwest Asia as, after allowing for the requirement for troop rotations, only one high readiness brigade might be deployed at any one time – virtually guaranteeing that future such deployments would be under the lead of a U.S. divisional, or higher, headquarters.²⁰

Certainly, the enablers have been of assistance to the deployed combat forces in situations, such as Afghanistan, where nation and capacity building has accompanied low-intensity conflict. However, in addition to the national caveats which reduced active combat operations to the handful of military forces deployed within Regional Command (RC) South and RC East, there are two other ‘rubs’ against the over-specialization of the military forces which might be actively employed in future combat operations on behalf of the Alliance / Western interests (generally those of collective security).

First, and in addition to national caveats, most nations have placed a ceiling on the number of personnel deployed to operational theatres creating a zero sum game for the deployed forces in that, if you increase the number of uniformed enablers, you

¹⁸ Michael Shurkin. “Allied Fronts: European Armies Approach Austerity in Instructive Ways”. *RAND Review*. Volume 37, No. 2 (Fall 2013), p. 2 (www.rand.org)

¹⁹ United Kingdom, *Future Army 2020: Ninth Report of Session 2013-2014 Volume 1 [HC 576]*, (London: House of Commons Defence Committee, March 2014), p. 50

²⁰ Michael Shurkin, *Setting Priorities in the Age of Austerity: British, French and German Experiences*, (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2013)

correspondingly decrease the combat forces. Similarly, for potential future deployments, force structures already account for the presence of significant enabler assets. Within Canada's Managed Readiness Plan, the single battle group (with approximately 600 personnel in its combat sub-units) within the high readiness task force, intended for potential employment in mid-intensity operations, will be provided with a capacity for up to 87 enablers drawn from the proposed IA Company.²¹

Secondly, while the recent operations in Iraq, Afghanistan and other failed states are believed to set the template for future commitments – there exists the possibility that they might not. Faced with renewed Russian territorial ambitions in Eastern Europe, both Poland and the Baltic states have requested the presence of permanent NATO forces within their territory. Notably, Poland has asked for the presence of two mechanized brigades, not constabulary forces 'practiced in the art of drinking tea with their village elders.'²² In this instance, even the powerful U.S. Army (with commitments across the globe) might have found greater use for one or more of the 19 armored battalions it is in the process of removing from its Order of Battle, rather than some of its 149 new MP 'units', 9 new civil affairs 'units' or 7 new Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) 'units.'²³

Further, it is very difficult to get an assessment on the full value that many of these non-kinetic enablers provide. "Afghanistan has proven to be one of the most complex environments to combat",²⁴ meaning that with the combination of very ambitious objectives and limited resources, strategic and operational success, in the final

²¹ Canada, *Updated Products – Canadian Army Managed Readiness Plan*, (Ottawa: National Defence Headquarters (Army G35), 13 June 2014)

²² Major Dr. Bob Martyn, "Unlearning Afghanistan", *Canadian Military Journal*. Volume 13, No. 3 (2013) (www.journal.forces.gc.ca)

²³ Andrew Feickert, *U.S. Army's Modular Redesign: Issues for Congress*, p.23. The author uses the term 'units' but appears to be referring to sub-units or sub-sub-units.

²⁴ Colonel Douglas V. Mastriano, p. 10

analysis, is not assured. And, as many observers have commented upon, it is especially difficult to determine and quantify measures of effectiveness in complex operations, as it is difficult to ascertain second order (or unexpected) effects.

In the current environment of reduced force structures, caveats on the potential use of some nations' forces, and a potential increase in the threats to the interests of collective security, it is becoming increasingly apparent that 'we do not have the luxury of building single-mission forces...i.e. separate agencies for each block of a "Three Block War world."'”²⁵ Coupled with the consideration that “fully integrated, flexible and combat capable forces can do peace support and counter-insurgency operations”, but ‘the reverse is not true for constabulary forces trained only for the latter’, it would seem best, for collective security, that the armies capable of fielding fully combat capable forces should strive to retain that capability within their available resources.²⁶

As the enablers are generally seen as less “offensive” in their intent and capabilities, this might seem to be the niche for NATO armies that are held in check by significant national caveats when deployed, or those that have been forced, for budgetary reasons, to reduce their armies to a structure more consistent with a constabulary force. In fact, this might prove to be a boon to the Alliance in more ways than one as a professional uniformed force (which would not count against the ceilings of battle groups deployed for possible combat operations) practiced in civil affairs, medical services, capacity building, and policing would offset the difficulties that many nations have experienced when their other government departments and civilian agencies have been

²⁵ Frank G. Hoffman, “Conflict in the 21st Century, The Rise of Hybrid Wars”. *Potomac Institute for Policy Studies* (2007), p. 46

²⁶ Major Dr. Bob Martyn, “Unlearning Afghanistan”, *Canadian Military Journal*, Volume 13, No. 3 (2013)

unable match the military's resources and commitments under the auspices of joint operations, as was witnessed in Afghanistan.

Some of the more "offensive" enabler capabilities, such as intelligence gathering to facilitate offensive operations, PSYOPS or offensive Cyber warfare might well draw on the same nations that would be committing the troops for combat operations during future expeditions, but in these instances it should be remembered that these nations could pool their assets and each would not have to provide the full operational requirement. Similarly, this process could be used to mitigate those instances where the nations that would provide enablers do not participate at all. This would embrace the concept of working together to eliminate redundancies that Anders Fogh Rasmussen championed. Or, in the spirit of Major Dr. Martyn's submission on the greater flexibility offered by fully combat-capable forces, a view shared by many military theorists, a combat arms unit could be retrained to provide some of these capabilities for a specific mission – being able to revert to its primary (and more flexible) role at mission's end.²⁷

In summary, it can be seen that IA and other enablers that provide non-kinetic effects within a theatre of operations obviously perform a useful function, although one that is hard to quantify within our normal measures of effectiveness. Historically easier to quantify has been the negative effects of cutting the combat arms and combat support arms, when active combat operations have been necessary. Given that many of these (IA) functions have been performed as secondary duties of the combat forces prior to the establishment of purpose-built enabler organizations, it is fair to say that Western / Alliance forces have won several military operations (and major wars) without the formal existence of these organizations. It is much harder to find examples of military

²⁷ Ibid.

operations being successfully concluded without sufficient combat forces, or by those that are inadequately organized.

Thus, it would seem apparent that those nations committed to expeditionary operations in support of collective security should seek to retain viable combat formations to carry out these tasks. In an era of fiscal constraint, this might be accomplished by relying on those militaries with restrictions on the scope of their operational employment to provide the non-kinetic enablers, or by pooling these assets amongst themselves – to ensure that the number of uniformed personnel committed to these requirements does not adversely impact their ‘Act’ function. Such arrangements would seem more efficient and could help to defuse some of the frictions, within NATO, that were observed in Afghanistan, between those nations that permitted their forces to actively participate in combat operations, and those that did not.

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