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## Inter-service rivalry: British defence policy, 1956-1968

RUSI Analysis, 19 Aug 2010

**Varying service views on the most effective approach to project UK power globally during the Cold War proved problematic in settling UK defence policy. Contradictory views hindered defence procurement and proved costly, ultimately forcing the abandonment of key projects. The Royal Navy's Joint Services Seaborne Force appeared viable but largely unrealised due to bitter opposition. Confronted by the current Defence Review, it is essential all three services buck the historical trend and opt for a 'spirit of jointery' in future defence planning.**

By Dr Ian Speller, for RUSI.org

This article is part of the Military History and Policy Series  
**Series III: Reforming Defence - Learning lessons from past Defence Reviews**  
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Current US maritime strategy argues that we are entering an 'era of declining access', where third-parties will be reluctant to offer bases and transit rights to western forces and where western governments will be reluctant to see their troops based on foreign soil where their presence could engender a hostile response and where they are vulnerable to guerrilla and terrorist attack. [1] The British faced a similar problem in the 1950s and 1960s. Decolonisation and a growth of nationalist sentiment in Africa and Asia threatened to deprive Britain of the string of overseas bases on which its military policy had previously been based. Simultaneously, there was an appreciation that the European withdrawal from empire and cold war rivalry made instability in these areas more likely.

In the first years of the cold war British defence policy had focused on the threat of a major war in Europe. By the mid-1950s British planners began to appreciate that the emerging nuclear stalemate made a major war against the Soviet Union unlikely and any war that did occur was likely to result in a nuclear exchange at an early stage. In such circumstances there was little point in maintaining the conventional forces required to fight a long war but there was both a need and an opportunity to deal with instability overseas. The result was a growing interest in the kind of mobile and flexible forces required to cater for unforeseen crises beyond Europe, particularly in the area 'east of Suez' where Britain retained residual interests and responsibilities. This process received a significant boost after the 1956 Suez crisis demonstrated the weakness of Britain's existing expeditionary capabilities. In the years after Suez there was a notable emphasis on the development of expeditionary forces and also on increasing joint (i.e. inter-service) co-operation.

### The trouble with bases

In the aftermath of the Second World War British imperial defence reverted to its pre-war form built around a global system of bases and garrisons held together by sea and air communications. The system worked tolerably well insofar as it enabled Britain to maintain access to and control of its overseas possessions at a reasonable cost, but it did have major short comings and these were becoming more apparent by the mid-1950s.[2]

## Commentary

**Introduction: Reforming Defence**  
 Learning lessons from past Defence Reviews

**Dodging the Bullet and Ducking the Question: British Defence Policy and its Post-Imperial World Role**

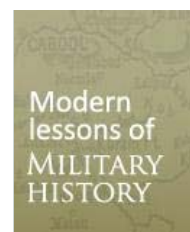
Britain's imperialist mentality is outdated and overambitious: viewing the country as a global power is damaging, rather than benefiting, current defence policy.

**Learning from Haldane**  
 Can Richard Haldane's reforms, responsible for the best organised expeditionary force of the twentieth century, provide a basis for the current Strategic Defence Review? .

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British military planning.[3] Five years later, during the Suez crisis, the military were unable to provide useful options until months had passed, by which time it was probably already too late. Operation *Musketeer* in November 1956 showed up the danger of relying too much on static bases that were either too distant (Malta), under-developed (Cyprus) or unavailable for political reasons (Libya, Jordan and Ceylon). The ponderous conduct of *Musketeer* further demonstrated deficiencies in Britain's expeditionary capabilities and made a material contribution to the political collapse that occurred back in London.[4]

The history of the Suez base provided ample testimony to the political difficulties inherent in maintaining bases on non-sovereign territory. It was significant that Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal only days after the last British troops vacated a base that had become untenable in the face of opposition from the host nation. In the aftermath of the crisis Britain was to lose access to important facilities in Jordan, Iraq and Ceylon, further underlining the difficulty of relying on bases in foreign lands, while the progressive withdrawal from empire reduced options further. This did not stop heavy investment in major new bases in Kenya and then Aden, the former vacated in 1964 even before it was complete and the later evacuated in 1967 as Britain abandoned Aden to insurgency.

The negative impact of maintaining a footprint on foreign soil was reinforced numerous times. For example, in January 1964 President Nyerere of Tanganyika requested British assistance in the face of an army mutiny. The response was immediate and effective. Royal Marines from No.45 Commando were landed by helicopters from the aircraft carrier HMS *Centaur* and restored order with minimum loss of life. It is noteworthy that, while British forces intervened at the behest of the legitimate government and were initially welcomed by the general population, as the weeks passed their presence began to excite negative comment. Whitehall was well attuned to this and the marines soon withdrew to poise out of sight offshore in amphibious shipping. At sea they provided a capable force in readiness without offending local sensibilities.[5]

The simple fact of the matter was that, then as now, few people welcomed foreign troops on their soil even when such troops were there to help. They were also unlikely to want to become drawn into a crisis by offering transit rights. The problem for Britain was to find a means of projecting power and influence overseas with a reduced emphasis on bases in and over-flight of other countries. In response to this the Royal Navy (RN) and the Royal Air Force (RAF) were to develop rather different solutions.

#### Jointery

The RN developed a concept for mobile and flexible maritime task forces capable of landing a balanced military force of up to a brigade group. Described by the RN as the Joint Services Seaborne Force (JSSF), the concept was designed to cater for operations against 'moderate opposition', but did not envisage assault landings against heavily defended beaches. It was designed to reduce dependence on overseas bases, anticipating a time when Britain might have access to only one major base east of Suez, probably in Australia.[6] In this respect it reflected government policy. The 1962 Defence White Paper emphasised the need to insure against the future loss of bases by increasing the strategic mobility of British forces.[7]

The RN's concept was overtly joint. While the Royal Marines were to supply the amphibious spearhead of the JSSF the Army would provide support and follow-on forces. The RN's new amphibious ships were designed specifically so that they could embark the full range of Army equipment. Aircraft carriers would provide mobile air defence and close air support for the embarked force while land based RAF aircraft would offer additional support and long range strike capabilities when within range and RAF transport aircraft would bring reinforcements into theatre.

In order to create synergies between air and maritime forces in the expeditionary role, a new concept of operations was required. The result was the seaborne/airborne/land concept developed, after tri-service consultation, in 1959/60.[8] The concept was eventually incorporated into the first Manual of Joint Warfare in 1965.[9] This was matched by institutional developments, with a Joint Warfare Committee, Staff and Establishment replacing their single service equivalents.[10] In 1959 the first unified (i.e., joint) overseas command had been created at Aden (Middle East Command), followed in 1961 and 1963 by Near East Command (Cyprus) and Far East Command (Singapore). In stressing the joint credentials of the JSSF the RN tapped into an issue of growing prominence in British thinking.[11]

#### Disjointery

The RN's concept does not appear to have caused a heated reaction within Army circles. The main concern of the War Office, busy adjusting to the shift to voluntary recruitment, was to protect historic regiments from the axe. Their periodic interest in the amphibious role is best explained in this context and the expansion of Royal Marine Commandos to five active units was viewed with jealousy and alarm. The Admiralty had to fend off Army attempts to take over the role of one or more commandos and also to take command of the Commando Brigade. Some within the 'dark-blue' element of the Naval Service recognised that the marines could be sacrificed in order to buy Army support for the JSSF but little came of this. The Royal Marines' expertise in expeditionary warfare was too obvious an asset to be given up lightly.[12]

To say that the RN's concept caused a heated reaction from the RAF would be an understatement. The RAF's concept of operations east of Suez was radically different. The RN focused on balanced forces able to deal with moderate opposition, with a reduced reliance on overseas bases. The RAF developed an alternative concept built around strategic air transport and the delivery of long-range fires from a series of as yet undeveloped bases in the region. They

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carpet' reception facilities was reliant on airborne forces operating up to 1,000 miles from the mounting base. In operations at such ranges, and in the absence of aircraft carriers, dismissed as expensive, vulnerable and unnecessary, air superiority would be achieved by pre-emptive air strikes and fighter aircraft could be flown forward once (if) an airfield was secured.[13]

Opposition to RN plans to construct new aircraft carriers lay at the heart of this scheme and this reflected a longstanding, almost reflexive opposition to such vessels. The RAF were willing to countenance small ships, somewhat akin to the later *Invincible* class but they virulently opposed anything that might challenge their role as the main providers of strike aircraft overseas. The loss of the nuclear bomber role to the RN's submarines did not encourage them to compromise on this issue. The RAF showed no real interest in accepting the Admiralty's offer of partnership in the expeditionary role.[14]

### Events

Even as the services laid plans for an expeditionary future the pressure of events tested some of their basic assumptions. The ideas underpinning the JSSF were proven in a number of crises, including Kuwait (1961), Tanganyika (1964), Zanzibar (1964) and the withdrawal from Aden (1967).[15] A joint capability was required to meet Britain's defence needs east of Suez. Operations in Oman in 1957 and in Aden in the 1960s demonstrated the limitations of independent air action. Air control theory did not work.[16] Air transport was very useful in delivering troops to secure airfields but long range air transport or airborne operations were not possible without air superiority and without an aircraft carrier the RAF could not provide this at significant distance from their fixed bases. That much was evident at Kuwait in 1961.[17] Their suggested alternative, of pre-emptive air strikes, neglected political reality.

Meanwhile, as the RN and RAF squabbled over the expeditionary role, Army interest east of Suez focused on the requirement to fight insurgencies in Borneo and Aden and the need to support them in this often tied down expeditionary forces, particularly the navy's amphibious ships and helicopters, reducing their availability elsewhere.[18]

The JSSF concept was well-suited to British defence needs as they appeared in the early 1960s and on this basis the Macmillan government rejected the RAF island strategy and agreed to build a new large aircraft carrier, CVA-01. As is well known, the carrier did not progress beyond the drawing board still less did the RN get the second ship they had anticipated. In 1966 the Labour government, bequeathed unsustainable spending plans by the previous administration, cut the programme.[19] This did not represent a victory for the RAF's alternative vision as much as an overall reduction in British aspirations. The island strategy did not, could not, provide the flexible range of options offered by the JSSF but the government decided that it did not require such options and with ambitions suitably reduced, the RAF plan would suffice. Quite how a total of twelve F-111 aircraft would truly have served British interests, out of sight and out of mind at airfields remote from many potential trouble spots, was never put to the test.[20] Within just two more years it was decided to withdraw from east of Suez altogether. There were insufficient funds even for this token capability.[21]

### Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose

The 1982 Falklands Conflict provided another, rather belated vindication for the JSSF concept. It also illustrated the danger of accepting at face value the claims of politicians that the armed forces will never again be required to carry out a particular type of operation. The war in the South Atlantic was sufficiently out of kilter with existing policy to be considered an aberration, it did not have a major impact on defence priorities. It was not until the 1990s and end of the Cold War that expeditionary capabilities once again gained prominence. In a manner not entirely dissimilar to thinking in the 1950s, the reduced threat of war in Europe was believed to coincide with an increasing probability of instability overseas and once again British defence policy took on an expeditionary hue. Amphibious and air mobile capabilities were enhanced and joint institutions and initiatives proliferated. Most prominently, perhaps, RN plans to construct two large aircraft carriers gained government approval in 1998.

Today, with operations in Afghanistan drawing in personnel and resources and a new government intent on controlling spiralling expenditure there are many who fear, and as many who hope, that the new carriers will go the way of CVA-01. Manifestly, RN aircraft carriers and amphibious ships do not make a vital contribution to current operations against the Taliban any more than do RAF Typhoons. However, rational defence planning is about more than immediate and obvious concerns. Mobility and flexibility are useful attributes because they allow one to cater for unforeseen contingencies. Paradoxically, surprise is one of the few certainties in military affairs. It makes sense to cater for it. Unfortunately it can be difficult to argue this case when faced with the press of current operations, constrained budgets and differing service priorities. That the RN failed to do so in the mid-1960s is a matter of historical record. Whether they will succeed in the twenty-first century remains to be seen. Much will depend on the attitude of the Army and the RAF and whether all three services respond to the defence review in a spirit of jointery or disjointery. The historical record is not encouraging.

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[1] *A Co-operative Strategy for the Twenty-First Century*, October 2007. Available online at <http://www.navy.mil/maritime/Maritimestrategy.pdf>

[13] For an overview of British policy see Phillip Parker, *British Defence Policy East of Suez*

- [3] See 'A Splutter of Musketry. The British Military Response to the Anglo-Iranian Oil Dispute, 1951' in *Contemporary British History*, Vol. 17, Issue 1, Spring 2003, pp. 39-66.
- [4] For further reading on the Suez Crisis see Keith Kyle, *Suez: Britain's End of Empire in the Middle East*, (2002) and Roy Fullick and Geoffrey Powell, *Suez. The Double War*, (1979).
- [5] Captain Steiner, Report to Flag Officer Middle East, UK National Archives, Kew (henceforth UKNA), ADM 1/29063. 45 Commando Royal Marines, Preliminary Report on Operations in Tanganyika, Feb. 1964, UKNA ADM 29063. Report on the Activities of 41 Commando Royal Marines, 1 Jan. 1964 - 10 April 1964, UKNA ADM 202/510. Lt-Col Stephens, 'A Joint Operation in Tanganyika', *RUSI Journal*, 637, February 1965.
- [6] For example, see 'Presentation of Alternative Long Term Naval Programme', 17 May 1961, UKNA ADM 205/192. For further details see Ian Speller, 'The Royal Navy, expeditionary operations and the end of empire, 1956-1975' in Greg Kennedy (ed.), *British Naval Strategy East of Suez, 1900-2000: influences and actions*, (2005) chapter 8.
- [7] *Statement on Defence 1962: the Next Five Years*, Cmnd.1639.
- [8] UKNA DEFE 2/2074. COS (61) 180, *Seaborne/Airborne/Land concept*, 8 June 1961, UKNA DEFE 5/114
- [9] *Manual of Joint Warfare, Vol1*, UKNA DEFE 73/1.
- [10] COS (62) 12, *Seaborne/Airborne/Land Operations*, 4 Jan 1962 and COS (62) 84, Joint Warfare Sun-Committees and Joint Warfare staff, 28 Feb 1962, UKNA DEFE 5/123. COS 365/63, Joint Warfare Committee - Terms of Reference, 8 Nov. 1963, UKNA DEFE 5/144. COS (62) 426, Joint Warfare training and development, 31 Oct 1962, UKNA DEFE 5/131. COS (62) 68 mtg, 20 Oct 1962, UKNA DEFE 4/148. For further details see Ian Speller, 'The Seaborne/Airborne Concept: Littoral manoeuvre in the 1960s?' in *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1 Feb. 2006 pp.53-92.
- [11] In 1964 the Mountbatten reforms enhanced the power of the central Ministry of Defence at the expense of the Service Ministries, adding a further element of 'jointery'.
- [12] For example see UKNA DEFE 7/1681, ADM 202/185, ADM 205/191 and ADM 201/135.
- [13] UKNA AIR 8/2354 and AIR 20/11423.
- [14] Eric Grove, 'Partnership Spurned: the Royal Navy's Search for a Joint Maritime-Air Strategy East of Suez, 1961-63', in N.A.M. Rodger, *Naval Power in the Twentieth Century*, (1996) pp.227-41.
- [15] See Speller, 'The Royal Navy and Expeditionary Operations'. For Tanganyika and Zanzibar see 'An African Cuba? Britain and the Zanzibar Revolution, 1964' in *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vo. 35, No. 2, June 2007 pp.283-301.
- [16] Darby, *British Defence Policy*, pp.130-133. Air Chief Marshal Sir David Lee, *Flight from the Middle East*, (1980). Spencer Mawby, *British Policy in Aden and the Protectorates 1955-1967*, (2005)
- [17] Ministry of Defence Naval Historical Branch, Box T2644-T2673, *Summary of lessons learnt by FOAC from the Kuwait Operation*, 25 Oct 1961. Lee, *Flight from the Middle East*, p.180.
- [18] For an examination of the impact of Confrontation on maritime forces see Christopher Tuck, 'The Royal Navy and Confrontation, 1963-66' in Kennedy (ed.), *British Naval Strategy East of Suez*.
- [19] *Statement on the Defence Estimates 1966. Part 1. The Defence Review*, Cmnd. 2901.
- [20] The 1966 Defence White Paper announced the decision abandon the new carrier and to purchase fifty F-111 strike and reconnaissance aircraft. Of these only twelve were to be stationed east of Suez. Darby, *British Defence Policy*, pp.306-7.
- [21] For an analysis of the British decision to withdraw from 'east of Suez' see S. Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez: The Choice Between Europe and the World?*, (2002) and J. Pickering, *Britain's Withdrawal from East of Suez. The Politics of Retrenchment*, (1998).

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