

As the UK's military occupies itself with the drawdown of forces from Afghanistan, and policy makers begin to work on the SDSR of 2015, it would be well for Britain to bear in mind the lessons of recent history. A pre-occupation with the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan risks blinding Britain to wider lessons which can be drawn from other operations says Mungo Melvin in an interview with Nick Watts, Deputy Director General of the UK Defence Forum. Mungo Melvin is a retired British Army major general, who served in the Royal Engineers. His more senior appointments were as Director of Land Warfare in the Army's General Staff, Director of Operational Capability in the Ministry of Defence's central staff, and latterly as Senior Directing Staff and head of the strategy cell at the Royal College of Defence Studies. He retired in 2011 and since then he has advised the House of Commons Select Committee on Defence. He also advises the British Army on commemorations of the First World War. He is President of the British Commission for Military History, is a published author and leads battlefield studies.

Melvin believes that thorough and open analysis is important for the formulation of good strategy, having been a close spectator of government defence policy for the last 20 years. "The UK has been fascinated and consumed by recent interventions, by intra-state warfare and counter insurgency. The strategic risk of all this is that we may have lost sight of the inherent geostrategic risks in the world and the interplay of big power politics."

"If you look at the 2010 National Security Strategy and its assessments of the tiers of risks, you would be hard put to ascribe the current Ukrainian crisis to one of those tiers. It is not terrorism, cyber or a direct attack on the UK or NATO, but it poses a number of significant challenges to our wider security. That is why Britain needs to do some profound strategic analysis, not only of the lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan, but also lessons from previous operations such as Bosnia and others and to learn from recent events."

Melvin believes that it would also be timely to look at some of the frozen conflicts which remain in Eastern Europe, such as Georgia and Transdnistria. He is disappointed that there seems to be little awareness of the need to undertake a fundamental appraisal of the geostrategic threats we face. He believes that while MOD is looking at 'new things' such as emerging challenges, it also needs to look again at old ones, where much of the expertise has been lost.

"It is pertinent to ask whether in the next National Security Strategy and SDSR there will be the appetite for a fundamental reappraisal of Britain's place in the world. We require a realism test based on the understanding that strategy is a course of action that integrates ends, ways and means." The UK needs to work out the correlation. Melvin notes that it is difficult to hold that there can be no strategic shrinkage in Britain's role in the world, when the means have been reduced. He notes that the ends have remained as big as ever.

"There is now greater strategic uncertainty than at the time of the previous National Security Strategy – but the Government has yet to draw the consequences. It is worth reviewing how the UK can best spend on Defence if the budget is going to remain limited. This requires a thorough

reappraisal of what we set out to do in recent conflicts, and what has been achieved. The UK must undertake this sort of net assessment. There is little evidence of a genuine appetite to do this. Given the cost accrued in lives and resources, the country surely requires this.”

Melvin says that he is not necessarily arguing for more resources, but for a far better informed debate on the correlation between what the effect of UK defence policy has been in the past and what might happen in the future. On the matter of resources, asked whether he thought the UK should seek to maintain a full spectrum capability, or take a more opportunistic approach, in effect hedging our bets, he warned of “the inherent uncertainty” of what we are going to face. “At the end of the Cold War, MOD staff foresaw no reason to suppose that our armoured forces might be deployed out of Europe. Shortly after that the first Gulf War happened. After which they said never again, and we did it again in 2003.”

Alongside the debate about capabilities, Melvin notes the need for “a proper analysis of what went well (and less well) in Iraq and Afghanistan. He believes that it is “...irresponsible to apply any instruments of national power without trying to audit the outcomes.” He hopes there will be an honest appraisal, notwithstanding the eventual outcome of the Chilcott Inquiry, about Iraq. He adds that the UK has “... a duty to record, not only for historical purposes, but we need to rationalise what has happened.”

Melvin notes that there have been no formal official histories of recent campaigns. The two exceptions are the Korean and Falklands Wars; but nothing subsequent. This he says is a “... huge historical deficit.” He cites the Afghan campaign where UK forces lacked historical awareness. The UK “...sent forces in 2006 to Helmand, very few of those deployed there were aware of the defeat of the British forces at Maiwand during the second Afghan war and the part this played in their (Pashtun) national narrative. This was inexcusable.” He cites the same broad error in Iraq. The UK didn’t concentrate on the lessons (of the Mesopotamian campaign) of the First World War and the subsequent insurgency. The troops there didn’t understand the Arab mind.”

Melvin notes that there is only a handful of staff undertaking historical research and analysis in each of the Service branches. But he also notes that there are academics and historians at RMA and Shrivenham who are not involved in this work. There is also a limited amount of capability in the Defence Concepts and Doctrine Centre. The MOD is good at gathering tactical lessons of campaigns. His criticism is the reluctance to do some profound historical analysis, and to draw the strategic lessons. He believes that it is good to be aware of future trends and threats and remain open to what the future may bring, avoiding the temptation to re-fight past wars. But a study of history is needed to balance the future with the past. “The MOD does plenty of good futurology, but not much historical analysis at all.”