

# Risk

## The Implications of Current Attitudes to Risk for the Joint Operational Concept

*"My great fear is that we as a nation will become so risk-averse, so cynical and so introverted that we will find ourselves in inglorious and impotent isolation by default"*  
Bill Rammell (Min AF 2009 - 2010) 14 Jan 2010

### Introduction

#### Background

1. There is a common accusation that the MOD and the Armed Forces are becoming increasingly risk averse. This aversion is always portrayed as a weakness in Government policy and as a limitation on military thinking. It is rarely quantified and even more rarely defined in any meaningful way. Before attempting to ascertain whether such accusations are true it is necessary to examine what is meant by risk in this context, what the evidence for risk aversion is and how such attitudes, should they exist, affect the delivery of military capability.
2. Once a working understanding of risk has been arrived at it can then be used to determine whether we have genuinely become more risk averse within the context of the use of military force in recent history. While it is possible that we have become more risk conscious (as Beck suggests<sup>1</sup>) rather than risk averse the effect upon our actions would be similar although the options to offset the deleterious effects upon our military activities might be different. Following on from that the factors that produce such an aversion can be identified and how they affect the MOD. Once those are identified a series of first and second order deductions can be produced that will have a relevance to the Joint Operational Concept.

#### A Definition of Risk

*"A risk is a chance you take; if it fails you can recover.  
A gamble is also a chance you take but if it fails recovery is impossible"*  
Field Marshal Rommel

3. Although somewhat trite, Field Marshal Rommel's definition provides a very useful working model to use when unpacking the meaning and significance of risk in the military context.
4. In its simplest form the relationship may be depicted as three areas namely operate, risk and gamble.
  - a. The Operate Area. Within the operate area the total capability is sufficient to deal with the problem and absorb any setbacks encountered within that capability without modifying the aim or end result. Military planners always aim to situate their plans within this area.
  - b. The Risk Area. In the area denominated as risk, the capability is sufficient to deal with the challenges likely to be encountered although dealing with such occurrences may involve severe penalties and some modification of the aim.

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<sup>1</sup>'Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity' by Ulrich Beck.

- c. The Gamble Area. The gamble area encompasses those decisions or activities that may pose challenges that it is impossible to overcome and failures will inflict such penalties that mere modification of the plan will not redress them and from which there is no recovery within that context.

5. To demonstrate the model in simple terms one may use the example of mountaineering.

- a. When climbing a mountain, equipped with the right levels of skill, fitness and equipment, supported by a favourable weather forecast one would be described as being in the operate area. Should there be a change in the weather, a member of the team fail to appear or one piece of equipment fail the team can still reach the top and return safely.
- b. In the risk area the situation differs in that the weather forecast is uncertain and the level of skill is barely sufficient to achieve the summit. The weather may then deteriorate but the team can still recover albeit without achieving the entire aim and is available for another attempt.
- c. Within the gamble area the situation is markedly different. Success depends upon everything going well. Favourable weather, fully functioning equipment and the presence of all team members are critical to achieving the mission and the failure of any factor will lead to disaster. Disaster being defined as the case where not only will the aim not be achieved (the summit will not be reached), but the team will have no way of recovering because in this case it is completely overmatched by the situation. Death ensues.

6. It is often argued that the MOD has become steadily more risk averse as the years have passed and this canard is steadily gaining acceptance. However it is very difficult to find historical evidence that the military have become more risk averse in recent years<sup>2</sup>; the military may have come to believe that the public, and through their influence, the political leadership of the government, has become more risk averse on the basis of recent campaigns. However this assertion is based on recent, post 2000 experience and we are in danger of learning false lessons concerning the public's attitude to military operations. Historically, once the public are convinced that they have a stake in the conflict they are prepared to endorse military risks and will accept casualties as the necessary consequence of the use of military force. This was evident in the public feeling during Operation Corporate and Operation Banner where public support was extremely robust. In those cases where the public is unconvinced of the relevance of the campaign to their well being they are not prepared to condone military risk and are acutely sensitive to the level of casualties incurred. Neither the action in Iraq nor the operations in Afghanistan have enjoyed public support and we are in danger of learning a false lesson from the experience of the last ten years.

7. It is more logical to argue that the context within which a campaign or operation is set is the major factor in determining the level and robustness of public support for military actions. The public have become better informed and our opponents more sophisticated in the exploitation of the sources of information with the net result that convincing the nation of the need to run military risks has become more difficult but no less essential.

8. Allied to this change, the reduction of the overall size of the Armed Forces has increased the relative significance of any specific operation. In illustration, the loss of an aircraft carrier in 1950 would have been a serious blow but unlikely to prevent the military from eventually achieving its aim. In 1980 the loss of a carrier during Operation Corporate would have terminated the operation<sup>3</sup>. In 2020 the loss of a carrier would be catastrophic and could not be recovered from

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<sup>2</sup> "Nationally our appetite for risk has become more robust" Commander 20 Bde in his POI after Op Herrick 15 dated 17 April 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Comment from Rear Admiral Woodward required.

within the campaign and would involve a complete revision of our strategy. With such penalties flowing from such a single action, as evidenced by the loss of the ARA General Belgrano and consequent withdrawal of the sole Argentine aircraft carrier from operations in 1982, military plans that hazard such valuable assets must be seen as now being in the area of a gamble rather than a risk. In 1990 Maj Gen Smith was told that he had been given the UK's only armoured division for Operation Granby but he was simultaneously given the rubric that he was to bring it back<sup>4</sup>. In other words he could operate at risk but not gamble.

### Risk Drivers

9. While the current level of risk aversion relative to earlier periods is open to question it is useful to determine those influences that produce this characteristic. These are set out on the left of the schematic below. The areas affected by such an attitude are extremely wide ranging and some of the areas affected by first order effects are illustrated on the right of the diagram.

## **Figure 1. The Sources and Effects of Risk Aversion within the MOD**

### The Significance of Individual Risk Drivers

10. While it is self-evident that there is a series of risk drivers that may produce a culture of risk aversion within the MOD it is important to understand that not all have the same influence or are susceptible to the same pressures. Public reaction to casualties can be influenced and as argued earlier is heavily dependant upon the perceived context. Government attitudes are driven by wider factors while the military perhaps have a more narrow range of considerations. This is well illustrated in the discussion of Operation ZEUS<sup>5</sup> by the Chiefs of Staff in 1972. There was no clamour for a military operation from the public and the Cabinet was divided in its support for a

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<sup>4</sup> 'The Utility of Force', Page 295, by General Sir Rupert Smith.

<sup>5</sup> Operation ZEUS was the proposed operation to protect and evacuate the UK citizens from Uganda using a brigade sized force parachuted into Entebbe. Details are included in the Annex to Item 1 of Part 1 to ~COS 26<sup>th</sup> Meeting /72 dated 21 September 1972.

military option, the Foreign Secretary had already stated that he did not wish to contemplate the military operation even prior to the detailed technical difficulties being exposed. The MOD based its reservations upon the likelihood of failing to meet the aim for purely technical reasons (loss of surprise, lack of air support and shortage of refuelling capacity) rather than damage to the nation's reputation, loss of high value assets or casualties.

### Cultural Constraints

11. The influence of a risk averse attitude is not limited to the direct policy outputs of the MOD. It can also have a very significant influence throughout the Armed Forces due to the ethos and attitudes inculcated throughout the Armed Forces from the very top. The moral component of fighting power is an area in which the UK's Armed Forces have always taken pride in their relative advantage and any loss in this area must be a major cause for concern. The diagram below illustrates how an attitude of risk aversion at the highest level could permeate into the culture of the Single Services and thus into the operational techniques and attitudes of our Forces.

## Top Level Cultural Drivers

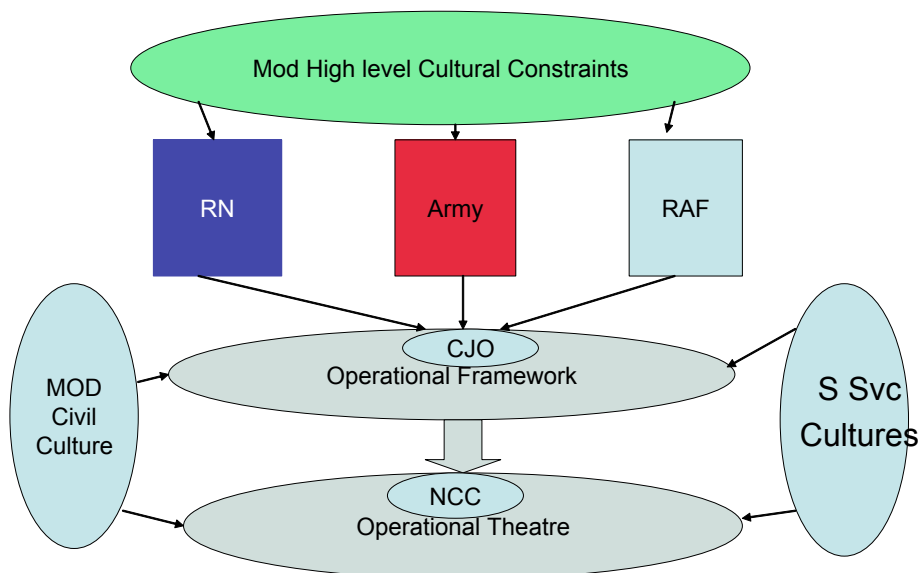


Figure 2. **The Cultural Influence within the Armed Forces**

12. Operating in the opposite direction is the imperative for action at the lowest level and the benefits that can accrue from a “who dares wins” approach which will encourage individuals to accept risk. This dilemma opens the question as to the level at which risk aversion is significant. Is it sufficient to have brave and dashing Armed Forces with cautious politicians? Are the public really the arbiters of which operations and campaigns are embarked upon? The example of the decision to invade Iraq is instructive as the public was not enamoured of the campaign, not because of the risk, they saw little risk in the venture, but rather because they could not see their interest in the conflict. In Afghanistan the situation has been repeated but the experience of the last ten years would suggest that while the public have remained supportive of the lower levels of the Armed Forces they are not equally enamoured of the political and senior military leadership.

### “Who Owns the Risk?”

13. In considering the question of risk it is important to identify the level at which individuals perceive risk to be held. The political risks inherent within the use of military force are very different from the physical risk taken by a low level commander in the field. As such it is possible to argue that within any campaign risk is held at various levels with each level holding its own specific type of risk.

14. Despite much military bravado most military commanders are not by nature risk takers. Outside major wars, the military ethos tends to favour those who eschew risk (for all the reasons illustrated above) and risk takers are rarely preferred for promotion over a safe pair of hands<sup>6</sup>. Commanders asking to be given a range of risks that they may take are not asking to take risk; they are, by definition, merely pushing it upwards. This is particularly clear in the Military Aviation Authority's system for managing risk which involves the transmission of risk ever upwards<sup>7</sup>. The owner of a risk is the individual who accepts the risk and its penalties without the authorisation of his superior. If you are authorised to carry a risk you do not own that risk.

### Deductions

15. Even if the proposition that risk aversion within the military is increasing has not been proven, it is still possible to draw deductions in this area that will be relevant to the way in which we will have to operate in the future. The second order deductions produce actions that the MOD can carry out to alleviate the effects of risk aversion at varying levels.

#### Major Deductions

16. Most drivers producing risk aversion are outwith the control of the MOD. This being the case the MOD must concentrate upon influencing those who can control or influence those areas identified as the major drivers behind the culture of risk aversion.

17. The Public's attitude is a major driver in this area and unless convinced of the need is likely to remain casualty averse and unsupportive of military actions<sup>8</sup>.

18. The lack of scale or mass within the Armed Forces tends to increase the level of risk aversion present in politicians and high level military commanders due to:

- a. the relatively higher value of individual platforms as numbers decline.
- b. the reduced ability of the Armed Forces to absorb losses from within their existing resources.

#### Second Order Deductions

##### 19. Information Policy

*"Maintaining population resilience is not simply a matter of reducing risk. Safety first is not enough. People need to know that there is a wider purpose to accepting risk.....The goal of risk free society, let alone risk free Armed Forces is unachievable and probably unpalatable; Better safe than sorry may seem sensible, but the danger is that we end up no safer and a lot sorrier"*<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> "The Psychology of Military Incompetence" Page 244 by Professor Norman Dixon.

<sup>7</sup> Within the system responsible commanders may take risks but they are required to report it to their superior who can agree with the decision or countermand it. If agreed the superior officer is required to report his risk taking to his superior ad infinitum.

<sup>8</sup> "Casualties and Consensus" – Rand Corporation, MR -726-RC (1996.) , by E V Larson.

<sup>9</sup> "Risk, Psychiatry and the Military", Report to the British Journal of Psychiatry by Simon Wessely, dated 2005.

The MOD cannot control risk drivers but the Armed Forces should have a clear and constant information campaign in order to influence the major areas of press and public opinion. To support such a campaign the MOD should take positive steps to:

- Ensure that the campaign narrative is clearly explained to the public as early and as often as is possible.
- Reduce the profile of the repatriation ceremonies.
- Discredit the concept that serving in the Armed Forces is just another job (vide NEM).
- Reduce public sensitivity to the penalties inherent in military operations.
- Inculcate an attitude that Service may involve sacrifice and that such risks are knowingly and willingly undertaken as a matter of professional judgement.

However such an approach risks the development of a Praetorian Guard culture and while the Armed Forces have always stood slightly apart from public attitudes they cannot be allowed to become divorced from civil society. For that reason it is essential that the public are won over to accepting the implications of using the Armed Forces.

20. Force Structure Implications. The experience of being involved in an enduring stabilisation campaign (mainly static locations, relatively low casualty levels) have produced an unrealistic expectation within the public of the level of medical support that will be consistently available within a campaign. The improvements in the availability, speed and efficacy of the medical support for operations has reinforced the trend towards a reduction in the public appetite for casualties and an expectation that the standard achieved during Operation Herrick will be met in all future theatres. The public expectation that the Armed Forces will meet the standards of support now believed to be routine will produce:

- A distortion of force structures – higher investment in medical resources in Army 2020 leading to less military capability. This may be offset by using novel technical solutions which should be investigated by the Armed Forces.
- A need to have sufficiently well equipped medical support to meet the well publicised goal of action within the Golden Hour. Again this may be offset by the use of novel medical solutions.
- Operational constraints in those areas where the requisite level of medical cover cannot be provided. This in turn may lead to Strategic constraints by limiting those geographic areas within which the UK military forces are allowed to operate.

21. The Human Element. We cannot eradicate danger to our personnel from the operational area and therefore we should attempt to minimise the numbers of Service Personnel committed to the battle space. This could be achieved in a variety of ways including:

- A major investment in autonomous systems for unmanned vehicles.
- A major investment in cyber operations.
- Increasing our deterrent capability (Not necessarily cheap) e.g. carriers, air power thus reducing the likelihood of our being challenged militarily
- Avoiding a policy of early engagement. A policy of early engagement may put a large

number of small isolated groups at risk and thus provide poorly protected hostages to fortune.

- Seeking alliances with less technically advanced or less casualty averse armed forces with the expectation that our contribution to such an alliance will be technical and that the personnel involved in the campaign will in the main be drawn from our allies. This could be expanded under the correct circumstances to the use of proxies.
- Investing in higher technical capabilities to preserve our technical advantage. While the technological lead we enjoy is being eroded it is still a major factor in minimising both the risk to our people and the numbers required to execute any task.
- Investing in greater numbers of SF. The use of SF brings two factors into play, namely the likelihood of large numbers being lost is small, and the public appear to have a more robust attitude to SF losses. The loss of 19 SAS soldiers in a single aircraft accident during the Falklands campaign did not arouse any significant comment.
- Pursuing a deliberate policy of keeping boots on ground to an absolute minimum
- The increased use of contractors. The growth of the private security company (PSC) has proceeded at a spectacular rate during the past ten years. The employment of such companies raises a series of complex issues which are not relevant here save the peculiar mindset prevalent amongst the general public towards casualties amongst the staff of PSCs. Neither the media nor the public in the West appear to identify with contractors in the way that they do with their military personnel. Thus casualties from within the contractorised force are more acceptable in pursuit of military ends than those from among our own forces<sup>10</sup>. This process is well advanced and in recent campaigns, notably Iraq and Afghanistan, contractors have consistently outnumbered troops in the battlespace<sup>11</sup> with no adverse public comment.
- Avoiding long term foreign entanglements such as stabilisation operations
- Concentrating upon on the non kinetic elements of stabilisation
- Where possible using proxies not alliances to achieve our ends

22. R&D. Defence research and development should be improved and expanded to maintain our technological edge. This is necessary both to influence allies and protect military personnel. At present it is felt that a culture of risk aversion is leading to spiral development being seen as the only route forward. Spiral development is a compromise between guaranteed capabilities and technical risk but is vulnerable to the black swan event or a revolution in military affairs, which is felt in some quarters to already be overdue from an historical perspective. The weakness of Spiral Development is that it is unlikely to provide us with a fresh technological advantage - upon which many of our hopes rest.

23. Understanding -In order to allow commanders to evaluate the risk involved in their proposed courses we must invest in an increased analysis and intelligence capacity.

## Conclusion

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<sup>10</sup> "Private contractors are politically valuable insofar as they neither enter into official head or body counts –nor it appears into our hearts. That is to say, the nation identifies with its troops to a far greater extent than its contractors". Privatization's Pretensions University of Chicago Library, Rev 717 Pages 753-757 (2010).

<sup>11</sup> "Dead Contractors: The un-Examined Effect of Surrogates on the Public's Casualty Sensitivity" by Schooner and Swan, Page 8, Journal of National Security Law & Policy 2011.

24. Risk aversion will be a factor in the operations that we will be called upon to carry out in future and it will require positive action by the MOD to mitigate its effects and in particular to ensure that all three Clauswitzian pillars are viewing the risks inherent in any military operation in the same context. To preserve the utility of the Armed Forces, by influencing those who might mistakenly place crippling restrictions on our actions, the MOD must institute a series of changes in our thinking and practices. Such changes need to be reflected in our current thinking and practices in order to ensure that the MOD is ready to meet the challenges of the future operating environment.

#### Future Work Required

Historical analysis to support evidence of an increase in risk aversion –This could take the form of research to identify operations that we have declined to carry out due to their inherent risk level – This has been set in train. Some work has already been carried out but examples are difficult to come by.

Analysis to demonstrate restriction on current ops produced by risk aversion based upon the evidence of Op Herrick POTRs (This has not been borne out by research to date).

Research to support failure to understand the nature of risk at the highest levels –Dr Latowski has already provided some historical examples.

Evidence to support the financial efficiency of R&D investment – DSTL sources would be used as the data base.

Evidence to demonstrate the latitude offered by existing legal frameworks - DCDC Legal team would be asked to assist

#### Sources consulted:

Military Aviation Authority

RMAS

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