



Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: Defence Must Close the Civil-Military Gap

Workshop Report

ESRC Seminar Series (ES/L012944/1)

Reconnecting the Academic Community to British Defence and Security Policy
Seminar 3: 'Armed Forces and Society in Britain', University of Bristol, 15 September 2014

The armed forces are dependent on the societies of which they are a part. In democracies, the military derives its purpose from acting in Society's name; whether to protect the nation from threat, or to advance its interests.

However, military-society relations in Britain are complex and changing. The UK is currently navigating a series of challenges in this area, including: how to fund and sustain the armed forces to fulfil their missions; how to recruit and retain service men and women; how to ensure an appropriate duty of care for service personnel and their families; and how to accommodate changing societal expectations in relation to social diversity and conditions of employment. These issues are often downplayed in debates on British defence and security. Even so, they are likely to significantly influence the legitimacy and sustainability of the governments forthcoming Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) in 2015.

The University of Bristol's Global Insecurities Centre (GIC) hosted a workshop on these themes on 15 September 2014. Speakers addressed a wide range of topics, from the macro-level discord between public opinion and elite ideas about the purpose of the armed forces, to the micro-level themes where individual service personnel (and their families) negotiate their roles as warriors and citizens.

The workshop was the third in a series of seven ESRC-funded events on *Reconnecting the academic community to British defence and security policy: the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review* (ES/L001616/1), in partnership with the University of Birmingham and King's College London. The workshop series brings together speakers and participants from across academia, civil society, government, the Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces to consider key challenges for British defence in the run-up to the 2015 SDSR.

Military and Society

The workshop was organised into four panels addressing: Military and Society; Public and Military Perceptions; Society in the Military; and The Military in Society.

The first panel set the wider context for understanding military-society relations in Britain. It is clear that the military does not exist outside of society but that society is crucial in shaping the purpose and the limitations of the military, not least in the manner in which it is funded, manned and legitimated. Timothy Edmunds from the University of Bristol argued that the public's idea of what the armed forces should be for may differ considerably from that of the established security elite, including policy makers, the military themselves and many academic experts and other analysts. Elite narratives on current military roles emphasise expeditionary war-fighting and stabilisation missions, in order to manage diverse security challenges away from UK borders. In contrast, research and polling on British public opinion show a continuing and consistent emphasis on defensive, primarily territorial roles for the armed forces.

While the armed forces themselves remain perhaps more popular than at any time since the Second World War, the missions in which they have been recently engaged – Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya – have been the subject of public scepticism, disengagement and hostility. Likewise, public support for military personnel does not translate into a willingness to spend more on defence, nor indeed to join the armed forces themselves. For Edmunds, this problematic was captured in the popular resonance of the Scottish National Party's vision for defence in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, in which the model of a smaller, more territorially focused military was a central theme. The question arises of whether this rift is indicative of a transformative post-imperial moment for the UK, whether it can be managed within existing parameters, or whether it is subject to the changing winds of geostrategic circumstance.

Patrick Porter from the University of Reading focused on the society that serving personnel return to and how this society relates to war, the military and the individual soldier. Porter argued that in contemporary Market States, such as Britain, collective notions of national civil society become eroded, in ways which make soldiers' return to home after war more difficult. This erosion of civil society is manifested in both a lack of support and lack of real opposition to war. In contrast to the First World War, for example, where the public participated actively in supporting the war effort, Porter argued that we now experience war primarily as consumers; as a low casualty spectator sport. In this context, public support for the military too often means simply carrying on 'as normal without asking too many questions'. Protests such as those against the Iraq war were short lived and never amounted to the kind of opposition that the Vietnam War provoked.

This dissonance between society and the military is most problematic for returning military personnel and particularly for reservists who move between these two worlds without a proper support network. The key problem for the mental wellbeing of returning UK personnel is that they have few mechanisms to vent their frustrations with either the military or society. For Porter, significant political courage is needed to create new spaces for civil-military relations where the voices of returning personnel are genuinely heard and taken into account.

Public and Military Perceptions

The second session explored the gap between public and military perceptions of the armed forces in more depth. Christopher Dandeker from King's College London explored the geostrategic context of change, arguing that the wars of the post-9/11 period were now coming to an end. These conflicts were characterised by their ambition and the labour

intensive demands that they made on western armed forces. In contrast, and in part in a reaction to the difficulties experienced by the US, UK and others in Iraq and Afghanistan, more recent interventions (in Libya in 2011 and Iraq in 2014) have been less ambitious and characterised by a 'labour light' approach.

Such campaigns have focused on the use of airpower, drones, special forces and cooperation with local actors. Yet they too carry significant risk, both of potential 'mission creep' and of casualties among local populations, both of which have implications for military-society relations. Public support for interventions can dissipate rapidly, even where it may have been initially high; as was the case with the French military involvement in Mali in 2013-14. Such labour light approaches lower the social profile for the armed forces in society and further contribute to the distancing of the general public from the wars in which their governments engage.

Jason Reifler from the University of Exeter presented the results of an ESRC funded research (ES/L011867/1) project on public attitudes to foreign policy in the UK. Reifler argued that public attitudes to foreign policy had remained stable over time, rather than arbitrary and capricious as is often claimed, and that, overall, the armed forces remained a popular institution. The research also found that that the British public were reasonably knowledgeable about global issues, and resistant to themes of isolationism, internationalism and militarism in British foreign policy. Overall, the research suggested that the validity of opinion polling on foreign policy issues in the UK was relatively high.

A third presentation by Rachael Gribble from King's College London focused on the notion of a 'civil-military gap' in Britain; a theme that was alluded to by a number of speakers on the day. The study presented here found that personnel that returned from the war in Afghanistan felt significantly more public support than those who returned from Iraq. This finding is not surprising, considering the difference in public opinion regarding the two conflicts. However, it also demonstrated that returning soldiers' perceptions of public support were higher than public support for the mission in which they have been involved. Twenty per cent of returning personnel reported that they had experienced hostility at home because of their engagements in the missions, while a much smaller percentage of the public admit to experiences of hostility with members of the Armed Forces. Significant sections of public believe that personnel receive insufficient support from the armed forces. Gribble argued that military personnel themselves do not seem to share this impression, but instead most personnel feel sufficiently supported and equipped by the military on their return.

For Gribble, these findings suggest that the civil-military gap in the UK may not be the 'gulf' it is sometimes suggested to be, with military perceptions more positive of support from the public and the military than public opinion. Gribble suggests that the core underlying issue of the civil-military gap may be the public's distinction between support and understanding. Whilst returning personnel feel largely supported on a superficial level, they do not appear to feel well understood in their professional role, nor indeed that people particularly want to understand them. These findings have implications for the goodwill built up between the public and the Armed Forces during the Iraq and Afghanistan missions, with the potential for increasing public indifference to the military.

Society in the Military

The third panel of the day looked at the ways in which societal and technological changes were contributing to changes in military behaviour. Drawing on an ESRC-funded research project (ES/K011413/1), Jack McDonald, from King's College examined the specific challenges presented by the use of drones and autonomous systems in warfare. McDonald argued that autonomous systems are increasingly used for information processing in the civilian world. These systems demonstrate the potential to produce information that could inform decisions to use violence by enabling militaries to identify and target irregular opponents. This in turn creates a potential legal uncertainty over responsibility for the use of military force, and challenges traditional conceptions of military accountability. This is particularly the case given close intelligence sharing between the UK and US, where legal liability for decisions to use force differs because the UK is subject to the jurisdiction of a number of international courts.

One of the greatest differences between military and civilian life is undoubtedly the position and role of women. This was a theme explored by Victoria Basham from the University of Exeter. Basham examined the prevailing ban on excluding women from close combat roles, arguing that research had consistently shown that women's performance in combat did not differ significantly from that of men. As such, Basham argued the ban must be understood primarily in cultural terms rather than those of effectiveness.

However, her research also found that the everyday gender politics in the military is more important to the marginalisation of women than the ban itself. This is not least down to younger recruits, who often have a romanticised vision of the armed forces as something of macho boys club when they first join. Sexuality also plays an important part in this culture and in the arguments against women in close combat, with servicewomen who have sexual relations with colleagues viewed and portrayed differently from male soldiers engaging in the same activities.

For Basham, it is a positive step that the ban on female participation in close combat is currently under review. However, she argues that women's differentiated standing in the military in general, suggests that the armed forces are only likely to make such overtures to female participation when they struggle to recruit enough men.

Tarak Barkawi from the LSE argued that military-society relations are not best conceived in binary or confrontational terms. Instead, they are characterised by a fundamental co-constitution; each shapes the other in various relational ways. Soldiers come from within society, and arrive in the military imbued with its norms and values. The figure of the soldier as we understand it today is a modern western construction, where the armed forces are viewed as a supremely rational institution. However, for Barkawi, the role of the soldier, and their socialisation into the military institution is far from modern, due to the ritualised ways in which they are prepared for battle and socialised into the military institution itself.

The Military in Society

The last panel of the day focused on how the military makes itself present, or is made present by others, in society at large. Rachel Woodward from Newcastle University examined the role of the University Armed Service Units (UASUs) in universities across the country. For Woodward, these units function primarily as a training and familiarisation programme for the armed forces, but are not aimed specifically at recruitment. Survey data found that

participants in the units largely found their time in them personally rewarding and beneficial to their CVs and job prospects. Woodward also noted the potentially positive impact of the UASUs on gender diversity in the armed forces, with around forty per cent of participants being women, compared to ten per cent in the regular armed forces and thirteen per cent in the reserves.

Alex Hyde of the LSE presented research analysing the position and status of service families living on military bases, focusing particularly on gender relations. Hyde argued that in the setting of British army camps in Germany, the nuclear family plays a crucial role. However, it is also challenged during times when the serving father is deployed away from home. Hyde explored the various ways that service families cope with these circumstances and explain them to their children. Narratives of humanitarianism are commonly used to do so; with mothers emphasising the roles their soldier husbands are playing in protecting other children and families in other parts of the world. For Hyde, traditional views about gender form the basis of much family life, with the gap between the father's job and the family becoming the mother's burden to carry. With decreasing rewards in terms of pay, pension and job security over time, the question is whether women in the future will be willing to make this lifestyle choice.

Paul Higate from the University of Bristol explored the relationship between the mental health of the veteran soldier and their status in society when they leave the armed forces. Higate argued that the question of the veteran has been on the agenda for some time in the UK, with concerns over homelessness and other mental health and social issues. According to his research, a majority of veterans are in employment after six months of leaving service, though many return to jobs that are temporary and unstable. Veterans' issues are also complicated by the fact that many soldiers are from socially excluded backgrounds before joining the military, meaning that the task of *reintegration* is itself often a misnomer.

Key Findings:

The workshop papers all identified aspects of a pronounced civil-military 'gap' in British military society relations. This gap has the following characteristics and implications:

1. There is a dissonance between elite perceptions of the armed forces role, and that of much of the general public. While the public are resistant to British isolationism in world affairs, they also remain sceptical of the expeditionary themes that have characterised UK security policy and many military operations since the later 1990s.
2. Institutionally, and as individual servicemen and women, the British armed forces are perhaps more popular now than at any time in the past 50 years. However, public support for the armed forces does not translate into support for the missions in which they have been involved. Neither does it reflect a greater willingness to spend more on defence or to join the armed forces themselves.
3. Armed forces personnel welcome public support. However, it is also clear that the military wishes to be understood on its own terms, and supported in the roles and missions in which it is engaged. Public scepticism towards recent British military operations can exacerbate perceptions of dislocation and alienation for service personnel returning from conflict or leaving the armed forces.

4. The armed forces are neither separate nor completely aligned with the wider society of which they are a part. Instead, they exist in a relationship of mutual constitution. Increasingly, however, changes in wider society – particularly a more contingent and individualistic engagement with the state – influences how service personnel and their families understand their relationship with the military institution, and how society sees its obligations to the military.

5. Military personnel appear to feel well-supported in their welfare and other needs whilst part of the armed forces proper, in contrast to public perceptions which emphasise failures in the duty of care. However, there are some notable blind spots in this picture, including the support provided to reservists and military veterans, as well as the continuing marginalisation of women in many quarters.

Policy Implications:

1. Closing the civil-military gap is unlikely to be easy. Government and the defence establishment should consider more carefully how justifications for the armed forces' role and the use of military force align with popular perceptions of legitimacy and threat.

2. The 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review must not be blinded by past tendencies to focus on equipment and force structures over 'softer' issues of recruitment, retention and the duty of care for service personnel.

3. The Armed Forces Covenant remains a crucial mechanism for navigating the mutual responsibilities and obligations of the civil-military relationship in Britain. More attention needs to be paid to the needs of those who fall outside formal military support networks, including families, reservists and veterans.

4. The armed forces have taken significant strides in accommodating diversity in their ranks. However, problems of marginalisation for women in the armed forces remain, and more attention should be given to how these issues of organisational culture and behaviour can be addressed, even if and when formal restrictions are lifted.

5. There is a pressing need for a more open and honest public debate about who the armed forces are, what they do, and how they fit into a collective vision of the UK's global purpose, interests and responsibilities.

Contact the Researchers:

Professor Andrew Dorman, King's College London
amdorman@btinternet.com

Professor David Dunn, University of Birmingham
d.h.dunn@bham.ac.uk

Professor Timothy Edmunds, University of Bristol
tim.edmunds@bristol.ac.uk

Oscar Berglund
Timothy Edmunds
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