Beat: Politics

Can the British Army still be considered an expeditionary force?

British Army

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USPA NEWS - The entire world knows that the British army is no longer at the head of an Empire, and that its funding has consistently been reduced, in recent decades. But does this mean that the Royal Army is the shadow of its former self? Or has the military capacity, which was acquired over experience translated into something else, new, and precious? Today, more than ever, England is at the crossroads.

What is an expeditionary force?

In the near-200 countries which are currently on the planet, nearly as many types of armies can be found. Some are parade armies while others are lethal warring machines. Some are good at defending their borders and nothing else. But few armies match what the British army was able to achieve, in its history. England has established as one of the world´s first and most advanced expeditionary forces. A rarity in the military world, expeditionary forces are armies which are able to transpose their military capacity to a different location on the globe, while retaining their power. Generally speaking, a rough formula can be applied to military power, in which every mile away from the homeland will deplete X% of the military force. As such, the art of war is fundamentally different according to whether we are talking of homeland defence or military overseas deployments. Expeditionary forces do not differ from border defence only in the equipment they use: the structure, training and philosophy are all radically different.

The Falklands war gave an excellent example of what an expeditionary force can do. When Argentina seized a British territory, it gambled that the 8000 miles to travel would simply be too great an effort for England, and that England would give up on the small dominion. Buenos Aires´ plan B was that, though Argentinian forces were no match for the British Armed Forces, London´s power would be greatly diminished at the end of the stretch to the Antipodes. Unfortunately for the Argentinians, the UK has an expeditionary force, which enabled it to project its military power across the globe with little or no loss of potential.

A unique military know-how, acquired over centuries

England has long had a skilled army, but a large part of it was garrisoned, a type of force which substantially differs from expeditionary ones. These troops were traditionally assigned to territories, and housed within forts, from which they would patrol the surroundings to maintain sovereignty. Expeditionary forces, which at times composed large portions of the armed forces, were not attached to territories. These ultra-mobile troops would be sent as reinforcements, or to oppose specific foreign forces in defence of global interests. As such they could be used as stand-alone military forces and were largely self-sufficient. With England´s former empire, British troops acquired expeditionary capacities which ranked among the best in the world.

The expertise has not gone to waste

With Britain´s current post-colonial configuration, one could surmise that all of the military know-how which was slowly and painstakingly acquired has gone to waste and now belongs in museums. Reality, however, is very different. Warfare has considerably evolved since the British Empire´s glory days. With today´s global security setting, there is more need than ever for armed forces with the capacity to deploy rapidly in every part of the globe. Many humanitarian crises, in the recent past, have shown how indispensable these forces are, to stabilize regions which don´t have the ability to stabilize themselves. Artemis, Unosom and Unamid are only a few recent illustrations of these needs. In other words, we may no longer have empire, but we still need expeditionary forces, to rescue endangered populations or to protect our interests abroad.

A necessary re-adaptation

To take this new era in its stride, Britain is re-adapting its army accordingly. In 2014, the Royal Navy acquired its new aircraft-carrier, thus maintaining its position in the small group of countries able to project entire forces globally. It also recently acquired a new fleet of 500 Boxer Mechanized Infantry Vehicles, to replace its aging fleet and support its troops on operations. Indeed, the ability to move and protect ground troops is essential to deployments. The next phase of military procurement will presumably focus on replacing the aging

AS90 artillery. These howitzers were designed for - and adapted to - Cold-war-era warfare, and struggle to operate on modern-day battlefields. Reinforced with thick armour built to resist Soviet shells, the AS-90s are too slow for agile insurgency, and their extreme weight and dimensions make them virtually impossible to deploy by air.

Though it is too early to say which design will next be chosen, it stands to reason that London may take example on the French, who have deployed new-generation truck-mounted artillery (Caesar truck) in recent operations, with good operational results. Their weight and dimensions make them air-transportable, their high speed makes them fearsome units on the battlefield and their chassis-based design means that commanders can order two, for the price of one shelled howitzer, with no loss in performance. France is not the only country to have equipped itself with these new cannons (China has recently put its PCL-181 into service), but London may want to use the opportunity to strengthen its post-Brexit diplomatic ties.

Of all empires, Britain was virtually the only who gracefully accepted that an era was over, instead of waging stillborn wars on its former territories. Who would have guessed that, half a century later, the world would, once again, turn to England to find the rare skills which its soldiers possess and which the world needs? Contrary to British-doomsday prophecies, it seems that England´s glory days are not over. And, with current military re-adaptations, the UK may even be on the international upswing.

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