

Lessons From Iraq And Chilcot

The UK's Chilcot Report into the 2003 invasion of Iraq, has some essential lessons for all Ministries of Defence to take on board when it comes to ensuring troops have the equipment and support they need, before the next major military operation starts.

By Pete Ito and Peter Antill

The July 2016 Iraq report from Sir John Chilcot¹, addresses some of the most significant issues concerning UK foreign, defence and security policy that have arisen in the early 21st century. The focus is justifiably on issues such as the assessment of an Iraqi capability regarding weapons of mass destruction (WMD), decision-making in the Blair government and the legal case for going to war.

It is also worth highlighting some of the less salient issues, which are significant for UK defence policy in general and defence acquisition in

particular. The report's sections on military equipment (pre-conflict) that are addressed in Section 6.3 and the conclusions regarding military equipment (post-conflict) in Section 14.2, examine numerous critical issues which warrant attention.

The report highlights four particular issues regarding defence acquisition, which should be of importance to Ministries of Defence (MoDs):

- 1) The need to properly identify available assets;
- 2) The need for an appropriate system to report the situation on the ground

without usurping the responsibilities in the chain of command;

- 3) The rapid identification of capability gaps during operations and;
- 4) The inherent clash between the allocation of scarce resources to satisfy immediate operational needs, versus those devoted to long-term acquisition planning.

WHAT DO WE HAVE?

The first set of issues involves the ability of the UK MoD to accurately determine what assets are in place before a military operation (particularly



A soldier from the RAF Regiment on patrol near Basrah Air Base (Harland Quarrington, MoD/Crown Copyright)



A Merlin helicopter delivers much needed supplies to an element during a patrol in Maysan Province, Iraq (Cpl. Ian Forsyth, MoD/Crown Copyright)

an unexpected operation) takes place. In his key findings, Chilcot provides positive commentary for the UK military in responding to the requirements for the Iraq campaign while operating within particularly restrictive parameters², noting that the UK's achievements "in preparing the forces deployed for combat operations in Iraq against tight deadlines were very considerable."³

However, the difficulties under which the UK had to deploy forces more quickly than anticipated in the Defence Planning Assumptions, meant that "there were some serious equipment shortfalls when conflict began."⁴

Chilcott notes that:

*"In particular, poor asset tracking systems meant that an already overburdened system was put under even greater pressure, and equipment that had been deployed to the forces in Kuwait did not reach the frontline before military operations began."*⁵

Chilcott asserts that those shortfalls "were exacerbated by the lack of an effective asset tracking system," adding that this was a lesson the MoD "had identified, but not adequately addressed."⁶ Moreover—and emphasizing the point—is that the "MoD's asset tracking system was still in need of improvement when the UK left

Iraq in 2009."⁷ That is compounded by the finding that:

*"The MOD had given assurances before the 2003 invasion that the necessary lessons had been learned since 1991. This proved not to be the case. In any future eventuality, the MoD has a responsibility to ensure that past mistakes are not repeated, and that its systems for asset tracking are robust."*⁸

DO WE KNOW WHAT WE REALLY NEED?

This leads to the second issue which needs to be highlighted. Chilcot notes that until May 2003 "neither PJHQ (Permanent Joint Headquarters) nor the MoD had a proper understanding of the problems with equipment that units were experiencing on the ground,"⁹ citing a specific recommendation made early in 2003 that "a direct and robust system accurately to report on readiness and equipment issues from theatre to Ministers was needed."¹⁰

Chilcot concedes that the pressure of operations makes it difficult to generate such a reporting chain and that "military commanders need the freedom to take operational decisions."¹¹ However, Chilcot's recommendation is that in "any future operations, the MoD should ensure that it has robust

systems in place to accurately report the situation on the ground without usurping the responsibilities of the chain of command."¹²

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

The Chilcot report notes as a key finding that it "was not sufficiently clear which person or department within the MoD had responsibility for identifying and articulating capability gaps."¹³ There are two specific items cited by Chilcot that underscore this point. The first is that:

*"Delays in providing adequate medium-weight Protected Patrol Vehicles (PPVs) and the failure to meet the needs of UK forces in Multi-National Division (South-East) (MND(SE)) for ISTAR and helicopters should not have been tolerated."*¹⁴

Furthermore, Chilcot comments that: "As in the case of protected mobility, the MoD was slow to respond to the deficiencies identified in ISTAR and showed a lack of understanding of the requirement for an enduring operation. The provision of ISTAR capabilities also suffered from the absence of a clearly identified sponsor addressing the capability gap."¹⁵

The second item specifically addresses the fact that: "The MOD was slow in responding to the developing threat in Iraq from

*Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). The range of protected mobility options available to commanders in MND(SE) was limited. Although work had begun before 2002 to source an additional PPV, it was only ordered in July 2006 following Ministerial intervention.*¹⁶

Chilcot asks the question as to “why it took so long to fill a capability gap that was apparent from the end of 2003.”¹⁷ He comments that while the process for meeting an equipment capability gap was clear, “what was unclear was where responsibility lay for identifying and articulating capability gaps.”¹⁸ The report notes that as an Urgent Statement of User Requirement (USUR) could be raised by any user, “there was no single individual or team accountable if an essential USUR was not raised.”¹⁹

Chilcot cites the Barry Report, which was an analysis of the land operations in Iraq published in August 2010.²⁰ It notes that an identification of a requirement and successful completion of an Urgent Operational Requirement (UOR) occurred when there was a strong sponsor in the Army or MoD.²¹ The Barry Report suggested that successful UORs

resulted from a ‘pull’ from theatre or a ‘push’ from MoD equipment staff (as was the case with Mastiff).²²

However, Chilcot has little sympathy for the MoD position, noting that: “The MoD should be proactive in seeking to understand and articulate new or additional equipment requirements. The MoD told the inquiry that there was no simple answer to the question of where the primary responsibility for identifying capability gaps lay during Op TELIC. That is unacceptable.”²³ Chilcot emphasizes that:

*“The roles and responsibilities for identifying and articulating capability gaps in enduring operations must be clearly defined, communicated and understood by those concerned. It is possible that this has been addressed after the period covered by this inquiry.”*²⁴ The MoD appears to have acknowledged that certain steps were needed to specifically address capability gaps, as it told the inquiry that the force protection policy in use in 2015, “defines risk ownership and governance more clearly than its predecessors” and that the policy had been integrated into

wider MoD risk management processes, which had also been revised.²⁵

Chilcot goes on to stress that:

*“The MoD has suggested to the inquiry that successive policies defining risk ownership and governance more clearly have addressed that absence, and that wider MoD risk management process have also been revised. In any future operation the level of force protection required to meet the assessed threat needs to be addressed explicitly.”*²⁶

LONG-TERM VS. IMMEDIATE NEEDS

The fourth and final point to be addressed indicates that the foundation of the problem for future conflicts may not lie in the MoD’s processes, but in the culture and behaviour of those who handle defence acquisition, and who must determine how to allocate scarce financial resources. Chilcot notes that:

“Funding was not a direct barrier to the identification and deployment of additional solutions to the medium-weight PPV gap. But it appears that the longer-term focus of the Executive Committee of the Army Board (ECAB)

The US DoD also experienced delays in getting Mine-Resistant, Ambush-Protected Vehicles to troops. (US Army photo)



The Foxhound Light Protected Vehicle: "The need to preserve funding for FRES influenced decisions on the requirement for PPVs." (Sgt. Ross Tilly RAF, MoD/Crown Copyright)

on the Future Rapid Effect System (FRES) programme inhibited it from addressing the more immediate issue related to medium-weight PPV capability."²⁷

The Inquiry heard testimony from the MoD's former Minister for Defence Procurement Lord Drayson. He believed "the Army's difficulty in deciding upon a replacement to Snatch was in part caused by their concern over the likelihood of FRES budgets being cut to fund a Snatch replacement vehicle."²⁸ Indeed, the report notes that it "is possible, however, that the need to preserve funding" for FRES, "influenced decisions on the requirement for PPVs."²⁹ The report goes on to say that "a number of witnesses to the inquiry made the point that, within a finite budget, resources for an additional requirement would have to be found from elsewhere in the defence programme."³⁰

Chilcot adds that:

"Sir Peter Spencer, Chief of Defence Procurement from May 2003 to April 2007, told the inquiry that using money from the capital Equipment Programme to deal with the short term had a "fratricidal effect" on the ability to move the FRES programme forward."³¹

Furthermore, the report mentions that: "The focus of the Executive Committee of the Army Board (ECAB) on the FRES programme may therefore provide a partial explanation for the lack of urgency in addressing the more immediate problem of the PPV capability gap. Another likely factor was an over-optimistic assumption about the timing of withdrawal from Iraq. The expectation of an early withdrawal from Iraq inhibited action on an expensive programme that might not be completed before troops left."³²

Chilcot's comment is that:

"Those responsible for making decisions on the investment in military capabilities should continually evaluate whether the balance between current operational requirements and long-term defence programmes is right, particularly to meet an evolving threat on current operations."³³

THE UK EXPERIENCE IS NOT UNIQUE

While the Chilcot report provides the most recent vehicle for discussing the challenges involved with efficiently conducting defence acquisition during operations, it is important to note that the UK MoD is not alone in finding

its performance wanting. Former US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates comes to the same conclusion regarding the inability of the Pentagon bureaucracy to focus attention on immediate operational needs. Gates notes: "The military departments develop their budgets on a five-year basis, and most procurement programmes take many years—if not decades—from decision to delivery. As a result, budgets and programmes are locked in for years at a time, and all the bureaucratic wiles of each military department are dedicated to keeping those programmes intact and funded. They are joined in those efforts by the companies that build the equipment, the Washington lobbyists that those companies hire, and the members of Congress in whose states or districts those factories are located. Any threats to those long-term programmes are not welcome, even if we are at war."³⁴

Gates goes on to emphasize that: "...current, urgent requests were weighed against the existing long-term plans, programmes, and available budgets, and all too often were found to be lower in priority than nearly everything else—which meant they disappeared into a Pentagon black hole."³⁵

The allocation of resources between immediate operational requirements and long-term needs for any military force is a challenge under any set of circumstances. Chilcot highlights a number of policy and process issues which generated questionable performance from the UK MoD in acquiring the necessary material for Iraq. However, it is also important to note the cultural and behavioural issues which are a critical part of such decision-making, particularly in a military organisation. With regard to the US Department of Defense's performance, Gates notes that:

*"To complicate matters, all the services regarded the counterinsurgency wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as unwelcome military aberrations, the kind of conflict we would never fight again—just the way they felt after Vietnam. The services all wanted to get back to training and equipping our forces for the kinds of conflict in the future they had always planned for: for the Army, conventional force-on-force conflicts against nation-states with large ground formations; for the Marine Corps, a light, mobile force operating from ships and focused on amphibious operations; for the Navy, conventional maritime operations on the high seas centred on aircraft carriers; for the Air Force, high-tech air-to-air combat and strategic bombing against major nation-states."*³⁶

Gates provides his final judgment on the Pentagon's performance in

providing the required equipment for Iraq and Afghanistan, commenting on DoD culture and behaviours. Focusing specifically on the delay in getting Mine-Resistant, Ambush-Protected Vehicles to troops, Gates writes that: *"As usual in a huge bureaucracy, the villains were the largely nameless and faceless people—and their leaders—who were wed to their old plans, programmes and thinking and refused to change their ways regardless of circumstances. The hidebound and unresponsive bureaucratic structure that the Defense Department uses to acquire equipment performs poorly in peacetime. As I saw, it did so horribly in wartime."*³⁷

The Chilcot report addresses many critical foreign and security policy issues of specific importance to the UK, but also of a broader significance to any government. While defence acquisition is clearly of secondary importance, when compared to issues such as governmental decision-making in going to war, the attention devoted by the report to the essential issue of equipping military forces for combat deserves attention by all military organizations, particularly as Gates indicates that the Pentagon faced similar challenges and had similar failures. The value of the Chilcot report for any government is to highlight the tasks that should be addressed now to ensure that troops have the equipment and support they need, before the next military operation begins. ■

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