

# GLOBAL STRATEGY FORUM

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*The 13th in our series of expert comment and analysis, by General Sir Richard Barrons, Commander Joint Forces Command (2013-2016), now Co-Chairman of Universal Defence & Security Solutions, and GSF Advisory Board member. As always, the views expressed are those of the author and not of Global Strategy Forum unless otherwise stated.*

## Is It Time For A Military Coup?

Ever since the COVID-19 pandemic took hold of daily life in the UK there have been muted calls from off-stage to suggest 'now might be a good time for the Armed Forces to take charge'. This reflects disquiet over the initial preparations for a well-identified risk and the subsequent difficulties of strategic, enduring crisis management, unprecedented in living memory, at all levels of national life and in every corner of civil society. It is certainly to be expected that when faced with natural or man-made disaster, confrontation or war the country turns in some expectation to its Armed Forces to ameliorate the surprise and the jeopardy to normal life, security and future prosperity. The Armed Forces are, after all, something of an insurance policy as well as daily contributors to deterrence, security and defence. They also regularly 'poll well' as trusted institutions held in high esteem, adding to the sense of reassurance in hard times. Could they do more and would we be better off if there was maybe even just a short period where the Armed Forces took full charge of us?

Fortunately, even the slimmest idea of the Armed Forces taking charge of the UK is guaranteed to result in a collective national frothing at the mouth – and not

just confined to the more liberally-inclined members of the chattering glitterati. There are some states where the military are a major force in politics and society, able to choose to take power or not and - in the absence of other functioning institutions - better able to provide public order and services such as policing, justice and economic direction. The UK is not in this club. There is a deeply-entrenched antipathy to seeing UK soldiers on their own streets, especially if armed, unless it is for clearly defined and short-term purposes. Several weeks of inspecting handbags at the London Olympics; a few days filling sandbags when rivers have ruined homes; the provision of fuel tanker drivers in a nationally-significant industrial dispute; the odd helicopter in medical support of remote places; specialist decontamination after the Skripal nerve agent attack; and an operation to dispose of infected cattle; these are about the UK mark. There is also widespread support for niche services like bomb disposal and very high-end counter-terrorism capability beyond the increasingly sophisticated range of the Metropolitan Police Service.

Any sniff that the Armed Forces could somehow supplant the role of democratically elected politicians and their civil servants has many citizens reaching for their twitter account, marching-trousers and placard kit. Even if they think the government is morally



[events@globalstrategyforum.org](mailto:events@globalstrategyforum.org)  
[www.globalstrategyforum.org](http://www.globalstrategyforum.org)

reprehensible and performing woefully, again, this is still way better than invoking martial law. In fact, demonstrations against martial law would be led by the Armed Forces themselves, who remain studiously and culturally apolitical – and fully aware that they do not have the scale, talent or skills or consent to conceive of running the country. They are kept pretty busy anyway with their own work protecting the UK and its vital interests abroad.

In fact, the COVID 19 pandemic has reminded us that civil society resilience rests in civil society, not the military. There are 1.4 employees in the NHS, a further 1.6m in social care and an appeal found and (more or less) organised another 750,000 volunteers. Tesco alone normally employs around 300,000 people, whilst the UK's Regular Armed Forces today total around 146,000 if fully manned (which actually means perhaps 136,000 today). These figures reflect a comprehensively demobilised society enjoying the fruits of 30 years free of existential military risk.

There is no prospect at all of the Armed Forces running central and local government, and certainly not policing the streets even if every single of the 126,000 police officers in the UK was minded to co-operate (and they would not). It is, of course, well documented that the Armed Forces have indeed provided valuable support in the response to the pandemic, but even at the peak this did not employ more than 4,000 personnel on any one day – from the 20,000 initially held at various levels of readiness – working across around 70 different tasks. This has included designing and managing the build of aspects of the Nightingale facilities, logistic help with the supply and distribution of PPE (which does not extend to making it or buying it internationally) and providing some mobile test stations. This was all necessary help, but it was not the sum of what brought the nation through the first wave by a long chalk.

On the other hand, if we set aside any prospect of the Armed Forces installing themselves in Downing

Street, is there more that the military could usefully contribute? There is a fair question here about whether the unused capacity that was offered might have been called upon. Perhaps, for example, the military should have run the testing and tracing organisation in place of the manpower found by Serco and an organisation built under Dido Harding in the Cabinet Office? This could certainly have been done using the military command structure across the UK and the military labour held in hand, and probably faster – but whether it would have been as good or as economic is as yet unproven.

Perhaps, however, a far more useful question about the role of the Armed Forces – in UK resilience especially – is not whether the military should 'take over' either the country or the pandemic response (to which the answer is still clearly to pick your niche very carefully), but whether there are aspects of how the *military works* that merit wider adoption, especially in resilience and crisis management?

Few Departments or the Cabinet Office define even to themselves how they orchestrate situational understanding, plans, operations, and logistics clearly, and connect this to others in a crisis. Nor is there much common agreement what a plan is (for some it is a list of desirable outcomes, for others a document of such intricate detail that it will never withstand contact with human enactors, let alone hostile ones), nor how to coordinate activities across many actors, nor how logistics will drive what is actually possible over time no matter how grand the ambition.

Few of our gifted civil servants who rise to prominence by their prowess at formulating policy are as strong in managing complex activities, and those few that can are often carrying an unreasonable burden. The military is very capable at over-complicating things, but for their civil servant colleagues to shake their heads wearily if the utility of a 'campaign plan' is raised (and it always is) is not an educated response. After years of trying



to make UK succeed on the international stage against major challenges through a combination of spur of the moment event-management, hope, risk-free tokens of support, and gravitas-infused communiques, perhaps we could try again at some strategy, planning and taut, enduring coordination of designated tasks matched with resources?

Armed Forces, unlike businesses and most of government most of the time, exist for crisis. They are designed, led, trained and organised to thrive in conditions of stress, peril and uncertainty (as well as look very smart and perform well at synchronised walking). They are the only major part of the nation's fabric that is conditioned to expect to go to work knowing its opponents wish it lethal harm. Armed Forces only succeed if they are resilient, able to take blows and to deliver action that is harder, faster, and more innovative than their (equally agile) opponent. This has led to a way of thinking (which the military labels doctrine, a term guaranteed – unfairly – to have most civil servants' eyeballs rotating to the skies), organising and acting that is specifically designed around the exigencies of warfare, exigencies that have much in common with managing the peril of natural and man-made disaster (and especially where a natural disaster is then amplified by clumsy man-made interventions).

The Armed Forces are heavily invested in the idea of strategy (a balance of ends, ways and means to deliver the desired outcomes determined by policy), the utility of planning (a detailed articulation of activities linked to resources in space and time to achieve specified objectives), and the value of contingency (alternative plans for different situations and uncommitted resources held in hand to deal with inevitability of surprise and set-back). They also invest in a style of leadership and a common ethos that has been well-tested in adversity over centuries. No one would argue that all of this is relevant or useful to civil crises, or that there is quite a long list of military failures over the same centuries to point at (and learn from), but to dismiss the whole

canon is equally misguided. There are some aspects worth highlighting in the light of current circumstances, relating to leadership, organisation and process

First, a brief word on leadership. Most British citizens (and their political leaders) have acquired their entire impression of military leadership from films and TV. Yet not every British General is Blackadder's General Sir Anthony Cecil Hogmanay Melchett, nor the matinee talent that has replayed WW2 on our screens for the past 75 years. It is regrettable that the prevailing popular caricature of senior military leaders generally emphasises how a strict hierarchy only gets it way by imposing a blind, unreflective obedience reinforced by punitive sanctions. Nobody in the Armed Forces goes to work on this basis, if they did they would be a liability. Nonetheless, according to some corners of the media up to about the rank of major/equivalent all officers are splendid heroes battling with Operation Certain Death, and on promotion to Colonel and above stupidity, careerism and cruelty show initiative and integrity the door. Of course, in the military people really are of necessity sometimes sent on missions from which a safe return is unlikely, but to construe from this that senior military leadership is so alien to leading by example, intellect, explanation and consent that it is wholly inapplicable to other enterprises is just ignorant.

Military leadership certainly has the advantage of being underpinned by a common culture, lexicon and universal basic training. It is also fundamentally empowered by a concept of delegation and empowerment wrapped up in the doctrine of 'Mission Command'. Mission Command is theoretically applicable from the highest, strategic level to the lowest tactical level – from the CDS to the Lance Corporal in charge of 3 soldiers. It establishes that the senior leader should: articulate his mission (what is to be achieved, defined as both a task and the purpose behind it); explain his overall approach to doing this; allocate specific roles to key subordinates; and bind it together with the essential supporting coordination and logistic arrangements.



The vital part is that a subordinate is told what he is to achieve, not how – that is left to their initiative, energy, creativity and experience. This ‘act of delegation and empowerment’ is a process, a conversation, not a single event or like launching a ‘fire and forget’ missile. When it works well, which takes time and training, it means that every part of an organisation is engaging all its talents to achieving a unified purpose, with sound and complementary decisions taken concurrently at all levels. Even when it works imperfectly, the results are better than all decisions being taken by a single, harassed leader at the very top, even with a small group of disciples spinning like gerbils around him/her. Very few Generals feel the need to decide what time a battalion bus leaves for the station, or even that a bus is needed, a competent Corporal has it safely in hand.

Has our response to the pandemic so far shown that there is a well-understood and robust system for crisis leadership across central Government and between central govt and regions/local govt, or is there some room for improvement? Some aspects are clear to the public: the dominance of No10, the role of COBRA, and the broad part played by specialist advisory committees. But at least anecdotally, the reports of a huge amount of detailed decision-making being vested in a small circle around the PM; the frustration of some ministers at the lack of consultation, inclusion or freedom to operate independently within guidelines; the tensions between senior officials about their boundaries even on matters such as data management; the alleged frictions between Central, Regional and Local government; and the challenge to communicate with clarity and consistency; all these would indicate that there is some scope to achieve greater unity of purpose, tempo, concurrency and confidence? This is not to deny in any way how hard it is to lead in conditions of great uncertainty, stress and significance, nor to judge with the clarity that only hindsight bestows, but if there is not a commonly well-understood lexicon, conceptual approach, organisation, and decision-making process

to how the UK manages its resilience in a crisis, would it be better if there was?

Second, are there lessons from the military about how a serious, difficult, complex situation can be met with a specifically designed form of organisation? Military ‘command and control’ has evolved since the late 1800s into a staff system designed for fighting. It includes a common basic structure that divides up HQ functions in way that is clear to its members and to the organisations with which it cooperates, built around 9 branches. Of particular relevance to resilience are branches 2(intelligence), 3 (current operations), 4 (logistics and medical), 5 (planning) and 6 (communication and information systems). These branches and their roles are replicated from strategic (including Alliances such as NATO) down to operational or ‘theatre of operations’ level and to the higher tactical level of divisions and brigades. This - by design - makes coordination vertically and horizontally more straightforward. HQs are controlled by Chiefs of Staff, leaving the commander free to command - including free to communicate publicly and to get out and about. A well-formed HQ makes it easier for key leaders to demand and get information and relieves them of a great deal of detail. Senior commanders who allow themselves to have every waking moment filled for them with minutia, leaving no time for the clarity of understanding, vision, and direction for which they are actually paid, or to sustain their physical and mental health, are in the wrong job. Are there aspects of this that would improve the resilience of government and civil society?

Third, process: these staff branches and the people who work in them are united by a common method for analysing and solving complex problems (the ‘Estimate’ process), common information formats such as ‘Operation Orders’ and a cycle of daily/weekly/monthly meetings (the ‘battle rhythm’) to cover immediate to longer term matters. It is entirely possible for a military HQ to drown in its own weight of PowerPoint and circular discussion (NATO has no equal



at this), but when done well it makes an excellent job of distilling complex risk into timely decisions and actions. It is also sustainable, it is designed to work for as long as it takes by supporting a regimen that allows for sleep, food, exercise, washing and time to think. Anecdotally again, that pivotal local government official trying to manage every aspect of a County-level response personally by broadcasting directly to over 100 different players twice a day is in a race between the limits of his own physiology and the crisis fortuitously ending. Seniority does not confer immortality.

It is well worth recording, however, that this long-established military system for 'command and control' is also about to be comprehensively disrupted by the advent of Digital Age data science, cloud computing, AI, synthetic environments, and connectivity in a blast of delayering and new organisation and process. So is civil government. If there were to be investment in a more common approach to resilience that draws on military expertise it must be forward looking, blending new technology with the still-relevant bits of tested organisation and method.

Some of the past reluctance to absorb military methods or people into crisis management is based on more than ignorance of what is on offer, there is often a fear of a military takeover – that the military is so large and just can't help itself – 'they' will want to be in charge even when the subject matter is a very civil affair. Aside from the basic lack of familiarity with the military, there is also a very human tendency in other Departments to resist accepting help when they are having a very big moment indeed in their own field. Sometimes this is never overcome, in other cases circumstances force a change of heart (the London Olympics went from zero enthusiasm for uniforms around the Games to around 18,000 on duty).

The military absolutely will take charge if instructed, allowed, or unconstrained, but the record shows a very creditable supporting act to civil servants, police

officers, and fire officers in recent years. General Sir Nick Carter has been very careful to reiterate the supporting role the UK Armed Forces are able to play in beating COVID-19. Perhaps another, more committed attempt to place military planners routinely and permanently in other Departments would help to broker better trust and understanding – and planning?

We are not going to have a military coup in the UK, it is a terrible idea. No matter how deep public frustration with the government of the day runs, the Armed Forces are not ever going to be silently allocating names to flagpoles in the Mall (are there even enough?). On the other hand, the Armed Forces will always discharge appropriate, vital and usually small-scale roles in supporting national security and resilience and this needs some preparation and training to do well. The wider question is whether how the military leads, organises and operates has lessons that could be transferred to wider crisis and resilience management? This might be better, and certainly better than none.

***General Sir Richard Barrons  
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***Commander Joint Forces  
Command (2013-2016),  
now Co-Chairman Universal  
Defence & Security  
Solutions***

