Viewpoint

The British Military and the 'Special Relationship'

By Professor Wyn Rees

Introduction

Within the politico-diplomatic world there are a variety of views about the value of the so-called Anglo-American 'Special Relationship'. Whilst British governments consistently extol the merits of the relationship, a powerful current of opinion within political elites and the media criticise the relationship and deny its 'specialness'. It is castigated by some as a myth that props up a bygone era of British power, whilst to others it has subordinated this country to American interests. Even for those less ideologically hostile to amity with the United States it raises questions as to whether Anglo-American interests are compatible; whether we share the same priorities in regions of the world and how to overlook the rivalry that results inevitably from other aspects of the relationship such as economic competition.

Such ambivalence is absent from the senior ranks of the British armed forces. They do not debate whether the Anglo-American special military relationship exists or whether it is in British interests. There is near unanimity within the armed forces that it is highly desirable to operate alongside the United States, whether that is as part of an American-led coalition or an operation to which America lends its support. As a superpower, the US brings to an operation the largest, most technologically advanced and most capable armed forces. It also provides critical 'enablers' for its allies, such as satellite reconnaissance assets and remotely piloted vehicles, that provide unparalleled intelligence of the battlespace. Working in tandem with US forces gives the UK the best chance of prevailing against an adversary at a relatively limited cost. Thus the US military serves as a valuable force multiplier for any British military effort. As one senior officer summed up the attitude within the UK armed forces : 'why would we not want to fight alongside US?'.[1]

Britain's partnering of the US has brought rewards in terms of leadership and influence within international organisations. As the second most important actor within NATO, the UK has enjoyed positions of Deputy Supreme Allied Commander (D-SACEUR), Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Transformation DSACT (formerly DACT) and lead country of the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps (ARRC). In the conflicts against Iraq in 1990 and 2003, the UK held the second in command positions after the US and in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, the UK has held the role of Deputy Commander. This has granted the British military a status second only to that of their ally.

A further advantage for the UK is that close cooperation with the US allows them to preserve particular defence capabilities that, through cost, they might otherwise have to forfeit. British armed forces have retained cutting edge capabilities bought 'off-the-shelf' at relatively affordable – in some cases highly advantageous - prices. The Royal Air Force purchased E-3 Airborne Early Warning and Control (AWACS) aircraft from the US when the Nimrod programme failed and British forces also secured the highly capable AH-64 Apache Longbow helicopter. The UK is currently in the process of purchasing the Short-Take Off and Vertical Landing (STOVL) variant of the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF), working with the US as a Tier 1 Partner. In the strategic nuclear field the US has been willing to share first its Polaris and subsequently its Trident D5 nuclear missile technology. Unlike any other nation, the UK obtains the missiles for its submarines from a pool that is shared with the US Navy. The US has committed to making its successor system to Trident D5 available to the UK.

As a result of benefits such as these the UK armed services have been the custodians of the security relationship with the United States. They have nurtured it at every opportunity and have invested considerable energy in forging a broad range of linkages with their US counterparts. The British military act as the institutional memory of the Anglo-American security relationship and they are a powerful source of influence in its perpetuation. Nevertheless, this military relationship is entering a period of uncertainty. The strategic context in which the two countries have worked closely together is shifting and this will herald important changes for both sides. These facts render it timely to consider how the military to military contacts between the two sides are likely to fare and what the British armed forces can do to minimise the risk of their stagnation. At the same time, the military need to discern where national interests lie and appreciate that the relationship can also contain drawbacks. Because it is such a champion of preserving the intimacy over security between the two sides, the military may overlook some of the associated risks.

Sustaining the Relationship Amidst a Changing Environment

The transatlantic security relationship is facing a period of change. The end of the NATO ISAF mission in Afghanistan will represent the termination of the longest period of campaigning between British and American forces. No longer will there be an enduring operation on such a scale, in which their forces operate together. The experience of Afghanistan will also leave behind some bitter US-European memories: including differences over the nature of the

mission, national caveats and the size of national contributions. Even UK-US relations have not been immune to frictions such as over their approach to the heroin trade.

The drawdown in Afghanistan feeds into a broader reassessment of US strategic priorities. President Obama has made clear his reluctance to be drawn into conflicts that involve US ground forces and long term nation-building. The legacy from Afghanistan will deter future American presidents from protracted military campaigns. At the same time, the US administration has identified the Asia-Pacific region as a growing priority. Tensions between states in that region coupled with the growing military power of China and North Korea makes it a volatile area for American interests and this led in 2011 to President Obama announcing a re-balancing of its military assets towards potential contingencies there.[2] Even the recent tensions with Russia over Ukraine, and over Islamic State in Iraq, are unlikely to alter fundamentally this American assessment of the changing equation between its European and Asian interests.

Reductions in defence impact on this evolving strategic environment. The 2010 UK Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) was a response to a £38 billion deficit in defence spending identified by the incoming Conservative government.[3] It resulted in swingeing cuts to Britain's armed forces, including a 20,000 cut in the size of the Army, and reduced its ability to act alongside the US. The risk of strategic divergence between the two countries appears all too real.

Yet this would represent an excessively pessimistic view of the prospects for Anglo-American security relations. On earlier occasions the relationship has adjusted to altered strategic circumstances and fiscal constraints. The end of the Cold War, for example, presented a dramatically changed situation yet collaboration remained close and proceeded to deepen. New types of security challenges incentivised both sides to adapt their relationship and find new ways of working together. The experience of the first Gulf War was quickly overtaken by the need to develop new responses to conflict in the Balkans, such as peace building and peace enforcement. The desired 'peace dividend' following the Cold War made it ever more necessary to use defence resources wisely and to coordinate with allies. Contrary to expectations, post-Cold War conflicts served to draw the US and UK closer together.

Similar prospects are presented by the contemporary situation. Rising challenges in the Asia-Pacific theatre will stretch US military power and increase the significance of allied efforts. In those parts of Europe where the US may have to decrease its military presence, the UK can play a galvanizing role amongst its continental allies in filling the resulting gaps. British leadership and military prowess will become more valuable to the US. This potential is exemplified by the UK's *Queen Elizabeth* class aircraft carrier project. Here the US has been providing the Royal Navy with a remarkable degree of help in re-learning the skills of flight deck operations. This is not least because the US is interested in how the UK might carry out future deployments that would release pressure on America's own diminishing carrier fleet.

Even the US has been forced to confront reductions in defence spending. Cuts have come from two sources: planned reductions, on the one hand, and emergency cuts through sequestration, on the other. The latter resulted from the Executive and Congress being unable to agree upon a budget. In the coming decade the total of these cuts will amount to nearly a trillion dollars.[4] As part of the process of conducting its own defence review the US has been eager to learn from the experiences of its British counterparts. Although the American defence review process is on a much larger scale, it has sought to benefit from the British experience as to how resources can be stretched further and tasks carried out more efficiently.[5] Like any other country the US appreciates having allies to whom it can talk and exchange ideas. As the US shares so many cultural attributes and values with the UK it is the natural partner with whom to share a strategic dialogue.

In their efforts to preserve the intimacy that has been built up with the US, the British armed forces need to keep three factors uppermost in their minds. First, the fact that the US military is sufficiently big and diverse to necessitate fostering relationships with each of its Services: the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps. After all, it is not possible to predict the kind of warfare that may occur in the future and which US Service could take the lead role. The relative intimacy between the different branches of the two armed services, in the past, has varied. That between the Royal Navy and the US Navy, for example, was very close throughout the Cold War and has continued since. Similarly, the Royal Air Force has preserved and deepened its ties with its American counterparts as a result of operations against Iraq and in Afghanistan. By contrast, the British Army and the US Army were less close during the Cold War because they were responsible for different stretches of the NATO front-line in Germany. The post-Cold War world has drawn them closer together but more in terms of coordinating their respective operations rather than integrating them.

There has never been a period when all three British Services have enjoyed such a close relationship with their US counterparts as they do now. These institutional linkages afford the British armed forces exceptional insight into the thinking of the US military; its doctrine, its manner of conducting operations and the capabilities of its equipment. With the end of the mission in Afghanistan, the US military are switching their attention to new roles and regions of the world. The US Air Force and Navy are re-focusing their attention on power projection capabilities in the Asia-Pacific region, whilst the US Marine Corps are returning to their traditional emphasis on amphibious operations. For its part the US Army is switching from counter-insurgency to high intensity warfare and 'forward engagement', by which its forces will be more attuned to the particular circumstances where they might have to fight. These new priorities will present problems for the UK: in the absence of shared operations they will have to ensure that their bonds with their US counterparts do not whither. Even the relationship built up over time by the Royal Navy will be challenged by the diminishing size of the fleet.

A key way of preserving this intimacy is for the British to expand the range of exercises and training that they carry out with US forces. Training together enables forces to understand how

the other side prepares for conflict, the extent to which their forces operate jointly and how communication and command and control is applied to the battlespace. The UK is able to draw upon common NATO operating procedures with the US and has conducted regular joint exercises, such as the 'Red Flag' aerial training exercises in the Nevada Desert and submarine exercises between the two navies. This knowledge of the US ensures a smooth transition from peacetime to wartime operations, as illustrated in 1991 and 2003 when British contingents and the Royal Air Force were integrated into American battle plans. Future training will need to take the place of the operational relationships. Whilst training is both expensive and time consuming, it is vital if the UK is to maintain its position as America's partner of choice.

Second, the British must strive to preserve their access to US defence planning and decision-making circles. The willingness of the US to grant this access has been one of the vital factors in Anglo-American relations because it has enabled Britain to participate in its planning process. British representatives have been able to speak their minds and offer criticism, *sotto voce*, to a much greater extent than an equivalent US officer within the normal chain of command. The UK currently has around 800 personnel, of all ranks, stationed within the US. These include officers in all the major US commands including Northern Command, Strategic and Cyber Command and Pacific Command. The most significant contingent of around 50 personnel, under a two-star general, resides in US Central Command in Tampa, Florida where US operations for the Middle East and Central Asia are planned. Some of these are embedded officers within the US chain of command, whilst others are British liaison officers whose role is to serve as the interface between the US and their UK masters. As US commands have prepared their operational or contingency plans it has afforded the UK unique insight into its ally's direction of travel.

This will be one of the hardest things to retain once coalition operations in Afghanistan cease because the UK will no longer be able to argue that its presence as the second largest troop contributing nation justifies shared planning. In future the UK will need to work even harder to convince its ally that it has things to offer. This will come down to the quality of the personnel that it makes available to the US: the ability of individuals to 'punch above their weight' will determine the access that they enjoy with their American counterparts. Placing members of the armed forces with seniority and experience in liaison and embedded positions pays handsome dividends. It will also be necessary to look at the careers of individuals who have served alongside American forces in earlier training or operational environments. Friendships formed in the past can play an essential role in obtaining special access to American personnel and bonds forged during times of shared combat can prove to be remarkably enduring. Recent conflicts have left a whole generation of officers and men with experiences of close interaction with US forces, and this has the potential to be cultivated in the future.

In the face of a British military that is down-sizing and whose budget is shrinking, such subtle arguments can easily be overlooked. Amidst all the other demands made upon a smaller pool of talent, it will not be easy to find the people of appropriate quality to send to the US. It will

also be harder to justify the resources to allow people to travel across the Atlantic and preserve a regular dialogue with their opposite numbers. Nevertheless, it would be a false economy to cut back on these things or reduce the quality of the personnel. The disproportionate benefit that the UK enjoys from the relationship would be put at risk over the long term.

Third, the UK must retain the ability to make a meaningful military contribution to US-led operations. Although America rarely needs help, it has valued, and will continue to value, the support of allies that are dependable and prepared to shoulder some of the burden. This comprises both the political will as well as the military capability. In terms of the former, the US has prized the fact that the UK has largely shared its world view and has been willing to take on leadership roles. British forces operating alongside the US have accorded it a vital sense of legitimacy in the eyes of the world. The UK has never taken for granted that the US will provide security for its allies, hence it has always sought to make a contribution in order to persuade America that its responsibilities are being shared. It has tried to preserve an American role in European defence by actively contributing to those global security issues on which the US might otherwise stand alone. On matters like nuclear non-proliferation and 'rogue' states, for example, the UK has offered its support. This has contrasted with the attitude of many other European allies who have regarded such issues as lying outside the remit of the western alliance.

In terms of military capability, the US has appreciated the UK's willingness to share all risks. British commanders have committed troops to operational environments without restrictions on how they can be used or where they can be deployed. In Afghanistan, for example, several European states sent their contingents with strict caveats that precluded their troops being involved in combat operations, patrolling at night or moving outside of their designated areas. By contrast the British, along with Dutch, Danish and Canadian troops, deployed to the most demanding operational environments. They took on the task to operate within southern Afghanistan in 2006 and, in doing so, the UK absorbed a relatively high proportion of casualties.

The US has also been impressed by the quality and professionalism of the forces that the UK has contributed to coalition operations. Although Britain's forces do not possess the same level of technological sophistication as the Americans, they are nevertheless highly capable and very well trained. For example, British hunter killer submarines (SSNs) have been regarded by their US counterparts as equals in terms of the skill of their crews. Relatively few navies in the world operate such vessels and so the Royal Navy practices against the larger US Navy's hunter killer force. The cooperation has always been intense and the two submarine forces use each other as foils to hone their skills and ensure that they can fight against potential foes.

The challenge of the future will be to discern what level of effort the US will regard as a meaningful contribution and being able to ensure its availability. This will depend in each case on the size of UK forces, the capability of the adversary and the breadth of the western

coalition. In the cases of the two wars against Iraq, a military power of considerable size, the UK contributed an armoured division on the grounds that this was a self-contained formation and one that justified the position of second in command. In the aftermath of the 2010 cuts to the armed forces it will be increasingly difficult for the UK to field such a force – although not impossible. The SDSR envisages a brigade sized contribution to most high-end military tasks with the option of mounting a larger operation for a short period of time.[6]

Perhaps of greater importance than the absolute size of the force will be guaranteeing its quality and interoperability with US units. In seeking to be able to operate alongside the US, the UK needs to privilege its expeditionary capacity and long-range strike, as well as the ability to supply and refuel its forces operating at great distances. The *Queen Elizabeth* class aircraft carrier and the Joint Strike Fighter are evidence that the government is committed to this approach. There are also capabilities and assets that the US has identified in the past as useful to them. These include British expertise in anti-submarine warfare, in mine counter-measures, in the conduct of anti-drug running operations and in the provision of its Special Forces. In addition, the British possess intelligence assets, such as the Government Communications Headquarters at Cheltenham and its base on Cyprus.

Drawbacks of the Relationship

There are potential drawbacks for the UK in being so closely associated with the US military. These drawbacks might not be readily acknowledged by the British armed services, because their priority is to perpetuate their close relationship with the Americans. But these risks exist and need to be borne in mind in the midst of the evolving strategic context.

One danger is that sustaining the relationship becomes an end in itself. Because the military have come to regard their privileged association with the US armed forces as so useful, this priority can become the over-riding objective. This runs the risk of being unwilling to disappoint American expectations and striving to please in all circumstances. Instead, the wider national interest of Britain needs to be asserted even if there is a price to pay in terms of the links of the armed services with the US. This may mean declining to be involved when the US wants the UK to be its partner in a particular operation. Undeniably, this will be a delicate balance to strike. The result could be US disengagement and a reluctance to act on behalf of its allies in the future. However, UK national interests must take precedence and there may be occasions when this country's interests do not coincide with those of America.

The vote by the House of Commons against military intervention in Syria, in August of 2013, was such an occasion. Despite the momentum for air strikes generated by the Obama administration, following the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime, the British government accepted that there was insufficient support for military action. The British armed forces could argue that this was a political decision and that it did not reflect on their close relations with the US military. Yet there may be instances in the future when the military themselves will need to advise policymakers that it is not in the interests of the UK to intervene

in a conflict zone even if the US is committed to act. The military must not put their interests in aligning with the US over the wider interests of the country.

By contrast, sentiment only goes so far in the American approach to relations with Britain. The US military grant the UK a privileged relationship because they believe it serves their own interests. In 2007 the British Army found itself dangerously over-extended, attempting to contain an ugly sectarian conflict in the south of Iraq whilst simultaneously engaged in an arduous counter-insurgency campaign in Helmand province. Even the Chief of the General Staff, General Richard Dannatt, described the Army as 'running hot'.[7] Yet when Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri-al-Maliki ordered his forces from Baghdad to confront and defeat the Shia militias in Basra, the US let it be known that they regarded the British as having failed to contain the situation effectively. The US has not hesitated to criticise or express its disappointment when it perceives the UK to have fallen short of expectations.

The US appears to view the relationship with the UK as robust rather than fragile. There will inevitably be times when the relationship stumbles over an issue and differences of perspective arise. The UK must learn to follow the American example and not be worried that every disagreement risks undermining the whole relationship. A tougher attitude might make British policymakers more willing to enunciate their own interests and accept that this will not always please their counterparts in the Pentagon. After all, Britain risked the ire of the US by refusing to intervene in the war in Vietnam and the relationship survived.

A second danger is that cooperation with the US over the course of several years can have the effect of shaping UK thinking. The close institutional relationship between the British and American military has helped to condition the former's approach to threats. British officers have been drawn in and have come to share many American planning assumptions. It is unsurprising that threat perceptions on this side of the Atlantic have evolved in tandem with those of the US.

Britain has sought to preserve all its military roles on the grounds that it can contribute to the full spectrum of threats in which the US could become engaged. It has done so at a time when it has been paring down its actual defence capabilities. During the SDSR the government re-affirmed that the country would remain capable of carrying out the full range of military tasks despite its smaller size. This risks Britain indulging in tokenism; preserving a limited capability that it could not fulfil in any substantial way. It avoids making painful decisions about future roles that should be cut. Criticism of this stance was forthcoming from retired US Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates. He warned that the UK might be unable to act alongside the US in certain operations, rendering it a less able partner. Gates referred specifically to the reductions in the size of the Royal Navy.[8] These criticisms, coming from someone formerly so senior in both the Bush and Obama administrations caused acute embarrassment within the British security community.

The disadvantages of such a British policy are twofold: it can easily result in over-commitment and it closes off alternative policy directions. In the case of the former, the House of Commons Defence Committee questioned the government's intention to preserve the same level of commitments while significantly reducing resources.[9] Operating alongside a superpower, whose resource base dwarfs that of the UK, can easily expose the weaknesses of such a policy. Attempting to act as a partner and dependable ally of the US can result in the British military being stretched beyond its means, not least because the US operational tempo far exceeds its own. For example, the entry of the US Marine Corps into Helmand province, led to American criticism of the under-resourcing of the British effort. It was a sobering lesson for British commanders that the US carried out a similar mission with a far higher level of personnel and helicopters.[10]

In the case of the latter, there has been a long-standing tension in British policy between defence cooperation with the United States - both bilaterally and within NATO - and within the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) of the European Union. The UK has been strident in its determination to avoid doing anything in a European context that could prejudice the transatlantic bond. It has supported the right of first refusal for NATO in interventions and has blocked any attempts to challenge American leadership on the continent. When France and Germany launched the idea of a European Union headquarters planning organisation in 2003, it was the most vociferous country in opposing the scheme.

Yet the opposition of the UK has ensured that the CSDP has remained emasculated and incapable of offering an alternative defence framework when NATO declines to lead. The UK has effectively sacrificed efforts to achieve closer European defence cooperation to preserve its privileged relationship with the US. This ignores the fact that part of the UK's innate attractiveness to the US is that it straddles the Atlantic and brings links to allies in the European Union. The UK would be wise not to relinquish this alternative framework, even at the risk of provoking concern from the US. Maintaining relationships with European allies would be in the UK's interest as demonstrated by the closer Anglo-French cooperation based upon the 2010 Lancaster House agreement.[11]

A final danger for the UK is one of delusion. Anglo-American military cooperation has much to commend it – as this paper has already argued. Britain obtains substantial benefits from its close collaboration with the American military and this is amplified in times of conflict. Close friendships are forged between the military officers of the two sides and the UK has an ally against whom it can measure its own martial prowess. In turn, the US obtains an influential ally that thinks alike and grants it legitimacy in coalition operations. The professionalism of the UK military is admired by its American counterpart.

However, the UK should not mistake this close relationship for influence over American strategic decisions. Cooperation gives the UK insight into American thinking at an early stage but this should not be confused with an ability to steer its decision-making. There are very

few occasions on which the UK has changed US policy. One was Prime Minister Tony Blair's influence over President George Bush to use the United Nations to try to obtain Security Council authorisation for the war against Iraq – although America's determination to use force was undimmed. Another was the Anglo-French decision to use force in Libya which pushed the Obama administration into changing course on the crisis.[12] On most issues the US has little need for allies, although it prefers to work, when possible, in conjunction with them. Policymakers in Washington take hard-headed decisions about what is in the interests of their country and they are unlikely to be swayed by arguments from another country.

Critics tend to see this in terms of the UK not getting anything back from the US, a lack of reciprocity. This is mistaken because the UK receives a disproportionate degree of benefit from cooperating with America. What they are really alluding to is the inability of Britain to shape US policy along lines that would suit British interests. This is unlikely to happen because the US is so much more powerful than the UK.

Conclusion

The Anglo-American security relationship has weathered changes before. Despite the pessimism of sceptics it has not disappeared once the international context has altered. The current international situation is a turbulent one and it will require the UK and the US to adapt their relationship to new demands. For the British military, which has worked so hard to foster cooperation with the United States, this will be a major objective of future policy. The fact that the US and UK Combined Chiefs of Staff Committee has resumed its meetings after a hiatus of 65 years is testament to the determination to preserve this bond. The presence of the American Chiefs of Staff in London for the second meeting in June 2014 indicates that they recognise its value and want to preserve it.

The American Chiefs of Staff appreciate that their country will not enjoy the same status as unchallenged hegemon that it experienced in the decade after the end of the Cold War. There are competitors emerging in Asia, as well as emerging security challenges such as failed states, nuclear proliferation, cyber-security and terrorism. Many of these threats are opaque and difficult to address. They will stretch American power at a time when the resources it devotes to defence are under pressure. It is likely that America will be rendered more vulnerable and thereby increase its desire for allies.

The result, ironically, may be to make the Anglo-American security relationship more important. America may place a higher premium on the UK's ability to act as its partner of choice in expeditionary operations and its assistance in the building of 'coalitions of the willing'. It may also value more highly its capacity to replace and backfill those roles that America relinquishes. This depends on the UK's political will to devote the necessary resources to defence. If this political will can be found and the UK invests in preserving its existing intimacy with America, it may come to find itself an even more valued ally. Skilful policymaking may

enable the UK to emerge closer to the US, more knowledgeable about its strategic direction and better configured to work alongside its forces.

Notes

[1] Interview (2013) between the author and a retired senior British Army officer, London, 19 December.
[2] BBC News Online (2011) 'Barack Obama says Asia-Pacific is "top US priority"', 17 November, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-15715446 (accessed 9/9/2014).
[3] Fox, L. (2011) Speech by Dr Liam Fox, Secretary of State for Defence, 'Strong economy, strong defence, strategic reach: Protecting national security in the 21st Century', Chatham House, London, 19 May, http://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/papers/view/171225 (accessed 25/8/2014).
[4] Odierno, R. (2013) Speech by the US Army Chief of Staff, General Ray Odierno, 'Sequestration is a "Bermuda Triangle" of Uncertainty', Brookings Institution, Washington DC, 15 February.
[5] C Hagel, Secretary of Defense, at Munich Security Conference 01 Feb 2014, http://london.usembassy.gov/forpol481.html
[6] Ministry of Defence (2010) *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review*, Cm 7948, HMSO, 19 October.
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[8] BBC News Online (2014) 'Military cuts mean "no US partnership" Robert Gates warns Britain', 16 January www. bbc.co.uk/news/wk25754870 (accessed 16/5/2014)
[9] The House of Commons Defence Committee (2012) *Operation in Libya*, 9th Report of Session 2010-12, HC 950, The Stationery Office, London.
[10] The House of Commons Defence Committee (2012) *Operation in Afghanistan*, 4th Report of Session 2010-12, HC 554, The Stationery Office, London.
[11] Gomis, B. (2011) Franco-British Defence and Security Treaties: Entente while it Lasts? Programme Paper ISP PP 2001/01, Chatham House, London, March, http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse%20Security/0311pp_gomis.pdf (accessed 27/8/2014).
[12] Interview (2014) between the author and a retired senior Royal Air Force officer, email, 15 September.