By Andrew Mok

Today marks 10 years since British troops landed in Freetown and intervened in Sierra Leone's civil war. This product of the Blair government's "ethical foreign policy" was a "short and sweet" success not repeated since. Yet, in the aftermath of Iraq and Afghanistan, the spearhead strategy that worked in Sierra Leone is a useful template for future British interventions. A small, short, and limited insertion of a "spearhead" to open the way for a larger multi-lateral force is politically feasible and fits well with UK capabilities, just the option Britain needs after two protracted, messy counterinsurgencies.

In May 2000, the war between the President Ahmed Tejane Kabbah's government and the brutal rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) under Foday Sankoh took a turn for the worse. The RUF was advancing on the capital, Freetown, and neither government forces nor the newly deployed UN peacekeeping mission, UNAMSIL, was in any position to stop them.

Faced with the imminent collapse of UNAMSIL and the elected Kabbah government, the UK sent a "spearhead" of 600 paratroopers to evacuate EU nationals. On 7 May, their Chinook helicopters arrived in Lungi airport outside Freetown. This force was bolstered by the amphibious assault vessel HMS Ocean with 600 embarked Marines and the aircraft carrier HMS Illustrious parked just "over the horizon." Within two weeks, the paratroopers not only evacuated EU expats but also stopped the rebel advance and pushed the RUF back from Freetown's outskirts. By July UNAMSIL, with British support, took to the offensive. The shift in momentum forced the RUF to return to follow through on disarming and demobilizing. By 2002, security had improved enough for free elections to be held, and continued stability led to the winding-up of the UN mission in 2006.

Politically palatable

At the time of Palliser, concerns about a costly military foray and "mission creep" were voiced in the press. However, the after-action verdict on Palliser has generally been that of an overwhelming success that turned the tide and helped end Sierra Leone's war. While the UK's experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan will make the public and elected leaders wary of future military interventions, the operation in Sierra Leone differs from the more recent political minefields.

First, there was much less contention about the justification for going into Freetown. There was an acute crisis of and the impending prospect of even worse human rights violations if the rebels captured Freetown and only urgent military action could stop it from happening. Unlike Iraq, no controversial case about a direct threat to Britain or its allies had to be made. Furthermore, Palliser-type interventions to stop egregious abuses or massive suffering appeal to wider-held norms of basic individual rights, like the right to survival, rather than contentious social-engineering theories like exporting democracy.

Next, a short deployment, coupled with quick, visible success makes this a politically viable form of military intervention. Unlike Iraq or Afghanistan, there is no drawn-out period of combat operations with mounting casualties and no sure metric for victory. After deploying in May, UK troops had essentially finished combat operations by September. British troops suffered a single fatality during the entire deployment, and the immediate defeat of the rebel offensive and their subsequent disarmament in 2001 was as clear a sign of victory as any. Combined with the moral argument to alleviate an immediate, visible humanitarian crisis, a short deployment and clear exit makes the political case for intervention more palatable.

A perfect capabilities fit

The spearhead intervention also suits the UK's current and future capabilities, and matches the 2004 Defence White Paper's stated requirement to simultaneously conduct "3 small to medium scale peacekeeping or peace enforcement operations." Palliser and similar operations in the future will require limited numbers but rapid reaction. This combination of requirements is a perfect fit for UK force projection capabilities. At the high point, there were never more than 1200 marines and paratroopers, or two battalions, on the ground in Freetown, in addition to the naval task force just "over the horizon." Given its current and future force structure, the UK remains one of the few countries with the ability to deploy a small expeditionary force quickly. During Palliser, 600 paratroopers moved from barracks in Aldershot to secure Freetown's airport in just 36 hours! The RAF's modern airlift fleet of, especially its heavy C-17s, is not an asset that many countries possess, and allows the timely deployment of a "spearhead battalion" without borrowing from an allied nation or chartering.

An equally crucial but rarer asset that must be maintained is the amphibious capability of the Royal Navy, centred around the HMS Ocean, which can carry up to 800 marines and their equipment as well as 18 helicopters. The Royal Navy's amphibious force provides UK leaders will the ability to launch and support ground operations from what's essentially a base at sea. While the amphibious fleet's maximum capacity does not exceed 4,000 embarked troops, only 1,200 were needed for Palliser. However, the Navy will need to find a replacement for aging HMS Ocean by 2018. The 2 Albion-class landing platforms slated to become the amphibious fleet's mainstay, have no hangar space for helicopters, limiting their capability to project force. Even so, the beauty of the spearhead intervention is that it fits with the UK's ability to rapidly deploy and support a small intervention force by air and sea with its current assets.

The rest of the spear

Of course, the key twist in the spearhead intervention is that one needs the rest of the spear to follow. In order for the operation to remain short, small and sweet, a larger force is needed to assure medium to long-term security. as the 2004 White Paper notes, "UK participation will generally be as part of a coalition," and British leaders will have to work through multi-lateral coalition that can take over from the initial intervention. So while Britain's first unilateral operation since the Falklands was instrumental in stopping the rebel advance, it reinforced UN peacekeepers that eventually secured the rest of the country. Operation Khukri in July 2000 successfully relieved a surrounded peacekeeping garrison in eastern Sierra Leone. Then, through a combination of negotiations and reinforced presence, UNAMSIL succeeded in

disarming RUF units and taking control of rebel-held areas. A reinvigorated UNAMSIL provided the secure space for the rebuilding of political and economic institutions, in which British civilian assistance played a key part, and provided security for the first post-war elections in 2002.

Indeed, the spearhead strategy was used during 2006 in eastern DR Congo, when a localized ethnic conflict in Ituri province deteriorated too rapidly for the UN peacekeeping mission to handle. To support the peacekeepers, who were also dealing with other hotspots, the EU started Operation Artemis, a 1500-strong deployment to restore security in Ituri. After 6 months, the security situation had improved, and the UN was able to take over again from the departing Artemis force.

In the spearhead strategy, achieving the UK's overarching goals depends on the ability of a multilateral peacekeeping force to capitalize on the initiative generated by the initial thrust. In Sierra Leone, UNAMSIL had to step up to end the war and create a stable, democratic country. Western commitment to multi-year nation-building operations waned after Somalia, and the experience of Iraq and Afghanistan will make similar endeavours politically difficult for countries like the UK. The spearhead option offers the advantages of short timeframe and limited troops and resource commitment. Success, however, requires proper multi-lateral groundwork for a follow-on force. Ten years on, Palliser is still the best example of the spearhead in British military interventions.