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The following is a summary of an article which appeared in The Economist on 29th January 2009. The full article can be found here
With British forces having been at war for the past seven years, there will be more cheers this summer when troops come back from Iraq for good. As a consequence of this, on June 27th Britain will begin to mark a new Armed Forces Day.
Despite the qualms about Iraq and Afghanistan, and instances of soldiers being abused, support for the troops is high. However, for all the public recognition, the armed services are going through unusually difficult times
British commanders have belatedly realised that they have much to learn, or rather relearn, about fighting small wars in distant lands. "We have lost our way," says one general. The British may have less military brawn than America, but they have prided themselves on often having more brain; with a history of empire and the experience of Northern Ireland, British soldiers saw themselves as masters of that particularly messy kind of warfare from peacekeeping to counter-insurgency.
In the early days in Iraq, British soldiers patrolled Basra as they did Belfast: on foot and wearing soft berets, but this style of 'policing' rather than out-right attack led some Americans complain that British troops are too quick to ask for air strikes. In response to this, Sir Jock Stirrup, the chief of the defence staff, says "there is nothing wrong" with allies operating in different ways but he admits Britain had become "too complacent" and "smug" about its experiences in Northern Ireland and Bosnia. "You're only as good as your next success, not your last one,"
Logistical Problems
British forces are organised to conduct, at the high end of operations, either one relatively brief "large-scale" war (requiring an army division, or about 30,000 men) or two simultaneous "medium-scale" campaigns (brigade-sized, involving around 4,500 men apiece). In the latter case, one operation could be a long-term peacekeeping mission and the other a short war; they would not both last longer than six months or involve prolonged combat. But since 2006 Britain has run two protracted and often intensely violent operations. Units routinely breach guidelines designed to give them time to minimise battle stress.
These troubles are made worse by a chronic shortage of manpower. On October 1st 2008, the trained strength of the British armed forces was 173,270. This is 3.2% below the official requirement, but it understates large gaps in some areas, especially infantry units. Most battalions are 10-20% short of their required numbers; if those deemed unfit to deploy (due to, say, battle injuries) are factored out, they are as much as 42% under strength.
Generals want the army to grow, yet it struggles to recruit, train and keep enough soldiers to fill its existing quota. An acute problem is the large "wastage" of recruits. Last year 38% of those in training either gave up or were thrown out
Defence Spending
Britain's military resources do not match its commitments. Three ex-generals have said that Britain's "unusable" nuclear weapons should be scrapped. Heavy spending on kit for the navy and air force leaves little for the army; one source says it will receive less than 10% of all spending on defence equipment between 2003 and 2018. One general says: "You cannot have a first-division army, navy and air force and a nuclear deterrent for £34 billion a year."
Britain badly needs a wholesale review of its defence policy. Two questions must be answered. Should the British continue to aspire to a global military role? And what sort of wars is the future likely to bring?