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## Reserve forces and the transformation of British military organisation: soldiers, citizens and society

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### ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been a sharp growth in political and sociological interest in the British military. Set against the backdrop of the armed forces' increasing presence in everyday life, alongside the organizations' ongoing restructuring, the current paper focuses on the MoD's problematic attempts to recruit 30,000 reservists by 2020; what has become known as the *Future Reserves 2020* programme (FR2020). We argue that these changes are driven in part by the need to cut costs in defence. However, we also suggest that they are a reflection of the changing nature of modern military organisation, and the manner in which armed forces engage with the societies of which they are a part, and with the citizens that make up that society. We locate FR2020 programme in the context of a wider narrative about the changing nature of military organisation in contemporary western democracies, identifying structural, circumstantial and normative reasons for change. We also examine the specific challenges of implementing FR2020 in practice, including issues of recruitment and retention, integration and support, and relations with families and employers, drawing on the experience of comparator countries to do so. We conclude by considering the implications of these changes, both for the future of UK armed forces, and for the evolving nature of military-society relations in Britain.

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The years since 2010 have been a period of major change for the British armed forces. In the wake of a controversial and contested Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) in 2010, against the background of the demanding and difficult wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and in the face of swingeing cuts to the defence budget, the UK defence establishment has undergone its most significant transformation since the end of the Cold War at least. Core capabilities have been withdrawn, reduced or mothballed; centrepiece procurement projects have been cancelled or reduced in size; and UK military commitments and ambitions scaled back significantly. However, perhaps the most radical and contentious changes have focused on redundancies and downsizing in the military force structure as a whole, and in the Army

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in particular. The 2010 SDSR, for example, announced an initial reduction in Army numbers by 7000, to a total regular strength of 95,000, accompanied by reductions of 5000 regular personnel each in the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force, respectively, as part of its Future Force 2020 vision (UK Ministry of Defence 2010). The SDSR was followed in July 2012 by the publication of a major review into the Army force structure, *Army 2020*, which outlined a further reduction in size to 82,500 regular personnel; its smallest size since the early nineteenth century (Summers 2011, UK Army 2012). These changes to personnel numbers have been reaffirmed and consolidated in the *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review* of November 2015 (HM Government 2015).

These reductions have been widely criticised in the media and by parts of the defence community, including retired senior offices. The Telegraph observed scathingly in 2014 that the UK now had more hairdressers than it did military personnel (Shute and Oliver 2014), while the UK National Defence Association lamented the diminishment of Britain's military strength the cuts represented and called for more to be spent for the armed forces (Hitchens *et al.* 2014).

Nowhere are these controversies more apparent than in the new role that is assigned to reserve forces. The SDSR and *Army 2020* were accompanied by a root and branch revision of the nature and purpose of reserves in the UK force structure in what has become known as the *Future Reserves 2020* (FR2020) programme (Independent Commission 2011, Ministry of Defence 2013a). FR2020 set out to increase the size of the UK reserve, in part to make up for the cuts to regular forces outlined in Future Force 2020. While regular Army numbers were slashed, Army reserves were to be increased from 19,000 to a trained strength of 30,000 by 2020. Moreover, the role and status of the reserves was transformed. The old Territorial Army (TA) was renamed as the Army Reserve, and its role within and integration with the regular force structure considerably enlarged and enhanced.

While attacked by some as a “fig leaf” for cuts (Hitchens *et al.* 2014), and “a cynical balance sheet exercise” (MP John Baron, cited by Farmer 2014a), we argue that the reforms introduced by FR2020 are significant for reasons that go beyond short-term cost-cutting or austerity-driven downsizing amongst the regulars. They are not simply a like for like replacement of regulars by reserves. More widely, they are a reflection of the changing nature of modern military organisation, and the manner in which armed forces engage with the societies of which they are a part and with the citizens that make up these societies. In this article, we examine these themes. We locate FR2020 programme in the context of a wider narrative about the changing nature of military organisation in contemporary western democracies, identifying structural, circumstantial and normative reasons for change. We also examine the specific challenges of implementing FR2020 in practice, including issues of recruitment and retention, integration and support, and relations with families and employers, drawing on the experience of comparator countries to do so. We conclude by considering the implications of these changes, both for the future of UK Armed Forces, and for the evolving nature of military-society relations in Britain.

## Reserve forces and military organisation

The changes introduced in FR2020 entail a transformation in the nature, role and purpose of reserves in the UK force structure. The reforms aim to create a trained strength of 34,900; including 30,000 in a new Army Reserve, 3100 in the Royal Navy Reserve and Royal Marines

Reserve and 1800 in the Royal Auxiliary Air Force. Reserves will be more closely integrated with regular forces, be subject to a more demanding training regime, be better supported in terms of pay, infrastructure and equipment, and can expect to be deployed more often, and across the full range of operational environments, both at home and abroad (UK Ministry of Defence 2013a, p. 7, HM Government 2015).<sup>1</sup> These reforms represent an important shift from the traditional role of reserves in Britain, and reflect similar changes that have taken place across Europe, North America and in Australia. We identify seven inter-related drivers for the current UK reform process, many of which are also shared by comparator countries.

The most important long-term driver for change is strategic in nature. Reserve forces in the UK and elsewhere were developed over the course of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Historically, their role has been to mobilise at times of significant national emergency and homeland defence (Bennell 1978, pp. 42–45). Reservists could expect to be deployed only in extremis, on conventional battlefields and at times generalised mass mobilisation. This is the pattern that has underpinned UK reserve forces for most of the period of their existence. However, with the end of the cold war, strategic circumstances have shifted significantly. The wars in which western armed forces have been engaged since 1990 have notably not been wars of national survival or territorial defence or even necessarily regular warfare. They have instead been characterised by expeditionary security management or power projection operations, requiring flexible, deployable and skilled professional forces (Edmunds 2012, pp. 267, 268). Indeed, there has been a general retreat from national defence missions for armed forces across Western Europe and North America. Military numbers have been cut dramatically, conscription abolished and equipment designed for high-intensity territorial conflicts – main battle tanks, artillery and so on – withdrawn, reduced or moth-balled (Haltiner 1998, pp. 7–36). At the same time, it has become more politically difficult to deploy “citizen soldiers” – whether conscripts or traditionally formed reserve forces – to what are often characterised as “wars of choice,” in contrast to conflicts of real national emergency or collective survival (as was at least potentially the case during the cold war) (Forster 2006, pp. 1043–1105, Haass 2009, pp. 167, 168, Freedman 2010, pp. 9–16). In this context, the traditional roles of reserve forces have declined in significance and, to many, seem of increasingly marginal relevance to contemporary security demands.

Second, and in large part as a consequence of these shifts, the size and status of the reserve has itself changed considerably. Most notably, reserve forces across Europe have declined significantly in size. In the UK, the TA was the target of successive savings measures from 2007. These included an 80% cap on the strength of some units, coupled with restrictions on marketing, and, in 2009 a freeze on reservist training and pay (UK Ministry of Defence 2013a, p. 16). The TA was also an ageing force, with personnel on average six years older than their regular counterparts, with new recruitment failing dramatically to keep pace with target numbers, and experiencing what one commentator called “an exodus” of existing personnel (Weitz 2007, p. 35, Hope 2013). In the UK, the TA shrunk from a size of 76,000 in 1990 to 20,000 in 2011 (UK Ministry of Defence 2013a, pp. 14, 15).<sup>2</sup> At the same, and in common with the experiences of countries such as the United States, UK reserves have been asked to do more. Between 1997 and 2008, for example, 28,000 reservists were deployed on operations in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere (UK Ministry of Defence 2012). As a consequence of the developments, it was clear that by 2010, UK reserves as then structured, were, in the words of FR2020, “in serious decline in terms of numbers, capability and morale,”

and increasingly overstretched in their role (UK Ministry of Defence 2013a, p. 17). For these reasons alone, a major root and branch reform of the TA was both inevitable and pressing.

A third and related driver for change can be found in the wider evolution of British – and to some degree western – military organisation as a whole. The changes in strategic circumstance and military role discussed above have also had important implications for the composition and structure of military organisation. In general terms, the complexity of overseas expeditionary missions, in what are often contested, ambiguous and difficult operational environments, has engendered a need for more highly skilled, technologically advanced and professionalised military forces (Edmunds 2010, p. 379). Such forces are more expensive and require longer and more intensive training than their territorial defence-oriented counterparts of the cold war period. They also tend to be smaller in size, with military advantage coming from the information-driven application of expert military knowledge and capacities rather than mass of numbers. King (2013) has characterised this process as one of “concentration,” in which combat forces have become increasingly focused on a highly professionalised military elite, united by intense patterns of training, drill and competence.

These changes have at least three implications for reserve forces. First, they require that if reservists are to be integrated and interoperable with regular forces on deployment, then they too must be trained and drilled to a sufficiently high standard. Second, they imply that it may be more efficient to concentrate regular forces on “core” military activities, while specialist skills and support capacities are provided from elsewhere; whether that be through the reserve, from allies or through private contractors (Heineken 2013, pp. 625–646). Finally, they suggest that reserve forces can expect to be deployed more regularly in order to augment and support the “concentrated” regular force structure. Indeed, one of the implications of concentration in the regulars is that the Army may struggle to deploy in force without these additional capacities. This shift is of a potentially fundamental nature for UK reserves. As part of the old TA, reservists could enjoy the various benefits of reserve service, including military and adventure training and the development of new skills, as well as the camaraderie associated with being part of a regiment or the like, but with a very low risk of wartime deployment short of a national emergency. The FR2020 reforms challenge this model, while the expectation that reservists will deploy in formed sub-units, may even suggest that the voluntary nature of reservist deployment could be eroded. At a minimum, and as we discuss further below, this suggests that pressures on reservists in balancing their military role with families and civilian employment are likely to increase significantly. Taken together, these changes represent a major shift in the role of the reserve; from supplementary forces to be called on at times of national emergency, to an integrated and indispensable part of the force structure as a whole. In UK parlance, this has become known as the “Whole Force Approach,” and underpins the reforms introduced by the FF 2020 programme (Louth and Quentin 2014).

Fourth, the logic of the Whole Force Approach is that it is more effective and efficient to draw on specialist capacities from dedicated providers and the civilian labour force, rather than to develop such skills indigenously within the regular force structure. This assumption has important implications for the development of specialist skills in the reserves. It is argued that the reserves provide a key opportunity for the armed forces to exploit existing expertise in the civilian sector, in areas such as medicine, linguistics or cyber security. Indeed, in the UK case, medical reserves have been routinely deployed on operations, making up 40% of hospital staff in Afghanistan for example (UK Ministry of Defence 2013a, p. 19). The US experience is even more pronounced with 97% of civil affairs units, 72% of psychological

operations units and 70% of medical units being concentrated in the reserves in 2007 (Weitz 2007, p. 12). It is no surprise therefore that FR2020 places the development and provision of the specialist skills in the reserves, at the heart of its justification for reform (UK Ministry of Defence 2013a, p. 9).

Fifth, there are ideological, political and financially driven justifications for reform. One of the first statements in the FR2020 document references a desire to better harness “the talents and volunteer ethos of the country,” in direct reference to the Cameron government’s so-called “Big Society” initiative of 2010 (UK Ministry of Defence 2013a, pp. 4, 10). FR2020 is also taking place at a time of significant budgetary constraint in the defence sector as a whole, as part of the Cameron government’s wider public austerity drive. These cuts have been criticised from within the defence establishment and more widely, as either short-sighted penny pinching by defence-blind politicians (Graydon *et al.* 2015), or as economically short-sighted (Joseph Stiglitz cited in Anthony 2015). Either way, it is difficult to see how defence can avoid its share of cuts, with the public showing no great appetite to devote more money to defence spending, whether in absolute terms or relative to other departments (Edmunds 2010, pp. 391–393). At the same time, contractual or other structural obstacles in the defence establishment mean that further savings on, for example, major procurement projects or infrastructure are likely to be difficult (Chalmers 2015, pp. 10–15). In this context, the personnel budget is one area in which the MoD does seem able to make further financial savings, albeit not without some considerable organisational cost. Thus, for the moment at least, the reduction in regular Army numbers appears to be an inevitable consequence of the UK’s current political and financial circumstances and the government response to them. In this context, the expansion and reform of the reserves offers an apparent mechanism through which key military capacities can be preserved in line with the strategic and organisational imperatives discussed above, at somewhat lower cost than through the regular force structure (UK Ministry of Defence 2015a). Indeed, Farrell *et al.* (2013, p. 188) note that the scale and speed of the military personnel cuts announced by the government in 2007 came as a “complete surprise to the Army leadership,” and forced them to consider novel solutions to the sudden reduction in manpower. The focus on reserves was further encouraged by a government decision to allocate £1 billion of the agreed defence budget for investment in reserve forces. The MoD itself has projected that the new force structure introduced by FR2020 would achieve staffing savings for the Army alone of £5.3 billion in the 10 years from 2012–2013 to 2021–2022 (National Audit Office 2014).

That said, the financial savings presented by employing reserve forces over their regular counterparts are not always straightforward, particularly during a period of major reform and transformation such as that represented by FR2020. At a minimum, the immediate costs of transition are significant. These include the expense of redundancy payments to those regulars who are laid off, as well as the investment required to institute such a major organisational change. Indeed, FR2020 has been accompanied by an additional investment of £1.8 billion over 10 years in order to support the required reforms (UK Ministry of Defence 2012, p. 6). The introduction of a new recruitment system for FR2020 with the private contractor Capita, was originally expected to deliver savings of some £267 million. However, problems with the implementation of the contract and new IT system have considerably disrupted this process, costing the MoD an estimated £70 million in the period to 2014 (HoCPA 2014, pp. 10, 11). Even once the FR2020 reforms have been established and consolidated, the UK’s new reserve structures are likely to be more expensive than the earlier reserve



forces they replace. Not only will the new reserve need to be better supported financially and in terms of equipment and training, they are also likely to be mobilised more frequently. In this context, the FR2020 document itself concedes that, while current reserve forces cost around 20% of a comparable regular unit when not mobilised, that same unit is only 10–15% cheaper than its regular counterpart on deployment. Indeed, it is striking that when looking at comparator countries, the role and significance of reserves is not seen primarily in terms of their relative cost-effectiveness, but more in terms of the strategic and organisational rationales already discussed above (Weitz 2007, UK Ministry of Defence 2013a, p. 61).

Sixth, reserves can provide an additional, arguably more cost-effective, manpower and capabilities pool for national resilience and homeland security tasks, as and when they arise (UK Ministry of Defence 2013a, pp. 26, 27). They can also be employed as a repository for trained personnel, skills and capacities that can form the basis of a regeneration of currently de-prioritised capabilities, such as artillery for example, should the circumstances of national security require it (UK Ministry of Defence 2013a, p. 27).<sup>3</sup> To this end, FR2020 proposes a “properly constituted” military capability, based in the reserves, to support the civil authority at times of domestic emergency and disaster (UK Ministry of Defence 2013a, p. 27). Certainly, UK Armed Forces, including reserves, have been deployed in these capacities on numerous occasions in recent years, including during the foot and mouth crisis of 2001, and during flooding Cumbria in 2009 and 2015, and in Somerset in 2014. This also mirrors practice in other countries, including the United States, France, Germany and Canada, where reserve forces have a key, often formalised, role in national resilience and homeland security (Weitz 2007). The location of such capacities in the reserve is in line with the logic of concentration in the armed forces discussed above, with regular armed forces focusing on core, combat-orientated roles, and other tasks being conducted from elsewhere within the Whole Force structure.

Seventh, and finally, reserve forces can have an important function in connecting the armed forces to the societies of which they are a part, and vice versa. Certainly, FR2020 claims on its first page that a transformation of UK reserves could enable the armed forces to “become better integrated with, and understood by, the society from which they draw their people” (UK Ministry of Defence 2013a, p. 4). Historically, this has been an important component of the TA and reservist role more widely, in the UK and elsewhere. As Dandeker et al. (2011, p. 349) observe, reserve centres and facilities [alongside Cadet Forces and University Service Units] are often the only tangible presence that the military may have in particular geographical areas of the country. In this sense, they present a “face” of the armed forces to communities in which it would otherwise be absent, while their explicitly “territorial” nature represents a tangible and sometimes intimate link between location and military service in the unit concerned. Because the reserves recruit from across society – from a range of different trades, professions, social classes and geographic areas – it has also functioned historically as a conduit for military familiarisation and representation in a civilian world that may have little connection to or experience of the armed forces in their regular, professional guise (see Beckett 2008). Such patterns are visible elsewhere too. France, for example, maintains a Citizens’ Reserve alongside its Operational Reserve for precisely this purpose (Weber 2011, pp. 327–329), while in the United States, such civil-military considerations have long underpinned the role of the National Guard. In Germany, the Ministry of Defence is explicit that its reserve forces “are the mediators between the *Bundeswehr* and the civilian sector of society,” and “contribute to sustaining motivation for military service and help people to see security issues in a wider context” (Weitz 2007, p. 49).



Reservists in all armed forces move regularly between civil and military worlds, and, in many ways, are located in both. As a consequence, they can function as “mediums for a constant flow of ideas” and experience between the two (Lomsky-Feder *et al.* 2007, p. 598). These exchanges occur during the actual period of reserve service deployment alongside regulars, and to a lesser extent during training. However, the experiences, relationships and knowledge they engender can also extend long beyond a reservist’s actual period of service, and so represent a potentially enduring link between armed forces and society. Thus, FR2020’s goal to revitalise UK reserve forces in military and public life may also, by implication, assist in revitalising UK military-society relations. This is an important task given the smaller size and greater exclusivity of the more concentrated regular force structure, but also given the difficult popular legacies of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Gribble *et al.* 2014, pp. 128–150).

There are therefore important structural, organisational and normative reasons for the current transformation of UK reserve forces. However, the FR2020 programme also faces a series of major challenges. In the following section, we explore these issues. We argue that many of the strategic and organisational rationales for the reforms remain sound and are not driven simply by cost cutting. However, we also suggest the UK defence establishment has consistently underestimated the role of military-society relations in conditioning their implementation. Perhaps nowhere are these tensions more apparent than in the difficult issues of recruitment and retention.

## Recruitment and retention

Issues of recruitment and particularly retention represent perhaps the biggest obstacle to the successful implementation of the FR2020 programme. We have already noted that the TA was suffering from major manpower problems by 2010, with a trained strength that fell some 17,000 short of its “establishment” or target figure (UK Ministry of Defence 2013a, p. 16). This is not just a UK problem, and similar challenges are faced by the reserve force structures of almost all comparator countries.<sup>4</sup> FR2020 too has struggled in this regard, at least in its first few years of implementation. The programme sets ambitious recruitment targets on the Army Reserve in particular, while also introducing new demands on recruits, which makes their transition to trained status more difficult and time-consuming than before. Thus, for example, achieving the new establishment target of 30,000 reservists by the end of financial year 2018–2019 will require an increase of 11,000 trained reservist personnel from 2013 to 2019. In practice, the reserves must recruit considerably more new entrants than this ultimate figure implies. This is because the natural turnover from existing reserves is itself considerable, while the “conversion” rate of those personnel recruited to those trained is only around 34% (National Audit Office 2014, p. 34). In fact, the MoD’s annual target figures for new recruits into the Army Reserve start at 3600 in 2014–2015, rising to 6000 in 2015–2016, to 8000 by 2016–2017 (National Audit Office 2014, p. 34).

Initially, recruitment fell short of these figures though by 2016 was showing signs of significant improvement. Thus, for example, for the year 2013–2014, the total number of personnel recruited into the Army Reserve was 2960, against an outflow of 4620, representing an overall *decrease* in strength of 1660 personnel. The figures for 2014–2015 were better, at 5210 new entrants against a target of 4900, but again set against an outflow of 3350, leading to an effective increase of 1860 (HL925 2015). Recruitment and retention figures for 2015

were stronger. Between 1 January and 30 December, 6480 personnel were recruited into the Army Reserve against an outflow of 2850 and increase of 3630 personnel (UK Ministry of Defence 2015b, p. 8). Even then, and taken on their own, these figures say little about the number of these new recruits who go on to full trained status. Manpower figures released by the MoD in November 2014, suggested that, taking into account new recruitment and natural turnover, the trained strength of the Army reserve had increased by just 20 from the following year; from 19,290 to 19,310 (Farmer 2014b). Again, by 2016, the figures had improved significantly, showing a 10.1% increase in the size of the trained reserve, from 20,480 to 22,550 – an additional 2080 trained personnel – between January 2015 and January 2016 (Farmer 2014b).

As the MoD itself notes, these figures need to be treated with care given known difficulties in data collection and quality (2015b), including an opacity over the status of reservists who have not turned up for training for extended periods, or a suggestion of creative accounting in relation to who counts as trained and who not. Even so, the broad picture is one of significant initial difficulties in recruitment, followed by improvements from 2015, though with continuing problems of retention, and challenges in moving to the ultimate target of a 30,000 trained strength by 2018–2019. Certainly, the recruitment issue at least has attracted criticism from the press and other commentators. The House of Commons Public Accounts Committee suggested that its targets were derived from “bold assumptions rather than robust evidence” (HoCPA 2014, p. 12), while General the Lord Dannatt, a former head of the Army, suggested that the targets were “based on hope rather than any science” (Farmer 2014a). Still others were of the view that it was premature and risky for the Army to frontload redundancies in the regular force structure on the basis of overly optimistic assumptions about recruitment into the new reserve (National Audit Office 2014, p. 89).

Stung by this criticism, the MoD and Army have since embarked on a major new advertising and publicity campaign for reserve forces and reviewed their recruitment processes since 2014 (Woodward *et al.* 2015). They have also offered new financial inducements for applicants and new recruits. These include a cash payment of £300 to applicants to cover travel expenses associated with the initial recruitment process, and two subsequent payments of £1000 each on completion of key phases of training (National Audit Office 2014, p. 35). Ex-regulars have also been offered a bounty of up to £10,000 to sign up with the reserves within six years of discharge (British Army Website 2016). It remains to be seen how successful these initiatives will prove, though recent figures may give cause for optimism, as noted above. The additional incentives offered to ex-regulars appear to have been particularly effective in the wider context of downsizing in the regular force structure. Over the long term however, their attractiveness seems likely to depend on the underlying reasons for the current shortfall. Here, we argue that there are three classes of challenge facing recruiters. The first are largely circumstantial and can be remedied through relatively straightforward measures. The second and third group of challenges are structurally derived and relate to underlying issues of military-society relations. These are considerably more difficult to address, and, we believe, have been consistently underestimated in military personnel policy to date.

The Army itself has identified a number for the difficulties it has experienced in recruiting to the reserves. These are primarily circumstantial in nature. They include a major breakdown in its recruitment process, and particularly the difficulties experienced in implementing a new relationship with the recruitment contractor, Capita, as discussed above. The impact of

these problems was significant, leading to major delays and frustrations for applicants, and causing many to abandon the process entirely (HoCPA 2014, p. 5). They also cite the winding down of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, which, in the Army's view removed a major motivation for some people to enlist. Certainly, there is some evidence from the UK and elsewhere, that the prospect and likelihood of regular deployment can be a key factor in motivating military recruitment, including into the reserves (Earnshaw and Price 2011, p. 29). However, this factor needs to be balanced against some of the other organisational and professional challenges faced by reservists on deployment, and which we discuss in the following section. In addition, the Army argued that the concurrent process of major redundancies in the regular forces sent a conflicting message on military recruitment to the general public. At the same time, it faced a series of constraints in its marketing activities in 2011–2012, driven by the need to save costs and in the run-up to Capita assuming responsibility for marketing in October 2012 (National Audit Office 2014, p. 35).

Each of these reasons is valid in its own terms, and indeed lend themselves to amelioration by the remedial measures introduced by the Army and MoD. However, we also argue that there are two deeper, more intractable, challenges that underpin some of the recruitment difficulties faced by FR2020. The first of these relates to the changing nature of threat, the concomitant decline of the mass army in Europe, the manner in which the British general public relate to their armed forces more generally and to the prospect of reservist service specifically. During the cold Wwar, reserve forces were legitimised and sustained by the prospect of a war for national survival should the superpower confrontation ignite. Reservist service was thus driven by an enhanced sense of national threat, and a clear, collectively orientated motivation for mobilisation should it occur. In contrast, and at least until the recent round of Russian military assertiveness in Ukraine and elsewhere, military and territorial threat perceptions in Europe today are lower than they have been for many decades. This decline in threat perceptions emerges both in public opinion polling over the period, and consistently in official defence and security and security documentation across European states and security organisations (Edmunds 2010, pp. 391–393; 2012, pp. 278–280).

In the absence of a dominant perception of hegemonic threat, publics across Europe have disengaged from militarised notions of collective national defence and military service. This pattern can be seen in the decline of conscription and mass armies across Europe, in a major and generalised decline in the amount European countries spend on defence, and recruitment and in retention difficulties in the armed forces themselves (Williams 2006, pp. 1–34). In the UK case, the Army particularly has been consistently understrength against its manpower requirement for much of post-Cold War period (National Audit Office 2014, pp. 11, 12), and, in 2013–2014, missed its regular soldier recruitment target by 30% (HoCPA 2014, p. 10). These issues have been especially pronounced in the reserves, the traditional role of which has historically been linked closely to the national defence mission. Indeed, it is well recognised, including in the FR2020 document itself, that increased threat perceptions increases tolerance for service in the reserves (UK Ministry of Defence 2013a, p. 62). However, the impact of this tendency is perhaps more significant than has been widely recognised. It suggests current recruitment difficulties in the UK reserve may be influenced as much by longer term geostrategic trends across Europe, and their concomitant impact on military-society relations in the UK and elsewhere, as by the specific circumstances of the FR2020 programme itself.

A second and related challenge concerns deeper themes of social change in contemporary western societies; and in particular the manner in which individuals engage with the state and its institutions. Broadly, these changes entail a shift away from collectivist identities, whether in relation to the state, workplace or public life, to more individualistic and pluralistic societies (Inglehart 1977, Tresch 2011, p. 245). Military sociologists have devoted considerable attention to these themes in recent years. For Moskos (1997), they are captured by a tension between “institutional” and “occupational” motivations for service in the armed forces. Institutional motivations incorporate intangible values and norms, such as duty to country, loyalty, commitment, sacrifice and so on. Occupational motivations concern tangible and immediate benefits, including comparative pay, technical training, working conditions, enlistment incentives and so on (Eighmey 2006, p. 308). In the UK, successive British Social Attitudes surveys suggest that these changes find expression in a wider liberalisation of social attitudes, as well as an increasing preference for individual over collectivist identities, particularly amongst the young (see British Social Attitudes 2013; The Economist 2013). Indeed, these trends are most pronounced amongst those born after 1979, and who, after all, form the primary recruitment base for the armed forces, including reservists. Britons from this younger generation are less likely to have a “high or very high” opinion of the armed forces than their older counterparts. They are more sceptical of collectivist endeavour more generally, being “less likely to belong to a political party or trade union, or to proclaim a belief in one of the established religions, than almost any previous generation in history” (Kingman 2013), and also more likely to be suspicious of the institutional conformism required by totalising institutions such as the armed forces.

Generally speaking, scholars agree that the decline of conscription and the mass army, coupled with these wider societal changes have led to occupational factors becoming more significant in recruitment and retention. In essence, decisions to join or remain within the armed forces have become more conditional and contingent than perhaps was the case in the past. Again, these patterns are particularly pronounced for reservists, because so much of their identity formation takes place beyond the confines of the military institution itself. Taken in isolation, these shifts do not necessarily imply problems for recruitment, particularly if the occupational “offer” is seen to be favourable and generous. However, they do suggest that the expectations of those considering joining or remaining within the reserves may be more exacting than previously assumed, and more fragile in the face of problems either in service or in the wider civilian environment, including at home or in work. This is particularly relevant given the increased demands that are likely to be placed on reserve forces under the FR2020 model, the emphasis placed on “volunteer ethos” in its initial conception, and, indeed, the already noted problems of retention in the reserve force. It is to these challenges that this article now turns.

### **Transmigrants and greedy institutions**

Issues around the relative manpower balance between regular and reserve forces, as well as recruitment into the latter, have dominated the public debate on FR2020 to date. However, perhaps the most radical element of FR2020 is the manner in which the new reserves are to be used, and, in particular, their transformation from a strategic to an operational force. As discussed above, traditional conceptions of the reservist role have focused on their strategic mobilisation at times of national emergency. However, during the post-cold war period,

reserves in both the US and UK have increasingly been used in a more routine, operational capacity as well. FR2020 formalises this shift to an operational reserve for the UK as part of the wider Whole Force Approach. In particular, it proposes a new “bargain” for UK reserve forces. On the one hand, reservists are presented with a stronger “proposition”; more opportunities for training, career progression, command and leadership roles, and so on, as well as improved rates of pay and better employment protection and employer support. On the other hand, the reserves will need to be able to be more closely integrated with the regular force structure, including greater expectations of their quality and availability for more routine mobilisation on operations (UK Ministry of Defence 2013a, p. 5).

FR2020 is thus underpinned by two core components, united by a common assumption. The first is that the armed forces will ask more of their reserve personnel. Reservists can expect to be deployed more frequently and with considerably less flexibility for individual circumstances than has been the case in the past. They will be expected to train more routinely and regularly, and to be able to integrate closely with their regular counterparts when mobilised (UK Ministry of Defence 2013b, pp. 7, 9). In return, and second, they will better remunerated and supported within the force structure as a whole. The assumption that underpins these changes is essentially occupational in nature, in that the balance between the demands of the new role and reservists’ willingness to fulfil it are primarily transactional in nature: the greater the tangible incentives on offer, the more that can be asked of the reservists themselves.

The logic of this bargain is sound, at least in relation to regular forces, and chimes well with the thrust of the institutional/occupational debate in military sociology discussed earlier. That said, we think that there are some significant problems entailed in extending such narrowly transactional premises to reserve forces. In particular, they risk failing to understand the increasing demands of both civilian and military environments in reservist life. Unlike regular service personnel, reservists exist in both military and civilian environments, as well as across them. Lomsky-Feder et al. have conceptualised this peculiar civil-military status as one of “transmigration.” They argue that reserves are best understood as “travellers between civilian and military worlds” (2007, p. 594). In this context, their civilian lives continually filter into and influence their military role, and vice versa, creating a unique series of motivations, pressures and identities. As Griffith notes, reservists are both “special soldiers” and “special civilians” at the same time (2009, p. 4).

This special status of reservists has at least three implications for civil-military relations, and our understanding of their role within them. First, it implies that reserves fit into a special sociological category of their own; and that established assumptions about regular personnel – whether in relation to recruitment and retention, ethos, role or deployment – cannot simply be carried over without modification. For example, a number of scholars note that voluntaristic and institutional motivations for service may be particularly important for reservist soldiers (Lomsky-Feder et al. 2007, p. 310). Second, that the dominant cultural ethos of the regulars – in the US and UK often focused around their role as professionalised war-fighting soldiers – may be in tension with some of the wider social and symbolic roles of reserve forces (Walker 1992, p. 308). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it implies that reserve service needs to be understood as taking place in a dynamic, sometimes antagonistic, matrix of relationships between the dominant institutions of *both* military and civilian life. One way of conceptualising these demands is through the lens of what have been called “greedy institutions.” The greedy institution is a sociological concept, used to describe those

institutions that make great demands on individuals in terms of commitment, loyalty, time and energy (Coser 1974). Military sociologists commonly identify two key greedy institutions in the civil-military relationship: the military itself, and the family (Segal 1986, pp. 9–38). In the case of reservists, who travel between military and civilian worlds, we also argue that a third institution needs to be included in this matrix: that of civilian employment. Below, we examine the demands that each of these institutions make on reservists' lives, and consider how these might be changing in the contemporary period.

In the reservist context, perhaps the most important impact of the FR2020 reforms is that it makes the military, an already greedy institution, even greedier. The demands of an operational reserve – in terms of time commitment, deployments away from home, and, indeed, potential for risk to life and limb – are considerably greater than those of the traditional strategic reserve role. At the same time, reservists do not generally have access to the same range of benefits and support networks to help them cope with these demands, as those of their more fully institutionalised regular counterparts. These differences are particularly pronounced at times of mobilisation, and including issues of pre-deployment training and preparation, integration while on operations, and post-deployment support.

While UK reservists are increasingly expected to integrate closely with their regular counterparts when mobilised, various studies from the UK and comparator countries suggest that they face particularly challenges in doing so. At a minimum, an expectation of closer and more routine integration with regulars is likely to increase the training burden of reserve forces, particularly given the increased demands of professional concentration discussed above. This is problematic both because of the more limited time available for the training of reserve personnel (with a minimum commitment of only 20 days a year), and also because the timetabling of reserve training sessions – on evenings and weekends – can lead to an isolation from their regular counterparts, who primarily train during normal working hours. Thus, the level of training required by particular roles within the armed forces also mean that reservists serving in similar roles – particularly those in specialist units such as commandos for example – can find it very difficult to achieve the levels of fitness and knowledge required to progress upwards through the ranks. Elsewhere, Brown *et al.* found that most UK reservists in Iraq tended to be mobilised as individuals rather than with their parent units. Such individualised deployments can lead to isolation and a greater risk of mental health problems on operations, as well as poorer relations with the chain of command (Browne *et al.* 2007, p. 487). Moreover, the stark transition from civilian life to military operations appears to have left many with “minimal time to process adverse fears and put their affairs in order,” leading to greater psychological stress both on and after deployment (Browne *et al.* 2007, p. 488).

The individualised nature of many reservists' mobilisation experience also means that they can come into formed units without the established social networks and relationships of their colleagues. Dandeker *et al.* (2010, p. 274) argue that, on reaching their units, many reservists were not easily accepted by their regular counterparts. Their complaints include a perceived lack of respect, and a tendency to be allocated the most unrewarding tasks and roles, and to be issued with inadequate kit and equipment (Dandeker *et al.* 2010, p. 275, 2011, p. 275). These findings mirror those of similar studies in both the US (Moskos 2005, pp. 663–676) and Sweden (Danielsson and Carlstedt 2011, p. 293). This tendency towards individualised deployment also has implications for the difficulties many reserves face post-deployment. When regulars return home, they do so with their units and to the institutional



and social support networks of an established military community. In contrast, reservists return home alone, and to an often-rapid transition back to their civilian employment. Hotopf *et al.* (2006, p. 1739) argue that the nature of these shifts can often be traumatic, with deployment impacting negatively on the mental health of reservists to a far greater extent than their regular counterparts, and making it more difficult for them to reintegrate back into civilian life when they return. Reservists returning as individuals also tend to miss out on the formal ceremonies that regulars participate in on return as unit, these include civic displays of gratitude such as marching through their base's home towns and associate visible and tangible displays of gratitude for their service.

It is clear therefore, that the demands made by the military institution on the reservist are considerable, and will likely intensify as the shift to an operational reserve consolidates. However, these pressures are intensified by the other greedy institutions that make demands on reservists' time and commitment. The first of these is the family. The tensions between military service and family life have long been acknowledged, and are prevalent amongst regular personnel too (Segal 1986). Moskos *et al.* (1999) argue that they have intensified in recent decades, in line with the wider processes of social change in western societies outlined above. These include the tendency for more military spouses to have jobs and careers of their own, and a greater expectation that fathers participate in the life and work of the home. This can make military commitments, and especially deployment, more difficult to manage. However, reservists again face additional obstacles in this regard. Unlike their regular counterparts, reservist families are less likely to live in dedicated military communities, and so have less ready access to the social and institutional support networks that these tend to provide. They are likely to be more socially isolated than their regular equivalents, and may struggle to accept or tolerate the considerable demands of deployment (Dandeker *et al.* 2010, p. 279, 2011, p. 350).

Reservists also face demands from a third greedy institution, unique to their status as part time soldiers; that of civilian employment. As Griffith (2009, p. 5) notes, the dominant social context for most reserve soldiers is the civilian environment rather than the military institution. Indeed, the bulk of any reservists' time, energy and commitment are likely to be directed towards their civilian, rather than military careers. Under the old strategic reserve model, demands on reservist civilian jobs, careers and employers were limited; with the requirements of the role commonly confined to attending regular evening and weekend training commitments, as well as attending an annual camp. The prospect of deployment was remote, and only likely in the event of a national emergency. Under such circumstances, the tensions between a reservist's military service and civilian career were relatively straightforward, if not always easy, to manage. In contrast, however, the greater and more frequent demands made by participation in an active operational reserve are likely to be harder to cope with.

For example, the government's own consultation on FR2020, found that "around half of reservists said that they had been disadvantaged in some way in the civilian workplace [as a consequence of their reserve service]" (UK Ministry of Defence 2013b, p. 4). Perceptions of disadvantage ranged from concerns that the time out required by deployment meant that reservists could miss out on career opportunities and promotion due to their absence, to a small proportion that believed that they had lost their jobs as a consequence. For their part, many employers, particularly those from small businesses, registered disquiet at the prospect of even greater demands being made on their employees' time. They also expressed

dissatisfaction with what was seen to be the overly bureaucratic and cumbersome process through which they could claim financial assistance, and suggested that the benefits offered by the current system of compensation did not outweigh the costs (UK Ministry of Defence 2013a, p. 44, 2013b, pp. 5, 22).

Thus, and uniquely amongst armed forces personnel, reservists find themselves caught within a “iron triangle” of greedy institutions. The MoD recognises some of these pressures. FR2020 has been followed by a consultation document that included a series of proposals aimed at ameliorating them. These include the strengthening of SaBRE, a dedicated MoD programme for employer liaison (see SaBRE 2016); an aspiration to work more actively to bring the families of mobilised reservists into established military support networks; consideration of new financial rewards for employers of reservists, together with new partnering arrangements on professional training and education; and the introduction of new legislation requiring that reservist mobilisation be given the same status as maternity or paternity leave (UK Ministry of Defence 2012, pp. 38, 29, 25). Even so, employers have met many of these measures with scepticism (UK Ministry of Defence 2013b, pp. 14, 22, 27). Similarly, the consultation document is explicit that, in relation to family support, the MoD does “not envisage significant changes to current arrangements” (UK Ministry of Defence 2012, p. 38). Given the tensions between the iron triangle of greedy institutions we discuss above, and the expectation that the military now needs to become even greedier, it is difficult not to be sceptical of their efficacy. Indeed, we argue that they indicate a fundamental misunderstanding on the part of the MoD of the role, importance and voice of the “civil” in the civil-military relationship. Further, they suggest that some of the core assumptions underpinning FR2020 may be flawed, and will require significant reappraisal if the transformation of Britain’s reserve forces is to proceed as planned.

### **Soldiers, citizens and societies**

The transformation of UK reserve forces presented in FR2020 represents a bold and strategically justifiable attempt to balance the competing demands of a changing security environment, military modernisation, domestic politics and austerity in the defence budget. It is, inevitably, a compromise of sorts, especially when considered in the light of the major cuts in regular Army manpower it accompanies. However, it is a compromise that also mirrors practice in a number of comparator countries, the reserves of which are significantly better manned in proportion to their British equivalent (UK Ministry of Defence 2012, p. 51). In this context, it does not seem unreasonable for the MoD to state in 2013, that it was “confident that the [recruitment] targets can be met. The total requirement represents only 0.15 per cent of the overall UK workforce and, in an historic, context, we require only about half the strength of the Reserves as they were in 1990” (UK Ministry of Defence 2013a, p. 14).

However, a more considered analysis suggests that this assumption is over-optimistic, and perhaps even naïve. In particular, it fails to recognise the significantly changed societal context in which the reforms must take place, and the likely impact and implications of increasing the demands of reservist service in the context. Against this background, it is perhaps unsurprising that the new Army Reserve has struggled to recruit to target, and to retain reservists once they have joined. If it is to do so, then it must recognise and address the unique status of reservist soldiers in the civil-military nexus, and the particular pressures

that are placed on them by the “iron triangle” of greedy institutions in which they are located. More generous incentives for reserve service are important. However, it is crucial that these are not understood in simple financial or transactional terms. Indeed, if the pressures of the iron triangle are to be properly addressed and ameliorated, then it will require a more considered and sustained programme of engagement with and support for the families and employers of reservists. In essence, and following our earlier analysis, we believe that the “civil” component of the civil-military relationship for reservists needs to be taken more seriously, and incorporated more fully and comprehensively into the FR2020 package as a whole. We recognise that such measures may blunt some of the cost savings of the reforms. However, we believe they are necessary if change is to be successfully implemented. We also believe that, if the armed forces are asking more of their reservist personnel, they have a duty to ensure that those personnel are properly supported and compensated for their service. This is an assumption that underpins the UK’s Armed Forces Covenant. We believe it should underpin the FR2020 programme too.

The UK’s experience in implementing the FR2020 is indicative of wider themes of civil-military relations, in Britain and across Europe and other comparator countries too. In particular, it suggests that domestic political and social influences have become increasingly assertive features of military organisation. It is striking that the FR2020 programme has been driven in large part by a domestic political unwillingness to spend more on defence, and the organisational change and adaptation that has become necessary as a consequence. At the same time, the implementation of these reforms, while taking place against a sound strategic and military organisational logic, has been conditioned in practice by a series of obstacles deriving from the wider social context. This in turn suggests that, if defence policy is to remain sustainable and legitimate, it needs to take society more seriously. It cannot simply be enough to view defence in narrow strategic, institutional or doctrinal terms. It is, instead, closely integrated with – and ultimately dependent on – the social context of which it is a part.

## Notes

1. SDSR 2015 proposes a consolidated figure of 35,000 for the expanded reserve force (HM Government 2015, p. 33).
2. Even this figure seems ambitious, with FR2020 noting the TA’s active trained strength could be as low as 14,000 (UK Ministry of Defence 2013a, pp. 14, 15).
3. See also, Mallinson 2014, pp. 111–113.
4. And indeed many non-western ones too. See, for example, Weitz (2007, p. vii).

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