



FIFTY THOUSAND DEFENCE CIVIL SERVANTS, FOUR SHIPS AT SEA: THE MOD'S OPERATING MODEL FAILURE

Delivery of the Defence Strategy is only as good as the Operating Model behind it



THE SITUATION

On 2 March 2026, a UK air base in Cyprus came under drone attack. Britain could not immediately send a destroyer. HMS Dragon eventually sailed on 10 March, days after an 11-ship French fleet was already in position.

The Centre for European Policy Analysis called it a national embarrassment. Commentators declared a scandal. Politicians demanded answers.

The answer they will reach for is money. It is the wrong answer.

The right answer is structural. Britain's defence strategy is sound on paper.

The Ministry of Defence, the organisation responsible for translating that strategy into fighting capability, is not structured to deliver it.

And in a threat environment that has shifted from Cold War submarines to kamikaze drones in the space of a decade, an organisation that cannot align its operating model to its strategy is an organisation that will always be preparing for the last threat, not the next one.



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THE NUMBERS TELL THE STORY

The facts, as reported by security analyst James Fennell MBE in CEPA's Europe's Edge journal, are difficult to read.

Of the Royal Navy's 13 destroyers and frigates, only around four are estimated to be at sea.

Of five attack submarines, reportedly only one is operational.

New ships sit alongside, uncrewed, awaiting trained manpower and funding.

The MoD employs 50,000 civil servants. More than at any point in its history. The Navy numbers just 20,000 personnel, excluding the Royal Marines.

50,000 civil servants. 20,000 sailors. Four ships at sea. This is not a resourcing problem. This is an operating model problem.

Those numbers are not a coincidence. They are the output of an organisation optimised for process, policy, and political responsiveness, not for generating and sustaining fighting capability. As one defence industry commentator observed, the sailors became the minority stakeholder in their own service.

But the Royal Navy is the visible symptom. The Ministry of Defence is the structural cause.

WHAT HAS GONE WRONG?

Joann Robertson, Head of Supply Chain Transformation at Babcock International, identified the structural mechanics precisely in her response to Fennell's analysis: "What James describes is the consequence of abandoning any coherent operating model. Complexity filled the vacuum left when institutional clarity was surrendered to leadership short-termism."

Military officers rotate every two years, long enough to inherit problems, rarely long enough to own solutions. Civil servants, never in genuine decision-making roles, manage the business on process systems and call it digital transformation. The result is enormous activity with diffuse accountability for outcomes.

The decision-making failure, Robertson argues, runs deeper than poor choices: clear responsibilities and accountabilities were never established in the MoD's unified structure.

This is the operating model diagnosis. Not bad leadership. Not insufficient funding. A structure in which no one is durably accountable for long-term capability decisions, because the organisation was never designed around that accountability.

"You cannot regenerate fighting power from an organisation never designed to own long-term capability decisions." — Joann Robertson, Babcock International

Fennell traces this to 1964, when the Admiralty, which had owned British naval strategy and capability since the 17th century, was dissolved into the new civilian MoD.

The operational logic of defence was subordinated to administrative governance.

The institution that had generated fighting capability for three centuries was replaced by a structure optimised for managing political relationships.

It has never been recovered.

THROUGH LIFE CAPABILITY MANAGEMENT

Robertson identifies one of the most significant yet least discussed structural failures in recent MoD history: the abandonment of Through Life Capability Management (TLCM).

TLCM was the mechanism designed to anchor long-term capability decisions within short-term financial windows, precisely the instrument needed to prevent the drift that has hollowed out operational readiness across all three services. Its abandonment was, as Robertson notes, "heralded as a quick win."

In operating model terms, TLCM was the accountability mechanism that linked strategic intent to capability planning and resource allocation over time. Without it, capability decisions fall into the gaps between rotating officers, each managing a two-year horizon, with no institutional owner for the decade-long view.

The Strategic Defence Review cycle compounded this.

It gave politicians a mechanism to reset defence strategy faster than capability could ever be built.

When decision-makers rotate every two years and accountability mechanisms are dismantled, the only horizon that is ever truly owned is tomorrow.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN OPERATING MODEL DESIGN IS SKIPPED?

A Defence Strategy Is Only as Good as the Operating Model Behind It

The Cyprus crisis is illustrative of a deeper problem: Britain's defence strategy resets with each political cycle, but the MoD's operating model never does. The result is an organisation that is always configured for a previous version of the strategy and a previous version of the threat.

Consider the trajectory of the threat. The Cold War demanded anti-submarine frigates, air defence destroyers, and sophisticated minehunters optimised for peer naval confrontation in the North Atlantic. The 1990s demanded logistics ships, humanitarian platforms, and patrol vessels for small wars and interventions. Today, UK sovereign territory can be put under drone attack with no conventional warning and no conventional response threshold.

Each of those shifts required not just different equipment, but a fundamentally different capability configuration — different skills, different doctrine, different industrial partnerships, different support infrastructure. In operating model terms: a different purpose, structure, people, process, and technology alignment.

The MoD has no structured methodology for making those transitions. Defence reviews reset strategy. They do not redesign the operating model required to deliver it. The gap between the two is where capability goes to die and where the threat environment moves on while the organisation is still reconfiguring for the last version of the plan.

The shift from mine countermeasures to drone defence is not just a procurement question. It requires reconsidering where capability sits across all three services, how joint doctrine is developed and owned, how the industrial base is configured, and how the workforce is trained and retained. None of that can be driven through a budget line or a review cycle. **It requires operating model design — structured, accountable, and sustained through political change.**

SIXTY YEARS OF ACCUMULATED DRIFT

How does an organisation arrive at four ships at sea and an inability to respond to an attack on its own territory? Not through a single catastrophic decision, but through the slow, compounding misalignment between what an organisation says it exists to do and how it is actually structured to function.

What followed the 1964 MoD restructure was a textbook case of operating model erosion:

- **Strategic clarity replaced by recurring Defence Reviews**, each resetting the entire premise of defence faster than capability could respond
- **Capability investment driven by short-term political priorities** — counter-terrorism, humanitarian intervention, "Global Britain" — rather than long-term defence requirements
- **Accountability mechanisms like TLCM were dismantled as efficiency wins**, removing institutional ownership of long-term decisions
- **The industrial base hollowed out as specialist expertise migrated or disappeared**, leaving no capacity to regenerate quickly when threats change
- **Workforce structure inverted**: 50,000 civil servants managing the process; 20,000 naval personnel unable to crew the ships that exist
- **Decision authority never clearly established across the three services**, creating gaps no one owns and duplication no one resolves

In operating model terms: purpose, structure, people, process, and accountability became fundamentally misaligned across six decades.

No single review fixed it because no single review named it correctly. They kept adjusting the budget.

Nobody redesigned the operating model.

THE FORWARD-LOOKING CASE: ONE STANDARD, THREE SERVICES

The failure case is established. The immediate questions are what good looks like and what the MoD must do differently.

Britain's defence strategy requires the Royal Navy, the British Army, and the Royal Air Force to operate as a coherent joint force.

In practice, each service manages its own capability planning, doctrine development, workforce strategy, and transformation governance in different ways to different standards, with no common methodology for making, owning, and adapting operating model decisions over time.

The consequences are predictable. Capability gaps emerge at the joints between services.

Joint doctrine lags behind joint operations. Transformation programmes in one service create dependencies and disruptions in another that neither has visibility of.

When the threat changes from submarine to drone, from conventional to hybrid, from single-domain to multi-domain, there is no common framework for how all three services adapt their operating models in a coherent, coordinated way.

A defence strategy that requires joint-force coherence, delivered by three services with no common operating model standard, is a strategy that cannot be executed.

A COHERENT, CO-ORDINATED METHOD FOR JOINT-FORCES

This is the case for OMDDMS®, the Operating Model Design Delivery Management Standard, as the common methodology across all three services and the MoD centre.

Not because all three services should operate identically. They should not. The Navy's operating model requirements differ fundamentally from those of the Army and the RAF. But the methodology by which each service designs its operating model, makes capability trade-offs, governs transitions, and aligns with the joint defence strategy should be consistent.

Common language. Common accountability structures. Common governance discipline for decisions that have cross-service consequences.

A shared OMDDMS® standard would deliver concrete, structural benefits:

- **Delivers a coherent process to ensure the Defence Strategy is translated into capability** requirements across all three services, so when strategy changes, the operating model implications are understood jointly, not in isolation
- **Structured accountability for long-term capability decisions** that survives officer rotations and review cycles, the institutional memory that TLMC's abandonment destroyed
- **A methodology for managing cross-service dependencies in transformation**, so a capability shift in the RAF does not create an unplanned gap in joint air defence that no one owns
- **A shared language for operating model design between military officers and civil servants**, closing the accountability gap that Robertson identifies between those who rotate and those who manage the process
- **A repeatable, structured approach to adapting the operating model when the threat changes** from minehunters to drone defence, from conventional deterrence to grey-zone operations rather than waiting for a defence review to reset strategy and a decade to erode capability

A COHERENT, CO-ORDINATED METHOD FOR JOINT-FORCES

That last point is the most strategically significant.

Britain's defence strategy will continue to evolve as threats evolve.

The question is not whether the operating model needs to adapt, it does, continuously, but whether the MoD has the methodology to drive that adaptation in a structured, accountable way that does not destroy existing capability in the process of building new capability.

Currently, it does not. **OMDDMS® is that methodology.**

WHAT THE MOD ACTUALLY NEEDS

Fennell asks whether the MoD has the leadership or organisational capacity to reverse the rot. Robertson sharpens this: it is not primarily a leadership failure; it is a structural one.

We would sharpen it further: it is a methodology failure.

The MoD does not need another Defence Review. It does not need more consultants layered over a broken operating model. It needs internal teams across all three services and the civil service, equipped with a recognised standard for designing, delivering, and managing operating models through change.

The MoD does not have a people problem. It has an operating model design problem, and there is now a standard built to solve it.

OMDDMS® Foundation and Practitioner certification builds exactly that capability. It is the missing methodology, the structured, accountable approach to operating model design, that the MoD dismantled in 1964 and has attempted to replace with successive reviews ever since.

THIS IS NOT A DEFENCE SPECIFIC PROBLEM

The MoD's story will be immediately familiar to anyone who has led or lived through a major transformation in a large, complex organisation.

Governance structures multiply. Review processes proliferate. Headcount concentrates in administrative functions while frontline capability atrophies. Accountability for long-term outcomes becomes diffuse. Individual decisions appear reasonable in isolation. The cumulative effect is an organisation that can no longer do the thing it exists to do.

This is what operating model failure looks like: not a sudden collapse, but a slow structural drift that becomes visible only when the organisation is tested under real conditions. For the MoD, that test came on 2 March 2026.

THE QUESTION THIS CRISIS SHOULD PROMPT

The Cyprus incident will generate months of political commentary. There will be reviews, reports, and spending commitments. Most will focus on procurement timelines, headcount, and budget lines.

Very few will focus on operating model design.

If you work in defence, central government, healthcare, or any large organisation navigating complex change, the question this crisis should prompt is not whether it could happen to you. It almost certainly already is, in some form.

The question is: **do you have the methodology to see it, name it, and fix it before it becomes your equivalent of four ships at sea and a Permanent Under Secretary to answer to?**

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SOURCES

James Fennell MBE, "The Royal Navy: On Course for National Embarrassment," Centre for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), March 2026.

Commentary by Joann Robertson, Defence Analyst, LinkedIn, March 2026.

OPERATING MODEL DESIGN IS A DISCIPLINE.

TREAT IT LIKE ONE.

Operating model design isn't taught in project management courses. It's not covered in change management certification, yet it is the critical skill that determines whether the transformation succeeds or fails.

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