

Review

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Time for honest defence. Review of Thomas-Durell Young. 2017. Anatomy of post-communist European defence institutions: the mirage of military modernity

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“Words are easy, but actions are what matters. And for its own protection, Europe - and you know this, everybody knows this, everybody has to know this - Europe must do more.”

Donald Trump

Macmillan Online Dictionary defines reform as ‘a change that is intended to correct a situation that is wrong or unfair, or make a system work more effectively’. One of the historical case studies to apprehend military reforms could be the establishment of the first Roman professional army by Emperor Augustus. The reform replaced the concept of temporary armies by introducing standing forces consisting of 28 legions (5,500 men in each). Cavalry was similarly reinforced by a number of auxiliaries. Standing forces therefore amounted to a total strength of approximately 300,000 men. The success of reform was built on enticing volunteers and keeping soldiers loyal by increasing wages, introducing veterans’ pensions and dropping the importance of nobility privileges in promotion. One of the takeaways from this case is the clarity of the reform’s objectives. It is therefore a paradox that the specifics of current European defence sector reforms are even excessively complicated in the formulation of objectives and evaluation.

The enduring pressure from the US to European allies for increasing military spending and Russian revisionism to reassert influence in the post-Soviet space are two critical aspects to reassess and refresh European military reforms. Moreover, the last changes in the security environment convinced even European states that are most avert to military action that the time to sheathe swords is over. The importance of credible military deterrence is one among the top priorities in the agendas of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and its member states. It is probably the first time since the end of the Cold War that existing qualitative capability gaps are not only recognised by most of European allies but also addressed in military reform programmes. Military reforms in post-Soviet countries can be compared with the experience of riding a roller coaster in an amusement park. They turned into western orbit and took up active roles in international operations within NATO; 4 of them are currently hosting troops of NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence.

It would be fair to start a review of Thomas-Durell Young’s book by saying that from a military practitioner’s point of view, many of the negative assessments seemed outrageous. During my reading, I was sunk in contemplation and the argumentation sometimes felt out of touch. It was difficult to accept some baseless statements. In my understanding, it means that the book reached the objective to disassociate from traditional declarative assessment of reforms and rethink achievements more critically.

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The author however rightly provided a series of relevant examples and figures: 30 flying hours per year to train pilots and structuring of few thousand troops into several brigades and battalions does not sound a convincing option to ensure the quality of military capabilities (p. 3). It is important to emphasise that defence institutions are effective only if they are able to generate capabilities, provide qualitative training and sustain the organisational structure of armed forces.

Thomas-Durell Young's assessments pretend to structure a better understanding (p. 5) about reforms in the context of a communist legacy in defence institutions and the efficiency of efforts to facilitate transformational processes. Therefore, key questions (p. 5) are addressed in this book: (1) what is the current state of the institutional capabilities? (2) what are the impediments to create new or reform existing legacy institutions in accordance with Western democratic defence governance concepts; what might be considered to be effective and least useful reform techniques? (4) how well did policies and organisational practices of NATO and its member nations perform in supporting the reforms? and (5) which policies, concepts, assumptions and logic would need to change both in Western and Eastern capitals in order to facilitate reforms in a timely manner?

The book begins with a description of the basic institutional and conceptual characteristics as well as the philosophy of command in defence institutions and armed forces with a communist legacy at the end of the Cold War. The author puts a commendable effort in trying to differentiate them into three groups: (1) Soviet; (2) Warsaw Pact and (3) Yugoslav (p. 14). It is arguable indeed that such a distinction can potentially bring about a better understanding of defence institutional reforms in these countries. However, the differences are too complex and the systems far too incomparable for the analysis not to end up in even more confusion.

Thomas-Durell Young's research goes on to describe a Western approach towards the 'new partners' in Central and Eastern Europe. The new 'security orphans' (p. 43) were mentally ready to become part of the Western defence and security community, and the West was ready to accept new aspirants under a common umbrella. However, the formulation of a common policy and strategy towards new security arrangements was and arguably is still in a thick fog (p. 44).

The main focus of this book is to describe the current status of institutional developments in the former Soviet, Warsaw Pact and Yugoslavian republics. Western practices were generally exported with limited analysis as to the scope of the needed reforms. Therefore, realities have been underestimated, impeding changes in conceptual thinking, organisational structures and governance models (p. 144). It is no surprise that only limited success and meagre results were brought over the last twenty-five years, since reforms predominantly focused on technical solutions using training at tactical levels. It did not make significant changes in policy and management and sent a chilling message to Western and Eastern defence policy decision makers: the 'one-size-fits-all' approach (p. 183) did not work.

In ensuing chapters, the Western response and approach to reforms as well as policy guidance and managerial practices are analysed and provided in a critical light. The author's colourful description of necessity to have 'institutional brains' is emphasised as an illustration of a weak ability on the part of civilian leaders to sustain armed forces over time (p. 185). It is important to emphasise that the lack of organisational reforms and defence institution building was due to the lack of national-level policy ownership and a decentralised implementation pattern on the Western side (p. 186). Expertise in defence policy development, planning and force management was not easily and readily available. The Western development priorities would have required skills among officers that were not available at the time, and this engendered an imbalance in civil–military relations and caused policy challenges to design new approaches and programmes (p. 191). Therefore, it leads to observe that the formulation of support and assistance policies from the Western side was not comprehensive enough due to ineffective abilities to organise mission analysis, conduct planning and execute strategy (p. 202). Bridging managerial gaps and determining new methods of management are direly needed.

The book ends summarizing specific recommendations for policy changes. The conclusions of the research highlight inert organisations, missed opportunities, a collection of expertise islands and difficulties to come to conceptual terms with important management responsibilities (p. 203). The author remains in the spirit of the book when he goes on to emphasise that 'low-hanging fruits' of reform are

privileged and all 'good reasons' (p. 204) to delay transformation are put forward. The author calls for 'honest defence' and emphasises that turbulence remains a defining characteristic of the global order (p. 214). Reforming defence institutions remains necessary in order to maintain the relevance of the military and to achieve credible deterrence effects. Probably, the main conclusion is that decisive reforms might be implemented if the political context is effectively addressed and relevant management and framework concepts are adopted and fine-tuned.

This is a significant reading for many defence professionals to supplement their understanding of reform processes in Central and Eastern European defence institutions. It is doubtful that this reading might change attitudes towards legacy transformational processes, but it definitely has an eye-opening effect.