

EVIDENCE PAPER AND POLICY PROPOSAL

GUARDIANS, NOT ENFORCERS

A Civilian-Led Home Resilience and Responsible Deployment Compact for the United Kingdom

Military personnel are people with families and a wide range of skills. Their purpose should be protection: defence against genuine threats, lawful support to civilian authorities, and service to life - never treatment as weapons, political theatre, or a substitute for properly resourced civil institutions.

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United Kingdom focus | Global comparative evidence

Abstract

This paper evaluates a proposal to reorient the United Kingdom's Armed Forces toward a guardian role: a stronger presumption that personnel should be based near home and family; a stricter test for overseas military action; and a larger, clearly governed contribution to domestic resilience, emergency response, specialist armed protection, and mutual training with civilian services. The central conclusion is qualified but supportive. The UK already has a lawful mechanism - Military Aid to the Civil Authorities (MACA) - that can deliver much of this vision. However, the evidence does not support routine military policing, routine military staffing of prisons, or a complete withdrawal from collective defence and peacekeeping. The most defensible model preserves police and civilian primacy, uses military weapons domestically only as an exception, protects service families, values the full range of military skills, and subjects both overseas and domestic deployment to necessity, proportionality, legality, oversight, and a defined exit.

Evidence status. The paper distinguishes observed evidence from a proposed global counterfactual. Current conflict, displacement, spending, family-separation, operational and legal facts are observed. The claim that a universal guardian doctrine would produce a safer world is a reasoned scenario, not an experimentally observed fact. Its likely benefits and its principal risk - exploitation by an aggressor who does not share the doctrine - are therefore assessed openly.

Executive summary

Finding	Evidence-led conclusion
People, not weapons	UK doctrine identifies Defence skills in planning, intelligence, communications, cyber, logistics, engineering, medicine, science, transport and emergency infrastructure. Combat is only one part of military capability. [4]
Civilian primacy	MACA already requires a civil request and ministerial authority in normal cases. Civil responders retain primacy; personnel remain under military command and law. [4]
Armed incidents	The police do have specially selected and accredited firearms officers. Military assistance may be justified when danger, scale or specialist capability exceeds civil capacity, but it should support - not displace - police command. [4][9]
Weapons are exceptional	JDP 02 states that armed military personnel in MACA operations will always be an exception. Service personnel ordinarily have only the arrest powers of a citizen. [4]
Families carry the burden	In 2025, 23% of Service families lived apart during the working week, 31% experienced more than three months' separation, and personnel reporting more than three months' separation had returned to 44%. [13]
Foreign action can create danger	The Iraq Inquiry found that peaceful options had not been exhausted and recorded pre-war warnings that military action would heighten the terrorist threat. Research in Afghanistan found local civilian casualties caused by international forces increased later insurgent violence,

Finding	Evidence-led conclusion
	while finding no equivalent effect in Iraq. [17][18]
But withdrawal is not a complete policy	Collective defence, territorial deterrence, evacuation, consent-based assistance and adequately mandated peacekeeping can protect life. Research finds well-resourced UN peacekeeping can reduce civilian killings. [21][22][23]
Prisons require a firewall	European standards require prisons to remain a civilian public service separate from military and police institutions. Defence support should therefore be confined to emergency logistics, engineering, medical, CBRN or perimeter capability, not routine custody or rehabilitation. [25] [26]

Recommended policy in one sentence

Adopt a Home Guardian Compact: keep the police and other civil services in command of civilian functions; make military support rapid but tightly bounded when life, safety or national resilience genuinely requires it; apply a stricter lawful-purpose test to overseas deployments; and treat personnel and their families as human beings whose skills, time, health and dignity must not be consumed without necessity.

1. The proposition: guardianship rather than enforcement

The moral starting point is simple. A uniform does not turn a person into an object. Service personnel are citizens who accept unusual obligations, restrictions and risks. They are partners, parents, children, friends and neighbours. The Armed Forces Covenant already expresses a national promise of fairness and respect to those who serve or have served and to their families. [15] A security policy that values their dignity should ask not merely whether they can be used, but whether the task is necessary, lawful, proportionate, matched to their training and worth the cost to them and their families.

A guardian is not passive. Guardians can be highly capable, disciplined and, when unavoidable, forceful. The difference is purpose and constraint. Enforcement starts with an order and asks how to compel compliance. Guardianship starts with people and asks what is required to protect life, freedom, safety and the rule of law. Force remains available against a genuine threat, but it is a controlled means rather than an institutional identity.

This paper therefore interprets 'bring our military home' as a strategic presumption, not an absolute geographical rule. The UK should reduce elective, weakly justified and open-ended overseas commitments; protect family stability; and devote more capability to homeland resilience. It should still defend the UK and allies against armed attack, meet lawful collective-defence duties, evacuate people in danger, support consent-based humanitarian operations and participate in properly mandated

peacekeeping. A blanket retreat could expose other families to aggression and could make Britain less safe.

Core principles

- Human dignity: service personnel, civil responders, suspects, prisoners, victims and foreign civilians are all human beings whose lives and rights matter.
- Civilian primacy: elected government and lawful civilian authorities decide the purpose; police, fire, health and prison professionals retain command of their statutory functions.
- Protection before coercion: prevention, communication, evacuation, medical care and de-escalation are attempted whenever the situation permits.
- Capability matched to need: Defence supplies a defined effect that the civil authority cannot provide at the necessary speed, scale or safety.
- Necessity and proportionality: force is never justified by status, insult, disobedience alone or institutional pride; it must respond to an actual lawful need.
- Family and personnel welfare: deployment decisions include predictable rotation, recovery, mental-health provision and an explicit family-impact assessment.
- No mission creep: every task has a written scope, command arrangement, review date and exit condition.
- Reciprocal learning: police and civil services teach civilian law, de-escalation, safeguarding and evidence; Defence teaches planning, logistics, engineering, CBRN, communications and operations in hazardous environments.

2. What the world looks like now

The contemporary baseline is not peaceful. UCDP recorded 65 state-based conflicts in 2025 - the highest number in its series beginning in 1946 - including eight interstate conflicts and about 153,600 state-based conflict fatalities. [1] SIPRI estimated world military expenditure at US\$2.887 trillion in 2025, the eleventh consecutive annual rise. [2] UNHCR reported 117.8 million forcibly displaced people at the end of 2025; the figure remained vast even after falling from the end-2024 total. [3]

These numbers do not prove that armed forces themselves cause war. Some spending deters attack; some deployments protect people; and aggressors, armed groups and authoritarian governments retain responsibility for their choices. The data do show that a world organised heavily around military competition has not delivered general human security. They justify testing a different organising principle.

A universal guardian counterfactual

Dimension	Measured status quo	Guardian scenario	Evidence / uncertainty
Purpose	Frequent preparation for state competition, expeditionary action and coercion.	Territorial and collective defence; civilian protection; disaster response; consent-based peace support.	Likely changes incentives, but cannot remove aggression or civil war.
Overseas force	Varies widely; some actions lack clear end states or generate civilian harm.	Force only for self-defence, collective defence, valid consent or a lawful international mandate, with a civilian-harm and exit test.	Iraq and Afghanistan evidence supports stronger restraint; effects are conflict-specific. [17][18]
Domestic role	Ranges globally from civilian support to routine military policing.	Civil authorities lead; military provides specialist or surge support only for a written, time-limited task.	Military-policing studies find little safety benefit in studied settings. [19][20]
Peace operations	Underfunded, uneven and sometimes absent.	More personnel and capability assigned to lawful, accountable protection and peacekeeping.	Adequately staffed UN missions have been associated with fewer civilian killings. [21]
Families	Long, repeated separation is treated as an operational externality.	Family stability becomes an explicit readiness and deployment outcome.	UK survey evidence shows substantial separation and mobility burdens. [13][14]
Main danger	Arms racing, miscalculation, proxy war and retaliation.	An aggressor may exploit restraint or non-reciprocity.	Requires credible defence, alliances and verification - not unilateral disarmament.

The counterfactual is therefore not 'no military'. It is 'military capability governed by protective purpose'. If adopted universally and credibly, it would be expected to reduce discretionary interventions, occupation-related grievance, civilian harm and family separation, while increasing disaster response and peace-support capacity. If adopted by one state while an aggressor rejects it, the benefits could be reversed. The doctrine must therefore preserve collective defence, readiness and the ability to stop serious harm.

3. Foreign intervention, fear and hostility

What the evidence supports

Foreign military action can produce fear and hostility through civilian casualties, displacement, humiliation, occupation, damaged infrastructure, uncertainty and propaganda. The effect is not automatic, but it is foreseeable. The Iraq Inquiry concluded that the UK joined the 2003 invasion before peaceful options had been exhausted, that the threat was not imminent, that consequences were underestimated and that post-conflict planning was wholly inadequate. It also recorded Joint Intelligence Committee warnings that military action would heighten the terrorist threat to Western interests and intensify anti-Western sentiment. [17]

Condra and Shapiro's district-level study found that, in Afghanistan, a typical incident involving civilian casualties caused by international forces was followed by approximately one additional violent incident in an average-sized district over the next six weeks and increased violence over a longer period. The authors did not find the same reaction in Iraq, demonstrating why the paper must reject the absolute claim that every intervention produces the same response. [18]

The responsible conclusion is narrower and stronger: any proposed intervention must treat fear, civilian harm, retaliation, recruitment and institutional collapse as security costs, not collateral public-relations issues. If those risks cannot be mitigated and the political end state cannot be explained, military action is unlikely to be a protective policy.

When overseas presence can still be guardianship

International presence is not always interference. A state may ask for assistance; an ally may be attacked; the UN Security Council may authorise action; civilians may need evacuation; or a peace agreement may need protection. NATO Article 5 recognises collective self-defence, while UN Charter Article 51 preserves individual and collective self-defence after armed attack. [22][23] Research on UN peacekeeping has found that larger deployments of military and police peacekeepers were associated with materially fewer civilian killings in studied civil wars. [21]

A guardian doctrine therefore judges the mission by law, consent, necessity, conduct, accountability and exit - not merely by whether the personnel are physically abroad.

Proposed Responsible Overseas Deployment Test

Test	Minimum question
Lawful authority	Identify the exact basis: defence of the UK, collective self-defence, valid host-state consent, evacuation authority, or a lawful international mandate.
Necessity	Show that diplomacy, inspection, sanctions, mediation, policing, evacuation or other credible non-force options cannot meet the urgent protective need.
Protective purpose	Define the people, territory or lawful order being protected. Regime change, prestige, punishment or vague influence are insufficient purposes.
Civilian-harm forecast	Publish a redacted assessment of casualties, displacement, infrastructure loss, retaliation, radicalisation and regional spillover, including uncertainty.
Achievable strategy	State the political end, military contribution, resource requirement, partners, exit conditions and plausible adverse scenarios.
Personnel and family impact	Set rotation, maximum separation, recovery time, welfare, injury, bereavement and family-support arrangements before approval.
Democratic authority	Require a Commons vote before sustained hostilities where operational urgency permits; otherwise require prompt retrospective approval and periodic renewal.

Test	Minimum question
Independent review	Require civilian-harm reporting, legal review, after-action evidence, whistleblower protection and a published lessons process.

4. The UK already has the beginning of this model

Military Aid to the Civil Authorities is the existing route for Defence resources to support government departments and civil authorities in the UK and Crown Dependencies. JDP 02 states that the civil authorities lead planning, response and recovery; Defence supplies niche capabilities, general support and expertise when requested. Normal requests require ministerial authority, while local commanders may provide immediate assistance where life is at risk, distress must be alleviated or significant property protected. [4]

The doctrine supplies four safeguards that should anchor reform. First, tasks must be clear and other options considered. Second, civil responders retain primacy. Third, Service personnel remain under military command and must act within the law. Fourth, using armed military personnel for a MACA operation is always an exception. [4]

This corrects two common misunderstandings. UK police are not wholly untrained for armed danger: Authorised Firearms Officers are selected, trained, accredited and authorised by a chief officer, and armed policing has its own command and legal framework. [9] Conversely, military training does not confer general police authority: JDP 02 states that Service personnel ordinarily have only the arrest powers of an ordinary citizen. [4] The case for military support is therefore about additional safety, scale or specialist capability - not replacing policing.

Demonstrated domestic contribution

During the COVID-19 response, Defence supported testing, vaccination, hospitals, ambulance services, logistics, planning, medical evacuation and scientific work. In January 2022 more than 1,000 personnel were already supporting the pandemic response, and the MOD reported more than 440 Operation Rescript tasks since March 2020. [12] JDP 02 also records engineering, communications, medical, CBRN, imagery, planning and emergency infrastructure capabilities. [4] This is practical evidence that personnel are not merely a weapon system.

5. A Home Guardian Compact for domestic safety

Institutional roles

Service	Civil function	Command rule	Defence interface
Police	Law enforcement, negotiation, arrest, investigation, evidence, public order and community legitimacy.	Lead for armed policing and counter-terrorism incidents.	Request Defence when capability, scale, specialist hazard or protection requirement exceeds civil capacity.
Armed Forces	Specialist protection, EOD, CBRN, engineering, logistics, communications, intelligence support, transport, medical and surge capacity.	Remain under military command while supporting the civil incident objective.	No routine patrol, investigation, punishment or general arrest role; weapons exceptional.
Fire and rescue	Rescue, fire suppression, hazardous materials, technical response and public safety.	Lead within fire and rescue competence.	Use Defence for specialist engineering, CBRN, aviation, access, communications or sustained logistics.
Ambulance / NHS	Clinical triage, treatment, transport, public health and patient governance.	Clinical authority stays with qualified health services.	Military medics and general personnel work only within competence and agreed clinical supervision.
Prison and probation	Safe custody, rehabilitation, release planning and lawful use of force.	Remain a civilian justice service, separate from military and police administration.	Defence limited to genuine emergency support: logistics, engineering, medicine, CBRN, communications or external protection.

Activation protocol

Stage	Required safeguard
1. Civil request	A chief officer, lead government department, devolved administration or authorised coordinating group defines the protective effect required.
2. Capability assessment	A joint liaison team records why mutual aid, specialist police, commercial or voluntary capability is unavailable, unsafe, too slow or insufficient in scale.
3. Written task	The authorisation names the objective, geography, duration, command relationships, permitted equipment, data access, force rules and exit condition.
4. Minimum force	Unarmed and enabling capabilities are considered first. Armed deployment requires a separate recorded necessity assessment.
5. Civil incident lead	Police, fire, health or prison command retains its statutory function. Military commanders retain command of their personnel and may refuse an unsafe or unlawful task.
6. Review and withdrawal	The authorisation is reviewed at fixed intervals and ends when the civil authority can safely resume the task.
7. Public account	After operational sensitivity passes, publish purpose, duration, numbers, cost, force used, complaints, injuries, lessons and any rights impact.

Proportionality and the meaning of 'tested'

Personnel should not be placed in manufactured confrontation, provoked for political display, humiliated, or treated as suspicious merely because they are military. That is consistent with dignity. It cannot mean that readiness, legality or conduct go untested. Controlled exercises, qualification, independent scrutiny, courts and after-action review are protections for personnel and the public. The proper rule is: no needless provocation; no unlawful order; no status-based challenge; but continuous professional testing and accountability.

For force, the governing standard should be necessity, proportionality, legality, accountability and de-escalation. Article 2 protects life and permits potentially lethal force only where no more than absolutely necessary. Police guidance likewise requires force to be proportionate, lawful and necessary. [7][8][10] A military support order must not weaken those standards.

6. Mutual training without militarising civil services

JDP 02 already provides for joint resilience education and exercises with civil authorities and records military attendance at the College of Policing's multi-agency incident command training. [4] The Home Guardian Compact should expand this into a reciprocal curriculum rather than a one-way transfer of military tactics.

- Police to Defence: civilian law, arrest boundaries, evidence preservation, procedural justice, negotiation, de-escalation, safeguarding, domestic abuse, mental-health crisis, equality duties, body-worn evidence and community impact.
- Defence to police and emergency services: operational planning, logistics, communications under failure, hazardous-environment work, CBRN awareness, mapping, engineering reconnaissance, command resilience and sustained operations.
- Fire and rescue to all partners: hazard zoning, rescue priorities, breathing-apparatus environments, building collapse, wildfire, water rescue and responder safety.
- Ambulance and NHS to all partners: clinical governance, triage, consent, confidentiality, mental-health care, infection control and limits of competence.
- HMPPS and probation to relevant personnel: custody law, rehabilitation, trauma, de-escalation, suicide prevention, release planning and why a prison is not a battlefield.
- Joint learning: JESIP principles, shared situational awareness, joint decision-making, communication, co-location and post-incident learning.

The objective is not to turn police into soldiers or soldiers into police. It is to let each profession understand the others well enough to cooperate safely while retaining its own legal and ethical identity.

7. Correctional facilities: support without takeover

Prisons are a particularly important boundary. The European Prison Rules state that prisons should be the responsibility of public authorities separate from military, police and criminal-investigation services, and that people in prison must be treated with humanity and respect for inherent dignity. [25] The UN Nelson Mandela Rules similarly centre dignity, safety, professional staffing and continuing training. [26]

The prison service may need emergency help, and its staff deserve safety. HMPPS training already covers care in custody, de-escalation, control and restraint. [27] Defence could support a severe prison emergency with communications, transport, engineering, medical capacity, CBRN response, emergency accommodation, planning or external site protection. It should not become the routine custodial workforce, direct rehabilitation, impose military discipline, or be used to bypass recruitment and safe staffing. Routine substitution would risk mission creep and weaken both prison professionalism and military dignity.

8. Families, dignity and reintegration

Family impact is a readiness issue

The 2025 Families Continuous Attitude Survey found that 23% of Service families lived apart during the working week, 31% had experienced more than three months of separation in the previous year, and 17% had moved at least three times for Service reasons in five years. The comparable personnel survey reported 44% of personnel separated from family for more than three months. [13] The Armed Forces Families Strategy recognises the effects of mobility, deployment and separation on healthcare, education, housing, childcare and partners' careers. [14]

Some separation is inherent in maritime service, training, deterrence and genuine defence. It should nevertheless be measured as a cost. Every sustained operation should include a Family Impact Statement covering expected separation, school moves, partner employment, childcare, communication, post-deployment leave, injury, bereavement and support. Commands should report actual against planned separation and explain avoidable excess.

Reintegration should be support, not suspicion

Police guidance can help serving personnel understand civilian law and conflict resolution, but the police should not own reintegration. The Career Transition Partnership and Defence Transition Services already provide the appropriate foundation for employment and wider adjustment support. [16] Reintegration should begin before discharge and include families, credential recognition, health, housing, finance, education, identity change and voluntary community connection.

- Create an optional six-month Public Service Fellowship for personnel approaching transition, with placements in emergency planning, engineering, NHS logistics, fire resilience, cyber defence, local government and approved charities.
- Translate military qualifications into civilian credentials automatically wherever standards match, with funded bridging training where they do not.
- Let police, fire, ambulance, prison and local-authority professionals provide orientation and mentoring, while Defence reciprocates with resilience skills.
- Guarantee protected health and family support through the transition period, including neurodiversity, disability and trauma-informed provision.
- Do not presume that every veteran is damaged, dangerous or suited only to security work. Skills, interests and identity are individual.

9. Risks, objections and safeguards

Risk	Failure mode	Safeguard
Civil militarisation	Routine presence normalises soldiers in law enforcement and may reduce public trust.	Civil primacy; weapons exceptional; no routine patrols; time limits; published authorisations; independent review.
Mission creep	A temporary emergency role becomes a substitute for civil funding or staffing.	Capability-gap test, charging transparency, maximum duration, civil recovery plan and parliamentary reporting.
Wrong skill assumption	Combat training is mistaken for competence in policing, medicine, fire or custody.	Task-specific accreditation, civil supervision and explicit competence boundaries.
Aggressor exploits restraint	Reduced overseas posture weakens deterrence or abandons allies.	Maintain territorial readiness, NATO commitments, intelligence, reserves, collective defence and lawful rapid deployment.
Personnel overuse	Domestic tasks are added to existing operational tempo, worsening family separation.	Family Impact Statements, force-generation limits, protected recovery and readiness reporting.
Political misuse	Government deploys troops to signal strength, suppress protest or bypass accountability.	Statutory purpose limits, parliamentary notification, judicial review, human-rights assessment and whistleblower protection.
Prison takeover	Military personnel become a routine	Civilian-service firewall based on European Prison Rule 71;

Risk	Failure mode	Safeguard
	custodial force.	emergency technical support only.
Data and surveillance creep	Military systems collect civilian information beyond the task.	Purpose limitation, deletion deadlines, audit logs, civil data controller and independent information-rights oversight.

Evidence from outside the UK reinforces caution. Studies of militarised policing in the United States and a military-policing intervention in Cali, Colombia found little evidence of the claimed crime or safety benefits in those settings, with reputational or post-intervention concerns. [19][20] These studies do not directly predict UK MACA operations, which have a different legal structure, but they strongly argue against routine military policing.

10. Implementation: a 24-month path

Period	Action
0-3 months	Cabinet Office and MOD establish a civilian-chaired Home Guardian Commission including devolved administrations, police, fire, ambulance, NHS, HMPPS, local resilience forums, service families, veterans, rights experts and independent inspectors.
3-6 months	Publish a capability map and draft revised MACA guidance: activation thresholds, armed-support rule, family-impact method, prison firewall, data rules, reporting and a common task-authorisation form.
6-12 months	Pilot reciprocal training in three varied regions; exercise one firearms/terrorism support scenario, one flood or wildfire, one infrastructure failure and one mass-casualty event.
12-18 months	Launch regional Guardian Support Rosters using existing structures, not a new police force. Begin voluntary public-service transition fellowships and qualification mapping.
18-24 months	Independent evaluation and parliamentary report. Amend doctrine and, where needed, legislate for deployment approval, transparency, rights safeguards and family-impact reporting.

Evaluation measures

Outcome	Example measures
Protection	Lives saved; injuries; evacuation time; infrastructure restored; responder safety; response time to approved MACA request.
Restraint	Armed deployments; force incidents; complaints; arrests attempted by Service personnel; task extensions; civilian-harm events.
Civil capacity	Whether support restored civil capability or displaced investment and staffing; time to hand back the task.
Personnel	Separation days, recovery time, retention, wellbeing, injury, task fit, refusal of unsafe/unlawful

Outcome	Example measures
	orders and family satisfaction.
Trust and rights	Public trust, equality impacts, data retention, judicial challenges, independent findings and community feedback.
Readiness and value	Defence readiness preserved, skills maintained, cost compared with alternatives, lessons implemented and interoperability performance.

11. Conclusion

The military should not be seen or used as a weapon detached from the people who serve. The evidence shows a force rich in engineering, medical, logistical, scientific, technical, planning and protective capability. It also shows real family costs, genuine risks from poorly designed foreign action, and serious dangers in routine military policing or prison administration.

The answer is neither permanent expeditionary warfare nor withdrawal from responsibility. It is guardianship under law: defend the country and allies from genuine attack; support peace where authority and protection are real; bring personnel home from missions that lack necessity or an achievable end; and make their broad skills available to civil society through a disciplined, requested and temporary support system.

Police should be able to police: communicate, investigate, de-escalate, arrest lawfully and maintain legitimacy. Fire, ambulance, health and prison services should retain their professional functions. When a danger exceeds those capabilities, the Armed Forces should be able to stand behind them quickly and safely. That arrangement respects every service. It treats soldiers as people, civil responders as experts, and the public - including suspects, prisoners and people abroad - as members of one human community.

Security fails when institutional ego becomes more important than the life it exists to protect. A guardian state keeps strength, but gives strength a purpose: care, safety, freedom, law and the minimum harm necessary to defend them.

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Method note

Sources were selected for relevance and authority: UK statutes and doctrine, official statistics and policy, international legal standards, independent public inquiries, and peer-reviewed research. Foreign policing studies are used as cautionary evidence rather than direct estimates for the UK. The universal guardian scenario is explicitly treated as a counterfactual. This paper is a policy proposal, not legal advice and not an operational order.