The Ammerdown Group brings together practitioners and academics in search of a new vision for the future of our common peace and security. The group includes participants from Conciliation Resources, Campaign Against Arms Trade, International Alert, Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, Oxford Research Group, Quaker Peace and Social Witness, Saferworld, and Three Faiths Forum, as well as independent practitioners, and academics from the universities of Bradford, Coventry, Kent, Leeds Beckett and Oxford Brookes.

The Ammerdown Group takes its name from the Ammerdown Centre, a retreat and conference centre in Somerset, where the group meets together. The views expressed in this document do not necessarily represent those of the Ammerdown Centre’s staff or trustees, but the Ammerdown Centre fully supports the work of the Ammerdown Group as part of its charitable commitment to promoting justice, peace and reconciliation and to facilitating free and open discussion on these issues.

The Ammerdown Group has produced this publication to stimulate debate about the UK’s approach to security. The group welcomes feedback on the paper and is interested in working with others to promote further discussion about the security challenges of the 21st century. For more information, visit rethinkingsecurity.org.uk

The Ammerdown Group, 2016.

This report may be distributed freely for non-commercial purposes. Please cite as: Ammerdown Group. (2016). Rethinking Security: A discussion paper.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International Licence. To view a copy of the licence, visit: http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Ammerdown Group brings together peacebuilding practitioners and academics concerned about the effects of geopolitics on the security of people worldwide. The group is seeking a public conversation in search of a new vision for peace and security. This paper is one contribution. It explores the security strategies of Western states, particularly the UK, and proposes principles for a more effective approach in the common interest. We welcome responses from all quarters.

To download the complete paper with references please visit rethinkingsecurity.org.uk

A failing response to growing insecurity

People across the world face growing insecurity. Violent conflict is spreading and intensifying, economic inequality is widening, and the natural ecology on which human life depends is in jeopardy. The world’s poorest people bear the brunt, while those in rich countries are also increasingly affected.

The preferred responses of Western states are manifestly not working and have often made matters worse. The UK’s primary response has been to ‘project power’, joining the US and other Western states in a series of military interventions and restricting civil liberties.

The expectation that this approach would shape the global security environment for the better has not been borne out. It has exacerbated insecurity, allowed global problems to worsen, and added to the harm already suffered in countries targeted for intervention.

These trends are daunting, but a future that better provides for the security of all is not beyond our collective wit and means, provided that we are willing to change course.

An outmoded narrative

The UK and its NATO allies account for half of the world’s military spending, so the deficiency in Western responses to insecurity is not a lack of military capability. The problem lies in the dominant narrative about what security means, whom it should benefit, and how it is achieved. That narrative:

1. privileges UK national security as a supreme imperative, to which the needs of others may be subordinated, rather than recognises security as a common right, to which all have equal claim;
2. aims to advance ‘national interests’ defined by the political establishment, including corporate business interests and UK ‘world power’ status, and so dissociates the practice of security from the needs of people in their communities;
3. assumes a short-term outlook and presents physical threats as the main risks, largely overlooking the long-term drivers of insecurity; and
4. proposes to respond by extending control over the strategic environment, achieved principally through offensive military capabilities, a superpower alliance, and restrictions on civil liberties.
A failing strategy

The UK’s National Security Strategy (2015) is premised on the same, dominant narrative. It presumes the supremacy of the UK’s interests; it is preoccupied with economic and political power; it takes a near-term view and overlooks the systemic drivers of insecurity; and it marginalises non-military responses. It also ignores deeply harmful actions by Western powers from colonial times to the present day. In addition, the strategy does not define ‘security’, identify the principles by which it may be built and sustained, or set out a ‘road map’ against which to measure progress.

Within these constraints, the strategy proposes that the principal threats to the UK’s interests are: competing nations, particularly Russia; transnational insurgent groups, particularly ISIS; and ‘instability’, particularly in Africa, the Middle East, and the Far East. The proposed responses are broadly the same as those adopted in the past, which have been largely ineffective even on their own terms. The threat of atrocities by non-state groups has grown; the stand-off between NATO and Russia has worsened; and interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria have added to regional and global volatility.

At the same time, chronic causes of insecurity have persisted largely unchecked. Fatalities from violent conflict have risen threefold since 2008 to a post-Cold War high of 180,000 in 2014. Human security is deteriorating as the effects of our ecological crisis are felt across the world. Refugee flows are on the increase. Economic inequalities have grown more extreme. Global progress towards greater democratisation and freedom seen in the 2000s is also now being reversed. These problems receive scant attention in the UK’s published security strategy.

A reluctance to adapt

The UK strategy, which is allied to that of the US, has changed little since the atrocities of 11 September 2001. At the end of the 2000s, new leadership in the UK and US encouraged an expansion in strategic emphasis to include long-term problems such as climate change, scarcity, poverty, and nuclear proliferation. This move met resistance from the political establishment in both countries. A number of factors appear to impede a productive change of approach:

1. the dominance of the narrative by a small and exclusive group, composed of a social elite, to the general exclusion of other voices;

2. the disproportionate influence of business interests on the policymaking process, particularly the preference shown to the arms industry;

3. institutional inertia and political calculations inclined to dismiss alternative approaches.

4. the preference for values associated with hegemonic masculinity, which reduces the discourse to a calculus of threats and coercive responses, at the expense of a comprehensive conversation about the social and ecological conditions of security; and

5. a discourse abstracted from its real-life impacts, as experienced by people around the world who are affected by the decisions of Western states.

Nonetheless, the prevailing security narrative has met with growing public scepticism. Support for Western military interventions since 9/11 has waned among the British and wider European public, raising the threshold for the use of coercive military power. In certain respects, the public appears to be recognising the shortcomings of the prevailing approach.
Security for the many

The proper goal of security should be grounded in the wellbeing of people in their social and ecological context, rather than the interests of a nation state as determined by its elite. This first requires a collective effort to build the conditions of security over the long-term. A commitment to the common good should guide the approach, recognising that security is a shared responsibility and its practice should be negotiated democratically; when security is the preserve of a few, it will not serve the many and is likely to fail everyone.

Principled engagement

This paper proposes four cardinal principles of security as a practice:

1. **Security as a freedom.** Security may be understood as a shared freedom from fear and want, and the freedom to live in dignity. It implies social and ecological health rather than the absence of risk.

2. **Security as a common right.** A commitment to commonality is imperative; security should not, and usually cannot, be gained for one group of people at others’ expense. Accordingly, security rests on solidarity rather than dominance – in standing with others, not over them.

3. **Security as a patient practice.** Security grows or withers according to how inclusive and just society is, and how socially and ecologically responsible we are. It cannot be coerced into being.

4. **Security as a shared responsibility.** Security is a common responsibility; its challenges belong to all of us. The continuing deterioration of security worldwide testifies against entrusting our common wellbeing to a self-selected group of powerful states.

Some European states show that similar commitments can shape policy for general benefit. In contrast, the UK’s heavily militarised approach is incongruous in context. Compared with the rest of the European Union, for example, no state spends as much on its military, exports as many arms, or has joined US-sponsored military interventions as often as the UK.

A shift in priorities

The primary concern of Western states is to prevent further atrocities by non-state groups. That risk is real, yet cannot be addressed in isolation from the profound security challenges arising from how we organise our societies. The following, which are now marginalised in the UK’s security strategy, deserve priority attention:

1. **Scarcity and climate change.** Depletion of the Earth’s natural resources is already aggravating tensions, entrenching violent conflicts, and displacing ever more people, leading to further conflict. The impact of the changing climate on vital resources, soil productivity, sea levels and flooding are predicted to lead to widespread scarcity, mass migration and conflict. The UN has said that people displaced by climate change will ‘test global solidarity in ways that are radically different from anything experienced before’.

2. **Inequality.** Half of the world’s wealth is now enjoyed by 1% of the population, while two billion people subsist on the equivalent of $2 or less per day. The injustice of growing inequality is feeding multiple violent conflicts worldwide. It has also been instrumental in the rise of ISIS from the humanitarian crisis precipitated by the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

3. **Militarism.** The world’s most powerful states are among those that have normalised a militarist outlook. These states are the world’s largest military spenders and arms exporters; they show no
sign of renouncing nuclear weapons; and they have initiated some of the most devastating wars of this century, frequently bending or ignoring international law to do so.

4. **Violent conflict.** When Western states have intervened in violent conflict, their preferred means have often been coercive. In contrast, ‘conflict transformation’ approaches, which support local people to transform conflict with a view to just and inclusive settlements, still receive little support.

**Practicable alternatives**

It has been suggested that the UK sees itself as a ‘warrior nation’, and that without extensive offensive military capabilities it would be left ‘naked and undefended’ in a dangerous world. This paper argues that the UK’s approach, which relies on a rate of military spending that far exceeds the European average, provides no appreciable advantage in response to the risks that the government has prioritised.

*The risk of a military crisis involving Russia*

The government believes that Russia is unlikely to attack a NATO country using conventional means but could try to undermine neighbouring states covertly. In response, senior figures in the British defence establishment have called for new military investments.

NATO currently outspends Russia ten times over on its military, with the US accounting for most of the difference. It is not plausible that the UK’s level of military spending is a factor in Russia’s calculations, or that British conventional forces, however large, could deter Russia from using covert tactics against NATO states.

Russia and NATO share responsibility for their rivalry in a self-serving competition for global influence. Both have legitimate complaints against each other, but rather than seek a frank dialogue with a view to détente, each party’s rhetoric has sought to use its grievances as a fulcrum for its own advantage. First steps towards improving relations might include **toning down the rhetoric, deploying diplomacy in preventive mode, and looking for confidence-building measures.** Intermediaries have been working to these ends and could be better supported.

*The threat posed by ISIS*

A US-led alliance, including the UK, aims to ‘destroy’ ISIS militarily. In addition, the UK government has extended surveillance of Muslim communities and challenged them to conform to its own list of ‘British values’.

It is widely acknowledged that ISIS cannot be defeated by air attack. It is doubtful that a ground offensive would be any more successful and it could bolster ISIS’ long-term strategy.

There is no blueprint solution to the problem of ISIS in the short term. In the longer term, effective responses will have to pay heed to the factors that have allowed the movement to flourish. These include the devastation of the Iraq war and its aftermath; a humanitarian crisis that has prompted fighters to join the movement for economic reasons; widespread anger at the West’s actions in the region; and the Wahhabist ideology of the group’s leadership, incubated in Saudi Arabia, a Western ally.

Western states must **critically examine their own role** in generating the conditions for insurgent movements to flourish – much Western policy in the Middle East continues to be self-serving and counterproductive. In the UK, the government should **preserve spaces for non-violent dissent,** however unpalatable, and **heed warnings about the counter-productive effects of much of its domestic ‘counter-terror’ policy.** It could also do more to **listen and respond to the longstanding grievances** of minority groups, particularly those relating to social and economic inequality.
‘Instability’

Commentators in the defence establishment have proposed that coercive military power, with or without UN approval, can supplement the UK’s diplomatic and aid effort in conditions of regional instability. Similar arguments have been used to justify British military action in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria.

NATO’s war over Kosovo in 1999 is widely lauded as a model military intervention, in which coercive power was both necessary for, and effective in, reversing a humanitarian crisis. This paper argues that the Kosovo war is a poor example to follow. NATO’s action was tactically successful in thwarting a bellicose Serb government, but by exacerbating the humanitarian crisis and leaving the dispute over Kosovo unresolved, the war was a strategic failure. It also had an intolerable impact on the people of Serbia; it broke and thus weakened international law; and it was extremely expensive. Viable alternatives to war were available long before the NATO action, even at the eleventh hour, but NATO’s leadership, particularly the UK and US, preferred overwhelming military power. The episode encouraged the British establishment to apply the same principles in Iraq, with disastrous results.

In other respects, the UK has taken a progressive approach to humanitarian crises; it has been the largest contributor in Europe to the UN’s Syrian refugee appeal, for example. The UK’s Building Stability Overseas Strategy is also forward-looking, defining ‘stability’ in terms of inclusive democracy, equitable access to vital resources, and the effective management of conflict. This approach could be brought closer to the heart of the official security discourse, as it was in 2008 when the Brown government published its security strategy, Security in an interdependent world.

A ‘common home’

As Pope Francis has suggested, we share a ‘common home’, which it is our common responsibility to keep. Seen from this perspective, the practice of ‘security’ cannot be limited to neutralising threats, but must encompass a commitment to build peace with justice. It has to evolve away from exercising control over world affairs towards facilitating genuinely democratic participation in them. Security discourse will need to become more reflexive and inclusive if it is to do more than merely legitimate a dysfunctional status quo.

The most successful societies are better able, as Gregory Raymond has put it, to ‘recast conflicts of interest as problems to be solved, not bouts to be won’. People’s movements and civil society initiatives of many kinds, the approaches of some nation states, and some of the work of regional and international institutions, further demonstrate that there is nothing inevitable about the current cycles of injustice and violence that are jeopardising the security of everyone. The UK can play a more effective part, too, by displacing the desire to ‘punch above its weight’ with a commitment to security as a common right for everyone.

May 2016
More responses to Rethinking Security...

‘This publication offers a thought-provoking analysis of current security policy at a crucial time when the status quo is not working. These insights from peacebuilding and security experts will undoubtedly provide a valuable perspective and enrich this much-needed debate.’

Miqdaad Versi, Assistant Secretary General, Muslim Council of Great Britain

‘Does security policy actually protect citizens from the insecurities spreading through an interdependent and fast-changing world? Have “humanitarian” interventions in developing countries helped the poor and vulnerable people they claim to protect, or have they instead sown the seeds of further violence and insecurity? This pathbreaking paper compellingly demonstrates that current UK and European security policies largely fail these tests. Even more important, it provides a roadmap towards an alternative and less narrowly state-centric approach.’

Dr. Robin Luckham, Emeritus Fellow, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex

‘The Ammerdown Group presents a genuine re-think of security that proposes a healing process rather than short-term fixes.’

Mohammad Ehsan Zia, Former Minister of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, Afghanistan
Across the world, people face growing insecurity as a consequence of a global crisis with ecological, economic, and political dimensions. The principal response of the world’s most powerful states – dominance of their environment by means of extended military and surveillance powers – has been making matters worse.

This discussion paper asks why and how the current approach has been failing, and what kind of alternative could be more productive in the long term. It argues that a more secure future for all depends on finding new answers to fundamental questions: what does ‘security’ mean, whom should it benefit, how is it achieved, and whose responsibility is it?

*The Ammerdown Group brings together peacebuilding practitioners and academics seeking a public conversation in search of a new vision for peace and security.*

rethinkingsecurity.org.uk

‘The West’s self-defeating approach to security since the end of the Cold War is examined in detail throughout this important work. The paper spells out the case for this country to stand with those who need our help and not stand over them. As someone who believes that our armed forces should be designed to meet the real threats of climate change, scarcity, inequality and for conflict resolution, I found the study compelling.’

Major General Patrick Cordingley (ret’d)

‘This profoundly useful document constitutes essential reading for every minister, every military planner, every official and every supplier concerned with British defence and security policy. Why? Because if the findings in this report are not digested and applied, this country will continue to waste money on defence projects that simply do not – and cannot – address current challenges and future threats.’

Scilla Elworthy, founder, Oxford Research Group and Peace Direct

‘As the world continues to grapple with spreading insecurity, and few of the conventional responses seem to really work, a debate on the very definition of security is long overdue. In presenting a new definition of global security, one that is based on a broad social and ecological perspective rather than a narrow politico-military perspective, this paper makes an important contribution to this crucial debate.’

Ambassador Jawed Ludin, former Deputy Foreign Minister of Afghanistan


ISBN 978-1-909390-45-4