

Parliamentary briefing: shortcomings in UK national security policy

Introduction

Building security in a globalised world is one of the most complex responsibilities of government. Meeting the security needs of people in the UK and overseas is a daunting challenge.

Rethinking Security is a network of peace and security experts, concerned about the impacts of geopolitics on current policy, and proposing an alternative vision of security¹. This Rethinking Security briefing highlights shortcomings in the UK's approach to security since the end of the Cold War, as exemplified by the current UK National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review (NSS & SDSR 2015). It makes the case for a fundamental rethink of security policy, and asks parliamentarians to press for wider debate about the range of options available. It also calls for greater public engagement in policy-making.

Shortcomings in current UK national security policy

NSS & SDSR 2015 does not 1) define security; 2) identify the principles by which it may be built; or 3) set out a 'road map' against which to measure progress.

More generally, policy is premised on four unexamined assumptions, namely that security can be assured by:

- Seeking political and economic power for the UK at the expense of security for people elsewhere²;
- Advancing ill-defined 'national interests', often disconnected from the security needs of people and communities;
- Prioritising short-term threats over the long-term systemic causes of insecurity, such as climate change and scarcity, economic inequality, social and political marginalisation, the global arms trade and violent conflict;
- Extending control over the strategic environment, achieved principally through offensive military capabilities, a superpower alliance and restrictions on civil liberties.

The policy responses that flow from these assumptions are often inadequate. Evidence of shortcomings is growing³, amid serious concerns⁴ about the effectiveness of current strategy. The threat of atrocities from non-state groups has increased; the stand-off between NATO and Russia has worsened, and interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria have not improved security either in the countries concerned or the wider world⁵. Chronic causes of insecurity – such as climate stress, exclusion and injustice – persist largely unchecked.

While NSS & SDSR 2015 was developed with significant cross-government participation, opportunities for meaningful public engagement were limited⁶. The consultation process largely

¹ For further information, see www.rethinkingsecurity.org.uk.

² See, for example, UK policy towards Saudi Arabia and Yemen: <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/saudi-arabia-arms-sales-yemen-war-uk-government-us-donald-trump-obama-aid-a7643066.html>

³ <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/the-report/>

⁴ <https://rusi.org/publication/rusi-books/wars-peace-british-military-operations-1991>

⁵ For further elaboration of this analysis, see <https://rethinkingsecurity.org.uk/portfolio/policy-resources/>

⁶ The deadline for receipt of public responses to the online consultation process was two weeks before the strategy was published, making it highly unlikely that they influenced the outcome.

privileged the voices of those who reinforce the current consensus, marginalising those who question the status quo⁷.

Six key issues that government should reflect on and clarify

How is security defined? What are its core principles? What is its relationship with ‘the national interest’ and how is that defined? What constitutes success and how is it measured?

Who are the intended beneficiaries of UK security policy? Who benefits in practice? How could policy better assure security for people living both in the UK and elsewhere in the world?

What are the greatest risks to the security of these beneficiaries in the short and long term? How do these risks compare with those identified in the National Security Strategy? How do the effects of systemic drivers of insecurity – such as climate change and inequality – rank next to risks such as international terrorism and a resurgent Russia, and why?

What approaches and resources are needed to build security and respond effectively to insecurity? Does current strategy and financial investment strike the right balance between UK military power and non-military actions, including peacebuilding approaches and long-term systemic change?

What kinds of strategic alliances does the UK need to prioritise, to build long-term security? What values and interests are they intended to foster? How productive/counter-productive for security is a grand-strategic alliance with the US? What are the implications of Brexit for the strategic reconfiguration of the UK’s security alliances?

How can security policy become more democratic? How are beneficiaries’ views about security taken into account in strategy development and implementation? How can oversight be strengthened?

Current scrutiny of security policy

The Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy (JCNSS) is the primary forum for parliamentary scrutiny of government policy. In its first report on NSS & SDSR 2015⁸, it highlighted some of the shortcomings identified above, but regrettably, its recommendations to government on these points have gone largely unheeded⁹. The Defence, Foreign Affairs and International Development Select Committees also scrutinise implementation of policy but rarely examine overarching strategy. There is very limited scrutiny of the operation of the National Security Council.

For consideration by political parties

Rethinking Security asks political parties to consider:

- To what extent current party manifestos engage with the six key issues and what opportunities exist to strengthen party policy on security and defence;
- How best to encourage the next government to reflect on and respond to the six key issues above, including as part of future scrutiny of security and defence policy.

⁷ See “Exclusion: security as an elite project” in Rethinking Security: a discussion paper:

<https://rethinkingsecurityorguk.files.wordpress.com/2016/10/rethinking-security-a-discussion-paper.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt201617/jtselect/jtnatsec/153/15302.htm>

⁹ In particular, recommendations 1 and 5 relating respectively to the process and substantive focus of policy formulation.