

Rethinking Security Parliamentary Briefing

Reframing UK national security in a global context

Why do we need a fresh approach to UK security strategy?

Building security in a globalised world has become one of the most complex responsibilities of government. It requires efforts to ensure the safety and wellbeing of citizens at home, as well as a firm commitment to international peace and security, based on the rule of law.

Among the lessons of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya are that wars, once started, are difficult to end, and their devastation precipitates further insecurity and violence. As these wars have consumed lives, resources, and political attention, the underlying drivers of our contemporary insecurity have persisted largely unchecked, particularly economic inequality, climate change and the political marginalisation of disaffected populations. Simultaneously, the UK's military and economic influence is diminishing, relative to other countries, as global power relations continue to shift.

The UK has yet to adapt to this changing context. Effective adaptation will depend on a wide-reaching public and political discussion about the future of the UK's approach. This briefing draws on the expertise of the peace and security field¹ to offer a contribution to that discussion.

Review the approach to strategy

The UK National Security Strategy (NSS) should, for the first time: define 'security' explicitly; articulate the assumptions, principles and values underpinning its policy choices; identify its intended beneficiaries; and explain the intended outcomes of strategy.

Since security depends ultimately on the ability of all people to meet their basic needs and enjoy their rights, as well as on the pursuit of equitable and cooperative international relationships, the strategy should make these goals explicit.

The strategic review process ought to incorporate meaningful public consultation, with a particular emphasis on the participation of groups facing the greatest insecurity at home and abroad.

Prioritise cross-governmental strategies that address long-term, systemic causes of insecurity

The underlying drivers of global insecurity, including economic inequality, climate change and marginalisation, ought to be top-tier priorities for the UK's approach. The strategy could commit to evaluating all relevant Government departments for their effectiveness in meeting these systemic security challenges.

Departmental actions

Foreign and Commonwealth Office

With the long-term aim of reorienting the UK's security alliances on the basis of shared commitments to peace and human rights, the UK could:

- Scale back and end alliances of convenience with repressive, aggressive, or corrupt states, beginning with a ban on arms exports to such states.

¹ Rethinking Security is a network of organisations, academics and practitioners who share a common concern about current national security policy. The network includes Campaign Against Arms Trade, CND, Conciliation Resources, Peace Direct, Quaker Peace & Social Witness, Oxford Research Group and Saferworld. For more information, see www.rethinkingsecurity.org.uk.

- Restore the UK's diplomatic capabilities, starting with a reversal of cuts to the FCO budget.
- Prioritise political and economic strategies to address enduring violent conflict and provide increased support for peacebuilding, with a special focus on the Middle East and North Africa.
- Champion constructive engagement in multilateral forums, and promote a thawing of relationships between permanent members on the UN Security Council.
- End the role of British Overseas Territories in facilitating tax evasion.

Department for International Development

With the long-term aim of contributing to the human security of the most vulnerable, the UK should pursue the vision of building peaceful, just and inclusive societies, as set out in Goal 16 of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and:

- Ensure that aid tackles the drivers of insecurity, with a focus on upholding fundamental human rights, fostering inclusive governance, enabling access to justice and building economic equality.
- Scale up investment in a rapid transition to ultra-low carbon economies in the Global South.
- Reverse recent trends to expand the definition of aid to include more 'hard security' measures.
- Prohibit the diversion of development assistance from the needs of the most vulnerable towards objectives such as UK trade and counter-terrorism, which should be funded in other ways.

Ministry of Defence

With the long-term aim of rebalancing the UK's military posture and reducing military spending (already the highest in Europe alongside France), the UK could:

- Work to harmonise military spending with the European context, and release policymakers from the non-binding, arbitrary NATO target of 2% of GDP.
- Commission an inquiry into the feasibility of rebalancing military forces, away from a focus on expeditionary capabilities and towards territorial defence, as is common elsewhere in Europe.
- Transition to all-adult armed forces by raising the enlistment age to 18; use the financial savings of a drawdown of expeditionary capabilities to improve pay and housing for personnel; and commit explicitly to a duty of care for personnel after discharge.
- Reduce nuclear dangers by advocating and facilitating multilateral nuclear disarmament initiatives, including the nuclear ban treaty, and open the renewal of Trident to review.
- Scale back and end subsidies for the arms industry and establish a Defence Diversification Agency to support companies seeking to transition from military to civil production.

Home Office

With the long-term aim of reducing the social and political marginalisation of vulnerable communities, the UK could:

- Acknowledge the complex causes of radicalisation and atrocities; recognise the diversity of Muslim communities in particular and consult more broadly with them; and rebalance the tone of official rhetoric away from suspicion and exclusion towards respect and inclusion.
- Commission an independent review of the Prevent duty and strategy, in close consultation with the most affected communities.

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