

Media FAQs

What's the problem?

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 approaches 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.

What can be done about it?

We don't have all the answers, but we think a new approach should have five priorities.

1. Meeting people's basic needs
2. Tackling problems such as inequality and climate change
3. Protecting human rights and the rule of law
4. Improving gender and racial equality and enabling inclusion
5. Supporting peacebuilding, diplomacy and international co-operation.

What difference will Brexit make?

The impact of Brexit is likely to be complicated.

By distancing the UK from other European countries, Brexit could oblige the UK to accept that it is no longer a leading military power. Despite post-Brexit hopes of forging stronger military links with the US, the US has lost confidence in the British armed forces since their defeats in Afghanistan and Iraq – the US security strategy barely mentions the UK at all. Seen from this perspective, Brexit could force a rethink about the principles leading the UK's approach to security. The change could open opportunities to act more independently of the US, strengthen the United Nations, opt in to the nuclear ban treaty, tackle the root causes of insecurity like climate change and poverty, and scale back UK military spending, which is now the highest in Europe.

On the other hand, Brexit could increase insecurity across Europe. For all its many faults, the European Union has greatly reduced the risk of war between its members while also helping to guarantee certain fundamental rights for its citizens. In these respects, a weaker Union could diminish the security of Europeans in the longer term, particularly if other states also choose to leave. In addition, Brexit is already straining the peace process in Northern Ireland, which remains fragile, and it will also remove the UK – a major arms exporter – from European controls on the arms trade.

Isn't a new approach to security simply a pacifist ideal?

No – it's a recognition of the insecurity that people face at home and abroad. Our common security depends on individuals, communities, and countries being willing to work together so that everyone can meet their basic needs. That does mean relying less on armed forces, not using them to project power abroad, and not trying to profit from war through the arms trade. It means tackling the underlying drivers of insecurity like economic inequality, political exclusion, and climate change. And it means developing peacebuilding approaches to handling conflicts before they erupt into violence, and during and after any violence also.

But surely it's too utopian for the real world?

One of the problems of some 'utopian' visions is that they expect people to behave well, as if human nature will be better in the future than it is now. Rethinking the meaning of 'security' does not mean wishing away problems, however, but dealing better with the ones we have. We are not proposing a utopian blueprint, but a set of principles that could guide a positive shift in the way major choices are made in future, so that the fundamental needs of people and planet are met more effectively and more humanely.

We're not so badly off, so why fix what's not broken?

After the end of the Cold War, more countries became more democratic, fewer people were killed in war, refugee flows abated, the human rights framework was strengthened, and some progress was made to support the very poorest people out of abject poverty. All this was a step forward for peace and security.

Since the turn of the millennium, these gains have stalled or suffered reversals, while the greatest threats to future security—climate change, economic inequality, and political exclusion, for example—have continued unchecked. Meanwhile, the national security strategies of the most powerful states, including the UK, have relied heavily on coercive capabilities like 'expeditionary' armed forces, the use of which has been hugely destructive and increased insecurity worldwide.

So the case for change is both moral and practical. A business-as-usual approach is very likely to make the world less safe for all its people, and as the world becomes more interconnected, the effects of insecurity will be widely felt.

Wouldn't the UK be at risk if its armed forces were smaller?

The UK is the largest military spender in Europe and one of the largest in the world, yet the government acknowledges that the country faces no serious risk of a conventional military attack. There is no prospect of such an attack from Russia; NATO outspends Russia's military spending 12 times over.

The risk of atrocities by non-state groups is real, as shown by the Manchester and London attacks of 2017, among others, but this risk is not reduced by large armed forces. The risk of a nuclear attack is also real, but that is because a nuclear-armed UK would be a priority target in any nuclear exchange between the great powers.

So, the UK would suffer no loss to its national security from relying less on large armed forces and nuclear weapons; if anything, it could become a safer place to live.

Many jobs depend on the current approach to security - what would change mean for them?

The British armed forces employ approximately 200,000 people, and a similar number depend directly or indirectly on the UK arms industry, so certainly a large number of jobs currently depend on business as usual. But these jobs are propped up by the taxpayer. The arms trade relies increasingly on government handouts to keep going; ending these subsidies would bring financial savings that could be used to generate new jobs. The UK has huge potential as a pioneer of renewable technology, for example, and the arms industry contains many highly skilled STEM workers (science, technology, engineering, maths), whose expertise could be transferred to the renewables sector.

An 'expeditionary' military is very expensive; scaling back the armed forces would release a substantial sum, which could be used to improve education and civilian job opportunities for young people.

War and poverty have been the historical norm, so can anything really be changed?

Violence and insecurity affect the whole world, but some societies have been able to make choices that have helped them to become less violent and more peaceful than others. These societies tend to value cooperation over conflict, do not harbour ambitions of 'world power' status, and are economically more equitable.

Certainly, war is the shame of humanity, but it can be prevented and it can also be ended. Various treaties have helped to bring peace to societies wracked by violence, safeguard human rights, abolish certain weapons of mass destruction, constrain justifications for war and the way it is fought, and de-escalate tensions that could have led to catastrophe. So yes, the problems we face are severe indeed, but the history of many major gains shows that, individually and collectively, we have the wit to make better choices... if we want to.

How can abusive governments and armed groups be stopped without military force?

There is rarely a quick fix. Opportunities to end violence or abusive practices depend on many things: the unique characteristics and culture of a society, the underlying factors that drive violence, and external influences. Relying mainly on military means for political change is rarely successful and normally makes the situation worse, as interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya show. Powerful states also often manipulate an armed conflict for their own ends; much international involvement in the war in Syria is an example. They may also actively support repressive governments – UK arms sales to Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, for example, signal to these states that repression of their people has no real costs internationally.

Instead, external actors should consider carefully how their actions can help to de-escalate violence and challenge oppression, while strengthening incentives for peace and justice. This should include efforts to stem the flow of resources to abusive governments and armed groups. External actors should also support locally-led peacebuilding initiatives, which work with all parties to tackle underlying causes of conflict and require sustained support over time. Peacebuilding approaches do not always work, because no approach comes with a guarantee, but with time they can achieve more than coercive military action, and are far less harmful and costly.

Isn't it naïve to think that terrorist acts can be prevented?

There is no way to eliminate the risk of atrocities by groups determined to cause harm, but it can be reduced over time. The fanatical action of such groups flourishes where legitimate grievances against dominant power are widespread. By selling arms to Saudi Arabia for use in Yemen, ignoring widespread human rights abuses in Israel-Palestine, and marginalising minority groups at home, some British policy risks exacerbating widely-felt anger at the harmful effects of western dominance.

In addition to good policing and public vigilance, a counter-terror strategy has to make sure that currently marginalised social groups are included socially, economically and politically, at home and abroad. The conditions of a just peace, and a more equitable global economy, are the only real defence against the risk of atrocities in the long term.

What about the huge threat posed by Russia?

Under Vladimir Putin, Russia has repeatedly defied international law, not least by annexing Crimea and committing war crimes in Syria. This has led some senior political and military leaders to argue that Russia could now threaten its neighbours or even the UK. In turn, Russia has protested that NATO has extended its power unreasonably by expanding its territory right up to its border.

What's really going on is a tussle for power between Russia and the US, which has little to do with the best interests of the public in either country. But while each side is wary of the other, neither wants—or can afford—an open military confrontation. Instead, the two sides spar in rhetoric, vie for the allegiance of other countries, and manoeuvre against each other in cyberspace. This intensifies tensions and increases the risk of a serious escalation, which could happen by accident rather than design.

So, the risk is not generated by Russia alone, but by a dangerous stand-off that, so far, neither Russia nor the US has wanted to resolve.

How viable is security cooperation when the UN is deadlocked?

The UN Security Council was set up to provide for the peace and security of the world, so it is scandalous that its five Permanent Members (China, France, Russia, UK, US) are the world's largest military spenders and arms exporters, and between them have started more wars this century than any other states. The main reason for frequent deadlock at the Council is that each of these five privileged states has the power of veto over its decisions; this is anti-democratic.

Without reform of the Council, deadlock is likely to continue and states will resort to their own 'solutions' to international problems outside the framework of international law. This is in no one's interests. The bombing of Syria by France, the UK, and US in April 2018 is but one of many examples of this since the end of the Cold War.

Doesn't deterrence have a role in peace and security?

Throughout history, all kinds of societies have hoped to deter a potential aggressor by ensuring that the cost of an attack would outweigh any benefit. But this logic is also dangerous. The more that states lean on deterrence for their security and status in the world, the more that they will vie for power and the greater the risk becomes of an arms race. Then, if deterrence fails, the consequences become catastrophic.

This risk can be reduced by progressively reducing reliance on large armed forces, in concert with others. Regrettably, powerful states still rely on military force to project their power abroad, but this is not the global norm; the armed forces of most states are configured for territorial defence or peacekeeping (like most European countries), and some states are strategically neutral (like Switzerland). Almost all states worldwide do not have or want nuclear weapons; those that do are making the world more dangerous.

Doesn't the UK-US 'special relationship' bring benefits to the world?

Britain and America have frequently referred to a 'special relationship' between them, which is said to benefit the prosperity and security of their people. Some believe that the 'special relationship' helps to increase British influence in America, and that the UK helps to ensure that the US does the right thing on the world stage.

In fact, the relationship is not so special to the US, which chooses its alliances on an 'America first' basis. The US wants the UK to support American and NATO interests, but its strategy documents barely mention the UK, and its armed forces are so big that it can manage without help from the British military. Nor has the relationship helped to bring peace. Acting together, the UK and US have been responsible for disastrous wars, particularly in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya.

British service to American interests has been an impediment to a more progressive approach to security, which would involve working more closely with other states. For example, the UK could opt in to the nuclear weapons ban treaty, which now enjoys widespread support across the world, but it is still too attached to the US to do so.