

Report of Radically Rethinking Security workshop, York, December 2019

Dr Eli Schweiger (University of York)

Dr Nick Ritchie (University of York)

Dr Tom Martin (University of Sussex)

How we think about security has become more complicated and contested over the past two decades through the collision of a number of significant developments: the practices of the 'war on terror' at home and abroad since 2001; the unfolding climate crisis that appears to have finally 'arrived' in mainstream UK politics in 2019; the refugee crisis stemming from the Syrian and Libyan civil wars and other conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa; the punitive effects of the austerity programme on UK citizens' life chances after the 2007-08 global financial crisis; the 'return of geopolitics' following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014; the exponential increase of cyber threats; the resurgence of nationalism and racism following the 2016 Brexit referendum; and the global pandemic that is radically reshaping our lives at the time of writing.

The Conservative government elected in December 2019 committed to a wide-ranging 'Integrated Security, Defence and Foreign Policy Review' that "will be the deepest review of Britain's security, defence and foreign policy since the cold war", according to Prime Minister Boris Johnson ([HC Deb, 12 February 2020, c845](#)). The purpose is to "reassess the nation's place in the world" and "examine how we strengthen and prioritise our alliances, diplomacy and development" ([HL Deb, 27 January 2020, cW](#)). As with previous national security and defence reviews, the framework looks set to be based around elite understandings of the state's 'national role' rooted in a reflexive Atlanticism that conceptualises 'security' in terms of expeditionary military war-fighting, global 'influence', and sustaining a 'status' for the UK as what Prime Minister Tony Blair once described as a 'pivotal power' post-Brexit. The review may well be "the deepest" since the end of the Cold War, but, the Covid-19 pandemic notwithstanding, it will in all likelihood be set within familiar parameters that constrain how we comprehend, think about, and act in relation to 'security' from the outset.

The UK peace and security community comprising NGOs, think tanks, grass roots movements and academics has been examining and advocating for a much more radical 'rethinking' of security in the context of deep concerns with the prosecution of the 'global war on terror', the environmental crises of climate heating and ecological destruction, and the inexorable rise of socio-economic inequality as wealth continues to concentrate in the hands of a few. One important way in which this has come together was in 2014 as 'The Ammerdown Group' of UK peacebuilding and disarmament professionals, which became the Rethinking Security network in 2017. Its ambition is to shift how security is conceptualised in the UK by applying the framework of human security based on core principles of security as a freedom, as a shared responsibility, as long-term practice, and as a common right (Rigby, 2015; The Ammerdown Group, 2016).

Building on this work, we believe that it is essential to further strengthen the links between NGO, academia, policy and community groups in order to open up the resources of this community and draw on critical work done in each field. This would increase its power to effect progressive change, which is limited compared to the structures of power (political, economic, ideological) that continue to reproduce the UK's security orthodoxy.

1. Expanding the network

We think there is a major opportunity to deepen engagement across communities of NGO practitioners, sympathetic policy-makers, and academics. Moreover, we think there is an opportunity and a pressing need to collaboratively develop a research agenda on UK security based on a clear understanding of the state of the art of our knowledge and research about the UK security complex, experiences and drivers of insecurity at home and abroad, and the efficacy of alternative policy frameworks. The aim is to deepen and develop the intellectual underpinnings of an 'alternative' framework for British security policy by mobilising academic expertise and engaging with a broad range of constituencies.

With this in mind, we held an initial workshop in York in December 2019 for 20 academics and NGO experts and practitioners. This included representatives from Action on Armed Violence, Airwars, BASIC, Campaign Against Arms Trade, Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy, Conciliation Resources, Forces Watch, Gender Action for Peace & Security, Oxfam, Oxford Research Group, Rethinking Security and Saferworld.

The participants are engaged with UK security practices in different domains and in different ways, and are united by a common set of values and ideas about UK security practices. These values and ideas are based on commitments to social justice, human rights, equality, anti-racism, feminism, anti-militarism, internationalism, environmentalism and accountability. The purpose of the workshop was to further deepen the process of engagement across the three communities of NGO practitioners, policy-makers and academics as part of a wider project. This has been compounded by the ways in which the Covid-19 pandemic has collapsed categories of 'domestic' and 'international' security and highlighted the importance of health, inequality and social resilience in how we understand 'security'.

This report sets out the conclusions we have drawn from this exploratory workshop. We identify six outcomes arising from our discussions, and that set out the basis of a research agenda that can develop a robust evidence base for an alternative approach to security policy in the UK.

The proposition is that a deeper, detailed and explicit intellectual framework rooted in theory and evidence will:

1. Lend legitimacy and authority to an alternative approach to security policy.
2. Foster community-building through dialogue connecting specific policy issues to a broader, common framework.

3. Empower the community of academics, NGOs, civil society organisations, and policy-makers working for and sympathetic to a different approach to security in the UK.

The intellectual and political challenge is therefore threefold: 1) to *develop* a compelling and coherent vision of UK security practices that reflects core values in ways that go beyond aphorisms to a practical level of conceptual and empirical detail; 2) to *translate* that vision into actionable policy changes or reinforcements supported by evidence; 3) to *sell* policy changes legitimised by an overarching framework in a generally hostile media and Whitehall environment. Excellent work has already been done within the NGO, academic and policy communities, but the development of an intellectual framework that mobilises the tools and work of academia and connects a plurality of experiences of insecurity stemming from the actions and inactions of the British state needs work.

The current security policy orthodoxy

This workshop was chiefly about the first part, asking: what would an alternative UK security politics look like? Next steps are follow-on workshops with former policy-makers and shapers in Whitehall, with a broader set of academic disciplines, and with a broader set of constituencies affected by and affecting security policy understood in broad terms. The workshop discussions articulated this mainly in terms of security practices that should end as well as dominant ways of thinking about security that should be challenged, in particular:

- The UK political economy of war and violence that underpins militarism centred on participation in and support for the arms trade, corporate interests, and Middle East oil and gas supply.
- Injustices of counter-terrorism legislation in relation to human rights, civil liberties, surveillance and different ways of engaging with armed groups.
- The normalisation of permanent war under the rubric of the 'war on terror' below the public radar and the general invisibility of the UK security complex, including in mainstream media.
- The UK role in the increasingly securitised global conflict, aid and development system centred on fragile and failing states, and the securitisation of a humanitarian-peace-development nexus.
- Security-as-influence understood in terms of geopolitical and geo-economic metrics, but underpinned by a masculinised ideology of the state associated with ideas of status, strength and power.
- The multiple, overlapping and reinforcing effects of climate disaster and their subordination to dominant security paradigms of economic and military power and influence.
- Security-as-patriarchy underpinned by a particular iteration of hegemonic masculinity in the UK that intersects gender, race and the drivers and effects of nationalist populism.
- The domestic effects of austerity experienced as direct and structural violence.

- The structural harms of neo-liberal capitalism, its connections to climate disaster and the political economy of militarism.

More specifically, the workshop interrogated a default position that peace and security is most effectively achieved through the threat or use of violence, thus conflating security measures with violent measures and erasing a host of alternatives that the government could in fact mobilise. This taken-for-granted assumption underlies many current security practices, from policing and detention to international intervention. It is an exercise in selective amnesia of historical cases that show how escalating, complex and often counterproductive dynamics of violence are which often end up producing more insecurity.

Outcome#1: The workshop recognised the importance of engaging with and undertaking more comprehensive research on the complex relationships between security policy and the production of security and insecurity. First, existing analyses from across academia, NGO and policy communities into the harms caused by violent security policy approaches need to be brought together, and concretely expressed in relation to current security policy orthodoxies. Second, and crucially, work needs to identify empirical cases wherein other approaches to security policy have been taken that do not privilege violence, and that cohere with the core values of the project set out above, and which empirically demonstrate the utility and success (and also challenges) of such approaches.

2. Security as contested responsibility

The workshop discussions tended to frame security as responsibility in terms of a duty of care, which in turn requires thinking through responsibility by whom, to whom and for what. This is a discourse rooted in moral values and centred on the responsibilities of the state to those to whom it can variously inflict and alleviate harm. It is at root about the idea of the social contract between state and citizenry in terms of obligations of the state to the citizenry and accountability for actions affecting other people and societies in the name of the citizenry's well-being. It is routinely (reflexively) associated with responsibility-as-protection: to protect the citizenry and state from (direct) external harm by other actors, especially predatory states and terrorists. This is underpinned by particular cultural framings of self and other that inform conceptions of risk and threat. It is on these bases that conceptions of 'national interest' and 'national security' are understood.

What is contested are: 1) which values underpinning responsibility, such as militarism, get privileged in security discourse and practice and how they are interpreted; 2) responsibility by whom, to whom and for what in terms of protection, harm and the social contract between state and society; 3) conceptions of self and other that underpin understandings of threat and risk; 4) the role of the state as a source of security as well as insecurity; 5) who is considered to be the 'citizenry' that is being secured, and who does this marginalise and exclude.

There are multiple responses within these contestations. A number of common ideas which featured in the workshop discussions are reflected in many NGO reports, but these can often lack breadth and depth. They can lack breadth in that they often only engage with one empirical area of concern. They can lack depth in that they often rest on vague maxims such as 'anti-militarism' or 'social justice'. We all have an individual and perhaps some

broad collective sense of what these maxims mean, but an alternative framework(s) of security would enable a clear and coherent response to these five contested areas that could inform a wider approach to security across policy domains.

For example, what does a concept like 'social justice' or 'anti-militarism' mean in practice in connection to an idea of security and the role of the state? What positive and negative manifestations of 'social justice' can be evidenced as attributable to government practice? On what basis are these practices antithetical to core values? For example, how much social injustice is too much? How much is acceptable and on what basis do we know and judge? What necessary (legitimate) changes follow from such a normative, conceptual and empirical critique? What security policies would we identify as 'good'? What are the examples of best practice? Where policies/interventions exist that are deemed problematic, how would a different framework generate different answers? Or, how would a different framework differentially problematise security in a way that provides for different approaches to be taken? This reflected feedback from workshop participants that they wanted the group and its assumptions to be challenged through critical analysis as well as by bringing in a greater diversity of voices.

Answering these questions will require engagement with academia, as a great deal of analysis of these concepts in theory and practice is present in published academic work. Nevertheless, critical academic work is all too often limited by two factors. First, it tends towards 'critique', identifying the harms of existing policy, but falling short of positively engaging with alternatives. Second, and in part driven by the incentives that govern academic labour, interventions tend to be theoretical as opposed to rooted in policy engagement. The development of alternative frameworks for security must move beyond critique. The UK peace and security community and critical academic community are very good at setting out the values upon which we might wish policy to be based. Indeed, there was valuable and interesting discussion on what values might underpin an alternative approach to security policy. Yet what also emerged was a set of significant questions around how we translate these values into relevant and saleable policy frameworks, something academia in particular has often failed to do effectively.

In thinking about security as responsibility, we also see that security is a multi-layered, overlapping, intersectional set of discourses, structures, practices and policies that traverse the domestic/international boundary. The referent of security practice from the workshop discussion is typically the marginalised human experiencing, or at risk of, direct and structural harms through the actions or inactions of the UK state. The absence of those from these same marginalised communities at this workshop and similar dialogues is an area of concern and needs to be addressed.

Outcome#2: The second outcome of the workshop is therefore a need to research and engage with experiences and conceptions of security and insecurity in relation to the actions and inactions of the British state from a broad range of groups (security by whom, to whom and for what, and the role of the state as a source of security as well as insecurity). This could include categories of people such as victims of military conflict, religious organisations, parliamentarians, veterans, social movements, aid workers, refugees, immigrants, BAME organisations, youth workers, women's organisations, and business groups.

This would investigate the UK (in)security complex from the bottom up in terms of the experiences of those directly or most impacted by direct and structural harms in which the UK government is complicit, i.e. the ways in which UK government practices mitigate, produce and enable deep insecurity for a range of groups domestically and internationally and traversing that boundary. This includes, for example:

- The effects of austerity on the population's most vulnerable.
- The treatment of refugees, especially refugee children.
- The effects of war on servicemen and women and their families.
- The effect of UK violence and UK-enabled violence on people, families and communities in other countries perpetrated in the UK citizenry's name for our security benefit.

This would yield a range of perspectives on the UK security complex and power structures, and enable an intersectional analysis of overlapping security harms across gender, class, race, and geography. It is thus a research agenda rooted in the empirical experiences of (in)security caused by British policy. From there, the construction of interests, threat and risk that enables the policies and practices of harm could be understood and alternative approaches could be identified and articulated through a meaningful engagement with the lived experiences of those affected by British security policy.

3. Conditions of possibility for UK security policies and practices

Part of the process for developing alternative frameworks for UK security is also about investigating and understanding the broader **conditions of possibility** within which it makes political sense for the UK government to engage in practices that the workshop participants collectively understand to transgress core values (i.e. the actors, discourses, identities, interests, institutions, networks and structures that need to be in place in a particular configuration to enable particular security practices to occur).

Security policy making

A significant amount of discussion in the workshop concerned the processes of policy-making around UK security policy: Who is making the decisions? What assumptions are driving these actors? What are the gendered, racialised, militarised and classed assumptions that are embodied and (re)produced by these actors? On the one hand, this manifested in the workshop as a discussion around mapping, and coming to an understanding of security policy decision-making and decision-makers. On the other hand, it also raises a question of strategy about whether the ambition is to influence these key stakeholders, and/or to find new means to articulate and shape policy processes.

Put differently, where does *agency* lie in this policy space and can this agency be reshaped/redistributed? One of the interesting points that was raised in terms of critical engagement, is that, often, there might well be NGOs in the room and engaged in these conversations, but that doesn't necessarily translate into influence and the ability to shape

or change policy decisions. Where it does, this can be because the 'critical' positions being articulated chime with specific policy interests. For example, the UK is very receptive when talking critically about the arms trade of others, but not when it comes to the UK's arms sales.

Outcome#3: A third outcome was therefore the need for a comprehensive mapping of the UK military-industrial complex, or more broadly the **UK security complex**. i.e. the people, institutions, actors, networks, power structures, and discourses of the 'securitocracy' and entry points for those engaged from a broadly 'alternative' standpoint. One approach would be to investigate the *assemblages of security* that enable specific security practices, for example the deployment of nuclear weapons, selling arms to Saudi Arabia for the perpetration of war crimes in Yemen, the rise of food banks and deep food insecurity stemming from the policies of austerity. The argument here is that a deep and broad understanding of the complex practices of doing (in)security will open up ways of challenging them.

Cultures of (in)security

An important part of the *conditions of possibility* is the cultural underpinnings of mainstream (militarised) conceptions of security. This was raised in the workshop on a number of occasions in terms of class, race and gender representation in parliament, civil service, military, government, and media, and an assertion of a class-based explanation for the production and reproduction of the current UK security orthodoxy. An important component of this is the production of a particular conception of what it means to be 'Britain' (England) based on the silencing of the UK's imperial/colonial past (symbolised most recently by Windrush), and a narrative that self-identifies the UK as a 'force for good' in world politics, including through use of military violence. It was argued that this is part of the reason for the lack of diversity of voices on security issues.

This debate underpins the post-Brexit 'Integrated Security, Defence and Foreign Policy Review' that in part seeks to reproduce a particular iteration of 'Britain' and what it means to be British as a state, people, and culture in the 'Global Britain' Brexit era. However, it was noted that Brexit, together with the effects of the climate crisis, also provides an opportunity for further developing and advocating other ways of thinking about and acting in relation to UK security. Periods of contestation are periods of opportunity for other approaches as well as consolidation of the orthodoxy.

A context-sensitive approach to security policies is crucial in order to transcend a self-other imagery. Constructing the 'other' through negative attributes might be a tempting inclination, but hinders intelligent security policies because it creates distorted threat scenarios that limit the range of possible action. Workshop participants consistently highlighted the importance of illuminating the legacies of colonial practices and reflecting on current violent and unjust practices of the British government. This necessitates a move from a naive notion of the government as inherently being the security provider by rights of its sovereign status and instead interrogating whether the government is fulfilling its obligations as security provider through its actions. A comprehensive system of accountability is needed for this practice of self-reflection to become more institutionalised.

Outcome#4: Understanding the conditions of possibility for UK (in)security practices must engage with (contested) national identity conceptions that inform how we think about security, interests and actions and confront the ways in which legacies of colonial practices inform contemporary approaches to security. In part, this needs to draw on experiences of (in)security discussed above: what vision of 'Britishness' is privileged in UK security discourses? How does this then produce security practices that render some secure, and some insecure? How would alternative frameworks for conceptualising the UK's security policy challenge and transform these approaches?

4. Accountability and security

Accountability for UK security practices was a core theme, in particular around complicity in war crimes, how accountability practices are stifled by a sense of a shrinking civil society space, the securitisation of NGO programmes and funding, self-censorship caused by the Lobbying Act¹; limited public knowledge and support for alternatives in the context of little media attention and a broadly sceptical framing when alternatives are addressed; and the absence of voices of those directly experiencing direct and structural harms in which the UK government is complicit (the question of 'who is licensed to speak?').

Holding the government to account

One focus of discussions was the difficulty faced by academics, activists and NGOs in holding the government to account for the harms caused by British security policy. It was noted that there is a lack of clear research and understanding of the mechanisms and pathways through which this can occur, and a concern that claims of secrecy and national security are often invoked in order to stifle critical understanding of state practices. Nevertheless, there are instructive cases that can and should be analysed to enable an understanding of how the government can be held accountable for its security policy.

Outcome#5: The fifth outcome of the workshop discussions is therefore a need for an improved and shared understanding of the means by which the UK government is held to account for its security practices and how it responds when it is. An important starting point would be Campaign Against Arms Trade's (CAAT) experience at suing the government over its failure to take into account serious violations of international humanitarian law in relation to arms sales to Saudi Arabia. Other more mixed experiences, and cases of failures to hold the state accountable, should also be analysed, which could include the experience of the Windrush scandal and well documented problems with the Prevent programmes. Here, alongside the previously discussed mapping exercise, we can think about the 'assemblages' of accountability in terms of the set of actors and practices that can hold the UK government to account for direct and indirect harms perpetrated or ignored and limits to the process.

Democracy, civil society and security policy

Questions of accountability also manifested as an exploration of ways to enhance democratic engagement with 'security' and security policy and practice. There were a

¹ The 2014 Transparency of Lobbying, Non-party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act.

number of ways in which the 'public' and democracy were discussed in the workshop in terms of security policy-making. The general assumption was that the public are not involved in security policy decisions being taken in their name and that 'secrecy' is often invoked as a way of managing public knowledge and engagement. The perhaps more tentative assumption that often followed is that by involving the public in these processes, a more 'progressive' perspective on British security is possible or more likely. This assumption perhaps needs testing. For example:

- Is the public more sympathetic to a radical security agenda than policy-makers/shapers?
- Is democratic engagement itself a force for developing and inculcating more 'progressive' ideas such that a more democratic debate would shift opinions?
- Would 'demystifying' security policy lead the public to react to security challenges in more progressive ways?
- Would bringing in marginalised voices change security debates and practices and do 'we' (as academics and NGO practitioners) have a responsibility to open up space for this to happen?

Outcome#6: There were two primary ways in which democracy and security policy came together as tangible and potential projects. First, a Citizens' Assembly on security policy. This would engage a random yet representative sample of the UK population on security policy issues. Participants would be provided with a range of expert perspectives on contemporary threats to the UK, and how one could/should respond to them. It would then make recommendations that would have political weight to them.

Second an Alternative Security Commission or Review (drawing on the model of the 1983 Alternative Defence Commission). This would draw together experts from academic, NGO and policy communities to set out an authoritative vision for what the UK's security policy should look like. The strategic intent would be to develop a high-profile piece of credible, policy-relevant research that could shape public and elite perceptions on the underlying assumptions and policy outcomes of UK security policy. This could be supported by polling and focus groups to develop a much better sense of the public's experience and conception of security at different levels (personal, local, national, regional, global) and the values, biases, and preferences that inform them.

Conclusion

These four areas - expanding the network, security as responsibility, conditions of possibility, and accountability - generated six outcomes from the workshop that can guide the development of a research and advocacy programme to develop an alternative security framework, or frameworks. Taken together, they foreground a broad and substantive research agenda that has the opportunity to empirically and analytically develop what an alternative approach to UK security policy could and should look like. The outcomes are:

1. Engaging with and undertaking more comprehensive research on the complex effects of violence within particular contextual settings that substantiates the

necessity of an alternative security policy. This requires greater engagement with communities of academic expertise on violence, harm, risk and their practices, structures and mitigation.

2. Researching and engaging with experiences and conceptions of security and insecurity in relation to the action and inactions of the British state from a broad range of groups (security by whom, to whom and for what, and the role of the state as a source of security as well as insecurity).
3. A comprehensive mapping of the UK security complex and assemblages of security that enable specific security practices in terms of the people, institutions, actors, networks, power structures, and discourses of the 'securitocracy'.
4. Researching the contested national identity conceptions that inform how we think about security, interests and actions and confront the ways in which legacies of colonial practices inform contemporary approaches to security.
5. An improved and shared understanding of the means by which the UK government is held to account for its security practices, how it responds when it is, and the limits of accountability.
6. Researching ways to enhance democratic engagement with UK security policy and practice, for example a citizens' assembly or Alternative Security Commission or Review, and the extent to which involving the public might yield support for a more 'progressive' approach to security.

References

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