



Risk, Threat and Security

The case of the United Kingdom

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This article expresses the consensus of a private seminar series which met at intervals between May 2006 and January 2008. In addition to the authors those participating included Sir Mark Allen, Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham, Chris Donnelly, Field Marshal the Lord Inge, Tom Kremer, Lord Leach, Baroness Park of Monmouth, Douglas Slater, General Sir Rupert Smith, Professor Hew Strachan.*

The security of the United Kingdom is at risk and under threat. The mismatch between the country's military commitments and the funding of its defence moved Lords Bramall, Boyce, Craig, Guthrie and Inge – five former Chiefs of the Defence Staff – to take the unusual step of raising their concerns publicly in a House of Lords Defence debate on 22 November 2007. A public forum – the Defence Association – has also been established to investigate and articulate the crisis they identify. Security is not only a question for Chiefs of the Defence Staff. It matters to every citizen of the United Kingdom. Security is the primary function of the state, for without it there can be no state, and no rule of law. The former Chiefs of the Defence Staff have stepped outside their traditional reticence to speak on behalf of all. Anxiety about defence and security runs far and wide.

This essay addresses the bases of that anxiety: the sources of risk and threat, both overseas and at home. It argues that weaknesses at home, particularly divisions in our attitudes to our defence, contribute to turning risks into threats. It proposes that positive steps to strengthen and update our defence and security efforts involve returning to long established constitutional arrangements of the Queen in Parliament. Thus we may meet the needs of today and

tomorrow. Our proposal is not a finely detailed blueprint. It is more fundamental. It describes the operating principles and the dynamics of constitutional machinery with the necessary strength to match present threat and future risk

How to realign our defence effort to changing risks and threats is not merely a technocratic question to be answered internally by the defence and security establishments within government. Repeated assertions by ministers that all is well, that the matter is well in hand and can be safely left to them to manage in-house, no longer carry conviction.

Uncertainty

The electorate is uncertain and anxious. People feel uncertainty about military adventures overseas which have cost many lives and have pushed our armed forces to the limits. They are worried about security at home since the successful terrorist attack of 7/7, the similar attack a fortnight later which was only averted by the incompetence of its perpetrators, and the narrowly pre-empted attacks on planes in 2006. In the summer of 2007, there were also car-bomb attempts at Glasgow airport and in the West End of London. The 'war on terror' is with us now in all its ugliness.

Both current military operations and the war on terror together raise a deeper

point. Is there any longer a clear distinction between being at war and not being at war? A declaration of war is almost inconceivable today, and yet both our defence and security services are in action against active forces, abroad and at home, at this moment. The electorate sees this paradox. It also worries about the way we were committed to war, especially in Iraq, and about Washington's sway and leadership. But equally, the electorate is disturbed by an undertow of doubt about the wider muddling of political responsibilities between Westminster and Brussels. Who actually holds, or will take, responsibility for our foreign relations, for our defence, and for our security? Who – for instance – should guarantee our borders?

Such uncertainty should be of primary concern because it weakens the bond between government and the governed, which is precisely what terrorists seek to achieve and what other enemies of the United Kingdom will exploit. For this reason, it is not enough for anyone (even Her Majesty's Government) to say, 'Don't worry, we have it in hand'. The uncertainty has to be addressed. The confidence and loyalty of the people are the wellspring from which flows the power with which all threats to defence and security are ultimately met. Our constitutional arrangements and institutional dispositions must both deserve and grow out of that loyalty and confidence. The present uncertainty suggests our arrangements need review and renewal.

Risk and threat

Latent risks can become patent threats. What marks the change of a risk into a threat is usually the emergence of a factor which has been misjudged. It has been the reduction of traditional threats (aggression from nation states) combined with the increase of possible risk factors (most notably, Islamist terrorism, but there are many others) which has so destabilised world affairs and increased uncertainty. But linked to these changes is a loss in the United Kingdom of confidence in our own identity, values, constitution and institutions. 'This England that was wont



'The country's lack of self-confidence is in stark contrast to the implacability of its Islamist terrorist enemy, within and without.' A policeman stands at a cordon in a London street after a failed car bomb attack, 29 June 2007. REUTERS/Luke MacGregor

to conquer others', wrote Shakespeare, 'hath made a shameful conquest of itself.' This is one of the main factors which have precipitated risks into threats. As long as it persists, it will have the power to do so again.

Islamist terrorism is where people tend to begin. The United Kingdom presents itself as a target, as a fragmenting, post-Christian society, increasingly divided about interpretations of its history, about its national aims, its values and in its

political identity. That fragmentation is worsened by the firm self-image of those elements within it who refuse to integrate. This is a problem worsened by the lack of leadership from the majority which in mis-placed deference to 'multi-culturalism' failed to lay down the line to immigrant communities, thus undercutting those within them trying to fight extremism. The country's lack of self-confidence is in stark contrast to the implacability of its Islamist terrorist enemy, within and without.



We live under threat. We sense that now is a time of remission, between the frontal attack of 9/11, and its eventual successor, which may deliver an even greater psychological blow. Significant though they were in their different ways, neither the 2004 Madrid train bombings (which affected a national election), nor the London Underground and Bus bombings of July 2005 (which exposed the weakness of the 'multi-cultural' approach towards Islamists) were that successor. Thus, we are in a confused and vulnerable condition. Some believe that we are already at war; but all may agree that generally a peace-time mentality prevails. In all three ways – our social fragmentation, the sense of premonition and the divisions about what our stance should be – there are uneasy similarities with the years just before the First World War.

We are fortunate in not having the specific external state enemies who once posed threats to the British state and against whom we could therefore define ourselves. There has been no straight substitution of the Cold War threat with another threat of different source but similar type. But the range and nature of the threats to the security of British citizens in 2008 are not confined solely to what the Islamists call their 'jihad' against the West.

A shifting complex of risks faces us. An adequate approach to Britain's security in the next few years must address questions that are intricate, delicate and strange to our conventional way of thinking. The familiar categories of 'home' and 'abroad', which have long reassured the British in a deep part of their national identity, are breaking down. We know much less about what threatens us and how it does so than our official policies assert.

Six categories of risk can be identified. Any one of these may ignite the powder trails in and between any of the others. The examples we employ are not exhaustive but illustrative.

Geo-strategic fundamentals do not change, but new sources of power are at play within them

There are unchanging geo-political factors of trade, distance, trade routes

and choke-points vital to the United Kingdom's well-being. Yet while British reliance on sea traffic is increasing, our policy-makers seem to suffer from 'sea blindness'. They have not yet noticed or, if they have, have not reacted to the weakening of the Royal Navy. The Navy is set rapidly to shrink in size and in capability because of the failure to maintain construction and establishment during the last decade. (We emphasise this point here not because there are not grave shortcomings throughout the services, but because naval force structure, once lost, is especially difficult to recover.) Likewise, the other fixed geo-political fact is that Britain is an island adjacent to continental Europe. Our security depends upon continental arrangements not encroaching on our basic freedoms, that do not sap but amplify our strengths and that do not traduce the limits of public consent.

The old surfs the new

Standing astride the old fundamentals are actors who deploy against us both old and very new sources of moral and material power. The jihadists deploy the power of conviction that comes from a sectarian understanding of religion. They also surf the internet and use it to their advantage and our peril. They are not state-bound, but can take over part or all of a state, as has happened in Afghanistan and Somalia, and as could happen in Pakistan. That is why 'home' and 'abroad' are now seamlessly interlinked in such troubling ways.

There is new competition for resources

Competition for energy, water and food is sharpened every day by the demands of the two awakening demographic superpowers, India and China. This competition entails, at the least, tighter markets and, at the worst, real vulnerability to interruption of supply. Both India and China are matching their greater dependence upon increasing volumes of sea trade with substantial programmes of naval construction. These resource questions interlace with wider and older types of question. Can the Chinese Communist Party successfully maintain its rule in an open economy? Can it manage to hand power down

without internal collapse, in a way that Gorbachev could not? How may these tensions influence its competition with India, the world's largest democracy? And what will be the consequences of America's deep and different engagements with each? These will be some of the most important and obscure questions in the coming decades. They are of a high order of importance in judging how best to plan for British security.

The politics of climate represent unexpected pressures

Climate change has now been added to the more familiar factors governing the competition for resources, and the security implications that flow from that competition. World food stocks may fall as demand increases for plant-based feedstock for biofuels. China and India have both made it plain that they will not constrain their economic growth to curtail emissions of man-made greenhouse gases. But can the Chinese Communist Party cope with political pressures rising from pervasive domestic pollution of air, land and water? The present failure of the Kyoto Protocol and the probable future failure of any successor built on the same flawed structural assumptions lay the ground for future conflicts of interest. This is a new source of tension between the advanced industrial regions, the demographic superpowers, and the rest; and it represents a simple operation of the Law of Unintended Consequences. The Law is greatly to be respected in developing a viable defence and security establishment. It turns risks into threats.

The problem of Russia is re-emerging

President Putin is showing considerable skill in mixing the old with the new. He has answered, with troubling clarity, the question in Alexandr Blok's poem: as Russia, the Sphinx, gazes at Europe, sometimes with hatred, sometimes with love; which sentiment predominates? A new Russian nationalism is being promoted. Proud in its wealth of oil and gas, this nationalism revels in its isolation and its contempt for the 'soft' West. It is ready to expropriate property, to break contracts, to hint at energy blackmail, and to pursue opponents



Our loss of cultural self-confidence', Prins and Salisbury argue, 'weakens our ability to develop new means to provide for our security in the face of new risks.' British Prime Minister Gordon Brown talks with British troops at their base in the southern Iraqi city of Basra, 2 October 2007. *REUTERS/Lefteris Pitarakis*

wherever they are – for instance in the unprecedented 2007 cyber-attack on Estonia, in which state resources were apparently complicit. The opportunity to engage Russia in the world economy efficiently (as opposed to colluding with robber baron capitalism) was squandered by those from the West who gave advice in the 1990s. We are yet to see the full bill for these errors. Meanwhile both birth rates and life expectancy in Russia continue dramatically to slide, compounding the ferocity of the new nationalism with a tragic urgency.

Multilateral institutions are weakening
Currently, for essentially ideological reasons, the United Kingdom continues to invest much effort and faith in three supranational institutions: the UN, NATO and the EU. The current Prime Minister restated that investment as his central credo in his first Mansion House foreign policy speech in November 2007. Yet all are simultaneously weakening. Originally intended as alliances to support agreed ends, they have lost their way and no longer offer their members the benefits once covenanted. What are the essential features of alliances worthy of that name? Shared essential values; shared

culture, and especially military culture; shared interests; and, most basic of all, trust – trust enough to permit the special intelligence relationships enjoyed by the UK for the last sixty years with Australia, Canada, the US and New Zealand. We have only to look at destinations for British emigration, and at world-wide phone traffic patterns, to see where our practical preferences are exercised.

What does all this – and particularly the last – mean for the United Kingdom? Coalitions of the willing are the only lasting kind; nations do not have permanent friends, only permanent interests. Foul weather friends are to be preferred to fair weather friends; and the British people know precisely which are which. The English-speaking world – manifestly close friends – and, less openly, those with interests common to ours, emerge as our main diplomatic resource. In making our choices, however, we need to know who we are ourselves and what we stand for. How else should we ourselves be reliable allies to others? Once we know these things and admit them, we can restore our divided house to harmony and thence to security.

A profound lack of agreement about the nature and priority of threats and the

right ways of confronting them enhances the risks. The stiff geometry of the Cold War world has given way to a less predictable (although actually older and familiar) flow of forces in world affairs; but the mindset of Cold War planners and analysts and the institutions shaped by them still linger. This mismatch leaves us open to ambush. We maintain a posture to meet threats of a certain type for which we have defences of a certain type. What we actually face are risks that could grow into threats that are significantly different in origin and in nature. We lack the certainty of the old rigid geometry.

So our defences must be much more flexible, agile and therefore of a scale to allow that flexibility. We can only take the risk of a bare-bones defence and security establishment if we are sure of the shape of the threat: that we are not, and cannot be. But to justify the costs of flexibility, there has to be a common understanding shared by people, government and defence forces that the risks and threats exist which warrant such expense. At present, in the United Kingdom, there is no such congruence of views. This is a source of vulnerability. It gives the wider context of risks a



menacing advantage in incubating threats. So we face these dangers in a condition of lost certainties, eroded self-confidence and fractured institutional integrity.

A vicious circle has thus been set up. There is no coherent and comprehensive mechanism for the analysis of risks and threats within government that the electorate can see to exist, and so rely on. When the unexpected occurs, the response to it is likely to be incoherent and ad hoc: short-termist and uncertain. This encourages government to 'spin' and manipulate, to cover the shortfall in real strength and coherence with public relations ploys. This will play into our enemies' strengths.

The deep guarantee of real strength is our knowledge of who we are. Our loss of cultural self-confidence weakens our ability to develop new means to provide for our security in the face of new risks. Our uncertainty incubates the embryonic threats these risks represent. We look like a soft touch. We are indeed a soft touch, from within and without.

There is now such disjuncture between Britain's enduring security interests and the manner in which the state's moral and material defence of those interests has been pursued since the collapse of the Soviet Union (and especially during the last decade), that this disjuncture is like a breach made by the defenders themselves in the walls of their own city. Both political parties have been complicit, from the time of the Riffkind Defence Review under the Major administration to the agitated activity and many institutional disturbances of the Blair administrations. And now we have the failure of the Brown administration to provide the significant increases of core funding for defence that so exercises Lords Bramall, Boyce, Craig, Guthrie and Inge. Official assertions plead otherwise, but the intervention of the Chiefs of the Defence Staff suggests an atmosphere of chronic disrepair. Britain's defence forces have been reduced during a decade of over-use, under-funding and general under-provision relative to that use.

A more fundamental source of damage to the security of Britain has been flabby and bogus strategic thinking.

History and experience have been neglected in favour of 'group think' and enthusiasm for ideological projects. Public expenditure has been directed in correspondingly perverse ways with clear consequences for our defence and security. All this has contributed to a more severe erosion of the links of confidence and support between the British people, their government and Britain's security and defence forces, than for many years.

What is needed is to reverse the vicious circle and turn it into a virtuous one. Fortunately, our history and experience suggest tried and reliable tools for doing this.

We need to remind ourselves of the first principles which govern priorities in liberal democracies. Defence and security must be restored as the first duty of government. The trust and mutual obligations between government, people and the defence forces must be reasserted. Our common understanding of and allegiance to the United Kingdom must be restored. We have a powerful history and a sound constitution, fit for the state's essential role as the ultimate guarantor of the individual's safety, freedom and security.

Moves are needed to take defence and security, as far as possible, back out of the arena of short-term party politics. We have the successful example of the creation of the Monetary Policy Committee at the Bank of England, which removed control of interest rates from the political arena. The range of threats and risks facing the United Kingdom, together with the experience of the past few years, suggest that measures to achieve that should go beyond changes in policy. Institutional changes are needed.

The present Government appears to understand this. Gordon Brown's 'Governance of Britain' initiative, launched by him in a speech in July 2007, buttressed in October by another speech and consultative papers issued by the Lord Chancellor, contains proposals relating to foreign policy and security. These implicitly admit errors in the recent past, and seek to create greater trust and consensus, notably by publication of a National Security

Strategy and giving Parliament formal powers over the engagement of troops and the making of treaties.

In that spirit, now may be an opportune moment to offer a further and complementary proposal for institutional change in the area of defence and security. But before doing so, let us be realistic about the role of such changes. Institutions do not guarantee sound analysis or clear thinking any more than they engender political will. It is a common error to conflate legislating with doing. Individuals do the analysis, the thinking and the determining. Institutions facilitate these. They can only provide the best possible spaces and the clearest lines of communication within and through which people come together to make these things happen. Institutional improvements such as we advocate here are necessary but not sufficient conditions for the improvement of British security.

Aim of the proposal

The aim is to match three needs: addressing the full range of strategic risks and threats coherently and consistently within government, instead of ad hoc; doing so in a manner which as far as possible escapes the traps of partisan and political-cycle factors, without doing violence to the principles of parliamentary government; and building political consensus so that public opinion can feel confidence in the political process, without the detailed mediation of the press – for these, of course, are matters that often need to be confidential, if not secret. This would represent a virtuous circle.

Twin Committees

We propose twin committees: one a Cabinet Committee (of ministers, with service personnel and officials not just formally in attendance, but actually as full members), and the other a Joint Committee of the two Houses of Parliament.

A key aspect of the proposal is that, although the Joint Committee would need a very small staff in each House, the two Committees should essentially share a staff within the Cabinet Office.

Functions

The Cabinet Committee would draw together all the threads of government relating to defence and security, whether at home or abroad. It would be 'somewhere for anyone to go' in raising concerns. It would draw all parts of government into strategy and planning, as required. Its key function would be strategic: assessing risks and threats, and our capabilities in addressing them, in order to make judgements as to the balance and proportions of policy across the full spectrum of government activity. It would not be concerned directly with operational matters. It would not be concerned directly with the allocation of resources, but would have an influential voice when a clear need for resources was not being met. Its principal task would be to exercise judgement as to the necessary levels of capability and the overall balance of effort and planning, long term.

The Joint Committee would provide a parallel institution within Parliament to monitor Government assessments and strategy, to make available the perspective of politicians from other parties (and none), and to act, in so far as it saw fit, to build consensus in Parliament for Government policy, or to raise awareness in Parliament of gaps in Government policy. It would not be inquisitorial, in the sense of investigating or scrutinising past actions by Government departments or agencies. It would have the power to report to the Houses as it saw fit, and so recommend matters for debate.

Membership of the Committees

The members of the Cabinet Committee would be ministers, defence staff and officials as ordered by the Prime Minister: the normal arrangement for such a Committee. The departments and agencies to be represented would probably include the Ministry of Defence, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Department for International Development, the Chiefs of Staff, the Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee and the Home Office. Others who were not permanent members might need to attend from time to time – for example, the heads of

the security services, Lord Chancellor or Attorney General (for constitutional issues impacting on the freedom of the individual) or ministers from the departments responsible for schools or higher education.

The membership of the Joint Committee would of course be a matter for the two Houses: but we propose two innovations to be established as conventions. First, all members should be appointed with the expectation of serving for at least a full Parliament, and normally for a fixed number of years. Secondly, all members should already be Privy Counsellors, or be appointed so on joining the Committee. This would emphasise the seniority of the Joint Committee and allow its deliberations to take place on Privy Council terms. It would also allow it to meet together with the Cabinet Committee if circumstances required.

Chairmen

We believe that these committees could become very important. This being so, for two reasons we suggest that the Prime Minister be *not* given chairmanship. First, the new committees are organs of analysis and overview, not executive organs. They will report to and thus empower the Prime Minister's executive committees. The best military, political and business experience shows that sound and decisive leadership involves delegation. Leadership can then be quiet, creative and clear. Secondly, we seek by re-engagement to stimulate the sinews, nerves and muscles of the whole parliamentary body politic that is grown flaccid from under use. It is imprudent and counter-productive to overburden a Prime Minister with detailed chairing commitments. Therefore, a senior Cabinet minister would chair the Cabinet Committee. This, together with responsibility for the Cabinet Office staff of the committees, should be a substantial, if not the major, part of his or her remit. One of the sinecure posts, ideally Lord President, would clearly be appropriate for this. The Committee would report, as appropriate, direct to the Cabinet or to the Prime Minister's own defence and overseas policy committee. A senior member of the

Opposition, possibly but not necessarily with Cabinet experience, should chair the Joint Committee.

Conclusion

This new structure of committees would have an important symbolic function, as well as a practical one. It would demonstrate to the public that the widest view of defence and security was taken within government and within Parliament. It would show that the whole range of risks and threats was being managed.

It would help both ministers and officials comprehend the interrelated nature of today's risks and the emergence of threats. It would help them build the underlying policies in support of operational strategies. It would be a guarantee of the coherence and legitimacy of operations in the eyes of the public.

It would reduce the appearance of short-term political advantage in the deployment of our defence forces and promote acceptance of necessary provision for defence and security. Most importantly, it would preserve and safeguard the authority of Parliament.

Our world has entered into a dangerous phase of uncertainty. In the United Kingdom, frustration with our piecemeal and erratic response to new threats has sapped the strengths we know we have. In reaffirming a political settlement that has served us well, by accepting some considered institutional innovation, we shall be better able to meet what lies ahead, and extend to our allies the support we owe them, helping them in turn to support us. ■

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