
The 2015 UK Strategic Defence and Security Review and beyond

September 2015

Introduction

As an independent conflict prevention and peacebuilding organisation working with communities in more than twenty fragile states, Saferworld recognises the immense challenges in trying to prevent and resolve conflict. The UK has an important role to play in responding to conflict as a thought leader, development actor (with over 30% of UK aid spent in fragile states), an economic and military power, and a key influencer on the international stage. The UK has made significant strides in its thinking and programming in this respect, including in the innovative 2011 *Building Stability Overseas Strategy* (BSOS), recognising the value of promoting a more stable world based on good governance and respect for human rights. For Saferworld this strategy continues to be a crucial tool for advancing UK interests while also preventing conflict. Conflict prevention will also be an important aspect of implementing the Sustainable Development Goals, which include a focus on peace, good governance and the rule of law as championed by the Prime Minister. The 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR), and its subsequent implementation, should reaffirm that it is in the UK's interest to address the drivers of conflict, promote the principles underlined in the BSOS, support sustainable development, and avoid actions that might fuel violence and instability. As such, this submission makes high level recommendations to the SDSR process, but is focused on a longer-term discussion for how the UK might better promote security and stability overseas.

The 2015 SDSR should commit to:

A continued focus on upstream conflict prevention and addressing the underlying causes of conflict.

1. The 2010 SDSR considered together the UK's development, defence, security, intelligence, resilience, and foreign affairs capabilities and mandated the development of a cross-government strategy on addressing conflict and fragility overseas. This resulted in the BSOS, jointly owned by the Ministry of Defence (MoD), Department for International Development (DFID), and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). It outlines three areas of focus; early warning, rapid response, and 'upstream' conflict prevention.
2. Crucially, the BSOS also outlines a progressive vision for the type of 'stability' the UK will seek to promote, characterised by "*political systems which are representative and legitimate, capable of managing conflict and change peacefully, and societies in which human rights and rule of law are respected, basic needs are met, security established and opportunities for social and economic development are open to all*".¹ This vision remains extremely relevant, as it sets the direction for a comprehensive approach to UK engagement in conflict-affected and fragile states based on lessons learned from past mistakes.
3. However, implementing this vision in practice takes time, and is not always easy, especially when there are competing priorities across government departments.² The SDSR should reaffirm the centrality of this progressive vision to the UK's overall approach to engagement in conflict-affected and fragile states, setting out a plan for better integrating the BSOS vision of stability across all relevant government departments, led by the National Security Council. This should include FCO, MoD and DFID, but also departments such as the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), which oversees private sector engagement and arms transfer controls, both of which can and frequently do have a direct impact on conflict drivers, good governance, and long-term stability.

¹UK Government (2011), "Building Stability Overseas Strategy"

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32960/bsos-july-11.pdf , p. 5

² Saferworld, (November 2012), "Building Stability Overseas Strategy: The Way Forward" <http://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/view-resource/705-building-stability-overseas-strategy-the-way-forward>

4. In addition, while the logic of working to prevent conflict before it breaks out or taking urgent action to prevent violence escalating is well recognised in the UK, there remains a lack of clarity around what an 'upstream' approach means and how it should be put into practice.³ Identifying appropriate 'upstream' responses is a challenge, not only due to the complex and often rapidly changing environment in conflict-affected states, but also due to the differing working cultures and capabilities across UK government departments working in fragile contexts. Therefore, an examination of how each department is contributing to the BSOS by 'doing' upstream conflict prevention and how and whether this reflects the best available evidence of what works in promoting long-term stability should be a priority going forward. This should be accompanied by an implementation push on cross-departmental understanding and buy-in to the concepts in the BSOS, including a training and communications plan on putting this vision into practice. This should reduce the risk of focusing too heavily on the mechanisms of cross-departmental working at the expense of delivering a clear vision for what that coordination should achieve in practice for people affected by conflict and fragility.
5. The SDSR should recognise that an upstream conflict prevention approach requires a strong understanding of context. The basis of an 'upstream' approach should focus on understanding the underlying causes of conflict and working together to address them. The UK Government should therefore aim to reinforce expertise on conflict issues in headquarters and in country offices, systematically drawing on partnerships in civil society and consultations with communities affected by conflict to build better local power analyses, and focus on actions that aim to increase the long-term prospects for stability.
6. Above all, the National Security Council should prioritise a long-term conflict prevention approach, focused on the needs of affected communities, as it sets whole of government objectives in fragile states. As additional departments participate in conflict prevention activities under the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund,⁴ it will be increasingly important to ensure that the way that the UK engages in fragile states is focused on sustainable peace. This holistic view of peace will also reinforce the UK's own national security interests in the long term. The SDSR should therefore reinforce that a comprehensive approach to engaging in fragile states must be underpinned by BSOS vision for stability, and develop a plan for reinvigorating efforts to put this vision into practice.

Rethink hard security responses to political problems:

7. The challenges that are at the forefront of government thinking on national security, including violent extremism and the domestic threat that it poses, are complex; there is no straightforward answer for addressing them. However, we note with concern a tendency in UK government policy and practice towards more hard-security focused approaches, such as drone strikes, to deal with extremism.⁵ The UK should pay attention to the context in which extremism is occurring, and avoid providing moral and material support to those who respond to extremism with indiscriminate violence, exclusion and abuse, as it has in contexts such as Yemen.
8. The UK government has accepted that corrupt, abusive and exclusive governance both set back development and drive conflict. Building on the experience and expertise that the Department for International Development brings to the table, a developmental approach to security in which the UK supports societies to negotiate their rights more effectively is the primary way to uphold British values and achieve the lasting peace that we want and need.

Exercise responsible arms transfer controls:

9. One area of inconsistency that Saferworld is particularly concerned about is on arms transfer controls and their lack of consistency with human rights and conflict concerns. For example, the provision of continued arms export licences to Saudi Arabia despite the extremely high risk that these arms will be used in bombing civilians in Yemen, in violation of the UK's own arms transfer controls.

³ Saferworld, (2012), "Upstream conflict prevention: Addressing the root causes of conflict", <http://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/view-resource/688-upstream-conflict-prevention-addressing-the-root-causes-of-conflict>

⁴ In 2014, it was announced that the tri-departmental Conflict Pool (owned by DFID, FCO, MoD), which supported the UK's work in addressing conflict and fragility, would be replaced by a £1.13 billion Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) in April 2015 under the direction of the National Security Council (NSC). It also announced that the NSC would lead on country strategies that cover the whole of the UK's engagement in any one priority country. Relevant statements: Spending review 2013 (p. 24, 45): https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/209036/spending-round-2013-complete.pdf; Conflict resources: [Hansard source](#) (HC Deb, 24 June 2014, c9WS); National Security Strategy/Strategic Defence and Security Review: [Hansard source](#) (HC Deb, 19 December 2013, c130WS)

⁵ BBC News, (13 July 2015) "Defence review: Spend more on SAS and drones – Cameron" <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-33500006>

10. The SDSR could helpfully reiterate the UK's commitment to the highest possible standards for arms transfer controls as part of a cohesive, long-term approach to conflict prevention. The UK has been a champion in the development of the international Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) agreed in 2013, and should build on this to promote the strongest possible interpretation of the Treaty's provisions. Evidence from other disarmament regimes shows the importance of setting strong international norms, therefore the UK could helpfully champion the robust implementation of the ATT.
11. In addition, the UK must seek to consistently and rigorously implement its own arms transfer controls under the EU Common Position and the ATT, refusing to transfer arms where they risk exacerbating conflict or undermining international law, even where the government calculates such transfers may offer a countervailing strategic advantage.

Taking a conflict sensitive approach:

12. UK government initiatives have an impact on conflict whether by explicit design, and as such have the potential to promote safer societies, or alternatively undermine long term stability. Starting with an understanding of the context in which aid, trade, diplomacy, defence or other interventions are taking place and evaluating their potential impact on conflict dynamics is an important part of operating in a conflict sensitive manner.
13. Progress has been made on setting up the structures to help ensure that UK operations are increasingly conflict sensitive. For example, guidance has been developed for cross-departmental conflict analyses, referred to as the Joint Analysis on Conflict and Stability (JACS) to help facilitate a stronger cross-government understanding of any one conflict. This should in turn inform how aid and other engagements are structured. However, it is not yet clear whether JACS are carried out consistently and across departments, nor whether there is a strong connection between JACS and subsequent programming. As the NSC, which is a centralised body far removed from the context, takes on greater leadership on setting objectives in fragile states, it will be increasingly important that there is greater transparency between conflict analysis and UK decision making.
14. It should be recognised that conflict sensitivity goes beyond aid delivery and should be prioritised across all departments engaged in fragile states. This also extends to the UK itself, where unfair business practices or providing haven for corrupt individuals may fuel instability elsewhere. The SDSR should commit to taking a conflict sensitive approach across government, to avoid unintentionally undermining UK development efforts or exacerbating the drivers of conflict and instability.

Building on work on gender, peace and security:

15. The UK has made strong commitments to integrate gender sensitivity in its programming in conflict-affected and fragile states and has recognised that gender equality is central to conflict prevention and peacebuilding, outlined in UK's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (NAP), the Call to Action on Protecting Girls and Women in Emergencies, and the Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative (PSVI). Addressing the gender dimensions of conflict is an integral part of upstream conflict prevention and response; this should not be limited to activities where gender is the main focus. For example, all conflict analyses (JACS) should consistently integrate a gender lens, informing a gender-sensitive approach to conflict prevention and peacebuilding.
16. The UK can also reflect on how it can best foster a wider culture within government that consistently considers the importance of gender in conflict, peace and security. For instance, comprehensive and ongoing training for all government officials, both UK-based and locally appointed, working on conflict issues will be key to achieving this, in addition to increasing embassy capacity on gender, peace and security (particularly in the UK NAP focus countries) and expanding the number of gender advisors in the military. Furthermore, cross-government coordination is needed to ensure policy coherence, and that all departments are working towards joint objectives based on peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and gender equality. This is particularly important in light of Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality.
17. The SDSR should bolster existing initiatives on gender, peace and security by calling for a gender-sensitive approach across all UK engagement in fragile states, not just those programmes primarily focused on gender issues. This would send a strong message that gender, peace and security issues must not be siloed in the NAP and PSVI work, but are relevant across all conflict prevention and peacebuilding work. At the same time, the NAP itself provides a useful tool for increasing transparency and accountability on the UK's commitments in this area, and requires dedicated funding and expertise if its ambitions are to be realised.

Upholding the integrity of UK aid:

18. Improving peoples' security is a legitimate use of UK aid and there is strong evidence of a correlation between security and development progress, all of which reinforces the UK's long-term interests in a more stable world. However, recent comments from the Prime Minister and the Chancellor calling for aid to be re-evaluated to serve national interests⁶ appear to be defining the UK's interests in a worryingly narrow sense, potentially undermining the effectiveness of aid, which best practice indicates should be delivered according to need. Promoting sustainable development, good governance and human security may benefit the UK in terms of creating a more stable world, but singling out projects that directly serve only short-term UK interests may undermine impact. The SDSR should recognise that UK aid should support peace and security, reinforcing how needs-based delivery is an effective means of fostering stability. The UK Government should also be mindful of this best practice when participating in discussions on the redefinition of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA).

Showing consistency in policy and practice on conflict:

19. As the UK Government moves towards more joined up and top-down working under the NSC, the SDSR must commit to policy consistency, in line with the BSOS vision of stability, across departments working in fragile states. This can be achieved by seeking:
20. **An inclusive structure:** All UK interventions in fragile states should be considered through a conflict prevention and conflict-sensitive lens, including trade, aid, defence, commercial investment, and diplomatic support.
21. **Strategic coherence:** It is encouraging to see the principles highlighted in the BSOS as a key part of the UK's approach to overseas engagement. In many countries around the world, the UK works to protect civilians and raise sensitive questions of human rights. However a progressive human rights focus can at times come into tension with other foreign policy priorities, which may result in incoherence. For example, the UK has pulled back from long-term support for Egyptian police who have been accused of human rights abuses, yet are still exporting arms to the Egyptian military and issuing statements that are supportive of the government. We also note with concern the recent decision by the FCO to rename their list of 'countries of human rights concern' to 'countries of human rights priority', seemingly to remove the policy basis for claims that government practice is inconsistent with its rhetoric, for example with regard to arms exports.⁷ The SDSR should build on the recognition that support for abusive regimes undermines long-term stability and aim for more consistent application of a principled, human-rights focused foreign policy across government.

Strengthen strategic partnerships

22. As the UK continues to develop its thinking and best practice on conflict prevention, it should continue to increase engagement with rising powers and other actors to share best practice and counteract counter-productive engagement. It can be challenging to work in a context where other actors with less stringent policies operate and may undermine progress on conflict prevention. It is therefore important to engage powers like India, Brazil, or China, especially at a time when they are developing their foreign policy approach to conflict affected states.
23. The UK government also has strong relationships with civil society within the UK and overseas, especially through DFID's Programme Partnership Agreements (PPA), providing a valuable resource for what works to prevent conflict and build peace at local and national levels. The SDSR could reflect on how to strengthen such partnerships where civil society is effectively working in fragile contexts on conflict prevention activities; this would be particularly useful alongside DFID's Civil Society Partnership Review.

About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with local people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe that everyone should be able to lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from insecurity and violent conflict. We are a not-for-profit organisation with programmes in nearly 20 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and Europe.

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⁶ Hansard, (HC Deb, 7 September 2015, c24WS); <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/cm150907/debtext/150907-0001.htm#1509074000002>

⁷ Bowcott, O. (3 August 2015), "Foreign Office drops references to its campaign to abolish death penalty", *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/aug/03/foreign-office-drops-references-campaign-abolish-death-penalty>