

International Security Monthly Briefing – March 2008

BRITAIN'S SECURITY – A NEW APPROACH?

Paul Rogers

The UK National Security Strategy (NSS), published in March, has been presented as an entirely new development in Britain's approach to international security. It is designed to build on a revised version of the earlier Strategic Defence Review, along with the development of the cross-government counter-terrorism strategy of 2006 and this year's new strategic framework for the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO).

Context and Aims

The NSS has been prepared and published by the Cabinet Office, rather than from an individual ministry, and is:

"...the first time the Government has published a single, overarching strategy bringing together the objectives and plans of all departments, agencies and forces involved in protecting our national security. It is a significant step, and the latest in a series of reforms bringing greater focus and integration to our approach."¹

In identifying the reforms and new structures that have already taken place, the NSS includes the joint Conflict Prevention Pools established in 2001 with the FCO, Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the Department for International Development (DfID); the Joint Terrorism and Analysis Centre (2003); the Serious and Organised Crime Agency (2006); and the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism and the Cabinet Committee on National Security, International Relations and Development (both 2007).

In all of these cross-departmental or cross-agency developments there has been a clear impetus stemming from the post 9/11 and post 7/7 environments. The government would argue, though, that a more integrated approach to international security was already in evidence prior to 9/11, not least through the development of the Conflict Prevention Pools and the government's early recognition of the significance of issues such as climate change.

According to the NSS the single overarching national security objective is one of:

"...protecting the United Kingdom and its interests, enabling its people to go about their daily lives freely and with confidence, in a more secure, stable, just and prosperous world."²

While it is therefore concerned, as a government, with the security and well-being of its own citizens, this approach implies that this is only possible in a global system that is itself peaceful.

The Strategy is set out in the context of a rapidly changing global security context in which Britain does not currently face a threat from any one state:

"If the international landscape as a whole is increasingly complex and unpredictable, so too is the security landscape. No state threatens the United Kingdom directly. The Cold War threat has been replaced by a diverse but interconnected set of threats and risks, which affect the United Kingdom directly and also have the potential to undermine wider international stability. They include international terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, conflicts and failed states, pandemics, and trans-national crime. These and other threats and risks are driven by a diverse

¹ National Security Strategy, Cabinet Office, March 2008, para 1.7. Full report available at: http://interactive.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/documents/security/national_security_strategy.pdf

² National Security Strategy, para 1.9

and interconnected set of underlying factors including climate change, competition for energy, poverty and poor governance, demographic changes and globalisation.”³

Even so, the greatest emphasis of resources and legislation is on terrorism and political violence and the core defence budget, the overall summary of key security developments being listed as follows:

Resources

- *Funding on counter-terrorism and intelligence increased from £1 billion in 2001 to £2.5 billion this year, rising to £3.5 billion by 2010/11*
- *A new Single Security and Intelligence Budget across different departments and agencies.*
- *The longest period of sustained real growth in the Defence Budget since the 1980s, as well as increased spending in dealing with global conflict.*

Legislation

- *New powers to tackle terrorism and secure successful prosecutions, including control orders, extended stop and search powers, new offences of acts preparatory, encouraging and glorifying terrorism, and training for terrorism; extended pre-charge detention; and extended proscription of terrorist organisations.*
- *New powers for both central and local government to coordinate responses to domestic emergencies.⁴*

The National Security Strategy seeks to identify “*major threats and risks, both immediate and longer term, and the trends and factors which drive them.*” The threats and risks are identified as:

- terrorism,
- nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction,
- trans-national organised crime,
- global instability and conflict and failed and fragile states, and
- civil emergencies.⁵

In assessing state-led threats the situation “*...remains the same as in the 1998 Strategic Defence Review: for the foreseeable future, no state or alliance will have both the intent and the capability to threaten the United Kingdom militarily, either with nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction, or with conventional forces.*”⁶

The main drivers of insecurity are:

- challenges to the rules-based international system,
- climate change,
- competition for energy,
- poverty, inequality and poor governance,
- global trends such as economic and technical change, demographic issues and interdependence of threats, risks and drivers.⁷

³ National Security Strategy, para 1.3

⁴ National Security Strategy, p5

⁵ National Security Strategy, paras 3.2 – 3.24

⁶ National Security Strategy, para 3.25

⁷ National Security Strategy, paras 3.29 – 3.57

Initial Assessment

In claiming that the National Security Strategy is a new development in Britain's approach to national security, the government is on firm ground. The document does seek to integrate a much wider range of security issues into an integrated strategy than has been attempted previously. In the past, individual defence reviews have assessed Britain's security very largely in terms of defence alone, and this has been almost entirely in relation to direct threats to the state. The new Strategy goes much further than this in its analysis of global trends and does try to place Britain's circumstances in a context that embraces some of the major issues of our time including global inequality, climate change, energy security, trans-national crime and terrorism and political violence.

This is all welcome, and illustrates a degree of innovative thinking that has been less in evidence in the past. It also demonstrates a serious attempt at cross-departmental integration. Even so, it is legitimate to argue that, however welcome this approach is, it does not succeed in going beyond an approach to national security which is rooted more in the past than in the future. To illustrate this, four issues are worth discussing in more detail.

1) Terrorism and Political Violence

The Strategy goes into substantial detail on the government's plans for counter-terrorism, focusing on the “*pursue, protect, prepare, prevent*” approach. While there is some focus on external issues, including a commitment to the Middle East peace process, there is little indication of any awareness of the impact of UK foreign and security policies on radicalisation. There is a recognised need to address grievances and the strategy “...will focus on those countries and regions which have the most influence on the ideology behind violent extremism and which have the most connections to communities in the United Kingdom.”⁸ The problem is that this is an essentially reactive approach that does not see any connection at all between the UK military involvement in Iraq or its close relationship with the current US administration.

Furthermore, while there is some commitment to resourcing challenges to violent extremism, the level of funding is paltry compared with the huge increase in expenditure on more traditional approaches to countering terrorism. On the government's own estimates, the annual commitment to resourcing counter-terrorism and intelligence currently runs at £2.5 billion per year increasing to £3.5 billion by 2011. In comparison, “*tackling violent extremism and promoting greater understanding*” is budgeted at an annual rate of approximately £24 million at home and £135 million overseas for the next three years. Thus the domestic commitment to countering extremism is less than one-hundredth of the counter-terrorism budget.

2) Nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction

Aspects of the government's approach to arms control and disarmament are both forceful and positive:

“We will press for early entry into force of the Comprehensive test Ban Treaty, including completion of its verification system; seek agreement to start negotiations without preconditions on a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty; and continue to support the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as the cornerstone of the international community's approach.”⁹

The government is also positive in its continuing support for the Chemical Weapons Convention, including the aim of achieving the 2012 deadline for the destruction of chemical weapons.

At the same time, though, the Strategy reinforces the UK commitment to maintaining its own nuclear forces in the belief that it cannot rule out a nuclear threat re-emerging over the next 50 years. The

⁸ National Security Strategy, para 4.10

⁹ National Security Strategy, para 4.19

problem here is that an avowed commitment to international nuclear arms control and disarmament is undermined by Britain's firm commitment to remain a nuclear weapons state for the next half century. This seriously restricts Britain's role, especially in relation to non-nuclear states that may have nuclear ambitions. As last year's Trident replacement White Paper makes clear, the new nuclear system will retain the capacity to have a small-yield warhead system and will also retain the option of using nuclear weapons first in a conflict.

In responding to the argument that British nuclear status must mean an acceptance that other states have a similar right, the government's response is that non-nuclear states are bound by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, whereas Britain is a signatory of the treaty as an existing nuclear power. As such, Article 6 of the NPT commits nuclear member states to progressive nuclear disarmament and the British government claims that the decrease in the numbers of nuclear warheads that Britain has undertaken in the past 15 years is a commitment to Article 6. This is, to say the least, a rather hollow argument given that the commitment to Article 6 was made over 40 years ago and Britain envisages maintaining nuclear forces for a further 50 years. 90 years is a rather long time to refrain from completing a commitment to such an important multilateral treaty.

Furthermore, if Britain believes that nuclear weapons are essential to its security, it can hardly argue that other states must refrain from acquiring such weapons because of their membership of the NPT. Since any country can opt to withdraw from the NPT with six months notice, one can equally argue that Britain's belief in the importance of nuclear weapons should mean that it should in no way discourage other countries from pursuing such a course of action and withdrawing from the Treaty.

3) Climate Change, poverty and inequality

Much of the Strategy's concern with climate change relates to issues directly affecting Britain, such as an increased risk of flooding. There is also a concern with mitigating the effects of climate change both in Britain and across the world, together with commitments to work towards tougher controls over carbon emissions. Unfortunately there are two elements which are almost entirely missing.

One is that while the Strategy has much to say about the importance of tackling inequality – an element that is highly commendable in a document on National Security – it does not make the connection between inequality and climate change. In recent years it has become abundantly clear that some of the poorest regions of the world will suffer most from climate change in terms of the increased violence of tropical storms, sea-level rises affecting some of the world's largest cities and richest croplands and, above all, the potentially disastrous effects of changes in rainfall distribution. The Strategy does make much of the interconnectedness of a globalised world but does not see the significance of this for the particular issue of climate change.

The second is that there is abundant evidence that the rate of change in the climate is accelerating and that there are feedback systems such as loss of polar sea ice and release of methane from thawing permafrost that are likely to accelerate it still further. The NSS makes much of Britain's role in encouraging tighter targets for decreasing carbon emissions, but the targets being set fall very far short of those being advocated by the world's leading climate specialists. In incorporating issues such as climate change and inequality into a National Security Strategy, the government is taking an important step, but this first attempt to do so falls far short of what is required.

4) Energy Security

The Strategy devotes attention to the issue of energy security in a manner which has not previously been emphasised. Given the run-down in North Sea oil and gas supplies and the ending of the UK's self-sufficiency in these resources such attention makes sense. The Strategy includes energy diversification and the move to a low-carbon economy as among its responses to this evolving predicament. Surprisingly, the Strategy makes no connection between this and the recent decision to build two very large aircraft carriers HMS Queen Elizabeth and HMS Prince of Wales and equip them with the advanced

US F-35 multi-role strike aircraft. The two carriers, at 65,000 tonnes each, will be by far the largest warships ever to see service in the Royal Navy and will give Britain a global expeditionary reach second only to that of the United States. The new carriers will be particularly appropriate for future military interventions in the oil rich region of the Persian Gulf, far exceeding current capacities, at a time when Britain will be becoming much more dependent on imported oil and gas resources.

In relation to both climate change and energy security it can be argued that Britain would be far better engaged in being the world leader in energy conservation and a rapid move towards renewable energy resources. As with the issue of nuclear weapons and the control of proliferation, the Strategy implies a particularly heavy reliance on older thinking on international security in a manner that does not integrate with its otherwise innovative recognition of the changing global security context.

Conclusion

There are many aspects of the National Security Strategy that are to be welcomed, some of which have already been mentioned. Others include a strong commitment to multi-lateral engagement, investment in conflict prevention, peace-keeping and aid for post-conflict reconstruction. The Strategy's concern with issues such as climate change and inequality is also very positive.

The problem is that there is insufficient evidence that the implications of this wider view are recognised. The great majority of the concern with international terrorism relates to its control, with remarkable resources being expended to expand the entire counter-terrorism system. There is far less concern with countering extremism and a basic inability to acknowledge any connection between Britain's involvement in the Middle East and South West Asia and the processes of radicalisation.

Similarly, nuclear proliferation and energy security are seen to be important, but the response, not least in terms of nuclear forces and global expeditionary capabilities, both indicate an inability to rise above traditional approaches to national defence. Above all, the Strategy may recognise the significance of climate change but simply fails to address this global threat with the seriousness and urgency that it deserves. Thus the Strategy is an important step forward but still represents an early stage in taking Britain's thinking in the direction of globally sustainable security that will benefit not just Britain but the wider global community. That would place Britain centre stage in responding to the key issues of the 21st century – an economically divided and environmentally constrained world – that affect all our futures.

Paul Rogers is Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford and Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group (ORG). His international security monthly briefings are available from the ORG website at www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk and visitors can sign-up to receive them via email each month. These briefings are circulated free of charge for non-profit use, but please consider making a donation to ORG if you are able to do so.
