British civil–military relations
and the problem of risk

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The theme of risk pervades the western security discourse at the beginning of the 2010s. The United Kingdom's 2010 *National Security Strategy* (NSS) employs the term 'risk' no fewer than 545 times, while its 2010 *Strategic Defence and Security Review* (SDSR) mentions the word 96 times.[1] The United States' 2010 *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR) uses the words 'risk' or 'risks' 95 times over the course of its analysis.[2] Risk is an explicit theme in the Australian Defence White Paper of 2009, Germany's Defence Policy Guidelines of 2011, The French White Paper on Defence and National Security of 2008 and the Spanish Security Strategy of 2011. It is also implicit in almost all other western security documentation since 2001 in one way or another.

This article examines the theory, uses and implications of risk for civil–military relations in western democracies, drawing primarily on the empirical experience of the United Kingdom since 2001. It argues that risk, rather than threat, has emerged as the dominant concept through which the contemporary security environment is understood and on which the making of defence policy and strategy is premised. This is reflected in the increasing use of formal risk assessment methodologies in structuring defence planning and in the character of operations themselves. However, the article also suggests that such approaches may be in tension with good strategy-making, in the sense of applying means and resources to achieve specific policy ends. Risk assessment is an attempt to order a multiple series of potential strategic ends through common organizational means. Not only does this potentially blur the distinction between means and ends in the strategy-making process, it also exposes that process to contestation, with multiple interpretations of what the risks actually are and the strategic priority (and commitment) which should be attached to them. The danger is that the driving theme of civil–military relations becomes as much about capturing the dominant narrative of risk, in order to justify policy and secure resources, as about linking means, ends and resources in a strategically coherent manner to meet the security challenges of the day.

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[1] HM Government, *A strong Britain in an age of uncertainty: the National Security Strategy* (Norwich: The Stationery Office, Oct. 2010); UK Ministry of Defence, *Securing Britain in an age of insecurity: the Strategic Defence and Security Review* (Norwich: The Stationery Office, Oct. 2010).
[2] US Department of Defense (DoD), *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington DC: US Department of Defense, Feb. 2010).

Throughout, the article focuses primarily on the UK, though it seeks to elucidate trends and developments that are, to some degree, common to western democracies more widely. The UK is a key exemplar of the salience of risk for three reasons: first, it has been an active contributor to western military risk management operations since the end of the Cold War; second, it has been at the forefront of European states' efforts to transform their armed forces over the same period, in large part in response to the demands of the risk society, discussed below; and third, it has made extensive use of risk assessment and management methodologies in its defence and security planning processes, most recently in the context of significant public spending cuts on the part of the government. This combination of circumstances exposes the British defence establishment fully to the logic of risk and emphasizes its implications for civil–military relations and strategy-making, both domestically and for the West as a whole.

Uncertainty, complexity and risk

The emergence of risk as an organizing concept for western security thinking is a product of the period after 9/11, and to some degree the whole period since the end of the Cold War. On the one hand, the latter has been a time of unprecedented security for the citizens and states of the West, at least in traditional military terms.[3] Yet it is also characterized by uncertainty and the emergence of new challenges. In what has been called the 'risk society' by Ulrich Beck and others,[4] the relatively straightforward international order of the twentieth century has been replaced by a global proliferation of institutions, agents and forces in which the state is just one element. In this complex and interdependent environment, no single threat predominates. Instead, global actors face a range of different risks, many of which are themselves by-products of the very order they potentially threaten.[5] These contribute to the 'new' security agenda of the post-Cold War period and include issues such as international terrorism, climate change, transnational crime, migration, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and the knock-on effects of intrastate conflict—complex emergency and state collapse.

This, then, is an unquiet peace, one in which the logic of threat has been replaced by the logic of risk. Threats in this sense represent clear and present dangers: they are specific, identifiable and known. In contrast, risks exist in the future, as scenarios of potential threat, emerging from a subjective reading of the complexities and uncertainties of the current international order, based on calculation and past experience.[6] In many respects, therefore, the shift towards risk is actually a

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[3] Christopher Coker, *War in an age of risk* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), pp. 73–4.

[4] Ulrich Beck, *Risk society: towards a new modernity* (London: Sage, 1992); Ulrich Beck, *World risk society* (Cambridge: Polity, 1999); Coker, *War in an age of risk*; Mikkel Vedby Rasmussen, *The risk society at war: terror, technology and strategy in the twenty-first century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[5] Beck, *Risk society*, p. 21.

[6] On the distinction between threats and risks, see Beck, *Risk society*, pp. 52–8; M. J. Williams, *NATO, security and risk management: from Kosovo to Kandahar* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 17–21. For alternative formulations, see Christopher Daase and Oliver Kessler, 'Known and unknowns in the "war on terror": uncertainty and the

product of the very security of the West in the current international order. At present, there *are* no clear and present super-threats to concentrate the minds of western defence and security elites. Instead, insecurity becomes measured by what *might* happen in the context of complexity and uncertainty; the logic of risk is one of potentiality rather than imminent danger.

The logic of the risk society has had at least three implications in the military sphere since the end of the Cold War. First, there has been a new engagement with conflict and instability in the developing world as a risk to the West itself.[7] According to the logic of risk, western actors can no longer afford to divorce themselves from such conflicts, or indeed from actions of potential 'rogue' actors on the international stage. Because of the interconnected and globalized nature of the international order, such events, situations and locations have spillover effects which may come to threaten the West itself: 'rogue states' may be seen as potential safe havens for international terrorists, centres of organized crime, sources of refugee flows or engines of nuclear proliferation. Such challenges have become new risks to be managed, through interventions such as peace-keeping, counterinsurgency, nation-building, anti-terrorist campaigns or preventive military action.[8] This has also been a period of unusual activity for western armed forces, with military interventions in contexts as diverse as Iraq, the former Yugoslavia, Somalia, East Timor, Sierra Leone, Haiti, Afghanistan and Libya.

Second, the nature and purpose of western military intervention itself has shifted, by default as much as by intent. The logic of risk—which seeks to identify, contain or curtail potential security challenges before or as they emerge—emphasizes conflict prevention and the ongoing management of insecurity, generally at arm's length from the territory of the home state and often in the kinds of 'new war' environment described above. Insecurity management is a different kind of activity from war as traditionally conceived, in which states attempt to impose outcomes by force of arms. Instead, as Rupert Smith has argued, today's conflicts and interventions take place *among* rather than *against* the people of the country concerned, with the aim of engendering conditions that will minimize the risks, or potential insecurities, for western actors.[9] Thus, the western intervention in Afghanistan aims to build stability in order to minimize the risk that the country will become a haven for international terrorism in future. The conflict in Iraq was premised first on containing the risks associated with the Saddam regime and his putative acquisition of WMD, and later on managing the consequences of, and instability caused by, the 2003 invasion and the subsequent insurgency. Such conflicts of risk are all, to some degree, 'wars of choice'. They are conducted on the basis that it is less risky to act militarily than not to, but they are not forced

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political construction of danger', *Security Dialogue* 38: 4, 2007, pp. 419–30; Elke Krahmann, 'Beck and beyond: selling security in world risk society', *Review of International Studies* 36: 3, 2010, pp. 6–9; Rasmussen, *The risk society at war*, pp. 1–2.

[7] Mary Kaldor, *New and old wars: organised violence in a globalised era* (Cambridge: Polity, 1999), pp. 1–12; Herfried Münkler, *The new wars* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), pp. 5–31.

[8] Mark Duffield, *Global governance and the new wars: the merging of development and security* (London: Zed, 2001), pp. 26–8.

[9] Rupert Smith, *The utility of force: the art of war in the modern world* (London: Penguin, 2006), pp. 267–305.

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upon their participants and they remain second-order tasks in comparison to, for example, the defence of national territory from a military aggressor.

Third, as Christopher Coker argues,[10] the logic of risk implies a retreat from commitment. In part this is simply because the absence of clear and present danger distances both elites and their societies from the risks they face in their security environment. Because risks deal in future potentialities, their linkage to national security is often long-term, speculative, and dependent on the judgement and analysis of experts.[11] Risks are not always obvious to or accepted by the lay public, as is evident from the controversies over climate change or the difficulty European governments have had selling the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—premised variously on future risks of WMD proliferation and use, terrorism and instability—to their electorates. At the same time, the generally transnational nature of many risks means that actions taken to address these tend to be multinational, often taking place through so-called 'coalitions of the willing'. Not only does this imply that dealing with particular risks is to some degree optional (by definition, states have to opt into a coalition of the willing), it also introduces multiple potential interpretations of risk into any response and spreads responsibility for addressing risk across a number of different actors.[12] These factors encourage a more circumspect and hedged engagement with security risks on the part of western actors than at times of pressing threat. Precisely because risk is to some degree based on a speculative judgement about the future, the commitment it engenders from states and their societies to achieve collective risk management goals is itself circumscribed, whether in terms of defence spending, acceptance of casualties, or the risks they are willing to take to achieve their objectives.

For Ulrich Beck, the risk society is ontologically distinct from its predecessors; it is a defining and inescapable feature of late modernity.[13] This article takes a more circumspect approach. While accepting that risk has become the principal frame for much western security thinking since the end of the Cold War, it contends that this state of affairs derives primarily from the very absence of a dominant military threat to western societies in the current international order. Of course, the re-emergence of such a challenge is a risk in and of itself, and if this were to occur it would be likely to alter the foundations of the risk society once more. However, for the moment risk dominates and provides the context for a new turn in contemporary civil–military relations and strategy-making, as the UK experience helps to illustrate.

Risk, strategy and defence planning

Strategy-making and civil–military relations are indissolubly linked; and both are potentially challenged by the logic of the risk society. Strategy is the process through which political ends and national security goals are achieved using the

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[10] Coker, *War in an age of risk*, pp. 19–26.
[11] Beck, *Risk society*, p. 23.
[12] Williams, *NATO, security and risk management*, pp. 114–15.
[13] Beck, *World risk society*, p. 3.

military (and usually other) means at a state's disposal.[14] Strategy thus goes to the very heart both of the purpose of military organization in the first place and of the civil–military relationship. Strategy-making also underlies the traditional concern of civil–military relations with civilian control over the military. In most mature western democracies, the issue of civilian control is no longer really about the latent threat of military praetorianism or the intervention of military actors into politics, if it ever was. Instead, the key questions and controversies of western civil–military relations have tended to be about the appropriate division of responsibility between civil and military actors in the formulation and implementation of defence and security policy and the prosecution of war.[15]

The experiences of the UK and other western actors in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere have led many to call for a reinvigoration of strategy and strategic thinking.[16] Two damning reports by the UK House of Commons Public Administration Committee in 2010 and 2011 went so far as to declare that Britain had 'all but lost the capacity to think strategically', and that 'the ability to articulate our enduring interests, values and identity has atrophied'.[17] Yet translating the call for better strategy-making into reality has proved easier said than done. In part this is simply because making good strategy is difficult. It requires a community of strategic thinkers, able to develop effective solutions to complex policy problems, and constrained by the usual problems of resources, organizational politics and so on. However, the current strategic malaise is also reflective of a deeper and more fundamental tension between the assumptions and requirements of traditional strategic thinking and the new logic of risk. Strategy as traditionally conceived is premised on the purposive linking of means and resources to achieve specific policy ends. However, in the context of risk management, the ends are multiple and uncertain; so risk thinking prioritizes flexible and adaptable means that can be put to different and multiple ends as required.[18] This is not to say that policy ends have gone away. However, the means by which they are divined and addressed have become more speculative and less immediately pressing than was perhaps the case in the past, and the balance between means and ends in the strategy-making process has shifted towards the former.

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[14] Colin S. Gray, 'Strategic thoughts for defence planners', *Survival* 52: 3, 2010, p. 167.
[15] See e.g. Eliot A. Cohen, 'The unequal dialogue: the theory and reality of civil–military relations and the use of force', in Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, eds, *Soldiers and civilians: the civil–military gap and American national security* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 429–58; Hew Strachan, 'Making strategy: civil–military relations after Iraq', *Survival* 48: 3, 2006, pp. 59–80; Hew Strachan, 'Strategy or alibi? Obama, McChrystal and the operational level of war', *Survival* 52: 5, 2010, pp. 157–79.
[16] Paul Cornish and Andrew M. Dorman, 'Blair's wars, Brown's budgets: from Strategic Defence Review to strategic decay in less than a decade', *International Affairs* 85: 2, March 2009, pp. 247–9; Lukas Milevski, 'A collective failure of grand strategy: the West's unintended wars of choice', *RUSI Journal* 156: 1, 2011, pp. 30–33; Patrick Porter, 'Why Britain doesn't do grand strategy', *RUSI Journal* 155: 4, 2010, pp. 6–12; Hew Strachan, 'Strategy and contingency', *International Affairs* 87: 6, Nov. 2011, pp. 1281–96; Hew Strachan, 'The lost meaning of strategy', *Survival* 47: 3, 2005, pp. 33–52.
[17] House of Commons Public Administration Committee (HoCPAC), *Who does UK national strategy?* (London: TSO, 12 Oct. 2010), p. 3; HoCPAC, *Who does UK national strategy? Further report*, 31 Jan. 2011, http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmpubadm/713/71303.htm, accessed 7 Feb. 2012.
[18] Rasmussen, *The risk society at war*, pp. 21–2.

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Western defence and security establishments have responded to these challenges in two main ways since the end of the Cold War. The first response, prominent during the 1990s and the early part of the 2000s, was to focus on ambitious, capabilities-based approaches to strategic planning, exemplified by the UK's Strategic Defence Review (SDR) of 1998.[19] These aim to address the problem of risk by developing broad spectrum forces with adaptable, flexible capabilities, useful across a wide range of military roles and potential security challenges.[20] They are generally shaped and constrained by a series of broad planning bench-marks—in the case of the SDR, eight 'defence missions and tasks' and the ability to conduct two concurrent 'medium scale operations' or one 'full scale operation' at any given time—but are otherwise non-specific in nature, in terms of both the risks they identify and the hierarchy of priority they assign to them.

While broadly welcomed at the time as a prudent way in which to hedge against uncertainty, capabilities-based approaches such as that embodied in the 1998 SDR have since faced considerable challenge. Notably, they have been criti-cized for taking military force out of its strategic context—that is, treating it in isolation from the specific political or policy purpose to which it will be put. As Hew Strachan comments, the generic planning assumptions contained within such documents have tended to be 'too abstract to be defined as policy: where are these wars to be fought, against whom, and above all, for what purpose?'[21] Strachan argues that in the absence of a more specific linkage between policy goals and military means, such documents are not strategy in the traditional sense at all. They are about *how* armed forces should fight rather than what they should be fighting *for*.[22] This is a distinction that has been felt acutely in the protracted wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, where policy ends have often been vague, unclear or changeable. At the same time, resources have proved tighter and the opera-tional demands of risk management more difficult than previously imagined. For many states, including the UK, maintaining a full spectrum portfolio of capabili-ties to respond to all foreseeable risks has become increasingly difficult to sustain, a challenge that has been intensified by the demands for austerity in state spending brought on by the financial crisis that began in 2008.

In this context, the defence reviews of the 1990s and early 2000s have increas-ingly come to look like optimistic wish-lists rather than clear frameworks for strategic planning. In order to address these problems, western states have turned to formal risk assessment methodologies in order to structure their defence and strategic planning processes more clearly. This is the empirical expression of strategy-making in the risk society and is an emergent, though increasingly

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[19] Colin McInnes, 'Labour's Strategic Defence Review', *International Affairs* 74: 4, 1998, pp. 823–45; UK Ministry of Defence, *The Strategic Defence Review: modern forces for the modern world*, July 1998, http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/65F3D7AC-4340-4119-93A2-20825848E50E/0/sdr1998_complete.pdf, accessed 8 Feb. 2012.
[20] Kenton G. Fasana, 'Using capabilities to drive military transformation: an alternative framework', *Armed Forces and Society*, 37: 1, January 2011, pp. 143–6.
[21] Strachan, 'Making strategy', p. 62.
[22] Strachan, 'Making strategy', p. 62.

apparent, feature of defence planning documentation across the West.[23] It aims to analyse and prioritize risk in order to tailor capabilities to meet it, but also to curtail, preclude or suspend other capabilities that are considered to be less relevant or pressing.

Risk assessment methodologies are prominent in the latest round of UK defence and security planning documentation. Britain's ambitions to retain an active, global military role in conditions of constrained resources and a concerted public austerity drive have forced hard choices in defence planning and encouraged a hard-headed engagement with risk assessment in order to structure and prioritize the options.[24] This new approach is particularly apparent in the UK's 2010 NSS and SDSR. The NSS is premised on a biennial National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA). The NSRA process compares, assesses and prioritizes major risks to UK security and classifies them on the basis of their likelihood and impact. The National Security Council then uses this assessment in formulating the NSS to group risks into three different tiers, with Tier One risks—including international terrorism, hostile attacks on UK cyberspace, a major accident or natural hazard, and an international military crisis between states which draws in the UK—identified as the highest priorities for UK security.[25]

The SDSR builds on this framework to make concrete choices and decisions on required capabilities. Certain capabilities are withdrawn altogether, on the basis that it is not necessary to retain them given the balance of risk currently faced by the UK, because these capabilities are provided elsewhere in the defence establishment or can realistically be expected to be provided by allied states, or because a judgement has been made that it is an acceptable risk to maintain certain capability gaps until new capacities can be brought in to cover them. For example, the SDSR made the decision to withdraw the UK's carrier strike capability on the basis that combat air support to Afghanistan will be the armed forces' strategic priority to 2015 and that this can be best provided from elsewhere in the force structure. While a new, much larger and more capable aircraft-carrier equipped with the Joint Strike Fighter is planned to come into service around 2020, the SDSR judges it 'unlikely that [the existing carrier strike force] would be sufficiently useful in the latter half of the decade to be a cost-effective use of defence resources'.[26] The SDSR also retains capabilities at four levels of readiness, from the deployed force itself—the people and equipment actually taking part in operations—to 'extended readiness' forces. This allows resources to be concentrated on those areas that are considered to be of highest priority, while others—including tanks, artillery and ships, for example—are effectively mothballed on the basis that the kinds of state-based military challenges against which they are most useful are associated with low or long-term risk.[27]

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[23] As well as the UK, prominent examples also include the US 2010 QDR and the Australian Defence White Paper of 2009. See also Strachan, 'Strategy and contingency', p. 1284.

[24] Timothy Edmunds, 'The defence dilemma in Britain', *International Affairs* 86: 2, March 2010, pp. 377–94.

[25] HM Government, *A strong Britain in an age of uncertainty*, pp. 26–7, 37.

[26] UK Ministry of Defence, *Securing Britain in an age of insecurity*, p. 23.

[27] UK Ministry of Defence, *Securing Britain in an age of insecurity*, pp. 19–20.

The SDSR demonstrates a number of features that are shared by risk assessment approaches to defence and security planning more widely. First, in focusing on risks rather than threats, it tends to deal in generalities rather than specifics. Thus, and excepting current operations such as that in Afghanistan, the risks to which the SDSR is tailored tend to be general classes of problem—'fragile states' or 'terrorism', for example—rather than specific challenges. Second, it imposes a much more explicit hierarchy of concern on these risks than earlier capabilities-based approaches, and allocates resources accordingly. Third, it is precautionary, in that it emphasizes the need for conflict prevention and stability management where possible, in order to prevent emergent risks from becoming direct threats. Fourth, it presumes the necessity, and in most cases assumes the certainty, of working with like-minded allied states in managing these risks. Fifth, it incorporates a hierarchy of readiness into force structures, with an emphasis on mechanisms for enhancing strategic warning through intelligence assets and other means. This enables a focus on those forces tailored to the most pressing strategic risks, with others held at low or extended readiness, allowing capabilities to be reconstituted in time and where necessary. Finally, it is part of a formally regularized defence review cycle, to take place every five years.

The increased use of risk assessment and management methodologies is one of the most striking features of contemporary western defence and security policy. It represents an institutional attempt to impose order on complexity and uncertainty, and to provide a coherent framework within which strategic planning and strategy-making can take place. Such approaches explicitly bring risk *into* the defence and strategic planning process. They accept that certain choices bring with them certain risks and even capability gaps, but judge that these are worth accepting given the likely constitution of the security environment over time. It is thus both a response to and a product of the means-based rationality of the risk society. It also poses a series of challenges for civil–military relations and strategy-making in western democracies. These are concerned less with who controls whom in the civil–military relationship and more with how risk is defined, negotiated and managed in the defence and security policy-making milieu.

Institutions and risk

The nature and extent of future risk are inevitably matters of judgement. While different risks may be 'real' in the sense that that they exist as products of the physical environment, the manner in which they are understood, prioritized and acted upon is necessarily subjective.[28] Judgements may differ on how pressing or serious certain risks may be and are likely to be informed by different historical experiences and cultural emphases. Such decisions may also have concrete organizational, financial and political consequences for the institutions and other actors involved. For these reasons, the practice of risk assessment is much more than a simple technical response to the problems of strategic planning in an age of

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[28] Beck, *World risk society*, p. 135; Coker, *War in an age of risk*, pp. 100–101; Krahmann, 'Beck and beyond', p. 6.

uncertainty. It also represents a new arena in which the traditional struggles and rivalries of defence politics can be fought out and regulated. In particular, the question of who gets to define what the risks are and how they should be prioritized has become a defining issue for contemporary civil–military relations.

In the UK case, risk assessment methodologies were employed as a mechanism for rationalizing and implementing defence spending cuts according to a strategic logic of risk. At the same time, however, that logic itself was shaped and even subverted by the institutional interests and competition the SDSR process encouraged and intensified. No one actor—apart, perhaps, from the Treasury with its austerity programme—was able to formulate and defend a distinctive and widely agreed programme of institutional change for British defence through the risk methodologies employed by the SDSR. Instead, the struggles over risk and its strategic and organizational implications coalesced around a series of more parochial narratives and interests. These employed the logic and language of risk to secure and promote specific institutional priorities, but at the expense of the strategic coherence of the review as a whole.

In Britain, the risk assessment approach employed in the 2010 NSS and SDSR was accompanied by a round of swingeing defence cuts. These involved a cut of 8.6 per cent in the defence budget proper, on top of which a series of additional costs—including the need to make up a gap of at least £38 billion between commitments and available resources—brought the final figure considerably higher.[29] Perhaps unsurprisingly, in the lead-up to the SDSR process a fierce battle took place between different groups within the British defence establishment over what should and shouldn't be cut.[30] On the one hand this was unremarkable and predictable; indeed, it would have been surprising if such struggles had not taken place, given the nature of the spending cuts being implemented by the government. However, what is striking is the extent to which these were played out through the logic and language of risk. Thus, for example, the Royal Navy drew extensively on the concept of risk in the defence and promotion of its new carrier programme, highlighting the unpredictability of the future security environment and the need to be prepared to meet a comparator state-based military opponent in the future if such a challenge were to arise.[31] The army approached risk differently, emphasizing the demands of the ongoing mission in Afghanistan, the crucial role of land forces in such counterinsurgency missions, and the risks posed to forces on the ground and to overall operational success if the mission was not properly supported.[32] The Royal Air Force too tried to employ risk to its own advantage, stressing the multi-role capabilities of its Tornado and particularly Typhoon aircraft, and their consequent utility across a range of different risk scenarios.[33]

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[29] Malcolm Chalmers, *Looking into the black hole: is the UK defence budget crisis really over?*, RUSI briefing paper (London: Royal United Services Institute, Sept. 2011), pp. 2–4.
[30] See e.g. 'Naval fury at "underhand" army tactics in defence review', *Daily Telegraph*, 7 Oct. 2010; 'Harrier dispute between navy and RAF chiefs sees army "marriage counsellor" called in', *Sunday Telegraph*, 7 June 2009.
[31] 'The navy strikes back', *Daily Telegraph*, 18 June 2009.
[32] 'Army chief General Sir Dave Richards: Afghanistan must be our top priority', *Daily Telegraph*, 8 June 2010.
[33] 'RAF chief predicts controversial takeover of naval air power', *Daily Telegraph*, 7 June 2009.

Thus different actors within the British defence establishment articulated their respective positions on these issues in terms of risk. In part, this was simply because certain types of risk resonated more keenly for some actors than others—the Royal Navy has traditionally felt a particular responsibility for the defence of national territory, for example—and this influenced its perspectives on what the risks were and what the appropriate balance between them should be. However, they also reflected—and to some extent concealed—significant institutional interests in the defence and strategic planning process. It is clearly no coincidence that each service emphasized an interpretation of risk which favoured its own institutional interests and resourcing priorities. Indeed, it is striking that despite the pervasiveness of the risk assessment methodology employed in the SDSR process, its organizational outcomes were shaped as much by traditional service interests as anything else.[34] The end result was that most actors managed to secure key institutional objectives, but that the document as a whole included numerous points of strategic tension and even contradiction. Thus the navy secured a new carrier, but without any fixed-wing aircraft to fly from it for ten years and at the cost of a significant reduction in the wider surface fleet. The army's mission in Afghanistan was supported, but this is to come to an end in 2014; and it—or anything like it— seems unlikely to be repeated any time soon. The RAF retained its ageing fleet of Tornadoes and protected Typhoon, but lost Harrier, an aircraft arguably better suited to operations in Afghanistan and more recently Libya.

These tensions are indicative of how institutional fault-lines can impact on the civil–military relationship, to the detriment of good strategy-making. As Beck and others have pointed out, because risk is ultimately about dealing with uncertainty and complexity, the judgements required to make decisions about it are often professionally expert in nature.[35] In western systems of civil–military relations, it is expected that judgements over risks and particularly the appropriate capabilities and responses required to meet them will be made by civilians, but closely informed by military professional expertise. This principle, after all, lies at the heart of Samuel Huntington's concept of objective control over the military, in which civilian actors maintain and respect the military's professional space and judgement while the military itself stays out of politics.[36] However, the subjective nature of risk and the institutional interests at stake in particular risk judgements can have a politicizing effect on the expert advice offered to civilian politicians by military actors. At the same time, there is a danger that the strategic coherence of the military voice in strategy-making will be undermined, as each actor within the strategy-making process attempts to promote a narrative of risk which best suits its own institutional interests and priorities.

Both of these tendencies were visible in the UK SDSR process. In part, this was because the speed of the review—conducted over a period of only five months—

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[34] Timothy Edmunds, 'A tough shake-up that just might pay off in 2015', *Parliamentary Brief*, 17 Jan. 2011, http://www.parliamentarybrief.com/2011/01/a-tough-shake-up-that-might-just-pay-off-in, accessed 7 Feb. 2012.

[35] Beck, *Risk society*, p. 23.

[36] Samuel P. Huntington, *The soldier and the state: the theory and politics of civil–military relations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1957), pp. 94–6.

allowed little time for compromise and reflection on key points of tension and contention.[37] However, it was also because of the difficulties of uniting different defence interests in a coordinated vision of strategic risk and marshalling these into an agreed programme of institutional restructuring. The main casualty of this failure was not civilian control over the military, but the effectiveness and coherence of military expertise in strategy-making. As a consequence, the driving logic behind the review became less about good strategy-making in the face of austerity—how to match means and ends with reduced resources—and more about conducting a rearguard action to minimize the impact of Treasury-driven cuts on a case-by-case basis, and according to localized narratives of strategic risk.

Operations and risk

A similar challenge is apparent at the operational level. By its very nature, risk management is a continuous process rather than an end-point. While there may be specific moments of success—such as the defeat of the Taleban in 2001 or the ousting of Saddam Hussein in 2003—the underlying problematic of risk means that such events are rarely the end of the story.[38] At the same time, precautionary actions to address specific risks can in themselves have unintended consequences, among which may be the creation of new risks.[39] Thus the problem of international terrorism was not solved when Al-Qaeda was defeated in Afghanistan, though its character may have altered and its centre of gravity shifted elsewhere. At the same time, the intervention itself created new problems, including a ferocious Taleban insurgency and a resurgence of Islamist activity in Pakistan. In large part, this tendency arises because the challenges of risk do not lend themselves to what Coker describes as 'definitive, linear solutions' or clear victory points.[40] Instead, they consist of multiple, interlinked challenges that are continuous in nature and only rarely susceptible to resolution through military means alone. In this context, the process of 'civilian control' during operations becomes less about who controls whom in the civil–military relationship, and more about how strategy is prioritized, sequenced and mediated among a variety of civil and military actors, often with differing organizational cultures, priorities and approaches, and in a dynamically evolving operational environment.

The UK experience since 2001 is indicative of these challenges. In Iraq, the armed forces were tasked with the broad goal of stabilizing the southern provinces around Basra as part of the wider US-led mission in the country as a whole.[41] In

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[37] Paul Cornish and Andrew M. Dorman, 'Dr Fox and the philosopher's stone: the alchemy of national defence in the age of austerity', *International Affairs* 87: 2, March 2011, pp. 338–9.

[38] Coker, *War in an age of risk*, pp. 154–8.

[39] Rasmussen, *The risk society at war*, pp. 129–31.

[40] Coker, *War in an age of risk*, pp. 154–5; Robert Mandel, 'Reassessing victory in warfare', *Armed Forces and Society* 33: 4, 2007, pp. 462–6.

[41] On the British military experience in Iraq, see Anthony King, 'Military command in the last decade', *International Affairs* 87: 2, March 2011, pp. 377–84; Peter Mansoor, 'The British army and the lessons of the Iraq war', *British Army Review*, no. 147, 2009, pp. 11–15; David Ucko, 'Lessons from Basra: the future of British counter-insurgency', *Survival* 52: 4, 2010, pp. 131–58.

Afghanistan, the military was deployed in support of the NATO International Security Assistance Force, initially in the north of the country, but from 2006 in the volatile southern province of Helmand.[42] The early strategic goals of these operations were exceptionally broad—bringing security and stabilization as part of wider, multinational, processes of post-conflict reconstruction—and premised on the relatively benign peacekeeping missions of the 1990s. However, the operational environments in Iraq and Afghanistan proved to be considerably more complex, difficult and violent than their predecessors. In both cases, the armed forces failed to anticipate the insurgencies which erupted in 2006–2007 and, once they had begun, then struggled to contain them. In Iraq, the army withdrew ignominiously from Basra in 2008. In Helmand, it was drawn into some of the fiercest fighting British armed forces have seen since the Second World War, with numerous tactical successes but only hesitant progress towards the stabilization of the province as a whole.[43]

Some of the reasons for these difficulties are specific to the UK case, including aspects of British military culture and doctrine which shaped the armed forces' response to these challenges.[44] However, others are indicative of the underlying problematic of war in the risk society and the difficulty of adapting existing patterns of civil–military relations to meet it. So, for example, civilian politicians were overly ambitious and insufficiently purposive in their commitment of the armed forces and other actors to these missions, particularly as the operational situation evolved (and escalated) over time. While both operations began as actions to impose specific outcomes through use of military force—the overthrow of the Iraqi regime and of the Taleban—they rapidly evolved into much more wide-ranging and ambitious insecurity management missions. Within the broad strategic narratives of stabilization and insecurity management, in both cases there was little specificity in terms of linking military means to clear policy ends. In each case, a number of different objectives existed alongside and sometimes in tension with each other, including tasks such as eliminating Al-Qaeda, defeating insurgency, supporting local governance capacities, protecting human rights, combating the narcotics trade and fostering the rule of law. At the same time, the armed forces were only one actor among many working towards these objectives: others included development agencies, NGOs, local partners, international organizations and allied armed forces.[45] Until 2009 at least, institutional mecha-

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[42] On the British military experience in Afghanistan, see Rudra Chaudhuri and Theo Farrell, 'Campaign disconnect: operational progress and strategic obstacles in Afghanistan', *International Affairs* 87: 2, March 2011, pp. 271–96; Theo Farrell, 'Improving in war: military adaptation and the British in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, 2006–2009', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 33: 4, 2010, pp. 567–94; House of Commons Defence Committee (HoCDC), *Operations in Afghanistan*, Fourth Report of the Session 2010–12, HC 554 (London: The Stationery Office, 17 July 2011); Anthony King, 'Understanding the Helmand campaign: British military operations in Afghanistan', *International Affairs* 86: 2, March 2010, pp. 311–32; King, 'Military command', pp. 377–84.

[43] Chaudhuri and Farrell, 'Campaign disconnect', pp. 271–2.

[44] King, 'Military command', pp. 388–93; Ucko, 'Lessons from Basra', pp. 134–6.

[45] HoCDC, *The comprehensive approach: the point of war is not just to win but to make a better peace* (London: TSO, 18 March 2010), http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmdfence/224/224.pdf, pp. 49–65, accessed 7 Feb. 2012.

nisms for civil–military coordination struggled to prioritize and sequence these tasks and actors in a strategically coherent manner, with, for example, the UK Department for International Development working to different operational priorities—and facing quite different operational constraints and challenges—from its military counterparts.[46]

Military commanders were also overoptimistic or reticent in communicating the demands of these operations to their civilian masters, in large part because of a systemic underestimation of the continuous, iterative demands of the missions in which they were engaged, a lack of specificity and continuity in strategic planning, and a failure to recognize change and escalation in the situation on the ground.[47] This in turn encouraged a tactical adaptation to circumstance rather than a more strategic linkage of means and ends, and reinforced the tendency towards 'mission creep' at the political level. So, for example, the decision to redeploy UK armed forces to Helmand in 2006 was part of a wider NATO decision to secure the south and east of Afghanistan. Yet it was implemented with only scant consideration of the strategic ends of the mission, the necessary ways and means required to meet these, and the wider impact of the deployment on British military strategy in Iraq.[48] The number of troops deployed proved inadequate for the task they were eventually expected to fulfil, and there was a shortage of enabling capabilities such as helicopters and protected vehicles. Once on the ground, the mission quickly escalated from the initial plan to establish a central 'lozenge of security' around key population centres and military bases to a much more ambitious and ultimately unrealistic 'platoon house strategy', in which forces were dispersed to provide security throughout the province as a whole.[49]

Finally, while the logic of risk tied the UK into significant and continuing commitments to both operations, it did not furnish sufficient political capital to sustain them properly. In both cases, forces could not be withdrawn from theatre after the immediate military goal was achieved. Doing so would have created new risks: increased insecurity in the countries and regions concerned; damage to the UK's multinational security relationships, alliance commitments and reputation, particularly with the US; and potentially political fallout at home.[50] Yet neither conflict, at least after the initial stage, was premised on a clear and immediate threat to UK security, and neither was popular among the electorate at home. In both cases, the British military contribution was part of a wider multinational effort, in which the US was the dominant actor and the primary driver of overall strategy. While the British contribution to Iraq and Afghanistan was important, in neither case was it definitive or, ultimately, indispensable. In this context, civilian politicians were reluctant to make a commitment to the scale of military effort that was increasingly required, leaving the armed forces to make the best of the resources they had to sustain a rolling, and increasingly demanding, status quo

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[46] HoCDC, *The comprehensive approach*, pp. 21–6.
[47] HoCDC, *Operations in Afghanistan*, pp. 23–5.
[48] HoCDC, *Operations in Afghanistan*, pp. 22–3.
[49] HoCDC, *Operations in Afghanistan*, pp. 18–29; King, 'Understanding the Helmand campaign', pp. 314–21.
[50] King, 'Military command', pp. 388–90; HoCDC, *Operations in Afghanistan*, pp. 60–65.

of insecurity management. In many ways, this final aspect underlies many of the others and is, in turn, indicative of a wider, more fundamental, challenge that risk poses for civil–military relations: the question of how to sustain the legitimacy of such conflicts among sceptical western publics.

The public and risk

In western democracies, war and strategy-making cannot take place in isolation from the domestic political and societal context. Any decision to go to war will generally have to be approved or condoned at some point by a parliamentary body or its equivalent. Beyond that, the prosecution of war will be subject to a rolling process of scrutiny, both through formal mechanisms such as legislative scrutiny committees and also in the media, on the internet and so on. Defence and security budgets are themselves subject to public approval in one way or another, and often face competition from other areas of political priority, including for example spending on health or education. Of course, under most circumstances democratic governments are still able to engage in unpopular wars and make unpopular policy and public spending choices if they so choose. However, doing so threatens negative political consequences and organizational risk to the armed forces themselves, both in terms of their reputation and in terms of issues such as recruitment and retention of personnel.

The logic of risk offers particular challenges in this area, connected to the problem of commitment identified by Coker and discussed above. Identification of risks is predicated on expert-informed judgements about the potential for threat in a complex and uncertain security environment, while the practice of risk management aims to prevent such risks emerging as threats. For the populations of western societies, this presents a more distant relationship to threat than was the case during more traditional periods of military confrontation, such as the Cold War. While specific incidents may shift this dynamic considerably—the impact of the 9/11 attacks on US public opinion is a dramatic example of this—it is generally the case that military threat perceptions among western populations remain at a historically low point.[51] In this context, sustaining public support and legitimacy for military operations can be a more difficult process than was the case in the past, and notions of the uncontested public good and national interest may be challenged.

In the UK case, the elite consensus on the security challenges of the risk society has a far less certain purchase among the general public as a whole. This is most apparent with regard to the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. In both cases, public support for these missions has been hedged at best, or minimal at worst. According to the polling organization Ipsos MORI, public approval for the government's handling of the war in Iraq peaked at 36 per cent during the 2003 invasion itself, but subsequently, and steadily, declined to only 17 per cent in May

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[51] See e.g. European Commission, *Eurobarometer 75*, Spring 2011, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb75/eb75_publ_en.pdf, p. 12, accessed 7 Feb. 2012.

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2007.[52] Support for the war in Afghanistan was always higher than for that in Iraq, but even here by 2009 a majority of the public opposed Britain's involvement, and by 2011 81 per cent supported the withdrawal of UK forces before 2014.[53] In part, this lack of support derives from the specific contexts and conduct of these particular wars. However, it also reflects a wider ambiguity regarding the armed forces' expeditionary role. Opinion poll data consistently show that the British general public sees homeland defence as the armed forces' most important, even definitive, mission. In contrast, risk management operations, such as preventing the proliferation of WMD or dealing with international crises, are assigned a much lower priority.[54]

Despite this popular scepticism towards the missions in which they are engaged, the public standing of the British armed forces remains high, perhaps higher than at any point since the Second World War. This is indicated both by public opinion polls and also in the extraordinary public displays of commemoration for the repatriated bodies of dead soldiers at Wootton Bassett and later Carterton. Even so, it is striking that the positive image of the military in the public imagination focuses more on the individual serviceman or woman than on the armed forces as an instrument of national defence and security.[55] Questions over the state's duty of care for military personnel and their families have been perhaps the most prominent feature of UK military–society relations in recent years, with successive public scandals over issues such as the treatment of wounded soldiers, inadequate military housing or the provision of appropriate equipment on operations.[56] Concern for the individual serviceman or woman thus pervades UK public engagement with war in the risk society. However, this does not appear to be accompanied by any strong connection with the military mission more widely or any strong sense that it is being conducted in pursuit of the collective national interest.

The political response to this public dissonance has been threefold. First, there have been successive calls to invigorate public diplomacy in order better to explain and communicate the rationale for such operations.[57] Second, the government has moved to address some of the incapacities for which it had been criticized through the Urgent Operational Requirement process and the SDSR. Finally, the government has introduced a new Armed Forces Covenant, formalized in law, which outlines the principles and obligations of the government and society

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[52] Ipsos MORI, *War with Iraq: trends (2002–2007)*, 31 May 2007, http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/55/War-With-Iraq-Trends-20022007.aspx?view=wide, accessed 7 Feb. 2012.

[53] Ipsos MORI, 'Attitudes to Afghanistan campaign', 24 July 2009, http://www.ipsos-mori.com/research publications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oItemId=2414, accessed 8 Feb. 2012; Gareth Price, 'Afghanistan: consensus on withdrawal', in Robin Niblett, ed., *The Chatham House–YouGov Survey 2011: British attitudes towards the UK's international priorities—survey analysis* (London: Chatham House, July 2011), p. 17.

[54] Helen McCartney, 'The military covenant and the civil–military covenant in Britain', *International Affairs* 86: 2, March 2010, p. 45; Niblett, ed., *The Chatham House–YouGov Survey 2011*, p. 17.

[55] Anthony King, 'The Afghan war and "postmodern" memory: commemoration and the dead of Helmand', *British Journal of Sociology* 61: 1, 2010, p. 10.

[56] Timothy Edmunds and Anthony Forster, *Out of step: the case for change in the British armed forces* (London: Demos, 2007), pp. 69–73.

[57] See e.g. HoCPAC, *Who does UK national strategy?*, p. 17; HoCDC, *The comprehensive approach*, pp. 34–5; HoCDC, *The Strategy Defence and Security Review*, p. 78.

in their relationship with servicemen and women, in areas ranging from terms and conditions of service to housing and health care, family life and support after service.[58]

Even so, the impact of these measures has so far been limited. Selling the Afghan war to the British public has proved easier said than done, with a continuing discrepancy between those who say they understand the aims and objectives of the mission (57 per cent) and those who think it will be effective in achieving its aims (38 per cent).[59] New equipment for the military has been welcomed; however, this has not been accompanied by a step change in the amount people are willing to pay towards defence, particularly if this means higher taxes or reductions in other areas of public spending.[60] The Armed Forces Covenant formalizes the moral contract between the state and the military, but in a manner which further emphasizes the significance of the individual serviceman or women within the military institution as a whole.[61]

The British public have thus struggled to engage with the strategic logic and narratives of risk. This tendency has been particularly pronounced with regard to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, where the human and financial cost has been high, and the end-point ambiguous and distant. However, as Anthony Forster notes, it has also been apparent in respect of earlier, less troublesome military interventions such as those in Kosovo and Sierra Leone, where public engagement was characterized by neither support nor opposition, but indifference—a pattern which appears to have been repeated during the 2011 military intervention in Libya.[62] For Forster and others such as Helen McCartney, this is indicative of a more conditional understanding of the obligations of citizenship during wars of choice.[63] It seems the British public may be willing to accept the management of risk when the demands of doing so are low; however, they appear far less convinced by such actions when costs and commitments rise, exhibiting at best a resigned tolerance and at worst outright opposition.

Strategic ennui and the West

For the UK, the logic of risk poses a profound challenge to traditional patterns of strategy-making and civil–military relations. On the one hand, it provides the framework through which the defence establishment interprets the interna-

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[58] MoD, *Armed Forces Covenant*, May 2011, http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/4E9E2014-5CE6-43F2-AE28-B6C5FA90B68F/0/Armed_Forces_Covenant.pdf, accessed 8 Feb. 2012.

[59] Ipsos MORI, 'Attitudes to Afghanistan campaign'.

[60] See e.g. *Ministry of Defence and armed forces reputation and defence research Autumn 2008*, http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/2A7285C0-1C10-4F03-B039-AA7EB7A35DF8/0/2008sept_public_opinion.pdf, 8 Feb. 2012, p. 13.

[61] Timothy Edmunds, 'This new military covenant may be law, but will it be honoured?', *Parliamentary Brief*, 12 June 2011, http://www.parliamentarybrief.com/2011/07/this-new-military-covenant-may-be-law-but-will-it#all, accessed 7 Feb. 2012.

[62] Anthony Forster, 'The military, war and the state: testing authority, jurisdiction, allegiance and obedience', *Defense and Security Analysis* 27: 1, 2011, p. 62; Reuters/Ipsos MORI, 'International poll on Libya', 12 April 2011, http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/2763/ReutersIpsos-MORI-International- poll-on-Libya.aspx, accessed 7 Feb. 2012.

[63] Forster, 'The military, war and the state', p. 62; McCartney, 'The military covenant', p. 415.

tional security environment. It thus represents an institutional attempt to impose strategic order on uncertainty and complexity. On the other hand, the need to make subjective judgements on levels of risk exposes this framework to ideational contestation and material competition, both within civil–military relations and in the military–society relationship more widely. These are exacerbated by the complex nature of such judgements, which engender a reliance on experts and are predicated on the precautionary management of potential insecurities rather than the direct amelioration of threat, and by resource constraint. At the same time, the rolling, long-term nature of such actions clouds the relationship between means and ends in strategy-making and obscures a clear, uncontested sense of the national interest from which to drive policy. In this context, risk makes it more difficult to justify the extraordinary in terms of the costs that society is prepared to bear in the practice of risk management, whether in terms of the resources allocated to defence or in terms of the national commitment to operations.

How far is the UK experience transferable to other western states? Certainly, there is much about the British case that is distinctive and particular. However, it is also indicative of trends that are visible elsewhere, including the need to deal with complexity and uncertainty in the security environment, the proliferation of risk assessment methodologies and the need to make public spending cuts in response to economic crisis. Thus, despite its full spectrum predominance, the US defence establishment has also been stretched and tested by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It too faces increasingly urgent budgetary pressures and the need to make trade-offs in defence.[64] While the 9/11 attacks fostered a sense of popular threat and national interest which drove the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, this has not been shared to the same degree in respect of Libya, or indeed in respect of earlier interventions in Somalia or the Balkans. In Europe, the problematic of risk is played out through debates over burden-sharing in NATO and these countries' contributions to multinational military operations in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Indeed, the contested nature of risk, and the manner in which military and strategic responses are shaped and constrained by domestic political context, are particularly visible in this respect.[65]

For the West, therefore, it is apparent that the logic of risk does not provide the same national motivation and sense of strategic purpose as the logic of threat. Against this background, calls for a reinvigoration of traditional strategic thinking or a renewed conception of national interest among western states may be missing a more fundamental dissonance between defence policy, civil–military relations and the wider security context. In this respect, the strategic ennui experienced by many western states may not simply be a question of somehow falling out of the habit of strategy-making or an absence of 'political will'. Instead, it may reflect deeper social and geostrategic trends which constrain and complicate the use of military force, and obscure its utility in the public imagination. The question how

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[64] US DoD, *Sustaining US global leadership: priorities for 21st century defense*, Jan. 2012, http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf, accessed 7 Feb. 2012; US DoD, *QDR*, pp. x–xi.
[65] Williams, *NATO, security and risk management*, pp. 115–17.

long such a situation will endure is itself a component of the risk problematic. Certainly, strategic shocks, such as that experienced by the US on 9/11, have the potential to reinvigorate popular and political engagement with strategy. However, in their absence it seems likely that strategy-making by western states in the foreseeable future will continue to be contested and hedged. The challenge for policy-makers will be to refashion their civil–military relations into forms that are able to recognize these constraints, marshal the various interests within them and transform the strategic narrative of risk into coherent strategy.