

## NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

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# Winning On Wicked Issues

Faced with the risks of organised crime, terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the public likes to believe that government is doing all it can to protect them. The idea that there might be inertia, or turf wars between departments charged with keeping them safe, is deeply disturbing. Now, the British government is publishing its first national security strategy, a chance to assess the threats and how best to respond.

**b** BRITISH GOVERNMENTS HAVE RARELY taken a strategic approach to national security, preferring instead to focus separately on issues of defence, foreign affairs, development and intelligence.

Invariably, this has led to narrow strategies, which have centred on individual Whitehall departments, or created new agencies and units to meet emerging security challenges.

In the wake of September 11 2001 for instance, the Security Service MI5 moved away from managing a portfolio of risks, which included organised crime, to focus almost entirely on the threat from international terrorism. Nearly all the service's work on organised crime was passed to the Serious Organised Crime Agency, an

amalgamation of a number of different organisations including the National Crime Squad and National Criminal Intelligence Service, which was established by the Serious Organised Crime and Police Bill of 2005.

Current operations, policy decisions and legislation also prevent the government from taking a strategic approach. At present most of the Ministry of Defence's time and resources are devoted to operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, while the new Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism, based in the Home Office, focuses on counter terrorism, rather than wider security issues, as originally envisaged by the former Home Secretary John Reid.

## CLAIM & COUNTER CLAIM

As the connections between development, foreign affairs and national security become more apparent, the 2002 International Development Act, which formalised aid funding, is raising a number of concerns. Some analysts question whether aid policy can remain independent from foreign policy and, given the current constraints on public spending, whether a ring-fenced aid budget is the best use of scarce resources.

Most important of all, an institutional bias is alive and well in Westminster, Whitehall and beyond. Instead of discussing the global risks to Britain, recent debate on national security has focused on the roles of government institutions rather than the problems that need to be solved.

Some commentators have lamented the decline of the Foreign Office, while others have questioned the increase in spending on development aid at a time when savings have to be found in the defence budget. It is a depressing cycle of claim and counter claim which smacks of short-termism and a lack of leadership across government.

## FRAGMENTATION

In reality, governments today are responding to complex issues, known as wicked problems, that are unbounded in time, scope and resources and cannot be managed by a single organisation. In the twenty-first century security environment separate ideas of 'intelligence', 'defence', 'foreign affairs' and 'development' are therefore becoming increasingly redundant. At best they tend to confuse roles and responsibilities rather than clarify accountability. At worst they act as barriers to collaborative ventures across government, strengthening the existing separate silo mentality and ensuring that those in power cannot create the effect they require.

While fragile states, organised crime and the threat from international terrorism, for example, all present security challenges to the British government, it is the complex interactions between them that create the context for today's and tomorrow's agenda. Taking a fragmented approach to security creates the risk of missed opportunities and surprises further down line and leaves both the government and the public less resilient to shocks and disruptions.

## AVOIDING COLLISIONS

The publication of the country's first national security strategy therefore marks a radically different approach to defence, foreign and domestic policy. While decision-making has moved on since Lord Salisbury's remark that English policy is to float lazily



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downstream, occasionally putting out a diplomatic boathook to avoid collisions, policy is still often based on little or no discernable strategy. The new strategy will therefore be welcome as a crucial opportunity to assess present and future security challenges and how best to respond.

The new approach has been strengthened further by the creation of a national security committee in the Cabinet Office. It was ultimately a compromise between those who favoured having a US-style National Security Council versus the strengths of the traditional cabinet committee structure.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the result was a new Committee on National Security, International Relations and Development, chaired by the prime minister himself and replacing the existing ministerial committees on Defence and Overseas Policy, Europe and Security and Terrorism. While both the national security strategy and the new committee are steps in the right direction, it is hoped the government will go further and create a national security secretariat.

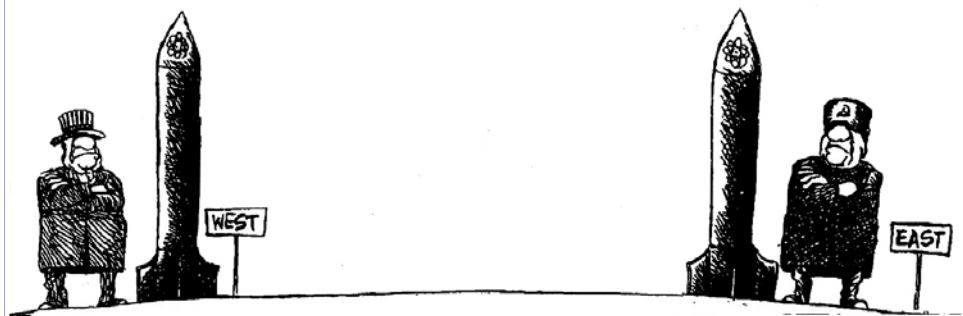
There is no doubt that this government recognises the size and nature of these threats and hazards, but not everyone has been convinced of the need for a national security strategy. The intellectual argument for such a strategy still needs to be won, especially with those in government who see this new approach as a threat to Whitehall's traditional way of working, rather than an attempt to build on the strengths of the system.

## TRANSFORMATION

This is only the beginning of a process of transforming how government manages national security. In the short and medium term the strategy will help highlight where there is progress and areas that need improvement and reform. However the most challenging aspect of organising government around a revised concept of national security will be how departments and agencies adapt to new structures and cultures.

In some areas the government has attempted this but it has not led to any

## Old World Order



## New World Order



obvious impact on the structures and processes of security, especially when compared with the reorganisation and culture change of public service reform. This is primarily because the idea of properly coordinated – or joined-up – government, particularly in national security, has never really addressed the underlying logic of Whitehall, challenging departmental structures or encouraging policymakers to work more effectively with practitioners and other interested parties.

The national security strategy could play a major role in how government responds to global risks but it must also start a transformation in how government organises to deal with threats and hazards now and in the future.

Whitehall may believe that its joined-up approach to national security is the envy of the world but more often than not it is a reputation built on sand. The familiar issues of bureaucratic inertia, turf wars between departments and inevitable clashes over resources, will undoubtedly remain for some time, but there must be a concerted drive to remove them from the culture of government. The new security strategy is an opportunity for government to transform its approach to tackling the complex security issues of today and tomorrow and in doing so adopt a strategic approach to managing the global risks of the future.

