



# Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy

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From: Margaret Beckett, Chair

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP  
Prime Minister  
(By e-mail)

29 October 2020

Dear Prime Minister,

## **The Integrated Review and biosecurity**

The Joint Committee intended to pass to the Government some interim recommendations from our inquiry into *Biosecurity and national security* that should be taken into account in the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development & Foreign Policy. However, on 21 October, exactly three months after launching the multi-year Comprehensive Spending Review,<sup>1</sup> the Chancellor announced that instead the Government would publish the results of a 'one-year Spending Review' in 'the last weeks of November',<sup>2</sup> leaving the Government considering the implications for the completion of the Integrated Review.

With significant and concerning uncertainty about whether the Integrated Review will be delayed, or published incomplete, or else be unfunded or stripped of choices that have spending implications, I am writing now on behalf of the Committee to highlight not just lessons from our Biosecurity inquiry but also the importance of the Integrated Review adhering to the principles set out by our predecessor Committee's examination of previous national security strategies (NSSs) and strategic defence & security reviews (SDSRs). As we discuss more fully below, the Government should ensure that the Integrated Review:

- considers all aspects of national security together;
- funds its results fully and adequately;
- addresses continuing geopolitical challenges honestly and more explicitly;
- treats with similar priority all highest 'tier' national security risks, including pandemics, in terms of contingency planning, resource allocation, capability-building and testing exercises;

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<sup>1</sup> Govt press release, 21 July 2020, [Chancellor launches Comprehensive Spending Review](#)

<sup>2</sup> Govt press release, 21 October 2020, [Spending Review to conclude late November](#)

- includes a renewed focus on building national resilience, not just as a domestic *internal* national security issue but as a component of the UK's *external* security capability and soft power;
- embeds the changing nature of defence and national security technologies, including those linked to the pandemic, in the Government's procurement plans and budgets; and
- strengthens governance structures for preparing for and responding to future pandemics, major natural hazards and other emergencies, recognising that many security challenges cut across all parts of government and lie outside the traditional national security departments.

The Government would avoid many of the pitfalls that we highlight below if the Chancellor's forthcoming Spending Review could include multi-year allocations for at least the principal elements of national security spending. If that is not possible, then there are, we believe, more disadvantages than benefits in producing an un-costed Integrated Review this autumn (rather than later), not least while there remain uncertainties also about the consequences of the forthcoming US Administration and a post-Brexit settlement.

### **Lessons for the Integrated Review from previous defence and security reviews**

*The Integrated Review must consider all aspects of national security together.*

1. Since the publication of the first National Security Strategy in 2008, successive governments have sought to integrate defence and security capabilities more coherently in making and delivering national security policy. It was primarily for this reason that the National Security Council was established in 2010, and the 2010 national security review considered defence and security capabilities together for the first time: a practice that was continued in 2015's exercise. Its importance prompted our predecessor Committee to criticise the separation of the defence element — the Modernising Defence Programme — from the 2018 National Security Capability Review.
2. We welcomed the Government's explicit inclusion of the different components of national security at the commencement of the Integrated Review, which it said would represent "the largest review of the UK's foreign, defence, security and development policy since the end of the Cold War", and would consider "the totality of global opportunities and challenges the UK faces" and "how the whole of government can be structured, equipped and mobilised to meet them".<sup>3</sup> The Covid pandemic has indeed highlighted the importance of a

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<sup>3</sup> [Written Statement](#), 26 February 2020; Govt press release, [PM outlines new review to define Britain's place in the world](#), 26 February 2020.

cross-Government, cross-sectoral, approach to preparedness and resilience to security risks.

3. The Government will have failed to learn the lessons of previous reviews if at this late juncture it produces only an incomplete analysis of intended national security objectives and capabilities simply because it has not been possible to determine the means – the funding –required to deliver them. Without a published Government-wide Integrated Review, for example, questions will remain about the wider policy implications of the MoD’s new ‘Integrated Operating Concept’: What, for example, are the implications of the Concept’s focus on forward deployments and short-of-war campaigning for the relationship between our conventional and nuclear deterrents? Without an Integrated Review, other departments’ similar potential ‘concepts’ – in FCDO, the Home Office and others – will run similar risks of remaining locked in departmental silos, with none of them reflecting the interplay of the many different components of national security. The balance and interaction of the UK’s soft power and hard power (not just military capabilities but also sanctions, trade policy, protection of key technologies, and the strategic use of ODA), and any adjustment required in that balance in the future, will remain invisible and unactioned.

*All aspects of the Review’s proposals need to be fully and adequately funded.*

4. Our predecessor Committee demanded the filling of the “significant structural hole” in the defence budget in the 2015 NSS & SDSR, which had continued a longstanding failure to match ambition with capabilities and funding.<sup>4</sup> The Committee was also concerned, subsequently, about over-committed and unaffordable defence funding, as well as the separate consideration of defence priorities, in 2018’s Modernising Defence Programme. This exposed a long-term Whitehall fault-line between defence and other security-related departments and policies.<sup>5</sup> Part of the answer was for next NSS & SDSR — now the Integrated Review — to be held alongside a Spending Review.<sup>6</sup> We therefore welcomed the Government’s commitment in February 2020 that the Integrated Review would be “closely aligned with this year’s Comprehensive Spending Review, but will also look beyond it”.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> JCNSS, First Report 2017-19, [National Security Capability Review: A changing security environment](#), HL 104, paras 32, 34

<sup>5</sup> JCNSS, Fourth Report 2017-19, [Revisiting the UK’s national security strategy: The National Security Capability Review and the Modernising Defence Programme](#), HC 2072, para 43; HL 104, para 59

<sup>6</sup> HL 104, paras 55, 63

<sup>7</sup> [Written Statement](#), 26 February 2020

5. The full public finance implications of the pandemic are uncertain, and the decision to delay the multi-year Spending Review is perhaps understandable. It is imperative, however, that departmental budgets are part and parcel of the Integrated Review's output, and that a long-term settlement is provided for national security programmes which look beyond any short-term Covid-induced constraints on overall Government spending. Without tying the Integrated Review to the Spending Review, there will be real doubts about whether, for example, the MoD's recently announced 'Integrated Operating Concept 2025' will be delivered, or more worryingly whether the savings from decommissioning legacy 'sunset' equipment programmes will be banked while the new 'sunrise' technologies (and the operational improvements linked to their use) are under-funded and delayed.<sup>8</sup> Other departments, similarly, need financial certainty to be able to plan for their national security related programmes, including their own versions of 'sunrise' and 'sunset' programmes.
6. Even a one-year Spending Review risks prolonging current spending priorities and delaying the longer-term development of national security capabilities and cross-cutting initiatives. If the Integrated Review is produced this autumn alongside only a one-year settlement, it should set out how much of the Review's output is tied to that short-term settlement and how much will still need budget changes beyond 2020-21.

*Continuing geopolitical challenges must be addressed honestly and more explicitly.*

7. Our predecessor Committee, in examining the National Security Capability Review (a 'refresh' NSS & SDSR), noted the changing geopolitical landscape that had helped to initiate that 2018 Review. The Committee highlighted a changing security environment, as well as intensifying and diversifying threats to the UK, including cyberattacks, the erosion of a rules-based international order and the antagonism of Russia and China. Our predecessor Committee identified four areas where the cornerstones of national security were then at risk of being undermined: growing strains in the relationship with the US; uncertainty over our security relationships with Europe post-Brexit; a lack of clarity and continuing avoidance of "honest conversations" about the UK's position on China; and the impact of the relative power shift away from the West on the UK's ability to protect its security and wider values and interests through the international system.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> MoD, [Introducing the Integrated Operating Concept 2025](#), 30 September 2020

<sup>9</sup> HC 2072, paras 19-20

8. These challenges remain salient today, and need to be fully addressed in the Integrated Review. Any more explicit focus on China or Russia should be accompanied by an explicit assessment of the UK's policy on 'legacy' issues such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya (including what has been learnt from such interventions, both for defence and for our development /nation-building efforts more generally), as well as the capability mix that that implies. The Integrated Review, as our predecessors urged in 2019, should go back to first principles “to chart a more nuanced course in the coming years, as the direction and influence of key countries such as the US and China change unpredictably, and following [the UK's] departure from the European Union”.<sup>10</sup>
9. It is encouraging, therefore, to hear the Government's commitment that the Integrated Review, in reassessing the UK's priorities and ambition, has involved “going back to first principles on the UK's foreign policy and national security objectives”.<sup>11</sup> Clearly, such a fundamental reassessment will be required if the Government is to deliver on its commitment to frame UK policy for the next decade, rather than for the five-year cycle of previous defence and security reviews.<sup>12</sup>
10. There were other steers that our predecessor Committee identified, covering, for example, the need to reflect the changing nature of security-relevant advanced technologies, as well as the importance of the multi-sector Fusion Doctrine approach and societal resilience to a range of threats. We address these aspects in our comments on biosecurity, below.

### **Additional lessons for the Integrated Review from our Biosecurity inquiry**

11. In our *Biosecurity and national security* inquiry, continuing work by our predecessor Committee from the last Parliament, we have sought to examine the Government's strategies for preparedness and resilience against biosecurity risks such as pandemics, and the role of the national security machinery in these areas. These are clearly issues for the Integrated Review.

*The Integrated Review should ensure that all risks at the highest 'tier' are treated with similar priority in terms of contingency planning, resource allocation, capability-building and testing exercises.*

12. Past national security reviews recognised the potential harm that both manmade threats

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<sup>10</sup> HC 2072, para 51

<sup>11</sup> [Letter to Committees from Alex Ellis, Deputy National Security Adviser](#), 8 July 2020

<sup>12</sup> [Written Statement](#), 26 February 2020

and natural hazards pose to the UK and its interests.<sup>13</sup> However, the Biological Security Strategy recognised in 2018 that there has been a growing likelihood of disruptive natural hazards because of, for example, greater international travel, trade, urbanisation and climate change.<sup>14</sup> The Government Chief Scientific Adviser, and others, told us last month that natural hazards like pandemics and antimicrobial resistance pose a greater risk to the UK and its interests than malicious biological threats.<sup>15</sup>

13. Despite this, only two out of 89 commitments in the 2015 Strategic Defence & Security Review explicitly addressed public health risks, even though these were identified as a Tier One national security risk. Those commitments related to providing response assistance abroad and producing a Biological Security Strategy.<sup>16</sup> By comparison, addressing cyber threats, another Tier One risk, involved 12 explicit commitments.<sup>17</sup> That unbalance was reflected in the evidence we heard in July from Sir Mark Sedwill, the then National Security Adviser, who intimated that threats may have been prioritised at the expense of hazards. He suggested that Government typically organises itself around threats (such as state-based threats and terrorist threats), even though hazards can have “more severe consequences than any of the classic national security threats”.<sup>18</sup>

14. From our inquiry’s evidence so far, it appears that, despite the ability of pandemics to significantly affect our health and prosperity for a prolonged period, mitigating actions for hazards may have received less funding and resources than threats, and that may have undermined cross-Whitehall planning and local-level testing exercises. The Integrated Review should ensure that all risks at the highest ‘tier’ are treated with similar priority in terms of contingency planning, resource allocation, capability-building and testing exercises. That means also treating natural hazard risks and malicious threats in a more balanced way. The Integrated Review should also reassess more generally how well the risk assessment process is used to help formulate NSSs and SDSRs.

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<sup>13</sup> The 2015 NSRA identified Tier One security risks, including malicious threats (terrorism, cyber, international military conflict and instability overseas) and natural hazards (disease, antimicrobial resistance, severe weather, major flooding). The 2018 National Security Capability Review included malicious threats and natural hazards when listing the six challenges that would drive security priorities over the next decade.

<sup>14</sup> The UK [Biological Security Strategy](#), pp. 11-12.

<sup>15</sup> Sir Patrick Vallance, Clara Swinson, DHSC, and Professor John Simpson, PHE, oral evidence to the JCNSS, 19 October 2020, [Q33](#)

<sup>16</sup> [National Security Capability Review, Annex](#), commitments 43 and 70.

<sup>17</sup> Commitments 1, 29-37, 75, 83.

<sup>18</sup> Sir Mark Sedwill, oral evidence to the JCNSS, 8 July 2020, [Q14](#)

*The Integrated Review should ensure a renewed focus on building national resilience.*

15. Our predecessor Committee in 2018 emphasised the importance of building national resilience. It highlighted how resilience was needed to deal with terrorist and cyber attacks and foreign states' disruptive propaganda. The Committee noted the importance for empowered citizens and of "regular crisis management exercises that involve the Government, businesses and society". The Committee recommended that the Government set out its plans to develop community and societal resilience to a range of threats, its plans for future crisis management exercises, and information about the types of scenarios being tested and the participants involved.<sup>19</sup>
16. Our predecessor Committee saw resilience as a test for the "whole-of-government effort" approach of the 'Fusion Doctrine' (see paragraph 23 below), announced in the 2018 National Security Capability Review. The then National Security Adviser highlighted how the Government's response to the Salisbury poisoning demonstrated the value of that approach.<sup>20</sup> Domestic security and international security were increasingly indivisible. Like serious organised crime and other national security risks, the Covid pandemic has demonstrated how national and international security are linked — in Covid's case not just in the context of threats but also natural hazards — with a need for our domestic and international response to be considered together and co-ordinated.
17. Some witnesses in our current inquiry have highlighted the UK's lower resilience and community preparedness than elsewhere.<sup>21</sup> There are also concerns that while Local Resilience Forums have worked incredibly hard and played a significant part in helping to tackle the pandemic, the interaction of local and national management of the crisis has been ad hoc and sometimes sub-optimal. There have been disconnections in terms of data sharing. There must be a concern also about how well LRF staff can continue to manage the pressures they are undoubtedly under.<sup>22</sup>
18. These are all areas which should be matters for the Integrated Review. The Integrated Review appears, however, to have turned to the question of resilience late in the day. In July it announced that it had undertaken new analysis of policy areas affected by Covid, including on "intensified geopolitical competition; the effect of this competition on our ability

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<sup>19</sup> HL 104, paras 87-90

<sup>20</sup> HC 2072, para 57

<sup>21</sup> Dr Patricia Lewis and Dr Jennifer Cole, oral evidence to JCNSS, 7 September 2020, [Q14](#)

<sup>22</sup> [Nottingham Trent University & C-19 National Foresight Group](#) written evidence (BNS0017)

to work with others in tackling global issues of strategic importance to the UK, such as global health; and *domestic and international resilience*, such as the security of international supply chains in strategic sectors”.<sup>23</sup> Then, in its August call-for-evidence, the Government sought information on how the UK could “maximise its resilience to natural hazards and malicious threats” and “build a whole of society approach to tackle these challenges”.<sup>24</sup>

19. The Government must carry through on its intention for the Integrated Review to focus on resilience. But resilience is not just a domestic *internal* national security issue. The Review should also address how resilience could be a key component of the UK’s *external* security capabilities, as part its soft power projection but also itself as a deterrent against external threats and hazards.

*The Integrated Review should embed the changing nature of defence and national security technology in the Government’s procurement plans and budgets.*

20. Our predecessor Committee noted how the defence budget has been dominated by legacy capabilities and lacked the flexibility to respond to changing threats and technologies. A wider change in culture was needed, to identify disruptive technological change and its implications for the application of military force.<sup>25</sup> Encouragingly, the recently announced defence ‘Integrated Operating Concept 2025’ now promises “a new approach to the use of armed force in an era of persistent competition and a rapidly evolving character of warfare”; involving smaller and faster, mobile and low-observable capabilities, and autonomous platforms in networks of systems.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, in taking account of the new Operating Concept, the Integrated Review should explain the circumstances in which it would make sense to deploy military force for operations, in pursuit of the UK’s national interests and consistent with the rules-based international system.

21. The Integrated Review must deliver a procurement plan and budget which fully reflects the ambition for the Concept’s new ‘sunrise’ Information Age capabilities, while also covering the transition from increasingly vulnerable legacy ‘sunset’ capabilities. The Integrated

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<sup>23</sup> [Alex Ellis letter](#), 8 July 2020

<sup>24</sup> [Integrated Review: call for evidence](#), 13 August 2020. Alex Ellis, Deputy National Security Adviser, also highlighted the emphasis on recovery and resilience in letters to the chairs of select committees ([Alex Ellis letters](#) of 24 June and 8 July 2020).

<sup>25</sup> HC 2072, para 37

<sup>26</sup> MoD, [Introducing the Integrated Operating Concept 2025](#), 30 September 2020

Review should also take on board the lessons of the Covid pandemic in terms of the technology challenges and opportunities it has highlighted, many of which directly affect our national security — whether because of the vital role of technology in health treatments and disease tracking, or because of the risks to supply chains exposed by global competition for critical goods.

*Governance structures for preparing for and responding to emergencies need to be strengthened.*

22. The July 2018 Biological Security Strategy envisaged a governance board reporting to the Threats, Hazards, Resilience & Contingencies subcommittee of the National Security Council. Despite its obvious importance, that sub-committee has not been re-established in this Parliament,<sup>27</sup> and the governance board has met only twice.<sup>28</sup> It is possible that the NSC's new COVID-19 sub-committees ('Covid-19 strategy' and 'Covid-19 operations') may have absorbed some of this remit, but there nevertheless remains a gap in accountability for activities to tackle other pressing biological risks, not least pandemic influenza, other emerging infectious diseases, antimicrobial resistance and the release of biological agents.
23. To help address resilience more widely (across all security risks, beyond the response to biosecurity risks), our predecessor Committee welcomed the introduction of the Fusion Doctrine in 2018, as an attempt “to strengthen the National Security Council's authority across Government — both in pursuing its strategic priorities and in responding flexibly to national security threats”.<sup>29</sup> The Fusion Doctrine aimed to “strengthen our collective approach to national security” by making better use of the UK's economic, military, diplomatic and cultural capabilities. It was intended to lead to a “more accountable system to support collective Cabinet decision-making” and identified ‘senior responsible owners’ to deliver each of the NSC's priorities. This approach explicitly recognised that many security capabilities “lie outside traditional national security departments”.
24. Several times the Government has suggested that the Integrated Review would consider reforms to the machinery of government, including the structures of the National Security

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<sup>27</sup> Government announcement, NSC [membership and subcommittees](#), 29 June 2020

<sup>28</sup> DHSC oral evidence, 19 October 2020, [Q37](#)

<sup>29</sup> HC 2072, para 61

Council,<sup>30</sup> and in August Lord Maude was asked to review the efficiency and effectiveness of the Cabinet Office and its ‘centre of government’ functions.<sup>31</sup> With the Covid pandemic clearly demonstrating the society-wide impacts of such risks, the Integrated Review should examine how well the Fusion approach has worked in practice in dealing with the crisis and whether it needs to be embedded more deeply. The Government should also set out how the central national security machinery will be reformed and improved, explaining how the organisational lessons of the Covid pandemic have been learned for the UK’s crisis and resilience management structures.

25. On biosecurity specifically, we recommend that the Government also take the opportunity in the Integrated Review to address the lack of clear accountability at the highest level for biosecurity resilience, which risks undermining the Integrated Review’s ambitions for a ‘whole-of-society’ approach to resilience. It should institute a mechanism to hold departments and agencies to account for their commitments to mitigating, and preparing for, biological risks. The focus should be as much on implementation of plans and the lessons from exercises as on the planning itself.

26. Finally, we aim to report more fully on our Biosecurity inquiry at the end of the year, once we have concluded taking evidence. Our initial findings of relevance for the Integrated Review, which we have highlighted in this letter, have served to reinforce our original plan to then examine the Integrated Review in the context of the pandemic, not least how the Review is adsorbing the national security implications and lessons of Covid-19.

Yours sincerely,



**Dame Margaret Beckett DBE MP**

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<sup>30</sup> [Notes for the Queen’s Speech 2019](#) (p141) stated that the Review would “develop an integrated plan for all forces engaged in security” and consider reforms to Whitehall that could facilitate “integrated policy-making and operational planning across departments and agencies”.

[Call for evidence](#), August 2020, requested information on “how should the UK change its governance of international policy and national security” and “how should UK systems and capabilities be reformed to improve the development and delivery of national strategy”.

Oral evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee, 6 October 2020, [Q166](#): Foreign Secretary stated that the Integrated Review was looking “very carefully” at how structures can become more integrated, including the NSC structures, DfID and MoD.

<sup>31</sup> Financial Times, [Government launches review of Cabinet Office](#), 20 August 2020