



Wednesday 16 July 2025

Dan Jarvis MBE MP
Security Minister and Chair of the Defending Democracy Taskforce

[By email]

Dear Dan,

I write regarding our scrutiny of the Defending Democracy Taskforce ('the Taskforce'). This letter sets out some observations and recommendations to help safeguard some aspects of our democratic system. We will examine many of these issues in further detail as part of our forthcoming scrutiny of the new National Security Strategy.

Defending the UK's democracy and trends

Tackling state threats while abiding by democratic principles is becoming increasingly difficult as the tactics used to disrupt democracy advance at pace.¹ We are concerned that the UK's exposure to state threats will increase between now and the next General Election. We welcome the Government's confirmation that the 2024 election faced no "major information operations or cyber incidents".² However this does not mean that the next – including the national and devolved elections – will be so secure.

The Strategic Defence Review (SDR) cited a "new era of threat" with Russia posing an "immediate" challenge.³ The UK's role in European security is set to increase over the next five years, as US foreign policy continues to evolve and the UK seeks to play a leading role in supporting Ukraine.⁴ We believe such changes are likely to increase the value of malicious efforts to exploit UK societal divisions, undermine trust in political decision-making, and erode support for robust foreign policy and defence positions.⁵

Confidence in democratic outcomes

Public trust in electoral processes is essential. Professor Rory Cormac, an academic who provided evidence to our predecessor Committee, emphasised that the bigger threat is not whether an election outcome was affected by foreign interference, but "the perceived legitimacy of those elections and the trust people have in the outcome".⁶

¹ MI5, [Director General Ken McCallum gives latest threat update](#) (October 2024); Jonathan Hall KC, [Terrorism and National Security: Internal Threats and Internal Fears](#) (May 2025)

² Letter to JCNSS from the Minister for Security, [Defending Democracy](#), 18 December 2024

³ HMG, [The Strategic Defence Review 2025 – making Britain Safer: secure at home, strong abroad](#), 2 June 2025

⁴ HMG, [UK and Ukraine sign landmark 100 Year Partnership](#), 16 January 2025

⁵ JCNSS oral evidence on Strategic Posture (28 April 2025) [Q 10](#); Letter from the JCNSS, [Risks and threats to UK democracy before, during and after 4 July 2024](#) (23 May 2024); Jonathan Hall KC, [Terrorism and National Security: Internal Threats and Internal Fears](#) (2025) para 43

⁶ JCNSS oral evidence on Defending Democracy (18 March 2024), [Q2](#) [Professor Rory Cormac]



Your oral evidence to this Committee acknowledged this is an ongoing risk, but did not provide further detail on whether the Government or the Taskforce is taking action to monitor the problem.⁷

The Taskforce should monitor the impact of foreign interference efforts to understand the effects on trust in democracy and participation – not just election results or voting intentions.

China and the Taskforce

We noted that the Taskforce's work addresses operational security for electoral periods, and longer-term strategic efforts outside electoral periods.

We have ongoing concerns about the new Foreign Influence Registration in this regard, which came into force on 1 July 2025. Tom Tugendhat MP, former Security Minister and chair of the Defending Democracy Taskforce, recently told the House of Commons Chamber that "the advice from MI5 was very clear: if China is not in the enhanced tier, it will not be worth having".⁸ Russia and Iran have been placed on the 'enhanced tier' of FIRS: China has not.⁹

In oral evidence, you were unable to clarify the threshold for a country being placed on the enhanced tier or confirm whether China would be added.¹⁰ This ambiguity, alongside the Government's decision not to publish the China Audit, is illustrative of wider uncertainty about who is in charge of China policy, and how the Government is balancing long-term security and economic objectives.

Not all such decisions will have a direct impact on the mechanics of democratic processes or people – but the long-term cumulative effect of deepening economic dependence risks creating more avenues for influence or coercion which is corrosive to our democratic values and processes.¹¹ Our initial assessment of the National Security Strategy, and the Foreign Secretary's statements on the China Audit, have not yielded much further insight into the adequacy of processes for managing this tension.¹²

The controversy surrounding China's plans for a new 'super-embassy' in central London is a case in point. It has raised widespread concern about Beijing's ability to target sensitive financial sector cables.¹³ The Government's apparent about-turn on approving this plan – shortly after the Chancellor's visit to China – suggests that the Government's priorities remain

⁷ JCNSS oral evidence on Defending Democracy on 17 March 2025 [Q2](#) [Dan Jarvis MP]

⁸ United Front Work Department, 16 December 2024, [vol 759](#), col 30

⁹ JCNSS oral evidence on The National Security Strategy on 23 June 2025 [Qq19-20](#) [Professor Michael Clarke]

¹⁰ JCNSS oral evidence on Defending Democracy on 17 March 2025 [Q7](#) [Dan Jarvis MP]

¹¹ Chatham House, [What the UK must get right in its China strategy](#) (July 2025)

¹² HMG, [China Audit](#) (24 June 2025), HMG, [National Security Strategy](#) (24 June 2025)

¹³ HL Deb, 9 June 2025, [col 603](#)



unclear. This is despite public expressions of concern from our allies, including the United States.¹⁴

The Taskforce's ability to influence the top levels of Government decision-making is consequently in question. We appreciate that the Taskforce is a "decision-making forum" which ultimately reports to the Prime Minister via the National Security Council, which is in turn "used to secure collective agreement".¹⁵ We note the Chair of the Taskforce is not listed as a permanent member of the National Security Council, which stands in contrast to some previous arrangements.¹⁶

We further note that Ministers from HM Treasury and the Department for Business and Trade are not listed as regular attendees at Taskforce meetings.¹⁷ And the National Security Strategy states that the Government has "renewed the mandate" of the Taskforce, citing a focus on "strengthen[ing] safeguards against individuals and companies acting as proxies for foreign donations" – which in turn does not suggest a major focus on influencing high-level trade-offs between security and economic policymaking.

As the rules-based international order continues to erode, we urge you to examine the Government's high-level process for deciding on trade-offs, and the risks of prioritising short-term economic partnerships which deepen strategic dependency on countries such as China – whose worldviews on democratic values and security objectives are fundamentally incompatible with our own. As Professor Michael Clarke of King's College London told us, "We have to be prepared to lose some investment in order to establish the fact that we are realistic [and] hard-headed".¹⁸ The Taskforce could be front and centre of these conversations, making its case at the highest-level of Government.

The Taskforce should be a central forum for helping to navigate the growing trade-offs between security and economic policy, in areas that create cascading consequences for the integrity of our democratic processes. The Taskforce should start by securing routine attendance from HM Treasury and the Department for Business and Trade officials and ministers to improve the join-up between economic and security policy choices.

The Government should prioritise long-term national security in its decision on the proposals for the new Chinese embassy in London.

¹⁴ FT, [US raises concern over plan for Chinese embassy in London](#) (8 June 2025)

¹⁵ Letter to JCNSS from the Minister for Security on [Defending Democracy](#) (16 April 2025)

¹⁶ HMG, [List of Cabinet Committees](#), 21 October 2024; Home Office ([DED0047](#)) para 26

¹⁷ Defending Democracy Taskforce, [HL3827](#), 21 January 2025

¹⁸ JCNSS oral evidence on the National Security Strategy on 23 June 2025 [Q18](#) [Michael Clarke]



Whole-of-society approach

Our predecessor Committee called for a 'whole-of-society' approach to defending democracy ahead of the 2024 General Election,¹⁹ and we welcome the National Security Strategy's ambition to take an "all-of-society effort to make our country stronger and more secure".²⁰

We note various commitments in the Strategic Defence Review, National Security Strategy and the Resilience Action Plan for improved use of cadets and reserve forces, public communications and learning from countries like Sweden and Japan, exercising, and building deeper partnerships with the private sector to align commercial and national security objectives.²¹ We will explore this in more detail in the coming months.

We remain unclear however about the outcomes the Taskforce is expected to achieve in this regard, and where its remit starts and stops relative to the wider Cabinet Office-led National Security Strategy.²²

We were also disappointed that media literacy did not feature more heavily in the Government's recent major strategy publications. We note the point in your letter about the Government's important curriculum review. We have not however seen sufficient evidence of a commitment to media literacy. The Government previously funded a three-year media literacy programme, which has now expired. The Online Safety Act requires Ofcom to improve media literacy, but in its letter to the Committee in April 2025, Ofcom told us "media literacy is everyone's business: it is not Ofcom's role to do it all".²³ We note the Government's intention to address media literacy in the Digital Inclusion Action Plan – though its main suggestion to "develop new initiatives" suggests there is more work to do on actual plans and funding.²⁴

We will keep these matters under close review as part of our wider assessment of the National Security Strategy and departmental delivery on its objectives.

Political finance rules

Public confidence in the UK's political finance system is vital.²⁵ Earlier this year, Transparency International UK published research that found that almost £1 in every £10 donated to political parties in the UK and its members has "come from unknown or questionable sources".²⁶

¹⁹ Letter from the predecessor JCNSS, [Risks and threats to UK democracy before, during and after 4 July 2024](#), 23 May 2024

²⁰ Cabinet Office, [National Security Strategy](#) (2025)

²¹ HMG, [Strategic Defence Review](#) (2025); [National Security Strategy](#) (2025); [Resilience Action Plan](#) (2025)

²² Cabinet Office, [National Security Strategy](#) (2025)

²³ Letter from Ofcom to predecessor JCNSS on [Defending Democracy and the Online Safety Act](#), 23 April 2024

²⁴ HMG, [Digital Inclusion Action Plan: First Steps](#) (2025); see also Communications and Digital Committee [oral evidence on media literacy](#) (10 June 2025)

²⁵ RUSI, [Democracy's weakest link: foreign money and political influence](#), 11 March 2025

²⁶ Transparency International UK, [Cheques and Balances: Countering the influence of big money in UK politics](#), Jan 2025; Electoral Commission ([DED0016](#)) para 48



RUSI says there are “well identified loopholes that allow for the possibility of donations from overseas sources to enter the UK political funding system”.²⁷ The Electoral Commission has noted particular loopholes around unincorporated associations, which “are not required to ensure that those who donate to them are permissible donors. This means that they could legitimately make donations using funding from otherwise impermissible sources, including from overseas”.²⁸ We welcome the recognition of the issues on political finance by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, including the need for the relevant legislation to keep pace with financial technology, practices and innovation “to ensure the financing of politics can be trusted by the public”.²⁹

Many of these issues could be addressed through proportional mitigations such as 'know your donor rules'.³⁰ The Electoral Commission has called for risk assessments and a requirement for donors to have made sufficient money in the UK to cover the amount of their donation.³¹ The Government has made welcome commitments to review and strengthen the rules around donations to political parties and we look forward to examining these in detail.³²

We welcome the Government’s commitment to review the political finance rules. We suggest this includes a focus on ‘know your donor’ due diligence requirements in order to increase assurance around the provenance of donations. We further suggest tighter requirements for unincorporated associations, and for donations to come from sources generated in the UK. We recommend the Government’s rules draw on and address assessments from the National Crime Agency about known vulnerabilities. We would welcome engagement from the Government with our Committee on this matter and we will examine the issue in more detail in due course.

Candidate safety and cyber security

In your letter of 16 April, you told the Committee that 1084 candidates attended security briefings delivered by Operation Bridger. We note this is slightly less than a quarter of all candidates who stood for election, according to House of Commons Library figures.³³ The letter stated that Operation Regency provided private security at 532 events to a total of 206 candidates.

²⁷ Centre for Finance & Security at RUSI ([DED0029](#))

²⁸ The Electoral Commission ([DED0016](#)) para 48

²⁹ JCNSS oral evidence on The National Security Strategy on [14 July](#) [Pat McFadden]

³⁰ The Telegraph, [Loophole allowing foreign money to influence UK politics ‘must be shut’](#), 31 May 2022; Spotlight on Corruption, [Time for a ‘Know your donor’ policy](#), 10 May 2023; Electoral Commission ([DED0016](#)) para 44-48

³¹ Electoral Commission ([DED0016](#)) para 45

³² Letter to JCNSS from the Minister for Security on [Defending Democracy](#), 18 December 2024

³³ According to the letter to JCNSS from the Minister for Security on [Defending Democracy](#), dated 16 April 2025, 1,084 individuals attended security briefings delivered by Operation Bridger, caveated by the fact that representatives of a candidate may have attended in place of a candidate. According to the [House of Commons Library](#) 4,515 candidates stood at the 2024 election.



**Joint Committee
on the National
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Your earlier letter nevertheless noted there were still “completely unacceptable levels of intimidation and harassment” experienced by candidates at the Election.³⁴

Your letter further outlined security measures taken by social media firms around mis/disinformation and harmful content, alongside the National Cyber Security Centre's work to improve candidates' cyber security.

We appreciate that engaging with support is ultimately the responsibility of Members and candidates, and we urge everyone running for local and national election to engage with physical and cyber security packages to their fullest extent. However, we also suggest that security providers need to be sensitive to the realities of candidates' campaigning schedules, and those of new MPs immediately post-election. Things get busy quickly. It may therefore be helpful for security providers to build in more capacity for extensive long-term repeat engagements both in the run-up to an election and afterwards. Further work on candidate security is being led by the Speaker's Conference.³⁵

The Government must ensure that the Home Office and NCSC have sufficient resources to deliver long-term repeat engagements to reach more candidates before, during and after an election. This should include capacity for persistent follow-up with Members who do not engage in the first months of a new Parliament.

Next steps

This Committee will continue to scrutinise the Government's work on related matters in the coming months. I will be placing a copy of this letter, and your response, in the public domain in due course. I would be most grateful for your response by Wednesday 8 October.

Yours sincerely,

Matt Western MP
Chair, Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy

³⁴ Letter to JCNSS from the Minister for Security on [Defending Democracy](#), 18 December 2024

³⁵ See work undertaken by the Speaker's Conference, [Speaker's Conference \(2024\) Commons Select Committee](#)