



House of Commons

House of Lords

Joint Committee on the
National Security Strategy

The UK's national security machinery: Government Response to the Committee's First Report

**First Special Report of Session
2021–22**

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The Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy

The Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy is appointed by the House of Lords and the House of Commons to consider the National Security Strategy.

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The following members were part of this inquiry, until January 2021 when they were discharged from the Committee: [Lord Campbell of Pittenweem](#) (*Liberal Democrat*), [Lord Harris of Haringey](#) (*Labour*) and [Lord Powell of Bayswater](#) (*Crossbench*)

Powers

The Committee has the power to require the submission of written evidence and documents, to examine witnesses, to meet at any time (except when Parliament is prorogued or dissolved), to adjourn from place to place within the United Kingdom, to appoint specialist advisers, and to make Reports to both Houses. The Lords Committee has power to agree with the Commons in the appointment of a Chairman.

Publications

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The Reports of the Committee are published by Order of both Houses. All publications of the Committee are on the Internet at www.parliament.uk/jcnss.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Carolyn Bowes (Commons Committee Operations Officer), Glenn Chapman (Lords Committee Assistant), Harriet Deane (Commons Clerk), Mark Doyle (Media & Communications Officer), Ashlee Godwin (Commons Senior Specialist and Team Lead, International Affairs Unit) and Simon Keal (Lords Clerk).

Contacts

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First Special Report

The Committee published its First Report of Session 2021–22, [The UK's national security machinery](#) (HL Paper 68, HC 231), on 19 September 2021. The Government's response was received on 19 November 2021 and is appended to this report, along with a cover letter from the National Security Adviser (Appendix 2).

Appendix 1: Government Response

Predictable structures for policy- and decision-making?

Committee request: *The Cabinet Secretary should write to us, by the end of November, setting out the protocol or processes through which he recommends to the Prime Minister that topics are assigned for discussion at either the NSC, COBR, full Cabinet, another Cabinet committee or an inter-ministerial group. We also call on the Government to publish the full list of cross-government committees—at inter-ministerial and senior official level—that consider topics relevant to the Integrated Review.*

Government response: The Cabinet Secretary recommends topics to the Prime Minister for discussion at Cabinet and the majority of Cabinet committees. The exception is the National Security Council (NSC), where the National Security Adviser (NSA) provides advice to the Prime Minister. In preparing those recommendations, the scope of issues and the classification they need to be discussed at, are taken into consideration. For example, cyber skills might be discussed at Cabinet at a lower classification, but more sensitive aspects would be discussed by the NSC. The COBR mechanism's role is distinct: to provide an all-informed picture for Ministers and senior officials to enable quick and efficient decision making during times of national crisis. The arrangements bring together Government response organisations and international partners, where appropriate, to maintain a common understanding of the latest situation and provide advice on strategic issues as they arise, including likely consequences and mitigation measures, use of emergency legislation and the communication of key messages to the public.

The current list of Cabinet committees is published on GOV.UK.¹ We do not publish every inter-ministerial group (many are ad hoc or single-issue focus) and we do not publish details of senior official meetings, including names of attendees, for security reasons.

Committee request: *The Government should clarify:*

- *How the NSC and the new National Security Ministers group relate to one another in practice—in terms of their agendas, any division of responsibility between strategy-making and operational decision-making and implementation, or whether the NSM has delegated authority for decision-making in the Prime Minister's absence;*
- *What status NSM decisions will carry in law, in the event of a judicial review; and*

1 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1027921/Cabinet_Committee_-_Membership_and_ToRs__October_2021___2_.pdf

- ***Who will chair the NSM on cross-cutting issues, such as Afghanistan, that require the orchestration of diplomatic, development, military and security instruments.***

The Government should also explain why it has decided not to designate a permanent Chair of the NSM. This would have positive implications for the consistency of decision making on national security and their implementation, even though we recognise it may also have awkward political implications for the Prime Minister.

Government response: We expect NSM to provide greater capacity for ministerial oversight of national security issues and implementation of the IR, while protecting the space for the PM-chaired NSC to focus on the most strategic and important decisions and issues. There is no standing chair of NSM to ensure that the most appropriate senior Minister can chair the meeting, depending on the topic. This recognises the breadth of topics that are likely to be taken by NSM and builds on the principles of flexibility and agility. For example, the Home Secretary might chair an NSM on our overall CT posture, with the Foreign Secretary considering the impact of CT threats on our overseas footprint. To safeguard consistency and readacross there is in practice likely to be a core group of attendees who will be present at all NSM meetings.

The National Security Adviser will advise the Prime Minister on which topics are best suited to NSC and which should be taken by NSM. The system is designed to be flexible to ensure that the central national security machinery can be both strategic and agile. Some topics may be on both an NSM and NSC agenda if required, but this is not expected to be the norm. There is no delineation between the two in terms of strategy or operations, as with some other Cabinet committees. And, in general, the NSM does not prepare topics for the NSC. NSM has the same powers of collective agreement as the NSC.

Who attends the NSC?

Committee recommendation: ***We recommend that the BEIS Secretary be restored to the NSC, given the range and relevance of his responsibilities to UK national security and the Integrated Review.***

Government response: The membership of each Cabinet committee is decided by the Prime Minister. While the published standing membership of the NSC has been reduced, in practice the attendance is issue-dependent. The BEIS and DIT Secretaries of State would be invited to relevant meetings.

Funding the Integrated Review

Committee recommendation: ***The Government should return to the practice of holding its reviews of national security strategy in parallel with multi-year spending reviews in future. It should also use the opportunity of the Spending Review 2021 to explain how its funding allocations are consistent with the Integrated Review, and to identify any changes to its goals as a result.***

Government response: We agree with the Committee that aligning long term strategy development and multi-year funding allocations is best practice. That has not proven possible recently due to the macroeconomic and wider uncertainties. The Government is

content that the allocations from the Spending Review process (and the £24bn increase to the defence budget agreed in the previous round) are consistent with, and help deliver on, the Integrated Review.

Committee recommendation: *There is a pressing need for strategic direction over cross-government resources dedicated to national security. We recommend that the NSC be given a formal role in reviewing departmental settlement decisions relating to national security and assessing whether funding has been spent as allocated. Its collective view should then be circulated across Whitehall to inform funding decisions by individual Secretaries of State.*

Government response: The balance between NSC oversight of national security resources and the responsibility of HMT and individual departments is an important one, which we will keep under review. Outcome Delivery Plans set out each government department's priority outcomes, the department's strategy for achieving them, and the metrics that will be used to track performance. NSC scrutiny and assessment of the impact of spend, and whether it has been spent as allocated, is an area we would like to develop further and focus on over this coming Spending Review period.

How are the NSC's decisions implemented?

Committee recommendation: *NSC and NSM meetings should be conducted in a way that enables Ministers to monitor progress towards national security goals and to use that information in shaping their decisions, especially in the absence of the Prime Minister's personal authority. As such, we recommend that:*

- *Discussion of items on the NSC and NSM agenda should start with an update on the progress made towards the Government's goals in that area, as well as any obstacles that have hindered implementation;*
- *There should be a standing item on the NSC agenda for resolving interdepartmental conflicts that have arisen since the previous meeting;*
- *There should be quarterly reporting to the Prime Minister on key national security 'deliverables'; and*
- *The NSC should hold an annual NSC session on the Government's overall progress in implementing the Integrated Review. This session should inform updates to the Government's national security goals as well as the Annual Report to Parliament.*

Government response: The Government supports the Committee's recommendations: the PM and NSC will receive regular updates on both key national security deliverables and progress toward implementation of the IR as a whole.

Moreover, papers for NSC and NSM are drafted to cover the issues and concerns raised by the committee – including the Government's progress and any challenges or risks incurred, which can also be resolved out of committee.

How does the NSC serve the whole of the UK?

Committee recommendation: *We recommend that the Cabinet Office undertakes a review of the role of the Devolved Administrations in national security strategy- and policy-making, with consideration given to:*

- *Mechanisms for their direct contribution to the development of the National Security Risk Assessment;*
- *Representation on NSC sub-committees;*
- *The secondment of Devolved Administration officials into the National Security secretariat and relevant Government departments (and vice versa); and*
- *The potential fine-tuning of the demarcations between devolved and reserved powers.*

Government response: We agree with the Committee that maintaining the Union and working collaboratively across all four nations is important to delivering effective UK national security. We are grateful for the recognition by the Committee and colleagues from the Devolved Administrations (DAs) about where we have done this well on crisis response. We do not believe a review is necessary as we are already working with the Devolved Administrations on the elements highlighted and a range of national security and civil contingencies reviews (including of the National Security Risk Assessment methodology), strategies and policy making. We have also, for example, seconded DA officials working with us on cyber and hostile state activity. Further consideration of roles, engagement and powers can best take place as part of those discussions.

Due to the highly-sensitive nature of the discussions, attendance at the National Security Council (NSC) and its sub-committees is strictly controlled to ensure the relevant ministers or officials are present, depending on the topic. This is dictated by the Cabinet Manual to protect the principle of collective agreement. Ministers and Officials from the Territorial Offices and DAs will be invited as appropriate for the topic under discussion. We recognise the strong value in joint working and that important areas of implementation and consequence management are devolved competences. As well as attendance at NSC sub-committees where appropriate, we will continue to hold Quad meetings and other such forums, at ministerial and official levels, as appropriate to ensure DA voices are heard, discuss mutual interests and facilitate alignment.

Committee request: *We would welcome a briefing, in confidence, from the Government about its plans to make the Union a strong foundation for national resilience. Furthermore, noting the previous Government's failure to prepare for a potential Scottish secession in 2014, we would also welcome assurances—in the event that a second Scottish referendum is called—that the Government has in place detailed and rigorously tested contingency plans for a break-up of the Union, including its implications for wider national security priorities.*

Government response: Our United Kingdom is the most successful political and economic union the world has ever seen, the foundation on which all our businesses and citizens are able to thrive. The UK Government is committed to protecting and promoting its combined strengths, building on hundreds of years of partnership and shared history.

Together, we are better able to draw on the skills of our great shared institutions like the NHS, the armed forces and civil service, and tackle the big problems, from defending our borders and fighting the national cyber security threat, to being a world leader in offering the vaccine to everyone.

Specifically, the response to the Covid-19 pandemic has shown how the UK Government can work strategically and at scale to save jobs and support communities throughout the UK working alongside devolved administrations to keep every citizen safe and supported no matter where they live in the UK. No part of the UK could have tackled this crisis alone. The UK Government has taken significant measures to protect the economy, providing billions in financial support to individuals and businesses in all parts of the UK – protecting lives and livelihoods. Our welfare system has been able to support people across the UK; our Armed Forces have been invaluable in supporting communities and health services; and the global reach of the UK has put us in a far stronger position in the procurement of vital equipment internationally. Meanwhile structures for ministerial, official and scientific engagement have supported effective collaboration between the UK government and the devolved administrations.

Regarding Scotland, a divisive referendum on Scotland's separation from the UK at this time would be an irresponsible distraction from the necessary work of recovery, given we are currently recovering from the worst public health crisis in a century. That is why our collective priority must be working on recovering from the challenges that the Covid pandemic has created.

The forthcoming Resilience Strategy, a key commitment of the Integrated Review, will take a four nation approach to building our national resilience. We are working closely with colleagues in the Devolved Administrations (DAs) in the development of the Strategy, which is due to be published early next year. Alongside the Strategy, we are also working closely with DA colleagues on the Review of the Civil Contingencies Act. As the Committee has recognised, we have a strong ongoing relationship with the DAs on civil contingency emergency planning. We note the Committee's request for a briefing, and will consider how best to keep the Committee informed on these matters.

Counteracting groupthink: diversity of thought and use of challenge

Committee recommendation: *Diversity of thought and exposure to challenge are critical to better decision making on national security, sharpening policy analysis and guarding against groupthink. The NSC structure should be in regular and constructive contact with external experts, including with academia, think tanks and those potentially involved in the delivery of the national security strategy—for example, relating to cyber security and biosecurity. In light of previous, unfulfilled commitments to improve external engagement and challenge, we recommend that the Government updates us on progress against this recommendation in six months' time, and then on an annual basis.*

Government response: HMG is committed to improving the use of evidence, analysis and challenge in developing and delivering national security and international strategy. The new central strategy function within the National Security Secretariat is leading cross-government work to strengthen the use of futures, foresight techniques, data and

challenge in the National Security Council structure, including in the development of the IR sub-strategies. In due course, the College for National Security should support this work, by increasing engagement between officials and experts.

Committee recommendation: *We recommend strengthening the Joint Intelligence Organisation at the centre of Government, ensuring that its remit incorporates providing assessments of the full range of threats and hazards. The Government should also consider tasking it with providing the formal warning function for all national security risks, in the near and longer term. It is essential that the JIO has the capacity to perform this function well and the Treasury should prioritise funding accordingly. The JIO should also ensure that its reporting maximises the volume of open-source information available.*

Government response: The Joint Intelligence Organisation's (JIO) work covers, but goes beyond, "traditional" national security topics such as geopolitical issues and threats to British interests. JIO applies a national security lens to issues such as emerging technology, economic and health security, climate change and horizon scanning. JIO horizon-scanning work (for example the JIC's annual assessments of Countries at Risk of Instability, and its Register of British Interests) is used by customers across government to alert policy decision-makers to upcoming security risks in both the near and longer term. JIO works closely with the Civil Contingencies Secretariat to ensure that the whole range of national security risks are assessed, and its activity is complementary to existing CCS capabilities including near term civil contingencies horizon scanning and the National Security Risk Assessment, which brings together the most serious threats and hazards into a single assessment to support preparedness.

JIO analysts draw on a wide range of material at all classifications. Sometimes this is secret intelligence; but increasingly we find that open source material from media outlets or think tanks adds important detail to the overarching assessment picture. The JIO draws on the knowledge of a network of experts across the intelligence agencies, the diplomatic service, operational and policy areas of government, as well as international partners, think tanks and academia, open source providers, and the private sector to ensure the inputs to our products are as wide-ranging as possible. Over recent months the Professional Head of Intelligence Assessment (PHIA) has also developed a new open source initiative (INDEX – the Information and Data Exchange) to share open source information across government through a single platform. INDEX allows users to find relevant information and data quickly from inside and outside of government; connect with others across departments, and to academia and industry; and promotes the best products, platforms and technologies from across HMG. We aim to roll out INDEX across government by April 2022.

Central governance and oversight: three lines of defence model

Committee recommendation: *We recommend that the Government:*

- *Re-establish a ministerial governance structure for overseeing risk and resilience, with a strong connection to the NSC—for example, by re-establishing a dedicated NSC sub-committee. This ministerial committee should be directly connected to the cross-government warning function described earlier.*

- ***Establish greater clarity of responsibility for national security risks, by designating Chief Risk Officers in each department and agency, overseen by a Chief Risk Officer in the Cabinet Office. The work of the central CRO would need to be deconflicted from the strategy and policy focus of the Deputy National Security Adviser for National Security and Resilience.***

The Government should also consider establishing an external audit function for the assessment and management of risks where appropriate. The Government should update us on its progress against this recommendation when it informs us of the outcomes of its review of the NSRA methodology and/or the biosecurity governance review.

Government response: The government recently re-established an NSC sub-committee in the form of NSM (Resilience).

As set out in the Integrated Review, the UK Government is committed to developing a Resilience Strategy, which will set out how the Government can make the UK the most resilient nation in the world. Assurance and risk ownership will be considered alongside a range of other issues as part of the development of that Strategy.

The role of the UK Parliament and parliamentary scrutiny

Committee recommendation: ***We agree with Professor John Bew, who led the Integrated Review for the Prime Minister's Office, that Parliament has a crucial role to play as a forum for strategic debate on national security. To that end, we recommend that the Government commits to an annual report to Parliament on national security and the Integrated Review, including notable updates to the trends outlined in the document, an update on the overall threat and opportunity picture, and progress against the Government's national security objectives. Recognising the Committee's proper role in scrutinising the NSC and its products, we also call on the Government to return to a more open relationship. To support our vital scrutiny work, we ask that the Government submits to us annually (in confidence, if needed):***

- a) ***Priority Integrated Review deliverables and progress against them;***
- b) ***NSC and NSM agendas, showing agenda items, paper titles and the name of the department or agency submitting them;***
- c) ***Attendees at each NSC and NSM meeting;***
- d) ***Reasons for any meeting cancellation or delays;***
- e) ***An update on external engagement (e.g. with policy experts) throughout the year, to inform NSC and NSM papers; and***
- f) ***An update on the work of the College for National Security, if it is established, detailing the training provided and the numbers of participants, broken down by department, agency and type of external organisation.***

Government response: In his evidence session to the committee on 5 July 2021 the National Security Adviser set out his ambition to produce an update report on the integrated review before Parliamentary recess in 2022. The Government welcomes the request for an open relationship with the Committee and we will endeavour to build and maintain this. We

will continue to share, periodically and in confidence, materials including the topics on the agenda for NSC and NSM, at the discretion of the PM, but this will not extend to attendee registers.

The Government Skills and Curriculum Unit is in the process of establishing a small team to begin delivery of the College for National Security proposal and, as part of that, working with partners across government to establish the best annual funding mechanism. When the team is stood up and the funding secured, we would be very pleased to brief the Committee informally and hear their views on the strategic direction of this work.

Understanding Afghanistan and planning for the withdrawal of NATO troops

Committee recommendation: We urge the Government to revisit how it plans for major domestic and international crises, including the possibility of simultaneous crises—as has happened with covid-19 and Afghanistan. As events in Afghanistan have shown, it is essential that the Government has up-to-date and detailed procedural plans for a range of potential scenarios, which both assign tasks and responsibilities across departments, and inform exercises involving Ministers and officials. These plans should cover a range of highly serious, anticipatable contingencies—such as the evacuation of civilians from conflict zones and fragile countries, the emergence of a new infectious disease, a prolonged, wide-area electricity outage, a major global financial crisis and the withdrawal of NATO security guarantees by key Allies. The Government should update us in confidence on its progress against this recommendation in six months' time, and then on an annual basis.

Government response: The Government has plans in place for a range of scenarios, including evacuations, emerging diseases and power failure. We have always recognised the importance of learning lessons and evolving these arrangements but also that plans must be flexible and adaptable to the events as they unfold. We are currently reviewing how we plan for catastrophic events. Preparations for these complex risks and concurrent events is inherently challenging and resource-intensive therefore we must ensure plans are informed by risk and proportionate, balancing detailed, specific plans with strong coordination arrangements and generic capabilities which can be applied to a range of risks. We agree to update the Committee, in confidence, on progress in six months' time.

Appendix 2: Letter to the Chair from the National Security Adviser

The Government welcomes the Committee's report on the UK's national security machinery.

Following the publication of the Integrated Review (IR) in March this year, the Government undertook a comprehensive review of the core structures of our national security machinery. Our objective was to ensure that Integrated Review objectives and priority actions, as well as future policy decisions, are implemented swiftly and effectively, and to establish systems that better support the National Security Council (NSC). This includes designing and implementing more integrated, adaptive and innovative structures and capabilities. As the Government has previously set out, many of the core structures of our national security machinery at the centre of government remain unchanged; namely the NSC, the National Security Adviser (NSA) and the National Security Secretariat (NSS). But a new component—National Security Ministers (NSM)—will both improve Ministerial oversight and inject greater pace and agility into our management of the government's national security business. Further, we have introduced a new central structure to reflect the prominence given by the Integrated Review to science and technology: the National Science and Technology Council (NSTC), which will sit alongside the NSC and operate seamlessly with it.

The subordinate machinery for managing our national security priorities has also changed. We are in the process of creating new senior official-level Integrated Review Implementation Groups (IRIGs), which will oversee the development and implementation of a series of Integrated Review sub-strategies. Each sub-strategy will have a named senior official as the Senior Responsible Owner (SRO), who is tasked by the NSA to convene departments from across government to ensure that decisions align with, and build upon, the IR and harness diverse perspectives, expertise and experience (from within and beyond HMG) in order to drive innovation, adaptation and integration. Additionally, we have created a new central strategy function within the NSS. This Strategy Unit will both oversee the development and delivery of the SRO-led sub-strategies as a whole, and enhance the support provided to Ministers in making grand strategy.

In addition to these changes in the centre of government, many departments are making complementary reforms to ensure that enhanced support is provided to Ministers in both developing and delivering strategic approaches to national security.

Please find enclosed the Government's responses to each of the Committee report's recommendations and requests. A response to your letter of 27 October to the National Security Adviser shall follow in due course.