



Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy

House of Commons · London · SW1A 0AA

Tel 020 7219 8092 Email JCNSS@parliament.uk Website www.parliament.uk



Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London
SW1A 2AA

[via email]

17 December 2021

Dear Prime Minister,

SAFEGUARDING THE UK'S NATIONAL SECURITY

The Joint Committee's work so far this Parliament has left us profoundly concerned about what appears to be a more relaxed approach to national security under this Government. As our September report on [The UK's national security machinery](#) highlighted, the fact that this is now the accepted approach—following the National Security Adviser's 2021 review of national security processes—gives us even greater cause for concern.

While there is much to be commended in the [Integrated Review](#), we are deeply troubled by the persistent signs that our nation's security is no longer a priority for the Government. These include:

- A significant reduction in your personal engagement with the work of the National Security Council (NSC), with your attendance at meetings to be reduced by roughly two-thirds from previous practice.¹ What would happen if Ministers took a decision that you disagreed with, in your absence, at meetings of the new National Security Ministers group?
- A significant reduction in the collective discussion of national security by other senior Ministers, with the number of meetings of the NSC and its sub-committees decreased by approximately 30%.²
- The relegation of national security as a spending priority in the 2020 and 2021 Spending Reviews. These spending reviews were intended to support the significant ambitions of the Integrated Review; instead, they saw the Ministry of

¹ This figure is calculated on the basis that the NSC was previously expected to meet in each week that Parliament was in session. In 2021, there are 35 sitting weeks for the House of Commons, meaning that under the previous system, there should have been 35 NSC meetings this year. Under the new system, however, it is expected that you, as Prime Minister and NSC Chair, will attend only 12 meetings each year.

² It is now expected that NSC Ministers other than the Prime Minister will attend 24 meetings of the NSC or National Security Ministers group each year—down from 35 NSC meetings each year under the previous system.

Defence and FCDO receive the smallest annual, real-terms growth in their budgets of all Whitehall departments, while aid spending has been slashed by approximately £5 billion each year until at least the end of FY2023–24. [Recent reports](#) that the FCDO is planning to cut staff numbers by 10% by Spring 2025 are simply staggering—especially in the context of a long history of cuts to the Foreign Office,³ in the face of growing international challenges, and in light of the Government’s ambitions for ‘Global Britain’.

While we understand the pressing need to rebuild the economy after the pandemic, we fear that complacency may be creeping in at the very moment when the Government should be getting to grips with the wide-ranging, complex national security challenges that we face.

This is a wholly unsatisfactory state of affairs that requires your personal attention to remedy. In doing so, we would highlight three areas of particular importance.

Afghanistan

We have been struck by the apparent complacency and lack of urgency within Government in the wake of a disastrous experience for the UK and our allies in Afghanistan.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the UK has acquiesced to US strategic thinking on Afghanistan for too long, including in quietly accepting the Trump Administration’s deal with the Taliban, the Biden Administration’s timeline for withdrawal in April, and the inevitability of a Taliban-controlled government in Afghanistan.

As we concluded in our September report, the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan further suggests a systemic failure by the Government to prepare properly for a scenario that it had, in fact, foreseen. The extraordinary effort of the armed forces and civil servants in evacuating British citizens and vulnerable Afghans in August should not have been necessary. Moreover, despite that exceptional effort, it is [now clear](#) that there remains a substantial number of vulnerable Afghans who should already have been evacuated, but who continue to wait for UK Government action.

The unedifying public briefing war between departments as Kabul fell in August exposed the failure of the NSC to direct unified, cross-government plans for withdrawal and for the identified contingency of a rapid fall of the country to the Taliban. [Whistle-blower testimony](#) and media reports suggest that the FCDO was in chaos during the evacuation, despite it having led more than 60 “campaign meetings” (including on contingency planning) in the preceding year, raising fundamental questions as to whether FCDO crisis response capabilities are fit for purpose. Meanwhile, the Home Office still cannot commit to launching the Afghan Citizen Resettlement Scheme by March 2022⁴—more than two years after President Trump announced the United States’ withdrawal from Afghanistan. This is an unforgivable delay for Afghans who have served the UK well over the past 20 years.

³ British Foreign Policy Group, [“Running out of credit? The decline of the Foreign Office and the case for sustained funding”](#), June 2019, p. 6

⁴ Oral evidence taken before the Home Affairs Committee on 17 November 2021, [Q99](#)

Crisis planning and risk management

The experiences of both Covid-19 and Afghanistan have demonstrated the importance of tested and reliable response mechanisms for the different types of crises we might face as a nation. Yet in both instances, the Government found that such mechanisms did not exist or were irrelevant, forcing it to turn to more ad hoc arrangements.

In our September report, we called on the Government to: task the Joint Intelligence Organisation with providing cross-government warning mechanisms for all major risks to national security, in the short and long term; link these mechanisms with the work of the NSC via a dedicated Chief Risk Officer; reinstate and reinvigorate the NSC as the central governance body for national security risks; and revisit how it plans for major domestic and international crises. A failure to put such robust plans and processes in place leaves you, your fellow Ministers and the British public unnecessarily exposed to both foreseen and unforeseeable risks to our safety and well-being.

Transparency, accountability and a ‘whole-of-society’ approach to national security

The Committee’s confidential access to the meeting agendas of the NSC and the National Security Ministers group remains extremely valuable to our work. We appreciate your provision of these, as well as the continued participation of senior Ministers as witnesses to the Committee’s inquiries.

Nevertheless, the Committee’s requests for more detailed information about how the strong narrative of the Integrated Review is being translated into action have repeatedly been denied. The Government has described such access as “inappropriate”—a characterisation we reject. The very nature of the Integrated Review suggests that it can only be scrutinised by a body that can look across the work of Government, which is the role and purpose of this Committee—the purpose, indeed, for which it was set up. I am sure that the Government would not wish to suggest that select committee scrutiny of its work is inappropriate.

A call to action

Your predecessor as Prime Minister, Sir Winston Churchill, once said: “I never ‘worry’ about action, but only about inaction”. With the publication of the Integrated Review, the imperative to build back better from Covid-19, and the impetus provided by events in Afghanistan, now is the time for action. In particular, we urge you to:

- Increase the frequency of your attendance at the NSC, chairing it at least once per fortnight;
- Designate a standing Chair of the National Security Ministers group, to improve the consistency of national security decision-making and implementation;
- Engage personally with the forthcoming National Resilience Strategy, as an opportunity to establish the robust crisis-planning and risk management practices described above;
- Reinvigorate the NSC as the principal ministerial body for managing and assessing risks to the UK’s national security, by prioritising it as an agenda item; and
- Lead by example through engagement with the ‘lessons learned’ process on Afghanistan, especially in relation to the events of the past two years.

Your leadership is needed to ensure that the Government has both the political direction and robust machinery to keep the UK, its citizens and its interests secure in the years ahead. We trust that the British people can rely on your personal engagement, as Prime Minister, in making sure this is so.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Margaret Beckett". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Dame Margaret Beckett DBE MP

Chair