



From the National Security Adviser

Dame Margaret Beckett,
Chair, Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy,
House of Commons, London,
SW1A 0AA

6 January 2022

Dear Dame Margaret,

The UK's National Security Machinery and Afghanistan

1. Thank you for your letter of 06 December 2021. I hope that my response below provides you with the information that you require.

National Security Council (NSC) and National Security Ministers (NSM)

2. As National Security Advisor, I am secretary to the NSC and responsible for advising the Prime Minister on agendas for both NSC and NSM meetings. The system is flexible and my advice on the relevant fora for any given discussion or topic is based on a range of factors, including the strategic significance of the issue, the seriousness of the threat and / or and the need for central coordination.
3. The Prime Minister has delegated authority to the chair of NSMs to decide on matters of policy as required, with powers of collective agreement. The Prime Minister can of course convene a meeting of the NSC at any time, including to consider an issue that had been previously-discussed at a meeting of NSM.

Integrated Review Implementation Groups (IRIGs)

4. We are taking a more joined-up approach to the implementation of the Integrated Review than has previously been the case. Each sub-strategy has a named SRO who will be responsible for implementing that aspect of the IR.

But we will also regularly convene the SRO community to take a broader view. IRIGs will generally have a wider membership - drawn from across government - than NSIGs. I have been clear that I see a key element of the role of the SRO is to properly integrate the work of their group with other IRIGs. IRIGs will also have the active support from across the National Security Secretariat, including from our newly formed Strategy Unit, in developing and delivering their strategies. I will meet regularly with the SROs both bilaterally and collectively to review progress, reporting to the NSC regularly.

NSS Strategy Unit

5. The new NSS Strategy Unit is already up and running, leading the IR's strategic reset across government. The team's primary role is to manage the system for IR implementation: it monitors and supports the delivery of both IR sub-strategies and individual deliverables; provides thought leadership to ensure strategic advantage; links strategy with resources; strengthens the corporate management of the NSS; and supports collective agreement through the NSC. It is led by a SCS2/Director and four SCS1/deputy directors with some 40 staff in addition at present - although this is under review through the current business planning process.

Crisis structures review

6. The Crisis Review is in its final stages and awaiting sign off by Ministers. I hope to be able to update you on progress in the first half of this year.

Joint Intelligence Organisation Funding

7. The Joint Intelligence Organisation's funding was subject to a 4-year settlement in the 2020 Spending Review. JIO's pre-pandemic budget for FY20-21, agreed in winter 2019, was £10m; and for 21-22 and 22-23 is £10.5m.

Meetings on Afghanistan

8. As we have previously set out to the Committee, NSIGs, generally chaired at SCS3/Director General-level, were part of the senior official level architecture

that developed and implemented policy on Afghanistan. As the pace of events quickened, much coordination was done by a SCS2/Director-level South Asia Cross-Whitehall Coordination Group. This was effectively an NSIG but called by a different name to distinguish it from the SCS3/Director-General level group. From October 2020 there were also weekly FCDO-chaired cross-HMG “Campaign Meetings” on Afghanistan that looked at the NSC-agreed campaign pillars of: peace; security; and contingency planning. These were all under the umbrella of the NSIG, reporting to the Government’s SRO Meetings of the NSC and NSC(O) continued to consider more strategic questions. In all, between August 2020 and August 2021, there were more than sixty senior official cross-Government meetings on Afghanistan.

Lessons from Afghanistan and the Integrated Review

9. Lessons from previous interventions, including in Afghanistan and Iraq, were reflected in the approach to conflict and stability in the Integrated Review. Section 3.2 of the IR strategic framework outlines the need for a more integrated approach to conflict in a more competitive and multipolar world. This includes a focus on political approaches to conflict resolution, harnessing the full range of government capabilities, with clearly-defined political goals and underlying theories of change, to enhance our impact and reduce the risk of ‘mission creep’ or of inadvertently doing harm.

Lessons from Afghanistan and Iraq

10. There is a stark difference between the circumstances that led to the Iraq war and withdrawal from Afghanistan. Government processes continue to learn and adapt in light of the findings from the Chilcot report, including the Chilcot checklist. HMG applied the Chilcot lessons by ensuring: that groupthink was challenged; that discussions were grounded in reality; and that different scenarios and probabilities were considered throughout.
11. Learning the lessons from Afghanistan has been a continuous process, including an internal army review following the conclusion of Operation HERRICK in 2014. These were also incorporated into the IR.

Lessons from Afghanistan and Expert Analysis

12. The British and Afghan staff at the British Embassy in Kabul and staff in London maintained contacts with Afghans from every walk of life. They had a very extensive network among Afghan political leaders, current and former members of the Taliban, civil society, development partners and parliamentarians. This fed into Embassy political reporting and London assessments. We recognise the need to engage diplomats and development experts to build an accurate understanding of a country. The UK had, and still has, a strong understanding of events in Afghanistan, independent of the military and counter-terrorism campaigns. The focus of the FCDO's lessons learned exercise has been on learning from the crisis response.
13. The relative weighting of the UK's overseas intelligence collection priorities, including for Counter-Terrorism (CT) and Afghanistan, is set annually by the National Security Council. Their decision is informed by advice from senior Officials across government. The CT and Afghanistan policy communities are tasked to update and reprioritise their intelligence requirements regularly.

Lessons from Afghanistan and NSC

14. The creation of NSM gives the option for the Prime Minister to delegate certain issues to the lead Minister. The NSC itself will continue to operate as it has previously, but these changes allow for more flexibility and provide space for Ministers to consider a wider range of issues.

Drawing Together Lessons from Afghanistan

15. As I have set out previously, departments and partners are taking forward their own lessons learned exercises. These are not conducted in isolation and departments have sought feedback and coordinated to ensure they capture and implement their findings. This work will be drawn together centrally. Where appropriate and as lessons are identified, we are keen to share these with allies and international partners.
16. I have committed to providing an annual update on IR implementation, which will now be informed by the new post-Afghanistan context. In recognition of the Committee's ongoing interest and the importance of Parliamentary oversight of our work, I have also tasked my officials to consider how best to

ensure that your Committee - and other relevant parliamentary Committees - are kept informed of our work going forward.

17. I trust that this additional information is helpful and I very much look forward to continuing my engagement with you.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Stephen Lovegrove". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'S'.

STEPHEN LOVEGROVE



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Paper 06

Sir Stephen Lovegrove
National Security Adviser
Cabinet Office

[via email]

8 December 2021

Dear Sir Stephen,

UK national security machinery; withdrawal from Afghanistan

Thank you for the Government's response to the Committee's September 2021 report on *The UK's National Security Machinery*, and for your recent correspondence following our oral evidence session on Afghanistan in October.

I am writing with a number of further questions relating to these matters, which draw upon the oral evidence we have since taken from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on national security spending, and the evidence you provided to the Defence Committee on 30 November.

We would greatly appreciate your response in writing by Thursday 6 January. We also note that it will (by then) have been several months since we last received in confidence materials relating to the National Security Council's meetings and agenda. It would be very timely if you could provide this regular update by the same date, along with information we requested in our September report, including on the new National Security Ministers group.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Margaret Beckett'.

Dame Margaret Beckett DBE MP

Chair



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Further questions on the UK's national security machinery

Changes to the core national security machinery in 2021:

1. You said that the National Security Council (NSC) and National Security Ministers (NSM) group have the “same collective powers of agreement”. How do you, as the Secretary to the NSC and NSM, determine which agenda items require the Prime Minister’s leadership and authority? Please provide examples.
 - What happens if the Prime Minister disagrees with the decisions made by the NSM in his absence?
2. Why will Integrated Review Implementation Groups (IRIGs) succeed where National Security Implementation Groups (NSIGs) have failed to improve cross-government working? What is the difference between them?
3. The establishment of the Strategy Unit within the National Security Secretariat is a welcome development. What is its intended composition, what progress have you made in its establishment and when do you expect it to be working at full capacity? (Please provide details on its size, functions by role and grade of civil servants.)

Risk and crisis management:

4. You told the Defence Committee that one of your first acts as National Security Adviser was to initiate a review of the machinery for responding to chronic, enduring crises. This information would have been pertinent to our inquiry into the national security machinery. When complete, we would appreciate a written briefing on the review’s principal findings and outcomes, including:
 - The relationship between any new mechanism and the NSC, other Cabinet and ministerial committees, and COBR;
 - The role of the Devolved Administrations in your review and in any new mechanism established as a result; and
 - How any new mechanism will be chaired by Ministers, supported by officials, and tested by the Government.
5. What funding was allocated to the Joint Intelligence Organisation under the 2021 Spending Review, and how does this compare with its allocations under the 2020 Spending Review and pre-pandemic spending?

Further questions on the UK's withdrawal from Afghanistan

Cross-government preparation for withdrawal:



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6. What was the role of the NSC and the Government's Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) on Afghanistan in the FCDO-led 'campaign meetings' that took place between August 2020 and August 2021?
 - Why didn't the relevant National Security Implementation Group lead these campaign meetings? What did you gain from abandoning the existing cross-government structures?

Lessons from Afghanistan:

7. You said that lessons from Afghanistan had been incorporated into the Integrated Review. What were these lessons and how did they change the IR's 'strategic framework'?
 - How do the lessons from Afghanistan differ from the lessons from Iraq?
8. Providing oral evidence to us, the SRO for Afghanistan questioned whether the UK's large military presence in Afghanistan and the focus of its intelligence agencies on counter-terrorism was "a good way to understand a country". To what extent has the Government sought to identify lessons on:
 - i. The role of the UK's diplomats and development experts in establishing a more accurate understanding of Afghanistan; and
 - ii. The relative weighting of the UK's intelligence effort towards counter-terrorism versus Afghan politics, and how this weighting was established and evaluated?
9. You have referred to various 'lessons learned' processes undertaken by departments, the centre of Government, NATO and allies. Which department will be responsible for drawing these together, disseminating them and then ensuring lessons are implemented?
 - What role will the NSC play in relation to learning the lessons from the evacuation and from the rapidity of the Taliban victory? What role will you play as National Security Adviser?
 - Will you commit to briefing us in confidence—in writing or in person—on the lessons identified by both the national and international processes, and the action the Government is taking to ensure these are consistently and effectively implemented?