**Scrutiny of Strategic Thinking in Government.**

Evidence submitted by Lord Ricketts, (National Security Adviser 2010-12)

## 1. The lost art of strategic thinking

Ministers are constantly calling for strategies on every subject, and civil servants are producing them. But a pile of uncoordinated strategies across government does not add up to a national strategy setting out the direction for the country and driving the allocation of scarce resources.

I was a civil servant for four decades, including periods as Permanent Under-Secretary at the FCO, and Britain's first National Security Adviser. My experience has been that successive governments have been weak at longer-term thinking about the strategic interests of the country. Britain and other democracies are now facing a more dangerous and unpredictable strategic landscape than at any time since the post-war years. As in that period, old patterns of international relations have been overturned and new global threats are requiring hard choices from governments. I therefore welcome the Committee's enquiry and am glad to contribute some personal reflections. In doing so, I draw on my book *Hard Choices: the making and unmaking of global Britain.*[1]

The Committee's Call for Evidence invites examples of best practice in strategic thinking. In the area of national security policy, the most impressive example of sustained strategic analysis and decision-making by a British government since 1945 is the Future Policy Study (FPS) commissioned by Harold Macmillan, which reported in 1960. The context was that, after the 1959 election, Macmillan concluded that Britain's national strategy needed rethinking. The Suez crisis had damaged UK relations with the US. The developing EEC risked becoming a competitor not just economically but in terms of influence in Washington. Macmillan therefore invited the Cabinet Secretary to set up an eminent panel of senior civil servants and military chiefs to look ahead 10 years and consider what role Britain should play to safeguard its vital interests.

The panel's report was brutally frank in its assessment of Britain's weakening economy and the risks to the transatlantic relationship. It concluded with a classic statement of British strategy which arguably remains true to this day:

> *One basic rule of British policy is clear: we must not find ourselves in a position of having to make a final choice between the United States and Europe. It would not be compatible with our vital interests to reject either one or the other, and the very fact that the choice was needed would mean the destruction of the Atlantic alliance.*

The authors of the FPS were able to give frank and unvarnished advice partly because they knew that this was what Macmillan wanted and partly because they could be confident that their advice would remain secret. That also gave Macmillan the political space to draw political conclusions with his Cabinet Colleagues on what the government should do.

The FPS is a classic case of strategic policy-making because it led Macmillan to act in ways which had a long-term impact on Britain's role in the world. In one week in December 1962, the Prime Minister went first to Rambouillet to present Britain's application to the EEC to de Gaulle, and then to Nassau to seal the deal on the Polaris nuclear weapon programme with Kennedy. Although it took another 10 years for Britain to join the EEC, the process began that week, and the Polaris deal locked in Britain's strategic defence relationship with Washington.

The secrecy which gave Macmillan the time to think and plan would be impossible today. But the FPS is useful in showing the importance of political leaders finding the time to look ahead to future challenges, and empowering their advisers to give them dispassionate analysis as a basis for political decisions.

My contention is that the UK and other democracies have lost the art of strategy-making at this level over the intervening decades. This is far from an original observation. Robert McNamara observed, on resigning as US Secretary of Defence in 1962, in the middle of the Vietnam war, 'There is no longer such thing as strategy, there is only crisis management'. The Commons Public Administration Select Committee reporting in 2010[2] drew a conclusion which matched my own experience: 'We have all but lost the capacity to think strategically. We have simply fallen out of the habit and have lost the culture of

strategy making… there is little idea of what the UK's national interest is, and therefore what our strategic purpose should be’.

Each country is different, but I think there are some common factors involved:

- the internet revolution enabling the 24/7 media and the fire-hose of social media has vastly increased the tempo of politics and the transparency of public life. As a result, the urgent drives out the important. Ministers spend their time on crisis management.
- the short-termist pressures may be particularly acute in parliamentary democracies, where Prime Ministers and senior ministers spend much more time being held to account by Parliament than is the case for their colleagues in presidential systems.
- many political leaders prefer to avoid making choices where possible. Choosing means leaving some colleagues disappointed. It can mean taking risky guesses on the basis of inadequate evidence, and later being found to have made the wrong choice. Muddling through can often seem a safer strategy, even though this is also a choice which can have longer term implications.
- there is a final element which I believe applies to America’s allies. Under the protective umbrella of the US as the world’s leading economic and military power, Britain and others have lived in a settled strategic landscape since the 1940s. There have been endless crises, but no fundamental strategic choices to make on the country’s destiny.

That period of strategic stability is now rapidly coming to an end. The post-war international order is eroding if not unravelling, blatantly violated by Russia, contested by China and treated with indifference by many leading non-aligned countries. With the fracturing of the world’s trading and financial systems, the centre of gravity of US national security is moving towards the confrontation with China. America’s allies are having to think for the first time in decades how to position themselves within this new international force-field. China is mounting a challenge to the economic security of Western democracies in a way the Soviet Union never did. The interdependence in trade and industry is far greater, and China is seeking to dominate areas of next-generation technology. National security is now as much about ensuring the West’s technological and scientific edge as it is about military threats. The impact of

climate change is leading to instability and migration pressures, as has been clear in the recent spate of coups in the Sahel region, heavily impacted by desertification.

Together, these trends create a volatile and unpredictable future for the national security of Western countries. Britain's departure from the EU sharpens the need for fresh thinking about how best to protect the country's vital interests. It is therefore urgent that politicians and civil servants re-discover the art of thinking in big-picture strategic terms.

## 2. The national security machinery

The Cameron government established the UK National Security Council in 2010 specifically to ensure better integration of the Government's overall response to this expanding universe of national security threats, risks and opportunities. The NSC's remit included both internal and external security as well as foreign and development policy. For the first time, it also brought the problem of resilience against natural hazards such as floods and pandemics into the ambit of national security policy, together with newly-emerging threats such as that from cyber attack. In addition to this remit (which went far wider than previous Cabinet Committees on defence and overseas affairs) the NSC was innovative in organisational terms. A National Security Adviser (NSA) at Permanent Secretary with a strengthened staff in the Cabinet Office ensured more effective coordination of Whitehall in preparing for and following up NSC meetings. In another change in traditional Whitehall practice, the NSC met systematically with senior advisers including the Chief of Defence Staff, the Chair of the JIC, and the Intelligence Agency Heads (the first time Ministers collectively had been given the opportunity to engage with them directly).

As NSA, I made it a priority to bring a mixture of business to the NSC, both immediate operational issues and longer term strategic questions. In the first six months, the preparation of the National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review ensured that strategic issues and choices occupied a lot of the NSC's time. But my experience was that it was easier to

interest ministers in crisis management issues than in longer term trends and possible future risks. I created an NSC (Officials) group, composed of Permanent Secretaries of Departments represented on the NSC. This met weekly to quality-control papers going to the NSC and to ensure follow-up of decisions. It was also a useful forum to consider longer-term and cross-cutting issues. But these tended to be crowded out of the agenda of the full NSC by more pressing business.

In terms of subject matter, the NSC provides a flexible structure. It is perfectly capable of handling the new issues of economic and technological security alongside the more traditional military and diplomatic subjects. Membership can vary as issues rise and fall in prominence. The key point from my experience was that the Prime Minister systematically chaired the meetings and used them to take decisions. This ensured that senior Cabinet members attended and that the NSC was seen as a centre of Whitehall coordination.

For that reason, I was concerned to hear that the NSA's review of NSC systems and processes in 2021 revealed that (at that time) the Prime Minister had decided to chair the NSC only once a month, with other meetings chaired by the relevant Cabinet Minister. The Joint Committee on National Security Strategy, in a Report in 2021[3], concluded:

> *The NSA's review of the national security system and process has led to the creation of a two-tier and NSC system with the Prime Minister chairing only half of the meetings. The new arrangement risks becoming a halfway house: it appears to be neither a slower-paced forum for tackling the most fundamental questions facing UK national security; nor is it a weekly meeting of senior ministers -- convened and brokered by the Prime Minister -- to tackle pressing issues. In our initial assessment, this is a retrograde step that suggests a more casual approach to national security.*

The national security structures seem to have continued to evolve following that 2021 review. The government's response to the parliamentary Intelligence

and Security Committee report on China, published in September 2023[4], noted that there were now two NSC subcommittees, one dealing with overall economic security, and another with threats and hazards, both chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister. These show that the issues of economic security are being taken seriously, and they will be in response to the increasing workload, given the many risks and threats the country faces. But there is a risk in proliferating subcommittees. If the result is that they develop separate policies, then it becomes harder to implement an overall strategy, integrating the various elements and setting priorities.

## 3. Scrutinising national security policy-making

In Whitehall, machinery of government issues can have a real impact on the quality of decisions and the efficiency of policy-making. It will therefore be important for parliament to continue to scrutinise the systems and processes of national security decision-making.

The Call for Evidence seeks views on what governments should publish or explain about its overall strategic concept. British governments have traditionally published defence reviews. The National Security Strategy (NSS) and Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) were published together in late 2010, the first major refresh of British strategy since 1998.

Having coordinated this set of documents as National Security Adviser, my conclusion is that preparing them was a valuable exercise especially for a new government. The process obliges a wide range of Ministers and their departments to think about national security risks and opportunities, and the trade-offs involved. The published texts are useful in providing the public with a broad statement of the government's views of the country's interests, objectives and priorities internationally. They crystallise thinking about policy initiatives and ensure that these are coordinated.

In my view, an NSS is of most operational value when it also provides some guidance on the allocation of scarce resources. Unless this is done, the document becomes a long list of aspirations. The 2010 NSS set out a prioritised list of 15 national security risks and threats. In the 2015 NSS, the list had grown to 20 priorities. In subsequent strategic documents (the 2018 Capability Review, and the two Integrated Reviews of 2021 and 2023) there was no prioritised list of threats or opportunities. Although the ranking of risks will never be an exact science, discussing a risk matrix with ministers had the benefit of requiring them to face up to the fact that aspirations have in the end to be aligned with scarce resources.

The 2021 Integrated Review (IR) made a valiant effort to draw the consequences of a period of intense upheaval, with Brexit followed by the pandemic. But the careful strategic analysis was interspersed with political rhetoric about Global Britain, and unrealistic claims about Britain's global leadership in areas such as science and technology and soft power. The Review was brimful of ideas and initiatives, but there was no recognition of the need to set priorities. The prominence given in the IR to the Indo-Pacific Tilt made a course correction necessary following Putin's invasion of Ukraine. The 2023 IR refresh duly increased the emphasis on NATO and European security.

The shifting focus of recent national security strategies is a reminder that they can only ever give a limited insight into the government's underlying strategic capabilities and effectiveness. They are inevitably documents of political advocacy, reflecting the agenda of the Prime Minister of the day. Their political purpose is as much to reassure publics that the government has everything under control as it is to inform. No government can be expected to be fully frank - in a document available to its adversaries - about its real assessment of the country's strengths and weaknesses. The 1960 Foreign Policy Study was only possible because everyone involved could rely on it staying secret.

I therefore suggest that the three most important areas for parliamentary scrutiny of national security strategy-making in government :

- regular oversight of the effectiveness of the NSC structure, the capability of the supporting National Security Staff in the Cabinet Office, and the skills and training of civil servants dealing with national security affairs in government departments;

- in the period when a new strategic document is being developed, to ensure that ministers and their teams have a process in place to draw in the widest range of views from outside government, including universities, think tanks, Parliament and allies abroad;
- in the period after strategy document is published, to hold the government to account on its implementation.

This latter point is important since national security strategies can only be effective if the decisions they announce are implemented. In the 2010 and 2015 NSS documents, one of the top-tier risks identified was that of an influenza pandemic. It will be for the UK Covid-19 Inquiry to consider whether these alerts resulted in more investment in pandemic preparedness. But there is a wider point here. Does the process of deciding public spending priorities takes enough account of the need to invest in resilience against possible future threats and risks, in addition to dealing with immediate crises?

This problem arises in acute form in one of the Committee's proposed case studies, on meeting the UK's net zero commitments, while maintaining energy security. The short-term political pressures will be to keep energy prices down and therefore to promote the lowest-cost forms of energy even if that means reducing investment in future renewable energy sources.

Scrutinising government strategies on achieving net zero should therefore include whether their decision-making processes ensure that essential investment in the future is not crowded out by dealing with today's crisis. Since the climate crisis is not one that can be solved by domestic policies alone, it will be important to hold governments to account on how much they are doing to promote climate adaptation in poorer countries, for example in contributing to the $100bn a year agreed at COP 21 in Paris in 2015, and the recent Loss and Damage fund. The overseas development budget would have been an appropriate source of funding for the UK contribution. But there has been a 40% cut in the UK overseas aid budget, and much of the remainder is currently being used to fund accommodation for asylum seekers in the UK. This is a clear example of short term pressures damaging longer term priorities.

## 4. Conclusion

I believe the government has the right machinery in place for longer-term strategic thinking and planning. The NSC provides ministers with a well tried and flexible structure for bringing all the competing interests across government to the table and reaching decisions on aligning British interests and resources. But this machinery needs to be used effectively: ministers should resist the temptation to use the NSC purely for crisis management, and to delegate much of the work to sub-committees, which risks losing overall strategic coherence.

The Prime Minister and senior colleagues need to create the climate for civil servants to do genuine strategic thinking. This means ministers making clear that they are interested in longer term issues, and are open to difficult advice and unfamiliar new ideas. Civil servants will only be willing to speak truth to power if they can be confident that they will in turn be treated with respect.

Civil service leaders need to ensure that their staff have the training and skills to produce useful and challenging ideas and options. The civil service can also do a better job of engaging those outside government with experience and expertise to offer. Parliamentary Committees should regularly scrutinise whether government departments have the right capability and organisation to undertake strategic thinking. This should include the Cabinet Office National Security Secretariat, and the departments dealing with economic and technology issues which are now central to ensuring Britain's security.

Documents such as NSS and Integrated Reviews can only be a point of departure for Parliament's scrutiny of strategy-making by governments. These can never give a fully frank account of the nation's strengths and weaknesses in dealing with the threats and risks it faces, parliamentary scrutiny should therefore extend to two other important phases of strategy-making. First, upstream of publication, to examine the scope and main themes and whether the net has been cast widely enough outside government to catch original ideas. And secondly, downstream from publication, to ensure that decisions are followed through and implemented.

Lord Ricketts

17 September 2023

[1] Atlantic Books 2022

[2] HC 435

[3] HC231

[4] CP 927