Written evidence submitted by Celia G. Parker

SUMMARY

- The NSC has created a vehicle for the education of executive decision makers in the nature and limitations of intelligence, a crucial function (paragraph 3)
- The NSC has facilitated and formalised a close relationship between intelligence officials and executive decision makers (paragraphs 2 & 5)
- In order to make improvements to the system enduring, and improve oversight and accountability, the NSC should be made a statutory body (paragraph 9)

DETAIL

1. This evidence will focus on the National Security Council (NSC), with particular reference to the use of intelligence by Prime Ministers and their immediate teams (henceforth referred to as the executive).

ADVANTAGES OF THE NSC SYSTEM

2. The creation of the NSC in 2010 formalised regular contact between intelligence and decision makers at the highest level of decision making on national security, and put intelligence formally at the top table of national security decision making. This was an improvement on some of the less formal arrangements which came before it. The NSC system enabled national security decision making to be more transparent than pre-2010 arrangements, as long as it was employed as designed in 2010. Moreover, its creation has reinforced the British culture of collegiality in both executive decision making and intelligence.

3. In relation to intelligence failures, the NSC’s creation has decreased the likelihood of some types of intelligence failure, for example misunderstanding by executive decision makers of the nature and limitations of intelligence. It has also reduced the likelihood of intelligence failures which stem from informal decision making on national security by the executive.

4. Historically, the UK has balanced the requirement for intelligence to ‘speak truth to power’ and ‘serve power’ with marked success, excluding some isolated incidences. The NSC reinforces this tradition.

5. The NSC has facilitated ‘positive politicisation’ of intelligence. For example, it has increased the relevance of intelligence to executive decision makers’ requirements. Moreover, intelligence officials can, through the NSC, provide their opinions in a semi-transparent consultancy-style manner, not just represent their agencies’ products. This is a real benefit, considering the wealth of experience held by intelligence officials who sit at the NSC.

6. The NSC system has decreased the opportunity for negative politicisation of intelligence. For example, the design of the NSC means suppression or cherry-
picking of intelligence is theoretically more problematic for executive decision makers.

**DRAWBACKS OF THE NSC SYSTEM**

7. However, the NSC is not perfect. Evidence suggests that groupthink is still a problem which the NSC system has not entirely mitigated. Moreover, it is not yet clear that the NSC has facilitated a function of challenge, which is so important in national security decision making.

8. The NSC has been accused of being too tactical at times, despite being designed as a strategic body. Its differentiation from COBR functions should be clearer, for example.

9. The NSC is not a permanent body. Its use is neither obligatory nor prescribed. Moreover, there is a clear lack of oversight and accountability when it comes to decisions made within it. As a result, the NSC’s use is at the whim of the Prime Minister of the day. These issues would be improved considerably by making the NSC a statutory body.

**CONCLUSION**

10. If used as designed, the NSC and accompanying bodies, like the National Security Secretariat, provide the best system the UK has had for the discussion and implementation of national security strategy. Failing to employ it as it was designed may well result in a significantly less effective, less transparent, and less accountable national security decision making system.

11. Furthermore, the NSC system is the best mechanism that has existed in the UK for integrating intelligence with policy.

12. This author’s Master’s dissertation (completed in August 2019) provides a more comprehensive analysis of the above points, and can be shared with the Inquiry, if required.

*Celia G. Parker is a PhD candidate at King’s College London’s Department of War Studies and author of “The UK National Security Council and misuse of intelligence by policy makers: reducing the risk?” Her thesis focuses on reform of the leadership and management of the UK’s Intelligence Community.*

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