Written evidence submitted by Ed Arnold, The D Group

Ed Arnold is a strategy consultant and programme director of The D Group’s National Security Working Group. He has experience across the public and private sector, including within consulting, the military, intelligence, and academia. His expertise covers policy, crisis management and operating model development, specifically in the defence and security sectors. This submission is based on Ed Arnold’s current and past research on UK National Security Strategy, Strategic Defence and Security Reviews and the National Security Council.

Executive Summary

Prime Ministers, and most Ministers, generally have little experience of national security before taking office\(^1\). Therefore, the national security machinery, especially its structure and key personnel, is vital in guiding inexperienced politicians through the increasingly difficult decisions they are required to make in a complex world. This machinery has become progressively centralised around No.10 and the Cabinet Office, with five Principal Ministerial departments now developing and implementing national security policy\(^2\) (see ANNEX A). Alongside this centralisation, through the three UK national security objectives; Protect our People; Protect our Global Influence; Protect our Prosperity, the scope of threats has significantly widened. This over-securitisation makes it very difficult for the extant machinery to effectively prioritise, prepare for and mitigate the range of risks it is charged to do. Without a corresponding uplift in capacity, the machinery relies on a relentless zeal for collaboration, primarily through Fusion Doctrine, to achieve its objectives.

The breadth of risks the UK now records in its National Risk Register (NRR) and National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA) diminishes their use as a practical analytical tool that can develop meaningful and regularly exercised preparedness plans. If we evaluate the UK’s Covid-19 response against the national security objectives, considering that the NSRA has had ‘Public Health’, including ‘Disease, particularly pandemic influenza’, among its Tier One risks since 2010, we can see that the extant machinery is insufficient to achieve its objectives:

On ‘Protect our People’, the UK has endured the largest excess death toll since the Second World War (outstripping casualties during the Blitz by a factor of four), the highest mortality rate of any country with a population over 20,000,000\(^3\).

On ‘Project Our Global Influence’, the pandemic has hastened the slashing of the UK aid budget from 0.7% to 0.5% of GNI, curtailing activities in the interest of UK national security such as ‘assisting other countries to develop their economies and long-term resilience,


\(^2\) Edward Arnold, Parliament should adopt a Fusion Doctrine of its own to mirror the policy environment and hold the Government to account on UK National Security, D Insights, October 2020 [accessed 15 Feb 2021]

\(^3\) John Hopkins University, Coronavirus Resource Centre [accessed 15 Feb 2021]
prepare for disease outbreaks and climate change effects, prevent or reduce conflicts, and intercept terrorist activities”.³

On ‘Promote Our Prosperity’, the UK suffered a 9.9% GDP contraction in 2020, the largest such drop since 1709 and the greatest economic decline in any G7 nation⁴. The Bank of England has projected that the unemployment rate will peak at 7.7% in 2021⁵, having been sat around 4% pre-pandemic, while by some estimates food bank usage has increased by as much as 110%⁶.

The National Security Council (NSC), at the centre of this machinery, achieves two of its three core functions to varying degrees of success: to achieve cross-Whitehall coordination; and to provide Ministerial oversight of national security affairs. However, it is severely lacking in its most critical function - to provide a forum for longer-term thinking on national security issues. The NSC, and its supporting structures and intelligence feeds, failed to foresee or produce effective policies for: the Arab Spring, Russian strategic aggression in Europe and Syria following the annexation of Crimea, the rise of Islamic State and now the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the machinery has failed to produce effective policies for the UK’s major conflicts over the past ten years resulting in ‘straight strategic failure after 2011 following Libya, Iraq, Syria and now, Afghanistan’⁷.

The machinery should be reformed around the NSC at its the heart – possibly to the extent of putting it on a statutory footing - so that it can strengthen the central ability of Her Majesty’s Government (HMG) to consistently analyse and behave strategically. Instead of another iteration of rebuilding, the current machinery should be enhanced with strategic thinking at its core.

How the NSC maintains its centrality in the policymaking process, sets ministerial direction and oversees implementation of national security decisions

1. The Integrated Review (IR) oversight, until very recently, was provided by Deputy National Security Adviser (DNSA) Alex Ellis, an elevation from 2015 when Conrad Bailey, as Director Defence in the National Security Secretariat (NSSec), provided oversight. This has enabled the NSC to maintain centrality over the policymaking process, but it is unclear whether this will continue during its implementation, a phase I believe to be far more critical. Continued oversight at DNSA level would ensure the centrality of the NSC and provide more coherence between the current quinquennial reviews and implementation of national security decisions. This would obviate the lack of responsibility, accountability and transparency of policy implementation that followed the

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³ Chatham House, Examining Impacts of the UK Foreign Aid Budget Cut, 30.11.2020 [accessed 15 Feb 2021]
⁵ Bank of England Quarterly Monetary Report: November, 05.11.2020 [accessed 15 Feb 2021]
⁶ Covid: 110% increase in food bank use reveals plight of pandemic in run up to Christmas, ITV news, 22.12.2020 [accessed 15 Feb 2021]
delivery of the 89 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) R2015 principal commitments which were overseen by four MPs in four years - Oliver Letwin, Amber Rudd, David Lidington and now Michael Gove\(^9\).

2. The centrality of the NSC, in all aspects, is very much dependent on how the Prime Minister wishes the machinery to operate and the personal commitment to the NSC and the National Security Adviser (NSA) that they are willing to provide\(^{10}\). There is a noticeable contrast between Theresa May’s and Boris Johnson’s commitment to the NSC, the former being a member since 2010. However, since April 2018 there has been no dedicated NSA and the NSC was completely side-lined in the Covid-19 response, suggesting this commitment has waned, making the NSC moribund.

3. To maintain the NSC centrality in policymaking it could be put on a statutory basis in the future, with an enhanced role for the NSA in government. A statutory basis may provide more accountability and strategic continuity, preventing successive Prime Ministers endlessly tinkering with the machinery to the extent that it diminishes long-term policymaking.

The appropriate role and remit of the NSA, including the NSA’s required interaction with the NSC, COBR and ministers

4. It would be a mistake for this inquiry to focus on the NSA role in isolation and not also to include the role of the DNSAs as they have had an increasingly important role to play since 2018. The UK has not had a dedicated and sitting NSA between April 2018 and February 2021. This 34-month hiatus does bring into question the importance of the NSA within the current machinery.

5. The three main recognised roles of the NSA are:
   a. To be a personal adviser to the PM on national security issues
   b. To be secretary to the NSC
   c. To lead the National Security Secretariat\(^{11}\).

6. Lord Sedwill’s role as Cabinet Secretary enabled him to be a personal adviser to the Prime Minister in a broader way and many Cabinet-level decisions have a national security angle. However, Brexit and Covid-19 have consumed so much Whitehall capacity, his ability to be an effective secretary to the NSC and lead the NSSec would have been diminished. While the Prime Minister can draw upon a wide range of advisers – Ministerial, official, academic, and private sector – the NSC needs strong and dedicated leadership to perform its increasingly difficult tasks.

7. Achieving continuity is critical in maintaining a strategic outlook and recent succession planning has been managed poorly by HMG. The three-and-a-half-month delay following Lord Sedwill’s departure, with DNSA David Quarry becoming acting NSA, was to allow Lord Frost to conclude the UK-EU Tree Trade Agreement negotiations. As it transpired this appointment did not take place, with Sir Stephen Lovegrove becoming NSA instead

\(^9\) Edward Arnold, Parliament should adopt a Fusion Doctrine of its own to mirror the policy environment and hold the Government to account on UK National Security, D Insights, 22.10.2020 [accessed 15 Feb 2021]


\(^{11}\) Sir Mark Lyall Grant, oral evidence session of the Joint Committee National Security Strategy, 01.02.2016
as of 1 February 2021. This surprising change, alongside the criticism on the original political appointment of Lord Frost, including from ex-Prime Minister Theresa May, needlessly cost HMG political capital. In addition, DNSA Alex Ellis became UK High Commissioner to the Republic of India, arriving in country 22 January 2021. It is likely that this movement has had a negative impact on the development of long-term policy through the IR which has experienced successive delays.

The interaction of the NSC and COBR systems

8. I am not sure whether it is a question of ‘interaction’ between the NSC and COBR systems as they seem to operate independently at present. COBR was decisively chosen ahead of the NSC as the primary Cabinet sub-committee to respond to Covid-19. The NSC, with a permanent core membership and well-resourced secretariat, may have been a more obvious forum to utilise Fusion Doctrine and deliver the much-needed coordination across Whitehall – its stated core function. However, neither had full Prime Ministerial commitment during the initial response to Covid as Boris Johnson did not attend the first four COBR meetings on Covid-19 (Jan 24 and 29, Feb 5 and 12), finally attending on 18 February 2020, at which point the NSC had ‘not met since the crisis started’ and NSC (Officials) first met the week of 13 April 2020.  

The role of key Government departments in national security policymaking

9. Since the publication of SDSR2015, UK policymaking has been dominated by Brexit and Covid-19, and has included three changes of government, two general elections and one hugely divisive referendum. This semi-permanent state of crisis management has consumed the vast majority of UK political and Whitehall capacity, forcing a premium on tactical firefighting to the detriment of real strategic thinking.

10. In addition to the high turnover of NSC officials outlined in Paragraph 7, there was significant movement in Permanent Secretary and other critical national security posts in key government departments primarily during 2020/21, for a variety of reasons:
   a. 31 December 2019 - Lord Darroch steps down as Her Majesty’s Ambassador to the United States (as a previous NSA and tasked with managing the UK’s primary national security this departure was significant)
   b. 29 February 2020 - Sir Philip Rutnam steps down as Home Office Permanent Secretary at the Home Office
   c. 30 March 2020 – Andrew Parker steps down as Director General of MI5
   d. 2 September 2020 - Anne-Marie Trevelyan MP and Matt Rycroft CBE step down as DfID Secretary of State and Permanent Secretary respectively, Sir Simon McDonald steps down as FCO Permanent Secretary
   e. 9 September 2020 - Lord Sedwill steps down as Cabinet Secretary
   f. 16 September 2020 – Lord Sedwill steps down as NSA
   g. 30 September 2020 – Sir Alex Younger steps down as the Chief of MI6
   h. 1 February 2021 – Sir Stephen Lovegrove steps down as Ministry of Defence (MoD) Permanent Secretary to become NSA.

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12 Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP, Secretary of State for Defence, Evidence to House of Parliament Defence Select Committee, 22.04.2020
11. Permanent Secretaries provide critical continuity at a senior level in departmental policymaking and contribute to a more strategic outlook rather than tactical short-termism driven by transient political expediency. While such movement is not always negative – ‘securocrat’ officials such as Lord Sedwill and Sir Stephen bring a wealth and variety of experience which is beneficial to the departments they take charge of – the volume in 2020 is significant considering the development of the IR, Brexit and Covid-19.

12. Covid-19 has exposed the inability of the current machinery to adequately represent the devolved governments and regional political entities. As these have no formal powers of defence, security, foreign or development policy they have no standing representation within the machinery. If their underrepresentation is not addressed, it could have an impact on the changing politics of the Union and contribute to future secession and the breakup of the UK – a significant threat to national security – which interestingly is not currently contained in the NSRA2015.

The coherence of the NSC committee structures, as reshaped in this Parliament and further revised to address Covid-19

13. It would be a mistake to consider the NSC committee structures in isolation. The interaction with other Cabinet structures should also be in scope of this inquiry to fully understand governmental national security decision-making. The NSC committee structures, as with Cabinet as a whole, are opaque and incoherent causing three main issues. First, the public are unable to fully understand how HMG makes decisions to protect its citizens – the primary duty of government. Second, it is more difficult for politicians and civil servants, without prior national security experience, to understand their role within an everchanging system. Third, it is difficult for the private sector to understand how they might best be able to assist HMG to deliver its national security objectives. This is a persistent frustration of The D Group’s national security sector members.

14. The Gov.uk website hosts a ‘List of Cabinet Committees and their membership’, first published 16 September 2010 and last updated 19 November 2020, at the time of writing with 21 intervening updates, which I have attempted to recreate as an organogram at ANNEX B.

15. The current list seems out of date and incomplete when compared to other HMG documents with some key sub-committees missing, while it is understandable that thematic sub-committees – such Syria and Iraq (2015) – are disbanded. Moreover, it is possible that each of the NSC sub-committees also has a corresponding Officials (O) sub-committee.

16. During the initial Covid-19 response four specific Ministerial Implementation Groups (MIGs) were stood up in addition to the Cabinet and NSC sub-committees:
   a. Public Sector – Chaired by Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster
   b. International – Chaired by the Foreign Secretary
   c. Healthcare – Chaired by the Health Secretary

d. Economy – Chaired by the Chancellor of the Exchequer. These MIGs were merged into Covid Strategy (S) and Covid Operations (O) in June 2020. Critically the MIGs included devolved and regional representation whereas the new Cabinet sub-committees did not. Of course, it is right and proper to adjust the machinery to suit each Prime Minister and the nature of the crisis. However, the Covid-19 response demonstrates a very reactive reorganisation, contributing to a more confused policymaking picture and suggesting that the original machinery was deemed not fit for purpose and therefore not sufficiently stress tested.

17. The domestic policy side of the Cabinet sub-committee structure is a tiered strategy – operations – implementation delineation for each thematic policy area to provide coherence, which according to the Institute for Government (IfG) stems from the perceived success of the EU Exit Strategy and EU Exit Operations committees in 2019. However, within this structure there are sub-committee level gaps, and this methodology is not replicated on the national security side at Cabinet, creating a misaligned machinery. If the strategy-operations-implementation works for this part of government then it should also be used for the NSC sub-committees.

18. The HMG list makes no reference to the establishment of the National Situation Centre (SitCen) which provides ‘data-led analysis to drive evidence-informed action and data-driven decision-making’. This supposedly transformational addition needs to be carefully integrated into the machinery, clearly delineating data from intelligence, especially the interaction with the assessment community in the form of the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) and Joint Intelligence Organisation (JIO) for decision support.

How well the ‘Fusion Doctrine’ is embedded, learning the lessons from Covid

19. It is unclear whether Fusion Doctrine is most accurately described as an: approach, ambition, process, capability, or behaviour. It is incredibly ambitious to fuse all instruments of national strategy together to persistently achieve positive effects at the political and strategic levels, especially with the wide range of risks outlined in the NRR and NSRA. The scope might be too ambitious to embed Fusion Doctrine within the national security machinery and it risks becoming another stalled attempt at a genuine whole of government approach. It would be far more effective to better distinguish between what is a genuine ‘national security risk’, as opposed to a ‘national risk’, and focus solely on the former.

20. Fusion Doctrine, and the NSC as the coordinating body, experienced notable success in 2018 in response to the Skripal poisoning, enabling positive political outcomes for the UK. However, this event created a perfect set of conditions – operational failure and poor Russian tradecraft – to react, seize the initiative and achieve political outcomes for the UK. In contrast Fusion Doctrine seems to be severely lacking in the response to Covid-19. Yet it has the ambition to be proactive as ‘At the strategic level, it ensures the UK’s response is greater than the sum of its parts and enables policy and strategy makers

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14 Institute for Government, Whitehall Monitor 2021, 28.01.2021, p29
15 Ibid, p29
17 Ibid
to formulate better, more timely decisions and for the UK to adopt a proactive posture\textsuperscript{18}. Based on this aspiration, Fusion Doctrine completely failed the UK in its preparedness and management of the Covid-19 pandemic. Fusion Doctrine is better suited as a reactive strategic tool to be used when the conditions allow, instead of a nebulous concept with almost unlimited scope.

ANNEX A – UK National Security policy and oversight landscape

\textsuperscript{18} The Ministry of Defence, The Orchestration of Military Strategic Effects, 27.01.2021, p2
ANNEX B – UK Cabinet committees’ system as at February 2021

15 February 2021