Written evidence submitted by Saferworld

Introduction

1. When the Integrated Security, Defence and Foreign Policy Review (or Integrated Review) is published, the UK Government will have to begin the much harder, and more important task of implementing it. This requires moving beyond positive policy documents to ensure the mechanisms of government work effectively. Given that, this submission will explore: how the UK can make more coherent policy; how the UK can measure success; and the role of oversight.

2. In doing so, this submission focuses on four of the questions posed by the Committee in its Call for Evidence:

- How well the National Security Council and/or Cabinet Office ensures that preparedness plans are resourced and exercised, and how their lessons are learned/implemented?
- How the NSC maintains its centrality in the policy-making process, sets ministerial direction and oversees implementation of national security decisions?
- The role of key government departments and agencies in national security policy-making.
- The coherence of the NSC committee structures, as reshaped in this parliament and further revised to address Covid.

Key points

- Addressing divergences in language, culture and planning processes between departments will be important for creating more coherent foreign policy – as will ensuring the long-term vision and approach of the Department for International Development (DfID) is not lost with the merger.
- Continued problems remain in measuring the impact of UK activities. The focus on short-term objectives (such as building influence or countering certain armed groups), can hinder the ability to measure the UK’s impact on the drivers of instability.
- Monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) efforts often fail to meaningfully engage with local populations and civil society, whose experience and feedback are vital to any understanding of whether UK security engagement is succeeding.
- In developing effective strategy, Parliament has an important role to play. However, for it to be effective, the government needs to invest in a much more open and frank conversation about its interventions – including releasing public versions of NSC country strategies.
- Beyond parliamentary oversight, establishing open and inclusive debate with independent institutions will also dramatically improve UK strategy making.

Towards more coherent policy-making

3. While progress has been made to ease cross-departmental working in Whitehall, barriers remain in bridging different languages, cultures, and planning processes across departments. Some experts have argued that these challenges relate to fundamental differences in planning between departments at a strategic, political, and operational level, where the assumptions and calculations are invariably different. Oxford Research Group (ORG), and now Saferworld, have run nearly 50 roundtables with experts and practitioners on UK strategy making. A participant at one of these roundtables argued that the ‘[r]ole of diplomats is to keep options open; while the role of the military is to shut options down – to get a decision – and this leads to frustration.’1
4. In June, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced a merger between DfID and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), as a means of addressing some of these problems. He stated that bringing these departments together in the new Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) would ‘unite our efforts [and] take a comprehensive overview.’ However, it is vital that the government does not forsake the benefits of bringing a spectrum of political, security, economic, development and humanitarian perspectives to bear on the complex challenges of conflict settings. All have a vital contribution to make. In fact, many costly strategic failures of recent years could have been avoided by adopting a more developmental, less security-oriented perspective to UK strategy and interventions in unstable contexts. If the merger does not fully account for the potential loss of a long-term perspective that addresses root causes of conflict, there could be a greater prioritisation of short-term national interests. Instead, then, strengthening the ability of the NSC to bring differing opinions together for meaningful debate and a focus on clear hierarchy of objectives, shared principles, mechanisms for reviewing and revisiting trade-offs is essential.⁵

5. Unfortunately, a number of problems still remain in building collective strategy in the NSC. Our own work has highlighted that heads of departments often come to meetings, ‘read their own briefs’ and remain unable to see the problem through the lens of others.⁴ Sir Peter Ricketts also noted that cross-Whitehall cooperation ‘works up to, but not including, the point where money becomes involved.’⁵ Added to this is the secrecy which surrounds many aspects and activities of the NSC. This may, to an extent, be necessary given the sensitivity of many of the operations it discusses but can also have implications for the ability and willingness of government to draw on a truly diverse range of voices when devising collective policy.

6. More generally, its creation is not enough to build a common language across departments. As it stands, differences in conceptualisation of threats to national security (i.e. what the problem is and what the priorities for responding are) and horizons of ambition (i.e. what can realistically be achieved) impede whole-of-government working. This can be seen in the context of recent discussion in government about civilian harm mitigation in conflicts. When advocating for an update to the UK’s Protection of Civilians strategy, a number of NGOs noted that the FCO relied more on the language of ‘Protection of Civilians’ (PoC) whereas conversations with Ministry of Defence (MOD) officials were framed around ‘Human Security’.⁶ While there is much overlap between these terms, it would be beneficial for two departments, who work closely on these issues,

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4 ibid
to agree on common terminology. Similarly, our research has found that differences in language used can create confusion between humanitarian and defence actors. This can stymie frank debate when personnel feel unable to work across departments. We heard, for instance, that there had been cases when MOD personnel felt ‘petrified’ by the language in some Conflict Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) and Joint Analysis of Conflict and Stability (JACS) documents. Feeling they couldn’t engage with these, they conducted their own analysis instead. Such challenges can limit departments’ ability to contribute effectively to joint discussions.⁷

7. Greater understanding of collective approaches and aims is also needed at the strategic level if the government is able to make good on its commitment to tackle the causes of conflict. The UK government requires a comprehensive, up-to-date cross-government strategy for conflict prevention and addressing the ongoing drivers of conflict. The Building Stability Overseas Strategy has not been updated since 2011 and was not mentioned in the National Security Capability Review.⁸ There is at present no cross-government equivalent to DfID’s well-evidenced, appropriately focused Building Stability framework and no clarity on its status in the FCDO. The MOD, Home Office, Department of Justice and National Crime Agency also engage in activities related to security and justice in conflict-affected countries. The potential value of deploying development programming, diplomatic assets, human rights promotion and CSSF more coherently in the service of conflict prevention is huge. Thus, having no integrated cross-government conflict prevention and peacebuilding strategy is a missed opportunity. Links can also be made to wider policy areas, strategies and structures covering crisis response, stabilisation and gender, peace and security.⁹

Measuring success

8. As important as a common language, is a common vision of success. Unfortunately, there are a number of systematic problems in how the UK learns and implements lessons in its foreign policy. In particular, there are two potential problems with the current approach:

- The focus on short-term objectives (such as building influence or countering certain armed groups), can hinder our ability to measure the UK’s impact on the drivers of instability.
- MEL efforts often fail to engage meaningfully with the local community, despite the fact that UK security assistance programmes cannot be said to have succeeded if they do not improve the experience of security and justice in the eyes of the public.

9. First, while the UK Government has increasingly acknowledged the need to address the drivers of conflict, the reality is that building influence and access and countering certain groups is often prioritised. Over the last few years, the UK has put a lot of effort into improving its ability to measure increases in British influence and reputation in the places it has engaged.¹⁰ However, a focus on influence could undermine efforts to measure the long-term impact of its activities on

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⁹ Saferworld (2020), Submission to Integrated Review Call for Evidence, 11th September

peace and stability in the places it intervenes. For instance, many UK officials and soldiers acknowledge that the UK’s deployment to the UN mission in Mali (MINUSMA) is largely about building international relations with European allies (especially France) in light of Brexit.\textsuperscript{11} The FCO said in evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee that its pivot to the region will ‘support our alliances with international partners such as France, Germany and the [African Union] as we exit the European Union’.\textsuperscript{12} A British soldier that ORG spoke to, put it more bluntly: ‘post-Brexit we need trade deals with France’.\textsuperscript{13} As the UK has acknowledged, the Sahel is ‘an area of long-term instability and extreme poverty’.\textsuperscript{14} It, then, requires carefully considered and implemented solutions that succeed in mitigating conflict and lastingly addressing its drivers - rather than more piecemeal short-term engagement designed to curry favour with France.

10. Similarly, a focus on countering certain violent non-state groups such as Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram or ISIS has undermined a longer-term approach which acknowledges the drivers of violent conflict. As the World Bank and the United Nations noted in their \textit{Pathways to Peace} report ‘the growing reach of violent extremist groups in recent years “is more a product of instability than its primary driver”’.\textsuperscript{15} Indeed, as illustrated in over a dozen Saferworld studies on international counter-terrorism and stabilisation efforts in the past five years, security-first responses to instability have often escalated violence, reinforced problematic partners, exacerbated conflict drivers and neglected to support peaceful change strategies and processes.\textsuperscript{16} Such approaches have thus proved counter-productive for the UK and its allies in contexts such as Afghanistan, Egypt, Somalia, Syria and Yemen.

11. When citizens see their own government as corrupt, unable to provide security and services, non-state groups can fill the gaps left by the state.\textsuperscript{17} This is the case in many places the UK is providing support. As the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) notes, ‘[g]overnments continue to pose the biggest threats to civilians around the world’.\textsuperscript{18} The consequence of

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\item \textsuperscript{15} United Nations and World Bank (2018), ‘Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict’, \url{https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/28337}
\item \textsuperscript{17} Task Force on Extremism in Fragile States (2019), Preventing Extremism in Fragile States: A New Approach, United State Institute for Peace, February 2019, \url{https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/02/preventing-extremism-fragile-states-new-approach}
supporting predatory state forces, then, may well be to exacerbate the drivers of conflict as civilians are trapped ‘between increased violence of abusive state forces and the terror of non-state armed groups’.

For instance, in Nigeria experts have long warned of the dangers of empowering the military. For this reason, one British soldier told ORG in 2018 that the international effort was ‘treating the symptoms not the causes of the problem [when] the whole defence structure here needs institutional reform.’ To truly measure success, then, the UK needs to find a way to evaluate decisions in light of holistic reflections on the results, strengths and weaknesses of its past efforts.

12. This should be fed back into long-term assessments of the prospects of success for future engagements. As one participant in our roundtable argued, the UK should be asking of every intervention, military and otherwise: ‘Are we doing the right things to address the drivers of conflict?’ They added that the UK should ask ‘whether [its actions are] a logical first step to get to peace, if the answer is no, we know you help spread terrorism and instability’. It has been well-documented that using force as a tool for conflict management will feed into further escalations of violence. The UK, then, needs to view it as a last resort after all viable alternatives have been exhausted, and ensure it is very carefully targeted and accountable whenever force is deployed. Recent campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan have, as one participant noted, already shown the dangers of engaging ‘without significant acknowledgement of what can be done or the possibility of success.’

13. As the government’s stabilisation guidance argues, there are ‘tensions between stabilisation actions to secure immediate security and reduce violent conflict and those activities designed to generate longer-term stability’. Where this is the case, strategies and guidelines should provide officials with greater clarity on what priority takes precedence. This could also require them to document why they decide on a particular trade-off. This would ensure there are processes for revisiting decisions, and for publicly disclosing details to enable debate and oversight whenever possible. The guidance also encourages a culture of challenge; officials are asked to look at options from different sides and interrogate the flaws. This should also inform the approach of politicians and decision-makers within the NSC.

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14. Second, while the importance of local buy-in has been acknowledged by the UK government, it is still a long way off broad, democratic ownership of development and reform processes. In April 2018, the Stabilisation Unit’s *Elite Bargaining and Political Deals* report noted that ‘interventions can be ineffectual, or counter-productive, when interveners fail to analyse and engage effectively with underlying configurations of power’. Unfortunately, as Saferworld has noted elsewhere, Western security decision-makers seem:

‘... content with international and local civil society organizations echoing their buzzwords and priorities, or offering technical ideas on 'best practices.' Civil society organizations that want to be included in higher-level discussions often feel they are supposed to leave critical perspectives [...] at home. This kind of echo chamber does not lend itself to improved security interventions, but to groupthink where the same flawed approaches persist despite their clear faults’.  

15. There must also be greater efforts to consult experts from the regions where the UK is engaged. These civil society groups in-country will often have a much better knowledge of the community they represent than the state elites that the UK and its allies routinely speak to. By consulting such groups, the UK will deepen its understanding ‘of the local context and culture’ and ‘give voice to often marginalised actors and [open] up the policymaking process to a wider set of perspectives’. The OECD notes that ‘given the weakness of state capacity in many countries, civil society groups are essential in helping not just to denounce bad policies but also to ‘make practical suggestions that will help to sustain the reform process.’

16. Sufficient engagement with these groups will also highlight the ways in which men, women, boys, and girls are impacted differently in conflict and post-conflict situations. In this sense, they can cast an essential light on who is secure, and how meaningful the security that a community or a country is moving towards actually is – and point out when UK programmes are having unintended consequences for certain groups. As Professor David Keen, of LSE, and Larry Attree, of Saferworld, note:

‘...community-based approaches to reforms in security provision (or ‘community security’ approaches) have an important gap to fill. They offer the potential to support both immediate and long-term solutions to security deficits. But crucially, they may do so in a way that seriously engages with the long-term objectives of achieving legitimacy, public confidence and improved state–society relations.’

17. One roundtable participant noted that there are two important challenges when it comes to including local civil society in MEL processes: there are insufficient resources to undertake such engagement; and British policymakers ‘don’t see civil society as useful for analysis.’ It is clear how these interact. The fact that the UK does not see civil society involvement as useful is the reason it is not given enough resources. This has dire consequences because, as the same participant noted, ‘decisions are made in London which are not grounded in the reality of people’s lives’.31 Addressing complex challenges of instability are dependent on understanding and recognising obstacles to achieving human security for all the populations of unstable contexts. Policy review, dialogue and learning structures, then, should support and enable research analysts and bodies in countries affected by UK engagement (including those that represent women, youth and marginalised populations) to analyse and feedback into UK policy debates.

The role of oversight

18. The UK Government’s willingness to commit to an honest and frank conversation with Parliament about its national security priorities will have a huge impact on the effectiveness of its strategy. It will have a significant bearing on how effectively Parliament can fulfil its role in scrutinising UK strategy, judging the success or failure of policies, evaluating the needs of UK personnel, and/or suggesting alternatives to ensure that the UK prioritises an approach to national security abroad that addresses the underlying causes of conflict.32

19. While the character of military engagements has changed over the last two decades, mechanisms for providing oversight over the UK’s conflict interventions have not kept up. Since January 2019, British troops have been deployed to, among others, Afghanistan,33 Mali34 and, reportedly, Yemen.35 But as deployments exempt from the War Powers Convention (because they are designated as non-combat or, in the case of Special Forces, are exempt from any external scrutiny) they have not required prior parliamentary approval. This is despite the fact that, in some cases, they have placed UK troops in the firing line in conflict environments.

20. Added to this, inconsistent and partial reporting on UK activities abroad makes it difficult for Parliament to hold departments to account. Some narrative may be given in the MOD annual reports and CSSF country reports, but this often only gives a snapshot of activities in a selection of countries where the UK works. Budgetary information when it is given is rarely consistent between countries or over time. This makes it hard to get a sense of how much time and effort the UK is putting into activities such as capacity building and engaging with its local allies. It also makes it difficult to understand if these projects are cost-effective.

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21. Parliament's role in scrutinising the Government's National Security Strategy should be encouraged. Professor John Bew has acknowledged UK Parliament has a ‘rich tradition of serious engagement with, and high-quality debate about, international affairs and Britain’s place in the world’, often acting ‘as the focal point for a healthy and robust dissenting tradition that challenges the core assumptions of the government of the day’.  

22. The Joint Committee on National Security Strategy (JCNSS), then, should be provided with greater access to information so that it can fulfil its role in holding the Government’s national security strategy to account. As an immediate step, the Government should publish unclassified versions of the NSC’s country strategies. Successive governments have pledged to (in correspondence with JCNSS) release them but failed to deliver. These strategies are likely to retain their significance as they were referenced by the Prime Minister in his speech announcing the merger of DFID and the FCO.

23. Beyond this, many have welcomed Independent Commission on Aid Impact (ICAI)’s scrutiny of UK development assistance; however, no equivalent structure is in place for scrutinising other aspects of UK foreign, defence and security policies, strategies and engagement. For the UK to be a leader in responding to complex global challenges, it needs to invest in the ideas base that informs national security and foreign policy decision-making. This could include establishing and sustaining independent bodies, think-tanks, policy institutes and/or practitioner organisations. These organisations can: review current policies, ensure inclusive and sustained policy dialogue, build a knowledge base for decision-makers. Likewise, the UK should invest in learning structures within government and between its implementing partners on foreign, security defence and development policy. By investing in policy research and dialogue, the UK can also influence the approach of its allies to complex global challenges and help prevent further counter-productive and costly security interventions in future years.

Conclusion and Recommendations

24. If the Government is to deliver on its promise of being a ‘force for good’ in the world, it must develop structures that: focus on the right challenges; achieve coherence and sustainability in practice; and institute a culture of reflection, learning, accountability and innovation.

25. Towards more coherent policy-making: the government must bring a spectrum of perspectives to bear on the complex challenges of conflict settings, through a clear hierarchy of objectives and shared principles.

- The government should produce a cross government conflict prevention strategy
- The government should encourage staff in all departments (and at all levels) to work effectively when participating in cross-departmental teams, particularly by ensuring that language used is agreed and understood by all departments.
- The government should ensure that, in merging the FCO and DFID, it doesn’t lose the focus on the long-term drivers of conflict and the strengths of the Building Stability Framework as a strategic approach.
- The JCNSS should seek clarity on how expertise on addressing the causes of conflict formerly housed within DFID will be retained and given a full hearing in the NSC.

26. **Measuring success**: The UK needs to find a way to evaluate decisions in light of holistic reflections on the results, strengths and weaknesses of its past efforts. To do this, the government should:

- Encourage a culture of learning, challenge and vigorous research at all levels of UK foreign policymaking.
- Ensure that long-term thinking is central when assessing the prospects for success
- Ensure that (at all stages of strategy development, implementation and adaptation) there is meaningful engagement with communities in the places the UK is engaged.

27. **Role of oversight**: The UK government has acknowledged that greater engagement with the UK Parliament and civil society is required to fill the gaps in the UK’s own knowledge and capability. However, the level of engagement can be variable and often insufficient:

- The JCNSS should continue to push for greater transparency and seek clarity on the status of national security country and thematic strategies and when public summaries will be published.
- The Government should encourage open and inclusive debate with external experts throughout strategy development, implementation, review and adaptation.

**About Saferworld**

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity. We are a not-for-profit organisation working in 12 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

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