Written evidence submitted by The Henry Jackson Society

The appropriate role and remit of the National Security Adviser

Introduction:

The Henry Jackson Society’s Centre on Cyber Security & Online Threats is a bold, policy-focused, international research centre, which seeks to provide imaginative policy options that safeguard a free and open cyberspace, and help challenge online threats to liberal Western democracies. Dr Danny Steed is a Research Fellow in Cyber Security and Intelligence.

The author wishes to acknowledge the role of the OS Exe research group, led by Freddie Nelson, whose support was invaluable in the preparation of this submission.

Summary

The role and remit of the National Security Adviser (NSA) is intimately tied to the role, remit, and performance of the wider National Security Council (NSC). It is a role that is shaped by the incumbent’s personality and Prime Ministerial patronage more than it is by any strict articulation of the role’s expectations. If HMG wishes to ensure the longevity of the NSA post and the NSC more broadly, actions need to be taken to evolve the role and transition it away from its opening decade of practice. That decade can be termed a form of “Prime Ministerial experiment” that now needs firmer guidance to turn it into a generational body with the longevity achieved by the JIC.

There are a number of challenges to be addressed in finding the appropriate role and remit of the NSA, all linked themselves to the operating functions and practices of the wider NSC. Those challenges go far beyond the sharp criticisms levelled by David Frost’s appointment and concerns of politicisation of the role. Indeed, the challenges strike right at the heart of any doctrinal aspirations the nation has in orientating government machinery for national security, and reflects our inability to think strategically, mistaking branding gimmicks for long-term strategic acumen.

Some of the recommendations provided can be enacted very quickly, others are longer term propositions, requiring significant intellectual investment to find the right solutions.

Spirit of the post

Any newcomer researching the role and remit of the NSA will fast encounter a great deal of uncertainty. Indeed, this author would go as far to say that any job description for the role would be difficult to write, given that when identifying such candidates, ‘much will depend on a prime minister’s conception of the NSC.’\(^1\) Understanding the role relies on piecing together a decade of convention, precedent, and Prime Ministerial attitude to fully gauge the

---

\(^1\) Joe Devanny, Josh Harris, The National Security Council (2014) Institute for Government, p. 28 (italics added).
role and remit. It can be held as little surprise that the JCNSS is now posing the very question about the appropriate role and remit of the NSA even after the post has existed for more than a decade.

To understanding the lack of clarity surrounding the NSA role, it is necessary to briefly revisit its creation, in order to understand – to borrow an adage from UK military practice – the commanders’ intent in creating the role, the spirit of the post itself. The Lord Ricketts, the first NSA, put this well in a recent article in reminding all that the job of the NSA was established in no small measure as a corrective to the perceived informality of Tony Blair’s decision making on foreign and security policy.² The slogan ‘sofa government’ being applied in derision much thereafter.

The NSC was created ‘to improve a perceived weakness in how long-term national security strategy was formulated and implemented.’³ The NSA, ‘to tighten up decision-making and improve coordination across government…’⁴ by serving – roughly – three elements: as secretary to the NSC, the Prime Minister’s closest adviser on national security, and lead the National Security Secretariat.

Challenges to address

The precedent set by David Frost’s appointment

The appointment, albeit short-lived, of David Frost to the post of NSA establishes the precedent that the role of NSA can be and remains vulnerable to politicisation. The appointment was at the time criticised by many, on mainly two grounds, first for the claim of the post being subverted into a political appointment. Second, on the grounds that Frost was unqualified, with former PM Theresa May stating her view that Frost held ‘no proven expertise in national security.’⁵

Of arguably more interest to the JCNSS however, is that the appointment of Frost provides a very tangible confirmation of a fear that has long been held of the NSC and the NSA, that is highly vulnerable to Prime Ministerial whim. This is true of the post of NSA, where who the Prime Minister appoints can have long-standing precedent for successors, but also of the NSC as a whole, where ‘the dependence of central institutions on prime ministerial support can make them fragile and vulnerable to change or loss of standing.’⁶

The vulnerability of the NSA and, by extension, the NSC itself to Prime Ministerial whim needs a long term solution, in order to ensure the long term effectiveness of the post and the Council. This is a vulnerability further evidenced by the revelation that the NSC did not meet

---
² The Lord Ricketts (2020), Speaking Truth to Power: The Problem with Prime Minister Johnson’s New National Security Adviser | RUSI
⁴ Ricketts (2020).
⁵ Theresa May, quoted in Theresa May attacks appointment of UK national security adviser | Financial Times (ft.com)
⁶ Devanny and Harris (2014), p. 45.
at all between January and July 2020,\(^7\) which raises questions in itself as to the value of the NSA and NSC.

**Establishing a convention of expectation for the NSA**

It makes little sense to place the role and remit of the NSA on any statutory basis, as this would detract both from the historic culture of UK defence, security, and intelligence practice, but it would also impose limits to the role when flexibility is needed. Instead, it should be based on established conventions of practice so far, with periodic reviews to propose amendments to evolve the role based on practice and reality.

A small number of conventions exist for the role that should be subject to debate in the JCNSS, to determine their appropriateness to the role, for each has weaknesses in practice:

1. The role is always filled by a senior civil servant with deep experience of the defence, security, intelligence, or diplomatic worlds. But this has been subjected to a shift in precedent with David Frost’s recent, short-lived appointment.
2. The role is to be inherently long-term and strategically focused,\(^8\) leaving COBRA to focus on short term responses. Yet, the extent of such strategic focus is highly questionable to date.
3. The role is centred on coordination of the national security machinery, but with questionable results so far and an inability to demonstrate success.
4. The role is notionally intended to make the NSA the PM’s chief adviser on national security matters, but this appears to hold more lustre on paper than in practice.

**Learning from the JIC**

At face value, work needs to be done to help better differentiate the NSC from COBRA and the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC). A more nuanced view, however, would recognise that many of the lessons currently being learned by the NSA and NSC are analogous to those learnt over many decades by the JIC and the role of its Chairman.

The 1957 transfer of the JIC into the Cabinet Office set the structure for permanently centralised intelligence for the first time,\(^9\) and helped evolve the role of the JIC Chairman into one of the most powerful intelligence voices in the country. Before 1957, it was easy for the JIC to be ‘marginalised and unheard’\(^10\) much in the same way we today fear the NSC and with it the NSA being so.

The history of how the JIC has evolved, and its ebbs and flows in status to successive premierships, carry important lessons worthy of note for the JCNSS to consider, for they are

---

\(^7\) Celia G. Parker (2020), *National Security Council: why it would be unwise for Johnson to reduce its role* | *British Politics and Policy at LSE*

\(^8\) Mark Sedwill said in previous testimony to the JCNSS that the NSC is to be ‘the strategic leadership group.’ *JCNSS, Oral Evidence: The Work of the National Security Adviser* (Wednesday 8th July, 2020), virtual proceeding.


harbingers of the types of experience already seen by the NSA and NSC. Simply put, there is little in the experience of the NSA and NSC to date that hasn’t already been seen at some stage in the JIC’s long history.

**Questioning the Fusion Doctrine**

The place of the Fusion Doctrine that was announced in the 2018 National Security Capability Review (NCSR) needs considered critical engagement, to determine whether it is an appropriate doctrine for an NSA to operate with. The biggest single problem with the Fusion Doctrine is its declared starting position.

Mark Sedwill said in his 2019 JCNSS testimony that ‘(Fusion) is strategy-led…strategy-led design of policy.’ The NCSR mirrors the term in saying ‘The Fusion Doctrine starts with strategy.’ This is a logically absurd declaration betraying a severe lack of basic strategic theory, the consequence of which is to place the NSA and NSC in a losing position immediately.

Strategy by definition is instrumental in nature, serving policy by bridging productive activities to established political intent; policy must give guidance and meaning to strategy. This can be easily explained by quoting the great theorist Carl von Clausewitz, an understanding of whom lies at the centre of all strategic insight. ‘The political object…will thus determine both the…objective to be reached and the amount of effort it requires.’

To have a doctrine that puts strategy ahead of policy is an abrogation of policy level responsibility on the part of our elected representatives. Those in the position of NSA and serving in bodies like the NSC can only achieve so much if they are expected to compensate for the lack of policy guidance with flawed doctrine like Fusion.

The second criticism of Fusion Doctrine to highlight lies in the diagrammatic representation provided in the NSCR below:

---

14 Carl von Clausewitz (Michael Howard and Peter Paret trans. & ed.), *On War* (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 81. The author elected to remove the reference to ‘war’ and ‘military’ objective within the quote to streamline the relevance to broader national security strategy itself.
This representation of the Fusion Doctrine heavily implies an inward process, arguably to the point of insularity, whereby entire other arenas of public policy contribute to national security strategy, not the other way around. This is especially troubling with regards to the openly labelled Economic arena, as these are areas of innovation and wealth generation with concerns that go far beyond just consideration of security affairs.

A matured vision of Fusion Doctrine would not aim to be insular, but extroverted. Surely the purpose of Fusion Doctrine at its core is to provide security guidance and advice to other policy arenas in order to shape their practices to (i) operate more securely, and (ii) where feasible, collaborate with security actors in the pursuit of national security objectives.

Fusion Doctrine appears to have taken centre stage in UK national security with little critical engagement as to its logic and construct. The Oxford Research Group were right to highlight criticism, that ‘it is neither an attempt to fuse nor a doctrine but, at best, an emerging concept.’ This needs redressing as soon as possible, and should be central in the role and remit of the NSA, carrying responsibility not only for its implementation, but that it is correctly conceived and fit for purpose from the outset.

**The lack of strategic foresight capability**

A basic understanding of the NSC suggests it should also be a form of intellectual clearing house for long-term strategic thinking, with the NSA acting as its secretary and coordinating its dissemination across government. As Mark Sedwill previously said to differentiate the NSC from COBRA, ‘My role is to try to help the NSC as a whole to see the entire picture and play that coordinating role.’ Yet, there appears to be little to no structure in the NSC to provide outward, long-term strategic thought.

For an NSC led by the NSA to differentiate itself from the tactical and operational response mechanisms of COBRA, and the committee led consensus of intelligence provided by the

---

JIC, it would be a natural expectation for the NSC to carry out more blue sky strategic thinking. To provide a tangible example, the NSC does not appear to engage in the type of thinking provided by the MoD’s Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre (DCDC) Strategic Trends programme, now into its sixth iteration.\(^{18}\)

With mechanisms in place through COBRA and the JIC to handle more operationally immediate challenges, there is an opportunity for the NSA role to be tangibly expanded to include ownership of longer-term strategic thinking for UK national security.

**Recommendations**

1. **The JCNSS should research JIC history.** The lack of historical perspective and prevalence of short-termism is endemic to political life. Many of the concerns about the role and remit of the NSA, as well as the place and esteem of the NSC, have been encountered by the JIC at some point during it’s past. A closer historical examination of some of the JIC’s lessons would be instructive in helping to craft the future direction of the NSA and NSC.

2. **A wholesale audit of the Fusion Doctrine is necessary.** There are serious logical errors with the Fusion Doctrine in its current form, indeed this author will go as far as to say it is conceptually flawed in concept and design. While it is encouraging that there is positive whole-of-government take up of a centralised doctrine to national security, that doctrine must be conceptually sound and subject to firm policy guidance. In its present form, it is highly dubious that the Fusion Doctrine represents little more than a vain branding exercise.

3. **Consider the following specific revisions to the role and remit of the NSA:**
   a. **Mandate the NSA to provide testimony on specific successes of the role.** While the NSA is accountable to the Prime Minister, mandating testimony (private and redacted if needs be) whereby the NSA demonstrates case studies of success for the role will be instructive in helping independent validation of the role, as well as shaping the long-term evolution of the post based on lessons learned. As it stands, with a high churn rate of NSAs since the post was created, big question marks remain about the ability of the NSC to retain institutional memory, leaving it too vulnerable to evolution based on incumbent personality rather than experience.
   b. **Consider making the NSA Chair of the NSC.** With consistent criticism that both the NSA and NSC are vulnerable to Prime Ministerial patronage (particularly the loss of it), one clear measure that can be taken to give the NSC greater resilience would be to make the NSA the Chair of the NSC. This would also protect the NSC from a loss of esteem – such as in 2020 when it barely convened – when the Prime Minister is too heavily occupied by crises like COVID-19 to give the NSC the attention it deserves. A practice of regular audiences with the Prime Minister could be considered as an alternative

---

model, serving to solidify the NSAs relationship as the Prime Minister’s adviser, while protecting the esteem of the wider NSC. There are pros and cons to change and the status quo, but significant change should be worthy of further consideration to make a research-informed decision.

c. **The NSA be given chief responsibility for the National Security Strategy.**
   Much ground was already made in this vein with the 2018 NSCR instituting three-star responsibility over the delivery of NSS strands. Yet a tangible measure that would enhance the NSA’s authority in the national security community would be to make the NSA chiefly responsible for the accuracy, delivery, and effectiveness of the National Security Strategy. This would give real accountability to the role without intruding on ministerial responsibility, enabling the NSA to demonstrate the value of the role, coordinate government efforts as intended, and give firm time cycles of responsibility that has so far eluded the role of NSA.

d. **Task the NSA to establish a long-term strategy cell.** The lack of strategic foresight capability in the NSC is a curious omission, rendering it vulnerable to criticism of being focused on the operational at the expense of the truly strategic. As well as taking central responsibility for the National Security Strategy, the NSA should oversee the establishment of a strategy cell who carry out more blue sky, long-term strategic theorising for future UK national security issues. Taking inspiration from DCDC’s Strategic Trends programme, the NSC could innovate a practice of inspiring debate on security matters and long-term policy development, instead of waiting for security concerns to emerge.

*Dr Danny Steed*
*Research Fellow in Cyber Security and Intelligence*

*11 February 2021*