Written evidence submitted by Sir David Omand and Suzanne Raine

The Chair’s letter of 8 June lists the questions that witnesses did not have time to consider during the session on 7 June. This reply comes jointly from Professor Sir David Omand and Suzanne Raine.

1. Has the proliferation of mission-focused bodies such as JTAC helped or hindered the operation of the NSC? How might they be better coordinated?

Having mission focussed bodies such as JTAC has produced invaluable results. The pooling of expertise from multiple departments considerably enhances breadth and depth of analysis. It ensures that there is one clear, authoritative voice which provides analysis on the trajectory of a threat (risk). JTAC operates – independent of political or policy influence – a warning function, which enables anticipation and swift, coherent response. The NSC will have benefitted from having their authoritative threat analyses. Of course, the central assessment function continues to be carried out by the Joint Intelligence Organisation analysts in the Cabinet Office supporting the JIC, and they of course draw on the JTAC, NCSC etc analysis. Not every topic is ripe for the JTAC approach without risking denuding agencies and departments of the analytic expertise they need to retain in support of their policymakers, a constraint that is a function of the limited size of the UK analytic profession. So, the choice of what detailed analysis to carry out as a joint cross-departmental responsibility has to be guided by current threat priorities, of which biosecurity is a good example.

The JIO and the JIC sit at the centre of an expanding and maturing government assessment community. For those areas where there is not a mission focused body responsible for warning, this role would fall to the JIO and the JIC. If the JIC chair is seen as the senior experienced impartial figure, attending the NSC, having the traditional warning responsibility but updated for current needs, then adding an analytic team supporting him seems appropriate to coordinate the identification and analysis of the different classes of potential threats and the relevant hazards that pose risks for national security. Both secret intelligence and open source information are likely to feature (as they do today for both JTAC and JIC). The National Security Adviser has his policy staff who can pick up those analytic outputs and prepare options for Ministers, preserving the decent distance that the Committee was evidently keen to maintain between analysis that uses intelligence and policy advice. It is important that if an assessment body is given the responsibility for operating a threat warning system then it is able to do so autonomously.

2. What would establishing a “centre of professional expertise on open-source information” entail? And should it be open to others beyond the analytical community?

There are a number of models around the world for the provision of open-source expertise. At one extreme there is the large US Open Source Enterprise located under the Director of National Intelligence but accessible by any agency, State or local law enforcement authority (with the necessary prior registration). At the other extreme there are many commercial organisations offering Open Source products to companies and governments and on which some smaller nations rely. Some of these boutiques specialise in open but hard to access material such as can be obtained from the Dark Web, for
example to enable companies to recognise when criminals are discussing targeting them, or when data stolen from companies is offered for resale. Open sources of internet available information now inform both analysis and policymaking in all UK government departments. Bellingcat’s work has demonstrated how useful it is, for example on issues of attribution after an attack, to have corroboration from open sources. Our suggestion is not for a large US-style Open Source Executive. We are arguing for widespread use of Open Sources across agencies and departments but with a joint centre of expertise to drive its use in the Intelligence Community and across Whitehall more generally by integration of the several different platforms that agencies and departments are using and ensuring that there is proper training available in the access to and safe use of open sources. The Open Source capability in the Cabinet Office has grown in recent years. At present we understand that the lead in the Intelligence Community rests with the Professional Head of Intelligence Analysis (PHIA) in the Cabinet Office (responsible to the chair of the JIC). That seems to us a sensible joint location - but the essential point is to ensure that there is sufficient expertise available to him to drive innovation in Open Source use and training and be in touch with equivalents in our Close Allies and the leading edge of the technology being developed by companies working this topic. A good starting point is the PHIA INDEX project to build an Open Source platform, accessible across government.

3. What are the key skills and expertise that the civil service will need to recruit or develop for national security policy-making in future? How might a College for National Security support this? What would be the advantages and disadvantages of opening senior roles within the national security machinery to external, as well as internal, recruitment?

We do not suggest trying to narrow down the key skills and expertise just to those that we know are scarce and highly relevant today, although it will be imperative to continue to recruit specialists in advanced mathematics, data science, cyber and the other key areas identified in the UK Government Research and Development Roadmap. We suggest for the future the bigger challenge is to recruit a rich mix of minds, backgrounds, cultures and experiences and having attracted them to train, reward, and progress them, thus retaining them in public service.

As is the case with the Armed Forces, leading people in the national security and intelligence community to achieve truly remarkable results, sometimes under conditions of difficulty and danger, requires recognition on their part that those leading them understand them, share their ethos and commitment to public service, and have themselves through one route or another proved themselves in comparable situations. There should always be room of course for exceptions for those of remarkable talent and experience to contribute to specific roles. Such cases, with the help of the Civil Service Commission, can also help broaden the experience base at the top. But to have an open recruitment policy for all senior jobs in the intelligence community we believe would be a damaging mistake. However, there would be merit in considering opening up places on courses run by the College for National Security to individuals from academia or industry in order to create greater understanding and more

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dynamic information flows. This would augment the proposal to create a civilian reserve force for greater resilience (also mooted in the Integrated Review).

To conclude, as you will have gathered from our evidence, both Suzanne and I believe now is the time with the Integrated Review and the challenges facing the nation to be bold and to be prepared to experiment. We need to try out new ideas such as a national security college and an expanded staff under the JIC Chair for obtaining and providing to the NSC warning and strategic notice. If the chosen processes turn out not to deliver as expected within a few years then they can be quickly binned and something else tried. The advanced tech industries have benefitted from the ‘fail fast but fail forward’ approach to innovation. We worry that there is a danger of trying too hard to emulate the great Lord Haldane and build structures that will last 100 years. That is not appropriate for the world we are entering.

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21 June 2021