

**Written evidence from Dr David Blagden, University of Exeter (NSS0004)**

**The Return of Major Power Competition:  
Implications for UK National Security Risk Assessment within the 2015-20 National  
Security Strategy/Strategic Defence and Security Review (NSS/SDSR) Period**

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1. This evidence submission focuses on changes in the UK's overall strategic environment, and subsequent consequences for the effectiveness of the 2015 NSS/SDSR. It is offered in an individual professional capacity, as an academic researcher of UK foreign and defence policy with elements of relevant policy and military experience; further details are available here: <http://www.exeter.ac.uk/strategy/people/davidblagden/>.

2. The evidence focuses on the implications for the UK strategic environment of the return of major power competition, and possible improvements to UK threat assessment processes. It is derived substantially from my component of a joint submission with two of my University of Exeter colleagues, Professor Sir Paul Newton and Professor Patrick Porter, to the House of Commons' Defence Select Committee's Autumn 2015 inquiry into the potential threats to be faced by the 2015 SDSR.<sup>1</sup>

**Relative Power Shifts and the UK Threat Environment**

3. **The fundamental change in the UK's strategic environment that is currently underway – and that must be the principal background condition in analyses of Britain's future threat environment – is the return of 'multipolarity': a situation of multiple competing great powers.** The 1990s and 2000s were characterised by 'unipolarity': US preponderance so overwhelming that it could pacify all other major power relationships simultaneously. The associated absence of major state-based threats compared to the pre-1990 era in turn enabled certain forms of British strategic behaviour. Most obviously, there was a shift in emphasis from the deterrence and containment of overseas threats towards direct military intervention – primarily under US leadership – aimed at political transformation and the resolution of instability abroad. A quarter-century of globalization-enabled catch-up growth for key emerging economies is bringing the 'unipolar moment' to an end, however, and this is already having important strategic consequences for Britain.

4. In my recent research, I have identified five key results of the return of multipolarity, and the competitive and confrontational international environment that it tends to create, which in turn carry implications for the UK's strategic environment.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> That original evidence submission is available here: <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/defence-committee/ansdsr-checklist-of-potential-threats/written/22550.pdf>. My follow-up oral evidence to the same Committee is available here: <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/defence-committee/publication-of-the-strategic-defence-and-security-review/oral/25041.pdf>. My evidence to the Defence Select Committee's March 2016 inquiry into the implications of Russia for UK defence, not yet published online as of the submission date for your NSS inquiry, further develops these points in the specific context of European geopolitics.

<sup>2</sup> David Blagden, 'Global Multipolarity, European Security and Implications for UK Grand Strategy: Back to

- The resurgence of Russia – although its economy is now stalling in the face of sanctions and, in particular, weak global oil prices – has already brought Moscow back to the point where it possesses the capabilities and resolve to threaten the territorial integrity of NATO, and to directly coerce the UK itself via various means.
- The US ‘pivot’ to Asia as Washington attempts to contain China may leave European NATO powers having to do more for their own defence as the US proves increasingly unwilling – and eventually unable – to shoulder the security burdens of its European, Middle Eastern, and Asian allies simultaneously.
- An increased risk of overseas military crises in which the UK has a stake taking on an element of major power confrontation and escalation.
- An increased risk of nuclear proliferation, as the best deterrent against coercion by the conventionally powerful – or at least, an uncondusive environment for disarmament and arms control efforts.
- Increasingly vulnerable sea lines of communication (SLOCs) – vital to the UK, as a trade-dependent power – as US command of the global maritime commons becomes increasingly contested and as other NATO states’ ability (including our own) to make meaningful naval contributions has dwindled.

5. These developments are highly relevant for this inquiry, because they underpin threats – and enable prioritisation – between different themes, regions, and domains. So, in asking ‘is there a credible threat of an attack on UK cyber space?’ (for example), the threat is not ‘cyber’ itself, but rather the powerful actors that might use cyber capabilities in conjunction with other forces for coercion and/or espionage, and the crisis dynamics that might unfold during this interaction (e.g. if a UK-Russia cyber exchange incentivised conventional escalation). Likewise, it is not regions themselves that generate threat; rather, the threat that the UK faces in any given region – and the strategic prioritisation that we should afford it – is a function of the capabilities/intentions of the political actors active there and the level of UK interests at stake. The same goes too for domains of conflict: ‘the sea’ or ‘the air’ do not themselves constitute threats, but rather act as fields for the manifestation of threat by (increasingly powerful) hostile states. We certainly need to pay attention to the growth of anti-access/area-denial capabilities that challenge our ability to provide sea and air control, for example, and to the renewed possibility of large-scale manoeuvre warfare in Europe. But again, the return of great power competition is the principal underlying *source* of the threat; the domain itself is merely the conduit for increasingly conflictual international politics.

6. Sometimes, the manifestations of relative power shifts for UK security are obvious: that NATO now once again faces a risk of conventional conflict with the potential for catastrophic escalation on its eastern border, for example. At other times, causation is more subtle: the possibility that a future major-power Brazil may significantly complicate the defence of the Falklands, for instance, or that our efforts to bolster the US presence in the Gulf could yield a confrontation with China (particularly if a US-China crisis was unfolding elsewhere). Either way, however, the point is that the demise of unipolarity and the return of multipolar great power competition is transforming the entire strategic environment in which the UK operates, necessitating the revision of several assumptions about the automatic superiority of UK/allied power that have endured since 1990.

7. In terms of prioritisation more generally, furthermore, given the capabilities of other major powers, one key implication of the demise of unipolarity is that the UK must

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the Future, Once Again,’ *International Affairs* 91:2 (March 2015), pp. 333-350.

reconsider whether the (still) most likely threats, such as terrorism and weak-state instability, are still the most important threats on which UK defence should concentrate (the analysis offered here would suggest that they may not be). Certainly, for a 2015 NSS/SDSR that is premised on a particular British vision of a liberal, litigious international system – the document mentions ‘rules-based international order’ no fewer than thirty times – the possibility that there will be other major powers out there that neither recognise nor comply with Western ‘rules’ as they pursue their own interests deserves to become a foundational element of our strategic planning. The fact that our values drive us to pursue one vision of the world does not mean that we should rule-out contemplation of how to advance our interests in a world that has not yet matched that vision, and that may be unlikely to do so in the immediate future.

### **Improving the Quality of UK Government Threat Assessment Capabilities**

8. Turning now to the issue of the threat-evaluation abilities of the British government, there is room for improvement here. The speed at which SDSR 2010 was exposed – given its predication on (a) only deploying force if vital interests were at stake and (b) not needing various ‘gapped’ capabilities during the forecast period – betrayed an over-confidence in (1) still-developmental risk assessment methodologies and (2) the government’s own military restraint. The latter is an issue that it is only within the power of the National Security Council to address: although contributions such as this can emphasise the heightened importance of conserving power resources and prudent prioritisation of commitments in the face of renewed major power competition. The former, however, is something that can be worked on. NSS/SDSR 2015 has taken some important strides in these areas compared to its 2010 predecessor, but it retains certain limitations.

9. While the National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA) methodology introduced via the 2010 NSS and repeated since – including, prominently, in NSS/SDSR 2015 – is admirable in attempting to weigh likelihood against severity, it faces key constraints. For one, it relies on assigning good-enough quantitative values to variables (likelihood/severity) for which we will inevitably lack high-quality quantitative data. For another, it can struggle to recognise differences of likelihood/severity within types of threat (e.g. terrorism may indeed be the most likely threat facing Britain, as both the 2010 and 2015 NSRAs reaffirm, but there is a substantial difference of severity between a 9/11-level attack and the Lee Rigby murder, and the same can be said of the difference between catastrophic and nuisance cyber-attacks). It also inadequately captures the linkages between domains of coercion and confrontation: in positing cyber-attack and international military conflict as separate Tier 1 risks, for instance, rather than as linked – and potentially escalatory – dimensions of state coercion. The particular utility of the ‘Tier 2’ category is open to contestation: if a risk is assessed to have a low probability but a high impact, just *how* high impact does it have to be to ascend to Tier 1 nonetheless? And such a risk approach can fail to recognise the extent to which likelihood and severity are not wholly exogenous variables, but rather dependent outcomes of prior/current UK and allied policy. For example, the 2010 NSRA’s coding of conventional attack on NATO and attack on a UK overseas territory as mere Tier 3 risks may well have been justified, but such threats were only low because of the strength of the UK’s past and present deterrent posture, and are thus not guaranteed to remain so if UK capability and/or resolve weakens.

10. There are political considerations, too, that may limit the effectiveness of an NSRA-style activity. To avoid the political costs of being ‘proven wrong’ by unforeseen events,

there is an incentive to make categories as wide as possible – which then have the advantage of ‘covering’ any/all subsequent crises that might unfold, but at the expense of *ex ante* specificity in threat prioritisation. For example, NSS/SDSR 2015 identifies ‘Instability Overseas’ as a Tier 1 risk – yet this is clearly such a broad category that it would be remarkable if there was *not* ‘instability’ (however defined) overseas in the coming five years! Similarly, there are incentives not to name or mention potential threats that are politically ‘off-limits’ at a given moment. For example, given the Government’s 2015 move towards deeper economic engagement with China, it was always unlikely that the 2015 NSS/SDSR would speak too explicitly about other, potentially more worrisome aspects of Chinese behaviour and capability development, or the complexities of our developing relationship with Beijing (as a close military burden-sharer with the United States).

11. The above is not to suggest that a risk approach is devoid of utility; far from it. But there needs to be better causal linkage between the NSRA and subsequent policy choices: it is not clear, for instance, how several key strategic choices taken by the UK government in the 2010-15 period fit with countering their own four 2010-identified Tier 1 risks. In the absence of high-quality quantitative data to make the likelihood/severity calculation reliable, moreover, there needs to be more ‘red-teaming’ both within and outside government – as all three of us emphasized in our Autumn 2015 Commons’ Defence Committee evidence – to ensure that approximations of likelihood and severity reflect collective best-judgement rather than prevailing fashions or group-think. And the NSRA’s prioritisation needs to be connected to strategic prioritisation in a much more specific, concrete way. ‘Germany First’ (the Allies’ approach in World War II) is a famous example of a simple, specific, prioritised and ultimately effective strategy; ‘Global War On Terror’ (with its expansive lack of prioritisation and maximalist goals) is an example of the opposite. Simply defining ‘international terrorism’ and ‘military crises between states’ as Tier 1 risks in the 2010 NSRA similarly lacked specificity, and resulted in an open-ended commitment to countering ‘instability’ – wherever and however it appeared – without any prioritisation by the capabilities/resolve of the actors involved or the level of UK interests at stake. The 2015 NSRA could potentially fall prey to the same tendencies. Indeed, the temptation with a risk-based approach is to start laundry-listing All Bad Things, without identifying a few principal sources of threat as our first-order strategic priorities.

12. Other concrete steps could be taken to improve UK government threat assessment. A few are suggested here.

- First, as noted above, there should be greater ‘red-teaming’ of threats, suggested prioritisation, and proposed solutions. Given the emphasis of the first part of this evidence submission – the return of multipolarity – and given the absence of this condition from most policymakers’ and implementers’ experience to date, a key focus should be restoring consideration of great power opposition/escalation/coercion to all scenario planning and simulation. As we touched upon in our Autumn 2015 Commons’ Defence Committee evidence, such ‘red-teaming’ should widen its inclusion beyond officials, and indeed, beyond the current network of a few savvy, opaquely-selected, close-to-government think-tanks and academics if it is to achieve genuine challenging of conventional wisdoms. Only by widening the net in this way – and accepting the risk of encountering unhelpful/irrelevant/disruptive voices that it brings – can the full spectrum of contrarian thinking be accommodated and the group-think of impervious policy communities avoided.
- Going beyond this simple observation, there needs to be scope for ‘red-teaming’ featuring external expertise to acquire both institutionalised access to senior decision-

makers and, potentially, classified information. The example of the US Defense Policy Board may be instructive (although the DPB's current composition runs the risk of simply duplicating current government voices with former government ones). So too might be the external membership of the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee (although that model too would be only a partial fit). The MOD already has non-executive directors, of course, but they are there to oversee the Department's financial business, not national security strategy. Our Autumn 2015 recommendation of a UK Office of Net Assessment (ONA), similar to the US and Singaporean examples, could be an ideal solution. Failing that – or in conjunction – a reinvigoration, institutionalisation, and empowerment of the Chief of the Defence Staff's Strategic Forum, launched in 2009, could also help. Either way, the point is that without institutionalised access to the ear of decision-makers and some sense of the prevailing intelligence picture, such 'red-teaming' exercises risk becoming simply an academic workshop between scholars and a few token officials, rather than genuine 'hard tests' of policymakers' threat assessments and preconceptions.

- In a similar vein, there should be greater scope for national security-related departments to bring external expertise onto their staff in a limited-term capacity, so as to implant alternative voices directly to policymaking positions. Drawing again on the US example, the International Affairs Fellowship in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and the Foster and Franklin Fellowships at the State Department, offer competitively-selected, publically-advertised opportunities for external experts to take on one-year policy postings as contrarian thinkers in the national security apparatus. Similar programmes at the FCO, MOD, and Cabinet Office National Security Secretariat could make a similar contribution here in the UK, as could external hiring to a newly-formed UK ONA (as the US practices). Whether such voices can meaningfully alter the direction of vast government departments is not the point; the point is that individuals able and willing to at least audibly challenge core internalised assumptions are installed within earshot of senior decision-makers.
- More could be done to provide space for thinking about security threats and strategic prioritisation for officials at all levels, and even Parliamentarians. The Armed Forces Parliamentary Scheme could be amended/complemented by the addition of further strategic studies education and discussion, beyond the current RCDS lectures, and endorsed by the major political parties as a prerequisite to a security-related frontbench portfolio. Our Autumn 2015 suggestion of a Parliamentary Select Committee itself taking a lead on 'red-teaming' and simulation exercises is also an innovative potential contribution to addressing the wider strategic challenge. At lower levels, meanwhile, military officers and civilian national security officials should be afforded greater scope to pursue academic strategic studies education beyond the strictures of the Staff Courses, up to and including PhD research, and this should be regarded as a prized asset for senior command, rather than as a career break to be squeezed in (or a dumping ground for mediocre personnel). The Royal Navy's 'First Sea Lord's Fellowship' initiative is to be lauded in this regard as a series of seminars, academic readings, discussion groups, and so forth, aiming to improve and sustain the education of high-flying RN officers who have completed graduate-level strategic studies training. The RAF's Centre for Airpower Studies is a similarly valuable conduit for Service-level strategic thought.

13. Finally, of course, it is important that we continue to recognise the limits of risk assessment techniques and the dangers of an overly-confident approach to forecasting. Preserving a balanced range of capabilities with the capacity to deter – and, if necessary,

scale-up to fight – against a range of possible opponents and in a range of possible contingencies is the necessary consequence of such humility. To the extent that NSS/SDSR 2015 promises a noteworthy uplift in capabilities from its 2010 predecessor, it is therefore to be commended – but it is now important that this programme is delivered on the scale envisioned, in a timely manner, and with sufficient ongoing investment in personnel to optimise the equipment procured.