

Written evidence from the Oxford Research Group (NSS0007)

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About Oxford Research Group

Oxford Research Group (ORG) is a UK-based charity that provides information, analysis, methodology, policy advice and mediation in order to promote a more sustainable approach to global security. ORG currently runs or hosts programmes working on: sustainable security and alternatives to militarisation; the implications of 'remote control' warfare; and track II mediation of several conflicts in the Middle East.

1. Executive Summary

1.1 This submission primarily addresses the Committee's questions concerning:

- How the NSS & SDSR 2015 addresses risk and contingency planning.
- Whether the NSS & SDSR 2015 defines "national security" in sufficiently broad terms and achieves an appropriate balance between military, economic and environmental risks.
- The extent to which the NSS & SDSR 2015 is founded on a realistic assessment of the UK's future goals, position in the world and uncertain future relationships with international organisations and nation states.
- Whether the links between domestic security and international security are sufficiently developed in the NSS & SDSR 2015.

1.2 The world is currently facing a range of interconnected and severe environmental, social and political challenges—including climate change and regional conflict that could escalate to nuclear war—which could lead to the destruction of the conditions necessary for a habitable planet. In an age of emerging powers it is tempting for nations whose position is one of relative decline, such as the UK, to maintain the status quo wherever possible. Yet the UK's history and current standing as a nation—with still significant capabilities and influence on the world stage—means that the government should be co-ordinating all its tools of national power to urgently mitigate these existential risks in partnership with the international community.

1.3 Instead of taking such progressive measures, so that the UK acts as a responsible global citizen, several policies outlined in the 2015 NSS/SDSR will, if enacted, increase the dangers of climate change, international conflict and terrorism in significant ways. This is most clearly the case concerning the UK's continuing reliance on fossil fuels, its intention to build a new generation of nuclear weapons and its enduring enthusiasm for overseas power projection.

1.4 In addition, a strong impression is given that the UK government is more interested in commercial and trade opportunities with emerging economies than fundamental problems of national and international security. A great deal of emphasis is placed on UK companies being able to access foreign markets and on expanding arms exports, with the UK itself being 'open for business'—including to repressive regimes such as China, with whom the government hopes to 'build a deeper partnership'.

1.5 In order to close the gap between the UK's current security policies and those needed for a sustainable approach, the government should radically change its policy-making process. Instituting a more accountable, transparent and democratic process, with policy co-ordination across government, will make it easier for the UK to develop the policies necessary for it to act as a responsible global citizen, so that the rights and needs of the majority of people, in Britain and the world, are prioritised and protected.

2. Growing existential risks: climate change, nuclear weapons and conflict

2.1 The NSS and SDSR's approach to risk is flawed because these documents do not properly consider the ways in which the government's existing and proposed policies may increase the likelihood of social and environmental catastrophe. Specifically, the UK contributes to rising existential dangers for humanity through its continued reliance on: i) nuclear weapons, as part of a wider commitment to overseas power projection, whereby it plans to build a new generation of nuclear-armed submarines ii) fossil fuels—and thus growing energy import dependence. The UK's current economic model also contributes to: i) unsustainable levels of resource consumption, which increases resource competition and the risk of conflict ii) the marginalisation of the majority of the world's population, which also increases the potential for conflict.

2.2 The UK's defence and foreign policies are characterised by their continuity and follow what Professor Paul Rogers has dubbed the 'control paradigm', whereby the projection of military power is used to ensure political control in regions of key strategic importance such as the Middle East. The UK's actions overseas have for several decades been characterised by this approach as the junior partner in the US's quest for global dominance, sought through unrivalled military strength to ensure open markets and the control of energy supplies and strategic resources. As Rogers outlines, however, Western attempts to keep the lid on efforts by the poor and marginalised to resist the status quo—rather than addressing the root causes of conflict and political violence—are bound to fail¹.

2.3 The main risk inherent in the UK's current approach is thus that people in regions subject to Western power projection—including the Middle East, where the UK has numerous political, military and trade ties—will seek to resist foreign control through both non-violent and violent means. The US Department of Defense has long been aware that its aggressive military campaigns help to create the conditions for international terrorism and the proliferation of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD). As Defense Secretary William Cohen outlined in January 2001:

'At the dawn of the 21st Century, the United States now faces what could be called a Superpower Paradox. Our unrivaled supremacy in the conventional military arena is prompting adversaries to seek unconventional, asymmetric means to strike what they perceive as our Achilles heel'².

¹ Rogers, Paul (2010), *Losing Control: Global Security in the 21st Century* (London: Pluto)

² Cohen, William (2001), *Proliferation: Threat and Response* (Washington DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense)

2.4 Cohen went on to note the ‘looming’ prospect of WMD finding their way ‘into the hands of individuals and groups of fanatical terrorists or self-proclaimed apocalyptic prophets. The followers of Usama bin Laden have, in fact, already trained with toxic chemicals’³. Eight months later, the terrorist attacks of September 11th took place, albeit with hijacked planes rather than nuclear, biological or chemical weapons. Yet despite such dire consequences, the control paradigm, and the risk of WMD or other extreme terrorist acts, continues today because the key lessons of recent conflicts, including the disastrous invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, have not been learned in Washington or London.

2.5 The government is thus wrong to assert in the 2015 NSS/SDSR that ‘Over the last five years, we have learned lessons from operations in Libya, Afghanistan, the Middle East, Sierra Leone and elsewhere’. This is clearly not the case given the fact that military power rather than political cooperation continues to be the principle means by which the UK plans to address problems of world order and security. The NSS/SDSR thus emphasised that the UK will maintain a ‘global role’ through possessing ‘the full range of military capabilities and the political will to protect our interests globally’, with the Ministry of Defence becoming a protected department and enjoying annual real-terms budget increases of 0.5 per cent a year up to 2020/21 and allocations for new equipment over the next decade rising £12 billion to £178 billion.

2.6 This military renaissance is justified by the government as being ‘vital’ at this time, because ‘the threats to our country are growing...From the rise of ISIL and greater instability in the Middle East, to the crisis in Ukraine, the threat of cyber attacks and the risk of pandemics, the world is more dangerous and uncertain today than five years ago’. Additionally, the NSS/SDSR states that ‘Russia has become more aggressive, authoritarian and nationalist, increasingly defining itself in opposition to the West’. What is not acknowledged here is the contribution that the US and its allies in NATO have made to the current mistrust and tension since the end of the Cold War. NATO-Russia tensions are one of the main reasons why former US Defense Secretary William Perry was moved to note in January 2016 that the likelihood of nuclear conflict is higher now than during the Cold War⁴. In the short-term it is therefore imperative that, Britain—as a leading NATO power—acts in ways that reduce rather than increase the risk of nuclear war. This is not least because any escalation to nuclear conflict between NATO and Russia would potentially involve the UK’s nuclear force, and would have the direst consequences for this country.

2.7 As for the question of conflict in the Middle East, the current government does not need to wait for the long-delayed Chilcot report to learn vital lessons regarding the causes and consequences of the Iraq war. For, as the Guardian reported in 2003, Tony Blair was warned on the eve of that war by Whitehall’s joint intelligence committee (JIC) that ‘al-Qaida and associated groups continued to represent by far the greatest threat to western interests,

³ Ibid.

⁴ Borger, Julian (2016), Nuclear weapons risk greater than in cold war, says ex-Pentagon chief, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/07/nuclear-weapons-risk-greater-than-in-cold-war-says-expentagon-chief>, 7th January

and that threat would be heightened by military action against Iraq—a warning Blair overruled⁵.

2.8 The JIC’s warning continues to be relevant when considering how effective and legitimate responses to terrorist groups can be crafted. For example, so-called Islamic State (IS) emerged from al-Qaida in Iraq, which was part of the Sunni Arab resistance to the Shia-dominated government that followed the US-led occupation. Without a credible long-term strategy that takes into account the underlying causes of how and why groups like IS rose to power—which in the case of IS includes the political, social and economic frustrations of Iraq’s Sunni Arab community—British and other Western military action is likely to be counter-productive. The UK should therefore accept its limited ability to influence events given the complexity of the situation and proceed with caution. Progressive action here might include the UK focusing on its soft power tools—including diplomacy, humanitarian aid and accepting immigrants and refugees from war-torn countries—in order to support conflict resolution, achieve just political settlements and undermine IS’s hateful propaganda.

2.9 Climate change, as groups such as the Global Sustainability Institute have pointed out, is one of the most important threats to the UK and the world’s security⁶. Yet the NSS/SDSR is notable for acknowledging that ‘climate change is one of the biggest long-term challenges for the future of our planet’ whilst saying nothing about how the UK could move away from its reliance on fossil fuels and transition to a low carbon economy, reducing resource consumption and increasing energy efficiency. In order to address this shortcoming, the government could follow Scientists for Global Responsibility’s proposal that the UK significantly reduce military R&D spending and significantly increase R&D spending focused on ‘tackling the roots of conflict’, including on development, poverty and sustainable energy⁷.

2.10 Instead of producing a long-term plan for how the UK can alleviate and respond to climate change, the NSS/SDSR focuses on commercial and trade opportunities, supposedly to ensure the nation’s ‘economic security’ by partnering with emerging powers. Yet the government’s expansion of trade with repressive regimes in the Gulf and nations such as China without rigorous monitoring and regulation is ill-advised. For example, the UK has continued to export arms to Saudi Arabia despite increasing evidence that Saudi forces are violating international humanitarian law in Yemen. Furthermore, the failure to prioritise green measures and develop renewable energy shows that the government’s claim that its pro-business agenda is allowing it to ‘invest further in our national security’ is false, since preventing runaway climate change is vital to the UK’s future prosperity and well-being.

⁵ Norton-Taylor, Richard and White, Michael (2003), Report reveals Blair overruled terror warning, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2003/sep/12/uk.davidkelly3>, 12th September

⁶ Global Sustainability Institute (2014), Written evidence, Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, The Next National Security Strategy

⁷ Scientists for Global Responsibility (2014), Written evidence, Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, The Next National Security Strategy

3. Resolving problems of democratic legitimacy and sovereignty

3.1 The continuance of the UK's failed and irresponsible approach to military, environmental and foreign policy in the areas discussed above should lead us to examine the processes through which these decisions have been made. Previous reflections on this by the joint committee, other parliamentary committees and civil society groups have highlighted a number of problems with the institutions and practices which the UK currently uses for strategy-making. Overall, the problems facing the British state regarding its inability to formulate a coherent and sustainable national strategy fundamentally relates to questions of democracy and sovereignty.

3.2 The primary factor determining British defence and foreign policy has long been the nature of London's relationship with Washington. It is argued that through being the US's closest ally and a nuclear weapon state Britain can influence its behaviour and thus 'have a say in the end of the world'⁸. To do this, Whitehall planners argue, Britain requires a sizable military budget for highly capable expeditionary forces, interoperable with those of the US. Yet as the Foreign Affairs Committee noted in its 2010 report into UK-US relations, rather than being able to influence Washington, in much of the evidence it received a 'recurrent theme' was that 'the UK's approach to the US could more appropriately be characterised as subservient rather than simply subordinate'⁹.

3.3 The consequence of British subservience is that, as analyst Shashank Joshi observed regarding the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Syria—but which can be applied more generally under current arrangements—'there can be no independent British strategy, but only British contributions to US strategy'¹⁰. The Public Administration Select Committee's 2010 report observed that an 'uncritical acceptance' of the special relationship had led 'to a waning of our interests in, and ability to make, National Strategy'¹¹. Yet rather than taking on board this committee's recommendations, which included 'the need to ensure democratic legitimacy and to recognise the political limits of what strategy and our national interests can achieve', the 2015 NSS/SDSR continued with business as usual, illustrated by its lack of

⁸ Roger Ruston (1989), *A Say in the End of the World, Morals and British Nuclear Weapons Policy 1941-1987*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press)

⁹ House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee (2010), *Global Security: UK-US Relations*, Sixth Report of Session 2009–10, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmffaff/114/114.pdf>, 18th March

¹⁰ Joshi, Shashank (2014), *Written evidence- The Iraq strategy and anti-ISIL ground forces*, <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/defence-committee/the-situation-in-iraq-and-syria-and-the-threat-posed-by-islamic-state-in-iraq-and-the-levant-isil/written/15998.html>

¹¹ House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee (2010), *Who does UK National Strategy? First Report of Session 2010–11*, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmpubadm/435/435.pdf>

serious consultation or engagement with civil society and alternative viewpoints. The government thus did not critically examine the costs and benefits of the UK-US relationship and made clear that the US would continue to be the UK's 'pre-eminent partner'.

3.4 As the joint committee itself has previously noted, the government has been reluctant to engage fully with political reality by failing to develop contingency plans for possible and highly important developments¹². The 2015 NSS/SDSR failed on this count by not considering the impacts of possible Scottish Independence or a changing British relationship with the EU. This is despite the SDSR being published at a time of unprecedented uncertainty concerning the future of the UK given the high level of support in Scotland for independence and the potential for a rerun of the 2014 independence referendum. Calls for Scottish independence are likely to rise if the UK as a whole votes this year to leave the European Union but the majority of Scottish voters opt to stay in. Overall then, as Professor Andrew Dorman notes, the UK as a state thus 'knows what it was, but there is no clear agreed idea of what it wants to become'. Dorman concludes that a 'forward-looking national security strategy' can only be constructed after such fundamental questions have been resolved¹³. An SDSR based in political reality would have faced these limitations upfront if it was to claim any legitimacy.

4. How can the UK become a responsible global citizen?

4.1 In order to begin remedying the current flaws in the British political system, the government should consider how it can better represent the interests and needs of the majority, realise its international obligations to be a responsible global citizen and support a sustainable approach to security. Numerous imaginative and progressive initiatives have been proposed here. For example, research by Dr Daniel Stevens and Dr Nick Vaughan Williams found a significant gap between the British government's and the public's priorities for and understanding of national security¹⁴. This suggests that the government needs to make future NSS and SDSR's more inclusive, taking the time and space to consult with a diverse range of people. This approach, the authors argue, would 'not only increase the democratic legitimacy of the NSS: in the longer term it would provide the footing for a more sustainable National Security Strategy, offer better value for money, and contribute towards greater societal resilience'.

4.2 Such short-term measures would support longer-term efforts to democratise state institutions so that the British people and their representatives have greater control over decisions affecting national security. For example, the recently abolished Political and Constitutional Reform Committee should be reinstated so that the government is held to

¹² House of Lords / House of Commons Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy (2014), *The work of the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy in 2013–14, First Report of Session 2013–14*

¹³ Dorman, Andrew M. and Kaufman, Joyce P. (eds.) (2014), *Providing for National Security: A Comparative Analysis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press)

¹⁴ Stevens, Daniel and Vaughan-Williams, Nick (2014), *Written evidence, Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, The Next National Security Strategy*

account and made to follow through on its commitment to democratise war-making decisions¹⁵. Increased democracy, transparency and accountability in defence and foreign policy decision-making are also vital if the UK is to realise its international obligations to disarm, make the transition to being a former nuclear weapon state and contribute to the creation of a nuclear weapons free world. Moreover, if the national interest in preventing runaway global warming is to be achieved British people and their representatives need to resist oil and gas multinational's efforts to prolong the UK's addiction to fossil fuels, limiting the influence these companies have on policy-makers.

4.3 Other British obligations are enshrined in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. The UK has a particularly great responsibility to support the realisation of these goals given its colonial legacy, industrial history and current capabilities and power. For example, as the 2015 NSS/SDSR points out, 'The UK is the only nation to be a permanent member of the UN Security Council and in NATO, the EU, the Commonwealth, the G7 and G20, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the OECD, the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank'. In order to be a responsible global citizen, the UK must therefore co-ordinate its levers of national power across government to realise its social, economic and environmental obligations and tackle the root causes of instability and insecurity in effective, just and legitimate ways.

This submission was written for ORG by Tim Street, Senior Programme Officer, with input from Richard Reeve, Director of the Sustainable Security Programme.

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¹⁵ BBC (2014), MPs renew demand for Commons votes on use of war-making powers, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-26754077>, 27th March