

Written evidence submitted by Sam Hilton (ISD0008)

Introduction

1. I am submitting as an individual, as former civil servant who has worked on risk policies (civil nuclear and financial stability) and is concerned that, based on my own experience and the references below, **that the way the UK maps and manages risks may be inadequate.**
2. I am also a research affiliate at the Centre for the Study of Existential Risk (CSER) based at the University of Cambridge and I provide the secretariat for the APPG on Future Generations.

Replying to the question "What methodology and analytical capability is required to ensure that assessments of threats and risks to the UK are future-proofed?"

3. The UK has been a world leader in managing and mapping future risks.[1] However, the current UK risk assessment process, the combination of the National Risk Assessment (NRA) and the National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA)[2] may not currently be fit for purpose.
4. The POST note on "[Evaluating UK natural hazards](#)"[3] identifies a host of problems including: depoliticising risks assessments, assigning risk owners, dealing with uncertainty, and acting to prevent future risks.
5. More starkly it is noticeable that the most recent [National Risk Register](#)[4] suggested that "emerging infectious diseases" could lead to "up to 100 fatalities". This is both a gross underestimation of the current Coronavirus situation and was out of line with the views of experts.[5] This issue of risk management is in need of serious review.
6. One particular problem I would be keen to highlight is that this process does not sufficiently push the UK to manage future emerging risks and long-term trends.
 - The NSRA looked ahead every 20 years at domestic and international risks. It contained within it a tiering system on the 5-year time horizon.[5] The tiering was the part of the NSRA that was often used and in practice decisions would be made based on that 5 year time horizon (which may now be a 2-year timescale.[2])
 - Different risks need to be managed on different and appropriate timescales. For example, terrorism tactics adapt and change rapidly over a year or two, such as the rise of the use of vehicles as weapons, and terrorism risk need to be reviewed regularly. Yet the risks posed by emerging technologies such as the deliberate misuse of AI or synthetic biology will emerge gradually over the next decade, but there are still many policy paths that can be taken now to mitigate these risks.[6]
7. **In conclusion I recommend that any methodology and analytical capability to assess threats and risks to the UK as part of a Security, Defence and Foreign Policy review needs to:**
 - **avoid the problems of the current risk assessment process.** I would like to draw attention to the ongoing work of my associates at CSER to [map out best practice](#) in this area.[7]
 - **recognise both short-term and long-term risks,** draw a balance between short-timeline risk management that is flexible to changing risks and a long-timeline risk management that identifies long-term future and emerging risks.

Replying to the question “What is required to ensure that the findings and outcomes of a review are implemented?”

8. Additionally, I would note that it has also been my experience that the assignment by the Cabinet Office of specific risks in the NRA to specific Ministers has helped to ensure there is the political will to act on these risks.

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REFERENCES

- [1] <https://www.oecd.org/governance/toolkit-on-risk-governance/goodpractices/page/theuksnationalriskassessmentnra.htm>
- [2] The NSRA and NRA may have been combined in 2019, and shortened to a 2-year time horizon. Public information is not available.
- [3] <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/POST-PB-0031/POST-PB-0031.pdf>
- [4] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/644968/UK_National_Risk_Register_2017.pdf
- [5] <https://www.fhi.ox.ac.uk/reports/2008-1.pdf> survey of relevant academic experts suggests there is consensus that a pandemic could conceivably cause 1 billion+ deaths
- [6] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/478936/52309_Cm_9161_NSS_SD_Review_PRINT_only.pdf
- [7] <https://www.cser.ac.uk/news/malicious-use-artificial-intelligence/>
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