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Sustainable Security: Defining, Measuring and Building Security after Covid-19

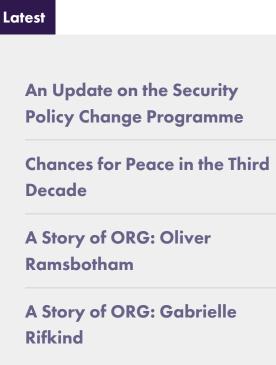**Abigail Watson and Alasdair McKay**

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Abigail Watson and Alasdair McKay make the case for Sustainable Security, incorporating a broader range of risk drivers and responses than the national security approach. Embracing this would be an opportunity for the UK to strategise a more secure society and world after Covid-19.

Covid-19 has not just been a health crisis; it has had huge implications for how we live our lives, interact with each other, and conduct international affairs. In conversations about national security strategies the implications of the pandemic will be a dominant feature. In this sense, the pandemic represents a test to traditional understandings of security. It highlights the need for a more holistic approach, which acknowledges the way in which national security is threatened by non-military challenges.

This is not a new argument. Previous British defence and security reviews and policy documents have already noted the importance of looking beyond traditional definitions of security to consider issues like "social inequality and exclusion, demographic changes, rapid and unplanned urbanisation, climate change, and global economic and other shocks." They have also noted the dangers posed by non-military or less conventional threats.

The 2015 National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA), for example, identified a major human health crisis such as pandemic influenza or "emerging infectious diseases" and severe weather events as Tier One risks. However, these ambitious and promising documents have often been followed by UK

engagement which has prioritised immediate national interests and short-term objectives.

Towards a Sustainable Security Index

It is for this reason that the Oxford Research Group (ORG) developed the Sustainable Security Index. The Index draws upon extensive research conducted by ORG on the concept of Sustainable Security. This preventative approach to security argues that to create lasting peace and security, it is essential to understand and address the interconnected drivers of insecurity, rather than react to the symptoms. This means rethinking and broadening our understanding of security.

The Index measures how well 155 countries around the world contribute to global sustainable security. That is, it assesses them across three areas (or drivers): governance and equality; climate change and the environment; and the use of military force. It does so because all three of these areas determine the eventual security of a country and its region, but only the last tends to be considered in decisions over perceived national security threats.

Governance and Equality

Take the first driver, governance and equality. Substantial research has highlighted that inequalities between groups and injustices in societies are highly important because they can be used to mobilise and expand non-state groups into episodes of civil unrest. The way states respond to protest and unrest about grievances can, if violent or divisive, often further exacerbate violence and instability.

There is significant evidence that violent extremism thrives in conditions where there has been a breakdown in the relationship between the state and society. When citizens see their own government as corrupt, unable to provide security and services, and where divisions within communities have emerged, non-state groups can fill the gaps left by the state. Research has observed that left-wing paramilitaries in South America and jihadist groups in the Middle East, Africa and Southeast Asia gained important territorial ground in those regions largely because they provided security, and the medical, educational and social services that the local governments failed to deliver. Through exploiting divisions in societies, these groups instilled a semblance of order in chaos.

These are as much international security issues as they are domestic ones because the internal governance of potential security threats in one country can have huge ramifications for the rest of the world, a reality made, very clear by the recent pandemic. Whether disease outbreaks, internal civil unrest or even war, these occurrences almost always have spill-over effects which impact regional security.

Environmental Governance

While climate change is often not associated with national security, it is increasingly being recognised as a "threat multiplier". A study of conflict between 1980 and 2010 suggested that "the risk of armed-conflict outbreak is enhanced by climate-related disaster occurrence in ethnically fractionalized countries." After conducting an extensive literature review on the climate-conflict connection, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency concluded that "under certain circumstances climate-related change can influence factors that lead to or exacerbate conflict."

The adequate protection of ecosystems is also crucial for human security. Forests act as carbon sinks. This means that deforestation not only stops trees from trapping greenhouse gasses, but also releases the carbon they store into the atmosphere. The increasing loss of biodiversity also has detrimental impacts on human health and well-being because of its close links with disease outbreaks. There is a scientific consensus emerging that future pandemics are most likely to emerge from ecosystem degradation, climate change and an interaction of the two trends.

The excessive reliance by states on fossil fuels, especially oil and natural gas, also exacerbates global insecurity. This dependency of states on these finite commodities can be a source of conflict, particularly in developing countries with significant inequalities, and is a major driver of climate change. Thus, if the stated aim of a country's 'security policy' is to keep its citizens safe, then, environmental governance is an essential piece of the puzzle.

Use of military force

Given the importance of these other factors, military-focussed solutions to global instability (whether great power competition or local insurgency) are likely to exacerbate tensions, create more conflict and add to the violence. Internally, if states violently crackdown on opposition, it is likely to lead to a false peace which, as demonstrated by the Arab Spring, may lead to further violence and long-term instability in the future. Repressive policies can also be ineffective and counterproductive when dealing with organised crime and gangs.

Research has shown that "iron fist" responses can have the effect of driving offenders towards more violent groups, increasing the brutality of such groups

as a retaliatory measure and having broader detrimental impacts on societies. In the cases of Colombia and Mexico, for example, the heavily militarised drug wars waged by these states have proven to not only be ineffective in halting the drug trade, but have also had hugely negative impacts on the countries' security, human rights, development and governance.

Internationally, foreign forces intervening militarily to address political problems, like terrorism or ethnic tension, may exacerbate instability and violence by adding more weapons and military personnel to an already tense and militarised situation. Numerous studies have now questioned the effectiveness of the Western military campaigns after 9/11. According to the Watson Institute's Costs of War Project, America's so-called Global War on Terror has cost more than $6 trillion since 2001; however, terrorism has not been eradicated and – in some countries – conflict has been prolonged and exacerbated. In some areas, a focus on military support has ignored broader political problems (such as corruption or poor civilian oversight of the military) and led "to a situation where rights-violating security forces become better equipped to do what they have always done."

Conclusion

For many, the UK and others could have been better prepared for the spread of Covid-19. If, for instance, it had looked less to the hybrid warfare techniques of Russia or the proxies of Iran, it may have been more alert to the worrying signs coming from Wuhan province. But, instead, it was looking at the wrong things and gauging its security by the wrong metrics.

As the UK looks towards the revived Integrated Review there is a chance to address this. If the Review does conclude this autumn, it is likely to be one of

the world's first strategic defence and security reviews to be released in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. This represents an opportunity. If done well this review could demonstrate to other nations how, in response to these recent events, they should transform conceptions of national security to address its true drivers.

The Sustainable Security Index can provide a useful pathway to do this. By encouraging policymakers to look beyond military means, it can help build a truly secure and truly prosperous world.

Image credit: Prachatai/Flickr.

Abigail Watson is Research Manager and **Alasdair McKay** is Senior Editor at Oxford Research Group. With Oliver Scanlan, they are the authors of the *Sustainable Security Index Report 2020*, released in June 2020.

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