

# Britain's National Security Strategy - One Year On

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1 March 2009

## Introduction

The UK National Security Strategy (NSS) was published in March last year, and an initial assessment formed the basis for the ORG International Security Briefing for that month ([Britain's Security – A New Approach?](#)). The Strategy was presented as an entirely new development in Britain's approach to international security, designed to build on a revised version of the earlier Strategic Defence Review, the cross-government counter-terrorism strategy of 2006 and the new strategic framework for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO).

It was published from the Cabinet Office and not from an individual ministry and was:

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**“ “...the first time the Government has published a single, overarching strategy bringing together the objectives and plans of all departments, agencies and forces involved in protecting our national security. It is a significant step, and the latest in a series of reforms bringing greater focus and integration to our approach.” (NSS para 1.7) ”**

The NSS built on a series of cross-departmental or cross-agency developments, including the joint Conflict Prevention Pools established in 2001 and there was a clear impetus stemming from the post 9/11 and post 7/7 environments.

According to the strategy, the single overarching national security objective is one of:

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**“ “...protecting the United Kingdom and its interests, enabling its people to go about their daily lives freely and with confidence, in a more secure, stable, just and prosperous world.” (NSS para 1.9) ”**

While it is therefore concerned, as a government, with the security and well-being of its own citizens, this approach implies that this is only possible in a global system that is itself peaceful. The Strategy is set out in the context of a rapidly changing global security context in which Britain does not currently face a threat from any one state:

## ORG's Vision

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**“ “If the international landscape as a whole is increasingly complex and unpredictable, so too is the security landscape. No state threatens the United Kingdom directly. The Cold War threat has been replaced by a diverse but interconnected set of threats and risks, which affect the United Kingdom directly and also have the potential to undermine wider international stability. They include international terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, conflicts and failed states, pandemics, and trans-national crime. These and other threats and risks are driven by a diverse and interconnected set of underlying factors including climate change, competition for energy, poverty and poor governance, demographic changes and globalisation.” (NSS para 1.3) ”**

In spite of this global approach, last March's ORG briefing pointed out that the greatest emphasis on resources and legislation in the NSS was on terrorism and political violence, together with the core defence budget. At the same time,

that briefing did acknowledge that the NSS sought “to integrate a much wider range of security issues into an integrated strategy” than had previously been attempted and said that it “does try to place Britain’s circumstances in a context that embraces some of the major issues of our time including global inequality, climate change, energy security, trans-national crime and terrorism and political violence.”

The briefing raised some concerns about particular aspects of the Strategy, including:

- an apparent inability to relate UK involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan to Islamic radicalisation,
- the inconsistency of promoting nuclear non-proliferation while planning to maintain nuclear forces for the next half century, and
- a failure to relate the likely consequences of climate change to a prevailing global context of widening socio-economic divisions.

The briefing concluded that “the Strategy is an important step forward but still represents an early stage in taking Britain’s thinking in the direction of globally sustainable security that will benefit not just Britain but the wider global community. That would place Britain centre stage in responding to the key issues of the 21st century – an economically divided and environmentally constrained world – that affect all our futures.”

## **An Election and a new Defence Review**

In just over a year’s time, the present government will call a General Election. However long the current recession lasts, the incoming administration will inherit an economic situation that will involve very high levels of national

indebtedness. As last month's briefing reported, the rate of decline in industrialised production in Britain, if annualised, was running at 16.4% in the three months to the end of January. German and Japanese industrial production was falling even faster, with the key German industrial sector of machine tool production falling 40% during 2008. There were also sharp falls in world trade, with Japanese exports falling 34% in the year to the end of January and even sharper falls for Singapore and Taiwan. The intensifying recession is leading to rapid increases in unemployment across the industrialised world, newly emerging economies and less developed countries. It is therefore clear that the recession will not be short-lived and its impact, not least in terms of government borrowing commitments, will last at least a decade.

For Britain, as a consequence, there will be strong pressure for higher taxes and for curbs on public spending. Given the extent of government borrowing in the past year, that pressure will be sustained. One of the areas of government spending likely to come under pressure is defence, and it is highly likely that the new administration, whatever party is in power, will move rapidly towards a defence review. Furthermore, such a review may well take the form of a more general review of national security, with the term "security" going well beyond traditional understandings of "defence". Last year's National Security Strategy makes that even more likely.

## **One Year On**

In the past year there have been several major developments that are relevant to any review of the current strategy, whether that involves a near-term updating of policy or, more likely, the full-scale review that will follow the next election.

The most clear-cut factor is that military spending will be under severe pressure at a time when the UK will still be involved in a costly war in Afghanistan. It is possible that the Obama administration will undertake a radical reassessment of its military posture in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but the current indications are that this is unlikely – the planned surge will be implemented in full, with at least 25,000 additional troops deployed. The nature of the transatlantic relationship is likely to ensure that the UK will at least maintain, and possibly increase, its deployments in Afghanistan. It is possible that this will lead to an easing of the deeply insecure environment in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but the signs are not positive. It follows that there will be sustained pressure to provide British units with more effective equipment, creating more pressure on the defence budget.

Assuming that the UK deployments to Afghanistan will last at least five years, this means that there is likely to be serious pressure on specific major defence projects, the two largest being the programme to replace the Trident missile system with a new generation of ballistic missile submarines (SSBN), and the plans for two very large aircraft carriers, HMS Queen Elizabeth and HMS Prince of Wales, deploying the advanced F-35 multi-role strike aircraft. While neither programme is currently under threat of cancellation, the carrier building programme has recently been put back by over a year and Gordon Brown has spoken of scaling down the SSBN programme so that each submarine would carry 12 missile tubes rather than the planned 16.

## **President Obama and Nuclear Proliferation Control**

The idea of the UK building smaller missile submarines has come at a time of a clear commitment from the new Obama administration to the vision of moving eventually to a nuclear-free world. Immediate moves in this direction include

the possibility of Congress being requested to pass legislation ratifying the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, and approaches to Russia to engage in a new treaty to follow the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START). It is probable that such a treaty would involve a bilateral agreement to take warhead deployments down to perhaps 1,500 on each side. This would still involve a remarkable degree of overkill, and neither state currently has plans to irreversibly dismantle the stocks of plutonium “pits” – the tens of thousands of fissile cores that remain in store from the Cold War nuclear arsenals. Deployments of 3,000 nuclear warheads by the two states would seem a long way from progress towards a nuclear-free world, but they would compare with deployments exceeding 60,000 warheads at the height of the Cold War 25 years ago.

## **Divisions and Constraints**

In analysing the National Security Strategy a year ago, the International Security Monthly Briefing pointed to a long-standing argument made by ORG that the most important global security trends were widening socio-economic divisions and the issue of environmental constraints on human activity, especially the impact of climate change. In both respects, these trends have been exacerbated by developments in the past year. The worldwide recession is having a profound impact on the world’s poorest communities. Unemployment is expected to increase by well over 50 million during 2009, with most of that rise being in poorer countries, and prospects of reaching the UN’s Millennium Development Goals are receding.

Meanwhile, there are numerous indicators to suggest that the rate of climate change is accelerating. During the course of the past year, abundant evidence has emerged that the rate of warming of the polar regions is substantially



greater than most climate change models have predicted. These regions are regarded as “early warning” markers of global trends, and there is a widespread consensus among climate scientists that feedback loops are now starting to impact on climate change, further increasing the rate of warming. As climate change accelerates, the impact on the world’s poorer communities is expected to include more intensive tropical storms, sea level rise and major changes in rainfall distribution, with this happening at a time of widening wealth/poverty divisions. Such trends make it highly unlikely that we are moving towards a “more secure, stable, just and prosperous world” that is considered to be the foundation of Britain’s National Security Strategy.

In the current economic climate, the British government has so far maintained its international development commitments, moving slowly towards the UN goal of 0.7% of GNP, but its policies on pro-poor north-south trading relations have remained relatively weak. On climate change there have actually been serious reversals, especially in a failure to encourage an increased move towards energy conservation and the development of renewable energy resources. What is particularly disappointing is the chronic inability to match the rhetoric about a “green new deal” with actual measures to bring that about.

## **Old and New Thinking**

In facing up to the challenges of a divided and environmentally constrained world, the indications are that British security thinking is still largely stuck in the past. Much of the emphasis, in terms of spending commitments over the coming decade, will be focused on heavy investment in a new strategic nuclear force and on massive new aircraft carriers that will together provide a global expeditionary capability far in excess of anything Britain has had for nearly four decades. There is thus a mismatch between the aims of the National Security

Strategy and its recognition of the nature of future challenges on the one hand, and a defence procurement outlook that is more reminiscent of the Cold War era.

What is perhaps unexpected is that this “old thinking” is itself going to be challenged by fiscal realities. In the changed economic climate of the next decade, Britain is simply not going to be able to afford to sustain these programmes, and will instead be forced to scale down its procurement intentions. Both the Trident replacement programme and the carrier/F-35 plans could well be casualties of a post-election defence review, forcing a rethink of Britain’s defence posture in what could be a chaotic and difficult process. This makes it all the more important that the significant insights that were contained in the 2008 National Security Strategy, and their implications for the UK defence posture, are recognised early, helping to ensure a more realistic defence posture in a global environment that requires innovative thinking.

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