



Towards a New Consensus on National Security

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As the UK commences negotiations on leaving the EU, juggles challenges to its own union, confronts a new wave of DIY terrorist attacks, and launches Europe's largest ever warship, the need for a "strategic" National Security Strategy has never been greater. Yet in the uncertain post-electoral context dominated by Brexit and 'supply' deals with fringe parties there is a high risk that UK policy will continue its somnambulant reliance on reactive militarised approaches that 16 years of the War on Terror have tested literally to destruction. This need not be the case. Any minority government is weak relative to parliament and there is an untested consensus emerging among people and parties that security and defence policy can and should move Britain in new directions.

There is, of course, plenty of evidence that the old consensus still prevails. Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen Joseph Dunford has been in Afghanistan this week, paving the way for the deployment of **4,000 additional troops**, and an **appeal** to NATO allies for further contributions. In both Syria and Iraq, the military defeat of the so-called Islamic State (IS) seems imminent, but the human cost has been enormous, with a UN independent commission of enquiry **denouncing** the "staggering" number of civilians casualties inflicted during the Raqqa offensive. Over 850,000 people have fled Mosul during the nine-month battle for the city. Ongoing chaos in Libya's foreign-fuelled war is **crippling** that country and EU efforts to address the Mediterranean migrant crisis. No end is in sight for Yemen's war, which increasingly provides cover for western counter-terrorism raids.

The UK is far from aloof from these crises. London has just **pledged** 85 additional troops to join its 500 already in Afghanistan on a train-and-advise

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mission under NATO's banner. UK troops in Iraq are carrying out a similar mission, while the RAF engages IS targets in Iraq and Syria. In these three states, Libya, and perhaps Yemen and Nigeria too, British special forces are on the ground with allied proxies. Commentators from [Patrick Cockburn](#) to [Anthony Cordesman](#) argue that the end of IS as a "state" will not solve the problems of peacebuilding in either nation, nor [end the threat](#) posed by extremist violence.

Once more, with strategy

What are the UK's interests and objectives in these diverse theatres of conflict so central to our current security and defence posture? Where is the plan to achieve them? The weaknesses of the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) and National Security Strategy (NSS) process created by the Conservative-led coalition government in 2010 were highlighted in the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy's (JCNSS) [first review](#). It noted that the NSS "...does not yet present a clear overarching strategy: a common understanding about the UK's interests and objectives that guides choices on investment across government departments". The committee also argued that the next NSS "should be the product of a much wider public debate and an attempt at political consensus".

The Committee's report published in July 2016, [found](#) that the 2015 NSS and SDSR did not achieve the "primary goal" of setting out "(a) what the UK wants to achieve; (b) how it intends to achieve it; and (c) what capabilities are required". References to wider consultation than in 2010 allude to "tick box" exercises and there is no mention of political consensus.

Once more, with consensus

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However, pledges in the 2017 election manifestos suggest that consensus on several key security issues is emerging across the main political parties, providing the foundations for a strategic reboot.

Whatever its weaknesses, the SDSR process has established military spending equivalent to 2% of GDP and Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) equivalent to 0.7% of GNI as the joint fiscal cornerstones of this multi-party consensus. While the 2% commitment is **well above** what almost all of Britain's neighbours commit to defence, reduction is probably unrealistic before 2020 given binding procurement commitments and force design constraints, regardless of any commitment to restructure, redeploy or restrain the armed forces in the longer term.

Similarly, complete consensus on membership of NATO among sitting MPs (Sinn Fein is the exception) does not mean acquiescence in operations to project power "out of area", nor to a subordinate relationship to the United States. There is room for rethinking the role of NATO, including its relationship to the invigorated European defence identity that Brexit is empowering. As the European Commission noted this month in a **reflection paper** on its own future defence role, "An unprecedented momentum is currently drawing the EU and NATO closer together." Defining the UK's role in collective territorial defence outside the EU will be a key challenge of the current parliament.

It is also clear from the **manifestos** that there is a resurgence of cross-party support for UK contributions to UN peacekeeping missions. This might offer a way for "Global Britain" to enhance its international standing, committing its military to supporting UN mechanisms and the principal of multilateralism more generally. Such commitment is crucial if the UK is true to its SDSR pledge to strengthen the "rules-based international order".

More divisive but clearly waxing is the idea of restricting arms sales to repressive regimes, not least Saudi Arabia. This is common to the Labour, SNP, Liberal Democrat and Green Party manifestos, if not the Conservatives or DUP. It is also the joint [recommendation](#) from the Chairs of the International Development Committee and Committees on Arms Export Controls. This suggests that a parliamentary consensus on this crucial issue may be attainable, even if the High Court does not rule against arms sales to Saudi later this year in its [judicial review](#).

In terms of challenging military industrial interests at home, it is difficult to see much movement for change. UKIP and the SNP are not considered to be natural political bedfellows, but they share a manifesto pledge to clamp down on waste and inefficiency in defence procurement, what UKIP calls the “cosy relationship between ministers, officials and arms firms”. However, Labour, SNP, DUP and many Conservative MPs with industrial constituencies retain a keen interest in the Defence Industrial Strategy process, disrupted by the general election. They will likely again dominate the incoming Defence Committee.

While the value of diplomacy is a totem of each main party manifesto, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office emerged from the last two SDSRs starved of funds. An expanded toolkit of engaged multilateral diplomacy, UN peacekeeping and development aid is more likely to represent real value for money in tackling what are fundamentally political problems of peacebuilding in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. But are the various parties prepared to put public money where their mouths are? The outgoing Foreign Affairs Committee was a strong, independently minded advocate for diplomatic capacity and activism; it could have real influence in this parliament.

A commitment to the Paris Agreement is also subject to fulsome cross-party support. However, as noted by the JCNSS, the 2015 strategy failed to accord this problem headline status, despite climate change's description as “one of the biggest long term challenges for the future of our planet”. Across party political manifestos (the DUP and UKIP are the exceptions on the hard-right), commitment to the Paris target is clear but the ways of getting there less so, particularly how domestic energy and industrial policy ties together with agriculture and the environment and how both relate to funding climate change mitigation in the Global South. The crucial question of what additional resources will be required to ensure we meet the Paris targets also needs an answer.

Finally, on the charged issue of Trident replacement, there is precious little consensus on ways forward. The formal nuclear disarmament lobby may be somewhat diminished by loss of SNP and SDLP seats but so (slightly) is the staunch Conservative (and DUP) commitment to renewal. Paradoxically, this may be an opportunity for considering the alternative disarmament options that fall between the Continuous at Sea Deterrence (CASD) status quo and unilateral disarmament. Only the Lib Dems currently occupy this territory, albeit marginally, suggesting a move from CASD to a “medium readiness” posture, with a three instead of four submarine fleet.

Deeply divided on nuclear weapons, the Labour Party's manifesto commitment to Trident renewal sits uncomfortably with Jeremy Corbyn's personal opposition, his rhetorical commitment to a NATO-defying “no first use” policy, and the manifesto's resounding omission of CASD. Labour is looking for a consensus-busting compromise and it may yet drag the other parties into discussing intermediary options to step down the nuclear ladder. Given the lack of popular

and political awareness that credible intermediary options even exist, it is hard to say where the current consensus (were such a description realistic) would lie in a reasoned debate. Such discussion has barely begun.

Options for change

What, then, are the options for the 2017 parliament and government to begin rethinking the UK's security strategy? First, there remain the recommendations from the outgoing JCNSS for the government to act on. These include creating a "ministerial post within the Cabinet Office with oversight of national security" and, by extension, coordinate foreign affairs and defence. Arguably, such a post has just been created for First Secretary of State Damian Green, a member of the JCNSS that made this recommendation. But how might he exercise this role in practice? Can he really make headway against the ingrained cultures of the MoD and FCO? A veteran of the Home Office, would he even want to try? Green's mandate is unclear but could be the seed of something useful.

The new government could opt for a new SDSR and NSS refresh, as advocated by Labour, the SNP and (for different reasons) the DUP. But this seems unlikely given the disruption occasioned to the government's five-year defence planning cycle, the government's mid-Brexit desire for strategic ambiguity on its future security relationship with Europe, and discomfort over scrutiny of its tight security relationships with the Trump administration and Saudi Arabia. At most, the executive might commit to a SDSR refresh to push back procurement commitments rendered unaffordable by the pound's devaluation. This much may depend on the relative influence of Chancellor (and former defence secretary) Philip Hammond, one of several mooted premiers-in-waiting.

Alternatively, recognising the strength of Parliament in this period of executive weakness, the new Chairs of the relevant Select Committees could take the initiative. As they all sit on the JCNSS, this body could hold a comprehensive inquiry to usefully explore some of the questions set out above in addressing how the UK security objectives can be realistically defined and met. The consensus is already forming, the opportunity is there: if the government will not seize it, then members of all sides of the House should do so.

Image credit: [Defence Images/Flickr](#).

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