

IN FOCUS

**QUESTIONS FOR THE
INTEGRATED REVIEW:**

**#1 HOW DO WE DEFINE
SECURITY?**



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Questions for The Integrated Review: #1 How Do We Define Security?

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Oxford Research Group (ORG) held a series of online roundtables to understand the risks and challenges remote warfare could present over the next five years and how the Integrated Review could address these.

These highlighted three key questions:

1. How should the UK define its national security?
2. How should the UK respond to threats?
3. How should the UK measure the success of military interventions?

This briefing seeks to address the first of these questions, with two more briefings to come on the others.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic 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 future conversations about national security strategies the implications of the pandemic will be a dominant feature. Despite the UK's own Integrated Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy Review – or the 'Integrated Review' – being delayed, the recent memories and continued realities of the pandemic will loom large even when British policymakers do re-start their efforts to plan the next five years of UK defence and security strategy.

This is, perhaps, not the type of conversation many policymakers thought they would be having when the Integrated Review was announced in February 2020. Those that thought the conversation would be about aircraft carriers, post-Brexit trade deals and cyber capability may be surprised to find health resilience and flattening the curve at the forefront of a debate about what is required to protect British people. Yet, few would now argue that these issues are not relevant to how we conceptualise and plan for

protecting UK national security. In this sense then, COVID-19 represents the latest challenge to traditional understandings of national security.

The argument that national security should be defined more broadly is not new. Support for an integrated approach to addressing insecurity has gathered considerable momentum over the years amongst intergovernmental organisations¹, policymakers², non-governmental organisations³ and think-tanks.⁴ In fact, previous British defence and security reviews have already noted the importance of looking beyond traditional definitions of security to consider things like "social inequality and exclusion, demographic changes, rapid and unplanned urbanisation, climate change, and global economic and other shocks."⁵

Unfortunately, these ambitious and promising documents have often been followed by UK engagement which has prioritised immediate national interests and short-term objectives. In fact, the UK Government's decision that it would merge the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and Department for International

Development (DfID) was announced as a way to better “serve our national interest”.⁶ As a result, short term (often militarily-focused) responses continue to be the “go-to” for the UK as it seeks to address instability abroad.

This is especially problematic when it comes to remote warfare. This is the trend where states engage abroad without deploying large numbers of their own forces and instead focus on training local and regional forces to do the bulk of frontline fighting. As ORG has explored elsewhere, there is often an assumption that these types of engagements are lower risk than conventional deployments and so the longer-term consequences are poorly understood.⁷ However, these deployments can have a detrimental impact on the true drivers of conflict, such as poor governance and inequality.

To address this, the UK needs to better conceptualise its understanding of national security. By acknowledging and accounting for all the drivers of conflict – and recognising that addressing them with a cross-governmental approach is also in the UK’s own national interests – the UK can ensure that all its engagements work towards a more peaceful and prosperous world.

Broadening definitions of our national security

To understand how the UK can better conceptualise national security, we convened 20 experts from the military, civil society, academia and government to discuss what national security means to the UK and how the Integrated Review should define it. There was no consensus. For some, defining national security too broadly could mean that the UK felt the need to intervene everywhere, “without significant acknowledgement of what can be done or the possibility of success.”

However, for others, defining national security too narrowly also had its dangers. For them, failing to account for all the drivers of conflict can mean that we enter relationships

with partners to achieve a short term, militarily-focused goal but, in doing so, can exacerbate the prospects for violent conflict in the long term. This can threaten our own national interests by creating safe havens for terrorist groups, forcing thousands of people to flee their homes and, potentially, creating space for adversaries to exploit “fissures and gaps” to extend their “malign influence.”⁸

This is important when it comes to defence and security partnerships. If the UK and its allies focus on narrow interpretations of their own national interests they can, as one roundtable participant said, “kid ourselves that harmful partnerships are in our interests.” Alternatively, if the UK recognises and accounts for a broader interpretation of its national security, it may be more mindful of the potential dangers.

In reconceptualising UK national security, there are three areas which need to be considered: governance and equality; climate change and environment; and the use of military force. In 2006, ORG began unpicking which factors should be given most attention when trying to understand global insecurity and conflict.⁹ This was eventually narrowed down to these three because they – as our 2020 Sustainable Security Index notes – “are the trends that, if left unattended, are likely to lead to substantial global and regional instability, and largescale loss of life, of a severity unmatched by other potential threats.”¹⁰

The first two - governance and equality and climate change - tend to be associated more with having an ethical foreign policy rather than one focussed on UK national interests; although there is strong evidence that this should be reconsidered. The rest of this briefing will explore why by taking each of the drivers in turn.

Governance and equality

Governance and equality tend not to be associated with state security; however, inequalities and injustices in societies are

important. They can be used to mobilise and expand resistance groups and may spark violence.¹¹ There is significant evidence that violent extremism thrives in conditions where there has been a breakdown in the relationship between the state and society and an undermining of human rights. When citizens see their own government as unable to provide security and services, and even as a threat to this security, divisions within communities have emerged and non-state groups can fill the gaps left by the state.¹²

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.¹³ These groups instilled a semblance of order in chaos. Ultimately, communal support from local populations is critical for groups not only to succeed in gaining ground, but also to function.¹⁴ As cultural anthropologist, Scott Atran, observes, “without community support, terrorist organisations that depend on dense networks of ethnic and religious ties for information, recruitment, and survival cannot thrive.”¹⁵

This has huge implications for the UK’s security partnerships abroad. As one roundtable participant said: “It’s all about how legitimate your partner is; if they are corrupt, that is not going to lead to a successful partnership.” This reflects the findings of a recent Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) briefing, which states: “Partner legitimacy is paramount ... in terms of how the civilian authorities and population view local security forces and, relatedly, the partner’s relative control of territory.” It states: “This challenge can be exacerbated ... by entrenched corruption within partner states, which is difficult to tackle for even the most earnest partners.”¹⁶

If this legitimacy is not present, any progress made in improving the military capabilities of

UK partners may exacerbate the drivers of conflict and create more instability and violence in the places the UK intervenes. In fact, one participant at our roundtable argued that “if you are too ready to deal with a partner, that guarantees malign elite capture of the states ... multiplies threats to UK interests as armed rebel groups grow and institutions shatter.”

This can undermine the UK’s own security. In the short term it may lead to groups like IS reforming and posing threats again in the future – and, arguably, already is.¹⁷ In the long term, it may create the very instability and chaos that countries like Russia (and their mercenaries) thrive in and Western countries struggle to engage in. As a CSIS briefing noted: “As competitors seek to discredit, corrupt, and alienate security actors that do not accord with their interests, partner legitimacy will be an important source of resiliency.”¹⁸

Climate change and environment

Like governance, climate change has not traditionally been associated with national security among military and governmental decision makers; nevertheless, it is increasingly being recognised as a “threat multiplier”.¹⁹ 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.”²⁰ Another study found “strong causal evidence linking climatic events to human conflict across a range of spatial and temporal scales and across all major regions of the world.”²¹ 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.”²²

In some cases, it has been shown to worsen problems created by poor governance and inequality. For instance, there is a greater likelihood of conflict if communities are

relatively poor compared to the country's elites and they feel that they do not have equitable access to the same resources.²³ According to Philippe Le Billon, of the University of British Columbia, in many cases national and regional governments often employ brutality towards populations to suppress unrest caused by grievances over resource distribution.²⁴

The relationship between climate change and conflict is complex and multifaceted and should not be over-stated. In fact, one participant said while it is important to acknowledge the consequences of climate change, it is also important to not "enter a competition about what's worst." They added that, at times, "climate change is sexier than protecting civilians" but we need to acknowledge the importance of both.

While this may be true, 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 to improve states' responses to conflict.

Use of force

While the use of force may serve a purpose in creating the conditions for peace, militarily-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 (a point deeply connected to the first driver). For instance, securitised responses to COVID-19 have been common among a number of countries in Africa and the Middle East but risk being dangerously ineffective.²⁵ These could present huge challenges in stopping COVID-19 from spreading, when populations with little trust in government are asked to follow public health directives.

Internationally, foreign forces intervening militarily to address problems that have multiple and complex origins, like terrorism or ethnic tension, may exacerbate instability and violence by adding more weapons and military personnel to an already tense situation.²⁶ Numerous studies have now questioned the effectiveness of the Western military campaigns after 9/11.²⁷ 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 was prolonged and exacerbated.²⁸

These campaigns have also had a number of unintended consequences.²⁹ In some areas, a focus on military support can ignore broader political problems (such as corruption or poor civilian oversight of the military) and "lead to a situation where rights-violating security forces become better equipped to do what they have always done."³⁰ In other areas, providing military support to groups without careful analysis of ethnic, geographical or community biases can exacerbate local and regional tensions.³¹

This, again, risks the UK's own national security. For instance, in some areas, this approach has driven recruitment for terrorist groups.³² One study on young Fulani people in the regions of Mopti (Mali), Sahel (Burkina Faso) and Tillabéri (Niger) found "real or perceived state abuse is the number one factor behind young people's decision to join violent extremist groups."³³

Conclusion

COVID-19 has created a seismic shift in debates about national security. Yet it was not unexpected. In its own Biological Security Strategy the government noted: "Significant outbreaks of disease are among the highest impact risks faced by any society – threatening lives and causing disruption to public services and the economy." In response, the strategy promised to "act both

at home and overseas to protect UK citizens and British interests from the risk of a significant disease outbreak, no matter the source.”

Yet, for many, the UK remained too focussed on the hybrid warfare techniques of Russia, the proxies of Iran, the military build-up of China and potential trade deals after Brexit. It was distracted from the worrying news coming from Wuhan – which, at least in the short term, changed the dynamics and, arguably, the importance of these military threats and trade-based opportunities.

Its poor response shows that the UK should have taken a wider approach to what it meant by national security. Looking forward, it should better conceptualise and prioritise threats to the UK; as one roundtable participant said, for “too long the national security paradigm of the UK has focussed on military threats. But we need to think more systemically about how these threats are faced up to -- such as climate change, inequality, and autocracy – by non-military capabilities.”

To do this, UK policies should be built on and assessed by the three core drivers of instability and conflict:

- Governance and inequality
- Climate change and environment
- The use of force

A recalibration of security threats should not mean that the UK intervenes everywhere, “without significant acknowledgement of what can be done or the possibility of success.” Instead, looking beyond military build-up may give a better insight into the potential for success. In many cases it should pause to consider if intervening militarily or with short term tactical efforts, while perhaps addressing a short term aim (of, say, building influence or militarily holding back a terrorist group), may exacerbate other drivers of

instability and threaten UK national security in the long term.

Once the UK has recalibrated its definition of security, it must move on to other pressing questions: how the UK should engage abroad and how it should measure whether its interventions have been successful. These questions will frame the next two ORG briefings on the Integrated Review.

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