Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy
Written Submission on
National Security Capability Review:
A Changing Security Environment

Submitted by Oxford Research Group February 2018

About Oxford Research Group

Oxford Research Group (ORG) is an independent UK-based think tank that provides information, analysis, methodology, policy advice and mediation to promote approaches to defence, development and foreign policies that are inclusive, accountable, sustainable and effective.

1. Executive Summary

This submission addresses the following issues highlighted by the current inquiry:

- The specific areas of national security policy that are under consideration as part of the NSCR;
- Ways in which the threats to the UK’s national security have changed since 2015, especially in relation to the four particular challenges identified in the 2015 NSS & SDSR:
  - ii. the resurgence of state-based threats and intensifying wider state competition;
- The extent to which the 2015 NSS & SDSR has been able to respond flexibly to the evolving national security challenges facing the UK, in terms of
  - i. the strategic analysis set out in the document;
  - ii. the range of capabilities set out in the document, including defence;
- Changes to the wider international security environment, such as the change in Administration in the United States and the UK’s vote to leave the European Union;
- The extent to which the NSCR was necessitated by challenges in delivering the capabilities set out in the 2015 NSS & SDSR;
- The extent to which it was possible to anticipate in 2015 the trajectory and pace of changes in the national security environment since the publication of the 2015 NSS & SDSR.

1.1. It remains unclear what necessitated the National Security Capability Review due to the opacity of the process and the failure of the UK Government to disclose its mandate or terms of reference. The present JCNSS inquiry is thus extremely welcome and will allay fears that the NSCR, by bypassing the NSS / SDSR process,
marks a retreat from the more inclusive process of UK Security and Defence decision-making pioneered in the current decade. Further steps should be taken to clarify the political (i.e. ministerial) ownership and control of the process, including the spun-off Defence Modernisation Programme.

1.2. In the absence of official information, it is a logical inference, widely drawn by civil society and the media, that the NSCR has been instigated because of the difficulties (chiefly but not only financial) delivering the capabilities set out in the 2015 NSS and SDSR.

1.3. The central problem is the estimated £20 billion funding gap in the Equipment Plan. Even if delivered within budget, current procurement plans will continue to lock UK armed forces into a configuration geared to global power projection, expeditionary warfare and constantly mobilised nuclear forces. As a consequence of these expensive global commitments, the UK is poorly positioned to meet emerging strategic trends around its core territory. Of these, the most important is the combination of an increasingly assertive Russia and a waning US commitment to the defence of Europe-Atlantic relative to Asia-Pacific allies. These trends were entirely predictable, predating even the 2010 NSS and SDSR.

1.4. The impact of the 2015 NSS and SDSR’s failure to address the contingency of the UK voting to leave the EU is very apparent in three specific contexts:

- the extent to which the devaluation of the pound relative to the dollar would impact procurement plans.
- the more substantial question of how the UK will collaborate with and influence European foreign and security policy.
- the extent to which leaving the European Union now places a higher premium on securing favourable trade deals with Asian countries like China, India and Japan, reinforces dependence on the US, and the implications that this has for the UK’s National Security Strategy.

1.5. The extent to which the NSCR’s mandate includes additional lacunae from the 2015 NSS and SDSR is unclear because of the opacity of the process. In addition to the specific points raised by the present inquiry, it would be sensible for the NSCR to address concerns already noted in the JCNSS’s 2016 review of the 2015 NSS and SDSR, including the future impact of a changing climate on UK security.

1.6. Whether through the NSCR or the more inclusive NSS / SDSR process, the UK Government should reconsider the feasibility of aiming for “full spectrum” capabilities. Maintaining the capability for extensive “out of area” deployments in addition to resourcing the Dreadnought SSBN programme will continue to hinder the UK’s capacity to fulfil its a priori obligations to territorial and collective European defence. Unless the over-riding objective of UK national strategy is to maximise its convergence with US strategic interests, any consideration of an expanded military role in the “Indo-Pacific” should be subordinated to the need for a more realistic alignment of required capabilities with more clearly prioritised aims and objectives.

2. The rationale for the National Security Capability Review
2.1. In the absence of a publicly disclosed mandate and terms of reference, the question of what necessitated the NSCR is by definition speculative. The 20th July 2017 press release announcing the NSCR addressed its purpose and relationship to the NSS and SDSR process in only the vaguest terms. To date, the review’s terms of reference have not been made public, nor has input from civil society been sought. This raises crucial questions of process and accountability.

2.2. The present inquiry is therefore particularly welcome, restoring a semblance of procedural coherence and at least an indirect level of public scrutiny and external input. This will allay fears that the UK Government is retreating from the principles of democratic accountability, inclusiveness and transparency concerning national security and defence policy-making adopted by the Brown government prior to the 2010 NSS and SDSR. Further steps in this direction might include clarification of ministerial responsibility, not to mention oversight, of the review conducted in camera by the National Security Advisor. A First Secretary of State with explicit responsibility for coordinating international policy (diplomacy, defence, development) and the NSS would be one means of achieving the desired ownership and coherence.

2.3. It is a logical inference, widely drawn by civil society and the media, that the NSCR has been instigated because of the difficulties delivering the capabilities set out in the 2015 NSS and SDSR. The core of the financial problem exposed by the National Audit Office comprises an enormous funding gap in the Ministry of Defence’s 10-year Equipment Plan, estimated to total up to £20 billion. This has been caused by a number of factors, including underestimates of costs in the development stages of the procurement process, cost overruns and, more recently, the decline of sterling versus the dollar.

2.4. Major purchases in the Equipment Plan include the Queen Elizabeth Class aircraft carriers (now mostly paid for), their F-35B fighter airwings, new ASW frigates (the cheaper general purpose version is not yet included in the plan), nuclear attack submarines and the Dreadnought class SSBN programme. The aggregate impact of the Equipment Plan, even if successfully delivered through additional spending, will be to lock the UK force structure into a configuration suited to projecting power “out of area”, poorly positioned to meet emerging strategic trends in Europe and its vicinity. To a substantial extent, procurement decisions (many made 10 to 20 years ago) are driving strategy, rather than vice versa.

3. The 2015 NSS and SDSR and emerging strategic trends

3.1. As a result of the over-burdened procurement plan, the Public Accounts Committee warned in April 2017 that there was no scope for additional equipment purchases to respond to changes in the strategic environment. While the 2015 SDSR added a number of systems generally suited to conventional defence commitments in northern Europe – maritime patrol aircraft, heavier armoured vehicles, Typhoon fighter squadrons – it did so simultaneous with bolstering global power projection capacities, notably the commitment to operationalising two active supercarriers. In short, without an adjustment of either aggregate ambition or total budget, the MoD promised to do more with essentially the same resources. Developments since 2016 have only exacerbated the trend of over-promising and under-resourcing.
3.2. Evidence presented to the recent Defence Sub-committee inquiry on “Defence in the Arctic” raises significant questions concerning the UK’s anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capability, a point underscored by the revelation this February that a minesweeper was sent to intercept Russian submarines in August 2017 due to the lack of available frigates in the fleet ready escort role. The Defence Sub-committee inquiry has also highlighted the potentially substantial degradation of the UK’s ability to conduct cold-weather warfare in the event of significant cuts to the Royal Marines. A RAND study in 2016 questioned the ability of the UK to rapidly deploy to the Baltic States and sustain itself in the field in the event of a crisis\(^1\). The aspiration of generating a full division, as envisaged by Joint Force 2025, cannot be considered realistic in the present context.

3.3. Russian defence planners and political leaders since Gorbachev have consistently and clearly articulated the view that the eastward expansion of NATO and the European Union would be perceived as significant security threats that would necessitate a response. The willingness of Russia to use military force to achieve political goals was demonstrated in both Chechen wars, the 2008 intervention in Georgia, and operations in Ukraine since 2014. The emergence of a more militarily assertive Russia was therefore predictable since at least 2008 and is referenced in the 2015 NSS / SDSR.

3.4. Similarly, although the Trump administration’s rhetoric may differ from that of its predecessors, the United States’ disquiet over unequal burden-sharing within NATO is long-standing. The US strategic “pivot” to Asia has been underway since at least 2011 and the failure of the 2015 NSS and SDSR to address this trend was highlighted by the JCNSS’ inquiry of 2016.

3.5. The strategic analysis within the 2015 NSS and SDSR therefore suffered from two categories of problems. The first is that much of the analysis is not strategic in the sense that it fails to draw out – or, at least, adequately prioritise - the appropriate implications of certain strategic trends for UK procurement and force structure. The utility of the new aircraft carriers in a threat environment where Russia continues to increase the deployment of missiles that outrange the F-35 is not critically discussed, for example. The second is that the analysis makes a number of major omissions, some of which were both highlighted in the JCNSS inquiry of 2016 and are the subject of the present inquiry.

4. Notable Omissions from the 2015 NSS and SDSR in the context of the NSCR

4.1. The vote to leave the European Union has left the UK Government flat-footed, as demonstrated by key weaknesses in the recent Department for Exiting the European Union (DExEU) position paper on the UK’s future Defence and Security relationship with Europe.

4.2. The most important question raised by the position paper is how the UK Government proposes to influence European Defence, Security and Foreign policy. Will the Government choose to pursue this indirectly, through enhancing bilateral diplomacy with member-states, the European External Action Service (EEAS) and European

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Commission? Alternatively, will it seek to retain some form of representation within the European Council, Council of the European Union and the Political and Security Committee? If the latter, how will it achieve this in view of the sensitivity of including Security and Defence in the current Brexit negotiations?

4.3. The failure to consider the National Security implications of a vote to leave has also contributed to the current funding gap in the Equipment Plan, insofar as the resulting decline in the value of sterling relative to the dollar was not adequately planned for. This issue will continue to impact the Equipment Plan funding gap, and analysis is required concerning how the performance of sterling will be affected by different outcomes from the Brexit negotiations (particularly an extreme “no deal” outcome), and how this performance might be expected to affect the costs of procuring foreign-made equipment.

4.4. Finally, there is the question of whether the vote to leave has now increased pressure on the UK Government to secure free trade agreements with countries outside the EU, and the implications that this has for UK Security and Defence policy. An obvious example is the UK’s policy towards China. Even before the vote to leave the EU, the JCNSS noted in its 2016 inquiry the potential “cognitive dissonance” in pursuing closer trade relations with a country that might be viewed as a security threat, as well as China’s deepening role in UK critical national infrastructure. As a result of the leave vote, more analysis is required as to whether the higher premium now placed on securing free trade agreements with non-allies like China - but also India, Japan and Gulf States - will begin to exert a far stronger pull on overall UK foreign and security policy. Such a development would not just pose questions for the UK-US security relationship. How, for example, might the UK’s developing relationship with India or Japan be subject to substantial challenges in the event of a downturn in Sino-Indian or Sino-Japanese relations?

4.5. This leads to other omissions from the 2015 NSS & SDSR which the present inquiry is not considering and on which the NSCR’s remit is opaque. It would be useful for the NSCR to address these omissions, particularly the security implications of a changing climate.

4.6. The weaknesses of the UK crisis response when Hurricane Irma hit Anguilla, the British Virgin Islands and the Turks and Caicos in September 2017 is well documented. While it is not possible to say with certainty that climate change “caused” the Hurricane, it is almost a scientific certainty that as global temperatures continue to rise, such events will increase in number and severity. While this trend represents only a fraction of the security risk to the UK and its Overseas Territories, a comprehensive treatment would include:

4.6.1. The direct physical threat to the UK mainland and Overseas Territories:

- Excess deaths and productivity losses from heatwaves;
- Vulnerability to flooding and extreme weather events;
- Drought and water deficits;
- Risks to farmland and fisheries;
- New pests and diseases.
4.6.2. The indirect threat to the UK mainland and Overseas Territories:

- Risks of food price spikes from a fragile global agricultural system;
- Similar vulnerabilities in trade and energy supply chains;
- Physical threat to overseas assets and UK international investment in general;
- Increasing costs to the UK insurance industry;
- Challenges to the insurance industry’s ability to effectively manage risk in general.

4.6.3. New and multiplying risks in strategically important regions of the world:

- The “risk multiplier” effect of a changing climate on conflict is now supported by an emerging scientific consensus;
- This risk is compounded by second order issues based on existing adaptation and mitigation policies, e.g. REDD and large-scale land purchases in Global South;
- It is further complicated by the increasing mobility of people, both in response to a changing climate and adaptation and mitigation policies;
- Risks of increasing inter-state conflict, not necessarily violent stemming from climatic changes, e.g. The Arctic and river management in South and East Asia.

4.6.4. An existential challenge to the global nuclear non-proliferation regime:

- A nuclear renaissance is currently underway as Global South countries seek emission-free energy security;
- The scale is vast, promising the spread of nuclear expertise, material and infrastructure across dozens of different regulatory regimes that poses severe challenges to nuclear material tracking, verification, monitoring and safety standards;
- The acquisition of civilian nuclear programmes for avowedly peaceful purposes will introduce further diplomatic and strategic tensions into the international system.

4.6.5. A major challenge to security priorities, planning and capabilities:

- Increasing requirements for UK forces to engage in humanitarian and disaster relief operations, the evacuation of UK citizens in response to natural disasters and political instability, peacekeeping operations in regions facing increasing instability and, potentially, “environmental enforcement”;
- Direct physical threat to strategic defence assets from extreme weather events and sea level rise.

4.6.6. A significant challenge to UK allies and alliances, and the ‘rules-based international order’:
• Direct and indirect impacts of a changing climate, and mitigation and adaptation strategies will be felt by every country in the international system;
• Cleavages during climate negotiations between Global North and South are replicated in institutions such as the UN Security Council, G20 and the Commonwealth;
• As impacts increase in severity, the rules-based international order will face increasing strain, possibly to breaking point;
• UK obligations to allies in responding to severe climate-induced impacts are unclear;
• There is potential for emergence of “climate coercion” and “eco-terrorism”.

4.7. If ensuring physical safety and prosperity of British citizens and the preservation of a “rules-based” international order are the UK’s core objectives, any strategy that fails to adequately address the security impacts of a changing climate is unlikely to be effective.

5. The need for a “strategic” strategy

5.1. In its 2016 report on the 2015 NSS and SDSR, the JCNSS noted that:

“The primary goal of the NSS and SDSR process is to set out (a) what the UK wants to achieve; (b) how it intends to achieve it; and (c) what capabilities are required. The NSS & SDSR 2015 does not achieve that presentational goal.”

The concern is whether the failure reflects a fundamental reality that, as presently conceived, the National Security Strategy is simply not a strategy.

5.2. Whether through the NSCR or a more inclusive NSS / SDSR process, the UK Government should reconsider the feasibility of aiming for “full spectrum” military capabilities. While there will continue to be political pressure for the UK to assert a Global Britain posture, maintaining a presence in breadth can only come at the expense of presence in depth. In other words, the desire to be seen to be able to do something everywhere will directly undermine the ability to do anything somewhere. This only makes sense if the UK’s strategic objective is always to form a component of US forces, which will maintain full spectrum force in depth and breadth for some time. There were huge dangers in this approach in 2003 and there are again huge dangers in following the US lead in confronting North Korea and containing China.

5.3. Maintaining the capability for extensive “out of area” deployments in addition to the Dreadnought programme will continue to hinder the UK’s capacity to fulfil its obligations to European collective defence and the effective control of UK territories. Taking into account the likely mounting requirements for missions in response to climate-induced humanitarian crises, which do not necessarily require involvement of the British armed forces, any consideration of an expanded military role in the “Indo-Pacific” should be subordinated to the need for a genuinely strategic approach that realistically aligns required capabilities with more clearly prioritised (and necessarily limited) aims and objectives.
This submission was written for ORG by Oliver Scanlan, Senior Programme Officer in the Sustainable Security Programme, with input from Richard Reeve, Director of the Sustainable Security Programme.