DEFENCE WHITE PAPER PROJECT

REVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF THE 'NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY AND STRATEGIC DEFENCE AND SECURITY REVIEW 2015'

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WD2207002

D uring the second Cameron administration, the British government issued the 'National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015' on November 23rd, 2015, in order to define the United Kingdom's (UK) defence strategy up to 2025.[1] It highlighted major threats to the UK and the resources and capabilities required to counter them. The initial reactions to the UK 2015 strategy document were mostly focused on the individual policies and capabilities that emerge from the overarching plan. Indeed, the entire effort has become known to the general public as the "SDSR".

Some may interpret the 2015 UK NSS's apparent semi-eclipse as implying that the core strategy approved in 2010 has only just been merely 'refreshed', rather than amended. After spending so much time and effort arguing what strategy is 'for' between 2010 and 2015, many politicians and analysts have concluded that the discussion yielded only a few meaningful conclusions. Analysts have often said that the British just do not 'do' strategy.[2]

Overview – The Framework

The 2015 UK NSS underlines three threats to the UK's national security: Russia, Iraq, the Levant and cyber.

Three 'National Security Objectives' can be identified in this strategy:

1. Safeguard our people
2. Increase our worldwide reach
3. Boost our prosperity

The strategy identifies four major problems that will likely influence British security objectives over the next decade:

1. Terrorism, extremism, and instability are increasingly posing to be more of a threat.
2. State-based dangers are reappearing, and state competition is becoming more intense.

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[1] Brooke-Holland, Louisa (2015). Review of *The 2015 SDSR: A Primer*. *Research Briefings Files Parliament UK*. United Kingdom: House of Commons Library. Available at https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7235/CBP-7235.pdf.

[2] Lunn, Jon. (2015). Review of *The 2015 UK National Security Strategy*. *House of Commons Library*, December. Available at https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7431/.

3. Technology's effect, particularly cyber dangers, as well as broader technical advances.

4. The international rules-based system is eroding, making it more difficult to reach consensus and address global concerns.

Several additional threats 'remain serious and must be addressed,' according to the strategy. Civil emergencies, severe natural catastrophes in other countries, energy security, the global economy, climate change, and resource shortages are among them. An addendum to the strategy document summarises the 2015 National Security Risk Assessment, which informed the present approach. The internal and foreign dangers that the UK confronts are divided into three levels in this evaluation, depending on the judgement of both likelihood and impact.

The 2015 Strategy Vs the 2010 strategy

The most noticeable distinction between the two strategies is that, whilst the NSS and SDSR were two independent papers in 2010, they were integrated in 2015. This shows that, compared to 2010, there is a stronger connection between the NSS's overarching strategy framework and the more policy- and capability-oriented SDSR. In terms of risk assessments, there are significant parallels between the 2010 and 2015 strategy documents. Given that they were published only five years apart, it would be astonishing if there were none. The 2015 NSRA, on the other hand, features a bigger number of Tier One and Tier Two risks than the 2010 version.[3]

In particular, the 2015 NSRA grants non-state players in international armed conflict more weight in Tier One and adds a brand-new category: 'instability overseas'. This heading can be found in Tier Two in 2010. Furthermore, two Tier One risks, 'public health' and 'major natural hazards', which were grouped in the 2010 NSRA, have been granted their own category in the 2015 version. Furthermore, the 2015 edition contains more Tier Two threats than the 2010 edition. There has

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[3] "National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015 a Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom" (2015), *Open Government* License, Cm 9161. November. Available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/478933/52309_Cm_9161_NSS_SD_Review_web_only.pdf.

been no change in Tier Three risks between 2010 and 2015. Neither the 2010 nor the 2015 risk assessments use the word 'climate change' in their three Tiers.[4]

Comparative Analysis of the 2015 UK Strategy

Long has the debate raged about what a strategy is 'for', who should be implementing it, and what it should look like. Rather than rehashing such issues in this briefing, we will look at the many methods that may be followed when developing a national security policy by comparing the 2015 UK strategy paper to two other key strategy documents issued in the previous year or so:

1. Global Strategic Trends - The UK Ministry of Defence (June 2014)
2. The National Security Strategy of the USA (February 2015)

We also evaluate how the three papers deal with the 'threats and possibilities' provided by two major countries: Russia and China. There is universal consensus in security and intelligence circles that Russia and China are substantial dangers to the national security of Western nations, including the United Kingdom. However, there is less agreement on the magnitude of the threat they pose. Some people are concerned that, although the UK is right to be wary about Russia, it is now overly eager to give China the benefit of the doubt.

Global Strategic Trends when compared with the 2015 UK strategy

The two papers are plainly distinct in terms of context and aim. The second, unlike the first, is an official policy paper. Simultaneously, it would be a mistake to dismiss them as unrelated. Global Strategic Trends was an essential input to the policy-making procedure that led to the UK's 2015 strategy. In addition to methodology, Global Strategic Trends has more to say than the 2015 UK strategy. Climate change is one topic where the two texts have a lot of overlap; it is mentioned frequently as a risk factor in both, but it is not given the spotlight in either. Both papers are dismal in tone while avoiding any suggestion that Russia is doomed to be a menace. The focus on China is overwhelmingly positive. For example, the question of Chinese engagement in the construction

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[4] Ibid

and operation of the United Kingdom's essential national infrastructure is not addressed in Global Strategic Trends.

China is briefly mentioned as a security issue in the 2015 UK policy paper in reference to its potential involvement in the construction of the new Hinkley Point C nuclear power station, but it is quickly followed by assurances that necessary measures have been taken to minimise the risk. When discussing cybersecurity risks, Global Strategic Trends makes no mention of China. In the 2015 UK policy paper,[5] China and cybersecurity are addressed only in the same line, but merely to emphasise the strengthening of bilateral cybersecurity collaboration. There is no mention of the consequences of prospective political or security problems in China during this time period in either text. The term 'Tibet' is absent from both documents; Xinjiang is mentioned in Global Strategic Trends, but solely in relation to Uighur terrorism.

The 2015 UK strategy and the 2015 United States National Security Strategy

The US government, like the UK, releases a National Security Strategy every five years. While there are some parallels between their 2015 tactics, there are also some significant disparities. Overall, the 2015 UK strategy paper is far more detailed than its American equivalent, and the broad strategic framework is connected to a variety of policies and capabilities inside it. Unlike the UK plan, the US equivalent prioritises 'national interests' which it has maintained since its inception in 2010. Eight 'major strategic dangers' to the country's interests are also identified in the US plan. While the 2015 US and UK plans have a lot in common in terms of the dangers they identify, the latter goes into deeper detail by defining three risk levels.

Other differences exist as well. For instance, contrary to the UK plan, the US strategy does not explicitly identify cyber as a 'top risk' but it does cite climate change as a 'top risk', even though the UK document does not use the term in any of its three categories. In terms of Russia, the UK plan and the US plan from 2015 have a lot in common. Both portray the country as a significant security threat. The tone of the US policy on China is less abrasive than it is on Russia, but it is

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[5] Ibid

still a lot more abrasive than the UK plan. The US commitment to safeguarding its existing position as the world's sole superpower– a status that only China is expected to harm in the years ahead– has been proposed as an explanation for the seeming difference between the UK and US agendas on China. It has been stated that the United Kingdom is in a 'different strategic posture' since it is engaged primarily with expanding economic connections with China. However, some experts believe that if ties between the US and China worsen significantly, the UK may be forced to make difficult decisions in the future.

Detailed Analysis

The SDSR appears to be more of a re-calibration of the prognosis from 2010 than a complete reversal. Terrorism, the rise of state-based threats, cyber security and the disintegration of the rules-based international order are the analogous four priorities. While there is some overlap with 2010, these goals indicate important fundamental shifts in the British government's approach to international security. As a first step, the UK's capacity to defend its own borders and oceans has been elevated in terms of priority in the defence plan. The UK government has announced its intention to replace the Nimrod aerial surveillance fleet with nine new Boeing P-8 maritime patrol planes, five years after the contentious dismantling of the Nimrod fleet. This is a clear indication that the existing scenario, which necessitates surveillance support from Canada, the United States and France in the search for Russian submarines in the North Sea, cannot continue. This return to self-reliance contrasts with concerns that the UK would become increasingly reliant on NATO or allies for specific duties, resulting in a further dilution of the UK's international power.[6]

Additionally, this decision is a continuation of the government's readiness to sever relations with national defence companies, which began in 2010. Purchasing 'off-the-shelf' Boeing P-8s from an American manufacturer rather than bespoke British-built designs (the MRA4 Nimrod) could be a step in the right direction for those who believe that defence strategy should be slightly more focused on quantity rather than the very best technology at any price. While the SDSR of 2010 was based on the concept of asymmetric warfare against non-state actors, such as foreign or

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[6] INTINS87 (2015). "Analysis of SDSR 2015*." International Insecurity.* November 30. Available at https://internationalinsecurity.wordpress.com/2015/11/30/analysis-of-sdsr-2015/.

domestic terror organisations or 'lone wolves', the new assessment underlines Russia's recent activities as a cause for worry. It is apparent that a resurgent Russia poses a threat to the UK and NATO's security because of its 'aggressive, authoritarian, and nationalist' behaviour, which culminated in the "illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014".

There is, however, recognition of Russia's P-5 membership and the necessity to collaborate with them to address global security concerns. Finally, the procurement of 138 F-35 Lightning fighter jets throughout the life of the programme reflects a renewed determination to project strength overseas, which will be reflected in the two new carriers expected to be completed by 2025. With the establishment of two 'strike brigades' (despite being formed out of current soldiers and not being put into action for at least 10 years), the SDSR 2015 looks to symbolise a less insular approach paired with a greater passion for fostering international stability. This is evidenced by repeated allusions to UK soldiers' capacity to maintain security, hence enabling stability and, as a result, prosperity across the world.

Conclusion

Therefore, while the SDSR 2015, arguably, falls short of providing a coherent defence strategy, implying that all eventualities be considered and catered for, the additional money pledged has allowed for a shift in strategy: less reliant on external support, less insular, more aware of the possibility of interstate warfare, and more prepared to act to promote global stability and prosperity.

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