April 2026

DEFENCE AND NATIONAL SECURITY:
FIXING THE MACHINE

Martin Howard, Tom McKane and Trevor Woolley

Policy Exchange

About the Authors

Martin Howard, Tom McKane and Trevor Woolley are former senior Ministry of Defence officials with experience of working in other national security departments, including the Cabinet Office.

Policy Exchange is the UK's leading think tank. We are an independent, non-partisan educational charity whose mission is to develop and promote new policy ideas that will deliver better public services, a stronger society and a more dynamic economy.

Policy Exchange is committed to an evidence-based approach to policy development and retains copyright and full editorial control over all its written research. We work in partnership with academics and other experts and commission major studies involving thorough empirical research of alternative policy outcomes. We believe that the policy experience of other countries offers important lessons for government in the UK. We also believe that government has much to learn from business and the voluntary sector.

Registered charity no: 1096300.

Abstract

Despite the ambitions set out in the Strategic Defence Review (SDR) and National Security Strategy, the Government has not so far succeeded in making national security and defence the "fundamental organising principle of government" (the Prime Minister's Introduction to the Strategic Defence Review). Nor has it mobilised "every element of society towards a collective national effort" (the Prime Minister's Foreword to the National Security Strategy). There has been little sustained effort to explain the challenges posed by a dangerous and unpredictable geo-strategic environment, the risks entailed and the difficult choices involved. Improvements to national security do not feature in the missions listed in the Government's 'Plan for Change'. There is little sign of Ministers ensuring that the national security policy-making machine can manage an unprecedented combination of short, medium and long-term challenges. Our judgement is that this machine is not doing what is necessary and, as a result, little or no progress seems to be being made on important initiatives such as:

- developing a National Defence Plan;
- re-introducing a modern version of national war planning;
- updating nuclear deterrence declaratory policy;
- building non-military national security capabilities;
- getting the balance right between national security and defence and military planning; between the roles of government, industry and civil society; and between central authority and regional responsibility.
- creating a civil and homeland defence apparatus suited to today's world.

We do not advocate wholesale restructuring. The key is to make better use of existing central machinery led by the National Security Adviser/National Security Council construct. Despite its flaws, the new Defence Operating Model can work, provided full use is made of the considerable policy making and delivery expertise that exists in the MOD.

There may be a case for dedicated units to look at particularly pressing issues, like establishing a national defence plan, assessing non-military national security

capabilities (including who owns them) and critical defence capability areas such as drone warfare and acquisition.

But the biggest gap is in explaining why all this is needed. Despite the Prime Minister's speech at the Munich Security Conference, as the House of Commons Defence Committee's November 2025 report on the UK contribution to European security pointed out, the national conversation about defence and national security that the SDR was intended to spark has not yet started. It needs to do so urgently.

The challenge

The Strategic Defence Review (SDR) stated "For the first time since the end of the Cold War, the UK faces multiple, direct threats to its security, prosperity, and democratic values." A rough list of the threats and challenges that face us today might look like this:

- Managing and trying to resolve a conventional war in Europe in which the UK and NATO are in effect underwriting one side.
- Escalating grey zone/hybrid conflict in Europe.
- Diminishing US commitment to European security partly by long term design but also made worse by an erratic and unpredictable American approach to foreign affairs and defence. This includes increasing uncertainty about the US nuclear guarantee with implications for UK and wider European nuclear capability and doctrine.
- Managing the consequences for Europe of conflict and instability in the Middle East and East Asia.
- Rebuilding UK defence capability after the SDR and finding the resources to do this.
- Transforming wider UK resilience and systematising planning for major military conflict and other whole of society risks.
- Achieving and maintaining a technological edge over hostile state and non-state actors.

- Securing the support of citizens through a sustained rather than episodic communications strategy.
- Contributing effectively to a renaissance in European defence capabilities, including the nuclear contribution provided by France and the UK.

There may be other versions of this agenda but one challenge is finding the policy bandwidth, not only to tackle the traditional tension between day-to-day crisis management and long-term planning but also to manage issues that have a medium-term (i.e. one to three years) timescale. This puts more strain on a policy and governance structure that has historically not coped well with the more common short-term/long-term stresses.

Saying it like it is: strategic communications

We strongly support the Prime Minister's assertion that we must "mobilise every element of society towards a collective national effort" to build security and resilience. To achieve that, citizens have to understand what is needed and why. In our view, in spite of the welcome publication of the government's Resilience Action Plan, the strategic communications necessary to make that happen are largely absent. The SDR made a few headlines but it has not started the national conversation about defence and security that Lord Robertson (the SDR's lead author) rightly saw as essential. The National Security Strategy passed off virtually unnoticed. Major speeches by the Prime Minister refer only occasionally to the national security challenge. The imperative of higher defence expenditure features, if at all, as an afterthought when presenting the fiscal problems faced by the Government. In our view a number of hard-hitting messages need to be addressed to the public in a frank and sustained manner:

- The risk of the UK being involved in a shooting war in Europe is higher than it has been for decades. The risk of nuclear conflict has also risen.
- Russia is already conducting grey zone/hybrid attacks against the UK and our allies. This is likely to increase with unpredictable consequences for national security and the wellbeing of citizens.
- The United States has made clear that Europe must do more to provide for its own defence.

- Successive governments have underinvested in defence and resilience. Changing that will take time and money. That means spending less on other things or raising taxes.
- National security is not just a matter for the military. Central government, the security agencies, law enforcement, regional authorities, industry, civil society and individual citizens all need to play their part.

None of these points are surprising and many eminent academics and commentators have made them. But the government has largely been silent, apart from a few equipment announcements and low-key statements from junior ministers. With the exception of the Chief of the Defence Staff's recent interventions, notably in a joint newspaper article with his German counterpart, in contrast to some allies, particularly those in central and eastern Europe, there is no sign of any systematic attempt to explain what whole-of-society national security means for ordinary people and communities, including the sacrifices that may have to be made. This needs to change.

Policy making structures: central government

After the end of the Cold War cohesive and detailed cross-Whitehall national defence planning faded away. Since the creation of the National Security Council (NSC), there has been a large expansion of the National Security Staff under the direction of the National Security Adviser. Despite this, however, we have no sense that the NSC is leading the whole of government response to the challenges outlined above which we believe to be essential. The foreign policy and defence agenda and the domestic agenda are insufficiently linked, thereby creating a potential gap between defence and security and national resilience – a point that the Prime Minister acknowledged in his foreword to the National Security Strategy, where he wrote that "delivering my Plan for Change requires us to bring foreign and domestic policy together". The government needs to make this happen.

A model for a more cohesive approach was the response to the terror attacks on 9/11 and (particularly) in London in July 2005 that prompted a major retooling of whole swathes of the national counter-terrorism apparatus across government departments and the intelligence agencies under an overarching CONTEST

strategy. In the aftermath of the pandemic, many called for a similar approach to dealing with whole of society threats, the rising risk of state-on-state war and the reality of grey zone conflict. Yet, as far as we can tell, these calls have mostly not been acted upon. In giving evidence to the House of Commons Defence Committee on 12th January this year the Chief of the Defence Staff referred to "a wider piece of work run by the Cabinet Office about developing our national defence plan and structure", but Ministers have largely been silent about these matters. So, what needs to be done?

An obvious place to start would be the National Security Council and the National Security Secretariat headed by the National Security Adviser. The creation of the NSC and the NSA in 2010 was a good initiative. It was arguably too short term in its outlook and, under the Johnson and Truss administrations, fell into disrepair. But it is now a central part of the government's security architecture with Jonathan Powell as NSA. However, viewed from outside, the system (the NSA/NSC/NSS construct) remains excessively focused on the here and now, with the NSA acting more as the Prime Minister's foreign policy adviser rather than directing a truly integrated national security agenda. The appointment of a Permanent Secretary deputy to Powell may help. But there are already two Deputy NSAs, so we are in danger of ending up with too many chiefs rather than boosting the national security engine room with mid-level expertise and adjusting the NSC/NSA charter to take a more directive and executive role in hardening national security and resilience.

A key gap in the UK national security architecture is the lack of a capacity to combine policy making with a strategic planning function for policy delivery. In Whitehall, the only department that really has this (metaphorically) under one roof is the MOD, though arguably the Homeland Security Group (formerly the Office of Security and Counter Terrorism (OSCT)) in the Home Office also fulfils this function. Could these entities help catalyse efforts by the NSA/NSC to put meat on the bones of the Prime Minister's ambition to make defence and security "the fundamental organising principle of government" through pragmatic cross-departmental sharing of planning resources? The MOD would for example be able to help with the masses of detailed planning needed to meet the requirement for HMG to reintroduce a modified version of war planning as practised (and coordinated with NATO) in the 1970s and 1980s. It could also help to plan and conduct exercises to test new arrangements.

There may also be a case for setting up dedicated expert units to tackle particular issues that need urgent focused attention as was done for AI security and the Covid vaccine roll out. These are not the only examples. Similar thinking led to the formation of the Joint Terrorism Assessment Centre (JTAC) in 2003 post 9/11. Topics that might need such an approach (some of which have already been mentioned) could include:

- getting a national defence plan agreed and in place.
- training and awareness building for leaders who will have national security responsibilities in times of crisis and war.
- drone warfare, including capabilities, acquisition, doctrine and counter measures.

However, some of the most important topics will not be susceptible to this highly focused approach. The reintroduction of effective war planning for example, will require strong central leadership, but it will also involve many central, regional and international authorities (including NATO). Similarly, legislation will be required to give the Government the powers to direct industry and society to take the necessary measures to put the country onto a wartime footing when conditions demand this. A Defence Readiness Bill has been promised but its scope and timetable remain unannounced.

Policy making structures – MOD

The MOD has been through innumerable reorganisations since it was unified in 1964, and is currently embarked on another, billed in the SDR as the most significant for 50 years. Our experience is that reorganisation absorbs immense amounts of senior staff time which, arguably, could be better devoted to meeting the strategic challenges described above. Nor is it clear, in the absence of any detailed publication about the reorganisation, precisely what it entails or is designed to achieve. It is essential, however, that any changes should have at their core the need to help deliver for the Government the enhanced central national security and planning capability described above. This requires professional staff who can offer actionable, detailed and rounded advice that allows effective decision making at Ministerial and other levels. There is a substantial policy

making capacity inside the MOD that complements and underpins the delivery of military capability. It needs to be utilised to the full.

Conclusion

We are not the only people speaking out on these issues. A recent report by the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy is a case in point. The Chief of Defence Staff has spoken about a whole of society response to security challenges. But apart from a few equipment announcements and the need to respond publicly to current events, such as the international turmoil caused by US actions in relation to Venezuela and Greenland and the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, Ministers have largely been silent on this bigger strategic picture.

We have not pulled our punches in this paper. But we are not recommending going back to the future (though there are lessons from past practice). Nor do we recommend a wholesale restructuring of national security and defence structures; despite its flaws, the machinery in place can work. It includes a lot of excellent, highly professional people in and out of uniform who, if properly led and tasked by Ministers can help deliver an essential step change in the UK's preparedness for crisis and war as promised in the SDR and the National Security Strategy; and an equally important transformation in strategic communications.