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Building a National Security Architecture for the Twenty-first century

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I was very pleased to be invited by Demos to give this annual lecture on building a National Security Architecture for the Twenty-first century. I intend to discuss the changing security environment and what this implies for the UK's security strategy and security structures. I do so as a former Civil Servant with involvement in these issues in a number of departments, principally the Ministry of Defence and the Cabinet Office. It is perhaps relevant that in some ways the most dramatic COBR meeting I ever attended was on 11 September 2001 as Permanent Secretary of then Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, which was probably not then generally seen as a security department.

I should also say that what I am not going to offer is a preview of the Government's forthcoming national security strategy of which I have no visibility; more generally, what follows are entirely personal views.

As it has turned out, the timing of this lecture has followed on from the publication of Demos' own report on some of the issues involved. There is I believe, much interest in the Demos report including the emphasis on the test of public value and the support for systems thinking. And my remarks this evening are not intended as a response to the Demos report. This said, the headline version of the report's main conclusions had two main themes—that the British Government lacks a clear and coherent view of the nature and priority of the risks to the UK and that our national security architecture is flawed in design and has hardly changed from the Cold War model. For reasons I shall explain, I believe neither of these propositions to be the case.

I want myself to develop a somewhat different line of argument that:

- what we might term the international security environment has developed broadly in line with our post Cold-War assumptions;
- international terrorism represents a growing threat but we should frame our response and how it is communicated in ways which weaken rather than enhance the terrorist's message;
- more "conventional" security threats need to be considered as part of a wider range of risks, some of which are as or more compelling;

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- the UK Government is addressing this broader range of risks but the priority accorded to each risk, and priorities between them, are not necessarily clearly articulated;
- in terms of organisational structures, there have been significant changes in “front-line” security structures and at “Whitehall” level; there are no organisational magic solutions waiting to be discovered and applied;
- arguments over institutional structures can be a substitute for recognition of the sheer complexity and difficulty of some of the issues, particularly as they arise in a political environment;
- in handling today’s and tomorrow’s risks, weight needs to be given to prevention alongside mitigation and response; the domestic and the international dimensions are intertwined; these are not just problems for Government but require much wider engagement.

The Security Environment

Some ten years ago I was engaged with others in the then incoming Labour Government’s “foreign-policy-led” Strategic Defence Review. The “foreign-policy-led” tag was possibly to head-off the alternative of a “Treasury-led” review. Being foreign-policy-led proved rather hard - I want to return to this in a moment - but the assessment made then of the broad security environment is relevant to our purpose (as well as to topical debates about defence expenditure which I do not intend to venture into). How does, what has occurred and what is in prospect compare with what was envisaged then?

Of course the fine-grained detail at the level of the nation-state has varied in many interesting ways in terms, for example, of the economic, political and security evolutions of say Russia and China. While we certainly recognised the importance of new risks threatening our security and way of life including the terrorist threat, I would not claim to have understood the potential of al- Qaeda nor indeed could have guessed at how that threat would develop. And, while we recognised the risk from failed and rogue states, I would not myself have predicted that UK forces would be simultaneously deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq.

But, at the most fundamental strategic level, the Review recognised that “the collapse of Communism and the emergence of democratic states throughout Eastern Europe and Russia, means that there is today no direct military threat to the United Kingdom or Western Europe. Nor do we foresee the re-emergence of such a threat”. While there has perhaps been a mixed picture in the evolution of Eastern Europe and Russia since, the fundamental conclusion remains the same.

This position is, of course, very unusual in our history. Perhaps it is only me that finds it odd it is less-remarked on- indeed there is often a reverse point made that contrasts almost nostalgically the so-called certainties of the Cold War period with uncertainty and instability now. This is to forget what it is like living with the albeit-remote possibility of nation-threatening war and to ignore the reality of super-power proxy wars and other conflicts during the Cold War itself.

The important strategic and policy conclusions to be drawn are not, of course, that the re-emergence over time of a strategic security threat is impossible to envisage but that it should be one of the most important goals of our international policy to sustain the conditions that have removed it. We should also note that a difficult challenge for our defence policy and defence planning is to judge the scale and types of insurance to be sustained against this remote risk.

As to the international terrorist threat, the balance sheet in relation to al-Qaeda is I suggest a mixed one. It is in some ways remarkable that the al-Qaeda top leadership remains at large, if operating under severe operational constraints. The organisation has morphed into a small core and a series of franchises, notably in Iraq and more recently in al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, whose actions we have seen to disgusting effect in the last few days. Alongside its original mix of followers, al-Qaeda has attracted new support from the citizens of Western countries.

This “home-grown” threat with links to the al-Qaeda core poses a very difficult and growing challenge, capable of highly-damaging attacks against people and infrastructure. But, at a more strategic level, the reality is that al-Qaeda has made little or no progress in the pursuit of its fundamental aims. It has been losing ground in Iraq and has had limited success in attacks in Western countries. Although it has certainly generated huge costs for those countries seeking to contain the threat it poses, nowhere has this proved unsustainable.

Perhaps most remarkably given the constraints it operates under, this is an organisation that has been very effective in defining a core narrative, getting its message across, and being taken at its own estimation. It has perhaps been significantly aided in this by the way in which Western countries have pursued and presented their counter-terrorist effort against what we have ourselves chosen, for example, to designate as a “ global” threat.

As Louise Richardson has pointed out in her book “What Terrorists Want”, their motivations are “revenge, renown and reaction”. Our goals in countering them should be to minimise the renown and as far as possible to formulate our reaction in ways which weaken rather than reinforce their ideology and support. This is, of course, a lot easier to say than to do. In

democratic societies, an important challenge for Governments is to mobilise the support of their citizens particularly at a time of danger and perhaps this rather than the wider impact can dominate in the framing of the message.

Future Security Challenges

Against this background and in thinking more broadly about future risks, we could spend much time on that which falls clearly into a basket marked “security” and which are confidently part only of a broader cluster labelled “overseas, development and security.” (This consideration can be seen in the decision to title the relevant overarching Cabinet Committee: “National Security, International Relations and Development”). Fun though this can be, I doubt it would be difficult to agree a widely-shared list on a broad definition which might include the following, ordered from the more global, to the more narrow:

- the potential impact of global economic change and how this may translate into a new distribution of diplomatic influence and military weight; obviously this raises important issues about both relations between states and the fitness for purpose of international institutions, many of which reflect a sixty-year old settlement;
- tackling global poverty, both on moral grounds in relation to those affected and because of the potential wider impacts of, for example, population movements;
- the impact of climate change and the likelihood or unlikelihood of the international community agreeing a sustainable approach to tackling this;
- the risk of a global flu pandemic;
- issues around energy security including potential economic and political consequences in terms of the leverage of energy suppliers;
- how the international community should tackle the problem of “failing”, “failed” and “rogue” states (and on whose definition) and the role of the UK in this;
- the risks arising from the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction both at the state and sub-state levels;
- the related but broader threat from international terrorism;
- the problem of serious and organised crime;
- and, lastly, more micro hazards and threats that the state needs to tackle.

Now it is obviously possible to think about and order such a list in a number of ways, in terms for example of: short versus more longer-term; direct impact on the UK versus more broader issues of our values and ideas of our role in the world; and issues which are potentially life-threatening and

others which are less tangible. Another way of looking at this would be to contrast working from the global inwards or perhaps “downwards” or starting with the concerns of the individual citizen and working outwards from there.

The first may be the natural frame of reference of the “Whitehall “policy maker; but the second is perhaps more relevant to a citizen-centric approach to security. What seems indisputable is that, while the list is long, none of the items on it could readily be ignored or not regarded as a priority.

Unsurprisingly, each of the issues listed is being actively addressed within the British Government in terms of both the likelihood of the risk arising and appropriate policy responses. Given the diversity of the issues, it seems to me inevitable that they have to be addressed by a combination of integrating and prioritising organisations at the Centre (No.10/Cabinet Office, FCO, Treasury) and lead departments. The difficult issues arise in how far lead departments can perform a cross-Whitehall function on complex issues such as climate change or counter-terrorism and on the weight of integrating and prioritising effort needed at the Centre.

The Government’s priorities

The Government has, of course, a range of strategies in these areas: on foreign policy, defence, international development, counter-terrorism, etc. What are less clearly articulated are the linkages and priorities between areas.

Can we see a pattern of priority setting between departments and is its logic transparent? One way into these issues would be through the pattern of public expenditure. This is of interest potentially at a number of levels. Following the then Chancellor’s speech to the Royal United Services Institution, effort was put into assessing the scale of “national security” expenditure, which was defined as covering the work of the Intelligence Agencies and the counter-terrorism effort of departments and those organisations (e.g., the Police) that they fund. This shows a pattern of considerable growth since 9/11 until now and plans for the next public expenditure period. In their recent report, Demos drew up a snap-shot of broader security -related expenditure for a single year covering FCO, Department for International Development (DFID), Defence, Home Office, and the Agencies. Of interest also is how expenditure has evolved over time.

This is not a simple task to work out because there is no agreed definition of security-related expenditure for which the Treasury provides a functional breakdown. I have not sought myself to look at this comprehensively, including identifying the security-related sub-components of expenditure in departments such as Transport or DEFRA. But looking at the departments

with a clear international or security role, which I took somewhat arbitrarily to be FCO, DFID, Defence, Home Office/Justice, and the Intelligence Agencies, a reasonably clear pattern emerges. If one compares 2010/11 with 2001/2 (chosen because of the ready availability of expenditure figures on a consistent Resource Accounting basis), in headline terms:

- overseas and security-related expenditure will have grown significantly more slowly than public expenditure as a whole;
- provision for international development has grown and is planned to grow very rapidly reflecting the Government's commitment to poverty alleviation; this commitment is measured in part against progress towards achieving the UN goal of spending 0.7% of Gross National Income on Official Development Assistance;
- the second beneficiaries are the Intelligence Agencies reflecting the value placed on their contribution in counter-terrorism in particular;
- Defence has had and is planned to have modest increases in provision along with the Home Office/Justice cluster;
- perhaps amongst other reasons because much of its expenditure is on administration which the Government has been seeking to contain, FCO provision has had much the smallest growth in provision on a nominal basis.

This outcome is, of course, now set until 2010/11. Moreover, looking to the next Public Spending round, the ratchet upwards of provision for international development is likely again to be a dominant feature if the Government then in power continues to support a UN/EU goal expressed in terms of percentage of Gross National Income. Life in these terms is likely to remain difficult for Defence because its expenditure dominates the international and security category so more resources here can not readily be achieved through reallocation from within the same functional area but, instead, the competition is with domestic priorities.

The important challenge going forward will be to integrate effectively the contributions of departments to joint "campaigns" whether in tackling climate change, preventing or handling conflict, or countering terrorism, on which new style "Public Service Agreements" have been introduced with considerable central impetus behind making them a success. It would perhaps not be revealing a great secret to add that the rest of Whitehall, particularly in the international sphere, has looked on enviously as extra resources have been allocated to DFID in successive Spending Reviews and wondered if this represented the best use of scarce resources. A further challenge going forward will be how to lever DFID's resources to maximum effect while fulfilling its poverty objective: it may perhaps be significant

that two of its Departmental Strategic Objectives relate clearly to wider Government objectives on climate change and conflict prevention.

I might note in passing, and with some caution with the prospective biases of a former Civil Servant, a different potential resource concern about the weight of analytical and policy-making effort available for security issues. As the administrative and broader budgets of MOD and the FCO come under pressure, there is a risk that their contributions to wider Government effort on security issues and intelligence will be squeezed at the same time as Government is investing more elsewhere in related fields. It is striking in this regard to see how the Government's commitment to the creation of the Office of Security and Counter-terrorism has been accompanied by such substantial increases in staff effort compared with the situation say one year ago. A coherent approach requires strategy and policy development capability in Whitehall as well as more front-line effort, which does not necessarily fit within the standard narrative about "good" and "bad" types of expenditure.

Strategy and policy challenges

What are some of the more strategic challenges which need to be addressed going forward? I might pick out three areas: issues around the handling of failing states or those at risk from insurgency, the Government's counter-terrorism strategy, and the handling of civil emergencies, and then pull out some common themes.

I do not intend to discuss the merits of the Government's decisions to intervene militarily in Afghanistan and Iraq. But the experiences of the UK, the USA and other partners in these and other interventions since the end of the Cold War – many of which we should keep in mind took place in the 1990s- has spawned a growing literature inside and outside Government on the lessons to be learned. I might encapsulate these as being about understanding the context for intervention, the why and when, the coherence of intervention effort, and what one might term 'expectations management'.

First then, I would argue that we need to recognise the importance of improving our understanding of those countries and their societies that we are seeking to influence through intervention. In democratic societies, public support has to be mobilised, requiring clear and relatively simple narratives. Problems are aggregated together and patterns imposed on events and societies. But the real world is complex and we need to find ways of reflecting that complexity and retaining and bringing to bear expertise whether of a geographical or functional kind in the decision-making process. It is, of course, not simply a question of having the expertise- those responsible for decision-making must also want to draw on it, which can be a separate challenge. Complexity makes clear decisions harder and the

experts may be cautious and conventional in approach. But lack of depth of knowledge brings its own risks. I would add the obvious point that this is not simply a recent issue. More generally, in security as elsewhere, we seem to re-learn too often old lessons, suggesting weaknesses in corporate memory.

The “why and the when” of intervention has been much debated post-Iraq, often around labels and score-settling between “neo-cons”, “liberal interventionists”, “realists” or whatever. While the generally accepted starting point would be that the absolute doctrine of the sovereign inviolability of the nation state can not hold in all circumstances, this then leads us on to a series of awkward questions around what level of human rights or other abuse justifies intervention and how is it to be sanctioned? And in what circumstances should the UK itself become engaged? As an example, the Strategic Defence Review struggled to find foreign-policy-led approaches translatable into a guide for action. The SDR White Paper, having rehearsed our European, non-European and other interests in three paragraphs, concluded:

“Our national security and prosperity thus depend on promoting international stability, freedom and economic development. As a Permanent Member of the UN Security Council and as a country both willing and able to play a leading role internationally we have a responsibility to act as a force for good in the world”

The next sentence then- perhaps recognising the open-ended nature of what has gone before- says:

“We do not aspire to be a world policeman; many of our important national interests and responsibilities are shared with others, particularly our partners and Allies in the European Union and NATO”

So there in a sense is the British dilemma encapsulated: we want to be a force for good; at the same time, we do not aspire to be a world policeman.

The previous Prime Minister set out a much more extended and thoughtful exposition around these issues in his “Chicago” speech, which has been much commented on in recent months in reviews of his years in power. In this speech, he posed five major questions when deciding when and whether to intervene: are we sure of our case, have we exhausted all diplomatic options, are there military operations we can sensibly and prudently undertake, are we prepared for the long term, and, finally, do we have national interests involved?

In a way this list perhaps brings us to the third issue I want to touch on around the nature and coherence of intervention. Re-reading old discussions

around these issues, there is a sense- which may be unfair and oversimplified on my part- of a largely two- pronged approach with the question being when the diplomatic process gives way to the military lever. What the military instrument can itself contribute and how it can most fruitfully be deployed in what Rupert Smith has described as “War Amongst the People” is itself a fascinating issue. But there is a broader point still about the comprehensive nature of the challenge of nation building which has perhaps come home to us most clearly as a result of experience in Afghanistan and Iraq in the last six years.

A recent RAND study helpfully enumerated a rough hierarchy of nation-building functions with six elements in order of priority in tackling them:

- Security;
- Humanitarian and relief efforts;
- Governance;
- Economic stabilisation;
- Democratisation;
- And, Development and infrastructure.

What we have learned or relearned in Iraq and Afghanistan is the challenge of operating in societies with weak governance where the Government’s writ may not run much beyond the capital if there, with Armed forces of limited capability, where the police are usually corrupt, the administration of justice problematical, with widespread economic problems, and so on.

The compelling requirement is for an integrated civilian-military approach. The obstacles are clear including the problem of finding and deploying civilian experts in what are effectively war zones. An insight into some of the challenges in a US context can be found in the excellent book “Imperial Life in the Emerald City”. And certainly in the UK’s case there can be other more administrative obstacles too: there often seems an iron law within government that quite marginal sums of money for operational purposes are very difficult to find.

Inevitably, these challenges have brought with them issues around exaggerated expectations over what can be achieved and over what timeframe. The reality in counter-insurgency is of a long haul and the underlying question is whether electorates in modern democratic states have the patience that may be required. A big effort in communication is needed to show- which is I believe not difficult- how what happens in Afghanistan has direct implications for our interests as UK citizens.

This is not, however, intended in any way as a counsel of despair. The recently announced outcome of the Afghanistan Review in the UK shows

the priority being given to these issues, including through very close working between No 10/cabinet Office, FCO, MOD, and DFID with a strong Ministerial lead.

How, secondly, do we stand in tackling the international terrorist threat? At an organisational level, the investment of substantial additional resources, including at senior levels, in the Office of Security and Counter-Terrorism in the Home Office, the inter-departmental Research, Information and Communications Unit also based within the Home Office, and in the Department of Communities, will over time strengthen our capacity at central Government level to tackle the international terrorist threat. The Centre will continue too to play a key role through my successor as the Prime Minister's security adviser and his links with opposite numbers overseas. Other elements of joint capability, particularly the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre, have bedded down very well and built effective international links.

The government has committed further additional resources to the work of the Intelligence Agencies and the Police and to efforts to improve community engagement in a number of dimensions. New organisational structures have been introduced including an enhanced regional structure for the Security Service; and my own contacts with opposite numbers and others overseas showed wide admiration for the quality and commitment of the various UK players and their unusually strong habits of co-operation.

The UK Government published its counter-terrorism strategy in July 2006. This was intended to be low key and in that was certainly successful. Inevitably the alleged airline bomb plot and its aftermath raised the stakes and work on its implications provided a new focus. How well has that document stood the test of time when White Papers can frankly start gathering dust within days or weeks?

This is not the place to go into detail. But my judgement would be that the broad aim of our counter-terrorist policy and a framework built around four "Ps"- Prevent, Pursue, Protect, and Prepare- should and will stand the test of time, both because they capture the essential elements of such a policy and importantly because they are reasonably well-understood across the broad community of players engaged in our effort at a number of levels in a number of places.

But this is not to suggest that further development is not necessary or desirable. One of the noticeable features of the published strategy is that it has relatively little to say about the contribution of our defence effort and the link between the international dimension of weakening and if possible eliminating al-Qaeda core and denying it safe space elsewhere, and the more direct threat to the UK. This is an important part of the narrative, which may

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have been underplayed because of the desire not to give too “kinetic” a flavour to the strategy as a whole and perhaps because of the difficulty in this context at the time in handling the impact of the Iraq campaign on the counter-terrorist threat. A complementary point would be the importance of bringing out even more centrally the role of prosecution in the Pursue strand of the strategy, particularly in relation to tackling the threat from UK citizens.

But the two main areas for further development concern developing a much better appreciation of the influences which lead to the radicalisation of individuals, how they can be countered and reversed at the levels of the individual and the community, and the related issue of the most effective forms of communication in countering radicalisation and terrorism nationally and internationally. There has already been much good work in these areas and more initiatives announced in recent months but they remain conceptually and practically very challenging.

The final area I want to touch on is the arrangements for tackling civil emergencies of all kinds. Here we have a clear example of just how much both philosophy and organisation have changed since the end of the Cold War and of the capacity of Government- often denied- to learn from events. To summarise briefly a complex story, the Cold War civil defence apparatus was dismantled in the 1990’s without recognising that a modern and effective capability for handling civil emergencies was still needed and that in some ways had become more pressing with economic change.

Three major emergencies in quick succession at the turn of the millennium exposed these weaknesses: unusually widespread flooding in 2000; fuel protests also in 2000, when the UK ran close to acute shortages of fuel supplies including those necessary to sustain essential services; and, shortly thereafter, the foot-and-mouth epidemic of 2001. All three showed weaknesses in governance at every level, including in the case of foot-and-mouth the failure to mobilise pan-Government effort quickly enough and to address economic and other impacts coherently. The fuel crisis showed the impact of “lean”, “just-in-time” supply chains and the implications for the resilience of a networked society.

Government and the authorities at all levels faced a similar triple challenge in quick succession this summer: the London and Glasgow attempted terrorist attacks; flooding on a much larger scale than in 2000; and a foot-and-mouth outbreak (followed by Bluetongue). Each had particular characteristics that helped shape the outcome, and direct comparisons with events in 2000/2001 are not, of course, possible. But it would I think be generally accepted that the emergency arrangements worked well and that lessons had clearly been learned and successfully applied.

Civil protection itself is about risk assessment and planning, taking action before an emergency to mitigate its possible effects, and responding in such a way that minimises the impact of the emergency on the public and speeds recovery from that impact. But the successful handling of a number of the risks described earlier will depend on how far companies, third sector organisations, and all of us as individual citizens are prepared to change our behaviour to help prevent some of these risks arising, and to accept the price in terms of appropriate regulation and sometimes cost to the consumer of effective mitigation of risk in a networked society. And each of us as citizens needs to be prepared to play our part when necessary in taking sensible preparatory measures and in helping others if an emergency materialises. The interim report of the Pitt review published yesterday brings out a number of these issues in relation to the impact of climate change and the risk of flooding.

In other words, these are not just problems for Government and the Government's role importantly is as much or more about prevention as about mitigation and response. Handling today's and tomorrow's risks therefore needs to engage the whole of the Government's strategic and policy-making effort and not simply those parts with a traditional security focus or responsibility for mitigating or responding to risks after they have crystallised. It has to join up national and international action. And success will depend on more effective communication of the range of risks we face and wider engagement of businesses, communities, and individuals in helping tackle them.

As work by Demos and others has shown, democratic Governments can struggle in handling issues that are long term and call for –potentially unpalatable- behaviour change by individual voters, because the pain is immediate and the gain intangible and likely to accrue to successors. The successful handling of some of these risks will require this too to be put to the test.

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