

Global Security Briefing – July 2018

Sustainable Security: Global Ideas for a Greater Britain

Paul Rogers

Summary

With the divisive process of leaving the European Union destabilising the UK's minority government and driving an obsession with redefining a global role for a "Great" Britain, the time is right for political parties of all persuasions to rethink the country's contribution to global security. This briefing seeks to lay out some politically realistic examples of short-term policy shifts and how these might be knit into a longer-term agenda for change.

Introduction

Oxford Research Group's work, especially in the [Sustainable Security Programme](#), contributes to the analysis of [Rethinking Security](#), which seeks an approach to security that is better suited to the complex problems now being faced globally. Many of these are rooted in the three drivers of socio-economic marginalisation, environmental limitations and a security outlook rooted in the privileging of military responses to security challenges. This kind of critical thinking seeks to work towards a more appropriate national security ethos over some years, but also faces the challenge of promoting new thinking in the short-term.

In the UK at present the considerable political uncertainty arising from the combination of controversy over negotiating a Brexit deal and the reality of a minority government means that the current government may not last the full five years to 2022. It may be forced to call a general election before the end of the year or it may seek to continue in minority under new leadership. In these circumstances it is a valuable exercise to explore how British political parties might fully or partially promote a different approach to security.

The case for change

For convenience it is helpful to take as a starting point the main points from the original [Rethinking Security discussion paper](#) (2016), starting with what is seen as the current outmoded but dominant narrative about what security means, whom it should benefit, and how it is achieved. That narrative:

1. **"privileges UK national security** as a supreme imperative to which the needs of others may be subordinated, rather than recognises security as a common right, to which all have equal claims;

2. aims to advance '**national interests**' defined by the political establishment, including corporate business interests and UK 'world power' status, and so dissociates the practice of security from the needs of people in their communities;
3. assumes a **short-term outlook** and presents **physical threats** as the main risks, largely overlooking **the long-term drivers of insecurity**; and
4. proposes to respond by **extending control** over the strategic environment, achieved principally through offensive military capabilities, a superpower alliance, and restrictions on civil liberties." (emphasis in the original in this and later quotations)

In spite of the many security problems of recent years, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria, there is little evidence of any fundamental rethinking, nor of much strategic emphasis on long-term problems such as marginalisation, climate change, resource scarcity or weapons proliferation, not least because of:

1. "The **dominance of the narrative by a small and exclusive group**, composed of a social elite, to the general exclusion of other voices;
2. the **disproportionate influence of business interests** on the policymaking process, particularly the preference shown to the arms industry;
3. **institutional inertia and political calculations** inclined to dismiss alternative approaches;
4. the **preference of values associated with hegemonic masculinity**, which reduces the discourse to a calculus of threats and coercive responses, at the expense of a comprehensive conversation about the social and ecological conditions of security; and
5. a discourse **abstracted from its real-life impacts**, as experienced by people around the world who are affected by the decisions of Western states."

The rethinking security paper goes on to propose four principles of security as practice:

1. "**Security as freedom.** Security may be understood as a shared freedom from fear and want, and the freedom to live in dignity. It implies social and ecological health rather than the absence of risk.
2. **Security as a common right.** A commitment to commonality is imperative; security should not, and usually cannot, be gained by one group of people at others' expense. Accordingly, security rests on solidarity rather than dominance – in standing with others rather than over them.
3. **Security as a patient practice.** Security grows or withers according to how inclusive and just society is, and how socially and ecologically responsible we are. It cannot be coerced into being.
4. **Security as a shared responsibility.** Security is a common responsibility; its challenges belong to all of us. The continuing deterioration of security worldwide testifies against entrusting our common well-being to a self-selected group of powerful states."

For the Rethinking Security group the priorities to be addressed follow on from earlier studies, not least by Oxford Research Group's seminal 2006 paper, [Global Responses to Global Threats: Sustainable Security for the 21st Century](#), with its emphasis on inequality and progressive marginalisation, climate disruption and militarism, the latter so often leading to the early recourse to military intervention.

Instead of the current security paradigm, what should instead be proposed is a progressive change to far greater concentration in addressing these underlying drivers of conflict. However, this leads on to the key question: is it actually possible to address such a radical change in policy within the confines of a short and intense period such as a general election campaign or change of leadership?

Some home truths

The problem goes further than this in that within the United Kingdom there remains a national narrative based on an enduring cultural belief in great power status, with emphasis on the "great". This may well be anachronistic over half-a-century after the end of empire but the use of military power is still taken to be the primary means of holding on to that lost "greatness", not least through being one of only a handful of states retaining nuclear weapons. This helps ensure that "defence" is very widely taken as synonymous with military strength, and it has proved difficult to counter this narrative in the short term.

Even so, there are two immediate arguments that can be used by any political party of whatever persuasion that might advocate a different approach. These are the abject failure of recent British military interventions and persistent problems with the management of the UK military procurement system.

On the former, the three main examples are Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, all of which have contrived to increase insecurity in the countries in question while leading to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people and the displacement of millions. Moreover, even insecurity within the United Kingdom is reported by the security agencies to be as high as ever. Significantly, any criticism along these lines is not strictly party-political since the Afghan and Iraqi interventions began under a Labour government and the Libya campaign was waged under a Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition.

On the second issue as outlined above, the military-industrial-bureaucratic complex rarely figures in political debate except in the specific field of controversial arms exports but its recent record is little short of appalling. Two of the better known recent examples are the Royal Navy's entire fleet of six front-line air defence destroyers (the Type 45 *Daring*-class) having fundamental defects which render them unable to function for long periods, and the decade-long gap in the RAF's long range maritime patrol capabilities following the Nimrod MRA4 debacle in 2010.

They are now followed by five more projects identified by the independent [Infrastructure Projects Authority](#) earlier this month as "unachievable and requiring reassessment". Four of these are new for 2018 – the *Astute*-class submarine programme, the Marshall

military air-traffic control system, the Protector armed drone programme and the Warrior armoured vehicle upgrade, with these joining the 2017-listed naval nuclear reactor core programme. Together these projects come in at £15.6 billion, but the IPA reports yet another thirteen MoD projects where the “successful delivery of the project is in doubt”.

Such acute, costly and widespread failings in the major equipment development and procurement process provide a powerful counter-argument within the Conservative government to the current Secretary of State for Defence’s campaign to significantly expand the MoD’s budget. This is one reason why the current Modernising Defence Programme remains paralysed after a year of wrangling.

Marketing positive change

The combination of failed wars and a cosy military-industrial-bureaucratic complex that is evidently not fit for purpose are both facets of UK defence policy that can readily be used by a party or parties interested in campaigning for changed defence policies, no matter how much mainstream parties normally avoid this in the UK political system. Even so, what amounts to negative campaigning is likely to have little impact unless it is in the context of advocating a different way of promoting security, a way that acknowledges that vexed issue of the desire for “greatness”.

The challenge here is starting to redefine “great” within the heated confines of short-term political change, but there are two broad areas in which this might be done, one relating to more traditional security elements and the other presenting a positive and attractive view of a different national perception of security. Each can be illustrated with examples that illustrate the kind of approach that can be adopted to change the agenda of the debate.

On the more traditional elements there are four obvious candidates:

- Prioritise the UK’s commitment to the United Nations and all its agencies. Argue for the UK to play a core role in the expansion of UN peacekeeping capabilities, including the establishment of a standing force, and commit a significant part of UK military forces to this, equipping and training them as necessary.
- Pledge to reverse recent cuts to Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) budgets and their impact on the diplomatic service, and expand the FCO’s resources in the areas of dialogue, mediation and conflict resolution.
- Expand UK military capabilities for providing emergency relief in responses to natural and other disasters, including epidemics. Given the RAF and Royal Navy/Fleet Auxiliary advantages in global logistics and the Army’s advantages in engineering and healthcare, these may be built into existing capacities even while resourcing a more efficient civilian capability to “project” humanitarian assistance.
- Place more emphasis on a positive UK role in arms control, not least in the areas of biological and chemical weapons, but also supporting the long-term aim of a UN Nuclear Weapons Convention.

In looking at the much wider conception of security, not least with a focus on environmental limits and marginalisation, among the new commitments could be:

- Greatly expand the UK commitment to global environmental understanding supported by world-class research. Thus, the UK could greatly expand climate, oceanographic and polar research, including filling any emerging gaps in US capabilities resulting from Trump's policies. The budget of the Met Office's Hadley Centre on Climate Change could be doubled over four years and on polar and oceanographic research the *Sir David Attenborough* could be the first of several ships of this size and capability.
- Expand support for renewable energy research and development and couple this with public investment and diverse fiscal measures to move rapidly towards a zero-carbon economy. Utilise Britain's abundance of renewable energy resources and make it clear that the UK under a new government will exceed the Paris targets and work persistently with other states to ensure that this expands to a global commitment.
- Make inequality a core concern of the Department for International Development (DfID) and also of departments concerned with international trade. Within the DfID budget put more emphasis on aiding countries in the Global South to accelerate their use of low carbon technologies and expand their use of renewable energy resources.

The point about this is that they are **examples**; rather than massive shifts they are incremental and achievable changes but all point in the similar direction of a different kind of internationalism based on a different interpretation of security. Put together, they represent a substantially different approach to the norm, which leads to the question of joined-up implementation in the longer term.

A Ministry for Peace?

One proposal has been for the UK to have a specific government department concerned with the cross-departmental advocacy of a new approach to security. The Sustainable Security Programme has argued for some time that this ought to be the responsibility of a 'super-minister' for international affairs who would coordinate the FCO, MoD and DFID towards a joined-up approach to security. In the particular area of arms control and disarmament this did exist as a "Minister for Disarmament" back in the 1960s but a detailed and thoughtful [new study](#) by ORG fellow Tim Street for *Conscience* develops this much more broadly in the context of the Labour Party's proposal for a Minister of Peace and Disarmament.

Some of the disadvantages are obvious, including the vested interests of particular ministries and the even greater vested interests of the powerful arms industry lobby. It is also easy to see how such a department might be parcelled off into a concern with arms

control and peacekeeping and very little else with little or no influence on wider security concerns.

Against this, as Tim Street's report argues, there are many advantages, including institutionalising support for peace, diplomacy and international law, exploring and advocating a wider role for non-offensive defence and, above all, promoting new thinking on global security challenges and the need for comprehensive response across government.

If this particular idea was to be accepted and be effective it would have two essential requirements. One would be a location at the heart of the executive, in the Cabinet Office, with the Minister present by right at Cabinet meetings and with access to, if not control over, the National Security Council. The other would be the sustained support of the Prime Minister. Even so, it would be a long and difficult process to change the current culture, even if it demonstrated a commitment that was intended to be sustained.

Conclusion

Much valuable thinking and analysis on new approaches to security is currently in progress in the UK and many other countries and while this is welcome, it will be even more effective if it relates to political realities and the potential for new and innovative policies. Such change can happen within existing political dynamics but would be more likely to be hastened by more significant political change.

It is helpful if those who see the need for change can accept the reality of political constraints and are willing to consider practical issues of how to sell many smaller examples of change to a sceptical, though not necessarily unsympathetic public. If they succeed and encourage political parties of different persuasion to take up such new thinking, the pace of change to a more sustainable security environment might well be increased.

About the Author

Paul Rogers is Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group and Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. His ['Monthly Global Security Briefings'](#) are available from our website. His latest book *Irregular War: ISIS and the New Threats from the Margins* was published by I B Tauris in June 2016. These briefings are circulated free of charge for non-profit use, but please **consider making a donation to ORG**, if you are able to do so.

Copyright © Oxford Research Group 2018.

Some rights reserved. This briefing is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs