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In the National Interest: Organising Government for National Security

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Introduction

I am grateful to Demos for this opportunity to pull together some interlocking themes from lectures I have given over the last year at King's College and elsewhere on the subject of terrorism, intelligence and national security. The ground covered by my title, organising government for national security, may seem familiar enough. But I want to contour round it from a different direction in the hope this may afford us some fresh glimpses of what needs to be tackled. In doing so, I shall try to draw organisational lessons from my different experiences of grappling with these issues as a senior official in the Ministry of Defence, in NATO, in GCHQ, in the Home Office and in the Cabinet Office. In a short lecture I will I hope be forgiven for keeping to the high ground, well aware that I stand between you and Christmas drinks.

An anticipatory view of national security

I start with the desirability of taking an anticipatory view of national security. 'Clear and present dangers' do of course arise unexpectedly. Such dangers have to be faced with whatever weapons and defences are at hand at the time. That will always be the case, but it is more important now than for some time past that we look ahead and recognise what may lie ahead; preferably, when the prospect of danger is sufficiently clear to justify attention but before the danger becomes present; ideally, acting in advance so as to avert the problem altogether but if not then reducing its likely impact on our lives; and certainly, preventing the needs of the moment crowding out the necessary preparations to face the future with confidence. And a similar statement can and should be made in respect of spotting opportunities when they are real enough prospects, and early enough to allow the necessary investment to capitalise on them. Risk management is about seizing opportunities as well as avoiding loss.

Behind my contention that we would do well to spend more time thinking hard about long-term security issues, and developing a national security strategy, are two thoughts. The first is that the potential global threats that really should command our attention are not going to be susceptible to simple solutions, least of all purely military solutions or just traditional diplomacy. The second is that our society risks becoming more vulnerable to disruption, both physical and psychological.

Looking outwards we can certainly see obvious dangers such as the long confrontation ahead with jihadist terrorism, and the rise of serious criminal economic attacks against the cyber-space in which we conduct so much of our business and private lives. Not least, the spread of destructive CBRN know-how and

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biotechnology into malevolent hands remains a real uncertainty. We can also see hazards which could significantly disrupt our everyday lives, using the term 'hazards' for impersonal risks so as to reserve the term 'threats' for man-inspired risks. Current examples include global pandemics such as an H5N1 variant influenza or SARS. If however we look further out then, as analysed by Sir Nicolas Stern, we face the prospect of threats driven by hazards as serious, irreversible impacts build up from climate change due to global warming caused by rising levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Examples given in the Stern Report on the Economics of Climate Change include intra- and inter-state conflicts over access to energy or to fresh water and large-scale migration movements, including those driven by rising sea levels, much of which will be into Europe across the Mediterranean. Severe impacts will be felt by Muslim countries already facing insurgency or terrorist threats. Will there be increased hostility to the US and Europe, no doubt accused of being responsible for the rise in global warming through disturbance of the natural order of things? And on the other side of the argument, will there be rejection of fundamentalist movements and regimes whose religious ideology would shut out modernity, the application of science and of international support and economic aid in managing the consequences of climate change?

My point is not to speculate on such matters here but to illustrate the necessity of analysing emerging trends, covering threats and hazards, and both in combination, which will profoundly affect our national well-being.

The second part of the argument on which I draw relates to the vulnerabilities of an advanced society to disruption. As we saw first in the 2000 fuel dispute, in the floods of 1998 and 2000 and in the 2001 foot and mouth disease outbreak modern society is strongly interconnected and we rely increasingly on complex systems in power, telecommunications, transport, food and water distribution, finance and the other parts of what is called the critical national infrastructure to keep normal life going. Protecting and strengthening this infrastructure is therefore going to be an increasingly important component of national security and well-being, a challenge when 80% of the CNI is owned by the private sector. To which, as I have mentioned, we can add the psychological dimension driven by the ease and speed of communication, rumour and propaganda. Reducing our vulnerability to risk is sufficiently important to warrant its own term: improving resilience, increasing the ability to absorb a deforming blow, and I might add the fortitude to withstand the threat of one, and bounce back quickly into shape to allow normal life to continue.

A primary responsibility of government is to take anticipatory action to enable the major risks facing society to be managed (and the opportunities seized) and to take anticipatory action to reduce society's vulnerability to the types of disruptive phenomena that we may face. It is in the judicious combination of these two responses that we will find future 'national security'. The expression 'creating the protective state' is one that I coined for this task – and that will be the title of a forthcoming book edited by Professor Peter Hennessy in which a number of us will be contributing our thinking.

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The characteristics of future national security

This approach highlights some distinguishing characteristics that differ from the national security preoccupations of the 20th century.

First, the long-term and uncertain nature of many of the risks we need to anticipate. This creates a need for the ability to scan and interpret the far horizon with understanding of both geo-political and economic and social developments. To take an obvious example, should we be encouraging parts of the developing world to join global action to divert resources now into tackling CO₂ emissions before the problem becomes significantly worse, or allow a decade or more of further growth to create societies that can then better afford the costs of action but at the expense of all of us having to devote a much greater share of national wealth to tackle what by then will be a significantly more dangerous problem? Again, it is not my purpose to discuss such issues tonight, but to illustrate how national security will rest on a sure grasp of a wide range of strategic issues.

Second, the 'global' nature of the issues with the implication that the division into 'domestic' and 'defence and overseas' affairs should no longer be such a central organising principle of government - as it has been since 27 March 1782 when the work of the two Principal Secretaries of State for the Northern and Southern Departments was divided in a new way with Charles James Fox becoming responsible for foreign affairs and the Earl of Selborne taking domestic business in what became the Home Department. The addition of a third Secretary of State and Department, for war, in 1794 completed the essential national security foundation for the following two hundred years: defence and overseas affairs on the one hand and home affairs on the other.

There is evidence of that paradigm already shifting: for example in the UK counter-terrorism strategy that spans domestic and overseas action and relies upon the joint work of external intelligence and domestic police and security communities. But further changes are needed, as I shall suggest in a moment.

Third, I have drawn attention to resilience as a further characteristic of national security. Building resilience involves concerting the work of central and local government, the private sector that operates so much of the critical national infrastructure and increasingly the tertiary sector of voluntary and volunteer effort. Many of these contributing organisations are not, and short of wartime conditions cannot be, 'under command'. Their activities can only be mutually reinforcing if their various decisions are guided by understanding of the 'Grand Strategy' being followed. This has significant implications for the central organisation for national security and its Ministerial leadership.

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Similarly, the fact that providing national security involves contributions from across government, spanning domestic and overseas, reinforces the need for a central staff capable of working with individual departments and agencies to turn the grand strategy into achievable and funded campaign plans.

Finally, we might note that future national security, as at key moments in the past, is going to have to draw on the national talent for innovation in applying science and technology. And that has organisational consequences – I welcome the current steps being taken by UK industry to bring the industrial supply base together, and their proposals to create a forum with all the relevant parts of government and with the operators of the critical national infrastructure.

The future organisation for national security

What should be the organisational consequences of this analysis, starting with the centre of government?

Let me suggest a package of mutually reinforcing evolutionary improvements that would help the development and implementation of national security strategy:

- a. Given the centrality of the issues, we should expect the Prime Minister, as now, to chair the key Cabinet Committee that brings the most senior Ministers concerned together with their professional advisers. With the difference, I would argue, that this should be a proper ‘national security committee’ of Cabinet that would devote more time to providing sustained political attention and focus on the wider agenda I have described, and that would own an explicit national security strategy without which it is hard to see how coherence can be brought into departmental planning;
- b. The national security agenda is best conducted in a non-politically partisan way, and I suggest that it would help build national consensus on what is to be done to have a ‘national security forum’ advising on the strategy from outside, on Privy Council terms, with senior figures drawn from across the political spectrum, academia and public life with expertise in these issues;
- c. For each major security concern - currently counter-terrorism is clearly one such - there needs to be a Cabinet Sub-Committee, chaired by a senior Cabinet Minister on behalf of the Prime Minister, to bring together the Ministers with key interests and to oversee on behalf of the Cabinet the production of detailed strategic campaign plans integrating domestic and overseas responses and to ensure sufficient pace is maintained.
- d. The main task of supporting the chair of Cabinet Committees should fall to the Cabinet Office. It is not possible to reorganise government so as to locate all the relevant functions within one Department of State – nor indeed within the centre of government - unless that is we want to revert

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to the status quo ante 1792. The deep expertise (for example in handling crises overseas, in projecting military force, in transport security, in nuclear security, or in public health) resides in many different Departments that will have to act as 'lead departments' for different aspects of the 'campaign plans' in support of national security strategy. This reinforces the need for strong central inter-departmental joint staff capability, responsive to the direction of the chairing Minister. Such a staff has to be more than the arbiter and secretariat of Cabinet Government, although it would be that too. It has to be able to conduct strategic intelligence assessment, threat and hazard risk analysis, to formulate strategy and identify options for Ministers, including assisting in the all-important selection of the strategic aim, to conduct joint operational campaign planning and adjust plans in the light of progress and obstacles encountered, to advise on matching allocation of resources, and to support effective strategic communications. And of course to provide the central strategic capacity for crisis management when disruptive challenges arrive.

There are three important qualifications if any central organisation for national security is to work effectively.

The first condition is that any senior Cabinet Minister appointed to a lead role, involving chairing the relevant Cabinet Committee, as for example the Home Secretary does on counter-terrorism, is acting on behalf of Cabinet as a whole. The Minister may have statutory authority of his or her own with Parliamentary accountability for important parts of the campaign but that has to be distinguished from the collective responsibility of acting on behalf of the Cabinet, using the political authority of the Prime Minister and being in effect his Deputy for these matters. It follows that the chair of a Cabinet Committee must look to the Central Staff for support in formulating the strategy and driving forward the agenda: we need a clearer understanding that the chair's agenda is their agenda.

The second condition is to have sufficient central capability for joint operational planning. We would do well to reread Alanbrooke's Diary on the value of having a proper joint planning staff to support 'grand strategy'. Future work on national security, and especially counter-terrorism, would really benefit from bringing together a small but powerful staff of policy advisers, diplomats, intelligence and police officers and staff-trained Service officers; the brightest and the best, uniformed and civilian, with the right practical experience and professional background. Let me emphasise this is not to weaken the need for strategic planning capacity within departments themselves, nor to draw functions in to the centre from Departments, but to add overall value. It is not a zero sum game between departments and the centre. Nor does it mean a larger centre of government overall if the focus is made genuinely strategic and the present complex arrangements are rationalised. What we need is the 'Nelsonian' model of leadership: a clear strategic aim and strong strategic direction, coupled with maximum delegation to contributing organisations to take their own decisions in the light of local conditions.

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The third condition is that this joint staff needs to be located in a modernised Cabinet Office, supporting the Prime Minister and Cabinet, and those senior Ministers the Prime Minister nominates to act on his behalf in leading the Government. Over the last few years we have seen a confusing web of strategy and policy staffs and units appear in or alongside Downing Street, with complex inter-relationships, essentially to balance a strong Treasury and fill the unintended vacuum left by having a Cabinet Office largely confined to secretariat coordination. It is time to rationalise these functions into a single central department to be the source of strategic support to the Prime Minister and to the Cabinet. Would that be a 'Prime Minister's Department'? Yes, in the sense of including much that is currently in No. 10, but emphatically not in the sense of draining further authority from the Cabinet and individual Secretaries of State. What I am recommending is a coherent, disciplined, well organised Central Department – the Cabinet Office - that has proper processes, all the talents and is empowered by the Cabinet to conduct strategic policy analysis and joint operational planning essential to future national security.

Let me turn very briefly to the key Departments of State.

For the Ministry of Defence, the direction of travel is already clear, for example from the steps that were taken in the Strategic Defence Review to enhance force projection capabilities, and the creation of Civil Contingency Reserves and military planners in each region within the framework of the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. Specialist support, for example in explosive ordnance disposal, and chemical, radiological and biological defence, stands ready under the doctrine of aid to the civil power. But such thinking needs to be taken further as part of reworking national security strategy, encompassing such areas as the security of our borders, sea and air space, the capacity to provide response to severe dislocation, for example in providing emergency communications and to exercise permanent joint command in the home theatre of operations. My suspicion is that such thinking has been held back by the combination of Home Office over-protectiveness of the civil lead and MOD over-defensiveness of possible civil raids on the defence budget. Understandable, but the time has come to move on, as would become clear from a national security strategy.

Likewise for the Foreign Office, we have already seen the exercise to redefine the objectives of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to align with the national objectives of HMG itself, and the current initiatives to open up the Diplomatic Service. We have had for some time joint initiatives such as that with the Home Office on visa and nationality work. The major issue here is less future organisation than lack of capacity both on the ground and in the FCO to conduct policy synthesis. At a time of significantly increasing counter-terrorism and other national security demands on the FCO and on overseas missions (policy work as well as consular) we should be seeing greater effort in foreign affairs. Another reason for looking in the round at the allocation of resources for national security. I would add too that given the nature of the

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international risks ahead DFID must be a full participant in the formulation and execution of modern national security strategy.

For the Home Office, key aspects of national security are once again a major part of its functions and should not just be seen as a sub-set of what in the past would have come under its police and criminal justice departments. I have argued for significant strengthening of central joint staff capacity but that must not be at the expense of the Home Office being equipped to carry out its lead Department functions, for example in relation to counter-terrorism. I have already mentioned as an example the need to support the relevant science and technology.

It is worth recalling that the outbreak of war in September 1939 saw the immediate creation of the Ministry of Home Security. This was a conjoined twin rather than a child of the Home Office with the Home Secretary carrying the additional title of Minister for Home Security. In that way the UK avoided the error of creating a separate Homeland Security Ministerial Department, with all the political rivalries and bureaucratic turf fighting that would have entailed. Additionally, as I have mentioned, since during the war home and overseas security was coordinated in turn by the Joint Planning Staff under Ismay, that allowed for management of the inevitable conflicts for military resources between the different theatres of operations and avoided the error of having disconnected overseas and domestic strategies. Sir John Anderson, who had served for 10 years as Permanent Secretary of the Home Office was appointed as the first joint Home Secretary and Minister of Home Security to set it all up, to be succeeded for most of the war by Herbert Morrison who also held both these two linked roles. Let me observe too that for the last few years the Home Office has had the mission of helping create 'a safe, just and tolerant society' with responsibilities that go much wider than security. I believe that it is important that the Home Office retains that ethos, and does not just become a State Security Ministry.

Conclusion

National security organisation goes well beyond lines on an organogram. In thinking about organisational design we need to hold two ideas in tension in our mind:

- a. The first idea is that purpose should come first. No set of arrangements in government is forever, and as the nature of the task changes so most probably should the arrangements, whatever the backwards pull of tradition. Good performance comes from organisations stretching beyond their comfort zone.
- b. The second idea is that organisations are more like people than machines: they have moods, they can sulk, they can have nervous breakdowns, they can show all the symptoms of paranoia; at the same time, they can surprise with their loyalty and their

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enthusiasms, the best of them have an ethos that can sustain them through adversity and a sense of history that provides a sure guide to good conduct in times of uncertainty.

Reconciling the tension between these ideas involves starting with what we believe are the objectives we are organising to achieve. It is rare to find that existing organisations have not in small ways already begun to adapt to what needs to be done. So we should be trying to identify the evolutionary path down which we are being led by history then press down hard on the accelerator of change to get there fast. As an example I would cite the way that we have retained our three fighting Services yet created a permanent national joint military headquarters to control the deployment and use of military force, and on a smaller scale the success of the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre in harnessing the very different expertise of the three intelligence agencies, the military, the police and Government Departments. The key point is that organisational changes that are seen to be going with the grain of history tend to produce longer lasting results than the discontinuities introduced by sudden shifts of direction. The law of unexpected consequences tends to apply to short cuts.

Nevertheless the words of the Duke of Cambridge, whose statue stands outside the Old War Office, hover in the air: "There is a time for everything, and the time for change is when you can no longer help it." But in national security we do not have the time to wait for such realisation of inevitability to dawn unaided. So to accelerate the process we need to show that the necessary changes fit a narrative that explains convincingly where the institutions have been, how they are evolving and why the time has come to accelerate the pace of change. These brief remarks are offered in that spirit.

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