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NATIONAL SECURITY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

The security threat has changed - something the UK Government's security strategy needs to reflect, argues Charlie Edwards

Over the past decade the Labour government has passed some 53 Acts of Parliament dealing with counter-terrorism, crime, and criminal justice. This figure exceeds by ten the total number of such Acts (43) passed in the 100 years leading up to 1997.

In the process, the government has created somewhere between 1018 and 3023 new criminal offences. By 2006 the Blair government had spent more per head on law and order than any other country in the OECD.

Discussion on important issues such as national security, intelligence and defence continues to be limited to a handful of Ministers and policy makers. The public rarely gets involved in such debate, often relegated to watching proceedings on the touchline. And yet in this period of uncertainty and complexity in global affairs we need desperately need a new narrative for security.

Successive British governments have lacked an understanding of the nature and priority of risks to the United Kingdom, preferring instead to respond to events as and when they happen. But the pace of change in today's world means we no longer can afford to solely respond to events, instead we must actively anticipate them and manage them.

The publication of the UK's first national security strategy was therefore a step in the right direction and highlights where and what risks we should be concerned about. But the UK NSS did not go far enough.

The strategy's narrative of change and globalisation failed to connect with the key drivers of change. These five drivers of change are at the heart of the new security paradigm and are the foundation on which conflicts, catastrophes and global challenges play out.

- Population stress arises from

differences in the population growth rates between rich and poor societies, and from spiralling growth of megacities in poor countries;

- Increasing scarcity of conventional oil results in energy stress;

- Environmental stress is rapidly worsening from damage to our land, water, forests and fisheries,

- Climate change from changes in the makeup of our atmosphere.

- Economic stress resulting from instabilities in the global economic system increases the income gaps between rich and poor people.

In short, the common unifying threat of the Cold War has been replaced by a plethora of risks, from trafficking and organised crime to international terrorism, energy security, and pandemics. They are dangers that are present, but not clear.

These new risks demand a different approach by government but the UK's national security architecture remains flawed in its design.

The government remains structured around functions and services with separate budgets for defence, foreign affairs, intelligence and development. Whitehall departments, intelligence agencies and the police forces that make up the security architecture have changed very little in the past two decades, despite the end of the Cold War and the attack on the World Trade Centre in 2001.

This model of government may have suited the security environment of the Cold War when the UK faced a threat to its national survival but the complex and uncertain security environment demands a fundamental review of how government is organised in two key respects. First the Government increasingly needs to 'connect the dots' between risks by bet-

ter understanding cause and effect. Second departments will have to develop a holistic response to so-called 'wicked problems', issues that are unbounded in time, scope and resources.

For all the frenetic activity of government, policy initiatives, large-scale set piece exercises and ministerial announcements, it is an intriguing paradox of the last two decades that while national security has become more frantic and urgent the real world has afforded the UK a relative lull from the most dangerous threats to the nation.

The paradox is further exacerbated by the shrinking authority of government and the lack of trust in political parties, in terms of their ability to respond to the wide-ranging risks and their ability to articulate the complexities of national security in an open and accessible manner. On the one hand this is a result of the limitations of government to effect change, but it is also a reflection of the government's determination to pursue a legislative approach rather than to review current approaches.

The next two years will be a crucial period for all three political parties. The traditional notion of security will remain on the periphery of debate with the concerns of votes focused on health, education and welfare. But political parties need to set out a new narrative for security in the twenty first century. One that moves beyond tired declarations of support for NATO, the Atlantic alliance and European integration (important as these may be). Britain is no longer a global power in the traditional sense; globalisation has created a new ecosystem ruled by complexity and uncertainty.

We need to realise this paradigm shift and in doing so set out a coherent agenda for the future.

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