



The UK's National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review

Comment and analysis by the United Nations Association – UK (UNA-UK)¹

Introduction

The UK's National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review (NSS/SDSR) was published in November 2015. Ahead of its publication, UNA-UK undertook a wide variety of policy and advocacy activities to highlight the extent to which effective international institutions like the United Nations (UN) underpin British security and prosperity.

Through policy reports, letters to relevant Ministers and by working with our supporters to play a major role the Ministry of Defence's public consultation on the NSS/SDSR (our submissions represented 10% of the total), UNA-UK underscored the need to strengthen these institutions and Britain's engagement with them at a time when the international system is under increasing strain.

UNA-UK advanced recommendations on strengthening the UN. In addition, it made recommendations on three specific areas:

- UN peace operations
- Preventing atrocity crimes
- Arms control and disarmament

Recognition of the importance of multilateral institutions

In identifying the need to "strengthen the rules-based international order and its institutions" as a key priority over the next five years, the NSS/SDSR sets out a strategy that, at a high level, accepts UNA-UK's fundamental proposition: that the UK must recognise the link between effective international institutions and our national security. The document reinforces this by outlining "the erosion of the rules-based international order" as one of four "particular challenges" likely to drive UK security priorities over the next decade.

The NSS/SDSR goes on to recognise the UK's place "at the heart of the rules-based international order", listing the UK's membership of the UN Security Council, as well as NATO, EU and other multilateral organisations as a means to "shape a secure, prosperous future for the UK and to build wider security, stability and prosperity". These organisations are described as instruments "to amplify our nation's power" and it is through them that "we play a central role in strengthening international norms and promoting our values".

Recognising the UN as "the world's leading multilateral institution", the following are specifically mentioned as UK objectives at the UN:

- Ensuring its effectiveness and legitimacy
- Supporting Security Council reform, including permanent seats for Brazil, Germany, India, Japan and permanent African representation
- Using funding to strengthen its efficiency and capacity
- Using political, diplomatic, military and development resources to support:
 - The Sustainable Development Goals
 - The Secretary-General's Action Plan on Preventing Violent Extremism

¹ UNA-UK is the UK's leading source of independent analysis on the UN and a network of people across the UK who believe that an effective UN is essential to building a safer, fairer and more sustainable world: una.org.uk

- Conflict prevention and mediation, peacebuilding capacity and work on human rights
- A better and more coordinated global humanitarian response
- Ensuring the World Health Organisation is able to recognise and respond rapidly to global health emergencies
- UN peacekeeping (see below)

At a broad level, UNA-UK is pleased that the overarching argument made throughout its advocacy and campaigning work – the need to invest in the apparatus of global governance if we are to tackle the raft of grave challenges we face as an international community – is included as a priority strand in the UK's foremost security document.

From this starting point, it follows that the UK's policies on peacekeeping, atrocity prevention and arms control, for example, should be seen through an international lens, with appreciation of the need to support the emergence of international standards and invest in inclusive, diplomatic solutions. However, the NSS/SDSR contains little indication of how the UK intends to pursue many of its UN objectives, nor does it adequately reflect on how the UK's own actions could prevent, or by implication, contribute to, the erosion of the international order.

Strengthening UN peace operations

The Government's response to UNA-UK's recommendations on peacekeeping has been positive. We have asked for increased troop contributions and a clearer definition of where UN peace operations sit in UK foreign and defence policy, including how they relate to securing the UK's national interests.

The NSS/SDSR acknowledges the UN's central position within the rules-based international order and recognises that “[p]eacekeeping is one of the UN's most important roles”. The Government has already pledged to double the UK's troop contributions and adds to this by also promising to increase law enforcement and civilian experts in the field and at UN headquarters. The Government has also pledged to form a “cross-Whitehall UN peacekeeping policy unit to maximise our military and civilian impact” and to “formulate UK policy on UN peacekeeping missions”.

Overall, this represents a significant success for UNA-UK's peacekeeping programme. It is understood that the new peacekeeping policy unit will bring together MOD, FCO and DFID officials working on peacekeeping to better understand the needs of specific UN peacekeeping missions and how the UK might support them. UNA-UK hopes that this will produce a more cohesive and strategic approach to UN peace operations but much rests on implementation. A detailed paper on how the UK intends to follow up on its pledges should now be produced, covering:

- A timetable for the establishment of the unit and information on its remit, including how it will involve external experts;
- A revision of the 2011 Joint Doctrine Note, which should put forward a distinct rationale and approach to UN peace operations, separate from NATO's Allied Joint Doctrine for the Military Contribution to Peace Support;
- Guidelines on how engagement will be determined and operationalised (the US presidential policy directive 23 and the 2015 White House memorandum on peacekeeping provide examples);
- A capacity review of UK and UN needs and expertise, and forthcoming vacancies in missions and in New York.

Preventing atrocity crimes and the responsibility to protect

Our recommendations focused on including the prevention of atrocity crimes as a national priority, as part of conflict prevention and stabilisation efforts. This included recommendations pertaining to early warning and analysis frameworks, training and policy guidance based on the need to recognise atrocity crimes as a related but different phenomenon to conflict and how this affects policy priorities.

Whilst the NSS/SDSR does make reference to using “UN mechanisms, such as the Responsibility to Protect” to drive global change and uphold International Humanitarian Law “in line with British values”, there is no mention of atrocity prevention and only one reference to “protection of civilians” throughout the document. The sections pertaining to the Conflict Stability and Security Fund, and to “implementing a new early warning and early action system across government” also fail to mention atrocity prevention as a specific goal of this work.

A short section on human rights includes, as one of two paragraphs, the following: “we have stood up for what we believe in: intervening to stop a massacre in Libya, leading the world in tackling sexual violence in conflict, and helping people who have fled violence in Syria.” All of these examples feature atrocity situations but the Government has missed an opportunity to recognise these as atrocity crimes, and to acknowledge the international framework that exists to prevent and respond to such crimes.

UNA-UK is concerned that this sends a confusing message internationally, and continues to leave potential gaps in the UK’s approach to preventing conflict and promoting stability. We hope that this is not a conscious choice but an omission, as the UK has stated its commitment to supporting the fledgling R2P norm and is one of the main funders of the UN Office for Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, which recommends that national governments cultivate an appreciation of the distinctions between conflict and atrocity in their national policies in the first place.

Given that mass atrocities continue to feature prominently in discussions and decisions on UK interventions, including military, and that much of the UK’s work is already concerned with such situations, UNA-UK recommends that the UK places greater emphasis on atrocity prevention, including through a UK strategy on prevention and response.²

Arms control and disarmament

Ahead of the review, UNA-UK set out the ways in which joined-up policies on arms control and disarmament contribute to UK security, from the broad starting point of strengthening the rules-based international order, to practical considerations relating the flow of arms to conflict-ridden states.

The NSS/SDSR recognises as a priority the need to “strengthen the rules-based international order” – an objective clearly in line with UNA-UK’s proposals, including:

- robust implementation of the Arms Trade Treaty;
- the regulation of drones and autonomous weapons;
- demonstrating progress on nuclear disarmament.

The following section demonstrates how the UK’s NSS/SDSR largely misses the opportunity to adopt joined-up policies on arms control and disarmament that support the UK’s stated internationalist priorities.

Robust implementation of the Arms Trade Treaty

From co-authoring the 2006 UN General Assembly resolution that began work on an Arms Trade Treaty to the Treaty’s entry into force in December 2014, the UK has championed robust arms export policies on the world stage. However, the NSS/SDSR’s lack of emphasis on the risks of an under-regulated arms trade read alongside recent UK arms export practices signal a step back in terms of UK leadership on arms control.

A running theme throughout the NSS/SDSR is the link between economic security and Britain’s ability to be able to defend itself effectively. From this, the document justifies additional support to promote UK arms exports, including the establishment of a dedicated UKTI team to support the negotiation and delivery of government-to-government defence and security deals and making “support for exports a core task for the MOD”³.

In light of comments made by Sir Simon McDonald, Permanent Secretary at the Foreign Office, who warned members of the Foreign Affairs Committee that the “prosperity agenda” was now “further up the list” than human rights in terms of Foreign Office priorities⁴, and in light of MPs’ calls for a more cautious approach to arms exports to countries with poor human rights records⁵, it is concerning to note the emphasis on promoting exports rather than promoting responsible arms export policies.

In keeping with the UK’s stated desire to support a rules-based international order, and given the

² For full details of UNA-UK’s recommendations on atrocity prevention, see *From promise to practice: Strengthening the UK’s approach to atrocity prevention and R2P*, available at <http://www.una.org.uk/content/promise-practice-strengthening-uks-approach-atrocity-prevention-and-r2p>

³ *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review*, paragraph 6.62, pg 77-78

⁴ <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/foreign-affairs-committee/fco-budget-and-capacity/oral/21587.html>

⁵ <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/other-committees/committee-on-arms-export-controls/news/publication-annual-report-2014-15/>

document's emphasis on supporting the defence industry, the NSS/SDSR missed the opportunity to highlight the UK's legally-binding commitment to a robust, criteria-based export system, which states that "[t]he Government will take into account the potential effect of the proposed transfer on the UK's defence and security interests or on those of other territories and countries ... while recognising that this factor *cannot* affect consideration of the criteria on respect of human rights and on regional peace, security and stability" [emphasis added]⁶.

The only specific mention of the Arms Trade Treaty is in the context of the UK campaigning "to increase the number of countries that have ratified the Arms Trade Treaty". Whilst Treaty universalisation is an important and desirable objective, there is much more the UK can and should do to strengthen the Arms Trade Treaty. By recognising the effect its own arms export practices are having on the Treaty and as a consequence adopt a more cautious approach the UK could make progress on its stated objectives to "build stability overseas" and "strengthen the rules-based international order".

The Arms Trade Treaty will only deliver maximum impact in terms of reductions in the levels of suffering caused by armed violence if a powerful norm emerges around responsible arms trading; a norm the UK and other major exporters need to help create by setting a positive example and ensuring their export control systems are in keeping with the letter and spirit of the Treaty.

Regulation of armed drones and autonomous weapons

The SDSR/NSS does not address the pressing need to build international consensus on the regulation of armed drones and fully autonomous weapons, or the negative security implications of inaction.

Armed drones

In outlining the future shape of the UK's armed services, the NSS/SDSR affirms UK Government's intention to acquire more than 20 'Protector' drones by 2025, more than doubling the UK's fleet of armed drones. Despite this significant investment, the UK's policy on the use of these weapons remains unclear.

Calls for a clear UK policy on drones intensified in September 2015, when the UK was criticised for carrying out targeted strikes in Syria, killing two Britons.⁷ At this time, the UK had not publicly stated that it was engaged in military activity in Syria, nor had this question been voted on in Parliament.

UNA-UK continues to call on the UK to respond fully to UN requests dating back to March 2014 for explanations on drone strikes that have resulted in civilian casualties. The same UN report also identifies an "urgent and imperative need" for states to build consensus on the legal ambiguities regarding the lethal use of drones in covert operations. More recently, the UK has failed to engage with this issue at the Human Rights Council.⁸

Without increased transparency and accountability from the UK and others regarding their use of armed drones, the emergence of international standards and norms on the acceptable use of these weapons is impeded. This is a particular concern, and one that could blow back on the UK, given the rate of proliferation of drone technology.

Autonomous weapons

The "impact of technology" is recognised by the NSS/SDSR as presenting a particular challenge with regards to the UK's security, with the corresponding strategy focusing chiefly on addressing cyber threats. The strategy also outlines measures to support hi-tech UK industries, citing the "innovation in products and services they provide" as a means to "maintain our advantage over adversaries". Notwithstanding the severity of the threats identified, such an approach fails to consider the full spectrum of risks associated with technological developments, including the increasing threat of states developing autonomous weapons.

More than 30 states raised concerns over the development of autonomous weapons at the 2015 session of the UN General Assembly's First Committee. In November 2015, states at the meeting of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons scheduled further talks in April 2016 relating to the regulation of autonomous weapons. Whilst discussions are positive, it is worrying that a regulatory framework is not being

⁶ Consolidated EU and National Arms Export Licensing Criteria, criterion 5: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/consolidated-eu-and-national-arms-export-licensing-criteria>

⁷ <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/sep/07/uk-forces-airstrike-killed-isis-briton-reyaad-khan-syria>

⁸ <http://www.una.org.uk/news/14/09/uk-fails-engage-human-rights-council-drones>

developed fast enough to stop autonomous weaponry becoming a reality.

The NSS/SDSR does not make reference to these weapons. The UK has previously stated that it does not intend to pursue them but it has been unwilling to support an international ban – something UNA-UK has called for as a member of the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots. Whether or not the UK supports a ban at this stage, as a country with advanced military hardware and a track record of supporting the emergence of international norms on humanitarian issues, UK leadership on this issue could be influential in building international consensus on the acceptable level of human oversight in weapons systems.

Despite UK Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond agreeing that the UK Government needs to “reflect on how best UK policy can be further developed and articulated” on this matter⁹, it is disappointing that the threats posed by autonomous weapons were not addressed in the NSS/SDSR.

UNA-UK will continue to make the case that it is in the UK's best interest to ensure that no country develops autonomous weapons, and, to this end, will continue to call on the UK to show leadership within the international community, including by setting out a clear domestic policy detailing the safeguards in place to prevent the UK development or deployment of autonomous weapons.

Demonstrating progress on nuclear disarmament

Rather than undergoing a meaningful, consultative review of the UK's nuclear posture, as we recommended, the starting point for the NSS/SDSR is the UK's commitment to a “minimum, assured, credible nuclear deterrent” based on a Continuous At Sea Deterrent patrol, which the current government judges necessitates four nuclear-armed submarines.

The language used in the NSS/SDSR to rationalise Britain's ongoing need for nuclear weapons appears to upgrade the UK's perceived requirement for these weapons, from 2010 when the UK supported a general strategy of retention “for as long as the global security situation makes that necessary” to the 2015 position, which states that “recent changes in the international security context remind us that we cannot relax our guard”.

The bulk of nuclear weapons-related material in the strategy document focuses on the renewal and maintenance plans for the UK's nuclear programme, including announcements of increased costs of and further delays to the programme to replace the UK's Trident nuclear weapons system. The document also outlines a new approach to investment decisions, with the Government moving away from a single “Main Gate” decision in favour of a “staged investment programme”.

Whilst UNA-UK has previously expressed disappointment at the lack of public and parliamentary consultation on nuclear issues, UNA-UK will continue to make the case for informed debate on the UK's nuclear posture and hopes that the further delays announced in the NSS/SDSR and the phased approach for Trident's replacement will present opportunities for such discussions to take place.

International obligations

The NSS/SDSR does not make reference to the UK's international obligation to disarm under Article 6 of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), nor does it add to the announcements made in 2010 on furthering this obligation through modest stockpile reductions. The document also appears to re-state language used in 2010 on continuing to “build trust and confidence between Nuclear and Non-Nuclear Weapon States” without acknowledgement of the changes in the international landscape, notably the deterioration in relations between the two groups of states.

For example, there is no acknowledgement of the additional diplomatic investment required following the failure of the 2015 NPT Review to reach a formal agreement or of the need to engage with the growing number of states (currently standing at 127¹⁰) that have signed the “Humanitarian Pledge” committing to work for a legally binding instrument to prohibit and eliminate nuclear weapons.

The NSS/SDSR also gives no indication how the UK intends to make progress within the ‘P5 Process’ and on two important treaties – the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty and the Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty, which are mentioned in passing. UNA-UK hopes that a more detailed paper on multilateral disarmament will be considered.¹¹

⁹ <http://www.una.org.uk/news/15/05/foreign-secretary-responds-una-uk%E2%80%99s-joint-letter-%E2%80%98killer-robots%E2%80%99>

¹⁰ Visit <http://www.icanw.org/pledge/> for the latest list of those who have signed the Humanitarian Pledge.

¹¹ A full set of UNA-UK's recommendations on this issue can be found in our recent [‘Surviving Nuclear Zero’ report](#).

