



An EU Survey on Whole-of-Government Approaches to External Conflict and Crisis

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# United Kingdom Report

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## 1 | Introduction

The United Kingdom (UK) was one of the first countries to launch a whole-of-government approach (WGA) in pursuit of its foreign and security interests. It was former Prime Minister Tony Blair (1997–2008) who was the first to demand that the British government “speak with one voice” on foreign and security issues, calling for “joined-up government”. In the intervening years, those efforts have been advanced by successive governments, which in turn has resulted in formal institutional, policy and financial arrangements.

The establishment of a WGA in the UK coincided with the government’s pursuit of an agenda of liberal interventionism, which evolved in response to lessons learned in successive military campaigns in the Balkans, Sierra Leone, East Timor, Afghanistan and Iraq (MCDC 2014; Stepputat and Greenwood 2013). More recently, the drivers for the furtherance of WGA have been related to the policy of austerity and the requirement across government to achieve economies of scale wherever possible.

Despite political declarations that austerity is at an end (May 2018b), the UK is unlikely to reverse its WGA. The forecasted economic consequences of leaving the European Union, and the consequent need and/or desire to demonstrate that Great Britain remains a global player of note, will require departments of state to act in a coordinated and consistent fashion.

The ability of departments to act in this way will be dependent on the extent to which civil servants adhere to existing policies and procedures. It seems unlikely that there will be any

radical changes to foreign and security policy whilst the political agenda is consumed by the process and implications of leaving the EU. In the absence of direct political engagement on security issues, it has fallen to civil society organisations to outline the framework for future policies. One recently published paper advocated the further consolidation of WGA as a means to ensure a “global Britain” in the 21st century (Seely and Rogers 2019). The authors proposed a national strategy council, a national global strategy, integration of departments, establishment of joint effects teams, and the assessment and recalibration of development assistance.

At this juncture, it is better to anticipate modifications to the existing WGA rather than a complete reversal. Those changes are likely to affect institutional and financial arrangements as efforts are made to operationalise the new Fusion Doctrine, which was unveiled in the National Security Capability Review in 2018 (HM Government 2018). There are indications that the Department for International Development (DFID) will be brought more fully under the direction of the National Security Council (NSC), and that the types of projects that receive funding from the GBP 1.2 billion Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) will be reviewed. These are, however, refinements to what is a well-established method of working to resolve and prevent conflict.

## **2 | What policies have been developed to further policy coherence?**

The initial steps in the establishment of WGA in the UK were taken with the publication of the Strategic Defence Review (SDR) in 1998 (Ministry of Defence 1998). Both the process of that review and the objectives set within it were viewed as means through which the newly elected Labour Government could reposition itself in terms of defence and the UK could assert itself within the post-Cold War order. Historically, the Labour Party had been perceived as weak on defence, given that it wished to withdraw from NATO and dismantle the nuclear deterrent. Tony Blair, as leader of New Labour, was an internationalist who sought to revise the party’s image. In successive speeches and in the party’s manifesto, he stressed the importance of the UN, NATO and the EU, and Britain’s leadership role within them, for stability and peace in Europe and the world (Labour Party 1997; Kampfner 2003).

Although produced within the Ministry of Defence (MOD), the SDR was very clearly foreign policy led. The ministry, then led by Secretary of State George Robertson, had adopted a more open and consultative approach during the review process, conferring with other departments of state, allies, CSOs, service personnel and thinktanks. As a result, strategic priorities were derived from and set within a broader strategic context, rather than solely being determined by costs and affordability. It was recognised that national security and prosperity were dependent on the promotion of international stability, freedom and economic development. The government declared its intention that the British Armed Forces should be a “force for good in the world” (Ministry of Defence 1998).

The review acknowledged that Britain no longer faced an existential threat, but that state fragility and conflict in other parts of the world could impact on its security. Thus, if the Armed Forces were to achieve their aim, they would need to act in concert with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Department for International Development (DFID), which had been newly established in 1997. As will be discussed below, a number of pragmatic

institutional reforms were taken to encourage WGA, however the overarching national policy framework under which that occurred remained the 1998 SDR and its 2002 update titled 'Strategic Defence Review: A New Chapter' (Ministry of Defence 2002).

The publication in 2008 of the UK's first National Security Strategy (NSS) (Cabinet Office 2008) marked a step change in terms of the way in which the UK conceptualised, assessed and provided security. While previous government policies had acknowledged the changed threat environment post-Cold War and the requirement for interagency cooperation for effective response, the 2008 NSS made that case far more explicit. It recognised that globalisation and greater political, financial, social and technological interconnectedness made it increasingly difficult to differentiate between purely domestic and foreign policy.

If individuals rather than states are the referent objects of security, then a fundamentally different approach to providing that ultimate public good is required. The 2008 NSS outlined a more systematic approach to the assessment and management of risk, and it argued that partnerships across government and between government and the private and third sectors would be necessary to ensure national security.

The 2008 NSS reflected lessons learned over a decade. Specifically, it acknowledged the growing complexity of the global security environment and noted that if the UK wished to tackle problems at source, then it would have to operate in coalition with others and employ WGA. Afghanistan had illustrated that stabilisation operations had a higher chance of success if a comprehensive approach was adopted. That approach would need to draw on the full range of capabilities across government and within NGOs. Two key enablers were to ensure that activities were demand- rather than supply-led and that there were links between the strategic, operational and tactical levels of a campaign (Baumann 2010).

Having waited 10 years to update the WGA policy framework, subsequent changes occurred quite rapidly. In 2009, following the start of the global financial crisis, the government published an update to the NSS titled 'Security for the Next Generation' (Cabinet Office 2009). This document outlined in greater detail the risk assessment process being employed, looking at "threat drivers, threat actors and threat domains". Again, the importance of WGA was acknowledged, but in this instance the government went beyond referencing the big three (MOD, FCO and DFID), acknowledging the contribution of the intelligence services, Home Office, cabinet committees and cabinet secretary to the delivery of security at home and abroad. The 2009 NSS detailed which ministries would lead in responding to which threats and outlined how parliament would conduct oversight of these activities through the establishment of a new Joint Committee on National Security Strategy.

This process of creeping centralisation was given further impetus when the coalition government published its own NSS in 2010 (HM Government 2010). Widely criticised at the time for being a rushed affair in which inadequate consultation took place, the 2010 NSS is viewed as significant because of the legal and institutional changes that accompanied it.

Prime Minister David Cameron sought to address perceived strategic deficits by creating a standing National Security Council (NSC), formalising the National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA), establishing a Joint Forces Command (JFC) and ensuring that, in the future, quinquennial strategic defence and security reviews (SDSRs) would align with the five yearly

general election cycle (Thompson and Blagden 2018). In so doing, the coalition government sought to formalise the approach to security, avoiding the accusations of adhocism, adventurism and creeping incrementalism made against the preceding government's conduct of operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. The aim was to ensure that the government pursued an evidence-based, strategic and comprehensive approach in the future.

Although this was the aim, it has not been fully achieved in practice. Political posturing in advance of the 2015 NSS and SDSR (HM Government 2015) placed in question the extent to which discussions were held across government on strategic priorities (Thompson and Blagden 2018). Subsequent events have raised further doubts regarding the UK's strategic priorities. The 2016 Brexit referendum, Prime Minister Cameron's resignation, the succession of Theresa May, and her decision to call a snap election in 2017 played havoc with the newly established fixed-term parliament and quinquennial security review. The government's response was to publish a National Security Capability Review in 2018 (HM Government 2018), which assessed the capabilities without addressing the National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA).

The development of a WGA within the UK has been primarily driven by internal considerations regarding operational and cost effectiveness. A desire to promote peace on a global stage and a firm belief in the utility of the comprehensive approach have led the UK to champion the adoption of this method within the UN, NATO and the EU. It has done so by leading debates in the UN Security Council on how to improve the coordination and effectiveness of assistance to countries emerging from conflict. Further, as an advocate for the universal adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals of the UN's 2030 Agenda, the UK has been keen to demonstrate the application of WGA at home and abroad.

Within the EU, the UK sought to accelerate the conceptualisation of and planning for a comprehensive approach through the provision of support from the Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre, the Permanent Joint Headquarters and the Stabilisation Unit, all of which were also engaged in knowledge transfer with NATO (House of Commons Defence Committee 2010). As one of the 'Big Three' foreign policy leads in the EU, a member of the UN Security Council, and the holder of the Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe (DSACEUR) post in NATO, the UK has been able to influence the agenda in these institutions so that they are mutually reinforcing (Lehne 2012). In turn, the evolution of WGAs within international organisations has led to further refinements of the UK's own approach. This demonstrates that the more one engages in multinational operations, the greater the potential to learn and improve.

### **3 | Who are the main actors involved in cooperating in a WGA?**

The British WGA has evolved over time as well as in response to the ideological preferences of the government of the day and changes within the broader strategic context. The year 2010 marked a watershed year in the development of the WGA because it saw the transition from the Labour- to the Conservative-led coalition government and a more formalised approach to the management of the WGA.

Under the Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown (1997–2010), the three principal ministries were the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), the Department for

International Development (DFID), and the Ministry of Defence (MOD). The focus on these three ministries was reflective of two key drivers. First, the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union had fundamentally changed the perceived threat environment. Indeed, according to the Strategic Defence Review of 1998, Britain no longer faced a state-based existential threat (Ministry of Defence 1998).

Second, there was growing global recognition that the way in which developed states engaged with less developed or under-developed states needed to change. The publication of the Brandt Report in 1981 had an impact on the way in which North-South relations would subsequently be framed. The Labour government's establishment of DFID in 1997 was reflective of that change.

The significance of these two drivers was that although the traditional functions of diplomacy, aid and arms were at the forefront of UK engagement in the world, the balance between them had changed. Initially, there was a significant power struggle between the three ministries, both in Whitehall and overseas. As Her Majesty's representatives overseas, ambassadors felt themselves to be *primi inter pares*. The Armed Forces, as represented by defence attachés, felt that they could provide the most effective access to the security services and, thus, to decision-makers in conflict and post-conflict states. The DFID, however, had the money and was able to spend it. Competing organisational cultures led to competing agendas. Formal mechanisms were thus required to harness the three ministries.

One of the ways in which the government sought to operationalise its WGA was through the establishment of a series of delivery units that were staffed by personnel seconded from the three principal ministries and the Home Office. The most significant and enduring of these has been the Stabilisation Unit (SU), which was established in 2007. Staffed by a core team of personnel drawn from across government and with the capacity to deploy experts (government civil servants and consultants), the mission of the SU is to "support the integrated co-ordination of UK government activities in fragile and conflict-affected states by being a centre of expertise on conflict, stabilisation, security and justice" (SU n.d.).

Political direction for, and coordination of, overseas engagements was provided by the Cabinet Office's National Security Committee, chaired by the prime minister. Support was provided by the National Security Secretariat under the direction of a security and intelligence coordinator. The coordination of intelligence and security risk assessments was undertaken by the Joint Intelligence Committee. The Cabinet Office Briefing Room (COBR) was responsible for responding to emerging security situations. The Defence Council was responsible for coordinating military activity.

In 2010, then-Prime Minister David Cameron chose to overhaul this structure in response to the increasing complexities of ongoing operations in Afghanistan and the post-Iraq security environment, concerns over the lack of emphasis placed on national security by his predecessor, and what was perceived to be a diminished ability to make a coherent national security strategy. In response, Cameron created a cabinet-level National Security Council (NSC) with a supporting secretariat and a national security adviser. A formalised national security risk assessment (NSRA) process was established to support the publication of the National Security Strategy (NSS). The government also established a Joint Forces Command to further integrate operational military activity.

These structural changes necessitated a review of how parliament ensured accountability. Prior to 2010, foreign, defence intelligence and development activities had been reviewed by relevant committees within the House of Commons. Post-2010, the parliament added a select committee to monitor the NSC.

As the risk of international terrorism has increased and it has become ever more apparent that interventions abroad have direct consequences for security at home, a growing number of ministries and agencies have been incorporated into the UK's WGA. The promulgation of the country's Fusion Doctrine – as set out in the National Security Capability Review of 2018 (HM Government 2018) – and the explicit linkage made between economic, security and influence activities are illustrative of that wider change. All ministries now need to demonstrate how they are contributing to the attainment of the three national security objectives: protect our people, project our influence, and promote our prosperity (HM Government 2015). One should note, however, that there has been some criticism that explicit measurement of performance against national security objectives risks securitising development assistance.

Concern has also been expressed about the implications of Brexit for national security. In her speech to the Munich Security Conference in February 2018 (May 2018a), then-Prime Minister Theresa May acknowledged that European and British security would remain closely interlinked post-Brexit and that, consequently, the government would wish to “continue this co-operation” in the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions and operations in the future. To date, British contributions to CSDP missions have been limited in terms of the number of personnel (2.3% of member state contributions), but significant in terms of effect. Britain's parliament has recognised that “CSDP missions and operations have made a significant contribution to UK foreign policy priorities and been an important channel of UK influence – from tackling piracy to promoting the rule of law to peacebuilding in post-conflict states” (House of Lords 2018: 3). Britain's principal contribution to these operations has been strategic guidance during their planning and review. Concern has been expressed that a failure to address the nature of a future relationship with the EU may mean that the UK is called upon to provide assets without having a say in how they are used – a position with which none of the political parties would feel comfortable.

## 4 | How does your country operationalise a WGA?

In an article on ‘joined-up government’ published in 2002 (Ling 2002), Tom Ling suggested that there were four critical success factors for what was then called ‘inter-agency cooperation’. These were: new ways of working across organisations evidenced by shared leadership, pooled budgets, merged structures and joint teams; new types of organisations with the concomitant requirement to establish new cultures and values, information and training systems; new accountabilities and incentives which would require the establishment of shared outcome targets, performance measures, regulations and systems of accountability; new ways of delivering services which will require joint consultation/involvement, shared client focus and shared customer interface. At various stages in the evolution of the UK's WGA, each of these critical success factors has been in evidence.

When the policy of 'joined-up government' was first promoted, there were clear tensions between the FCO, the MOD and the DFID, with each ministry feeling that its autonomy was being undermined. In order to promote greater cross-departmental collaboration, the government decided in 2001 to pool the resources of the three ministries in order to "develop a more formal, collective approach to addressing conflict prevention" (Cleary 2011: 45). Two funding pools were established: the Global Conflict Prevention Pool (GCPP) and the African Conflict Prevention Pool (ACPP). The three ministries agreed that any proposed project submitted to the pools should contribute to one of the following three aims (Ministry of Defence 2003: 13): first, to strengthen international and regional systems' capacity for conflict prevention, early warning, crisis management, conflict resolution/ peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding; second, to contribute to global and regional conflict-prevention initiatives, such as curbing the proliferation of small arms and the diversion of resources to finance conflict; and, third, to promote initiatives in selected countries, including indigenous capacity-building, to help avert conflict, reduce violence and build sustainable security and peace.

Over time, those two pools would merge into one. In 2015, the government announced the establishment of the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) worth GBP 1.2 billion. That fund was described in the 2018 NSCR as enabling the government "to use the optimum combination of development, diplomacy, defence and security assistance rapidly and flexibly in countries at risk of conflict and instability" (HM Government 2018: 44). Its establishment is credited with enhancing the agility of response to crises, incentivising the joined-up use of capabilities, and funding assessed contributions to multilateral peacekeeping operations (*ibid.*).

It is the National Security Council that sets the strategic priorities of the CSSF, which are demonstrably linked to the national security objectives. Prior to 2015, the allocation of funds was achieved on the basis of agreement between the FCO, the MOD and the DFID. Research conducted by the author (Cleary 2011) has indicated that the FCO and the DFID were generally more successful at getting their projects funded because they tended to send more senior personnel capable of taking decisions to the deliberative committees.

The establishment of a series of operational delivery organisations, including the Security Sector Development Advisory Team, the Post- Conflict Reconstruction Unit and, later, the Stabilisation Unit, are all examples of the government's seeking to establish joint teams for the delivery of effect. Each of these organisations has been staffed in a similar way, with personnel seconded from the FCO, the MOD, the DFID and the Home Office. Each has relied on its ability to draw additional resources from other government departments as well as from consultants. And each has struggled in the first instance with engendering a shared culture among its seconded staff.

The 2010 establishment of a National Security Council is evidence of an attempt to create a new institution, but assessments of its effectiveness have been mixed. Given the way the conceptualisation of national security has changed, the establishment of an NSC is viewed as a welcome alternative to the previously informal attempts at inter-ministerial coordination. Those most closely associated with the NSC, however, suggest that it is falling short of its stated objectives, and that it could do more to set national strategy. Specifically, it could seek to "present a unifying national aim, especially in times of international crisis, and to further enhance inter-departmental coordination" (Thomson and Blagden 2018: 581).



This last point is particularly important given the conclusions of the Chilcot Inquiry into Iraq (Committee of Privy Councillors 2016). Published in July 2016, the Chilcot Report details the decision-making process that led to the UK's commitment of forces in Iraq in 2003. It made a number of criticisms of that process, stating that the assessment of risks and the capabilities required to address them was not as robust as it could and should have been, that there was insufficient coordination across government, and that ministries struggled to work across organisational boundaries.

Since the publication of the Chilcot Report, ministries have been at pains to demonstrate that they have taken on board the recommendations it made. This has led to efforts to improve oversight and accountability within ministries. For example, in 2017, the MOD published the Good Operation Handbook (Ministry of Defence 2017), which provides a checklist for the planning, delivery and review of an operation. It encourages personnel to bring critical thinking to bear and to resist groupthink. At a national level, the NSC is seeking to hold ministries to account by asking them to demonstrate how their individual and collective activities contribute to the attainment of the national security objectives. Their performance is also reviewed by a number of select committees within the House of Commons as well as by the National Audit Office.

Taken collectively, these efforts seek to inculcate a culture in which consultation and collaboration become the norm. Although there may be criticism of the formal structures that have been established, they have encouraged informal networking (see, e.g., Thomson and Blagden 2018). Civil servants in different ministries are discussing issues, generating scenarios and seeking to determine joint positions prior to ministerial meetings. This is a fairly significant cultural development and one that can lead to the generation of more effective doctrine for stabilisation operations (Ministry of Defence 2016). It is also of the utmost necessity to ensure a degree of policy continuity during periods of political crisis, such as that currently being experienced.

## 5 | Conclusions

In his book *Exporting Security*, Derek Reveron defined 'interagency' as "an adjective to describe a process of bringing together elements from across the government and not a noun to describe an organization that brings solutions" (Reveron 2010: 181). That process should be viewed as an iterative one – or, in other words, government should learn by doing.

As this report has highlighted, initial efforts at establishing a WGA in the UK were blighted by a number of fairly predictable occurrences. Different organisational cultures led to a competition over status, agendas and resources. This competition was reduced, although not completely eliminated, through the provision of clear political direction. In the first instance, ministries were forced to work together owing to the fact that their funding was pooled. The establishment of formal committee structures to determine the allocation of resources and the co-location of personnel from the FCO, the MOD, the DFID, and other ministries and agencies in overseas missions led to improvements in informal networking, which in turn led to further adjustments being made in the formal architecture.

The responsiveness and resilience of any system is only demonstrated when that system is placed under stress. UK operations in Iraq and Afghanistan certainly provided a test for the



system, and elements of it were deemed to have failed. Since the publication of the Chilcot Report in 2016 (Committee of Privy Councillors 2016), all political parties and government ministries have declared their desire to learn from the mistakes of the past, which has led to the establishment of new institutions and accountability mechanisms as well as the adoption of new doctrines. Thus, one can conclude that a critical enabler for a successful WGA is to encourage an organisational culture that is reflective and capable of learning from mistakes. Another key enabler is the provision of a unified purpose. The introduction of an NSS in 2008 (Cabinet Office 2008) and its subsequent linkage to a Strategic Defence and Security Review in 2010 (HM Government 2010) have succeeded in providing a conceptual framework for security from which all relevant ministries subsequently derive their purpose.

Britain's assessment of its strategic context has changed dramatically since 1989. In the initial post-Cold War period, there was no apparent existential threat. Operational commitments in Sierra Leone and the Balkans were relatively contained. However, 9/11 and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq fundamentally altered how the UK viewed its security. From 2002 onwards, the risk posed by international terrorism would increasingly dominate the security debate within the UK. The London bombings in July 2005 painfully demonstrated that interventions overseas could have dire consequences for domestic security. The case for a WGA was firmly made.

As of 2019, the United Kingdom has a formal and centralised system that provides direction and coordinates activity across government. There is an established system for assessing global trends and security risks. There is a process for the regular review and revision of the National Security Strategy and associated doctrines. Internal and external accountability mechanisms are being continuously refined, and substantial funds for conflict response and development assistance have been set aside and ring-fenced.

The publication of the NSCR in 2018 (HM Government 2018) and its unveiling of the Fusion Doctrine demonstrate that WGA has now become the cultural norm. Government officials acknowledge that the promotion of a WGA has contributed to the development of a wider perspective on issues, reduced the extent of competition among ministries, improved the delivery of security, and ensured greater cost-effectiveness. It has, however, taken over 20 years to achieve that. The final lessons are that it takes time to develop a WGA, and that it will always be subject to further revision.

The 2018 'Global Britain' agenda (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee 2018) reflects the UK's determination to remain a global player, upholding the rules-based international system and contributing to the furtherance of global prosperity, peace and security. While the UK's future relationship with the EU remains in question, the desire to work on a multilateral basis to resolve conflict is not. In all the pronouncements on security that have been made in the last three years, there is a consistent recognition of the value of WGA, and that if the UK is to be a force for good in the world, then its overseas operations will need to be multi-phased, multi-dimensional, multi-level and multi-lateral. Given the consistency in policy prescriptions, we should expect to see modifications to WGA, specifically with reference to institutional and financial arrangements, as the British government seeks to operationalise the Fusion Doctrine. Now more than ever, the government needs to speak with one voice on security.

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