

# The United Kingdom's National Interest: A Framework & Definition

By Air Vice-Marshal Andy Turner

---

As the pressure on resources and people rises, the lack of strategic clarity could lead to the development of forces with out-dated equipment, the wrong training and inappropriate readiness. It could also lead to overseas adventures borne on short-term aims, in a vision vacuum and in extremis where activity may be absent a clear aim or the loss of life may be without a strong sense of purpose. To shape and prepare the Country and guide overseas activity, answering the Maréchal's question today remains as pressing as then. This paper will argue that sharper definition of the UK's vital national interest could lead to better national strategy, more stable aims and better shape (people, equipment and training) for the UK's security and defence capability. Without such definition, UK national strategy is difficult to cogently craft, which could lead to hunting operational aims, sub-optimal security capability structure and poorly focussed training. The paper will suggest that national interests could usefully be codified into and those that are 'vital' and that transcend politics, those 'essential' interests that are shorter-term and are likely to be political in nature and those others deemed 'desirable'. Within this, the paper postulates that the following may be a start point for debate over what constitutes the UK's 'vital national interests': to preserve the UK way of life; to protect the UK from catastrophic attack; to protect UK personnel, property and interests overseas; to protect and advance the UK's economic well-being; and to insulate the UK from the effects of overseas shocks. The paper recognises that these are not an explicit and absolute list and that future study might include analysis of: the balance between the UK interests' vulnerability and the strength of the UK levers of power to enforce and protect them; comparative analysis of the UK's national interests against near-peer powers and those in regions of competitive interest; further development and analysis of the concept of 'vital' versus 'essential' interests; the idea of diplomatic constructive in-distinction as a means of protecting wider interests with sub-optimal levels of national power; and a critique on the proposed interests codified above to gain weight around the idea and shuffle them towards policy definition. Above all, the paper seeks to start a conversation on a topic that has extremely limited policy and academic definition and yet 'UK's national interests' are regularly quoted in political messaging.

'De quoi s'agit-il?'

Maréchal Foch, 1916

## Introduction

The 1648 Treaty of Westphalia reset national and international arrangements profoundly. Prior to it socio-economic groupings were drawn together by family, force and/or finance where identity was as much defined by the nature of the amalgamation as it was by history. However, since this point, increasing sophistication has led states to develop an identity of their own, drawing on all aspects of their forebears and, in some cases, their vision of the future. This 'national identity' helps shape the nation and state and points towards what values are the most sacred and must be protected. These vital 'national interests' are an expression of what is held most dear and, given the gravity of committing forces to mortal combat, what governments deem acceptable to go to war over.

But Maréchal Foch warned that 'the idea that morale alone could conquer was an infantile notion.' His prewar books *Les Principes de la Guerre* and *La Conduite de la Guerre*, in an almost Clausewitzian style, spoke in depth to the detail of tactics (the placement of advance guards, the necessity of protection, the elements of firepower, the need for obedience and discipline, etc). He taught the necessity of perpetual adaptability and improvisation and was heard to say '...regulations are all very well for drill but in the hour of danger they are no use...you have to learn to think.' This was summed up in an aphorism he made famous: '*de quoi s'agit-il?*' literally 'what's it all about?' Originally with reference to the Battle of the Somme, where the appalling loss of life balanced the absolute and unbound demand to save the third French Republic from the clear and existential threat of Germany, his meaning could not have been clearer.

One hundred years later the consequences of combat remain as profound as they were then. War's nature at the individual level remains a bloody, ultimate contest for survival. Whilst the clash is undimmed, we have benefited from an array of modern technological developments and the UK has shifted its tolerance for the loss of blood and treasure overseas downwards. This with the accessibility of the combat zone through modern media, the contemporary lack of exposure of our population to real adversity, the nature of war in general, scepticism around international involvement and the degree by which society has shifted from deference to reference has led to a thirst, penetrating throughout our society, for a clearer sense of purpose against which to measure our Armed Forces' sacrifice.

But politics, the pressures of modern Government, the inter-connected nature of society and an upwards shift in the military and human cost of involvement overseas has led to ever less clear definition of what our interests are. This at a time of significant changes in the balance of power – through an economic lens, between religious fissures, towards Asia, with nationalism, enabled by asymmetry, via cyber and space, by means of terrorism and less around water and hydrocarbon scarcity. Of course the lack of national interest definition provides political

freedom to navigate into and within international crises *à la carte*. But strategy should be based on vision and continuity through change; it should not fluctuate with the daily media diet and strategy is not 'what's in the PM's diary'; perhaps it should be more *table d'hôte*.

As the pressure on resources and people rises, the lack of strategic clarity could lead to the development of forces with out-dated equipment, the wrong training and inappropriate readiness. It could also lead to overseas adventures borne on short-term aims, in a vision vacuum and *in extremis* where activity may be absent a clear aim or the loss of life may be without a strong sense of purpose. To shape and prepare the Country and guide overseas activity, answering the Maréchal's question today remains as pressing as then.

## Thesis

This paper argues that sharper definition of the UK's vital national interest could lead to enhanced national strategy, more stable aims and better shape (people, equipment and training) for the UK's security and defence capability. Without such definition, UK national strategy is difficult to cogently craft, which could lead to hunting operational aims, sub-optimal security capability structure and poorly focussed training. It will propose a methodology for defining national interests and a list which might reasonably be debated as a development of the UK's 2010 National Security Strategy (NSS).

## Background

### History

The idea of national interest stems from the Treaty of Westphalia which ended a range of conflicts between European parties and in so doing also defined the state. This new entity became the kernel for a range of new diplomatic practices and principles. One of which, touched on by Machiavelli and first used by France under the direction of its Chief Minister Cardinal Richelieu in the Thirty Years' War, was the idea of *raisons d'État* literally 'state interests'. In an attempt to balance religious power across Europe, Richelieu expanded the definition to be '...a mean between what conscience permits and affairs require...'<sup>1</sup> Carrying an initial malign flavour – 'the national interest' was a justification for war and that states could embark on wars of self-interest – the idea quickly gained momentum through the kinetically turbulent 18th and 19th Centuries. The pursuit of the national interest in this manner is central to realism – that states will always act aggressively and in their own interests. This came to a head at the 1815 Congress of Vienna when national interests were balanced across Europe through the redefinition of boundaries, apportionment of territory and the termination of conflict through treaty; this provided a long-term peace.

The sense of national interest and its perception has developed considerably since this time, poignantly now at the centenary commemoration of the Great War, none more so than at the time of the Treaty of Versailles. Here, perhaps prompted by Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points speech,<sup>2</sup> the sense that national interest was a reasonable justification for war shifted towards the concept of collective security – 'an attack on one is an attack on all'. The League of

Nations embodied this approach but it did not work not least because, ironically, states did not always find it 'in the national interest' to deter each other from the use of force. This dichotomy continues to lay at the heart of diplomacy today – the challenge between rationalising principle with policy.

Lessons from this Treaty and the management of the League played heavily at Bretton Woods as the bifurcated approach to international security emerged post Second World War. The establishment of the United Nations to consider matters *jus ad* and *in bello* against a body of internationally-accepted law and the creation of a security council and secretary general to collectively pronounce on state behaviour and hold them to account when they deviate from internationally-accepted norms. The parallel establishment of NATO and the Warsaw Pact in this era also framed security arrangements around the collective security concept. Whilst NATO and the Warsaw Pact can be said to have delivered their mandate (thus far to have avoided war through collective security arrangements), history suggests the UN has at times been seen as a point of reference and not necessarily deference by states; its authority cannot be said to be all-pervading.

Soon after the 1997 UK General Election the new Government commissioned the *Strategic Defence Review* to set out its initial defence policy and pass judgement on some key programmes, notably the Vanguard submarine and Typhoon aircraft. However, in a true MacMillan 'events dear boy, events' moment the conclusions of this review were rocked by 9/11 and the international reaction to them. This new paradigm led to the issue of the *SDR New Chapter* work in 2002.<sup>3</sup> This was followed in 2006 by the cross-government counter terrorism strategy or 'CONTEST'; which included the counter-proliferation framework and hooks for acquisition in niche areas. Then, in 2008 the Government produced its *New strategic framework for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office* which underlined how national security depends on our work with other nations. Arguably it would have been more elegant for this to have preceded the SDR and CONTEST work.

A range of complex and contentious overseas operations and an array of growing threats followed 9/11 and throughout the last Parliament. This led to a national conversation on the absence of strategy and strategic thinking specifically. In part the debate was focussed on events of the time, but it increasingly began to fixate on the art of strategy, the making of it in Britain and the absence of a strategic culture, a cadre of experts and strategic documentation. The subtext was that the travails of the preceding 10 years might have been helped had there been a 'national strategy' and that responses to crises were isolated from longer-term aims and a wider national framework. Afghanistan is perhaps a case in point – an adjusting aim, varying investment and decisions more borne on personality than principle.<sup>4</sup>

Collectively, this led to the development of the UK's first National Security Strategy in Jun 08.<sup>5</sup> A sound document, but the continued absence of a central, empowered guiding staff led to the House of Commons Defence Committee reflection in May 09 that national strategy '...

co-ordination at the political level is not as clear as it might be and...it only reaches the top of the in-tray at times of crises...<sup>6</sup> A further Joint Committee report reflected '...the use of the Armed Forces must be rooted in the framework...the Defence contribution should be coordinated with the full range of instruments at home or overseas...'<sup>7</sup>

In May 10 the new government was confronted by the financial challenge and associated Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR), whilst a flurry of structural changes was introduced. This was at a time when global operations were at a peak, predominantly in Afghanistan, but in 25 other countries besides. At home Northern Ireland and home security continued to be significant and London 2012 was a growing thread. Emergent challenges also included the rise of terrorism, a spate of hostage situations, prolific piracy in the Indian Ocean and the imminent Arab Spring that continues to metamorphose today. At this time the security Ministries were conducting the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) and the preceding Administration's National Security, International Relations and Development (NSID) Cabinet sub-Committee, which met infrequently and debated issues on an event-related cadence, was replaced by a National Security Council. Supported by the small NSS Team, it had a new format, new committees, new challenges and new people. The Secretariat's role and remit was extensive – setting an annual agenda, building sub-committees and drafting papers; alongside Cabinet, the new NSC and its small industrious secretariat became an inner axle of Government.

In parallel, the narrative that '...we don't do strategy well, indeed that we don't do it...'<sup>8</sup> had grown weight and led, just after the last election, to a line of analysis through the House of Commons Public Accounts Select Committee to enquire 'Who Does UK Strategy?' A number of esteemed commentators gave evidence that added colour, fact and perspective. All of which broadly aligned with the Committee's lament that we have '...simply fallen out of the habit, and have lost the culture of strategy making.'<sup>8</sup> A number of recommendations followed, chiefly amongst which was that '...the recently established National Security Council and the post of National Security Adviser should have their remit widened to encompass National Strategy with a central coordinating role...'<sup>9</sup> However, by the time these recommendations came to the fore, the National Security Strategy was in its final draft stage. Pace was driven by the need to synchronise and sequence Coalition policy reports and, in particular, the urgent need to publish a national security strategy prior to the SDSR and CSR reports, where deductions of the former should have informed the latter. Given this context, it is not surprising that the Oct 10 Strategy *Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The National Security Strategy*, which established a solid and sound basis for much of Government's security policy, was a good start, but could have been better in some areas.

However, this period must have felt similar to that in the United States around the publication of its first National Security Strategy (NSS) Report. Directed by the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act, which legislated that the President must submit a National Security Strategy Report to Congress,<sup>10</sup> President Reagan delivered this first report on 1 Jan 1987, 93 days after the Bill was

signed into law. It is widely accepted that it was rushed, only reflected the current strategic thinking and made little or no attempt to describe the means of integrating the various tools of statecraft available to national security planners. Instead it emphasized the military instruments of power and did not document, much less integrate, strategy across geographic regions. The 13 submissions since the initial 1 Jan 1987 report have become increasingly more visionary in outlook, strategic in nature and inter-departmental in means.

## Contention

But does having a clear, simple national strategy help? To provide independence, scrutiny and to ensure the UK Government was held to account, the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy (JCNSS), comprising 12 Members and 10 Lords, was formed in Oct 10. It has reported three times, each time setting out significant criticism. The first report stated that ‘...there is no evidence that the NSS has influenced decisions ...if [it] is not guiding choices then it needs to be revised...’ and ‘...there should be an “overarching strategy”, a document designed to guide government decision-making and crisis management both at home and on the international stage...’<sup>11</sup> In publishing its second report the Chair, Rt Hon Margaret Beckett MP, said ‘...the last NSS, SDSR and CSR were (understandably) produced in great haste, and are the weaker for it. There is little sign of the forward planning needed to avoid those mistakes being repeated – still less of an approach to build consensus which could establish a sound foundation of long-term planning for our nation’s security...’<sup>12</sup> The most recent report states that ‘...the NSC appears to have focused on operational matters and short-term imperatives, rather than long-term strategy...major strategic policy changes appear to have been made by individual Government departments without discussion at the NSC...’<sup>13</sup>

Symptomatic of these wider criticisms, but the central focus for this paper is the way in which the 2010 National Security Strategy defines the national interest. It talks of ‘...our enlightened national interest as being an inter-connected and mutually supportive sense of security, prosperity and freedom and that this is our national interest...’ It goes on to set out that ‘... our prosperity enables us to afford the skills and capabilities we need to advance our security from military training and arms, to technical and scientific expertise and equipment. Security and prosperity form a virtuous circle. Without the security of our land and infrastructure and the ability of our citizens to live their lives freely, the foundations of our prosperity, trade, industry, enterprise and education would be undermined. Above all, we act to maintain our way of life: to protect our people and the freedoms we have built for ourselves, and the values of our society and institutions...’<sup>14</sup> Rightly, these are all-encompassing words, but greater clarity (another level of detail) would materially contribute to the understanding of what and where are the UK national interests.

This paper does not argue for an explicit definition of national interest that constrains or curtails state diplomacy or forecloses on security options. Certainly, greater precision in policy and diplomatic intent can be a risk; if Government identifies with too much accuracy its aim, intent and perhaps any red lines, it is likely to be exploited. The 2013 Syria debate in

Washington DC is instructive. Whether the threat of US action was misunderstood, calculated as to be unlikely or simply that President Assad's tolerance for pain and misery (on the Syrian people) was unbound is not clear. Governments are unlikely to issue similarly sharp policy direction again unless they intend to make the full weight of state power available to force through its will. Whatever the circumstances, states are likely to be clearer about what they mean and that they have the capability and will to back it up. Contemporarily it is interesting that, despite the grave and penetrating implications of the Ukrainian crisis, no red lines were drawn. This constructive in-distinction, the creative lack of clarity, is an art; it is part of diplomacy. Ivor Robert's edit of Satow's *Diplomatic Practice* sheds much light on this and is perhaps the pre-eminent handbook on the subject for practitioners. Perhaps this is most succinctly captured in his reflection that '...the strong do what they can, the weak do what they must...'<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Sir Jeremy Greenstock's reflection on what the whole text has to offer is sharp: '...having clarity over the rules of the game, separating duty from stupidity, finding the right words when the sword might be the alternative, are all part of the practise of diplomacy at its finest...'

The absence of a detailed and explicit guiding national strategy has other value; it allows Government to derive policy aims as they encounter problems, measured acutely against the context, pressures and opportunities at the time. This approach offers the maximum flexibility, however the corollary is that long-term strategy, continuity of relationships, strategic influence and 'upstream engagement' all benefit from stable, enduring aims. In practice however, agile and responsive Government has a double edge. US Government insight on Riyadh's reflection of the West's support for the arrest of President Mubarak in Cairo was gloomy – 'friends for 30 years and gone in a day'.<sup>16</sup> In here is the juxtaposition of strategy over tactics. A true strategy will find enduring values and purposes of our overseas aims where the investment in or protection of relations may be at the expense of the short-term. Certainly in the Egyptian context Israel sees it through this lens – a 30+ year territory-for-peace-and-security treaty was ceded in a night to a revolution. Whilst Israel co-operates very closely with Egypt, some 39 months and 5 regimes later there is continued uncertainty. These are just data points, but the principle applies elsewhere - in the Gulf region, across North Africa, in South America, within Europe and across the Near East - in the absence of strategy, how is the UK to best metre its limited power effectively and efficiently?

Indistinct policy is difficult to follow, even more challenging to plan for and very hard to deliver against. At the core of this is the substitution of ends, ways and means with values and principles; and long-term strategy with short-term direction. If strategy is to be the balancing of Ends, Ways and Means it is vital to have clear sight of the Ends first. The absence of a written strategy is not a good enough reason for change, but it could lead to wider implications, some of which may include:

- Short-term approaches that compromise longer-term aims
- Evolving intent and shifting objectives that require more time to deliver

- Unintended consequences – protracted involvement, opportunity costs and inequitable approaches
- Uncertainty amongst partner nations about how the UK might react to emergent security challenges
- Poor preparation of contingent capability – people, equipment, support, partners and proxies

These reflections are beginning to be played more publically, beyond the immediate security community; *Defence Strategy: Missing in Action*, the 8 Mar 14<sup>17</sup> Economist leader is one of a number that echo the JCNSS 3rd report and touch on the absence of strategy and related purpose, meaning and role of the UK's Armed Forces post Afghanistan. More could be done to sharpen the National Security Strategy and define the national interests in particular if we are to avoid these pitfalls. '...The Coalition Government has given national security the highest priority...'<sup>18</sup>; to this end sharper definition of interests is vital.

## A Framework

### Structure

Sir Lawrence Freedman's treatise *Strategy* is seminal. It captures the ideas of strategy from the earliest writings to contemporary warfare and describes where strategy sits. He and others recognise that the purpose of the national strategy is to protect the national interests. But what is 'the national interest' or what are the interests of our nation? Although there is very little writing directly on the subject there is a surfeit of references to it but not definition. Commentators<sup>19</sup> suggest that our interests are derived from the national character and its identity. This in turn is derived from both the notion of the nation and the state where the nation represents the families, tribes and allegiances that make up our peoples and the history, culture, governance and philosophy that defines the state.

In advising citizens on referenda questionnaires, the Office for National Statistics suggests that National identity is '...a measure of self-identity. A question on national identity allows a person to express a preference as to which country or countries, nation or nations that they feel most affiliated to...'<sup>20</sup> In his book *Patriots* that charts the history and acclaims the death of the British national identity, Richard Weight professes that national identity is 'how people define themselves in accordance with the nation they feel they belong to.'<sup>21</sup> In the 1960s relationships that for over 200 years had sustained the British people began to erode: their relationship with Parliament and the belief that it was sovereign and essentially belonged to them as key component of a free society; their relationship with the armed forces and the idea of a superior British imperial world; their relationship with Protestantism and the idea of a free heritage; their relationship with manufacturing and their reputation as the world's oldest industrial nation; and finally their relationship with themselves as British and alike and growing more alike in fundamental ways.<sup>22</sup> The perceived weakening of attachment to the nation and state is a possible effect of globalisation.



Structurally some have argued that local identities have become more important as nation states have been weakened by transnational corporations and political entities. Delanty speaks of a legalistic 'constitutional patriotism', that is commitment to and identification with constitutional norms rather than the state, territory, nations or cultural traditions, as the possible basis for European identity. As David Pearson notes, 'Nationality, 'race' and ethnicity are not natural categories or predetermined identities, they are political constructs with shifting memberships and meanings. They are ways of naming oneself and others, of representing identities and interests within different orders.'<sup>23</sup> Contemporary analysts often categorise nationalisms as more or less 'ethnic' or 'civic' - according to the centrality of claims referring to cultural and historical characteristics (shared origin, language, traditions) versus political aspects (territory, society, citizenship) in the definition of the nation.<sup>24</sup> Bruce Carrington and Geoffrey Short's paper *What Makes a Person British? Children's conceptions of their national culture and identity*<sup>25</sup> is fascinating for its rejection of a largely monolithic and ethnically undifferentiated description – a post globalisation state?

But in a broader sense what is the United Kingdom? In Nov 13 the Daily Mail declared '... Marks & Spencer is not just any shop... it is the British shop, as much a part of our cultural heritage as the Women's Institute, the BBC and the Queen...'<sup>26</sup> The Cabinet Office's 2010 *A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The National Security Strategy* set out a more sophisticated sense of UK identity including: '...at the heart of many global networks; the English language gives us the ability to share ideas with millions – perhaps billions; connected to many parts of the world through our diverse population; our security, prosperity and freedom are interconnected and mutually supportive; security and prosperity form a virtuous circle; to maintain our way of life: to protect our people and the freedoms we have built for ourselves, and the values of our society and institutions...'<sup>27</sup> Better than the Daily Mail and incontrovertible but, as with the NSS's interest definition, these words offer little practical insight and analytical help.

Greater definition of our identity is possible and necessary if we are to gain a sense of what is vital to protect and importantly that will also carry the country's support. Perhaps a contemporary example of this linkage – from identity, to interest, to policy, to activity – is Russia and the recent Ukraine/Crimea crisis. The Economist charts the recent origin of Russian defence reform as '...nearly seven years ago...'<sup>28</sup> when in the aftermath of the Aug 2008 Georgian war, perceived in Moscow as partially successful but wholly a signal of defence capacity and capability decline, it declares that '...it is an article of faith for the Russian President that a great power must be able to project military force. He sees the modernisation of Russia's armed forces as a vital national interest...';<sup>28</sup> the position is sound, but this is part of the Russian identity and not an interest per se. The Moscow Carnegie Center suggests that the Ukrainian conflict is '...far more complex and difficult to fit into anyone's neat theory...'<sup>29</sup> But given the Georgian precedent and the re-equipment since, perhaps the internal chaos, Crimean secession and Donetsk disorder are simply opportunities that President Putin has exploited for wider Russian nationalistic gain.

Below this paper expands on the NSS's characterisation of national interest to show how identity might be developed usefully, so that interests might be determined. Through some critical lenses, inexhaustively, but beyond the BBC, 007, WI and M&S, these might include:

- **History** – an old, strong, trading nation state; maritime-orientation; one origin of democracy; post imperial; a history of engaging and being engaged in conflict and closely connected to the two World Wars; a once economic powerhouse, through contraction and into a new era of financial and technological leadership.
- **Cultural** – internationalised and partially integrated society; multi-ethnic; open, free and conservative.
- **Religion** – Christian origins, partially secular and generally welcoming.
- **Philosophy** – innovation, dynamism, mercantilism (nation of shopkeepers), free-market orientation and entrepreneurialism; fair-minded and rules-orientated.
- **Business** – anchored in the markets financially, with a limited industrial/manufacturing capacity; innovative in outlook, cutting-edge (internet, machinery, pharmaceuticals and infrastructure) in development, but not exploitative.
- **Opportunity** – class-based, partially accessible, less aggressive than the US 'frontier spirit'.
- **Status** – key representative place at all the critical World-governing bodies - UN P5, WTO, G7, G20, EU, NATO; generally club members, but on our own terms.

Certainly disputable, but if these represents a sense or part of our national identity, it is possible to develop a range of interests. These range from the fundamental right to free speech, collective protection from terrorist attack to the price of petrol and voting rights on local parish councils. Whilst all do contribute to the sense of who we are and what we aspire to, not all of these can be said to be so pivotal to our identity that they are worthy of uncompromising effort to protect; hence, it is sensible to think of these as on a spectrum of gravity and import. To simplify this, the paper proposes a scalable approach to the classification of our interests into vital, essential and desirable; loosely defined as follows:

- **Vital National Interests** – those that lead to the heart of our identity and way of life; these transcend politics, are generally long-lasting and are universal in public acceptance and agreement; these may include fundamental freedoms, cultural and ethnic tolerance, core elements of our national power and/or the structure and nature of our system of governance.
- **Essential National Interests** – political in nature; those that may derive from state-level commitments, possibly policy orientated, but that may be closer in horizon and less universally shared; these may include treaty obligations, alliances and other structural relationships; but they would continue to be critical to the maintenance of our way of life and the extent of people's aspirations.
- **Desirable National Interests** – almost by exclusion, desirable national interests represent everything else that contributes to and helps make up the nation and state as we see it; conceptually, they could curvy only fractured and marginal sponsorship from elements of the

country and public; they may be temporary in nature; but generally they are too diverse and expansive to warrant closer definition.

This classification, and Weight's analysis in *Patriot*, suggests some variation by and over time. In classifying interests in these 3 groups, there is likely to be time and political cycle-based variation. It feels right that as a nation evolves, so will its interests. Indeed, the changes to UK's interests (culturally, economically and organisationally) have been profound since July 1945. The Empire has largely been ceded. The fabric of the country – the class system, education and welfare support - have changed dramatically. The crushing post War financial position forced the country to look very differently at itself - how it generated cash flow and GDP growth. Little of the pre-War industry was untouched in the post War years and manufacturing has been replaced by a service-led commercial society. The country has experienced the deep enrichment of immigration in different waves since 1945. Numerous global geo-political shocks have shaped our outlook some of which include: the 1956 Suez crisis, the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, the 1989 fall of the Warsaw Pact and Cold War, the 1992 exit from the ERM, the 1995 partial peace in Northern Ireland, 9/11, the 2008 financial crash and most recently the 2010 'Arab Spring'; these have all shifted our national priorities to protect our way of life, institutions and spirit. It is self-evident that further and future adjustment, to both identity and interests, is inevitable. Finnemore spells this out when she says that states change over time as will their preferences and interests.<sup>30</sup> Given this, it would be wise to cater for such change and factor analysis, re-definition and publication into our strategic cadence; the quintennial review of NSS and SDSR may be the next most appropriate time to do this.

National scale and relative power (between peers and adversaries) have a role to play here too. It stands to reason that the greater the power of the state, the more freedom it has to pursue and protect its national interest; the smaller, the lesser. For example, the recent annexation of Crimea from Ukraine was clearly against the incumbent Ukrainian national interest (albeit as expressed by the acting President Oleksandr Turchynov after the Ukrainian Parliament ousted Viktor Yanukovich on 21 Feb 14). However, Ukraine's relative size to Russia and the absence of other states willing to help protect their interests (territorial integrity, strategic resources (bases, access and facilities) and the legitimacy of the state) meant that Ukraine could not resist Crimean secession to Russia. Conversely, the Chinese imposition of East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone in the vicinity of the Senkaku islands led immediately to the 26 Nov 13 planned passage of USAF B-52 aircraft directly through it in an act (of defiance) protecting its (and others) right to free passage in international airspace. Whilst any state may establish its sense of national identity and interests, they matter little if its levers of power are inadequate to enforce its position.

Is it the case that the definition and projection of explicit national interests are a luxury for large states, a fantasy for small states and are conscience-challenging for medium states? In this context the UK is neither a large nor a medium state, but somewhere in between. Its levers of power often deny an ability to independently act without the support of others, bar some

circumstances where national resourcing has been focussed on a specific goal; protecting the Falkland Islands might be a case in point. Therefore, the UK will have to continue to box cleverly if it is not to be found wanting in either capability or the will to act if challenged. We will have to pick the timing and ground of any unilateral robust stances with some care and carefully align Allies, partners and proxies where there is a risk of overmatch (in hard power, fiscal resilience, endurance in any sense and legitimacy). Self-evidently our levers of power and their connection to our national interests are a critical link for force structure and capability definition for all of our security Departments. Further study here, to establish the linkages and dependencies, would add real value.

Before proposing what the UK's vital national interests might be, it is perhaps valuable to set out what they are not. Interests are things we might seek to protect. At the most facetious level the UK's interests are not 'what's in the PM's diary' as one senior official has once quipped nor are they concepts, principles or goals. Our interests do not include membership of international institutions; although they may be served through membership. Our interests are not activities – securing facilities, stationing forces, training partners – but again they may be secured through these activities. At another level, if definition is to have any relevance for policy development, our interests are not theoretical or ethereal concepts, nor are they principles or behaviours – although again these may contribute towards the protection of our interests. As such, they cannot be prosperity, World peace, poverty eradication, climate stability, halting the spread of HIV/AIDS and/or providing universal primary education. High-minded and valid, these are unlikely to be interests states would defend with unbounded resource.

### **National Interests – A Proposal**

So if national interests are derived from our identity, that there are broadly 3 levels (vital, essential and desirable) of longevity, continuity, political bias and popular approval and that they will vary over time, it is possible to craft a list. So what follows is a debate-opener – six vital and a selection of essential national interests, no prioritisation and some supporting characteristics against each.

### **Vital UK National Interests**

Probably the first set of ideas that derive from the concept of our identity is the rights of the individual. Progressively codified in the 1215 Magna Carta, the 1628 Petition of Right, the 1689 Bill of Rights, 1998 Human Rights Act and the 2010 Equality Act these protected and assured the human rights and fundamental freedoms of our people. One could express this as: freedom of expression and movement, to serve and worship; from suspicion and control; of secularism, tolerance and ethnic assimilation. It also suggests the right to life, justice, protection and democracy. The Parliament Acts of 1911 and 1949 and the 1998 devolution Acts assure the survival of a constitutional monarchy government, regional institutions and representative bodies. In sum these lead to the idea that it is a British vital national interest to **preserve our way of life** in all its facets.

It follows that the first responsibility of government is towards its people and to assure them from interference by and from other states – security is its first and primary role. But it is probably reasonable to see this as bifurcated – home and away. At home citizens expect to be protected from a catastrophic attack, which requires *inter alia*: a cutting edge intelligence capability; survival against chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear attacks; and protection against cyber and conventional attack. This would require the development of resilient border controls, response, and organisation and the development and protection of the will of the people. One would also expect Government to develop redundancy in areas of critical national assets and capabilities. So another British vital national interest might be the **protection of the UK from catastrophic attack**.

‘Away’ we must ensure there is a security guarantee to our citizens, property and interests overseas. For citizens this would require timely consular advice, direct support and, if necessary, evacuation. The Government has been explicitly clear, most recently in endorsing the Falklands sovereignty referendum and in the UN, that our overseas territories will retain the right to self-determination of their sovereignty and associated citizenship. Many of our critical national assets (hydrocarbons, critical minerals, internet nodal points, etc) reside overseas and therefore UK support to those Allies and partners who govern, oversee or enable supply of our critical national capabilities might also be a vital national interest. Therefore, the **protection of UK personnel, property and interests overseas** could be a British vital national interest.

The UK’s fundamental well-being is derived from our wealth which is reflected in our GDP and driven by commercial and sovereign activity. Over the least 50 years, as manufacturing and heavy industry has progressively dropped back, the financial sector has become a particular engine of our economy. Without cash flow, capitol for investment or liquidity, the UK Government would very quickly grind to a halt and individuals’ ability to go about their business would be affected almost immediately. The banking system, access to cash and the seamless way with which we conduct individual transactions are vital to the UK. In addition, on an international level, the way in which the World is financially structured, with controls, risk weightings, transparency and standards is similarly important. This encapsulates the World Bank (WB), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Trade Organisation (WTO) as part of this structure. We have seen, through the 2008 financial crash, just how quickly and profoundly a shock in this area can have far-reaching and long-lasting effects. Therefore, the **protection and advancement of the UK’s economic well-being** and the associated structures might well be a vital national interest.

However we view the World, state borders are less hard than they were 20 years ago given the all-penetrating nature of the internet, global commercial activity and the degree to which the World is accessible to all. Borders that previously would have offered some protection now generally won’t. This suggests that we are vulnerable at home to shocks in far-away places. Self-evidently, these events are not predictable, but insuring and insulating against their effects – building resilience, influence in places of uncertainty and unity of perspective in

supra-national bodies (UN, *et al*) – can help to attenuate their effects. In regions where there are significant British interests (large expatriate community, financial centres, commercial hubs, hydrocarbon reserves, areas of known trans-national terrorism fecundity, etc), strong, capable, interoperable and like-minded Allies and institutions (HMG's Building Stability Overseas concept) can mitigate risks. In other areas, the development of a network of strong partners, proxies and surrogates in the vicinity of our overseas national interests might be a key approach. Whilst not a conventional security interest, climate change could lead to an array of fragile outcomes<sup>31</sup> around which we may wish to consolidate opinion and lead international policy. Hence, a strong/leading role in Global governing bodies (UN, WB, IMF, WTO, G7, G20, EU, NATO, the Elders, etc) all could be central to the preservation of stability at home, through stability overseas. Security and prosperity do form a virtuous (and vicious if not protected) circle;<sup>32</sup> therefore, the **insulation of the UK from the effects of overseas shocks** might well be a core vital national interest.

### Essential UK National Interests

If the above five represent interests that would carry consent across the country and against which we should place considerable effort to assure against their demise, there are other interests that sit below this level. In some areas 'essential interests' are those that have not yet become vital, but they may become so. Hence, some proposed below are an extension of those deemed vital above. Other essential interests may lie where public consensus is less solid; these might include emergent issues (climate change may be one), political issues (such as immigration, secularism, etc) or those which support or directly enable the vital interests such as a World-class education system (schools, colleges and universities), state support of a commercial sector (cyber, submarine building, nuclear industry, etc) or the development of trade and commerce links (bi-laterally, multi-laterally through institutions or business-to-business).

The following is a non-exhaustive set of examples, some from the World Development Report 2014,<sup>33</sup> that might be considered essential UK national interests, but do not need further codification at this point. The first area that might be considered an essential national interest is that of **culture** where interests might include: promotion of international police and judicial standards to combat crime and corruption; promotion of enforceable laws against racial or ethnic discrimination; secure and respected private property rights; promotion of regulations for consumer protection and environmental preservation; and promotion of the Commonwealth to advance UK values and standards.

Another area is that of **security** where interests might be: development of risk-focused bi-lateral sy relationships with key nations and states; denial of trans-national terrorist safe havens; projection of disaster mitigation skills and capacity in vulnerable areas; protection of critical UK industrial manufacturing capability (maritime, aircraft, missile and CBRN manufacture); promotion of essential security industrial partnerships at home and overseas; investment in key partners' military and security capacity building; and driving innovation, resilience and redundancy in our energy sector and its reserves.

Under **finance**, our essential national interests might include the promotion of: macro-prudential regulation to lessen financial crises and avoid bailouts; national financial strategies that addresses inclusion, depth, and stability; transparent and credible monetary policy based on price stability; provision for natural disasters, financial crises, and pensions of aging populations; and regulations to foster consumer protection and competition among financial institutions.

**Commerce** is an important area too and possibly an area of essential national interest that might include: secure and light-touch trading freedoms with key partners – TTIP, EU, Northern Gp, others; development of an attractive financial climate for international business; development of a series of UK research and development hubs for industry; enhancement of UK industries (pharmaceutical, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, etc); development of World-class transportation architecture at home; and promotion of growth and inclusion policies for impoverished regions overseas. Closely supporting all of the above, **education** could also be an area of essential national interest; this might include: maintenance of a World-class UK schools and university system; the development of the optimum UK skills and employment climate; and the development of an active, cutting-edge think tank community.

All of this needs more detailed assessment, analysis, greater codification and debate. Some of the essential interests may be deemed ‘desirable’ in nature and therefore fall away from this list; others may become vital in the sense of consensus and the need to protect them. As stated earlier, these interests will change with Global context, geo-political tremors and the parliamentary cycle to name but a few influences. The key is to be clear as to what they are, configure policy towards a set of priorities to assure ourselves they are protected and be clear with the public where the limits of our levers of power lie. As a medium-large state we may not have the power and influence at home or internationally to do as we please. Therefore we must apply rigour, sharp analysis and focus to those activities we choose to do. Where we cannot act alone, we must garner international support, through influence and cogent debate to achieve our aims and assure against those national interests that are most dear.

## **Conclusions**

### **Summary**

This paper has suggested that the evolution of a suite of National Security documentation represents a big and necessary step to codify and drive the state’s security architecture. This is especially valuable as the net capacity is reducing and therefore there is a need for closer co-ordination. Of the documentation produced thus far there is a clear expansion in the depth, sophistication and utility of the thinking, policy and direction that it encapsulates. However, as the various Parliamentary bodies and a number of external commentators have suggested, there is room for improvement if Government is to drive true strategy, address emergent issues in the context of a wider plan and build relationships, capability and influence around the World to meet its aspirations. The next opportunity to develop some of this

thinking and advance the security cannon is the 2015 quintennial iteration of National Security Strategy development and the subsequent Foreign, Home and Security reviews.

Whilst there are many areas that would warrant some adjustment, most of which would benefit from greater study, this paper has focussed on the definition of the National Interest. It has argued that our interests derive from our sense of identity and that this stems from the sense of where our peoples have come from, where they want to go to and what constitutes our state. Interests are likely to be in constant flux and vary as the assimilation of ethnicity, culture and peoples into the country changes. They will also vary according to contemporary shocks (which have the habit of occurring at least every 10 years) and against the World's challenges such as climate change, financial stability and international trade. Our interests have changed and will continue to change.

This variation over and by time is a further driver to understand them in more detail – without such acuity we may chase an ill-defined target and insure against a range of unnecessary capabilities, functions and risks. At the same time our interests do drive our approach to home and away policy pronouncements, both of which must be tuned to our national levers of power. We may not be able to afford to be too strident in areas where we have little leverage if challenged. It is perhaps worth restating that simply defining the national interests could be conceived as a luxury for large states, a fantasy for small states and conscience-tugging for medium states; the UK straddles the gap between the first and last. Hence, the quintennial reviews of NSS and SDSR are an ideal time to take stock, re-assess national priorities and clarify where our policy position is on resourcing resilience, developing capability and driving forward a wide agenda of growth.

It is also true that there are a range of levels of interests. In truth it is a continuous spectrum of policy aspects Government may wish to pursue, but for simplicity have been codified them into 3 levels. Those vital national interests judged to be those that transcend politics, endure beyond parliaments and constitute the very fabric of our way of life. Slightly below are a range of policy-driven interests, which may vary over time and may not be universally agreed amongst the public, but are by the majority, titled essential. Then there is 'the rest' - a category that does not bear greater definition, is unlikely to drive a resourcing position in any Department, but may constitute a critical part of life for some of the population.

## **Recommendations**

This paper recommends that greater definition of the national interest could help strategy development, the preparation of capability and decision-making. It suggests that national interests could usefully be codified into those that are 'vital' and that transcend politics, those 'essential' interests that are shorter-term and are likely to be political in nature and those others deemed 'desirable'. It proposes five vital national interests for the UK which include: to preserve our way of life; to protect the UK from catastrophic attack; to protect UK personnel, property and interests overseas; to protect and advance the UK's economic well-being; and to



insulate the UK from the effects of overseas shocks. This paper certainly recognises that these are a proposal and not an explicit and absolute list.

This paper also recognises that further work may be commissioned to develop these ideas further. Areas of future study might include further analysis of where the UK sits with respect to its interests and levers of power to govern the conceptual employment of state power (diplomacy, information, military power and economic leverage). There would be value in greater analysis of UK national interests against those derived in other states, particularly near-peer powers such as France and Germany and those in regions of interest such as *inter alia* Argentina, Nigeria, India, Japan and Korea. Further analytical work might usefully be expended on the development of the concept of vital versus essential; the paper proposes a boundary – politics or transcending politics, but there may be elements that straddle this and therefore influence or distort the overall findings. There would be benefit also from analysing further the concept of constructive in-distinction mentioned earlier - the degree to which definition closes down political options and is therefore undesirable is unclear. Finally, a critique on those interests codified above as vital need analytical reflection if they are to gain weight and be borne into policy.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Church, W F; *Richelieu and Reason of State*; Princeton University Press; 1973; pg168.

<sup>2</sup> Wilson W; *Fourteen Points*; Joint Session of the US Congress; 8 Jan, 1918.

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Defence; *The Strategic Defence Review: A New Chapter*; Stationery Office; July 2002.

<sup>4</sup> De Waal, J; *Depending on the Right People: British Political-Military Relations 2001-10*; Chatham House, London; 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Cabinet Office; *The National Security Strategy for UK: Security for the Next Generation*; Stationery Office; 25 Jun 09.

<sup>6</sup> House of Commons Defence Committee; *Sixth Report Session 2008-2009*; Stationery Office; 5 May 09.

<sup>7</sup> Cabinet Office; *Joint Committee Memorandum*; Stationery Office; 17 Mar 10.

<sup>8</sup> House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee; *Who does UK National Strategy?*; 12 Oct 10; pg3.

<sup>9</sup> Op Cit; pg3.

<sup>10</sup> US Congress; *Goldwater-Nichols Act, 1986*; 50 USC § 404A – Annual National Security Strategy Report.

<sup>11</sup> Cabinet Office; *First Review of the National Security Strategy 2010*; Stationery Office; 8 Mar 12.

<sup>12</sup> Cabinet Office; *Second Review of the National Security Strategy 2010*; Stationery Office; 11 Jul 12.

<sup>13</sup> Cabinet Office; *The work of the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy in 2012*, Stationery Office; 28 Feb 13.

<sup>14</sup> Cabinet Office; *The National Security Strategy for UK: Security for the Next Generation*; Stationery Office; 25 Jun 09; pg22.

- <sup>15</sup> Roberts I; *Satlow's Diplomatic Practice*; OUP; 2009; pg1..
- <sup>16</sup> Conversations with Dir National Strategy, White House, Washington DC; Apr- Jul 13.
- <sup>17</sup> The Economist; *Defence Strategy: Missing in Action*; 8 Mar 14.
- <sup>18</sup> Cabinet Office; *The National Security Strategy for UK: Security for the Next Generation*; Stationery Office; 25 Jun 09; pg9.
- <sup>19</sup> Prof Hew Strachan & Dr Rob Johnson; CCW Seminar; DPIR, Oxford University; 10 Feb 14.
- <sup>20</sup> ONS; *National Identity*; <http://www.ons.gov.uk/>; 2014.
- <sup>21</sup> Weight R; *Patriots*; MacMillan; 2012.
- <sup>22</sup> Colls, R; *What British identity is - and what it is not*; <http://www.historytoday.com/>; 2012.
- <sup>23</sup> Pearson, D; *The Politics of Ethnicity in Settler Societies* Basingstoke: Palgrave; 2001; pg16.
- <sup>24</sup> McCrone, D; *The Sociology of Nationalism*. London: Routledge; 1998.
- <sup>25</sup> Carrington & Short; *What Makes a Person British?*; 06 Jul 2006; pg 228.
- <sup>26</sup> Vine, S; Daily Mail; 6 Nov 13; <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/indiahome/indianews/article-2488039/html>.
- <sup>27</sup> Cabinet Office; *The National Security Strategy for UK: Security for the Next Generation*; pages 21 & 22; Stationery Office; 25 Jun 09.
- <sup>28</sup> Economist; *Putin's new model army*; 24 May 14.
- <sup>29</sup> Rumer, R & Weiss, S; *The unravelling of Ukraine*; Politico, 14 May 14.
- <sup>30</sup> Finnemore, M; *National Interests in International Society*; Cornell University Press; 1996.
- <sup>31</sup> Taleb, N; *Antifragile*; Penguin, London, 6 Jun 13.
- <sup>32</sup> Cabinet Office; *The National Security Strategy for UK: Security for the Next Generation*; Stationery Office; 25 Jun 09; pg22.
- <sup>33</sup> World Bank; *World Development Report 2014; Risk and Opportunity - Managing Risk for Development*; Oct 2013.

## **This article has been republished online with Open Access.**

Ministry of Defence © Crown Copyright 2023. The full printed text of this article is licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0. To view this licence, visit <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/>. Where we have identified any third-party copyright information or otherwise reserved rights, you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned. For all other imagery and graphics in this article, or for any other enquires regarding this publication, please contact: Director of Defence Studies (RAF), Cormorant Building (Room 119), Shrivenham, Swindon, Wiltshire SN6 8LA.

 **ROYAL  
AIR FORCE**  
**Centre for Air and  
Space Power Studies**

**OGL**