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# Does the United Kingdom do National Strategy?

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As astute observers of today's conflicts will have realised, battlefields are remarkable for their geographical consistency. The topography of conflict – where wars happen – hasn't changed all that much over centuries. If Bismark, Stalin, Churchill, Eisenhower, and – perhaps – Machiavelli might recognise the conflict zones (and even styles) of today, they might also be familiar with the conversations happening in Western capitals about national security topics, whether about resource allocation, prioritisation, infrastructure protection, funding, the dangers of escalation, as well as the dependability of allies. It is not just the norms and forms of warfare (the death and destruction of peoples and their urban landscapes) that have not changed fundamentally: neither have the difficulties in finding solutions that do not impose crippling costs elsewhere in community.

What our political and military predecessors did manage to achieve was a series of grounded conversations regarding the value not just of sacrifice but also of pragmatism, about ascertaining not only what might realistically be achieved within accepted parameters, but also whether those parameters might, in extremis, need to be redrawn. The lexicon of grand concepts that might, on the face of it, offer to deliver the grandest of strategic ambitions, was carefully balanced by subtleties and nuance, founded on a deep understanding of what complex ideas like deterrence, coercion, and containment actually meant for a given conflict.

Political and military leaders driving national security today appear, however, to have lost this critical ability to balance ambition against resource or, in common military parlance, to ensure that ‘ends, ways and means’ are in balance with each other. Ironically and very alarmingly, the result is that we appear no longer to understand the limits of the big strategic concepts upon which the West has ‘bet the farm’ since the end of World War II. Neither, it appears, is there the desire to spend time and mental capacity in learning about these ideas, debating their relative merits, discussing their relative viability and questioning whether ‘ambition’ now requires more ‘resource’. In contrast, Western leaders’ discussions of national security and strategy are governed and regulated in purely fiscal terms. Wars are fought, support is loaned, alliances are formed on the basis of one simple question: “What is the minimum amount of money we must expend on this issue?” When this is the starting point for discussions over the central question of national security and defence, we should all start to worry.

When posing bigger questions, as General Sir Patrick Sanders, the professional head of the British Army, did recently, the political reaction has been rather peculiar. The idea that the UK might need to consider a ‘citizen army’, for example, if it is to remain a power with some martial credibility on the world stage, was met with ire and tantrums in some quarters, and wilful misunderstanding in others.

Sanders made a subtle and very sobering point: the global security environment is altering in such a way, and at such a pace, that the UK might have to reassess the scope, strength and stamina of its strategic culture. ('Strategic culture' is a much debated term. We use it here to mean the national confidence, capacity and processes to manage and deploy military force as part of the accepted range of legitimate and effective policy instruments). Speaking in measured terms, Sanders argued that this 'pre-war generation' should not only understand current strategic trends but should also be aware of our own strategic history and our propensity for basing strategic decisions upon wishful thinking rather than hard analysis: "How we respond will reverberate through history." The words 'conscript' or 'conscription' appear nowhere in his relatively short speech although he did float the idea of a shift in culture and sensibility towards a 'citizen army'. Nevertheless, the established media, as well as some specialist commentators, decided immediately that this was indeed a discussion about conscription, or national military service, and spent several days talking amongst themselves rather than addressing the wider and more urgent issues of policy and requirement, ambition and resource.

This distraction from Sanders' pointed intervention is emblematic. An unwillingness to engage with the critical discussion whilst offering simplistic analysis allows politicians and civil servants to respond without apparently understanding the import of what was being offered for discussion. Sanders seems to be the only person at that level who is willing to engage with the British public on such weighty matters. In the same week that Sanders made his remarks, the BBC broadcast its Question Time programme. The programme audience, a public group intended to represent a cross section of political views, did not seem dismayed in principle by a discussion of conscription (as the debate had almost instantly defined itself). Rather, they lacked – and perhaps wanted – more evidence and understanding of the issues at hand. Conversely, the politicians and experts on the panel lacked a depth of understanding (nor, it seemed, possessed the lexicon) to provide it, despite their positions and titles.

It might not be surprising that the current government is not willing to engage in deep discussions or to look much beyond the immediate term, given their predilection to weigh every policy decision in purely financial terms and their likely defeat in the next general election. It is, however, rather peculiar that the Labour Party, which polling indicates will form the next government, is just as absent from any large-scale reflection upon and discussion of national strategic ambition and resources.

This pattern is not one that is confined to British culture, either. Similar behaviours and intellectual disengagement are evident elsewhere. In Germany and Canada, for example, sweeping political statements are made, and security policy declared, that are not backed by an engagement with a larger sense of national strategy. By contrast some other governments do recognise (and fund) national security as the primary responsibility of their administrations. In the United States, South Korea, Japan, Georgia, and in many of the Baltic and Scandinavian states, a contextually specific national strategy is actively sought (and admired) and the capabilities needed to underpin the rhetoric are pursued. In Chile and France too, development of a coherent and capable national strategy remains a staple of government thinking.

How is it, then, that the British have developed this inclination to make big promises and statements of intent without the underpinning of a coherent national strategy and accompanying policy? Is there something in our education and selection of political and military leaders that weeds out those with the intellectual capacity to construct policy based on national strategy and on a deep understanding of the concepts that have enabled the West to prosper, even when facing considerable threats and uncertainty? If so, then this would be a strange state of affairs since the UK has some of the best thinkers and researchers on national security that the West has to offer.



Why is it that these experts and specialists are so rarely engaged in discussion with governments and leaders? Are the people selected for high office now simply unwilling to admit they have something left to learn? Has their rank and status really endowed them with such an undisputed command of concepts, insight and even foresight that critical, constructive challenge no longer has a place in British policy? And if this is the case, what might change the dynamic and force a return to a period in which the British national strategic debate is informed by clear, intelligent, inclusive and purposeful dialogue?

## Get in touch

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