

# Who Does UK Grand Strategy? Strategic Thinking in Government

## Issues and Questions Paper

The Public Administration Select Committee (PASC) is doing a short inquiry into the way that the Government develops UK Grand Strategy, how it underpins the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) which is due to be published towards the end of the year, and where and how capacity for strategic thinking should be developed and sustained. This paper sets out the issues and outlines the key questions that those wishing to submit evidence are invited to consider.

### Reasons for the inquiry

PASC's 2007 inquiry on 'Governing the Future' examined strategic thinking within government.<sup>1</sup> That report noted that "*Future thinking is an uncertain business. Strategies should be kept under review so that they take account of new information and developments in research. Willingness to adjust policy in light of new evidence or changing circumstances should be seen as a sign of strength, not of weakness*".

That inquiry was focused particularly on domestic policy. However, it considered the structures, processes, skills, and culture (including a more collaborative and corporate approach to problems across Whitehall departments) necessary for good strategy-making. The present inquiry will build on this earlier work by looking across the whole of government, and more particularly in support of foreign, defence and security policy, as the Government considers the SDSR.

One of the first acts of the new Government was to establish a National Security Council (NSC). In a recent speech the Security Minister described the NSC as "... *not just a fire fighting machine for daily issues. It is the strategic heart of government for a broad definition of national security. ... One of the main outcomes of the NSC should be to develop the capacity across government for strategic assessment, long term policy making and sustained delivery*". The Government is also promising to develop and publish a new National Security Strategy. An examination of the way in which UK grand strategy is made—and sustained—is therefore timely.

### Background

The UK's vital national interests have been regularly invoked by successive governments over the last fifty to sixty years, as a basis for policy and actions. These include the special relationship with the US; reliance on NATO as the cornerstone of our defence and security arrangements; and our political and economic ties to the European Union as our key market place. More recent has been the investment of negotiating capital into multilateral negotiations on international trade and aid deals and on mitigating and seeking to reverse the impact of climate change. The new government has now signaled its intention to develop new relationships with emerging economies such as India and Brazil.

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<sup>1</sup> Public Administration Select Committee, Second Report of Session 2006–07, *Governing the Future*, HC 123–I

Recent events and threats (such as '9-11', '7-7', swine flu, foot and mouth disease or flooding) have had strategic consequences. The government responded with military force (e.g. in Afghanistan) and with the development of new anti-terrorist, contingency and resilience capabilities. The Government's response to the credit squeeze and banking crisis in 2008 was to establish the National Economic Council (a Cabinet committee of key ministers with expertise).

Less evident in all this has been the depth and coherence of UK strategic thinking underpinning the response to these events and where, in the centre of government, the capacity and structures to undertake such thinking exist. The MoD strategic 'think tank', the Research and Assessment Branch based in Shrivenham, for example, was disbanded earlier this year.

There have been examples in the past of teams in Number 10 and in the Cabinet Office which have sought to stand back from the day to day of policy making and "think the unthinkable", most famously the Central Policy Review Staff (CPRS) in the 1970s. Since 1998 the government has also sought to create some of this capacity in a number of units, currently the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit. However, as PASC's report on Governing the Future noted, the Strategy Unit has inevitably become involved directly in policy making and recommended that "... *that the PMSU is not diverted to current policy making and crisis management at the expense of its key strategic role. Strategy is its distinctive contribution to government*".

## Questions

1. What do we mean by "strategy" or "grand strategy" in relation to the foreign policy, defence and security functions of government in the modern world?
2. Who holds the UK "strategic concept" and how is it being brought to bear on the Strategic Defence and Security Review?
3. Do the different government departments (eg. Cabinet Office, Number 10, FCO, MoD, Treasury) understand and support the same UK strategy?
4. What capacity exists for cross-departmental strategic thinking? How should government develop and maintain the capacity for strategic thinking?
5. What frameworks or institutions exist or should be created to ensure that strategic thinking takes place and its conclusions are available to the Prime Minister and Cabinet?
6. How is UK strategy challenged and revised in response to events, changing risk assessments and new threats?
7. How are strategic thinking skills best developed and sustained within the Civil Service?
8. Should non-government experts and others be included in the government's strategy making process?

9. **How should the strategy be communicated across government and departmental objectives made consistent with it?**
10. **How can departments work more collaboratively and coordinate strategy development more closely?**
11. **How can reduced resources be appropriately allocated and targeted to support delivery of the objectives identified by the strategy?**
12. **Do other countries do strategy better?**

### **How to respond to this paper**

PASC would appreciate receiving responses to any or all of the questions in this paper. Although some of the questions could be answered by a simple yes or no, it would be valuable to have fuller responses in order for us to understand the points being made. Some respondents may wish to concentrate on those issues in which they have a special interest, rather than answering all of the questions. Respondents may also wish to suggest any proposed recommendations for action by the Government or others.

Written responses to this issues and questions paper will usually be treated as evidence to the Committee and may be published as part of a final report. **If you object to your response being made public in a volume of evidence, please make this clear when it is submitted.**

Responses should be submitted by **Friday 3 September 2010** by email to [pasc@parliament.uk](mailto:pasc@parliament.uk) If you do not have access to email, you may send a paper copy of your response to the Clerk of the Public Administration Select Committee, Committee Office, First Floor, 7 Millbank, London SW1P 3JA.

### **Please note**

Each submission should:

- be no more than 3,000 words in length;
- begin with a short summary in bullet point form;
- have numbered paragraphs; and
- be in Word format or a rich text format with as little use of colour or logos as possible.

The Committee will hold oral evidence sessions during September 2010.