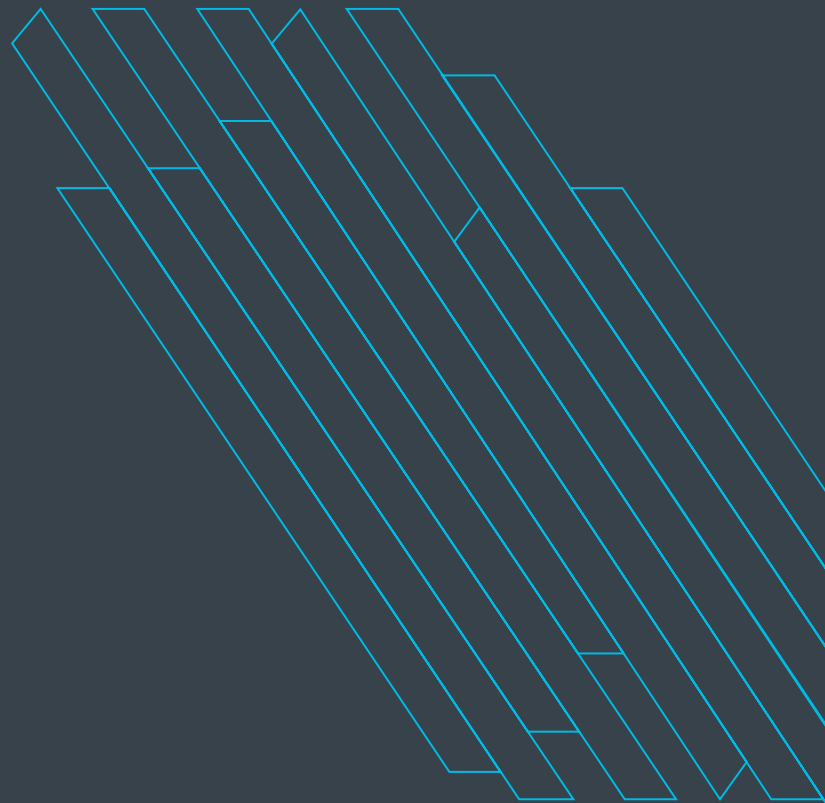


# The National Security Council

National security at the  
centre of government



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Josh Harris



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council

**KING'S**  
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**LONDON**

## Foreword

Keeping the country safe and secure is the first priority of any government. That means finding the most effective way to direct and co-ordinate scarce public resources has to be at the top of any prime minister's in-tray.

This publication by Joe Devanny and Josh Harris is both the third output from the Institute for Government's Centre of Government project, and the first of our joint Contemporary History of Whitehall project with King's College London, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. It draws on the material we assembled for the Centre Project, supplemented by subsequent research to put the National Security Council into its historic context. It shows how the NSC is not the first time a government has sought to address this very important area through institutional innovation.

Our report, *Centre Forward*, identified David Cameron's commitment in opposition to strengthen the coordinating arrangements around national security by establishing a National Security Council (NSC) and appointing a National Security Adviser as an example of how the Prime Minister could create additional capacity to take forward his priorities. The need for more heft at the centre to confront new challenges was a view shared by both external bodies (a joint report by Lords Ashdown and Robertson for the IPPR had reached a similar diagnosis) and by insiders, as became clear at a series of private roundtables the Institute for Government hosted with Libra Advisory Group in the run-up to the 2010 election.

The aim of assessing the NSC now is to document how it came into being and highlight some of the factors which seem to be critical to the impact it has had to date, to place the NSC in historical perspective, as well as point out the potential for further evolution. But as we make clear in *Centre Forward*, prime ministerial time is a scarce commodity and how the NSC evolves will depend on the relative priority the Prime Minister (whoever it is) is prepared to give national security issues after the next election. Meanwhile we hope all those who will be in a position to decide what happens next will benefit from reading this account of the NSC and its antecedents.

**Jill Rutter**

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This report draws on research into the history of national security coordination at the centre of government, undertaken as part of the AHRC-funded *Contemporary History of Whitehall* project hosted by the Institute for Government and King's College London.

It is inevitable that some readers will not quite recognise our account, since no person's experience is the same as another's. We nonetheless hope that this report shines a useful light on the workings of one of the most vital parts of the centre of British government. Any errors or omissions are our responsibility alone.

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## Executive Summary

The first duty of any government is to protect its citizens. Coordinating national security is, therefore, one of the most important tasks a prime minister faces. The task is as complex as it is unavoidable.

Broadly construed, national security encompasses defence, intelligence, foreign affairs (including trade and development assistance), internal security and civil contingencies. While these categories are static, the challenges they denote are not: the cyber threat is just the most recent addition to a fluctuating array of national security threats.

To coordinate government's response to these national security issues, prime ministers can call on Cabinet committees, senior advisers and official secretariats. Successive prime ministers have shaped and reshaped the national security machinery of central government, each searching for the right constellation of resources and personnel to meet the threats facing the UK.

In its recent *Centre Forward* report, the Institute for Government identified the capacities required for effective executive support to prime ministers at the centre of UK government. This paper builds on that report. It focuses specifically on national security, examining the National Security Council (NSC) as a case study of how prime ministers can effectively coordinate a key area of policy from the centre.

The NSC is a relatively new committee, but it is only the latest iteration of over a century of prime ministerial efforts to coordinate national security issues from the centre. To date, there have been few sustained attempts to examine the NSC and its performance. Four and a half years on from the NSC's establishment in May 2010 – and with a general election approaching – this paper examines the NSC, the role of National Security Adviser (NSA) and the supporting National Security Secretariat (NSSec).

Different prime ministers choose to approach the issues, structures and appointment of senior advisers in different ways. It is important that the centre of government can accommodate each prime minister's preferred way of working.

Few prime ministers now take office with much experience of national security issues and national security coordination is rarely a key theme in general election campaigns. But no prime minister needs to re-invent the wheel once in office: their predecessors have grappled with similar problems of coordination for over a century. This paper uses historical perspective to distil some lessons for effective central coordination of national security by prime ministers.

In bureaucratic form, there are more similarities than differences between the NSC and its predecessors. But in terms of persistent prime ministerial attention, regularity of process, frequency of high-level ministerial and official attendance at meetings, and focused secretariat support, it has brought greater clarity to a broad range of national security policy issues. It provides an accessible forum for cross-government working and a process for driving delivery from the centre.

One former official described the creation of the NSC as like 'the lights coming on because it was very difficult under the previous arrangements to necessarily detect what decisions, if any decisions, were being taken on a number of issues and the thinking that led to those decisions was even more opaque'.<sup>1</sup>

The NSC demonstrates the potential benefits of 'strong grip' at the centre and the 'halo effect' of significant prime ministerial investment of time and effort in committee work. But a prime minister's time is at a premium and sustained investment of it in the NSC process depends on that process being seen to add value to national security decision-making. In this respect, the NSC underlines the

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<sup>1</sup> Institute for Government round-table discussion, November 2013 (NSC1).

importance of a well-resourced secretariat and an effective NSA to coordinate the process and drive delivery.

The performance of the NSC and its predecessors provides a valuable case study to help unpack the challenges and opportunities of central coordination of national security, including:

- the significant potential gains from sustained prime ministerial attention and the concomitant risks of losing effectiveness if prime ministers fail to devote sufficient time to the process
- the necessity of inter-departmental co-operation, and the integral role that a national security adviser can play as an effective broker between competing departmental interests
- the potential tension between strategic and operational focus
- the need for a well-resourced central secretariat and the difficulty of driving delivery from what is, relative to international comparators, the small centre of UK government, as the secretariat – like any other part of the centre – suffers a capacity gap *vis à vis* departments, and has become smaller since May 2010.

It is too early to say whether the NSC will long survive in its current format. As recent history shows, central committees often have short life-cycles and can suffer from personal identification with one prime minister.

But to take a longer view, it is clear that past administrations have repeatedly grappled with the same core problems of central coordination. In wartime, most prime ministers have coordinated activities using committees very similar to the NSC, although long-serving prime ministers like Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair can begin to favour less formal, smaller circles of national security advice and decision making. Such a step away from formal committee processes prompts criticism that it jeopardises clarity and transparency within government.

Successive prime ministers have also experimented with different combinations of senior official appointments at the top of the national security hierarchy. The NSA post is the latest and boldest iteration of this process. It combines most of the responsibilities previously undertaken by up to five different officials.

It would be a mistake to interpret all this as a process of evolution, leading gradually to one, uniquely 'perfect' method of coordinating national security from the centre. Prime ministers will continue to differ in their needs; much will depend on what kind of prime minister they intend to be and what priorities they wish to drive personally. In each case, the Civil Service must be ready to recalibrate arrangements to provide the necessary support, whether a prime minister intends to adopt a more or less 'hands on' approach to national security. The NSC reform is a good example of one such reorganisation to suit a prime minister's needs in coordinating policy from the centre.

# 1. Introduction

On 12 May 2010, one of David Cameron's first acts as Prime Minister was to appoint a National Security Adviser (NSA) and convene a meeting of the newly-established National Security Council (NSC).<sup>2</sup> Prior to the 2010 election, both Cameron and then Prime Minister Gordon Brown appeared to be committed to the appointment of a senior official as NSA.<sup>3</sup> Brown had already convened a national security committee that, on paper at least, prefigured Cameron's NSC.<sup>4</sup>

There had been wide-spread recognition before the election that reform was needed to 'enable a holistic approach to national security'.<sup>5</sup> An IPPR report in 2009 had called for a National Security Council and a single security budget.<sup>6</sup> And participants in a series of closed-space discussions facilitated by the Institute for Government and Libra Advisory Group shared the view that a 'more powerful' NSC-like structure 'underpinned by a strengthened secretariat' was necessary, feeling 'that the arrangements for coordination on counter-terrorism, with the lead in the Office of Security and Counter-Terrorism, worked well, but that this degree of strategic focus and clear line to delivery did not exist in other areas'.<sup>7</sup>

After four and a half years, and with another general election fast approaching, there is now an opportunity to take stock and assess the development of the NSC and whether it has improved central coordination and longer-term thinking about national security issues, to consider what problems still exist, and what could be done better. The stakes are high: 'the public rightly sees the provision of security as government's first responsibility', so any government must address not only what it wants to achieve in the national security sphere, but how it is going to go about it.<sup>8</sup>

This paper aims to address these issues, filling a gap in the existing literature on the NSC by assessing how it has developed and performed at the centre of UK government. We look at the last 15 years of coordinating intelligence and national security at the centre, as well as to some examples of national security coordination in Whitehall that preceded the NSC. This paper builds on the Institute for Government's recent *Centre Forward*<sup>9</sup> report about the core capacities prime ministers need to be effective, which cited the NSC as a good case study of how prime ministers can drive policy decisions and delivery from the centre of government through a Cabinet committee. It is also part of the Institute's and King's College London's *Contemporary History of Whitehall* project, sponsored by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

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<sup>2</sup> Prime Minister's Office press release, 'Establishment of a National Security Council', Gov.UK website, 12 May 2010, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/establishment-of-a-national-security-council>

<sup>3</sup> Blitz, J., 'National security chief planned', *Financial Times*, 16 April 2010, p.2

<sup>4</sup> Kirkup, J., 'Brown to create US-style security council', *The Telegraph*, 27 October 2007; retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/labour/1567468/Brown-to-create-US-style-security-council.html>; Staff, 'In full: Brown security statement', *BBC News Online*, 19 March 2008, retrieved 4 November 2014 from [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/7304999.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/7304999.stm)

<sup>5</sup> Edwards, C., 'A Holistic Answer to National Security Challenges', *The Financial Times*, 8 August 2007, p.13

<sup>6</sup> Institute for Public Policy Research, *Shared Responsibilities: A national security strategy for the UK*, 2009, retrieved 4 November 2014 from [http://www.ippr.org/assets/media/images/media/files/publication/2011/05/shared\\_responsibility\\_summary\\_1704.pdf](http://www.ippr.org/assets/media/images/media/files/publication/2011/05/shared_responsibility_summary_1704.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Institute for Government & Libra Advisory Group, 'Written evidence submitted by the Institute for Government and the Libra Advisory Group (GS 06)', 2010, retrieved 29 August 2014 from <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmpublicadm/memo/grandstrat/gso6.htm>

<sup>8</sup> Omand, D., 'Securing the State', *PRISM 4 no.3*, 2013, p16, retrieved 14 August 2014 from [http://cco.dodlive.mil/files/2013/09/PRISM\\_4-3\\_14-27\\_Omand.pdf](http://cco.dodlive.mil/files/2013/09/PRISM_4-3_14-27_Omand.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Harris, J. & Rutter, J., *Centre Forward: Effective support for the prime minister at the centre of government*, Institute for Government, 9 July 2014, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Centre%20Forward%20-%20Final.pdf>

The paper undertakes three tasks:

- 1 It puts the NSC in historical context, exploring some key episodes in the evolution of foreign, defence and security coordination at the centre of government in the 20th century and up to the present.
- 2 It describes the structure and processes of the NSC, including its supporting secretariat, exploring the core responsibilities of the National Security Adviser and identifying the main lines of contemporary criticism.
- 3 It situates the NSC in the wider context of the centre of British government, identifying what makes for successful cross-Whitehall coordination.

We draw throughout on the existing but sparse literature, as well as a roundtable discussion and series of interviews conducted by the Institute for Government in late 2013 and throughout 2014 with current and former participants in the NSC and the pre-NSC national security, foreign, defence and intelligence decision making processes.

#### 1. National security and the evolution of the centre

First, it is worth looking back at the evolution of different aspects of central coordination of foreign, defence, security, resilience and intelligence policies to understand the different configurations that have been tried, to judge how innovative the NSC is, and to determine in what ways it reflects long-standing organisational problems. Though by no means an exhaustive chronology, this section puts some of the themes of the current NSC in historical perspective.

### The origins of committee coordination: The Committee of Imperial Defence

To put the NSC in its proper context, it is necessary to start with the origins of the Cabinet Secretariat in 1916 and to consider an even earlier body, the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID).<sup>10</sup> Many of today's challenges to successful central coordination of national security issues were foreshadowed in the early 1900s, whether inter-departmental rivalries, potential capacity gaps between central secretariats and departments, or the level of prime ministerial backing for the coordination process.

Prior to 1916, the British Cabinet had functioned without dedicated secretariat support: 'no minutes were circulated, no agendas were set, no decisions were recorded.'<sup>11</sup> Cabinet meetings could be long, rambling affairs; ministers departed with little idea of what had been decided. Their private secretaries would then write to each other discreetly, trying to clarify the details. For example, an appeal to one of Gladstone's private secretaries stated that 'there must have been some decision...My Chief has told me to ask you what the devil was decided, for he be damned if he knows. Will you ask Mr. G. in more conventional and less pungent terms?'<sup>12</sup>

The areas of foreign and defence policy – or 'imperial defence' as they were then conceived – were the first to benefit from improved secretariat support. A Colonial Defence Committee (CDC) had attempted to coordinate metropolitan, dominion and colonial defence arrangements from 1885.<sup>13</sup> But it was Prime Minister Arthur Balfour who in 1904 converted the existing 'weak and informal' Defence Committee (set up in 1902) into the CID by establishing a small permanent secretariat to support its

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<sup>10</sup> Strachan, H., 'A War Examined: Allies and ethics: British national strategy: Who does it?' *Parameters*, vol.43 (2), 2013, p.49

<sup>11</sup> Naylor, J.F., 'The Establishment of the Cabinet Secretariat', *The Historical Journal*, vol.14, no.4, 1971., p.783

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* pp.783-784

<sup>13</sup> See Gordon, D.C. 1962. 'The Colonial Defence Committee and Imperial Collaboration: 1885-1904' *Political Quarterly*, Vol.77, No.4 (December), pp.526-545



work.<sup>14</sup> This marked a step-change in coordination at the centre by providing dedicated capacity for the first time.

At the outbreak of war in 1914, the Head of the CID secretariat, Maurice Hankey, placed it at the disposal of Prime Minister Asquith's attempts to coordinate wartime decision making. None of Asquith's efforts to coordinate between the civil and military sides of the war effort succeeded in establishing a strong grip. From December 1916 Asquith's successor, Lloyd George, 'established a war cabinet of five, so as to avoid any repetition of divided governmental authority.'<sup>15</sup> It was this change that ultimately led to the development of today's Cabinet Office and the Cabinet Secretary role.

The CID continued to develop until the outbreak of war in 1939. It subsumed the Colonial Defence Committee (CDC) within its network of subcommittees<sup>16</sup> and developed a series of other subcommittees, including the Chiefs of Staff Committee.<sup>17</sup> After a short-lived Foreign Office attempt to create its own centre for political intelligence assessment to complement the military services' assessment of military intelligence,<sup>18</sup> the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) was also established as a CID subcommittee in 1936. To begin with, therefore, the JIC was a purely military organisation ('a mere adjunct to the Chiefs of Staff organisation')<sup>19</sup> but the civilian intelligence agencies were formally added as members in 1940 and in 1957 the JIC was moved into the Cabinet Office, reflecting growing civilian involvement and the increasing importance of political intelligence.<sup>20</sup>

Key to the CID's coordinating and delivery function was the assembly of leading figures from each department and service around the CID meeting table. In 1947, it became the Defence Committee, but its membership was little changed from that of the CID in previous decades, comprising:<sup>21</sup>

- Prime Minister
- Minister of Defence
- Lord President of the Council
- Foreign Secretary
- Chancellor of the Exchequer
- The Service ministers
- Minister of Labour
- Minister of Supply
- The Chiefs of Staff.

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<sup>14</sup> Johnson, F.A. 1961. 'The British Committee of Imperial Defence: Prototype of U.S. Security Organization' *The Journal of Politics*, Vol.23, No.2 (May), p.235

<sup>15</sup> Naylor, J.F. 2004 [2008]. 'Hankey, Maurice Pascal Alers, first Baron Hankey (1877–1963)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/33683>, accessed 14 July 2014]

<sup>16</sup> The Colonial Defence Committee maintained a sort of distinct existence, and ultimately evolved into the Overseas Defence Committee. Gordon, D.C., 'The Colonial Defence Committee and Imperial Collaboration: 1885-1904', *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 77, no. 44, 1962, p.543

<sup>17</sup> Stanbridge, B.G.T., 'The Chiefs of Staff Committee: 50 years of joint direction', *RUSI Journal*, 118.4, 1973, pp.25-31.

<sup>18</sup> Goldstein, E., 'The Foreign Office and Political Intelligence 1918-1920' *Review of International Studies*, vol.14, no.4, 1988, pp.275-288.

<sup>19</sup> Cradock, P., *Know Your Enemy: How the Joint Intelligence Committee saw the world*, John Murray, London 2002, p.4.

<sup>20</sup> Goodman, M., 'Learning to Walk: The origins of the UK's Joint Intelligence Committee', *International Journal of Intelligence and Counter Intelligence*, vol.21(1), 2007, pp.40-56.

<sup>21</sup> Johnson, F.A., 'The British Committee of Imperial Defence: Prototype of U.S. security organisation', *The Journal of Politics*, 1961, p.254.

As with the NSC today, other ministers attended CID meetings at the prime minister's behest, as appropriate to the subjects under discussion.

The CID's first head, Sir George Clarke, was able to bring to the CID many of the bureaucratic routines – regular minute-taking and marshalling of a network of subcommittees – he had long honed as the head of the CDC secretariat.

Clarke recognised the challenges to any prime ministerial adviser facing competing departmental centres of power and influence, lamenting that he had to operate by 'the gentle pulling of strings' rather than 'being able to speak with power', given his inferior standing and resources as CID secretary *vis à vis* ministers and service chiefs.<sup>22</sup>

The CID's secretary from 1912, Maurice Hankey, used the CID model to form the basis for the cabinet committee structure and secretariat that is still used today.<sup>23</sup> The structure for defence and security issues was, and still is, closely bound up with the relationship between prime ministerial, ministerial and collective cabinet responsibility: who took the lead was about which bodies dominated.

In the face of inter-departmental and inter-service tensions, prime ministerial support was crucial for the CID's effectiveness. This was not always forthcoming. During its first decade, the CID suffered from a general lack of prime ministerial commitment to ensuring its decisions were implemented. Under Balfour, the CID met on average more than once per fortnight, but under Campbell-Bannerman it met just 15 times in over two years. Moreover, Balfour did not 'turn to the departments and insist that the conclusions of the Committee should be the basis on which they worked. He did not urge his ministers to follow the new ideas through'. Campbell-Bannerman was allegedly 'not interested in defence' and, although he permitted the CID to continue meeting, he 'did not set it to work on any major issues.' Things were little better under Asquith, with the CID meeting 'rather less than once every two months' between April 1908 and the outbreak of war in August 1914.<sup>24</sup>

Despite this chequered record, the CID was significant in establishing several breaks with previous practice at the centre of government.<sup>25</sup>

- Its secretariat provided much-needed support to the prime minister and facilitated strategic planning and decision making.
- Politicians and career service leaders served as equal and active participant members.
- At a time of inter-departmental rivalry, it was a coordinating committee, bringing together representatives from the military services and civil departments, with a flexible membership determined by the Prime Minister on an *ad hoc* basis.

The pre-war CID and Lloyd George's War Cabinet foreshadowed many of the key operational challenges and structural features of the NSC. As CID secretary, Hankey needed to cultivate a reputation for 'honest brokerage' between the Prime Minister, departmental ministers and service chiefs. Indeed, Hankey probably over-involved himself in the post-war years as a prominent member of Lloyd George's travelling entourage, although the choice was not so much his as the Prime

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<sup>22</sup> Gooch, J., 'Sir George Clarke's career at the Committee of Imperial Defence', *The Historical Journal*, vol.18, no.3, 1975, p.557

<sup>23</sup> Johnson, F.A., 'The British Committee of Imperial Defence: Prototype of U.S. security organisation', *The Journal of Politics*, 1961, p.237

<sup>24</sup> MacKintosh, J.P., 'The Role of the Committee of Imperial Defence before 1914', *The English Historical Review*, vol.77, no.304, 1962, pp.494-496

<sup>25</sup> Johnson, F.A., 'The British Committee of Imperial Defence: Prototype of U.S. security organisation', *The Journal of Politics*, 1961, p.235

Minister's. Resentment was particularly keen in the Foreign Office, perhaps unsurprisingly given that the Foreign Secretary was excluded from formal membership of Lloyd George's war cabinet.<sup>26</sup>

The CID and Cabinet Secretariat were part of the permanent machinery of government, but, as relatively recent creations, they were strongly marked by the personal stamp of Lloyd George. This mirrors the position which the NSC and National Security Secretariat will face at the May 2015 General Election. That led to doubt whether the CID and Cabinet Secretariat would survive Lloyd George's downfall in 1922, but Hankey was flexible enough to adjust to 'the different temperaments of the five premiers he served.'<sup>27</sup>

The secretariat needed to strike a careful balance to maintain the co-operation of relevant departments: 'If the secretary and his staff became a separate department having independent interests and policy-making powers, the CID would fail. The cabinet leaders would almost certainly combine against such a threat to the sacred principle of cabinet responsibility for executive action.'

Furthermore, like the NSC on occasion, the CID also became 'a bi-partisan forum, as several times the Leader of the Opposition joined subcommittee discussions.'<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the CID secretariat was 'designed, not to *take action*, but rather to *see that action was taken* by constituted departments after decisions had been made.'<sup>29</sup> Departments owned delivery, but the CID coordinated and drove the overall process.

The CID demonstrates the enduring challenges to coordination of foreign and defence policy at the centre of British government. Active prime ministerial backing is crucial for the success of any committee set up for these purposes. The mere existence of a central coordinating committee does not, in itself, guarantee harmonious inter-departmental cooperation. Effective coordination requires a skilled and diplomatic figure at the centre, enjoying the confidence of key participants. Hankey performed this function for over 20 years, at the same time as discharging the responsibilities of Secretary to the Cabinet, setting a precedent for his successors, few of whom had his long experience of defence, intelligence and foreign policy issues.

## Organising national security, 1979-2010

While it is possible to see clear similarities between the CID and the NSC, it is also instructive to look at how the NSC differs from its more immediate predecessors. The NSC seeks to bring together foreign, defence, security, resilience and intelligence policy under the auspices of one committee and secretariat structure in a way that was not a feature of earlier arrangements. This is partly because the concept of national security has shifted. Over the last century, Cabinet committees and other structures have handled individual aspects of this portfolio. Previously, different connections were seen between defence (particularly during times of war), foreign policy, security (terrorism), the nuclear threat (pre-eminent during the Cold War) and intelligence, let alone resilience and civil contingencies.

Reflecting the salience of the terrorist threat, 'national security' has a significant focus on coordinating intelligence and anti-terrorism efforts.

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<sup>26</sup> The Foreign Secretary's exclusion was not absolute; he attended many meetings of the War Cabinet at the Prime Minister's invitation, but not as a full member. Warburg, R., 'The Erosion of Foreign Office Influence, 1916-1918', *The Historical Journal*, XV, 1, 1972, p.135.

<sup>27</sup> Naylor, J.F., 'Hankey, Maurice Pascal Ales, first Baron Hankey (1877-1963)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/33683>

<sup>28</sup> Johnson, F.A., 'The British Committee of Imperial Defence: Prototype of U.S. security organisation', *The Journal of Politics*, 1961, p.236

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* p.248

There have also been a variety of ways to carve up the key senior positions. The National Security Adviser post largely combines the roles previously played by the prime minister's adviser on foreign policy, the Head of the Overseas and Defence Policy (OD) Secretariat, the prime minister's intelligence coordinator, and also some of the tasks previously overseen by the Cabinet Secretary and the Chair of the JIC.<sup>30</sup>

In the following sections we look at three aspects of dealing with national security: coordination of intelligence and the response to terrorism; the roles of senior advisers to the prime minister and finally coordination at time of war. These illustrate the sort of challenges now faced by the NSC – but also the way the system has been able to adapt to and cope with varying prime ministerial styles and priorities.

i. Central coordination of intelligence and the response to terrorism

Ministerial oversight and direction of intelligence policy, priorities and capabilities is an important part of national security coordination. Intelligence agencies contribute information and operations to secure the country against serious organised crime, terrorists and hostile foreign intelligence agencies.

Ministerial decisions about strategic intelligence priorities and more operationally-focused issues require effective coordination of the activities of the four main intelligence agencies.<sup>31</sup> The last 30 years have seen many different organisational and leadership changes in the intelligence community and in its relationship to the different parts of the national security apparatus. Governments have, at times, aimed to bring intelligence closer to the policy process to maximise its utility and to emphasise the value of 'all source' analysis, rather than individual briefings by agency heads. But intelligence and policy can become too close. Official inquiries such as the 1983 *Falklands Islands Inquiry*<sup>32</sup> and the 2004 *Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction*<sup>33</sup> stressed the need to uphold the independence and objectivity of intelligence assessment.

Throughout the Cold War, intelligence and security issues were overseen by a ministerial committee<sup>34</sup> chaired by the Prime Minister and comprising the Foreign, Defence and Home Secretaries and the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The committee was supported by a 'flanking' committee of senior officials<sup>35</sup>, chaired by the Cabinet Secretary and attended by permanent secretaries from the Defence, Home and Foreign ministries, together with the Chairman of the JIC and the Intelligence Coordinator.<sup>36</sup>

The Chair of the JIC was traditionally a Foreign Office appointment. Following the Falklands War, however, the Franks Report argued that intelligence assessment needed greater separation from

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<sup>30</sup> Of course, prime ministers also receive national security advice from a wider circle of (political) advisers – their 'kitchen cabinets' or 'denocracy' – whose opinions are valued more because of strong personal relationships and trusted judgement than for any national security credentials.

<sup>31</sup> The four main intelligence agencies are the Security Service (SyS/MI5), the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS/MI6), Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) and Defence Intelligence (DI).

<sup>32</sup> Franks, O.S., *Falklands Islands Review: Report of a Committee of Privy Counsellors, Command 8787 (The Franks Report)*, January 1983, London: HMSO, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/109481>

<sup>33</sup> Butler, R., *Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction: Report of a Committee of Privy Counsellors (The Butler Report)*, 2004, retrieved 4 November 2014 <http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Politics/documents/2004/07/14/butler.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> The committee was known variously as the 'Committee on Security and Intelligence' (CSI) or the 'Committee on Intelligence and Security' (CIS).

<sup>35</sup> This committee was known as the 'Permanent Secretaries' Committee on the Intelligence Services' (PSIS).

<sup>36</sup> The Coordinator post was created in 1968 to bring a senior intelligence or security official into the Cabinet Office to assist the Cabinet Secretary with his intelligence-related responsibilities, including reviewing the agencies' performance, formulating their requirements and scrutinising their annual bids for budget allocations as part of the Single Intelligence Account (SIA) – the combined budget of SIS, SyS and GCHQ. Cabinet Office, *Notes on the Central Intelligence Machinery Division of Cabinet Office Records and Other Intelligence-related Cabinet Office Records*, 2010, retrieved 24 July 2014 from [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/60940/notes-on-cim-division.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/60940/notes-on-cim-division.pdf)

Foreign Office policy advice. It recommended that the JIC Chair should become a prime ministerial appointment as a senior, full-time Cabinet Office post with direct access to the prime minister.<sup>37</sup>

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher subsequently appointed Sir Percy Cradock as JIC Chairman in 1985, a role he held simultaneously with his role as Prime Minister's Foreign Policy Adviser. Cradock noted that the 'combination of the posts of Foreign Policy Adviser and JIC Chairman was a great help to me at No.10. It gave me a supporting staff of a kind that the Downing Street arrangements denied; and it gave greater weight to my recommendations.'<sup>38</sup>

And yet, Cradock acknowledged that such a combination of roles was 'unorthodox' and had provoked the disquiet of both the Foreign Secretary and Cabinet Secretary, albeit both of whose objections were 'briskly overruled by the Prime Minister'. For Cradock, however, their reservations 'had some foundation in normal practice. Intelligence and policy are usually kept apart in separate rooms. The partition has to be thin, otherwise assessments, however interesting to their composers, fail to answer the questions uppermost in ministers' minds. But if there is no partition, there is a risk of intelligence being slanted to provide the answers the policy makers want.'<sup>39</sup>

Cradock's successor, Sir Rodric Braithwaite, also held both roles until his own retirement in 1994, after which the Foreign Policy Adviser role lapsed and the JIC Chairmanship was combined with the more junior Cabinet Office post of Head of the OD Secretariat. To compensate for the consequent loss of foreign policy capacity in the Prime Minister's Office, later in John Major's prime ministership one assistant private secretary was added to the private office to supplement the existing foreign affairs private secretary.

As Figure 1 (below) demonstrates, there has been further flux in the Cabinet Office's coordination of intelligence and national security issues, especially during Tony Blair's second term, both in terms of personnel and the configuration of roles.

During Blair's first term in office, Peter Ricketts briefly held both the JIC Chairman and Intelligence Coordinator posts, in a sense prefiguring his later responsibilities as NSA. Over the next decade, the JIC Chairmanship alternated between being a separate appointment and being combined with the Coordinator post.<sup>40</sup>

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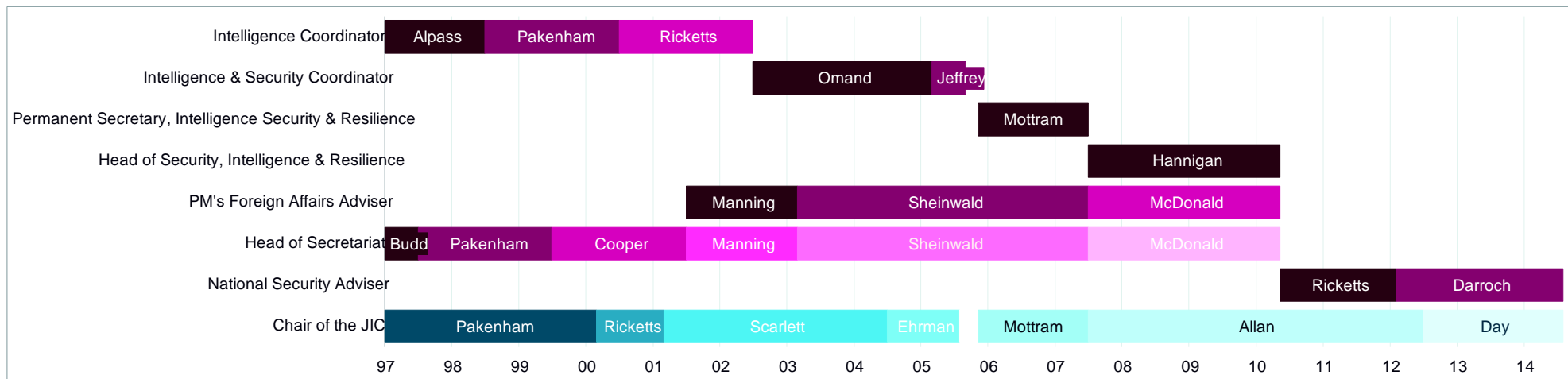
<sup>37</sup> Franks, O.S., *Falklands Islands Review: Report of a Committee of Privy Councillors, Command 8787 (The Franks Report)*, January 1983, London: HMSO, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/109481>

<sup>38</sup> Cradock, P., *In Pursuit of British Interests*, London, John Murray, 1997, p.43.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* pp.43-44.

<sup>40</sup> There was also an interim appointment in 2004-05 following John Scarlett's appointment as Chief (C) of SIS, when the FCO Director General for Defence and Intelligence, William Ehrman took over as JIC Chairman until he became the British Ambassador to China in 2005. Staff, 'New JIC chair William Ehrman profiled', *BBC News Online*, 20 July 2004, retrieved 4 November 2014 from [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/3911385.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/3911385.stm)

**Figure 1: Timeline of senior Cabinet Office and Prime Minister's Office national security appointments, 1997-2014.**



Source: Compiled from several sources, including the BBC News website; the Civil Service Year Books; Cradock, P., *In Pursuit of British Interests*, (1997); Davies, P., *Twilight of Britain's Joint Intelligence Committee*, (2011); Hennessy, P., (2010), *The Secret State*; West, N., *Historical Dictionary of British Intelligence*, (2014); and Wikipedia.org.



Following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, Sir David Omand was appointed to a new role as Security and Intelligence Coordinator to oversee both the intelligence agencies as a whole and the Civil Contingencies Secretariat. Another of Omand's responsibilities was to chair the Permanent Secretaries' Intelligence and Security Committee, PSIS. In 2005,<sup>41</sup> the Coordinator role was again re-badged, as 'Permanent Under Secretary: Intelligence, Security and Resilience'. In this role, Sir Richard Mottram combined the existing Coordinator's duties with responsibility for the Joint Intelligence Committee. On Mottram's retirement, these roles were again separated.<sup>42</sup> The Cabinet Secretary took over responsibility for oversight of the Single Intelligence Account until this transferred to the newly-created National Security Adviser post in 2010<sup>43</sup> and the JIC chairmanship was retained as a separate post, held successively by Alex Allan and Jon Day.

Following the Iraq war, the Butler Inquiry report had recommended that the JIC chairmanship should be filled by officials with sufficient experience and stature to be able to defend the independence of intelligence assessment from policy – meaning that these would be likely to be officials who were close to retirement.<sup>44</sup> This stipulation about keeping intelligence assessment separate from policy advice is, perhaps, one reason why the JIC Chairman and Assessment Staff were not formally incorporated within the National Security Secretariat serving the NSA, even though the NSC increasingly shapes the JIC's workflow.

Alongside intelligence, there have been significant changes in coordination of the government's responses to terrorism and its approach to wider issues of security and resilience. Since the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks and the 7 July 2005 London bombings, the Islamist terrorist threat has become the defining national security issue and triggered substantially increased investment in intelligence and security. The need for a coordinated response led in 2003 to the development of a counter-terrorism strategy (CONTEST) and the establishment of a Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC) and, in 2007, to the creation of a new Office for Security and Counter Terrorism (OSCT) based in the Home Office – both of which aim to increase the cross-departmental coherence and capacity of the effort against terrorism.<sup>45</sup>

Until 2007, Cabinet discussion and decision making concerning international terrorism took place through an OD subcommittee on International Terrorism (OD(IT)), chaired by the Prime Minister. Detailed work was driven by its Home Secretary-chaired subcommittee on Protection, Security and Resilience (OD(IT)(PSR)). Shortly before his 2007 resignation, Blair reorganised this system, replacing the OD(IT) subcommittee with a new Ministerial Committee on Security and Terrorism, which also encompassed the counter radicalisation aspects of the Cabinet's Domestic Affairs Committee.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> This was after Omand's retirement and a brief interim period during which Bill Jeffrey held the Security and Intelligence Coordinator post before taking the top civilian post at the Ministry of Defence.

<sup>42</sup> Alex Allan took the JIC Chairmanship and Robert Hannigan the now more junior role of Head of Intelligence, Security and Resilience, but with the added title of 'Prime Minister's Security Adviser'. These moves were announced to the House of Commons by Prime Minister, Gordon Brown on 25 July 2007, as a direct response to the Butler Inquiry, but did not take effect until Mottram's retirement in November 2007. Hansard, National Security, 2007, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmhansrd/cm070725/debtext/70725-0004.htm>

<sup>43</sup> Hansard, *Written evidence from Sir Peter Ricketts GCMG, National Security Adviser to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee*, 14 January 2011, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmcaff/665/665we07.htm>

<sup>44</sup> Butler, R., *Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction: Report of a Committee of Privy Counsellors (The Butler Report)*, 2004, retrieved 4 November 2014 <http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Politics/documents/2004/07/14/butler.pdf>

<sup>45</sup> Underpinning all work on counter-terrorism is the cross-government CONTEST strategy. Home Office, *Policy Paper: Counter-terrorism strategy (CONTEST)*, Gov.UK, 2011, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/counter-terrorism-strategy-contest>

<sup>46</sup> Hennessy, P., *The Secret State: Preparing for the worst, 1945-2010*, London, Penguin, pp.378-381.

What this shows is a high degree of flux in efforts to coordinate different aspects of the security and intelligence brief, particularly since 2001. The massive pressures to address international and domestic terrorism – and the priority role for intelligence in this effort – saw new organisational solutions pursued with great frequency. Perhaps it also reflected the style of the Labour government at that time, adapting the machinery of government at frequent intervals and experimenting with changes in organisation at the centre and cross-cutting Whitehall. Though these changes were in some ways about intelligence coordination and the management of the assessment process, they also reflected changes in the wider security sphere, of which intelligence is but one part.

The move towards a more over-arching national security machine can be seen as an attempt to provide greater stability, seniority and more coherence to areas of overlap that the centre had struggled to coordinate effectively. The formal creation of an integrated national security secretariat and committee process in May 2010, overseen by a national security adviser, could be seen as a further step along this path of central coordination.

ii. Advising the prime minister

On top of the machinery for coordination sit senior advisers to the prime minister. Although there are a number of cabinet ministers with relevant portfolios, the prime minister has a particular responsibility for ensuring a coherent approach to national security, for the conduct of policy and for overseeing the response to crises. There have been different constellations of senior officials acting as adviser to the prime minister on these roles. The NSA post was created to provide a single focal point for the coordination of many of these issues, but other voices remain influential. These include the most senior officials and military officers, the heads of various secretariats, services and agencies, the Cabinet Secretary, the prime minister's chief of staff and other political advisers.

The traditional model of prime ministerial support had been for there to be a single foreign affairs private secretary in No.10, whose role was to draw on the key departments of state – principally the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and Ministry of Defence (MoD) – for advice. But in the 1980s that began to change. Margaret Thatcher, 'in light of her disenchantment with the Foreign Office as a result of the Falklands experience... wanted a senior figure on her personal staff who would alert her to coming problems and if need be offer independent advice.'<sup>47</sup> Initially retaining the part-time services of the recently-retired UK Permanent Representative to the UN in New York, Sir Anthony Parsons, Thatcher ultimately employed another experienced senior diplomat, Sir Percy Cradock, as her long-serving Foreign Policy Adviser. Cradock, who survived the transition to John Major and retired in 1992, supplemented the advice of the foreign affairs private secretary but had little other support of his own, with the services of 'a secretary to type his minutes and little else... If there was to be a contest with the hundreds of high-powered operators across the road in the Foreign Office, it was going to be a very unequal one.'<sup>48</sup> As noted in the previous section, when Sir Percy retired he was replaced by another career diplomat, Sir Rodric Braithwaite, who like Sir Percy combined this role with the JIC chairmanship.

As we noted in *Centre Forward*, the private office for this period relied primarily on a single foreign affairs private secretary, not gaining an additional private secretary until later in John Major's prime ministership.<sup>49</sup> Sir Stephen Wall has written that, as John Major's foreign affairs private secretary in the early 1990s, his responsibilities were wide-ranging, from foreign policy to Northern Ireland and

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<sup>47</sup> Cradock, P., *In Pursuit of British Interests*, London, John Murray, 1997, p.8. Cradock also noted a less successful attempt to provide Thatcher with defence advice within the Prime Minister's Office, reportedly thwarted when then Defence Secretary, Michael Heseltine forbade officials in his department to return the telephone calls of the Prime Minister's Defence Adviser.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* pp.9-10.

<sup>49</sup> This was when Philippa Leslie-Jones was appointed to assist the private secretary, Roderic Lyne. HM Government, *Civil Service Yearbook 1995*, Stationery Office Books, London, 1995



defence issues. Even though he was part of the private office, Wall felt that he did not have the capacity to substitute his efforts for the deeper contribution of the relevant departments of state. However, both Cradock and Wall noted that Wall's predecessor as foreign affairs private secretary, Charles (now Lord) Powell, had, in spite of the same dearth of support, encountered resentment in the Foreign Office due to his close relationship with Margaret Thatcher and the perceived influence this gave him over her foreign policy.<sup>50</sup>

Tony Blair's chief of staff, Jonathan Powell, himself an ex-diplomat, took a lead both on Northern Ireland<sup>51</sup> and on other foreign and security issues. Things started to change significantly in Blair's second term as he looked to boost his ability to drive his priorities from No.10. In June 2001, the Cabinet Secretary conceded that the foreign affairs capacity available to the Prime Minister could be increased by 'double-hatting' both the Head of the Cabinet Office European Secretariat and the Head of the OD Secretariat as respective prime ministerial advisers on Europe and Foreign Policy. This brought the capacity of the secretariats behind the advisers.

Lord Wilson has testified to the Iraq Inquiry that he saw this move as 'the lesser evil' at a time when a merger of the Prime Minister's Office and the Cabinet Office had been mooted.<sup>52</sup> The arrangement survived under both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, with Sir David Manning, Sir Nigel Sheinwald and Simon McDonald occupying the double-hatted role.

Sir Stephen Wall, who performed the parallel role of Prime Minister's Europe Adviser for Blair from its inception until his retirement in 2004, has reflected that it was 'no more than common sense...for the Prime Minister to have a small team dealing with foreign policy rather than a one-man band.' Wall argued that Blair's 2001 reorganisation created 'greater capacity for independent origination of ideas, for negotiation, on the Prime Minister's behalf, and for implementation of policy than existed before. The risk in this lay not in the structures themselves but in how they were used within the overall framework of cabinet government.'<sup>53</sup>

### iii. Coping with war

Coordination of decision making during conflicts is one of the greatest tests for any government. During the later Cold War period, deployment of UK forces in military operations abroad was relatively exceptional and merited special arrangements. Domestically, of course, under Operation Banner the armed forces were deployed continuously in Northern Ireland from August 1969 until July 2007. Since the Cold War, UK armed forces have been in action abroad almost as the rule rather than the exception, most notably in Iraq and Afghanistan, and that has been reflected in the mainstreaming of coordination arrangements. During the Second World War, the machinery that directed the war effort was extensive, bringing together a mass of military and officials' committees under a final decision-making apex, the War Cabinet. The scale of the supporting machinery was of a different magnitude to anything seen before, but the War Cabinet itself was deliberately kept smaller than peacetime Cabinets. The Prime Minister – simultaneously serving as Minister of Defence – exerted a forceful, personal influence on War Cabinet decision making.

During the Cold War, the Soviet nuclear threat (and all the other defence and security issues faced during the period) necessitated a larger bureaucracy of Cabinet, military and intelligence committees

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<sup>50</sup> Wall, S., *A Stranger in Europe: Britain and the EU from Thatcher to Blair* Oxford, OUP, 2008, p.196

<sup>51</sup> Northern Ireland was previously part of the foreign affairs private secretary's remit. In addition, under Margaret Thatcher, Cabinet Secretary, Sir Robert Armstrong also played an important role, e.g. in negotiations with the government of the Republic of Ireland which led to the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985. Shannon, W.V., 'The Anglo-Irish Agreement', *Foreign Affairs*, vol.64(4), 1986, pp.849-870.

<sup>52</sup> Wilson, T.J., *Evidence to the Iraq Inquiry*, Iraq Inquiry website, 25 January 2011, pp.19-22, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/51640/20110125-wilson-final.pdf>

<sup>53</sup> Wall, S., *A Stranger in Europe: Britain and the EU from Thatcher to Blair* Oxford, OUP, 2008, p.197.

than had existed before 1939. But decision making was less concentrated in one forum like the War Cabinet. Following the Second World War, Cabinet used separate Defence and Overseas Policy subcommittees until 1963, when the Defence and Overseas Policy Committee (referred to as OD or DOPC throughout its existence) was established. Rather than a completely new innovation, the NSC is the latest iteration in this process.

Throughout the Cold War period, DOPC sat at the primary forum for defence and foreign policy decision making.<sup>54</sup> It was flanked at official level by a permanent secretaries' group, the Overseas Policy and Defence Official Committee (OD(O)), itself supported by the Cabinet Office OD Secretariat.<sup>55</sup> Gordon Brown renamed DOPC in 2007 'the Ministerial Committee on National Security, International Relations and Development' (NSID), with corresponding changes to the names of its flanking and subcommittees.<sup>56</sup>

OD performed as the ultimate coordinator and *de facto* war cabinet during various conflicts. Immediately following the Argentinian invasion of the Falkland Islands in April 1982, Cabinet Secretary Sir Robert Armstrong performed some of the functions of a National Security Adviser, coordinating the civilian and military parts of Whitehall in preparing the transition to war footing. Instead of following procedures to establish a formal 'war cabinet', Armstrong advised the creation of a virtual 'war cabinet' subcommittee of OD, which became known as OD (South Atlantic) (OD(SA)), comprising the Prime Minister, Defence, Home and Foreign Secretaries, and the Paymaster General. Other ministers attended as appropriate.

A number of other senior advisers were also present at OD(SA) meetings. In addition to ministers, officials who frequently attended included Armstrong himself, the recently appointed Foreign Office Permanent Under-Secretary, Sir Antony Acland, and Acland's predecessor, the recently-retired Sir Michael Palliser, who was retained in an advisory capacity to provide continuity of experience and to think about post-war prospects.<sup>57</sup> Other regular attendees were the Chief of the Defence Staff and, when required, the Chief of the Naval Staff and members of the Chiefs of Staff Committee.<sup>58</sup>

This 'war cabinet' was supported by the OD(O)(SA) flanking committee, chaired by Armstrong. Armstrong was keen to ensure that OD(O)(SA), and officials in general, were not seen as acting beyond their remit in devising courses of action but merely ensuring ministerial decisions were implemented. Hence he avoided going through the full transition to war process as laid out in the official 'war book'.<sup>59</sup> Armstrong's aim was apparently to avoid allowing the bureaucracy to dominate proceedings. However, historian Lawrence Freedman, writing later about the committee, noted subsequent criticism of its shortcomings and the 'informality' of its arrangements.<sup>60</sup> Criticisms of OD's

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<sup>54</sup> DOPC was a supple committee. Under Margaret Thatcher, Cabinet discussions of Northern Irish issues were channelled through DOPC, with terrorism being discussed in a separate DOPC subcommittee. Cabinet Defence and Overseas Policy Committee, *Northern Ireland: The overall situation*, The Margaret Thatcher Foundation, 1979, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://fc95d419f4478b3b6e5f-3f71d0fe2b653c4f00f32175760e96e7.r87.cf1.rackcdn.com/4DE105D0A75547E9B3F4578B37FFB09B.pdf>

<sup>55</sup> In practice, 'OD' was often used to describe the ministerial committee as well as the officials' flanking committee.

<sup>56</sup> Davies, P., 'Twilight of Britain's Joint Intelligence Committee?' *International Journal of Intelligence and Counter-Intelligence*, 24:3, 2011, p.428.

<sup>57</sup> Armstrong, R. & Whitmore, C., Letters between Armstrong and Clive Whitmore, Principal Private Secretary to the Prime Minister, 3, 6 and 14 April 1983, National Archives, CAB 164-1617-2 and CAB 164-1618.

<sup>58</sup> Hastings, M., & Jenkins, S., *Battle for the Falklands*, London, Pan Macmillan, 2012, p.103

<sup>59</sup> The Transition to War Committee was Cold War architecture that would officially implement measures set out in the Government War Book, in some cases comprising emergency measures handed to it by Parliament. Hennessy, P., *The Secret State: Preparing for the worst, 1945-2010*, London, Penguin, p.228

<sup>60</sup> Freedman, L., *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign: War and diplomacy*, vol 2, Psychology Press, 2005, p.23

performance also include claims that it was a lowest common denominator committee and that its secretariat did not have sufficient expertise in defence issues.<sup>61</sup>

As prime minister, Margaret Thatcher increasingly relied on a close circle of advisers – including her influential and long-serving Foreign Affairs private secretary, Charles (now Lord) Powell – and chosen ministers, rather than formal cabinet subcommittees. Sir Percy Cradock later noted a significant difference between Thatcher and her successor, John Major. Thatcher's Cabinet meetings 'rarely debated foreign policy...as distinct from hearing reports of decisions taken'. Real decision making occurred either in the OD subcommittee, or often 'in practice at small *ad hoc* groups of ministers and advisers, the Prime Minister's preferred way of working.'<sup>62</sup> While prime ministers should have latitude to choose their working methods, Cradock saw disadvantages in this informal approach.

In the necessary secrecy of the Gulf War Mrs Thatcher's highly personal habits of consulting and deciding had got near the point of disrupting the Whitehall machinery.' [On Major's succession, the] 'servicing of the War Cabinet was now taken over by the Cabinet Secretariat. No more records by the Private Secretary circulated to some but not to all.' Under Major, 'orthodoxy returned to Whitehall business. There were more ministerial meetings, fewer private conclaves.'<sup>63</sup>

As with Thatcher's Falklands OD(SA), Major chaired an OD subcommittee as a war cabinet during the first Gulf War, its membership comprising:

- Foreign Secretary
- Defence Secretary
- Chancellor of the Exchequer
- Energy Secretary (in his capacity as the coordinator of government publicity)
- Other ministers attended when necessary, including the Health Secretary, Home Secretary, Attorney-General, and Transport Secretary.<sup>64</sup>

Tony Blair also used OD 'war cabinets' in his early military conflicts, but more informal processes leading to the decision to take military action against Iraq prompted both criticism from former officials<sup>65</sup> and even official inquiries.<sup>66</sup> Decision-making processes do need to work with the style of the prime minister. Blair reportedly acknowledged that formal committees 'don't really function for me, and they don't enable me to have the sort of discussions I want to have'.<sup>67</sup> However, more informal national security processes can make it harder for officials to function.

Initially, however, there was continuity between Blair's and Major's use of OD committees. As one of our interviewees recalled, war cabinets – as during the 1998 Iraq bombing campaign and the later war in Afghanistan – were the exception to Blair's subsequent reluctance to use formal cabinet

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<sup>61</sup> Lee, J.M., Jones, G.W. & Burnham, J., *At the Centre of Whitehall: Advising the Prime Minister and Cabinet*, London, Macmillan 1998, pp.172-173.

<sup>62</sup> Cradock, P., *In Pursuit of British Interests*, London, John Murray, 1997, p.10.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* pp.32-34.

<sup>64</sup> Hughes, D., 'War cabinet to meet on Wednesday', *The Sunday Times*, 13 January 1991.

<sup>65</sup> Hope, C., 'Labour's sofa-style of government criticised in report from ex-permanent secretaries', *The Telegraph*, 23 January 2010, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/7053206/Labours-sofa-style-of-Government-criticised-in-report-from-ex-permanent-secretaries.html>

<sup>66</sup> Brown, C., 'Lord Butler lambasts Blair over bad government', *The Independent*, Friday 10 December 2004, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/lord-butler-lambasts-blair-over-bad-government-6156229.html>

<sup>67</sup> Seldon, A., Snowdon, P., & Collings, D., *Blair Unbound*, Pocket Books, 2008, p.329.

committees. 'Mr Blair quite liked having a war cabinet with the generals, and the officials, and the agencies, and the few ministers. And he would choose the ministers.'<sup>68</sup>

Lord Wilson testified to the Iraq Inquiry that 'between January 1998 and January 1999 I attended and noted 21 ministerial discussions on Iraq, of which 10 were in Cabinet and seven had some substance to them. Five were in DOP Cabinet Committee and six were *ad hoc*, including one JIC briefing.'<sup>69</sup>

This use of DOP as a coordinating committee extended into the Afghanistan campaign.

On Afghanistan between 9/11 and the middle of January 2002, I attended and took notes of 46 ministerial discussions of which 13 were in Cabinet, four being very short, 12 were in Cabinet committees – a committee called DOP(IT), which we set up as a kind of War Cabinet – and 21 were *ad hoc*. Approximately just under half were, using the phrase, on the sofa. Actually they were not always on the sofa. Sometimes they were round the Cabinet table and there were a lot of people there, but they were not a formal Cabinet committee.<sup>70</sup>

In the run up to the 2003 Iraq war, the use of DOP and the committee system was different.

Two former Cabinet Secretaries testified to the Iraq Inquiry that Blair's Cabinet routinely afforded him considerable latitude. They suggested that this was a habit formed in opposition.<sup>71</sup> The late Robin Cook, who resigned as a Minister over the war, endorsed this view, noting that the many cabinet discussions of Iraq in 2002 and 2003 rarely involved the expression by ministers of 'frank doubts' about Iraq policy.<sup>72</sup>

Tom McKane, who from late 1999 until mid-2002 was OD Secretariat's Deputy Head, confirmed to the Iraq Inquiry:

There were no formal meetings of the Defence and Overseas Policy Committee that dealt with Iraq in the period that I was there. However, there was frequent and regular exchange of correspondence between the offices of the cabinet ministers concerned and between the members of the Cabinet, and there would be meetings of small groups of relevant ministers as required.<sup>73</sup>

Iraq Inquiry member Sir Roderic Lyne<sup>74</sup> has described this pre-war coordination as a 'completely nebulous process' and expressed consternation that one senior Cabinet Office official giving evidence did not know the full details of how many ministerial meetings were held to discuss the issues, who attended, or what was decided during the meetings.<sup>75</sup>

Lord Wilson remembers only five cabinet discussions of Iraq and one non-cabinet ministerial discussion before his retirement in September 2002, none of these discussions being supported by

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<sup>68</sup> Harris, J. & Rutter, J., *Centre Forward: Effective support for the prime minister at the centre of government*, Institute for Government, 9 July 2014, p.53, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Centre%20Forward%20-%20Final.pdf>

<sup>69</sup> Wilson, T.J., *Evidence to the Iraq Inquiry*, Iraq Inquiry website, 25 January 2011, pp.11, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/51640/20110125-wilson-final.pdf>

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, p.11.

<sup>71</sup> Wilson, T.J., *Evidence to the Iraq Inquiry*, Iraq Inquiry website, 25 January 2011, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/51640/20110125-wilson-final.pdf>; Turnbull, A., *Evidence to the Iraq Inquiry*, Iraq Inquiry website, 25 January 2011, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/51794/20110125-turnbull-final.pdf>

<sup>72</sup> Cook, R., *The Point of Departure*, London, Pocket Books, 2004, p.116.

<sup>73</sup> McKane, T., *Evidence to the Iraq Inquiry*, Iraq Inquiry website, 19 January 2011, p.9, retrieved 28 July 2014 from <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/51684/20110119-mcKane-final.pdf>

<sup>74</sup> Sir Roderic Lyne succeeded Stephen Wall as John Major's Foreign Affairs Private Secretary in 1993.

<sup>75</sup> Bowen, D., *Evidence to the Iraq Inquiry*, Iraq Inquiry website, 7 December 2009, pp.42-43, retrieved 29 July 2014 from <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/40474/20091207pmbowen-final.pdf>

papers.<sup>76</sup> He suggests that, following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, Blair increasingly preferred a smaller circle of advisers on international and security affairs, including on Iraq.

What really happened was the Prime Minister had a stronger centre around him and he really after 9/11 had around him – he developed a very close team on Iraq, which would be Jonathan Powell, David Manning, C and so on. He had his own team. That is, to be honest how he liked to work.

For Lord Wilson, there were ‘all sorts of reasons’ why Blair ‘didn’t like cabinet committees.’ Wilson suggests that Blair preferred smaller, more discreet meetings with people who were already ‘implicitly on side’, rather than larger, potentially obstructive cabinet committees which were vulnerable to leaks and thereby undermined ‘media handling’ of the issue.<sup>77</sup>

Lord Turnbull, who replaced Lord Wilson as Cabinet Secretary in September 2002, shared Wilson’s view of Blair’s management of Iraq decision making, emphasising that Blair wished to restrict Cabinet discussion of the issues to a trusted group of ministers. ‘Clearly the Prime Minister didn’t want Clare Short or Robin Cook in, because he thought they would be troublesome. That’s his style of working.’<sup>78</sup>

#### iv. The route to the NSC

Blair’s 2007 reorganisation and his creation of a Ministerial Committee on Security and Terrorism did not survive the early months of Gordon Brown’s premiership. In July 2007, Brown established the Ministerial Committee on National Security, International Relations and Development (NSID), in part to reflect his particular interest in international development. As of late 2009, Brown’s NSID had nine ministerial subcommittees, in addition to a separate Ministerial Civil Contingencies Committee. Five of the NSID subcommittees – Overseas Defence (OD), Tackling Extremism (E), Intelligence (I), Nuclear Security (N), and Afghanistan-Pakistan (AP) – were chaired by Brown himself. Two – Africa (A) and Trade (T) – were chaired by the Secretary of State for International Development, and one apiece – Protective Security & Resilience (PSR) and Europe (EU) – were chaired by the Home Secretary and Foreign Secretary.<sup>79</sup>

Brown’s NSID subcommittee on intelligence (NSID(I)) was established in 2009 following a Cabinet Office review of intelligence coordination, and at the same time the permanent secretaries’ committee on intelligence (PSIS) was replaced by a flanking officials’ subcommittee, NSID(I)(O). This flanking committee also assumed oversight of the intelligence community, previously a JIC responsibility. This has been described as having the effect of stripping down the JIC to its core roles of assessments, setting intelligence requirements and priorities, and advising on professional standards of intelligence analysis.<sup>80</sup> The Intelligence and Security Secretariat also moved, becoming part of the Cabinet Office National Security Secretariat, as its Directorate of Intelligence.

Gordon Brown complemented his Cabinet committee reforms with efforts to open national security decision making to external expertise. He first proposed to create a National Security Forum (NSF) of outside experts on 19 March 2008, but it was not until 9 May 2009 that the NSF held its first meeting.

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<sup>76</sup> Wilson, T.J., *Evidence to the Iraq Inquiry*, Iraq Inquiry website, 25 January 2011, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/51640/20110125-wilson-final.pdf>. Lord Turnbull made a similar point about the scarcity of cabinet papers on Iraq in his evidence: Turnbull, A., *Evidence to the Iraq Inquiry*, Iraq Inquiry website, 25 January 2011, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/51794/20110125-turnbull-final.pdf>

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* pp.87-88.

<sup>78</sup> Turnbull, A., *Evidence to the Iraq Inquiry*, Iraq Inquiry website, 25 January 2011, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/51794/20110125-turnbull-final.pdf>

<sup>79</sup> Hennessy, P., *The Secret State: Preparing for the worst, 1945-2010*, London, Penguin, pp.383-385.

<sup>80</sup> Davies, P., ‘Twilight of Britain’s Joint Intelligence Committee?’ *International Journal of Intelligence and Counter-Intelligence*, 24:3, 2011, p.436.



It then met only sporadically and was discontinued under Cameron. Although its membership comprised some academic experts and business professionals without government experience, most NSF members were in fact retired senior police and military officers or civil servants.<sup>81</sup>

In addition to NSID and the NSF, Brown had three senior officials in the Cabinet Office leading the Europe & Global Issues (Jon Cunliffe), Foreign & Defence (Simon McDonald), and Intelligence & Security (Robert Hannigan) Secretariats. Pre-election press reports in 2010 indicated that Brown was considering further reform and the appointment of one, higher-ranking National Security Adviser to provide 'strong grip' across all international and security issues. One Whitehall official told the *Financial Times*, 'There's a sense that there is no one figure who can bat for the PM across the range of issues, internationally and across Whitehall.' National security support to Brown was compared unfavourably with the respective US and French national security advisers and secretariats.<sup>82</sup>

There was a sense that 'the idea of properly coordinated – or joined-up – government, particularly in national security, has never really addressed the underlying logic of Whitehall, challenging departmental structures or encouraging policymakers to work more effectively with practitioners and other interested parties.'<sup>83</sup> An IPPR report in 2009 had called for a National Security Council and a single security budget.<sup>84</sup> More polemically, William Hague, as Shadow Foreign Secretary, claimed that although Brown had 'announced his own National Security Committee to sound like ours...he forgot about it, then it met only three times in 21 months despite two wars being in progress'.<sup>85</sup>

The NSC was created 'to integrate at the highest levels of government the work of...foreign, defence, energy, home and international development departments.'<sup>86</sup> Prior to the May 2010 election, the Institute for Government organised a series of private seminars looking at the potential for improved national security organisation. These saw broad agreement among the officials, political advisers and outside experts that a 'more powerful' NSC-like structure was needed, 'underpinned by a strengthened secretariat', to emulate across a wider range of issues the successful model and strategic focus of 'the arrangements for coordination on counter-terrorism, with the lead in the Office of Security and Counter-Terrorism.'<sup>87</sup> As we have seen there was an emerging cross-party consensus on the need to bolster prior arrangements.

The Conservative Party had, in fact, envisioned an NSC since a December 2006 policy paper<sup>88</sup> produced for party leader David Cameron by a former diplomat and JIC chair, Dame (now Baroness) Pauline Neville-Jones,<sup>89</sup> which also called for a Cabinet-level 'Security Minister'. Conservative thinking culminated in a January 2010 green paper<sup>90</sup> which pledged to create a NSA post as an official rather

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<sup>81</sup> Brown, G., Statement to House of Commons, 9 March 2009, retrieved 21 July 2014 from <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmhansrd/cm090309/wmstext/90309m0001.htm>

<sup>82</sup> Blitz, J., 'National security chief planned', *Financial Times*, Friday 16 April 2010, p.2

<sup>83</sup> Edwards, C., 'Winning on Wicked Issues', *The World Today*, vol. 64, no. 2, 2008, p.21.

<sup>84</sup> Institute for Public Policy Research, *Shared Responsibilities: a national security strategy for the UK*, 2009, retrieved 29 August 2014 from [http://www.ippr.org/assets/media/images/media/files/publication/2011/05/shared\\_responsibility\\_summary\\_1704.pdf](http://www.ippr.org/assets/media/images/media/files/publication/2011/05/shared_responsibility_summary_1704.pdf)

<sup>85</sup> Hague, W., 'Shadow Foreign Secretary's Speech', Manchester, 2009, retrieved 29 August 2014 from <http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=344>

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> Institute for Government & Libra Advisory Group, 'Written evidence submitted by the Institute for Government and the Libra Advisory Group (GS 06)', 2010, retrieved 29 August 2014 from <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmpublicadm/memo/grandstrat/gso6.htm>

<sup>88</sup> Neville-Jones, P., *Security Issues: Interim position paper*, National and International Security Policy Group, Conservative Party, 2006.

<sup>89</sup> Pauline (now Baroness) Neville-Jones is a retired senior diplomat and former Head of OD Secretariat and Chair of the JIC.

<sup>90</sup> Conservative Party, *A Resilient Nation: National security green paper – policy green paper No. 13*, 2010, retrieved 4 November 2014 from [http://www.conservatives.com/~media/Files/Green%20Papers/National\\_Security\\_Green\\_Paper.ashx?dl=true](http://www.conservatives.com/~media/Files/Green%20Papers/National_Security_Green_Paper.ashx?dl=true)

than a political appointment, although a security minister would also attend NSC meetings. The Conservative NSC would amalgamate both Brown's NSID and his Ministerial Civil Contingencies Committee; its National Security Secretariat would similarly be formed 'by rationalising and integrating the overlapping functions of the existing security-related secretariats in the Cabinet Office – the National Security Secretariat, the Foreign and Defence Policy Secretariat, the Civil Contingencies Secretariat and parts of the European and Global Issues Secretariat.'<sup>91</sup>

The (2006) Neville-Jones report had called for better coordination, but also channelled public criticism of Blair-era foreign policy, articulating a desire to reset US-UK relations to avoid the UK becoming a 'mute partner in every foreign undertaking'.<sup>92</sup> This was welcomed by some officials. One senior diplomat reportedly told the *Financial Times* in the lead up to the 2010 election that the Conservatives' NSC proposal came helpfully at a time when, 'in recent years no one had been allowed any say in foreign policy "except the PM and 17 teenagers"'.<sup>93</sup> Whether or not such a view was justified, Conservative thinking resonated with the views of several senior national security and intelligence officials at the time.

David Cameron's NSC is, on paper at least, a slightly enlarged and reconstituted version of Brown's NSID, its subcommittees and flanking committees. To one observer, Cameron's NSC was 'a relatively shallow repackaging and reshuffling of existing Cabinet Office mechanisms and procedures'.<sup>94</sup> But another commentator makes the point that, while 'a good idea' in principle, Brown's NSID had such a 'huge' remit that it needed to meet much more frequently than it did, when 'the bulk of its work is delegated to subcommittees'.<sup>95</sup> From this perspective, the significant difference between Brown's and Cameron's national security coordination is not to be found in any novelty of organisational design but more in the practical reality of how energetically and frequently the NSC is used by Cameron. This point is put in context by Lord O'Donnell:

The point is the difference between NSID and the National Security Council is that the National Security Council is chaired by the Prime Minister and meets every week and looks at Afghanistan, for example, every fortnight. So you have the continuity there and you also have the substructure. You know, we brought together not just – and I think people were saying, "What is the National Security Adviser – isn't it just Nigel Sheinwald?" It is not. This brings together foreign policy, the military, the security, the intelligence, the counter-terrorism, the civil contingencies. It is much bigger. The structure under it brings together lots of different aspects of the Cabinet Office including new things like cyber. To me, this, I think, is a very welcome development.<sup>96</sup>

## Conclusions

Neither the NSC nor the NSA post represents a fundamental break with the past. Both are the latest iterations of an ongoing process of reform and re-structuring in the central coordination of national security (intelligence, defence and foreign policy), a process which reaches back to the foundation of the Committee of Imperial Defence. Several different configurations have been tried: combining the JIC Chairmanship with a Prime Minister's Adviser role (Cradock and Braithwaite) or with the Head of OD Secretariat (Neville-Jones and Pakenham); combining the Coordinator and JIC Chair posts (Pakenham and Ricketts); enhancing the responsibilities and status of the Coordinator (Omand and

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<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.* p.9.

<sup>92</sup> Adams, C., 'Tories call for US-style security body to tackle terrorism', *Financial Times*, 18 December 2006, p.2

<sup>93</sup> Cameron, S., 'Resurgent FCO faces turf war', *Financial Times*, 20 January 2010, p.12

<sup>94</sup> Davies, P., 'Twilight of Britain's Joint Intelligence Committee?' *International Journal of Intelligence and Counter-Intelligence*, 24:3, 2011, p.438.

<sup>95</sup> Hennessy, P., *The Secret State: Preparing for the worst, 1945-2010*, London, Penguin, p.398.

<sup>96</sup> O'Donnell, G., *Evidence to the Iraq Inquiry*, Iraq Inquiry website, 2 February 2011, p.31, retrieved 28 July 2014 from <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/51849/20110202-odonnell-final.pdf>

Mottram), and merging the OD post with the Prime Minister's Foreign Affairs Adviser role (Manning, Sheinwald and McDonald). The role of National Security Adviser is a further step in this process. As such, perceptions of 'old wine in new bottles' are quite valid.

However, where previously there were between four and six posts at the centre – Intelligence Coordinator, Cabinet Secretary, JIC Chairman, Head of OD Secretariat, Prime Minister's Foreign Policy Adviser and Prime Minister's Chief of Staff – each exercising separate responsibilities, the NSA now fulfils the core national security responsibilities of many of these posts. The Cabinet Secretary, Chief of Staff and JIC Chairman posts remain separate from the NSA, but the NSC increasingly shapes the national security context in which they all must operate, making the NSA an integral role.

Not only is this a new configuration of roles and responsibilities, but, as Lord O'Donnell has emphasised, the NSC is also innovative in the increased breadth of subjects under its purview, the regularity of its meetings and the persistence of prime ministerial attention. Sir Alex Allan told us that there was more momentum behind the NSC process than its immediate predecessor, NSID. While Gordon Brown had 'set up the institutions...[he] didn't give them any oxygen.'<sup>97</sup> The next sections go on to examine how the NSC has operated since its establishment and to consider what issues still may need to be addressed.

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<sup>97</sup> Interview, November 2013.



### 3. The NSC now

#### Ministerial composition

Like its predecessors, the NSC is a cabinet committee of ministers, supported by a dedicated secretariat, which exists to co-ordinate and ‘consider matters relating to national security, foreign policy, defence, international relations and development, resilience, energy and resource security’.<sup>98</sup> The NSC is scheduled to meet on a weekly basis (often on the day of Cabinet meetings to maximise attendance) when Parliament is in session and the Prime Minister is in London. In its meetings, the NSC usually takes papers on two subjects, with a short presentation stimulating debate and discussion for roughly 30 minutes per issue, although sometimes the meeting takes just one paper for the duration.<sup>99</sup>

**Figure 2: Membership of the National Security Council**

Ministerial members of the NSC <sup>100</sup>	Senior officials attending when required <sup>101</sup>
▪ <b>Prime Minister</b>	▪ National Security Adviser (NSA)
▪ <b>Deputy Prime Minister</b>	▪ Cabinet Secretary
▪ <b>Chancellor of the Exchequer</b>	▪ Chief of Defence Staff (CDS)
▪ <b>First Secretary of State/Leader of the House of Commons</b>	▪ Permanent Under-Secretary, FCO
▪ <b>Foreign Secretary</b>	▪ Chief of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS)
▪ <b>Home Secretary</b>	▪ Director of Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ)
▪ <b>Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change</b>	▪ Director General of the Security Service (SyS)
▪ <b>Secretary of State for International Development</b>	▪ Chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC)
▪ <b>Chief Secretary to the Treasury</b>	
▪ <b>Minister for Government Policy, Cabinet Office</b>	
▪ <b>Defence Secretary<sup>102</sup></b>	

Ministers who are not standing members of NSC are invited to attend as necessary to discuss issues affecting their departments. The Chief Whip and Deputy Chief Whip attend when issues of

<sup>98</sup> Cabinet Office, *Cabinet Committee System*, 2010, p.3, retrieved 24 July 2014 from [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/60639/cabinet-committees-system.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/60639/cabinet-committees-system.pdf)

<sup>99</sup> Institute for Government round-table discussion, November 2013.

<sup>100</sup> Cabinet Office, National Security and Intelligence: National Security Council, Gov.UK website, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/national-security/groups/national-security-council>

<sup>101</sup> Cabinet Office, National Security and Intelligence: National Security Council, Gov.UK website, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/national-security/groups/national-security-council>

<sup>102</sup> Although not listed on the National Security Council’s membership page (cited above), Michael Fallon has been a member of the NSC since his July 2014 appointment as Defence Secretary. Biography: Michael Fallon, Gov.UK website, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <https://www.gov.uk/government/people/michael-fallon>

parliamentary business are raised. As the figure above illustrates, the ministerial membership of NSC reflects the dynamics of the coalition, with the Deputy Prime Minister, Energy and Climate Change Secretary and Chief Secretary to the Treasury representing the Liberal Democrats. The NSC currently has three formal subcommittees, each comprising of ministers whose departments have a stake in the issues to be discussed. These are the NSC (Threats, Hazards, Resilience and Contingencies), NSC (Nuclear Deterrence and Security), and NSC (Emerging Powers).<sup>103</sup> Membership of these subcommittees ranges from 20 ministers (NSC (THRC)) to just seven (NSC (N)). The THRC subcommittee also operates a smaller, more restricted group to consider intelligence issues. This restricted group comprises the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary, Home Secretary, Defence Secretary and the Chancellor of the Exchequer.<sup>104</sup>

Subcommittees are also established on an *ad hoc* basis, the most prominent example of which has been the NSC (Libya) committee, which met 62 times from 20 March to 25 October 2011. Of these NSC (L) meetings, the Prime Minister chaired 36, with the Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary each also chairing 13 meetings. As with other NSC subcommittees, NSC (L) had a parallel or 'flanking' NSC (L) (Officials) subcommittee, which met 82 times between 18 March and 2 November 2011 to prepare ahead of, and follow-up after, principal NSC (L) meetings.<sup>105</sup> Another (now defunct) subcommittee was the NSC (Afghanistan).

Taken as a whole, this is a considerable commitment of time at ministerial and senior official level – implying a similar commitment in preparatory and progress-chasing efforts at lower levels – to the consideration of national security and foreign/defence policy issues. The entire NSC process assumes the clear personal commitment and engagement of the Prime Minister.<sup>106</sup>

## The National Security Secretariat

The NSC and NSA are not the only important features of the new National Security structure. The secretariat that supports it, its capacity and the way it works with machinery in departments is just as important to the function of these bodies. At its outset, the National Security Secretariat (NSSec) comprised over 200 officials, split between six directorates, with the largest numbers sitting in the civil contingencies unit.

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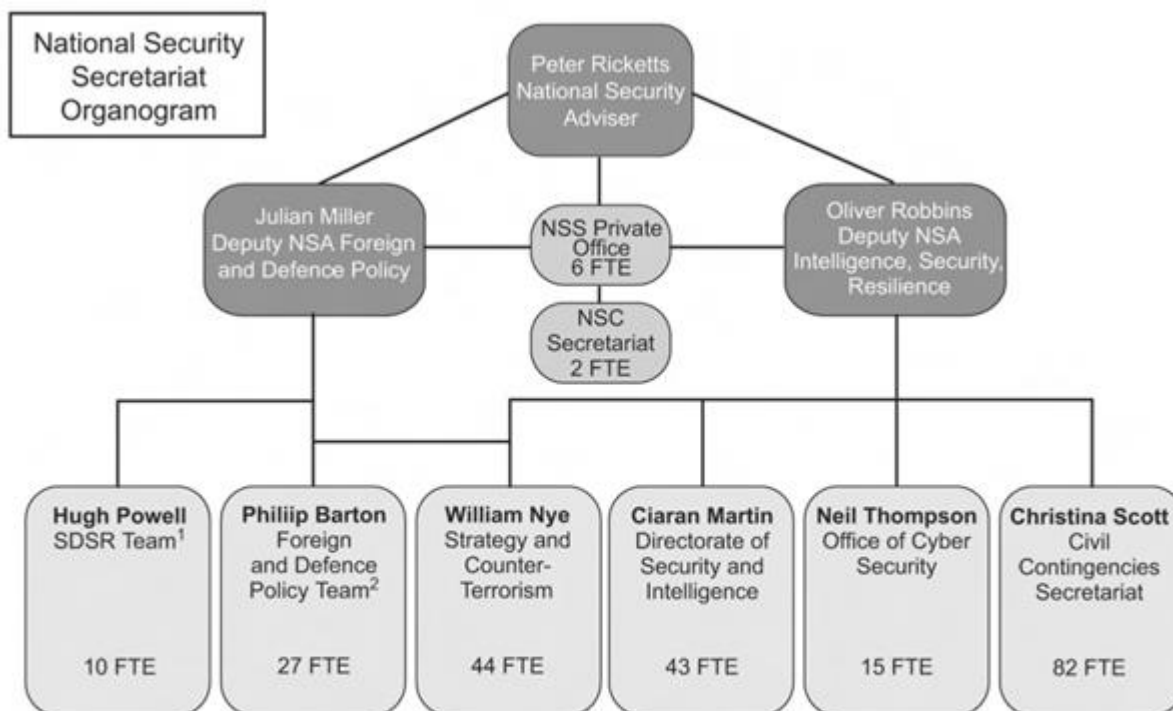
<sup>103</sup> HM Government, *Cabinet Committee Membership List*, February 2014, retrieved 4 November 2014 from [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/279220/Cabinet Committee Membership Lists\\_12\\_Feb\\_2014.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/279220/Cabinet_Committee_Membership_Lists_12_Feb_2014.pdf)

<sup>104</sup> Cabinet Office, *Cabinet Committee System*, 2010, p.4, retrieved 24 July 2014 from [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/60639/cabinet-committees-system.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/60639/cabinet-committees-system.pdf)

<sup>105</sup> HM Government, *Libya Crisis: the National Security Adviser's Review of Central Co-ordination and Lessons Learned*, 2011, retrieved 4 November 2014 from [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/193145/Lessons-Learned-30-Nov.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/193145/Lessons-Learned-30-Nov.pdf)

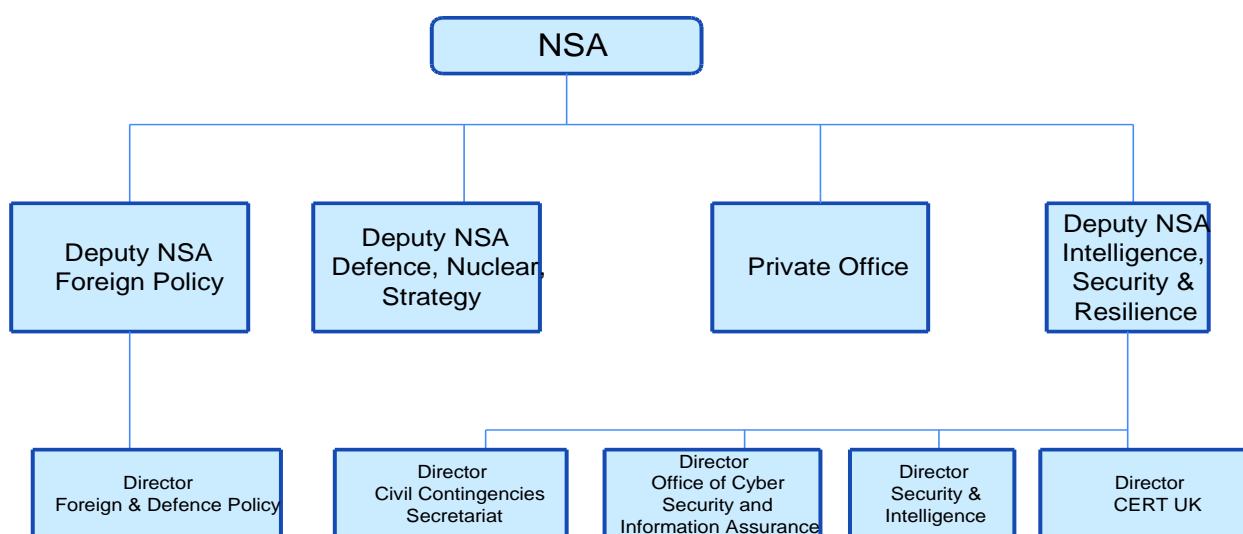
<sup>106</sup> As we describe below, the most recent parliamentary Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy (JCNSS) report expresses concern at the reduced number of NSC meetings in 2013. The NSC is meant to meet weekly when Parliament is in session. We understand that, with the exception of 2013, the NSC has kept closely to this total number of meetings each year.

Figure 3: National Security Secretariat Organogram, 1 August 2010. From *Who does UK national strategy?* PASC October 2010



Staffing levels as of 01 August 2010 expressed as Full Time Equivalents  
<sup>1</sup> Temporary team  
<sup>2</sup> Excludes Iraq Inquiry Witness Unit (temporary team of 5 FTE supporting inquiry)

Figure 4: The National Security Secretariat, as of July 2014, based on information provided by the Cabinet Office



By mid-2011, the temporary Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) directorate (including Hugh Powell's director-level post) and William Nye's director-level Strategy and Counter Terrorism post were abolished. Powell later became a third Deputy NSA, responsible for foreign affairs, with Julian Miller's portfolio shifting to nuclear and strategic issues.

The current NSSec comprises five directorates: the Civil Contingencies Secretariat, Foreign Affairs, Security & Intelligence, the Office for Cyber Security and Information Assurance (OCSIA), and Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT) UK. With the exception of a Foreign and Defence Policy Director reporting to Hugh Powell, the NSSec Directors all report to the Deputy NSA for Intelligence, Security and Resilience, Paddy McGuinness, who replaced Oliver Robbins when he moved to be Director General for Civil Service Reform in early 2014. In addition to these directorates, Julian Miller oversees a Nuclear Strategy team with the assistance of one deputy director.<sup>107</sup>

In January 2011, the NSSec comprised 195 officials, 25 of whom were in the Foreign and Defence Policy team. Following the Spending Review, the Foreign and Defence Policy team was projected to account for 20-25 *per cent* of the whole secretariat, once reductions had been made in other areas.<sup>108</sup> This pattern of reduced staff numbers reflects the wider backdrop of austerity in central government.<sup>109</sup>

## The National Security Adviser

The NSA plays a key role in the new NSC system. Lord O'Donnell has described the NSA as 'someone who is kind of mimicking the Cabinet Secretary for a part of his work. So just like I prepare the agendas, make sure the papers are there, brief the Prime Minister for Cabinet, so immediately after Cabinet we go short break, and then we go into National Security Council' where these functions are the responsibility of the NSA.<sup>110</sup>

The American political scientist Professor John P Burke has developed a typology to consider the core responsibilities of a National Security Adviser.<sup>111</sup> Amending slightly for the British context, the seven responsibilities are:

- source of personal advice and counsel to the prime minister
- focal channel for information during situations of crisis
- conduit for written information to and from the other principals
- organiser of the prime minister's regular national security briefing
- provision of day-to-day support to the prime minister
- efficient management of the NSC secretariat
- shepherd cross-Whitehall preparation for, and delivery of, NSC decisions.

Burke draws out different aspects of this typology, emphasising the need for NSAs to foster effective working relationships with important participants in the process. Two of his broader points are worth exploring in further detail, especially as they relate to a key question for the NSA concerning whether

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<sup>107</sup> HM Government, *Cabinet Office Staff and Salary Data: Senior posts as at 31 March 2014*, Gov.UK website, retrieved 24 July 2014 from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cabinet-office-staff-and-salary-data-as-at-31-march-2014>

<sup>108</sup> O'Donnell, G., & Ricketts, P., *Evidence to the Iraq Inquiry*, 28 January 2011, p.4, retrieved 24 July 2014 from <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/51323/ODonnell-Ricketts-statement.pdf>

<sup>109</sup> As of early November 2014, the NSSec had approximately 200 full-time officials, according to an estimate provided by the Cabinet Office. This estimate excludes staff employed by CERT UK and may also be inaccurate due to secondments unrecorded in the total NSSec headcount. The largest part of NSSec is still the Civil Contingencies Secretariat with circa 60 officials, whereas the Foreign Policy team has fewer than 20 officials.

<sup>110</sup> O'Donnell, G., *Evidence to the Iraq Inquiry*, 2 February 2011, p.15, retrieved 28 July 2014 from <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/51849/20110202-odonnell-final.pdf>

<sup>111</sup> Burke, J.P., 'The National Security Adviser and Staff: Transition challenges', *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol.39, no.2, 2009 pp.283-321

his responsibilities lie more with the prime minister or with the committee as a whole. While some argue that the NSA must cultivate a close personal relationship with the prime minister, others 'say he must speak for the NSC, not just for the prime minister, and that it was partly to get away from that sort of informality that the NSC was formed. One member of the council says: "The prime minister can't have a foreign policy of his own. The security adviser must work for consensus."<sup>112</sup>

Burke emphasises 'honest brokerage' as essential for effectiveness as National Security Adviser, and one which can conflict with efforts to become more involved in the policy-formulation and implementation process directly on behalf of the prime minister. An honest broker must be 'concerned for the fair and balanced representation of views among the principals and others at various points in the deliberative process' and also dedicate attention 'to the quality of the organisation and processes in which deliberation occurs at various stages'.<sup>113</sup>

In developing this notion of the 'honest broker', Burke identifies a series of key responsibilities that a National Security Adviser should undertake:

- balance resources within the system
- strengthen the position of weaker advocates
- bring in new advisers to argue for unpopular options
- establish new channels of information to ensure a plurality of sources
- arrange independent evaluation of starting assumptions and policy options
- monitor the effectiveness of the policy-making process, identifying any potential malfunctions and correcting them.

Being able to foster the necessary relationships to drive this process is a crucial capability for any NSA, and prime ministers must clearly devote sufficient 'attention to how that decision making can operate effectively and, especially, the role of the NSC advisor in fulfilling that task'.<sup>114</sup>

To date, David Cameron has successively appointed two senior career diplomats as his NSA. Given the two key qualities underpinning the 'honest broker' role – namely (1) the ability to cultivate instrumental relationships in negotiation and (2) a ready understanding of the processes and procedures that shape Whitehall decision making – it is easy to understand why Cameron opted for experienced and respected insiders rather than for a potentially riskier, outside appointment. Ricketts and Darroch understand the system from long experience within it, know how to operate effectively within it, and had already cultivated many of the necessary instrumental relationships over their careers. Indeed, Ricketts had already pre-figured many of his NSA responsibilities a decade earlier as both JIC Chairman and Intelligence Coordinator.

When identifying a prospective candidate for the NSA post, much will depend on a prime minister's conception of the NSC, on what kind of personal approach to national security the prime minister intends to take, and accordingly on what role the NSA needs to play. David Cameron's successors may have different ideas about their role in the national security process, and different assessments of a putative NSA's right balance of managerial skills, policy experience, national security credentials, and ability to work credibly and effectively with (*i.e.* be the 'honest broker' between) ministers and senior officials in the NSC process.

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<sup>112</sup> Staff, 'The National Security Council; Defenders of the realm' *The Economist*, 29 January 2011, (US edition) vol.398(8718), p.29, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.economist.com/node/18011808>

<sup>113</sup> Burke, J.P., 'The National Security Adviser and Staff: Transition challenges', *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol.39, no.2, 2009, p.294.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* p.296.

The brokerage function does not weigh solely on the shoulders of the NSA. As Sir Kim Darroch's testimony to Parliament makes clear, the NSA can rely heavily on the support and departmental experience provided by the team of three deputy National Security Advisers.

The way we organise the NSC or the National Security Secretariat, I tend, given my background, to concentrate on the foreign policy agenda. I have three deputy national security advisers, one of whom, Oliver Robbins<sup>115</sup>, is the lead on counter-terrorism, and he certainly does spend quite a lot of time on the radicalisation agenda. For example, he is effectively the secretary of the group the Prime Minister set up on radicalisation after the Woolwich bombing [sic]<sup>116</sup>, which met again this week. So, yes we do that within the NSS, and Oliver Robbins is the man who does it. Do I personally do very much work on it? I don't, I'm afraid. I wish I could spend more time on it.<sup>117</sup>

Although both the current and former NSA have been career diplomats, their three deputy NSAs<sup>118</sup> have brought with them experience from careers in other relevant departments.<sup>119</sup> One of Darroch's deputy NSAs, Julian Miller, 'has a long MoD pedigree and has specific responsibility for defence issues in the National Security Secretariat.'<sup>120</sup>

In spite of this wider team, however, one former senior official told us that the NSC had found it hard 'to bridge the domestic and foreign policy divide which is quite a serious tribal division in Whitehall and it kind of is more comfortable on foreign policy'.<sup>121</sup> Similarly, Sir Kim Darroch told us that the Foreign Office had been the most active of Whitehall departments in putting papers to the NSC.<sup>122</sup>

This is not a failing on the part of either the current or former NSAs, or of their wider team. As Sir Kim Darroch told a parliamentary select committee: 'In the end the Prime Minister decides what the agenda should be. There are always two or three options for every slot.' Prime ministerial intention is far more likely to account for the perceived dominance of overseas and defence issues in the NSC's agenda than is any preference for foreign affairs on the part of Ricketts or Darroch. Giving evidence to the JCNSS committee, David Cameron defended the NSC's record:

I would argue that it has been a reasonable mixture. I have the figures with me. In 2011, we had 36 NSCs, we covered 50 foreign policy topics and nine domestic policy issues but 14 security-related issues, such as counterterrorism and defence. I think there is an argument that it could do more domestic subjects, and the Home Secretary is always keen that we discuss more.<sup>123</sup>

Moreover, with a major foreign intervention in Libya, the longer-term planning to extricate British military forces from Afghanistan, and recent major international events including the ongoing crises in

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<sup>115</sup> Oliver Robbins has since been appointed Director General for Civil Service Reform in early 2014 and replaced by Paddy McGuinness.

<sup>116</sup> A reference to the 22 May 2013 murder of the soldier Lee Rigby near the Royal Artillery Barracks in Woolwich.

<sup>117</sup> Darroch, K., *Evidence to the House of Commons Defence Committee*, 11 September 2013, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmdfence/197/130911.htm>

<sup>118</sup> These are currently Hugh Powell (Foreign Policy), Julian Miller (Defence, Nuclear & Strategy) and Paddy McGuinness (Intelligence, Security & Resilience). Each of these officials has relevant career experience to complement Darroch's foreign policy anchor.

<sup>119</sup> Moreover, as we note above (p.14), Ricketts' tenure as Intelligence Co-ordinator in the Cabinet Office between 2000 and 2002 afforded him experience of performing some of the core NSA functions. While Darroch headed the Cabinet Office's European Secretariat between 2005 and 2007, acting as the Prime Minister's Europe adviser, his experience was otherwise more uniformly of diplomatic postings.

<sup>120</sup> House of Commons, *Oral evidence to the House of Commons Defence Committee*, Wednesday 11 September 2013, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmdfence/197/197.pdf>

<sup>121</sup> Institute for Government round-table discussion, November 2013 (NSC1).

<sup>122</sup> Institute for Government round-table discussion, November 2013.

<sup>123</sup> Cameron, D., *National Security Strategy Evidence from the Prime Minister: Transcript of Oral Evidence to the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy*, 30 January 2014, p.3, retrieved 2 October 2014 from <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/joint-committees/national-security-strategy/PM%20session/JCNSS14-01-30TranscriptCameronC.pdf>



Ukraine, Syria and Iraq, it is unsurprising that overseas and defence issues have often dominated the NSC agenda since May 2010.

Despite this, future NSA candidates could be considered from outside of the Foreign Office. Diplomats do not have a monopoly on the qualities necessary to perform the job successfully, and other departments might ultimately begin to lose confidence in the wider NSC process if it became an unwritten rule that a career diplomat would always be preferred for the role.

Another core responsibility of the NSA is to provide substantive policy and strategic advice to the prime minister, even in cases of contested policy debate across Whitehall. The exercise of this responsibility could be seen as potentially in tension with the practice of honest brokerage, especially if the NSA must take a side in contentious policy debates.

As an adviser to the prime minister, the NSA must navigate adroitly through the spectrum of opinion within Whitehall. In doing so, the NSA could experience a challenge identified by one former senior adviser: senior Cabinet Office advisers sometimes have two discrete and separate tasks.

One is bringing together – actually working for the Cabinet and trying to bring together different opinions to find a solution to things and the other is serving the Prime Minister and acting as the Prime Minister’s department and you have to be crystal clear when you’re in the Cabinet Office... [whether] you’re in the last one which is support to the Prime Minister, not the one of helping the Cabinet to work.<sup>124</sup>

Sir Kim Darroch acknowledged the role he plays as an adviser to the Prime Minister, as distinct from a broker between departments, ahead of NSC meetings.

If you have conflicting views among Departments and you bring them to the National Security Council to try to get a co-ordinated, coherent government view, it is no secret that I will put a note to the Prime Minister saying, “This is where I think the right balance of policy lies.” He may agree with it. He may not agree with it. But he will use that as his brief for the meeting. So we have some policy capability.<sup>125</sup>

Sir Kim Darroch’s coordination of permanent secretaries is but one example of how the NSC process is used to provide coherence and coordination. Departments have also developed dedicated central units to shepherd their preparation for and follow-on from NSC meetings. These central units ensure successful throughput of papers to the meetings, briefings for the respective attendees at NSC, and the subsequent dissemination of NSC minutes to all relevant officials.

## The NSC in practice: Tactical not strategic?

The NSC would be a logical place to have longer-term strategic discussions about the direction of government policy – and it has been used on occasion in that way. But in practice its focus has been much more on tactical and operational decisions, reflecting in part the constraints of the format (though that of course is not immutable) but most importantly the prime minister’s own preferences.

The former Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), Lord Richards, is a ‘big supporter of the NSC’ but laments its lack of strategic thinking.

There’s a big difference between talking about strategic issues and being strategic. I think some people round that table thought – because we were talking about Russia, or Libya, or the Middle East – that we were being strategic, but we weren’t. We didn’t. We were talking about policy goals!<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Interview, March 2014 (NSC2).

<sup>125</sup> Darroch, K., *Evidence to the House of Commons Defence Committee*, 11 September 2013, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmdfence/197/130911.htm>

<sup>126</sup> Hennessy, P., ‘Whitehall Conversations: Lord Hennessy meets Lord Richards’, *Civil Service World*, October 2014, retrieved 2 October 2014 from <http://www.civilserviceworld.com/articles/interview/lord-hennessy-meets-lord-richards>

Lord Richards contends that one of the consequences of failing to consider grand strategy is:

People don't come to terms with a reduced Britain. The Armed Forces are a lot smaller than even 10 years ago... Money is obviously an issue for the country. And we need to debate again whether we have suffered some strategic shrinkage. A man that I've got a lot of time for, William Hague, claimed we haven't. My feeling is that's probably not the case.<sup>127</sup>

As with the balance between foreign and domestic agenda items, with the prime minister often in the chair, the balance of discussion between strategic and operational matters is a question for political decision. One former member of the NSC put the issue more bluntly: discussion was, and would continue to be, just as strategic as ministers wanted it to be. If discussion was not yet very strategic, that was because ministers did not want it to be so.<sup>128</sup> David Cameron's own testimony to the JCNSS reflects this view:

Of course in the NSC we discuss strategy, but I want us to determine policy, I want us to agree action, and I want us to check that we have done what we said we were going to do. ... I find that the problem all too often is that people love sitting around talking about strategy. Getting people to do things and act and complete on the strategy is often the challenge.<sup>129</sup>

Sir Kim Darroch emphasised to us that the strategic capacity of the NSC had already improved over its life span, with increasing discussion and deliberation over strategic priorities across a range of core national security themes. One example was NSC discussion of the allocation of funds from the Conflict Pool, another was NSC discussion of strategic intelligence priorities.<sup>130</sup> In both cases, the NSC is used as a forum for addressing, and where necessary recalibrating, potential 'misalignments' between ministerial expectations and operational reality. This responsive and active ministerial consideration of 'priority setting' within the NSC framework was seen as a significant improvement on past practice in determining UK intelligence requirements and priorities, and similar exercises on the aid budget, military footprint and national prosperity agenda were envisaged in future.

There was nuance underneath this view, with interviewees noting that the performance of the NSC had, unsurprisingly, been most beneficial in improving areas which had previously been the subject of poor cross-Whitehall coordination (such as cyber security) and less obviously beneficial in areas (such as those concerning Afghanistan) which were already subject to strong cross-Whitehall coordination. The opportunity remained to improve the NSC's consideration of Whitehall's capacity to address specifically domestic national security issues, and Civil Contingencies would stand to benefit from greater integration into NSC proceedings. Baroness Neville-Jones pointed to the asymmetry between the NSSec and the Ministry of Defence when it came to capacity to engage in the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review process.<sup>131</sup> The NSC secretariat's ability to contribute effectively to this process in 2015 will test its role in the wider defence and security apparatus.

From May 2010 onwards, the exercise of both policy and strategic advocacy and honest-brokerage functions were potentially further complicated by the nature of the government as a coalition administration. Not only were there competing departmental and agency positions to consider, but the political principals also had differing party-political views. One official told us that there was a sense that the Liberal Democrat contingent on the NSC often found it difficult to shape the agenda, losing

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<sup>127</sup> Hennessy, P., 'Whitehall Conversations: Lord Hennessy meets Lord Richards', *Civil Service World*, October 2014, retrieved 2 October 2014 from <http://www.civilserviceworld.com/articles/interview/lord-hennessy-meets-lord-richards>

<sup>128</sup> Institute for Government round-table discussion, November 2013 (NSC1).

<sup>129</sup> House of Lords & House of Commons, *The Work of the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy in 2013–14*, 2014, p.12, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/lt201314/jtselect/jtnatsec/169/169.pdf>

<sup>130</sup> Institute for Government round-table discussion, November 2013.

<sup>131</sup> Institute for Government round-table discussion, November 2013.



out on issues of real disagreement.<sup>132</sup> In fact, the development of the NSC since 2010 reflects a broader resurgence of the dispute resolution role of cabinet secretariats, as the civil service plays a more prominent role in winnowing out key issues for resolution which in majority governments might otherwise be resolved by special advisers or ministers directly.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Institute for Government round-table, November 2013 (NSC3).

<sup>133</sup> Harris, J. & Rutter, J., *Centre Forward: Effective support for the prime minister at the centre of government*, Institute for Government, 9 July 2014, p.56, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Centre%20Forward%20-%20Final.pdf>

## 4. Assessing the NSC

### External views

As we have shown, the current NSC is the latest iteration in a century-long process of central coordination of intelligence, security and foreign policy. In many respects, both consciously and not, it has built on prior foundations. But this does not mean the process of development is over.

As the Institute's report *Centre Forward* found, the process of prime ministers reinventing the support they have – in all areas, not just national security – has all too often 'not followed a linear trend'.<sup>134</sup> It is therefore important not only to place the NSC in context, but also to consider assessments of how it has performed – so that the future of the NSC builds successfully on what has come before.

Since its creation, the party-political debate has focused more on improving the NSC's effectiveness than on the merits of its creation. The current Labour Shadow Defence Secretary, Vernon Coaker MP, has stated that 'Labour supported the establishment of the National Security Council, and it is vital that we see the NSC deliver the long-term strategic direction that it was originally established for'.<sup>135</sup>

The NSC has been subject to parliamentary scrutiny and attempts to review how effective it has been in improving the coherence, clarity and strategic focus across the full range of national security decision making. The parliamentary Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy (JCNSS) has issued a series of reports that suggest ways to improve the NSC process.<sup>136</sup> In its early 2012 report, the JCNSS stated:

The NSC lacks sustained strategic focus and is distracted by more operational issues. The JCNSS criticised the NSC's failure to discuss the national security implications of the Eurozone crisis, the uncertainties posed by the referendum on Scottish independence and the possible future referendum on the UK's membership of the EU, and the US pivot to Asia-Pacific.<sup>137</sup>

It also criticised an apparent lack of more abstract, "blue skies" discussion by the NSC.

While broadly positive about the appointment of a NSA, both the first NSA, Sir Peter Ricketts, and the current adviser, Sir Kim Darroch, have been career diplomats. The JCNSS think this could explain the NSC's bias in favour of foreign policy and away from more domestic national security issues. The JCNSS is also concerned that the NSA has direct line management responsibility for the performance appraisal of the three heads of the intelligence agencies. This might reduce the heads' direct access to the prime minister.

The JCNSS think the NSC process would benefit from the appointment of a dedicated Minister for National Security. With the strong prime ministerial commitment which then underpinned the process, the current administration felt no need to establish such a post, but the JCNSS suggest that if prime ministerial commitment were to wane, a dedicated minister could be a substitute sponsor for the whole process.

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<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7

<sup>135</sup> Coaker, V., *Press Release: Speech to RUSI*, Labour Party, 24 March 2014, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://press.labour.org.uk/post/80568857412/vernon-coaker-mp-labours-shadow-defence-secretary>

<sup>136</sup> See 'Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy – publications', <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/joint-select/national-security-strategy/publications/>, retrieved 5 November 2014.

<sup>137</sup> 'House of Lords & House of Commons, First Review of the National Security Strategy 2010: First Report of Session 2010-12, February 2012, paragraphs 9–12, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt201213/jtselect/jtnatsec/115/115.pdf>

Recognising the stated aim of the NSC to synthesise rather than to duplicate the work of other departments and agencies, the JCNSS recommend that the NSC 'should have some resources to undertake its own analytical studies and to commission research from outside government. It may need to provide alternative viewpoints to those of departments.' Major policy decisions were being made by individual departments (notably MoD) without discussion at the NSC.

Furthermore, the JCNSS criticise an alleged lack of effort on the NSC's part to reach outside the Civil Service for expertise and advice, especially in light of the decision to abolish Brown's National Security Forum.

In its most recent report,<sup>138</sup> while noting that the NSC is a 'useful forum' that has 'improved collective decision making', and which ought to be structured 'in the way that works best' for the prime minister, the JCNSS has repeated its concerns about the perceived disproportionate dominance of foreign affairs on the NSC meeting agenda. It also cites the recent crisis in Ukraine as an example of the risks entailed by failure to discuss Europe in the NSC space, and preferring to reserve it for discussion in the Cabinet's European Affairs Committee.

Other early criticisms suggested that the NSC suffered a slow start and initially made some poor decisions.

According to people involved, too much was left to the last moment and there was insufficient political leadership: David Cameron is said to be a rigorous chairman, but his style is to hold back until his intervention is absolutely necessary. The result was some poor decisions; critics suggested the NSC was guilty of concentrating too much on the present war [Afghanistan] and not enough on longer-term threats.<sup>139</sup>

There is general agreement that the intelligence chiefs have benefited from more sustained and focused access to ministers through the NSC. The agencies now have greater clarity of ministerial decision making and consequent tasking – although some fear that this places them too close to policy making.<sup>140</sup> The outgoing (and now former) director of GCHQ, Sir Iain Lobban, recently described the NSC as 'one of the best things this government has done' because it 'takes the sentiment in the room and translates it into tasking for each organisation.'<sup>141</sup> Another former senior intelligence official told us that the NSC was like 'the lights coming on because it was very difficult under the previous arrangements to necessarily detect what decisions, if any decisions, were being taken on a number of issues and the thinking that led to those decisions was even more opaque.'<sup>142</sup>

The same consensus does not, however, obtain in the case of the military, with one commentary noting that:

The intelligence services do indeed believe that their influence has been usefully strengthened. On the other hand, the military element, represented only by Sir David Richards<sup>143</sup>, the Chief of the Defence Staff, urgently needs beefing up.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> House of Lords & House of Commons, *The Work of the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy in 2013–14*, 2014, p.12, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt201314/jtselect/jtnatsec/169/169.pdf>

<sup>139</sup> Staff, 'The National Security Council; Defenders of the realm' *The Economist*, 29 January 2011, (US edition), vol.398(8718), p.29, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.economist.com/node/18011808>

<sup>140</sup> Phillips, M., *Intelligence Support to the National Security Council and Related Issues: Written Evidence to the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy*, 2012, p.133. Accessed on 2 September 2014 at <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/joint-committees/national-security-strategy/nsscollatedevidencefinal.pdf>

<sup>141</sup> Moore, C., 'GCHQ: "This is not Blitz Britain. We sure as hell can't lick terrorism on our own"', *The Telegraph*, 11 October 2014, retrieved 11 October 2014 from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/defence/11154322/GCHQ-This-is-not-Blitz-Britain.-We-sure-as-hell-cant-lick-terrorism-on-our-own.html>

<sup>142</sup> Institute for Government round-table discussion, November 2013 (NSC1).

<sup>143</sup> Now Lord Richards, he became Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS) in October 2010, replacing Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup. Richards retired in July 2013 and was replaced as CDS by General Sir Nick Houghton.

A further capacity issue is whether the NSSec currently provides sufficient support to the NSA in reviewing the efficiency of the intelligence and security agencies. Sir Alex Allan told us that, when he was in the Cabinet Office, the Secretariat was underpowered in this respect. 'They can't match the agencies in terms of firepower... they can test and probe, but are in danger of being outgunned.'<sup>145</sup>

In the absence of an increase in total staff numbers – unlikely in the current climate – or the re-prioritising of its existing programmes of work to meet this requirement from within existing resources, this alleged capacity gap at the centre is likely to remain. As presently configured, the Secretariat is primarily an instrument for coordination and driving delivery. Potential future responsibilities for deeper analysis and assessment would be likely to require it to address these questions of capacity, configuration and recruitment.

Following the practice of separating intelligence assessment from policy, the Joint Intelligence Organisation has been kept separate from the NSC. Since an October 2011 Cabinet Office review of the relationship between the JIC and NSC – undertaken by the NSA and JIC Chairman at the Prime Minister's behest – the work of the JIC has been more closely aligned with the NSC, reflecting the review's recommendation that the 'NSC's priorities should be the lead driver of the JIC agenda.'<sup>146</sup>

The review judged that the NSC(O) meeting was best-placed to task the JIC with programmes of work, but that the JIC should nevertheless retain capacity to provide early warning reports independently of NSC(O) tasking. Another recommendation was that the NSC should increasingly augment its capacity by drawing on the wider intelligence assessment and analytical community, including JTAC and Defence Intelligence (DI), in a process overseen by the Chief of Assessment Staff. Given the fragmentation of analytical expertise throughout departments and agencies, this puts the Chief of Assessment Staff in an integral position, coordinating the cross-government analytical effort in support of the NSC, and generates further overlap between the NSSec and JIC.

## What makes for successful coordination from the centre?

This paper has focused on the development of central coordinating committees for national security issues. There are unique challenges in coordinating government activity in this area, not least the highly classified and diplomatically sensitive nature of the issues under discussion and the complexity of coordinating not just Whitehall departments but the armed forces, security and intelligence agencies as well.

Nevertheless, acknowledging the unique challenges and history of national security coordination does not mean the institutions developed to tackle it are inherently exceptional – or that there are not lessons to learn from other areas of cross-government coordination.

In assessing the current national security arrangement's it is not just important to reflect back on a century of development and change, but also to compare it to other attempts to drive better coordination from the centre.

Committees driven by strong and persistent prime ministerial involvement can help government to grip specific issues, improve coordination across Whitehall, and generate decisions at pace. But prime ministerial time is at a premium. Active coordination risks tensions and alienation and, while

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<sup>144</sup> Staff, 'The National Security Council; Defenders of the realm' *The Economist*, 29 January 2011, (US edition), vol.398(8718), p.29, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.economist.com/node/18011808>

<sup>145</sup> Interview, November 2013.

<sup>146</sup> Cabinet Office, *Supporting the National Security Council (NSC): The central national security and intelligence machinery*. October 2011, retrieved 24 July 2014 from [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/61948/Recommendations\\_Supporting\\_20the\\_20National\\_20Security\\_20Council\\_The\\_20central\\_20national\\_20security\\_20and\\_20intelligence\\_20machinery.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/61948/Recommendations_Supporting_20the_20National_20Security_20Council_The_20central_20national_20security_20and_20intelligence_20machinery.pdf)

committees can be good at drawing together the leading decision makers, they can also find it hard to drive delivery following key decisions.

Cabinet subcommittees, rather than full Cabinet, have long been the integral discussion and decision making bodies of government. The obvious advantage that Cabinet subcommittees have over more informal arrangements is the dedicated support of a secretariat and clearly delineated cross-departmental involvement. This is essentially the criticism that Sir Percy Cradock made of late era Thatcher and Lord Wilson made of Blair's increasing preference for similarly informal arrangements. Conversely, if prime ministers do not find the formal cabinet subcommittee process helpful, then it is likely that they will look to use other avenues of coordination and decision.

This raises the question of what makes for a successful central committee process. In the Institute for Government's report, *Centre Forward*, we compared the experience of the NSC under the coalition government with Gordon Brown's National Economic Council (NEC), which was established in autumn 2008 to address the consequences of the global financial crisis, as a more active coordination mechanism for government action than the existing Cabinet subcommittee mechanisms. Both are cited as examples of 'Cabinet Office processes [being] used more actively to drive the prime minister's agenda and to ensure better quality engagement from departments... [providing] a useful way of linking Number 10 into the wider government machine. Key elements of success include senior attendance, prime ministerial commitment, and high-powered secretariats.'<sup>147</sup>

There are five key parallels between the NEC and NSC, highlighting features that account for successful performance:<sup>148</sup>

- prime ministerial commitment – in both cases the prime minister chaired the committee
- high-level senior attendance by ministers, including key political players
- participation of officials in discussions – the NSC provides a platform for the security services and senior economic officials participated in the NEC
- lead departments being prepared to 'cede sovereignty' on issues under discussion
- high-powered, activist and well-resourced secretariats.

#### i. Prime Ministerial commitment

Prime ministerial commitment is a significant factor underpinning successful cabinet committees.<sup>149</sup> Reflecting on the NEC experience, former Number 10 adviser Dan Corry wrote that a committee 'needs a very busy prime minister to be fully committed, willing not only to find precious time to chair the meetings, but be fully engaged in their preparation and process'.<sup>150</sup> The scarcity of prime ministerial times means that dedicating it – especially when consistently done over a period of time – is a powerful signal to the rest of Whitehall about the prime minister's priorities. Persistent prime ministerial engagement is an especially fragile commitment, given that 'time is rationed in government; one needs to be sure the added value of a new committee is worth it'.

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<sup>147</sup> Harris, J. & Rutter, J., *Centre Forward: Effective support for the prime minister at the centre of government*, Institute for Government, 9 July 2014, p.5, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Centre%20Forward%20-%20Final.pdf>

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.* p.55.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.* p.63.

<sup>150</sup> Corry, D., 'Power at the Centre: is the National Economic Council a Model for a New Way of Organising Things?' *The Political Quarterly*, vol.82, Issue 3, 2011, p.467-468

Prime ministerial chairing of NEC meetings arguably professionalised departmental preparation for the meetings. Sam White, a former special adviser to Alastair Darling, told us that ‘the meeting isn’t really the thing, it’s the amount of work it drives in departments in advance so their secretary of state doesn’t look like a fool in the meeting’.<sup>151</sup> High-level participation under the chairmanship of the prime minister was an important accelerating factor to galvanise work on the NEC agenda.

Corry notes that such special committees consequently risk becoming victims of their perceived success, if many other bodies are established in emulation to address different problems. ‘When the NEC was set up and the prime minister gave it all that time everyone knew it was the key committee of the day. As others were created, Whitehall started to read the signals about the NEC.’<sup>152</sup>

Sir Kim Darroch singled out David Cameron’s personal stake in the NSC process as one of the leading factors in ensuring its success. He told us ‘I doubt that previous prime ministers have spent anything like the amount of time this Prime Minister spends on foreign policy and preparing for and then chairing and then following up these meetings.’<sup>153</sup>

One metric which indicates the actual level of prime ministerial support is the frequency of meetings, given the scarcity of prime ministerial time. David Cameron has been remarkably committed to the NSC, holding meetings most weeks during the parliamentary term. This waned a little in the last year or so. In 2013, the NSC appears to have met less than weekly, reportedly 20 times.<sup>154</sup>

The regularity of meetings is an important signal to Whitehall about the importance the prime minister attaches to the NSC. Cancelling or delaying too many would risk undermining the effectiveness of the committee.

## ii. High-level attendance by ministers

Prime ministerial attention not only sends signals to the civil service machine, but also to their cabinet colleagues. Other senior ministers have taken the NSC very seriously, and a prime minister’s use of it as a forum for taking important operational decisions is a significant incentive for ministers entitled to attend to do so. They are also, unlike some cabinet committees, not permitted to send substitutes.

For example, Chancellor George Osborne’s interventions at NSC meetings, in particular his questioning of senior military officers on the rationale behind Afghanistan policy, his argument for reducing expenditure on counter terrorism activities and increasing cyber security investment, and his engagement in NSC discussions of possible responses to the Ukraine crisis, have led one journalist to label him the ‘imperial chancellor’.<sup>155</sup> While Osborne’s expenditure focus might be perceived as reflecting traditional Treasury priorities, one NSC attendee observed, ‘Osborne has personally engaged a great deal, but this seems to be as the prime minister’s strategist, speaking accordingly, rather than as Chancellor per se. Discussion of resources has featured little if at all.’<sup>156</sup>

Both Oliver Letwin and Philip Hammond have also been reported as sharing similar views to Osborne on the desirability of a quicker draw down of UK commitment to Afghanistan.<sup>157</sup> Moreover, one former

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<sup>151</sup> Institute for Government round-table discussion, December 2013.

<sup>152</sup> Corry, D., ‘Power at the Centre: is the National Economic Council a Model for a New Way of Organising Things?’ *The Political Quarterly*, vol.82, Issue 3, 2011, p.468

<sup>153</sup> Institute for Government round-table discussion, November 2013.

<sup>154</sup> House of Lords & House of Commons, *The Work of the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy in 2013–14*, 2014, p.12, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt201314/jtselect/jtnatsec/169/169.pdf>

<sup>155</sup> Forsyth, J., ‘The risks for Osborne now he’s back on top’, *The Spectator*, 22 March 2014, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.spectator.co.uk/columnists/politics/9163731/osborne-sticks-to-his-guns/>

<sup>156</sup> Interview, November 2013 (NSC4).

<sup>157</sup> Kirkup, J., ‘Defence chiefs draw up plans for faster withdrawal from Afghanistan’, *The Telegraph*, 12 October 2012, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/defence/9605922/Defence-chiefs-draw-up-plans-for-faster-withdrawal-from-Afghanistan.html>



minister has described Michael Gove's participation in NSC discussions as playing 'a role... of holding the security establishment to account from a neocon perspective, asking some pretty hard questions.'<sup>158</sup> Interventions by ministers stretching beyond narrowly representing their department's interests reflects the level of clear, inter-ministerial debate about policy that the NSC was created to facilitate.

The 15 July 2014 reshuffle saw the exit of the NSC member with the most ministerial experience, Kenneth Clarke, and the arrival of Michael Fallon as Defence Secretary, together with the continued membership of Philip Hammond (now as Foreign Secretary) and former Foreign Secretary William Hague (as First Secretary of State and Leader of the House of Commons). It is too soon to speculate how these personnel changes may affect the dynamics of NSC meetings, but Hague's continued presence – now without needing to represent the FCO's position – could be an interesting aspect of NSC meetings up to the May 2015 General Election.

NSC is a select group of ministers, far smaller than the Cabinet's gathering of 22 full members with a further 11 ministerial attendees.<sup>159</sup> Any such subcommittee process potentially risks the prospect of alienating those Cabinet members not present at core policy-making discussions (as Corry notes, 'NEC was always bound to upset some' on this basis). And the more important or special the subcommittee – such as the NEC during the global financial crisis – the greater the potential for disgruntlement. 'Some key players were not fully brought in to regular discussions...and felt that they were left outside of the key debates.'<sup>160</sup>

The lesson here is that it can be just as important to consider the impact of a committee meeting on those departments or other stakeholders not represented at the meeting as it is to fine tune proceedings to serve the standing members of the committee. The full NSC meets regularly with a selective ministerial attendance. This improves its focus and ease with which meetings can be scheduled, but potentially risks alienating ministers and officials who do not attend on a regular basis.

NSC discussion does not, of course, preclude a wider discussion in the full Cabinet. The August 2013 Syria crisis demonstrated that Cabinet can play an important role as the ultimate decision making forum for the most politically-sensitive foreign, defence and security issues. In testimony before the House of Commons Defence Committee, Sir Kim Darroch described the NSC process leading up to the 29 August 2013 House of Commons vote against the possibility of UK military intervention in Syria.

- Monday 26 August: Darroch convenes a special meeting of NSC (O) ('I called in most of Whitehall to prepare it') ahead of a special NSC meeting on 28 August.
- Wednesday 28 August: 'The NSC did not decide on the British posture on potential involvement in US military action; it prepared a recommendation that went to full Cabinet.'
- Thursday 29 August: Full Cabinet meets to decide the government position.
- House of Commons debates and rejects the government motion.

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<sup>158</sup> Watt, N., & Adams, R., 'Gove accused of using national security council to promote 'neocon' ideas' *The Guardian*, 4 June 2014, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/jun/04/michael-gove-national-security-council-neocon-ideas-theresa-may>

<sup>159</sup> HM Government, Ministers, Gov.UK, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <https://www.gov.uk/government/ministers>

<sup>160</sup> Corry, D., 'Power at the Centre: is the National Economic Council a Model for a New Way of Organising Things?' *The Political Quarterly*, vol.82, issue 3, 2011, p.467

Darroch's conclusion from this episode was that, on 'other issues, the NSC will basically set the agenda, set the strategy or set the course. Sometimes things need to go up to full Cabinet; sometimes they do not.'<sup>161</sup>

Another option to ensure wider ministerial involvement is to involve a greater number of ministers in a larger number of subcommittee discussions. This is the approach of the NSC (THRC) subcommittee, which considers such a wide range of issues that over 20 ministers are full members. The increased size of the (THRC) committee is one possible response to the risk of alienation, but its cost may be high, in that subcommittee's large membership making it an impractical vehicle for regular, usefully-focused discussion.

### iii. Participation of officials in discussions

While ministers comprise the formal NSC membership, in practice the committee also includes the intelligence and security agency chiefs, the chiefs of staff, and the JIC chair. As one NSC participant put it, one of the unique benefits of the NSC was that senior officials were 'at the table' with ministers on a regular basis and 'they participate in the discussion on pretty much an equal basis'.<sup>162</sup>

The formal regularity of the NSC and its accessibility for senior officials can be seen as a departure from the recent past, but Jonathan Powell takes a different view, rebutting the implied 'criticism of sofa government' under Tony Blair. Powell argues that formal structures like the NSC differ little in substance from Blair's more informal arrangements. 'The key thing is that you have the right people there, the people who need to be involved in a decision, that they are properly informed, have the proper material before them, in written or in oral form, and that decisions are taken, then recorded, and then distributed to government to be followed up. As long as that happens, I think it doesn't really matter if someone is sitting on a sofa or sitting round a table.'<sup>163</sup>

Though the NSC involves senior officials, it does not engage external expertise in a systematic way. Asked by the JCNSS about the NSC's use of external experts, the Prime Minister stated:

On outside advice, we have on occasion brought outsiders in, but we have also occasionally had seminars that NSC members attend in order to hear from outside experts. We had a particularly good session on Pakistan and Afghanistan for which some experts came. We had a special NSC in August last year on Syria. For our G8 agenda on tax and transparency and all of that, we had a whole series of experts in to address those issues.<sup>164</sup>

There appears to be a keen appetite within the NSC in principle for involving outside experts. However, it can be difficult to do this successfully, given differences in expectation and style between outsiders, such as academics, and ministers and officials.<sup>165</sup>

### iv. Lead departments ceding ground

In ordinary times, it is common for bilateral discussions to take place between line departments and the central departments over, e.g., spending or policy directions. Corry notes, however, that one factor necessary for the success of a specially-convened, cross-Whitehall committee is that 'the lead department has to be prepared to cede some ground – possibly because there is a crisis.' This means the opening up of discussion to a wider, inter-departmental group of participants. Issues on which

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<sup>161</sup> Darroch, K., *Evidence to the House of Commons Defence Committee*, 11 September 2013, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmdfence/197/130911.htm>

<sup>162</sup> Institute for Government round-table discussion, November 2013 (NSC5).

<sup>163</sup> Powell, J., *Evidence to the Iraq Inquiry*, 18 January 2010, pp.8-9, retrieved 13 August 2014 from <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/44184/20100118pm-powell-final.pdf>

<sup>164</sup> Cameron, D., *Evidence to the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy*, 30 January 2014, p.11, retrieved 13 August 2014 from <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/joint-committees/national-security-strategy/PM%20session/JCNSS14-01-30TranscriptCameronC.pdf>

<sup>165</sup> Institute for Government round-table discussion, November 2013 (NSC5).



there is a significant, inter-departmental difference of opinion can test the lead department's willingness to co-operate in such a forum. 'They were often where the most sparks flew' in the NEC, when the lead department (the Treasury) was reluctant to allow wider discussion of key policy issues. One of Corry's central arguments is that, in crisis situations, a body like the NEC must be willing to subject these difficult, controversial areas of debate to discussion in an open forum. NEC 'needed to get consensus across departments as to what the real priority for the government collectively was.'<sup>166</sup>

In the case of the NEC process, there was qualified support from the Treasury and this was clearly sufficient for the NEC to transact considerable business over its life span. In the case of the NSC, the primacy of lead departments to formulate policy has been upheld. According to Darroch, the NSC 'do not – and do not have the resources to – do the policy lead. That is what the Foreign Office is for.' Moreover, 'if you had a National Security Council that was creating and making a lot of policy, then you would be disempowering the Department of State that is meant to do the policy'. The relationship is complex, especially given the NSC's role in driving policy delivery. Darroch describes the NSC as 'essentially a committee that provides a forum in which you can get a coherent, cross-government view about all of those issues and from which you can drive policy delivery, but the lead on policy delivery still sits with the individual departments.'<sup>167</sup>

Sir Kim Darroch suggested to us that, while the FCO might have originally seen the NSC as something of a threat and a challenge, it had recognised that it was actually strengthened and empowered by the NSC process because, provided the FCO could convince the NSC of the merits of its preferred policies and proposals, it could gain formal, cross-Whitehall support and thereby solicit the formal assistance of Cabinet Office machinery to ensure follow up and implementation of NSC decisions.<sup>168</sup>

Prompted by Labour MP, Thomas Docherty during the House of Commons Defence Committee hearing, Sir Kim Darroch summarised the essence of this NSC function.

Mostly what we are required to do and bring to the National Security Council is not grand strategy, as you describe it, but self-contained pieces of policy with clear objectives, exit strategies and a consideration of the implications, risks and threats involved.<sup>169</sup>

This illustrates both the potential scope and the real limitations on the power of the centre to shape policy decisions through cross-Whitehall committees if there is resistance from lead departments. The role of the prime minister in breaking down such resistance is crucial.

#### v. An effective secretariat

Jeremy Pocklington, a senior Treasury official and former NEC Secretariat Director, emphasised that the relatively large size and quality of the secretariat was a significant factor in enhancing the performance of the NEC.

A well-resourced secretariat... we had about 15-17 people at its peak, I think, solely focused on serving one committee and that meant we had teams that were capable of doing their own analysis, producing their own ideas, really engaging with departments on the detail... I think it gave us a bit more credibility with departments because we were trying to add value.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Corry, D., 'Power at the Centre: Is the National Economic Council a model for a new way of organising things?' *The Political Quarterly*, vol.82, issue 3, 2011, p.465-468

<sup>167</sup> Darroch, K., Evidence to the House of Commons Defence Committee, 11 September 2013, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmdfence/197/197.pdf>

<sup>168</sup> Institute for Government round-table discussion, November 2013.

<sup>169</sup> Darroch, K., Evidence to the House of Commons Defence Committee, 11 September 2013, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmdfence/197/197.pdf>

<sup>170</sup> Institute for Government round-table discussion, December 2013.

Similarly, the NSSec is a significant resource underpinning the NSC, especially compared to the other two cabinet secretariats.<sup>171</sup> One former senior official observed that Sir Peter Ricketts had built himself a 'heavy duty machine' in contrast to the lighter resource of smaller Cabinet Office secretariats.<sup>172</sup>

Nevertheless, a 2012 parliamentary report thought that the NSSec has only 'a limited capacity to undertake analysis and commission wider work...the primary role of the Secretariat is to support the NSC rather than to duplicate the work of other departments'.<sup>173</sup>

Direct support to the prime minister is smaller than in many other comparator countries. Even those who were concerned about the lack of support when they were in No.10 thought that expanding it was not the answer. Both Sir Stephen Wall and Jonathan Powell have expressed a preference for keeping a limit on any similar expansion of the Prime Minister's Office. Although Powell recognises the need for 'more muscle inside Downing Street', he considers it 'prudent' to realise that 'Number 10 is, in the end, a court and not the HQ of a multinational corporation'.<sup>174</sup> Similarly, Wall has argued that Blair was right to increase central capacity in foreign affairs after 2001, but that Blair's machine ultimately became too potent.<sup>175</sup>

The small official size of the centre, Cabinet Office and Prime Minister's Office combined, comes historically from a deliberate policy to control the size of the centre in relation to other departments. Not only the size of the centre, but also the nature of its staffing, has been a sensitive issue. The mid-20th century Cabinet Secretary, Lord Normanbrook is representative in that he 'had firm views about the need to recruit [specifically Cabinet Office] staff on the basis of two- to three-year secondments in order to retain the confidence of departments and avoid the impression of a permanent élite at the centre'.<sup>176</sup>

Secondments remain important in secretariats, not least for the networks and relationship to home departments they bring with them to the centre. Jeremy Pocklington stressed the importance of seconded officials in the NEC secretariat, who were able to finely calibrate the NEC's relationships with their home departments in pursuing NEC business.<sup>177</sup>

There is already a *de facto* cadre of officials at the centre with a 'national security' anchor to their careers. NSSec and other secretariats are able to draw seconded officials from the Ministry of Defence, Home Office, and the national security and intelligence agencies. More could, of course, be done to develop an explicit cross-departmental career pathway and support structures for national security officials. But Sir Alex Allan thought that, for civil servants outside of the agencies, there was

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<sup>171</sup> As of 31 March 2014, the Economic & Domestic Affairs Secretariat (EDS), including the Implementation Group, has *circa* 36 staff, while the European & Global Issues Secretariat (EGIS) has 29. Although we do not have exact figures for the size of NSSec (see note 109, above) to make an accurate comparison possible, the Civil Contingencies Secretariat part of NSSec alone is roughly twice the size of the whole of EGIS, and the approximate total of 200 NSSec staff suggests a size over three times that of EDS and EGIS combined. HM Government, Cabinet Office staff and salary data, Gov.UK, updated 17 June 2014, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/cabinet-office-structure-charts>

<sup>172</sup> Interview, March 2014 (NSC2).

<sup>173</sup> House of Commons and House of Lords Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, First Report: First Review of the National Security Strategy 2010, 2012. Retrieved on 5 November 2014 at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/lt201012/jtselect/jtnatsec/265/26502.htm>

<sup>174</sup> Powell, J., *The New Machiavelli: How to Wield Power in the Modern World*, Vintage, 2010, p.81.

<sup>175</sup> Wall, S., *A Stranger in Europe: Britain and the EU from Thatcher to Blair*, Oxford University Press USA, 2008, p.197.

<sup>176</sup> Theakston, K. 2004. 'Brook, Norman Craven, Baron Normanbrook (1902–1967)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press; online edition January 2011; accessed online at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/32089?docPos=1>

<sup>177</sup> Institute for Government round-table discussion, December 2013.

‘a danger that you would become institutionalised if you spend your whole career in national security issues’.<sup>178</sup>

A separate but related issue is that of continuity of personnel. Although the senior portfolios and roles have changed, the length of tenure of Miller, Powell and (until early 2014) Oliver Robbins as deputy NSAs provided continuity in the NSSec, which was especially important with the transition from Ricketts to Darroch in early 2012. Continuity also extends to director-level, with no more than two occupants of each director-level post since May 2010.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Interview, November 2013.

<sup>179</sup> HM Government, *Cabinet Office staff and salary*, Gov.UK website, last updated 27 June 2014, retrieved 4 November 2014 from [datahttps://www.gov.uk/government/collections/cabinet-office-structure-charts](https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/cabinet-office-structure-charts)

## 5. What next for the NSC?

### Strategic forum

While retired and serving officials we interviewed were agreed that the NSC had been more effective than its predecessors, they also judged that it had tended to focus on operational rather than strategic decisions, but that this had reflected the Prime Minister's (publicly articulated) preference for action-focused discussion. There would, of course, be nothing to stop the NSC from considering more strategic issues more regularly, perhaps on the basis of longer meetings with fewer agenda items to facilitate more comprehensive discussion. Whether the secretariat currently has the capacity to drive preparations for such strategic discussions, or would need to act as a co-ordinator to leverage cross-government capacity, is a different question, but that is clearly not the role that the secretariat has been configured to perform in support of the more tactically-focused NSC.

There were also concerns from some of those who had seen the new secretariat in action that it lacked the capacity to challenge – whether on the review of the agencies or to take an independent lead in the next strategic defence and security review, where it could not hope to match the resources within the MoD.

Ultimately, the long-term effectiveness of the NSC should be judged by whether its creation and use has improved the effectiveness of national security decision making. Is the UK more secure – or at least, were its leaders making better-informed and more timely decisions on security – than in the NSC's absence? Such counterfactual analysis is difficult. We do not know whether the NSC's predecessors would have performed any better or worse in overseeing the Libya intervention, but the NSC(L) appeared to provide an effective focus for ministerial attention. Moreover, as the history shows, at points of crisis 'war cabinets' and emergency response procedures are well-entrenched phenomena, so that what potentially marks out the NSC as an interesting development is its attempt to emulate the intensity and coherence of such extraordinary measures in normal business.

In recent years, the UK government has appeared to be caught by surprise during the Arab Spring, the escalating eastern Ukraine crisis and the advances of the Islamic State (IS)<sup>180</sup> group in Syria and Iraq. This could suggest a number of possible failings: misjudged priorities for intelligence collection; poor assessment of the intelligence; or, as Rory Stewart MP has recently argued, a lack of 'deep country expertise' within government.<sup>181</sup>

As the NSC has an integral role in setting strategic priorities for the intelligence community, it would need to take its share of responsibility for such failures. Neither the collection nor the assessment of intelligence is, however, a competence of the NSC, being the respective responsibilities of the agencies and the Assessment Staff. The NSC is just one part of a wider intelligence and foreign policy community, but it is reasonable to ask whether the relationship between it and other parts of the community could be better configured, and whether the government's analytical capabilities and skills are best served by current patterns of recruitment, training and career progression.

The National Security Secretariat has decreased in size since its creation in May 2010. This reduction occurred against the backdrop of Whitehall-wide retrenchment, but it is important to bear it in mind when assessing criticisms of the secretariat's capacity. While the secretariat is still considerably bigger than other secretariats, such as EGIS and EDS, it covers a lot of ground. Closer cooperation

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<sup>180</sup> We follow here the naming convention adopted by *The Economist*: 'The many names of ISIS (also known as IS, ISIL, SIC and Da'ish)', *The Economist*, 28 September 2014, retrieved 2 October 2014 from <https://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2014/09/economist-explains-19>

<sup>181</sup> Elwes, J., 'Rory Stewart interview: Britain's strategic gap', *Prospect Magazine*, 18 September 2014, retrieved 2 October 2014 from <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/opinions/rory-stewart-interview-britains-strategic-gap>

between the secretariat, other relevant parts of the Cabinet Office and the wider, cross-Whitehall community, could help to address this challenge.

## A Minister for National Security?

Explicit prime ministerial commitment to NSC meetings has enhanced the NSC's standing within Whitehall. If the Prime Minister were to delegate his chairmanship to another minister on too regular a basis then it is reasonable to expect that some of the 'halo effect' in terms of improved co-ordination and momentum would be lost. Could the political appointment of a NSA or a 'National Security Minister' provide enhanced status and more direct democratic accountability to the management and oversight of the machinery of government in this area? Baroness Neville-Jones' (2006) position paper outlined plans for a cabinet-level security minister,<sup>182</sup> but the Conservative Party's (2010) pre-election 'green paper' committed rather to create a National Security Adviser as an official-level appointment, with a junior security minister in the Home Office regularly attending NSC meetings.<sup>183</sup>

Any coordinating National Security Minister would need to enjoy sufficient status within the government as a whole to ensure continued, high-level ministerial and official participation in the process, and be credible as an honest broker between other ministers. This would be extraordinarily challenging role requiring a confident and senior cabinet minister, when trying to co-ordinate 'big beasts' of the Cabinet such as the Home Secretary, Foreign Secretary and Defence Secretary. It would risk cutting against the grain of how accountability and authority is exercised in Whitehall. As the former Cabinet Secretary, Lord Armstrong of Iminster described the experience of subordinate ministers under Churchill's brief post-war experiment with 'overlord' ministers, 'ministers that were being overlorded greatly disliked it...and, on the whole, they were responsible to Parliament [simply as] Cabinet Ministers'.<sup>184</sup>

In the US, a presidentially-appointed National Security Adviser chairs meetings of the administration's most senior officials. There is, of course, a different convention for executive accountability in the US government, and the US NSA does not have to contend with Westminster norms of accountability of Secretaries of State to parliament, nor with the clearer division between official and political appointments in the UK government. It is at least possible, however, that a UK National Security Minister could fulfil a similar function. But it would take a minister of considerable authority to do so. We doubt this could substitute fully for a prime minister's personal commitment in any case.

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<sup>182</sup> Neville-Jones, P., *Security Issues: Interim position paper*, National and International Security policy Group, Conservative Party, 19 December 2006, p.1, retrieved 14 August 2014 from <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/torydiary/files/InterimSecurityIssues.pdf>

<sup>183</sup> Conservative Party, *A Resilient Nation: National security green paper – policy green paper No.13*, 2010, pp.8-9, retrieved 4 November 2014 from [http://www.conservatives.com/~media/Files/Green%20Papers/National\\_Security\\_Green\\_Paper.ashx?dl=true](http://www.conservatives.com/~media/Files/Green%20Papers/National_Security_Green_Paper.ashx?dl=true)

<sup>184</sup> Hennessy, P., & Welsh, D., 'Lords of all they Surveyed? Churchill's Ministerial 'Overlords' 1951-1953', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 51(1), 1998, p.62.

## Conclusion

The NSC is the latest stage in over a century of development in the national security coordination machinery of central government. Its origins lie in the early 20th century Committee of Imperial Defence and more recently in Gordon Brown's consolidation of several strands of work under the auspices of NSID. But as a development to bring greater clarity to national security decision making, it is widely held to have been remarkably effective.

The NSC may become a permanent feature of government, but future prime ministers could use it in new and different ways. For example, NSC might meet less often or take more papers on longer-term, strategic subjects.

As we said in the Institute for Government's report on the centre of government, *Centre Forward*: 'The optimal configuration for each function varies according to the circumstances of the time, the resources available, the problem being solved, and the personality or governing style of the prime minister and their key lieutenants.'<sup>185</sup>

However, the dependence of central institutions on prime ministerial support can make them fragile and vulnerable to change or loss of standing. One senior official we spoke to warned that a less consistent prime ministerial commitment to regular attendance at NSC meetings might risk the whole NSC process suffering a slow death.<sup>186</sup>

If higher priorities were to crowd out the NSC on a large enough number of occasions, traction would most likely be lost and the currently well-entrenched position of the NSC and its flanking officials' meeting could ebb away. As Lord Hennessy notes, there 'are limits to the width and sustainability of concentration and every busy prime minister especially has to ration his or her attention.'<sup>187</sup>

Nonetheless, David Cameron's personal commitment as Prime Minister to drive the national security process by regularly chairing a senior committee meeting, combining both ministers and senior officials, is the most consequential aspect of his NSC reforms since May 2010. The frequency and structure of these meetings has also exerted a beneficial impact on central coordination. Lord O'Donnell stated, 'The engagement of the Prime Minister's regular, frequent meetings with a clear structure and clear set of papers, I think that's a good underpinning.'<sup>188</sup>

So long as ministerial and official actors can confidently assume regular prime ministerial attention to NSC-related issues, and similarly regular prime ministerial attendance at NSC meetings, it is likely that there will be a high tempo and rigour in the preparation for and subsequent follow-up on these issues. It is difficult to measure the extent to which this increased commitment of energy and time has had a beneficial impact on specific policy outcomes. Several of those involved in the NSC process told us that Cameron's personal commitment had injected renewed vigour into proceedings, but some said that he could do more to ensure subsequent delivery – specific examples of which remain hard to find.

Assuming that the NSC remains, post-2015, in something like its present form, it will cement its place in the national security landscape if: (1) it continues to provide a regular, high-level forum for senior ministerial decision making across the widely defined range of national security issues; (2) its

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<sup>185</sup> Harris, J. & Rutter, J., *Centre Forward: Effective support for the prime minister at the centre of government*, Institute for Government, 9 July 2014, p.10, retrieved 4 November 2014 from <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Centre%20Forward%20-%20Final.pdf>

<sup>186</sup> Interview, November 2013 (NSC4).

<sup>187</sup> Hennessy, P., *The Secret State: Preparing for the worst, 1945-2010*, London, Penguin, p.xxii

<sup>188</sup> O'Donnell, G., *Evidence to the Iraq Inquiry*, Iraq Inquiry website, 2 February 2011, p.98, retrieved 28 July 2014 from <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/51849/20110202-odonnell-final.pdf>



secretariat and flanking committee structures ensure efficient preparation for and effective implementation of NSC decisions, and (3) perhaps most importantly, if the prime minister of the day continues to be convinced that regular, direct prime ministerial participation in the NSC is worth the cost in precious time and effort.