In 2010, and in anticipation of a controversial and contested Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR), the UK House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee (PASC) issued a stinging critique of strategy-making in the UK, accusing the government of having ‘all but lost the capacity to think strategically’.1 Two years later, in 2012, it was still lamenting ‘the government’s inability to express coherent and relevant strategic aims’.2 These criticisms have echoed similar claims by senior figures in the armed forces,3 and in the academic strategic studies and foreign policy analysis literature.4 They include calls for a revival of grand narratives of national interest to drive strategic practice,5 for a new relationship between political decision-making and professional expertise in strategy-making,6 and the reinvigoration of institutional capacities for strategic thinking and action in the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and elsewhere.7 Related themes are also apparent in the burgeoning literature on risk, which identifies distinct challenges to strategic practice associated with contemporary patterns of complexity, uncertainty and interdependence, and calls for better strategy-making in response.8

This article examines the politics and practice of strategy-making in the UK in the face of these challenges. While recognizing that strategic uncertainty and domestic austerity pose new problems for the strategic policy community, it argues that the criticisms of British strategic practice are often misplaced, for two main reasons. First, many of them posit their critique on a reductionist notion of unitary

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'national interest' that fails to capture systemic patterns of complexity and contestation in the wider security environment and at home. Second, they underestimate or ignore the extent to which the UK strategic community is itself innovating in response to these themes, particularly since the last SDSR. This is not to argue that considerable challenges do not remain for British strategic practice. Chief among these are how to translate strategic innovation in departments and elsewhere into a coherent national strategic agenda; how to do this while maintaining institutional coordination and a shared sense of strategic purpose across government (and beyond); how to sustain and consolidate institutional expertise and experience in a rapidly changing civil service and at a time of continuing public austerity; and how to articulate and legitimate security policy decisions among a general public that is both disengaged from elite strategic discourse and sceptical of the efficacy of military force. Even so, the article concludes by arguing that it is possible to see the outline of an emergent and distinctive theory of action in contemporary British strategic practice, characterized by principles of adaptivity, anticipation, self-organization and nascent cross-governmentalism.

An anatomy of the attack

The attack on British strategy-making has been building for some time. Its immediate spur was the stuttering progress of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, though arguably it reflects structural tensions that have been present in British defence for decades.9 In 2005, in the first of a series of seminal articles on the issue, Hew Strachan argued that western strategy faced ‘existential crisis’ in the wake of the Iraq War, owing to an inherent confusion in strategic thinking and a consequent failure to effectively link military action to clear political goals.10 A series of public interventions by military officers and others over the following years accused UK policy specifically of having lost its sense of strategic purpose in Iraq and Afghanistan, to the point where the army risked being ‘broken’ by its experiences.11 More recently, criticism of UK strategy has crystallized around the conduct and outcomes of the National Security Strategy (NSS) processes of 2008 (updated in 2009) and 2010,12 and perhaps most particularly around the controversial and contested SDSR of 2010.13 The three NSS documents were disparaged for their breadth, vagueness and perceived lack of focus.14 For its part, the 2010 SDSR was widely derided for a lack of strategic coherence and a perception that it was led primarily by a hastily implemented and cuts-driven government

14 Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy (JCNSS), First review of the National Security Strategy 2010, HC 1384 (London: TSO, 8 March 2012), p. 3.
spending review rather than by a measured consideration of the UK’s strategic circumstances and requirements in the new context of austerity.\(^\text{15}\)

In one way or another, all these critiques call for a reconsideration in the manner in which the UK makes strategy. Strategy is variously defined in these and other literatures, but generally consists of the linking of ways and means to achieve specific ends. It is thus best considered as a theory of action; a rationale for employing the resources and assets at one’s disposal effectively in order to deliver particular policy outcomes. Yet, as Strachan points out, the very breadth of potential offered by these definitions means that it has ‘acquired a universality which has robbed it of meaning, and left it only with banalities’.\(^\text{16}\) Strategy in this respect is most clearly understood as applying specifically to the circumstances of war; it is an iterative, realistic and purposive process, ‘a compromise between the ends of policy and the military means available to implement it’.\(^\text{17}\) In this context, the primary strategic failures of the UK since 2001 have related to the defence role, and particularly the application of military force. They are concerned first and foremost with a failure to properly think through the desired political outcomes of the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, and then to deliver an effective and achievable commitment of military and other resources to achieve that effect.

However, the critique of British strategy-making goes deeper and wider than this focus on recent military adventures. After all, the NSS and SDSR apply a much broader lens to the security and foreign policy of the United Kingdom, and address questions of a different, albeit related, order from those concerning the use of military force. Indeed, many of the most pointed commentaries on these issues relate to what is often called ‘grand’ or ‘national’ strategy: that is, the strategy of the state itself in delivering its national interests and creating security for itself on the global stage. As the PASC report has it: ‘In modern politics, [national strategy] is about ensuring that the whole of government identifies and acts upon the national interest.’\(^\text{18}\) Similarly, for Colin Gray, ‘grand strategy is the direction and use made of any or all of the assets of a security community, including its military instrument, for the purposes of policy as decided by politics’.\(^\text{19}\) Against these definitions, the perceived failure of UK strategy-making has occurred as much at a systemic, institutional level as it has in the field in Iraq and Afghanistan. For the PASC and others, the UK has ‘all but lost the capacity to think strategically’ in these terms, and ‘the ability to articulate [its] enduring interests, values and identity has atrophied’.\(^\text{20}\)

To their critics, the 2008 and 2010 NSS documents are embodiments of this malaise, ‘thick with description, and thin on the main question: the dialectic between the country’s aims and its ability

\(^{15}\) Paul Cornish and Andrew M. Dorman, ‘Dr Fox and the philosopher’s stone: the alchemy of national defence in the age of austerity’, *International Affairs* 87: 2, March 2011, p. 3.

\(^{16}\) Strachan, ‘The lost meaning of strategy’, p. 34.

\(^{17}\) Strachan, ‘The lost meaning of strategy’, p. 52.


to meet them'. They exemplify an overly passive and ultimately astrategic understanding of the UK’s place in the world by focusing too heavily on risks over opportunities; on reaction and preparedness over taking the initiative.

Against this background, it is tempting to suggest that ‘good strategy’ has emerged as a catch-all solution to the entire range of the UK’s strategic ills. Given its precipitous fall from fashion during the post-Cold War years in favour of the wider discipline of security studies, this reassertion of the value of strategy and strategic studies is perhaps ironic, and no doubt heartening for its few champions during the lean years. Yet this renaissance in strategic studies faces challenges of its own. While the literatures and commentaries cited above have been powerful in their critique of UK strategy and policy, they have been less articulate in explaining how the UK should actually go about making good strategy in the contemporary era. It is common for such contributions to return to the classic texts of strategic thought, or to historical example, or to exhortations to pursue ‘the national interest’ to make their points, with varying degrees of insight and success. Yet, with some exceptions, there have been few attempts to translate the critique of UK strategic practice into an alternative theory or framework for strategic action. Little time has been spent considering the ways in which the UK strategic policy community has itself been innovating in response to strategic challenge, public austerity and a perception of institutional failure since the last SDSR in 2010.

National interest in an age of uncertainty

If there are two words that have become synonymous with the contemporary western security environment, they are ‘complexity’ and ‘uncertainty’. It is a rare national security review document or defence white paper that can even get through the preamble without using them. Of course, security policy has always been characterized by uncertainty to one degree or another, not least because it involves interaction with other states and actors, who themselves have autonomous agency in the international arena. Likewise, strategy, and perhaps particularly strategy in war, must inevitably grapple with complexity owing to the constant interplay of different factors, actions and reactions which comprise evolving strategic circumstances.

Even so, there is good reason to attach more than simple rhetorical significance to the role of complexity and uncertainty in modern strategy-making. Complexity as a concept is employed by systems engineering, climate science,

mathematics and other disciplines to describe environments which are systemically dynamic, adaptive, and not subject to straightforward relationships of cause and effect.\textsuperscript{28} Certainly, the international security environment against which national strategy is outlined shares many of these characteristics. It comprises a diverse network of risks, threats, opportunities and actors, many of which transcend clear boundaries of departmental and national responsibility, disciplinary expertise or even state competence. Examples include—among many others—international terrorism, climate change, cyber attack, the proliferation and use of weapons of mass destruction, and the spread of new, potentially transformative, military and non-military technologies. Such challenges are inherently complex, in the sense that they have multiple, frequently interrelated, causes and are likely to be multifaceted and unpredictable in their consequences, with cascading effects.\textsuperscript{29} They are also uncertain, in that they tend to be predicated against future eventualities rather than clear and present dangers, and, in conception and response, subject to interpretation, contestation and controversy. These dynamics are intensified by the densely interconnected nature of contemporary global affairs. Information technology, mobile communication and social media mean that the relationships between cause and effect, action and reaction, can be exceptionally rapid and wide-ranging, as can be seen by the spiralling consequences of the sub-prime mortgage crisis in the United States in 2008, or of political protest in Tunisia in 2010 and the subsequent events of the so-called Arab Spring.

The complexity of this environment means that linking ways and means to achieve specific policy ends, according to the strategic truism, is often easier said than done. This is perhaps particularly the case when it comes to the knotty issue of national interest, a concept which lies at the heart of many of the recent commentaries on UK national strategy. The PASC report, for example, places national interest at the centre of its critique. Steven Jermy, while recognizing the role of complexity in contemporary strategy-making, places national interest at the heart of his understanding of strategic action.\textsuperscript{30} For Harry Yarger, an ‘underlying assumption’ of interest underpins any notion of strategy,\textsuperscript{31} while Patrick Porter calls for the use of ‘smaller and more bounded concepts of the national interest to rebalance ends and means’.\textsuperscript{32} None of these contributions is necessarily incorrect in the broad direction of its analysis. As Yarger himself notes, all strategy is, to some extent, ‘a process that seeks to apply a degree of rationality and linearity to circumstances that may or may not [have] either’, and in some respects ‘national interest’ provides as good a measure as any against which to judge the rationality of particular actions.\textsuperscript{33} From this perspective, the implication is that the UK’s strategic malaise stems from the inability of successive governments to recognize

\textsuperscript{28} Alex Ryan, ‘The foundation for an adaptive approach: insights from the science of complex systems’, \textit{Australian Army Journal} 6: 3, Summer 2009, pp. 70–74.
\textsuperscript{31} Yarger, \textit{Strategic theory}, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{32} Porter, ‘Why Britain doesn’t do grand strategy’, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{33} Yarger, \textit{Strategic theory}, p. 1.
these enduring national interests for what they are, and on this basis to articulate
a strong enough sense of national purpose against which clear lines of strategy
can be drawn.

But there are dangers in privileging national interest in this way. For national
interest to have meaning as a framework for strategy-making, it needs substantive
articulation. Yet it is striking that many of the recent critiques of UK national
strategy leave this concept undefined, or at the very least requiring further defin-
tion, while still placing it at the centre of their argument. In so doing, they imply
a concept of national interest that is at once objective and self-evident, yet also
curiously disembodied from specific expressions of interest and purpose. While
this critique may be tempting in its rhetorical clarity, it is inadequate as a guide
to action, and underplays the deeply political and contested nature of national
interest itself.

Today, in contrast to some earlier periods, the UK lacks a hegemonic national
narrative such as empire or Cold War to concentrate minds on the national interest
and to unite British grand strategy around a powerful organizing idea. Instead,
UK foreign policy incorporates a range of sometimes complementary, sometimes
competing strategic narratives of varying strength and character—Atlanticist,
Europeanist, liberal interventionist, multilateralist, among others. All these
narratives exist within the context of contemporary strategic complexity, in which
direct threats are diffuse and uncertain, and in which the international environ-
ment itself is neither static nor highly predictable. Against this background, even
when national interests are defined with any degree of clarity, they tend either to
present non-hegemonic, and so inherently contestable, goals—such as free trade,
for example—or to be cast at such a level of generality that their utility as a
guide to strategy-making is limited. Even on the specific issue of defence, and
the more limited question of national interest within this, the complex nature of
the contemporary security environment means that multiple interpretations of
strategic priority are possible, perhaps likely. In the institutionally constrained
context of the 2010 SDSR process, it is striking that different services and inter-
ests within the British defence establishment were able to promote quite distinct
conceptualizations of strategic risk and interest to further particular priorities in
the defence policy process.

An even wider divergence is apparent between elite narratives of UK security
and those of the general public. One of the characteristics of UK military–society
relations since 2001, and perhaps even since the end of the Cold War, is that popular
engagement with the strategic narratives of the UK political and security elite,
including those both within and outside the immediate policy environment, has
been tenuous at best, and actively hostile at worst. This dissonance was dramatically
illustrated in the public and political debate surrounding the efficacy of military

35 Jamie Gaskarth, ‘Strategizing Britain’s role in the world’, International Affairs 90: 3, May 2014, pp. 000–000.
36 Timothy Edmunds, ‘British civil–military relations and the problem of risk’, International Affairs 88: 2, March
intervention in Syria in August 2013. More widely, opinion polling consistently shows no clear consensus on the British national interest, beyond a broad and rather generic attachment to maintaining the UK’s historical Great Power status. Currents of Atlanticism, Europeanism and isolationism coexist within the public. However, all of these preferences are nuanced and conditional, and none appears to dominate—or come close to dominating—the popular consciousness. More specifically, the public remains ambivalent towards international activism on the part of the UK (whether military or otherwise) and has struggled to engage with strategic imperatives that are premised on uncertain, indirect, geographically distant or long-term risks to national security. Of course, to its advocates the concept of national interest has distinct and enduring qualities that rise above the mood of the public on any given day. However, it is equally the case that if strategy is to have meaningful purchase in wider society, if it is to persuade the public and politicians to devote resources—financial, human and otherwise—to its achievement, then it needs to be grounded in some kind of collective sense of what is nationally important and why. In the absence of such broad consensus, the extent to which any given concept of the national interest can act as a suzerain driver for the making of strategy is likely to be constrained.

In the final analysis, as Colin Gray notes, ‘strategy can be oversold … It refers to a function that no one can oppose: is it possible to argue against the importance of the three-way marriage among political ends, ways and means?’ The deceptive simplicity of this strategic trilogy risks imposing overly linear solutions to the complex, contingent and evolving security challenges and opportunities against which contemporary strategy is formulated. The implication is that once suitably clear and robust national interests have been identified and translated into specific strategic ends, strategy-making becomes a technocratic endeavour under which available ways and means are brought together to achieve these goals through a rationalist process of planning. But as Strachan observes, the danger of such an approach is that it introduces an overt determinism into the strategy-making process, which then may struggle to comprehend or respond to strategic contingencies as they occur. Instead, such circumstances require flexible, adaptive responses; an ability to coordinate across complex policy networks and act accordingly. In this context, the idea that a kind of Palmerstonian deus ex machina of national interest is the solution to the UK’s perceived strategic ills should, at the very least, be taken with a pinch of salt.

37 ‘Syria crisis: the British public has its say as two thirds oppose strikes’, Independent, 3 Sept. 2013.
Strategic innovation

If a clear and hegemonic notion of the national interest does not provide a solid enough purchase for strategy-making in the UK today, then what does? Part of the answer lies in the fact that interest does not go entirely undefined in either the NSS or the SDSR. The 2010 NSS, for example, talks explicitly about Britain’s role in the world, albeit in terms—‘ensuring a secure and resilient UK’ and ‘shaping a stable world’—that are exceptionally broad and non-specific.\(^{43}\) However, also striking is the extent to which the strategic policy community has, particularly since 2010, embraced strategic complexity as an organizing framework to fill in some of these gaps. In so doing, it has faced an enduring challenge of complexity thinking: how to translate a contextual recognition of complexity and uncertainty into a clear guide to action. This is particularly so given that the institutions which comprise the UK strategic policy community are large, often somewhat bureaucratic entities, organized for the most part around traditional models of hierarchy and administrative decision-making. Such institutions incorporate an inherent bias towards linear, sequential approaches to problem-solving and action, not least in order that their responses to what are often recognized to be complex problems can be effectively and reliably implemented across the organization as a whole.\(^{44}\) Moreover, the inherently long-term nature of much strategic planning—in which, for example, expensive and complex defence equipment purchases such as aircraft carriers and fast jets are conceived, developed, purchased, maintained in service and updated over timescales measured in decades—embeds a tendency towards inertia, inflexibility and path dependency into many aspects of their decision-making.\(^{45}\) Under such circumstances, it is perhaps not surprising that long-established models of strategic organization and planning have struggled to adapt to the complexities and contingencies of the contemporary era.

Even so, it would be wrong to assume that the UK strategic policy community has simply stagnated in response to the challenges of recent years. Indeed, since 2010, and even within the SDSR itself, there has been considerable evidence not only that it recognizes the strategic implications of complexity, but also that it is increasingly innovating in response. Most of these innovations remain relatively novel in application, immature in their impact on the policy process, and subject to series of continuing challenges. However, they are indicative of the manner in which the UK strategy-making system is transforming itself in response to change, and of the direction in which it is likely to consolidate in future. They fall into three broad categories: methodological innovations that aim to capture the dynamics of complexity in the security environment and attempt to impose strategic order and priority on decision-making on this basis; strategic policy developments that aim to further focus the analysis of the NSS and function as guides to action in specific areas of concern; and institutional innovations that aim


to marshal organizational complexity and establish coherent modes of strategic practice that can cross departmental boundaries and exploit the range of expertise and capacity that resides in government and beyond.

One of the novel features of both the 2010 NSS and the SDSR was their prominent use of formal risk assessment methodologies, both to comprehend the security environment and to discipline strategic planning decisions on this basis. Thus, for example, the narrative and conclusions of the NSS were premised on the findings of a newly implemented National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA). The NSRA compares and prioritizes a wide range of national security risks against the twin criteria of likelihood and severity of impact. It then groups these risks into three tiers indicating their relative significance and priority for action. The NSRA takes place against the background of a wider National Risk Assessment (NRA) process, and, along with the NSS and SDSRs themselves, is reviewed at regular intervals. This new approach has had its difficulties. The emphasis on risk arguably came at the expense of identifying strategic opportunity, leading to a charge from some critics that the two documents were ill-focused and overly reactive. At the same time, and in the absence of a clear sense of strategic priority from above, the contestable and contingent nature of the NSRA findings provided a new framework within which old organizational disputes over resource allocation between the services and other interests could be pursued, to the detriment of national strategy as a coherent whole. Finally, and in contrast to the risk-based policy approach employed by the United States in its 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), the NSRA was essentially one-dimensional in its methodology, focusing only on external security issues rather than considering these against other dimensions of risk such as those relating to, for example, organizational effectiveness or political legitimacy.

Nevertheless, there was much about the risk-based approach of the NSS and SDSR that was genuinely innovative. The framework introduced a clearly articulated strategic rationale against which to discipline and prioritize difficult defence spending choices at a time of unprecedented public austerity, in defence as elsewhere. Thus, for example, the decision to withdraw the UK’s fixed-wing carrier strike capabilities until the introduction of new aircraft carriers in 2020 was made on the explicit basis of a risk assessment of likely security challenges and military requirements over this period. Similarly, new investment was targeted towards cyber security following a judgement on its continuing significance to

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48 JCNSS, First review, p. 16.
51 MoD, Securing Britain, p. 23.
national security in the coming decade. These judgements and decisions remain controversial. Even so, they reflect to a striking extent an imperative to both recognize and impose a form of strategic order on a complex and uncertain security environment, and to make policy decisions and resource allocations on this basis.\textsuperscript{52}

The SDSR has also become a regular, five-yearly process, rather than an intermittent exercise conducted according to the priority of the government of the day. Over a decade elapsed before the 2010 SDSR superseded its predecessor, the 1998 Strategic Defence Review—a decade which included the Kosovo and Sierra Leone interventions, the attacks of 9/11 and the 7/7 bombings, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and over the course of which the global strategic landscape changed beyond recognition.\textsuperscript{53} The introduction of a regular cycle for the SDSR process follows the US example with its QDR, and explicitly recognizes the fast-moving and changeable nature of the contemporary security environment. In the UK case, the run-up to the 2015 SDSR (and possibly NSS\textsuperscript{54}) has been characterized by the continued development and application of the NRA/NSRA framework, alongside a series of other innovations designed explicitly to grapple with the problem of complexity. These increasingly draw on so-called ‘foresight’ methodologies, the aim of which is to provide anticipatory, often probabilistic assessments of future strategic trends against which decision-making can take place, using techniques such as horizon scanning, driver and trend analysis, and scenario planning.\textsuperscript{55}

For example, the Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre (DCDC) of the MoD produces a five yearly \textit{Global Strategic Trends} (GST) report, which is timed to coincide with the preparations for the SDSR. The 2014 iteration of this document aims to provide strategic context for decision-makers by considering the evolution of current and potential trends in the defence and security environment until the middle of the century. DCDC’s work in this area is wide-ranging and methodologically eclectic, drawing on a range of different approaches including gap analysis of relevant existing literatures, the NSRA and previous GST reports, the commissioning of essays from and consultations with experts from the policy community, academia and industry, and a comprehensive mapping and analysis of global security trends and their interrelationships.\textsuperscript{56} DCDC’s work on strategic futures parallels similar exercises across government, albeit with specific departmental emphases and generally narrower foci, including those of the Futures and

\textsuperscript{52} Cornish and Dorman, ‘Fifty shades of purple?’, p. 1192.
\textsuperscript{54} Unlike the SDSR, the NSS is not subject to a formal five-year cycle, though at the time of writing there was an expectation that a new NSS would precede the 2015 SDSR.
\textsuperscript{56} DCDC, ‘Setting the strategic context for defence and security: method’, Global Insecurities Centre consultation, University of Bristol, 26 Sept. 2013.
Innovation group within the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory, the Cabinet Office’s Horizon Scanning Programme, the Foresight Programme at the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, and the Horizon Scanning and Futures team within the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. All of these groups and organizations aim to provide a detailed sense of context through which strategic risk and opportunity can be judged and against which decision-making can take place.

On its own of course, this proliferation of new methodologies does not represent a new dawn of effective strategy-making in the UK. However, they are indicative of a sustained, cross-governmental attempt to grapple with the contemporary problem of strategy. They underpin an emergent approach to British strategy-making that avoids grand hegemonic narratives in favour of a strategic adaptivity bounded by futures-orientated analysis. They also illustrate a shift away from unitary, linear notions of national interest, reflecting instead a model of action that understands strategy as comprising a series of intractable, continuing and even contradictory policy challenges, which in consequence lend themselves to an iterative process of positive adaptation rather than to definitive solution. This ‘adaptable posture’ in UK strategy-making has not been without its critics: the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy (JCNSS), for example, argues that it risks short-termism in government policy and is insufficiently convincing as a guide to action. Such concerns seem less about the efficacy of the new strategic approaches pioneered by the DCDC and others, which are, by their very nature, longer term in outlook, and more about the manner in which they are translated into strategic practice. Indeed, it is clear that if these new analytical innovations are to have strategic purchase, and avoid repeating the most egregious pathologies of the 2010 SDSR, they need to be able to be effectively coordinated, applied and prioritized in ways that both inform decision-making in the real world and mobilize action across government.

In fact, the period since 2010 has seen a series of further developments intended to address these and similar issues. They include the development of sub-strategies to the NSS in priority thematic areas, such as the International Defence Engagement Strategy, the Building Stability Overseas Strategy and the Serious and Organized Crime Strategy, the aim of which is to provide a more focused and purposive framework for action—and where considered appropriate, cross-departmental working—than is the case in the NSS itself. These documents go much further towards outlining the ‘ways’ of UK strategy than either the NSS or the SDSR: that is, the manner in which the defence and security establishment is to set about achieving the strategic goals outlined in these documents. Other initiatives include the establishment of new cross-departmental structures for strategic decision-making, in particular the creation of a National Security Council (NSC) along with the new posts of National Security Adviser (NSA) and two Deputy NSAs.

58 JCNSS, First review, p. 16.
(for Foreign Policy and Intelligence, and for Security and Resilience). The civil service as a whole is introducing organizational and professional changes to facilitate working across departmental boundaries, while defence specifically has also undergone a significant reorganization under the auspices of the Levene Report on Defence Reform. This has seen the establishment of a stronger, more strategically orientated Defence Board, the aim of which is to take major cross-service decisions relating to the armed forces under the overall direction of the NSC; the creation of a Joint Forces Command to oversee and implement joint military capabilities such as military intelligence and cyber warfare; and the devolution of greater autonomy to single-service chiefs as part of a revised framework of accountability and governance in the armed forces as a whole.

Taken together, these initiatives represent the biggest revision of the architecture of British strategy-making for decades, and signify a whole-of-government attempt to take seriously the challenges of contemporary strategy practice. Against this background, the claim that the UK continues to operate in a strategic vacuum is neither wholly true nor entirely fair. Even so, it would be equally disingenuous to pretend that the problems of British strategy have been resolved. While the UK’s new methodologies of strategic complexity offer a nuanced framework against which decision-making can take place, they remain only one component of the strategy-making process, and their role is limited to informing strategic judgements rather than prescribing them. Foresight and risk-based approaches certainly offer a compelling dimension to contemporary strategic analysis. However, they have themselves been criticized for the dubious epistemological reliability of applying quasi-scientific and often probabilistic modelling techniques to complex social phenomena, their capacity to deal with high-impact, low-probability, so-called ‘Black Swan’ events, and the extent to which they have been able to recognize and incorporate critical or non-orthodox perspectives. Such oversights were apparent in the previous NSS, the JCNSS expressing its concern that ‘central and uncomfortable’ questions had been neglected, including the strategic and security impact of the eurozone crisis and the uncertainties posed by the planned referendums on Scottish independence and UK membership of the EU. More widely, and as noted above, there is a continuing danger that by placing risk at the heart of the strategy-making process, the potential for recognizing and creating strategic opportunity, whether security-related or otherwise, is missed.

These new approaches thus complement rather than replace the need for other forms of capacity in the British strategic policy community. These include regional and country-specific expertise, as well as ready access to specialist knowledge in areas like cyber security and climate change, and the corporate memory and experi-

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62 Ryan, 'The foundation', p. 84.
ence to translate these analyses into effective policy. As others have remarked, the decline in civil service numbers since the late 2000s, the shrinkage of indigenous departmental research capacities in the mainstream Foreign and Commonwealth Office and MoD, and the increasing prevalence of new cross-departmental career paths for civil servants themselves, mean that some of these functions have been eroded. Efforts have recently been made to engage external expertise to meet these gaps, from academia, the think-tank community and industrial sector, whether through direct consultation or by sponsoring specific research funding calls with UK research councils. Even so, the manner in which such relationships are and will be able to influence British strategic practice remains to be seen, particularly with regard to their capacity to constructively challenge rather than simply validate policy orthodoxies, as does their ultimate impact on policy itself.

Indeed, the second, and deeper, question underpinning many of these issues concerns the extent to which innovations in British strategic analysis, however well executed, are actually able to influence policy outcomes through the structures of decision-making. Here, the impact of institutional change in the strategic policy community has been more limited. Nowhere is this more apparent—or arguably more significant—than in the function of the NSC. In conception, the NSC was created in order to lead and articulate UK strategic thinking at a truly national level; to incorporate and surmount interests and perspectives from across government and beyond. Under the chairmanship of the prime minister, its permanent membership comprises eight cabinet ministers from key departments, with others, including the chief of the Defence Staff and the chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee, regularly invited to attend. The NSC structure includes a number of subcommittees formed to address specific topics such as nuclear issues (NSC (Nuclear)) or the Libyan intervention of 2011 (NSC(L)). Since its formation, the NSC and its subcommittees have been active in areas ranging from the development of the NSS and SDSR to the conflicts in Afghanistan and Libya. In so doing, and in the JCNSS’s assessment, it has undoubtedly been able to function as ‘a valued and important forum for collective discussion’ across departments.

Nevertheless, the NSC has struggled to act as the engine for strategic thinking and direction for the UK policy community, at least to date. While it played an important role as a forum for brokering discussions and negotiating disagreements between individual departments during the SDSR process, it was not able to lead the review as a whole. Indeed, it only published the 2010 NSS, over which it had primary oversight, subsequent to the SDSR, and so essentially paralleled this document rather than setting its agenda from the outset. The predominance of a brokering rather than a leadership role might be excused by the rapidity of the SDSR process and the new-born status of the NSC itself at that time. However, it is not clear that the committee has been able to fully assert itself on UK strategy-making in subsequent years. Major strategic policy initiatives—such

65 JCNSS, The work of the Joint Committee, p. 5; see also JCNSS, First review, pp. 34–5.
66 JCNSS, The work of the Joint Committee, p. 5.
as the transformative *Future Reserves 2020* and *Army 2020* documents—have been driven by individual departments (in these cases the MoD), while the committee itself appears also to have devoted considerable effort to operational matters in Afghanistan, Libya and elsewhere. At the same time, the NSC is largely dependent on the departments themselves for research and analysis, and has only a limited capacity to undertake such work itself, or to commission it from outside. While this avoids the problem of duplication across government, it also limits the extent to which the NSC is able to move beyond existing departmental agendas and mindsets and reinforces a strategic brokering rather than a leadership role.

Finally, the NSC too is bounded in its remit and in consequence limited in how far it can grasp a truly national strategic agenda. National security is itself only a component of national strategy in its broadest sense, and as Sir Peter Ricketts, National Security Adviser from 2010 to 2012, has observed, in this context, ultimately ‘the only place where [National Strategy] comes together finally is the Cabinet’. For the PASC, this represents a lost opportunity for the NSC to function as a ‘deliberative forum with access to proper analysis and assessment’ at a truly national strategic level, against which the cabinet can discuss options and make decisions. Moreover, it also raises the question of how far the recent innovations in UK strategic analysis and assessment are actually able to feed into and influence decision-making at the highest levels of government.

**Conclusion**

The period since 2010 has seen considerable innovation in the UK strategic policy community, in ways that have built on and consolidated the approaches first introduced in the NSS and SDSR. There are other signs, too, of a reinvigoration of strategic thinking in the UK. It is striking, for example, that so much of the popular and parliamentary debate that led to the government’s defeat in August 2013 on the issue of potential military intervention in Syria took place using the language of ways, ends and means, and made specific reference to the extent to which it could be understood to serve the national interest—albeit a national interest that was context-driven and evolving rather than hegemonic in nature, and in which the question of public legitimacy was prominent. These innovations do not represent a ‘magic bullet’ solution to all the challenges that have been posed to UK strategy-makers, and there remain a number of areas where British strategic practice could be significantly strengthened. However, they do reflect a concerted and serious attempt to accommodate the contemporary challenges of the global security environment and to articulate an appropriate organizing framework for strategic decision-making in this context.

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67 The NSC(L), for example, met 62 times over the course of the Libya crisis, a frequency that led the JCNSS to comment that ‘any committee meeting over 60 times in a relatively short period of time is doing far more than looking at the strategic direction of the campaign’: JCNSS, *First review*, p. 27.

68 Cabinet Office, in evidence to JCNSS, *First review*, p. 32.


71 See e.g. Hansard, 29 Aug. 2013, col. 1452.
Against this background, it is increasingly possible to discern the contours of an emergent theory of action in the British strategic policy community. It addresses a world in which strategic context is rapidly changing, and is, in important ways, inherently unpredictable. It deals with an environment in which resources are constrained and choices must inevitably be made between what strategic capacities can be funded and sustained and what cannot. In so doing, it is characterized by four key principles. The first of these is a focus on adaptivity, alongside a concomitant wariness of grand strategic narratives or hegemonic notions of the national interest. Second, it is anticipatory, in that it employs a methodologically eclectic range of analytical approaches in order to comprehend, order and prioritize contingencies within the strategic environment, in ways that are intended to better inform decision-makers in the face of uncertainty, and to bound the principles of adaptivity noted above. Third, it is self-organizing and emergent, in the sense that it emphasizes departmental, and even non-governmental, diversity and bottom-up strategic analysis to gain analytical purchase on the complex and multidimensional security challenges that confront British strategy-makers. Finally, it is, at least nascently, cross-governmental, in that it establishes institutional structures such as the NSC, whose role is to cohere these principles into a process of national decision-making and make choices about strategic risk and priority on this basis.

Undoubtedly, significant challenges remain in consolidating this approach, particularly in terms of institutional coordination and engagement at the highest levels of strategic decision-making. Yet it is perhaps ironic, given the strength of the recent critiques that have been levelled at British strategic practice in recent years, that this dissipated and iterative approach to national strategy-making in the face of a very modern kind of strategic complexity accords not only with historically grounded traditions of incrementalism in British policy-making but also with the nuanced and conditional position of the British general public in relation to core questions of national interest. It also suggests that the prospect of some kind of panoptic national strategy being fashioned against which to drive policy is not only politically unlikely but, given contemporary dynamics of global complexity, possibly also strategically undesirable.