



BRIEFING PAPER

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The UK National Security Council

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Summary

This Library briefing provides an introduction to the UK National Security Council (NSC) in eleven answers.

The NSC was established in May 2010, immediately after the coming into office of the previous Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government. It had been a long-standing pledge of the Conservative Party and featured in the coalition agreement. Since 2010 it has become an established part of the infrastructure of government. Indeed, an increasingly large amount of public money is now coming under its ambit.

Other relevant briefings are:

[The 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review](#) (12 January 2016)

[The 2015 UK National Security Strategy](#) (14 December 2015)

[A brief guide to previous British defence reviews](#) (19 November 2015)

[The 2015 SDSR: a primer](#) (19 November 2015)

[The coming UK 2015 National Security Strategy – advance insights into the financial context](#) (Library blog, 6 November 2015)

[Replacing the UK's Trident Nuclear Deterrent](#) (26 October 2015)

[Defence Expenditure - NATO 2% Target](#) (21 October 2015)

Q1: When was the UK National Security Council established?

It was established in May 2010, immediately after the coming into office of the previous Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government. It had been a long-standing pledge of the Conservative Party and featured in the coalition agreement.

Q2: What is its legal basis?

The NSC has no specific legal basis. It is not a new or additional government department and no legislation was required to create it. As such, its creation was entirely an administrative act, with prerogative powers exercised by ministers.¹ As you may be aware, the UK does not have a codified constitution in which it might be provided that such a body should be established.

Q3: What is its composition?

The NSC is made up of senior ministers, including the Prime Minister, who chairs it, and is served by a National Security Secretariat. The Secretariat is headed by the National Security Adviser (currently Sir Mark Lyall Grant). The National Security Secretariat is based in the Cabinet Office, which is in effect the Office of the Prime Minister, and serves both the Cabinet and the NSC, with a view to making sure that ministerial decisions are well prepared and then are properly followed through.

According to the [Cabinet Office](#):

The government Departments with key security-related functions are all represented on the cross-government National Security Council chaired by the Prime Minister. Member Departments include: FCO; HMT; Home Office; MoD; DECC; DFID and the Cabinet Office. Cabinet Ministers in other Departments not principally engaged with security issues also attend Council sessions as the subject matter requires. The national security strategy is being developed with all Departments concerned, and it will be endorsed by the NSC collectively.

The benefit of having a single strategic approach to national security is exemplified by DFID, which has aligned its crucial contribution to the Government's response to conflict and instability overseas in a way that can both help the world's poor and—by making the world a safe and more stable place—enhance UK security.

During the last parliament, there were two ministerial sub-committees of the Council; NSC (THRC) to consider Threats, Hazards, Resilience and Contingencies and NSC (N) to consider Nuclear Deterrence and Security.

¹ Prerogative powers are those powers which a British government has historically been able to exercise without any recourse to parliamentary scrutiny or approval. Originally prerogative powers would have been exercised by the reigning monarch. However, over time a distinction has emerged between the monarch acting on his or her own capacity, and the powers possessed by the Monarch as head of state. In modern times, government ministers exercise the majority of the prerogative powers either in their own right or through the advice they provide to the Queen which she is bound constitutionally to follow. There have been calls to reform prerogative powers, chiefly because they are exercised without any parliamentary authority. Efforts to do so under the previous Labour government were ultimately unsuccessful.

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Their remit was to examine more specific national security areas, in which a range of other relevant Departments participate, including the Ministry of Justice, Department of Health, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, Department for Communities and Local Government, Department for Food, Environment and Rural Affairs, and Department for Transport.

Additionally there were associated cross-government senior official groups that support and inform these ministerial-level structures. Principal amongst these was the Permanent Secretaries Group, chaired by the National Security Adviser. All of these centrally co-ordinated structures aimed to ensure a coherent strategic approach to national security across government.

The then Foreign Secretary, William Hague, said in [evidence](#) to the House of Commons Public Administration Committee in 2010:

Our objective in creating the National Security Council has been explicitly not to create a new department. Of course you can see sometimes in the way other governments elsewhere in the world have operated that it is possible to create a great rivalry between a centre of advice on national security and the people in the other departments. Dr Henry Kissinger was here with us yesterday and he was able to recount in the 1960s and 1970s how that worked in the United States. Our objective in creating a National Security Council is to ensure that the existing departments work well together. Not that there is a rival source of advice to the Prime Minister, but that that advice is drawn together in a way that ministers can think about together and own together. But the principal adviser to the Prime Minister on foreign affairs should be the Foreign Secretary; the principal adviser on international development should be the Development Secretary. With the National Security Council, as in so many other ways, we are trying to make Cabinet government work and not create a lot of cross-cutting lines and overlapping responsibilities that create confusion and rivalry in government.

He added that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has provided the papers to lead the discussions of the National Security Council but that “really it is all the ministers together who are dealing with our national security.”

Q4: What are its main functions?

The [Cabinet Office](#) has summarised the purpose of the National Security Council as follows:

The security of the nation and its people is the first duty of government. That is why on the first day of the new Coalition Government the Prime Minister established the National Security Council (NSC) to oversee all aspects of the UK's security.

The NSC provides the forum for collective discussion about the Government's objectives and about how best to deliver them in the current financial climate.

The first two tasks for the NSC, coordinated by the National Security Adviser, were the publication of the 2010 National Security Strategy (NSS) and Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR). These documents set out in detail how the UK Government intended to

approach national security issues.² At the end of November 2015, the 2015 National Security Strategy and SDSR were published, this time in a single document.³

Q5: Does it play an advisory or executive role?

The National Security Council does not have a separate existence in terms of decision-making from the Government as a whole. Formally speaking, it is the latter, led by the Prime Minister, which makes final decisions. These may, of course, be based on discussions that have taken place within the National Security Council and any recommendations made in that context, which the UK Government then considers. Of course, in practice, given that many of the most senior ministers overlap, it will be rare for the Government as a whole to ignore or contradict recommendations emanating from the National Security Council.

Q6: What is its role in decisions that commit UK forces to military action?

In the event of a declaration of war or the commitment of British forces to military action, constitutional convention requires that authorisation is given by the Prime Minister, on behalf of the Crown. Decisions on military action are taken within the Cabinet with advice from, among others, the National Security Council and the Chief of the Defence Staff.

Q7: Who is responsible for setting the agenda for its meetings?

The National Security Secretariat, led by the National Security Adviser, has formal responsibility for agreeing the agenda for meetings of the National Security Council. However, it will only do so following consultations with the Prime Minister, ministers and government departments, who in practice have the final say. As a Cabinet committee, information about its proceedings are not disclosed.

Q8: Are there any changes to how it operates in the pipeline?

As part of the planning for the implementation of the 2015 National Security Strategy and SDSR, the Government considered how it could further strengthen strategic direction and oversight. When both were published on 23 November 2015, some changes were announced.

One change is the establishment of a new committee of the National Security Council (NSC), chaired by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Oliver Letwin, to oversee implementation of the strategy. Reviews of how the NSC and the Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms (COBR) are supported during crises and of the “structure for strategic assessment within central government” were also announced.

² For more on the 2010 NSS and SDSR, see House of Commons Library briefing paper 11/10, [UK Defence and Security Policy: A New Approach?](#), (January 2011)

³ For more on the 2015 NSS and SDSR, see Library briefing paper 7431, [The 2015 UK National Security Strategy](#) (14 December 2015) and 7500, (2015)

A number of “new issue-focused cross government teams to remove duplication, consolidate national security expertise and make the most efficient use of it across government” are also being created under its auspices. They are:

- A Euro-Atlantic Security Policy Unit, hosted by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO)
- An International Counter-Terrorism Strategy Unit, hosted by the Home Office
- An Arms Control and Counter-Proliferation Centre, hosted by the Ministry of Defence (MOD)
- An Export Controls Unit, hosted by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS)
- A Gulf Strategy Unit, hosted by the Cabinet Office
- A UN Peacekeeping Unit, hosted by the FCO
- A single provider of National Security Vetting Services

A “virtual National Security Academy” will also be established, to act as a “hub” for sharing, developing and maintaining “critical knowledge and skills across the national security community”.⁴

Q9: What funds are under its ambit?

At least three funds will be under the ambit of the NSC during the current parliament.

Conflict Security and Stability Fund

The Conflict, Security and Stability Fund (CSSF), became operational in April 2015. A beefed-up version of the tri-departmental (FCO, MOD, DFID) Conflict Pool but now managed and controlled by the NSC, it represents an attempt to fulfil the long-standing aspiration for a ‘whole of government’ approach to national security.

The CSSF is now the main means for the implementation of the 2011 Building Stability Overseas Strategy (BSOS), which was produced in order to act upon the conflict prevention agenda originally set out in the 2010 UK NSS.⁵ A government minister asserted in July 2015: “The new system will better align our national security objectives with conflict prevention.”⁶

A key element of the UK’s conflict prevention agenda during the last parliament was a greater focus through UK ODA on fragile and conflict-affected states.⁷ As the Independent Commission on Aid Impact (ICAI) said in a critical report on DFID’s work in fragile states published in February 2015, a growing proportion of UK ODA is being spent today high-risk countries.⁸

⁴ [National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence Review 2015. A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom](#), Cm9161, 23 November 2015, pp81-84

⁵ [Building Stability Overseas Strategy](#)

⁶ [HL Deb 16 July 2015 c689](#). Another strategy which has a strong focus on conflict prevention is the “[International Defence Engagement Strategy](#)”, which was launched in 2013. The latest version covers 2014/15.

⁷ [HC Deb 16 July 2015 c688](#). In the same source, the government said that there are no plans currently to update the BSOS.

⁸ “[The Scale-up of DFID’s Support to Fragile States](#)”, 12 February 2015

A target was set to spend 30% of UK ODA on such states by 2014-15. In 2013 this was achieved when 43% of UK ODA was spent in fragile and conflict-affected states.⁹ In a speech on 16 November 2015, David Cameron announced that in future at least half of DFID's budget would be spent on "stabilising and supporting broken and fragile states".¹⁰

First announced in 2013 and funded from core departmental budgets, the CSSF is worth £1.033 billion in 2015/16. The Government has announced that the CSSF will be worth over £1.3 billion annually by 2019/20.¹¹

The CSSF can be counted as ODA or towards the pledge to spend 2% of the national budget on defence – or both, if this is "consistent with the classification guidelines".¹²

In March 2015 the settlement for the CSSF was announced in parliament, including how and where it will be allocated. Below are some extracts from the ministerial statement:¹³

The NSC has agreed a range of country and regional strategies, along with approaches on peacekeeping and multilateral institutions which together form a strategic framework for NSC Departments to prioritise HMG's effort to tackle instability and insecurity overseas. These strategies are designed to cover the breadth of HMG interests and resources. They set the objectives which will guide our stabilisation and security-related activity, whether funded by the CSSF or from other sources.

Bureaucracy has been reduced, with a streamlined Whitehall structure. Newly created Regional Boards, will be chaired by FCO Senior Officials and include senior representation from all NSC Departments. The Regional Boards are responsible for effective implementation of the strategies in their region, including monitoring of all activity funded by the CSSF. The National Security Council (Officials) will provide oversight and assurance to support NSC level decision-making.

The CSSF will come into being on 1 April 2015 and replace the Conflict Pool. The CSSF's larger scope will include conflict reduction and development assistance as well as tackling threats to UK interests. It will also be used to fund the UK's contributions to multilateral peacekeeping budgets and related commitments. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office will continue to be responsible for managing and reporting to Parliament on the peacekeeping element of the CSSF, which it manages on behalf of Government.

The NSC has now agreed CSSF allocations for FY15/16. These allocations may change during the course of FY15/16 to reflect changing priorities or to enable the Government to respond more effectively to new cases of conflict and instability.

⁹ [PQ 224151, 23 February 2015](#). Note that these figures cover both bilateral and multilateral aid from all sources.

¹⁰ ["Lord Mayor's Banquet 2015: Prime Minister's speech"](#), 16 November 2015

¹¹ ["UK aid: tackling global challenges in the national interest"](#), HM Treasury and DFID, Cm 9131, 23 November 2015, p13

¹² [PQ 9455, 11 September 2015](#)

¹³ [HCWS392, 12 March 2015](#)

Conflict Stability and Security Fund resources, FY15/16

CSSF	FY15/16 (£millions)
Peacekeeping & Multilateral	462
Regional/Country Strategies	482.8
Security & Defence	75
Delivery Support, including the Stabilisation Unit & National School of Government International	13.2
TOTAL	1033

£163 million of this total was spent during the first quarter of the financial year.¹⁴

The government has said that, under the departmental allocations from the Fund in 2015-16, the FCO will receive £738.8 million, the MOD £191.5 million, DFID £59.9 million, and other departments and agencies £42.81 million.¹⁵ The FCO's CSSF allocation appears to have been entirely transferred from DFID's budget.¹⁶

Joint Security Fund

In the 2015 summer budget, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, announced the creation of a Joint Security Fund of up to an additional £1.5 billion by 2020/21.¹⁷ It will become operational in 2017. The Armed Forces and security and intelligence agencies will be eligible to make bids to the Fund to support "key capabilities".¹⁸

Prosperity Fund

In November 2015 the Government announced that it would create a:

new NSC-led Prosperity Fund, worth £1.3 billion over the next five years. Its priorities will include improving the business climate, competitiveness and operation of markets, energy and financial

¹⁴ [HL2068, 18 September 2015](#)

¹⁵ [The FCO and the 2015 spending review](#)", HC 467, 23 October 2015, p11

¹⁶ DFID, [Main Estimate 2015/16: Memorandum to the International Development Committee](#)

¹⁷ [HC Deb 29 October 2015 c1-2MC; HL1945, 21 September 2015](#)

¹⁸ [PQ7223, 20 July 2015](#)

sector reform, and increasing the ability of governments to tackle corruption.¹⁹

Q10: How is parliamentary scrutiny organised?

The two parliamentary select committees which have given most attention to the NSC to date are the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy (JCNSS) and the Defence Select Committee.²⁰

The JCNSS's most recent report was [The Next National Security Strategy](#) (3 March 2015, HC 749 2014-15). The Committee was recently reconstituted for the current parliament.

The Defence Committee examined the role of the National Security Council as part of its wider inquiry into [Decision Making in Defence Policy](#) (HC 682, 26 March 2015).

The National Audit Office and the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI), which reports to the International Development Committee, have also looked in the past into the Conflict Pool, which was overseen by the NSC but has now been superseded by the CSSF (see above).²¹ At times, inquiries by the IDC and Foreign Affairs Committee have also addressed activities funded by the Conflict Pool.

Only the JCNSS has conducted rolling scrutiny of the NSC. But it has not conducted much scrutiny of funds under the ambit of the NSC. Some might argue that – particularly with the scale of these funds increasing significantly during this parliament – this leaves a potentially significant ‘scrutiny gap’.

Q11: Can the Leader of the Opposition attend?

The Leader of the Opposition is not routinely invited to attend National Security Council meetings. But it has the discretion to invite them to do so. This has reportedly occurred four times since the Council was set up:

- Harriet Harman in 2010,
- Ed Miliband attended in 2011 to discuss Libya,
- He also attended in 2013 to discuss Syria
- Harriet Harman attended in July 2015, also to discuss Syria and ISIS.

The Defence Committee in 2011 commended the Prime Minister for inviting the Leader of the Opposition to attend NSC meetings. The Committee report said:

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44. In January 2010, the Prime Minister, when Leader of the Opposition, stated that the "NSC will be responsible as a de facto 'War Cabinet' for the conduct of the UK contribution to the mission in Afghanistan" and that "if elected, we will invite the leaders of the main opposition parties to attend the war cabinet on a regular basis so they can offer their advice and insights". At our evidence session on 9 March, we were told that the

¹⁹ ["UK aid: tackling global challenges in the national interest"](#), HM Treasury and DFID, Cm 9131, 23 November 2015, p17

²⁰ [Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy](#); [Defence Select Committee](#)

²¹ National Audit Office, ["Review of the Conflict Pool"](#) (March 2012); ICAI, ["Evaluation of the Inter-Departmental Conflict Pool"](#) (July 2012)

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"Opposition had been invited to meetings of the NSC " and that Rt Hon Harriet Harman MP, when acting Leader of the Labour Party, had attended a meeting in the early summer. Rt Hon Oliver Letwin MP, Minister of State at the Cabinet Office, explained that invitations would continue to be issued by the Prime Minister from time to time "if there was a particular issue on which he thought there was likely to be a huge national advantage in doing so" [...]

45. We commend the Prime Minister's initiative of inviting the Leader of the Opposition to attend the NSC. We hope that such invitations will become more frequent and that the Leader of the Opposition will accept them.²²

The Cabinet Office has confirmed, in correspondence with the House of Commons Library, that there is no specific guidance on when, or to whom, those invitations might be extended. It would be done with the agreement, and at the discretion of, the Prime Minister and on Privy Council Terms.

²² Defence Committee, *The Strategic Defence and Security Review and the National Security Strategy*, 3 August 2011, HC 761 2010-12, para 44-45

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