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On 10 October the Prime Minister presented to Parliament the National Security Strategy (NSS), titled "A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty". This article will examine the Strategy's contents, and ask to what extent it achieves the aim of the introductory statement that "the security of our nation is the first duty of government. It is the foundation of our freedom and prosperity".

First, then, the contents. There is a disappointing but unsurprising number of criticisms of the previous administration that reek of party politics ("Unlike the last Government, our strategy sets out clear priorities" – p.5 – for example) when national security should be above such squabbling. The Strategy highlights the formation of the National Security Council, and explains how this will function in terms of reviewing the Governments list of security challenges, drawing together expert advice and offering broad changes in direction: all good, strategic stuff. It lays out, very clearly, in Section Three (see especially p.27) what are seen as the current priority risks, grouped into three tiers of importance. The highest tier comprises international terrorism, cyber attack, a major accident or natural hazard, or an international military crisis that draws in the UK. These are all entirely reasonable, and with the promise that the list will be kept under constant review and formally refreshed every second year, a sensible and open method of identifying threats. A state-on-state threat to the UK is, entirely reasonably, afforded lower priorities (a Tier Two threat if using chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear weapons, Tier Three if conventional weapons only are employed in attacking us).

Much is also made of alliances, with the relationship with the US stressed as remaining the most important (see p.4) followed by the EU and then NATO. Again, this is entirely sensible and in keeping with the theme of living in a globalised world, and the new demands (and, therefore, security challenges that we face). The other broad theme that runs through the Strategy is the need to harness all the levers of national power (with particular emphasis on the diplomatic) to secure Britain's place. And finally, this NSS stress that it addresses only the ends and ways, the means being left to the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR). Given that the SDSR deals with more newsworthy items such as troop numbers, ship orders and air base closures, and was to be seen as an element of the Government's spending plans, it is unsurprising that the SDSR has received much more attention than the NSS; whether this emphasis of public review is correct is less clear.

Having made the link between the NSS and the SDSR, and having claimed that the NSS sets the strategic direction and boundaries within which the SDSR should operate, it is clear that one should follow the other, and that they should be read in conjunction with each other – for without a strategic direction, how can the SDSR match the necessary means to achieve the ends and ways, particularly when defence procurement is itself so drawn out, and therefore requires a clear strategy?

And it is here that I start to struggle with the NSS. For the SDSR to have real meaning, the NSS must and should be the leading document, yet it has received scant attention in the blaze

of publicity surrounding the spending announcements. The NSS makes much of our strength as a trading nation, with the added bonuses of English being the world's lingua franca for trade, and our geo-temporal positioning as part of Europe and straddling the time differential between the Far East and the US. But what is left unanswered is the key question of what role does Britain foresee herself playing in the future? While the NSS is strong on identifying some of the challenges the world faces in a globalised era, including such extremes as climate change and international, ordered crime, it singularly fails to give a clear articulation of the role this Government expects the UK to play, beyond some fairly broad, even banal, statements about maintaining order and upholding rights. And of equal concern is that this document claims to be a strategy, but looks forward little more than five years (convenient since that equates to the life of a Parliament, but hardly strategic in time-scale). It contains some well-crafted rhetoric, but gives little feel as to how or why further change might occur, how this might affect the UK, and what the country might do to influence the course of events in Britain's best long-term interests.

The Government is to be applauded for going as far as it has in producing this NSS, but it leaves too many nagging doubts. Has the Government really got a clear view on the likely course that world events will take? Does it see the world being uni-polar or multi-polar in the future? What will Britain's relationship to major, and regional, powers be? What is the most likely role for the EU, for the UN, for NATO, what part will we play and how will we influence their direction of travel? And w(h)ither our relationship with the US? Perhaps this was just too rushed; perhaps, since it is the first attempt at such a strategy, it is only a starting point; perhaps there is another, classified document addressing such questions. But perhaps it is also something of a missed opportunity....

I suspect that Pitt the Younger, one of William Hague's great heroes from history, had a clearer idea of the country's strategic direction when he came to power (and I am not referring to the period of the Napoleonic wars, but before those conflicts started); having carefully read this National Security Strategy I am unsure where the Government intends Britain to head, or how it envisages us reaching this undefined Nirvana.