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Much is being written at present about defence, about security, about Britain's place in the world, and the extent to which we need (note need rather than do not need) military power. But before we can determine how we are going to undertake defence, and in particular what force structures we need, we should first establish where the threat comes from: that critical link between defence and security. The conventional approach is to look at threats to the country from state and non-state actors, placing everything in the realm of International Relations, within the state-to-state construct. This essay will approach the issue from a more individual level by considering first insecurity, which then allows the focus to be applied to security and hence to those defence apparatus that afford security. It will do so by first exploring why we presently feel insecure, then propose a different approach to achieving security, before exploring some of the practical implications that such an approach would require, and finally summarising.

There appears to be considerable concern both at Governmental level and for the man in the street about the threats the country and its citizens face, leading to a growing feeling of insecurity. Why is this, is it rational, and what actually are the threats? In many ways security is now far harder to define, and to achieve. In the present era of globalisation, we are more interconnected than ever, more interdependent for food, energy and information. Events on the other side of the world can have a far greater impact on both the country and the individual than before: one thinks of the impact of the Volcanic Ash cloud earlier this year and the disruption it caused. Moreover, our borders are, compared with a century ago, far less inviolate: we have little real say over satellites passing over head, the advent of aircraft have brought a new dimension and a new challenge to securing our borders from a determined foe (and this is the 70th anniversary year of the Battle of Britain), while the invention of the nuclear weapon, and inter-continental delivery systems, brought an entirely new paradigm to the threat to security. Moreover, near-instantaneous global communications and the advent of the 24/7 media have not only shrunk the world in a new manner, but by beaming images of violence and disaster around the world direct to citizens' homes, have arguably increased the feelings of insecurity of the citizen.

And yet the world is no more dangerous in terms of natural disasters than it ever has been, the threat of state-on-state attack against the UK is, by historic measure, very low, and the vision of extinction from a massive nuclear exchange faded with the end of the Cold War; compared to most of our history we are in a period of marked peace. And yet we feel less secure, have introduced draconian legislation that limits individual liberties to counter what is, compared with history, a very minor threat; in doing so have further reinforced the feelings of insecurity within the populace. Do terrorists really threaten our vital interests? A little, maybe, but compared with the threats of much of the twentieth century, hardly. The capacity for terrorists to inflict crude but large-scale attacks on Western interests has already been largely curtailed, and they have never had the capacity to undertake complex and more meaningful actions. The gravest threat from terrorism is its ability to provoke unwise over-reactions on our part.

To look at the issue from another perspective, what makes those who we deem to be our enemies feel insecure? Are we too ready to try to impose our norms and political approach on others? Do, in fact, our policies towards, and our approaches to, international affairs actually increase feelings of insecurity among others, who then respond by threatening us? If so, our defence posture would then be counter-productive. By adopting a different approach to security and hence to defence, we could tackle feelings of insecurity in a more productive manner.

While it is not always productive to look to history to offer answers, since no two periods of history will ever be truly identical, we can nevertheless discern where our traditional strengths lie, and seek to exploit these to increase our feelings of security. In this respect, our greatest strength is in the field of diplomacy. We remain largely respected around the world, the Commonwealth is an under-exploited resource, English is the main lingua franca of the business world, and we retain our P5 seat on the UN Security Council. We continue to play our part in the international order, have numerous treaties and interests around the world, and remain in a position to exploit these attributes more effectively.

But our strength in the diplomatic field is largely born out of past necessity: we built our network of diplomatic missions and developed our reputation for diplomacy (as well as for cultural understanding through institutions such as the School for Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, with its founding aim of training administrators for employment across what was then the Empire) in order to facilitate trade. For it was as a maritime trading nation that Britain built its reputation, its strength and its feeling of security. If we were to seek to return to these principles - diplomacy and trade - as the bulwark of our international policy, what would be the practical implications, and how might it increase our security?

The biggest challenge that adopting such a system would require would be a change in our philosophical approach to how we chose to support international order. An acceptance of the limitations of the application of military, or "Hard" power, and a re-evaluation of both our place in the world order and the part that we would seek to play would only be the start of the process. A more low-key and measured response to international affairs and a greater reluctance to become involved in the affairs of other states would require a period of adjustment, but would have more in common with our historic approach, and sit more readily with our strengths in diplomacy and our status as a trading nation. A less expeditionary posture for the Armed Forces, signalling not weakness but a shift away from force as the prime response, would follow, and would flag to others our new intentions.

Moving beyond philosophy, what would be the practical steps required? The first, and most important, is not directly in the defence field: a markedly beefed-up Foreign and Commonwealth Office. A reversal of the cuts in Embassies and Embassy staff may appear out of step with the present wider restrictions on public spending, but investment in this area would pay with increased national wealth through trade and, perhaps, lower defence spending. Inevitably, the media spotlight would fall on changes to force structures and force numbers, but a necessary re-alignment, rather - possibly - than an outright reduction in the defence vote, would be

required to carry forward this policy. Again, history suggests that we have been at our most successful, prosperous and secure when we have stuck firmly to our maritime heritage, and avoided large-scale, enduring continental commitments. While acknowledging that Navies and Air Forces cannot win wars in isolation, that only Armies can do so, if we seek to increase our own security by lowering the threat as perceived by others to their own security, what size Army would we actually need? No more, it can be argued, than is sufficient and necessary to meet our commitments at home, to our Dependent Overseas Territories, to meet our treaty obligations, and to provide some flexibility to contribute to significant overseas natural disasters or violence; but for the latter only when it is in the clear and direct national interest. The additional spending could be directed primarily towards the Royal Navy, with the royal Air Force re-configured to two key roles: defence of the United Kingdom and those forces required to support the other Services, but primarily the Royal Navy, in the discharge of their roles.

The key to this new approach is its impact on the feeling of insecurity for the people of this country. It would appear counter-intuitive to many that changing our emphasis within international engagement to diplomacy and trade would increase our security, and it would require significant effort to explain such a shift. Moreover, there are dangers: were this policy to fail it would take time to rebuild a more hard-hitting military capability, and some allies (one thinks primarily of the United States) may take more persuading that this is a productive, and complimentary, approach. Nevertheless, the potential gains in security, prosperity and international standing for this country, and for wider rapprochement within the international order, demand that it is given serious consideration.

To conclude. While, ultimately, the suggestion made here may be deemed ill-founded or too radical, or (more likely) belittled by vested interests, it is only through thinking the unthinkable that we can have an honest debate; this is too important an issue for us to fall into the trap of only accepting the perceived wisdom, of group think, and of accepting the present norm. Too important, for the country faces severe financial pressures against a rising feeling of insecurity; together these represent a significant challenge. By examining the issue of defence and security through the lens of feelings insecurity, for ourselves and for those we deem our opponents, we can identify the extent to which we actually are insecure. By re-aligning our foreign policies more towards our historic strengths of diplomacy and trade, and by avoiding actions that appear to our protagonists to be undermining their security, we can not only increase our own security, but contribute to a lowering of tensions more widely. For the past one hundred years we have invariably resorted to military violence to achieve our national aims; the time is ripe to learn from our more distant past and seek a new way of achieving security and a new, supporting role for defence.