

Halving Violence

An Ambition for the UK's Integrated Review

Context

The UK's Integrated Review of foreign policy, defence, security, and international development covers “all aspects of the UK's place in the world.” It considers “the totality of global opportunities and challenges the UK faces” and how “the whole of government can be structured, equipped and mobilised to meet them.”

The Prime Minister has said that the review will set the way in which the UK will be “a problem-solving and burden-sharing nation.” It will also shape the objectives of the newly formed Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, which brings together the UK's diplomacy and development.

Security Risks

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the UK faced increasingly complex security threats, with high levels of volatility and uncertainty, rising geopolitical threats, conflict and insecurity driving poverty, and an increased threat from non-state actors (often with state support and sponsorship).

COVID-19 has further increased volatility and uncertainty, and heightened risks. It has fuelled:

- Geopolitical tensions – between the US and China, but also more broadly in Russia, India, the Middle East and elsewhere, has escalated international and regional tensions, politicised the COVID-19 response, and provided cover for major powers to breach their international obligations (e.g. the security law in Hong Kong).
- Economic disruption – the IMF and others project a dramatic slowing down of global economic growth, prolonged unemployment, and rising inequality. Declining export earnings (especially from natural resources) and remittance flows can generate economic hardship, undermine state capacity, and aggravate instability.
- Rising food insecurity - the WFP estimates that over 265 million people are already at risk of severe food insecurity, most of them in fragile settings. There are robust relationships between food price shocks and social unrest.
- Deepening fragility in countries and cities – with protests, demonstrations and potentially state repression in countries across all income levels and from all regions, as levels of trust in institutions fall, political settlements are strained, exclusion fuels grievances, and societies fail to mediate disputes peacefully.
- Decreasing personal safety – with a rise in other forms of interpersonal violence in which the UK has traditionally taken a leadership role – in particular, violence against women and children as they are isolated in their homes.

The pandemic response has provided new opportunities for state repression and human rights abuses, while non-state actors (both extremists and criminal) are re-grouping and shifting their strategies, and there is continued state sponsorship of these groups.

Implications for the UK

Elevated risks of violence and insecurity threaten UK interests in the following ways:

- Increased threats to the lives of British people – within its national borders and overseas.
- Reduced capacity for collective action at an international level to respond to the pandemic and other major priorities.
- Damage to British prosperity as it rebuilds the economy after an unprecedented downturn.
- Challenge to British values and to the ambitions of a Global Britain.
- Increased poverty and reduced value-for-money for its 0.7% aid budget.
- Potentially unsustainable demands on the 2% of GDP it spends on defence.

In the worst case, the UK will find itself unable to make meaningful progress on any of its priorities in the 2020s, as insecurity and the fear it creates undermines the basis for global co-operation. This happens at a time when, as the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster recently argued, we already faced a “decade of peril” with societies divided, economies fractured, and a new understanding of “how fragile the networks of our interconnected world have become.”

A Platform for Networked Action

In its 2018 National Security Capability Review, the government recognised that security risks could only be managed through whole-of-government approaches, active engagement with like-minded partners, and effective use of the UK’s position in global and regional institutions.

The Integrated Review is likely to further underline the necessity of partnership and networked approaches given the complexity of modern insecurity. Sustaining these approaches requires:

- A shared goal and narrative to allow disparate partners to work together effectively, and metrics that allow them to measure success.
- A hard-headed assessment of the seriousness of the potential risks, combined with an understanding that rapid reductions in violence and improvements in security can be achieved.
- Strategies that are grounded in rigorous data about the nature of the threat and evidence about which approaches have demonstrated effectiveness.
- A commitment to a problem-solving approach that will design interventions capable of delivering measurable reductions in violence and insecurity with a challenging environment.
- A willingness to shift resources towards more innovative and lower-cost approaches, and away from platforms that were designed for the security threats of the 20th century.

A Goal to Halve Violence

Through the 2030 Agenda, all countries have committed to build peaceful societies that are free from fear and violence. SDG16.1 aims to “significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere.”

The goal of halving violence:

- Provides an ambition that is commensurate with the scale of the challenges the Integrated Review must confront.
- Puts people at the centre – and the need to measurably reduce their experiences of violence and their perceptions of security.
- Can be used to bring all UK assets – across and beyond government – behind a common vision, while providing a basis for working with other countries on SDG targets that they have already endorsed.
- Catalyses new types of partnership with a strong UK role, including with non-WEOG states that have a commitment to halving violence (e.g. South Africa) and through a city network that acts as the equivalent of the C40 for violence prevention.
- Will significantly increase the value-for-money UK citizens receive from the aid program and from defence expenditure, while protecting other UK investments from substantial tail risks.

Implementing the Goal

In practice, the UK could:

- Instigate a Stern Review for violence prevention – bringing scientists together to create a roadmap for halving violence and present it to the UN Secretary-General.
- Set out a doctrine of de-escalation that can be applied at all levels – from great power tensions, through civil conflicts and the response to protest movements, to the role of security and justice actors within communities.
- Dedicate resources to violence hot spots where the greatest reductions in violence can be delivered at least cost through data-driven and evidence-based prevention programmes.
- Continue to invest in the longer-term shifts that will sustain peace, ending violence against women and children, and confronting corruption, illicit flows, and other drivers of violence.

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