Our Changing Perceptions of National Security
Sir Richard Dearlove KCMG OBE
25 November 2009

I am the fifth Peter Nailor lecturer I believe, and those preceding me were Sir Kevin Tebbit, Lord Boyce, David Omand and Robert Fox. My career intersected with each of them quite significantly, particularly the first three, so there is definitely an established line of succession here, which leads back I think ultimately to Peter Nailor. I did not know him, but I gather he was an outstanding Provost of Gresham College, who actually died whilst he was still in office, and his career combined significant success in Government service and subsequently in academia. To an extent, my career has assumed a similar shape, though I would not claim the academic success, rather, the privilege of living in an academic environment, which at least has given me the opportunity to be reflective about aspects of my previous responsibilities. So I hope my reflections are very much in the tradition of someone like Peter Nailor, who evidently bridged with great credibility the worlds of academia and government.

Now, in Pembroke College, we have just had the privilege of a visit by Henry Kissinger. It was fascinating to hear him speak about the contrast between the preoccupations of a Harvard Professor and the pressure of office as President Nixon's National Security Advisor. Kissinger's point was about the relative completeness of an academic project and its long timeframes in contrast to the obligation in government office to take decisions and to act, inaction seldom being an option, and the incompleteness of one's knowledge at the point of decision making. Hindsight of course sees and judges situations completely differently, but it is worth keeping all of this in mind when we talk about national security. There is no question out of which tradition I have emerged, and my reflections therefore will incline to the practical and less towards the theoretical.

It is an appropriate moment, I think, to be asking questions about the nature of national security as we look into this new century. Our traditional view of it is largely built around the competing interests of nation states in different stages of their rise or decline, but that is unquestionably been destabilised, and I think we are struggling to identify what now actually constitutes the threats to which our national security policies should respond.

The 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall has triggered an outpouring of commentary on the significance of the ending of the Cold War, and with the passage of time, I think 1989 now does look like one of those historical divisions, as clear cut in the sense of a before and an after as 1789. As someone whose career for the preceding 23 years before the end of the Cold War - and my career was very much defined by the Cold War - I cannot really exaggerate the extent to which our preoccupations of national security, hitherto so very firmly anchored, were cut adrift when the Cold War ended, and really have remained in an extremely dynamic state, and to an extent that surprises me personally. I would have expected things, with the passage of time now, to have taken on greater certainty.

The other contemporary event which I think frames this lecture is the controversy which attaches to the deployment of our military forces in Afghanistan. The question of why we are at war with the Taliban is of course a crucial one of national security. I am not necessarily going to try and answer it tonight, but I hope

that what I have got to say will point one in the direction of what might be a comprehensive answer. However, I am going to just say a few words about Afghanistan here before I return to my main theme.

The first thing I want to say - and these are just a series of more detailed observations - is that armed forces have been under-resourced. This is a basic fact, from which there really is no escape. The Treasury has been squeezing the defence budget for approximately eight years.

The second thing is that until recently our political leadership has failed to explain satisfactorily why we are at war. Their advocacy of the policy has, I think, been half-hearted. Maybe now we see a change in that advocacy, with a more confident position being taken, but the reason for change looks rather more like political damage limitation than vigorous belief in the policy.

The third point I want to make is the Taliban, if they think we are wavering, will up the pressure and be encouraged to try to kill more of our soldiers.

The final point I want to make is satisfactory political exits from such wars come from achieving relative positions of strength, both militarily and politically. We still have much to do to get into such a position, and it is not yet too late. I expect President Obama - and I think this is due shortly after I think what has been a dangerous tactical delay - to surge around 30,000 troops, and this will be a good moment for the UK to start putting past deficiencies right, and I think all of those deficiencies can be solved at the political level.

Now, back to my main argument... What I have to say tonight does refer mainly to the UK's national security interests, but the influences which are changing our perception of threats are global in character and do touch, to a greater or lesser extent, the sovereign interests of almost every nation. However, we must remind ourselves that regional geopolitical issues still weigh heavily in many countries and that traditional nation state threats dominate national security thinking still in many parts of the world. So Georgia's worries are about Russia, Taiwan's about China, South Korea about North Korea, Venezuela about Columbia, and so on, but that is not really what I want to talk about tonight. What I am trying to say is that where you are on the map and who your neighbours are does very much condition one's thinking and one's actions, but, we cannot get away from the fact that the competing and clashing interests of nations is still a key part of the overall picture and one that adds great complexity when we start to look at the newly emerged and emerging threats and what our response to them should be.

To give you one example of this, it is worthwhile to refer to the apparently unshakeable conviction of most Pakistani military officers that India is a greater threat to Pakistan than the Taliban. Pakistan's radical Islamist allies have complicated the problem enormously that Pakistan now faces in dealing with the potentially lethal threats to its stability and integrity.

Now, this brings me on neatly to consider, first, the threat of terrorism and the impact that it has had on our thinking about our national security. Frankly, nothing in recent times has had more impact.

I am going to refer to the terrorism that I want to talk about really as 'new terrorism'. I will not say that every time, I will just say 'terrorism', but that is really what I am going to be talking about, because of course, in the UK, we have had to contend with terrorism for years in the form of Irish terrorism. But in spite of lethal and disruptive capability and the durability of its proponents of this form of terrorism, it always remained very tightly contained in national security terms, and we always kept a strong sense of proportion about the problem, both in Government and in terms of public attitudes to the problem.

The terrorism of Al Qaeda and its franchises is, in my view, qualitatively different. It has no realistic political

aims, it is non-territorial, and its capacity for violence, frankly, seems unrestrained. We fear that Al Qaeda could, if it had the capability - and its interest in the capability is very well documented - do something really horrendous, like explode a device with a nuclear yield. With its disregard for political consequences, having no political aims, it seems there is really very little to hold Al Qaeda back. Al Qaeda aspires to occupy a non-negotiational space, it is nihilistic, rejects completely our value system, and its absolute destructiveness in the name of a set of revelatory beliefs sets it apart from most other movements which espouse violence as an extension of their political activity or as a method of reaching a set of political objectives.

In consequence, as a result of the character of what I am describing, our national security policies have had to take account of a new type of extreme risk and the possibility of truly excessive terrorist events. In this context - and I am not going to go through it in any detail - I do commend to you the Government's updated Counter-Terrorist Strategy, which was published, unclassified, in March 2009. I am not going to talk about the implementation of that policy, but frankly, the policy document is a very impressive product. Such clarity of thought about the problem is admirable, because there is no question that the events which followed on from 9/11, primarily in the US, made balanced and sensible discussion of counter-terrorism and the wider national security issues more difficult to conduct. Some of the Bush Administration's policy decisions, in particular the way that it chose to execute what it called the 'Global War on Terrorism', have polarised opinion and have, I think, inhibited the development of effective counter-terrorist measures. Fortunately though, we are now moving beyond this problem and the new US Administration's change of style, and to an extent change of policy, has made it easier for other nations to be supportive of US policy.

But there is one observation I should make, and I think those of us who understand the detail of these things are quite struck by this: if we look at the detail of US counter-terrorist policy, it does remain very aggressive and very hard-line. I am of the opinion - I cannot say this definitely, but I think it is the case - there have been more targeted killings approved by Obama than by his predecessor from drones over Northern Pakistan, and certainly the full presidential executive powers are still used without restraint in carrying out interception. I do not think liberal opinion in the United States really expected this, but I think there is a now realisation of having to come to terms with the realities of trying to effectively counter an adversary that is radical, uncompromising and unrestrained.

But on the point of the acceptability of US policy, it is important to emphasise how crucial it is now that we have, as it were, effective international cooperation in looking at these problems, and maybe the most far-reaching change in the last decade - and this is not obviously perceived, as it were, from outside the professional circle - is the extent of our interdependence in facing up to security threats which, if they are not globalised, and many of them are, run across borders and jurisdictions regardless of the linguistic, cultural and political barriers. The diffusion of threats - by that I mean their spread - and the diffusion of the power of the nation state to take them on effectively means that even the United States, traditionally extremely autonomous when protecting and promoting its own security, has become dependent on a network of security alliances, with a great variety of partners. Some of them are partners of necessity, and certainly not partners of choice. In my own experience, this has been very striking for the United Kingdom: the extent to which someone in my previous position has to, as it were, travel to many different countries, which, in the past, one might not have paid much attention to, to try to establish the sort of relationships that could guarantee effective cooperation in taking on some of these problems.

Now, the most vexing and challenging of these partners is of course Pakistan, and I am going to talk quite a lot about Pakistan, a key ally in countering the terrorism of radical Islam and in taking on the Taliban, but the manifest inadequacies of Pakistan in that role illustrate the frustration that can attach to pursuit of the most straightforward of our strategic national security aims. The reason I say that is because I think almost every conspiracy that has been dismantled here in the UK leads back to its origins in Pakistan, notably the federally administered tribal areas of Northern Pakistan.

I have devoted a significant part of this talk to the national security aspects of countering terrorism because

it illustrates very well why our perception of national security has shifted in part onto new ground. However, though Al Qaeda may still have some nasty surprises in store, it could be that the movement is past its high point in its ability to mount mass casual attacks in the West. Now, that is perhaps a risky observation for me to make, but I do not think any of us expected them to have, as it were, not been successful over such a long period of time in doing what was their primary aim since 9/11. I think Al Qaeda's apparent focus on Pakistan at the moment is perhaps a strategic error, as was its attempt to take on the US military in Iraq, but of course it depends on the Pakistani Government holding the line and NATO gaining the upper hand in Afghanistan.

The Obama Administration, in my view, is right to speak of AfPak. Our own Government could talk more of Pakistan when it talks of Afghanistan, and the dangers to international security were Pakistan to be threatened with disintegration, particularly - and this is an important point - if the integrity of its nuclear arsenal were also in question. For me, the stability of Pakistan is just as important as taking on Al Qaeda, and actually, taking a medium to long term view, I think Pakistan's stability is really the stronger reason for not leaving Afghanistan prematurely.

My reference to the integrity of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal brings me on to the threat that arises in terms of national security from the proliferation of weapons systems, in particular weapons systems of what I would describe as of mass effect, and I think 'mass effect' is a rather more accurate and useful categorisation than 'mass destruction'. Think about that, as I am not going to take the time here to explain it.

I think there are three primary concerns here: the first is those who have developed such weapons, particularly a nuclear capability, we should not see them be used; the second is that those who have developed them should not pass the technology on to others; and third, that the weapons themselves should not fall into the hands of a group, whether governmental or non-governmental, which the international community would find it difficult to restrain or to which the theory of deterrence could not be applied.

Of course, if you think about it, in all three of these areas, Pakistan is right at the top of our concerns, along with Iran and North Korea. The fact is that we just cannot afford for an act of nuclear terrorism to occur, and what one might say 'the tyranny of preventing that possibility' does add enormously to the weight of national security planning. But the good news is, because there is a little bit, to quote Graham Allison, who is the primary expert on this issue, the ultimate terrorist catastrophe is in fact preventable, because the bottleneck for terrorists is acquiring either nuclear weapons or fissile material from which they could make their own device. But what we need to keep in mind is that if we allow at any point that bottleneck to widen, then this dreadful, indeed unthinkable, threat becomes rather less preventable.

I do not really have time this evening to devote attention to other disturbing weapons technologies which, in the wrong hands, would or could have devastating consequences. Suffice to say that I believe the threat that abuse of the Life Sciences presents is probably at this moment more latent than actual, but is nonetheless serious in the medium to long term, and protecting ourselves effectively will tax our scientific community. The difficulty here is that, whereas the production of fissile material requires heavy industrial plant - that is, it is the domain of the nation state - biological research, for example the genetic manipulation of viruses, can be done relatively cheaply in a small space. The example I would quote is of the American scientist Craig Venter, who recently, to show that it could be done, synthesised a polio virus for $250,000.

The more difficult issue actually, in terms of the Life Sciences, fortunately, is how to turn that research into an effective terrorist weapon, and the answer to that, at a practical level, is frankly far from clear. But I highlight this issue as another challenge to the ingenuity of national security committees in advising governments on planning an appropriate response. So I think that this is still a problem which is coming towards us. It has not yet arrived and it is quite difficult to judge at what speed it is coming.

I now want to move on to make some general observations about national security that we can extract from the threats, or the nexus of threats, that I have mentioned, which are new in their content, potency and spread.

The first point is that even the most powerful nation states are dependent on others to act with effect against these problems.

The second point is that modern communications technologies have a tendency to empower small and determined groups and to give them a global platform to win sympathisers and supporters. In the past, one could be reasonably confident that such individuals would have great difficulty, particularly internationally, finding each other. Modern science, thoroughly democratised by the internet, in the wrong hands, has its dark side and can certainly facilitate mass casualty terrorism, the point here being that nations or governments no longer have a monopoly of sophisticated technologies.

Then, I would say the sophistication of modern life renders it highly vulnerable to malign intervention at many points: the interdependence of the systems which we take for granted - international travel, cyberspace, banking and monetary payments, or the distribution of energy. Intervention means that problems can spread with alarming speed and that they can reach the very core of our national interests before we are really ready to respond to them, unless we have carefully planned our response and well in advance.

This is a rather disconcerting world that I am describing, but it is actually the same world which provides us with reassurance, comfort, convenience and a very high standard of living. But I think, since 9/11, we have had a number of graphic reminders that we live constantly close to the edge, and I think our awareness of that edge is becoming more acute. I would characterise our age, in some respects, as one of significant public anxiety about this. Perhaps the rise of terrorism may be partly responsible for this. Though the likelihood of being a victim of terrorism is really very remote, the randomness of the threat which emanates from within our own society means that a sense of proportion about the problem can be quickly lost, and of course we also have a media which itself sometimes lacks proportion and is very much attuned to playing on our anxieties.

I think it is also in this domain that we move from considering threats to having also to take account of hazards, and by that I mean natural hazards. I think two stand out at the moment: they are the possibility of a pandemic or a serious outbreak of disease, and extreme weather events. Hitherto, I doubt that these issues would have rated a mention in a lecture like this, but the ability of the swine flu outbreak to clear the streets of Mexico City, and the rapidity with which a tropical storm could cause social breakdown in New Orleans, illustrates to what extent the traditional boundaries of our thinking about national security have in fact been significantly eroded.

Our national security policy, as we step into a fragile 21st Century, faces a rather fundamental paradox: our citizens are assailed by increased fears for their own safety, stoked by a 24-hour media, at the very moment when nation states apparently have a reduced ability to keep control of their own security. Judged in an absolute sense, we have probably never been safer, but this sense of anxiety in the face of a multiplicity of threats, manmade and natural, is a remarkably striking characteristic of our times, and of course perhaps the most socially pervasive example of this is climate change.

So what actually constitutes our national security is evidently in very significant mutation. The very phrase seems inappropriate when coordinated international action is so fundamental to having an effective national policy. I think we are in danger of using the term to sweep up almost every issue that might worry or threaten the citizen, and perhaps we do need to be more discriminating and to distinguish between a register of civic anxieties, that is the risks and hazards that press against the complex structures of

everyday life, and what, for the national security professionals, really constitute our core concerns and might threaten the viability of the state, as opposed to the quality and safety of life that it tries to deliver to individual citizens.

Furthermore, the internationalisation of national security has eroded that traditional distinction between 'home' and 'away'. What is 'domestic' and what is 'foreign' has been important in determining how we organise ourselves to deliver an effective policy. I have tried in this talk to show how wide is the territory and how shifting the ground - of course there is much that I have had to leave out. But despite recent attempts to define and to make more accessible national policy in this area, I still think there is much work to be done, and the controversy over why we are fighting in Afghanistan does point towards the need for this.

But let me conclude with some concrete suggestions about what I think the Government might do to define national security policy more clearly and strengthen our ability to implement it.

I firmly recommend and support the idea of creating a National Security Council, chaired by the Prime Minister, which meets regularly and can pull together the various ministers and officials relevant to the creation of policy, and, if necessary, can take direct control of a crisis.

I also think we should create the post of a National Security Adviser, with supporting staff, to give the Council a permanent expression and to do some of the longer term conceptual thinking and planning. This is following quite closely the American model, but I would advocate a much lighter bureaucracy here than exists in the States to support their National Security Council.

I think we should create a National Security Staff College which would train around a cohesive programme all the senior staff of the intelligence and security agencies and make them more interchangeable. It might also put an end to the anomaly of unqualified senior officials being parachuted into senior national security appointments. It would also embrace selected law enforcement officers, armed forces officers, and other civil servants, as appropriate, to create a cohesive, cross-Government, national security culture. Finally, it should also aim to be the centre of European excellence in national security. I think it is far more effective for the UK to train Europe's national security experts in a field in which the UK is clearly pre-eminent, rather than try to create another European institution at 27 in Brussels to deal with this. In my practice, they do not really deliver what you want, particularly in such sensitive areas.

These may sound like modest changes, but I think that, over time, their impact could be far-reaching in creating greater consensus about what really constitutes our national security concerns in strengthening the Government's structures to deliver policy and strengthen the cadre of professionals, both in the UK and Europe, who would lead the delivery.

Of course, the irony of this evening's talk is that, in talking about the UK's national security, I have spoken much more about Pakistan. Of course I have done this deliberately to try to bring home to you just how much we are now part of an interdependent security regime, how we cannot really stand apart from problems which we might prefer to regard as distant and alien. As I said, the line between what is domestic and what is foreign has disappeared, and in conclusion, I would say effective national security has no frontiers any longer.