

# GLOBAL STRATEGY FORUM

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*The 32nd in our series of expert comment and analysis, by **Sir David Omand GCB**, visiting Professor in War Studies at King's College London and a former UK Security and Intelligence Coordinator, Permanent Secretary of the Home Office and Director of GCHQ. As always, the views expressed are those of the author and not of Global Strategy Forum unless otherwise stated. This opinion piece draws on Sir David's latest book, 'How Spies Think: Ten Lessons From Intelligence', published this month by Penguin Viking.*

## **Time To Recalibrate National Security Planning In The Light Of The COVID-19 Experience, To Take Us From The Secret State Of The Cold War To The Protecting State Of Tomorrow**

The UK is in the deepest recession for at least a century. The pandemic has caused more economic damage and social dislocation – and resulted in the premature deaths of more people - than any hostile terrorist or cyberattack could have. That fact looms over the current Integrated Security, Defence and Foreign Policy Review.

COVID-19 has brought problems for defence, not least maintaining submarine crew and aircrew rosters given quarantine restrictions and keeping forces operationally effective whilst establishing social distancing in repair and support facilities, gyms and mess halls and coping with disrupted global

logistic and supply chains. It is essential that planners take account of the risk of other natural hazards, as well as familiar malign threats, not least watching out for our adversaries trying to exploit the dislocation such events cause.

In the last 20 years, new public bodies have been created to help in the identification, analysis and mitigation of the jihadist terrorist threat including the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC), the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism, and the police National Counter-Terrorism Security Office. More recently the threat from cyberattacks has led to the establishment of the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC), a vital part of GCHQ. More recently still, the significant threat to the US and UK democratic nations from digital subversion by Russia has been uncovered, but awaits a national allocation of responsibilities to manage that risk. The painful COVID-19 experience has at least



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prompted the setting up of the UK Joint Biosecurity Centre, modelled on JTAC, and a promise of a new independent health body that will have the remit of pandemics, but there are many other potential major hazards we need to plan against.

There are therefore important debates to be had as part of the Integrated Review, drawing on lessons from the COVID-19 experience, about how best to organise the identification and analysis of all classes of potential hazards and the processes then needed to link effectively to policymakers so that informed choices are made as to where best to invest in precautionary measures that will meet with public support and to manage events well when they occur.

In my experience when problems arise it is because policymakers and analysts have failed sufficiently to probe the others position. The answer you get from the professionals does depend on their knowing the true motivation for asking the question. Just as the good corporate lawyer does not start by telling you what law is, but advises on how to achieve your objective safely within the law. The policymaker needs four distinct kinds of advice (as do all of us in tackling problems we face): **Situational awareness**; **Explanation**; **Estimation**; and **Strategic notice**, that form the SEES model I set out in my book, *How Spies Think*.

**Situational awareness** answers questions about 'what, when, where and who?' In a crisis, decision makers at all levels of government and the private sector need

to work with analysts to determine what data, on what common definitions, will be central to their upcoming decisions, and by when it will be needed. Today, that may involve allowing access to sensitive citizen personal data in bulk, and the application of AI algorithms, for which public support must be obtained before crisis strikes.

**Explanation** is the second component needed for satisfactory management of a disruptive challenge, answering objectively questions about 'why are we seeing this data?', for example explaining the vulnerability of some minority communities to COVID-19. As we acquire evidence-based explanations then we can be more confident in moving on to estimating how events may unfold.

**Estimates and modelling** are needed to answer key questions about 'what will happen next if we do, or do not, apply some policy intervention?' Estimates will depend on the explanatory model being used, and on the assumptions chosen. Here we must expect differences between experts adopting different approaches so there has to be a process that the policymakers will understand for resolving differences. If public support is to be maintained the inevitable trade-offs have to be explicable in terms the citizen will understand. If not, conspiracy theories will thrive.

Finally, the policymaker needs **Strategic Notice** of possible *future* challenges to complete the policy process, helping answer important questions of the 'how could we



best prepare for whatever might hit us next?’ type, or even ‘how could we preempt this risk so that it never significantly materializes?’

When governments fail to act appropriately or in good time it can be due to professional/policymaker interface problems arising at each of those four stages. There can in particular be specific ‘warning failures’ that fall into the cracks between adequate analysis and appropriate policy action: looking but not seeing and hearing but not listening. For security threats the National Security Council is well supported by the JIC on which intelligence professionals and senior policy officials sit. Major hazards too deserve equivalent process.

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown us into a state of national insecurity. Confidence in government to take optimum decisions in a timely manner has been shaken on both sides of the Atlantic. It has not helped that COVID-19 struck on the back of a rising tide of social media misinformation and information manipulation. The Internet is awash with conspiracy theories, many picked up by Russian media such as the suggestion that COVID-19 originated in a US military bio-lab, totally false claims that there is a connection between 5G microwave radiation and vulnerability to COVID-19 and anti-vaxxer disinformation that COVID-19 is being exploited as a pretext to introduce compulsory vaccinations. In adverse circumstances it really matters that the public will follow official advice. We cannot count on quickly building up

trust in the actions of government itself in the midst of the inevitable confusion *after* a crisis has arrived. Strong, consistent leadership is what will make a big difference here, to generate a sense of purpose in circumstances when danger looms and to guide the political class and public to reframe their expectations accordingly.

In conclusion, the opportunity must be taken in the current Review to integrate our organisation and processes for protecting the public from the full range of threats and major hazards, drawing on the experience of the defence and intelligence world, to ensure that impartial professional advice is brought together with incisive policy analysis to form an effective and robust warning, pre-emption and protection system that can be convincingly explained to the nation.

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*Sir David Omand will be speaking to Lord Lothian about his new book, ‘How Spies Think: Ten Lessons From Intelligence’ on Wednesday 14th October – further details will be posted on our website, [www.globalstrategyforum.org](http://www.globalstrategyforum.org) and emailed directly to GSF’s members.*



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