

Transcript: National Security

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From an expert talk given at the National Emergency Briefing on 27th Nov 2025 at Westminster Central Hall. Full talks can be found at <https://www.nebriefing.org/>.

You've just heard about food security and health, the foundations of a functioning and functional society. So I want to add the next level, if you like. What does this matter to our national security?

I spent over 35 years in the army, serving in, among other places, Northern Ireland, Iraq and Afghanistan. Even 5 to 10 years ago, if you'd raised climate change in the MOD, most people would nod politely, move on, with even a couple of top officials telling me "we're exempt climate change". I didn't have a good answer for that originally. I came up with one a bit later. But that has now changed.

The MOD is now looking at environmental impacts with a team working on climate security, energy self-sufficiency for our forces and how they can adapt to a rapidly changing planet. The Chief of Defence staff is engaged, other countries and NATO are doing the same, factoring climate into national security.

Why? Because the threat picture is shifting faster than we expected, and faster than we anticipated.

In this more complicated and contested world, we have had a clear steer. And whilst you may not be able to read all of that, they're direct quotes from the Strategic Defence Review [see video for slide].

We must be better prepared for the threats coming towards us in this country. And they are not just military. They're threats to the fabric of this great country of ours, which require action.

The Strategic Defence Review calls for a whole of society approach. Now, many of you will know what NATO Article Five says. An attack on one is an attack on all. But NATO Article Three stresses the need for each country's ability to withstand and recover from all types of shock, whether they're military, natural disasters or other crises. And common sense demands a resilient homeland from all threats: from cyberspace where we're being attacked daily, air, land, sea or space — imagine if you didn't have GPS, you didn't have the internet — or, of course, from climate change.

Climate change can be thought of as a threat multiplier, making existing threats worse or more frequent, and introducing new threats.

Climate shocks fuel global instability. When farmers can no longer earn a living, they're recruited by non-state actors, and we saw this in Afghanistan, and we saw this with ISIS in Iraq.

Competition for water, food and land is rising. We see this in tensions between Egypt and Ethiopia — now, the Egyptians have somebody to blame if the Nile fails, not some thing — and potential flashpoints already seen involving Pakistan, India and China.

Climate impacts make livelihoods impossible in some areas. And you've heard about how the combination of 50 degrees, which I was fighting in in Iraq and 100% humidity, renders the human body impossible to act.

So I can tell you it is extremely unpleasant. And most of my soldiers couldn't cope with it. And just as an aside, I had no casualties from my battle group of over a thousand in Iraq from the enemy. We were a successful battle group, but I had five returned to UK for heat stroke, and I used in that battle group of a thousand, 250 drips to keep people alive. That was the real killer for my battle group in Iraq, not the enemy. I was lucky.

People are forced to move within countries and across borders. That puts pressure on receiving regions, can stoke instability and feeds into wider political tensions. And my goodness, the whole of Europe is seeing that today.

The Arctic is becoming a new flashpoint due to the climate crisis, directly. You've heard how sea ice is receding, and at four times the rate of the rest of the world. But let's put that into a geopolitical perspective. The Russian Duma has claimed it's a Russian internal sea, whereas we treat the Arctic as international waters. So there's risk of conflict over access, over resources, and of course, over shipping routes. So the climate crisis is now shaping strategic and military competition.

And although we're talking more about climate security in general, we're not yet acting as if peace and addressing the climate are two sides of the same coin.

And then there's the potential for instability at home. For example, food price shocks and supply chain disruption, which Paul went through so eloquently, with just this week, food inflation still at 4.9%. So whilst our inflation has come down in this country, food inflation hasn't. And Paul's covered this, but I would just add one interesting 120 year old quote. "There are only nine meals between mankind and anarchy".

We had a tiny flavor of this during Covid with panic buying of, of all things, toilet rolls and of course food. I could only get crevettes, which nobody eats when I went to the supermarket.

We're seeing a growing need for military support in emergencies: floods, fires, heatwaves. In 2019, in Derbyshire, the Royal Air Force had to send Chinooks to drop concrete and prevent a dam collapse and after torrential rain. It wasn't that long after, that the two dams collapsed in Libya.

That is a glimpse of our future If we don't both cut emissions and adapt our infrastructure to what is coming down the road to us.

Finally, personal economic impacts, and this has been made completely clear by Hugh and others: uninsurable homes — there are parts of the world that are uninsured now, and parts of this country which are guessing that way — and the loss of livelihoods when you've been flooded out again and again and again.

I give just one example. Hugh mentioned his son. My son was flooded out of Shepherd's Bush, of all places. He suffered £60,000 worth of damage to his flat and couldn't live in it for six months. One flood, one flat, and there were 21 flats on that street that were flooded out. What is the cost to the insurance companies? I'm amazed he's still insured.

But what concerns me most is not any single crisis. It's crises cascading together. Multiple crises: food, health, infrastructure, migration, energy, extreme weather etc, all hitting at the same time, eroding trust in government by slow or failed responses — and reactionary politics claiming to be able to solve all these crises at once.

Government systems and institutions risk being overwhelmed, not just strained. The biggest concern is that **we're facing the potential of an ungovernable state unless Government takes this seriously.**

Not simply one party losing power and another taking over, but the very real possibility that Western democratic systems themselves cannot cope. And unless we act, we will see a growing breakdown of the norms of society, the very essence of national security, perhaps highlighted by populist non-democratic regimes using authoritarian measures to solve perceived issues.

The encouraging part is that what we need to do on climate also makes Britain safer and more resilient. Take energy independence, renewables storage on a decentralised grid, reduce our dependence on foreign oil and gas and they're less vulnerable, like the biomass boiler at Saint Andrew's that provides the heat for the oldest university in Scotland — provides the heat for all their buildings. Or closed loop geothermal - a baseload heat, just as nuclear is a baseload power production.

Look at Ukraine. Russia has targeted their energy networks relentlessly. They managed to knock out roughly half, but not all. Why?

Some of the remaining system is nuclear, of course, but much of it is renewables, which are decentralised and dispersed. Wind turbines can't all be knocked out with a single missile.

And on that note, some are using the threat from Russia to say, well, let's not worry about climate change now — or not at all. But that's a false choice. Tackling climate is central to our national resilience today. It's part of all today's security threats, not tomorrow. And there are many other measures that we could use on this slide.



Overall, we need to embrace the amazing innovation that's happening in this space, but prepare for what's already locked in.

In the military, you learn a clear principle: face the threats that is in front of you, not the threat as you would wish it to be.

We have to plan realistically for a future others cannot see, or would rather not wish to imagine, a future which would have untold consequences if it came to pass. And just because you don't like the risk does not mean it will go away — or can be ignored.

Britain has faced severe challenges before and we prevailed. We prevailed because we had leaders, political leaders, civil leaders and military leaders with the courage to look the threat in the eye and act against a possible outcome they could not predict or guarantee.

It takes courage to stand out from your peers and their consensus, and it takes courage to act, particularly in the face of adversity.

But there is also a good opportunity. If we do treat this as the security challenge it is, the solutions make us stronger. We end up with more secure energy, more resilient infrastructure and a safer, more stable society. And important to me and, I hope, to you, a stronger democracy.

Thank you