Beyond Zeitenwende: What Structures Are Needed to Implement Germany’s New National Security Strategy?

Event Transcript of the MSC Nightcap Session at the Deutsches Forum Sicherheitspolitik (DFS) 2022

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Background
As part of the annual Deutsches Forum Sicherheitspolitik (DFS) organized by the Federal Academy for Security Policy (BAKS), the Munich Security Conference (MSC) hosted a Nightcap Session on May 17, 2022 to discuss Germany’s national security architecture, with a view to the implementation of the national security strategy which is currently being prepared.

Speakers
Lord Peter Ricketts – Member of the House of Lords, Parliament of the United Kingdom, London; former UK National Security Adviser

Julia Friedlander – Director, Economic Statecraft Initiative, The Atlantic Council, Washington, DC; former Director for European Affairs, US National Security Council; Munich Young Leader 2018

Dr Gerhard Conrad – Intelligence Advisor, Munich Security Conference, Berlin; former Director, European Intelligence Analysis and Situation Centre (EU INTCEN)

Moderation
Ambassador Boris Ruge – Vice Chairman, Munich Security Conference, Berlin

Disclaimer
The transcript reflects the discussions within the scope of the MSC Nightcap Session at the Deutsches Forum Sicherheitspolitik (DFS). It does not necessarily reflect the views of the MSC.

This transcript has been abridged and edited for clarity.
Ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of the Munich Security Conference, welcome to our Nightcap Session on Germany’s national security architecture. This is part of an annual event called Deutsches Forum Sicherheitspolitik.

Last year, we looked at the issue of a national security strategy, which Germany so far has not had. In the meantime, our new coalition has decided that we should have one. So colleagues in government are writing up this paper which hopefully will be out at the end of 2022.

What we want to do this time around is to look forward and consider how such a national security strategy, which no doubt will be an excellent paper, can be implemented and whether our national security architecture is up to the task.

We have two friends of the MSC to help us with this: Lord Peter Ricketts who had a very distinguished career in the Foreign Service of the United Kingdom (UK), including as the first UK National Security Adviser from 2010 onward. And Julia Friedlander of the Atlantic Council, soon to be the CEO of Atlantik-Brücke in Berlin, who served as director for European Affairs at the National Security Council of the United States (US) and in several positions at the US Treasury. Thanks very much for being with us this evening.

Also online is my colleague Gerhard Conrad, Intelligence Advisor to the MSC. He had a distinguished career at BND and later served as Director of the EU INTCEN. Our audience is following via YouTube and can put questions into the chat, which I encourage you to do early on. Please keep in mind that this is on the record and that we are in fact being recorded as we speak.
Let me start by giving a brief explanation why we chose to discuss the topic of the German national security architecture. In October 2020, one year ahead of the Germany’s national elections, we put out a publication called “Zeitenwende” on German foreign policy.\(^3\) Zeitenwende translates as turn of an era or paradigm shift. In that report, among other things we made the case for first, a national security strategy, and secondly, better coordination mechanisms for national security. At the end of 2021, the new government coalition did in fact agree that we should have a national security strategy. By contrast, there has been no decision on adjusting mechanisms for national security coordination, whether by creating a new National Security Council or by making better use of the Federal Security Council which is already in existence.

It is worth noting that two out of three coalition partners, specifically the Greens and the Liberals, called for a new set-up in their election platforms in 2021.\(^4\) And the Social Democratic Party, while not calling specifically for such mechanisms, did call for “overcoming silo thinking” between ministries and government agencies.\(^5\)

[The CDU/CSU called for a National Security Council to be created in their election platform. And the leadership of the two parties reaffirmed this position in May 2022 in a special declaration dedicated to security issues].\(^6\)

What is remarkable is that since 1998 we have had this discussion about whether or not we need to improve.\(^7\) Back then, it was the Social Democratic/Green coalition agreement signed by Gerhard Schroeder and Joschka Fischer specifically calling for the Federal Security Council to be restored to its original coordinating role.\(^8\) In its 2016 White Book, the government announced that it would be using the Federal Security Council in a more systematic way.\(^9\) At the end of the day, not very much has happened.

Now, the issue will be on the table again in the context of the national security strategy, because the obvious question will be once we have this undoubtedly excellent paper: How will we implement it across ministries and government agencies?

And of course, the issue will be discussed in the light of recent experiences: First, the 2021 Afghanistan evacuation; secondly, Russia’s renewed invasion of Ukraine in February 2022; thirdly, Nord Stream 2 and what might be described as the train wreck of German energy policy; and finally, climate and security and how to bring those matters together.

Those are some of the things I believe people will be thinking about and reflecting
on as they consider whether we need to make a change.

My apologies for the long introduction. I would now like to ask Peter to speak about the UK system that was created in 2010. He was the first UK National Security Adviser. And then I would ask Julia to tell us about the American NSC, which is obviously very different given the US presidential system. Nonetheless, I think there are lessons to be learned. Later, I would ask Gerhard to tell us about the intelligence angle of some of these issues. And afterwards, of course, we will go to the questions from our viewers. So once again, please write your questions into the chat. Peter, over to you.

Ricketts

Thank you very much indeed, Boris. It is a great pleasure to be with you.

And congratulations to the MSC, not least for producing your Zeitenwende report in 2020. I mean, if it wasn’t quite Zeitenwende then, it certainly is now.

I am very happy to talk briefly about our experience in the UK. In 2010, David Cameron was elected Prime Minister with a manifesto commitment that if elected he was going to set up a National Security Council. And the backdrop was essentially a lot of public unease about the alleged informality of the Tony Blair decision-making, famously, over the Iraq war. And the Conservatives wanted essentially to copy on a much smaller scale the Washington example of an NSC, which was the first to be created and in many ways the model for the rest of us. And I think if we asked ministers then what exactly they wanted out of an NSC, they would have said something like three things.

First of all, better coordination across government of this expanding universe of national security with more issues concerning more departments and the need for rigorous decision-making. Against the backdrop of that Blair history and in addition to the four burning topics you just referenced, Boris, you could add a fifth. We now know that public health is also potentially a national security issue after the COVID-19 pandemic. So first, better coordination.

Secondly, better decision-making through more challenge. This was a very strong theme with David Cameron. He wanted a forum where all the senior ministers from the national security departments, foreign affairs, defense, interior, etc., plus some non-departmental ministers (to inject some blue skies thinking) could meet with the senior advisers across government to hear their advice, to probe it, to challenge it, to debate it, and then to make decisions and set priorities.

And then, the third priority they would have said was better strategic planning, not
just an instrument for managing day-to-day issues and giving political direction in a crisis, but also to do the longer-term strategic thinking and horizon scanning to try to spot the next issue, the next threat, and the one behind that as well.

So if that was the standard they were aiming for, what is our experience as a coordination mechanism? I think certainly in the early years when I was involved, it did produce a good forum where ministers across government became familiar with each other’s issues and had a place where they could take coherent decisions and set priorities among competing objectives. It also, funnily enough, turned out to be a useful place for coalition management, e.g. to discuss the balance between security and privacy in counter-terrorism legislation. The NSC became a forum where we could debate those things and resolve them. I think it is probably true to say that in the early days, the major departments of state, like the Foreign Office or the Defense Ministry, were nervous about the arrival of the new kid on the block close to the prime minister, that it could become a barrier between senior ministers and the prime minister. But experience, I think, has shown that a good minister with good ideas can use the National Security Council structure as an amplifier, as a way of getting by and across government to pursue policies.

We were also careful to keep the structure, the secretariat of the NSC small. So it was not a competing bureaucracy with the main departments of state. And also the Prime Minister decided that he would appoint a civil servant as National Security Adviser. As you say, I was the first one, not a politician who might become competitive with other senior ministers and a barrier. It also gave us a single person in our government who could talk to the US National Security Adviser, which is a useful thing.

So by and large, is a coordination mechanism useful as a mechanism for testing and contesting official advice? That depends crucially on the prime minister of the day. We found that David Cameron was very good at that and used the National Security Council very actively. Theresa May a bit less so, she was more concerned with internal security issues. And I gather Boris Johnson is not using the NSC so much and prefers other mechanisms. So it does depend on the prime minister, the chancellor of Germany of the day using a mechanism and using it to actually make decisions so that senior ministers know it is a forum that counts.

One of the benefits in terms of testing and challenging is the presence of the intelligence agency heads at the National Security Council. We have never before in the UK had collective access for the intelligence community to ministers. We have had individual intelligence agencies reporting to individual ministers, but this gave
senior ministers a chance to meet and discuss with intelligence heads. For example, the reliability of a particular line of reporting or why they made a particular analysis and how was their level of confidence in it. It was an intelligence client function for the intelligence community with the policy world that they had not had before. And as long as you avoid crossing the line into the area where intelligence heads are giving policy advice, as long as you keep them in the reporting and the analysis area, I think has been a benefit as well.

On strategic thinking, I think, honestly, we have not succeeded. We tried to maintain a balance in the early years between using the NSC for operational issues and for more longer-term thematic horizon scanning kind of thinking. Ministers so love to get their hands on the immediate issue, the immediate crisis that they really were not prepared to give a lot of time or attention to the longer-term foresight as to what might be coming but might of course not happen. The urgent drives out the important. I think it is a much wider issue actually for our democracies that it is really hard to get senior ministerial attention away from the tyranny of the breaking news world in which they live. And I cannot say that the British National Security Council has really made much progress on that.

But overall, I think it has been useful. Obviously, every government has to adopt this model to their own constitutional arrangements, administrative culture. But in this world of multiplying national security threats, I think some sort of coordination mechanism is important and also a chance to take a wider view while also trying to cope with the disruptive threats that the world keeps throwing at all.

So there is an opener, Boris, and of course, very happy to take up the issue from that.

Thank you very much, Peter. Maybe I can follow up with one question that you have already touched on. How did the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defense react to the creation of this new structure that could be seen as competition? This is a sentiment that is felt very strongly in Berlin, where ministers have a constitutionally guaranteed autonomy in running their ministries. And there is a sense that a stronger structure located at the chancellery in terms of power, influence, and visibility, would undercut the traditional ministries. It is seen as a zero-sum game: Whatever is put into coordination represents a loss for the individual ministries.

Yes. There was a degree of nervousness, even perhaps resentment, particularly in the Foreign Office, that there was this new structure in Whitehall that might use up some of their functions. Of course, we do not have exactly the same constitutional
set-up as in Germany. In our system, other ministers are all dependent on the prime minister and the prime minister can interfere and will, if he or she decides to do so in the work of individual ministries. There is collective cabinet responsibility and in a way, the NSC exemplified that it was a collective body for taking decisions across government.

I think it is important in a structure like ours not to make the National Security Secretariat too large. It should not be so large as to be able to initiate policy and become a competing bureaucracy with others, and the National Security Adviser figure should not be a politician with a high profile, who does media interviews, and who compete for political space with other senior ministers. I was very careful never to get between the Prime Minister and his senior ministers, but always to facilitate discussion among them.

And over time I think those concerns lessened, particularly because the ministries saw the value of the NSC for getting decisions. As I said, if they came forward with a good, attractive policy proposal, they could get the Prime Minister's attention. They could get the buy-in from the other major departments which is crucial since almost no policy these days can be implemented only by the Foreign Ministry. It always needs support from other departments, usually resources as well. And the NSC was a forum in which to do that.

Ruge

Thank you, Peter. Julia: You know Germany very well. What insights do you think would be useful coming out of the US system for the German debate?

Friedlander

Thank you so much for the invitation. The US National Security Council is a post-war institution. It sits atop. The situation that the United States found itself in in the post-war period was marked by the emergence of certain three-letter agencies and the huge military-industrial complex that it had never had, and a role in the world it had never had. And I think from that principle in the forties and fifties the NSC has grown first from being an immediate coordinating body, basically the coordinating power of the White House to bring key ministers together, to then adding staff and creating this centralized body within our presidential system that allowed us to coordinate the ever-growing US government and an ever-growing concept of what national security actually means.

I was part of the national security strategy drafting under the last administration and General McMaster. And I think what was useful about that process was not really the paper that we produced, because in the end, these papers are part of the sausage-making process. Everybody adds their bells and whistles or their
ornaments for the Christmas tree. Someone strips them out, someone else puts
them back in. They produce guidelines for us to follow. But for me, the most
instructive element was working with my colleagues.

What does the strategy actually mean? How does it reflect the will, the preferences
of our political masters? But then also the structures and the realities of how the US
government functions.

I did not love the [National Security Strategy] paper. I think few people did. It was
the process of getting there that I found was most instructive.

Our fights in the presidential system are more with Congress than they are with co-
alition partners. Obviously, we do not have coalition partners. We do have personal-
alties, though. We do have fiefdoms in a way. The State Department is huge, and the
Defense Department is huge. The NSC in many ways in the US sometimes serves as
a coordinating committee not only between departments but within departments.
You get a call and you have to work out differences between two actors in the same
department. The larger the government, and the German government is not small,
the more you need some sort of mechanism to keep the whole thing together.

I would not say that that the US NSC, in its current form, is always a paradigm of
efficiency. Certainly not. What I like about it the most is when it functions not only
as a coordinating body for the ministers, but also for coordinating on the lower
levels. My job was to call interagency meetings of my colleagues. Sometimes it was
the National Security Adviser who said you need to have a meeting on X. A lot of the
times it was actually just me saying I think there is a problem here and to be able to
pull colleagues in and say, we are going to try to handle this issue with the lowest
level possible and feed that information up. Ideally, a decision should be made at
the lowest possible level, so that the president and the cabinet only reach a decision
point and you can say we have worked this up and the assistant secretaries and the
undersecretaries and the deputies have a decision point around a specific topic. It
does not always work that way. A lot of times it is very top down. Decision-making
just gets pushed further and further up because no one takes responsibility at the
mid-level.

The other thing is about the size of the staff itself. I think what you said about
keeping it slim, you know, this is forever and a day, the aspirations of various
administrations. Usually it is a Republican administration that says we want to
trim it down and make it bring it back to the “Brent Scowcroft model.” And then,
of course, in Democratic administrations, it balloons out again.
I would say that I worked with about the same number of colleagues at the Trump NSC as my predecessors did on the Obama NSC. There are always a lot of people there. And I would say that it is a cautionary tale in power, the creation of a shadow government that essentially uses the interagency as implementers.

I am also an intelligence analyst by training. To come to the NSC is to actually understand how my own government functions. If you talk about the Russia crisis, what we have collectively done in the financial, economic, and regulatory sphere is something that you cannot do if you are sitting in one room in the Pentagon, one room at the State Department, etc. It also means you have to understand: this is how Commerce Department authorities work, therefore, export controls. This is how trade restrictions work, therefore, the US Trade Representative.

I do not presume to say what Germany should do. I would say you need a slightly larger chancellery staff. My former counterparts there are overworked, underresourced, with a lot on their shoulders. And there needs to be a coordinating function at the junior and mid-level, again bringing in any agency that might have equity in an issue.

Julia, thank you very much. Peter, you mentioned one point that I found interesting, which was that by creating an NSC and a National Security Adviser on the UK side, you had one person who was the obvious counterpart to the US National Security Adviser. Before you created the new system, was there less clarity as to who the point person in London was?

Yes. And it varied with the personalities around the prime minister at the time. There were times when the prime minister had a very strong official working near them. I’m thinking of Charles Powell with Margaret Thatcher, who was then the natural counterpart of the US National Security Adviser. At other times it wasn’t absolutely clear who the US NSA would call at three in the morning, when the crisis was erupting. Having a National Security Adviser as part of an NSC system means that there is a single point of contact, whether it’s a foreign affairs issue, whether it’s something to do with defense or intelligence, or pursuing Osama bin Laden, whatever it may be. I think it is quite an important point.

Gerhard: In terms of intelligence, there are two German terms that are relevant to our discussion: One is Lagefeststellung, the other one is Lagebewertung, corresponding to “situational awareness” and “situation assessment.” As we heard, one feature of the UK system introduced in 2010 is that it brings together the intelligence community with cabinet-level officials. Tell us about how you see the German
Let us focus on the BND. The BND is subordinated as one of very few federal government structures to the Federal Chancellery. So the Head of the Chancellery is the responsible minister for supervising the BND and coordinating the federal intelligence and security services.

The Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (BfV), by contrast, is subordinated to the Ministry of Interior (being the internal intelligence and security service), roughly comparable to the British MI5 that is overseen by the Home Office. Last but not least, military counter-intelligence is handled by the MAD which comes under the Ministry of Defense. So the BND is the only service that has a direct link to the Federal Chancellery. The BND attends a regular weekly meeting in the Chancellery, which is not strictly speaking a coordinating meeting. It is the heads of the services, the heads of police and judicial agencies, and the state secretaries of the security related federal ministries, who meet in the Chancellery, with the Head of the Chancellery presiding. In the services’ parlance, it is called “ND Lage” (Nachrichtendienstliche Lage). It is really a security issues-related meeting where participants update each other on pertinent situational aspects. It is an exchange of views that sometimes could lead to some mutually agreed joint action. The state secretaries sometimes ask additional questions, they might have some take-aways for the work of their ministries. It is a two-hour meeting, generally there are no formal decisions, no protocols. So that is the name of the game.

The chancellor himself, herself in former times, is normally not involved, nor are the ministers as such. In recent days we have a slightly different set-up, as I gather, which is not necessarily part of that structure. It seems that the president of the BND, in view of the current situation in Ukraine, has regular direct access to the chancellor himself, sometimes also to the whole cabinet. Up to now that seems to be circumstantial without further institutional implications.

The German government has no structure yet to combine, not to speak of fusing, situational inputs from the different services in a systematic way. If you are unlucky and you have a chancellor who is not particularly interested in the inputs of the services, you end up just in Directorate Seven which is the working muscle of the head of the Chancellery for overseeing the BND and coordinating the federal services. Your papers then may well not be forwarded, your input may well be lost before reaching decision-makers’ levels.
I personally was the chief of the presidential staff in the BND between 2009 and 2012, just prior to my secondment to the German Embassy to London as BND station chief and liaison with the British services and with Whitehall. My impression was that the UK had done a very precious job not only in creating the NSC, but also in creating the JIO, as you call it, the Joint Intelligence Organization, together with the assessment staff of the Cabinet Office to support the Joint Intelligence Committee and the National Security Council. That structure provides the NSC with what we call the “joint situational awareness and assessment,” based not only on MI6, MI5, and GCHQ-inputs, but also the inputs from the FCO, the Home Office, and other ministries. Comprehensive assessments were to be submitted to the NSC presented by the Chief JIO, but in attendance of all heads of services who were able and invited to further contribute and discuss. And the procedures could also include reaching out to trusted allies for augmenting and corroborating situational awareness.

I went from London to Brussels as Director of INTCEN that had, by the way, been created by a Brit, with some elements of NSC structures and procedures, and especially the JIO/JIC replicated, of course adapted to the multilateral set-up where you had 28 EU member states at the time. So we were able in Brussels to collect and fuse finished intelligence contributions of, in theory, up to 50 or 60 European intelligence and security services.

Ruge

Thanks very much. Peter, would you like to add to what Gerhard said on intelligence?

Ricketts

Yes. In fact, the Joint Intelligence Committee was created in 1936 and was the forum where intelligence assessments were produced throughout the Second World War and the Cold War. That continues up to the current day. As Gerhard said, our tradition in the UK is that intelligence heads do not talk directly to ministers collectively. MI6 and GCHQ report to the Foreign Office, MI5 to the Home Office. But the JIC is the only body authorized to assess intelligence for ministers. In the past, these JIC assessments went into the red boxes of senior ministers each weekend. In the case of the prime minister, the assessments often came back with a red tick on them showing that the prime minister had read them, but with no comments. That left the JIC staff and the intelligence agencies with little or no guidance as to what might be interesting to the ministers the following week.

What the NSC has revolutionized is that the JIC assessments are presented collectively to ministers. People are there to see the reaction. Ministers can say: Are you sure about that report? Is it reliable? How trustworthy is the source? I imagine...
before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the intelligence was tested pretty thoroughly, before the government put it out publicly. So it gives ministers the opportunity to be an “intelligent client” for the intelligence community, giving real-time feedback on whether the assessments are on target, whether they are relevant, or whether other things are needed. I think in the British system this works well. We are careful to make sure that the intelligence agencies are not giving advice on policy. But it does mean that the politicians have a better understanding of the issues intelligence can shed light on, and those it cannot elucidate, and the intelligence community can see how political leaders are reacting to their material.

Ruge

Thank you, Peter. Question to you, Gerhard: Back in the summer of 2021, we had these floods in the western areas of Germany. And obviously this was an issue that was handled at the level of the states, the Länder. There was information available in the system, but it was not acted on. And at the end of the day, we had 180 people killed in those floods. Is there anything we can learn from that experience that is relevant to the conversation that we are having, looking at the national level and at national security issues?

Conrad

We can definitely learn something, though it is of course not intelligence at stake in the narrow sense, in such national disaster situations. It is about information and, of course, the need for assessed information. Situational awareness as such always has a much larger scope and background than secret intelligence. And what we should learn from these sad events is that we need to have a structured flow of assessed information on the regional level and where necessary, up to the national level in order to be first of all aware in time and be able to react and intervene on that level, if necessary. If you decide that you have to intervene as soon as a catastrophe crosses local or regional borders, then of course, at least coordination or even active intervention may be needed, first and foremost by the Federal Ministry of Interior, but potentially also by other ministries, certainly the Ministry of Defense when it comes to invoking support by the armed forces. In the German system, resilience in terms of national emergencies and natural disasters is ultimately the responsibility of the Ministry of Interior though stable, performant, and tested provisions should be in place for a “whole-of-government” approach in situational awareness and action when and where needed. Authorities at the regional and local levels, and then of course at the national level should therefore follow similar, stringent procedures of relaying information, having unified procedures in producing situational awareness and assessment and relaying it to the higher levels with the aim of keeping them informed in a timely manner and enabling them to react where necessary. This kind of complementary whole-of-government approach at local, regional and national levels does not yet exist.
Thank you. Obviously, not a national security issue in the narrow sense, but nonetheless relevant for our discussion today. Parliamentary commissions are looking into what was done and at what point there was a failure of communication or decision-making.

I want to take a few questions from the audience. I have one for you, Julia: Should the discussion on the national security architecture not be preceded by a discussion on our interests and the aims we want to achieve?

That is what I was getting at with this idea of the drafting of a national security strategy. I think that Germany has often struggled with the concept of what national security means. And I think sometimes the US has, too. I think we increasingly have this tendency of calling everything national security which is also a risk. But this idea of shared national interest has not been present in the German debate in the same way. I think it is important to say that if the economics ministry is looking after the interests of German commerce, for example, that is a German interest. It is a national interest. It could also be a national security interest in specific cases. And so it is saying that Germany actually has a strong foreign policy and influence in Europe, in the world, together with NATO, with the EU, with the United States, G7, etc., and to actually feel comfortable publicly stating what that national interest is.

Question for you, Peter, posed by Dr Ian Anthony of SIPRI: Does the secretariat of the National Security Council bring scientific advice into the UK system?

It is a very good question. And just one sentence to add to what Julia said about national security strategies. I have now worked on a few in my time. I am a bit suspicious that they are a useful guide to setting priorities in national security, because governments tend to use them as opportunities to reassure the public that the whole range of national security issues are being well taken care of. Everything is under control and they do not need to worry. And they tend not to be instruments for prioritizing scarce resources and applying them to the top priority. So once you have got your national security strategy, that is when you need the NSC to translate that into operational priorities.

The answer to Ian Anthony’s questions is no, I do not think it did have scientific knowledge plumbed into the national security structure, not when I was there. I think since the pandemic, everyone has realized that public health issues or technology are national security issues in their own right. And I am sure that there is now more science and technology advice available to the National Security Secretariat. Whether they actually have got a scientific adviser, I do not know. But I
think looking back, it probably was a gap and that we were not paying sufficient attention to horizon scanning of the various scientific and technological risks to national security. I think probably that has changed now.

Ruge

On your observation on national security strategies, Peter, I am sure you are right. I would just say that the only thing that is worse than having a national security strategy is not having a national security strategy, because you have nothing to work with, basically. I think you have to go through that process. But I agree, you can come up with a marvelous paper, but if you do not have the mechanisms to turn it into something real, it does not amount to much.

A question from Christina Moritz, who is with the German Armed Forces and is somebody who is very interested in the issue of a National Security Council. She comments that the NSC does not need to be a stronger, dominant structure at all. In fact, if properly set up as a cabinet committee, it would strengthen existing government structures and procedures.

Ricketts

Our experience of Cabinet Committees was that they were useful, but were too narrowly focused to take in the whole range of national security issues and traditionally were only composed of ministers. You could see our NSC as just another Cabinet Committee, but it has specific aspects like the presence of a number of senior advisers and a stronger secretariat which I have talked about, and which distinguish it from our traditional practice. An NSC structure does also provide a forum for resolving issues at the working level between ministries. In the end, all depends on how the leader wants to use the structure. If it is to be used for real decision-making on major, important issues, then it becomes a very powerful part of government. And the most senior ministers will attend. If not, and if the prime minister starts to skip meetings and delegates to other ministers to chair, then the NSC loses its value and decisions will tend to be taken elsewhere.

Ruge

Can I ask you, Peter and Julia, to describe very briefly the process through which issues are considered and decision-making prepared and brought up to the level of the principals.

Ricketts

Well, in our system the National Security Adviser is a kind of honest broker between the prime minister and the various members of the committee. I thought it was my function to try and give them a balanced diet so that there would be some foreign policy, some defense issues, some internal security, some short term crisis management, some longer-term strategic thinking about our longer-term priorities or future threats. And I would assemble a weekly agenda for the meeting, which I
would then get the Prime Minister to approve (and then I would field complaints from other ministers when this subject was not included). The problem with all that is that the urgent crisis issue always drives out the important but longer-term issues and, however hard I tried, I was not able to find a mechanism for keeping minds focused on strategic issues. In the end, if the NSC is going to work properly, it needs to both reflect the direction of the political leader, but also interest the other ministers and make sure they feel they are getting their fair share of time and attention for what they think is important.

Ruge

There is also, Peter, if I remember correctly, something called NSIGs – National Security Implementation Groups. I imagine on an issue like Afghanistan, you would have a group of senior officials who would get together and agree on a document that would be the basis of discussion and decision-making at the political level. And what I thought was interesting about the UK system was that these groups could be chaired by an official from Foreign Office or the Ministry of Defense. That is an interesting point for us because in the bureaucratic world of Germany, where people are so concerned about winning or losing, chairing those meetings and preparing decisions to be taken at the level of principals is an important role and something where these ministries can come into the picture and actually shape decision-making more than is the case today.

Ricketts

That is true. We have an interagency structure and we did have a substructure of official-level coordination meetings that did not always have to be chaired by the Cabinet Office. And they tended to report to something I created, which we called the National Security Council Officials’ Group, the NSC(O), which was the Permanent Secretaries in our system (the State Secretaries in the German system) of ministries represented at the NSC. The intention was that this NSC(O), equivalent I think to the Deputies Committee in the US NSC, would control the quality of the papers going into the NSC, but also ensure the follow-up – that things happened as a result of the decision-making. And that created a new level in Whitehall for the state secretaries who did not otherwise get together in any collective policy-making forum. I also used it as a forum for longer-term strategic thinking as well. But yes, the idea of involving other ministries, giving them the chance to chair inter-departmental meetings if they were the leading advocate of a policy, does help to create buy-in to this structure and avoid a feeling that it is a top-down imposition on individual ministries.

Friedlander

The National Security Adviser is designed to be an honest broker, often an outside personality, him or herself. And so that does create some tension sometimes. The function can go bottom-up or it can go top-down. The priority could be set by the
cabinet and then task the interagency to start working it through. And so then it goes back down to mid-level civil servants to start conversations and report back up, to produce a report, to produce an analysis, and have a meeting about it. What is interesting about the American system is that it often goes bottom-up. You would identify a problem at the working level, gather your colleagues on your own, from your own initiative and say, guys, we need to start thinking about this. Something happens in the world. Let us start thinking about this. A government changes in an important country: Let us have a foundational meeting about our priorities with that government. And so I think with some of that, agenda setting was often very useful. The other thing that you can also do is be an honest broker at a lower level. So one department or agency is fighting with another. And you say, okay, we are going to have a meeting about this, we are going to figure it out. And I often did that. I would get a call from one part of the government saying, you know, we really want to prioritize this. These other people are not listening to us or they are on a different page. Can we have a meeting? So the State Department would ask the NSC to have a meeting on an issue, and that allows for sort of more dynamic policy-making or just at least level-setting.

And just to the point on intelligence, there was always someone, even at the junior level, from an intelligence agency who delivers the opening words: “This is what the situation is.” At the very beginning of the meeting, you open the meeting, you turn to the intelligence representative to set the scene. And so there is this automatic incorporation of that analysis into what all of the departments and agencies around the table are responding to.

Follow-up question, Julia: So let us say you have this bottom-up kind of initiative. How do you get that on the agenda of the Deputies Committee or the Principals Committee at some point?

Well, again, it is an art. So you could mention it in your briefings. You pass it up in your written work. You mention it to the National Security Adviser. You mention it to your bosses. And you recommend that meeting to take place through a formal process. Sometimes, it really does end up being the foundational work to build consensus. When I was there, I started a process on economic statecraft: How do we actually bring different agencies together around this emerging consensus that much of our national security is being projected through economic and financial means? So I would have a meeting on that once a month to see where everybody was.

Thanks, Julia. Peter, a question to you from one of our younger colleagues here at MSC, Martin Kerl, who says public debates on national security issues generally lag
behind in Germany compared to the UK and the US. His question: Has the public debate in the UK benefited from the creation of the National Security Council and possibly from using a certain format? You have the 2021 Integrated Review. Previously you had national security strategies. Have those documents helped to improve the debate?

Ricketts

Not as much as I would like. I think it is a really important question. The young generations are going to inherit the world being shaped by decisions taken by our governments now, and they deserve to have their word heard as we go through this enormous transformation in the international order. National security strategies certainly can help. And in the case of the Integrated Review which the UK government produced last year, they did try to use that to consult, to put out ideas, to encourage people to feed in their own views and so on. I do not think it got a great deal of uptake apart from the world of the think tanks and academia. It is very difficult, given the complicated world we live in, to cut through with these sorts of issues of national security and attract the people’s attention.

Climate change is probably the one area which really does get young people’s interest, and I think the government can do a lot more to set out in approachable, accessible terms what the national security issues are and what is being done about it. So I think basically the process of producing a national security strategy, and then implementing it, ought to be an opportunity for the public to be more involved and we can encourage debate and discussion and ideas to be fed in. That is probably the most publicly accessible part of this national security process.

Ruge

So let us stick with climate for a moment. In our 2020 Zeitenwende report we wrote that the German government spends a lot of time thinking about climate issues. But we noted that at the time, there was no serious interagency process to bring these things together, and I think that was a fair statement. The Foreign Office had an annual report on climate and security issues, but it did not plug in with what the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of the Environment, Ministry of Economic Affairs, the Chancellery, were doing.

Notably, that has changed because under the new government, the Foreign Office has been put in charge of the climate negotiations. So we now have a link here between the national security set-up and the climate set-up that previously did not exist.

What are your thoughts, Peter and Julia, on climate and national security, and how that is covered in your respective systems.
I wish it were better than it is. I would say that we are still understanding climate and how we define it as a national security threat. We are far behind. We do not really have the structures in place to handle this. And I think that one reason is because of the separation of powers. A lot of it is about congressional powers and congressional appropriations. And then there is the issue of a federalized system where much of climate policy in the US is ultimately devolved to the state level. It is going to be handled by local government, but then also by the private sector. Our data policy in many ways, our climate policy, the ever expanding renewable sector are driven by private capital and by providing incentives. We are a capitalist society. To some extent, the availability of capital drives policy. And all that makes it harder for us conceptually to say we are going to sit down in the White House and direct this. I think Julia puts her finger on the important point, that there are so many different aspects of the climate crisis. There is the technology, the economic issues, the green finance initiatives, the kind of thing that the G7 summit agreed on last year. I think those will have been worked on in Whitehall, not in the NSC structure, but in a coordination between our Treasury and our energy and climate ministry. This would include the very difficult choices between lower energy prices and less green investment or higher energy prices and investing for the long-term climate effect, zero carbon targets and so on. Another aspect is the whole area of national disaster preparedness. If we are going to have more floods, extreme weather events of various kinds, then that whole resilience planning aspect of the government, which in our system does come under the National Security Council, is called into play. So climate is an awkward issue that partly involves the world of national security and partly falls outside it. And I suspect in our government as well, apart from in preparing for the annual COP conferences, it is quite hard to put all that together. You could, of course lump it all into national security, expand the remit of the National Security Council. But there comes a point where the definition of national security becomes so wide that it is more or less the entire cabinet of the government. And then there is not much point in having a separate National Security Council. So we tended, as far as we could to keep economic policy issues rather out of the national security apparatus. But that is not a perfect solution either.

I have some good questions here. I will take one from Stefan Steinicke who is a staffer at the Bundestag and was previously with SWP, one of the leading German think tanks. His question: What added value can an NSC play in strategic communication? And he asked whether there are any examples from the US and/or the UK where the NSC structure enabled a better framing and dissemination.

I think strategic communication in conflict is a vital role for a National Security Council.
Council. I lived through the Libya experience where in the early stages we did a pretty bad job of strategic communication, what we were doing, why we were doing it, why we thought the risks were worth taking, what the end game was, and so on. And we did pull together a strategic communications operation within the NSC, which got out key messages day by day, sometimes hour by hour, and ensured that we did not immediately lose the media battle, because Sky News were reporting what the Libyans claimed were Western attacks on civilians and so on. There was a rebuttal function as well as a strategic messaging function. I think that works best in our system in a conflict period. Outside conflict, it tends to be part of the wider government communication and rebuttal operation, which goes well beyond national security. But at certain times, particularly when you cross that red line into conflict, then you need to be managing communications very actively and senior leaders want to be involved in strategic messaging about what you are doing.

Friedlander

I agree with that. I think there is something to be said for a body that is not a direct mouthpiece of the chancellor getting to speak on behalf of the federal government. So to say this is a consensus government opinion, and therefore these are talking points for the government itself. I think also in times of crisis it just helps to make sure that people are not saying different things and contradicting each other, because that is what adversaries are looking for. See where the weaknesses are between different factions of the government. And that is of course where the intelligence picture comes in as well. If you have a fast moving conflict and you have a bunch of ministers who are not even in the same room. It requires them having a shared understanding of what the situation is and then take it from there.

Ruge

I have another question here from a good friend of the MSC, André Loesekrug-Pietri who is the head of JEDI, the Joint European Disruptive Initiative. His question: How do you include people from outside government regarding tech issues? I guess you could also ask the question, are there people inside the government who have the expertise on emerging and disruptive technologies, who are at the table and are part of the process?

Ricketts

These are very good questions about how you involve the wider opinion in some of the decision-making that is needed in national security. I think we are long past the time when national security was a secretive art that only happened behind closed doors with a few people involved across government. Nowadays, national security is a very public policy area, and perhaps the pandemic and now the war in Ukraine just are double reminders of that. Disruptive policies and technologies, I am sure, are part of the day-to-day work of a number of agencies in the government, not least those who are looking in the cyber area, for example, and those who are looking at
hybrid warfare possibilities and how we protect us against that. How you involve
the wider public debate, I think it is up to the government to try to make these
issues important and interesting to people and then listen to their views. It will
never be a mass public opinion consulting exercise. I do not think enough people
will be interested, but I do think it is time that this whole area of national security,
including how we protect our societies against disruptive threats and risks, and the
divisiveness that states like Russia and China are always too happy to introduce,
how we bring that into the discussion with the wider scientific, technological, and
university communities as well as citizens with an interest. We have not done a very
good job of that so far. I think the use of national security strategy type documents,
laying out the issues for the public, encouraging them to engage and feed in their
own views has got to be the way forward in the future.

I think what is happening in Ukraine now has brought that home very strongly to a
younger generation of people. So let us try and capitalize on that and make sure
that there is a wider public discussion of all these things.

Ruge

I think that is right on point. The UK Integrated Review was remarkable for placing
a lot of emphasis on science and technology and the UK as a hub for science and
technology. I think part of the problem is also that both in the executive branch and
in parliaments we do not have a whole lot of people who are tech literate. There is a
real dearth of people who understand these cutting-edge issues which are changing
the world so rapidly.

Julia, would you like to come in on that? And then I would like Gerhard to speak to
the issue of Germany’s cyber security architecture.13

Friedlander

I think there are a couple different ways that that this expertise is brought into the
current system. The White House does have an Office of Science and Technology
that is specifically designed to bring in expertise and have a nexus for the private
sector and to understand how that intersects with national policymaking. It does
also speak to the revolving door to allow people to come in for short periods of time
to take up political appointments who come from tech, who know how it functions.
As a former regulator, my own big concern was that the government creates a lot of
very cute policies, but has no idea how they are actually implemented. In a sense,
the soldiers of our economic war against Russia are the companies, not our
military. So that revolving door is incredibly important. And I think that there are
appropriate firewalls to make sure that it is not a lobbying exercise or a special
interest exercise, but to be able to get private sector input.
Conrad

With regard to technological disruptions and cyber-attacks, I would like to refer to a framework which we developed in Brussels as a Hybrid Fusion Cell (HFC) as early as 2016. The HFC fuses inputs, not only intelligence inputs, but also high-tech related and other relevant information from commission directorates, for example, from member states’ services, and also the respective ministries and other government bodies. The aim is again updating EU and member states’ decision-makers on potentially dangerous situational developments and trends. That means, first of all, if you want to prepare for eventualities, for risks and threats, you need to have a specific kind of science- and intelligence-based risk and threat awareness. The HCF produced on the one hand quite comprehensive papers, but also succinct analysis straight to the point, that enabled to develop potential action items for decision makers. These issues should, again, be a dimension for a joint assessment staff on hybrid threats collecting, fusing, and assessing pertinent intelligence and information and thereby supporting a National Security Council. 14

Finally, a word on cyberattacks: If you remember the prominent case of the Colonial Pipeline system in the USA, it was not encouraging to see in retrospect that not even the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Justice was adequately involved in governmental situational awareness and response. They were just not part of the information bubble. That kind of situation should, of course, be avoided by stringent and performant procedures. But if you do not have a comprehensive body overseeing that kind of whole of government approach, monitoring it, and taking care that everyone is at the table at the right time, you will not be able to do it. So this relates to situational awareness in general but even more so to cyber-attacks with their considerable nuisance capacity and dynamic implications on a national level. You need a kind of very resilient, very fast, multisource and multidimensional situational awareness in order to enable everybody to react fast and in an adequate way.

Ruge

I think this is an area where the UK has done very well with the National Cyber Security Centre, where it has a set-up that actually brings all the key government actors to the table (also reaching out to industry and academia). 15

I want to ask a final question to Peter and Julia, and that is on accountability. In my mind, one important reason for having a National Security Council set-up and more of a structure is accountability; to create an element of transparency, at least within the executive branch on who is in charge and who was part of the decision-making. Does that sound right?

Ricketts

Yes. And I think I said at the beginning that was part of the motivation for having a
National Security Council, a sense that decision-making under Tony Blair over the Iraq war was not as transparent or as rigorous and formal as it should have been. Whether that is right or wrong, that was the perception. And so the idea of the National Security Council would be a place where clear decisions are taken in the presence of the government’s legal advisers, carefully minuted for the record, and then the prime minister is accountable to Parliament for decisions taken. That is certainly part of the rationale for having the NSC. And thank you very much for the opportunity to participate in this.

Friedlander

I agree with that. I mean, there is always going to be the shadow meeting to the shadow meeting. That is just the reality. But I think that as a structure, it is very important. Someone has to hold the bag. And if the entire government holds the bag in some way, it is a more responsible approach.

Ruge

Thank you Julia, Peter, Gerhard. I really enjoyed the conversation and I hope our viewers also got something out of it. Many thanks for some very good questions from our viewers.

We do not know whether this government coalition will move towards creating more of a structure, whether by making use of the Federal Security Council or by creating a new National Security Council. But you have provided food for thought. Many thanks also to our team at MSC for setting this up.

Thank you so much and good night.
Endnotes


