

Rethinking National Security in a European Context

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I have been asked to spend some time outlining alternative approaches to European security for France and Britain. This has been an interesting exercise, discussing ideas with my colleagues and identifying some similarities in security and defence posture of UK and France. And how Rethinking Security's ideas apply.

What I want to do is, first, outline some of those similarities between the UK and France when it comes to approaches to security. Secondly, I will offer a critique of current approaches to national security. And finally, suggest some alternatives.

If I have time, I'd also like to link this to Christian thinking. Although Rethinking Security is not a faith-based organisation, I think understanding how to redefine ideas about security in the light of faith is an important task and there are some ideas from one author in particular that I would like to share. If there isn't time now, perhaps we can come to that in the discussion.

Similarities in French and British Security Postures

- **Imperial Legacy:** Both countries had vast empires in Africa, Indian subcontinent, Pacific islands, East Asia and after the First World War controlled areas of the Middle East. As a result, both retain military bases in far flung locations, contributing to a security posture that seeks to project force and intervene in places that have very little to do with the defence of France or the UK.

- **Role in the United Nations:** This imperial or powerful legacy of both the UK and France mean they retain privileged roles in the United Nations. Both have permanent seats on the UN Security Council.
- **Nuclear Weapons:** France and the UK are two of the 9 states to possess nuclear weapons capabilities. There are some differences here French nuclear weapons are independent but the UK's warheads are 'on loan' from the US. But the Lancaster House treaties and now the Northwood Declaration are bringing the two nations' nuclear posture together much more closely.
- **Military Industrial complex:** Both countries have a strong military industrial complex, including a large export market. Although the UK, technically, has a few more controls on arms exports, both sell to countries that commit war crimes and/or human rights abuses against their own people.
- **Borders and internal security:** An issue regularly making headlines is so-called illegal immigration. Rather than deal with the human security of asylum seekers, these policies benefit security and arms companies and are all about looking tough to the electorate.

With many similarities in security posture, we must ask why this is the case and whether it is working or not?

The problems with national security

At the moment, European states are of course grappling with serious issues like an expansionist Russian regime, cyber-attacks, climate breakdown, the potential of terror attacks, what to do about high numbers of immigrants and the far-right political challenges, including the uncertainty of the US as a reliable ally. However, approaching all these issues within a very limited national security framework, often undermines real security and certainly does not address the causes of insecurity. I want to break down so-called national security and some of the problems with it.

- **National 'security' centres the state:** The state is both the subject and object of security. It is the entity to be secured and the entity that does the securing. Although the self-determination of a nation has become the way the world is organised, the idea of a state is ultimately an abstract concept. "Keeping its people safe" is often described as the first duty of a government. But we must question whether national 'security' as it currently operates – prioritising the state – is the best way of keeping people and planet secure. It isn't necessary to do away with state, but it is possible to change the approach to security to foreground people and planet – humanising the state, in other words.
- **National 'security' is highly militarised:** As a result of the state-centric nature of current national security policy, it also prioritises militarised responses to threats. The thinking is that projecting power or force will maintain the security of the state. I don't know so much about French policy, but the UK is an outlier among European states in its narrow thinking on this. Many other countries' national security strategies include human security concerns and appropriate ways of addressing these types of insecurities.
- **National 'security' is an exclusive area of policy making:** Those who are trusted with national security issues, in the UK at least, tend to be from a very small circle of people.

One of our colleagues from a partner organisation who worked inside Westminster said that these people meet an “invisible tick list of attributes”: being male, white, middle class, privately and Oxbridge educated, and with a family connection to the military or foreign policy. As young woman of colour, she could only make her voice heard through a couple of trusted male allies. Those who meet the invisible tick list are likely to have a similar way of thinking, resulting in many blind spots in policy formation.

- **National ‘security’ is a static policy area:** Perhaps due to this exclusivity or elitism in policy making, stability is favoured over other outcomes. For example, at the moment, as the Trump presidency undermines the post-war international consensus, as well as actively supporting far right movements that are destabilising European politics, NATO members (particularly the UK) are bending to meet new expectations, rather than think outside the box. The Franco-British collaboration on nuclear weapons is not ‘different thinking’. It continues to base security on the idea of nuclear deterrence, enhancing rather than replacing the US-led NATO assumptions.
- **National ‘security’ is unsustainable:** Using a highly militarised approach to security, formulated by a small cohort of likeminded individuals, to address so-called threats is ultimately unsustainable. In fact, force projection, threatening the use of force, and operating competitively create insecurity. It is clear that this type of security has failed even on its own terms. Afghanistan may be the most obvious example of this. A war and occupation to deal with terror and extremism has left the country in tatters and resulted in a return of the Taliban. Moreover, the idea that NATO has succeeded in containing Russian expansion appears to have failed too. And last but not least, militarism is completely unsustainable for the planet, nor does it do anything to address the insecurity we face from climate change.

This is why we desperately need alternatives: instead of seeking to project force, policy makers must seek cooperation and mutual security on a wide range of issues that foreground people and planet.

Alternatives

There are multiple tried and tested methods of building sustainable security that policy makers should keep in their toolkit. I want to outline a few principles from which building sustainable security can proceed, and some examples of what that could look like today, using the tools available.

First of all, rather than approaching security policy in a way that foregrounds the nation state, we can must think of security in terms of global, community, and individual needs.

- **Global:** We are faced with existential threats to the planet in the form of planetary heating and nature depletion. The impacts of these such as extreme weather events, possible pandemics and crop failure require global (not just national or European) cooperative efforts and listening to those with real, workable solutions who may not normally be involved in policy.

- **Community:** Within states like France and Britain, certain communities often bear the brunt of hard security policies. In the UK, and I'm sure in France, counter terror strategies have targeted Muslim communities and done real damage to individuals and families as well as trust across wider society. Migrants, travellers and activists are all viewed as threats, and there is ongoing systemic racism in policing and other institutions. Community security asks how all communities can feel safe, how dialogue and inclusion can overcome divides. It is also important that issues such as health, housing, jobs and welfare, access to food and the environment are considered as part of the sustainable security of communities.
- **Individual:** The above issues also affect individuals, but there are other issues to think about at an individual level too. Are individuals able to use their full capabilities in society? Are they kept safe, no matter their identity.

Rather than security policy making the state and its institutions safe, sometimes at the expense of the climate or particular communities within the state, policy should serve global concerns, communities and ordinary people.

Where should policy makers start? In Rethinking Security we identify 6 principles:

- **Sustainability:** *There is no security on a dead planet.* We need to put climate justice and nature restoration at the heart of everything. This requires addressing the causes of climate breakdown, such as our reliance on fossil fuels, and supporting places that are facing the worst impacts through adaptation and mitigation.
- **Solidarity:** *No-one is secure until everyone is secure.* Security policy must start with those who face insecurities, not protecting those who are already secure at the expense of others.
- **Justice:** *Rights, fairness and equality are integral to security.* This is what solidarity will lead to. Maintaining the status quo which privileges some groups in our societies over others will never produce true security.
- **Inclusivity:** *Everyone's views on security matter.* Security policy-making should not be the preserve of the military and arms company staff. Security is much more than defence and needs to be built from the ground up.
- **Accountability:** *Definitions, scrutiny and impact matter.* Unlike other areas of government policy, there is little assessment of whether national security policies actually work. It should undergo the same scrutiny as other government departments.
- **Reflexivity:** *Questioning our assumptions and values.* It is important that rather being stuck in maintaining the status quo, security policy responds to changing circumstances, not simply with "more money for defence" but really questioning the assumptions that national security is built on.

Here are some examples of what an alternative approach could look like today:

- States like the UK and France need to question assumptions about the US as the guarantor of European security, given the Trump Presidency's retreat from international aid and development and climate action, and the lack of commitment to international law and democracy itself. Rethinking the post-war consensus for more equitable

international relations is a necessary task but it is important not to throw out the good with the bad, and there is a lot that can be shared from the European experience.

- European security policy obviously cannot ignore Russia. There are expansionist hopes in the regime and real threats from cyber attacks, for example. But continued NATO expansion and freezing out Russia from dialogue is not a recipe for stability. Our peer network, Sicherheit neu Denken, in Germany developed a 'positive peace scenario' outlining how European policy makers could contribute to a ceasefire in Ukraine by supporting multilateralism and including the global south and BRICS nations (excluding Russia) in peacekeeping. Moreover, community peacebuilders in Ukraine and Russia have much to say to policy makers about what people on the ground need.
- Finally, with continued conflict, instability and climate breakdown, levels of migration to Europe will continue to increase. Instead of pushing borders further away and handing out huge contracts to security and arms companies, European states increase investment in programmes such as peacebuilding, community security, economic justice and climate mitigation and adaptation.

These are just a few examples of where security policy, based on principles that centre people and planet rather than the nation state, could change. Security isn't and shouldn't just be about defence, but should be focussed on addressing the underlying causes of insecurity.

A Christian Perspective on Security

From a Christian perspective, we also need to question how far we buy in to the idea that the state does or should provide security. There are very different experiences for Christians in different countries and of different denominations. Yet it should be problematic to us that state security or national security is built on power projection, competition and the threat of force. In particular the idea that the threat of nuclear war provides our main defence is not something that sits comfortably with is.

One political theorist, John Heathershaw, a Christian who has written a book called *Security After Christendom*, outlines alternatives to "Christendom security", a situation in which "the church legitimises the state and government secures the church" (p.10)

Although the French and British relationships between church and state are very different, for many in the church, there is lack of critique of the role of that state because of a lingering Christendom way of thinking. When churches themselves are full of military regalia and national flags it's understandable that there is much confusion among lay people about Jesus' teaching when churches appear to legitimise state sanctioned violence and an unjust and exclusive society.

One example from the US illustrates the point. Russell Moore, former head of the Southern Baptist Convention and editor of *Christianity Today* said in an interview that he had had, I quote *"multiple pastors tell me, essentially, the same story about quoting the Sermon on the Mount, parenthetically, in their preaching — "turn the other cheek" — [and] to have someone come up after to say, "Where did you get those liberal talking points?" And what was alarming to me is that in most of these scenarios, when the*

pastor would say, "I'm literally quoting Jesus Christ," the response would not be, "I apologize." The response would be, "Yes, but that doesn't work anymore. That's weak."

It is frightening that church goers are so easily swayed by dominant social and political narratives. To stick to Christ-centred security is not weak, it is hard work, and will likely see us opposed by the very structures of society – some theologians call “the powers” – and people who legitimise Christendom and national security.

As John Heathershaw writes the answer is not to seek a return to Christendom, where top down security of the state becomes an exclusive form of security that works for us, but not others, and does not address underlying insecurities. Instead he offers three principles for thinking about what Christ-centred security should look like.

- **Radical inclusion:** Jesus’ life, death and resurrection broke down the barriers between all of us. Any form of security that is exclusive and seeks to build security at the expense of other groups or people should be rejected by Christians.
- **Non-violent protection:** with the example of Jesus non-violence in mind, the church should commit itself to methods of non-violent protection for the vulnerable, rather than supporting state-sanctioned war.
- **Abundant provision:** because our economic model is based on the pursuit of having more, no matter how wealthy a family or nation is the aim is more. This creates insecurity at all levels of society. Instead, and in order to avoid climate and nature breakdown, we reimagine our economy of consumption and find local sustainable solutions.



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