Consultation Paper 161

INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

Liberal Democrats

Spring Conference

YORK 2026

Background

This consultation paper is presented as the first stage in the development of new Party policy in relation to international security. It does not represent agreed Party policy. It is designed to stimulate debate and discussion within the Party and outside; based on the response generated and on the deliberations of the working group a full policy paper will be drawn up and presented to Conference for debate.

The paper has been drawn up by a working group appointed by the Federal Policy Committee and chaired by Dr Ben Jones. Members of the group are prepared to speak on the paper to outside bodies and to discussion meetings organised within the Party.

Comments on the paper, and requests for speakers, should be addressed to: Alexander Payne, Policy Unit, Liberal Democrats, First Floor, 66 Buckingham Gate, London, SW1E 6AU, United Kingdom. Email: policy.consultations@libdems.org.uk

Comments should reach us as soon as possible and no later than 27 March 2026. Further copies of this paper can be found online at https://www.libdems.org.uk/members/make-policy/policy-consultations

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1 A World in Flux: Our Starting Point and Recent Developments

1.1 The international security environment facing the United Kingdom has changed, and continues to develop at an unprecedented pace. A period of relative stability since the Cold War has been replaced by urgent and stark challenges driven by heightened great-power competition, rapid technological change, and the erosion of long-standing democratic norms and multilateral institutions.

1.2 The UK and our allies are being forced to confront the reality that the key assumptions which shaped post-Cold War security policy no longer hold. For example, the belief that economic interdependence could moderate authoritarian behaviour has been undermined by the willingness of states such as Russia, China, and Iran to accept economic damage in the pursuit of their strategic goals, and of a number of countries to use economic leverage to pursue security objectives. Simultaneously, the expectation that liberal democratic norms would continue to spread was misplaced. We face a more contested global environment in which authoritarian modes of governance and democratic backsliding are increasingly prevalent.

1.3 The electorate is increasingly conscious of these challenges and politicians need to hold a more honest and direct conversation with the public about the nature of the threats we face and the trade-offs involved in addressing them. More in Common research for *The Sunday Times* shows that Britons across political affiliations now describe the world primarily as chaotic and dangerous. There is widespread uncertainty about whether the 'special relationship' between the UK and the United States still exists in a meaningful form, and only around half of the public believe that the US

would come to the defence of another North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ally.

1.4 The British public increasingly view Russia, Iran and China as adversaries, while views on the United States are mixed and increasingly contingent on political leadership in Washington. Against this backdrop, the Government published the Strategic Defence Review 2025 (SDR), which set out a vision for UK defence and a plan for what could be done to deter or, if necessary, fight a war in the near future. Liberal Democrats agree with the core diagnoses of the SDR, including its claim that technology is fundamentally changing the nature of state-on-state war and that the UK must transition away from its post-Cold War posture to face this new context. It rightly emphasises the importance of NATO, support for Ukraine, and the need to increase investment in our armed forces and the industrial and societal base that supports them. However, we are concerned that its implementation has been too slow for the world we now inhabit. The disparity between ambition and available funding has widened since the SDR's publication, and the Government needs to move more quickly with its key recommendations as the strategic environment worsens.

1.5 We are proud of the Liberal Democrats' strong record on international security. We continue to see defending democracy at home and abroad, and protecting our national security as fundamental to our core values. We have consistently supported Ukraine, NATO, cooperation with our European and Commonwealth partners, international law and multilateralism. However, the changing international landscape and evolving threats make it ever more important that we are a strong voice defending liberal values in a world that is more dangerous, more competitive, and less predictable than the one many British policymakers grew up in.

1.6 At the beginning of this parliament, the Conference endorsed Policy Paper 157, *Liberal Values in a Dangerous World*. That paper comprehensively examined and updated the party's policies on defence, security, diplomacy, international development and soft power. With that in mind, it is our intention to ensure that our new policy paper focuses on making a contribution to policy development where it is most needed. This means directly addressing the new and evolving challenges to British security policy that have arisen since Policy Paper 157 became Federal party policy. We are also ensuring coordination with two other policy working groups where there is cross-over with our own work, including on defending our democracy from foreign interference and using economic and industrial policies to ensure our national, food, and energy security, and resilience against future disruption, including artificial intelligence, climate change and pandemics.

1.7 The remainder of this paper sets out some of the challenges, and possible solutions and principles, that the international security policy working group is contending with, together with questions to which we would welcome input. These questions are not exhaustive; all comments are welcome.

Questions:

Q1 *Does this consultation paper accurately identify the key security challenges facing the UK today?*

Q2 *Which organisations and individuals should this working group be engaging with during the policy development process?*

Q3 *How should the Liberal Democrat approach to international security*

differ to a) the Labour Party's b) the Conservatives' c) Reform UK's and d) the Green Party's approaches?

Q4 *To what extent does defence spending need to increase further? How would you fund this?*

Q5 *What are the most pressing issues and policies that the group needs to engage with?*

Q6 *What ought to be prioritised within government spending on UK security?*

Q7 *Are there any conflicts that are being underconsidered within British politics?*

2 Future of European Security

2.1 Putin's Russia has worked for more than two decades to sow dissent and weaken democracy in Europe. Increasingly emboldened, its security organs have conducted acts of violence and sabotage on the territory of other European states, including the UK, and worked to subvert our democratic institutions and processes. China's rise since the 1980s has been remarkable and President Xi's decade-long leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has increasingly transformed China into a political and economic systemic rival to the current world order. The efforts of Russia and China to retain or develop economic footholds in Europe, including in the critical energy sector and infrastructure, for example in south-east Europe, add to the complexity of the overall security environment.

2.2 The re-election of Donald Trump in 2024 has accelerated an existing trend in US foreign policy towards deprioritising European security. While the US has by no means disavowed its interests in Europe and the Middle East, it continues to place greater emphasis on the Indo-Pacific, and has identified the Western Hemisphere as an area for greater attention. These changes are evident across defence, intelligence, trade and economic policy. While the US remains indispensable to European security, we can no longer assume or rely upon the depth of American leadership and commitment that we have taken for granted for decades.

2.3 Only half of Britons now believe that the US would defend another NATO country, and confidence falls sharply during moments of tension between Washington and its allies. This may be why a majority of people recently polled by YouGov said that Britain's defence and security would be positively impacted by a closer relationship with the EU, and the biggest reason for people wanting to align with Europe is because they believe the

US cannot be trusted. This uncertainty creates both risk and opportunity: risk if Europe fails to adapt, and opportunity if the UK helps to lead a more resilient European security posture.

2.4 As Liberal Democrats, we remain unequivocally committed to NATO as the cornerstone of UK security, and share the Government's view that defence policy should be 'NATO First'. This not only aligns with our values, but it is also the only practical way to defend Britain; collective defence is cheaper, more credible, and ultimately the most viable route to long-term security in Europe. Our support for NATO is not shared across British politics. Until very recently, the Green Party opposed UK membership outright, and their leader continues to advocate for the UK to leave NATO.

2.5 We need to consider how best to reform how NATO plans and procures systems, tools, and technology. NATO currently does this via development and capability cycles, which typically span four years or more and focus on the capabilities required for traditional warfare, for an era of rapid technological and strategic change. While it is positive to see Poland, Germany and Nordic countries ramp up their defence spending, we believe the UK should be playing a leading role in ensuring NATO members are using defence spending to prepare for the warfare of today and tomorrow, rather than the warfare of yesterday. We are also interested in whether NATO and its Member States could and should move faster on capability development, experimentation and deployment. While there is still a crucial role to play for long-standing conventional capabilities, the experience of Ukraine suggests that speed of development and acquisition, adaptability and operational learning must also be part of the solution to new threats.

2.6 European defence currently depends on the US continuing to provide critical capabilities. As important as US military personnel

themselves are, there is also a significant amount of underlying capability infrastructure and strategic enablers including command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR), air tankers, missile defence and air-to-air refuelling. Recent research from the International Institute for Strategic Studies has highlighted that the US currently contributes over half of all NATO's fighter and fighter ground-attack aircraft, and around half of the non-US contributed aircraft are of US manufacture, which is just one example of the extent of European dependency on the US.

2.7 Tackling this dependency cannot be achieved without greater coordination and cooperation with our European allies. No European country is in a position to replace the US alone, so increasing Europe's self-resilience will mean confronting difficult questions — including in the UK — about autonomy, cooperation, interoperability, and leadership to develop a collaborative approach. We believe the UK must take a leading role in this process by addressing concerns, building a consensus, and providing a clear, fair route forward. The EU also plays an increasingly important role, both in terms of military capability development and also in complementary policies that deal with sanctions and wider economic and societal resilience. Liberal Democrats welcomed the signing in 2025 of the UK-EU Security and Defence Partnership, but we are deeply concerned by the failure to move forward on UK access to EU capability acquisition initiatives, including the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) programme. Both the UK and the EU have a vital interest in ensuring that there is deep and structured defence and security cooperation between them.

Questions:

Q8 To what extent do the priorities of the Trump presidency reflect a lasting change in US foreign policy? How far can we expect the US to

resume its former role in European security?

Q9 *How can NATO best adapt to changing US security priorities? What are the possibilities for a "European pillar" within the alliance?*

Q10 *Are NATO policy and planning systems sufficiently robust for the threats the alliance faces?*

Q11 *What is the best means to ensure effective security leadership in the EU/NATO Europe with a less-engaged US?*

Q12 *How can the UK best ensure the success of European efforts to drive greater efficiency and effectiveness through military cooperation?*

Q13 *Is the new EU-UK Security and Defence Partnership delivering? What more can be done?*

Q14 *Does the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) still have a role to play, despite the voluntary nature of its commitments and lack of enforcement mechanisms?*

3 Authoritarian Threats

3.1 Russia's illegal war against Ukraine, alongside the extraterritorial actions of China and Iran, reflects a more aggressive and full-throated authoritarian challenge to liberal democracies. This challenge is taking place through cyber-attacks, sabotage, assassination, disinformation and coercive economic practices.

3.2 The responses of NATO allies to such actions have not always been sufficiently robust. There are increasingly frequent and serious cases of sabotage of European infrastructure and attacks on allied transport networks, such as the damage done to railway tracks south-east of Warsaw. In less fraught times, such events would dominate headlines and provoke decisive responses. Without sufficient deterrence through the imposition of credible costs on hostile actors, they will continue or further escalate; when hostile actions go unanswered, or responses are perceived as performative rather than substantive, the risk of escalation increases rather than diminishes.

3.3 The Liberal Democrats remain firmly pro-Ukraine, pro-European and committed to the defence of liberal values. Supporting Ukraine is the right thing to do and reflects our values as a party and as a country but it is also in the UK's self-interest. Ukraine is defending European security; its armed forces are the most experienced in Europe, particularly in modern, high-intensity warfare. While the Russo-Ukrainian war should not be treated as a template for all future conflict, we should nevertheless adapt our procurement processes and battlefield innovation based on lessons we can learn from their experience.

3.4 As is discussed in more detail below, we recognise the potential of new multilateral partnerships. More thinking needs to be done on how

such a grouping might be most effective, and the policy areas it might focus on. We also recognise that advancing UK interests and values may increasingly require pragmatic engagement with middle-sized powers that do not perfectly align with liberal democratic ideals, including countries such as Brazil, South Africa and Qatar. This raises difficult but unavoidable questions about how values and interests are balanced in a more contested world.

Questions:

Q15 *How should the UK Government approach the CRINK (China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea) axis? Should we regard this as a de facto alliance, or a looser alignment of convenience?*

Q16 *How can the UK best balance its values with more pragmatic international cooperation?*

Q17 *Should we view cyber-attacks, sabotage, assassination, disinformation and coercive economic practices as a form of hybrid warfare, or as a different phenomenon?*

Q18 *What forms of response to hybrid attacks should the UK and its allies be willing to employ? How should responses be calibrated to deter further aggression without provoking dangerous escalation?*

Q19 *What role should the UK play in Indo-Pacific security, and how should we balance this against the priority of European security?*

Q20 *How should the UK approach China as a strategic competitor - balancing deterrence, engagement, and risk management across*

economic, technological, and security domains?

4 Transforming Defence

4.1 We support the ambition, articulated by senior defence leaders, to make sure our armed forces are fit for the challenges posed by the radical changes in our security environment. This includes rethinking force structure to reflect modern warfare, with a greater emphasis on recoverable systems, autonomous and uncrewed technologies, resilient, automated, and non-linear networks designed to find, fix, track, target, engage, and assess (F2T2EA) adversaries in real-time, and mass at lower cost.

4.2 To this end, we are receptive to proposals from senior military figures to restructure the armed forces along the lines of a smaller proportion of traditional platforms, combined with a much larger share of recoverable and expendable autonomous systems. This represents a significant shift away from past thinking and has raised additional questions about how we can best work with Europe on defence procurement.

4.3 The Strategic Defence Review 2025's (SDR) vision for UK defence is broadly right in its diagnosis of the challenges facing the UK given its remit, but we believe there are some challenges facing its implementation that should be considered.

4.4 The SDR provides a ten-year vision, but its objectives must be delivered within a much shorter timeframe — closer to three to five years — if they are to remain relevant. Since the SDR was agreed, the funding gap between ambition and resources has grown by several billion pounds, further underlining the urgency of action. The SDR's timelines and sequencing raise concerns. In a world where technological and strategic change is accelerating, reforms that begin several years from now may

arrive too late. We believe there is a strong case for developing a plan to bring forward key elements of the SDR.

4.5 Additionally, against a worsening backdrop of international uncertainty, there are justifiable concerns that some of the assumptions of the SDR have been overtaken by events, both in terms of spending and demands from the US that Europeans to do more for their own defence. This may have implications both for capability development and force structures. We remain concerned that the SDR model itself may not keep pace with rapid changes in threats, technology, and alliance requirements. Policy Paper 157 warned that five-year defence review cycles are routinely overtaken by events and we believe that, in today's environment, that risk is even more acute.

Questions:

Q21 What should a Liberal Democrat plan for implementing the SDR faster look like?

Q22 To what extent do key SDR assumptions need to be revised in the light of recent events?

Q23 What steps, if any, does the UK need to take to ensure the ongoing independence and strength of its nuclear deterrent?

Q24 Do we have the right mix of capabilities for the challenges that we are facing?

Q25 To what extent are European NATO Member States sufficiently well-aligned in terms of their capability investment plans and their "concepts of operations"?

Q26 Both in terms of the defence industrial base and the operational use of

capabilities, what is the right mix of sovereign UK, European cooperation and continued reliance on the US?

5 Industry, Innovation, and Procurement

5.1 The experience of Ukraine has exposed the limitations of defence planning processes that prioritise long development timelines and "exquisite", high-cost platforms over adaptability and mass. While legacy capabilities remain important, modern conflict increasingly rewards forces that can learn quickly, integrate new technologies, and replace losses at speed; Liberal Democrats believe the UK should play a leadership role in this new environment. We are therefore interested in whether the UK should push more assertively within NATO for a shift in how capability targets are set and evaluated. NATO's current approaches often specify inputs, rather than outcomes such as resilience, regeneration capacity or operational effect. This risks locking allies into expensive procurement choices that may not reflect the realities of contemporary warfare.

5.2 We are also examining ways in which the UK can become a more attractive place to start and scale defence-related companies. Smaller and medium-sized defence firms seem to struggle to navigate procurement systems that appear to favour larger, incumbent contractors. These reforms could include a dedicated 'front door' within government to support innovators, improved investment terms, and regulatory reform. At present, there is evidence that some medium-sized firms are choosing to locate in Germany or the US, despite having a preference for the UK, due to more supportive environments.

5.3 Defence investment should also serve to nurture and develop the high-skill manufacturing jobs which ultimately provide the means to protect our nation. Strengthening our defence industrial base would provide well-paid jobs and regional growth. In 2023-2024, there were more than a quarter of a million industry-supported jobs that are well distributed across the UK, particularly in areas that are not traditionally thought of as having

highly-skilled, and highly-paid career opportunities. For example, the high concentration of defence suppliers in the south-west, including Leonardo in Yeovil, BAE's digital intelligence in Dorchester, and Thales in Templecombe provides jobs for 22,000 civilians, and drives almost £400m into SMEs each year.

5.4 Rapid advances in artificial intelligence, autonomy and uncrewed systems are transforming warfare and security. From a geopolitical perspective, we believe AI regulation should focus on flexible, problem-specific international collaboration rather than rigid, abstract frameworks. At the same time, domestic investment in skills, research and institutional capacity will be critical. Without this, the UK risks becoming a rule-taker in a domain that will shape future power relationships. We are interested in how the UK can balance innovation with ethical leadership, ensuring that technological advantage does not come at the expense of democratic accountability or public trust.

5.5 The UK and Europe currently suffer from fragmented procurement systems, national duplication and high unit costs. For example, comparable munitions can cost several times more in the UK than in the United States. We are interested in the extent to which deeper European cooperation on defence manufacturing, specialisation and procurement can reduce costs, eliminate redundancies and make Europe less dependent on the United States. This may involve shared supply chains and mutual dependence, which requires considerable trust and long-term political commitment in an increasingly fragmented international arena.

Questions:

Q27 Which technological developments should this working group be focused on?

Q28 *How can we maximise procurement cooperation in Europe?*

Q29 *What steps can we take when reforming British and European defence procurement to ensure we are creating high-skill manufacturing jobs, secure supply chains and national resilience?*

Q30 *Should the UK support binding international agreements to maintain meaningful human control over lethal autonomous weapons systems? What should 'meaningful human control' mean in practice?*

Q31 *What are the implications of new technologies for our security?*

Q32 *How can we balance taking advantage of the opportunities presented by AI with necessary control?*

Q33 *How should the UK manage the tension between being a competitive location for AI development and being a leader on AI safety and ethics?*

Q34 *How should the UK prepare for AI-enabled threats to societal resilience, including deepfakes, automated disinformation, and AI-enhanced cyber-attacks?*

6 Multilateralism in a Multipolar World

6.1 Liberal Democrats remain committed to multilateralism, but recognise that the largely post-war institutions of the 'rules-based international order' (RBIO) are struggling to adapt. The UN and, for all its flaws, the Security Council, is as necessary as it has ever been. But, as in many international organisations, even when a need for reform is widely recognised, finding an acceptable formula has proved elusive. Nevertheless the UN continues to play a vital role in global security, both on the diplomatic stage and through peacekeeping operations.

6.2 Since Policy Paper 157 was published in 2024, the pressures on multilateralism have become sharper. The RBIO is being strained simultaneously by renewed great-power competition and the growing willingness of states to violate their international commitments and disregard them. Security Council member Russia has violated international commitment after commitment since its illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. More recently, the US, long seen as a strong proponent of the rules based order has retreated from its previously strong multilateral profile. Institutions that were designed to help the world manage existential shared problems like security, trade, and climate change have also become gridlocked or under-resourced to the point where their viability comes into question. The UN itself is facing a severe budgetary situation, underscored in Secretary-General Guterres's letter of 28 January 2026. In it, he underlines the extent to which even core functions are being jeopardised by arrears and a widening disparity between the UN's mandate and resources. At the same time, multilateralism is being challenged from within liberal democracies, as domestic political incentives push leaders towards short-term, transactional approaches.

6.3 For the UK, the members of the 'Five Eyes' community remain vital to our security interests, notwithstanding current US unpredictability. Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney used his special address to Davos this year to warn of a "rupture" that has begun in the international rules-based order. He attributed this to the fact that the architecture of collective problem solving, including the World Trade Organisation, the United Nations, and Conference of the Parties (COP), are under threat, and the waning of American hegemony. We strongly share Prime Minister Carney's diagnosis of the problems facing multilateralism, and endorse many of his prescriptions rooted in our shared liberal values. We agree that investing as a collective is cheaper, and that we, like Canada, must remain principled in our commitment to fundamental values, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the prohibition of the use of force. However, we continue to see value in defending and reforming existing multilateral structures, rather than accepting the inevitability of a more atomised international order.

6.4 The OSCE provides space for political debate across wider European fault lines, but commitments made by its 57 participating states are unenforceable, and its conflict prevention and resolution functions are hobbled by the need for consensus between adversaries. Against a background of formal multilateral cooperation under pressure, it is unsurprising that questions are increasingly being raised about developing closer relationships in multilateral and bilateral contexts with non-traditional allies, including middle powers beyond Europe. Our policy paper will consider the potential of these new multilateral partnerships, and assess the areas in which it might be most effective. The UK must also, however, be clear about where our interests lie, realistic about what can be delivered that has not already been explored through existing diplomatic relationships. We must also be honest about the tension inherent in closer

pragmatic engagement with states that do not necessarily align with all our liberal democratic ideals. Such tension raises difficult but necessary questions about how to balance values and interests in a more contested world.

6.5 International development can play an integral role in our security policy. We are proud that the Liberal Democrats were the first UK political party to commit to meeting the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) target of spending 0.7% of Gross National Income (GNI) on Official Development Assistance (ODA), and that we enshrined this target in law whilst in government. While we have supported the Government's decision to increase defence spending, we regret successive, swingeing and short-sighted reductions to the international aid budget. Development spending is not only an investment in stability but has been an important element of UK soft power and influence: its erosion risks leaving space for authoritarian actors to expand their reach. Liberal Democrats will continue to argue for restoration of a more substantial development budget and in the meantime, draw on our own considerable resource of expertise to develop ideas on the most effective ways of delivering that assistance. One such way would be taking a stronger lead on international development through multilateral organisations.

6.6 We believe that the Liberal Democrats remain uniquely placed to defend and renew multilateralism in this environment through our work with our sister parties in the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, and Liberal International. We will continue to use these relationships to strengthen international cooperation and promote liberal values, even as the world becomes more contested.

Questions:

Q35 Assuming current trends in international relations continue, what is the

right balance between multilateral, minilateral and bilateral engagement?

Q36 *What should our approach to international development look like, given the current state of international relations and global trends?*

Q37 *How should the case for international development funding be made alongside that for defence and diplomacy?*

Q38 *What new 'Coalitions of the Willing' need to be considered in the context of geopolitical shifts?*

Q39 *Which multilateral organisations need reforming, and which need replacing?*

Q40 *On which issues could new multilateral partnerships be most effective? Where might it be less effective? Should such a grouping be formally institutionalized or remain ad hoc?*

Q41 *What potential is there for enhanced security and defence cooperation through the Commonwealth, and how might this complement European partnerships?*

Q42 *Should the UK pursue the Canada–Australia–New Zealand–UK partnership (CANZUK) concept as a meaningful defence partnership, or are there more promising configurations?*

Q43 *Which international regulatory and standard-setting bodies are most critical to UK security, and how should the UK work to protect them from erosion or capture by hostile states?*

Q44 *How can the UK use its hosting of the International Maritime Organization to advance security objectives, including action against Russia's shadow fleet?*

Q45 *As multilateral institutions face gridlock or under-resourcing, should the UK shift resources towards 'minilateral' alternatives, or double down on institutional reform?*

Q46 *How hard should we fight to protect weakened multilateral structures? Which organisations do we consider most important in contributing to international security?*

Q47 *Where can we most effectively focus our efforts to protect the international rules based order? Are there realistic options for institutional reform that would enhance international security?*

Q48 *Where should we look for potential partners beyond traditional allies and partners?*

Q49 *How might we reimagine international development to make most effective use of the resource and demonstrate the case for development as contributing to our security alongside defence and diplomacy?*

7 A More Resilient United Kingdom

7.1 Covert attacks on infrastructure in a number of countries across Europe have raised public awareness of the potential vulnerability of the critical infrastructure on which our modern day economies and societies rely. The likelihood that Russia and its security organs are responsible further underlines the willingness of the Kremlin to act beyond its borders with no regard to international law or public safety. Similarly our democratic processes and institutions, our open societies, and accountable government have proved vulnerable to malign external influence and interference.

7.2 Issues around domestic resilience and preparedness have not, until recently, had a high profile in UK national security policy. Allies such as Denmark, Norway, and Sweden have dedicated agencies for civil protection and resilience; Finland, assigns these responsibilities to a specific ministry. They also have cultures that emphasise whole-of-society readiness, and strong national emergency agencies. By contrast, the UK has not treated domestic preparedness with the seriousness it requires. This approach is no longer viable. Liberal Democrats are interested in strengthening the UK's resilience in ways that are effective but also proportionate, non-compulsory and avoid alarmism. This includes societal, economic, cyber and infrastructure resilience.

7.3 Comprehensive whole-of-society approaches to national resilience merit serious consideration. These include clear public communications about threats and appropriate preparedness measures, regular civil defence exercises, dedicated resilience ministries or agencies, and institutional frameworks that coordinate across government, local authorities, and civil society. We welcome the establishment of the UK Resilience Academy and its stated ambition to make resilience a

whole-of-society endeavour. We are interested in whether its reach could be extended beyond resilience professionals to wider civil society, and how such an expansion might be resourced. The Nordic model demonstrates that genuine whole-of-society resilience requires not just professional capacity but broad public understanding and engagement. The aim should be to build what the SDR describes as a "national conversation on defence and security"; the aim must be a public that understands the challenges we face and feels capable of contributing to our collective response, rather than one that is either complacent or alarmed.

7.4 Energy security is a critical part of national security, as is reliable supply of key industrial components such as rare earths. Heavy industry in the UK, such as steel production and advanced manufacturing, is struggling as a result of uncompetitive energy costs, alongside increasingly fragile global supply chains. Without urgent measures to improve energy security and reduce the cost of raw inputs, above all energy, to industrial processes, the UK risks becoming increasingly vulnerable to capricious actions on the part of other players in the global economy. It is difficult to imagine how the large-scale reinvestment in the UK's domestic defence industries described elsewhere in this paper could take place without robust capacity in place for domestic production of steel, as well as other key industries such as chemicals and refining; the question of reliable access to critical minerals is increasingly urgent. Meanwhile the loss of domestic industrial capacity in nuclear energy production has made us heavily dependent on foreign know-how and capital in a key sector.

7.5 Cybersecurity and digital infrastructure are now among the clearest examples of how national resilience and national security have merged, with potential vulnerabilities no longer limited to central government systems. Both local government and many public services remain exposed because of a continued reluctance to invest in cyber capability, staff

capacity, and basic digital hygiene. Local government in particular is not adequately funded for digital protection, forcing councils like Somerset Council to both find the resources from already tight budgets and to manage negative press in order to replace devices that are too old to receive security updates.

7.6 The UK's resilience also depends on whether the UK can secure the foundations of its digital economy with trusted hardware supply chains, proper data infrastructure, and the workforce needed across both the public and private sectors. Policy Paper 157 argued for a comprehensive national strategy, including a UK equivalent to the US and EU "Chips Act" approach, and stronger cooperation with European and other democratic allies. Since then the strategic logic for this has only strengthened, and the UK must be able to operate securely when being coerced, or when there is international disruption. We are therefore interested in how resilience policy can move beyond reactive incident management towards long-term national preparedness, and will work with the Economy policy working group on this.

Questions:

Q50 What should our priorities for improving national resilience be?

Q51 What immediate steps can the UK take to empower citizens without creating undue panic?

Q52 How does disinformation play into resilience? How can it best be countered?

Q53 How should the public be prepared for the kinds of threats we face?

Q54 What steps should we take to increase domestic cyber resilience?

Q55 What is the best route for ensuring sufficient domestic resilience in critical heavy industrial processes without undermining our climate change objectives?

Q56 To what extent can we rely on other countries to fill gaps in our national industrial capacity?

Q57 To what extent should we rely on external sources of energy (e.g. gas and electricity interconnectors from Europe/Norway, liquefied natural gas (LNG) shipments from Qatar and the US etc) to meet our future energy needs? Likewise, how do we ensure reliable supplies of critical minerals that do not place the UK and our allies in a condition of dependency?

Q58 How should we ensure that industrial regions of critical importance to our national security, such as the Humber, are able to continue to be able to provide the reliable outputs (electricity, steel, chemicals etc) that will be vital for future industrial and defence resilience?

Q59 How should the UK balance its economic relationship with China against security concerns, particularly regarding critical infrastructure, technology transfer, and supply chains?

Q60 Should the UK establish a dedicated agency or ministry for national resilience, similar to those in Nordic countries? What should its remit and powers be?

Q61 How can the UK counter disinformation and information warfare while protecting free speech and avoiding government overreach?

Q62 What role should local government play in national resilience, and how should it be resourced to fulfil this role?

Q63 How can the UK reduce critical supply chain dependencies without undermining economic growth and international trade?

Annexe: Remit

Last year, the party endorsed a wide-ranging policy paper on international security covering defence and security, diplomacy, international development and soft power. We knew then that a second Trump presidency would pose big new challenges.

Now that the grave threats to the future of NATO, European security and more are starting to become clear – and will continue to evolve – this working group will review Policy Paper 157, *Liberal Values in a Dangerous World*, and update it in light of the world as it is today.

In particular, it will take into account of:

- The US government becoming a less predictable and reliable ally, particularly on defence, intelligence and in the global economy
- The impact of emboldened authoritarian regimes in Russia, China and Iran – particularly in their willingness to operate extra-territorially
- Trends towards autocracy and authoritarianism in other countries, and the threat they pose to democratic values
- Ongoing developments in military and security technology, including advances in artificial intelligence
- The importance of UK leadership on defence and security in Europe and the Commonwealth
- The value of new possible defence partnerships, such as the proposed CANZUK grouping of the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand
- The interplay between security and economics in the conduct of international affairs

It will also build on the policy motion *The UK's Response to Trump*, passed at Spring Conference 2025.

This group will, as a top priority, develop up to three headline policies on international security that the party can communicate widely to help elect as many Liberal Democrats as possible – especially at the next general election.

It will take evidence and consult widely both within and outside the party. This evidence should inform the group's proposals, which will be presented alongside an analysis of costs and an Equalities Impact Assessment.

A policy paper of no longer than 10,000 words should be produced for debate at Autumn Conference 2026. Prior to that a consultative session should be held at Spring Conference 2026, and a draft policy paper should be presented to the Federal Policy Committee by June 2026.

July 2025

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