Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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UK spymasters warn of surge in overlapping security threats

The UK intelligence community has been going into overdrive of late to warn of an unprecedented level of diverse threats confronting Britain and aimed at undermining its security.

Today's bad actors, both foreign and domestic, are said to range from hostile states to resurgent terrorist groups to petty criminals and vulnerable teenagers groomed online to serve the designs of their shadowy masters.

The head of the GCHQ cyber agency, Anne Keast-Butler, said this month that security services were grappling with the most "contested and complex" threat environment she had seen in her three-decade intelligence career.

Her analysis echoed the assessment of another top spy, MI5 domestic intelligence chief Ken McCallum, who said in the same month that the UK faced a new era of "multiple overlapping threats on an unprecedented scale".

Strengthening defences in a nation under siege

At a time when AI threatens to boost the armoury of cybercriminals and hostile states, businesses are meanwhile being urged to strengthen their defences against attacks on critical national infrastructure, supply chains and key economic sectors.

After a series of high-profile cyber attacks on British brands, the UK's National Cyber Security Centre said a 50 per cent rise in such events for the third consecutive year should serve as a wake-up call.

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The fear is of a multiple cyber crisis in which hostile states and criminals could strike simultaneously, potentially crippling public services and economic activity and threatening national security.

The picture that might be assembled from these and similar warnings is of a nation under siege. The threats are indeed complex and overlapping. But it is still worthwhile to break them down.

Hostile states and domestic proxies

The most evident threat is still from foreign states - MI5's McCallum cited Russia, China and Iran - along with persistent concern about Islamist terrorism and a growth of the extremist far right. The rise in cyber attacks can meanwhile be linked variously to hostile state activity and conventional crime.

What has changed are the tactics of these hostile actors and the tools that are now at their disposal. Security chiefs point to the growing use of domestic proxies, many of them recruited online.

The head of counter-terrorism at the Metropolitan Police recently warned that young British men were been approached online and even actively reaching out to hostile foreign states and offering to commit crimes on their behalf.

British citizens for hire

Commander Dominic Murphy said incidents in which foreign agents attempted to hire British citizens were becoming increasingly common, while the number of potential recruits available online posed a challenge for the police.

He was commenting on a trial in which 21-year-old Dylan Earl and five associates were this month jailed for their part in a Russian-sponsored arson attack last year on a London warehouse providing aid for Ukraine.

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Earl was recruited on a promise of £9,000 after offering his services online to Russia's now disbanded Wagner Group mercenary organisation.

Earl and his number two in the conspiracy, 23-year-old Jake Reeves, were the first to be sentenced under the enhanced powers of the National Security Act of 2023, which equips prosecutors to deal with evolving threats from hostile states.

The use of such proxies may be as much a matter of necessity as of choice when it comes to the Russians. The UK has been on the alert to the threat posed by Moscow since before the invasion of Ukraine.

The UK expelled Russian diplomats in 2018 after the botched attempt by Moscow's agents to murder double agent Sergei Skripal with a nerve agent at his hideaway in Salisbury.

China, Russia and the evolving landscape of threats

Some were tempted to speculate that the failed plot reflected the decline of Russia's intelligence agencies. However, restrictive measures imposed post-Ukraine merely obliged the Russians to employ new tools, including proxies, to seek to undermine their Western antagonists.

This month's arson trial and a series of other arrests and prosecutions may have alerted the public to the Russian threat. But it is the level of threat from China that has come to dominate the political and security agenda.

Amid continuing political reverberations from the collapse of a Chinese spy trial, McCallum recommended a pragmatic approach that reflected the UK's complex relationship with Beijing.

He nevertheless spelled out a series of China-related risks, including "a steady stream of attempts to lure UK academic experts".

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In a university sector heavily dependent on attracting foreign entrants, a recent report, meanwhile, claimed Chinese students were being pressured to spy on classmates and report back to Beijing.

As to the threat from non-state actors, MI5 agents were reported to be involved in near-record volumes of terrorism investigations, with a focus on individuals and small groups, rather on more established networks.

Revealing that one in five of 232 terrorism arrests last year were of children under 17, McCullum asserted that: "Terrorism breeds in squalid corners of the internet where poisonous ideologies, of whatever sort, meet volatile, often chaotic individual lives."

The enemies within

The overall message from the security professionals appears to be that everyone - from parents and teachers to politicians and business leaders - should be on the alert for the perils of a hostile world.

The nation's spymasters have a duty to be vigilant, but there is always a danger of creating a generalised paranoia about existential threats - GCHQ, Cornwall

The nation's spymasters have a duty to be vigilant, but there is always a danger of creating a generalised paranoia about existential threats.

Perhaps the greater threats to the UK and other democracies are the enemies within, those deliberately fostering distrust between communities, loss of faith in institutions, and a coarsening of the political and public debate.

People see the evidence every day in their social media feeds, where lies and misinformation frequently prevail.

Whether inspired by traditional hostile actors or AI bots or screen-bound conspirators, such divisive assaults on the truth are as pernicious as the work of any foreign spy.

The UK's spooks should perhaps add the unbridled power of the tech potentates to their blacklist.