

## **Liaison Sub-Committee Inquiry on Scrutiny of Strategic Thinking in Government: Submission from House of Commons International Affairs & National Security Hub**

### About the International Affairs & National Security Hub

The International Affairs & National Security (IANS) Hub is a recent innovation within the policy scrutiny teams of the House of Commons. It sits alongside existing team structures in the Select Committee Team, Library and the Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology. Its membership includes experts working in policy, research and analysis roles across Parliament.

Our goal is to ensure that MPs and Peers have access to cutting-edge policy analysis in scrutinising UK foreign and security policy—whether in the Chambers or Select Committees—by creating a vibrant hub of policy development and richer working lives for parliamentary staff.

### Request for evidence

The Head of the IANS Hub received a request from the Clerk of the Liaison Committee on 9 January 2024, seeking evidence about the practice of Select Committees in scrutinising strategic thinking, to feed into the Liaison Sub-Committee inquiry on the Scrutiny of Strategic Thinking Across Government, launched in June 2023. The question posed to the Hub was:

*What attempts have been made by select committees to engage in strategic thinking on specific policy questions, or scrutinise Government’s strategic thinking, including those using methods that supplement the usual formal means of written and oral evidence taking?*

Rather than seeking separate submissions from a range of committees, the Hub was asked to coordinate a response drawing on the experience and knowledge of the policy, research and analysis community in the international affairs and national security policy area. This would be particularly relevant to the Sub-Committee’s case study on the UK’s place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century international order while balancing security and prosperity.<sup>1</sup>

### Focus group

In response to the request, the IANS Hub held a staff focus group on 1 February 2024. The group considered the headline question outlined above alongside other relevant questions in the inquiry Terms of Reference.

### Submission

The key points raised in the focus group discussion were as follows.

#### **1. How Select Committees consider strategic questions, including any recent examples of scrutiny of Government strategic plans and/or their delivery.**

Select Committees have a number of tried-and-tested methods for scrutinising Government strategy-making and implementation, including taking written and oral evidence. Previous experience suggested that one-off oral evidence sessions do not always enable effective scrutiny of long-term strategic thinking, not least because they infrequently lead to a formal Report and recommendations to which the Government must respond. However, some conventional

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<sup>1</sup> [Liaison Sub-Committee on Scrutiny of Strategic Thinking in Government - Summary - Committees - UK Parliament](#)

Committee methods can be used or combined in a way that is beneficial in holding Government to account on its strategic thinking. For example:

- **Correspondence with Government** is a reliable tool when seeking to probe questions of strategy, not least because Government's responses on its strategic thinking are often high-level in nature. Benefits include enabling Committees to follow up on limited responses and to pursue their respective angles of interest together, thereby adding to the 'weight' of requests but without the more difficult procedural elements of a joint inquiry. This worked well during the 2020 Integrated Review, when four Committees persistently pursued information on the cross-government strategy review process through joint correspondence.<sup>2</sup>
- **Correspondence** can also be used to 'stress test' over time Government's stated goals and reported progress, including **as a follow-up to other activities**, including site visits in the UK and overseas—as with the Science, Innovation and Technology (SIT) Committee's work on the UK's 'science superpower' agenda and strategic framework.
- **Pursuing a 'programme' of inquiries** can enable Committees to cover various elements of a strategic issue in detail before bringing their findings together to scrutinise Government's overarching strategy, including its goals, prioritisation of and trade-offs between the component parts. The Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC), for example, has been pursuing a programme of inquiry work on the 'rules-based international order' this Parliament.<sup>3</sup>

Committees have also trialled several activities that are effective supplements to conventional modes of evidence-gathering on questions of UK strategy. These include:

- **Policy simulations:** sponsored by FAC, this pilot programme of staff-organised simulations (2022–23) enabled Members of five parliamentary Select Committees to explore questions of long-term strategy, including priorities and trade-offs between policy areas, by simulating future crises that would affect UK interests. All three simulations were designed to stress-test international law, rules and organisations as currently constituted, with the goal of identifying questions for the UK's strategy and capabilities in turn.
- **External engagement:** this might include deliberative events—such as the Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change, which was established by six Select Committees in June 2019<sup>4</sup>—to test how the public would approach long-term policy challenges or Committee 'roadshows' to different regions of the UK (such as those held by the FAC in the 2017 Parliament)—to involve people more directly in exploring the opportunities and challenges of the UK's strategic options. Committees have also routinely engaged with early-career academics to test current or proposed strategy through greater diversity of expertise and

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<sup>2</sup> The four Committees were the Commons Defence, Foreign and International Development Committees and the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy.

<sup>3</sup> First agreed by the Committee early in 2022, the FAC has undertaken a number of inquiries either directly or partially relevant to the 'RBIO programme'. An example of the former is the Committee's 2022-23 inquiry 'The Wagner Group and beyond: proxy Private Military Companies', which explored the impact of PMCs on the conduct and therefore the rules and norms of warfare. The [Report](#) for this inquiry was published in July 2023. Questions about 'RBIO' have also been explicitly woven into the Terms of Reference, inquiry plans and Reports for other FAC inquiries, such as those on: the Indo-Pacific ([Report](#) published in August 2023); illicit finance and the role of sanctions in response to the Ukraine war ([Report](#) published in June 2022); and the Government's international technology strategy ([Report](#) published in July 2022). It is also central to the FAC's current inquiry into '[International Relations in the Multilateral System](#)'. The intention is to draw together threads from this programme of work into a single set of findings to be published before the end of the Parliament, in order to inform Government's next review of defence and security as the UK seeks to navigate a multipolar world. This programme of work is led by the current Head of the International Affairs Unit in collaboration with the FAC staff team.

<sup>4</sup> [About - Climate Assembly UK](#), accessed 23 May 2024

perspective. This was considered an effective tool for parliamentary scrutiny of the UK's military intervention in Syria in 2015–16, although in-person engagement in Westminster often privileges those who can travel to London more easily.

- **'Policy labs', roundtables and workshops with multiple stakeholders, including Government officials:** policy events that draw on the expertise and views of many stakeholders afford Members' a more interactive way of exploring strategic issues, including by providing more informal insight into Government thinking. The 'Sino-UK Policy Lab', held in June 2023 and organised by IANS Hub staff in collaboration with the University of Bristol, enabled Members of both Houses to engage with experts and Government officials on key policy areas such as the economy, the 'global commons' (specifically, the Arctic, oceans and space) and emerging technology, in addition to the UK's China strategy, which had been articulated at a very high level in the 2023 Integrated Review Refresh.<sup>5</sup>

The effectiveness and practicality of the methods outlined above can vary depending on the point at which they are used—for example, visits and external events can be difficult to arrange during the latter stages of a Parliament. They are also often less straightforward to organise than taking evidence in Westminster. The Covid-19 pandemic necessarily limited Committees' ways of working but in doing so created opportunities to focus on previously overlooked tools such as correspondence with Government.

## **2. The engagement of individual departments, and Whitehall as a whole, with Select Committees on strategic challenges, including through the provision of information necessary for effective scrutiny.**

- **Do Committees get the information and documents they need to conduct effective scrutiny?**

Departments are generally reluctant to provide clear articulation of strategy (for example, on specific countries or regions). It has proven especially difficult to secure information about the implementation plans that 'sit beneath' government strategies, with departments often arguing that these are internal business and, as such, should not be shared externally. Departments occasionally provide more detail in their formal responses to Committee Reports—detail that would have been useful in fine-tuning Conclusions and Recommendations had it been shared with the Committee during the inquiry process.

Previous experience suggests that departments engage most effectively with inquiries and Select Committees when Ministers set the expectation of positive engagement with Parliament, often taking a personal role in doing so (noting that this was possibly more likely to happen when there was a 'good story to tell' in some way). Closer engagement at ministerial- and official-level throughout inquiries can lead to more constructive ministerial evidence sessions and, ultimately, Committee Reports.

The contrast between ministerial- and official-level engagement on the 2021 Integrated Review (IR) of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy and that on the 2023 International Development White Paper was instructive.

Although the government process for the latter was problematic in some ways, the Minister nevertheless sought sustained, substantive engagement with the International Development

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<sup>5</sup> [Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/integrated-review-refresh-2023), March 2023

Committee and Parliament more widely. This is in stark contrast to the 2020–21 IR process, with Committee staff recalling that it was difficult to secure details about the review process during multiple conversations with officials. Churn in official-level contacts was also obstructive, while there was a lack of understanding among officials working on the IR—as on other areas of Government policy—of Parliament’s role and how it works in practice.

The difficulties experienced by Committees during the 2020–21 IR process were not unusual for set-piece reviews of the UK’s national security strategy and associated capabilities: absent strong expectations set by Ministers at the centre of Government, departmental engagement on such cross-government processes has tended to be complicated, siloed, and has necessitated considerable ‘capital’ in terms of time, energy and personal relationship on the part of Committee Chairs, Members and staff.

The experience of the 2020–21 IR process suggested that Committees can ‘carry more weight’ in their requests for greater transparency on cross-departmental strategies and review processes if they make joint approaches to Government. For example, joint correspondence from four Committee Chairs ultimately secured private briefings from the Deputy National Security Adviser then responsible for the Integrated Review. Members may wish to replicate this or a greater level of ‘jointery’ during the next major defence and security review, facilitated at staff level by an established, cross-cutting team of policy experts, the International Affairs Unit (IAU). This will be for future Committees to decide, however, noting that it can take considerably more time to plan and achieve sign-off for formal action pursued jointly by Committees, including correspondence.

### **3. How well does Government identify strategic risks, opportunities and threats?**

The Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy (JCNS) has consistently heard criticism of Government’s approach to identifying and prioritising risks to the UK’s national security, with its risk assessment and management processes reportedly undermined by the centre of Government’s inability to prioritise risks and coordinate a coherent response across multiple departments, as well as by political and official-level short termism.<sup>6</sup> The confidential National Security Risk Assessment was subject to methodological review in 2022, in part to address these and other shortcomings.<sup>7</sup> Short-termism was similarly highlighted by the recent JCNS Report on ransomware.<sup>8</sup>

However, it can be difficult for Committees to know whether Government has identified the relevant opportunities, threats and risks because it can be difficult to establish what it is really thinking—even after Government has published its strategy on a particular topic. The 2023 UK Battery Strategy is an example of a strategy for which it will be necessary to create a ‘jigsaw picture’ of what it means in practice, using various means over time in part because Government, for understandable reasons, has not published information that it considers to be commercially sensitive. Not having access to such information makes it difficult to assess whether and how the UK might be internationally competitive in this sector. Committees could, in such cases, benefit from arrangements (e.g. private meetings with officials) where departments are prepared to share sensitive information in confidence. The shape of this sector of the UK economy will become clear over the next 2–3 years, meaning that institutional memory at staff level—perhaps through cross-department groupings like

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<sup>6</sup> Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy (JCNS), [First Report of Session 2021–22, The UK’s National Security Machinery](#), HL 68, HC 231, para 119

<sup>7</sup> [NSM00024](#) (Sir Stephen Lovegrove, National Security Adviser)

<sup>8</sup> JCNS, [First Report of Session 2022-23, A hostage to fortune: ransomware and UK national security](#), HL Paper 23, HC 194

the IANS Hub and teams like IAU in the Select Committee Team—will be important in identifying when Committees should return to scrutiny of this issue of strategic importance.

Opacity on the part of departments can be for a variety of reasons, including the commercial or political sensitivity of the issues involved. The growing threat from state actors over the past five years means that Government is also increasingly withholding information for reasons of national security. Staff have experienced reduced access to information as a result, especially where Committees have not formally requested it. While departments sometimes offer Committees private briefings at higher levels of classification, experience suggests the information provided is not as sensitive as might be assumed from officials' warnings about confidentiality and leak risks.

#### **4. Is Government using lessons learned from previous policies when developing new strategic plans?**

- **Are there elements of Government strategy and delivery that are repeatedly identified by Select Committees as effective or deficient? What has the Government done about these?**

Experience suggests that departments find it difficult to learn and implement lessons from previous policies when developing new plans, and to engage with Parliament on the matter. For example, in its 2023 Report on the withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Defence Committee noted that the Ministry of Defence (MoD) would not share its 'lessons learned' report and called for an open, honest and detailed review of military operations and political decisions over the full timescale of the UK's involvement. The Committee argued that such a review would have been helpful to the then ongoing Integrated Review Refresh.<sup>9</sup> In response, the Government asserted that numerous lessons had been analysed but many were above the classification of the Committee's Report. It further argued that "the value of a further wide-ranging review of the totality of the Afghanistan Campaign is limited".<sup>10</sup> JCNSS similarly raised concerns with then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson in 2021 about "the apparent complacency and lack of urgency within Government in the wake of a disastrous experience for the UK and our allies in Afghanistan."<sup>11</sup>

Several Committees in this and previous Parliaments have further identified deficient cross-Whitehall coordination on strategic issues that involve multiple departments—especially absent the strong backing of No. 10 and the Cabinet Secretary, and the involvement of particularly effective Civil Servants. For example, JCNSS has repeatedly identified weaknesses in Government's ability to act with a single mind in: setting clear strategic goals and pursuing the necessary prioritisation and trade-offs between them; allocating resources across Government accordingly; and holding departments to account for delivery through strong governance from the centre.<sup>12</sup> This is mirrored by poor coordination of Official Development Assistance (ODA) spending across Government. In late 2022, the Minister of State for Development announced a 'star chamber' committee, which would be co-chaired by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and whose remit was to "question the quality of

<sup>9</sup> Defence Committee, [Fifth Report of Session 2022-23](#), *Withdrawal from Afghanistan*, HC 725, 10 February 2023, paras 63–65

<sup>10</sup> Defence Committee, [Fifth Special Report of Session 2022-23](#), *Withdrawal from Afghanistan: Government Response to the Committee's Fifth Report*, 28 April 2023, HC 1316, p. 6

<sup>11</sup> [Letter from Dame Margaret Beckett MP](#), Chair of JCNSS, to Prime Minister Boris Johnson, 17 December 2021

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, JCNSS, [First Report of Session 2021–22](#), *The UK's National Security Machinery*, HL 68, HC 231

ODA spend".<sup>13</sup> However, this was in fact the revival of a previous ministerial grouping, rather than a distinct change in approach.

However, Committees' ability to diagnose precisely why cross-government direction and coordination is deficient can be hampered by the lack of information in the public domain about the machinery of government, which is the 'bread and butter' of Committee work but of less interest to departments. For instance, in 2021 the then National Security Adviser declined to provide JCNSS with an organogram of the national security teams and capabilities within Government, stating only that: "The NSC [National Security Council] can draw on all levers of government to pursue their aims as the issues require."<sup>14</sup>

In light of Select Committees' previous experience of scrutinising cross-government exercises such as the Integrated Review, the Liaison Sub-Committee's inquiry on the Scrutiny of Strategic Thinking Across Government offers an important opportunity for Select Committees to encourage a coherent multi-department approach to strategy-making and implementation through more joined-up efforts at scrutiny thereof.

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<sup>13</sup> Oral evidence taken by the International Development Committee, [HC 148](#), 6 December 2022, Q354

<sup>14</sup> [NSM0036](#) (Sir Stephen Lovegrove)

## 2021 Integrated Review and 2023 Refresh case study for Strategic Thinking inquiry

*Contact: Ashlee Godwin, Head, International Affairs & National Security Hub*

### 2021 Integrated Review

In February 2020, the Government [launched](#) an “foreign policy, defence, security and international development”. The Government said that the Review would be undertaken “with the aim of creating a coherent and strategic approach to our overseas activity”. The remit of the review was to “define the Government’s ambition for the UK’s role in the world and the long-term strategic aims for our national security and foreign policy”.

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the prioritisation by the Government of the UK’s response, then delayed the Review. It was paused in April and resumed in June 2020.

The product of this work was a policy document, [Global Britain in a competitive age](#), published in March 2021, which set out a ‘strategic framework’ to guide its actions to 2025. The Government also announced several policy developments of relevance to the review before its formal conclusion. These included:

- [June 2020](#): the announcement of a merger between the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Department for International Development (DFID) to form the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). The merger took place in September 2020.
- [September 2020](#): the announcement that the UK’s international policy would ‘tilt’ towards the ‘Indo-Pacific’ region.
- [November 2020](#): a multi-year funding settlement for the Ministry of Defence and a capital investment settlement for the intelligence agencies, but not for other areas of government. The Government announced an increase of defence spending by £24.1 billion over four years.
- [November 2020](#): the reduction of the UK’s expenditure on Official Development Assistance from 0.7% to 0.5% of GNI, with a return to the previous level envisaged when specific fiscal tests were met.

The Government wanted the review to be unprecedented in its consideration of multiple policy areas, with input from multiple departments and bodies, in a coordinated and concurrent way. It therefore held relevance to several Select Committees, which responded with a similarly aligned approach to scrutiny, undertaking coordinated or collaborative activity alongside their autonomous inquiries.

The Committees that undertook work focused on the review were the Defence, Foreign Affairs and International Development Committees of the House of Commons and the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy. Together, they held two principal aims:

- First, to influence the **process** of the Integrated Review by pressing for it to be transparent in its remit and timing and broad in its consultation.
- Second, to influence the **outcome** of the Integrated Review by using a diverse range of evidence to make recommendations for the Review’s final content.

The Committees carried out these individual actions:

- The **Defence Committee** addressed the Integrated Review in two phases. Its first Report, [In Search of Strategy – the 2020 Integrated Review](#) (August 2020), focused on the process of the Review. The Committee called for clarity and transparency around the Review, strong political leadership, and thorough external engagement. In the second phase, the Committee used its Report on [The Integrated Review, Defence in a Competitive Age and the Defence and Security Industrial Strategy](#) (July 2022) to assess the Government’s decisions under the Integrated Review about the role of the UK’s armed forces and attendant capability and funding commitments. It did so in light of the subsequent fall of Afghanistan (August 2021) and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (February 2022).
- The **Foreign Affairs Committee** held an inquiry into ‘[The FCDO and the Integrated Review](#)’ that asked voices around the world how the UK was viewed and valued abroad. Its Report, [A Brave New Britain? The Future of the UK’s International Policy](#) (October 2020), made recommendations on the UK’s international priorities with a view to influencing the Review’s outcomes.
- The **International Development Committee** considered the role that aid could play as part of the UK’s integrated international policy through its inquiry into the ‘[Effectiveness of UK Aid](#)’. The inquiry produced two Reports: [one published prior to the merger of the FCO and DFID](#) (June 2020) and [one following the announcement of the merger](#) (July 2020). Both Reports criticised the merger and called for specific priorities within UK aid policy. Both also sought to give voice to an aid sector that the Committee felt the Government had not adequately consulted during the Review process.
- The **Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy** [wrote to the then Prime Minister](#) (Boris Johnson) in October 2020 to highlight interim findings from its inquiry into ‘[Biosecurity and national security](#)’ that the Committee wanted to see reflected in the Integrated Review’s outcomes. In January 2021, the Committee also launched an inquiry into ‘[The machinery of government for national security](#)’. Its [Report](#) was published in September 2021, after the conclusion of the Review. The Report’s Conclusions and Recommendations were relevant to the Review’s implementation and called, for example, for greater clarity on the role of the National Security Council.

The four Committees also collaborated through the following actions:

- The Committees together submitted a series of [letters to the then Prime Minister](#) to press for greater transparency and engagement during the process of the Review.

By writing together rather than individually, and by demonstrating that concern about the process of the review spanned different policy areas (in terms of the Committees’ remits) and political parties (in terms of the party memberships of their Chairs), the Committees aimed to maximise the likelihood that the Government would respond as hoped.

Cooperation also sought to achieve clarity by forcing the Government into a single avenue of response from the centre of Government, removing the risk that individual initiative would see departments reply with different information to different Committees.

The letters succeeded in making public details about the process, including the timing of the suspension and resumption of the review during the Covid-19 pandemic and the methods by which consultation would occur as part of the review.



- The four Committees combined their research budgets to commission a survey of young people around the world, conducted by the British Council, about their perceptions of the UK's global role. The cost of this could not have been met by individual committees. It enabled them together to hear from a demographic less often considered by Committees and it enabled an international scope. Young people from 78 countries responded. All the Committees contributed questions to the survey. Most chose to use the answers to inform their private considerations. The Foreign Affairs Committee published the responses to its questions as an [Annex to its October 2020 Report](#).
- The Committees coordinated their bids for, and invited one another to sessions with, high-profile witnesses. The aim of hearing from high-profile witnesses was to build an authoritative evidence base and to increase the likelihood of the Government responding as hoped to the Committees' recommendations about the outcomes of the Review. His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan, for example, met with the Defence and Foreign Affairs Committees. A write-up of their meeting was [published by the Foreign Affairs Committee](#): the first known time that a head of state has given public evidence to a Select Committee.
- The Committees together contributed to a [Backbench Business Debate that the Defence Committee secured in February 2021](#), shortly before the publication of the 2021 Integrated Review report. The Committees' Reports were tagged and the Chairs of all four Committees spoke. Again, they pressed for transparency around the process of the Review (specifically, the timing of its publication) and made recommendations for what they wanted to see in its outcomes. The debate allowed more than 70 MPs to contribute their views before the Review report was published. As part of the debate, the Minister made public that this report would be published the following month.
- The Defence and Foreign Affairs Committees coordinated their recommendations in their [August 2020](#) and [October 2020](#) reports, respectively. This again sought to encourage the Government into a single avenue of response that could not exploit any differences between the Committees' reports.

These joint efforts were coordinated by a cross-cutting staff 'unit', the International Affairs Unit (IAU), which was established in the Select Committee Team in 2019. The IAU also served both as a single source of information and analysis on the review's progress and output—including through the recruitment of a dedicated academic fellow—and as a single point of contact with the Cabinet Office for arranging private briefings and submitting joint correspondence.

### [2023 Integrated Review Refresh](#)

In September 2022, less than 18 months after the Integrated Review's publication, then-Prime Minister Liz Truss announced that the Government would undertake a 'refresh' of the document by Christmas. The refresh process continued under Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and the final Integrated Review Refresh document was eventually published in March 2023.

There was limited time for Committee scrutiny of the Refresh, due to the intended brevity of the review process. The FAC launched a short inquiry and [published a Report in December 2022](#), with a view to influencing the Refresh's outcomes and the media's assessment thereafter. Other Committees incorporated the Refresh and its outcomes into ongoing or subsequent work, such as the Defence Committee's April 2023 inquiry into the readiness of the UK armed forces, [the Report for which was published in February 2024](#).

When the final Refresh document was published in March 2023, it was released in advance to Parliament under strict embargo conditions: of the many Committees with an interest in the Refresh, only the JCNSS Chair received an advanced, electronic copy, while other JCNSS Members (which included several Select Committee Chairs) were invited to a Government reading room on the morning of publication.

This made it more difficult for Committees and their Chairs to offer an informed response in the Chamber and to the media following publication of the Refresh document. It also made it difficult for staff to provide informed advice to Members in the same period. The length of the two documents further hindered rapid assessment and response, with the first Integrated Review document more than 100 pages in length and the Refresh more than 60 pages.

To support Members in overcoming these challenges, the IAU led a rapid, staff-level analysis of the document as soon as it was available. A small staff team was established to divide and conquer, bringing to bear expertise across the range of policy issues covered by the two reviews, including newer concepts such as ‘economic security and deterrence’.

In total, twelve staff from nine teams in the Commons Select Committee Team (SCT), Library, the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) and the Lords Committee teams created a ‘reference guide’ that compared the original Integrated Review with its Refresh. This factual reference guide was paired with a three-page introductory analysis—produced by the then Head of the IAU—which offered an at-a-glance assessment of the implications of the Refresh for the Government’s national security and international strategy, identifying changes in context, general approach and notable policy shifts.

The introductory analysis was delivered to the Members of eight Select Committees (six in the Commons, two in the Lords) just before the Foreign Secretary made a statement on the Refresh in the Commons Chamber, meaning that Members could use it to ask questions of the Government in immediate response. The full compare-and-contrast reference guide was delivered to Committee Members and to all relevant House staff within 48 hours of the Refresh being published. Committee Members have since continued to use the reference guide in support of their work on international affairs and national security.

### Potential lessons for scrutiny

- For scrutiny of cross-government strategies, Select Committees can collaborate effectively to achieve their goals without resorting to the more time-consuming, formal approach of a joint inquiry. These goals may range from seeking greater transparency on the part of Government, to maximising the available evidence (including that taken from high-profile witnesses), identifying potential trade-offs between policy areas as part of the Government’s strategy-making, and influencing the outcomes of such reviews through a coherent, if not formally joint, set of recommendations for Government.
- Where Committees work together, they can draw out a single response from the centre of Government that sets the tone and approach of contributing departments. This has the additional benefit of encouraging departments not to offer individual, often-conflicting narratives and information.
- The Government’s willingness to engage Committees during the strategy-making process or in advance of publication may correlate with the level of interest formally expressed by Committees—for example, through correspondence with the Government or an inquiry.
- Correspondence can be a useful tool for maintaining pressure on and seeking clarity from Government over the course of a review.

- Although coordinating formal activity such as joint correspondence can take time, the House of Commons now has established mechanisms for more effective and efficient coordination of cross-committee working at staff level in the form of the International Affairs Unit in SCT and the International Affairs & National Security Hub, which works across SCT, the House of Commons Library and POST.
- Even where Committees do not undertake formal inquiry work on cross-government strategies, either separately or in coordination, the House possesses the expertise and mechanisms through which to offer multi-disciplinary staff analysis to all Committees, enabling them to contextualise decisions relating to their respective policy remits as part of a wider strategy.

## Policy simulations case study for Strategic Thinking inquiry

*Contact: Ashlee Godwin, Head, International Affairs & National Security Hub*

### FAC's pilot programme of policy simulations: purpose and outline

Between March 2022 and September 2023, the Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) sponsored a pilot programme of policy simulations (table-top exercises) in support of parliamentary scrutiny. The primary goal was to facilitate Committee scrutiny of the UK's international strategy through simulating either 'acute' or 'slow-burn' international crises set in the future. In doing so, Members of the FAC and other relevant Select Committees would be able to:

- Stress-test the Government's current strategy (the Integrated Review)—specifically, its stated objectives and attendant capability and resourcing decisions;
- Stress-test existing international laws, rules, norms and institutions, as well as the UK's current set of bilateral relationships and membership of multilateral organisations, in a future crisis, to identify potential gaps that the Government should address through its long-term strategy;
- Explore possible escalation and de-escalation 'ladders' in an international crisis; and/or
- Improve their understanding of how to react strategically in a crisis, pursuing national goals and navigating any trade-offs between them even as the situation rapidly evolves.

In addition to enabling a more forward-looking form of scrutiny through which to hold the Government to account for its long-term strategy and implementation, secondary goals for the simulation programme included:

- Rapid and dynamic learning for Members, through engaging in detail with a subject as the 'political decision-maker' and through sustained interaction with external experts acting as policy advisers; and
- Team-building between Members and staff after the Covid-19 pandemic.

The pilot programme involved three simulations, each of which was designed to test a fundamental question for the UK's international strategy, its relationships and their interaction with the 'Rules-Based International Order'. The details of the simulation scenarios are not in the public domain but they were:

1. The ambiguous beginnings of a potential conflict in the South China Sea, with the People's Republic of China having invaded one of Taiwan's smaller, outer islands—held in March 2022 and set in 2027;<sup>15</sup>
2. The potential for escalation by Russia as Ukraine's armed forces appear on the verge of re-entering Crimea—held in November 2022 and set in early 2023;<sup>16</sup> and
3. An impending crisis in a warming Arctic as a Chinese commercial vessel, escorted by the Russian FSB coast guard, appears to be preparing for deep-sea mining in the contested waters off the coast of Svalbard—held in September 2023 and set in 2035.<sup>17</sup> (The high-level findings of this simulation are appended to this document.)

<sup>15</sup> Involving Members of the Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) only.

<sup>16</sup> Involving Members of FAC, the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy and the Lords International Relations and Defence Committee (IRDC).

<sup>17</sup> Involving Members of the Foreign, Scottish Affairs and Environmental Audit Committees and the Lords IRDC.

For each simulation, the staff team (led by the then Head of the International Affairs Unit and supported by an external game designer) identified the overarching question and sub-questions that would inform the design of the game. They also created a starting scenario and briefings for each actively played country, with ranked objectives (some of which were in tension) and contextual briefing.

These materials were given to the country teams (comprising Members as political decision-makers, external experts as policy advisers, and parliamentary staff as team managers) at the start of each simulation, along with a verbal briefing on the scenario and an overview of the rules of gameplay. Over the course of four hours, the game and scenario would then unfold, driven by the sequential decisions taken by Members and through negotiation between teams.

Following each simulation, staff analysed the dynamics at play between the country teams<sup>18</sup> and identified areas for further exploration by Committees in their inquiry work. The FAC, for example, used the analysis of the Taiwan simulation to inform its nascent Indo-Pacific inquiry. It subsequently published a high-level summary of the sim analysis as an Appendix to its inquiry Report.<sup>19</sup>

### How the simulations worked in practice: an Arctic crisis in 2035

The Arctic simulation was designed to test the following master question, which was agreed with the Chair of the FAC:

*How could the UK advance its interests in a crisis involving increased competition over resources in a warming Arctic, given our current institutions and bilateral relationships?*

The scenario was set twelve years into the future when evidence suggests the conditions might be ripe for a deep-sea mining crisis in the region. Such a crisis would directly affect the UK's interests even though it is not an Arctic country and is not a member of the most directly relevant international forum, the Arctic Council.

The specific location of the potential mining crisis was selected because of the longstanding 'grey area' concerning the applicability of the 1920 Svalbard Treaty relative to the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and more recent international discussions about rules and norms governing deep-sea mining.

However, the UK's international relationships and the status and membership of relevant multilateral institutions were kept as they were in 2023.<sup>20</sup> The intention was therefore to identify gaps in relationships, fora and capabilities that the Government should address in the coming years to ensure that the UK has what it needs to respond to such crises in the future.

The Select Committees invited by the FAC to participate were drawn from both Houses and varied in their remits. As such, they brought a range of existing expertise and focus to the simulation, with a view to exploring the interaction between:

- The UK's domestic and international goals;
- Its climate and environment, economic, national security, and regional and global foreign policies; and

<sup>18</sup> This analysis was created by drawing on the action in the room, the teams' notes from decision-making and negotiations and the end-of-sim debrief.

<sup>19</sup> FAC, [Eighth Report of Session 2022–23, Tilting Horizons: The Integrated Review and the Indo-Pacific](#), HC 864

<sup>20</sup> The only exception was that the meetings of the Arctic Council had resumed and it was once again a forum in which Russia could be engaged formally on issues of safety, security and competition in the region.

- Its interests and values.

The Members were divided into teams and assigned countries: the UK; United States; China; Denmark; Norway; and Russia.<sup>21</sup> External experts also represented key international organisations such as the Arctic Council, NATO and the European Council. The country teams could convene in these fora but in doing so they had to adhere to the organisations' rules and working practices.<sup>22</sup>

Over the course of the afternoon, the teams played four 'turns', each of which represented three months in the simulation. At the end of each 'turn', teams announced up to three overt actions, informed the Control Team of any covert actions, and reported back on the outcomes of negotiations undertaken with other countries or at multilateral fora. The starting point for each new 'turn' was the end-point of the previous one, once all countries had taken their actions.

Subsequent staff analysis of the simulation's dynamics yielded six areas for further exploration by Committees should they wish, covering:

- How to foster European leadership without the US;
- Ways in which the UK and its allies might actively drive a wedge between Russia and China;
- Ways to overcome differences in allies' risk appetite and approaches to foreign policy (especially Norway);
- How to maintain UK and other Western voices in key multilateral organisations as China seeks to expand its influence within existing international institutions or to create alternatives;
- Resilience among Western allies in terms of access to relevant international for a and specialist military capabilities; and
- Greater understanding of the impact of deep-sea mining on sea life and coastal Arctic communities, and how to balance these risks against the potential economic benefits.

### Lessons for scrutiny

Staff are currently undertaking a formal evaluation of the pilot programme for effectiveness and value for money. However, contemporaneous feedback from participating Members suggests that:

- Policy simulations and other forms of evidence-based interactive exercises can complement more conventional methods in enabling Committees to explore the UK's long-term policy needs and the strategy required to meet them. This in turn can help Committees to identify questions through which to hold the Government to account for its strategy-making and implementation.
- Simulations can help Members to explore potential conflict between the UK's interests and between its policies as part of strategy-making and delivery and/or in a crisis, thereby experiencing the challenges that the Government will face in its decision-making and enabling more effective scrutiny thereof.
- Simulations rooted in international scenarios can effectively demonstrate the practical consequences of other state and non-state actors' policies and actions, anticipation of which should shape the UK's strategy-making and delivery.

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<sup>21</sup> Each country team benefited from an expert to provide advice and information to Members as the game unfolded. We were also joined by experts in climate science, international law, mineral supplies, fishing routes, and international security who provided advice to country teams and informed the Control Team's adjudication.

<sup>22</sup> Other countries and other multilateral organisations were represented by House staff. These 'non-played' entities could be consulted by active country teams but could not participate proactively themselves.

- Cross-committee simulations can encourage Members to learn in greater detail about other Committees' policy remits. They can also enable rapid immersion in obscure topics such as neglected regions or issues of international law and treaties, including through informal and sustained interaction with subject-matter experts.
- Simulations can increase Members' experience of—and comfort with—getting to grips with both process and policy as the political decision-maker in a crisis.

## Appendix: Arctic flashpoint policy simulation, September 2023: high-level findings

- 1) In March 2022, the Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) launched a pilot programme of three policy simulations. These simulations focused on fictitious but plausible future scenarios and were intended to inform parliamentary scrutiny of Government policy by enabling Members of Committees to explore and anticipate future policy questions and needs.<sup>23</sup>
- 2) This appendix offers a high-level presentation of the outcomes and areas of focus that emerged from the third policy simulation, which took as its scenario geopolitical competition over deep-sea mining in a warming Arctic in 2035. Held in September 2023, this simulation was hosted by the FAC and involved: Members of the Commons Foreign Affairs, Environmental Audit and Scottish Affairs Committees and the Lords International Relations and Defence Committee as the country teams' national decision-makers; academics as policy and international organisation advisers; and Committee staff as team managers. A more detailed analysis was made available to the Committees and their staff after the simulation with a view to informing current and future inquiries.

### Purpose and outline of the Arctic simulation

- 3) The simulation was designed to explore the implications of environmental change and geopolitical competition in the Arctic region, and the potential interaction between the two. It drew upon 'dynamic learning' methodologies to test existing UK bilateral relationships and engagement in multilateral institutions, and the extent to which they would enable an effective UK response to an emerging future crisis in this increasingly important region.
- 4) The simulation was set in 2035 to capture salient, anticipated changes to both the climate and the geostrategic landscape. These include:
  - i) The retreat of the summer ice sheet, opening seasonal navigable shipping routes through the Arctic;<sup>24</sup> and
  - ii) The green energy transition, which will have sky rocketed demands for minerals, fuelling competition over supply chains and accelerating interest in deep-sea mining.<sup>25</sup>

In this context, the simulation also tested the potential ambiguity of existing treaty and legal regimes. Six countries were played by Members: China; Denmark; Norway; Russia; the UK; and the US. Five design choices shaped the dynamics and outcomes of the simulation in particular:

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<sup>23</sup> The game design and scenario for each simulation in the pilot programme have been developed and delivered by Committee staff in collaboration with a specialist game design company, Stone Paper Scissors. In doing so, the Committee has drawn on, and benefited from, wide-ranging academic and diplomatic expertise. The research and design for the third simulation was led by Dr Kristen Harkness, Thematic Research Lead for the House of Commons' International Affairs and National Security Hub and Senior Lecturer, School of International Relations, University of St. Andrews. The design team drew extensively on the experience and expertise of: Dr John Ash, former Institute Associate of the Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge, and a guest lecturer at UiT, Norway's Arctic University; Professor Klaus Dodds, Professor of Geopolitics, Royal Holloway, University of London; and Dr Ingrid Medby, Senior Lecturer in Human Geography, University of Newcastle.

<sup>24</sup> Klaus Dodds and Jamie Woodward, *The Arctic: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp.22–27, 118–19.

<sup>25</sup> Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2013, 'Policy Paper: Resilience for the Future: The UK's Critical Minerals Strategy', [Resilience for the Future: The UK's Critical Minerals Strategy - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/274242/Resilience_for_the_Future_The_UKs_Critical_Minerals_Strategy_-_GOV.UK.pdf) ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)).



- The decision to play the US actively;
  - To include as played teams four Arctic states with representation in different international fora, especially the Arctic Council;
  - To present international organisations broadly as they are now, including their membership and decision-making rules;
  - To include China as an actor seeking influence and access in the region, in alignment with its recent Arctic strategy and growing partnership with Russia;<sup>26</sup> and
  - To include Greenland as a ‘non-played’ entity with which other teams could interact.
- 5) The analysis of the dynamics of this one-off simulation held under limited time conditions should be regarded as indicative, reflecting only the nature of this specific policy game. Nevertheless, the simulation raised important questions and highlighted persistent issues. These form the basis of clear recommendations that Committees might wish to pursue through future inquiry work.

### Potential areas for consideration in future inquiry work

- 6) An analysis of the simulation dynamics—including an assessment of team data capture forms on intentions, diplomatic efforts and actions—drew out several important issues and related questions for Committees to consider in future inquiries:

#### *How could the UK/Europe lead in the Arctic?*

- 7) The simulation highlighted the difficulty of coordinating an effective response to a crisis among European allies should the other priorities simultaneously demand US attention and resources—such as a crisis in the South China Sea. Given this possibility, the following questions could be addressed:
- How can the UK build and foster its own capabilities, partnerships and bilateral relationships beyond the US, and its role within multilateral institutions to protect its interests in the Arctic?
  - How can future European leadership in the Arctic be developed in the coming years?

#### *Can a wedge be driven between Russia and China on Arctic matters?*

- 8) The simulation underscored the importance of wedge issues that prevent cooperation and coordinated responses by Russia and China, especially during a crisis affecting UK and Western interests. Doing so would be an alternative approach to slowing down or halting their activities, reducing the need for Western coordination. Possible questions include:
- How can the UK identify and monitor Russian and Chinese channels for Arctic cooperation, with a view to disrupting them if necessary?
  - As China and Russia extend their alliance and seek to create alternative multilateral institutions and groupings, such as the recently expanded BRICS, does this create further opportunities for finding wedge issues and disrupting coordination in the event of an Arctic crisis?

#### *Does the UK fully understand its allies’ interests in the Arctic, their approaches to foreign policy and their tolerance for risk?*

- 9) Policy development and analysis often focus on adversaries’ motives, interests and capabilities but can neglect those of allies. The simulation highlighted how coordinating a Western response

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<sup>26</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, ‘China’s Arctic Policy’, 2018. [Full text: China’s Arctic Policy \(www.gov.cn\)](http://www.gov.cn).

to Chinese or Russian activities in the Arctic most likely requires overcoming differences in underlying interests, risk appetite, and the preferred means of achieving shared goals. Related questions include:

- Given Norway's centrality to any crisis involving Svalbard, how can the UK develop its understanding of Norway's national interests in the Arctic and how it would pursue or defend them?
- Are there key differences with other allies in the High North that could be addressed before an Arctic crisis occurs?

*How can the UK and its allies protect their voice in multilateral institutions?*

10) In many ways, the current international legal and institutional status quo in the Arctic suits Russia, which has a history of using consensual decision-making rules and its veto powers to obstruct action. China, meanwhile, often seeks to expand its influence within existing international institutions or to create alternatives. There is a danger that Russia could abandon the Arctic Council altogether and build a rival organisation in its place, allowing China to join. Possible avenues of future inquiry could include:

- What strategies might the UK and its regional allies pursue to preserve the democratic and consensual character of Arctic institutions while protecting them from capture, paralysis or replacement by hostile states?
- How can the UK deepen its understanding of alternative and informal diplomatic channels—perhaps enabled by existing multilateral institutions (for example, routine meetings and conferences that bring leaders together)—that could facilitate coordination among allies in a crisis?
- What role, if any, might the Joint Expeditionary Force play in an Arctic crisis given that it is currently a military rather than political forum?<sup>27</sup>

*Does the UK and its allies have appropriate intelligence-sharing, coast guard cooperation and military cooperation mechanisms in the Arctic region?*

11) Gathering more intelligence is often seen as vital to understanding the situation and formulating an appropriate response. However, the Arctic is an unforgiving environment. Operations in the region require specialised assets, equipment and training that imply trade-offs for readiness in other theatres. In a crisis, the UK may not be able to rapidly deploy its own capabilities to gather information and/or execute necessary operations. It would also be risky to rely on a single partner or multilateral institution to access additional such capabilities. Possible questions include:

- What are the UK capability gaps in the Arctic? Can the UK expand its intelligence and military cooperation arrangements to fill these gaps?
- Does deterrence of such 'sub-threshold' challenges, and adequate responses to them, require agreeing among allies and setting up immediate and more automatic actions? For example, might the UK and its allies agree and articulate 'trip wires' that establish a clear red line and automatically trigger a coordinated response when that deterrence threshold is crossed?

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<sup>27</sup> The Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) is a UK-led task group consisting of armed forces from the UK and eight partner nations: Denmark; Estonia; Finland; Latvia; Lithuania; the Netherlands; Norway; and Sweden.

*What are the long-term environmental and community impacts of deep-sea mining?*

12) Much is currently unknown about how deep-sea mining could negatively impact sea life and coastal Arctic communities. Those risks must also be balanced against the potential economic benefits of deep-sea mining. More scientific research is needed, suggesting the following possible line of inquiry:

- What are the current gaps in scientific understanding on the effects of deep-sea mining?  
How can UK polar science help to fill them?