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Executive Summary:

- This submission responds to the question of the priorities for UK foreign policy and the development of strategy by the FCO.
- The main claims of the submission are that the UK government's recent efforts to develop a post-Brexit strategy, demonstrate a continuation of longstanding unresolved tensions between national interests and overseas ethical responsibilities
- The continued difficulty in developing a clear strategy for UK foreign policy relates to the increasingly fragmented British national community, which makes both national interest and the values to be promoted in UK foreign policy more contested.
- When considering future strategic priorities for future UK foreign policy, greater attention must be given to the domestic consensus behind these priorities and how this might limit or enable foreign policy activities.
- Enhanced public diplomacy and outreach by the FCO *within* the UK are required to help conceive and sustain the future strategic direction of UK foreign policy.

1. Values, interests and strategic coherence in UK foreign policy

1.1 Despite changes in government and significant shifts in the international landscape, UK foreign policy has remained consistent in the emphasis in its promotion of 'values' and global ethical obligations, alongside more traditional concerns for national interest.¹

1.2 Global ethical commitments to international development, human rights promotion and enhanced regulation of UK arms exports, although key tenets of Labour's much maligned 'foreign policy with an ethical dimension', have been maintained by subsequent governments.

1.3 Terminology and points of emphasis have shifted under recent successive Conservative governments, with an increased emphasis on a more 'practical' approach, economic interests and the promotion of 'British' values.² However, core commitments to development funding at 0.7% of GDP, the promotion of human rights, use of humanitarian intervention and advocacy of the Responsibility to Protect have endured.

¹ Jonathan Gilmore, "Still a Force for Good? Good International Citizenship in British Foreign and Security Policy", *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 17(1), 2015, pp. 106-129

² David Cameron, "Address to the UN General Assembly", 26th September 2012; Conservative Party, *Invitation to Join the Government of Britain: The Conservative Manifesto 2010*, (London: Conservative Research Department, 2010), p. 109; William Hague, "Britain's Values in a Networked World", speech given at Lincolns Inn, London, 15th September 2010

1.4 As strategic priorities for UK foreign policy, there has been a tendency by successive governments to suggest the UK pursues an 'enlightened' form of national interest, where the UK's global influence and its economic interests, can be reconciled in a mutually reinforcing relationship with global ethical responsibilities.³

1.5 There is no intrinsic tension between the pursuit of national interest and the pursuit of international ethical commitments. However, there has been little clarity in recent foreign policy of the precise relationship between national interests and global ethical commitments and how they may support one another.

1.6 Assuming an automatically mutually reinforcing relationship between national interest and global ethical responsibilities obscures the common tensions that exist between different areas of foreign policy responsibility.

1.7 Inconsistencies between the Britain's professed support for human rights and its pursuit of narrower national interests have been notably evident in its continued sales of weapons to regimes with exceptionally poor human rights records.⁴

1.8 UK support for the practice of humanitarian intervention and the Responsibility to Protect has been heavily tempered by concerns for national interest and the risk of ground-level entanglements in both Libya and Syria, resulting in limited forms of intervention primarily using airpower. In both cases, large scale human rights abuse and violence against civilians has continued despite varying degrees of armed intervention by the UK.

1.9 Compromises between national interests and global ethical responsibilities may be necessary in many cases. However, continuing to suggest a near symbiotic relationship between Britain's interests and the values it promotes in its foreign policy, risks strategic incoherence as resources and political will fails to match the ends sought.

1.10 The UK acting at odds with the values and global ethical commitments it professes to support, creates an obvious image of inconsistency with the likely consequence of reducing its soft power and ability to promote international norms of conduct.

1.11 The government and the FCO should clarify the specific relationship between its understanding of national interest and the values or global ethical commitments it seeks to pursue. This would acknowledge more honestly, rather than seek to obscure, the tensions between different priorities in UK foreign policy. Doing so would establish a clearer link between the ends sought and the resources necessary.

³ Jonathan Gilmore, "The Uncertain Merger of Values and Interests in UK Foreign Policy", *International Affairs*, 90(3), 2014, pp. 541-557

⁴ Committees on Arms Export Controls, *First Joint Report of the Business, Innovation and Skills, Defence, Foreign Affairs and International Development Committees of Session 2013-14: Volume I*, (London: TSO, 2013), pp. 29-32

2. 'Global Britain' and a disunited kingdom

2.1 The Global Britain agenda for post-Brexit foreign policy, demonstrates a high degree of continuity with and prior foreign policy and similarly internalises many of the tensions between the pursuit of national interest and the promotion of values. The recent use of language describing Britain as a 'force for good in the world' by the foreign secretary, evokes a direct continuity with the terminology of Labour's foreign policy during the 1990s.⁵

2.2 The Global Britain agenda is characterised by the dual emphasis on free trade and securing the UK's economic interest, alongside the promotion of values and the defence of the 'rules-based international order'. Once again, there is little consideration of the tensions between that may exist between these dual objectives, and whether both can be satisfied with the resources available.

2.3 Previous investigations of the Global Britain agenda and post-Brexit international relations, have highlighted the vagueness of the concept, the potential incompatibility of the roles and decline of political capital in key international organisations.⁶ However, less commonly explored is the connection between the domestic political context within the UK and its broader implications for foreign policy strategy

2.4 The tension between national interest and the global ethical responsibilities that a values-based foreign policy entails, sits alongside entrenched internal divisions about Britain's role in the world. Evidence from before and after the 2016 referendum, reveals significant divides in public opinion on foreign policy priorities, between approaches confined to the pursuit of narrow economic interest and those informed by values-based commitments. Socio-economic class, age and regional location indicate divergent priorities amongst key demographics.⁷

2.5 The 2016 referendum itself was an important driver for the emergence of distinctive identity communities within the UK, reflected in polarised attitudes towards global governance, immigration and the appropriate positioning of Britain in world politics. Far from resolving this polarisation, the outcome of the referendum and the protracted withdrawal negotiations have further cemented these identities.

2.6 Rather than providing a coherent strategy for post-Brexit foreign policy, the Global Britain agenda is better understood as an attempt to provide a unifying narrative, directed at a polarised internal audience, which attempts to reconcile conflicting preferences about Britain's international positioning.

⁵ Dominic Raab, "Global Britain is leading the world as a force for good", *The Sunday Telegraph*, 22nd September 2019; Dominic Raab, "Foreign Secretary's introduction to the Queen's Speech debate", 13th January 2020

⁶ Kai Opperman, Ryan Beasley and Juliet Kaarbo, "British Foreign Policy after Brexit: losing Europe and finding a role", *International Politics*, 2019; Jess Gifkins, Samuel Jarvis and Jason Ralph "Brexit and the UN Security Council: declining British influence?" *International Affairs*, 95(6), 2019; Christopher Hill, *The Future of British Foreign Policy: Security and Diplomacy in a World after Brexit*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2019)

⁷ Chatham House/YouGov, *British Attitudes Towards the UK's International Priorities: General Public Survey Results*, London: Chatham House, 2014; Edward Elliott and Sophia Gaston, *Behind Global Britain: Public opinion on the UK's role in the world*, (London: British Foreign Policy Group/BMG Research/Henry Jackson Society, 2019)

2.7 It emphasizes continued promotion of values, the defence of the rules-based system and acting as a “moral compass to champion causes that know no borders”. Commitments to human rights, development and the promotion of democracy remain at the core of this agenda, and are suggested to be integral to the British way of life and its national character.⁸

2.8 It is impossible to wholly disengage a post-Brexit strategy for UK foreign policy from the populist nationalist rhetoric of the EU referendum campaign. Hostility to global governance, immigration and rules constraining British sovereignty which characterised the pro-leave camp, reflect commonalities with what has been identified in recent research as a broader global trend in “reactionary internationalism”.⁹ In emphasising the need to unshackle the state from the constraints of the liberal international order, this trend is sharply at odds with the rules based order Global Britain ostensibly seeks to defend.

2.9 Frequent allusions to Britain’s imperial heritage and metaphors of the UK “re-emerging after decades of hibernation” and “leaving its chrysalis” in speeches promoting the Global Britain agenda, promote the idea of a state breaking free from external constraints on its sovereignty. Again, this is in obvious tension with the notion of global ethical responsibilities and the defence of values worldwide.

2.10 The vagaries and inconsistencies of the Global Britain agenda, reflect the fragile domestic foundations for UK foreign policy strategy and a flawed attempt to provide a unifying narrative for a divided society.

2.11 The weak domestic consensus on foreign policy has significant implications for foreign policy activities that have a large potential financial cost or commitment burden and require consistent public support. Public spending on international development is a key area of contestation between segments of the public that see development as an important ethical priority for the UK, and those who feel the money would be better spent on the British people.

2.12 Weak domestic consensus on foreign policy priorities has similar implications for intervention and the use of force in UK foreign policy. Recent research and investigations by the Defence Committee have highlighted the challenges in developing reliable public support for armed humanitarian interventions.¹⁰

2.13 The FCO must clearly consider international conditions and UK capabilities when developing foreign policy strategy. However, it must also appreciate the problem of a divided domestic landscape and seek to develop a more stable domestic consensus on foreign policy priorities, practices and Britain’s position in world politics.

⁸ Raab, “Foreign Secretary’s introduction”; Jeremy Hunt, “An invisible chain: speech by the foreign secretary”, Policy Exchange, 31st October 2018; HM Government, *National Security Capability Review*, (London: Cabinet Office, 2018), p. 7

⁹ Pablo de Orellana and Nicholas Michelsen, “Reactionary Internationalism: the philosophy of the New Right”, *Review of International Studies*, 45(5), pp. 748-767

¹⁰ House of Commons Defence Committee, *Intervention: Why, When and How?*, HC952, (London: TSO, 2014); Graeme Davies and Robert Johns, “R2P from Below: Does the British public view humanitarian interventions as ethical and effective?”, *International Politics*, 53(1), 2016, pp.118-137; Jamie Gaskarth, “The fiasco of the 2013 Syria votes: decline and denial in British foreign policy”, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 23(5), 2016, pp. 718-734

2.14 The post Covid-19 international political environment remains unknown at present. Domestically, the pandemic is likely to do little to develop a more stable domestic consensus for UK foreign policy. It has the potential to further enlarge the divide between sections of the public who see the need for expanded global connection to respond and recover from the crisis, and those who see it as cause for a strong refocussing on narrower national interests.

3. Building a more reliable domestic consensus for future UK foreign policy strategy

3.1 The absence of a stable domestic consensus on foreign policy presents an important barrier to the development of consistent and coherent foreign policy strategy.

3.2 Previous investigations by Parliamentary committees have tentatively started to address the way in which the public engages with foreign policy and the importance of a clear narrative about the UK's foreign policy objectives.¹¹

3.3 However, a narrative generated by foreign policy elites, is unlikely by itself to resolve tensions between divergent and entrenched views on the UK's national priorities amongst the public. Concerningly, when responding to the Foreign Affairs Committee's 2018 report on Global Britain, the government neglected to answer the direct question of "what does Global Britain mean to the people of the UK"?¹²

3.4 Developing a more stable domestic consensus for future UK foreign policy strategy requires a large-scale programme of public diplomacy, but one directed at the British, rather than overseas publics. The objective of such an exercise would be to better understand the way in which national interest, values and overseas ethical commitments are understood by the public. In keeping with the emergence of 'dialogue-based public diplomacy', such an exercise must be a process of listening as well as persuasion.¹³

3.5 The desired outcome of such a process would be a foreign policy strategy underpinned by stronger domestic legitimacy and a clearer sense, amongst both the public and policymakers, of how the UK's foreign policy priorities should relate to one another.

Conclusion and Recommendations

- UK foreign policy strategy has consistently internalised unresolved tensions between the pursuit of national interests and the global ethical responsibilities created by the promotion of 'values'. The Global Britain agenda has continued this trend.

¹¹ House of Commons Defence Committee, *Intervention*, p. 20; House of Lords Select Committee on International Relations, *UK Foreign Policy in a Shifting World Order*, HL250, 2018, p.96

¹² House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, *Global Britain: Government Response to the Sixth Report of the Committee*, HC 1236, p. 5

¹³ Shaun Riordan, "Dialogue-based Public Diplomacy: a New Foreign Policy Paradigm?" in Jan Melissen (Ed.) *The New Public Diplomacy*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), pp. 180-195

- The recurrent suggestion has been that values and interests are mutually reinforcing. However, this assumption obscures the tensions that frequently exist in practice. This risks strategic incoherence as resources and political will fails to match the ends sought.
- The government and the FCO need to clarify the specific relationship between its understanding of national interest and the values or global ethical commitments it seeks to pursue. The tensions between different priorities in UK foreign policy must be acknowledged and accounted for more openly.
- Current UK foreign policy strategy has also paid very little attention to the absence of a stable domestic consensus on Britain's role in the world and the significant internal divisions that have endured following the 2016 referendum. Rather than a coherent strategy for UK foreign policy, the Global Britain agenda reflects a flawed attempt to provide a unifying narrative for a divided society.
- The lack of a stable domestic consensus on foreign policy has significant implications for costly or complex foreign policy activities, like armed intervention or stabilisation, which require robust public support.
- Developing a more reliable domestic consensus in support of UK foreign policy, would benefit from a large-scale programme of public diplomacy directed toward British, rather than overseas publics.

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