

# **The FCO and the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy**

Memo to the Foreign Affairs Committee from Dr. Robin Porter

## Short Summary

1. In 1962 the former American Secretary of State Dean Acheson remarked that Britain had 'lost an Empire, but not yet found a role'. Remarkably, in the wake of the decision to leave the European Union, this appears more than ever true.
2. It is contended here that a coherent strategy is needed for our foreign policy which takes account of Britain's current circumstances and capabilities, and that while other government departments may be involved in implementing that strategy, the formation of foreign policy advice to government should come from the FCO.
3. We are no longer an industrial or military superpower, and are heavily dependent on imported goods and foodstuffs. However we still have much influence in education, science and technology, and cultural areas (soft power), as well as in niche areas of manufacturing and service provision, including financial services.
4. This submission will therefore be in two parts. First, questions raised by the Foreign Affairs Committee will be addressed. Subsequently, certain constraints on the evolution of a new strategy will be explored, and proposals put forward in outline for the content of that strategy.

## About Robin Porter

5. Robin Porter has taught at universities in Canada, Australia and the UK, his two principal areas of teaching and research interest being modern China and British foreign policy. From 2002 to 2005, as Counsellor for Science and Innovation at our Embassy in Beijing, he set up and managed our science network there, conceiving and directing the year-long project of scientific exchanges known as 'UK-China, Partners in Science' in 2005.
6. Earlier in his career he was for four years full-time adviser on technology transfer to China for the British motor industry at the SMMT in London. He has also undertaken commissioned research for the UK Ministry of Defence, the European Union, and the motor industry, and co-edited The China Business Guide for the DTI's China Britain Trade Group in 1992. His latest sole-author book is From Mao to Market: China Reconfigured (Hurst 2011).
7. Since retiring he has been a Visiting Professor in the Centre for Global Insecurities at the University of Bristol, in this role initiating a conference on British foreign policy at Chatham House, and co-editing the book British Foreign Policy and the National Interest (Palgrave 2014).

## Terms of Reference

### **The Committee welcomes written evidence on:**

#### THE PROCESS OF THE INTEGRATED REVIEW

##### The efficacy of the Review's process

8. The normal FAC process of reviewing the FCO's actions and initiatives, under which evidence will be taken, the Committee will send a report to the FCO and the Government, and a response is then forthcoming, seems to work in practice. It is important, however, that the Committee's remit should in this instance encompass input to the Review relating to foreign policy from other government departments, that its recommendations are taken seriously, and that a specific and detailed (and public) response is offered to its recommendations.

##### The relationship of this Review with other foreign-policy reviews

9. As I am retired, I am unable to comment on the other reviews of foreign policy which may be in progress, or how they relate to that of the FCO.

##### The role of the FCO in the Review process

10. The FCO and the FAC should in my view have the primary role in reviewing and advising government on foreign policy, and should at the very least have a co-ordinating function in the presentation of foreign policy proposals from other government departments to Government. See also below.

#### STRATEGY IN UK FOREIGN POLICY, including:

##### The priorities for UK foreign-policy strategy

11. As indicated in a previous submission to the FAC, published in April 2014 as written evidence (USA0015) to the inquiry into 'Government Foreign Policy towards the United States', certain priorities in British foreign policy are discernible over the past two hundred years. These traditional objectives remain fundamental, but have been augmented in recent times by other concerns. The passage below is reproduced from that submission:

"Historically, certain fundamental principles have guided British foreign policy as the country sought to protect and advance its interests in its relations with other states. Core among these have been:

- a belief in the rule of law, specifically in this case international law
- a primary concern with the international politics of Europe
- promotion of Britain's economic interests overseas

- the military defence of the realm
- the maintenance of freedom of movement internationally for British subjects

There have been strong echoes of these concerns in the 'global objectives' of Britain's foreign policy in recent times. To these, since 2001, have been added terrorism, and the security of energy supplies, while collaboration on climate change and on scientific projects of all kinds have also featured heavily among the objectives of our diplomacy. It is the contention of this paper that the principles encompassed in these objectives are as close as it may be possible to come to an explicit statement of the UK's 'national interests' where they relate to our foreign policy today".

12. It is suggested here that these factors should continue to guide our diplomatic strategy and allocation of resource.

### The relationship of the FCO with the other UK Government Departments in foreign-policy strategy

13. Other government departments in recent years have developed and pursued their own agendas for activity overseas, including the Ministry of Defence, DfID, Defra, and the various manifestations of the business arm of government – the DTI, UKTI, now BEIS etc. On occasion these OGD initiatives have been in conflict with those of the FCO, or have been carried out without the degree of sensitivity that successful diplomacy requires.

14. In particular I would say that some in the MoD (though not the military themselves) are too close to American strategic objectives to offer advice that will necessarily advance the UK's interests, which are not always the same as those of the US.

15. Also, I believe that the process of bringing into the FCO from the DTI and its successor organizations commercial specialists to redress an alleged lack of knowledge of trade among FCO personnel, while it might have been needed originally, has meant also that expertise in diplomacy has to some extent been sacrificed. Commercial staff are sometimes less aware of the political implications of what they do. One example in the writer's experience was a UKTI proposal to trial untested drugs in a developing country, which in the event was firmly blocked by the FCO in London. Such a project, if it had gone ahead, would have had serious political ramifications.

### UK allies, and how they shape or contribute to the FCO's strategy

16. Alliances, it may be recalled, are taken to be organizations which can be more or less permanent, through which nation-states take a common stand or combine resources in pursuit of a shared objective. This may be military (NATO), ideological (opposition to communism), political (the European Union), economic (the original European Coal and Steel Community), environmental (ad hoc campaigns for climate change), or have other *raison d'être*. The reasons for the UK to support, or seek support through, any particular alliance or ally are not fixed in stone however and may shift over time. The FCO should of course always seek

to promote collaboration with allies on any issue of common interest, but this should not prevent a re-evaluation and shift in policy where this seems appropriate. It has sometimes been said about diplomacy that there are no permanent alliances, only fixed interests.

### Case-studies, including from external perspectives, of the FCO's record as a strategy-led organisation

17. I am not sufficiently aware of current projects, but I would say that our commitment to promoting among our interlocutors an acceptance of the science of climate change has been consistent and productive. I know from personal experience that Sir David King's visits to China, arranged by the FCO when he was Chief Scientist, materially contributed to acceptance by the Chinese Government of the need to take action on climate change.

THE FCO's RESOURCES AND CAPABILITIES, including:

### International comparisons

18. When I was an active diplomat the UK's representation overseas was proportionately comparable with that of other large European countries – Germany, France, Holland, Italy, Spain, for example, though the particular areas of expertise varied from country to country. We were also supported in China by the activity of the EU mission, notably in science, for which I was responsible. Australia and Canada had similar establishments, though with fewer personnel. Other countries were represented according to their resources.

19. What marked out the British diplomatic effort, in China as elsewhere, was the high degree of competence of FCO personnel, and the respect that this helped to bring the UK. It was also the case that British diplomats went out of their way to engage with interlocutors – not the case with all Embassies.

### Resource priorities, and areas that the FCO has deprioritised

20. I cannot comment on current trends, though I am aware that budgets have been significantly reduced in recent years.

### Key assets and obstacles for FCO capabilities

21. The British Foreign Office continues to command respect internationally as one of the most highly skilled and professional foreign service organizations. Its value as a major asset lies in its extensive knowledge of the culture, politics and economic circumstances of countries overseas, and of their languages as well. This knowledge enables British diplomats to more readily engage with our interlocutors abroad, and to develop

genuinely warm relations with them. In turn this facilitates not only trade deals, inward investment, and political collaboration, but communication of our values, provision of educational opportunities in both directions, scientific exchanges, and joint approaches in the international arena on matters which can only be approached globally, such as climate change and disease control.

22. Among the obstacles facing the FCO is the trend that has emerged in Britain and the United States in recent years to transfer part of the foreign policy advice function away from the State Department and the Foreign Office. In the US this first became apparent under the presidency of George W. Bush, with the foreign policy initiative passing to the Department of Defence, while under the Trump presidency the White House has taken the leading role. In Britain there has been pressure from other government departments to assume control over their own foreign dealings, while at times individual politicians have appeared to be making foreign policy on their own. The idea that practically anyone (or any government Minister) can or should be conducting relations with other countries has gained currency. As noted above, specific knowledge and skills are required to do this successfully, which people with no relevant experience do not have.

23. Other obstacles include drastic cuts to the FCO's budget with consequent impact on staffing and the estate, the need for increased language training, and in my day the need for a more efficient HR function within the FCO (I worked for the FCO for three months before my name appeared on the payroll), (when in post my urgent request for HR to fill a previously agreed position in Shanghai took almost a year to action).

#### CONSTRAINING FACTORS: SOME COMMON FALLACIES

24. Finally, beyond the specific matters raised by the Review, several contextual issues should be noted which condition the scope for the FCO's work, and the wider perception of it, as well as forming the parameters for future strategy. These take the form of beliefs commonly held by Ministers, MPs, and by the British public at large, as follows:

#### The belief that we are still a superpower

25. The writer was first taught history by a man who had been present at the relief of the siege of Mafeking. He was also taught British diplomatic history at university by another man who as a young diplomat had been an aide to Harold Nicholson at the Versailles peace conference of 1919. The attitudes engendered by Britain's imperial past have not fully left us, and often form a part of the public perception, and for that matter politicians' perception, of our power in the world today. Yet in fact the Twentieth Century marked a very significant decline in our power and influence internationally, a process hastened by the Suez crisis, withdrawal from imperial possessions, and the erosion of our manufacturing and trading

capabilities. Moreover our military capability has been drastically reduced. Though we have certain technological and educational advantages, we are now a mid-ranking power, no longer able to issue threats to get our way in the manner of Lord Palmerston in the Nineteenth Century.

#### The belief that we have a powerful economy, still capable of dominating trade deals

26. If proof were needed that this is no longer the case, negotiations in recent years and ongoing with both the EU and with prospective alternative trade partners – the US, Canada, Australia, China and others – over Brexit provide ample evidence. The so-called ‘special relationship’ with the United States cannot be relied upon to deliver any particular trade advantages to the UK, and the existence of the relationship itself may be questioned (see USA0015, written evidence 2014). Both Canada and Australia historically have grievances with the UK over the way their special terms of trade were arbitrarily withdrawn when Britain entered the EU in the 1970s. The market in China for British goods and services, as opposed to once-only technology transfer, is often exaggerated. Moreover, with the loss of much of our manufacturing capacity, and the takeover of many British enterprises by foreign firms which conduct their trade relations from head offices overseas, we have less to offer. For the most part, only niche markets for goods and services remain active opportunities for us, while on the other hand we have become used to importing large quantities of goods from elsewhere, for which we must somehow pay.

#### The belief that our products and services are ‘the best in the world’

27. In my experience dealing with British exporters of goods, services and technology, this is a line often taken by company representatives who may be unfamiliar with what their competitors have to offer, and sometimes even with what they themselves are offering. While some British products are without a doubt ingenious and of excellent quality, not all are, and we delude ourselves if we think that assertions like this, if unsupported, will influence potential customers. Complacency has no place in the presentation of Britain to the world.

#### The belief that we are capable of ‘going it alone’

28. The rise of populist nationalism, in the UK a strand of thinking that can be traced back to the ‘little England’ movement of the Nineteenth Century and beyond, runs completely counter to the FCO’s understanding of the world in which we now must live. This world is interconnected as never before, and has a globalized economy (unlikely to change much even with the threat posed by the coronavirus). The future is international, not national or tribal. Moreover we have moved on in terms of what we can produce, the needs that we can now satisfy domestically. We must be capable of interacting constructively to mutual benefit with other nation-states and international

organizations such as the UN (whose predecessor, the League of Nations, we ourselves set up). The way forward is through cooperation, not competition.

IN THE LIGHT OF THESE CONSIDERATIONS,  
WHAT SHOULD OUR STRATEGY BE?

29. While continuing to adhere to the principles enunciated in section 11 of this document, if the UK is to succeed in the newly globalized world, it must cut its coat according to its cloth. Military commitments should be limited to the defence of the UK and Europe through NATO. In political terms, we should develop the closest ties with countries that already share our values, and act in concert with them in promoting these values. We should reaffirm our strong support for the United Nations and its functional agencies, especially in pursuing action on issues of global significance, such as climate change and disease control. We should be realistic about our trade prospects, and focus on marketing niche manufactures and services, through projects of collaboration where appropriate. We should continue through DfID and Defra to encourage and assist sustainable development in target countries. Finally we should resist the temptation to become involved in adventures at the behest of other countries, where such projects will not advance or may even run counter to the British national interest. This is particularly the case with respect to relations between the US and China.