

## Written evidence submitted by Nick Witney (INR0031)

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### Summary

- Covid-19 is changing the world, even as Britain reconceives its role in it. Some changes – a retreat from globalisation, more virtual interaction – are already visible. Others, and their geopolitical consequences, remain to play out.
- Nonetheless, some big issues for the IR to address are already discernible, from national resilience to transatlantic relations to China. The risks to Europe's south and east will likely sharpen; Africa will need new attention. Britain's future influence may depend less on a strong military and more on its soft power capabilities, to inform and persuade.
- In a more regionalised world, the European Union will remain a key partner, in economic terms and for global agendas. But getting what it wants will require realism on Britain's part, about its own weight and about Europeans' attitudes and aims.

**The Pandemic's Impact.** Covid-19 has made the task confronting the Integrated Review (IR) – to reconceive Britain's role in the world after Brexit – doubly difficult. Now, it is not only Britain which faces a major historical rupture, but quite possibly the world itself.

At time of writing, it seems that we may be nearing the end of the beginning of the pandemic, at any rate in the developed world. Lock-downs are being cautiously relaxed. But with the progress of the virus across the developing world hard to forecast, and the early achievement of an effective, globally-available vaccine still more hope than certainty, no-one can yet tell whether Covid-19 can be decisively defeated, or merely beaten back.

Key geopolitical questions are equally obscure. Which political systems and ideologies will emerge as "winners"? People the world over have been reminded of the fundamental importance of the nation-state. Yet few populist authoritarians can so far claim to have had a good crisis. That may, of course, change as the emphasis shifts from saving lives to restoring livelihoods. There is everything yet to play for in the battle of narratives.

That battle is already intense in relation to China and the US. An unprecedentedly aggressive Chinese propaganda offensive has encountered strong Western push-back. Pre-virus, European countries were all too ready to compete against each other for favour in Beijing; whether that now changes remains to be seen. It would be foolish, however, to bet against the effectiveness of Chinese propaganda, backed with health and financial aid,

across the developing world. As for the US, Trump's every move and utterance might have been designed to trash America's decades-long status as global leader. So the global context with which the IR must deal may be as much affected by the US presidential election as by the progress of the pandemic.

Huge uncertainties also hang over the consequences of the pandemic, and of the present collapse of oil prices, in Europe's neighbourhood. Nightmare scenarios are easy to envisage in the Middle East and Africa. These may or may not come to pass: but Europeans should prepare for the risk of increased migratory pressures, and reckon with the possibility of Russia becoming an even more difficult neighbour.

Some consequences of the pandemic can be more reliably foreseen. The first is a retreat from globalisation. Even pre-pandemic, the combined efforts of Trump's America, Russia and China had already done major damage to the idea of a global community, operating on a rules-based international order. Trade, the rising tide that lifts all boats, was being widely reconceived as the continuation of geopolitical rivalry by other means. Even the European Union, responding to widespread popular discontent about how the global economy was operating and who was harvesting its benefits, was beginning to talk of "a Europe that protects".

There will, however, be limits to this retreat. National autarky is not a viable option for more than a few outliers. Nations will be no more ready to self-isolate indefinitely than are households. But, like households, their bias may be towards contact and cooperation with the relatively near, and the relatively familiar. Regionalisation could well become the new globalisation.

On top of that, there is now a growing realisation that, much like the world's financial system in 2007, the global economic system has been running too hot. Too many risks have been ignored in the pursuit of efficiency; dangerous external dependencies have been allowed to develop unchecked, even unnoticed. Western countries have just had a hard lesson in how, even for products as unremarkable as hospital gowns, global Just-In-Time supply chains can turn out to be Just Too Late. "Resilience" is now the watch-word.

We should also expect that, even post-lockdown, some part of the global shift from physical to virtual interaction, economic and societal, will endure. It is too soon to write the obituaries of offices or business travel; man, after all, is a social animal. But clearly the dominance of all aspects of our lives by American big tech companies and Chinese parastatals will be reinforced – and with it concerns over privacy, security, access to the big data needed to develop Artificial Intelligence, and governments' ability to secure tax revenue.

The IR will have plenty to think about.

**Implications for the IR.** Previous UK "strategic reviews" have largely focussed on how to preserve Britain's Big Power status – maintaining global influence through a tight alliance with the US, and a continuing ability to "project power". New threats have been acknowledged, but imperfectly reflected in resource allocation; SDR 2015 diagnosed

terrorism and pandemics as top threats, but stuck with two large aircraft carriers as key prescriptions. Inevitably, and rightly, the IR's mood will be more defensive, with a further diminished enthusiasm for overseas interventions in a likely even more chaotic world, and a focus on protection rather than projection. The shift towards a wider interpretation of how "security" is construed will also be accelerated. Britain will want to preserve international influence, but hopefully with clear national interests in mind, not vague aspirations to "punch above our weight". This should entail a shift of emphasis from hard power instruments to soft – with which Britain is fortunately well endowed.

More specifically, our recommendations include the following:

- (a) **Resilience.** Clearly, all countries will need to think harder about their vulnerabilities, and how to mitigate them. Beyond the health sector, energy and food are two areas where it will now seem imprudent to rely on the world to supply whatever we want, when we want it. Diverse suppliers, buffer stocks, dormant contracts and surge production capacity could all have roles to play. The risks lie not just in natural disasters, but in well-recognised cyber vulnerabilities, and excessive dependence on monopoly suppliers. The concept of a "strategic industry" needs cautious handling: claims to that status are often just self-serving appeals for subsidy and protection. But the fact that the UK finds itself without an effective national supplier of 5G equipment highlights the dangers of laissez-faire. (It did not have to be this way: half a dozen years ago Nokia, now the world's third largest supplier of network equipment, was a failing handset maker.)
- (b) **Transatlantic relations.** The Trump presidency has dented the UK's confidence in its "special relationship" with Washington. But the self-image of the US's loyal first lieutenant, shoulder-to-shoulder in foreign wars and vigilantly guarding NATO against European defence ambitions, dies hard. The IR will need to recognise that, whoever occupies the White House next January, America will expect Europeans to do more for their own defence and regional security, even if faced by a dangerously failing Russia. If the UK determines to deploy fewer heavy forces in central Europe, it will need to find other ways to contribute to strengthening NATO's European pillar. And a Biden presidency would not only reverse Trump's hostility to the EU, but measure the UK's value in large measure by its influence with European partners.
- (c) **China.** The pandemic has cast Europe's China dilemma into stark relief. China's money and markets look set to be even more important as Europeans struggle to recover economically. But the ruthless, ambitious and fiercely nationalistic nature of the Chinese regime will be even harder to ignore. The EU will struggle to present a united front and resist Chinese efforts to divide and rule. Brexited Britain has the option of reverting to pursuit of a "Golden Age" in relations with China. But the international cost of such a strategy, in terms of relations with the US and other key Western partners, would seem prohibitive, even if the implications of an open door to China were domestically tolerable. On this issue, like many others, London will have to try to make common cause with Paris and Berlin.

- (d) **Europe's southern neighbourhood.** If the Middle East and Africa are indeed heading for a perfect storm of pandemic, famine and collapsing oil revenues, Britain's commitment to spend 0.7% of GDP on overseas aid becomes even more vital, and not just for humanitarian reasons. The UK is lucky to have the European continent as a buffer between it and looming chaos to the south and east. But that buffer will be no defence if Islamic terrorism is reignited; and much of Britain's relative immunity to unregulated mass migrations depends on European, especially French, cooperation. Before the crisis, the EU had already prioritised its fledgling partnership with Africa; that will be all the more important as China seeks to exploit the pandemic to build its own position there. The UK should ally itself to those European efforts: the recent letter from a slew of European and African leaders in the Financial Times lays out a comprehensive agenda.<sup>1</sup> And if the IR is really to exempt no sacred cows, it will reconsider whether the economic benefits of UK arms sales are still worth the damage such sales do in the region, and to the UK's reputation.
- (e) **Hard power.** Britain's defence posture and capabilities will obviously be central to the review. A reduction in heavy land forces and a greater focus on defending the "UK base" are already mooted. There is logic in both, provided neither is overdone: we have emphasised above the importance of NATO's European pillar; and retreat from the major interventions of recent years should not ignore the enduring value, as tools of national influence, of British military training, contributions to multinational peace-keeping, and even "surgical" interventions designed, for example, to shift the momentum of a local conflict. The government's manifesto pledge rightly protects the nuclear deterrent. Overall, however, the scale of national investment in traditional defence will need tough evaluation against competing claims: and the Ministry of Defence's age-old inability to live within its allocated means should no longer be tolerated. Competing claims clearly include those of the intelligence agencies, and the police (whose job, e.g. in combatting organised crime, will be made harder by Brexit).
- (f) **Soft power.** More optimistically, the confused but hyper-connected post-crisis world should play to some of Britain's strengths. The UK should be well-placed to take advantage of the development of teleworking, e-health and distance learning that the shift from physical to virtual interaction should entail. That shift will also exacerbate the problems of mis/disinformation, especially in a world of battling narratives. Here there are huge opportunities for those who can provide trusted information and clear analyses, whether through the media (the BBC pre-eminently) or through the interactions of diplomats and intelligence exchange. Understanding, foresight and reliable information should be valuable British currency in the years ahead and deserve proper investment.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.ft.com/content/8f76a4c6-7d7a-11ea-82f6-150830b3b99a>

**Relations with the European Union.** Recent weeks have strained the EU. As with the migration crisis of 2015, the pandemic poses an especially acute challenge to an organisation which has to try to develop agreed responses amongst 27 sovereign member states, each in a condition of high anxiety. Matters of health remain for now a national responsibility, with little role for EU institutions beyond some coordination. But measures to safeguard the European economy are a different matter: and here the politics have been turbulent, with major tensions between weaker and stronger economies. Emergency action by the European Central Bank has helped – as has agreement by national leaders to a half-trillion-euro package of emergency aid. But further dispute can be expected once the Commission tables its proposals for a major recovery fund.

So the stakes for the EU's future remain high: but the situation is less “existential crisis” than the EU doing what it so often has to – gradually developing compromise between sharply differing national and philosophical viewpoints. European leaders are simply too heavily invested in their joint enterprise to let it founder. Even the degree of disenchantment evinced in certain member states (Italy in particular, and with some justice, feels that European solidarity has been in short supply in recent years) is backhanded testimony to what the 27 have come to expect of “Europe”. What is true of governments is even truer of their publics; research undertaken last year by ECFR in conjunction with YouGov<sup>2</sup> revealed record levels of public support for the EU, with popular support for coordinated European action on the global stage particularly pronounced<sup>3</sup>. It will also help the EU that the German presidency in the second half of 2020 will bring Chancellor Merkel back to centre-stage.

In sum, the IR is likely to have to reckon with a continental Europe that still aspires to work together; that exerts an even stronger gravitational pull (mass x proximity) on the UK economy as globalisation yields to regionalisation; and which, for all its evident deficiencies as a geopolitical actor, will approach the wider world with attitudes more in tune with those of Britain than other major powers. The huge continuing importance of the EU to Britain is implicit in many of the IR recommendations made above, whether in relation to Africa (UK aid will surely be more effective if coordinated with the world's biggest donor), or to the threat of unregulated migration (bearing in mind the problems the UK would face if France withdrew its permission for Britain to exercise its border controls on French territory).

**Outside the EU institutions, the UK will have to work differently, and harder, to make its influence felt.** Bilateral relations with Berlin and Paris, as well as other ‘likeminded’ capitals particularly in the north of Europe, will need even more attention and effort. Britain will find willing partners, especially on those international issues where the extent of its global networks, resources and influence is still recognised. President Macron's idea of a European security council is explicitly intended to keep the UK clutched in. But the UK badly needs to stop overestimating the strength of its hand.

Britain has suffered a damaging loss of trust, and respect. President Macron's lack of sympathy for Brexit has long been understood in London; but the idea persists that

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<sup>2</sup>[https://www.ecfr.eu/article/despite\\_record\\_support\\_eu\\_voters\\_fear\\_collapse\\_of\\_political\\_framework](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/despite_record_support_eu_voters_fear_collapse_of_political_framework)

<sup>3</sup>[https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/popular\\_demand\\_for\\_strong\\_european\\_foreign\\_policy\\_what\\_people\\_want](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/popular_demand_for_strong_european_foreign_policy_what_people_want)

Germany will always be a secret ally. Anyone tempted to think that way should look at this analysis from ECFR's Berlin office about how British stock in German political circles has plummeted.<sup>4</sup> The **ECFR's Coalition Explorer tool**<sup>5</sup> has tracked how, for years now, The Hague has displaced London as Berlin's go-to partner after Paris. Suspicion is now widespread in Europe that Britain has no real intention of instituting effective controls between the mainland and Northern Ireland as required by the withdrawal agreement, or doing other than run down the negotiating clock in 2020. In the absence of real progress by the autumn, capitals across Europe, bored with Brexit and absorbed by their own crises, may be all too ready just to follow the EU Commission's lead, accept the likelihood that the transition period will finish with no deal on the future, and attend to Brexit only as an issue of damage limitation.

Of course, the IR will know how 2020 has worked out. But if 2021 has begun with the acrimony of a failed negotiation, the review will have to reckon with the increased difficulty of preserving cooperation with the EU on just those non-economic issues (security, foreign policy, development) which are its subject. In 2018 a report by an ECFR reference group, **Keeping Europe Safe after Brexit**<sup>6</sup>, urged that these areas be insulated from the wider Brexit fall-out, and suggested ways this could be done. This looks even tougher now than it did then. So it is vitally important, for both Britain and its European neighbours, that the IR moderates its inevitable bullishness with careful attention to what governments and peoples across Europe are actually thinking. A major ECFR "**COVID-19 impact**" poll, the results of which will be available in the summer and available ECFR's website, should throw interesting light in that regard.

**May 2020**

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_brexit\\_weltschmerz\\_an\\_era\\_ends](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_brexit_weltschmerz_an_era_ends)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ecfr.eu/eucoalitionexplorer>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/pr/keeping\\_europe\\_safe\\_after\\_brexit](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/pr/keeping_europe_safe_after_brexit)