

The FCO and the Integrated Review

Written Evidence Submission

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Part of my research focuses on UK foreign policy and how this will develop in the post-Brexit environment. I have a particular interest in UK engagement with multilateral institutions. I am submitting this in a personal capacity and my evidence and the views expressed therein should be taken as a reflection or representation of those of UCL.

Executive Summary:

1. For 75 years the international rules-based system has been one of the main foundations of the UK's capacity to exercise influence internationally.
2. The UK has helped construct and develop many of the key multilateral institutions that constitute this system - notably the UN, IMF, World Bank, WTO, NATO, EU etc. Support for multilateralism has therefore become part of the DNA of UK foreign policy (understood here as including defence, development and security as well as diplomacy).
3. This system has been crucial in ensuring the UK's ongoing influence and relevance as an international actor; and its capacity to protect, promote and pursue British interests. Maintenance of this system is therefore in and of itself a core British interest.
4. A primary focus of the Integrated Review should therefore be about how the UK can maintain and strengthen the rules-based multilateral system - something the FCO described as being 'a key priority of British diplomacy' in March 2019. This requires a commitment both to values and resourcing and to ensuring the FCO is a properly empowered actor at the heart of this process.
5. Brexit, and especially the Future Relationship negotiations between the UK and EU, create significant and particular challenges for the UK in terms of how it defines, constructs and pursues its foreign policy. In particular, it is the source of very significant ongoing uncertainty externally as to the nature of the UK's commitment to its European allies and the kind of partner it can be to other states.
6. However, whilst Brexit has certainly created new problems for UK foreign policy-making, it also represents an opportunity for a long overdue major strategic re-evaluation of UK foreign policy and how this should be developed and enacted.
7. In this context, the Integrated Review presents a chance for politicians and policy-makers to set out a clear and enduring vision for UK foreign policy, filling a leadership vacuum that has existed for nearly two decades and answering the key questions of what UK foreign policy is for in the 21st century, and what kind of power the UK wishes to be internationally.
8. The Government faces difficult decisions in terms of resource allocation - significantly exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, if the decision is that the UK is to remain an active and activist power commensurate, for example, with its responsibilities as a P-5 member of the Security Council, then sufficient resources must be made available to avoid a significant capabilities-expectations gap opening up that could cause reputational damage and reduce the UK's international standing, credibility and influence.

9. Consequently, the Integrated Review must start by determining the UK's international priorities and cannot become an ex post exercise in justifying a budget pre-determined by the Treasury. Nor should the Government pursue major institutional change and upheaval - particularly a mooted merger of DfID with the FCO - as an alternative to properly resourcing the FCO, particularly given that DfID has become a highly effective tool for UK influence and impact internationally in its own right.

Strategic Vision & Leadership

10. For almost two decades the UK has lacked a clear strategic vision for its foreign policy. Successive governments have committed themselves to maintaining the UK's influence internationally and to playing an activist role in key international institutions which are entirely respectable objectives. However, the last serious attempt to articulate a particular vision of British international engagement came with Tony Blair's 'Doctrine of the International Community' speech in Chicago in 1999.
11. It is clear that the UK has the core elements required for a successful foreign policy: tools, access, motivation, abilities. However there has in the words of one POLMIL official been 'a lack of strategic consistency' or 'the ability to go beyond next year's spending round and the next election'. Rather, pragmatism has been the watchword and whilst an important quality, it is no substitute for strategic clarity.
12. In recent years, and particularly since the 2010 Coalition Government, there has been a trend towards retrenchment and greater introspection in UK foreign policy - unsurprising given the costs in lives and money of British involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq; and the need to address the consequences of the Global Financial Crisis.
13. However, the consequence has been a sense of the UK being in strategic retreat. Having been a key player in European-led efforts to find a negotiated solution to the Iranian nuclear crisis, for example, the UK was by contrast absent from the main diplomatic efforts in response to the Ukraine Crisis (led by Germany and France); it was also sidelined in the international response to Syria following a vote in the House of Commons precluding military intervention.
14. Following the 2016 Brexit referendum decision, the UK has been focused primarily on concluding highly complex negotiations both to withdraw from the EU and agree a new future relationship with former EU partners. This has left the UK with a much-reduced 'bandwidth' for its broader foreign policy; it has also left international partners questioning both its capacity and willingness to play a meaningful international role.
15. These challenges are exacerbated by the current difficulties in the UK-EU Future Relationship negotiations and particularly the impression being created of UK unwillingness to live up to its commitments vis-a-vis the Withdrawal Agreement. A key test of this is the implementation of the Northern Ireland protocol. This will be taken as a benchmark of the UK's reliability and trustworthiness by external partners with whom it seeks to strike trade and other agreements. The reputational risks to the UK of being seen as unreliable in this regard must not be underestimated. Indeed, the Democrat-controlled House of Representative in the US has declared that there will be no UK-US FTA if commitments to Northern Ireland are not fully respected and enacted.
16. Taking these factors together, the major strategic risk the UK currently faces is that among external partners the impression of strategic drift that characterised the 2010s

gives way to one of strategic retreat in the post-Brexit period. As Andrew Glencross and David McCourt argued in 2018, Brexit ‘unsettles other countries’ expectations about the UK’s role in the world’ (2018:4).

17. A priority of the Integrated Review must therefore be to arrest this view and provide a clear and unambiguous statement of the kind of role the UK seeks to play in the coming decades and - crucially - the resources it will commit in pursuit of that. This will be essential if the concept of ‘Global Britain’ is to be meaningful in a practical sense.
18. The UK’s international credibility rests on its ability and willingness to match its words with deeds. Crucial to the review process therefore is to ensure that the UK’s reputation and capacity to be a responsible, consensus-building power - seen for example in its ability and willingness to champion the international governance agenda around humanitarianism and human rights at the UN - are placed front and centre in how the UK engages with the international system in future.

The role of the FCO

19. The FCO’s position at the heart of UK foreign policy-making and diplomacy means it must play a central leadership role in the Integrated Review both in terms of helping set the strategic vision called for above; and in providing the means through which this vision is then enacted.
20. Its responsibility for and management of the UK’s extensive global diplomatic network - both bilaterally and multilaterally - means the FCO is uniquely placed both to communicate the UK’s foreign policy vision outwards and to ensure London is fully cognisant of its impact and the responses it receives. It is crucial, therefore, that the FCO is sufficiently resourced to provide the requisite analytical, language and diplomatic capacity to play the role for which it was designed.
21. The FCO has faced very significant pressures on its budget over the longer term under both Conservative and Labour administrations, although the cuts administered under the Coalition’s austerity policies were particularly deep. Thus the FCO has seen its analytical and diplomatic capacity increasingly hollowed out.
22. There have been proposals to merge the FCO with DfID - which has a budget around four times that of the FCO’s approximately £2.4bn - as a means of addressing this funding shortage.
23. Some, including former International Trade Secretary Liam Fox, have also suggested that the return of responsibility for overseas development aid and policy to the FCO - where it sat prior to the 1997 establishment of DfID - would also address a problem with DfID running a separate, rival foreign policy.
24. This kind of major institutional change is ill-advised for a number of reasons:
 - (i) The FCO and DfID (along with the MoD) play very different and distinct roles within the UK’s broader foreign policy and their institutional complementarity is therefore not as straightforward as is often assumed.
 - (ii) DfID does not run a separate foreign policy. It manages one important component of the UK’s wider international engagement. It is moreover very highly regarded for its success in ensuring the UK is one of the few among the wealthier states to be able to live up to the commitment of 0.7% of GDP to

international aid. Thus, it has become a significant soft power asset, giving the UK important reputational and political capital.

- (iii) Departmental mergers are highly complex and difficult undertakings. Significant time is required to restructure and bring together different teams, processes and cultures to ensure they can function successfully. It is not at all clear in this case whether the supposed advantages of a merger would outweigh such challenges. Moreover, such a policy would mean significant disruption and distraction over an extended period, reducing the effectiveness of a newly-enlarged FCO at the worst possible moment.
- (iv) A merger of the FCO and DfID is not an alternative to providing the FCO with sufficient resources and capacity in its own right to enable it to fulfil its responsibilities as effectively as possible.

25. Ultimately, a core objective of the Integrated Review must therefore be to enhance and augment the capacities of the FCO without undermining the other institutions contributing to the making and pursuit of UK foreign policy objectives.

The Covid-19 Challenge

- 26. The requirements for a clear and strategically-focused UK foreign policy have been thrown into even sharper relief by the Covid-19 pandemic. This is posing an enormous challenge to states globally, placing massive strain on healthcare systems and resulting in an unprecedented reduction in economic activity.
- 27. It has also highlighted and exacerbated tensions and weaknesses in the international system. Unsurprisingly, national governments have prioritised the protection of their own citizens, leading to increasing competition for scarce medical resources.
- 28. Of considerable longer-term concern is the growth we have also seen in nationalist sentiment around the world. The increasingly bitter and recriminatory rhetoric that currently characterises US-Chinese official exchanges is an example of how division is undermining global cooperation in responding to the pandemic precisely when it is most needed.
- 29. One question the Integrated Review will therefore need to consider is the potential impact of the pandemic on the international system - and particularly where power and influence lie once the worst has passed. For the UK, a key risk over the longer-term is that one consequence is a weakening of the multilateral institutions and rules-based system upon which it relies.
- 30. The UK therefore has a clear interest in maintaining and buttressing the key institutions involved in the response, and in acting a consensus-builder and facilitator for international cooperation.
- 31. In this regard, its co-leadership role in supporting efforts at finding a vaccine - co-hosting the Coronavirus Global Response Summit on 4 May and committing £250 million for international vaccine research - are significant contributions.
- 32. This response is a model for how the UK should think about international action within the context of the Integrated Review. It is an important reminder of what the UK can and should be achieving as an engaged and responsible international actor. It

also demonstrates to others the value and importance of maintaining the international rules-based, multilateral system at a time when this is being increasingly questioned.

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