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Summary:

- The government should reconsider 'influence' as a National Security Objective. It should instead be regarded as a means to an end
- The Integrated Review should go further than past reviews by explaining how government's National Security Objectives relate to each other and which is to be prioritised in the event of a difficult trade-off
- The assumptions underpinning the viability of the government's expansive 'Global Britain' vision will be brought under further strain by the fallout from Covid-19

Note: This submission focuses on the second area of the Committee's call for evidence: the United Kingdom's foreign policy strategy in the forthcoming Integrated Review of Foreign Policy, Defence, Security and International Development (hereafter 'Integrated Review'). As such, it does not evaluate the efficacy of the review process and how strategies and priorities are updated between reviews.

UK FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGY

1. The priorities of UK foreign policy strategy

The Integrated Review should strive to bring the government's ambitions into line with available resources. This is the crux of responsible statecraft. This may seem obvious, but successive British national security strategies have unfortunately failed to achieve this balance between potentially unlimited ends and finite means. The globalist objectives of the 2010 and 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Reviews (SDSRs), as well as the 2018 National Security Capability Review (NSCR), have been disproportionate to the resources allocated to defence and foreign affairs.¹ This was recently acknowledged by Defence Secretary Ben Wallace, who stated that previous reviews have been "overambitious and underfunded".²

The 2015 SDSR set out three overarching objectives:

1. Security ("protect our people")
2. Influence ("project our global influence")
3. Economic growth ("promote our prosperity")

¹ William James, 'Grandiose Strategy? Refining the Study and Practice of Grand Strategy', *The RUSI Journal* (Vol. 165, No. 2, May 2020).

² Georgina Bailey, 'Ben Wallace interview: UK defence isn't fit for purpose – our Armed Forces must adapt to 21st Century threats', *The House Magazine*, 19 June 2020.

These priorities were reiterated in the 2018 NSCR and the FCO's most recent single departmental plan. It is regrettable that 'influence' was retained as an objective, after the 2016 Iraq Inquiry warned about the dangers of doing so.³ It is strategically illiterate to regard 'influence' as a goal in its own right. It should instead be seen as a means to an end. The experience of 2002-2003 is worth exploring briefly.

The UK committed itself so heavily to the US-led invasion of Iraq in part because of the mistaken belief that a larger stake would secure additional influence with the Americans.⁴ A limited package made up of air and naval assets, as well as Special Forces, was considered in late 2002, but the Ministry of Defence feared that not contributing substantial land assets (a division) would "reduce the influence we have over planning".⁵ For his part, Prime Minister Tony Blair believed that Britain had to "steer close to America. If we don't, we will lose our influence to shape what they do."⁶ The level of influence that was ultimately accrued was not proportionate to the substantial costs of British involvement. It is concerning that this thinking has seemingly become entrenched.

By continuing to regard influence as a national objective, the government risks overcommitting itself once again. This is not an outlandish possibility; it is highly likely that the United States would expect a British contribution in the event of conflict with North Korea or Iran. Influence must remain an essential component of the UK's foreign policy strategy, but it should be seen as a vehicle rather than the destination.

If the three goals from the 2015 SDSR and 2018 NSCR are to remain unchanged, then, at the very least, the Integrated Review would benefit from a lengthier discussion on how they relate to each other and which is to be prioritised in the event of a particularly onerous trade-off. Although security was listed as National Security Objective 1 in 2015 and 2018, it was unclear whether security interests should always trump influence or prosperity concerns. Conversely, in the foreword to the 2015 SDSR, Prime Minister David Cameron wrote that "the first step in our National Security Strategy is to ensure our economy is, and remains, strong".⁷ This seemed to suggest that National Security Objective 3 ("promote our prosperity") was, in practice, the government's top priority.

³ Committee of Privy Counsellors, *The Report of the Iraq Inquiry: Section 7* (London: The Stationery Office, 2016), p. 631.

⁴ David Betz and Anthony Cormack, 'Iraq, Afghanistan and British Strategy', *Orbis* (Vol. 53, No. 2, 2009, pp. 319-336); David Blagden, 'Global multipolarity, European security and implications for UK grand strategy: back to the future, once again', *International Affairs* (Vol. 91, No. 2, 2015, pp. 333-350); Patrick Porter, *Blunder: Britain's War in Iraq* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁵ Iraq Inquiry: Section 6.1, p. 293.

⁶ Robin Cook, *The Point of Departure* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), Thursday 7 March, pp. 115-116.

⁷ HM Government, *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015* (London: The Stationery Office, 2015), p. 5.

This correlated with the government's behaviour in condoning foreign ownership of Critical National Infrastructure. Concerns have been raised over Chinese involvement in the UK's energy and telecoms networks. At best, security concerns came second to economic interests under the governments of David Cameron and Theresa May. At worst, the pursuit of the latter undermined the former. Until the U-turn on Huawei this year, it seemed that the Johnson administration was following suit. The Integrated Review is therefore the ideal opportunity for the new government to clarify its priorities.

These objectives should also filter into the UK's wider foreign policy so that it can better prioritise its diplomatic assets. The 2015 SDSR did not rank allies in importance. This is understandable, given the fact that these documents are public and read closely by both friends and potential adversaries. Based on the order in which they were mentioned, one could assume that NATO, the United States, France and Germany were the government's priorities in 2015. Since then, of course, Britain voted to leave the European Union, while the United States elected Donald J. Trump as president, an erratic leader who has a transactional and zero-sum approach to international relations.

In the aftermath of the Brexit vote, ministers adopted the slogan of 'Global Britain' to describe the UK's foreign policy. The government went nearly two years without articulating the meaning and scope of this concept. In response to a request from the Foreign Affairs Committee, the government announced in March 2018 that "the vision of Global Britain means being active and influential in all regions, the institutions of the rules-based international order and key global issues". This was an incredibly bold aspiration. Not even the British Empire at the height of its power would target such geographic reach. Only the United States could credibly make this claim today and even that would be questioned in some quarters. The government attached to this "vision" a laundry list of pledges to: invest "in all our relationships across Europe"; "deepen our already close UK-US ties"; maintain "an All of Asia policy"; deepen engagement with Latin America as it "is likely to be increasingly important for British interests"; "grow...our focus on Africa"; and develop a "credible and consistent" policy in the Middle East.⁸

Britain is a major power with interests beyond Europe, but 'Global Britain', as currently defined, is an overly grandiose ambition. Those drafting the Integrated Review should tighten the concept's focus if it is to achieve real outcomes. Grand strategic thinking is ultimately about making choices, however difficult those choices may be. Pretending there are no trade-offs does not make these resource dilemmas disappear. If anything, they are even more acute now, given the likely impact of Covid-19 on Britain's means. The UK will have to live with the economic and political repercussions of this crisis for many years. It is only right that strategic thinking is updated to reflect changing realities.

⁸ 'Memorandum from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office' in House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 'Global Britain', HC 780, Sixth Report of Session 2017-19, 6 March 2018.

This last point raises a wider question about the purpose of these reviews: do these documents represent a genuine attempt to reconcile ends within available means or are they about signalling to audiences at home and abroad? The answer can, of course, be both, but, in that case, the signalling should at least be credible. 'Global Britain' may have been useful in the immediate aftermath of the 2016 referendum to signal that the UK had no intention of turning inwards and pulling up the drawbridge to 'Fortress Britannia'. Four years have passed since the Brexit vote; foreign policy must be about more than branding. Without clear priorities, 'Global Britain' will neither reassure allies nor deter enemies. Why should allies in Europe believe that the UK is "unconditionally committed" to the security of the continent when ministers talk of permanently stationing hard power assets 'East of Suez'?⁹ A similar calculation is being made by Britain's "old friends and new allies"¹⁰ in Asia, who wonder whether the UK has the strength to play an enhanced role in their region, particularly when diplomatic resources are being shifted back to Europe to mitigate the fallout from Brexit.¹¹

Without significant investment in defence and foreign affairs, Britain cannot credibly claim to be a major player in Europe *and* 'East of Suez'. That, in turn, would require political leaders to have an honest conversation with the public about the price they are prepared to pay for a globalist foreign policy. For a foreign policy to be sustainable in the long-term, domestic political support (or at least acquiescence) is required. The government would therefore do well to garner public backing for 'Global Britain', once they have sharpened its focus. At present, a quarter of Britons (and 38% of 2019 Conservative voters) believe that the meaning of 'Global Britain' is "a nation with strong and secure borders, focused on issues at home".¹² That should set alarm bells ringing for those charting a more globalist foreign policy.

In his study of British grand strategy, Dr Rob Johnson argues that setbacks have historically been caused, in part, by ignoring strategic principles. "Catastrophic failure", he adds, has only been averted when those at the helm "recognised the limits to national power and adjusted" course.¹³ It therefore falls on those responsible for the Integrated Review to trim the sails of 'Global Britain'.

II. UK allies and how they shape or contribute to the FCO's strategy

⁹ Theresa May, 'Prime Minister Theresa May's Speech at the 2018 Munich Security Conference, 17 February 2018', speech given at the 2018 Munich Security Conference, Munich, 17 February 2018.

¹⁰ Theresa May, 'The government's negotiating objectives for exiting the EU', speech given at Lancaster House, London, 17 January 2017.

¹¹ Foreign Affairs Committee, 'Global Britain', p. 13.

¹² The British Foreign Policy Group, 'UK Public Opinion on Foreign Policy and Global Affairs Annual Survey – 2020', 23 June 2020.

¹³ Robert Johnson, 'The United Kingdom', in *Comparative Grand Strategy: A Framework and Cases*, eds. Thierry Balzacq, Peter Dombrowski & Simon Reich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 142.

In 1970, Richard Neustadt, a former adviser to President Kennedy, urged future leaders to remember that alliances are a “friendship between government machines”, not individuals.¹⁴ British political leaders would do well to heed his counsel. All too often, Britain’s alliances are seen through rose-tinted glasses. Consider the US-UK alliance, or ‘Special Relationship’ as it is often unhelpfully described. For its part, the United States has special relationships with Israel, Ireland and Saudi Arabia to name but a few. Even Anglophiles in Washington are capable of separating their emotional attachment to the UK from the pursuit of US priorities. President Trump waxes lyrical about Queen Elizabeth II, Sir Winston Churchill and Prime Minister Boris Johnson, but he has ignored British concerns over his policies on Iran and the environment.

Although President Trump may express himself more bluntly than his predecessors, this is not a new phenomenon. A former British ambassador to Washington once cabled home that, “the Americans are very good at compartmentalising their sentimental and sincere affection for Britain from the single minded pursuit of national interest. It is a gap we have to close.”¹⁵ None of this is to suggest that the United States is a bad ally. The deep, institutional bonds between the military and intelligence services are the core of the US-UK alliance. Rather, the goal of this discussion is simply to illustrate that even the closest of friends pursue their own interests when it suits them.

The United States remains the UK’s most important ally. Over the medium-term, however, the United States is going to shift the relative emphasis it puts on Asia as opposed to Europe. President Trump’s focus on China is backed by a rare bipartisan consensus in Congress. This will not change; European allies might take solace in the thought of a Biden presidency, but the harsh reality is that the US gaze is moving further east in accordance with the shift in the global economic and military centre of gravity. Should the UK follow its long-standing ally, or should it prioritise security in the Persian Gulf or on the European mainland?

In thinking about these questions, it is important to remember that alliances, like influence, are a means to an end – greater security. States primarily join together to balance against external threats.¹⁶ Australia, for example, has been calling for a bolstered British presence in Asia not out of some nostalgic desire to see the UK return as an Indo-Pacific player. Rather, Canberra aims to amass and internationalise a strong coalition to deter Chinese assertiveness in the region. The fact that Britain and Australia have strong cultural and historic links is complementary to this endeavour. Australia’s behaviour is perfectly understandable and par for the course in international relations. It does, however, mean

¹⁴ Richard E. Neustadt, *Alliance Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), p. 138.

¹⁵ Sir Christopher Meyer quoted in the Iraq Inquiry: Section 3.1, p. 344.

¹⁶ Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 263-265.

that the UK needs to be discerning in its alliances. What are the UK's interests 'East of Suez' compared to Europe? Should the UK allocate more resources to deter Russia or China? If the former, the concerns of allies in Europe should come above those in Asia. The thinking around these questions must be sharper now, given that the US commitment to Europe is under review.¹⁷

A public document such as the Integrated Review is not the place for a candid ranking of the UK's alliances. It is, however, vitally important that the National Security Council subjects its internal assessment to independent or semi-independent scrutiny behind closed doors. In 2016, the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy urged the government to "'game' hypothetical scenarios where the UK's relationships with key allies and partners are called into conflict" in order "to establish which aspects of the UK's key relationships are the most important".¹⁸ The need for such a process was recently underscored by the public way in which the Huawei debate played out. The U-turn highlighted the problems that arise from not ordering the National Security Objectives (particularly security and prosperity). It also demonstrated the challenge in weighing time-honoured alliances (Five Eyes) with new partnerships.

The UK has a web of alliances which spans the globe. Many of these have been maintained long after their initial *raison d' être* (usually a shared threat) disappeared. In her recent study of US alliances, Mira Rapp-Hooper notes the dangers of "alliance dilation", which she defines as "a subtle expansion of commitments beyond those indicated by the original alliance".¹⁹ Longstanding allies can come to view their ally's interests as synonymous with their own (which, in part, explains why some alliances endure). It is therefore vital that policymakers stress-test the UK's interests against those of its allies. Do their interests still coincide? Asking such questions would mitigate the risk of alliance creep. The Integrated Review can play a useful role here, but only if it is seen as part of an iterative process to evaluate whether judgements still reflect changing conditions.

III. Conclusion

Given this new era of great power competition, security should be placed explicitly as the FCO's primary goal, followed by prosperity. Short-term economic gains cannot come at the cost of long-term insecurity. The Integrated Review should reconsider 'influence' as a National Security Objective. It must of course remain integral to British strategy, but it should instead be regarded as a means to an end. A similar approach must be taken towards

¹⁷ Oliver Moody, 'Donald Trump makes good on threat to withdraw troops from Germany', *The Times*, 12 June 2020.

¹⁸ Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, 'National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015', HL Paper 18 / HC 153, First Report of Session 2016–17, 10 July 2016.

¹⁹ Mira Rapp-Hooper, *Shields of the Republic: The Triumph and Peril of America's Alliances* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), p. 92.

Britain's global network of alliances. Finally, the government should seek to clarify the meaning and scope of its 'Global Britain' vision.

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