

THE BFPG'S RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

1. The British Foreign Policy Group (BFPG) is an independent, non-partisan think tank dedicated to advancing the UK's global influence, at a crucial time in the nation's modern history. Our core objective is to bridge the link between the domestic and international spheres – recognising that Britain's foreign policy choices and challenges are shaped by our social landscape at home, and the political constraints of our allies and strategic rivals. In addition to exploring the UK's evolving geopolitical opportunities and challenges, we conduct in-depth qualitative and quantitative social research on a range of issues pertaining to foreign policy and international affairs.
2. The BFPG has been conducting qualitative and quantitative research on public opinion since 2017. We publish an annual survey, which explores citizens' views on a wide range of foreign policy issues, their preferences and priorities in our foreign expenditure, and the tone and values underpinning our foreign policy. We have also, in 2019 and 2020, expanded the social dimensions of this research, to better capture the myriad influences shaping citizens' perspectives, including demographic and socio-economic factors, and citizens' lived experiences of mobility – both in terms of international travel and lifetime residence mobility.
3. In addition to our various forms of quantitative and qualitative public opinion research, the BFPG conducts research within towns, cities and communities across the UK. These projects intend to better explore the regional dimensions of variations in public opinion, and also to obtain a more comprehensive and granular understanding of the local 'ecosystem' of international engagement. One such programme has been the National Engagement Programme, which has been supported by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, as a pioneering means of engaging both stakeholders and citizens in several cities across the UK.
4. It is the strong belief of the BFPG that the Global Britain project, and our foreign policy activities more generally, will only prove a success if public consent is sought and secured amongst the British people. We therefore seek to help the Government to better understand the existing landscape of public opinion, and stakeholder opinion around the UK, as well as highlighting the deficiencies of knowledge, engagement and support towards the UK's international objectives.

OBSTACLES TO BUILDING PUBLIC CONSENT

5. The BFPG's social research has identified several core obstacles to building public consent towards the Global Britain project. These are both practical and conceptual in nature:
 - a. It is difficult to identify a substantial degree of consensus around a vision for the UK's role in the world. The nation is deeply divided around social, cultural, political and economic preferences, and these divisions are carried through into public opinion on foreign policy.
 - b. Significant socio-economic, gender, educational, and regional, distinctions can be observed as underpinning foreign policy preferences. These include citizens' lived experiences of mobility, with disparities of access to international travel appearing to be an especially strong contributing factor.

- c. International identities appear to now be an important expression of polarised visions for the nation's future and deeper social and political values.
 - d. One of the most politicised aspects of the UK's foreign policy is the question of the emphasis that should be placed on a values-led agenda, or the nation's economic and strategic interests. Overall, Britons are becoming more inclined to want the UK's own national interests to be emphasised in aid and development spending.
 - e. While Britons have become considerably more knowledgeable and interested in foreign policy since the 2016 EU Referendum, large gaps remain between levels of self-reported interest and knowledge, and tremendous socio-economic and regional disparities persist.
 - f. The consensus that once existed amongst citizens around the nation's allies and strategic rivals has been significantly eroded. Britons are now sceptical and increasingly suspicious about the moral foundations of other nations.
 - g. The Global Britain project is introducing many new concepts to citizens, which have not been debated extensively in public life over recent years. Knowledge and salience of issues such as trade are very low, and subject to influence by both government and other actors.
 - h. Citizens' understanding of the Global Britain project is extremely limited, and preferences around its realisation are deeply governed by partisan identities around the Brexit vote.
6. In addition, the BFPG's regional engagement programmes have underscored the need to develop greater institutional understanding and interaction with city and regional leaders, businesses, key international sectors such as higher education institutions, and with citizens.
 7. While the National Engagement Programme, a partnership between the BFPG and the FCO, is still ongoing, we have already observed that there are vast differences in the level of sophistication in regional engagement activities around the UK, and that these influence citizens' own perceptions of different policy issues.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE BFPG'S SOCIAL RESEARCH

Lived Experiences of Mobility

8. Our research in 2019 and 2020 has found that one of the most important factors shaping citizens' views on foreign affairs is their lived experience of mobility.
 - a. Around 42% of Britons did not travel at all for leisure in 2019, and socio-economic and regional inequalities appear to play an important role in shaping citizens' access to travel opportunities. These are strikingly expressed via the polarisation between Remain and Leave voters, with Remain voters considerably more likely to have travelled abroad.
 - b. These experiences of travelling and experiencing other cultures shape fundamental views on foreign policy. For example, compared to those who did not travel in 2019, Britons who travelled frequently are 27 percentage points more likely to feel informed about foreign affairs (78% to 51%) and 23 percentage points more likely to advocate for increased expenditure on international engagement and programmes (39% to 16%).

International Identities

9. International identities in Britain are becoming more concretely fused onto the broader trends towards social and political polarisation. The proportion of Britons who are unsure about their international identities has fallen in the past year, and the majority of those switching from uncertain to having a view are those *actively rejecting* identities. This reflects the increasing degree of tribalism around international identities – which are expressed distinctly between both political party preferences and Leave-Remain identities.

Interest and Knowledge in UK Foreign Policy

10. Interest and self-reported knowledge in the UK's international activities has been growing steadily since 2017, as a result of the greater prominence of foreign policy debates in the aftermath of the Brexit vote.
 - a. Nonetheless, a number of different demographics continue to hold disproportionately low levels of knowledge and interest, with women, Leave voters, residents in the North East, East of England, Wales and the East Midlands all vulnerable to disengagement.

Foreign Expenditure and Priorities

11. Most Britons want the UK's international expenditure to stay at its current levels. The proportion of Britons favouring both increases and reductions in our foreign policy funding has fallen, with both sides more likely to favour a cautious approach of maintaining the status quo.
 - a. Most Britons want our foreign policy to balance strategic and humanitarian principles, but this is an area of increasing polarisation along party-political lines. Overall, 36% of Britons would prefer that Britain's international activities emphasise economic and strategic defence interests, 16% would like our foreign policy to emphasise democracy and human rights, and 32% favour a balance between the two.

Advancing the UK's Interests

12. Britons support aid and development spending on areas seen as basic human rights, but many also want a stronger emphasis on the UK's interests.
 - a. When asked to consider how the UK should focus its aid and development spending, 31% of Britons choose combatting poverty as a priority, followed closely by 30% who choose providing infrastructure to provide essential public services, such as sewers and clean water, and 29% who choose basic health programmes, such as vaccinations.
 - b. A quarter of Britons believe our aid should be directed to 'create new investment opportunities for the UK' and 16% want aid directed to programmes discouraging immigration from poorer countries to wealthier nations, such as Britain.

Multilateralism and Global Allies

13. Support for retaining the UK's NATO membership remains strong. A majority of Britons (67%) support the UK maintaining its membership of NATO, with just 11% of the population actively against our membership. However, nearly a quarter of Britons (23%) are unsure, indicating a weak level of knowledge about NATO's purpose and relevance to Britain's security interests.

- a. Moreover, there is very little consensus about our strongest global allies. Britons are divided between favouring the United States (29%), the Commonwealth (25%), and other Anglosphere nations such as Australia as our ‘best friend in the world’, and these relationships are becoming increasingly politicised around party-political and Brexit divides.

Critical Threats to the UK’s Future

14. Aside from the coronavirus pandemic, Britons regard international terrorism, cyber-attacks, political instability in the Middle East and North Korea’s nuclear programme as critical threats to geopolitical security.
 - a. Older Britons and those without a university education are much more likely to regard every geopolitical and security threat as ‘critical’ than younger and university-educated Britons.
 - b. Climate change is the only issue outside of the defence spectrum which is regarded as a critical threat by the majority of Britons (53%).

Global Britain

15. Britons’ understanding of the ‘Global Britain’ project is complex and often contradictory. Overall, the most popular understanding of ‘Global Britain’ is for the UK to become ‘a champion of free trade and globalisation’, followed by the notion of Britain as ‘a diplomatic powerhouse, brokering negotiations in Britain’s interests and helping to facilitate international cooperation on shared challenges’.
 - a. However, a quarter of Britons (and 38% of 2019 Conservative voters) indicated that their understanding of Global Britain is ‘A nation with strong and secure borders, focused on issues at home’.
 - b. Global Britain messages that promote strong defensive capabilities, or moral and values-based leadership, are much less popular overall.
 - c. Support for core Global Britain narratives is deeply polarised along party-political lines, inspiring a high degree of volatility in public opinion. Many of the voters who would have traditionally been instinctively opposed to its messages have, through their party-political allegiances and Brexit identities, found themselves supportive. Equally, many citizens who would have traditionally supported internationalism, and an open and connected foreign policy, have been discouraged from upholding these values because of the close relationship of the Global Britain project to the Leave campaign and the Brexit Referendum.
 - d. Significantly, 28% of Britons are unsure about what Global Britain really means.

COVID-19

16. At the end of April and the beginning of May, we re-ran a number of sections of the BFPG’s annual survey, selected to identify areas of fluctuation in public opinion. We found that the COVID-19 crisis is indeed influencing citizens’ instinctive preferences for the UK’s role in the world, their trust in the Government, and our relationships with other nations.
 - a. While some of these findings were unique to the pandemic – for example, the dramatic falls in the assessments of the United States’ moral capacity on the world stage – overall, the data suggests that the pandemic has largely deepened and accelerated existing trends. This creates a further degree of urgency around the communications challenge embedded within the Integrated Review.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

17. The Integrated Review and the Global Britain project will need to be sensitive to the enormous task of building public consent, in an environment in which public opinion on foreign policy is becoming polarised, and dynamically responsive to political narratives.
 18. It is certainly true that, as international identities harden, and perceptions of our global relationships and the critical threats we face as a nation become more contested, the task of bringing the country together around a vision for our role in the world becomes more challenging.
 19. Despite narratives of national unity, the COVID-19 pandemic appears to have accelerated and further deepened these trends, further complicating the task for the FCO and the Government more generally.
 20. Educational attainment and lived experiences with mobility remain significant predictive factors in public attitudes, raising significant questions around equality of access to international opportunities.
 21. So too is it patently clear, both from the social research BFPG has conducted, and our partnership programmes with the FCO in the UK's cities and regions, that a one-size-fits-all approach to foreign policy engagement will not be successful in making the most of the UK's existing assets, and better harnessing under-utilised talent and human capital.
 22. The BFPG therefore recommends that the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, in its role scrutinising the Integrated Review and the FCO's leadership within the project, champions the need to invest heavily in understanding, seeking and achieving public consent – a task that will only be effective if attention is paid to the diversity of viewpoints and lived experiences, as well as the deficits in access to international opportunities, that continue to shape public opinion in Britain in 2020.
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DATA NOTES

This submission presents the findings of nationally representative surveys of British adults led by the British Foreign Policy Group (BFPG), with the fieldwork undertaken by Opinium Research. These surveys in 2020 build on the previous surveys conducted by the BFPG in 2017 and 2019. Fieldwork was conducted by Opinium Research over two sessions, incorporating the full questionnaire, to minimise the influence of topicality: 21-24 Jan and 7-11 Feb 2020. Additional surveys were conducted at the end of April and the start of May, to specifically explore survey areas vulnerable to COVID-19-related volatility. Sample size was 2,000 UK adults per session. Results were weighted to be nationally representative.

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