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Context

For more than 70 years, the UK has enjoyed a privileged position in global affairs and its prosperity and security are closely tied to developments around the world. In 2016, the then-foreign secretary Boris Johnson unveiled plans for a ‘Global Britain’ⁱ. The Integrated Strategic Defence and Security Review (ISDSR) is the opportunity to turn that vision into reality.

The UK’s continued success will not only be measured in terms of its ‘hard power’ assets (military, aid budget or number of aircraft carriers, for example) but also in terms of its ability to work with other countries. To do that, the government needs a coherent narrative: it must clearly set out the UK’s foreign policy priorities, including how it will cooperate with partners to address global problems. It must also decide what organisational changes are necessary at the heart of government to maximise the UK’s influence across the world: including where to prioritise resources, soft diplomacy skills and expertise inside of Whitehall. The government has already taken a key decision on the future of the UK’s international-facing departments: by announcing the merger of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Department for International Development (DfID) ahead of the findings of the ISDSR. But more work needs to be done.

In January 2020, the Institute for Government published a paper looking at how the UK could work with the EU after Brexitⁱⁱ and what resources the government would need to deliver on its ambitions – but many of the paper’s recommendations can be applied to UK foreign policy more broadly. Our recommendations are drawn from over 70 interviews with officials, diplomats, business executives and civil society leaders from the UK, EU, Switzerland, Norway, Turkey, Canada, the US and India.

The process of the Integrated Review

1. **The ISDR should start by taking stock of the UK’s core selling points**, including:
 - a. The UK’s extensive diplomatic footprint, with embassies in almost every country in the world;
 - b. The fact that the UK has a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and is a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the G7, G8 and G20, the Council of Europe and the Commonwealth, among others;
 - c. The fact that it is a powerful convenor and is recognised for its thought leadership;
 - d. The capabilities and resources it has to back up its pledges;
 - e. Its status as the only G7 country to meet the target of spending 0.7% of GNI on overseas development assistance.

The review should look to compare these assets with those of other major countries like the US, France, China and Germany.

Strategy in UK foreign policy

2. **The government must decide the UK's foreign policy priorities.** The UK has a huge range of interests, but it cannot influence everything and will have to make choices.

2.1 One of the UK's immediate priorities will be to identify where it wants to continue to work with the EU and member states. Boris Johnson, when he was still Foreign Secretary, was very clear that while the UK was leaving the EU, it was not leaving Europe. But that has not stopped the UK's European allies from wondering what the future of UK foreign policy entails.

2.2 The government needs to decide whether it still wants to work with the EU – especially in those areas the UK has traditionally supported strong EU action in like trade and development cooperation.

For example, the EU (Commission and EU27) currently provides around 6% of global official development assistance (ODA). The UK was closely involved with the set-up of the EU Emergency Trust Funds (EUTFs) for Africa which included the participation of other third countries like the US and Norway. Our research also found that some UK businesses are concerned about market access issues in developing markets; if their interests continue to align, the Department for International Trade (DIT) should consider working closely with the Commission and EU embassies abroad where possible.

3. **When deciding the UK's foreign policy priorities, the government should set up consultations with experts and leaders outside of government** to test out its priorities and ideas based in and outside of the UK. These formal and informal networks will continue to remain important long after the review has been published (see point 8).

4. **Being clear on the UK's foreign policy priorities can help government be a more effective foreign policy player too:**

- a. Ministers are more likely to take an interest in countries and organisations when they understand how these affect the government's overall priorities;
- b. Civil servants working on foreign policy can more easily come up with proposals on how to co-operate with, and influence, countries and organisations. A lack of strategic direction from the top hampers internal decision making and can result in conflicting messages about the government's aims;ⁱⁱⁱ
- c. It will help the government to decide where it should allocate resources and effort;
- d. Co-ordination ensures that messages from London to British embassies are consistent. This will also help ensure that British businesses and civil society are clear on the UK's strategic objectives for the EU.

The FCO's resources and capabilities

5. **The UK will need to make sure it has the capabilities it needs to meet its global ambitions.** Between 2009/10 and 2014/15, the FCO suffered a 14% reduction in staff as

a result of its 2010 spending review commitments.^{iv} But Brexit reversed this trend: Theresa May's government committed more resources to British embassies across the EU in terms of postings, local recruits and the financial resources available to them. The FCO also plans to create an additional 250 new posts in London and overseas to support work on EU exit in a third tranche alone.^v But the government needs to do more.

The FCO will need to offer more competitive salaries: In evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee, the FCO argued that "at policy officer level our base pay is 19% lower than the leading department, while the gap at middle management stands at 20%".^{vi} The committee agreed that "low pay is affecting staff morale and retention, and that similarly qualified staff are offered considerably higher pay at other government departments".^{vii} It is unclear what effect the recently announced merger of the FCO with DfID will have on staff salaries, but Institute for Government analysis of civil service statistics^{viii} shows that the average DfID salary is higher than the FCO equivalent at each grade apart from the most junior staff; if FCO salaries are to be levelled up to their DfID equivalents this may help deal with the some of the morale and retention questions. Furthermore, the Institute for Government's own analysis of figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) broadly supports the FCO's case.^{ix}

- 4.1 The government should also consider increasing the length of diplomatic postings (3 to 5 years) for specialised postings. In addition, it should continue to recruit local specialists with deep and extensive local expertise and privileged networks to work in British embassies. It should also make a more systematic effort to retain them – including through improved and competitive job packages.
- 4.2 British embassies need to be able to host delegations and put on events: Theresa May's government already provided a larger budget for discretionary spending on activities like hosting and sponsoring events in Brussels; but it should consider increasing discretionary spending in British embassies that are likely to receive a growing number of visits from government, parliament or business and civil society delegations.

The government will also need to assess whether British embassies in key capitals have the facilities to host events: some officials we spoke to argued that the current residency in Brussels is overstretched^x – the UK's representative to NATO, the UK's representative to the EU and the British Ambassador to Belgium all currently use it. This makes it difficult to provide a round-the-clock service.

6. **Ministers cannot afford to leave all the UK's engagement up to UK diplomats.** The prime minister's ability to maintain strong personal relationships with world leaders and heads of international organisations will be crucial to ensure the UK can remain influential. UK ministers will need to think about how to use other occasions to promote the UK's broader interests – for example, bilateral or ad hoc meetings in the margins of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), NATO summits and meetings of the G7 and G20. They should also make the most of their visits to Brussels like the US does:

many US officials attending NATO summits will also try to meet with the EU during their visit to Brussels.

7. **The government must invest in building foreign policy expertise in the UK:** the government has already started to provide training on EU and broader foreign policy issues through its diplomatic academies; but the challenge will be to make sure its foreign policy knowledge is up to date. There are several ways the government can do this – some of which it is already doing.

The first is to bring external expertise into government. Departments should continue to run dedicated training courses and lectures on the EU. By January 2020, the FCO's Europe Faculty's Diplomatic Academy had already provided training on EU exit to 249 staff across 10 departments since 2016.^{xi} It also since expanded its training to other areas of foreign and security policy. The FCO has also put in place a scheme that gives academics the opportunity to spend time in the FCO and has created schemes for civil servants so they can develop specialisms.

Second, the government could rejuvenate its scholarships to study abroad, for example at France's prestigious *École Nationale d'Administration* (ENA) where many alumni go on to occupy important positions inside the French Administration. Other EU governments do not just offer scholarships for students at ENA, they also send guest speakers. The UK government should consider doing the same.

The third way in which the government could invest in training and skills is through secondments to international organisations and foreign ministries in other countries. This would be particularly valuable in helping to understand complex institutions like the UN or the EU. As one interviewee put it to the Institute for Government, EU institutions "don't make intuitive sense", so spending time in Brussels, but particularly in the EU institutions, can be valuable.

8. **The government should also draw on the detailed technical expertise available in arm's-length bodies, business groups, civil society organisations, universities and think tanks.** These groups have their own avenues for access and influence abroad. They can offer insight into countries' politics and foreign policy priorities, as well as suggestions for how the government should approach individual countries and advocate its position more effectively.

Think tanks can be powerful conveners and agenda-setters so British embassies should look to host or attend as many events as possible – like the British Embassy Washington does across US states. The government should also consider supporting projects that look at the UK's bilateral relations with the EU or individual member states.

9. **In the UK, the FCO should make the most of embassies in London to build relationships and trust.** This includes making the most of meetings with diplomats based in London.

As one EU diplomat put it to us: “it was not always clear to us that British officials knew what they could and could not say – even in areas that focused on bilateral co-operation [..]”.^{xii}

10. The UK must continue to invest in bilateral relationships and not be afraid to drive the creation of new forums. The UK boasts a number of strong bilateral relationships notably with the US, France and many Commonwealth countries. It should also maintain existing formats such as the ‘E3 group’ for Iran (France, Germany and the UK) and should not be afraid to drive the creation of new forums.

9.1 The government should invest in informal networks and gatherings too. For example, it should also continue to send ministers and senior government officials to annual informal gatherings such as: Tertulias (Spain and the UK); Aurora (Nordic countries and the UK); Pontignano (Italy and the UK); La Colloque (France and Britain) ; Koenigswinter (Germany and the UK); and similar gatherings with non-EU countries too. The UK prime minister and German chancellor have frequently taken part in the Koenigswinter conference. The informal setting can provide more useful and more frank exchanges than formal meetings.

Looking at the EU specifically, these bilateral dialogues will become all the more important now that British diplomats abroad are no longer be invited to take part in EU-wide discussions, such as those hosted at the EU delegations in Moscow or Washington D.C. British diplomats will need to continue to build relationships with EU officials and EU27 and third-country diplomats in the EU, along with civil society actors.

11. The government must use the right tone and language: how much the UK can influence countries around the world will depend on how predisposed countries are to listening to the UK. Communication is therefore essential. A couple of people we spoke to from third countries and member states said that while British officials have been very good at promoting why “Britain is great” since the EU referendum, they have not always convincingly shown what the UK was planning to do differently after Brexit. The government’s strategy should be as much about the ideas it puts forward as it is about the approach and language it uses to frame its ideas. It will need to be mindful of the tone it uses

Conclusion

The UK is and will remain an important international actor. But Brexit is, and should be, an opportunity for the UK to think of new ways of engaging Europe and the rest of the world. The ISDSR has promised to take a more holistic approach at UK foreign policy, bringing more coherence to the UK’s security, defence and development policies.

Most of this evidence has focused on what the UK can do in Europe – but many of the recommendations apply to UK foreign policy toward other parts of the world. The UK’s success will depend on strategy, resources and effort.

References

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- ^{xi} Comptroller and Auditor General, *Implementing the UK’s Exit from the European Union: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office*, Session 2017–19, HC 899, National Audit Office, 2018, p. 17.
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