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The future of UK foreign policy: executive summary

Report

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➤ Executive Summary

Dr Nicholas Kitchen, *LSE IDEAS Editor*

Upon assuming power in May, the United Kingdom's historic coalition government set in motion three exercises that collectively aimed to reshape British foreign policy. Taken together, the new National Security Strategy (NSS), the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) and the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR), seek to lay down the bounds of Britain's future role in the world, articulate Britain's national interests, establish the goals of policy and set the means by which to achieve them.

The salience of this exercise in refocusing UK foreign policy can hardly be understated. British military, diplomatic and aid resources have been stretched over the past fifteen years by Britain's global activism. The UK has committed significant military force to the Balkans twice, to Sierra Leone, Afghanistan and Iraq, and has committed to play a global leadership role on issues such as climate change, debt relief and development. The global economic crisis, catalysed by the banking sector on which so much of the UK's strong economic performance since the mid-1990s relied, has hit Britain worse than most, leaving a budget deficit estimated to be as high as 12% of GDP. The United Kingdom, goes the analysis of the ruling coalition, has been living beyond its means, and the sections of the budget tasked with pursuing British foreign policy will have to accept their share of the inevitable cuts.

Whilst the government denied Opposition claims that this review of UK foreign policy was simply a cost-saving exercise, real strategy is a process of setting constraints as well as establishing goals. Timed to coincide with the government's announcement of what should amount to a grand strategy for the United Kingdom, the cross-party Parliamentary committee for Public Administration released a report that stated that 'the Government in Whitehall has lost the art of making national strategy in relation to defence and security'. Bernard Jenkin, the Conservative chairman, was not alone in his concern that an inability to 'think strategically' was fundamentally undermining the process of reviewing the UK's national strategy.

This report is conceived as an attempt to address this perceived failing. The contributors here – all with long and distinguished careers in British foreign policy – were asked to consider Britain's role in the world in the broadest sense, to identify our core interests and the most appropriate capacities to secure them, and to do so in recognition of the reality of the resource constraints that are coming to define this period in British political history. Doing so in light of the government's proposals serves to shine a light on whether the result of this review process represents a coherent and appropriate refocusing of British strategy that reflects the world as it is, and is realistic about the United Kingdom's place in it.

The result of such a broad remit for the authors is – as one might expect – a range of perspectives and disagreements on certain specific issues. But perhaps surprisingly there is core agreement that whilst the British Government's attempt to review British strategy is laudable, the outcome has been

determined more by political and bureaucratic drivers than by sustained and coherent strategic thought, with the result that the ends and means of UK foreign policy will remain inappropriately matched.

The authors are clear that restoring the health of the British economy, and the UK's ability to compete on the world economic stage, is central to the fulfilment of any of the UK's national interests. A world that is increasingly globalised and multipolar offers opportunities to an outward-looking trading nation. British society and the institutions of British are well adapted to play a leading role in this complex order, but the reality of this world is that economic strength is what matters above all else in maintaining Britain's position as a leading international actor.

The complexity of the international order brings with it security challenges that are multifarious, and which differ from those of the past. Great power war appears obsolete, and whilst its return cannot be ruled out, nuclear weapons render that likelihood barely credible. The National Security Strategy, on balance, is a credible attempt to focus attention on the challenges presented by the world as it is, and whilst the muddled rhetoric of 'risk' and 'threat' is unhelpful, the effort to rank threats in terms of likelihood and impact is welcome, and the conclusions drawn broadly correct.

The author of the NSS, the National Security Council, is to be overwhelmingly welcomed and deserves sustained support. If it can be made to work, it should be able to coordinate foreign policy at the most senior level, making processes more efficient and ensuring the maxims of strategy are transmitted to the various bureaucracies charged with implementation responsibilities. Overcoming the tribalism inherent in Whitehall budget competition will not be easy however, but would be aided by the introduction of a parliamentary oversight committee to audit the Council's work and provide confidence in the ultimate decisions taken.

However, whilst the NSC may have thought realistically about the world we face, the Strategic Defence and Security Review which sets out the UK's response to that world reflects more political and bureaucratic legacies than it does the requirements of the challenges for foreign policy identified by the NSS. In this sense, the linking of the SDSR to the wider Comprehensive Spending Review has undermined the Government's ability to construct coherent strategy. Whilst British interests may indeed range widely across the globe, the maintenance of major capital-intensive military systems reflects a legacy of over-commitment in the Ministry of Defence and bureaucratic competition between the services more than it does the needs of strategy. At the same time, the Government's ring-fencing of DFID, and the commitment to international development expressed as a share of GDP, has not been integrated within strategy: the UK's aid budget needs to be linked more clearly to the national interest.

The biggest bureaucratic loser in recent years, and indeed in the course of this review itself, has been the Foreign Office. On this point the authors are unanimous: substantive diplomatic engagement is what underpins both Britain's hard and soft power, and investment in the UK's diplomatic capacity is crucial to the success of strategy in a world that increasingly depends on specific local knowledge born of strong and sustained relationships. Traditional British diplomatic strengths of flexibility, pragmatism and egalitarianism are uniquely suited to the complex world we face; cuts to what is a relatively inexpensive area of government spending, particularly when compared directly to defence and international development, threaten that legacy and Britain's ability to play a truly effective international role. ■
