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IDEAS' Written Evidence Submission to the Commons' Foreign Affairs Committee – “The Role of the FCO in UK Government”

John Collins

IDEAS was recently [pleased to see](#) that a report it wrote and written evidence it submitted were used extensively by the House of Commons' Foreign Affairs committee in their report on [The Role of the FCO in UK Government](#), published on May 12th.

IDEAS first set out its analysis of the problems in its own special report [The Future of UK Foreign Policy](#), published in November 2010 and featuring contributions from senior politicians, civil servants and diplomatic staff.

Below is the actual written evidence submitted to the Committee by LSE IDEAS:

“The traditional view of the FCO as a global diplomatic network using its local assets and specialised expertise to drive British foreign policy from the heart of government has been undermined in recent years by four developments:

- 1) The shift towards Prime-ministerial control of foreign policy decision-making;
- 2) The loss of regional expertise due in part to budget cuts, but also deriving from...
- 3) ...the shift towards functional structuring of the bureaucracy around particular issues as opposed to maintaining a regional focus;
- 4) The demotion of the role of the UK's embassy network in the policy decision-making process.

The current government has sought to reaffirm the traditional model, and this is to be welcomed. However, the Foreign Secretary's 'prosperity agenda' threatens to cast diplomats as salesmen for UK Plc, rather than as the guardians of the national interest. This is particularly worrying given that priorities of commerce, security and values may clash. Policy making and policy implementation are not inherently separate undertakings, and diplomatic expertise should be reinstated to a central position in formulating foreign policy; the FCO should be more than simply a coordinating body for HMG interests abroad. It is worrying therefore that the FCO's research analysts may be decentralised and placed under the control of individual directorates, depriving them of central coordination and the ability to engage comprehensively with the expertise of academia and think tanks.

The relationship between the FCO and DFID is central to formulating coherent strategy. In certain areas of the world, and in particular in failed and failing states, it may be appropriate for DFID, with its expertise in development, to take the lead role in diplomatic engagement. However, in these areas, FCO and DFID priorities need to be brought into line with each other on the basis of the national interest. Development aid and effort, whilst laudable in its own right, should be predicated on the long term security interests of the UK.

The cumulative impact of the recent NSS, SDSR and CSR undermined the capacities available to the FCO in formulating and implementing UK foreign policy. Whilst the Government's attempt to review British strategy was laudable, and the new processes surrounding the National Security Council to be welcomed, the financial outcomes have 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. In particular, the continued funding of capital-intensive military systems, predicated on the unlikely possibility of major military confrontation, is hard to square with a world where the core threats terrorism and cyber threats require intelligence and technical capacities far more than hardware. A more comprehensive strategy review would have diverted more funds towards the diplomatic assets of the FCO.

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.”

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