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GLOBAL STRATEGIES

The UK's Foreign, Defence, and Security Policy After Brexit

Notes on the roundtable discussion held at
Ditchley Park, 9 November 2017

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GLOBAL STRATEGIES CONNECTS ACADEMICS WITH WHITEHALL AND BEYOND.

The aim of the project is to provide sound practical advice on how strategy can be made more effective in this complex age. The focus is on international strategic issues, often military but also political, diplomatic, economic, and business issues.

To do this, the project brings together a wide range of academics from LSE with senior practitioners past and present, from the UK and overseas. Regular discussions take place with senior officials on the strategic aspects of major issues such as ISIS, Iran, Syria, Russia, Ukraine, China, Migration, and Energy.

The project's close links with Whitehall reflect the value senior officials attach to the discussions they have with us and the quality of our research. Private Global Strategies papers have contributed to the government's work on the Strategic Defence and Security Review, and policy towards Russia and Ukraine.

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The UK's Foreign, Defence, and Security Policy After Brexit

Notes on the roundtable discussion held at
Ditchley Park, 9 November 2017

In November 2017 the Global Strategies Project at LSE IDEAS brought together a group of British politicians, senior officials and other experts at Ditchley Park to discuss options for the UK's foreign, defence, and security policy after Brexit. The discussion covered the UK's future relations with Europe, the US, and China, and the relationship between policymakers and the British public.

Against the background of uncertainties arising from what course Brexit may take, and from the shift of relative economic and military power from West to East, some areas for initiative in UK foreign, defence, and security policy – in addition to threats – were identified. It was clear that dealing effectively with these initiatives and threats will invariably require enlisting the support of partners. These partnerships and their terms, however, have yet to be defined.

The Public Diplomacy Division of NATO generously supported the event as a co-sponsor.

This paper reflects the overall sense of the discussion, but no participant is in any way committed to its specific contents.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH EUROPE

Whatever the final shape of the UK's relations with Europe, many of the European determinants of UK policy will remain unchanged: geography, security threats to Europe, the long-term pressure of migration, and the immediate challenges of terrorism and cross-border crime. Existing institutional channels within the European Union for coping with these challenges, and opportunities to listen and influence at the margin of many meetings, will be closed off by Brexit. New ways of working with the European Union will be needed, and bilateral relationships across Europe will become critical.

The European Union is itself changing rapidly, and its collective decisions and capabilities will also change. While this could make it harder for the UK to work with the European Union in future, there is also a possibility that cooperation could become easier. There are still open questions about the will on both sides to engage in future, and about the areas where the UK and the European Union may try to work together. The extent of cooperation will depend in part on whether the European Union focuses more on its internal structural issues, or beyond its borders.

For example, we discussed one such practical test of the will to work together - UK and European Union policy towards the West Balkans. The region remains in a long-term crisis, characterised by faltering economic performance, Russian attempts at de-stabilisation (including the recent attempted coup in Montenegro), pressures from migration, and criminality. More coordinated action within Europe is urgently needed, and the UK has scope to take the initiative when it chairs the forthcoming West Balkans summit in 2018.

Future mechanisms for the UK and the European Union to work together on foreign policy remain undefined. There are precedents, including the arrangement that Norway has for consulting on European Union foreign and security policy and then aligning itself with the results. But the UK will seek influence in advance rather than merely being an observer with an option to align afterwards. A similar gap needs to be filled in cooperating with the European Union on crises, and on sanctions.

The need for new institutional channels should not, some participants believed, be seen as too big a challenge. It may be possible to find a 'Norway-plus' arrangement that gives the UK a voice and possibly influence in advance of decisions on policy – a practice that works with the US. All approaches are now being considered, including arrangements for formal relations with the European Union, refreshing bilateral partnerships with a number of countries in Europe (most notably France), enhanced cooperation with NATO, and ad hoc coalitions of European partners for addressing specific issues.

Brexit has given more prominence to the debate about the UK's approach to the European Union's Common Defence and Security Policy. It was agreed that in defence and security, there was likely to be "more, not less Europe" in the years ahead; at least in cooperation on defence equipment and joint missions led by the European Union, and that it will be in the UK's interests to support this. Since the UK has at best tolerated European Union initiatives towards European defence integration in the past and consistently worried that these could reduce the effectiveness of NATO, a more positive commitment would require a cultural shift within the government and Whitehall.

It could become politically more feasible for the UK to support greater European integration of defence capabilities after Brexit, depending on the motivation for such integration. If it is driven by militarily effective European powers with the aim of enhancing defence capabilities, this will find more political support in the UK than integration motivated by a broader objective of closer union.

The UK is widely recognised for 'exporting security' to Europe, with its contribution within the European Union of one third of defence research, 25% of total defence spending, and the fifth largest financial source for the Common Defence and Security Policy. This is amplified by the UK's less formal but important contribution of advanced skills, for example in military planning.

The UK has already sent a strong signal to Europe that it will remain unconditionally committed to European defence. How this commitment will be defined is still unclear. Codifying defence and security arrangements within a new UK-European Union treaty would be valuable for the UK, but in return, the UK will have significant demands that may be resisted. Working with the European Union on an ad hoc basis could be more attractive than codifying mutual obligations if these were narrowly formulated in a way that constrains both sides.

Within NATO, the UK already has considerable influence. Not only does it provide the Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe (though the UK's occupancy of this position may be questioned), it will in the summer of 2018 also take over the chairmanship of NATO's Military Committee. The UK can best maintain this influence by deepening bilateral relationships with member countries beyond France and Germany, including Poland, Romania, Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands. The UK should also seek to promote better relations between NATO and the European Union. While the commitment to NATO spending targets remains important despite lean resources, it is equally important to protect defence partnerships where the UK has made a leading contribution, such as the Joint Expeditionary Force and the Northern Group, from political volatility.

THE UK AND THE US

The US will see its overall relationship with the UK post-Brexit solely on the basis of its own interests. As the UK seeks a new trade partnership with the US, the UK will become an arena for the longstanding regulatory contest between the US and Europe, and commercial relationships with the US will be strained by the negotiation of a new trade agreement.

The UK is looking for a new basis for its relations with the US at a time when Donald Trump's policies, and his personal behaviour as President, are amplifying the task of managing the relationship. Trump's personality aside, his presidency represents a significant economic, social, and political shift that is not specific to the US.

Trump draws attention to the tone of his communication rather than the substance, and observers need to watch more carefully what he does rather than what he says. A further challenge for policymakers is to work out how to deal with a weakened State Department, and poorly functioning relationships between agencies in Washington.

The need to re-tune the UK's relationship with the US while interpreting the noise from the White House brings into sharper relief the issues discussed in the Chilcot Report with respect to access and influence. Access is not the same as influence, and UK influence on US policy is likely to remain modest at best. When the politics get choppy, there is still a risk that the UK may become too uncritical a partner to the US. There is the added complication of when and how the UK calls out the President's expression of values.

The UK would be significantly weaker without its deep defence and security relationship with the US. To maintain this relationship, the UK will need to preserve full spectrum capabilities, and to remain active and capable in crisis situations. The US will want the UK to stay involved in large operations like Iraq for political reasons. It also expects the UK to maintain a major role in NATO, and to stick to the objectives of the 2015 strategic review. Other expectations of a major ally include the continuing commitment of the UK to innovation in defence technology, and reliance on the UK's overseas bases and US facilities in the UK.

Matching the UK's constrained resources with US expectations, particularly under a transactional US administration that encourages strategic impatience, may require a new approach. One possibility is to explore whether the US would be receptive to greater specialisation by the UK in areas where it has particular expertise, and closer partnership between the UK and European powers in other areas. This could perhaps allow us to give up some areas of our current capability while maintaining the conviction of the US that the UK – and Europe – are doing enough to make the alliance worthwhile.

It is conceivable that France could offer such an opportunity. France is interested in a more prominent role in transatlantic relations in response to Brexit, and wants to project agreement with the US that Europe should share more of the costs of the Atlantic alliance. There may be scope for the UK to promote a three-cornered discussion about greater specialisation in defence.

Despite the turbulence of the first year of the Trump administration, the UK-US intelligence relationship is holding up well and is expected to remain stable.

RELATIONS WITH THE REST OF THE WORLD AND CHINA

Areas of current strategic focus for the UK were identified as the European neighbourhood, the Gulf and Iran, and East Asia.

On Europe's periphery, the UK needs to demonstrate that it can support Germany with respect to Ukraine, French efforts to stabilise Libya, and assist with stability in the West Balkans. More work needs to be done on the UK's contribution to failing states, and the challenge of fast population growth in sub-Saharan Africa.

In the Gulf region, there are no good alternatives to continuing alignment with Saudi Arabia. Security remains the major threat, and investment flows to the UK the major opportunity.

Longer term, the UK will continue its own pivot to East Asia. The security pact with Japan was pursued to reduce the impact on UK-Japanese relations from Brexit. There are limits to how much attention the UK can devote to chronic problems like North Korea, though in the event of a crisis the UK will need to decide quickly on how it responds to US expectations of support.

The future of the UK's relations with China is the major preoccupation in the region. Like his American counterpart, China's President Xi wants to make his country great again. But there is a crucial difference: not only does Xi have the vision, he also has a strategy, aimed at restoring the dominant regional role that China enjoyed for centuries, while pushing Chinese influence into the wider world.

Long-term Chinese plans being pursued in technology, the supply of energy and raw materials, military capabilities, and new forms of warfare, stretch out as far as 30 years. This scope to plan long-term is supported by the ability to silence opposition at home. Overseas, China will exert growing pressure, particularly on smaller countries, as it seeks to assert its own priorities and to neutralise opposition. One example discussed is the debate within the European Union on closer scrutiny of Chinese foreign direct investment, where China is already using economic ties with certain European countries to prevent a consensus.

If Xi succeeds, Beijing will present most other nations with political, economic, and military challenges unprecedented in modern times. And to date, Xi's efforts have achieved remarkable gains at home and abroad.

Brexit will make it more important for the UK to develop a clear and consistent understanding of its own interests in relation to China, and a willingness to stand up for them. The UK has a lot to offer China, and is currently the largest recipient of Chinese foreign direct investment. It also has a lot to protect. It was suggested that in some areas, such as the relationship with the technology company Huawei, nuclear power development, and other investments by Chinese state-owned enterprises, the UK may need to reassess the balance of its economic and security interests.

The assertion of values, as well as interests, is an essential part of the UK's approach to China's rise. A more robust response is needed when values are under pressure from other policy objectives, whether in relation to censorship of British publishers seeking Chinese market access, conditions attached to Chinese grants to our universities, or protests from China about awkward questions asked in Parliament. Differences over values are intrinsic to the relationship with China.

Once outside the European Union, the UK will need to work more closely in partnership with like-minded countries as it seeks to re-calibrate the relationship with China.

RE-THINKING FOREIGN, DEFENCE, AND SECURITY POLICY

Brexit obliges the UK – voters, officials, parliamentarians – to re-think our place in the world.

Overseas, defining policy and making it effective will require the UK to pay closer attention to the views and concerns of others, helping this country to identify common concerns and priorities. This effort will need to be adequately funded.

At home, the task of devising a new approach to foreign, defence, and security relations that has the broad assent of a significant majority of British people could be undertaken more effectively if accompanied by changes in the way that policy is developed.

In the current situation, where immediate domestic issues dominate discussion, there is a bias against longer term discourse about foreign, defence and security policy, within parliament and with the public. Policy makers need to find ways to clarify choices about the UK's future role and the related spending on defence, diplomacy, development, trade, and soft power assets, and how these affect other priorities – encouraging public debate around them. They should also ensure that they engage

with, and respect, a wide range of viewpoints, with significant effort devoted to explaining foreign policy at home as well as overseas.

The need for better understanding by officials of parliament, and by parliamentarians of the issues underlying foreign, defence and security policy, was also emphasised. The UK's political system produces a constant flow of new ministers who could be more effective if they had gained familiarity over a longer period with the issues they face in office.

Concerns about re-defining the UK's role, however, went beyond the policy process. These included the potential for a mismatch between expectations of a confident, independent role implied by 'Global Britain' and policies that can be delivered. There was also a concern that the weight of the UK relative to other powers on the global stage will erode as most of the growth in the world economy, for the indefinite future, takes place outside Europe and the US. ■

Hugh Sandeman

PARTICIPANTS

HOSTS	Christopher Coker	Co-Head, Global Strategies, LSE IDEAS
	Michael Cox	Director, LSE IDEAS
	Hugh Sandeman	Co-Head, Global Strategies, LSE IDEAS
POLITICIANS	Bim Afolami	MP for Hitchin and Harpenden
	Alistair Burt	MP for North East Bedfordshire, Minister of State, Department of International Development, and Foreign & Commonwealth Office
	Tom Brake	MP for Carshalton and Wallington, Lib Dem Spokesperson for Exiting the EU
	Nusrat Ghani	MP for Wealden, Member Foreign Affairs Committee
	Baroness Arminka Helic	Member, International Relations Committee
	John Spellar	MP for Warley
	Nadhim Zahawi	MP for Stratford on Avon
OFFICIALS	Madeleine Alessandri	Director General, FCO
	Edward Christie	Defence Economist, NATO
	Linda Dann	Head European Bilateral Relations & EU Exit, MoD
	Commodore Rhett Hatcher	Head of Futures & Strategic Analysis, Development Concepts and Doctrine Centre, MoD
	Kathy Leach	Director, Policy Unit, FCO
	Liane Saunders	Strategy Director and Strategic Programmes Coordinator, FCO
	Christian Turner	Deputy National Security Adviser
	Caroline Wilson	Europe Director, FCO
EXPERTS / FORMER OFFICIALS	Gordon Barrass	Visiting Professor, LSE IDEAS and Former Chief of Assessments Staff, Cabinet Office
	Richard Barrons	Former Commander, Joint Forces Command
	Robert Cooper	Special Adviser to Solana and Ashton
	Bill Emmott	Visiting Fellow, All Souls College, former Editor, The Economist
	Steven Erlanger	Chief Diplomatic Correspondent, New York Times
	Julia Himmrich	Dahrendorf Fellow, LSE IDEAS
	Tom McKane	Former DG for Security Policy, MoD; Visiting Senior Fellow, LSE IDEAS and Senior Associate Fellow, RUSI
	Benjamin Martill	Dahrendorf Fellow, LSE IDEAS
	Clovis Meath Baker	Former Director of Intelligence, GCHQ
	Julian Miller	Former Deputy National Security Adviser
	Richard Mottram	Former PS, MoD, and Chairman of JIC

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ADDRESS

LSE IDEAS
9th floor, Towers 1 & 3
Clement's Inn, London
WC2A 2AZ

lse.ac.uk/IDEAS

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