



Briefing on the UK's role at the United Nations in light of the new Secretary-General, a new US administration and Brexit.

This briefing has been prepared by United Nations Association – UK (UNA-UK)¹ to assist Parliamentarians in preparing for the following two House of Lords debates, scheduled for 26 January 2017:

1. Lord Howell of Guildford to move that this House takes note of the United Kingdom's international relations in the light of Brexit, including its future engagement with the United Nations and the United States.
2. Lord Howell of Guildford to move that this House takes note of the Report from the International Relations Committee on The UK and the UN: Priorities for the new Secretary-General (1st Report, HL Paper 60).

The briefing makes the case that a coherent, cross-departmental strategy for the UK's engagement with the United Nations will be required if the UK is to maintain its global influence and help preserve the rules-based international system upon which our prosperity and security depend.

The briefing contains concrete recommendations for UK action and includes extracts from UNA-UK's evidence to the International Relations Committee report, as well as further research.

Overview

In this period of increased domestic and global uncertainty, the UN will play a more valuable role than ever. As acknowledged by the UK's National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015², the UK derives many benefits from the rules-based international order: a system of international laws and norms that has the UN at its heart.

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Britain depends on this system for its security, prosperity and for offering a framework through which problems like climate change, financial crises, pandemics and international terrorism can be tackled. Concerted UK action to invest in the health of the rules-based international order will be required to maintain the UK's influence on the world stage and to realise HMG's vision of a "bold new positive role".³

With a greater proportion of the UK's post-Brexit international affairs set to be channelled through the UN, Britain's stake in the health of the Organisation is set to increase. Following the UK's role in improving the selection process for the UN Secretary-General there is an opportunity to build on progress by supporting the new Secretary-General on various fronts, including mediation, peacekeeping and reform of the UN development system.

To maximise impact, the UK should establish a comprehensive strategy for supporting and strengthening the rules-based international order which will involve: cross-departmental work to support the UN, a greater awareness of the extent to which Britain's own conduct affects the health of the international system; a deepening of the debate around foreign policy issues through sustained civil society engagement; and a strengthening of the UK's diplomatic capacity.

Overstretched and underfunded, the United Nations is close to breaking point. Whilst it is the responsibility of all member states to ensure the Organisation has the resources and political support it needs to be effective, the UK – as a permanent member of the Security Council and a country that benefits greatly from the international system – has a special responsibility to invest in its future.

¹ The United Nations Association – UK is the UK's leading source of independent analysis on the UN and a nationwide grassroots movement campaigning for a safer, fairer and more sustainable world – see www.una.org.uk

² www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/555607/2015_Strategic_Defence_and_Security_Review.pdf

³ Prime Minister, Theresa May, speaking outside Number 10 Downing Street on July 13, 2016

Priorities and challenges for the UN Secretary-General

In 2014, UNA-UK cofounded the ‘1 for 7 Billion’⁴ campaign for a more transparent, meritocratic process for selecting the next Secretary-General. The objectives of the campaign were complemented by the level of interest and commitment shown by members of the House of Lords on this issue.

The UK went on to play a pivotal role in securing the most transparent process in the UN’s history, leading to the appointment of Secretary-General António Guterres. As a former Portuguese Prime Minister with a decade leading the UN Refugee Agency and a strong track record of standing up to powerful states and promoting gender equality, he is widely seen as a strong choice⁵.

Throughout the selection process, there were calls for the next Secretary-General to focus on a dizzying number of issues, and to be not only the world’s top diplomat, but also an inspiring communicator, a voice for the poor, a hard-headed reform driver, a negotiator and more. Mr Guterres will need to prioritise.

Mediation

Secretaries-General have a certain scope for manoeuvre at the beginning of their term. Mr Guterres, who assumed office on 1 January 2017, has stated his commitment to bolstering the UN’s role on matters relative to peace and security, describing his top priority as a “surge of diplomacy for peace”⁶.

Mr Guterres’ early appointments and the restructuring of the Executive Office should support the UN’s ability to act as mediator, and in particular, the Secretary-General’s convening power and ability to act as an interlocutor between major powers.⁷

Against a backdrop of deteriorating relations on the Security Council over Syria, Ukraine and the South China Sea, sustained support from member states will be key if Mr Guterres’ diplomacy drive is to be effective.

“If there is a smaller UN reform area, which I think the Secretary-General should push for, it lies in strengthening the UN’s mediation unit and the roster of people who are called up, because at the moment there is not only a north/south imbalance but a gender imbalance. A lot more can be done to find people from lots of different parts of the world. That is ultimately what we need when going in to mediate a situation and to negotiate. You need people who understand the context and have some sympathy with it.”

Excerpt from UNA-UK Executive Director Natalie Samarasinghe’s oral evidence to the Lords International Relations Committee

Recommendations for UK Government action

- **Support the UN Secretary-General in:**
 - **Setting an ambitious but realistic vision that sees the UN focus on areas where it can make a unique contribution – notably resuming a central role in peace and security**
 - **Actively seeking to improve big power relations, which are hindering the UN’s ability to address pressing conflict and humanitarian situations**
 - **Taking a hands-on approach in conflict negotiations and strengthening the UN’s mediation capacity, including through the appointment of female mediators**
 - **Pressing ahead with recent reform reports on peace operations, peacebuilding, and women, peace and security**

⁴ <http://www.1for7billion.org/>

⁵ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/10/security-council-backs-guterres-chief-161006203451644.html>

⁶ <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=55781#.WIYGFFx2NyU>

⁷ <http://www.innerecitypress.com/guterres1eosg1icp.pdf>

Reforming the UN development system

In evidence to the House of Lords International Relations Committee, UNA-UK highlighted development reform as the primary reform priority for the Secretary-General. Effective reform requires greater awareness and acknowledgement of the parts of the development agenda where the UN, and in particular the UN Secretariat, is not well-placed to lead. In those cases the UN should step back, encourage others to step forwards, and concentrate its efforts on those areas where the UN is uniquely placed to make a difference.

There is limited scope for the Secretary-General to overhaul the development system by himself, although there is scope for providing thought leadership, and in resurrecting some good proposals that have remained unimplemented for nearly 50 years, such as those contained within the capacity study produced by Robert Jackson in 1969.

Since it is politics that prevents these proposals from being implemented, the Secretary-General will have a role in building support for these reforms and encouraging countries to see UN development reform as the missing piece of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Countries, such as the UK, that are important aid donors and have a lot of influence in the multilateral system, should support the UN Secretary-General in efforts to reform the UN development system.

“The UN has not really moved on from the time when it was the only actor on the ground. There are now many actors that work on direct delivery—local NGOs, the many more funders and so on—so we need to look at where the UN still adds value, which I think is in the areas of transition and surge capacity, when a crisis hits and when expertise is needed. On the day-to-day direct delivery side, there are other actors that can probably take a much more prominent role. That means very difficult questions. It means perhaps merging some agencies and some mandates, downsizing some agencies and scrapping some agencies. That is a very difficult and political thing for a Secretary-General to get into, because there are vested interests on the part of donor countries, beneficiary countries and officials, but if there is one fight that it is worth the Secretary-General picking, it would be this one.”

Excerpt from UNA-UK Executive Director Natalie Samarasinghe’s oral evidence to the Lords International Relations Committee

Recommendations for UK Government action:

- **Support the UN Secretary-General in developing a clear plan for the UN’s contribution to implementing the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement on climate change. This plan should focus on encouraging, advising and monitoring states, and be accompanied by proposals for moving the UN away from the direct provision of development services and towards reinforcing its humanitarian response capacity**

Sexual exploitation and abuse by UN peacekeepers

The UN’s effectiveness is contingent on the trust placed in it by peoples and governments. One of the greatest challenges to the UN’s credibility is the allegations of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA) perpetrated by peacekeepers. This is a problem that the UN – and its members – must solve for moral, practical and reputational reasons.

Despite the urgent need to tackle SEA, the UN has so far failed to grips with this issue, which has persisted along with calls for reform for over two decades. An increasing number of UN experts and practitioners⁸, feel that this is due to the impunity that sits at the heart of the peacekeeping system, which gives the UN little power to sanction offenders.

One solution is to bring all troops deployed as part of a UN mission under a common legal framework by establishing an international justice mechanism, such as a court or tribunal. Such a mechanism could operate through an existing body; a UN Security Council (UNSC) mandate; or through a treaty or agreement that troop-contributing countries (TCCs) could be encouraged, or required, to accept.

⁸ Including two House of Lords committees, UN Women and Radhika Coomaraswamy – the first UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, for example.

Yet such a course is fraught with challenges: few if any TCCs would be willing to surrender jurisdiction to an international body, leading to a possible reduction in troop contributions. Yet the experience of the last 21 years suggests that without imposing some form of accountability mechanism the chances of reform are slim.

UNA-UK therefore suggests shifting the debate towards the issue of accountability within TCCs, and looking to drive up standards for the prosecution of SEA by TCCs themselves. Part of this approach will involve naming and shaming TCCs with a poor record, particularly when failings are widespread and systemic.

At the same time there is a need to strengthen the UN's willingness and ability to support TCCs towards that end: addressing issues of coordination, capacity, and UN immunity and confidentiality. We hope this will increase the number of prosecutions by TCCs and reduce impunity. If it does not, then the case for an international justice mechanism will be self-evident.

Recommendations for UK Government action:

- **Support the Secretary-General in responding to calls for an international accountability mechanism to address sexual abuse by peacekeepers**

UK's role at the UN

Policy-making in the UK, as in many countries, has been slow to embrace the extent to which national and global interests overlap. The financial crisis made us look inwards, less prepared to tackle global challenges and support institutions like the UN, which is our best hope for global solutions. There is a risk that Brexit will exacerbate this tendency. Whatever the eventual settlement on the UK's future relationship with the EU, significant resources will be monopolised and questions will be asked of Britain's commitment to international cooperation by our partners around the world.

For Britain to prosper, it must redouble efforts to invest in global solutions. A major part of this should be keeping our key allies like the US engaged, active and coordinated at the Organisation. This should be backed up by a comprehensive strategy for strengthening the UN, including an increased awareness of the extent to which Britain's own conduct, both domestically and on the world stage, affects the wellbeing of the rules-based international system.

While the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has a team focused on UK-UN engagement, all too frequently this is undermined by the impacts of policy and statements from other areas of Government which fail to consider the implications for the rules-based international order in general, or UN-UK relations in particular. Consequently, UK action with respect to the UN can appear piecemeal and disjointed.

For instance, maintaining the 0.7 per cent overseas aid target and recent increases in troop contributions to UN peacekeeping set a positive example and give a significant boost to the international system, whereas on other issues, such as arms export controls, the UK's actions have an undermining effect. This effect was identified by two Parliamentary Select Committees last year: "the UK's support for the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, primarily through arms sales in the face of evidence of IHL violations, is inconsistent with the UK's global leadership role in the rule of law and international rules-based systems."⁹

Recommendations for UK Government action:

- **Develop a cross-departmental strategy for strengthening the UN and the rules-based international order that it serves, with a current focus on supporting the incoming Secretary-General – including by championing UN effectiveness through merit-based senior appointments, and on seeking to keep British allies – the US and other EU countries – engaged, active and coordinated at the Organisation.**

(Recommendations continue on following page)

⁹ 1st Joint Report of the Business, Innovation and Skills and International Development Committees of Session 2016-17 - The use of UK-manufactured arms in Yemen: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmbis/679/67908.htm>

Recommendations for UK Government action (continued):

- **Acknowledge the extent to which Britain's own conduct affects the health of the international system and the standing of international law. The Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary, and senior civil servants should take responsibility across Government for ensuring that statements and policies that could undermine the rules-based international order are prevented, including ensuring a respectful and constructive language is used when addressing United Nations officials.**
- **Deepen public and civil society engagement on foreign policy issues, including by enhancing the #GlobalBritain fund, to support educational and outreach programmes that demonstrate the value of international organisations to UK citizens**
- **Recognise the central role that must be played by UK diplomatic networks if Britain is to sustain or expand its influence on the world stage. This should include increasing funding to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office with an emphasis on operations that support work at the UN level as the UK seeks to earn its keep on the Security Council and operate under the strain of Brexit.**

This briefing was produced by UNA-UK for members of the House of Lords.

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