United Nations Association – UK

Evidence submitted for the Integrated Review 2020

1. What are the key opportunities, challenges, threats and vulnerabilities facing the UK now? (Submissions focusing on rapidly evolving areas such as science, technology, data, cyber, and space are particularly welcome.)

What unifies the key opportunities, challenges, threats and vulnerabilities facing the UK is that they have no regard for international borders. Be they pandemics, cybersecurity, AI, terrorism, or our global chains of supply and commerce the major issues that our government faces cannot be neatly separated into domestic and international elements. This makes international cooperation a necessity – crucial to securing our national interests, security and prosperity. Unfortunately, the multilateral system is under threat – overstretched and underfunded, and with a number of its traditional champions preoccupied with domestic concerns or sceptical of multilateralism.

It is therefore vital that the UK invests in our international system both politically and financially. While this has been a longstanding tenet of UK security strategies, it has not consistently been put into practice – with impacts for the UK's influence as well as for progress on addressing global challenges. The approach taken by the United States provides a salient warning in this regard. The decisions by the US to withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement, the World Health Organisation, UNESCO, the Iran Nuclear deal, and the Human Rights Council have reduced its standing on the world stage and weakened institutions that deliver benefits to its own citizens, as well as vulnerable people across the globe. They have also failed to increase US influence in these institutions.

There is now an opportunity for the UK to step into the breach, by making contributions to UN peace operations and human rights work, and providing leadership on arms control (including on lethal autonomous weapons) and atrocity prevention – in line with the UK's stated desire to be a "global force for good". To support this objective, the UK should also ensure that it sets an example to others by fulfilling its obligations and commitments under international law and agreements, and by engaging positively with UN human rights and other such mechanisms.

2. What are the key global and domestic trends affecting UK international policy and national security out to 2030, and how should the government prioritise its efforts in response to these?

In terms of the global threat environment, there are a number of interlinked challenges: the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on stability, as it fuels the first rise in global poverty in over two decades and the first fall in human development since the UN launched the Human Development Index in 1990; the existential threats posed by climate change and biodiversity loss, as well as by resurgent nuclear tensions and the breakdown of international arms control frameworks; the rapid shifts in demography and technology, including the development of lethal autonomous weapons and impacts of the fourth

industrial revolution; and popular discontent and distrust of institutions, which the UN Secretary-General has described as a "horseman of the apocalypse".

These issues are more challenging to address because of three trends in international sphere:

The first is the trend towards multipolarity whereby the relative gap between top and mid-level powers reduces due to the rise of BRICS and other mid-level powers and the retreat from global affairs, stagnation, or reduction in influence of major powers of previous eras. To maintain influence and to strengthen its relationships with key countries – including those outside the EU and Commonwealth – the UK must make the most of the platforms available to it within the United Nations. This should include active engagement with efforts to revitalise the General Assembly and support effective, diverse leadership in international institutions; demonstrating responsible use of its permanent seat on the Security Council; and cultivating a broad array of alliances in all regions and at all levels of development. For instance, the UK should look to follow the advice of the Lords' International Relations Committee[1] and diversify its alliances in the Middle East with a view to reducing tensions between regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Iran rather than supporting any one side against the other.

The second is the crisis of legitimacy caused by an increasing number of people feeling alienated and disenfranchised by a global system they no longer feel speaks for them. In response to this it is vital that the UK commit to engaging with the public and building popular support for international institutions. This dynamic increases the importance of universal multilateral mechanisms such as the UN with their core commitment to "work for all", not just for the like-minded, and to "leave no one behind". In this regard, the UK should build on its track record, for example supporting increased transparency of the Secretary-General selection process, by championing efforts to make the UN more inclusive and accountable to the British and global public. Examples include supporting efforts to appoint a high-level focal point for civil society.

The third and final trend is a crisis of performance of international institutions due to a failure to reach agreement with regards to action on the primary challenges we face. The UK should make strengthening these institutions a priority, investing diplomatic, political, human and financial resources.

3. What are the key steps the UK should take to maximise its resilience to natural hazards and malicious threats? How can we build a whole of society approach to tackle these challenges?

Building a whole of society approach to challenges requires a whole of society approach to developing a security strategy.

A Rethinking Security comparative study of various nations' security strategies[2] demonstrated that other nations have taken a much more holistic, and we believe effective, view of security. This starts with the concept of human security and thus proceeds on the basis that the security strategy of a democracy is a security strategy of the people; it therefore must be developed alongside and with those people. Ownership of the strategy by the people, and the integration of the peoples' hopes and fears into that strategy, itself represents a strong element of national security – guarding against the immediate threat of domestic extremism, and the longer term but equally dangerous risk

[1] https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201617/ldselect/ldintrel/159/159.pdf
[2] https://rethinkingsecurityorguk.files.wordpress.com/2018/03/contrasting-narratives-march-2018.pdf

posed by feelings of alienation and disillusionment and the delegitimization of core institutions and elements of our security apparatus that can result.[3] An engaged citizenry that feels its views are heard is more likely to be cohesive and publicly-minded, and more likely to play its part in times of crisis. It is therefore vital that the Review include a comprehensive and open process of consulting with civil society and the general public.

In 2015 we were concerned that the Review consultation was cosmetic and did not genuinely influence the drafting process. We were further concerned that the lack of proactive outreach meant that the review process only heard from certain sections of well-connected society, while other voices were excluded. That is why we mounted a large outreach initiative, in particular to our youth and community groups. We were therefore disappointed by the process and timings the review has followed. It is a matter of concern that there has been even less consultation for this review than for the smaller-scale 2015 NSS/SDSR.

We understand that the unprecedented challenges of the Coronavirus pandemic presented difficulties for the government in implementing an effective process. However, we feel that this leads to a greater, not lesser, need to ensure effective strategic decision making and that more attention, not less, should therefore be given to facilitating participation. If the government do not feel able to provide such a mechanism at the current moment, then it would be prudent to postpone the review until such a process becomes possible.

4.   What are the most effective ways for the UK to build alliances and soft power?

The UK needs to recognise the context of the history of our global system over the past 75 years.[4] The UK can take considerable credit for the primary role it played in designing the architecture of that system and thus can make good use of the elevated position it plays within that system as a result. However the UK also needs to realise that the position of historical privilege it therefore enjoys, the roots of that privilege in empire, and the racial element of global power dynamics that result, mean that the UK needs to exercise considerable sensitivity in its dealings with the wider world if it is to build alliances and influence – the root of soft power.
In this respect the UK could do well to learn from other nations that are widely considered to "punch above their weight" on the international stage, such as Singapore, the Scandinavian Countries and Costa Rica. Common characteristics across their foreign policies include a belief in "earning their keep" by making themselves useful in international forums, a humility and absence of entitlement in their dealings with the global system and reform initiatives in particular, and a communications strategy built around underselling and overdelivering on achievements.

We have argued that the UK will be better able to positively influence global affairs if a clear set of actions are not just articulated via its security strategy but followed in practice and held to account domestically when the two fail to meet. As part of the UK's commitment to be a positive global force we urge the UK to adopt an explicitly feminist foreign policy. Such an approach, as described in detail by the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy,[5] would help the UK move towards a more coherent, historically informed, interpretation of security based on solidarity, equality and collaboration.

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[3] In January The UN Secretary-General warned that this feeling of alienation was one of his "four horsemen" – major threats to our global system https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-01-22/secretary-generals-remarks-the-general-assembly-his-priorities-for-2020-bilingual-delivered-scroll-down-for-all-english-version
[4] For more information on this see our recent publications https://www.una.org.uk/magazine/2018-1 and https://www.una.org.uk/keeping-britain-global
[5] https://centreforfeministforeignpolicy.org/feminist-foreign-policy

5. What changes are needed to Defence so that it can underpin the UK's security and respond to the challenges and opportunities we face? (Submissions focusing on the changing character of warfare, broader concepts of deterrence, technological advantage and the role of the Armed Forces in building national resilience are particularly welcome.)

We would like to make three recommendations:

The first is that the UK lead efforts towards a global ban on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems, as advocated by the UN Secretary-General. Expert analysis points to lethal autonomous weapons as undermining human responsibility for decision-making, and unlikely to meet international humanitarian law standards, including the rules of distinction, proportionality, and military necessity.

The UK's assertion that it does not intend to develop these weapons is welcome, but will not insulate the UK from the negative effects of developments in this area. Over the next two years, there is an opportunity for the UK to work cooperatively with other countries to protect UK citizens and create a binding international treaty. History shows that ban treaties are a successful way to reduce the threats caused by dangerous weapons and technologies. Diplomatic leadership on this issue could help the UK demonstrate its stated aim of becoming a world leader in ethical AI.[6]

Second, we encourage the UK to increase its commitment to UN peacekeeping, building upon its commitments in South Sudan and Mali. Peacekeeping provides unmatched training and enrichment opportunities for the UK's armed forces, as well as helping coalition building and increasing the UK's influence both at the UN and with host and fellow troop contributing states. Troop contributions by western donor states such as the UK help bridge the damaging divide within peacekeeping between "those that lead and those that bleed". Peacekeeping missions are also a highly effective way of delivering the UK's conflict prevention, Building Stability Overseas, atrocity prevention and Protection of Civilians work.

Third, we recommend the UK announces a planning assumption that the Dreadnought programme will be the UK's last nuclear weapons system, in line with its longstanding commitment to disarm under Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.
The UK's Dreadnought programme is expected to last well into the 2060s, therefore such an assumption would not commit the UK to a firm timeline for disarmament; future governments would still have time to reverse this decision. But by changing the default position to one where the UK's strategy for disarmament is successful, the UK would send a powerful signal to non-nuclear states that it intends to deliver upon its NPT obligations to disarm.

As long as the UK possesses nuclear weapons it has to attempt to mitigate its growing diplomatic fallout with a majority of UN member states who challenge the concept of deterrence and see the humanitarian and environmental risks associated with the continued possession of nuclear weapons as an unacceptable global threat. Nuclear weapons states' perceived failure to make sufficient disarmament progress is leading many to the question the effectiveness of the NPT – a framework the UK regards as the cornerstone of nuclear security and an imperative for Britain's safety. By taking concrete steps and planning for a denuclearised national security strategy the UK can repair relations with non-nuclear states and accept that a weapon whose success relies on the

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[6] https://www.computerweekly.com/news/252433779/Theresa-May-wants-UK-to-be-world-leader-in-ethical-AI

perpetual threat of inflicting a mass atrocity on civilian populations has no place in the UK's national security strategy.

6. How should the UK change its governance of international policy and national security in order to seize future opportunities and meet future challenges? (Submissions focusing on the engagement of an increasing range of stakeholders while maintaining clear responsibility, accountability, and speed of action are particularly welcome.)

We will focus our comments in on the NSS/SDSR process. The 2015 NSS/SDSR envisaged a light touch and static process of annual reporting back against a fixed set of benchmarks. However, the first annual report was the only one to be published as expected (in December 2016). The second annual report was notionally incorporated within the NSCR, which did not appear until March 2018 and due to the format of that document the reporting element was limited to a simple annex indicating that progress was on track. A third and final "annual" report was published in July 2019.

While it is likely that any reporting process would have struggled with the enormity of the changes that took place during that time – which is why UNA-UK argued from 2017 onwards that a new NSS/SDSR was required – we feel that in any instance a more stringent reporting process may be prudent.

UNA-UK recommends that the government consider a more stringent but flexible approach to reporting back whereby the UK's strategic documents can be both reviewed and updated more frequently. This should include formal opportunities for public and parliamentary appraisal of the UK's performance against the agreed-upon strategy, and a discussion about updating the strategy itself as circumstances dictate.

Over the previous NSS/SDSR cycle Parliamentary scrutiny in particular has proven invaluable. UK Foreign Policy has been much richer and effective as a consequence of the investigations launched by the Commons Foreign Affairs, Defence and International Development Committees, the Lords International Relations Committee, the Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement and the Joint Committee on a National Security Strategy. We very much hope to see Parliamentary scrutiny maintained or increased, not reduced, as a consequence of the FCO/DfID merger.

7. What lessons can we learn from the UK's international delivery over the past 5 years? Which are the key successes we should look to develop and build on, and where could we learn from things that didn't go well?

The UK can be proud of its contribution in the fields Peacekeeping,[7] and reforming the selection process of the Secretary-General.[8] It must learn lessons in terms of its misguided approach to the war in Yemen[9] and the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear weapons.[10]

Space precludes a detailed discussion of these issues here, but the references above provide links to statements we made at the time. Furthermore, over the past five years we

[7] https://www.una.org.uk/news/una-uk-welcomes-uk%E2%80%99s-continued-commitment-un-peacekeeping
[8] https://www.una.org.uk/news/uk-praises-una-uks-role-reforming-secretary-general-selection-process
[9] https://www.una.org.uk/news/court-appeal-rules-against-uk-arms-sales-saudi-arabia
[10] https://www.una.org.uk/news/opportunities-uk-action-nuclear-security-ahead-key-2020-meeting

published a number of "Global Britain Scorecards"[11] in which we appraised the UK's performance in a number of areas. We also worked with researchers at Leeds University[12] to determine how the UK's influence at the United Nations has changed in recent years.

[11] https://www.una.org.uk/scorecard
[12] https://www.una.org.uk/global-britain-united-nations