

The government's National Security Strategy correctly identified global risks but bureaucratic infighting and a weak economic position threaten the UK's ability to 'punch above its weight' on the international stage

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Upon assuming power in May, the United Kingdom's historic coalition government set in motion three exercises that together aimed to reshape British foreign policy. The new National Security Strategy, the Strategic Defence and Security Review and the Comprehensive Spending Review all seek to lay down the bounds of Britain's future role in the world. A new report by [Nicholas Kitchen](#) and former diplomats examines the goals of Britain's foreign policy and how they can be realised in an age of austerity.



The government's efforts to re-articulate Britain's national interests and refocus UK foreign policy can hardly be understated. British military, diplomatic and development 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 in since the mid-1990s relied, has hit Britain worse than most, leaving a budget deficit estimated to be as high as 12 per cent of GDP. According to the ruling coalition the United Kingdom has been living beyond its means and the sectors of the budget tasked with pursuing British foreign policy will have to accept their shares of the inevitable cuts.

The government denies opposition claims that this review of UK foreign policy was simply a cost-saving exercise and insists that real strategy is a process of setting constraints as well as establishing goals. Just before the government announces what should amount to a grand strategy for the United Kingdom, the cross-party Parliamentary committee for Public Administration has 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.

A new [report](#) from LSE IDEAS, *The Future of UK Foreign Policy*, was conceived as an attempt to address this perceived failing. The contributors- all of whom enjoyed 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, keeping in mind 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 whether or not it is realistic about the United Kingdom's place in it.



[Image Credit: Rogiro](#)

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 its strategy is laudable, the outcome has been determined more by political and bureaucratic drivers than by sustained and coherent strategic thought. There is concern 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 improving the UK's ability to compete on the world economic stage are central elements to fulfilling any of the UK's national interests. Our increasingly globalised and multipolar world offers opportunities to an outward-looking trading nation like the UK. British society and its institutions are well adapted to play a leading role in this complex order, but we must recognise that Britain's economic strength matters above all else in maintaining our position as a leading international actor.

The National Security Strategy

The [strategy recognises](#) the complexity of the international order and its concurrent and multifarious security challenges which differ from those of the past. While we cannot completely rule out great power war, the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons greatly reduces its likelihood. On balance The National Security Strategy focusses 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 it draws are broadly correct.

The newly established National Security Council (NSC), who authored the National Security Strategy is to be overwhelmingly welcomed and deserves sustained support. It should be able to coordinate foreign policy at the most senior level, making processes more efficient and ensuring that maxims of strategy are transmitted to the various bureaucracies charged with implementation. Overcoming the tribalism inherent in Whitehall budget competition will not be easy, but introducing a parliamentary oversight committee to audit the Council's work could help provide confidence in the ultimate decisions taken.

The Strategic Defence and Security Review

While the NSC is realistic about the foreign policy challenges we face, the Strategic Defence and Security Review- which sets out the UK's response to those challenges-reflects more political and bureaucratic legacies than serious considerations on how to respond to complex international issues. In this sense, the linking of the Strategic Defence and Security Review 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 prioritises the legacy of over-commitment in the Ministry of Defence and bureaucratic competition between the services over the needs of strategy. At the same time, the government's ring-fencing of development aid, and its commitment to increase aid levels to 0.7 per cent of GDP should 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 foreign policy strategy in a world that increasingly depends on specific local knowledge born of strong and sustained relationships. Traditional British diplomatic strengths such as flexibility, pragmatism and egalitarianism are uniquely suited to the complex world we face. Cutting this relatively inexpensive area of government spending, particularly when compared directly to defence and international development, threatens that legacy and Britain's ability to play a truly effective role on the international stage.

For more information and to download a copy of The Future of UK foreign policy, please click [here](#).