

'Global Britain'? Assessing Boris Johnson's major changes to national security and foreign policy

There is a real risk that the shake-up of UK national security and foreign policy currently being orchestrated by Number 10 will not provide the solutions the country needs, write [Edward Elliott](#) and [Sam Goodman](#). Here they interview former National Security Advisers, former Foreign Secretaries, former foreign policy advisers to PMs, and former senior diplomats, to assess recent developments and their potential repercussions.

The first year of Boris Johnson's premiership has been dominated by Brexit and then COVID-19. This chaotic schedule has not held him back though from making a big shake-up of UK national security and foreign policy. But is it the right shake-up? Many policy experts have long argued that the UK has been in need of greater co-ordination in how it approaches national security and foreign policy; and under the auspices of the Sedwill driven 'Fusion Doctrine', an attempt to fuse capabilities to deliver '[strategy-led design of \(national security\) policy](#)', the Conservative Government has been moving around the pieces of the UK's national security infrastructure over the last few years

The Prime Minister has ramped up this process in recent weeks. He replaced Sir Mark Sedwill as National Security Adviser (NSA) with political appointee David Frost, merged the Department for International Development (DfID) into the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), and encouraged Sir Simon McDonald to step down early as Permanent Under-Secretary at the FCO. Through these changes, and the upcoming Integrated Review, there is a risk that this government could end up centralising foreign policy once again to the confines of a small cadre of unaccountable advisers loyal to the Prime Minister.

National Security Council (NSC)

The NSC is supposedly central to all national security decisionmaking yet has been neglected by Johnson. In many ways, the NSC is the perfect showcase of the changes the PM is looking to make – and of the risks that come with it. The decisionmaking process at the top level of foreign policy is always going to be somewhat nebulous, and it is hard to know exactly what happens behind closed doors.

In late May, it was revealed that the NSC had not met in months, with the official excuse being the pandemic. Although former NSAs we spoke to confirmed it had started meeting again since the end of lockdown, the ease with which the NSC has been put to one side during a national crisis is worrying. To provide just one example, one source told us the NSC had only met once in the past few months on Huawei, a critical national security issue that has yet to be fully addressed and resolved.

Now more than ever, the future of the NSC is up in the air.

Decline of the NSC over the years

The UK's NSC structure was the brainchild of the Coalition Government and was considered a break from past allegations of foreign policy being run by a small clique of advisers and Ministers in an informal setting. Under the Coalition, the NSC stood separate from No.10 with its own secretariat under a permanent secretary-level National Security Adviser. Members of the NSC have generally included relevant government ministers, the heads of the security and intelligence agencies, and the Chief of the Defence Staff.

According to Lord Peter Ricketts – NSA under Cameron – the NSC would meet every week after Cabinet; key ministers would be expected to attend or decisions would be made affecting their Department in their absence. Other sources confirmed that it met weekly under Theresa May too. However, there were instances where meetings would be postponed, with former members of the NSC stating that over the past ten years, it would be reasonable to estimate that it met on average 30-35 times a year.

Much of the initial decline of the prominence of the NSC happened under May. Arguably the biggest structural shift was combining the role of the NSA with that of the Cabinet Secretary. By merging those two roles, May was inevitably diluting the impact of the NSA, who had less time to dedicate to the role. Sedwill's predecessor as NSA between 2015-2017, Sir Mark Lyall Grant, told us that the merging of the two roles 'was a mistake', although one brought about by the circumstances at the time.. This sentiment has been shared by many, including former NSA Lord Ricketts and [Tobias Ellwood](#) MP, Chair of the Defence Select Committee.

When quizzed by the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy in 2019, Mark Sedwill admitted doing the job 'somewhat differently' from his predecessors, focusing on 'embedding the Fusion Doctrine' and 'reforming Whitehall'. The question then becomes who takes the decisions the NSA used to take? Sir David Manning, former UK Ambassador to Israel and the US, and former foreign policy adviser to Tony Blair, has stated that the NSC's focus and effectiveness, unlike the US NSC, seemed to depend strongly on the personality, interests, and time of the Prime Minister of the day. 'He or she chairs the meetings as they are the ones who chair the meetings and, it would appear, decides what priority to give to NSC business'. This assertion is backed up by Ricketts, who recognises that the NSC's effectiveness depends on the Prime Minister's use of it.

Gavin Williamson's supposed leaks from the NSC in 2019 further undermined the NSC, risking making senior civil servants and intelligence officials less willing to '[speak freely about sensitive issues](#)' – one of the original benefits of having an NSC. Under Theresa May, the number of NSC sub-committees was also reduced – sources indicated that some of these hardly ever met at all.

The political instability in this period of time, due to the lack of a parliamentary majority, battles over Brexit, and rising ministerial leaks, was part and parcel of a breakdown of trust which coincided with the devaluation of the NSC under May. [Some sources](#) indicated that May really valued the NSC, but even if it was a consequence of circumstance and external pressure, Theresa May oversaw a notable decline in the NSC.

New National Security Adviser: a frosty reception

The biggest announced change to the NSC is the appointment of David Frost as NSA. A former diplomat, Scotch Whisky Association CEO, and SpAD to Boris Johnson, David Frost is well-respected. Yet there has been widespread concern about his appointment to the role of NSA, due to both the lack of relevant security experience and the lack of accountability following the decision to make his appointment a political one, breaking from previous tradition. Frost will also hold the role of chief Brexit negotiator when he starts as NSA which is a concern for some, even though the overlap with the two roles is currently expected to be of short duration.

It makes sense to look to America's NSC; after all, our model is based on theirs. But we should avoid copying their mistakes: in defending the decision to make the NSA a political appointee, the government [argued](#) that this was not unusual in America. However, Javed Ali, a former Senior Director of Counterterrorism at the American NSC, told us how having a political appointee as NSA was controversial in the US too, stating that 'there has been lots of debate in Congress in changing the law about the Nat Sec Advisor position to allow the Senate to exercise its advice and consent role, similar to the confirmation process for other equivalent positions'. There are also concerns in the US about the NSA holding a second position. Ali told us that 'there is some thought too that active duty military officers should retire if so appointed (like McMaster) in order to not conflict with the unique requirements of the job'.

Other potential NSC reform

The possibilities for reform extend beyond just the NSA. For example, the argument of needing to balance the members who attend the NSC is a well-trodden one. In light of the DfID/FCO merger, several former members of the NSC spoke to us about the importance of keeping a unique voice for Development on the table, to avoid the risk of this being absorbed by the FCO. This contrasts with the view shared with us by Tom Swarbrick, a former adviser to Theresa May, who argues that there is a need to reduce the number of people who attend NSC meetings. Members of the NSC have previously expressed to him that membership size creates logistical issues including there not being enough time for everyone to make their points and then substantially discuss the issues at hand.

There is also a need to have a membership of the NSC that reflects the immediate threats facing the UK. The 2015 NSS and SDSR identified pandemics as a top threat for the UK yet the Health Secretary was not a permanent member. The fact that this was still the case when the latest list of members was published in late June, in the middle of a huge crisis sparked by the coronavirus pandemic, remains baffling.

One of the challenges of the national security and foreign policy process is finding the balance between crisis management and strategic thinking. An aspect of the NSC infrastructure that is crucial in obtaining this balance is the 'NSC Officials Group', with permanent-secretary-level attendees and focussed more on long-term strategic thinking. As Johnson looks to reform the national security apparatus, it is key that this group is maintained and continues to meet, even when the main NSC isn't able to. Again we can turn to our US counterparts to see the value they place on having an equivalent system at the NSC. Javed Ali talked about the importance of having 'a built-in layer of integration and transparency that informs the highest level of decision making', and that without that 'revert to a decentralised approach, which leads to bad policy outcomes with unintended consequences'. Bolstering the NSC in this manner does carry some risks. Sir Christopher Meyer, former UK Ambassador to the US, told us the UK does not need/want 'American bureaucratic gigantism' in its national security process.

The Merger of DfID into the FCO

The merger was unsurprisingly unpopular in the international development sector, but many of the former foreign policy advisers we spoke with reserved judgment, arguing that in theory the move could be successful. There has been a need for several years now to better co-ordinate foreign policy in Whitehall, especially around having a shared strategic vision. This has been paired with growing concerns that an under-funded and under-staffed Foreign Office has fallen into neglect. Former Foreign Secretary, Lord David Owen, in particular believes that the merger fits with the radical need to reduce the number of separate ministries and number of ministers who attend Cabinet for it to become an effective decisionmaking body again.

There are of course risks that could stem from the DfID/FCO merger, including the fact that it could serve as the starting point to more fundamental changes to how the UK does international aid. These range from moving away from the transparency and accountability of Official Development Assistance spending that the UK had in DfID, to bigger moves such as moving away from the OECD definition of Official Development Assistance, or even eventually scrapping the 0.7% gross national income spending on it.

The Integrated Review

In 2020, Johnson announced the Integrated Review, the newest version of what was the NSS, but which brings foreign policy and international development very explicitly into the fold. [One of its four remits](#) is to 'identify the necessary reforms to Government systems and structures to achieve these goals'. Although the Integrated Review has been delayed, the reforms clearly haven't. If the reforms precede the review, what remains the purpose of the latter? Tobias Ellwood [recently echoed](#) that we are: 'seeing changes in Whitehall architecture without firstly understanding threats coming over the horizon, taking a stock check of our current capabilities and then working out what we actually want'.

For Lyall Grant, the biggest strategic security threat the UK faces remains the threat to the rules-based international order. To combat that threat, in particular from China, Lord David Owen said the UK must focus on by strengthening defence spending within NATO, forging a unified stance within the Five Eyes rejecting Huawei 5G, and working with partners towards a new policy of containment to deal with the CCP's expansionist ambitions and in response to dismantling of One Country, Two Systems in Hong Kong.

The UK also needs to assess its capabilities across defence, soft power, aid, diplomacy, and more. For Sir David Manning, the review must consider not only the post-Brexit world but the potential for a 'post-special relationship' one that may be under great strain if Trump is re-elected. He cautions that 'if Global Britain is to mean anything we need to invest in our defence and intelligence capabilities and above all in reinforcing the Foreign Office and our diplomatic network overseas'.

All of this leads to the hope that the Integrated Review can help the UK decide on what it wants its role in the world to be. Sir Stephen Wall, the former Ambassador to the EU and private secretary to John Major believes the 'integrated review should take an objective, rigorous, fact-based approach to the UK's place in the world post-Brexit'. Lyall Grant told us that it is likely the UK will make 'the strategic choice to remain a global player with strong regional interests' and that the review should go 'much wider than machinery of government and focus on building on the strategic direction taken in 2015'. In order to do so, Sir Stephen Wall argues the UK must 'make ourselves an unavoidable partner both for the US and our erstwhile fellow EU member states', even if 'it will be impossible to replicate the unique cooperation the EU provides'.

Whilst it is unfortunate that this government has decided to implement structural reform *before* reviewing its objectives and capabilities, its success will ultimately depend on the degree of clarity it brings to the objectives of 'Global Britain', and whether it can show a detailed pathway of how the UK can get to where it wants to be.

Conclusion

After one year as Prime Minister, Boris Johnson has stuck with his ambition for a 'Global Britain' and not been shy to make major changes in that pursuit. It has been clear for a while that the UK's security and foreign policy has been in need of a shake-up. Yet there is a real risk that the shake-up currently being orchestrated by Number 10 will not provide the solutions the UK needs. Recent changes already indicate that the UK's national security decisionmaking process is set to further radically shift under Johnson's tenure – there even still remains a small possibility that the NSC in its current format will be scrapped altogether. This would be a mistake as it continues to have immense value as a vehicle for coordinating policy.

The UK has a unique opportunity to provide strategic clarity, appropriate funding, and structural soundness to its foreign policy and national security, and the fact the government has already shown it is willing to take action is a positive sign. However, as it does so, the UK risks veering towards the tendency of many of Johnson's predecessors: to centralise power in an unaccountable nucleus at the expense of a collaborative model designed to encourage long-term strategic thinking.

About the Authors

[Edward Elliott](#) is Senior Associate at the British Foreign Policy Group.

[Sam Goodman](#) is an Associate at the British Foreign Policy Group.

Photo by [Greg Rosenke](#) on [Unsplash](#)