



Wilton Park



Report

Britain's place in the world: a force for good?

Thursday 9 – Friday 10 November 2017 | WP1597



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This 24 hour, off the record roundtable meeting provided an opportunity for a small expert group of decision makers, influencers and opinion formers to discuss prospects for Britain's role as a future force for good in the world.

Background

Contemporary domestic challenges and shifts in the international power balance have created uncertainty concerning, and increased pressure on the institutions projecting, the UK's influence as a force for global good. This 24-hour roundtable brought together a small expert group of decision makers, influencers and opinion formers to discuss prospects for Britain's future role in the world. A cross-section of leaders from government departments, civil society, academia and the private sector met to:

- Identify current challenges and concerns and explore ways forward
- Consider options and opportunities to strengthen Britain's commitment to and collaboration with international efforts in delivering global public goods and tackling global public 'bads'
- Develop a better understanding of the objectives of organisations and institutions represented as a basis for stronger future collaboration
- Explore prospects for an expert network to sustain emerging ideas and develop the emerging vision

Perceptions of the UK in the world

1. The UK has long been seen as an indispensable global player with a rich history of global engagement. It has a wide range of valuable economic, military, diplomatic and cultural assets, including the English language, which have underpinned its role both in constructing the post-war rules-based international system and in acting as a force for solutions around the world. These assets should be built on and provide the foundation for the UK's positive global engagement.
2. However, the UK's role in the world is in a state of flux, and it is important to recognise positive and negative perceptions of the UK's historical global engagement. There is a sense that our influence is waning due to a confluence of factors, including the rise of new powers, the weakening of key relationships and broader threats to the existing multilateral order. Nevertheless, the UK's interests lie beyond its borders, and it cannot afford to step back from the world.
3. The UK's foreign policy can seem disconnected from the broader domestic environment and decision-making is perceived as elitist and highly London-centric. There is a need for a national conversation, which entails a diversity of voices, to establish what role Britain wants to play in the world.
4. There is not a clear consensus on the way in which the UK's decision to leave the European Union has affected perceptions of the UK globally, but in Europe it has

contributed to an already extant view of the UK in decline, associated with the UK's declining military and diplomatic capacity as well as its reluctance to engage on key foreign policy issues such as Ukraine. The UK will need to make a reality of the positive European engagement policy as it leaves the EU, maintaining key partnerships and protecting vital areas of collaboration.

The UK's role in delivering global public goods

5. International development, whereby the UK has historically been at the forefront is central to engagement with the world, and a strong example of how the UK can be a force for good. There is a concern that the UK's position as a global leader on development is under threat. In particular, there are concerns that development is being subjugated to other agendas, such as trade and counter-extremism. Development should define its role within the government's broader global engagement strategy. Global public "goods" and "bads" transcend national borders. Solving problems requires a collaborative approach, which entails outreach beyond government and national borders to facilitate and harness deep and broad collaborative efforts. The UK's commitment to Official Development Assistance (ODA) is a crucial part of engagement with the world and while there was no consensus on the best way to manage commitment, both the inherent value and reputational importance of ODA spending was underlined.
6. Global public goods are increasingly interlinked, and delivering them has a significant benefit to the UK in terms of influence. Their delivery requires the UK to take a long-term view of the issues that matter, as well as to develop a coherent approach in which the values the UK promotes are consistent with actions taken at home and abroad. It is important to counter the perception that the UK's approach to values is inconsistent, as well as addressing declining trust in institutions and in the UK as a whole.
7. Transparency and trust are fundamental global public goods. The pace of global change in information technologies is rapid and is reshaping how decisions are made, communicated and interpreted. There is a risk that these technological transformations lead to a fractured and polarised information environment, causing divisions along ethnic, religious and other lines. Trust in media and public institutions is falling and global public confidence is worryingly low, creating an environment in which global public 'bads' are flourishing. However, changes in information technology have enormous positive potential and, what is more, the UK, through its world-leading media and public institutions, can be at the forefront of catalysing positive transformation. With a new vision for media and journalism, the UK can harness this digital transformation to enable more democratic and diverse discussion, bringing new, especially young, people into the conversation.
8. The UK should not underestimate the global profile of Parliament, and that, as a mature democracy, there are many examples whereby it has proved resilient in the face of robust tests. These positive experiences are worth sharing with others. A dynamic, influential civil society and strong institutions provide the underpinning for the UK's democratic culture. UK engagement, when done in a collaborative and supportive way, encouraging local ownership, can provide leadership and guidance when it comes to improving the quality of governance in other countries. Engagement with democratic processes in developing nations also has significant benefits for the UK. It broadens and deepens relationships, allows the UK to learn from other countries' experiences and improve its own political culture. However, the UK should recognise that poor political leadership can damage the perception of our political culture in the eyes of others.

The challenges and risks to the UK's influence in the world

9. The immense societal and technological changes facing the world require effective, coherent and long-term strategies to prepare the UK to benefit in the future. Innovation

is a global public good capable of catalysing sustainable development, democratic engagement and more inclusive societies. The UK should take the opportunity to lead on issues such as social innovation and sustainability. Government may not be ideally placed to maximise the benefits of these changes, and there is a risk that if the UK does not invest in new technologies and innovative companies, it may be left behind in the global race. Rather, the UK should invest in and harness new technologies, such as artificial intelligence, which have the potential to positively 'disrupt' the way in which the UK delivers public goods at home and abroad.

10. The UK has extensive international networks of NGOs and other key organisations which multiply influence and importance. However, these bodies cannot and should not be deliberately leveraged for a soft power benefit. There is a risk of creeping short-termism at the expense of more important long-term objectives, as well as the instrumentalisation of civil society organisations to conform to other agendas. Government should provide the conditions for civil society to flourish and innovate, not direct its development.
11. Mitigating the risks associated with leaving the European Union should include bold steps in areas such as development and the environment. The UK's commitment to the SDGs should be redoubled and they could act as a framework to enable greater international efforts. They also provide an opportunity to articulate a consistent UK offer to the world, at home and abroad. There was a general view that the UK's tone and practice on visas, citizenship and refugee policy did not accord with a positive view of the UK in the world.
12. There is a disconnect between policymakers and the public as a result of austerity, wage stagnation and the housing crisis which make it harder to have conversations about the UK's global role.

Global Britain: strategies and opportunities now and in the future

13. Leaving the European Union can be seen as an opportunity for the UK to take stock of its identity, role and ambitions. There is an opportunity for less top-down policy-making and more national engagement involving diverse communities from all over the UK. Although there was not total agreement on the role and importance of the Commonwealth, there was a general consensus that the Commonwealth has the potential to act as a vital soft power network for the UK, as well as a focus around which a moral purpose can be embedded within UK foreign policy
14. Maximising these opportunities requires strong, reliable leadership and the maintenance of our reputation for competence. This will require a more strategic approach to how the UK engages with the world, which takes into account trade, diplomacy and security and defence, recognising the interlinkages between them and how the UK can leverage the full suite of its 'assets' to promote its influence for good on national, regional and global scale.
15. Despite different views on the extent to which leaving the European Union will have positive and negative impacts on the UK's global status, there was a general consensus that the UK must quickly seize the opportunities that this change presents. For example, departing the EU means that the UK has the opportunity to construct a 'gold standard' in terms of coordinating trade and development policy to promote sustainable development.
16. The UK is a world leader in education, culture and connectivity but must recognise the risk of losing ground as others in Asia and Europe invest in their own soft power. To maintain and grow our influence requires bold action in areas where we can make a significant difference. It also means investing in programmes to internationalise our domestic environment through school curricula, international exchanges and language teaching.

Potential ways forward

17. Recognising the challenges facing the UK in the years ahead, whilst making the most of opportunities that arise, requires bold action. The UK has a broad suite of institutions and relationships that can contribute to influence the world for the better, and these need to be taken into account when developing an approach to global engagement. As the roundtable came to a close, participants reflected on potential ways forward for them as individuals, as a group and for the UK more broadly. As well as committing to working together across a number of issues, below are some of the suggestions for action whereby the UK could position itself in the world in a more positive way, as well as safeguard its interests and influence overseas:

- Understand that showing weakness can be a means to discovering where strengths lie.
- Consider what the UK can learn from the way Canada and Sweden positively and progressively frame their foreign policy.
- Recognise the importance of civil society as a driver of progressive influence in the world and create conditions in which this indispensable resource can flourish.
- Underline the need for the UK to have a moral purpose in its foreign policy and acknowledge that the Commonwealth can have a role in this.
- Support efforts to get outside of the London-centric elite bubble and genuinely consult the public on foreign policy.
- Develop a global engagement strategy based on measuring impacts not inputs.
- Acknowledge the need for difficult and critical conversations in order to identify issues and solutions.
- Recognise the need to build and maintain trust on a national and international scale, and acknowledge the important role that language has to play.
- Understand the necessity of building new relationships as well as maintaining close cultural and economic links with European partners.
- Examine UK visa policy and citizenship tests and the image of the UK that they portray.
- Ensure diplomats have the necessary tools and resources to represent the UK in the best possible way.
- Recognise the value of internationalism in British universities and work to safeguard it
- Acknowledge the need to explain important messages about foreign policy simply and accessibly.

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