LSE !deas

GLOBAL STRATEGIES

Enhancing Decision Making in Foreign and Security Policy

February 2017

Global Strategies connects academics with Whitehall and beyond.

The aim of the project is to provide sound practical advice on how strategy can be made more effective in this complex age. The focus is on international strategic issues, often military but also political, diplomatic, economic, and business issues.

To do this, the project brings together a wide range of academics from LSE with senior practitioners past and present, from the UK and overseas. Regular discussions take place with senior officials on the strategic aspects of major issues such as ISIS, Iran, Syria, Russia, Ukraine, China, Migration, and Energy.

The project's close links with Whitehall reflect the value senior officials attach to the discussions they have with us and the quality of our research. Private Global Strategies papers have contributed to the government's work on the Strategic Defence and Security Review, and policy towards Russia and Ukraine.

Beginning in 2016, Global Strategies also hosts private lectures on broader themes of strategy: the challenges faced in creating and implementing strategy, the difficulties multinationals have in making decisions in an age of radical uncertainty, and the likelihood of nuclear weapons being used in the years ahead.

LSE !deas]

GLOBAL STRATEGIES

Enhancing Decision Making in Foreign and Security Policy

February 2017

In late 2016 thirty British politicians, officials, officers and former officials and experts met at Ditchley Park to discuss ways in which the making of foreign policy still leaves the UK vulnerable to major strategic errors, but also put forward practical ideas for improving decision making that are well within the reach of the UK's current institutions and resources.

The discussion focussed on the nature of relations between ministers and officials, lessons from major foreign policy decisions over the past 15 years and the importance of the process of decision making.

This paper reflects the overall sense of the discussions, but no participant is in any way committed to its content or expression.

MINISTERS AND OFFICIALS

There is an implied deal, in which officials and ministers recognise the difference between the political and administrative aspects of the state. Politics matters to ministers, and there is an inevitable contingency in political life compared with the permanency of official life. The task of officials is to fit around the outlook of their minister and to shape decision making in the direction that the minister wants to take it. Personalities matter – effective ministers can shape the culture around them in their departments.

Officials need to try to ensure that decisions are taken on evidence, with their advice presented directly to the minister, not filtered via special advisors. Ministers are meant to take both the credit and the blame, a convention that some felt had frayed.

The private office is fundamental to a minister's effectiveness. It occupies a structurally ambiguous position, acting for ministers and for the department. The quality and calibre of the private secretary is what overcomes this ambiguity, and his or her ability to earn and retain the trust of both the minister and fellow officials is vital.

Because most ministers learn on the job, they need guidance from officials about the policies they inherit and the positions taken by other officials and departments. They also need to be told the truth about policies they inherit that are not working, requiring a relationship of complete trust with the permanent secretary from the start.

Without a deliberate approach to preparing for office, ministers tend to enter important roles in a haphazard manner. Frequent rotation makes their job more difficult and leaves them less able to stand up to pressure from Number 10. Less experienced ministers have much to gain by talking in detail to their predecessors, and could benefit from the professional coaching that is widely accepted in other roles, but resisted among politicians.

The judgement of politicians has come to be distrusted when set alongside the judgement of the military – the worst thing for a politician is to be accused of ignoring military advice. Politicians need to challenge the generals because the generals will then offer better advice – "you don't have to be an expert to ask basic questions".

Finally, a system in constant crisis is a tired system, making judgement and long-term thinking difficult. Officials need to understand that the Prime Minister is exposed to requests and views from other national leaders and is effectively in a negotiation each time they meet. Speaking truth to power is still hard for

even the most hardened official; listening to it is just as hard for ministers; and officials don't always acknowledge this, or find the right way or place to have the best "difficult" conversation.

The ability to speak out depends on how people use the licence they have earned, via trust, to disagree in a constructive way – being clear about the hierarchy of choices and stating what is doable. To this end the policy debate needs to be opened up to include different, 'edgy' personalities, so that it generates genuine options.

And when there are no good options, one should 'choose the one that causes least damage.'

DECISION MAKING IN PRACTICE

Discussion then focused the main lessons to be drawn from our experience in dealing with the Balkans, Iraq, Russia and the Arab Spring.

The Balkans

Bosnia in 1992 and Kosovo in 1999 book-end a significant chapter in the annals of Western military intervention. If the former exposed the impotence of the international community and of the EU and UN in particular, the latter showed its power, with Kosovo representing NATO's first shots fired in anger. More than 15 years later, Bosnia has maintained an uneasy peace while Kosovo's status is not fully resolved, but there has been no return to war and the Balkan countries have moved closer to the EU and NATO. UN peacekeeping, however, never fully recovered from the Bosnia failure.

Macedonia provides an example of making the right decisions in good time. By the summer of 2000 the Albanian minority were reporting a high risk of conflict with the Serb majority. The Whitehall committee on the Balkans recommended that NATO deploy 200 men to reassure the local communities. The UK provided the largest contribution, one of the first uses of the Conflict Prevention Fund. At the same time, the EU negotiated the Ohrid agreements: improvements in the position of the Albanian community, against a promise of eventual EU membership.

The lessons from the Balkans are diffuse. These include the critical importance of US-EU policy coherence. The UK has to be able to disagree with the Americans, but this has to be done at an appropriate stage. A second lesson concerns the threat, and actual use, of force: it is essential to avoid looking impotent, as UNPROFOR did. A third lesson was not to attempt a military solution without addressing the politics.

Iraq

The key feature of the decision to join the US invasion of Iraq is that it came from the top. Blair was in a strong position politically following the intervention in Kosovo, and had succeeded in pushing the US towards a more international stance on Iraq.

Any feasible challenge to his advocacy of regime change in Iraq would have to have come from senior political figures. But there were not enough of them ready to ask questions like "is this wise?", and "what are the consequences if we get this wrong?" The prospects of a challenge reaching the top were further reduced by the division of responsibilities for Iraq within the Cabinet Office, which meant that the role of Cabinet Secretary, a critical figure at a time of crisis, was not fully deployed.

One final area where there was insufficient challenge was the military, for whom the Iraq crisis was "the most exciting thing likely to happen for a long time". The enthusiasm for getting involved is intrinsic to the military profession and no minister should think that this will go away.

Russia

The present impasse with Russia, which stretches back more than a decade, is not largely the fault of the West. But contributing factors include a loss of focus on Russia in favour of more pressing international problems, an underestimation of the forces of Russian conservatism and an unrealistically benign view of a potential "strategic partnership" with Russia.

We got into a scrap with Russia over Ukraine without calculating how much it mattered to Russia. Now the West has to think carefully about its broad strategic options for managing relations with Russia. Deeper isolation would strengthen hardliners and risk a Russian-Chinese alliance. Another "reset" would do the opposite, amounting to capitulation. Peaceful co-existence would imply Russian hegemony in the former Soviet Union. Constraint combined with pragmatic engagement would entail risks in managing Russian brinkmanship. Pressure on Russia's vulnerable areas – its weak economy, and limits to expanded defence spending – exerted through a new arms race would be a high-risk policy for the US, given the unpredictability of Russian reactions.

More specific questions for Western policy include whether the arms control agenda should be revived, how we can strengthen NATO, the credibility of defence of the Baltic states, how to balance the challenges of both Russia and China to avoid driving them together, the objectives of Russia in the Middle East and Turkey, and Putin's overtures to Japan.

The Arab Spring

The Arab Spring raised different issues. While there was concern at the absence of reform, there was no specific forecast of an upheaval. When events in Tunisia began to undermine Mubarak, HMG's inclination was to continue dialogue rather than urging Mubarak to go. Once violence erupted, however, the UK advocated his departure. Our willingness to talk with supporters of greater democracy generated the strong and unanticipated resentment of other regional states.

As the Arab Spring advanced, it proved difficult for officials to identify significant turning points in the daily flow of events that called for a reassessment of policy – such as the creeping abuse of power by militias in Libya, the mishandling of government by the Muslim Brotherhood regime in Egypt, and the increasing likelihood of Russian intervention in Syria. These incremental changes were not always effectively communicated to and absorbed by ministers. For example, after the fall of Gaddafi, ministers continued to

set the goal of delivering a transition of power and to believe this level of ambition was being pursued, at the time when officials had recognised that a transition was increasingly undeliverable.

The Arab Spring was the first test of the National Security Council (NSC) in an external crisis. The flow of papers to, and pace of the NSC prior to the Arab Spring had not prepared Whitehall for how the Prime Minister and the NSC would want to receive information and take decisions in a crisis, and there was initial tension ("war speed not Whitehall speed") over the way that officials presented options and risks.

Political judgement and risk appetite, however, mattered more than policymaking machinery. Officials with recent policy experience looked at the increasing destabilisation of the Middle East through an Iraq prism: if you break it, you will need to fix it. This influenced the form and focus of UN Security Council resolutions on Libya. Others, including ministers, with the Balkans as their reference point, wanted to avoid a humanitarian catastrophe, genocide or chemical attacks on civilians: "not on our watch". Hence their focus on action in both Libya and Syria.

The decision to intervene in Libya was dominated by the political urge to be seen to act, evidenced by the transition within one week in March 2011 from advice that the UK could not do anything, to the start of bombing. The grandiose rhetoric surrounding the intervention was seen as symptomatic of the gap between the UK's capability and position in the world, and the requirements for success. The very long-term nature of political issues in the Middle East, requiring years of sustained application, were not understood.

HARSH REALITIES

Many participants felt we have had an exaggerated view of our role in the world and our relationships with our allies, and have been unrealistic about our resources. The question "what can we do?" is asked too often, rather than "what do we have to stop doing?", or "is it our problem?"

Another related major problem is that the UK's values have ensnared us in a discourse trap, in which we maintain that every country has the right to determine its own destiny. Our liberal values make it very difficult to say externally or internally that, for example, women's rights in Afghanistan are beyond our ability to deliver. This form of discourse about foreign affairs, characterised as "virtue signalling", has prevailed for years.

The issue is complicated by the changing environment for taking decisions, with big ones often being made on the run – on planes, or even behind the Speaker's chair. We are living, so to speak, in an age of "simplexity", where the pressure of events pushes ministers to deliver complex solutions in a simple way. This increases the risk that choices are not honestly presented and a tendency to believe that "There is no job that can't be done rhetorically."

In these circumstances there is a need to establish balance among policymakers on who makes the military call, who manages the risk, who analyses the consequences. Ministers, therefore, should take a critical approach to policy and decision making, encouraging officials to speak with them openly and frankly, and being willing themselves to challenge accepted and comfortable conventions.

The ability of ministers to question depends on briefing by officials. To the extent that budget constraints have thinned out the knowledge base of officials, we may need to look more outside the official system for knowledge and understanding.

When challenging assumptions – including those underpinning intelligence estimates – politicians and officials need trust in their own judgement, which does not necessarily depend on expertise. Care needs to be taken, however, to prevent clear analyses from implying unwarranted clarity about the underlying situation, and to prevent assumptions from entering the policymaking process unchallenged – for example, through the progressive editing and implicit endorsement at increasingly senior levels of a position initially based on modest effort and expertise.

There is a tension between career development and specialist knowledge: attempts to give officials a range of skills have gone too far, and rotation of staff within the FCO is too rapid and record management is really poor.

In addition, there has been too much reliance on inter-departmental cooperation and persuasion, instead of project management. One example: the UK is not agile enough in cyber warfare because it takes too much time to get separate decisions. Ministers and officials need to delegate to project teams.

During the Arab Spring the NSC process evolved and became more systematic. Its decisions were backed with analysis and assessment from the JIC and other sources. It brought ambassadors into the room, connected its broad national security strategy with other specific objectives such as building stability overseas, and went through a rigorous process of identifying realistic priorities to concentrate on in specific countries and regions. It needs, however, to provide space for strategic discussion of big issues on a timely basis.

POINTS TO BEAR IN MIND WHEN FORMULATING POLICY

Research done by *Global Strategies@LSE* and others highlighted the importance of recognising what they called the "Seven Deadly Sins" of decision making:

- poor definition of the problem;
- mistaking goals for strategy;
- failure to get inside the other side's mind;
- failure to recognise that resources are scarce;
- failure to establish what your own side's competitive advantage vs that of one's adversary;
- assumptions not stated; and
- not having an interdepartmental task force to articulate a strategy and monitor its implementation.

There are few basic ways of thinking that help overcome these 'Sins'.

- Don't ask what the problem is, ask what the story behind it is – and that will give a much better insight into what the problem really is. For example, Putin's intervention in Crimea and Ukraine created a problem for the West, but in deciding how to react, one needed to understand the chain of events that had led Putin to act in this way.
- What is it that you dislike about what has happened? What do you want your response to achieve?
- Assemble a team to look at what options are available, their pros, cons and costs, and the feasibility of each. This team needs to include people who will own the implementation, to prevent a gap between thinking and getting things done.
- Once you have selected your option, the next step is implementation:
  - Get together a team comprising the key stakeholders (politicians, officials, diplomats, the military, political advisers etc.) to work out how that can be done – with the different facets being co-ordinated and synchronised.
- Check that:
  - you understand the way your adversary sees the issue and the ways they could respond to your actions,
  - your 'strategy' is not simply the deft wielding of power, but you are exploiting a decisive asymmetry to your advantage.
- Challenge all the assumptions you have made and revise where necessary.
- Accept that what you have to do to address one issue, may not be the same as that for another; develop a strategic narrative that explains your actions.
- And make sure that whoever is in charge of implementation is supported by a team that keeps on monitoring whether any of the assumptions have changed, so that if they have one's own actions can be adjusted.

Hugh Sandeman

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

HOSTS	Gordon Barrass	Leader, *Global Strategies,* LSE IDEAS
	Christopher Coker	Leader, *Global Strategies,* LSE IDEAS
POLITICIANS	Douglas Alexander	Former Shadow Foreign Secretary
	Crispin Blunt MP	Chair, Foreign Affairs Select Committee
	Alistair Burt MP	Former PUSS at FCO
	Kwasi Kwarteng MP	Member of PAC and Finance Committee
	Charlotte Leslie MP	Vice Chair of Conservative Middle East Council
	David Lidington MP	Leader of the Commons
	Seema Malhotra MP	Former Shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury
	Rory Stewart MP	Minister of State, DFID
	William Wallace	Foreign Affairs Spokesperson for LibDems in Lords
	Nadhim Zahawi MP	Member, Foreign Affairs Select Committee
OFFICIALS/OFFICERS	Richard Barrons	Commander, Joint Forces Command (2013-16)
	Lindy Cameron	DG for country programmes, DFID
	Peter Hill	Director of Strategy, FCO
	Nick Hine	Assistant Chief of Naval Staff (Policy)
	Kathy Leach	Joint Head of the Policy Unit, FCO
	Sarah MacIntosh	DG for Defence and Intelligence, FCO
	Antony Phillipson	Director of Trade and Partnerships, DExEU
	Karen Pierce	Chief Operating Officer, FCO
	Andrew Priestley	PS to John Raine, FCO
	John Raine	Director, FCO
	Liane Saunders	Strategic Programmes Coordinator, FCO
	Christian Turner	DG, Middle East and Africa, FCO
EXPERTS/FORMER OFFICIALS	Clovis Meath Baker	Former Director of Intelligence, GCHQ
	Robert Cooper	Special Adviser to Solana and Ashton
	Lawrence Freedman	Strategist
	Roderic Lyne	Former Ambassador to Russia, PS to PM
	Tom McKane	Former DG for Security Policy, MoD
	Julian Miller	Former Deputy National Security Adviser
	Richard Mottram	Former PS at MoD, Chairman of JIC
	Daniel Thornton	Programme Director, Institute for Government
LSE IDEAS	Michael Cox	Director, LSE IDEAS
	Hugh Sandeman	Leader, *Global Strategies,* LSE IDEAS (from Jan 2017)

LSE THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

EXECUTIVE MASTERS PROGRAMME

INTERNATIONAL STRATEGY AND DIPLOMACY

LSE IDEAS, a Centre for the study of international affairs, brings together academics and policy-makers to think strategically about world events.

This one year **EXECUTIVE MASTERS PROGRAMME** is at the heart of that endeavour. While studying in a world-leading university you will be able to learn from top LSE academics and senior policy practitioners.

The programme will sharpen your ability to challenge conventional thinking, explore new techniques for addressing risk and threats, and coach you in devising effective strategies to address them.

The course has been especially tailored so that you can accelerate your career while holding a demanding position in the public or private sector.

"Right from the first week I was able to apply the lessons I had learnt to our operational and policy work and to coach my teams to look at issues differently."

- Karen Pierce
UK's Permanent Representative to the UN and WTO in Geneva

CONTACT US

Email: **ideas.strategy@lse.ac.uk**
Phone: **+44 (0)20 7955 6526**
lse.ac.uk/ideas/strategy

LSE IDEAS is LSE's foreign policy think tank. We connect academic knowledge of diplomacy and strategy with the people who use it through our projects, publications, events, and executive education.

ADDRESS

LSE IDEAS
9th floor, Towers 1 & 3
Clement's Inn, London
WC2A 2AZ

lse.ac.uk/IDEAS

FOLLOW US ON TWITTER
@lseideas

facebook/lseideas