

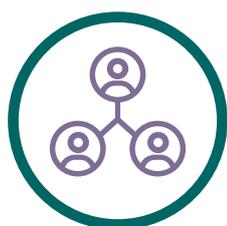


Aid, security and Britain's role in the world: proposals for coherent government action

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This briefing outlines five areas for action to promote a more integrated and effective United Kingdom government approach to aid and security. These are:



Make better use of existing structures for cross-government coherence and collaboration



Instil a working culture of greater collaboration, reinforced by appropriate incentives



Ensure response strategies are informed by timely, high-quality context and risk analysis



Match political ambition with adequate financial and human resources



Multiply efforts to achieve UK aid and security objectives through international partners

Introduction

How can the UK government institute a more integrated approach to promoting peaceful, secure, resilient, and prosperous societies across the developing world? Through convening informal roundtables and holding bilateral consultations with senior UK officials across relevant government departments, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) have explored recent experiences of collective government working on aid and security to identify pathways for more coherent and effective action.

Given past criticisms, including those highlighted by the Chilcot Inquiry, the UK government has renewed efforts to increase the coherence and effectiveness of its aid and security responses. New cross-government structures, such as the National Security Council (NSC), aim to facilitate greater cross-Whitehall coherence (HMG, 2015a; PACAC, 2017). A more collaborative working culture has also been championed through approaches such as combining official development assistance (ODA) with non-ODA funds for work in fragile or conflict-affected states. This shift was underlined by the UK aid strategy (HMG, 2015b), launched in 2015. The National Security Capability Review (HMG, 2018), with its strong emphasis on a ‘fusion doctrine’, has also emphasised new ways of more effective working across government.

Have these efforts to enhance cross-government working in aid and security yielded results? What changes have these initiatives brought about in how the different departments work together, and where is there space for greater collaboration still? It is important to consider these questions as the increasingly complex nature of conflict and fragility worldwide necessitates more collective and collaborative action from donor countries, including through the multilateral system.

This briefing suggests five areas for action to address the challenges highlighted and promote a more integrated and effective UK government approach to ensuring greater international stability and prosperity.

Insights from UK government officials

Officials engaged in the RUSI–ODI project reported that the new cross-government structures are proving effective in increasing collaborative working between key departments – although not necessarily across the full breadth of government. New structures cited as particularly effective include the NSC, the Joint Analysis of Conflict and Stability framework (JACS), the Joint International Counter-Terrorism Unit and the joint FCO–DFID Ministers.

Some argued that combining ODA and non-ODA funds, especially through the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF), has increased the range of issues that can be addressed coherently by the UK government in fragile or conflict-affected states. This has encouraged more innovative thinking from government officials responding to crises.

Collaboration also takes place organically at working level between teams, such as in overseas posts, as acknowledged and promoted through the ‘One HMG overseas’ framework (NAO, 2015).

However, participants also highlighted a number of challenges that continue to hamper more coherent and effective government responses to conflict and fragility overseas. Achieving multiple, often competing, objectives in fragile or conflict-affected states is inherently difficult, necessitating tough decisions based on incomplete or rapidly shifting information. The principal challenge identified is that failure to acknowledge these tensions and trade-offs increases the difficulty of delivering to the agreed strategies.

Participants also noted that the UK, like other donor governments, has struggled to sustain a coherent response strategy during protracted and complex crises. Despite some recent improvements, the differences in working cultures and methods between departments remain a challenge, especially given the divergent operating timeframes and measures of success.

The new structures and mechanisms aimed at overcoming some of these long-standing challenges are not yet reaching their full potential. While cross-government response strategies developed by the NSC are joined up at the highest level and show evidence of progress towards greater coherence (ICAI, 2017), some officials noted that different departments still tended to focus on the objectives most relevant to them, rather than ‘buying into’ the wider strategy.

The JACS and other more informal collaborations have resulted in high-quality analysis. However, officials indicate that such analysis has not always informed ministerial decision-making. JACS processes have proved most effective when tied to particular decisions and where there is strong ownership from multiple departments – but this is not always the case. Past experience of joint ministers in government indicates that this alone is not sufficient to increase coherence between key departments (Hughes, 2016). Although the CSSF, intended to blend ODA and non-ODA funding, has expanded significantly in recent years, some participants indicated that it too is not yet reaching its full potential.

At a cultural level, participants noted a lack of incentives for behavioural change among staff and leaders. They also noted that overall progress on cross-departmental working is challenged by traditional lines of accountability to Parliament, which focus on individual rather than joint departmental reporting.

1

Make better use of existing structures for cross-government coherence and collaboration



UK officials highlighted that the NSC has provided robust leadership, helped foster greater discipline across departments and led to more coherent cross-government country strategies. The recently created system of Senior Responsible Officers (SROs) also has potential to institute a truly cross-government approach. Attention is now turning to improving incentives to deliver NSC-agreed priorities. Yet, long-standing challenges continue to impede progress. While some relate to the perennial competition between key departments for available resources, specific action is needed to realise the full potential of new mechanisms, policies and structures.

- NSC country strategies would benefit from more stringent review, including assessment of whether aims and objectives remain relevant and realistic. They should be stress-tested for how UK activities fit with those of other international actors in each specific context, their likely impact and effectiveness, and whether the financial, human and logistical resources are available to deliver the strategy.
- NSC country strategies should indicate more clearly where there are trade-offs between different objectives and, in these cases, how objectives should best be prioritised or sequenced.
- Maximising the potential of the CSSF, including ensuring it is as adaptive as possible in crisis contexts, requires not just increased staffing but assigning personnel with the requisite skills and experience to manage these processes at country and Whitehall levels.
- Recognising and reinforcing the imperative of cross-government working, relevant parliamentary select committees should be empowered to request joint ministerial appearances as standard on key aid and security issues. The same principle should be reflected in the mandate of scrutiny bodies such as the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI).

2

Instil a working culture of greater collaboration, reinforced by appropriate incentives



New mechanisms, funds and networks are unlikely to realise their full potential without a step change in the operating culture, with clearly assigned responsibilities and incentives for delivering change. Achieving cultural change has previously relied on the personalities of individual leaders. Institutionalising changes in operating culture is essential for success but will require concerted steps.

- Elevating the informal networks and peer learning between foreign and security policy officials could create a new professional cadre, along the lines of other government professions. This could include joint training and continuing professional development, action and peer-learning sets, and cross-posting between departments.
- Job profiles for senior staff members should be adjusted to ensure that collaborative working is a core objective for all posts involved in tackling conflict and fragility overseas.
- Existing guidelines and skills training should be updated and elaborated to augment skill-sets on collaborative working for all relevant personnel, including leaders.
- Permanent Secretaries should institute a stronger culture of collaboration in crisis response at working levels, spearheading this both collectively and within their respective departments.
- Ministers should promote a culture that privileges cross-governmental collaboration over individual departmental priorities.
- The Prime Minister's Office and Cabinet Office should send clear signals that collaborative working across departments is the norm and that career progression is contingent upon demonstrable outcomes in this area. This could include adjusting performance-appraisal systems and even issuing commendations for excellence.

3

Ensure response strategies are informed by timely, high-quality comprehensive risk analysis



High-quality risk analysis produced by different departments is not always systematically pooled. Departments differ significantly in how they integrate evidence and lessons on effective past action. There is often limited uptake of the analysis by government ministers, especially during crisis response, and a gap in available analysis for sudden-onset crises where the UK has no historical interest. The challenge is to ensure that quality analysis is accessible, shared across government and – crucially – actually informs government actions.

- Greater encouragement of pooling and synthesising risk analysis from different departments throughout the life-cycle of a crisis can support coordination efforts. This can be facilitated through greater use of the many existing internal networks, such as the NSC, JACS, cross-department mailing lists, and reporting from British Embassy Posts.
- The National Security Secretariat could provide greater clarity on how the various assessments commissioned by different departments complement each other and connect to other mechanisms and tools used at country level, such as the Prosperity Fund.
- More accessible presentation of analysis by officials could increase Ministers' uptake. This could include greater use of frameworks that outline the political, security, humanitarian and economic risks of the different options for action or inaction.
- Better use of analysis by national and international partners could address analytical gaps in new crisis contexts and increase learning from past responses in fragile settings. Such partners include other
- governments, the United Nations system, think tanks, academics, NGOs and local experts and commentators.
- Initial responses to sudden-onset crises, including those led by the COBRA emergency committee, should remain adaptive to more detailed analysis as it becomes available.
- Appropriate re-scaling strategies should be integrated as early as possible, with clear criteria for drawing down, scaling up or maintaining aid, diplomatic, security or other interventions.
- Notwithstanding the political context of ministerial-level decision-making, such decision-making should always be informed by available analysis and assessments.

4

Match ambition with resources and with political and operational capacities



High-profile crises tend to elicit an ambitious response from Ministers, shaped by identified needs and also by UK media and public opinion. However, depending on the circumstances, the UK may not be best placed, or have the available resources, to lead or substantially contribute to an international response.

- Officials should undertake detailed analysis of where, when and why it makes sense operationally and/or politically for the UK government to respond actively to a given overseas crisis. This should consider from an early stage what resources are realistically required and whether they are readily available. This analysis should also include the potential impacts of responding on other strategic priorities, and officials should be empowered to explore the option of no response.
- Informed by such analysis, Ministers should make tough decisions about when to authorise a UK response to an overseas crisis and when to hold back in favour of, or working through, other international actors who are better placed to lead.
- Where the UK is well placed to respond, Ministers should ensure commensurate cross-departmental resources – both human and financial – to deliver the objectives set. Alternatively, objectives must be rationalised to match the available resources. Significant mis-matches between defence, diplomatic and development resources should be reviewed carefully for sustainability.

5

Multiply efforts to achieve UK aid and security objectives through international partners



The UK's imminent departure from the European Union creates opportunities and challenges for its international role and partnerships, including in crisis response. The UK should build on its existing partnerships with international, regional and national actors – bilaterally and multilaterally – to achieve its aid and security objectives.

- Ministers and officials should look afresh at the international system and partners, including the EU, to articulate a new vision for the UK's global partnerships. This would include making political and financial investments in the multilateral system, based on an assessment of where the greatest added value would be generated, in terms of both contributing to local stability and enhancing UK influence.
- Methods of gaining greater leverage over local political and security actors should be developed through targeted use of aid and other policy instruments in ways that incentivise conflict resolution, the development of more inclusive institutions and a fairer distribution of power, and equitable economic development.
- Careful analysis of the objectives and programmes of other external actors is necessary, including non-OECD donors and security assistance providers. The UK should seek cooperation where possible, while recognising that UK assistance can include a competitive element when its objectives conflict with those of other actors.

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