



Submission to NSS/SDSR consultation on safeguarding British security and prosperity through effective international institutions

From the United Nations Association – UK (UNA-UK)*

Introduction

This submission seeks to highlight the extent to which effective international institutions underpin British security and prosperity. It underscores the need to strengthen these institutions and Britain's engagement with them at a time when the international system is under increasing strain but collective solutions are becoming more elusive.

It contains recommendations that are relevant to foreign policy, defence and international development, and calls on the Government to give priority in its National Security Strategy (NSS) and Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) to enhancing the effectiveness of the UN.

After making this general point, the submission focuses on three specific areas:

- UN peace operations
- Preventing atrocity crimes
- Multilateral nuclear disarmament

An effective UN is in the UK's national interest

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the UN. Since 1945, it has had a transformative impact on the world, through the promotion of dialogue between adversaries, the construction of multilateral agreements on trade and security, and the provision of essential services to the poorest and most vulnerable. For the UK, the development of a rules-based international system has so far delivered stability and prosperity, serving also to cement Britain in international power structures in a manner that has endured even as the global distribution of power has changed.

The UN's success, however, depends heavily on states' willingness to work together. The convergence of crises in recent years, both political and economic, has demonstrated the growing need for concerted and principled global action. But across the world, governments have been reluctant to respond through international cooperation, turning inwards instead to their domestic constituencies.

Many governments have over-emphasised their response to terrorist and extremist threats, rather than seeking to tackle their root causes through conflict prevention and poverty eradication. This concentrated response has, too often, led governments to downgrade their international obligations, such as the universal ban on torture, and the duty to uphold human rights. Sadly, growing numbers of refugees have precipitated a similar response, with many states not meeting their commitments under the 1951 Refugee Convention.

The long period of peace between big powers will not endure unless governments consciously will it to last and make the necessary sacrifices. The patterns of polarised

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thinking that led to the breakdown of relationships before the First World War are starting to be recognisable again. Political leadership is too often trapped in narrow national agendas. International compromises, of the kind that made the UN possible in 1945, still appear too costly when measured by the familiar criterion of national interest.

The UK has not been immune to these developments. Over the past decade, UNA-UK has observed a disappointing British reluctance to invest in a consistent manner in the continuing health of the UN. There has been a narrowing in the definition of “national interest” and a drift in commitments to international norms. To date, the UK has taken in fewer refugees than it did in the previous decade, and there is an overwhelmingly negative debate on human rights laws, which British citizens fought hard to establish. At times, the UK has been absent from the international table, on occasion even playing an obstructive role at the UN, on issues such as drone strikes, for example, perhaps placing a higher priority on its relationship with the US than on finding collective solutions.

This approach does not take into account the longer-term implications of inaction for British citizens. Many people in this country, including UNA-UK's supporters in all four nations, are deeply concerned at the prospect of the international system breaking down, which would have serious consequences for the UK's security and prosperity into the future, and would also diminish its global role and standing.

There are some commendable exceptions to this trend. The Government's championing of the Arms Trade Treaty and commitment to international development are two areas that demonstrate the UK's ability to lead by example with global impact.

A UK strategy for the UN

The UN remains an indispensable tool for realising the UK's international objectives and support from the UK is necessary for UN initiatives to succeed. By any objective measure, the UK remains one of the most active and powerful states at the UN. Its capacity to lead, its convening power and multilateral skill are well-suited to the modern political environment. It has the potential to play an important role in restoring communications between big powers, in forging diplomatic compromises and in championing practical solutions. It will be some time before emerging powers are able – or willing – to match the UK's diplomatic and military contributions, and disengagement would only serve to hasten the decline in UK influence.

UNA-UK therefore calls on the UK government to recognise the urgent need to invest in global solutions, and to set out a clear strategy for UK engagement with the UN. Such a strategy should:

- Emphasise the importance of effective global institutions to the UK's security and prosperity
- Recognise that this requires consistent and concerted UK leadership at the UN, in terms of strengthening the Organisation and engaging with states on the hardest issues, such as atrocity prevention and multilateral nuclear disarmament
- Make clear the need to address the root causes of threats to the UK, such as poverty, human rights violations and instability in countries that may not be considered priority interests
- Set out ways in which the UK can achieve this, for example, by adopting a new strategy for contributing to UN peace operations; by ensuring that human rights remain a core element of UK foreign policy; and by re-focussing development programmes to support the new Sustainable Development Goals
- Commit the UK to upholding its international obligations and to setting a positive example in its implementation, at home and abroad, of international humanitarian and human rights laws and norms
- Invest in the continuing quality and reach of British diplomacy, which has up to now been widely regarded as pre-eminent

There are three particular areas that we believe merit special attention in the NSS and SDSR: UN peace operations, preventing atrocity crimes and multilateral nuclear disarmament.

Strengthening UN peace operations

UN peace operations are a tool for achieving UK interests in preventing conflict, sexual violence, mass displacement and extremism; and in building stable, prosperous trading environments. They provide a framework for the UK to make strategic deployments to missions that are: collectively funded and carried out; have the legitimacy of UN authorisation; and address situations of potential risk to UK interests, where unilateral or NATO action is not feasible.

The UK already invests considerable sums of money and political energy into UN peace operations, through its role on the UN Security Council and as the fifth-largest funder of UN peacekeeping. The UK should capitalise on this investment by strengthening UN peace operations through: contributions of military, police and civilian personnel; contributions of materiel; and active support for the recommendations of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations, notably on mediation and conflict prevention.

British expertise in peacekeeping diplomacy raises the overall quality of UN missions. A physical presence would enhance their effectiveness, contribute to UK national security priorities, contribute to training and co-deployment experience, and ensure that the UK is ready to engage with future UN missions in countries of UK interest. It would also raise Britain's international standing as a country that shares the burden of addressing global conflicts. Key UK allies, notably the United States, have called on the UK to commit more troops to UN peacekeeping.

UNA-UK applauds the recent announcement that the UK will send troops to support missions in South Sudan and Somalia. We hope this will pave the way for a more strategic approach. The UK should be open to deploying to ongoing UN peace operations where conditions are appropriate and contribute to national interests. This should include an increase in specialised contributions and technical expertise, but should not rule out larger, battalion-sized contributions in the form of co-deployment or an operational partnership with NATO or EU allies.

Preventing atrocity crimes

Genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity signify a wholesale breakdown of the rule of law and the presence of extremist ideologies. Such atrocities are not inevitable by-products of conflict and are not confined to conflict situations.

Intrinsically unacceptable, they are also a threat to UK national interests. They destabilise countries, embed motivations for conflict and create ill-governed areas that can foster the spread of violence and terrorism, which, in a globalised world, can affect UK citizens both in the UK and overseas.

Atrocities cause major internal and regional displacement. The unpredictable influx of people to neighbouring countries can reverse economic growth and threaten social cohesion and political stability. With UN agencies forced to cut programmes due to funding constraints, refugees are now travelling further afield. Criminal gangs traffic them illegally, affecting international travel and trade.

To tackle the causes of instability, UK strategy must take account of the complexity of current crises and their geopolitical context. An effective analysis of instability requires an awareness of the origins of both conflict and atrocity crimes. An effective response requires an integrated approach that mobilises all available tools. It means civilian

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capacity and expertise in development, human rights and diplomacy that can identify atrocity risk and respond before, during and after conflict, as well as outside typical conflict situations; and Armed Forces capable of stabilisation and interventions that aim to protect civilians, beyond just targeting armed groups.

The UK should declare the prevention of atrocity crimes a national priority, undertake a national risk assessment and articulate a cross-government strategy for foreign and domestic policy. For example, all departments, including the Home Office, should speak with one voice when it comes to assessing risk and responding to atrocities.

Making progress on multilateral nuclear disarmament

The current difficult environment makes it more, not less, important, for the UK to show leadership. As such, UNA-UK believes that this (and every) SDSR should be an opportunity for the UK to re-examine and set out the rationale for its nuclear programme. This should not be a formulaic exercise but a genuine review with appropriate opportunities for expert and public consultation and debate.

This process should recognise the limited utility of nuclear weapons in dealing with all but a very narrow set of threats, and should therefore acknowledge the need to tackle the full range of threats from multiple angles. This must include: maintaining an effective military capacity; investing in non-traditional military capabilities such as regional conflict resolution; and developing new avenues for diplomatic engagement on collective security approaches, particularly amongst larger powers with competing philosophies.

A key part of this approach must be investing in the health of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Considered the cornerstone of international efforts to stop the spread of nuclear weapons, the NPT's legitimacy is suffering from a loss of momentum, particularly with regard to nuclear-weapon states' obligations to disarm. This tension is damaging buy-in to the non-proliferation regime, and could weaken international cooperation more broadly on a raft of peace and security matters.

The UK should use its energy to encourage progress within the 'P5 Process', as it has in the past. This should include but not be limited to confidence-building and steps that signal progress towards its own international commitment to disarm, such as stockpile reductions or changes in nuclear doctrine. It also implies a dialogue on how the bigger powers can accommodate their divergent interests within an overall system of order.

The UK could also play an increased role in furthering progress on the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty and the Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty, and in operating as a bridge between nuclear and non-nuclear-weapon states. This should include fostering dialogue with the growing number of states discussing the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons. Such actions could start a compelling trend in international debate about extending global peace and security deep into the 21st century. That in itself could trigger progress in terms of strengthening the international non-proliferation regime, and creating the conditions that are necessary for multilateral disarmament.

Conclusion

The UK must devote adequate resources to strengthening the rules-based international order on which global stability and our own security and prosperity depend. By investing in UN initiatives, the UK can address national and global challenges that affect the everyday lives of people in this country and beyond, while maintaining its position of influence within the international system.

Doing so would be the most appropriate way in which the UK can mark the 70th anniversary of United Nations, and ensure that citizens in the UK and around the world benefit from this global organisation for decades to come.

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