National security, foreign policy and rights in a more volatile and violent world

Recommendations for the UK

Kate Ferguson

CENTRE FOR STATECRAFT & NATIONAL SECURITY
KING'S COLLEGE LONDON

P A Protection Approaches

About

Kate Ferguson is Co-Executive Director at Protection Approaches and Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Statecraft & National Security at Kings College London.

Analysis and recommendations in this paper reflect observations of Labour's first year of foreign policy and draw on lessons from the last ten years working with and towards various parts of the Foreign Office and the UK government to help strengthen UK crisis response, mass atrocity and conflict prevention, and civilian protection. This paper was written in advance of the 2025 National Security Strategy being published.

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Contact

Kate.Ferguson@protectionapproaches.org

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Cover photo: Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, French President Emmanuel Macron, and UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer lay flowers at Wall of Remembrance for fallen Ukrainian soldiers, Kyiv, Ukraine 10-05-2025.

Executive summary

There are varied competing demands that feed into any state's foreign policy and national security strategy. This policy paper addresses the relationship between rights and grand strategy at a time of metastasising global challenge, complex domestic need, and contracted financial resource. The core proposition is that the Labour government must recognise in its approach to national security strategy the politics of rights – the realpolitik of rights? – as being fundamental to the effective practice of international relations and a necessary cornerstone of contemporary democratic internationalism. Rather than continuing to view rights and people-centred decision making as an idealistic alternative to the pursuit of national interests, there is considerable advantage to build from prioritising serious comprehension of and vision for rights within UK grand strategy.

While it may be tempting to the government to drive a domestic focussed administration bulwarked by a resolute defence positioning, neither the UK nor Labour's leadership can afford to ignore or misdiagnose the current global juncture forced by intensifying systemic competition between states, between democratic and authoritarian values, and over the nature of the international order.[1] As the government prepares to implement a national security strategy fit for a new era defined by the struggle against and impacts of identity politics, authoritarianism, climate collapse, and technological revolution, it is necessary to reappraise how the corners of UK foreign policy are considered within and advanced by Number 10, the National Security Council, the Treasury and by the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) itself. This will require the UK to place rights not as a peripheral concern but as a strategic asset and core pillar of national security.

Articulating a vision for Britian in a world on fire is not easy, but reforming – and repairing – the UK's approach to international rights, peace and security holds potential for enormous impact and would quickly become all but cost neutral. It does, however, require something of a step change in how foreign policy and the FCDO has come to be viewed in Whitehall. As the world has become more violent and less predictable, and as the impacts of global volatility are felt variously at home, the UK's own international capabilities have been diminished. If 'the threats we now face' are indeed 'more serious and less predictable than at any time since the end of the Cold War'[2], the diplomatic, analytical, programmatic, and policy advisory capabilities of the FCDO will be essential in helping to steer the world to less dangerous realities – and must become fit for purpose. This paper therefore offers a series of three scalable recommendations to help to reinforce serious progressive, strategic and cost-effective capabilities at the heart of British foreign policy to support this administration in meeting the challenges of deepening global violence, volatility, and insecurity.

i. Recognising the competitive statecraft of rights and their violation

The last decade or more of western foreign policy failed to take sufficiently seriously the degree to which malign states and harmful non-state actors have become expert at weaponising identity, rights, and political grievances as a means of advancing their own interests. The reluctance to invest seriously in comprehending and confronting such statecraft has kept expertise regarding rights, human safety, and the geopolitical implications of massive rights violations on the margins of North Atlantic grand strategy. This failure has become more striking as the historic contradictions of western internationalism have been made more explicit and the consequences of an inconsistent or marginal approach to rights in western foreign policy have contributed to a world that is less safe – and where Euro Atlantic interests are more directly threatened. While Moscow and its military have spent decades cultivating expertise in the commission and enablement of widespread or systematic violations against groups as primary tools of its domestic and international policy, UK capabilities regarding their prevention and mitigation continue to be excluded from the most important decision-making tables and policy-making processes.

In its analysis and assessment of the shifting global context, the 2021 Integrated Review (IR) identified the rise of 'systemic competition, including between states, and between democratic and authoritarian values and systems of government'. The 2023 IR refresh determined that 'the intensification of systemic competition' had become 'the dominant geopolitical trend and the main driver of the deteriorating security environment. A growing convergence of authoritarian states are challenging the basic conditions for an open, stable and peaceful international order, working together to undermine the international system or remake it in their image.'[3] However, a traditional approach to grand strategy has so far focussed investment of attention and money on defence, technology, and partnership, but kept much of what is directly being challenged by authoritarianism – democracy, rights, internationalism and human safety – on the sidelines of the UK's response. Despite investing in a more active defence and security policy, the UK remains on the backfoot in the struggle for a more stable, secure, and safe world; responding to threats and managing crises as they arise but neglecting a lot of the hard work necessary to protect and cultivate the alternative to what our adversaries (and some allies) are advancing.

This paper does not refute the foundational analysis and assessment of the Integrated Review but rather argues its pillars that have shaped recent UK national security strategy – of strengthening security, defence and resilience both at home and abroad, and of contributing to shaping the international order – cannot be advanced without comprehending and committing to confront the weaponisation of identity, rights, and grievance as central to waging systemic competition. The complex and rapidly evolving threats of this harmful playbook are global, transnational, national, and local – they take practiced aim at the fissures and fault-lines that can be found in all societies, and draw on the history and practices of propaganda, populism, othering, and grievance. It includes the hostile advancement on the post-1945 system that has exploited real and exaggerated flaws, inconsistencies and hypocrisies to successfully weaken democratic commitment to the first principles of 'maintaining international peace and security, developing friendly relations among nations, and achieving international cooperation in solving problems while respecting human rights.'[4]

While identity politics and their violences are rapidly evolving, the principles of their propulsion and the narratives that provide justification and appeal are familiar. Europe's own past and present has much to teach on that front. The roll back of rights; the anti-gender movement and contemporary experience of misogyny; the assault on expertise, institutions and truth; and the instrumentalisation of anti-migrant extremism are internationalised experiences of political strategies historically waged within national or imperial borders that have become part of struggles for power at the global level. The diffusion of threats and tactics can appear disconnected – and intentionally so – but represent an effective sequencing and coordination enabled by our more connected and online world.

The gravest violations of rights – often described as mass atrocity crimes (genocide, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, war crimes) – appear to be rising inside and outside of armed conflict and are now dominant in most current complex security threats, humanitarian crises, and projected major risk scenarios. Thus, the International Development Committee in 2022 concluded Russia's mass atrocities in Ukraine underlined the urgent need for the UK to adopt a national strategy for preventing and responding to such crimes. The report judged that, without concerted action, "mass atrocities are likely to become more common, which will constrain global development".[5] No such strategy yet exists but the deliberate commission of mass atrocities has become a dominant feature of contemporary malign statecraft and non-state violence. From the Kremlin to Kigali; of today's major and emerging foreign policy crises, the vast majority – Ukraine, Sudan, Israel and Palestine, Myanmar, DRC and Xinjiang – cannot be addressed without confronting this reality.[6]

These are powerful political forces and must be treated as such, but effective confrontation can never solely be through traditional security and defence strategy. The history of successful resistance to authoritarianism teaches us that strong social cohesion is fundamental to resilient communities and a 'bellwether of societal health'[7]; the practice of sustainable democracy teaches us that the compact between state and citizen is integral. At home, cultivating such resilience is the work of Whitehall's domestic departments but internationally, this is where the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office will be essential.

'Adversaries,' John Bew warns, 'plan, plan, plan.'[8] 'Planning and grand strategy' he adds 'hard as it is for democracies to do, is absolutely vital.' What can no longer be ignored is that central to the planning and strategy of those adversaries is a cynical but effective playbook of tactics that include expansionism, aggression, interference in democratic process, divisionism and extremism, and atrocity crimes. The UK – indeed all whose safety and prosperity are threatened by the growing convergence of authoritarianism – need to acknowledge this reality and centre comprehension of rights, their violations, and their implications as a cornerstone of modern democratic national security and foreign policy. There is strategic advantage to be built in doing so – and existential peril in failing to do so.

ii. Labour's difficult inheritance

On winning the general election the Labour government inherited the UK's international responsibilities towards a world that was its most volatile and violent than at any point since at least the Second World War.[9] At the same time, they took over a hollowed out FCDO that was in urgent need of attention. David Lammy became the ninth foreign secretary in ten years – handed a diminished contact book, a slashed overseas development budget, and a demoralised department damaged by deliberate decisions and the inevitable compounding consequences of unrelenting ministerial churn. Whatever value a more considered merger may have held for DfID and the FCO, the roughshod decision-making of Boris Johnson damaged the cohesion, morale, strategic clarity, political heft, and international reputation of the joint department.

Labour came to power to find the post-1945 rules and systems that had previously provided imperfect frameworks, processes and forums towards international problem solving weakened from intentional and passive erosion. The UK's own role in and towards those institutions was damaged by the 2016 vote to leave the European Union and the public political rhetoric that then surrounded the uncoupling. Decisions by the Conservative government to at times disregard the rules-based system and international law had further damaged the UK standing in the world – as actions by Labour in the 2000s had done – contributing to the momentum of global backsliding.

In contrast to the disconnect and discomfort of the Foreign Office, the development of a fairly active defence policy has, at least since the 2021 Integrated Review, sought to respond to a rapidly shifting world of threat and challenge through a pragmatic security strategy that bolstered traditional and emerging security capabilities.[10] This was helped, too, by the comparative stability of Ben Wallace remaining in post as Secretary of State between 2019 and 2023 (during the same period, the Foreign Office had three foreign secretaries and went through the merger). It indicates the prioritisation, greater clarity – and resourcing – accorded to the MoD in implementing its contributing strategic objectives to the IR. This focus has continued to sharpen since Russia's second invasion of Ukraine, but even as recognition of the threats posed by rising authoritarianism and systemic competition have intensified, prioritisation of the FCDO's functions, strategy, and resourcing to prevent and mitigate these risks has been far less evident.

An exception can be found in the growing capabilities on mass atrocity crimes, particularly those that are identity-based. Following important commitments set out in the Integrated Review and a full inquiry by the International Development Committee into the UK's approach to atrocity prevention, the FCDO created the Mass Atrocity Prevention Hub, which now sits within the Migration and Conflict Directorate as the Conflict and Atrocity Prevention Department.[11] It is a dedicated team tasked with developing central tools of prediction and analysis, and supporting geographics in upholding the UK's approach to mass atrocity crimes.[12] The team 'strengthens understanding and knowledge of atrocity prevention across government through training and promoting collaboration and best practice', and 'is run as a hub and spoke model [drawing] on dedicated expertise from both thematic and geographical directorates across the FCDO and works with teams in-country ensuring the atrocity prevention agenda is integrated across the FCDO.'[13]

However, in the face so such evident threat, greater incentive is needed across the FCDO network, and Whitehall-wide, for stronger and more coherent collaboration and prioritisation. Outside of the demonstrable leadership of the directorate, there is limited (space for?) senior expertise tasked with driving tangible protection and prevention policy options, nor is there yet an articulated strategy or political heft standing behind these efforts to prioritise FCDO contributions to weakening the authoritarian and anti-rights foothold. Without proper resourcing and a clear sincere strategy, this important (and in a number of ways genuinely groundbreaking) work remains inevitably nascent insomuch as it connects to or informs national security, ministerial decision making, senior policy development, or the considerations of Number 10. Given how dynamic and varied conflict and atrocity risks have become in the digital age, the need for the FCDO to take a more holistic and comprehensive view will only increase – and as a result, comprehension of rights and their violation is now relevant to a far wider spectrum of policy areas. In addition to introducing the agenda of atrocity prevention, the framework of the Integrated Review set out much needed prioritisation of 'grievances, political marginalisation and criminal economies' as part of 'a more integrated approach to government work on conflict and instability.' In practice, this significant commitment has not yet translated into defined strategic objectives guiding UK policy and so implementation remains deeply incoherent. Properly and creatively articulated, this is exactly the arenas UK diplomatic and programmatic capabilities should be deployed, whether in the most acute contexts such as the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Sudan or in regions of deepening contestation, from the Western Balkans to the Sahel. Instead, there is real risk that this critical work itself becomes treated as a departmental programme rather than as the vehicle to drive strategic shift in understanding across the department and wider government.

On the whole, rights are still seen by HMG as something to be promoted and as a soft agenda, rather than recognising the politics of rights and the implications of their violation as being central to any kind of political or power analysis. This can be seen, for example, in the marginalisation from top decision-making tables and continued de-politicalisation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda even as the incitement and weaponisation of a resurgent misogyny has become a central tool of state and non-state authoritarian strategy. Considering the treatment of marginalised or minoritised groups as being peripheral to policy making has led to patterns of violence and political strategy being missed or downplayed time and time again, from underestimating Russian objectives in Ukraine to failing to foresee the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan in 2021, the likelihood of war and atrocity returning to Sudan in 2023, or the intensity of Israeli response to the October 7th terrorist attack.

Despite the prevalence of deliberate widespread or systematic violations of rights, and despite the depth of their human, economic and security impacts, mass atrocity violence continues to be seen by much of HMG as infrequent or as collateral harm. This means that the tactical manner with which authoritarian forces commission, incite, enable, and profit from identity-based violence and mass atrocities is still not readily acknowledged. Complex state and nonstate networks now enable and benefit from these tactics but their logical dynamics do not commonly inform UK policy or strategy. Instead, a continuing practice of ad-hoc crisis reaction and response conveys to the world in this time of heightened systemic competition a sense of inconsistency and unpreparedness.[14]

Since taking office, the world has entered a different phase of precarity, intensifying the scope and scale of international challenge the Labour government must comprehend and confront. Day one executive orders from President Trump triggered US withdrawal from varied international collective efforts spanning global health to climate change; the hurried closure of USAID, dismantling of numerous key offices of the State Department, and unprecedented budget cuts created, almost overnight, an unparalleled vacuum of global financing, security and leadership. Collective security backboned by the United States as the cornerstone of postwar transatlantic internationalism is over, demanding new partnerships capable of withstanding and confronting the competition for global governance posed by adversaries. Already on the multilateral level recent US withdrawal is propelling longer term deliberate efforts by states and non-state auxiliaries to dismantle the ethical, political, and legal standards of the United Nations. Leaked proposals for a slimmed down and politically neutered United Nations signal the pace at which change is coming, directly and indirectly emboldening those who see benefit in the dismantling or weakening of international institutions and responsibilities.[15] Within months a new future of the UN will be determined – the vision from those states that see benefit in its most robust and constructive evolution has yet to be set out but the alternative is looming.

Irrespective of any deal the UK can maintain, Labour now faces a radically different and 'unreliable' American international strategy that will continue to reshape contemporary international relations as well as our own transatlantic relationship.[16] How the government take on this challenge has significant implications for domestic resilience to varied state threats, particularly those that take aim at British social cohesion by weaponising identity, grievances and democratic process. The UK, given its very particular relationship with the US, will face a confronting internal as well as international identity crisis as the Trump administration rejects political plurality, employs robust and unaccountable central power, dismantles protections of democracy, and takes aim at the separation of powers, civil liberties, and the rule of law.

As the world has become more violent and less predictable, and as the impacts of global volatility are felt variously at home, the UK's own international capabilities have been diminished. The rushed merger, massive cuts to the aid budget, and the consistent de-prioritisation of the department in the years before and following the UK's withdrawal from the European Union eroded the political power of the Foreign Office both in Whitehall and internationally, and narrowed serious political consideration of British global relations. As a result, and while it may be tempting in the immediate term to drive a domestic focussed administration bulwarked by a resolute defence positioning, Labour's leadership cannot afford to maintain the status quo it has inherited with regards to how foreign policy is conceived and towards the department responsible for its implementation.

iii. Building strategic advancement through rights

Five years ago David Miliband warned the world had entered what he called 'the age of impunity', offering as 'a symbol of this shift, President Putin and Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman high fiving at the G-20 summit just weeks after the killing of Jamal Khashoggi.'[17] In 2023 Miliband warned again that 'lack of accountability for crimes in places like Syria and Yemen' had emboldened violations of international law in Ukraine, Sudan and elsewhere.[18] The consequence of a reactive and disjointed approach to peace, security, and rights by Euro Atlantic states – and a collective global failure to defend, invest in, and reform the forums and processes of multilateralism – was one of slippage, characterised by short-term rather than strategic trade-offs and an underestimation of the long game being played by others.

The case of what democratic states had to lose by failing to confront either the growing authoritarian threat, or the self-harm of their own inconsistency, was not sufficiently made. Nor was the case made of what states strategically had to gain in integrating an assertive and coherent approach to rights into their national security and foreign policy strategies. There are varied reasons that explain the evolution of North Atlantic foreign policy and its relationships with rights in an era shaped by the invasion of Iraq, the War on Terror, and declining US hegemony but it still feels contradictory that amid increasingly explicit challenge for global governance and influence, many safer parts of the democratic world have come to see collective peace and security as a value rather than a strategic imperative; an ideal not an issue of self-interest. This is now changing as hard lessons from Russia's invasion and atrocities in Ukraine, Trump's re-election, and Israel's destruction of Gaza coalesce. There is urgent need to accept both the strategic mistakes that were made and what is now approaching. In addition to the immediate threats posed by global authoritarian resurgence, evidence-based scenarios of climate and biodiversity collapse over the next five-20 years predict grim possible futures characterised by violence, population movements, resource shortages, and disrupted supply chains.[19] Beyond the immediate catastrophic human impacts, this trajectory holds tremendous implications for the transition to renewable energy, the risks of armed conflict between nuclear powers, and UK access to regional markets. There can be no sustainable growth and secure supply chains in a world with no rules.

But authoritarianism can and has through history been defeated. In the same way states like Russia and China have found common benefit – and wider state and nonstate support – in 'working together to undermine the international system or remake it in their image,'[20] working in broader and more inclusive coalition to reimagine and reinvigorate the international order to better represent its first principles would deliver both national and collective advantage. This does not mean lowering standards to make quick compromise with states that themselves operate within the axis of, or benefit from, strategic rights violation and or authoritarian practice, but rather bringing corresponding strategic conviction to the UK's international vision, positioning, and decision-making. Far from constricting UK options, integrating rights as a primary consideration of political analysis and grand strategy will often open pathways to new partnerships and problem solving. Respect for rights is a powerful and strategically important organising force within diplomacy that can turn otherwise short term and transactional tactical disorder into a coherent and consistent set of actions (which often frustrates Russia's agenda) and provides a diplomatic framework for security and stability.

The strategic error by multiple democratic donor states to roll back their international aid contributions has ceded influence to those the UK recognise as posing threats not only on the ground but in the global political imagination. It is difficult to identify where cuts to aid have been made but political (as opposed to defence) capabilities to confront global challenges have been bolstered. If there are unavoidable financial pressures driving down programming budgets, even greater and more creative attention must be given to strategy, policy, and ensuring the systems tasked with implementation are effective. Instead, the trend of cuts to ODA budgets has so far only made the difficult political work on rights and confronting their violation more vulnerable to further deprioritisation.

The decision by the Labour government to make a huge cut to UK international aid contributions appears to be following the same pattern and will again dramatically reduce FCDO capabilities across the diplomatic, political, and programmatic. Imminent 'significant' cuts to the FCDO headcount by up to one in five signals a slimmed down department with a smaller footprint in Whitehall, including a substantial reduction of director level expertise.[21] The FCDO could do with considered structural adaptation – to address its flawed desk system, find more effective balance between its analysis and policy development, open up the recruitment process and so on – but without clear sense of Labour's vision for the department, it is hard not to see this as misjudged short-term cost saving in the face of unprecedented global violence and volatility. There are few who dispute the need for the UK invest in national, global and human security but it is evident that this cannot be even close to achieved through defence budgets alone.[22]

There is no hiding the fact that these cuts are already having brutal impact on the ground and will mean that the UK contributes far less to the global prevention of, protection from, and preparedness for crises, shocks, and violations. If the decision cannot be reversed, the government – indeed the Prime Minister and Number 10 – must, at the very least, guard against what risks becoming the political malignment of the FCDO and the function of the foreign secretary in Whitehall and in senior strategic decision-making which, given global precarity surely should be considered untenable.

It is evident that government must ensure it is set up to adequately confront, interrupt, prevent or mitigate the ways in which coalescing forces weaponise identity, rights, and political grievances as a means of advancing their own interests; its national security strategy needs to fully appreciate that this struggle lies at the heart of systemic competition over the nature of the international order – and that these forces will increasingly hit hard at home. This should be championed by foreign policy realists and progressives alike. No strategy towards Russia or China, for example, can succeed in the long term without addressing Vladimir Putin's or the Chinese Communist Party's deliberate violations of rights and of international law. Human safety and regional security cannot be achieved in the Europe, the Indo-Pacific, the Middle East or Africa without confronting the weaponisation of identity and grievance and understanding the pathology of mass atrocity violence. Likewise, any policy on the changing climate, evolving technology and AI or democracy must reckon with rights, power and violence. The political and financial dividends of an approach to prevention and preparedness would be considerable and hold potential for the UK and likeminded partners to revive, renew and reimagine internationalism and safety.

iv. Recommendations

This paper concludes by offering a series of three recommendations to strengthen how our national security, foreign policy, and rights are understood to intersect in a more violent and volatile world. Behind this lies wider need for the Labour government to reappraise the function of its Foreign Office, recognising the growing pressures on its foreign policy in safeguarding UK interests and security. Such a reset will require political provision to be made for the department to repair, consolidate, and to reimagine itself – and for creative and strategic foreign policy expertise to become part of the wider functions of government, including but not limited to Number 10, the National Security Council, and Treasury.

A. Articulate strategy and vision

- The Labour government must recognise in its national security strategy the politics of rights and the implications of violations as being fundamental to the effective practice of international relations and a necessary cornerstone of contemporary democratic internationalism. This means comprehending the strategy and tactics of weaponising identity, rights and grievance and developing a serious cross-government strategy held by the FCDO to respond to, mitigate, prevent, and repair the harms such malign statecraft has on human, global, and national safety and security. This should include but not be limited to developing a strategic approach to the gravest violations such as wars of aggression, genocide and crimes against humanity, including by updating the 2019 National Approach to Preventing Mass Atrocities.

B. Bolster senior political expertise

- Advancing such a political strategy needs to become the responsibility of several senior jobholders across Whitehall, including the FCDO and in Number 10. This would complement or, where necessary, pose constructive challenge, to those parts of government tasked with pursuing national security, UK trade interests, climate policy, tech and AI, crisis preparedness, and so on. The planned reduction in FCDO directors from 50 to 30 must protect roles with deep expertise regarding and responsibility for rights, conflict and atrocity prevention, and providing relevant policy advice. However, given the scale of forthcoming cuts, a more dynamic and political way of working across UK foreign policy is needed, likely requiring greater freedom and higher risk thresholds for directors to develop policy advice and work with ministers towards implementation

- A new senior policy advisor to the Prime Minister and/or Foreign Secretary tasked with viewing decision-making with distinct consideration of human rights and their violation would provide a function of constructive challenge, strategic advice, and technical subject matter expertise. This would ensure wider strategic implications of decisions regarding rights and responding to their violations are explicitly represented and considered, rather than implicitly included in analysis of trade-offs and risk assessments. New strategic advisors working across Number 10, King Charles Street and national security functions will help bring coherence and practical follow-through. These appointments should address ministerial frustration of wanting to receive a greater spectrum of more creative options to tackle the

most serious challenges by providing easier direct access to senior strategic and technical advice.

- As the systems of international justice face mounting challenge, including sanctions by the United States, UK policy regarding international law will become an increasingly significant – and explicit – component of HMG's strategy and identity in the world. However, the interaction of government legal and political analysis, within the FCDO and across government can create internal contestation and there is clear need to find more effective resolution of how the two inform policy, both in responding to specific crises and in UK grand strategy. Government should seek to 'de-agonise' policy and decision-making regarding rights and international law.[23] There are creative opportunities too for the advancement of international law, for example the draft Crimes Against Humanity treaty and associated mechanism for its implementation. As chief legal adviser to the Crown, with oversight of all major international and domestic litigation involving the Government and responsibility for promoting the rule of law at home and internationally, the function of the Attorney General will change and could make new contribution. Effective interaction between the Attorney General, the FCDO, and national security structures to support UK adherence to and advancement of international law will be integral as systemic competition deepens.

C. Draw on external expertise

- The Prime Minister's Civil Society Covenant to improve and reset the relationship between civil society and government has so far been oriented towards a reset regarding domestic policy issues, but the FCDO has indicated the intention to take forward the covenant to support foreign policy. The expertise of those most proximate to the threats and impacts of what the UK seeks to confront and prevent needs to be far more seriously heard and brought into decision-making. Again, this is far more than an ethical way of working but ensures that those who best understand threats and perpetrators are directly informing the UK's analysis and policy. This should be seen as a necessary methodological and political shift to make effective contribution to the prevention and mitigation of varied rights violations, to build strategic advantage through rights-based strategy, and for the UK to successfully earn global public trust.

- The creation of the Soft Power Council[24] is a welcome example of a commitment to reach into external expertise and holds potential to create complementary space for cross sector input to Labour's emerging international strategy. The Foreign Secretary and his ministers should be further supported through the provision of formal and informal external expertise. The reconstitution of the Foreign Secretary's Human Rights Advisory Group, first established by William Hague, would provide an important forum of constructive challenge and engagement from the UK's most experienced and expert. However, focus should be on strategy, political policy options and problem solving. One year into government, Labour's FCDO ministers remain surprisingly closed to UK-based civil society and perhaps risk missing the opportunity to rebuild the relationships with a sector that were deeply harmed in the last years of Conservative government and whose partnership, expertise, networks, and vision will be integral to UK and collective resistance to gathering storm.

D. Strengthen existing FCDO systems

- The Migration and Conflict Directorate and Human Rights Directorate should serve as HMG's central hubs for its international strategy on rights and their violation, already bringing together different agendas and thematic expertise, and therefore able to advance greater synergy and strategic coherence. Existing FCDO rights-related assets, including policy and analytical capabilities, early and urgent warning systems, legal advisors, key posts in New York and Geneva – and many capitals, do not need to be radically reimagined but do require greater influence and consideration. At the very least they must be protected as the department faces further pruning. Lessons must be learned from efforts to 'mainstream' other agendas widely considered to fall under a human rights rubric that have led to shallow institutionalisation, political marginalisation and low impact. Instead, the Directorates require capabilities to support ambitious and creative policy development and contribute seriously to international and national security strategy, including closer collaboration with the intelligence services. To uphold their function, the mandates of rights, prevention, and protection must be recognised as central rather than peripheral to UK interests and international policy.

- A central ringfenced fund to support the FCDO's work confronting, mitigating and preventing authoritarianism; the weaponisation of identity, rights, and grievance; and advancing the department's existing efforts on mass atrocity prevention will be essential. Budget lines to mitigating and reversing trends of authoritarianism, mass atrocity crimes, and conflict, should be ringfenced in both ODA and non-ODA budgets, and include investment from funds tasked with confronting the same malign global trends and/or those that enable higher-risk, more dynamic or catalytic, and cross-cutting work. Rethinking the UK Integrated Security Fund (ISF) offers timely opportunity to establish new priorities for the Fund and to reverse some of the decisions that appear to see rights and conflict as solely the business of the foreign office but not the Cabinet Office. There are few FCDO or ISF geographic strategies that will not have to content with rights rollbacks, identity-based harms from misogyny and anti-LGBT+ mobilisations to mass atrocities and extremism.

Endnotes

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