

**House of Lords
International Relations Select Committee**

UK foreign policy in changed world conditions

**Written evidence from the British Council
22 February 2018**

1. British Council

1.1 The British Council is the UK's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. We create friendly knowledge and understanding between the people of the UK and other countries. We do this by making a positive contribution to the UK and the countries we work with – changing lives by creating opportunities, building connections and engendering trust. This enhances the security, prosperity and influence of the UK and, in so doing, helps make the world a better, safer place.

1.2 The British Council builds the UK's soft power through a cultural relations approach, which develops long term relationships and trust for the UK with people and organisations around the world.

Responses to Questions

2. (Question 1) How should the UK develop its portfolio of engagements with global institutions and networks, both new and existing, such as the EU (which it is leaving), the modern Commonwealth, the Pacific Alliance and the new power centres and associations of Asia?

2.1 The role and importance of networks and non-state institutions in international relations is significantly increasing.¹ As the world becomes increasingly hyperconnected, the UK will need to place more importance on engaging with these new international networks and actors, in addition to traditional diplomatic relationships. Reaching out across borders to global civil society organisations, businesses, NGOs, universities, media organisations and cultural institutions, as well as influential individuals and opinion formers will be absolutely critical, given their increasing role in global policymaking and networks of influence.

2.2 The UK is well placed to be able to develop its connections and influence within a more networked and disaggregated international order, with its globally renowned soft power institutions such as the British Council, BBC World Service and cultural, educational and civil society sectors that are admired and desired globally. One of the most effective ways of engaging with these networks and groups will be people-to-people level engagement, cultural relations and citizen and cultural diplomacy, building ties based on attraction and mutually beneficial relationships. Specifically the UK should consider scaling up its bi-lateral relationships with European, Commonwealth and other priority countries with increased connections between schools, universities, communities and a wide range of non-state actors. The UK government can play a critical role in facilitating and enabling these relationships via increased funding for key soft power organisations, and creating a supporting policy framework – for example in education promoting the learning of relevant languages, seeking to reverse the decline in school exchanges and negotiating to remain within the Erasmus+ programme.

3. (Question 2) What impact have digital technologies and the on-going communications revolution had on global affairs, both economic and political?

(Question 3) What effect have digital technologies had on the practice of diplomacy? Do we have the diplomatic resource of the right kind and weight to meet the demands of a world of intricate and extensive networks?

3.1 Digital technologies have already had a significant impact on international relations and this raises key questions about the ability of traditional diplomacy alone to bring about the kind of influence that the UK will need in the future to ensure its prosperity, security and global influence. The UK needs to develop its capability in being able to engage with critical influencers and opinion formers globally and indeed whole populations around the world. This can be aided by encouraging diplomats to use social media, but the changed international landscape requires an approach of an entirely different order and magnitude. It will require much deeper and more sustained engagement with people, organisations and institutions from the UK. We will need to support millions of UK young people and opinion formers to engage internationally and use digital technologies to build global relationships and connections that will support business and trade, as well as lasting influence.

3.2 Digital technologies enable greater reach at lower marginal costs. This contact with larger global audiences provides opportunities for ongoing engagement and interaction. The British Council has almost 200 million active digital users and specific activities such as *Shakespeare Lives* enable interaction with new audiences – social media, for instance, had a hashtag reach of 2.7 billion. In addition, digital widens the audience scope and depth of diplomacy. In Wider Europe, English language learning material is being combined with arts content – from UK cultural organisations – to interact with youth audiences and

¹ Joseph Nye, *Smart Power*, 2011; Lord Howell, *Old Links and New Ties: Power and Persuasion in the Age of Networks*, 2013; Anne-Marie Slaughter, *The Chessboard and the Web: Strategies of Connection in a Networked World*, 2017

represent new perspectives on the UK. Similarly, video content, tailored for mobile devices enables organisations to reach younger audiences that would be inaccessible by traditional diplomatic means.

3.3 The British Council is also exploring mobile first and mobile only solutions to communicate with new audiences. Mobile is the access point for youth audiences and provides a platform to offer new products and services. Our mobile first English language assessment test, for instance, is creating a new opportunity for people to learn English, improve their lives and develop career opportunities. With inherently shareable content and features mobile also enables self-forming communities.

3.4 Digital platforms provide new means of communication and collaboration. Facebook Live, for instance, is used by The British Council to promote the UK and UK universities to overseas students. Digital can provide safe spaces for people to explore challenges, share experiences and build solutions. *Five Films for Freedom* – the first global LGBT digital short-film programme - reached over 1.7 million people in a week demonstrating how digital cultural relations can promote the UK's values in countries such as Iraq and Russia.

3.5 Technology is changing customer expectations and providing new pathways for the disadvantaged. This provides an opportunity for the UK to embrace. The British Council is a member of the Microbit Education Foundation teaching 100 million children to code and engaged in activities ranging from coding classes in refugee camps to collaborations with Education Ministries in the Western Balkans.

3.6 It should be noted that while a significant amount can be done through digital engagement, this should be no substitute for face-to-face engagement, which can be significantly more effective in building lasting influence and relationships. And at a time of fake news, negative digital narratives about the UK or its people will be more readily questioned and more easily dismissed by those that have had direct engagement with people from the UK.

4. (Question 4) Are there organisational changes required to ensure Government, its institutions and agencies are able to respond to these challenges and opportunities?

4.1 At a time of increasing global uncertainty and a growth in non-state actors wielding influence on the world stage, the UK needs to continue to develop a clear and future-facing vision of its foreign policy for the decades ahead. While traditional understandings of foreign policy in the form of military, international aid and diplomacy will continue to be important, and indeed should be maintained and even increased, soft power should be considered alongside each of these aspects as a way in which to increase their impact. Soft power should not be seen as an aside to these efforts, but rather an integral part of securing the UK's security, prosperity and influence around the world.

4.2 There is a need for HMG to recognise the vital importance and independence of soft power organisations. As was recommended by the 2013 House of Lords report on Soft Power, these organisations are not in need of top-down control or direction (which would render them less effective), but would be aided in their work by a clear national vision and narrative about the UK's future place in the world and key relationships, and the potential role that soft power and the development of cultural and educational relationships can play in achieving this. This would enable the main soft power organisations to develop their strategies to help support these overall aims, but do so in a manner that maintains their independence and legitimacy in the eyes of audiences around the world.

4.3 As a strategic partner of HMG, the British Council is able to help share policy insight and expert views on how the UK is seen internationally, and is able and willing to offer expertise on the theory and practice of soft power and on the ground insight in order to help find the most effective means of tackling international challenges.

4.4 There are strategic benefits and efficiencies to be made by the British Council leading in delivery where it is the best placed organisation to do so, therefore avoiding duplication of work and resource by government departments and meaning that it can develop long term credibility and relationships around the world. It is far more effective for HMG to work with the British Council or other public institutions for the long term on major projects, rather than tender out short term contracts for soft power related work that therefore cannot form lasting ties and trust. Our relationships with UK cultural and educational institutions, as well as the governments and cultural and educational institutions in the countries in which we work, built through decades working on the ground, often mean we are best placed to mobilise partnerships to best effect using our expertise in UK soft power.

5. (Question 6) How should the UK's relationship with the US be adapted and refreshed to take into account the present US Administration's (a) reduced predictability and its apparent retreat from its

post-War global role and (b) its emphasis on putting US interests, narrowly defined, as an overriding priority?

5.1 The United States is pivoting towards Asia in terms of its foreign policy focus, and the unpredictable actions of its current leadership are raising questions about its continuing alignment with the values and priorities of the UK. This is creating a risk of a long term diminution of the UK's most important bi-lateral relationship. Given that the UK relies on the US for its security, for support on key diplomatic issues and for trade, it is vital that we try and forge a renewed transatlantic partnership for the future. We should reach out to the next generation of leaders and decision makers in the US to ensure a deepening of relationships, collaborations in education, science and culture, and values-based ties and connections.

5.2 A vital element in building this relationship, and others around the world, will be to increase people-to-people engagement, ensuring that future leaders in these key strategic countries understand and value the UK. Research shows that cultural relations builds trust with other countries and this often underpins decisions to do business with, study in, invest in and visit the UK². New research by the University of Edinburgh³ shows that cultural institutions such as the British Council are influential for attracting international students, tourists and foreign direct investment. A 1% increase in the number of countries a cultural institution from a country covers results in a 0.73% increase in international student flows and a 0.66% increase in foreign direct investment. The same research also found that there is a close relationship between countries voting with a country in the UN and the cultural ranking of that country.

5.3 In the United States, our strategy focuses around building opportunities for the next generation of leaders, who will be key players in shaping the future relationship with the UK. We launched the *Global Innovation Initiative*, a multilateral higher education research partnership worth \$9.25million funded by the US Department of State, the (former) UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and British Council. It created 37 partnerships between universities in the UK, USA, and Brazil, China, India and Indonesia to develop solutions to global challenges. However, in recent years our work in the US has reduced as our non-ODA funding has declined. Reversing this trend will be important if we are to be able to increase our future work in support of this vital relationship for the UK.

6. (Question 7) How should UK foreign policy adapt to the rise of China as a global power, particularly in the light of President Xi's ambitions for a new era in Chinese influence and China's extensive "one belt, one road" initiative?

6.1 China's influence continues to increase and its "one belt, one road" initiative will ensure it becomes an ever stronger force in international relations. The wide cultural differences and geographic distance between China and the UK mean that the UK is not automatically placed as a top trading partner for China, and we must focus on building mutual trust, understanding and future facing relationships with the Chinese people, organisations and government to overcome this.

6.2 In China, arts exchange builds trust and mutual understanding. The 2015 *UK-China Year of Cultural Exchange* showcased a range of UK talent in China, with face-to-face activities reaching over two million people and a further 820 million people digitally. It was a springboard for UK and Chinese businesses to form new partnerships, leading to 100 new relationships between UK and Chinese cultural institutions and over £20 million of cultural and creative industry commercial agreements.

6.3 In the future the UK should aim to continue to grow its cultural, educational, scientific and sporting ties with China, aiming to ensure the strongest possible people-to-people ties with the world's largest economy.

7. (Question 8) What challenges, now and in the longer term, does Russia present for the UK's foreign policy in both the cyber and conventional spheres?

7.1 Cultural engagement has the potential to aid the UK's challenging relationship with Russia, given the importance to Russia of culture, education and science and the relevance of what the UK has to offer in these areas. They can play an important role in building a mutually respectful and trusting relationship between the UK and Russian people for the future. Young Russians are open to the world, and the world is open to them in a way unprecedented in Russian history. They are also more digitally connected than almost anyone on the planet.

7.2 The *UK-Russia Year of Language and Literature* 2016 used two UK assets – the English language and Shakespeare – to connect the UK with over 17 million Russians. Through a new partnership with the Ministry of Education, the British Council's Russia team reached children and teachers in 40,000 schools

² Trust Pays <https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/trust-pays-report-v2.pdf>

³ Soft Power Today. Available at: <https://www.britishcouncil.org/organisation/policy-insight-research/soft-power-research>

across Russia's 11 time zones through a Shakespeare Schools Day and a National Shakespeare Olympiad. HM Ambassador Moscow Laurie Bristow described the year as "an extraordinary opportunity to build links between people and institutions in our two countries at a time of political tension between our governments".

7.3 The British Council would like to do more to support UK education and cultural organisations in growing links with Russia at what is a critical time in the relationship between our nations. However, the decline in the British Council's non-ODA government funding is meaning that we are unable to increase activity.

8. (Question 9) How should the UK re-position itself in relation to emerging powers such as India and Brazil, or others in Latin America, Asia and Africa?

8.1 There are immense opportunities for the UK's future trade and influence if we can build strong relations with emerging powers for the decades to come. Cultural relations underpin trade, and it is imperative that the UK increases people-to-people engagement with the future decision makers across these continents. Through building collaborative relationships, and investing in the development of English language skills, education reform and research collaboration, professional and vocational skills, and expertise in the cultural and creative industries, the UK can make an important difference in countries globally. These areas could lead to a significant payback for the UK in future exports, investment and influence.

8.2 The UK's relationship with India in particular should be a key priority given its rapid economic growth, deep historical and cultural ties with the UK and likely future trajectory as the world's most populous country and second largest economies.

9. (Question 10) To what extent does the Government have the skills and capability to build and maintain the bilateral relationships necessary for the UK to thrive in the changed global context?

9.1 Given the UK's urgent need to step up international connections as we leave the European Union, the country should be urgently increasing its diplomatic and cultural relations work globally, including in developed economies. However, both the FCO and British Council are under significant financial pressure in the developed world.

9.2 The British Council has undergone reduction in its non-ODA grant of £120m since 2010. It achieved this by stopping virtually all non-ODA activity in ODA countries such as China and India, closing its 4 offices in the Nordics and its office in New York, moving to 28% of country directors being locally appointed and reducing grant spending in EU countries from £20m in 2010 to just over £9m in 2017 – leaving a number of operations as skeletal presences with no resident country directors.

9.3 By 2019-20 the British Council's non-ODA government funding will reduce to £0. This means that its total non-commercial spend in the developed world will fall from £74m last year, to £55m this year, to around £24m in the future funded purely by the surpluses from commercial activity. This will mean a major reduction in its work and presence. In future, in the developed world the British Council will not have the capacity to build and maintain the kind of deep and future facing relationships with key organisations and influencers that the UK needs. Whilst it has been very successful in developing commercial activity in developed economies – such as teaching English, providing access to UK qualifications, and winning contracts from organisations such as the EU - these things alone cannot provide the rounded cultural relations offer or arts and education relationships that the UK needs. Already the organisation is significantly under-resourced in developed countries and could be doing far more for the UK. But the planned reductions in grant funding will mean a further reduction in work in developed countries. This makes little sense in at a time when the UK needs more non-development funded soft power projects.

9.4 It is also important to acknowledge and understand that the full benefits from spending on cultural relations and other soft power activities can take years, if not decades, to emerge. People who have experienced the UK thanks to the British Council go on to become influential actors and leaders in national or international affairs and have a lasting stock of goodwill, understanding and trust towards the UK and its people. It is at this point that more significant impacts in terms of diplomacy or trade are evident. Resource dedicated to soft power activities should be allocated accordingly, enabling these activities to develop for the long term.