

6 August 2020

IN THE 'NEW NORMAL' POLICY-MAKERS MUST THINK LONG-TERM



Sir Stewart Eldon KCMG OBE is an adviser and commentator on international defence and security issues. He served as UK Permanent Representative to NATO; Ambassador to Ireland; and Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN in New York. He works with private and public sector clients in Africa and has led executive workshops in negotiation and diplomatic skills.

An unpalatable truth has emerged from growing Western difficulties with China and the delayed Intelligence & Security Committee report on Russian influence in the UK. It is that both China and Russia think long-term. In recent years Western governments have not.

Gaps in UK long-term policy-making have been thrown starkly into focus by the government's handling of the Coronavirus pandemic. The UK is not alone in this, but the pandemic has had an obvious impact on the country's national and economic security. One lesson that's bound to come out of the current crisis is the need to retain the sovereign capability needed (whether in vaccine production and research, PPE, cyber-deterrence or 'hard' military power) to assure national security and resilience. That requires long-term planning; 'just-in-time' systems will not suffice. Coronavirus has taught us that established Alliances and international arrangements can no longer entirely be relied on.

Many systemic challenges to policy-making are about leadership and culture. Political (and other) leaders must be able to pick out things that will really matter in the longer term. This requires a proper sense of strategic patience and a willingness to allow ideas to be properly tested and challenged in a transparent way. Policy shaped by focus groups and determined on a week-by-week basis ultimately will not work. Nor will rushing things on the basis of inputs from a few individuals. That includes the Integrated Review of Security Policy currently being led by Downing Street.

In an interesting piece published by the Global Strategy Forum in May this year the former Head of UK Joint Forces Command argued cogently that the combination and concurrency of managing Brexit, Russia, the planet, China, and the AI industrial revolution will set the bar for what counts as competent government. We will need to think properly about the balance between ends, ways and means and recognize we cannot do it all. If our politics is entirely consumed by responding to a well-tuned sense of what the majority of people reckon at any particular moment, we will deserve the poverty and insecurity that will ensue.

Access. Engagement. Resolution.

To be successful at any time – but particularly in the ‘new normal’ - long-term policy has to be credible. If it’s not – and this holds true particularly for defence, security and foreign policy – people will have endless time to pick it apart. Credibility implies maintaining a constancy of approach, while being willing to adapt as priorities shift and requirements change. It was fair enough for the then British government to decide the Royal Navy needed modern aircraft carriers (with all the undoubted appeal to Scottish shipyards at the time contracts were signed). But it was not so clever to fudge the need for ships to support and protect them, including with arguments that other Allies could provide the capability.

As the UK moves to reset its national resilience it must decide how to counter the new, complex and asymmetric threats it faces and – post-Brexit - project a new and more assertive country. Both Allies and enemies will have expectations of us. We will not keep a seat close to the top table by cutting nuclear capability or gutting the Army. Change may rightly be necessary as the definition of national security expands. But it needs to be done carefully and deliberately in a way that maintains trust and confidence.

Credible policy also implies well-resourced policy. That will be particularly important after Brexit. There seems little sign of real recognition by political leaders that projecting the sort of UK they say they want will cost a lot more money. That money must be spent properly, not invested in ideas that won’t deliver. Defence, foreign, security, trade and aid policy are all interlinked. Some things will be much cheaper than others. But you cannot do everything on the cheap and get away with it. Financing what’s necessary was going to be difficult before Coronavirus. It will be doubly difficult now.

Some things can help political decision-makers operate successfully within a long-term context:

- Putting in place light but transparent strategic policy-making mechanisms that can work relatively quickly but maintain public and professional confidence; take advantage of the considerable expertise and experience already available to government; and sustain constructive challenge.
- Crucially, encourage leadership behaviours that reinforce strategic patience and value considered and mature advice.
- Develop a clear but realistic vision of where you want to be in the world
- Concentrate on ensuring the necessary sovereign capabilities to make that vision happen. Ensure national resilience and remove the need to rely on others for essentials.
- Ensure policies are resourced to deliver, even if that means unpalatable spending decisions in other areas.
- Act credibly and with deliberation.
- Once a strategy is decided, stick to it.

Access. Engagement. Resolution.

The Ambassador Partnership LLP is a **unique specialist** partnership of former Ambassadors with unrivalled networks of influence in almost 100 countries. We provide discreet services to resolve your international problems and to improve your capacity to operate effectively wherever you need to.

We are **dispute resolution** specialists and **political risk** experts.

To discuss how we can help you to manage your political risk please call:

Tracey Stewart

Partnership Secretary

+44 (0) 7950 944 010

tracey.stewart@ambassadorllp.com

www.ambassadorllp.com