

Briefing

Brexit, “Global Britain” & the UK’s place in the world: key issues for peace and security

The Brexit debate is happening at a time of shifting global power relations. With the UK’s economic and military influence already diminishing relative to some other powers, the prospect of Brexit has prompted renewed questions about its future place in the world.

Whatever the final outcome of the Brexit debate, it will provide an opportunity to reset the UK’s approach to security and international relations. The government’s “Global Britain” agenda emphasises an ambition to remain outward-looking – but the debate has also highlighted pressures to bolster the UK’s status and prosperity through arms exports, overseas military bases, and interventionist capabilities. This outdated approach overlooks both past failures and contemporary security realities, including the urgent problems of climate change and inequality. An interdependent world requires the UK to draw on other strengths and chart a different course, adopting a more humane, collaborative and sustainable approach to current challenges.

Rethinking Securityⁱ urges all political parties to seize this opportunity, and set out a new vision and strategy for the UK’s approach to peace and security.

Build on positive foundations: how the UK can best contribute to peace and security

As the UK prepares to renegotiate relations with individual states and multilateral institutions, the government should assess how these interactions might contribute to either exacerbating insecurity and violence, or building peace. On the basis of evidence drawn from a wide range of sources, it should prioritise approaches that enhance prospects for sustainable security.

1. Champion and implement international treaty obligations and policy frameworks. The UK could demonstrate its renewed commitment to global norms and multilateral action through implementation of, and sustained political and financial support for, the UN ‘Sustaining Peace’ agenda, the peaceful, just and inclusive societies elements of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SDG16+), the newly-established Youth, Peace and Security agenda, successive resolutions to UNSCR 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security, and the Arms Trade Treaty.

2. Prioritise prevention: tackling climate breakdown, inequality and marginalisation. Many of the world’s most serious challenges – inequality, climate change, marginalisation – require intensive international cooperation as well as action at home. Government departments could give these challenges greater strategic priority and investment, and be monitored and evaluated accordingly, including for the effectiveness of their collaboration with international partners.

3. Enhance aid and development spending. To maximise the potential of its 0.7% commitment, DFID could increase efforts to ensure its programming contributes to the achievement of SDG16+, supporting local civil society groups working for peace, justice, equality and development. An effective focus on achieving SDG16+ commitments will be essential to tackling the structural conditions that lock the world’s poorest people into poverty and inequality.

4. Diplomacy for peace. The government should prioritise and advocate for political and economic strategies to address enduring violent conflict, and provide increased support for peacebuilding,

with a special focus on the Middle East and North Africa. It could harness and build the UK's diplomatic capacity for peace, by increasing political and financial support for peace processes and mediation, investing in local capacities for peacebuilding in conflict contexts, and encouraging further development of knowledge and skills in this area within the FCO and DFID.

5. Peace operations. Future UK contributions to UN Peace Operations must promote the 'primacy of politics' as the basis for such interventions, as recommended by the UN High Level Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO). They must also prioritise civilian protection as well as developing greater civilian capacity to address causes of conflict.

6. The Northern Ireland peace process. The UK government must continue to uphold and implement the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement, paying particular attention to concerns about the border, conflict-related truth recovery and reconciliation mechanisms, and long-term strategies to address ongoing paramilitary violence in vulnerable communities.

End failing policies: how to prevent the UK from contributing to insecurity and violence

7. Re-set arms export policy. With the UK potentially operating outside the EU Common Position in the event of Brexit, the government should reaffirm its commitment to the Arms Trade Treaty. It could demonstrate this in practice by introducing a presumption of denial when considering applications for licenses for the export of military equipment to repressive governments, states where there are credible allegations of human rights violations or areas of violent conflict. It should also close the Government's arms sales agency, end financial support to the arms industry through export insurance, and create a Defence Diversification Agency.

8. Combat global militarisation. Using its influence in NATO, the government could work to harmonise military spending with the European context and release policymakers from the arbitrary target of 2% of GDP. It should resist pressure for further increases to the MOD's budget, and commission an inquiry into the feasibility of rebalancing military forces away from a focus on expeditionary capabilities and towards territorial and cyber defence.

9. Review nuclear weapons policy. The government should advocate and facilitate multilateral nuclear disarmament initiatives in close collaboration with other states, to promote further progress in establishing the mechanisms that make up the disarmament and non-proliferation regime. As part of a robust strategy for urgent multilateral disarmament, the UK should reassess its programme to renew the Trident system and its relationship with the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

10. Reject 'Countering/Preventing Violent Extremism' (C/PVE) approaches. DFID should separate its international development efforts from the failed global war on terror by divesting from C/PVE approaches and avoiding using aid in the service of security objectives such as counter-terrorism. Instead, it could refocus its investment on peacebuilding, human rights, governance reform and development. The Home Office should commit to acting on recommendations from an independent review of the PREVENT duty.

11. End 'securitised' approaches to forced migration. The UK government should adopt responses to forced displacement and migration that address their political, social and economic causes. It should scrupulously uphold the rights of asylum seekers and refugees seeking sanctuary in the UK and bring in a 28-day limit to detention. It should immediately end the wider 'hostile environment' policy and rhetoric, acknowledging its adverse impacts on minority communities and societal relations, and put in place a comprehensive strategy to combat discrimination and hate crime.

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¹ Rethinking Security is a network of UK non-governmental organisations, academics and campaigners who seek a fresh approach to UK national security and international relations. See www.rethinkingsecurity.org.uk.