By Dr Robert Crowcroft

It has, sadly, become a common observation that Britain's strategy for defending her security is in a permanent mess, and only one crisis removed from meltdown. That is hardly to be wondered at when the sheer scale of the contradiction which exists between the two great departments of state charged with advancing UK interests – the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Defence – is laid bare. Such is the size of this gap that, if London is not careful, Britain might well tumble into it. A lack of effective leadership, the paucity of strategic analysis, and the incoherent worldview of the FCO has left Britain on the brink. Whichever party forms the next government will have to deal with the consequences of years of woolly thinking.

The most glaring area of disagreement centres upon how those departments view the nature of the international system itself. To the MOD, power politics have never gone away, meaning that the United States and NATO are, and must remain, the keystone of any sensible UK grand strategy. The Ministry finds it is 'extremely unlikely' that the British military will conduct significant warfighting without 'US leadership', its 2010 Defence Green Paper confidently asserts that NATO 'remains the critical underpinning of our security', and even policy toward the European Union is viewed through the prism of the special relationship: 'Playing at the heart of Europe will strengthen our relationship with the US'. Taken together, this hints at important – and highly conventional – departmental assumptions about Britain's international role. To the MOD, Britain's relationship with America is paramount to actually acting in the world, as opposed to deploying mere rhetoric.

The FCO's basic view is quite different. A contact there told me that, in the view of his department, the MOD is simply 'too realist'. But one wonders if not realism, precisely what should the FCO, of all departments, aspire to? And what would Lord Salisbury or Ernest Bevin make of this attitude? That problem shines through in official FCO documentation. It is not an exaggeration to say that, if a visitor from outer Mongolia read through FCO material produced in the last three years, he would find no hint of the fact that the centrepiece of UK foreign policy is the American alliance. In fact, the FCO's view of the US is one of barely disguised scorn. Its 2008-2009 annual report actually declared that while 'the counter-terrorism relationship with the USA is the most important single relationship ... this relationship has also faced a number of challenges, including those over Guantanamo Bay and extraordinary rendition ... we welcomed President Obama's early moves on Guantanamo Bay, rendition and torture'. Note here the casual endorsement of the liberal view that the Bush administration employed 'torture', as well as the implication that the UK was tempted to look elsewhere for a morally preferable partner! Besides these verbal jibes, the US alliance rarely features. On proliferation, the most that is conceded is 'The FCO works with a wide variety of partners ... at home and overseas'. But there is more. The year before, there was nothing in the whole FCO report about the US alliance and how it shapes UK policy. Equally bizarrely, in the 2008-2009 document, NATO is mentioned only in relation to helicopter procurement and increasing land force deployment

capability! (This, at least, was an improvement: in the previous report, NATO was not mentioned once in the relevant section on international institutions.)

So aside from indulging anti-Americanism, what is the FCO's worldview? This is where the contrast with the MOD is most powerful. The FCO is fixated on worthy causes and international institutions, particularly the EU. The Foreign Office seems to assume that there are no distinctly British national interests anymore, and that there is instead a global human community which it is the FCO's job to support. Their annual report lists rather extensive 'Departmental Strategic Objectives' including countering terrorism and proliferation; preventing and resolving conflict – Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, Somalia, Sri Lanka, and Georgia are all noted; developing effective international institutions (this includes a Global Europe Conference, a Commonwealth mini-summit, tribunals on war criminals, being on the UN Human Rights Council, a British judge on the International Court of Justice, and getting the Council of Europe to agree to a zero growth budget). David Miliband's foreword declares that 'the need for global solutions to the great issues of our time, like climate change, terrorism or inequality, is moving power to a global level'.

It goes without saying that the FCO has much broader objectives than the narrow security concerns of the MOD; however, even so, the sharp-eyed reader will notice a major discontinuity here. Contrast the fact that where the FCO is fixated on humanity as a whole, the MOD speaks only of 'the UK's interests'. The unpalatable truth is that it is not the FCO's role to act as a global branch of Barnado's, but to set a strategic framework for British policy abroad within which the MOD then functions. This failure to do so leaves the military having to make their own strategy. Diplomats always prefer to talk, but security concerns seem wholly excluded from the FCO's view of the world. The department attempts no articulation of distinctly British priorities, and its annual report devoted just 301 words to London's efforts to manufacture peace in Afghanistan, compared to 211 on efforts in Sudan, 135 in Northern Uganda, and 199 in Kenya – areas wholly peripheral to UK interests. Anyway, has British diplomacy had much effect in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, or Georgia? Exhortations made, such as to the UN to 'meet its responsibilities', or to 'help secure Security Council responses in relation to the need for UN peace-keeping in Darfur, terrorist attacks in Lebanon, unrest in Burma and the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan'are not a substitute for achievement. No detail is offered of what Britain did, other than signalling endorsement of a position or a small amount of lobbying – which presumably translates as not very much. It could be that FCO thinking is too expansive with no good reason. But it need not be that way – Japan, for instance, does less but might well do it better.

It could be objected that the UK lacks the power to exert much influence; fair enough. But there is still an absence of systematic thinking about how to deal with the problem of 'failing states'; the only solutions offered are financial aid to correct resource imbalances, and verbal exhortation to human rights observation. That perhaps indicates the FCO is happy to leave serious thinking to others, focusing instead on 'feel good' utterances. Likewise, the 'underlying causes of conflict' in the world are held to be two: human rights and struggles over natural resources. Both are plausible as a basis for conflict, but the assumption is clearly that war waged for more conventional reasons is somehow unnatural. One wonders where the actual evidence for that is.

Compare all of this with the Ministry of Defence. It sees the UK's whole 'global standing' as resting on its ability to exercise significant military force. This might be expected of Defence, but to read between the lines is, again, to discern a wholly different view of the world and Britain's place in it. It adds up to a very traditional 'hard power' and, crucially, state-centred, perspective of international relations. In stating that in future 'It is possible that the UK may be involved in a coalition action against a state actor possessing significant military capabilities, with the UK fighting in some cases from a position of near parity or even relative disadvantage', MOD thinking demonstrates the continued willingness of major states to accept war as an arbiter. Similarly, the EU is allotted no practical role whatever in MOD thinking. And that goes to the heart of the tension here – whereas the FCO can dream, the MOD has to be pragmatic. The MOD position is broadly sensible: who is the biggest power in the world? Are their objectives broadly compatible with our own? Can we work with them? The US seems to offer positive answers to those questions, while the EU is plainly seen as failing to do so – do we, for instance, have the same objectives as many European countries? That is not at all clear. Can we work with them? Neither is that.

And no one seems able to impose harmony on these squabbling departments. Cabinet Office papers simply list the (contradictory) FCO and MOD priorities next to one another! Therefore this goes beyond cross-departmental disagreement; the different worldviews on offer are profound. At the heart of government, the two leading departments of state are at odds on the issue of alliances and priorities. Considering that the UK has been engaged in two simultaneous wars, this is evidence of a frightening failure to connect the dots between policy objectives and military force. And with a landmark Strategic Defence Review due to occur in a climate of severe spending cuts, the consequences could yet prove calamitous.

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