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In the last decade there have been rather damning assessments of the United Kingdom's ability to develop and implement strategy at the highest levels of government. A 2010 Parliamentary inquiry into "Who does UK National Strategy" wrote of "the profoundly disturbing conclusion that an understanding of National Strategy and an appreciation of why it is important has indeed largely been lost."¹ The Foreign Office—now known as the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office—has been the target of criticism as well. A 2018 article in *Prospect Magazine* described the Foreign Office as "struggling to define its role" and disinterested in developing a strategy for life after the European Union.² More recently, Lord Peter Ricketts, former National Security Advisor and former Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, has described strategy as a "lost art" among British policymakers.³

Despite these dire assessments, the study of strategy within the United Kingdom is arguably more popular than ever. The Strategy and Security Institute at the University of Exeter and the Centre for Grand Strategy and King's College London are two examples of dedicated university centres, while the establishment of undergraduate and postgraduate strategic studies programmes is indicative of its popularity among younger generations. Scholars such as Catarina Thomson, David Blagden, Jamie Gaskarth, David Morgan-Owen and William James continue to drive the debate with notable scholarship, much of which is implicitly addressed to contemporary policymakers.⁴ Scholar-practitioners such as Alexander Evans and John Bew

¹ "Who Does UK National Strategy?", House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee (London: The Stationary Office, 2010), 15.

² Steve Bloomfield, "An island apart: the inside story of how the Foreign Office is failing to prepare for Brexit", *Prospect Magazine*, 15 October 2018.

³ Peter Ricketts, "How British foreign policy lost the art of grand strategy", *New Statesman*, 26 February 2020.

⁴ Catarina Thomson and David Blagden, "A Very British National Security State: Formal and informal institutions in the design of UK security policy", *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 20:3 (2018): 573–593; Jamie Gaskarth, "Strategy in a Complex World", *The RUSI Journal* 160:6 (2015): 4–11; David Gethin Morgan-Owen, "History and the Perils of Grand Strategy", *The Journal of Modern History* 92 (2020): 351–385; William James, "Grandiose Strategy? Refining the Study and Practice of Grand Strategy", *The RUSI Journal* 165:3 (2020): 74–83.

are examples of writers who, having examined contemporary and historical case studies of British strategy, now find themselves in the halls of government themselves.⁵

Louise Kettle's recent article on "The Role of the Policy Planning Staff in British Foreign Policy: Historical Lessons and Contemporary Insights" is a valuable addition to this wider body of literature and is a work which students, scholars and practitioners will turn to in the future. Her focus is admittedly more specific than those studies which have examined 'national strategy' or 'grand strategy,' as it focuses on the evolution of a specific planning body within the Foreign Office from the 1950s onwards. It is, as she argues early on, a body which has exercised an important influence on foreign policymaking—one which makes it an essential subject for scholars. It is hard to dispute this claim given the centrality of the planning body to wider Foreign Office policy in the decades since its creation. Its work, like the work of any Foreign Office department, deserves the attention of diplomatic historians and political scientists interested in British foreign policy.

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One of the great contributions of the article is to trace, at times in exhaustive detail, the changing responsibilities of this Foreign Office Planning Staff, from its creation after the 1956 Suez Crisis through to the present day. At various points in the last six decades, senior Foreign Office officials, reflecting on the mechanics of British foreign policy, have sought to expand or contract the brief of this Planning Staff. The publication of the Plowden report in 1964 led to an increase in responsibilities, as did the crises in Iran and Afghanistan in the late 1970s and early 1980s, respectively.⁶ At times, this grouping of officials has been instructed to think in broad and bold terms about the direction of British policy abroad, while elsewhere, their responsibilities have been reduced to plugging bureaucratic holes. To be sure, tracking these bureaucratic and administrative changes does not make for the most entertaining reading, but nonetheless, it provides an important scholarly foundation for those studying the policymaking structures within the Foreign Office during the second half of the twentieth century.

The article succeeds in shining light on several important aspects relating to the mechanics of policymaking within the Foreign Office. Three overarching responsibilities, the author points out, have allowed for the Planning Staff to exercise a degree of influence: long-term thinking, challenging key assumptions and giving attention to 'cross-cutting' issues. Concerning the first of these tasks, the article highlights an especially relevant point, namely, that contemporary Foreign Office planners look ahead 12-36 months when seeking to outline policy for the future (494). It is details such as this which provides invaluable insight for those studying and analysing contemporary British foreign policy, as well as those interested in the practice of strategic foresight.

At various points, the article also describes what might be referred to as the 'politics of strategy-making.' The majority of this brand of politics is intragovernmental, whether within the Foreign Office or across government departments; and it is fair to say that, at times, this political game is often as important as the strategy itself. Foreign Office planners during the Second World War, a grouping which will be discussed later, certainly understood this reality of bureaucracy. Not only was the relationship with their Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, important, but his willingness to stand up to the Prime Minister—including a threat to resign if a major planning paper was not read—attests all too well to this unchanging characteristic of

⁵ Alexander Evans, "Organizing for British national strategy", *International Affairs* 90:3 (2014): 509-524; John Bew and Gabriel Elefteriu, "Foreign Policy and National Security in the New Parliament", *Policy Exchange*, September 2017.

⁶ A committee chaired by Lord Plowden had been tasked in 1962 with reviewing "the purpose, structure and operation of the services responsible for representing the interests of the United Kingdom Government overseas." Its main focus, however, was on the future of the Commonwealth Relations Office and the Commonwealth Service. "The Plowden Report: Commonwealth Relations in Whitehall", *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* 54:215 (1964): 222-227, here 222.

polymaking.⁷ Thus, a key determinant of the Planning Staff's influence, as the article rightly points out, is its relationship with the Foreign Secretary and Permanent Under-Secretary.

While the article serves as a valuable overview of the structure and functioning of the Foreign Office Planning Staff, it offers less in the way of detailed evidenced as to how, and to what extent, this grouping of officials has actually influenced specific Foreign Office policies over the years. The author's assertions of the Planning Staff's relevancy remains vague and stems largely from interviews with former officials and from documents which, though pulled from the archives, seem only to note that certain Planning Staff documents were taken up by more senior officials. Though it is useful to understand whether a certain policy recommendation was pushed forward, this does not necessarily reveal the Planning Staff's influence on future policy itself. To take one example, the author writes that, "A 1970 paper on relations with Japan [prepared by the Planning Staff] formed the basis for fresh objectives given to the Embassy in Tokyo." While intriguing, there is little detail given beyond that initial claim, a fact which makes it hard for the reader to accept that, as the author posits, "some planning papers had a significant impact on policy" (495). Overall, the article may have benefitted from a more detailed engagement with one or two of the more successful policy recommendations put forward by the Planning Staff.

At times, the article also acknowledges but refrains from wading into larger, more fundamental questions, such as the way in which the Foreign Office, despite its planning staff, has had its influence on British foreign policy slowly eroded in the decades since the Second World War. As David Reynolds has noted, "The twentieth century has seen an underlying struggle between three departments, with influence gradually shifting away from the Foreign Office and the Treasury towards the Cabinet Office."⁸ There are numerous reasons for this decaying influence—and they vary depending on the period—but in the last decade, one of the central issues has undoubtedly been the presence, since 2010, of the National Security Council. Though it is true that, since the council's establishment, a number of National Security Advisors have come from senior positions within the Foreign Office, the fact that the National Security Council Secretariat is housed in the Cabinet Office is representative of influence which might be waning.⁹ Thus, as the article examines the influence of policy planners within the Foreign Office, there remains a particularly important underlying question—namely, the Foreign Office influence over national strategy writ large.

For future scholars focusing on Foreign Office policy planning, it will be worthwhile to examine the extent to which the creation of the Planning Staff in the 1960s was rooted in earlier approaches, and crucially, whether these earlier practices provide any insight for those who take up the mantle of planning in the present day. As the author briefly mentions, there is a clear lineage running from the Planning Staff back to the Permanent Under-Secretary's Planning Committee in 1949, which itself was modelled on the earlier Russia Committee (established in 1946).¹⁰ Tasked with developing policy towards the Soviet Union in the post-war period, the Russia Committee was unlike the Planning Staff which came after it, in that its brief was directed at addressing a specific challenge. Given the interest in earlier iterations of a Foreign Office planning

⁷ Oliver Harvey diary, 3 November 1942, in John Harvey, ed., *The War Diaries of Oliver Harvey, 1941-1945* (London: Collins, 1978), 175-76.

⁸ David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the 20th Century* [2nd edition] (London: Routledge, 2013), 45.

⁹ Joe Devanny and Josh Harris, "The National Security Council: National security at the centre of government", *Institute for Government: Contemporary History of Whitehall*, 4 November 2014. When asked by the Foreign Affairs Committee who was "responsible for British grand strategy", Jeremy Hunt, then Foreign Secretary, noted the presence and increased influence of the National Security Council, though he claimed that the Foreign Office was still the "conductor of the orchestra." "Oral Evidence from the Foreign Secretary," Foreign Affairs Committee, 31 October 2018.

¹⁰ Ray Merrick, "The Russia Committee of the British Foreign Office and the Cold War, 1946-47", *Journal of Contemporary History* 20:3 (1985): 453-468.

body, which the article under review certainly exemplifies, it is worth investigating whether, in the present day, planners might find increased success if tasked with more specific questions.

Going back even further, one arrives at the work of the Economic and Reconstruction Department, a grouping which could be considered the first, and arguably the most profound, example of policy planning within the Foreign Office in the twentieth century. Established in June 1942, the department was led throughout the war by Gladwyn Jebb, a diplomat who, despite the department's original brief being restricted to relief and reconstruction questions, ensured that it was the body which assumed responsibility for, in his words, "long-distance schemes."¹¹ British plans for the United Nations Organization and, to a certain extent NATO, have their origins in the papers produced by this department.¹²

Given such achievements, one might describe this period as a kind of 'golden age' for policy planning within the Foreign Office. But the extent to which a number of officials in the period, including Jebb, were wary of official bodies designed for this purpose is surprising. A debate among senior officials in 1945 found that many considered it mere "crystal-gazing," a practice which was viewed as more of an intellectual exercise than a policy endeavour.¹³ Writing years later, Jebb noted that the practice of 'planning' was a "debatable aspect of foreign policy since theory is not only difficult to formulate but often impossible to apply."¹⁴

For a number of these earlier Foreign Office officials, a dedicated Planning Staff would likely have been viewed as a wasteful layer of bureaucracy. Not only was it dangerous to look too far into the future, but there was an underlying expectation that the construction of strategy itself would be carried out within and between departments. Importantly, the heads of departments, the Assistant Under-Secretaries, and the Permanent Under-Secretary, in conjunction with the Foreign Secretary, would engage in a process whereby assumptions were challenged, objectives were calibrated and policy was delivered.

Thus, uncomfortable as it may seem, a question for scholars and practitioners in the present day is whether a dedicated strategy unit within the Foreign Office represents an essential or superfluous grouping. The author's useful findings suggest that at various points over the last sixty or so years, the Foreign Office hierarchy has reflected on this basic question, with senior leadership in the early 2000s even opting to disband the staff altogether. Even where the article has offered tangible evidence of the impact of a Planning Staff between the years 1967 and 1971—the author points to recommendations concerning Anglo-French relations, the United Nations and the Anglo Japanese relations—it begs the question why, when there are regional and functional departments dedicated to developing policy towards countries and international organisations, is there a need for a strategy unit to deliver such proposals? Should this not instead be the work of the departments and officials responsible for British policy towards these international actors? More importantly, has the modern iteration of the Planning Staff—the Policy Unit—removed, to some degree, the responsibility for strategic thinking from rank and file Foreign Office diplomats?

To answer these questions it might help to expand on a significant point raised by the author, namely, that the "process of composing...drafts [is] as valuable as the product of the policy paper" (495). This reflection reveals an important, if often misunderstood, aspect of what many scholars and practitioners refer to as grand strategy. Far from the production of grand plans or comprehensive blueprints, grand strategy should be seen as a way of thinking about the international system and a

¹¹ Gladwyn Jebb to Orme Sargent, 20 June 1942, FCO 73/263/Misc/42/1.

¹² Sean Greenwood, *Titan at the Foreign Office: Gladwyn Jebb and the Shaping of the Modern World* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2008), chapters 4 and 5.

¹³ See for example a minute by Orme Sargent (later Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office from 1946 to 1949) from 28 June 1944. FO 371/40741A/U6254.

¹⁴ Gladwyn Jebb, *The Memoirs of Lord Gladwyn* (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1972), 227.

country's place within a particular political, economic or security order. Crucially, grand strategic thinking should not be seen as a practice reserved for the high priests and priestesses of foreign policy but instead should pervade the rank and file. Thus, while the author valiantly covers the attempts by the Foreign Office to create small, 'highly regarded' groupings responsible for this activity, the work also raises a larger, more fundamental question: are officials within this great department of state capable and willing, across all levels, to think grand strategically?

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