

# 2

## The shaping and making of British foreign policy

In studies like the present one, where the main text takes a chronological approach, a separate discussion of the policy-making process serves a dual purpose. It allows the student of British foreign policy since 1945 to explore the role which the policy-making process has played in key events during the period under review, while also providing insights into the effect of those events on the policy-making process itself. Indeed, it can be argued that after decades in which the context of international politics was shaped by British decisions, made within an institutional framework which remained broadly unchanged, the post-war period has been marked by changes in the British decision-making process promoted (if not induced) by developments in the international context. In other words, rather than helping to explain Britain's global influence, a chronological survey of the foreign policy making process is suggestive of the extent to which the world has influenced Britain since 1945.

In any account of the foreign policy making process in Britain, the obvious place to start is the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). The FCO is still regarded (along with the Treasury and the Home Office) as one of the three senior departments within the British government, and appointment to the job of Foreign Secretary normally entails very high rank within the Cabinet. Thus, in the 2010 coalition government the Foreign Secretary, William Hague, was formally ranked above the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne; Iain Duncan Smith (Secretary of State for Work and Pensions), who had, like Hague, previously served as Conservative Party leader, was placed only ninth. This is not to say that the FCO has ever enjoyed a monopoly over the making of British foreign policy. But in recent years its role has come under increasing scrutiny as other institutions and actors have become more prominent in the policy process. In order to understand the making of British foreign policy, therefore, the FCO can only mark the point of departure; other key sources of influence over foreign policy, both domestic and external, must be examined.

The 2016 referendum which started the process of British withdrawal from the EU has already affected the FCO more than other Whitehall departments, and the ultimate impact of this decision will not be evident for some time. While taking note of 'Brexit' in the relevant places, the following discussion is chiefly coloured by pre-2016 trends; it remains to be seen whether they will be confirmed or challenged by subsequent events.

## History of the FCO

The Foreign Office was established in 1782, after a reorganisation of ministerial responsibilities. Previously there had been two Secretaries of State, heading 'Northern' and 'Southern' departments; apart from the conduct of external relations roughly approximating to these geographical terms, these ministers were also responsible for the north and the south of Britain respectively. In 1768 a new post of Secretary of State for the Colonies had been created in response to the rebellion of Britain's subjects in North America (which, confusingly, had previously been administered by the Southern Department). After the loss of the American colonies this governmental position was abolished and responsibility for the remaining British colonies was entrusted to a Secretary of State for the Home Department. Relations with the rest of the world, whether 'north' or 'south', were handled by the newly established Foreign Office.

In strictly institutional terms, the history of British external relations since 1945 could be seen as a process in which the Foreign Office gradually absorbed government departments which had been set up at various times to administer the Empire. The Colonial Office was revived as a separate institution in 1854 to deal with Britain's expanding overseas possessions. In 1925 a new Dominions Office was spun off to handle relations with colonies (such as Canada, Australia and South Africa) which had been granted self-governing status while remaining within the Empire; its remit increased in 1947, when it took on responsibilities for relations with India, which, until the end of British rule, had been allotted to a separate India Office. The political head of the newly augmented department was given the title of Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations. The Commonwealth Relations Office (CRO) and the Colonial Office maintained a somewhat prickly coexistence until 1966, when their responsibilities were united under a new Commonwealth Office. This arrangement lasted for just two years; in 1968 all of these tortuous institutional pathways converged in the all-encompassing FCO.

In the course of these various governmental gyrations, the magnificent building which now accommodates the FCO was at one time or another home to four separate departments – the Foreign Office, the India Office, the Colonial Office and the Home Office (the latter was not re-homed until 1978). The building, designed by the Gothic-revivalist architect George Gilbert Scott and

Table 2.1 The FCO in numbers, 2015–16

<i>Budget</i>	<i>Staff</i>	<i>Overseas posts</i>
£1.1 billion	Approx. 14,000 worldwide	Approx. 270, in 160 countries

completed in 1868, was threatened with demolition a century later. That such an idea was taken seriously could be taken as a symptom of an indiscriminate rage for ‘modernity’ in the 1960s; an attempt to downplay Britain’s imperial past by erasing its most notable symbol; or, indeed, as an amalgam of both these motivations.

In itself, the institutional history of Britain’s external relations sheds interesting light on the landmarks in the country’s foreign policy, particularly in the post-war period. It is no coincidence, for example, that the FCO was established in the year after Britain had declared its intention to abandon its role ‘east of Suez’; the prospect of a reduced role raised the possibility of institutional simplification. It is also instructive to follow the complicated career of an institution set up by the incoming Labour government in 1964 in an attempt to promote economic development in the world’s poorest countries. The Ministry of Overseas Development (ODM) was designed to bring greater clarity and political impetus to a variety of piecemeal initiatives administered by the usual array of Whitehall departments, including the Foreign Office itself. The ODM’s champions insisted that it should be independent, but from the outset its status was strongly disputed. The first ministerial chief (the redoubtable Barbara Castle) was included in the Cabinet, but in 1967 the position was deprived of that status. When the Conservatives returned to office in 1970 the ODM was incorporated into the FCO, where it remained (apart from a brief interlude in 1974–5) until 1997, when New Labour launched the Department for International Development (DfID). The new department quickly established a political profile to rival that of the FCO itself. Despite continued public misgivings about the advisability (or affordability) of overseas aid in an era of austerity, the Conservative-dominated coalition of 2010–15 retained DfID as a separate department, and its hard-won independence was affirmed in 2015, when the Conservatives freed themselves from their Liberal Democrat coalition partners. In 2015 DfID expenditure was around £12 billion, dwarfing the FCO’s budget (Table 2.1).

## FCO structure

As we have seen, the political head of the FCO, the Foreign Secretary, is always regarded as a very senior member of a government, regardless of his or her previous career. Five post-war Foreign Secretaries (Sir Anthony Eden, Harold

Macmillan, Lord Home, James Callaghan and John Major) subsequently served as Prime Minister, compared to four Chancellors of the Exchequer and two Home Secretaries. In addition, in 1970 Sir Alec Douglas-Home (the former Lord Home, who had renounced his peerage) agreed to return to the FCO after his spell as Prime Minister (Table 2.2).

In addition to the prestige of the job, the Foreign Secretary has an opportunity to exercise practical policy influence through his or her access to restricted information and membership of several key Cabinet committees. The Foreign Secretary heads a team of ministers (currently five; there were six before the 2016 referendum on EU membership and just four in the immediate aftermath of the vote (see below)).

Table 2.2 Foreign Secretaries since 1945

<i>Name</i>	<i>Party</i>	<i>Held office</i>
Ernest Bevin	Lab	1945–51
Herbert Morrison	Lab	1951
Sir Anthony Eden	Con	1951–5
Harold Macmillan	Con	1955
Selwyn Lloyd	Con	1955–60
Earl of Home	Con	1960–3
'Rab' Butler	Con	1963–4
Patrick Gordon Walker	Lab	1964–5
Michael Stewart	Lab	1965–6
George Brown	Lab	1966–8
Michael Stewart	Lab	1968–70
Sir Alec Douglas Home	Con	1970–4
James Callaghan	Lab	1974–6
Anthony Crosland	Lab	1976–7
David Owen	Lab	1977–9
Lord Carrington	Con	1979–82
Francis Pym	Con	1982–3
Sir Geoffrey Howe	Con	1983–9
John Major	Con	1989
Douglas Hurd	Con	1989–95
Sir Malcolm Rifkind	Con	1995–7
Robin Cook	Lab	1997–2001
Jack Straw	Lab	2001–6
Margaret Beckett	Lab	2006–7
David Miliband	Lab	2007–10
William Hague	Con	2010–14
Philip Hammond	Con	2014–16
Boris Johnson	Con	2016–

Their responsibilities cover a variety of geographical areas, international organisations and themes, such as human rights and counter-terrorism (Table 2.3).

The political team is supported by a bureaucratic machine whose calibre is invariably compared to that of high-performing motor vehicles. The Diplomatic Service is still a separate branch of the UK's civil service and has sometimes been accused of regarding representatives of the Home Civil Service with ill-concealed disdain. A sense of intellectual superiority was matched by social elitism, at least until the First World War, when independent wealth, as well as powerful patronage, was essential for any ambitious recruit. Women were excluded until the service was reformed by Sir Anthony Eden in the 1940s; until the 1970s they were required to leave if they committed the professional faux pas of matrimony. Women (and members of ethnic minorities) are still under-represented in senior FCO roles; but the department is no less conscious of the case for equal opportunities than its domestic counterparts, and considerable progress has been made recently (Dickie, 2004).

The keys to this 'Rolls Royce' department are entrusted to the FCO's Permanent Under-Secretary (PUS). Free from the Foreign Secretary's party-political distractions, this official has more time to absorb the information flowing into the FCO and thus has a plausible claim to be regarded as the 'Deputy Foreign Secretary'. At the same time, the low public profile of the PUS provides ideal 'cover' for occasional diplomatic ventures into areas where political visits would arouse unhelpful publicity. In the past the PUS would normally accompany the Foreign

Table 2.3 FCO ministers, 2017

Boris Johnson	Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs	
Sir Alan Duncan	Minister of State	Europe and the Americas, NATO, the Falklands and relations with parliament
Alistair Burt	Minister of State	Middle East and North Africa
Rory Stewart	Minister of State	Africa and international crime
Mark Field	Minister of State	Asia, Australasia and the Pacific, and public diplomacy including the British Council
Lord Ahmed of Wimbledon	Minister of State	Leads for government in House of Lords; human rights, the Commonwealth and UN

Secretary to key meetings abroad. However, in recent decades the FCO has succumbed to the general Whitehall vogue for 'managerialism', ensuring that the diplomatic skills of the PUS are more often deployed in internal personnel issues than in battles of wits with the representatives of other nations.

The work of the FCO is divided into numerous 'departments', dedicated either to geographical areas or policy themes. The FCO's board, which convenes twice weekly, is dominated by officials whose remit is 'thematic' rather than geographical and includes non-executive members. As such, it would be fair to conclude that even before the seismic events of 2016 the hierarchy of the FCO had been reshaped to reflect an era in which international dilemmas are no longer state- (or even region-) specific, and that expertise in 'human resources' or legal questions is at least as highly prized as specialist knowledge of international relations.

Traditionally, the FCO's role in the policy-making process depended on the intelligence-gathering capacity of its formal diplomatic representatives, stationed across the globe in official public buildings. Ambassadors would transmit the knowledge they had gleaned from meetings with significant political actors in their host countries, resulting in a constant stream of telegrams to London. The most significant of these communications would be passed up the departmental channels to the PUS and the Foreign Secretary. This process depended on the judgement of the 'man [and it usually *was* a man] on the spot', which was not always reliable. According to the stereotyped view of the Foreign Office, when its representatives were sent overseas they would seek out people much like themselves as suitable targets for their acumen and charm, resulting in impeccable summaries of the state of 'educated' opinion in a given country, without tapping into the mood among the populace as a whole. Even before the advent of the internet, technological change had facilitated more direct and relevant access to global developments. In 1946 the government's eavesdropping/code-breaking service, which had played a pivotal role in the victory over Nazi Germany, was renamed the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ); in 1951 it moved to its current base near Cheltenham, Gloucestershire.

Formally, the Foreign Secretary is responsible for the activities of GCHQ, although it has considerable operational autonomy (thanks to the British government's addiction to secrecy, its existence was not officially admitted until 1983). In comparison to the electronic assistance which this facility provides for those who want to excel in the 'dark arts' of espionage – including the 'hacking' of individual telephone conversations and supposedly private computers – information gleaned from polite conversations at pre-arranged cocktail parties can only seem embarrassingly outdated and even irrelevant. If the intelligence gathered by GCHQ and other clandestine government operatives was confined

(at least initially) to the FCO, the department's prestige would be as high today as it has ever been. However, the most sensitive information has always been spread beyond departmental boundaries.

## The Prime Minister

For understandable reasons, the most sensitive information is made available to the Prime Minister; and it is equally understandable that, even when she or he is distracted by other issues, the holder of the highest political office can be expected to give close attention to the latest intelligence. Prime Ministerial interest in external policy is certainly not new. Even in the eighteenth century premiers like the Pitts (both 'Elder' and 'Younger') took prominent roles in this field; for his part, Lord North was derided for having 'lost' Britain's colonies in North America. In more recent times the Marquess of Salisbury and Ramsay MacDonald combined the roles of Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister. Despite his lack of relevant experience, Neville Chamberlain seized overall direction of foreign policy from Sir Anthony Eden, who was less than a wholehearted supporter of the Prime Minister's strategy of 'appeasement' (Chapter 3). When Eden himself became Prime Minister in 1955 he found it difficult to work with a strong-minded Foreign Secretary (Harold Macmillan) and quickly replaced him with the more malleable Selwyn Lloyd. The ensuing Suez fiasco cannot be regarded as the Foreign Office's finest hour, but the chief responsibility clearly lay with Eden rather than Lloyd.

Broadly speaking, all these examples of Prime Ministerial dominance of foreign policy can be explained by the fact that the incumbent had a specific interest in the subject; and the office of Prime Minister does not entail any specific departmental responsibilities, allowing the incumbent relative freedom to choose policy priorities. However, Eden's tenure at Number 10 can be seen as marking a watershed in this respect. By the late 1950s air travel had become so convenient that instead of having to make a special effort to attend crucial international meetings, Prime Ministers could anticipate criticism if they *did not* attend – from a media whose representatives had become more mobile thanks to the same technological developments. Thus, while positive publicity had been an unplanned side effect of Chamberlain's attempts to placate Mussolini and Hitler, by Macmillan's time it was possible for Prime Ministers to orchestrate overseas visits (particularly to the Soviet Union) with the specific purpose of impressing the electorate back home.

In short, even by 1960 it was reasonable to regard Britain's head of government as the country's 'chief diplomat' – not just for epoch-making occasions like the peacemaking at Versailles in 1919, when Lloyd George played the dominant role, but also for more mundane meetings like a Commonwealth conference

held in an uneventful year. On such occasions the performance of the Foreign Office in preparing the ground in advance – or salving injured feelings during the event itself – could be decisive in terms of success or failure. But since the credit or blame would fall on the Prime Minister, it seemed only sensible that the holder of that office should be able to draw upon additional resources; and if a Prime Minister who already enjoyed unsurpassed access to information could also recruit talented individuals to interpret that material and help with the writing of keynote speeches, the special status of a Foreign Secretary seemed to be endangered.

While modern Prime Ministers have always availed themselves of advice to supplement the suggestions of the Foreign Office, Mrs Thatcher's appointment of a Foreign Policy Adviser in 1983 was another significant step, not least because it was a direct product of her 'disenchantment' with the FCO's performance over the Falklands (Cradock, 1997, 8; Controversy 2.1). The Prime Minister already had a trusted source of advice, since her Private Secretary, Charles Powell, had worked for the FCO both at home and abroad. Rather than seeking to tone down the Prime Minister's forceful views on international affairs, Powell tended to second them, and his presence at the premier's elbow made it unlikely that a Foreign Policy Adviser could ever persuade her into an alternative course of action. As a result, Thatcher saw no reason to follow FCO advice if it conflicted with her own views and those of her favoured 'courtiers'; indeed, at times after 1983 it seemed as if her default position was to ignore or circumvent FCO promptings. This attitude could be explained by her impatience with the diplomatic style of Sir Geoffrey Howe (Foreign Secretary, 1983–9); however, since she had worked alongside Howe quite amicably when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer (1979–83), her apparent desire to humiliate him at every opportunity evidently arose from institutional antipathy towards the FCO as well as personal factors.

After Thatcher's downfall – precipitated by Howe's belated decision to resign from the government – John Major reverted to a more rational and sustainable approach, relying heavily on the counsel of his Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd. However, even if Major had not felt a general inclination to revert to a more collegial model of decision-making now that the Thatcherite storm had blown itself out, he would have been inclined to defer to Hurd who had an impeccable FCO pedigree (whereas the new Prime Minister himself had served for just three months as Howe's successor as Foreign Secretary when Mrs Thatcher chose to overlook all of the better-qualified candidates, such as Douglas Hurd).

Thus the restoration of the Foreign Secretary to a key role in foreign-policy making under Major turned out to be the short-lived product of unusual circumstances. After the landslide New Labour victory of 1997 Tony Blair quickly reverted to Thatcherite type. Although Blair had no previous experience in foreign policy, Mrs Thatcher had been in the same position when she became



### Controversy 2.1 The Falklands War

The events leading up to the Falklands War of April–June 1982 provide invaluable insights into almost every aspect of post-war British foreign policy (Chapter 7). From the point of view of the policy-making process, several points are worth summarising:

- Although the FCO was castigated for its diplomatic efforts to find a peaceful solution to the Falklands/Malvinas issue, it is difficult to argue that it could have pursued a more fruitful strategy. Public opinion in Argentina was strongly in favour of a transfer of sovereignty over the islands, but the residents were adamantly opposed. A compromise had to be sought; and, since the British government was imposing defence cuts (while simultaneously permitting arms sales to re-equip Argentine forces), the FCO could only hope to secure a deal which left Argentina reasonably satisfied without leaving the islanders with a sense of betrayal. This was a task which would have baffled the greatest of diplomats; the fact that the FCO suggestion of a formal transfer of sovereignty to Argentina, combined with a 99-year 'leaseback' to Britain, was expounded by junior FCO minister Nicholas Ridley – an ideological soulmate of Margaret Thatcher, who had even less taste (or capacity) for tactful discussion than the Prime Minister herself – only abbreviated the passage towards inevitable failure.
- Whatever the reasons for the Argentine invasion, the FCO was rightly blamed for its misreading of the signals from Buenos Aires, which had been registered in security circles (Freedman and Gamba-Stonehouse, 1990, 18). The logic of the FCO's desire for a compromise which, essentially, favoured Argentina over the islanders, implied a recognition that an attempt to seize the Falklands by force was at least theoretically possible; but despite the failure of the 'leaseback' solution to the sovereignty question, the FCO seemed to fall back on the hope that Argentine menaces amounted to no more than sabre-rattling. For this reason, the subsequent resignation of Lord Carrington, along with two junior FCO ministers, can be regarded as a genuine acceptance of responsibility rather than a chivalrous attempt to divert the blame from colleagues (i.e. Thatcher herself and the Defence Secretary, Sir John Nott) who were probably more culpable.
- Despite the impressive House of Commons debate of 3 April 1982, at key moments in the Falklands crisis Parliament unwittingly reinforced the case *against* those who would entrust it with a decisive role in British foreign policy. The MPs of all parties who denounced Nicholas

Ridley when he reported back to the Commons after his unsuccessful (1980) mission to sell the 'leaseback' idea to the Falkland Islanders might have been justified in giving full vent to their displeasure; but the 'Falklands lobby' was not representative of the Commons as a whole (let alone of the British public, few of whom had heard of the Falklands Islands at the time). After the Argentine invasion Conservative backbenchers treated Lord Carrington so roughly that he felt compelled to resign. If Mrs Thatcher's supporters felt any elation at the ejection of a minister who was unsympathetic to the government's policy on a range of issues, their spirits were quickly doused when Thatcher appointed Francis Pym, a much more outspoken critic, as his replacement. As a result, the friction between Downing Street and the FCO was even greater than it would have been if Tory MPs had treated Carrington more tenderly.

- Once the Argentine invasion had begun, the FCO lived up to its high reputation. Skilful diplomacy at the UN provided the British government with sufficient grounds for military action to recover the islands (although subsequent UN resolutions calling for a ceasefire had to be vetoed once the military balance had swung Britain's way). Sir Nicholas Henderson, at the Washington embassy, marshalled existing sympathy for Britain within the Reagan administration to maximum effect. 'Europe' was also strongly (and perhaps surprisingly) supportive, although any gratitude Mrs Thatcher might have felt for this symptom of continental solidarity was short-lived.

Prime Minister – and this factor had certainly not deterred her from decisive interventions. In Blair's case, the itch to take a leading role in foreign policy was increased by his previous agreement to allow his Chancellor, Gordon Brown, a dominant position over any domestic issue which involved the significant cooperation of the Treasury. Blair's first Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, might have been a dangerous rival if he had been given a domestic portfolio; as it was, although Cook made an eye-catching start by signalling a shift to a more 'ethical' foreign policy, within a few months his position was undermined by revelations concerning his personal life, which resulted in a humiliating demand from Downing Street for him to choose between his wife and his mistress. Blair seized the initiative, emerging as a leading advocate of military action in the Balkans and Sierra Leone and rationalising this approach in his 1999 Chicago speech which outlined the case for 'liberal intervention' (Chapter 9).

After the 2001 general election Cook was removed from the FCO, whose officials on the whole were disinclined to lament his departure. His replacement, Jack Straw, was a much less controversial character, having earned the image of

an 'elder statesman' through his aptitude for survival during decades of Labour faction-fighting. Any (remote) possibility that the FCO might regain some of its former prestige under his stewardship was extinguished on 11 September 2001, when the terrorist attack on New York's World Trade Center provided Blair with the opportunity to play a starring role. As Straw himself put it, after 9/11 'the pace and focus of our lives changed completely. Tony set that pace' (Straw, 2012, 340). By contrast, a *Guardian* reporter described the Foreign Secretary as 'out of his depth, nervous, over-reliant on officials and completely dominated by the prime minister, who has taken personal command of foreign policy'. In a key interview, the report added, '[Straw's] tie was not straight, his suit was lopsided and his descriptions of Afghanistan sounded like those of a keen geography student who had just been taught about the country from a map' (Watt, 2002b).

Straw was hurt by this critique, particularly (in true New Labour style) by its personal elements (Straw, 2012, 352). His less media-fixated predecessors would have latched on to the brief passage in the offending article which explained why a Foreign Secretary was suddenly vulnerable to such jibes. Blair, the author wrote, had established 'a parallel Foreign Office' in Downing Street, ensuring that the Foreign Secretary would be seen as 'the weakest member of the Cabinet's top four' even if Ernest Bevin himself rose from the grave (presumably in a well-fitting suit and perfectly perpendicular tie) to take the job on the eve of the War on Terror (Watt, 2002b).

In his last snapshot of the FCO the journalist Anthony Sampson, who had been a close and perceptive observer since the early 1960s, contrasted the material grandeur of the FCO's 'Whitehall palazzo' with Straw's menial ministerial function, at Blair's 'beck and call' (Sampson, 2004, 136). In March 2003 Straw had wound up the House of Commons debate on the case for war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq. If Robin Cook had still been Foreign Secretary, the situation would have been much more complicated; while Straw genuinely accepted that Iraq was a threat to Western security, Cook was far more sceptical and resigned from the government on this issue. However, from the FCO's point of view it was probably a good thing that in 2003 it was led by the biddable Straw rather than the combustible Cook. The Prime Minister's indisputable leadership on this foreign policy issue deflected public attention from the FCO's failure to restrain his instinct to support the US, either by questioning evidence relating to Saddam's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) or by presenting more forcefully the argument that 'regime change' might cause more problems than it solved. Perhaps the cruellest comment on the FCO's role in the Iraq War is that it was less damaging than its performance before the Falklands Conflict. In the latter instance it might have averted the invasion of a British Dependent Territory, whereas in 2003 it could only have made things a bit more difficult for individuals who could never have been deflected from their chosen course. An inadvertent, though eloquent, commentary on the relative decline of the FCO can be gleaned from the

‘valedictory’ despatches of two seasoned ambassadors – Sir Nicholas Henderson, who left Britain’s Washington embassy in 1979, and Sir Ivor Roberts, who retired as Ambassador to Italy in 2006. The despatches were equally gloomy; but while Henderson analysed the post-war decline of Britain in political and economic terms (highlighting the failure to engage in European integration at the right time), Roberts riveted his attention on the perceived shortcomings of the department he had served for almost three decades (Case Study 2.1).

## The National Security Council

Perhaps the most telling comment on the position of the FCO at the end of the New Labour era was William Hague’s stated intention, on becoming Foreign Secretary in the coalition government, ‘to place the Foreign Office *back at the centre of government*’ (Hague, 2010: italics added). In itself, Hague’s appointment did something to restore the FCO’s clout within Whitehall; Hague also held the position of First Secretary of State, making him Deputy Prime Minister in all but name. However, the early days of the coalition featured an institutional innovation which raised new questions about the FCO’s role in the decision-making apparatus.

In one respect, the newly created National Security Council (NSC) confirmed the importance of the FCO. The first National Security Adviser, who acted as secretary to the body, was the former PUS Sir Peter Ricketts, and his successors (including the current incumbent, Mark Sedwill) have held a variety of key diplomatic positions. However, the NSC was chaired by the Prime Minister, and apart from the Foreign Secretary its membership included no fewer than eight other ministers. The ‘Threats, Hazards, Resilience and Contingencies’ subcommittee of the NSC was like a meeting of the full Cabinet under a different name. Apart from the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary, 15 ministers were listed among the members: even the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport was considered to be a desirable attendee. Although the FCO was reportedly relaxed about the formation of the NSC, the clear implication was that the policy dilemmas arising from Britain’s external relations now required the advice of people who were skilled in the provision of ‘security’, very broadly defined, rather than the diplomacy in which the FCO has always excelled.

## The foreign policy role of other departments

Since 9/11 (if not before) matters of national security have obviously been a key concern for the Home Secretary, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer has to be closely involved in the likely event of policy decisions with financial

### Case Study 2.1 Valedictory despatches

Sir Nicholas Henderson (1979):

A representative abroad has a duty to draw the attention of the authorities at home to the realities of how we look . . . Viewed from the continent our standing at the present time is low. But this is not for the first time in our history, and we can recover if the facts are known and faced and if the British people can be fired with a sense of national will such as others have found these past years.

Sir Ivor Roberts (2006):

The Foreign Office I leave is perforce very different from the one I entered in 1968. And most changes have been for the better, particularly those long-overdue reforms on the status and parity of women . . . But the culture of change has reached Cultural Revolution proportions with no opportunity for new working methods to put down roots . . . Too much of the change management agenda is written in Wall Street management-speak which is already tired and discredited by the time it is introduced. Synergies, [value for money], best practice, benchmarking, silo-working, roll-out, stakeholder, empower, push-back and deliver the agenda, fit for purpose are all prime candidates for a game of bullshit bingo, a substitute for clarity and succinctness . . . our failure to make a successful case for resources adequate to finance the current network while others are literally awash with funds is at the heart of the malaise . . . It is sad that there is not a recognition by government as a whole that allocating greater resources to the FCO saves the spending of far larger resources through the [Ministry of Defence] or DfID.

After the wide dissemination of Sir Ivor's despatch, it was reported that retiring diplomats would no longer be allowed these official opportunities to embarrass their former employers. Given the morale-sapping content of Henderson's effort, it is more surprising that the practice was tolerated for so long.

implications. But the inclusion in the NSC itself of ministers like the Secretaries of State for Business and for Energy and Climate Change served as a vivid illustration of the difficulty in distinguishing 'domestic' and 'external' policy spheres in contemporary Britain. While departments like Business and Energy and

Climate Change obviously had to undertake negotiations with external bodies – non-governmental, as well as the representatives of other states – the FCO has to divert its attention from the making of ‘foreign policy’, as traditionally understood, to technical matters like economic policy and the environment. The impetus behind these changes is usually designated by the term ‘globalisation’; its cumulative effect on the FCO carries a clear risk of turning a department which prided itself on its expertise in one activity (diplomacy) into an institution which is better characterised as a ‘jack of all trades’, staffed by individuals who can facilitate the work of other departments without being indispensable in any key policy area.

For many academic observers, developments in the foreign policy making process illustrate a more general trend in British government, suggesting that a long-established explanatory framework should be replaced by a more realistic approach. On this view, the traditional understanding of the FCO as a formidable governmental institution reflected ‘the Westminster model’ of British government, which depicted decision-making as highly centralised and restricted to clearly identified sources of authority. From this perspective, crucial decisions affecting Britain’s external relations would invariably (and quite properly) be taken by the Prime Minister after consultations with the Foreign Secretary, who would be briefed by his or her senior officials. For those who continue to understand British government through the lens of the Westminster model, the perception of a decline in the policy-making role of the FCO indicates a faltering (to say the least) in the potency and coherence of British foreign policy. If the FCO no longer exercises control over Britain’s external relations, it even becomes pertinent to ask whether Britain still has a foreign policy at all in a meaningful sense.

Other political scientists reach less apocalyptic conclusions on the basis of alternative explanatory models of British government. ‘Multi-level governance’, for example, takes note of transnational institutions, such as the EU, and (in the British case) the introduction of devolved institutions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland since 1997. These developments have an obvious effect on the relevance of the traditional Westminster model. However, to date they have had a relatively limited effect on the making of foreign policy. Thus foreign and defence policy were among the ‘reserved powers’ which the British government explicitly retained when it embarked on the process of devolution after 1997. As for the EU, its policy-making competence was limited in scope when the UK joined what was then the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973. While European legislation was a crucial concern for the Ministry of Agriculture, for example, most other ministers could concentrate on the domestic aspects of their work. Indeed, in the early years UK membership promised to bolster, rather than weaken, the institutional clout of the FCO within Whitehall. It played a very influential role, not least by providing Britain’s Permanent

Representatives to the EEC. The foreign ministers of member states have also exercised an important coordinating role in what is now the Council of the European Union (formerly the Council of Ministers) through the General Affairs and External Relations Council, which since the 2009 Lisbon Treaty has been divided into the General Affairs and Foreign Affairs Councils.

However, subsequent developments within what is now the EU have added plausibility to another explanatory framework for decision-making in British government: the 'differentiated polity model'. From this perspective, government in Britain (and elsewhere) can no longer be a matter of 'command and control' from specific institutional locations; rather, decisions can only be made and implemented through a process of negotiation. The old understanding of a nation state is no longer viable: decision-makers have no alternative but to work with a variety of non-state institutions and to collaborate with other actors within their own formal government structures, since decision-making has become subject to overlapping areas of policy responsibility.

Even if the EU has limited authority in foreign and defence policy, it provides numerous venues which encourage a range of government departments ostensibly concerned with 'domestic' policy to develop perspectives formerly associated with diplomatic activity. The Council of the European Union now covers a wide range of subjects, including the Environment; Justice and Home Affairs; Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs; Transport, Telecommunications and Energy; and Education, Youth, Culture and Sport. Through frequent attendance at such meetings the relevant British ministers and officials have inevitably become familiar with the workings of the EU; so although the FCO's expertise in this respect might still surpass that of other UK departments, it can no longer be said to be 'unrivalled'. Ministers and officials from various departments enjoy opportunities to acquire knowledge and personal connections which would once have been monopolised by the FCO. If Britain had joined the European single currency, the ubiquitous Treasury would almost certainly have become the leading departmental player in the EU; as it is, while the Chancellor of the Exchequer attends meetings of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (Ecofin), he or she is excluded from the core eurozone group of ministers.

The differentiated polity model can certainly be applied to the fortunes of the British FCO since its establishment in its current guise in 1968. Indeed, the blurring of departmental responsibilities was identified as a problem for the FCO by the Duncan Committee's official report into Britain's overseas representation (1969), and William Wallace, who was conducting academic research into the foreign policy making process at that time, observed that 'the role of the Foreign Office has become far less clear than it was fifteen or twenty years ago', and that it was now 'more appropriate to talk about a foreign policy dimension across the whole range of domestic politics, demanding particular attention from



particular ministers, civil servants, and commentators' (Wallace, 1975, 272, 270). Wallace's penetrating analysis opened the prospect that the FCO could now only be one of many departments charged with the task of 'doing' foreign policy. It might continue to coordinate the work of other departments at Brussels, but back in Whitehall it seemed more logical to entrust this task to the Cabinet Office. Since this institution was closely linked (in geographical and other respects) to Number 10 Downing Street, the tendency for these developments to augment the foreign policy role of the Prime Minister (whether she or he liked it or not) was readily perceptible.

Since UK membership of the EU was a key driver behind the development of theories which challenged the Westminster model, it is probable that they will require refinement when the dust finally settles on the 'Brexit' phenomenon. For the present purpose, however, the main point arising from all of the theoretical approaches is that the FCO's position within the British policy-making process is no longer as significant as it was when the present department was formed in 1968. On some readings of recent events, the FCO is well placed to reassert its traditional role. Equally, though, it can be argued that the department would have lost even more influence within Whitehall had Britain never been a member of the EU, and that the tendency to lose functions to other ministries (and non-government institutions) can only accelerate after 'Brexit'. Speculation is at the mercy of unpredictable events, and students of the subject are invited to keep a close eye on future Whitehall reconfigurations.

## Think tanks and other non-governmental organisations

While the relationship between government and external sources of policy advice has not been as intimate as in the US, Britain has produced several world-renowned institutions which provide policy-relevant information and serve as convenient venues for the exchange of ideas. The Royal Institute of International Affairs (RIIA, also known as Chatham House) was established in 1920 and publishes a highly regarded journal, *International Affairs*. The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) was founded in 1958, in response to growing fears of nuclear conflict. The Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI) has an even longer institutional history, having been established in 1831; however, its research activities were relatively limited until the 1960s.

Generally speaking, the motivation behind the establishment of foreign-policy think tanks has been a feeling that Whitehall lacks a capacity for impartial research geared towards long-term planning; their rationale tends to resist the logic of the differentiated polity model and to reaffirm foreign policy



making as a specialised activity, demanding specific expertise. For all prominent think tanks, a persistent challenge is to strike an appropriate balance between policy influence and institutional autonomy, and this dilemma has been particularly acute for organisations working in the defence and foreign policy fields (Garnett and Mabon, 2016). It is all too tempting for governments to cherry-pick the results of serious research to advance their short-term policy goals. For example, an IISS report on Iraq was cited as a source for British government claims concerning the level of threat posed by Saddam Hussein's forces. Ideas advanced by Sir Lawrence Freedman, a prolific academic writer with long-standing connections to Chatham House and the IISS, featured heavily in Tony Blair's 1999 Chicago speech on liberal intervention. On the one hand, such examples suggest that British governments continue to depend upon the advice of foreign policy 'experts' at times of crisis; but they also indicate that in such instances they tend to look outside the FCO for advice. A key issue for think tanks is the source of their funding, which can raise questions about their impartiality. For example, in 2016 it was revealed that the IISS had received considerable donations from Bahrain, a Gulf state with a highly controversial human rights record.

Although the policy influence of think tanks should not be discounted, other non-governmental bodies, notably international charities, are equally (if not more) significant members of the policy networks which characterise the differentiated polity model. Organisations like Oxfam were consulted on a more regular and 'official' basis after New Labour's victory in the 1997 general election; their expertise was helpful to the FCO as well as to the DfID. Senior figures within the key international charities have been recruited as policy advisers; for example, Dianna Melrose was Policy Director for Oxfam between 1993 and 1999 before embarking on a successful career within the FCO (including service as Ambassador to Cuba).

## Parliament

In 1815 Lord Grey, the opposition Whig politician and later Prime Minister, told the House of Lords that 'although it was the practice of Parliament during the pendency of all foreign negotiations to leave the management and direction in the hands of the Executive Government', in certain cases 'it became the duty of Parliament to intervene' (quoted in Nicolson, 1946, 187–8). This characterisation of Parliament's foreign policy role still seems plausible, more than two centuries later, despite the fact that the House of Commons, at least, enjoys much greater democratic credibility than it did in 1815 (thanks, at least in part, to the 'Great Reform Act' passed in 1832 by a government led by Lord Grey himself).

The arguments for executive direction of external policy have, if anything, become more pertinent in the intervening years, largely due to technological changes relating to the nature of international conflict:

- In the face of unexpected crises the executive is much better placed to organise a timely response than the legislature, whose members might not even have the chance to assemble before the opportunity for an effective response has passed;
- Even in democratic states, it must be recognised that the unimpeded circulation of information can sometimes have a deleterious effect on diplomatic activity. While full and open debate in the legislative branch of government is a laudable ideal, elected assemblies are unlikely to maintain the kind of balance between disclosure and secrecy which is compatible with the national interest.

In addition, British legislators have tended to resemble their counterparts in other liberal democratic states in their tendency to prioritise domestic-policy issues, which have a direct impact on their constituents on a daily basis, over external affairs which have a more sporadic effect (Richards, 1967). As a result, it has usually been assumed that Parliamentary debates concerning foreign policy will be thinly attended and dominated by a handful of specialists. By the same token, when Parliament has been asked to pronounce on momentous policy issues the turnout of MPs tends to be much more impressive than the result of the ensuing deliberations. Thus, for example, the lengthy debates of 1972 which led to Parliament's agreement to join the EEC were followed by a series of votes which were distorted by the effect of partisan point-scoring (on that occasion, by the Labour Party). In March 2003 the House of Commons authorised British participation in the invasion of Iraq, defeating by 396 votes to 217 an amendment which would have prevented military action without unambiguous endorsement from the UN. Whether or not this outcome was secured by deliberate exaggeration of the threat from Saddam Hussein's regime, it is certainly reasonable to conclude that many MPs who cast their vote in favour of the government's position would not have done so if the available intelligence from Iraq had been presented with some attempt at impartiality.

The Parliamentary vote on Iraq left a lasting legacy, and it was a significant factor in a remarkable Parliamentary defeat inflicted on David Cameron's coalition government. In August 2013 it tabled an ambiguous motion that was (rightly) seen as an attempt to pave the way for British air strikes in support of anti-government forces in Syria. The margin of defeat was narrow – by 285 votes to 272 – but Parliament had been recalled specifically to debate the question, which in itself was intended to stiffen the resolve of coalition supporters who doubted the gravity of the situation. On 26 September 2014 Parliament was

recalled again, this time to approve British action against 'Islamic State' (IS) terrorists in Iraq; on that occasion the government won by 524 to 43. The implication of these votes was that the British Parliament was happy for the country's forces to strike against IS in Iraq but not in Syria – a position which was susceptible to rational justification, but which ministers presented as wholly illogical. The government duly asked the Commons to support action in Syria after all, in a vote of 2 December 2015. The motion was approved by 397 votes to 223 – a margin of victory which (even allowing for the subsequent change in Parliamentary support for the major parties) was unsettlingly similar to the one secured by Blair after the Iraq debate in 2003.

Critics of the coalition government's position could argue that although it had been consistent in its desire to extend military action from Iraq to Syria, this apparent consistency masked a dramatic strategic switch – from bombing targets associated with the Assad regime to targeting IS insurgents. However, leaving aside any concrete developments which might have affected Parliamentary opinion between August 2013 and December 2015, a legislature which was capable of such a comprehensive reversal of its initial decision on a key issue would have difficulty sustaining its credentials as a reliable custodian of a nation's foreign policy. Even more damaging was the suspicion that the August 2013 vote had been decided not by a clear-eyed review of the facts but rather by a (somewhat belated) desire in some quarters to purge the Commons of guilty feelings arising from its conduct before the war on Iraq. If so, it would certainly not be the only occasion during the 2010–15 Parliament when the House of Commons allowed emotion to override its capacity for collective rationality. Rather than accepting the 'consensus' view that a referendum on UK membership of the EU should be delayed until significant changes had been proposed in a new treaty, Conservative backbenchers forced David Cameron to promise an 'in-out' referendum on UK membership before the end of 2017, whether or not the 'Brussels bureaucrats' had come up with any new hare-brained schemes.

Recent events have provoked suggestions that British troops should not be committed to action without a previous Parliamentary vote. In typically British style, this has already become something like a constitutional convention – when Parliament has the opportunity to assemble and deliberate in advance of such a decision. The problem, as in the US, is to find a way of ensuring a role for the legislature in cases when instant decisions are demanded. In such cases, whether or not the British Parliament chooses to demand a role, judgements regarding peace or war can only be left in the hands of the executive, with the proviso that the legislature has the right to hold ministers to account if they misuse this power.

Those MPs who take a continuous interest in external relations have a convenient outlet in the Foreign Affairs Select Committee. Like similar bodies in the House of Commons, the Committee (established in 1979) was strengthened by reforms under the coalition government; even before this it had earned a

reputation for searching scrutiny of executive decisions. Its prestige is sufficient to ensure the attendance of well-informed witnesses. Thus, for example, a report published in 2011 was based on testimony from the serving Foreign Secretary, William Hague, and five of his predecessors as well as numerous officials and academic observers. The Committee's inquiry, significantly, had been triggered by concerns about the future role of the FCO (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 2011). Another key report, on the ill-fated British intervention in Libya, attracted considerable attention when it appeared in 2016 (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016). However, although governments usually respond to the Committee's reports, they are under no obligation to adopt its recommendations. Also, like the FCO itself, the Foreign Affairs Select Committee has encountered obstacles because of the growing importance of 'national security', which falls within the remit of the more secretive Intelligence and Security Committee.

Critical comments about the foreign policy performance of the House of Commons are much less applicable to the House of Lords, where debates are relatively free from partisan considerations. Its select committee on the EU, with its various subcommittees, won an enviable reputation for its objective and detailed scrutiny of EU business. However, in more general terms, the Lords cannot hope to rival the potential influence of the Commons over decision-making; it is not unduly cynical to argue that its limited powers are the main reason why debates in the upper chamber are more balanced and better informed than the proceedings in the Commons.

## Public opinion

Writing in 1937, the MP and former diplomat Harold Nicolson expressed the view that 'the British people have not yet acquired the habit of judgement in regard to foreign policy', and were subject to 'strange emotional fluctuations'. It was an uncanny echo of the lament of an early Foreign Secretary, William Grenville, who wrote in 1797 that:

To desire war without reflection, to be unreasonably elated by success, to be still more unreasonably depressed by difficulties, and to call for peace with an impatience which makes suitable terms unattainable, are the established maxims and the regular progress of the popular mind in this country.  
(quoted in Ehrman, 1996, 55)

Nicolson, however, was optimistic that this situation would be rectified as the British public became accustomed to the new role in foreign policy which was implied by the (fairly recent) introduction of universal suffrage.

In the 1930s the problem of public opinion was particularly acute for Nicolson's former Foreign Office colleagues. Whether or not Britain was a democratic country, the state of public opinion would have to be considered seriously, since technological developments meant that a new war would endanger the lives of ordinary citizens as well as the armed forces. Reading between the lines, Nicolson's own view was that British public opinion would have arrived at maturity when an overwhelming majority had realised that in such matters its own judgement would always be inferior to that of the 'experts' in the Foreign Office (Nicolson, 1937, 55).

Unfortunately, even in the 1930s it was clear that the members of the public who were sufficiently motivated to inform themselves on matters of external policy tended (almost by definition) to be passionate supporters of one course or another and thus impervious to the Foreign Office insistence that international affairs should be seen in varying shades of grey. It seemed as if totalitarian states enjoyed a considerable diplomatic advantage, since they had no need to take account of possible public dissent in the decision-making process.

There is good reason to suppose that Nicolson's hopes regarding public opinion have not been realised. Whether or not the general level of knowledge concerning external relations has improved since the 1930s, those who are well-informed are still a minority, and the intensity of their commitment still compensates for their lack of numbers. For the most part, Britain's foreign policy makers have continued to regard public opinion as a force which, within definite limits, can be managed – an attitude which was rudely challenged by the result of the 2016 EU referendum. The best justification for this approach was the fact that governments have been re-elected after apparent foreign policy disasters – the Conservatives won comfortably in 1959 despite the 1956 Suez fiasco, and New Labour repeated the feat in 2005, despite increasing evidence that the 2003 intervention in Iraq had been less than a complete success and had been launched on false pretences. While foreign policy reverses have not necessarily led to electoral defeat, Margaret Thatcher's hopes for re-election in 1983 were undoubtedly helped by a public reaction to the 1982 Falklands War which is best interpreted as a gut reaction against previous humiliations, rather than a sober assessment of the country's international status. But victory in war is no guarantee of electoral success. When the Conservative Party went down to a heavy defeat in the 1945 general election voters might have been influenced by memories of Neville Chamberlain and appeasement; but by 1945 Chamberlain was dead, and the Conservatives were led into the election by Winston Churchill, the man who had resisted appeasement and provided heroic wartime leadership.

From the perspective of liberal democracy, the Iraq War was particularly troubling, since the depth and extent of well-informed opposition had been exhibited in mass demonstrations, which seem to have impressed Britain's American allies more than the country's own government (see the fascinating

polling evidence at Ipsos MORI, 2003b). In this instance, although many members of the public were clearly unimpressed by his attempts to make the case for war, Tony Blair could draw on memories of the early 1980s, when demonstrators tried to prevent the siting of American cruise missiles in British territory. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) had enjoyed considerable support, which extended beyond the usual ‘troublemakers’ who had thought deeply about the subject; in 1982 surveys suggested that the case for unilateral nuclear disarmament was backed by nearly a third of voters. Nevertheless, the Thatcher government and its media allies prevailed, largely by cutting through the complexities of the debate and presenting the issue in terms of patriotism and national security. Blair had special reason to remember this outcome, since he had been affiliated to CND himself for much of the 1980s.

Britain’s possession of nuclear weapons, and its membership of NATO, could in certain circumstances have been made the subject of referendums. In practice, governments have not felt it necessary to consult the public on issues which, literally, could make the difference between life or death for their citizens. Instead, in 1975 and 2016 governments agreed to engage the public in direct consultation on the single external policy issue of membership of ‘Europe’. However, the initial decision to apply for membership (in 1961) was not even a Conservative manifesto commitment in the preceding election; and (contrary to a popular urban myth) the vote which finally took Britain into the EEC was cast by MPs (in 1972) rather than in the 1975 referendum, which merely confirmed a previous Parliamentary decision. It was thus a remarkable feat for proponents of ‘Brexit’ to claim in 2016 that citizens who voted against continued EU membership would somehow be *reclaiming* an historic right to play a significant role in shaping their nation’s destiny. While the argument for withdrawal could be (and sometimes was) advanced on a rational basis, its supporters in the media tended to rely on the old assumption that the majority of British people knew very little about international realities and were perfectly content to vote on the basis of emotion rather than reason. It could be argued, ironically, that the prevalence of this attitude had prevented British politicians from exerting a constructive influence within ‘Europe’ from the outset. Thus in 2016 the British public was given an unusual invitation to play a decisive foreign policy role on an issue where its direct input was likely to prove uniquely unhelpful.

## External actors

For some observers, domestic influences no longer explain the making of British foreign policy, which instead arises from the country’s engagement with a variety of multinational organisations and nation states. As such, the UK’s foreign policy (in keeping with its approach on an ever widening range of issues) is testament

to multi-level governance. Some go even further, claiming that external influences are so potent that there is no longer any such thing as a distinctively 'British' foreign policy.

No one could seriously deny that Britain's engagement with institutions like the UN, NATO, the EU and the G8 have a significant foreign policy impact. Despite occasional serious disagreements (e.g. over Suez and Iraq), Britain's role within the UN has usually been consistent with its position as a founder member with a permanent seat on the Security Council. Without the UN, Britain's preferred approach to all international disputes – the possibility of peaceful negotiated settlements, the imposition of effective sanctions, the provision of peacekeeping troops and/or humanitarian aid – would be infinitely more remote. Nevertheless, the compromises involved in formulating UN resolutions which will command support without alienating other Security Council members has contributed to the notion that Britain lacks a distinctive foreign policy.

The EU exercises significant influence over its member states, including the UK, in relation to trade policy. Having, arguably, succeeded all too well in one of its original purposes – the maintenance of peace within Europe – to the extent that this is now often taken for granted, the main justification for the EU lies in its ability, as the world's most populous single market, to promote economic prosperity. Apart from its own tariff-free status – finalised, somewhat belatedly, after the Single European Act (1986) – the EU has engaged in numerous negotiations with non-member states. British Eurosceptics have argued that the country could have secured similar free-trade deals if it had not joined the EU. Whatever the truth of that claim – which will be tested in years to come – the EU has certainly been a major influence on UK policy making in relation to trade agreements. It has been a member of the World Trade Organisation in its own right since the latter was founded in 1995.

In terms of traditional foreign policy issues, i.e. those relating to disputes which threaten to lead to armed conflict, the EU has been far less influential than its opponents claim, or than its supporters have hoped. Informal consultation on such matters began in 1970, but the European community's response to the Balkan crisis of the early 1990s was widely criticised and apparently strengthened the case for closer cooperation. However, the creation of a European Union at Maastricht in 1992 generated limited changes in the previous arrangement: foreign and security policy remained 'intergovernmental', requiring unanimous support in the Council of Ministers. The Amsterdam Treaty of 1997 instituted a High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, whose remit was broadened by the subsequent Treaty of Lisbon (2007); but while these reforms made it easier to identify a single individual who could 'speak for Europe' in the appropriate circumstances, it was still unclear when such circumstances would arise. Certainly, the existence of a High Representative made little difference to the divisions among EU member states in relation



to the 2003 Iraq War. Among (many) other things, that conflict checked the momentum towards increased European cooperation on defence and security, which Britain and France had initiated in the St Malo declaration of December 1998. More recently, responses to international crises like Libya (2011) and Ukraine (2013) highlighted different priorities within the EU, with the UK and France taking prominent roles in the former situation and Germany in the latter.

Theoretically, Britain's membership of NATO subjects it to much greater constraints, since Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty stipulates the collective defence of any member state which comes under attack. However, this clause has only been activated once (in 2001, after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center); Article 4, which mandates consultations between member states, has been used five times (all since 2003). The 1949 NATO treaty did not specify that signatory states should have identical friends and enemies, but membership of the alliance can still exert some influence over British policy at times when NATO members and other states are engaged in controversies which fall short of armed conflict. In this respect, the fact that NATO membership has increased from the original 12 states to 28 might be regarded as a mixed blessing.

It can be argued that NATO's influence over British foreign policy is mainly a reflection of the UK's relationship with the alliance's dominant power, the US. It is possible to interpret NATO itself as the product of *British* influence over the US – certainly, it was an immediate post-war priority for Britain to secure an American commitment to the defence of Europe, and NATO provided this. However, it would be a mistake to suppose that the US would have made such a commitment without calculating its own perceived interests. While Britain has influenced US policy in specific instances since 1949 – even in the notorious example of the 2003 Iraq War, the Bush administration is unlikely to have persisted in the attempt to win UN backing if Tony Blair had been less insistent – such instances, even if taken at British evaluation, would hardly satisfy the hopes of observers like Harold Macmillan, who anticipated in 1943 that the transatlantic relationship would emulate that between the Romans and the Greeks, i.e. that virile, headstrong Americans would be prodded onto the path of wisdom thanks to the seasoned (if not world-weary) Brits.

US influence over British foreign policy can be seen throughout the current volume. NATO is not the only forum in which such influence can be exercised; indeed, the UK–US relationship has certainly been 'special' in the extent of informal contact between senior officials. On occasions (notably, but not exclusively, on the Israel–Palestine issue) it has seemed that direct consultation has been unnecessary, and that the guiding 'principle' of British foreign policy has been to wait for the Americans to take a decision and then fall in behind it. If this situation has changed over recent years – particularly with regard to strengthening British ties with China – the overwhelming impulse has been economic necessity. In short, British economic imperatives have promoted relations with China,



even at the risk of courting US displeasure, in the hope that the same considerations will keep US–China tensions on more traditional foreign policy issues within manageable limits. If these expectations prove ill-founded, it is likely that British policy will return to its familiar post-war pattern, in which ‘rational’ considerations of national self-interest are subordinated to the instinctive desire to toe the American line.

## The ‘Brexit’ effect

As noted above, the shock waves triggered by the 2016 referendum on EU membership have affected the making of British foreign policy in several significant respects. Most notably, when Theresa May succeeded David Cameron as Prime Minister in July 2016 she created two new departments of state whose functions intersect with those of the FCO. The Department for Exiting the European Union (DExEU), whose name is self-explanatory, was entrusted with the government’s most important policy brief. Its staff were drawn from a range of existing departments, particularly the FCO itself. The other new institution, the Department for International Trade (DIT), was given the task of scouring the world for lucrative market opportunities. While the FCO continued to operate in the field of ‘economic diplomacy’, its value for this purpose seemed to be threatened by the DIT, which, unlike DExEU, seemed likely to become a permanent Whitehall fixture.

The reduction in the number of FCO junior ministers since 2015 could be taken as a quantitative indication of the department’s sagging status. From this perspective, Theresa May’s eye-catching appointment of Boris Johnson as the new Foreign Secretary could also be taken as evidence that the new Prime Minister no longer saw the FCO as one of the ‘great offices of state’. However, some of the ministerial changes were merely a logical product of ‘Brexit’; for example, the position of Minister of State for Europe within the FCO looked anomalous, even if Britain looked set to remain within the EU for at least two years. While Johnson had not previously been noted for his mastery of the enigmatic utterance, he was at least a highly visible public figure, who had an obvious interest in defending the interests of his department.

As such, while there were many ominous signs for the FCO even before the 2016 referendum, the outlook in its aftermath also included potential opportunities. As such, the FCO’s situation was much like that of Britain itself.

## Conclusions and summary

As this chapter has shown, numerous actors are involved in the making of British foreign policy. It was never the case that the Foreign Secretary enjoyed a

monopoly in that field, or anything like it. As de facto head of the executive branch, the Prime Minister has always been consulted: even at the Congress of Vienna, in 1815, Lord Castlereagh took pains to square his decisions with his political chief, Lord Liverpool, back in London. Since 1945 the extent of Prime Ministerial intervention has varied, at least in part due to temperamental differences among the office holders. However, since 1979 there has been a definite tendency for Prime Ministers to play a leading part – and not just at times of crisis – despite the very different characters who have held the position. The itch for intervention, which can make the Foreign Secretary seem like a secondary player, has been augmented by the demands of the media and given institutional backing through the presence of specialist advisers in the Prime Minister's entourage.

If influence over headline-grabbing decisions has been drawn upwards, from the FCO to the Prime Minister's Office, responsibility for more mundane matters has shifted sideways and downwards within the traditional Whitehall hierarchy, lending support to the differentiated polity model of decision-making. An economic dimension to British foreign policy making is nothing new, but the Chancellor of the Exchequer now invariably exercises considerable influence over decisions – as well as enjoying an ever tightening hold over the FCO budget. The presence of a strong security aspect to most of the key foreign policy questions also gives the Home Secretary a leading role. Meanwhile, 'second-rank' ministers, whose predecessors formerly regarded the Foreign Secretary with deference – if not envy – are now regularly consulted on matters which either would not have been regarded as significant elements of 'foreign policy' or would have been handled within the FCO. Ministries responsible for issues like trade or the environment can supply a depth of expertise which the FCO could not hope to rival, and in this respect the emergence of a new Department for International Trade is not helpful to the FCO. The FCO's battle to control overseas aid seems to have ended in defeat, with the DfID now established as a separate institution with a sizeable budget.

The British FCO is not the only institution of its kind to face diminished prestige and an uncertain role. However, the British example is different because the fall from grace has been so dramatic; in the language of political science, the institutional certainties of the Westminster model are a world away from the overlapping (and sometimes conflicting) responsibilities arising from a differentiated polity in an era of multi-level governance. The FCO now seems like a Rolls-Royce department which has been relegated to a Morris Minor mission. At the beginning of the post-war period the British Foreign Secretary was inevitably a prominent player in any significant international negotiation; now the FCO is chiefly mentioned in news reports as the purveyor of advice to those wishing to travel to hazardous destinations or as a source of solace to the relatives of murdered British nationals.

The importance of the FCO as a coordinator of the overseas activities of other government departments – and as a facilitator for private-sector companies looking for opportunities abroad – should not be underestimated, even if they tend to go unnoticed by the general public. For this reason, however, the FCO has been regarded as ‘low-hanging fruit’ by successive governments looking for painless spending cuts. Even if the Westminster model is redundant in relation to most UK government departments, it still seems relevant to the outlook and behaviour of the Treasury, which (for various reasons) has rarely been a wholehearted supporter of the FCO. There seems to have been an assumption that Britain could continue to project soft power even if it recalled all of its overseas representatives; from the traditional Treasury perspective, a separate department providing overseas aid would be far more amenable to performance targets based on a cost–benefit analysis. However, a more far-sighted policy would have recognised that the provision of financial assistance to other countries would lose much of its influential force unless it was backed by a strong diplomatic presence on the spot. This realisation might have prompted a resolve to spare the FCO budget from cuts, to give foreign observers the impression that Britain was still confident of playing a constructive role in international affairs even if its ‘hard power’ was obviously reduced. In the wake of ‘Brexit’ there was an excellent case for boosting FCO budgets to help foster new relationships outside Europe. Initially, at least, there was little sign that this argument had made much impression in the Treasury or on Downing Street.

Whatever might have befallen the foreign ministries of other Western countries, the British FCO was at least in part the victim of its own virtues. Uncertainty about Britain’s role in the post-war world did not arise from failings among the FCO’s highly educated senior officials, who understood that things had changed but were prevented from developing a more realistic perspective by party politicians, who, for electoral reasons, continued to claim that Britain was as ‘Great’ as ever despite persuasive evidence to the contrary. Even after the 1956 Suez disaster British foreign policy was made under a tacit agreement that politicians would persist with their misleading rhetoric, while the professionals at the FCO conducted practical business on the basis of a common-sense appraisal of global realities. Even Britain’s tortuous path towards membership of what was then the EEC was conducted without exposing the contradictions in this dual approach. Indeed, during the 1975 referendum campaign mainstream politicians of all parties implied that a leading role within the EEC would provide an admirable springboard for revived British *global* influence.

The Falklands War put an end to this informal *concordat* between the politicians and the foreign policy professionals. It proved impossible to square either of the political narratives – that Britain was still a major power or that it was now on the path to recovery after unavoidable setbacks – with the seizure of

### Case Study 2.2 Christmas broadcasts and soft power

During the reign of Elizabeth II successive Prime Ministers have paid tribute to the knowledge she has accumulated since 1952 and to her shrewd judgement. However, the British monarch has no formal role in the making of foreign policy, even though decisions are taken in his or her name. Even the suggestion that the monarch prefers one course of action to another is regarded as constitutionally improper; hence the furore during the 2016 EU referendum campaign when the *Sun* newspaper claimed that the Queen favoured 'Brexit'.

However, it has become something akin to a constitutional requirement that the monarch deliver a Christmas message, broadcast on the radio since 1932 and televised since 1957. Inevitably, these messages have included topical allusions when certain events have been too important to be passed over in silence. Notoriously, during the 1990s Queen Elizabeth referred to developments within her own family; but before then she had mentioned key foreign policy issues in a manner which could be squared with her 'above politics' posture. In 1982, for example, she applauded the courage of British service personnel who had helped to recapture the Falkland Islands, without attributing the conflict either to Argentine aggression or policy failures closer to home. In 1990 she condemned the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, but this was unavoidable since thousands of British troops were spending that Christmas in expectation of imminent orders for military action to expel Saddam Hussein's forces.

Perhaps the most interesting broadcast in Elizabeth II's long career was the message of 1956. This was crafted at a time when Britain was trying to repair the damage to its international reputation which had been inflicted by the Suez Crisis. Without referring to the cause of dispute, the Queen recognised that the Commonwealth had been sharply divided over Britain's actions:

deep and acute differences, involving both intellect and emotion, are bound to arise between members of a family and also between friend and friend, and there is neither virtue nor value in pretending that they do not. In all such differences, however, there comes a moment when, for the sake of ultimate harmony, the healing power of tolerance, comradeship and love must be allowed to play its part.

If British politicians had not shown by Christmas 1956 that they were ready to learn at least some of the lessons of Suez, these words of reconciliation might have been unavailing. However, they certainly maximised the chances that the Commonwealth would recover from this serious setback.

From the beginning of her reign the Queen had addressed citizens in Britain's former and existing colonies as if they were part of a 'family'; and while she was the Commonwealth's constitutional 'leader', she always emphasised the equality of its members. More importantly, she took every opportunity to emphasise that individuals, as well as member states, should be regarded as equals. Thus in 1968 – the year that saw the outbreak of civil war in Nigeria, as well as Enoch Powell's 'rivers of blood' speech (Chapter 6) – she went out of her way to express her belief in the 'brotherhood of man', arguing that harmony between nations must begin at the individual level. This tacit assault on racism was underlined by her explicit reference to the great Kenyan athlete, Kip Keino, who had won a gold and a silver medal at the 1968 Olympic Games. With astonishing chutzpah, given the furore over Kenyan Asians which had inspired Powell's engagement with the politics of race, Queen Elizabeth rejoiced in the fact that 'Kenya sent us her great runner Keino. I hope many more sportsmen from Africa will take part in competitions and will establish new contacts between Africa and the rest of the world'. It was the closest that the Queen could prudently come to blowing a raspberry in Powell's direction.

The allusion to Kip Keino's more recent feats was actually a pretext for a generous reference to the 1966 Empire and Commonwealth Games, which had been held in Jamaica – the source of many recent immigrants to the UK and, according to the Queen, an island notable for 'the kindness of the people'. Apart from its usefulness as a weapon against racists at home, the Queen had realised that these sporting contests – the 'Friendly Games', as they came to be called – could help to burnish Britain's external image. The texts of her Christmas broadcasts suggest that for most of her reign she felt that she might be fighting in a losing battle. Even so, she kept plugging away, year after year, with her personal 'narrative' – that whatever its past might have been, Britain's new role was to act as a moral exemplar to the world. Ironically, this was not far removed from the outlook which prompted members of CND to argue that world leaders would sit up and take notice if Britain took the lead in renouncing its 'deterrent'. By another irony, the Queen was such a successful salesperson for Britain's soft power – whether in receiving deputations from other countries or undertaking overseas tours – that she provided indispensable 'cover' for politicians who wanted to claim that the country still mattered and could 'punch above its weight' in terms of global hard power. In other words, thanks to the Queen's Christmas broadcasts, elected politicians could be assured that the 'moral role' narrative was still available for Britain to fall back on, whatever indignities might be involved in the attempt to convince voters that the country was still a great power in traditional hard-power terms.

an Overseas Territory, whose inhabitants clearly wanted to remain under British sovereignty, by a country which was ruled by a right-wing military junta. During the conflict and for years afterwards it was natural for a majority of British voters to accept the argument of the right-wing media and to think that the FCO was full of 'appeasers' who had been unmasked by Margaret Thatcher, the only politician who had the courage to expose their devious designs. On this view, Britain's interests could only be upheld if foreign policy fell under the direction of the Prime Minister; and Mrs Thatcher did not demur from this conclusion.

As Paul Williams has noted, 'the UK simultaneously pursues multiple foreign policies, some of which overlap and some of which may be contradictory' (Williams, 2004, 913). This suggests that the need for the FCO has not been diminished by recent developments; indeed, it could be argued that a department which can coordinate Britain's various international initiatives is more important than ever. It can only be regretted that the transition in the FCO's essential purpose has coincided with a period in which the department has undoubtedly lost prestige – a process which began with the Falklands episode of 1982. In this unhelpful context it has been natural for observers, both within and outside the FCO, to equate a change in role (attendant on a more general switch from the outdated Westminster model to more sophisticated forms of decision-making) with a demotion in status – not least because in 1997 Tony Blair renewed Mrs Thatcher's attempt to win control over foreign policy as if the partial resuscitation under John Major (1992–7) had never happened.

Whatever their constraints in other fields, British Prime Ministers have good reason to assume a licence to try, try and try again in respect of foreign policy until they finally get something right. Unlike the FCO, which has to deal with international 'realities', Prime Ministers have a vested interest in clinging to the delusion that Britain is still (at least potentially) as potent on the global stage as it was in 1945. Previous experience, after all, suggests that palpable policy failures (e.g. Suez and Iraq) are less damaging in electoral terms than even a tacit acceptance that Britain's best days might lie in the past. Since 1945 the best way of reinforcing the preferred construction of Britain's role with some concrete evidence was by turning the country's relationship with the world's pre-eminent power, the US, into an overriding foreign policy priority. Since that relationship is indeed 'special' in significant respects, prudent British policy makers could have used it to the country's perceived advantage, i.e. by regarding it as a useful source of assistance on those occasions when it could help to secure policy objectives identified in the course of objective analysis. Instead, successive British Prime Ministers have forgotten that diplomatic alliances, however intimate, should be regarded as means to specific ends, rather than ends in themselves. Even Prime Ministers who have possessed a basic grasp of modern history – which Thatcher and Blair patently lacked – have felt

compelled to persist with the delusional post-war narratives based on an uncritical interpretation of Britain's nineteenth-century status and (with varying degrees of enthusiasm) to accept the consequences. As a result, rather than the FCO or even the Prime Minister's Office, at the time of writing it is arguable that the ultimate source of Britain's foreign policy should be sought in Washington rather than London.