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LONG-TERM, NATIONAL STRATEGY

DESIGNING A CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE OF NATIONAL STRATEGY

JUNE 2025

Lucy Smith
Heywood Fellow

About the Fellowship

The Heywood Fellowship is a visiting fellowship created in memory of Jeremy Heywood, Cabinet Secretary from 2012 to 2018. The purpose is to give a UK Civil Service Permanent Secretary the opportunity to explore issues relating to public service and policy outside of the immediate responsibilities of government duties.

The Heywood Foundation and the Blavatnik School, University of Oxford, established the Heywood Visiting Fellowship with support from the Cabinet Office. The Fellow is associated with Hertford College, Lord Heywood's former college.

This year's Heywood Fellowship sets out to examine how governments come to a national view of what really matters over longer time horizons, the ways governments can best confront and tackle future problems, and how the configuration, mechanisms and capabilities of the state can best enable the pursuit and delivery of long-term outcomes for citizens.

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The Fellowship Team

Lucy Smith is the 2024-25 Heywood Fellow. She is supported by a small team.

- **Lucy Smith** — Heywood Fellow. Lucy was previously Director General for Strategy at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and for UK Governance Group at the Cabinet Office. She was Constitution Director and Principal Private Secretary to Nick Clegg as Deputy Prime Minister.
- **Zainab Agha** — Visiting Practitioner. A Director in the Cabinet Office, Zainab has 20+ years' experience working in senior public policy and economist roles across the UK civil service and internationally including in Namibia, Ghana, Tanzania and Pakistan. Her most recent roles have focused on devolution and intergovernmental working.
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- **Alex Downing** — Policy and practice lead. Alex is a civil servant with policy and private office experience in the Cabinet Office and Department for Education. He was Head of Office to the Chief Executive of Government Communications and Senior Private Secretary to the Education Secretary. Before that, he worked in a range of DfE teams, primarily on schools and academies.
- **Marius Ostrowski** — ESRC Research Fellow. Dr Marius S. Ostrowski is a social scientist, modern historian, and policy thought leader. His work specialises in UK and European geostrategy, the role of skills in political economy, how to make democracies more resilient against social threats, and the ways society shapes how we think.

The Author

Lucy Smith
Heywood Fellow 2024-25

LONG-TERM, NATIONAL STRATEGY

DESIGNING A CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE OF NATIONAL STRATEGY

In a nutshell

- We need long-term national strategy as a core capability of the state, if we are to have real agency over the future
- Other countries — democracies — are outpacing us in strategic capability. There is lots for us to learn from around the world, and from our history
- Democracies can support long-term, national goals, but need new practices, cycles and structures to do so
- National strategy should be a national endeavour, mobilising all our national capacities — not a function or practice of central government alone
- A national strategic framework to guide action and trade-offs can be built from a diagnosis of our inheritance, challenges, objectives and 'big bets'
- A nation's 'big bets' may be explicit or implicit. Often the biggest are the implicit ones that are rarely examined, except at times of strategic pivot.
- Long-term national strategy should be conceived of as a practice. It is a practice that must become intrinsic to key institutions and processes, if it is to be successful in changing incentives and culture
- This practice should be rooted in history and inheritance, future-oriented, outward-facing (to other countries and competitors), place-oriented, intelligent about uncertainty, open and 'national' in approach
- Strategic pivots and long-term goal-delivery require the creation of learning systems rather than necessitating top-down control

Why do we need national strategy?

This year's Heywood Fellowship sets out to examine how governments come to a national view of what really matters over longer time horizons, the ways governments can best confront and tackle future problems, and how the configuration, mechanisms and capabilities of the state can best enable the pursuit and delivery of long-term outcomes for citizens.

We start from the view that this is a generational moment for the UK and countries like it, where assumptions held previously won't hold for the next phase. A shifting global order, climate change, demographics and ageing, the technological transformation of the economy and society, intergenerational fairness, public trust in institutions and democracy — these are trends and drivers in our future outlook

that imply major shifts and will require complex, concerted responses from the state and society. These future challenges will have to be met from a starting position that is realistic about the embedded strengths and weaknesses inherited from the last phase — high levels of national debt, NHS and social care pressures that absorb an ever-increasing proportion of public service funds, defence capabilities that need to be built for the challenges we face, a recent history of serious territorial tensions within the UK that are unresolved, and a loss of public confidence that either politicians or the state more widely can actually do things.

There is now a broad coalition for the idea that we cannot meet these challenges with our current level of strategy capability. A serious attempt to forge national strategy and a serious focus on developing strategic capability is required. Advocates for long-term thinking and national strategy come from a range of perspectives: from the imperatives of 'grand strategy', to the perspectives of intergenerational thinking, to those who consider us — and the world — caught in a polycrisis.

We have studied these viewpoints and think there is a diagnosis they share: that what is required of the state is a strong grip of the national interest over longer time horizons; a deeper ability to explain, elucidate and chart the path to difficult trade-offs without losing societal resilience and cohesiveness; bold, creative and tenacious transformation of public policy and institutions; the ability to synthesise and execute across complex systems; and the capacity to deal with uncertainty without falling back on incrementalism and risk avoidance. We will require a more outward-looking, future-focused, nationally informed way of setting ambition and direction, and an enhanced strategic practice of agility and integration to succeed at meeting national goals. There has been a strong emphasis on this problem in Parliament, with the Liaison Committee completing a report, *Promoting national strategy: How select committee scrutiny can improve strategic thinking in Whitehall*,[i] ahead of the 2024 election.

It is clear to us that the way the UK thinks about the next twenty years needs to be very different from the last. One of the ways of confronting this imperative is through political choices, mediated through the electorate and the democratic process. This is not the only load-bearing mechanism in our state machinery for deep thinking and change. The institutions, practices and culture of policymakers can either support or inhibit genuine strategic thought and action. Short-termist thinking can be as much about bias, expediency and institutional path dependency as it is about democracy, evidence or genuine uncertainty. In terms of our current capability, we do not have the requisite methods and tools for synthesis between economic, security, social, and other policy domains. We do not have methods to integrate the separate cycles and routines we have for looking at geopolitical and external challenges and trends, political commitments made to the electorate and fiscal planning, and we lack a joined-up spatial planning framework. This lack of

synthesis deepens fragmentation, causes significant opportunity cost and inhibits others in society pursuing long-term goals. A predisposition to look inward rather than look outward for the best assets available nationally — in the countries, regions, localities of the UK, or in civil society or the private sector — constrains ideas generation and impact. Our habits in relation to policy formation and consultation assume a limited role for the public, whereas new approaches might help us navigate trade-offs that are inevitable, but we lack the confidence to face. It is this institutional path dependency - the fact that if we keep repeating the same practices, routines and processes we will inevitably generate the same results - that has led us to think about national strategy itself as a practice. The nature of this practice and its renewal — i.e. whether we keep repeating the same activities or develop an approach that is designed properly for the demands of the next phase — will be critical to success.

Our adversaries and competitors are betting that democracies like ours can't think long — that election cycles, shifting mandates and changes in public mood stop us taking on big challenges and delivering long-term goals. And yet, many democratic countries are proving otherwise: setting priorities, investing behind them, and mobilising state and society to stay the course. They are also trialling ways of enhancing democratic structures to help them fulfil this nationally-strategic role – for example the Committee for the Future in Finland and the National Assembly Futures Initiative in South Korea. In the UK, Parliament is a vital locus and guardian of the long-term national interest and the ability of the state to secure it. This role extends to devolved legislatures too, in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Parliament has taken a keen interest in fluctuations in capability and practice. There have been many attempts to scrutinise and assess strategic capability over time, though there has never been a full articulation from government of what it thinks its role, function and capability is in relation to long-term national strategy. As discussed by the Liaison Committee, this constrains the committee system from developing as a richer locus of debate for long-term and nationally-strategic issues and capabilities.[ii]

We have set out to learn and define what a contemporary practice of national strategy, fit for the challenges of the next twenty years, actually is. We will be developing solutions for how to reintroduce this practice into government with the breadth, depth and openness of a national endeavour. We will develop this practice by learning from other countries through comparative analysis and case studies, from our own history, from the experiences of places around the UK, from the practices of the private sector, and from interviews, roundtables, seminars and events with a range of practitioners and experts from across the UK and internationally. We are not the first people to ask this question and we rely on the work of many others. Our focus is to develop a renewed practice of national strategy by asking, constantly, how would we actually do this?

In this first working paper, we explore our starting point. Where should the development of long-term national strategy begin? What are the key concepts and frameworks from which we can build? Who is involved? And what might be the most important characteristics of a practice of long-term national strategy? We are publishing this paper with the purpose of eliciting views and debate, and will continue to refine and iterate in response to this discussion. By articulating, discussing and refining our conception of the practice of long-term national strategy, our aim is to improve our collective understanding and, in turn, the consistency and quality of its application in the UK.

A framework for national strategy

This project takes as one of its core concepts that national strategy is a practice. It is the practice that sets the forward orientation and direction of the country's institutions and shapes the way it pursues its goals. It is a practice that can be more implicit or explicit, more casual or more disciplined, and it has fluctuated on this spectrum at different times in our history and under different political leaderships. It is more likely to be explicit in countries that consider themselves to face a form of existential threat, where these disciplines are considered even more vital to statecraft and are therefore among the capabilities that politicians and civil servants see as warranting special examination, updating and improvement.

In broad terms, this practice is made up of the following:

1. How policymakers and decisionmakers read the world — their **worldview** imbued by history, their reading of the current state of the nation and its strengths and weaknesses, their understanding of the country's position relative to other countries, and their reading of the future. Subsequently, how they distil from this their **diagnosis** of the challenges that the nation must respond to over the chosen horizon.
2. **Strategic purpose**, largely articulated by elected politicians, and reflecting as best it can the identity, fears, hopes and desires of citizens. Often expressed as specific **objectives** and goals.
3. The often-implicit **assumptions** that underpin our sense of the world or act as constraints. Examples might be the nuclear deterrent, an NHS free at the point of delivery, an open economy. These assumptions form the tramlines of national policy formation, and it is only at significant inflection points that they are considered at all. In this project we will often refer to them as **'big bets'**, and we look at what to do when big bets need re-examining.
4. The institutional capacity and capability to **reimagine, synthesise, integrate and act** in respect of opportunities or challenges facing the country — by the state and its institutions, by the private sector and by society at large.

In simple terms, these practices, if they are done well, build a model for national strategy in which there is a collective understanding of: (i) where the country is coming from, (ii) where it wants to get to, (iii) how it expects to get there. A succinct assessment of national strategy can be made through this framework, comprising the challenges the nation believes are most salient, the objectives it sets against them, and the big bets it makes in response, giving insight into what the national strategic approach of a country is at any point in time. This assessment can be **comparative**, looking at other countries or entities, or it can be **retrospective**, looking at historical periods. We have begun to test this framework by using it as a lens through which to understand other countries' strategic approaches, and to examine the UK's strategic history.

Even more importantly, this idea of a framework comprising challenges, objectives and big bets gives us a model for what we might aim for as an expression of national strategy at the endpoint of a **generative** process. We are very clear that the goal of a national strategy process should not be an 800-page document or a description of activities or commitments, however well brigaded. Our aim is a framework that genuinely guides trade-offs and action, and the design of systems oriented to its success. If we add in the requirement of selection — to select only the truly definitional challenges, let's say around five — we arrive at the idea of a "3 x 5" framework for national strategy. "3" refers to the three categories of diagnosis, objective and big bet. "5" represents the requirement to select. This level of selection is critical if we are to bring the limited resources of the state — and actors within the state — properly to bear on them. This model should enable genuine integration, constant monitoring and making of trade-offs between the goals in the framework, while expressing a clear hierarchy in relation to other aims. The framework needs to be simple, but the practice to generate, shape and support it is not simplistic. Among other things, it involves analysis, foresight, diagnosis, design, competition, selection, integration, synthesis, settling and explaining, across multiple forms of governance and among many partners. This is what a new practice of national strategy must be designed to do.

Figure 1 *— The 3x5*

Diagnosis

Select the five most salient challenges from the overall context facing the country. The focused response to these challenges will shape the country's approach over the next 15–20 years.

This requires an understanding of:

- The current context and challenges (opportunities, threats) facing the country.
- The history of this context and these challenges.
- The longer-term view of the events and trends that will shape the country's context by 2040.
- The national capacities (strengths, weaknesses) that make up the country's inheritance.
- The country's national identity, including levels of public consensus about now and the future.
- A certainty and risk assessment for each of these factors.

Objective(s)

Articulate the objectives the country should adopt in respect of each of these challenges, which it will stick to consistently over the next 15–20 years. These are shaped by the country's vision of what kind of country it wants to have become by the end of this period.

These objectives need to:

- Include interim milestones that the country should reach over the course of the 15–20-year period.
- Highlight trade-offs between choices and priority rankings of different decisive options.
- Enable the constituent parts of the country to mobilise their own efforts to advance these objectives, including private-, public-, and third-sector actors, and other layers of governance.

Big bet(s)

Articulate the 'big bets' that are being made in pursuit of each of these objectives.

This requires an understanding of:

- The status quo 'bets' the country has made in relation to these challenges, which may have been implicit in the country's national approach for a long time (passive assumptions).
- The key new ideas, pivots, or resource transfers that need to be made to deliver strategic change, which will condition the nation's approach over the 15–20-year time-period (active assumptions).
- An understanding of the 'roads not taken', and who the winners and losers that are (not) being bet upon are as a result.

A comparative practice — learning from other countries

A major source of learning about the practice of national strategy is from countries across the world. We have sought to study countries that are the UK's direct comparators on several political, economic and cultural measures; while equally looking for innovations and approaches in countries that are unlike the UK. The existence of several countries that have established their own rich national strategy traditions can act as a source of useful comparative case-studies for the UK to draw on. Equally, we are interested in studying countries who have demonstrably pursued and succeeded in strategic transformations of their national outcomes, and what capabilities — explicitly 'strategic' or otherwise — enabled that to happen.

Our list includes the following:

- España 2050: **Spain's** long-term foresight and strategy exercise, launched in 2020
- The Republic of **Ireland's** period of rapid economic growth (the 'Celtic Tiger') and a case study of its Brexit strategy
- The Republic of **Korea's** economic and industrial transformation, including the development of its cultural sector
- **Japan's** approach to socio-economic issues through Society 5.0 and its mission-based industrial policy, and a case study on Hiroshima prefecture and the central-local relationship in long-term planning
- **The Netherlands** 2040 horizon**,** how it has enabled cities, businesses and sectors to plan on shared timeframes, and how this has led to new approaches to aligning budgets and land use
- Comparative approaches to foresight, strategy and long-term planning: **Singapore**, **Finland**, **New Zealand**
- **France's** approach to formal strategic training for public and private sector personnel.

It is clear from our review of these countries' practices that the UK is being outpaced in strategy capability as others innovate and improve. Singapore is the world leader in strategy-making expertise and process, run out of the PM's office. President Sánchez's 'España 2050' exercise brought academics, civil society, citizens, and experts into long-term foresight and planning. Ireland has mastered the use of small margins of advantage to become one of the most productive economies in Europe. Japan and South Korea are adept at making 'big bets' on the future, committing and mobilising national capabilities and assets (private

sector, science and tech, regional government) to deliver impressive transformations.

We do not think there is a perfect template for the UK to copy. Instead, we must assess how distinctive each country's conditions are, and how far these underpin the success of their approaches. Every country has its own specific cultural and institutional inheritance, but the most successful innovators actively learn from others and replicate what works.

The global position of the UK is now akin to a number of other countries, and we may need to think more explicitly like them. Only global superpowers — or in the case of the EU, a major trading bloc — are able to set the rules for their own markets. Facing a more multivariate system, UK policymaking is underdeveloped in its ability to think about the UK's relative position, competitiveness, and place in the world. If we think about comparative targets at all, we tend to want to be 'world-beating' on multiple fronts. This is a drag on our own ability to learn, emulate, adapt, and improve. It stops us from identifying where competitors are moving ahead, and where we need to study their model to catch up fast. It disregards a global ecosystem, where others are expecting to derive the same gains in the same domain (e.g. artificial intelligence). It potentially reduces what should be a determined focus on areas of strategic advantage, allowing our genuine strengths to atrophy as others copy and leapfrog us. The ability to think comparatively — and competitively — is key to a country's strategic practice. We have looked to countries like Japan and the Republic of Korea for examples of how governments alive to strategic tensions and alert to their place in geopolitics and global markets make long-term plans and commit to long-term goals.

We are also looking particularly to nearer neighbours — Spain and the Netherlands — to see how others have used longer-term horizons and scenarios to hold an open discussion of the future and future choices, and to enable many other parts of the state, from the private sector to cities and regions, to make longer-term plans.

Other publications

Today we are also publishing our case study of España 2050: Spain's long-term foresight and strategy exercise, launched in 2020.

A historical practice: lessons from history

We can learn about national strategy by attempting to apply our concepts and frameworks retrospectively. Our inquiry into what UK history can tell us about national strategy began in partnership with the Strand Group at King's College London and has further developed through engagement and roundtables with historians from a range of historical perspectives and domains.

There are three lenses through which this project is looking at the role of history in UK national strategy-making. The first is to examine the history of the last 100 years through distinct periods of national strategy. By identifying periods of strategic consistency — normally about 15–20 years in length — punctuated by well-known strategic turning points, we will be investigating the key challenges, strategic responses and big bets taken by governments; what insights that gives us into the state's national strategy; and why, when and how it made significant pivots. A key test is to look at whether our '3x5' *can* be applied to the past, and what it tells us.

The second is to examine state and national capacities and their evolution and influence on national strategy-making. Not only do changing circumstances affect choices and approaches for the next period, but so does the inherited state capacity. The level of national planning which was taken on by the state to run the war economy provided the capability needed within the state — centrally and locally — to conceive of, design and deliver the post-war settlement: the NHS, the welfare state and urban expansion and renewal. This 'generational' inheritance of what it is possible and desirable for the state to do can sometimes be helpful and sometimes not. What the state decides it should do is informed to a significant degree by what it believes it can do. A radical shift in 'big bets' might require different capabilities of the state, not all of which necessarily exist as a result of the last period, accelerating or inhibiting progress as a result. As part of this we will look at the institutional development of strategy-making capability — why and how the state believed it needed to introduce or roll-back capabilities at different points, the effect of these changes, and what we can draw from them. Bodies have been introduced, abolished and reintroduced again in fairly quick succession. Despite their different constructions and formal remits, the Central Policy Review Staff (1971–83), No10 Policy Unit (1974–), Prime Minister's Delivery Unit (2001–10, 2021–), Prime Minister's Strategy Unit (2002–10) and National Security Secretariat (2010–) have all sought to offer varying degrees of strategy advice, analysis, synthesis and integration for the whole-UK policy ecosystem. The question for the design of our contemporary national strategy capability is what we can learn from these prior phases of strategic evolution.

Thirdly, as well as learning from the past, we think history has a vital role in contemporary strategy-making. It is only in understanding our inheritance, and the ability to identify the underlying assumptions of the last phase, that a nation can renew its approach. A key consideration for the design of future national strategy capability will be the state's ability to engage with history and historical analysis.

A generative practice — the components of national strategy-making

Most importantly, we are looking at how we should actually do long-term national strategy — what is a practical approach, and what components are required for

success? Alongside the imperatives of comparative and historical thinking, we believe it involves concepts and methods built to tackle the themes below.

Orienting to the future

The question of time is one of the key points that separates immediate, short-term tactical decision-making from the inherently longer horizons and more durable impact associated with strategy. National strategy should be oriented towards medium to long-term horizons, not because of an argument for rigidity, but because the cost of not projecting forwards, or back-casting based on potential scenarios, can be extremely high. Governments face problems with radically different timeframes, from immediate imperatives to 'long' problems like demographics and ageing or climate change.[iii] Business, economic and investment cycles, infrastructure, defence and military procurement, urban regeneration, environmental interventions: these policy timeframes range from 5 to 50 years or more. All our decisions create long-term legacies: every government governs with a volume of inherited decisions that far outweighs the sum-total of decisions it will make. Even a basic IT procurement, designed to solve a problem now, will result in systems that are embedded in our digital infrastructure for decades. This means we are constantly navigating trade-offs between now and the future. Grappling with this is crucial, even more so if we believe the future is going to be different from the past.

In this project, we are interested in how futures and foresight techniques could be used to inform collective decision-making; how medium- to long-term scenarios could best inform collective strategy-making and planning; and how a national strategy cycle could improve capacity for strategic action by better anticipating and facing known choices and trade-offs, and enabling synthesis between a wider set of policy areas, objectives and goals than is allowed through current planning processes. There are some fantastic techniques and expertise available across the UK to look at different facets of the future; how to adopt best practice and bring this to bear as part of decision-making and planning is the focus for this project.

We are interested in the distinction between horizons and planning. Different countries take different approaches to both, e.g. five-year planning cycles on 10–20-year horizons. We will be looking at the practices associating with horizon-setting and planning cycles, and how the policy-making process could better manage extended timeframes and the trade-offs inherent in them.

Intelligent approaches to uncertainty

Planning and forecasting are important activities within any practice of national strategy. At the same time, it is not possible for any country to predict the future or to know with certainty that their chosen route will succeed. 'Uncertainty' is often

posited as a reason why short-term horizons and incremental goals are best. However, good strategy takes a more sophisticated view of uncertainty. While some things about the future are uncertain, other problems and trends are relatively stable and predictable. The classic 'long' problem is something we know will happen (or is happening), yet its effects are believed to be far enough into the future to ignore. Examples might be demographic change, degrading infrastructure or regional inequality. Trends which involve a lot of uncertainty might include technology, where what is predictable is change, but the precise technologies and their social and economic effects are difficult to forecast. These different types of relationships between the long-term and uncertainty need to be unpacked.

The other aspect of uncertainty of interest to this project is the role of different levels of government in increasing or mitigating uncertainty for others. The relationship between different tiers of government, operating on different cycles, can increase uncertainty, and uncertainty is usually exacerbated for those at the smallest, most local level. One of the major functions a national strategy could play is in making the system more predictable for all actors.

In this project we will be looking at examples of how others — other countries, the private sector — deal with questions of uncertainty. We are interested not only in the tools and approaches for improving the appreciation of uncertainty over the long-term, but the selection and design of appropriate strategies in response.

The importance of trade-offs

Formulating a national strategy is, first and foremost, a question of decision-making. It is about deciding between different options for how a country can end up at a future version of itself that it wants, while avoiding a future version that it does not. It is by no means always obvious which route and which steps it should take to get to its best alternative as efficiently and effectively as possible. When we make 'big bets', these should be the agreed guesses, or concerted verdicts, by the decision-makers in the UK policy landscape about what the most effective route will be. If transformational change is to be realised, there needs to be a facility to commit to this course of action, making consequential trade-offs and choices accordingly. The complex apparatus of the state cannot succeed in strategic action if it is concurrently running multiple, contradictory strategies where choices are avoided or unclear or undermine each other's effects.

As part of this project, we are interested in the best techniques for evaluating and choosing between strategies, once the ends are clear. One example is Eisenhower's Solarium Exercise, where rival teams were commissioned to design successful strategies for the US in the Cold War through different and competing lenses. The exercise exposed genuine, large-scale trade-offs between strategies designed with robust internal logics. This is a technique that is used among some

parts of the strategy community, and we are interested in its application in wider domains.

We will be developing the tools and practices for making trade-offs with a clear eye on the types of trade-off ahead for the UK. How to analyse trade-offs to properly understand impacts on, for example, geographies or generations, will be vital for a properly integrated approach to priority-setting. There are new techniques available for this, for example to genuinely engage the public in choice-making where costs need to be borne and distributed. The question of how to make well-informed and nationally transparent trade-offs will be fundamental to our design of national strategy.

A non-hierarchical view of place

While a national strategy process might be convened by central government , it should not be *centralising*. A genuinely *national* strategy must make sense not just in Whitehall, but have meaning in towns, cities and regions, and all parts of the UK. Places should be seen as the source of ideas and transformative interventions to achieve long-term national goals and objectives, not merely as settings for the delivery of centrally-determined action. A successful practice of national strategy will need to make it easier for places to develop and pursue their own long-term strategies, recognising how current government practices inhibit this. The new practice also needs to be able to recognise when a strategy developed and led outside central government — for example by a mayor or a first minister — is of national importance, and to support it accordingly. A good example is the Scottish Government's Net Zero strategy — vital to the UK's overall success in decarbonising its economy — developed and overseen in Scotland.

We are therefore interested in how we can be better at using place-specific strengths and opportunities to shape our understanding of national challenges and to identify the UK's strategic priorities and the 'big bets' we need to take to deliver long-term impact. We also want to understand how a national strategy practice can be grounded in the multi-level governance framework of the UK and how different levels of government can align around the delivery of longer-term outcomes.

To be effective, national strategy should bring together governments at all levels, businesses, universities, and other actors to align common goals without fully co-opting individual ambitions. This project will seek to design national strategy in a way that does not display "central chauvinism" in relation to places, by working with a wide range of practitioners and experts and by developing case studies. We are looking at what we can learn about national strategy from the lens of industrial transformation in Port Talbot and the semiconductor sector in Cambridge. We have partnered on this with PolicyWISE and the Future Governance Forum.

The role of the public

For a strategy to be genuinely national and long-term, it cannot be developed and agreed by a small number of actors. Unless those directly involved in the process meaningfully engage as broad a range of individuals and groups as possible, the likelihood of the strategy delivering its objectives is reduced. This might be because the strategy is not seen as legitimate - either because it fails to reflect the views and needs of the public or key groups, or because those groups are unaware or unsupportive of the strategy's goals and so do not contribute to its delivery. It may also be because strategy-makers misjudge public attitudes towards the future, including the trade-offs people are willing to make between short-term costs and long-term benefits.

We are interested in how a country could conduct a genuine 'national conversation' with the public as part of national strategy development. At the same time, we aren't making the assumption that a national strategy process *must* involve a national conversation at scale. There are instances, for example the deployment of citizens juries in Ireland, where these techniques have been game-changing for a country's understanding of its choices and direction. There is also evidence these exercises can be annoying to the public, particularly when likely action is far off, and in those circumstances deliver little in additional engagement, legitimacy or trust. As we approach this area of the project, we are distinguishing between public engagement necessary to generate genuinely new evidence and insight on a problem, and public engagement that might enhance understanding and legitimacy. We will be looking at tools and techniques to fulfil both purposes.

One of our vital strategic capabilities is found in the institutions and mechanisms the country already has to understand evolutions in the public's behaviours, interests and attitudes over time. This is critical to understanding our inheritance, current position and the future. The UK has a good institutional infrastructure for this through a strong domestic polling and research ecosystem within and outside government. We want to look at ways of using this existing capability in long-term national strategy, as well as considering how to sustain this capability and bridge any gaps.

We are also interested in how new techniques could be used to explore trade-offs with citizens, as well as areas and ranges of consensus or shifting consensus. We know that current consultative approaches with the public can be deeply unsatisfying for them, and are not always particularly informative or evidence-generating for policymakers. There are big opportunities now from technology supported platforms and techniques. We will be looking at the tech-enabled, low-cost solutions being employed in the UK and around the world, and how we could use these better.

Defining, involving and mobilising 'national capacities'

We are interested in how a practice of national strategy can best take account of, involve and mobilise the real capacities of the nation. 'National action' is not really based on policy domains, albeit this is the way governments organise themselves and therefore the way policymakers tend to think. It is based on the combined activities of multiple actors: of business, industry, local government, communities and individuals. For example, the UK's current productivity puzzle is of course partly based on regulatory policy, infrastructure and regional economic inequality. Yet it is also based on a set of things that are less accessible to government policymakers: optimism in boardrooms, levels of management capability and the ability of public and private sector organisations to do the things they want to do, the level of ideas-generation in society, and how easy or hard it is to get an idea in front of a financial backer.

As part of this, we will be considering the role of business and the private sector. We know business thinks its relationship to government strategy is suboptimal, with a sense that business finds government essentially short-termist. One of the charges levied is against government's listening and engagement mechanisms, which are too often issues-based or policy-based, rather than rooted in the development of long-term relationships and a deeper understanding of companies' own outlooks, views of opportunities and risks, and long-term strategies. We will be looking at how other countries involve and engage their private sectors in long-term and nationally strategic issues, and how they think about the private sector — or parts of it — among their 'national capacities'.

Thinking about 'national capacities', how these might be defined in a way that makes them accessible to the strategy and policy process, and how those capacities thereby figure in national strategic decision-making, is a key academic research topic of this project. We aim to develop a taxonomy of national capacities, and a way of understanding them, such that national strategy can move beyond current policy domains and consider genuinely game-changing action in areas that might need rethinking or reimagining.

Enabling the system to learn quickly and adapt to new strategic imperatives

Once the strategy is formulated, how can we successfully make national pivots? A system that is used to operating on one set of assumptions can find it very hard to shift to the next. We will seek to develop a set of tools and methodologies that support big strategic shifts in complex systems, as well as enabling learning and adaptation.

The world of machine learning gives us a model for training complex systems. Models are trained by feeding them examples over and over again, allowing the

model to fail, and bit by bit, converging on desired outcomes. In emergency planning, and in military planning, exercising is extensively used to improve contingency planning and preparedness, to reveal unforeseen risks, and to mobilise a wide range of partners to achieve aligned objectives without the need to dictate these from the top.

In the policy-making world, fast-learning, system-wide on big things can be hard. If we want to make and pivot on big bets; and if we want to experiment, fail and learn, we need new ways of doing this. Our inquiry system does not support the pace of learning required by a strategic system. It is of course designed not only for that but for other purposes.

A hypothesis of this project is that we can develop this model to better support strategic action. Partly inspired by the Harvard Kennedy School's Case Centre and its previous experience working with the US Government, as well as by the learning approaches developed by the Blavatnik School of Government's Case Centre, we will be looking at how to develop a much more prevalent use and generation of case studies, games and simulations in government, and will consider how simulations for long-term problems or national strategy could be designed and delivered to produce learning and mobilise diverse partners.[iv]

Conclusion: national strategy as a national endeavour

Our aim in this project is to design a contemporary practice of long-term national strategy, fit for the challenges ahead. There is a lot to play for. A country better able to confront long-term challenges with direction and drive. A state that sets clear goals and mobilises national effort. Institutions, businesses, places and communities able to take a future-focused, longer-term approach to their own goals and planning, while contributing to shared priorities. In the coming weeks, we will be producing a series of working papers to set out our background thinking and evidence, our design process, and ultimately our proposals and recommendations. Our intention is to seed debate, and to hear feedback from a wide range of thinkers, practitioners and partners, and not just from those who think about themselves as strategists. Ultimately, national strategy must be a national endeavour, and so must its design.

Other publications

The next papers in the series will be:

- España 2050: Spain's national strategy and foresight exercise — a case study. Available now.
- History and National Strategy
- Place: Thinking of national strategy from the ground up
- International Case Studies
- The Conditions for National Strategy
- The Public's Role in National Strategy

And more to follow.

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[i] Liaison Committee (2024). *Promoting national strategy: How select committee scrutiny can improve strategic thinking in Whitehall* (HC 2023–24 31).

[ii] Ibid, p.10.

[iii] Hale, Thomas (2024). *Long problems: Climate change and the challenge of governing across time.* Oxford: Princeton University Press.

[iv] www.thecasecentre.org/caseCollection/HarvardKennedySchool and www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/case-centre/case-centre-public-leadership