



## What is strategic advantage?

*By Gabriel Elefteriu, William Freer and James Rogers*

Geopolitical competition is intensifying. In the words of the Integrated Operating Concept of September 2020: ‘Our rivals engage in a continuous struggle involving all of the instruments of statecraft...to undermine cohesion, to erode economic, political and social resilience, and to challenge our strategic position in key regions of the world.’<sup>1</sup> Opponents and competitors once again are linking together a wider range of levers to secure their national objectives. In this environment, the United Kingdom (UK) must be capable of securing its interests against determined opposition, which is often backed by superior material power – both regionally and globally. With the publication of the Integrated Review of March 2021, His Majesty’s (HM) Government offered the new term of ‘strategic advantage’ as a starting point to secure British objectives more effectively (though without explicitly defining it).<sup>2</sup>

The 2023 Integrated Review Refresh (IRR) took strategic advantage a step further, adopting it as one of four elements of HM Government’s strategic framework.<sup>3</sup> Pointing to how Britain’s ‘understanding of strategic advantage has

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<sup>1</sup> Integrated Operating Concept, Ministry of Defence (Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre), 30/09/2020, <https://bit.ly/3yQGrBt> (checked: 21/11/2023).

<sup>2</sup> ‘Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy’, Cabinet Office, 07/03/2021, <https://bit.ly/3sDC1Oo> (checked: 21/11/2023).

<sup>3</sup> This framework included shaping the international order, deterring hostile states, enhancing national resilience, and securing strategic advantage. See: ‘Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world’, Cabinet Office, 13/03/2023, <https://bit.ly/3QLsLQC> (checked: 21/11/2023).



further evolved in the past two years', the IRR highlighted the significance of initial lessons from the American withdrawal from Afghanistan and Russia's renewed offensive against Ukraine.<sup>4</sup> It noted how both experiences 'have reinforced the importance of strategic as well as operational integration', and 'the importance of: drawing on multiple areas of competitive edge to compete both asymmetrically and simultaneously across domains; achieving mass in combination with allies and partners; and speed of adaptation and innovation'.<sup>5</sup>

Informed by the Integrated Review, the IRR also introduced a preliminary definition of 'strategic advantage' as 'the UK's relative ability to achieve our objectives compared to our competitors', by 'cultivating the UK's strengths'.<sup>6</sup> It emphasised that strategic advantage is 'indispensable to maintaining the UK's freedom of action, freedom from coercion and our ability to cooperate with others, and is the underpinning for the other pillars of the strategic framework'.<sup>7</sup> While this initial approach provides a valuable starting-point, it opens issues in need of further exploration. In British strategic discourse, confusion remains as to whether strategic advantage refers to national strengths (such as economic weight, technological advancement, geographic location, population demographics, or resource access), a strategy for building national power (such as a Defence Command Paper or diplomatic doctrine), or a strategic outcome (i.e., a comparative advantage born from strategic pursuit).

Strategic advantage cannot be any of these. Aptly, the IRR describes national strengths as the 'foundational building blocks' of strategic advantage, implying that it is not merely a synonym for strength. So while strategic advantage is a derivative of strength, it must also sit beyond it.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, strategic advantage cannot be about building up national power, because per Lawrence Freedman, Emeritus Professor of War Studies at King's College London, that is the purpose of strategy itself: 'the art of creating power'.<sup>9</sup> Here, an element of ambiguity arises in the IRR when strategic advantage is described as a 'way'.<sup>10</sup> But if seen as mere strategy, the conceptual and practical utility of strategic advantage would be lost. Finally, strategic advantage cannot be the *result* of strategy; it is not an end state. While a country may hold or develop an

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Here, an ambiguous statement slips into the IRR when it describes the generation of strategic advantage not only as a stand alone pillar of the strategic framework, but also as 'the underpinning for the other pillars of the strategic framework'. *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. xii.

<sup>10</sup> For example, the IRR states: 'The four pillars of this updated IR strategic framework set the "ways" through which the UK will pursue these "ends"', of which strategic advantage is identified as one of the pillars. See: 'Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world', Cabinet Office, 13/03/2023, <https://bit.ly/3QLsLQC> (checked: 21/11/2023).



absolute or comparative advantage over another, this would be the result of a pre-existing strength or a strategy, not *strategic* advantage.<sup>11</sup>

With this in mind, this Primer aims to refine the notion of strategic advantage to help HM Government pursue British national strategy more effectively. It adds to the helpful steer provided by the Integrated Review and IRR by developing a typology of strategic advantage based on four key catalysts. Using this typology, it then identifies forms of strategic advantage the UK has developed in the past, is developing now, and may induce in the future, to catalyse its national strategy. It ends by explaining why, particularly for the UK, strategic advantage is an important approach through which to secure British national interests.

## Strategic advantage: Refining a definition

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**Strategic advantage is the ability to induce catalysts to help secure, more efficiently and effectively, national objectives.** It is derived from catalysing the resources and instruments at the country's disposal, in other words, its national strengths, to generate a strategic – that is to say, a calculated and intended – effect which is more potent than if the catalysts had not been devised (i.e., an advantage). Whereas the IRR only speaks of 'cultivating' strategic advantage (which implies the nascent elements of strategic advantage are already present), it could also be *generated* anew or *refashioned* from existing catalysts.<sup>12</sup> Compared to more traditional understandings of strength (the orthodox understanding of 'advantage'), which are tied to measures of quantity and quality, strategic advantage has a dynamic and non-linear character.

In the realm of national strategy, the *ends* are formulated in very general terms (for the UK defined in the Integrated Review and IRR as 'sovereignty, security and prosperity'); the *ways* represent strategy per se; and the *means* correspond to allocated national strengths (such as the diplomatic service, intelligence agencies, and the armed forces, as well as the funding which sustains

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<sup>11</sup> Here, it is important to point out that strategic advantage is not the same as the commercial sector's concept of 'competitive advantage'. Competitive advantage can be obtained when companies either have specific attributes or adopt particular strategies to gain a greater share of their particular markets by, for example, reducing costs, focusing on specific consumers, differentiating themselves from competitors, and so on. These are strengths or strategies and not comparable to the idea of strategic advantage. For more on competitive advantage, see: Alexandra Twin, 'Competitive advantage definition with types and examples', *Investopedia*, 03/08/2023, <https://bit.ly/47yr5QS> (checked: 21/11/2023).

<sup>12</sup> 'Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world', Cabinet Office, 13/03/2023, <https://bit.ly/3QLsLQC> (checked: 21/11/2023).



them, or geographic position, and so on). **Strategic advantage sits between the ways and means.** Recall that it is neither a national strength compared to rivals in absolute terms (e.g., a bigger economy, a stronger navy, or a larger diplomatic service, a better geography, and so on), nor strategy (ways). Rather, strategic advantage should be seen as a *catalyst* for national means which *enables* a much more efficient and/or effective strategy – allowing a country ‘to punch above its weight’ – in pursuit of national goals. It also has an operational dimension, i.e., it reflects the imperative of improving strategy execution and implementation.

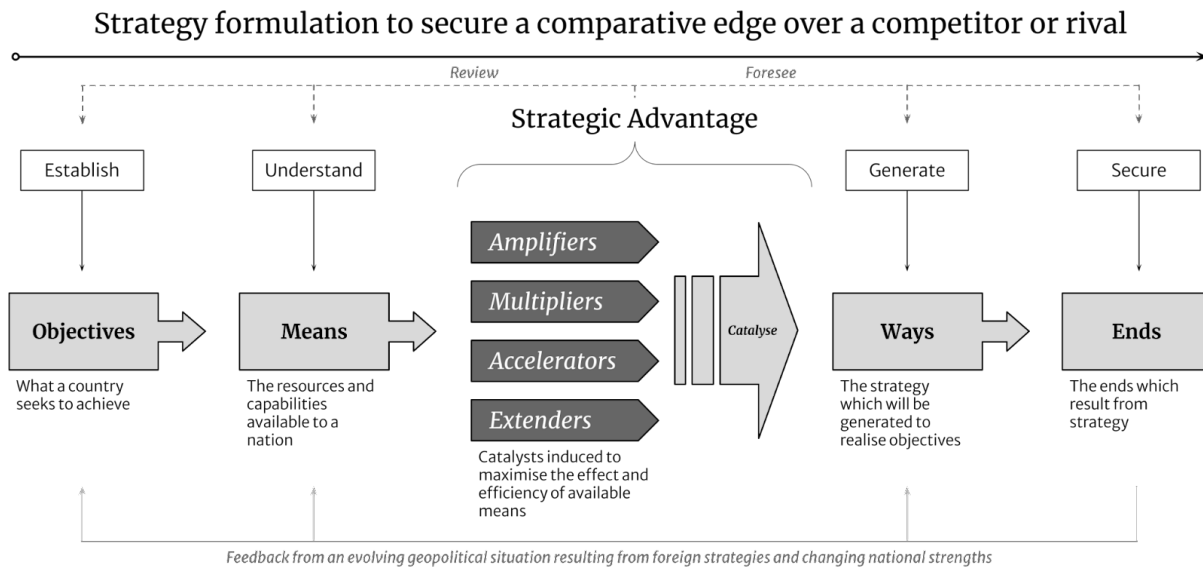
In both the Integrated Review and IRR, HM Government identified the British scientific and technological ecosystem as a potential catalyst for the UK to enhance its ability to pursue national objectives. This emphasis makes sense, as historical evidence demonstrates the decisive impact of superior scientific and technological capabilities on specific strategies. Certain technologies – e.g., steam engines, cartographic techniques, chronometers, telegraphy, and quinine prophylaxis – empowered the UK during the 18th and 19th centuries, providing the ‘tools’ with which to become a genuine global power.<sup>13</sup> Imperial expansion is not HM Government’s strategic objective in the 21st century, but science and technology can still have an equally catalysing impact on British strategy.

The problem here is that the IRR offers no explicit system for assessing the impact that the various forms of strategic advantage may have on national objectives. For this reason, we offer a typology based on how particular catalysts might empower national strategy. As shown in Diagram 1, the potential catalysts a nation might pursue can be classified in accordance with four fundamental functions:

- **Amplifiers** intend to increase strategic effect through coordination, integration and innovation;
- **Multipliers** strive to broaden strategic impact by incorporating and aligning foreign actors;
- **Accelerators** aim to speed-up strategic success through new mechanisms, programmes and institutions;
- **Extenders** attempt to further strategic reach via new enablers, logistical networks and points of control.

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<sup>13</sup> See: Daniel Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); Daniel Headrick, *Power Over Peoples: Technology, Environments, and Western Imperialism, 1400 to the Present* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010); and ‘The Day the World Took Off’, Episode 3, Channel 4, 2000. Available at: Prof. Alan Macfarlane, ‘The Day the World Took Off’, Youtube, 30/07/2007, <https://bit.ly/47iOHJW> (checked: 21/11/2023).



**Diagram 1: Strategic advantage in strategy formulation**

If seen in this way, science and technology, for example, could be catalysed to *amplify* the nation's means, align allies and partners to *multiply* the effort, *accelerate* national objectives, and *extend* resources and instruments over greater distances and across domains, in support of Britain's strategic interests.

Moreover, science and technology should not be seen as the only potential avenue for strategic advantage. To illustrate further the forms of strategic advantage a state can pursue, Table 1 outlines some of the catalysts induced by the UK in the past, in the present, and, ones which could potentially be cultivated in the future.

**Table 1: Past, present and potential forms of strategic advantage**

	Past	Present	Potential
<b>Amplifiers</b>	Creation of Bletchley Park in 1938 to integrate and geographically centralise British signals intelligence gathering capabilities	Decision to generate an 'Integrated Review' in 2019 to create a proactive national grand strategy rather than a reactive national security strategy	A national project to develop a commercially-viable fusion power plant to reduce energy dependency and meet Net Zero ambitions
	Establishment of the 'Landship Committee' in 1915 to develop weapons to help overcome German defences along the Western Front	Merging the Department for International Development into the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 2020 to deliver foreign	Construction of a national High Speed railway network to reduce space-time relations and boost economic growth

	(leading to the development of the tank)	aid in accordance with the national interest	
<b>Multipliers</b>	Signing of the UKUSA Agreement in 1946 (formalising the 'Five Eyes') to combine American and British (and Australian, Canadian and New Zealand) signals intelligence gathering efforts	Initiation of Operation Inteflex to draw in allies and partners to increase the capacity to train Ukrainian military personnel	Closer coordination with allies (especially through the Trilateral Initiative with Poland and Ukraine, and the Joint Expeditionary Force) manufacture ammunition to help Ukraine defeat Russia
	Formation of the Western Union (1948) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (1949) to broaden the resources behind the Euro-Atlantic defence effort	Deepening relations with Japan through the Hiroshima Accord (2023) and the Global Combat Aircraft Programme (GCAP) to create stronger Atlantic-Pacific connectivities	Tighter and more permanent coordination through the Group of Seven on geoeconomics to strengthen supply chain and manufacturing resilience
<b>Accelerators</b>	Dispatch of the Tizard Mission in 1940 to share British scientific expertise with the US to speed-up war-winning technological developments, including the development of atomic weapons	Formation of AUKUS in 2021 to accelerate the acquisition of next-generation nuclear attack submarines and development of on-the-horizon technologies	Implementation of UK Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanisms to boost domestic manufacturing and expedite reaching Net Zero
	Creation of the Microelectronics in Education Programme (1980) to speed-up the incorporation of information technology in British schools to boost economic growth	Establishment of the National Space and Innovation Programme in 2020 to finance private companies for high risk, high reward, space sector innovations	Closing sanctions loopholes in the UK to speed up the impact of the sanctions regime on Russia
<b>Extenders</b>	Incorporation of steam engines into British warships and merchant vessels during the 1820s to eliminate dependency on meteorological conditions	Creating new military facilities in Bahrain, Oman, Estonia, Norway, etc., and new ships for the Royal Fleet Auxiliary, to modernise Britain's strategic posture	Developing a working and effective quantum compass to reduce dependency on foreign space assets and increase UK situational awareness
	Laying of trans-oceanic telegraph cables during the 1850s to compress	Enhancement of the British diplomatic presence in 2019 in the	Deploying a Carrier Strike Group in 2025 to the Indo-Pacific to



	space and time and extend British influence over distant theatres	South Pacific, Southern Africa and the Caribbean	demonstrate the extent of British naval reach and interchangeability with allies and partners
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At this point, it is important to stress that the catalysts induced to establish strategic advantage are *not mutually exclusive in terms of function*. A particular catalyst might be prioritised at different moments in time – as a multiplier or extender, for example – but this does not mean that it cannot act as an amplifier or accelerator. Indeed, when policymakers induce catalysts, they should, wherever possible, be designed with more than one function. This can stimulate national strengths so they are greater than the sum of their parts, enabling a government to generate a *systematic* advantage. And when this becomes persistent, or even institutionalised, a country can secure its strategic objectives more effectively for extensive periods of time. For example, the UK has leveraged its control over key strategic choke points for over two centuries to amplify and extend its national influence, while the US reinforced and utilised its technological ecosystem throughout the Cold War consistently to outperform the Soviet Union.

## Employing strategic advantage

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Although strategic advantage sits between means and ways, it cannot be seen in isolation from the formulation of national strategy. Indeed, as it is not a direct function of broad-based strength in different domains, strategic advantage is impossible to generate if specific catalysts (including operational ability) and the national strategy or strategic approach are misaligned. The strengths, catalysts and strategy all have to match. The role of the policymaker is to link the three together. This is no easy task; it requires concerted effort and a detailed understanding of what objectives the country seeks to achieve and the resources it has at its disposal. An innovative and flexible attitude is also needed as and when geopolitical circumstances or national strengths change. For example, a certain catalyst which was developed to harness national strengths in pursuit of a particular strategic approach might not constitute a strategic advantage under a different strategic approach or set of conditions.

In an adversarial environment, strategic advantage goes hand-in-hand with strategies which strive to establish a comparative edge over an opponent, rival or competitor, ideally with minimal resource expenditure and as few

‘opportunity costs’ as possible, while encouraging adversaries to overextend themselves in response. This is not for the faint-hearted; it requires a disruptive and determined mindset. But when done successfully, the pay-off can be considerable – and from across the strategic spectrum, from the very general, to the more particular.

Theoretically, while strategic advantage can be pursued by any nation, it holds particular salience for a compact country such as the UK, which, while strong on institutions, possesses or has access to fewer resources than many sprawling continental rivals. Historically, Britain’s influence, though often substantial, has stemmed from its economic, technological, and organisational prowess, rather than attributes such as a vast landmass, a big army, or a substantial population.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, much of Britain’s contemporary international standing largely is still defined by its past triumphs in inducing strategic advantage through a multitude of maritime, agricultural, industrial, and organisational catalysts, which enabled the country to pursue its objectives more effectively – ‘to punch above its weight’.

The IRR rightly recognises that the UK continues to benefit from these accomplishments but also acknowledges that the nation’s ‘*relatively privileged position* is under challenge as others also seek to generate advantage.’<sup>15</sup> This is because, in the 2020s, Britain is deficient in certain resources and in volumes sufficient to engage as an equal with the largest powers, such as the United States (US), the People’s Republic of China (PRC), and to a lesser extent, India. Their relative power has grown over the past two decades. The UK may also struggle, in certain circumstances, to match countries such as Russia, Iran and Argentina, or even certain allies and partners, such as Germany, France and Japan. This is because these predominantly regional powers can focus their national strength more decisively within their respective spheres of influence than can Britain, which is often spread thin in pursuit of multiple, often overlapping, global interests.

However, the UK has shown how it can leverage strategic advantage effectively to undermine competitors and rivals. Britain’s support for Ukraine, particularly in late 2021 and early 2022, is a shining example of how catalysts can be induced and drawn together to achieve strategic effect *and* a comparative edge over a rival. By proactively releasing intelligence on social media to shine light on Russia’s actions and providing relatively inexpensive Next Generation Light Anti-Tank Weapons (NLAW) to Ukraine, the UK *amplified* and *extended* its influence while inflicting significant costs on Russia at little expense to itself.

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<sup>14</sup> James Rogers, ‘Britain could do better after Brexit by acting more like David, and less like Goliath’, *Daily Telegraph*, 05/04/2019, <https://bit.ly/3QEJhSg> (checked: 21/11/2023).

<sup>15</sup> ‘Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world’, Cabinet Office, 13/03/2023, <https://bit.ly/3QLsLQC> (checked: 21/11/2023). Emphasis added.





The resulting applause Britain received from the Baltic and Nordic states and Poland and several other countries only served to *multiply* the impact of its effort, especially when they began to follow the UK's lead with the delivery of additional weapons and support of their own. Operation Interflex and the 'Tallinn Pledge' served as additional *multipliers*, not least by coaxing Germany and others into sending modern battle tanks to Ukraine.<sup>16</sup>

Likewise, if considered as a form of strategic advantage, AUKUS may have a similar catalysing effect. Not only does Pillar I of the arrangement *accelerate* the ability of Australia and the UK to procure a new generation of larger nuclear attack submarine, but it also *speeds up* HM Government's ability to help shape the Indo-Pacific in the face of growing Chinese geostrategic pressure.

Simultaneously, AUKUS *multiplies* British efforts by drawing in Australia and the US to reduce costs; *extends* British and American naval power through a new operating hub – Fleet Base West in Perth – for Royal Navy (and US Navy) submarines; and *amplifies* the overall naval power at Britain's disposal (as it does also for Australia and the US). And this says nothing about Pillar II, which aims to accelerate the development of a plethora of new strategic technologies, which may then act as amplifiers and extenders in their own right.

Inducing strategic advantage can be taken even further, not least as HM Government has promised to treat it 'as a core national mission across all areas of domestic, economic and international policy'.<sup>17</sup> To catalyse British strategy to secure a comparative edge over competitors and adversaries in an increasingly contested international environment, HM Government should:

- Enhance national resilience by shutting hostile forces out of the country's political ecosystem, economy and discursive space;
- Stimulate economic growth by connecting the country with better transport and communications lines to draw peripheral regions into the national economy;
- Strengthen the ability to process information through the development of artificial intelligence;
- Generate energy from greener sources – such as wind and nuclear – to enhance energy autonomy;
- Improve the country's geostrategic posture, for example in key geopolitical theatres, and in relation to space and undersea areas;
- Boost the deployability, lethality and survivability of the armed forces to deter and defeat potential adversaries – for example, by developing new

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<sup>16</sup> 'Joint Statement – The Tallinn Pledge', Ministry of Defence, 19/01/2023, <https://bit.ly/3QRfBkK> (checked: 21/11/2023).

<sup>17</sup> 'Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world', Cabinet Office, 13/03/2023, <https://bit.ly/3QLsLQC> (checked: 21/11/2023).



weapons systems, such as hypersonics, autonomous, and directed-energy systems;

- Increase the country's freedom of action, by reviewing alliances and partnerships to reflect new geopolitical and geoeconomic realities and to manage dependencies more determinedly.

That said, strategic advantage is no silver bullet; indeed, given the intensification of geopolitics, the UK may require more resources – naval and air platforms, diplomats, scientists and engineers, and so on – to maintain geopolitical effect in the years ahead (let alone to increase it), particularly as others grow in relative power and/or try to induce strategic advantage themselves. Investment in the British Armed Forces and diplomatic service remains at historic lows, despite a moderate uptick since 2020, while research and development and transport and communications spending all lag behind leading peer competitors.<sup>18</sup> Without sufficient resources, even the most effective catalysts will fail to generate satisfactory strategic effect, particularly in a hostile environment where staunch opposition poses significant challenges.

## Conclusion

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By refining existing conceptions of strategic advantage, this Primer tries to encapsulate the core of Britain's predicament and the IRR's overarching concerns. It delves into the intricacies of catalysing means to accomplish multilayered objectives across an increasingly complicated and contested geopolitical landscape. Moving forward, the cultivation of science and technology will certainly help harness British means to catalyse ways to secure complex ends. But other forms can be identified and induced to amplify, multiply, accelerate and extend the country's national strategy. These could be generated, cultivated, or refashioned to address areas where the UK may be deficient in resources and strategic impact, or to make it more challenging for adversaries to exploit their own strengths or strategies against British interests.

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<sup>18</sup> For example, UK defence spending remains lower as a percentage of national income than it did in 2010, while research and development expenditure, while significantly higher than in 2010 and marginally higher than the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's average, is still far lower than peer nations such as Israel, South Korea, Sweden and the US. See: 'Military Expenditure Database', Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2023, <https://bit.ly/49KRYmH> (checked: 21/11/2023) and 'Gross domestic spending on R&D', Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3MMw3S7> (checked: 21/11/2023).

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The Council on Geostrategy's new 'Strategic Advantage Cell' – the first research project of its kind in the UK – will look at how HM Government can induce specific areas of strategic advantage to help maximise the power it has available to secure British national objectives as efficiently and effectively as possible.

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