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Science and Soft Power: Building a New Narrative for the UK's Role in the World

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About this Report

This paper, drafted by the British Foreign Policy Group, forms part of an ongoing programme of work, in partnership with the Wellcome Trust, focused on the contribution of British science to UK soft power. The report, and its recommendations, are the result of the conclusions of three roundtable consultations with experts from across science, foreign policy and industry on the opportunities and challenges of leveraging science as a soft power asset.

Drawing on insights from these engagements, this report aims to present a clear, accessible overview of the role of UK science in driving UK soft power and recommendations on how it can be better leveraged as a UK soft power asset. The paper is not designed to be exhaustive but rather to provide an entry point for further discussions on the contribution of science to UK soft power.

We would like to thank the Wellcome Trust for supporting this project. Thanks also to the leaders and experts who have given up their time to engage with this project. We hope this report successfully captures their valuable contributions.

Full editorial responsibility for this paper lies with the British Foreign Policy Group.



The British Foreign Policy Group

The British Foreign Policy Group (BFPG) is an independent, non-partisan think tank focused on the intersection between the domestic and the international. BFPG was founded on the principle that the UK's foreign policy choices are shaped by our social, economic and democratic landscape at home, and that a better understanding of the intersection between the domestic and the international is therefore essential for effective foreign policy decision making. A key pillar of BFPG's work is focused on UK soft power, recognising the key contribution that UK soft power - from arts, to sports, to science - makes to UK foreign policy. As well as co-convening the UK Soft Power Group alongside the British Council, BFPG regularly conducts leading research and projects on UK soft power.

Responding to a Changing Global Environment

The rise of new world powers, major global conflicts, the decline of multilateralism and the retrenchment of some of the UK's longest-standing partners, is reshaping the world as we know it. Like many of its allies, the UK is urgently trying to find its role in this changing global environment, seeking new opportunities to protect and promote the UK's security, prosperity and values.

So far, the UK's response has been heavily focused on strengthening its hard power, with the debate often narrowly focused on how, and by how much, to increase the UK's defence budget. While investment in national security is critical in such a challenging geopolitical environment, these investments are complemented and strengthened by investment in UK soft power. The UK's long-term security and economic resilience relies on the UK's ability to cultivate strong international alliances, uphold the multilateral system and promote international law, for which soft power is critical.

This importance has begun to be recognised, and since taking office last year, the new UK Government has made soft power an increasingly important part of its foreign policy. This has been illustrated by the creation of a UK Soft Power Council and the ongoing development of a UK soft power strategy. These are important and welcome commitments that will enable the UK to take a more strategic and holistic approach to UK soft power, more effectively leveraging it as a key part of the UK's diplomatic toolkit.

However, while cultural exports such as music, heritage and sport receive considerable, and well-deserved, attention as soft power levers, science has remained on the periphery, despite global recognition of UK excellence in science and technology. There is a relatively limited representation of science in the membership of the UK Soft Power Council, and the otherwise excellent events, analysis and research on soft power which are being fed into the Council and its Secretariat often underemphasise the importance of science and technology.¹

This paper, and the project of which it is part, therefore seeks to critically assess the state of UK science, its contribution to UK soft power and the opportunities and challenges to fully leveraging the UK's scientific strengths as a key part of UK soft power.

The Role of Science as a Soft Power Asset

The UK's longstanding leadership in science, innovation, research and development is an intrinsic part of the UK's global identity. A legacy of groundbreaking discoveries, from hydrogen to penicillin, combined with a thriving ecosystem of world-class research institutions and active participation in shaping international scientific norms, all reinforce the UK's role as a leader in science and innovation. Indeed, the UK is second only to the United States in number of Nobel prize-winning scientists, boasts the third most valuable tech ecosystem in the world - valued at \$1.2 trillion - and is home to three of the top ten universities globally.²

Internationally, this scientific expertise is a major driver of perceptions of the UK, serving as a critical interface for global engagement with the UK. As research from the British Council shows, having world-leading universities, being at the cutting edge of technology, and having an education system that fosters creativity and innovation, emerge as some of the most important drivers of a nation's overall attractiveness.³

This is particularly important in today's interconnected and contested world, where the line between soft and hard power is increasingly blurred. Science and technology sit squarely at this intersection. Scientific capabilities are central to countries' abilities to project influence, build trust, and respond collectively to shared threats, while also underpinning critical infrastructure, national defence, and economic security. The global race to lead in areas such as artificial intelligence (AI), green technology, and biotechnology illustrates how scientific leadership now carries both geopolitical weight and normative influence when it comes to carving out the operating environments of these emerging fields. The ability to set global standards for emerging technologies, for example, grants not only technical authority, but also strategic leverage, in promoting a nation's values and leadership.

Leveraging science more strategically is therefore fundamental in shoring up the UK's long-term resilience and strengthening its global influence, in the face of mounting geopolitical challenges. In this first chapter, we therefore begin by exploring the existing contribution that science makes to achieving the UK's soft power and wider foreign policy ambitions. In this report, the term 'science' is used in its broadest sense to encompass all forms of research and development - including extending to arts, humanities, and social sciences - recognising 'science' as the systematic exploration of new knowledge across a broad range of disciplines.

Providing opportunities for UK leadership and progress on global challenges

Effective leadership is reliant on authenticity. As the UK looks to carve out its position in this changing world, it should therefore resist the temptation to claim leadership in a broad and eclectic range of areas. Instead, it should identify opportunities to lead in a limited and realistic set of arenas, grounded in the reality of where the UK can make distinctive, credible contributions.

Here, there is a clear role for science. Science is a domain in which the UK has a history of continued excellence and potential for sustained, authentic leadership. The UK consistently leads in areas such as global health, space, climate science, life sciences, and AI, providing a credible and impactful route through which the UK can address some of the world's most pressing challenges.

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Vaccine development offers a clear example of where the UK can lead authentically. The success of the Oxford-AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine not only positioned the UK at the forefront of vaccine innovation but also gave it the credibility to launch and champion the *100 Days Mission* during its 2021 G7 presidency, an initiative to ensure vaccines, therapeutics, and diagnostics can be deployed within 100 days of a future pandemic threat.⁴ This reputation for excellence helped the UK secure international pledges for pandemic preparedness and underpinned the success of the Global Pandemic Preparedness Summit, which raised over US\$1.5 billion to support the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations' (CEPI) 2.0 strategy.⁵

Looking ahead, UK leadership in malaria vaccine development can play a similarly pivotal role, particularly as the UK co-hosts the Eighth Replenishment of the Global Fund.⁶ This provides a critical opportunity to leverage UK expertise and its strong reputation in vaccine development to drive progress against infectious diseases while reinforcing the UK's wider development and global health ambitions.

When this scientific excellence is combined with the UK's other strengths in areas such as law, regulation, and diplomacy, the opportunity for, and global benefits to be derived from, UK leadership become particularly clear. The Bletchley Park Summit was a powerful illustration of this, with the combination of the UK's AI capabilities and its expertise in regulation, providing a clear 'USP' for the UK in the global conversation around AI and earning it a seat at the table.⁷ Through its AI Security Institute, the UK now has the ongoing opportunity to participate in global debates about AI and to help set the terms of those debates, establishing standards and benchmarks for safety, and fostering international cooperation on emerging technologies.

These opportunities for UK scientific leadership not only enhance the UK's global influence but also enable the UK to reflect and embed its values and priorities on the world stage. The focus of much of the UK's scientific work - such as contributing to solving climate change, bolstering health security, and enabling sustainable development - means that UK scientific soft power can help encourage other nations to help achieve the UK's international ambitions such as driving global prosperity and security. Meanwhile, the way in which the UK science sector conducts its work in a manner that fosters transparency, free inquiry, mutual respect, independence, and adherence to the rule of law, helps reinforce these norms which the UK seeks to uphold internationally. Combined together, this enables science to position the UK as a collaborative partner and uphold and promote the priorities and values it advocates for globally across a wide range of arenas.

Strengthening the UK's Relationship with Europe

Science and scientific collaboration act as a powerful force of attraction. They showcase the value of openness and cooperation, creating a scaffolding of trust, goodwill and mutual benefit on which wider diplomatic relationships can be built. As the UK embarks on a reset of its relations with Europe, science and innovation act not only as engines of discovery and prosperity, but also as powerful instruments of soft power that can help rebuild trust and deepen cooperation with its closest neighbours.

The resilience of these ties has been illustrated by the endurance of scientific collaboration with Europe, even after the UK's departure from the EU, and despite the significant challenges posed by the three years the UK spent outside of Horizon Europe. The UK has remained a core contributor to the European Space Agency (ESA), for example, collaborating and supporting on missions such as the Solar Orbiter, while 40% of Cancer Research UK-supported clinical trials collaborate with countries inside the EU single market.⁸ Beyond these examples, the UK contributes to major shared infrastructures such as the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN), and has rejoined Copernicus and EuroHPC, ensuring collaboration on critical issues from climate monitoring to supercomputing. Through continued scientific collaboration with Europe, the UK has therefore been able to not only maintain some of its ability to influence

on issues critical to UK security and prosperity but has also maintained wide-ranging channels of communication and partnership with Europe, strengthening trust, and creating the foundations for wider relations.

Science therefore offers more than just symbolic value; it provides an institutional framework for cooperation. Shared laboratories, joint projects, funding mechanisms, and innovation hubs create dense networks of interdependence. These, in turn, can be utilised as platforms for governments to strengthen diplomatic, security, and economic ties. The launch of the EIT Hub UK, which links UK and EU innovation ecosystems, illustrates how strategic investment in joint initiatives can provide both scientific advances and the foundations for renewed alignment across a broad range of fields.⁹

The endurance of this collaboration rests on clear mutual benefit. By pooling resources and expertise, the UK and the EU can expand research capacity, accelerate innovation, and respond more effectively to shared challenges such as climate change, global health crises, and security threats. This has created political will even in difficult times, evidenced not least by the UK rejoining Horizon Europe in 2023, a process that was prolonged and difficult, but which has enabled a level of collaboration and cooperation seen in few other policy areas. The UK's early success since returning to Horizon, including securing £635 million in grants in 2024, further underscores the mutually-recognised value of this renewed cooperation.¹⁰

Looking forward, there is clear appetite for closer collaboration. The Joint Statement which came out of the May 2025 UK-EU Summit, recognised technology as a key mechanism for strengthening mutual resilience, enhancing joint capabilities, and deepening strategic collaboration. Furthermore, the EU's ongoing desire to develop a youth experience scheme and discussions about UK participation in the Framework Programme 10 and Erasmus+, highlight opportunities to further strengthen scientific collaboration - opportunities which could be leveraged to strengthen wider UK-EU relations in areas like trade, security, and regulatory cooperation, as well as a negotiating tool when the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) is renewed.¹¹

As the UK looks to 'reset' its relationship with the EU, there is therefore a clear role for scientific soft power. Its resilience through times of political strain demonstrates the trust and shared benefit scientific collaboration generates, and there are clear opportunities to leverage scientific soft power as a stable foundation for UK-EU relations, grounded in shared benefit, mutual trust and respect, around which to continue to strengthen the UK-EU relationship for the long-term.

Deepening and Diversifying the UK's International Relationships

The global balance of power is shifting, as emerging and developing economies grow in geopolitical and economic importance. In 2023, India overtook the UK as the world's fifth-largest economy, and it is now on track to rank third within a few years. By 2050, one in four people will live in Africa, up from one in eleven in 1960.¹² As centres of people, capital, and influence shift, the UK must broaden beyond its traditional alliances to maintain its influence, security, and prosperity.

Science offers a powerful means of doing so. For many emerging economies, scientific collaboration is a key driver of growth and diversification. Indonesia's new sovereign wealth fund, Danantara Indonesia, for instance, is channelling much of its initial capital of \$61 billion into renewable energy and technology, as part of the country's wider push towards technological advancement and economic diversification.¹³ As emerging economies reorientate to science and technology, research collaboration can therefore enable the UK to maintain and grow its international partnerships, unlock economic opportunities, and meet the opportunities and challenges presented by shifting global dynamics.

Such scientific collaboration can also help to generate the ‘equitable partnerships’ with developing nations, which the UK Government is committed to delivering. Initiatives such as the International Science Partnerships Fund (ISPF) leverage UK research expertise to support sustainable development in low and middle-income countries.¹⁴ Similarly, the UK-CGIAR Centre for Science Collaboration helps to drive cutting-edge research to accelerate the breeding of climate-resilient and nutritious crops, and to scale global sustainable agricultural practices.¹⁵ As developing nations search for solutions to complex, long-term challenges such as modernising agriculture and improving health outcomes, UK science can help meet the long-term needs of developing nations, address global challenges, and at the same time strengthen the UK’s relationships with these nations.

This is reinforced by the fact that many of the UK’s scientific institutions are committed to building sustainable partnerships, which respect local expertise, co-develop solutions, and support capacity-building, moving away from historic, more extractive models of partnership. For example, the Wellcome Sanger Institute, a leading genomics research centre in the UK, has developed comprehensive guidelines to promote equity in international research collaborations. Recognising the potential for power imbalances in international partnerships, the Institute emphasises the importance of mutual respect, shared decision-making and capacity-building, as well as transparent communication and co-development of research questions.¹⁶ This approach not only enhances the relevance and impact of research outcomes but also strengthens local research ecosystems, laying the groundwork for sustained partnerships that extend beyond science into broader areas such as trade, governance and education, and support more sustainable and equitable development partnerships.

This is particularly important given the UK’s systemic competitors are investing heavily in their scientific soft (and hard) power in emerging and developing nations. China, for example, has integrated science and health diplomacy into its broader geopolitical strategy through initiatives such as the ‘Health Silk Road’, which ties scientific cooperation, including the distribution of vaccines, medical equipment, and medical personnel, both directly and indirectly to political decisions.¹⁷ It is alleged, for instance, that Beijing offered Paraguay Chinese-made vaccines during Covid-19, on the condition that it sever ties with Taiwan. Indeed, China donated more Covid-19 vaccines to Africa than any other country, a reflection of its wider, very extensive, soft power influencing efforts across the continent.¹⁸

This strategic deployment of science is mirrored in China’s sustained investments in green technology. Between 2021 and 2024, developing nations accounted for 70% of the growth in China’s exports of solar panels, wind turbines, and electric vehicles and China now commands around 60% of the global market for EV batteries and hosts approximately 40% of the world’s hydrogen refuelling stations.¹⁹ These long-term, strategic investments have positioned China as an essential partner for countries seeking to scale-up their clean energy transitions, forcing them to tighten their ties with China and thereby strengthening its global influence.

Meanwhile, Russia is investing heavily in education diplomacy, particularly in Africa, increasing the number of scholarships it offers to African students fourfold from 2013 - 2023.²⁰ Russia now offers several times as many scholarships as the UK does through Chevening, using this as part of their wider influencing efforts in the region, which has seen many of the largest beneficiaries of Russian scholarships (and wider soft power efforts) in Africa, including Algeria, Angola, Congo and Zimbabwe, increasingly align with Russia on key geopolitical issues, including UN resolutions around the war in Ukraine.²¹

For the UK, investing in scientific soft power is therefore essential - both for strengthening bilateral relationships and for countering the influence of strategic rivals. By pursuing partnerships that are ethical, inclusive, and rooted in mutual respect, the UK can provide a compelling alternative to authoritarian powers. In doing so, it can strengthen its international partnerships, support sustainable development globally, and strengthen the international science ecosystem as a whole.

Strengthening National Security

Science and innovation are core contributors to the UK's national security. Not only do they provide the foundations for much of the UK's military capability, including in cyber, space and quantum technologies, which are beyond the scope of this paper, but they also provide 'softer' contributions to national security.

Historically, science has been seen as a relatively depoliticised space for international collaboration, where shared objectives often transcend national or political divisions. Even at the height of the Cold War, scientists from the United States, UK, and Soviet Union engaged in 'Track 2 dialogues'. These informal, non-governmental exchanges allowed scientists to build mutual understanding, reduce mistrust, and lay the groundwork for negotiations between Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev and subsequent arms control agreements.²²

Similarly, in the aftermath of the Second World War, eminent scientists and Fellows of the Royal Society, Dorothy and Joseph Needham, were instrumental in rebuilding UK-China relations at a time of deep ideological divide. Through their leadership in establishing and running the Sino-British Science Co-operation Office, they fostered enduring academic and scientific exchange between the two countries, using science to bridge cultural and political gaps.²³

This tradition of depoliticised scientific collaboration continues to this day. Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew's memorandum of understanding with the Chinese Academy of Sciences, and the Science Museum Group's exhibition, *Zimingzhong 凝时聚珍: Clockwork Treasures from China's Forbidden City*, for example, are instances of strong scientific and cultural relations between the UK and China, upon which mutual trust and wider collaboration can be built.²⁴ These relationships do not ignore strategic tensions. Instead, they offer a way to build parallel channels of engagement rooted in people-to-people connections and mutual respect, sustaining dialogue in a turbulent geopolitical environment. They also provide an opportunity to mutually benefit and learn from each other's capabilities, and for all the (legitimate) concerns about China stealing the UK's intellectual property, the value to the UK of learning from Chinese technological advances is often underweighted.

At the same time, science and technology can also help to address underlying security risks such as food insecurity, pandemics, and environmental degradation. For example, UK scientific expertise has powered Ukraine's Grain Verification Scheme, protecting Ukraine's food security and global supply chains in the face of Russian aggression.²⁵ Not only does this serve to increase Ukraine's resilience but it also helps demonstrate the UK's commitment to Ukraine and enhance its ability to persuade others to provide more innovative and diverse forms of aid to Ukraine.

The British Antarctic Survey (BAS) likewise illustrates how science can straddle soft power and security. Its research supports the Antarctic Treaty System and global climate modelling, playing a critical role in strengthening climate security, while also maintaining a strategic UK presence in the Arctic and Antarctic, critical for governance of shared global spaces. In doing so, BAS advances climate security and national security, and underscores the UK's leadership in international climate debates, strengthening UK soft power.²⁶

Utilising the 'softer' side of science in the UK's national security efforts, therefore, enables a more holistic approach to security. In this sense, scientific soft power reinforces the UK's international standing, strengthens alliances, and helps to shape a world in which stability is maintained not just by deterrence, but by trust, cooperation, and shared knowledge.

Challenges Facing Science as a Soft Power Asset

The UK has built a well-earned reputation as a global leader in science and technology. However, despite the UK's considerable strengths in science, technology and diplomacy, strategic and structural challenges mean that science continues to be underutilised as a tool in the UK's soft power arsenal.

Rebuilding the UK's Reputation as a Reliable International Partner and Scientific Leader

Political turbulence at home, compounded by the UK's departure from the EU and the Covid-19 pandemic, has created uncertainty about the UK's role in the world in recent years, felt both domestically and internationally. This instability has left partners questioning the UK's values, its ambitions, and its reliability as an ally.

These questions over the UK's reliability are particularly visible in science. The UK's departure from the EU upended many existing research programmes, while successive decisions to cut the UK's aid budget, including most recently cutting it to 0.3% of GNI by 2027, have undermined the UK's reputation as a reliable and committed research partner, particularly in the Global South. Moreover, the research and development (R&D) budget within Official Development Assistance (ODA) is set to halve over the current Spending Review period, falling from £800 million in 2025/26 to £400 million in 2029/30.²⁷ This sharp reduction will constrain the UK's ability to maintain long-term scientific partnerships, especially with developing countries that have traditionally looked to the UK as a trusted partner. The winding down of the Newton Fund, once a flagship mechanism for science and innovation collaboration with the Global South, has further worsened this decline in capacity and credibility. These funding challenges have also been compounded by the financial pressures facing British universities and institutions like the British Council, limiting what UK actors are able to bring to international partnerships.

For too long, the UK has assumed its reputation as a global scientific leader would endure without the sustained strategic investment required to support it. Meanwhile, nations that once looked to the UK for leadership are now investing at levels that look set to eclipse UK capabilities. A look at R&D spending, for example, shows that not only are the United States and China vastly out investing the UK, but so too are nations such as Japan, Germany, and Korea.²⁸ The consequences are already visible. In critical fields such as semiconductor fabrication and computing power, for example, the UK is losing ground to competitors such as South Korea, Taiwan, and China with consequences for UK hard and soft power, as well as the UK economy.²⁹ Sudden budget shifts and piecemeal financing weaken international collaborations, discourage global partners, and squander opportunities to shape international norms, exercise innovation-driven diplomacy, and project British values and influence through science.

This instability is particularly challenging given research is, by its nature, a long-term endeavour. Groundbreaking research is often the result of long-term, cross-border cooperation, with initiatives such as CERN exemplifying how shared global infrastructure enables research at a scale no single nation could achieve alone. Meanwhile, initiatives such as the Newton Fund and the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), though imperfect, were powerful tools for fostering equitable collaboration with developing and emerging economies, supporting vital research and cementing UK leadership as a trusted, values-led scientific partner.³⁰ Their closure has left a significant gap in the UK's ability to sustain collaborative

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global research, negatively impacting both scientific progress and soft power. When the UK is perceived as an unreliable partner - subject to sudden funding shifts or short-term political changes - it jeopardises not only individual collaborations but also the broader scientific ecosystems in which the UK participates.

Strengthening the UK's reputation for commitment to international collaboration and scientific leadership will require a multipronged approach. First, it requires a conscious reorientation towards consistency, credibility, and long-term engagement on the world stage. This means placing less emphasis on immediate returns on investment and more on building enduring partnerships grounded in mutual respect, shared priorities, and trust, and funding them consistently. It also requires the UK to identify opportunities to lead authentically. This should include mapping out the UK's scientific capabilities, alongside international demand for different areas of UK expertise, targeting its soft power and scientific efforts at where supply and demand meet, to maximise returns.

It will also require consistent and sustained investment, centred around a fundamental belief in the value of science to help deliver the UK's domestic and international goals. Long-term research projects depend on financial certainty and multi-year planning. In the current system, frequent budgetary changes and political uncertainty make it difficult for researchers and institutions to plan with confidence or attract long-term partners, having a knock-on effect on ambition and innovation. The UK therefore needs to not only increase investment but also invest more strategically – prioritising stability, long-term capacity, and international collaboration – in order to strengthen UK scientific collaboration and leadership.

Adopting a More Coordinated Approach to Science and Soft Power

The UK's approach to science and soft power is very fragmented, a challenge rooted in the fact scientific soft power does not have a clear 'home' within government. The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) plays a vital role in advancing UK science policy and maintaining the country's global scientific leadership but has pressing domestic challenges to address which sometimes compete with international ambitions for UK science. As a result, international perspectives and agendas are often deprioritised or siloed, rather than being systematically integrated into the UK's overall science strategy.

Meanwhile, more internationally facing departments such as the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), Ministry of Defence (MoD), and the Department for Business and Trade (DBT) are often very focused on traditional levers of power - diplomacy, defence and trade. Science clearly has a role to play in all three, but this is rarely strategically and systematically recognised in the development of the UK's international policies.

As a result, scientific soft power consistently falls through the cracks. No department takes ownership, decisions across government pull in competing directions, and the wider consequences of policies are often overlooked. For example, the UK's scientific soft power is reliant on continuing to have top scientific talent. This means ensuring that the UK has a steady pipeline of homegrown skilled workers, which is undermined by the major funding challenges facing the UK's higher education sector. It also means being able to attract top international talent, which is increasingly undermined by the politicisation of migration in public discourse, the tightening of UK immigration policies, and the high visa costs imposed on international researchers - far higher than in many other similar nations.³¹ Decisions being taken across a wide range of Government departments are therefore impacting the UK's scientific soft power, often with little regard to these consequences.

Compounding this challenge is the diverse and decentralised nature of the UK science ecosystem. UK universities, research institutes, foundations and charities, alongside bodies like UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and the British Council, are all major players in the

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global scientific landscape. Their presence creates enormous opportunities for influence and engagement. Yet, without clear coordination, these opportunities can frequently be missed, efforts duplicated, and the UK's message diluted as organisations working to their own priorities often send out mixed messages around the role of UK science.

Further complexity is added by the growing role of private and multinational companies in science and technology policy. In particular, major corporations are developing bilateral relationships with foreign governments and multilateral institutions. In the Ukraine war, for example, United States negotiators used Starlink - a critical part of Ukraine's security owned by then 'Special Government Employee' Elon Musk - as a negotiating tool, to try and secure a US-Ukraine minerals deal.³² These decisions underscore the complex role that private companies play in science and diplomacy, as their technologies become increasingly integral to state operations.

The UK therefore needs a more coordinated and deliberate approach to science and soft power, which brings together these diverse actors to think strategically about scientific soft power. A practical starting point would be a thematic focus on science in the Soft Power Strategy which is currently being developed.

To enable this, it is critical that DSIT becomes more involved in shaping the soft power strategy, to ensure join-up across government priorities, both domestically and internationally, and help secure buy-in from across government. The focus on scientific soft power should also be designed in partnership with academia, industry, and civil society, ensuring it captures the expertise and ambitions of a wide range of stakeholders, given the diversity of actors who define the UK's international and scientific landscapes.

In parallel, the Government should also focus on ensuring that scientific expertise is embedded throughout the UK's foreign policy machinery. The UK's recently rebranded Science and Technology Network (STN), formerly known as SIN, is a hugely valuable asset, employing over 130 staff in 65 locations globally to build partnerships around science and technology innovation.³³ The work of the Network should be highly commended, working effectively to strengthen the role of science in the UK's international offer. However, it is important that science is better integrated into foreign policy priorities beyond the Network. This should include ensuring that all diplomats, including those without scientific briefs, have a fundamental understanding of the international role of UK science, and ensuring science and technology is embedded into the strategic planning processes of departments including the FCDO and MoD, and into country-level strategies and programming, to enable a more coordinated approach to scientific soft power to develop.

Responding to a Contested Global Market of Ideas

Geopolitical turbulence and scientific advancement have left the global marketplace of ideas in flux. This instability has been deepened by the United States' retrenchment from its traditional role as a global leader in science, accelerated during the presidency of Donald Trump. Under President Trump's new administration, the United States has cut funding to universities, federal science agencies and USAID, made politically motivated interferences in research, and left major global science and climate bodies and agreements like the World Health Organisation and the Paris Agreement.³⁴

For the UK, this poses significant risks. The United States' withdrawal undermines the foundations of the global scientific order, erodes shared values, and creates a vacuum of global scientific leadership that strategic rivals are eager to exploit. It also places the UK in a precarious position reputationally. Given the close "special relationship" between the two countries, disengagement by the United States risks diminishing the UK's own reputation and influence in global science.

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In this environment, the UK must step forward to defend and advance global scientific norms and values, both to protect them from being reshaped by rivals and to seize the opportunity to strengthen its own leadership role. This will require expanding scientific and academic mobility, including fellowships, research exchanges, talent visas, and youth programmes. It also means addressing the high costs and bureaucratic barriers that discourage talent from coming to the UK and fostering a more supportive environment for spinouts and startups so that the UK becomes an attractive global hub for science and innovation.

But the UK cannot, and should not, try to replace the United States alone. Preserving a global scientific system rooted in collaboration, ethics, and trust will require working in concert with like-minded partners, especially in Europe, the Indo-Pacific, and Africa. By forging stronger alliances, the UK can help safeguard international research collaboration while projecting its values and influence more effectively on the global stage.

Championing Multilateral Partnerships

The UK's response to the shifting global scientific landscape must extend beyond bilateral relationships. To safeguard its role in the collaborative foundations of global science, the UK must actively champion multilateral scientific institutions, such as the International Science Council, CERN, and the Global Research Council, as well as broader platforms such as the United Nations and the World Health Organisation. These institutions provide critical platforms for shared governance, collective funding and inclusive priority-setting that transcend national rivalries. In doing so, they offer a counterweight to zero-sum competition and sustain the open, collaborative values that underpin scientific progress.

Active participation and leadership in such forums not only demonstrates the UK's commitment to a rules-based order in science but also amplifies its influence in shaping global research norms and agendas. They reinforce the UK's reputation as a principled and reliable actor, one motivated by fairness and collaboration rather than short-term geopolitical advantage. Multilateral forums also enable the UK to sustain constructive engagement with countries even where political relationships are strained. These channels preserve influence in areas of shared interest, such as health, climate, or technology, where cooperation is essential, despite today's fragmented geopolitical environment.

There is therefore a clear opportunity to be derived from the UK's unique position as a recognised convenor, which equips it with access and credibility across a wide range of multilateral institutions. Leveraging this reputation to champion and strengthen existing multilateral partnerships and groupings would simultaneously serve to support global science and to strengthen the UK's international reputation on key issues, and with both traditional partners and strategic rivals alike.

Communicating the Value of Science

To strengthen the UK's international reputation as a leader in science and innovation, it is essential that this narrative is embraced at home. After all, the public are among the most powerful champions of a country's image, shaping perceptions abroad through their words, actions, and example, whether consciously or not.

However, science in the UK is too often perceived as an elite pursuit rather than as a defining part of the nation's identity and future prosperity. The UK's STEM talent pipeline is under strain, in part because many young people, particularly those from underrepresented or disadvantaged backgrounds, do not see science as an accessible or inspiring career path. Public disengagement also makes it harder to build support for prioritising and protecting science in policy and investment decisions. And when Britons engage internationally, whether travelling, studying, or through work, they frequently miss opportunities to showcase UK science,

weakening its soft power potential.

The UK must therefore do more to foster public engagement with, and support for, science. Public-facing initiatives play a crucial role here. Cultural and educational projects, such as the Science Museum Group's *Injecting Hope: The Race for a Covid-19 Vaccine* exhibition, help demystify science, connect it to everyday life, and spark pride in UK achievement.³⁵ Equally important is identifying and supporting potential advocates for UK science, from community leaders and educators to international alumni of UK universities, many of whom go on to become influential scientists, policymakers, and innovators in their home countries. These individuals represent a vital, underutilised network of voices who can strengthen the UK's reputation and extend its scientific reach worldwide.³⁶ Here, there is a role for research from organisations such as CaSE, whose public opinion work has helped identify critical themes for building public support, such as medical breakthroughs and agricultural engineering, as well as value in messaging such as 'growing the economy' and focusing on early-career job creation, to ensure government and the sector are communicating as effectively as possible about the value of science.³⁷

Recommendations

As the global environment becomes more contested, the UK stands at a pivotal moment in its foreign policy. The UK must find opportunities to authentically lead, leaning into and building on its existing strengths. Here, there is a clear role for science and technology, a long-standing area of UK excellence and an underutilised soft power asset. Successfully embedded throughout the UK's foreign policy, science has the potential to drive UK growth, improve the UK's international image and strengthen its soft power capabilities.

To achieve this, we recommend that the UK:

Recommendations

1. Develop a cohesive national narrative that champions science as essential to the UK's resilience, prosperity, and global leadership, ensuring this is amplified through coordinated messaging across government, media, science and cultural institutions.
2. Leverage the expertise of the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, and external scientific experts, to develop a thematic focus on science in the Government's upcoming Soft Power Strategy.
3. Embed scientific expertise in key FCDO planning and infrastructure, including wider diplomatic training and strategy development.
4. Expand the UK's scientific and academic mobility schemes, including youth exchanges, fellowships, and talent and visa pathways.
5. Restore and scale targeted international science funds.

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