**Re-thinking British Foreign Policy**

**Nicholas Westcott**

Professor of Practice in Diplomacy, SOAS University of London

Some of you may remember the comedy classics of Laurel and Hardy, at the end of which, as often as not, Ollie would turn to Stan and say in exasperation: ‘Well! Here’s another fine mess you’ve got us into…’

British foreign policy is in a fine mess. It needs serious re-thinking. I am not alone in thinking this: David Miliband in *The Observer*, David Lammy for the Fabian Society and now in *Foreign Affairs* on Labour’s progressive realism, David Cameron in a speech last week, Tom Fletcher in the *Financial Times*, Moazzam Malik at the UCL Policy Lab, Jonathan Black for Blavatnik, , and Chatham House in a report published only yesterday – all have been outlining their views on ‘What is to be Done’ about Britain’s foreign policy.

The next government, whoever it is, will need to have a very clear idea from the get-go of what its foreign policy should be, because events (‘Events dear boy, events…’ as Harold Macmillan called them when asked what were the greatest challenges he faced as Prime Minister) will hit the government from day one and risk pushing it off course if they are not prepared. So now is the time to do the thinking, and come up with a plan.

Of course, as the boxer Mike Tyson pointed out, ‘Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face…’ But without a plan, you don’t know how to punch back. So better to have a plan than not to have one.

I will suggest a new foreign policy based on four pillars:

* A significantly closer relationship with Europe
* A wider security partnership, based on NATO, but bringing in more democracies
* A new, re-balanced relationship with middle powers and emerging economies
* A revision of the rules-based international order, that keeps the core of free exchange but increases the mutual respect.

I admit, I am not necessarily an impartial observer. I was for 36 years a British diplomat, working for the Foreign Office and latterly for the European Union (this was the old days you see…). I worked under six different prime ministers, from Mrs Thatcher to Mrs May, both Conservatives and Labour, and with the Lib Dems in the ill-fated coalition. So I am implicated. But also informed. So bear with me.

**The World**

When I joined the FCO (as it then was) in 1982, the Falklands War had just ended, the Cold War was still running, and British foreign policy was quite simple. It rested on three pillars:

* Membership of the EU for our prosperity
* Membership of NATO for our security, and
* Our permanent seat on the UN Security Council and the Commonwealth as a legacy of our imperial past and the sign of a continuing active involvement with the rest of the world.

This worked, for the world we lived in then. The Cold War was set in a stable stand-off in Europe that allowed the EU to flourish under the US security umbrella. Repeated rounds of nuclear talks between the US and Soviet Union reduced the nuclear risk. There was conflict in Latin America, Asia and Africa, often proxy wars, but they diminished by the end of the 1970s. The greatest threat we faced was of economic crisis and the need to tame inflation.

And then the Wall fell.

In 1989, it felt like the liberal order had triumphed: ‘the end of history’ and all that. Democratisation spread around the world; the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ was pronounced (by Tony Blair in his Chicago speech, and in 2005 at the UN) and put into action in Sierra Leone and elsewhere. The EU enlarged dramatically to the east; and Deng Xiaoping’s economic opening up of China led to the most rapid economic growth, reduction in poverty, and integration into the global economy even seen. The third pillar of British foreign policy transitioned into a commitment to the multilateral global system which seemed to underpin ever increasing prosperity and peace.

This unipolar moment, those halcyon days – which actually felt rather more turbulent at the time – were undermined by four things: hubris, economic crisis, geopolitical shifts, and climate change.

Firstly, **hubris**, in the form of the US invasion of Iraq, supported by the UK due to Tony Blair’s conviction that Britain would retain influence with the US only by standing with them at all times. We learnt that the neo-cons paid little heed to their closest ally and the domestic costs were high (British soldiers died and Blair’s reputation never recovered). With no Soviet threat to worry about, the post 9/11 ‘global war on terror’ and the ‘axis of evil’ provided the neo-cons with a convenient new enemy, but permanently destabilised the Middle East as a result.

In a lower key, there was also European hubris, a belief that everyone would converge on the European model, reflected in the rapid enlargement to the east and neighbourhood policies to the south. But this ended up alienating neighbours to the east, in Russia, and to the south, the other side of the Mediterranean.

Secondly, the **economic crash** of 2008 signalled that there were limits to the globalised liberal economy, that unfettered financial capitalism would create unacceptable inequality, overreach and crisis. It led to the imposition of austerity in many countries, in some cases exacerbating inequality. It slowed growth in the developing world, making it harder for countries in Africa to catch up as Asia had done and provide jobs for its rapidly expanding population. Increased economic strain contributed to the Arab Spring, bringing instability in North Africa and the Middle East and increased pressures for migration.

Thirdly, the **rise of China** as the new workshop of the world made it a more active global player and re-shaped the geo-political landscape, along with the rise of other Asian and Latin American economies.

Fourthly, the acceleration of **climate change** created growing strains in many societies. Reactions have varied: from denialists, who want to pretend it’s not happening, or won’t affect them, or are unwilling to bear any short-term costs; to activists, who are growing in number and want more urgent action to be taken. Diplomats, in the COP process, have focussed their attention on trying to agree the maximum measures national governments are willing to take. But growing numbers, in the more marginal lands of the Sahel or in flood-prone coastal areas, are bearing the costs on a daily basis. This has exacerbated instability, especially in the Sahel and Horn of Africa, forcing people to move to places where they can find a safer living.

From Latin America and Africa, more and more people are migrating north to the green and pleasant lands, still flowing with milk and honey, of Europe and North America.

The political response to these destabilising forces has weakened the multilateral order. In democracies, we have seen the rise of the nationalist, populist right. In autocracies, we have seen regimes prioritise their own security through tighter political control, sometimes accompanied by an assertive nationalism to distract citizens from their loss of freedoms. The global challenge of Covid did nothing to reverse these trends.

The effects of these trends have varied from region to region.

China has been turning its economic growth into political clout: through external investment in the Belt and Road Initiative, through attempts to change the western global narrative of the benefits of liberalism, democracy and human rights through its global civilisations, development and security initiatives, and through massive military spending. It is courting new partners by expanding the BRICS group to new members. But President Xi has responded to the internal challenges of sustaining economic growth and providing for the country’s future by increasing the Communist Party’s political control. China is looking a less collaborative or predictable partner for the future.

The US economic recovery has been remarkably robust, based on the continuing dynamism of its tech sector, and borrowing from the rest of the world. Worries persist that this will prove unsustainable in the medium term and another crash will come. But for now it is carrying on. The reaction against globalisation, migration, and the consequences of US overreach in Afghanistan and Iraq still reverberate, and will make it more difficult for the next US President, whether Trump or Biden, to engage with the world – other than in competition with China. In short, America’s schizophrenia over ruling the world or retiring from it is growing, and its actions will also become less predictable.

The EU, frankly, appeared to lose its way after the financial crisis, the Arab Spring and the migration crisis of 2015. It too has remained prosperous, but with globalisation slowing, internal problems multiplying, right wing parties strengthening, its leadership wobbled – until Russia’s re-invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Suddenly the EU re-discovered not only its economic but its geopolitical purpose – to defend, not just promote, democracy and to keep the peace in Europe.

Because the threat from Russia is real and immediate. Putin seems personally determined to re-establish as much of the old Russian/Soviet empire as possible, and will bend the full force and resources of the state to this end. He has friends in China and Iran who will back him up, and the campaign will last as long as Putin remains in power – which looks likely to be as long as he lives.

The middle powers (as they are often now called) and emerging economies – from India and Indonesia to Brazil, South Africa, Turkey and the Gulf states – are interested in playing a larger part in world affairs and in asserting their autonomy to pursue their interests with whatever partners they find convenient. Their allegiance to any partner will be conditional on results, and they are becoming more proactive in foreign policy. The former consensus around multilateralism cannot be taken for granted.

We can therefore discern two broad trends from this narrative:

* Firstly, that there is a questioning, even challenging, of the global norms on which the post-war multilateral structure has been built – a questioning that has only been reinforced by the war in Gaza which has a global significance way beyond the fate of the Palestinians and Israelis; and
* Secondly, the shift from a world based on economic power to one based on military power – from Davos man to Munich man, if you like. The fact that the British economy is still far larger than Russia’s does not count for much in a confrontation if Russia devotes 40% of government spending to defence and the UK only 4%.

The world looks set in the coming decade to be one of ‘persistent complexity and uncertainty’ as Jonathan Black says. Or, as Gramsci would say, the old world is dying, and the new one struggling to be born.

**Britain now**

Why have I devoted so much time to this analysis of global changes? Because this is the world in which the UK needs to make its foreign policy. There is no point designing a foreign policy for a world that no longer exists, let alone for one that never existed.

But that is exactly what recent British governments have done.

In Britain, the reaction against the circumstances described above took the form of the populist campaign for Brexit. For reasons familiar to all, the Brexiteers captured the Conservative Party and used it to implement a set of populist policies, the consequences of which we are living with today.

Of the three pillars that constituted British foreign policy, Brexit knocked out one completely (membership of the EU), and seriously damaged the third, our relations with the rest of the world. From a three-legged stool, our foreign policy now rested effectively on a single leg.

At a school my son went to (only briefly), his teacher would sometimes make him sit on a one-legged stool. When I asked why, she said: ‘It’s good for him. Makes him concentrate.’ It has taken a few years, and a few prime ministers, for this message to get through to the British public, but they are at last beginning to concentrate again on the real world, not the fantasy world of the Brexit imagination. In a benign world of multilateral order and universal free trade, Brexit might have been a forgivable indulgence, a relatively safe thing to do. But the world is not a benign place, and free trade is under serious threat. The world remains, as Hedley Bull put it, an ‘anarchical society.’

Brexit successfully proved two things: firstly, that it could be done. Britain could reverse the decision to join the EU, and leave. Democracy worked. We left. Secondly, it proved that this was a costly and stupid thing to do. We have lost a great deal and gained, effectively, nothing.

Of course, the deed is done. Britain now needs a foreign policy that takes account of that fact. But ‘making a success of Brexit’ is an oxymoron: we first need a clear-eyed assessment of the real impact it has had on Britain’s place in the world in order to decide how best to remedy the damage and pursue a more effective foreign policy in the future. If your ship is letting in water, you need to fix the hole first, not just blithely carry on sailing in the direction you intended to go.

We need to understand the damage done if we are to repair it. Brexit has had four effects on the UK:

* Reduced its power
* Damaged its reputation
* Distorted our understanding of sovereignty, and
* Weakened its diplomatic machinery.

Firstly, **power**.

In international relations, power comes essentially from three things: economic strength, military might, and having friends. Being weak in one of these can often be compensated by the other two, but it is the combination of the three that defines one’s weight in international affairs.

In Brexit, Britain effectively threw away power. The estimates of its economic cost vary from around 2% of GDP growth to 7%, but the one I trust most (John Springford at CER) puts the loss to the UK economy at around 4-5% of GDP – on a continuing basis. So we are poorer, and suffering from what you might call ‘long Brexit’: the damage goes on indefinitely.

‘Brexit benefits’ proved rather like Saddam Hussain’s WMD – people were convinced they existed, but nobody could ever actually find them.

But there are wider economic repercussions. Brexit was a blow to free trade and to Britain’s influence on global trade issues. Leaving the world’s largest and most successful international free trade area was clearly going to damage our trade in the short term, but the chimera of being ‘free’ to strike better trade deals elsewhere has been swiftly exposed. Despite (disadvantageous and economically insignificant) deals with [Japan](https://www.politico.eu/article/japan-triumph-uk-joins-cptpp-trade-post-brexit-kemi-badenoch-new-zealand/), Australia and New Zealand, no big deal has been struck with either India or the US which might make a difference. In trade, size matters: the bigger you are, the better the deal you get. Britain in the EU was strong (not least because DG Trade was well known as a bastion of liberal Anglo free-marketeers, an approach now at risk from the EU’s protectionists). Britain alone is weak. That it could become a ‘Singapore on Thames’ has been shown to be a fallacy, and free trade forces in the world as a whole have been weakened, to Britain’s own detriment.

Weaker economic growth also leaves Britain with less to spend on defence. 2% of a smaller GDP is still less cash, at a time when there is a growing demand for increased defence spending. It has underlined the challenge Britain faces through its under- or misallocated investment in military hardware and manpower – a navy with two aircraft carriers it can barely afford to equip, run, man or protect; a nuclear deterrent whose renewal is costing an arm and a leg; and an army short of new armoured vehicles and new recruits. Britain’s involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan brought much experience and taught many lessons, but cost lives and brought little glory. Still, defence is the one remaining leg of our stool, and recent British governments have therefore doubled down on membership of NATO and taken a leading role in providing support for Ukraine, precisely in order to demonstrate that it can still exercise a global military role. So we have a leg to stand on.

Secondly, **reputation**.

As I’ve argued, having friends gives you power, and Brexit was an object lesson in how to lose them.

The vacuous mantra that Britain is ‘leaving the EU but not leaving Europe’ (as meaningless as ‘Brexit means Brexit’) ignores the fact that Britain resiled from a binding Treaty with its 27 closest friends, neighbours and allies, effectively blowing them a raspberry, marching out of the house and slamming the door behind it. The collective solidarity the 27 showed throughout the Brexit negotiations illustrates what Britain has lost – that mutual loyalty and support. The remaining members do not dislike Britain or the British: they miss them, as I am repeatedly told. But Brexit has damaged trust and broken the deep links that regular official and ministerial contacts at Council meetings enabled one to develop. This just no longer exists, and British influence on the continent is at a lower ebb than at any time since before the Napoleonic wars.

Beyond Europe, Britain’s decision to leave the EU was greeted with widespread incomprehension (except in Russia and China, where it was celebrated): why leave? Many other countries would give their right arm to join the EU and benefit from its market, its protection and its solidarity. I know this because I spoke with many in Africa, the Middle East and North America in the years after 2016, and most just could not get their heads around it. More than just puzzlement, they questioned Britain’s long-standing reputation for pragmatism, reliability and trustworthiness. And reputations once lost, take a long time to recover.

Of course, it is part of the British national myth that we don’t care what others think: we know our value, stick to our guns and soldier on, alone if need be. Victory will be certain. It reminds me of the old Irish joke about the Englishman with an inferiority complex: he thought he was the same as everyone else.

In fact British people as well as their governments *do* care about how they are seen. This is reflected in the regular hyping of Britain as a ‘soft power superpower’ (the [British Council](https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-insight/sources-soft-power) even published a report on it in 2019): the world loves the Royal Family, listens to the BBC, , visits London and Shakespeare’s birthplace, speaks English, and religiously follows the Premier League and respected our legal and political systems. All true – though the reputation of our political and legal systems has taken a battering from some of the recent actions by politicians, parliament and the government.

But soft power can only be turned into real, useful power if there is a political gearing mechanism. Unless there is a *political* commitment to engage at a high level with allies and partners, primarily through the Prime Minister, all that ‘soft power’ counts for nothing on critical international issues – like Ukraine, or Gaza, or future trade deals. Soft power won’t make other countries vote with Britain at the UN. And recent British governments, distracted by domestic chaos, have severely neglected our relationship not only with Europe but with many other parts of the world as well. The costs of this for British policy in the Middle East have recently been highlighted by [Chatham House](https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/03/has-david-camerons-return-revitalised-uk-policy-middle-east?utm_source=Chatham%20House&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=14429185_CH%20-%20Content%20Newsletter%20-%2009.04.2024&utm_content=UK-CTA&dm_i=1S3M,8L9MP,4S4EAO,ZL8FS,1).

Particularly damaging was the enthusiasm for some kind of ‘Empire 2.0.’ The phrase, though contested, accurately caricatured an enthusiasm for building relations with our ‘old friends’ in the ‘Anglosphere’ – Australia, New Zealand, Canada – and rallying the Commonwealth to the cause of Brexit. It showed an obliviousness to changing attitudes towards the empire and was at odds with the government’s own actions, including the sudden and savage cut in development aid from 0.7% to 0.5% of GNI. This alone did serious damage to Britain’s reputation as a reliable partner.

Foreign governments do not see Britain through the misty-eyed, rose-tinted, nostalgic spectacles widely found amongst British politicians, press and public. They see Britain as it really is, and so must we. The fact is that Britain’s global reputation and influence will not be restored by bombast, but by constructive actions, consistent policies and above all, top-level engagement from the Prime Minister as well as the Foreign Secretary.

Thirdly, **sovereignty**.

Brexit was based on a fundamental, almost north Korean, misunderstanding of the concept of sovereignty. It was predicated on having complete control over everything within our borders. That is wrong. Real sovereignty is having influence over the things that affect your country’s future. That means having a seat at the table where decisions on those things takes place. It means keeping your friends, neighbours and rivals close, not pushing them away. As *Hamilton* puts it, you have to be ‘in the room where it happens’.

In leaving the European Council, for example, Britain abandoned a body whose decisions (on real issues like money, migration, trade and economic policy) have far more effect on British life than do those of the UN Security Council, membership of which is so prized. The European Council actually decides things which then happen; the Security Council expresses opinions which may or may not result in action (other than sanctions), with less direct impact on Britain. The Security Council seat may give you prestige; the European Council seat gives you power.

In practice, Britain has become unmoored: adrift on a raft, proudly independent, but incapable of influencing our direction of travel in the turbulent seas of contemporary geopolitics. As we have seen at the UN, Brexit has made the UK increasingly dependent on the US. This may be fine while a friend like President Biden is in office, but is high risk when the outcome of the next US election is so uncertain and the next president may prove far less interested in a relationship that has always been more ‘special’ to one side than the other.

This ‘sovereigntist’ fantasy world has influenced the government’s strategic thinking on post-Brexitforeign policy. In 2021, the government published its long-delayed *Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy (CP 403): Global Britain in a competitive age*. It proposed an ambitious agenda for doing everything, everywhere, all at once – except in Europe, which got scarce a mention (or Africa, come to that). It was a polo mint policy, with a hole in the middle where Europe ought to be. The prime minister’s introduction was pure boosterism and the much trumpeted ‘tilt to Asia’ has swiftly vanished.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 exposed its flawed view of the world, and an *Integrated Review Refresh (CP 811)* was issued in March 2023 with a far greater emphasis on security and defence, but without acknowledging that our political relationship with the EU was also key to this (it is p. 21 before the EU gets a mention, whereas the rather less known European Political Community gets in at p. 9). The Brexit blinkers remained firmly in place.

The ambition for a ‘Global’ Britain is also weakened by the UK’s inability to get Britons appointed in international organisations. The senior British official in the UN, Martin Griffiths, is about to retire as the head of OCHA. Currently there are no other British heads of [UN or other international agencies](https://unsceb.org/board-members). At the World Bank, the senior Brit is the Chair of the Inspection Panel; at the IMF, I don’t know, I couldn’t find one; at the ICC, the Prosecutor (Karim Ahmad Khan) is British, but in the recent elections for the ICJ, on which a British judge has sat ever since it was founded, the British candidate was defeated by the Indian (the Indians were so pleased they wrote a book about it, ‘how India beat the Brits…’) There are plenty of British CEOs of global companies and NGOs, of British actors, musicians and celebrities of global renown, but very few Brits in positions of geopolitical power. This is a problem.

To remedy it requires not only good British candidates, prepared for these jobs, but a government that focuses on the issue, and plans ahead. Without the reliable backing of 27 other EU members, it will also become more difficult to redress. Many countries of similar size, and some far smaller, have been much more successful in placing their nationals in key positions of global influence.

Which brings me to the final area of damage which needs to be remedied.

Fourthly, **diplomacy**.

Britain has a justified and well-deserved reputation for diplomatic skill. Its diplomats continue to be excellent and widely respected. But this Rolls-Royce machine has suffered a lack of maintenance and some very erratic driving which has left dents, scratches and patches of rust. We need perhaps to trade it in for a more robust all-weather Land Rover to tackle the challenges ahead. Some former colleagues recently [proposed](https://www.ft.com/content/6a96015d-d5ad-45d3-a7f4-957c34c9a05b) just such a major revamp of Britain’s foreign policy machinery. This will help. But not as much as good leadership and a sound strategy.

Britain has suffered in quick succession three of the worst foreign secretaries in living memory (in Johnson, Raab and Truss). All had their good points, but sadly these were outnumbered by their weaknesses.

The populist mantra that the civil service was a pro-European establishment working against, not for, ministers created a mistrust and antagonism that demoralised the whole civil service, but was compounded by the disorganisation that resulted from the car-crash merger of DFID with the FCO. The principle was not bad, but the execution was disastrous, carried out with unseemly speed and a clear intention to destroy DFID. Many good staff left, and policy-making on foreign as well as development policy suffered disruption.

Things have improved under the last two foreign secretaries, Cleverly and Cameron, and Cameron has a seniority, work rate, travel schedule and global contacts that have had an impact. To make a difference, however, the FCDO needs not only adequate resources but a sensible foreign policy.

True, many of the problems Britain faces would have arisen even without Brexit. The world has been changing. But Brexit happened, and has made them worse or harder to deal with.

**A new foreign policy**

In practice **Britain today has no effective foreign policy**.

It has plenty of ***policies*** on foreign matters (though, as on Gaza, is sometimes having difficulty making up its mind what the policy should be), but there is no coherent vision of how Britain should approach the world and how it should protect the interests and future of its citizens. As my former colleague Lord Peter Rickets has argued for years, this involves hard choices. The current government, as it limps towards elections, is unlikely to make such hard choices – and has no sound policy basis on which to do so.

New governments always tend to prioritise the domestic policy on which they won the election. But Britain’s economic as well as strategic future depends above all on a revitalised foreign policy. Tackling NHS waiting lists, levelling up, transformational investment in tech etc – all to some extent depend on attracting people, trade and investment to this country; and keeping our citizens safe depends on the right alliances abroad. Domestic priorities can easily be blown off-course by international crises, as we’ve seen in the last few years. So foreign policy matters – a lot.

And it needs to start from the reality of what Britain is today, not nostalgia for a glorified past. That reality has three key components:

1. An economy dominated by service industries – financial, legal, educational, creative, retail – and manufacturing, agriculture and trade still heavily dependent on European markets;
2. An increasingly diverse, globally-connected and mobile society that is closely integrated into the rest of the world; and
3. A security structure that is creaking under the weight of the threats it faces and needs alliances for it to be effective.

In essence a good foreign policy is simple – at least to state, though not always to implement. It should recognise who your friends are and stick with them; identify your interests and defend them; and engage with the world as it is, even where you don’t like it. Clearly stated, it provides an essential guide in responding to crises as they arise.

**The objectives** are simply stated, familiar to all and relatively uncontroversial:

1. **A prosperous and sustainable Britain in a sustainable world**: the action we take in international and domestic affairs should be consistent with tackling climate change and reducing global poverty while sustaining free exchange and using technology productively. The climate threat is existential and needs collective action. Failure to tackle it increases conflict, as we see in the Sahel, and conflict prevents or delays action to tackle climate change, exacerbating its impact.
2. **A secure Britain in a peaceful world**: this means reforming the multilateral system to make the world safer for small countries, respecting their views, and establishing more effective mechanisms to reduce the risk of conflicts or resolve those that break out. This includes the efforts to tackle global terrorism, themselves the symptom of a failure of states to provide adequate security or opportunity for their people. As identified at the beginning, the existing global mechanisms are creaking, and new ones may need to look very different. It also means sustaining the alliances, political as well as military, that secure the defence of our own democracy. These too are at risk.
3. **A world which facilitates the free movement of goods and people**: ‘globalisation’ has gone out of fashion, but the evolution of human society has reached a level where it is unavoidable. We must therefore find a way to live with it. The internet has connected us as never before, global markets have created more wealth than ever before, and the global population has grown to an unprecedented size and fluidity. But the growing tendency to fragment markets, limit migration, and build national autarky will lead to tensions that could again cause more widespread and more damaging conflict.

To deliver these objectives, I propose four new pillars:

1. **The closest possible relationship with Europe**, to help restore our prosperity;
2. **An alliance with fellow democracies, based on NATO**, to improve our security;
3. A **re-balanced relationship with middle powers and emerging economies**, to address the legacies of the past and find a healthier basis for future partnership; and
4. **A renewed commitment to a reformed rules-based international order**, recognising the need for such collaboration to deal with global problems like climate change.
5. **The closest possible relationship with Europe** for both our prosperity, our sustainability and our security. I am *not* advocating that Britain immediately rejoin the EU: the word ‘possible’ in my formulation carries a lot of weight – politically, diplomatically and economically. But the damage done by Brexit needs to be remedied. This will take time, unless events in eastern Europe and across the Atlantic force swifter action. The government need to recognise that security is *political* as much as military, and that closer political relations with Europe will strengthen our security.

Resuming closer relations is equally essential for Britain’s economic growth, especially to bring back the lost investment which is essential to improve our lagging productivity, and the trade which is crucial for growth. In the near term, nothing can substitute for our closest and largest market, and only faster growth will generate the extra revenue needed for government spending. Europe also shares our concerns about sustainability, and British influence can help keep the EU focussed on that objective.

In the short term much can be done by:

* + A firm political commitment to build a closer, friendlier relationship. Simply to state this, ideally to a meeting of the European Council, will help clear the air and re-engage European attention.
  + Facilitating ways to bring people closer together across the channel, through easier educational exchanges (Erasmus, school trips, academic collaborations) and working travel, e.g. for musicians and creatives. The recent Commission initiative on this was well-intentioned if ill-timed, and a positive response should be a priority after the election.
  + Cooperating more explicitly and closely on foreign policy issues by not only discussing them bilaterally, as we do, but joining meetings of the Foreign Affairs Council to discuss matters of mutual interest, and allowing our ambassadors to work more closely with EU ambassadors collectively overseas. There is no harm in continuing to build the European Political Community, but it is no substitute for the EU.
  + Easing trade: Europe will always remain our closest trading partner and the obstacles Brexit created have done far more damage to our economy than to the EU’s. Things can be done, on phyto-sanitary or veterinary equivalence for example. Given that British business remains in practice pretty tied to EU standards in many areas, the economic cost of excluding ourselves from the customs union or single market, will soon exceed the political cost of rejoining.

1. **Keeping an alliance of democracies, centred on NATO, intact, active and adequately resourced**: A democracy that cannot defend itself will not long remain a democracy. So the threat to Europe from Russian aggression is now clear to all; the threat of a dis-engaging America is equally a cloud on the horizon rather bigger than a man’s hand; the risk of inadequate materiel and military capability is being vividly illustrated by the war in Ukraine. So security must remain a top priority, and can only be achieved through alliances.

NATO is at the heart of this, but not alone. The G7 has no military role but a powerful political one, though it suffers from its ‘western’ exclusivity. The G20 is inclusive, but therefore includes autocracies as well as democracies. And the expanded BRICS+ grouping is explicitly one where no questions are asked about the nature of governance.

What both NATO and the G7 do is keep the US engaged. This is crucial for both British and European security, and can no longer be taken for granted. A top priority for the new government is to actively engage all quarters of US opinion to make the case for continued US involvement. That means taking to the road and talking to backwoods Republicans as well as the like-minded coastal elites. (David Cameron seems to be making a welcome start on this.) Of course, Britain’s relationship with the US goes well beyond security. But without NATO and the Five-Eyes intelligence exchange, it would be hard to call it ‘special’.

This underlines the importance of working with European partners, inside and outside NATO, to ensure greater resilience in the event that the US starts to limit its commitment to Europe’s security.

The global game-changer would be to build a more robust link between the G7 and other major global democracies - India, Brazil, Indonesia, South Korea, Nigeria. This would be hard, and may take time, but the concept is crucial.

1. **Building a re-balanced relationship with middle powers and the developing world**: this is crucial. The world is in play; former loyalties and ties can no longer be taken for granted, and if Britain does not engage proactively, it will lose its friends – and its markets.

Britain therefore needs to announce a new relationship based on equality, respect and partnership, with mutually beneficial trade and investment. It needs to build a new relationship based on mutual respect, not rest on the faded laurels of the past.

And it needs to begin from honesty about Britain’s global role in the past, for good *and ill*.

The extraordinary growth of the global population and economy in the 20th century owes a great deal to the foundations laid and the innovations led by Britain in the 18th and 19th centuries. But so too does the current inequality among nations and peoples. There is much to celebrate in Britain’s past, but there is much for which repentance is also due, and should be given. I am not a fan of reparations (the historical precedents are not encouraging), and restitution should be a matter open for discussion in specific cases. The clock cannot be turned back, and *neither* party will benefit from an endless raking over the coals of the past. But Britain should try to avoid the same fate as France, whose efforts to maintain a privileged relationship for too long in Africa stoked the anti-French sentiment underpinning the recent coups in the Sahel and their expulsion from several countries.

The Commonwealth, despite its imperial origins, could play a constructive role in this, if its full membership feel a genuine sense of ownership of the organisation. The fact that it cuts across East-West, North-South, and every continent in the world, all speaking the same language, gives it a unique character and provides a context for conversations to find common ground in an increasingly divided world. In particular it cuts across the desire of some to segregate the ‘global South’ from the ‘neo-colonialist West.’ For India in particular, it provides a potentially valuable constituency across the whole world open to influence, if it could overcome its post-colonial schizophrenia about it.

The Commonwealth also provides a valuable forum for many small states where their voice is taken seriously, states which Britain neglects at its own cost. Britain should in fact pay *particular* attention to small countries and support their aspirations on the global stage. With relatively few friends, they value those they have.

Britain has a singular advantage in building such new partnerships: large, diverse and well-integrated diaspora communities from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and the sub-continent. Many remain in close touch with their countries of origin. Recent British governments have obsessed over how they can ‘use’ the diaspora. They are not to be ‘used:’ they are part of what Britain is, and the links they have with their communities back home should be fostered – perhaps by making it easier for their families to get visas to visit. The fact is that the empire came back home with us. If Britain was *not* the open and diverse society it has become, it would not be Britain. This is one of the country’s greatest international strengths, and one that was damaged, but not destroyed by Brexit.

This re-balanced relationship applies to economic links as well. Britain needs to shift from an international development policy to a partnership approach focused on promoting economic growth. The recent [international development White Paper](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/international-development-in-a-contested-world-ending-extreme-poverty-and-tackling-climate-change) was full of good, sound policies, but it reflects a traditional view that is increasingly seen as paternalist by the ‘recipients’. In all honesty, the volume of aid money is unlikely to increase and the DFID-FCO merger will not be unbundled. So we need to re-imagine how most effectively to help poor economies grow and adapt themselves to a fast-changing climate, and how to present that policy in a way that avoids falling into the narrative trap set by Russia and China.

In particular, this means helping democracies demonstrate their value to their citizens, and providing help that responds to climate needs. This is not to prescribe strict governance conditionality: it is important given the current geopolitical competition to signal that we recognise the forms of government other countries choose for themselves. But providing resources to a dysfunctional government is like putting petrol in a broken-down car: it still won’t go. And transparency remains essential for justifying such continued assistance at home.

1. **Supporting reformed multilateral institutions and the rule of law**: this follows logically from the last points and is consistent with stated British policy over many years. But it needs a refresh as Britain is seen as more part of the problem than the solution, and has been pursuing some policies, on migration for example, clearly contrary to our commitment to a rules-based order.

To restore its credibility, Britain needs to:

* Re-state its commitment to the rule of law, including the European Convention on Human Rights, and show we expect international humanitarian law to be fully observed in Gaza.
* Continue to play an active role in negotiating reforms to the IFIs and UN bodies to provide a greater role for smaller countries and avoid so many falling in to debt traps. The demand for institutional reform from the ['global south'](https://issafrica.org/iss-today/global-south-moving-off-the-menu-and-to-the-table?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email) needs a positive response from the UK so that the reforms support accountable governance rather than undermine it.
* Underline internationally the risks for small states of being absorbed into the sphere of influence of one of the aspiring great powers (or aggressive middle powers) who offer political, security or financial support to whatever regime suits them in return for loyalty. This passes accountability from the citizens to an outside power, falling back into the neo-colonial trap they have just escaped. We need to recognise the right of people to choose their own form of government and that government to choose its international friends and investors, even at some cost to the UK.
* Reinforce the importance of global bodies addressing the challenge of climate change – obviously the annual COP meetings, but also those responsible for supporting implementation, from the IMF to UNEP.
* Support new fora that will limit arms trade and proliferation. The current trend is in the opposite direction, with arms production and use expanding in all directions. Arms manufacturers have rarely had it so good. There is a limited amount the UK can do about this alone, especially if it is investing in its own arms production capability. But we need to keep an eye on the long-term as well as the short.

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These four pillars provide a framework within which we can define our relationships with particular countries or regions, such as the Middle East and Africa, and respond to crises like those in Ukraine, Gaza, the Red Sea, Sudan or Myanmar. A more proactive role, led by ministers who stay in their posts for years rather than months, would be welcomed, and effective.

There is, however, one country of particular importance – China.

Relations with China matter, but Britain is not currently high on China’s priority list (unlike France or Germany). It is seen as following the US line, and its positions on Hong Kong, Taiwan and Xinjiang are seen as irritating, so it has effectively been sidelined by China. Britain needs to think hard whether its strategic interests are more closely allied to those of Europe than those of the US, in which case continued engagement will remain important. In a contested world it is essential to keep talking to those you disagree with.

**Conclusion**

I return to what I said at the beginning: Britain’s current foreign policy is not fit for purpose, and a new government needs a new foreign policy *before* it takes office that addresses realities but sets a strategic direction. Without one, external shocks (‘Events, dear boy…’) will swiftly drive it off course.

My aim has not been to set specific policy choices on all the major issues – Gaza, Ukraine, China, climate – but to outline a re-oriented strategic direction. The discussion is well-under way, but it needs to reach some conclusions fast. My argument has been that Britain’s path back to a global role and effective defence of our interests runs through Europe and a re-defined partnership of equality and respect for middle, small and emerging powers elsewhere in the world – neither of which has the present government pursued. In particular, Britain should remain a firm friend to small countries, not just big. It is one area we can make a big difference.

But one thing is certain: whoever becomes the next Prime Minister will have to devote up to, if not more than, half his time on foreign policy, because it will be critical to delivering his domestic agenda. Better to start with that understanding, and have a plan.

15 May 2024