Debating Britain's role in the world: from decolonisation to Brexit

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Abstract

The debate on foreign policy generated by Brexit is the latest in a series of reappraisals since 1945 of what Britain's role in the world, and indeed its identity, can and should be. These reappraisals have arisen out of a tension between the wish to retain the status of a leading player, on the one hand, and the recognition of reduced influence and capabilities, on the other. In dealing with this tension, foreign policy-makers have been prone to nostalgia and conservatism. The past has thus cast a long shadow, and major issues, such as the balance between regional and global roles or what resources should be committed to the UK's global role, have never been fully settled. Although Brexit interrupted 43 years of cooperation with the Member States of the EU, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has led the foreign policy pendulum to swing back to Europe.

Introduction

Britain's relationship with the European Union (EU) had two dimensions: the first concerned the ways in which European law and regulation affected the everyday lives of British citizens; the second related to the UK's international orientation. Yet in the campaign which led up to the referendum decision of 2016 the implications for foreign policy were rarely mentioned (Clarke et al. 2017: 30–60, 146–174; Clarke and Ramscar 2020: 162–164). It was thus a surprise when the Johnson government which took power in 2019 made a clean break with the largely uncontroversial process of coordination with the EU on foreign and security policy, seeing

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Brexit as an opportunity to reassert a global role for Britain which would raise the country's influence and status.

This article argues that the debate on foreign policy generated by Brexit is simply the latest in a series of reappraisals since 1945 of what Britain's role in the world could and should be. These reappraisals have arisen out of a tension between the wish to retain the status of a leading player, on the one hand, and the recognition of reduced influence and capabilities, on the other. British foreign policy-makers have tended to see themselves as pragmatists adapting to new realities, but they have also been prone to nostalgia and conservatism. The result has been that the past has cast a long shadow and that issues like the crucial relationship with continental Europe have never been fully settled.

The analysis begins by identifying the perennial importance of status in British thinking about foreign policy and how that concern has been central to three key debates which have been revived by Brexit. It then shows how the choice for Europe in the 1960 and 1970s had seemed a solution to the problem of reduced power only to become gradually more problematic again through divisions within the Conservative Party and through the rise of popular concern over migration. Johan Galtung's notion of 'Rank disequilibrium' is then employed to explain how competing perceptions of Britain's status and role in the world have continued to create difficulties for the practice of its diplomacy. In conclusion, it is argued that the functions which Britain seeks to perform internationally and the kind of society in which its people wish to live together produce both the country's status and its sense of identity. The relationship between these elements has still not been fully resolved.

Decline, rank and status

As the extent of the intended severing of the UK's ties with the EU became clear after the end of Theresa May's government in July 2019, and as the vision of 'Global Britain' which she had articulated was given more prominence, then so it seemed that this might be a watershed moment for British foreign policy akin to that associated with Dean Acheson's painful remark in 1962 about the UK having lost an empire but not yet found a new role (Hill 1988: 44, 49, note 9). Whether or not this turns out to be true, we can see that we have at least been here before. Departure from the EU has brought to a head three long-running debates about British foreign policy, debates which pre-dated Acheson's comment and were not fully addressed even in its aftermath. They largely revolved around the relationship between power and status. Status, or reputation in the eyes of both foreigners and citizens, has been of perennial importance to British decision-makers, always anxious to avoid becoming a 'second-class power'. They have entailed the following questions:

(1) What in practice has been the meaning of the relative 'descent from power' (Northedge 1974) identified after 1945 and sensed even earlier (Kennedy 1981: 20–27; Barnett 1986)? Given that Britain could not claim the rank of superpower, on equal terms with the United States and the Soviet Union, what were

(2) Should Britain fall back on a regional rather than a global role if it wants to make the best use of diminished resources? Is Europe where the country's most vital interests lie? But is regionalism a tacit admission of reduced status?

(3) What kind of state and society should Britain seek to be in the post-imperial era, given that its prosperity, politics and culture have been profoundly shaped by the acquisition of empire in the first place? Should foreign policy continue to be a major priority or would the acceptance of a reduced international status open up space for a new kind of United Kingdom to evolve, at home and abroad?

These interconnected debates have ebbed and flowed in varying rhythms according to periods of perceived success or failure, triumph or fiasco. Underlying them were slow-burning issues relating to the influence Britain could have in a changing world, and how that related to reputation and to self-confidence. Ordinary British citizens in the post-1945 decades were in the process of acquiring a much higher standard of living, and arguably a better life, than the generation which struggled through the 1930s. At the same time, the country's relative power in the world had declined over the last century from the position of still just about primus inter pares after World War I to that of a leading middle power, holding on to the privilege of a permanent seat in the United Nations (UN) Security Council but with a decreasing ability to set its agenda. Its international status had been reduced accordingly. Yet the question remained open as to how far that change had been assimilated either by the British public or by the foreign policy establishment—or indeed how far it mattered.

Power does not rise and fall in a linear fashion. It is relative to context, to issue-area and to the behaviour of other states. Britain has had periods since 1945 when it was weaker (as after the Suez crisis of 1956 or in the late 1970s) and times when it had more clout (as after victory in the Falklands, or during Tony Blair's heyday). Equally, power is not the same as status, which depends on image as well as on material assets, on soft power as well as well as hard (Volgy et. al., 2014). The two are, however, closely related making it unsurprising that the debates about British foreign policy over the years often confused power with status. Both seem desirable in principle. The general acknowledgement of a country's power always connotes a certain kind of status in the hierarchical views which tend to dominate thinking about international politics. Conversely, the kind of status and niche role which Singapore or Switzerland have achieved provides a degree of protection, as well as influence through the power of example.

For Britain, whose capacity to shape world events, both relative and absolute, has undeniably reduced over time, status has become a key performance indicator—as opposed to a simple concomitant of pre-eminence, as it was in the nineteenth century. In turn, soft power has become a critical means of sustaining prestige and reputation, as noted by Max Beloff (1965: 479) at one of the high points of debate about Britain's role: 'We surely have no wish to see Britain regarded in the twentieth century as was Italy in the 18th'. It is also the case that the ability

to maintain status, in the sense of *appearing* still to be a major player, has served for both global and domestic audiences to camouflage the material power realities. This is what Mark Webber in this special issue has termed 'status protection' (Webber 2022). It was both the challenge of adapting to straitened material circumstances, resulting in a decline in relative power, and a concern to maintain Britain's rank among the leading states of the international system, which generated the three key debates outlined above. I now turn to the ways in which thinking about the UK's role in the world and how to adapt have evolved—and yet in some respects stayed the same.

Turning to Europe—the origins of a post-imperial consensus

The most obvious sources of self-doubt after 1945 were the conjoined issues of financial weakness, US power, and decolonisation, given the lack of sympathy in Washington for the European empires. It is striking, however, that the rapid relinquishing of responsibility for both Palestine and India under the Attlee government led to very little soul-searching about the future of the Empire as a whole. Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin accepted the need to hug the Americans close but continued to see the empire in strategic terms, as a major asset (Bullock 1983: 610). It was only after the humiliation (at the hands of President Eisenhower) over Suez in 1956, and the quickening pace of African demands for independence, that a new realism set in under Harold Macmillan. The extraordinarily rapid cutting loose which then occurred was accompanied by a volte face on the project of European integration. Derided at its origins, by the 1960s this had come to seem a necessary platform for Britain's continued influence and prestige in the world.

When in 1968 the decision was taken to close the remaining military bases 'East of Suez' it was not seen as a necessary consequence of decolonisation but rather followed on from the sudden devaluation of Sterling a few months earlier. At the time, it appeared that the UK had made a strategic choice to go forward as a regional rather than a global power (Darby 1973). The decision closely followed, after all, the second application to join the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1967. Given that this was also the time of the worsening US entanglement in Vietnam a falling-back on Europe seemed quite a progressive move—even if one which would have been inconceivable only 15 years or so before when Britain had sent 60,000 troops to the Korean war, many of them conscripts. Saki Dockrill (2002: 202) has argued, against this, that the decision had a narrower scope, being the natural culmination of cost pressures and Labour's plans for defence cuts from 1964 (see also Wallace 1975: 132–40), but that does not take account of the commitment to support Malaysia in its confrontation with Indonesia up to 1966 or of the willingness to fly in the face of the belated US wish to see Britain remain a power east of Suez (Sanders and Houghton 2017: 120–24).

This was a considered and significant change of course. Both the desire to enter the EEC and the withdrawal from East of Suez were motivated by changes in the power calculus and the need to attend to economic weakness. The loss of military bases from Aden to Singapore involved some inevitable damage to prestige but did

not affect the UK's overall international status so much, given that it was disguised by decolonisation and the war in Vietnam, where involvement would have proved disastrous for the country's reputation. Continuing economic problems and domestic strife had a far bigger impact on the country's status, to be reversed to an extent later by foreign admiration for Margaret Thatcher's policies at home and abroad. As for the move towards the EEC, while it was true that London had to suffer short-term humiliations at the hands of Charles De Gaulle during the process of making applications, in the long term membership proved a way of stabilising the UK's power position and, by the same token, of revivifying Britain's status through its standing as one of the 'big three' in the EC/EU.

Yet the 1960s were also the period when British society started to experience some aftershocks from international factors, including the decisions of its own governments on foreign policy. A new generation impatient for change, enjoying a higher standard of life than their parents and influenced by American film and music, showed no nostalgia for either empire or war—indeed students noisily opposed any association with US foreign policy. It was also hostile to the racism suffered by the many migrants now beginning to arrive from the ex-colonies—if not yet notably pro-European (Butler and Kitzinger 1976, 253). Thus, what had seemed in the 1950s to be a relatively stable society, focused mainly on material well-being after the deprivations of the war years, had become an arena of swirling debates, with issues of war, change, identity, and geographical orientation intertwined and complicating each other (Hennessy 2006).

The issues of identity or international orientation were not all settled by the referendum, which in 1975 gave a resounding approval to membership of the European Community, but there was certainly a reduction in the level of political angst. Britain participated in, and indeed came to lead, the modest processes of foreign policy coordination known as European Political Cooperation without any risk to its national independence. Most European partners gave crucial support during the Falklands War in 1982, the result of which did much to boost the morale of Margaret Thatcher's government and to restore the image of the UK abroad as a serious player. New Labour subsequently sought to build on this momentum, adding a concern for development and for human rights and under Tony Blair aspiring to lead Europe in its quest to become a serious international actor—at least until the Iraq war brought that aspiration crashing down.

Consensus undermined

The UK was one of the major actors within the EU. But it was not disagreements with France and Germany which undermined the domestic consensus that membership of the EU would provide Britain with the means to demonstrate its importance in world politics without in any way compromising its freedom to conduct independent relationships beyond. The real problem was at home, with the emergence of a faction in the Conservative Party, steadily growing after the financially damaging withdrawal of Sterling from the European Exchange Rate Mechanism in 1992, which opposed the idea of participating in the monetary union which most other

EU Member States favoured. This discontent was not appeased by the Blair government's decision to keep the Pound rather than to accept the Euro when the latter came into being in 2002. Rather, the argument intensified, with many Conservatives now being influenced by the same concerns over sovereignty that the Conservative maverick Enoch Powell had expressed 30 years before (Gilbert 2021: 235–36). The conjunction of these philosophical objections with the growing concern among voters at the numbers of migrants who were coming to Britain after 2004 under EU freedom of movement rules led for the first time to vocal demands for a referendum on membership and incidentally also to the revival of the idea that Britain was well able to cope as a fully independent state on the world stage (Owen and Ludlow 2017: 264–5; Kenny and Pearce 2018: 143–150).

As it turned out, foreign policy was barely raised on either side of the argument during the referendum campaign itself. The issue of the UK's role in the world was only indirectly at stake, a by-product of the debate about independence. Apart from the Remainers' view that cutting the UK off from its partners and nearest neighbours would be self-defeating, there was no discussion of what alternative foreign policy would emerge if the country voted to leave the EU. The debate was only to get going subsequent to Theresa May's resignation in July 2019 and her replacement by Boris Johnson, although the writing on the wall could have been seen through attention to May's speeches and to those made by Johnson as Foreign Secretary between 2016 and 18. This was when the theme of 'Global Britain' began to emerge, mostly driven by Johnson's personal sense of mission.

Post-Brexit and an historical reawakening

In leaving the EU, Britain faced three possible paths for its future foreign policy: first that of attempting to make the 'special relationship' with the USA even closer, as a guarantee of security and (with luck) also of access to the huge American domestic market; second, that of continuing close cooperation with the EU and its Member States, as indeed forecast and requested by Prime Minister Theresa May in her major speech in Florence of September 2017 (May 2017); third that of a free-floating independence, making partnerships on an ad hoc and shifting basis across the planet, with a deliberate emphasis on global reach and on liberation from a confining Europeanism.

The government of Boris Johnson made a clear choice for the last of these three options but was not able to put flesh on the bones either theoretically or in practice (*The Economist* 7 May 2022). The result is that a debate has been ignited, inside and outside the UK, as to where the country is and should be going internationally—the first major discussion as such since the late 1960s. Inevitably, given the practical constraints on Britain's position, the debate harks back to many of the ideas and possibilities of that period. Among these, the most prominent are the construct of the 'three circles' and the proposition that Britain's decision to withdraw from East of Suez was essentially irreversible.

Winston Churchill's 'three majestic circles'—of the British Commonwealth and Empire, the English-speaking world of the USA and the Dominions, and what he

thought would be a 'United Europe'—has been the main organising idea for thought about UK foreign policy ever since 1948 (Churchill, 1950). Churchill's scheme indicated a unique stance for Britain as the only state at the centre of the overlapping Olympic-style circles; since its first articulation, it has survived all the major changes of the next 60 years. Decolonisation simply privileged Commonwealth over Empire, while entry into the EEC did not mean relinquishing any pre-existing special partnerships. The idea has been adapted over succeeding generations, through Prime Minister Jim Callaghan's 'bridge-building' and Blair's 'global hub' to the 'concentric circles' of Robin Niblett at Chatham House (Harvey 2011; Niblett 2015). But in supposing that one circle (Europe) was of core importance, this went against the careful efforts of politicians of both major parties to avoid making such choices.

Before the arrival of Johnson in King Charles Street, foreign secretaries and prime ministers had shown every willingness to participate in discussions on a common European foreign policy, while reserving the right to opt Britain out. It was useful to be able to show the Americans how London was a leading player in the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) of the EU and the states of the Commonwealth that they had a friend inside the increasingly important EU development policy system. Within the EU, London regularly attempted to play the role of balancer between France and Germany and, when that was not possible, turned to Italy as a means of balancing the Franco-German couple. Such tactics were reminiscent of Britain's historical preference for acting as the fulcrum of the nineteenth century balance of power rather than participating fully in continental affairs. On the wider global stage, aided by its status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, Britain could pose as a country with a unique range of connections and influence.

This last stance has certainly survived Brexit and indeed can be said to drive the discourse of global Britain. It runs, however, into one obvious obstacle—the fact that the country has not only left the EU but has, under the Johnson government, deliberately absented itself from any systematic consultations with the 27 member states in the context of CFSP and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). What is more, as a trading rival, it is now difficult for any government in London to harness itself to the EU's commercial and financial power when that might be needed for political leverage. True, during the Russia–Ukraine crisis, the UK has returned to talking about its role in Europe and about the need for solidarity on the sanctions to be imposed on the Putin regime, but the primary framing here has been through NATO, which does not itself dispose of economic instruments. The UK's actions in support of Ukraine, welcomed by the eastern member states of the EU, have drawn attention to the difference between 'Europe' and the EU while also suiting the Brexiter preference for bilateral relations. Britain is unexpectedly back *in* Europe, but it is in not in a position to speak *for* Europe inside or outside NATO and the G7. The three circles idea is therefore now redundant, with the threadbare content of the 'Global Britain' idea also now more exposed. Indeed, the Ukraine war has if anything pushed London further into an asymmetrical if uneasy dependence on Washington.

The other foreign policy ghost from the Cold War period which Brexit has raised is the issue of a presence East of Suez. After the decision of 1968, which took nearly

five years to implement, including the handing over of Diego Garcia in the Chagos Islands to the USA in 1975 (with the ruthless expulsion of Chagossians) military training continued in Oman and Brunei, while intermittent naval visits were made to Australia, New Zealand and Singapore. The Simonstown base in South Africa (actually west of Suez) was also closed in 1975, which fortuitously helped to provide a degree of useful distancing from the apartheid regime in Pretoria. Although Hong Kong remained a British crown colony until 1997, the decision to depart was taken in 1984, on the same pragmatic logic as the decisions of 1968 and 1975 (but in contrast to the view taken of the Falkland Islands). To all intents and purposes, therefore, by the time Britain settled into its EC membership after the legitimising referendum of 1975, it had retreated from its defence commitments outside the Euro-Atlantic area. Foreign policy links with India and Japan remained important, but that was also becoming the case for France and Germany, Britain's new European partners. Europe as a collective actor was beginning to envisage a post-colonial global role, based on less on military strength and more on trade, diplomacy and what was to become known as 'normative power', meaning the influence of the ideas and values inherent in this new model of inter-state relations (Manners 2006).

Thus, the withdrawal from East of Suez, although technically a separate decision from that of pursuing EEC membership, seemed indicative of having found the new, post-imperial, role which Acheson had advised in 1962. The role was that of a leading middle power in international politics, conducting its foreign and defence policies largely through the influence-multipliers of NATO and the EC/EU and therefore drawing in its horns to exert influence in the region of Europe and its neighbourhood—meaning the Balkans, MENA (Middle East and North Africa) and the western borders of Russia. British interests were starting to be redefined to align with those of the EU generally even if, as with every member state, the UK had its distinctive concerns—and sites of influence—within those broad parameters (Hannay 2013: 285–86).

The end of East of Suez thus soon became established as both a material reality and a symbol of a new orientation for British foreign policy—if not of a wholly new mentality, given that the exceptionalist assumptions of the three circles continued to be unquestioned. The decisions taken after 2016 for a *hard* Brexit, therefore, represented a major upheaval. Theresa May sought explicitly to continue the practices of foreign coordination with EU Member States, but her parallel statements about leaving the Customs Union and the Single Market encouraged those in her party who wanted a clean break with the EU, enabling their eventual triumph. As a new Prime Minister, Boris Johnson initially concentrated on 'getting Brexit done' and achieving an electoral victory. Thereafter, he quickly turned back to ideas about Britain as an important and independent global actor, ideas which both had personal appeal and were a logical consequence of a hard Brexit.

This combination meant that some form of the 'Global Britain' theme was an inevitable development, whatever the exact terminology. There was no great wish to resurrect the 'East of Suez' phrase itself ('Suez' in any case had too many uncomfortable associations for the Conservative Party). But the criticisms of the EU as both a constraint on sovereignty and an ineffectual system of diplomacy did start to bring with it the argument that the withdrawal from East of Suez had been as much

a mistake as participation in the European project. Indeed, it was closely related to the revisionist thinking in Conservative circles which had been going on for some time about Britain's role and reputation. Writers like Paul Johnson (1992), Niall Ferguson (2003), Andrew Roberts (2006), Robert Tombs (2014; Lester 2022) and Brendan Simms (2016) have variously contested the critics of the British Empire, of decline and of the idea that sovereignty is an anachronism. Boris Johnson has clung to their intellectual coat tails and added his own romantic attachment to the story of Winston Churchill first as a critic of foreign policy orthodoxy and then as a heroic leader in times of crisis (Johnson 2014). In practical terms, David Cameron upgraded the importance of the Gulf in UK foreign policy and in 2014 announced a revived 'Naval Support facility' in Bahrain, albeit overshadowed by the US presence which had filled the post-1971 vacuum. On a visit to the Kingdom, Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond actually claimed that this entailed 'a return to a permanent British presence east of Suez' (Hammond 2015). The language was clearly shaped by the speech's location, given that it was repeated in the same place by his successor a year later (Johnson 2016a; b).

Global Britain

In December 2016 at Chatham House Johnson as Foreign Secretary stated his fundamental rationale: 'we are not some bit part or spear carrier on the world stage. We are a protagonist—a global Britain running a truly global foreign policy'. Interestingly, in terms of the three circles, he added:

> Britain is not just a link or a bridge between Europe and America, we are not merely the intersecting set of a complex Venn diagram, we have our own distinctive identity and contribution (Johnson 2016a, b).

It then followed that '[i]t is right that we should make a distinctive approach to policy-making as regards China and East Asia'. Still, Johnson did not justify this more expansive approach in anti-European terms. As late as July 2017, in his Lowy Institute speech in Australia, he was talking about our 'Europeanness' and the need for cooperation with the EU on foreign policy issues, while in his Policy Exchange speech the next year Johnson argued that:

> It makes sense for us to continue to be intimately involved in European foreign and security policy. It would be illogical not to discuss such matters as sanctions together, bearing in mind that the UK expertise provides more than half of all EU sanctions listings (Johnson 2017, 2018).

It was, however, noteworthy that even on sanctions Johnson was reluctant to acknowledge the potential weight of the EU relative to the UK.

These attempts to balance global and regional perspectives were made while Johnson was still working under Prime Minister May. After his decisive election victory of 2019 came a changed tone and the decision not to seek a foreign policy closeness with the EU. In the Munich speech of 19 February 2021 Prime Minister

Johnson opined that 'Global Britain' was about letting the USA know 'that their allies on this side of the Atlantic are willing and able to share the risks and the burdens of addressing the world's toughest problems'. He also made the claim (mistaken given the intergovernmentalism of EU foreign policy) that '[in] leaving the European Union we restored sovereign control over vital levers of foreign policy' (Johnson 2021). The EU went otherwise unmentioned. In the major document published a month later—*Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence Development and Foreign Policy*—among the grandiloquence of the PM's vision for Britain's great assets and influence are claims reminiscent of the three circles image and of Blair's hub power conception: 'We will sit at the heart of a network of like-minded countries and flexible groupings'; 'Among European countries, the UK has uniquely global interests, partnerships and capabilities'; 'We will be the European partner with the broadest and most integrated presence in the Indo-Pacific' (HM Government 2021: 6, 60, 66).

It is the 'Indo-Pacific tilt' which is clearly the centrepiece of the *Integrated Review* and represents the true revival of East of Suez thinking. It derives from various sources: antagonism to the EU and a belief that Europe is not enough, politically, economically and scientifically; nostalgia for past greatness and independence; a belief that 1968 constituted a wrong turn; a wish to associate the UK with the USA's own tilt towards Asia since the Obama presidency and with Washington's growing concern over the rise of China; a belief in the value of the Anglosphere (the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand are at least all Pacific countries); an acknowledgement of the importance of Asian markets and technological innovation, with 60 per cent of the world's population living in the Asia–Pacific region. All this has led not just to the pursuit of trade deals and diplomatic partnerships but also to some excitable talk about having once again an important security and defence role in what is still the 'far' East for Britain. The *Integrated Review* talks of the importance of the freedom of the seas which the UK will help to secure through 'persistent engagement by our armed forces and our wider security capacity-building' (HM Government 2021: 66). To make the point more publicly, six months later the Royal Navy's new aircraft carrier, HMS Queen Elizabeth, was sent on its maiden voyage to lead a naval task group into the Indian Ocean and on to the Philippine Sea.

But what might the Indo-Pacific tilt mean in practice? Can it return Britain to a position where it might envisage taking an active part in crises in the Korean peninsula, or over Taiwan? This seems highly unlikely, despite the assertive statements of Foreign Secretary (and subsequently Prime Minister) Liz Truss. Although the Royal Navy has naturally welcomed the renewed emphasis on maritime power, and its acquisition of new ships, the other armed services are more ambivalent. Two aircraft carriers and regular courtesy visits are no substitute for the bases relinquished half a century ago. Diego Garcia could be used in conjunction with the Americans but only on their foreign policy terms. If the UK wants to have a new military presence in the eastern hemisphere, it cannot help but be as part of a US-led strategy, which given the increasing tensions between Beijing and Washington, and the problem of Taiwan, is a gamble. Harold Wilson only managed to resist Washington's pressure to commit to the Vietnam War with great difficulty. Thus, the Australia-UK-UK trilateral security pact (AUKUS) of September 2021, which Boris Johnson celebrated

(with some associated *schadenfreude* at French displeasure), might in the long run turn out to be a two-edged sword—or little more than rhetoric.

The potential threats faced by the UK are much closer to home than anything which might happen in the Indo-Pacific except a world war, in which case all bets are off. These real threats, in the form of jihadist terrorism and Russian aggression, in the form of subversion but also now as major geopolitical confrontation, are bound to be the focus for such resources as exist post-Covid for more spending on defence. Moreover, despite public sympathy for the plight of Ukraine there is no sign of greater support for the kind of overseas military interventions which in Iraq and Afghanistan damaged the reputation of the British armed forces. Indeed, public opinion on such actions, while malleable, has become distinctly more critical (Holmes 2020: 3–5; Gaston and Aspinall 2021: 84–89).

There has been an extensive debate in parliamentary committees and within think tanks on what the re-orientation of foreign and defence policy orientation might mean, in principle and practice, but this has not surfaced in electoral terms, not least because the government's plans are mostly abstract and vulnerable to events. The *Integrated Review* (Her Majesty's Government, 2021: 22).

> Recognises the importance of powers in the region such as China, India and Japan and …others including South Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines. We will seek closer relations through existing institutions such as ASEAN and seek accession to the CPTPP.
> ….We will do more to adapt to China's growing impact on many aspects of our lives as it becomes more powerful in the world. We will invest in enhanced China-facing capabilities, through which we will develop a better understanding of China and its people […] We will continue to pursue a positive trade and investment relationship with China, while ensuring our national security and values are protected. We will also cooperate with China in tackling transnational challenges such as climate change.

It would be unfair to judge the success of these aspirations given that the implementation of the *Integrated Review* is a matter for the medium if not the long term. Negotiations with the eleven Pacific Rim countries of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) began in mid-2021 but are unlikely to reach a conclusion before 2023 at the earliest, and in any case this is a matter of pure trade policy. Britain is a 'dialogue partner' of ASEAN and collaborates with its member states on a range of defence and security issues—apart from the ex-British colony of Myanmar (Burma) where the military coup led to Britain breaking off training activities. Given that ASEAN's fundamental principle is that of national sovereignty, there is little chance of joint diplomacy in an attempt to resolve the Myanmar crisis.

As for China, relations are severely circumscribed by a number of factors. Increased US hostility to the more assertive policies of Xi Jinping led to the UK changing its view on Huawei having access to the 5G market, while China's own behaviour in Xinjiang and Hong Kong is a major obstacle to hoped-for increases in trade and investment. Even on climate change, where the two countries seem to be starting from the same point, President Xi failed to attend the Glasgow climate

summit of November 2021 and ultimately refused to commit China to phase out coal as Britain had asked. Indeed, China is now perceived more as an adversary than as a partner for the UK, which reacted strongly to the shutting down of freedom of expression in Hong Kong. But the UK had only one card in its hand—that of offering passports to the British Nationals Overseas resident in Hong Kong at the time of handover in 1997—and played that immediately, thus relinquishing any possibility of future leverage. As far as Beijing is concerned, UK criticism is expected and discounted.

Regional versus global versus—again

Whatever the possibilities for Britain of regaining a role in east and south Asia (the UK had never completely lost one on the African continent or aspired to one in Latin America), it never seemed plausible that this could be at the expense of its European destiny—despite the snubs issued by the Johnson government to 'our European friends' (Hill 2019). NATO's primary focus has always been on European security (a point confirmed by the retreat from Afghanistan), while the USA has not stopped wanting the UK to be a leader in the defence of the continent, politically and in terms of resources committed. The EU will remain Britain's main trading partner for the foreseeable future and also a key reference point for counter-terrorism and criminal investigations. The Brussels institutions can be loftily disregarded to an extent, but relations with individual member states will remain vital. Indeed, pursuing bilateral relationships has become London's preferred tactic in its ongoing disputes with the Union. There has been a particular stress, natural for a post-Brexit administration, on cultivating the *souverainistes* of the Visegrad Group, as well as the smaller states like Estonia which are grateful for British troops and military training. So long as the European continent remained peaceful, the government in London could turn towards the wider world, developing a discourse in which the Anglosphere, the Five Eyes arrangement and the Commonwealth were the prime motifs (though in the era of critical post-colonialism it has wisely not built up expectations about an ability to lead the Commonwealth). In that sense, the 'Global Britain' trope depended on both the US security guarantee and the EU's conflict prevention capabilities. As the year 2021 developed, however, it became clear that in both Bosnia Herzegovina and the Ukraine serious tensions were developing which could lead to violence. Over Bosnia, Britain continues to act as a potential guarantor of state stability, not least because the Conservative Party has some painful memories of failure in the 1990s (Mujanović 2022; Simms 1999). In the case of Ukraine, Britain provided an actual security guarantee, through the Budapest Memorandum of 1994, after Kiev had renounced its nuclear weapons—although that was never understood to be the equivalent of a NATO Article 5 commitment. The re-emergence of both Bosnia and Ukraine as major concerns should have led to more attention being given in the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office and the Ministry of Defence (no doubt with the participation of the Treasury given the post-Covid spending constraints) to the issue of where the UK's geographical priorities should lie.

As it happened, events overtook any contingency planning. The mounting tension in Ukraine during early 2022, culminating in the shock of a Russian invasion on 24 February, made Europe the cockpit of an expanding crisis, with some nationalist voices in China even calling for Beijing to use the opportunity to 'take back Taiwan'. In such circumstances, Britain would seem to have vital interests in both defending Ukraine's right to sovereign independence and in preventing events from spiralling out of control—two aims not easy to pursue in parallel. The Johnson government also took the opportunity to claim political leadership and to increase its visibility in Europe.

Leadership and visibility were asserted through government visits to Ukraine before war broke out, and subsequently to Poland and to the Baltic states. Europe, at least geopolitically, was once again at the centre of British foreign policy. But Britain was noticeably on the margins of the diplomacy which attempted to prevent war breaking out. That was conducted primarily by the USA, by France and by Germany. Their heads of government were never going to take second place to the EU's High Representative, but equally the UK's absence from the networks and routines of the European foreign policy system meant that it cleaved more to Washington, whose superpower status inevitably overshadowed it. The very poor nature of Russo-British relations over two decades was also a factor, culminating in Foreign Secretary Truss being given the cold shoulder by her Russian opposite number Sergei Lavrov when she visited Moscow just before the invasion. Johnson himself did not attempt such a visit. None of this, however, stopped Johnson from talking about 'our continent' and re-focusing on Europe (Johnson 2022). Once the war had started, he was also in the forefront of those urging the supply of arms to Ukraine in its heroic defence, while at the same time accepting that no troops or warplanes would be sent to its aid—given the risk of direct encounters with Russian forces, and even that of nuclear miscalculation, after Vladimir Putin's threats of escalation. Johnson was able to be prominent in NATO because Britain (along with France) is one of Europe's only two serious military powers. But there were limits to its use as a diplomatic platform. NATO is not a foreign policy organisation, let alone an economic bloc capable of mobilising a serious collective sanctions policy. That role was played by the EU, with unaccustomed speed and determination, almost to the point of economic warfare. Britain's willingness, after years of procrastination, to act against the vast amounts of Russian money and property in the London area was an important contribution. But it was evident to all that not only would British action be insufficient unless followed by the EU but also that Brexit had removed any possibility of Britain being accepted as a leader by its European ex-partners even if the crisis revealed that the aspiration remained alive. It is too early to make any serious statement about the impact of the Ukraine crisis on the balances of power and of influence in Europe, but at the very least it is clear that 'Global Britain' cannot mean relegating Europe to a bit part role in UK foreign policy (Hill 2018). It is, in Simon Tisdall's (2022) words 'the inescapable neighbourhood, where primary national interests lie'. Geography, history and the presence of Russia make the politics of Britain's continental hinterland of compelling importance.

Rank disequilibrium

The underlying difficulty for Britain's position in international relations is that of rank disequilibrium, the concept coined by Johan Galtung (1978) to denote the tensions and uncertainties created by a state scoring highly on some indicators of rank (or status) but much less so on others. In this case, the key disequilibrium is between the internal and external perceptions of rank. In the minds of UK decision-makers from 1945 to the present, the notion has consistently prevailed that Britain is and should be a key player in determining the development of the international system and the rules by which it is governed. Permanent membership of the UN Security Council, and representation on the International Court of Justice (ICJ), has enabled and perpetuated that belief, despite the undeniable facts that Britain had been overtaken by the superpowers, had lost its empire and had been absent from the creation of the new European project. In more recent times, the UK has discovered that there was nothing it could do about the rise of China, which had forced on Mrs. Thatcher acceptance of the inevitable British withdrawal from Hong Kong and in 2020 had led to Beijing jettisoning the terms of the Joint Declaration of 1984. It has suffered the setback of failing for the first time (in 2018) to get its candidate elected onto the ICJ. Within Europe, the fact that the British persistently resisted attempts to deepen integration also demonstrated the limits of its power, given that the Eurozone and the (admittedly toothless) CSDP were created against its preferences. Prime Minister Gordon Brown's unwillingness to attend the ceremony for the launching of the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009 was symbolic of this kind of foot-dragging frustration.

Despite these constraints and failures, it has been a major priority for British governments of all parties to maintain a high status in international politics, as perceived by third parties abroad, but also at home. For much of the period after the choice for Europe, which seemed to have settled the matter, such debate as took place was on particular issues of foreign policy such as the Falklands or the Iraq war, rather than on its overall direction. The one exception was the most sensitive issue of all, that of the nuclear bomb which Bevin (cited in Bullock 1983: 352) had said just had 'to have the bloody Union Jack on top of it'. From time to time, the deterrent evinced serious doubts in sections of the Labour and Liberal (Democrat) parties (and was rejected outright by the Scottish National Party). The argument was partly about the value and morality of nuclear weapons as such but also about the utility of such a strike force for a country like Britain dependent for its technology on the USA and in any case benefitting from an American security guarantee. Although the arguments in terms of both deterrence theory and resource allocation came to seem ever thinner, the view that nuclear weapons ensured the UK's continuing presence at the top tables of international politics was more difficult to discount given the bipartisan consensus on the need to be a leading power.

Yet what were and are these 'top tables'? Clearly, nuclear weapons are not an entry ticket for the G7, G20, the World Trade Organisation and other important economic/functional organisations. Even the Security Council, were it ever to be

reformed, would probably not make possession of them a precondition of permanent membership given that non-nuclear Germany and Japan have long been serious candidates. What the possession of nuclear weapons does guarantee is a place in the discussion of arms control and of proliferation. This is undeniably important. On the other hand, such issues are vital enough to justify the participation of any stakeholder, nuclear power or not, as was demonstrated by the debates about Cruise and Pershing missiles in the 1980s and by the involvement of the EU (and especially Germany) in the negotiations over Iran's nuclear capacity. It is, therefore, possible that the perennial British fear of exclusion from significant issues affecting the country unless the nuclear deterrent is maintained is exaggerated if not misplaced.

It follows that some of the concern for status must be for its own sake—and for domestic consumption, in that status justifies a level of UK defence expenditure which has always been at the top end of the NATO league table. There is also the question of competition with similar states, notably France. The two countries encourage each other in their linked determination to maintain both nuclear weapons and a permanent seat on the Security Council. At the same time, this very approach creates expectations in third countries that London and Paris will take on responsibilities beyond their immediate 'possession' goals (Wolfers 1962: 73–80). The fact, however, that the UK has now left the EU has created not just tensions with France but two more general disjunctions between status on the one hand and capabilities on the other.

The first disjunction is that the scaling up of UK influence represented by its leadership role in EU foreign policy has now disappeared. In the crisis created by Russia's invasion of 24 February 2022, the Johnson government asserted its role as a leading European power and backed it up first by sending weapons to Ukraine and then, by offering security support to Finland and Sweden before they were able to achieve NATO membership. Yet it was self-evidently not in a position to speak for the EU or to mobilise the bloc's capabilities. Indeed, by pursuing close relations with the eastern Member states and by promoting NATO's role the UK was signalling its obvious lack of interest in finding common ground with the EU and its major players, France, Germany and Italy. Absent a change of approach, or the collapse of the EU, political leadership in Europe therefore seems no longer open to the UK.

The second disjunction results from 'Global Britain' which, given a hard Brexit, followed on from the desire to reawaken the country's historic external ties—commercial, diasporic, cultural and political—over 'little Europeanism'. This is not, as Robert Saunders has shown, the same as nostalgia for empire (Saunders 2020). Potentially it struck a chord with patriots of all stripes who felt that some of the qualities of Britishness had been lost—not least independence—through immersion in globalisation and multilateralism. Yet Global Britain' did suggest a major foreign policy reset for which the capabilities are manifestly lacking. If its heroic assumptions on both trade and security were to be followed through it would entail significant new burdens in resource terms. It only seems plausible if Britain were to commit itself to accepting Washington's predominance and policy leads. This has in practice been the case globally since the 1960s when debate and reappraisals came to a head with the Duncan Report of 1969 (Duncan 1969). Thus, both globally

and in Europe there is a disequilibrium between the rank claimed, or aspired to, and the practice evident to third states (for further elaboration see Drake in this special issue). To some extent, this is a long-term trend, partially disguised because membership of the EU enabled Britain to be both an independent actor and one of the leaders in an economically powerful bloc. Post-Brexit, the disequilibrium has resurfaced now that Britain is once more making a virtue of an independent foreign policy. Against this, there is no doubt that Britain remains 'a serious country' in the eyes of foreign policy-makers world-wide given its relative wealth, the professionalism of its diplomats and armed services, and its soft power. Yet the two sets of external perceptions are not incompatible: Britain is admired and followed in certain respects. At the same time, the views that Britain tends to over-state its own centrality to world politics, and that leaving the EU is an act of self-harm, are widespread.

In conclusion: constraints and self-understandings

In the end, history has the last laugh; empires cannot be sustained; over-stretch rebounds; geography insists. But both the timing of change and the point at which necessity dawns are variable and unpredictable—for material circumstances are not deterministic in any simple sense. There is much scope for decision-makers to construct the reality which faces them (McCourt 2014). Although there may be a price to pay—perhaps not known until too late—for rowing against the tide, the process of adaptation can to some extent create new facts. The corollary of this, however, is that a government's understanding of its role in the world can remain out of synch for quite a while with how others see it and with what can actually be achieved. In the same vein, the debates which take place about British foreign policy may be anachronistic hangovers from past dilemmas, without much traction in new circumstances. Decision-makers post-Brexit have shown awareness of changed times by referring to the Indo-Pacific rather than East of Suez, or to the UK as a 'global' player rather than as being at the centre of three circles. If, however, the underlying mentality, 'the habit and furniture of our minds' as Lord Franks (cited in Darby 1973: 22) put it in 1954, is 'that Britain should be a great power', then the issues are merely reformulated, not fully addressed. What is more the meaning of great power status in the post-Cold War world remains unspecified.

Ultimately, the question which a society debates (or should do) is that of the relationship between the outside world and the kind of country it wishes to be. This, in turn, entails a conception of what functions the state in question can and needs to perform in the international system—in other words, how it defines the 'national interest(s)'. Whichever country we belong to, the story we tell ourselves has to relate to 'the empire of circumstance' internationally (Hill 1996: note 9). Britain's declining relative power since 1945 has led to intermittent foreign policy crises and periods of introspection about the country's world role. For the most part, debates have been limited to decision-makers and to the 'attentive' public. Yet, in the long run, foreign policy is also subject to the impact of changes in society. Domestic priorities will come to the fore whether in the form of fiscal constraints, evolving values or changing demography. Some reflexes turn out to be surprisingly constant, like the

way the sympathy in Britain for Ukrainian refugees of 2022 echoed the welcome given to the *kindertransport* in the late 1930s, overcoming the angst about migration so implicated in Brexit. More generally, path dependency in foreign policy has proved a powerful force, reinforced by the leitmotif of gradualism in British political culture. The fundamental assumption that Britain is and should remain a leading global actor has proved remarkably durable, surviving the rise of the superpowers, the loss of empire and entry into the European project. The war in Ukraine seems likely to have reinforced this belief in political circles. Despite this, there are still debates to be had on UK foreign policy, about its orientation, conception or role and performance in practice. In particular, the issue of a global versus a regional role remains unsettled, while the support of an increasingly diverse and engaged public opinion for the commitment of more resources to external policy cannot be taken for granted. The way a society evolves, in terms of values, outlook and priorities, can in the long run undermine consensus on conceptions of the nation's overall role, as powerfully demonstrated by both Euroscepticism and the growing internal critiques of Britain's colonial past. Indeed, a country's identity is constituted by the interplay between external views of its status and its domestic self-understandings. At times that identity is stable, at others it seems in flux. The present post-Brexit period is one of considerable volatility at both levels. Still, history shows that continuity in both the practice of British foreign policy and the assumptions behind it is a powerful force. *Plus ça change*….

Declarations

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