



British Security Policy Programme  
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## British Security Policy in Transition<sup>\*</sup>

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## **Defining limits and priorities**

The UK is one of the world's five or six 'medium powers', each with greater means for exerting international influence than most states, but with far less global clout than the US. In some areas, such as capacity for expeditionary military operations and development assistance, the UK ranks in the top three. Its permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) also gives it significant influence, providing it with an entry ticket into key security discussions.

Over time, the UK's position relative to some other medium powers is declining. China, in particular, is attempting to break out of the medium power 'pack', and is on its way to establish a role as a second global superpower. India might achieve a similar transition in a longer time scale. It is less clear that UK influence is set to decline relative to that of Germany, Japan or Russia, all of whom face significant normative and structural obstacles to their playing a wider global role.

Of all the medium powers, the UK's foreign policy posture is closest to that of France. Its military and development commitments outside Europe are in countries to which it has close historical links, and it faces comparable military resource and commitment problems. Like France, it continues to struggle with how to reconcile national preferences with a commitment to multilateralism. Both powers seek to answer this conundrum, at least in part, through balancing different partnerships alongside each other.

During most of the Cold War period, the UK sought to address resource and commitment dilemmas by steadily withdrawing its military and developmental presence from the world outside Europe: first from Palestine and South Asia, and then from Africa, the Gulf and South East Asia. Since 1990, however, it has begun to return to these same areas, with an ambitious military posture in Iraq and Afghanistan, and a sharply expanded aid budget centred on sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. By contrast, the UK invests relatively fewer resources in relations with the former Soviet Union, where Germany's engagement has been greater. Latin America has been given a lower priority, despite the continent's growing international profile. In relations with China and India, the UK has been only one of several powers competing for economic influence.

## **Towards a more *national* security policy?**

Particularly since the terrorist attacks on London in 2005, there has been a growing emphasis on relating UK security policy directly to the protection of uniquely national interests. Even if most of the security problems facing the UK have a strong international dimension, they are not always global in nature. The problems

of terrorism and organised crime, in particular, seem to point to the need to focus attention on some countries and regions rather than others.

### **Still a force for good?**

Yet this renewed focus on national interests takes place in the context of a national culture and self-image, which emphasises the wider global role of the UK, beyond direct national interest. Political leaders believe that the UK can and should be a 'force for good'. Across the political spectrum, there is a continuing appetite for overseas involvement (albeit with dispute over the balance between hard and soft power). The political dynamics of 'something must be done' still generally trumps that of 'it's nothing to do with us'.

### **Which multilateralism?**

There is a broad recognition that the UK needs to work with others in order to achieve its objectives, and widespread acceptance of the need to support a 'rules-based' international order. Yet this remains a *variable multilateralism*, preserving national flexibility in order to ensure that the UK is not simply a recipient of international rules, but also an active participant in interpreting and developing them. At the heart of many key foreign policy debates, therefore, are choices on the priorities given to different multilateral partnerships, and thus on the boundaries of the 'international community' which is the rhetorical reference point for most foreign policy.

This is seen in debates on the relative weight given to transatlantic and European commitments, and on the extent to which the UK can and should preserve its autonomy of action from one or both. It can also be seen in relation to the UN, where agreement on action requires building coalitions with powers - including China, Russia and (in future) India and Brazil - whose membership on the UNSC the UK promotes, but to whom it is reluctant to give a veto power over its foreign policy.

Some believe that the UK already pays too much obeisance to global organisations in which non-democracies maintain considerable power, and argue instead for a focus on narrower coalitions of the like-minded, whether this be a 'community of democracies' or the 'Anglo-sphere' of English-speaking rich democracies. Others argue that the UK will need to respond to the rise of China and India by putting more focus on broader multilateral institutions to ensure that new powers accept the existing 'rules of the road'. It is less clear, however, that the latter are always willing to accept the restraints on UK or US action that this would involve, especially in relation to international norms (for example, in relation to

intervention in internal affairs) which have long been favoured by undemocratic and developing states.

### **Can the three circles be maintained?**

Since the Second World War, analyses of UK foreign policy have often pointed to the existence of three key networks of engagement for the UK: the relationship with European partners and allies, the US special relationship, and relations with the Empire/Commonwealth.

The EU's growing role in foreign policy is both a force multiplier for, and a constraint on, the UK's ability to pursue its foreign policy. In many issue areas (including trade, relations with the European neighbourhood and climate change) and regions (including the former Soviet Union and the Middle East) the UK exerts influence more through the EU collectively than through its continuing bilateral relationships. The EU's areas of comparative advantage (over both national decision-making and other international organisations) could grow further in future. The ability of the UK to continue to be a 'global hub' in these issue areas and regions, therefore, may depend on whether it can also be a 'European hub', shaping the direction of wider EU policy. But domestic euro-scepticism, together with decisions to opt out of key European regimes, continues to raise questions as to the credibility of UK aspirations to remain at the heart of the EU.

The UK's imperial legacy is also both a source of strength and weakness for its foreign policy. It provides it with expertise, understanding and networks (including the Commonwealth) that strengthen its ability to effect change in other societies. Yet it can also be a source of post-colonial resentment in many countries and regions, where current suspicions of UK motivations are grounded in historical memories of past injustices.

Not least, the UK's relationship with the US is a source of considerable strength, especially in relation to the 'hard power' capabilities of defence and intelligence. The UK has a privileged degree of access in Washington on security issues, unparalleled by other medium powers. But this access has its costs. It creates a heightened expectation that the UK will make a substantial contribution to US-led military operations, while inevitably (given the disparity of resources invested) only giving it influence at the margins. As Iraq has demonstrated, this asymmetric bargain continues to have the potential to exact significant domestic political costs.

## **Mars or Venus?**

The debate on the balance between Atlantic and European partnerships is paralleled by, and in some measure overlaps, the debate on the balance between hard and soft power. Since 1997, Prime Minister Tony Blair was the leading exponent of the view that it was possible, and necessary, to have both. The UK had to have both a strong Atlantic relationship and to be at the heart of Europe. And, he argued, neither hard nor soft power could work on its own. They had to work together in order to be effective. Yet there are tradeoffs. This is most obvious in relation to budgetary allocation, where some point to the longstanding dominance of the 'security' budget by the Ministry of Defence (MoD). Others point to the rapid and continuing growth in Department for International Development (DfID) spending. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office points to a budget settlement less generous than either of the two big spenders, at a time of unprecedented demands for its skills.

Arguments on relative budgetary allocations are often based on implicit assumptions on the relative importance attached to different security challenges, as well as on where the UK is best placed to contribute to addressing them. For example, the UK could seek a comparative advantage in soft power and development assistance, filling the gap left by US underinvestment in this area. Alternatively, it is argued, investment in hard power gives the UK entry into the very small club of states with expeditionary reach, as well as providing assurance of protection against the (low probability but high impact) threat of a re-emergence of military threats to the UK.

## **Is the balance of the defence effort right?**

Current UK defence commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq ensure that the UK is playing a major role in supporting the US's two primary overseas commitments. While these two commitments are stretching MoD resources to the limit in many areas, however, they are still dwarfed by the US resources devoted to these two theatres. Moreover, it does have an opportunity cost in terms of the UK's ability to contribute to military missions (such as in Chad, Lebanon and the DRC) where European states are playing the leading role. It also has an opportunity cost in terms of ability to support smaller scale operations in sub-Saharan Africa, for example in Darfur or Somalia.

The strains on the defence budget from current operations are contributing to a wider debate on the size and purposes of the defence budget. Many current military capabilities are not being used in current operations, and are maintained primarily to guard against the threat of major inter-state war. Yet the UK itself appears safer than ever from such threats, and there has already been a rundown

in capabilities (for example) for armoured warfare, air defence and anti-submarine warfare. Growing concern over terrorist threats has led to increased resources for the intelligence services, but it seems so far to have had few implications for the defence budget. In time, new Great Power threats to Europe may emerge, obliging NATO rearmament. While the rest of NATO-Europe appears relatively relaxed about this possibility, however, the main determinant of whether the UK should give it a higher priority appears to be whether such capabilities would be useful in major inter-state war outside Europe.

Indeed, given the scepticism over major war threats in Europe, the defence budget would probably have come under much greater scrutiny over the last decade in the absence of the successive 'wars of choice' that have been fought during this period. The MoD has still been obliged to accept a steady decline in its share of government spending. Yet it continues to enjoy real spending growth, and the gap between its allocations and those of other departments has recently declined even as the government's overall fiscal position has worsened.

### **Is the balance of the aid effort consistent with government objectives?**

Sharp increases in the aid budget have raised expectations of what it can deliver, and are increasing focus on whether it is delivering commensurate returns. On the one hand, there is pressure for the UK's aid budget to be tied more closely to broader foreign policy objectives. On the other hand, there are concerns that this could dilute DfID's pro-poor focus. Subordination to other government objectives can weaken, rather than strengthen, support for development spending. And the cross-party consensus in favour of the 0.7 per cent target suggests that public support for a strong development effort is more strongly-based than in the past.

If the government's commitment to supporting pro-poor development is to be realised, however, is there more that could be done to ensure that diplomacy and 'hard security' help deliver developmental impact? Government still has difficulty in adequately resourcing activities that fall between traditional security and development investments, such as support for security sectors in poor and fragile states. DfID remains reluctant to fund work in this area, not least because it is relatively staff-intensive and thus unable to absorb the high levels of spending necessary to meet its spending targets. The MoD, for its part, seems reluctant to support activities unrelated to possible UK force deployments, such as the increased investments in defence and security sector reform advisory missions.

### **Can we make ideas matter more?**

Foreign Secretary David Miliband has suggested that we think of Britain as a 'global hub', inviting us to reflect on the UK's role as a centre for the discussion and

promulgation of ideas and norms. It is a concept that emphasises the important role that the FCO can play. It also points to areas of national comparative advantage that are not under direct government control, including: globally-respected mass media, international non-governmental organisations based in the UK, a strong higher education sector contributing to the international public goods of research and education, and an unusually open economy and society.

The strengths that these assets bring for the UK, however, often come precisely because they reflect the liberal values that underpin British society, rather than supporting the particular policies of the government of the day. Nor is the unusually open nature of Britain's economy and society without costs for UK security objectives. The role of London as a haven for political and tax-evading exiles from around the world can contribute to undermining governance in their countries of origin. There are also continuing political tensions between this open global role and national concerns over the dilution of national identity, seen not least in relation to migration.

### **Organising security policy**

'Security policy' is increasingly being used as a framework for discussing how the UK government should organise itself to meet risks and threats that require cross-departmental responses. Compared with other major powers, the UK already has a relatively good record for co-operating across departmental boundaries (the long-established Joint Intelligence Committee is an example). Further steps in recent years have included the development of new mechanisms for co-operation in counter-terrorism, conflict prevention and post-conflict stabilisation.

Even so, resistance to increased co-operation often remains strong, and continuing institutional reform and cultural change is widely supported. The publication of the National Security Strategy raises expectations of further movement. Realistically, though, the process of developing a more integrated approach to security policy may be a long and incremental one.