

Whitehall Report 1-20



Taking Control

Rediscovering the Centrality of National Interest
in UK Foreign and Security Policy

Malcolm Chalmers



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COVER IMAGE: President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Boris Johnson at the G7 in Biarritz, 2019.
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Executive Summary

- Foreign policy is too often seen as an area of activity that is separate from others, and is focused on protecting the international order ('the Rules-Based International System').
- The starting point of foreign policy should instead be a clear articulation of the UK's national interests and values, accompanied by a realistic strategy for protecting and pursuing them.
- The 2019 election has highlighted the need for the government to give top priority to tackling the country's deep-seated domestic problems. Foreign policy needs to be seen to be relevant to tackling these concerns.
- There is strong support for the UK to do what it can to protect the world's most oppressed and disadvantaged, for example in support of high levels of aid, where the UK remains a world leader in quantity and effectiveness. But two decades of failed interventions have shown how difficult it is for Western powers to radically reshape the dynamics of foreign societies.
- The UK should cease to promote the narrative that there is one single Rules-Based International System. There is not. Efforts to tackle pressing international problems through collective action are more likely to succeed if they involve coalitions between major powers than if they are only based on rules-based systems that lack clear and binding obligations. Given the rise of more nationalist leaders in most major powers, the UK needs to be realistic about the prospects for success in such endeavours.

Facing multiple challenges with limited resources, principles for UK foreign and security policy include:

- **Focus on the Homeland:** The first priority should be to respond to security threats to the UK homeland, both from competitor states and from non-state actors.
- **Secure the Neighbourhood:** Maintaining strong security partnerships with European allies is vital to tackling threats to the UK and its immediate neighbourhood.
- **Increase Capability for Action Without the US:** The government should examine where relatively modest investments could enhance UK capability for action with European allies, if necessary without direct US involvement, notably in the range of limited security crises that could develop at short notice in and around Europe.
- **Be Prepared for Competition Without End:** UK policy towards Russia and China should be based on a readiness (and ability) to push back strongly, in concert with allies, when threatened, but also a willingness to seek cooperation where common interests can be furthered.
- **Setting Clear Priorities Outside Europe:** Commercial advantage is likely to be the main driver for UK foreign policy in most countries outside Europe. In some places, the need to counter direct security threats – including terrorism and organised crime – may take a more central place. While other policy instruments (such as diplomacy, development and security assistance) have global application, the ability to use military force outside the European neighbourhood should not be given a high priority.

Taking Control: Rediscovering the Centrality of National Interest in UK Foreign and Security Policy

THE UK GOVERNMENT has made clear that this year's Integrated Review will be a broader review of foreign, defence and security policy than previous reviews, reflecting the need for a reappraisal of the UK's international relationships in the aftermath of Brexit.

This report argues that the starting point of UK foreign policy should be a clear understanding of the UK's interests and values, accompanied by a realistic strategy for protecting and pursuing them. Given the rapidity of current shifts in the international environment, together with the formidable new challenges (and opportunities) created by Brexit, the need for a clear-eyed calculation of how best to pursue the UK's interests is more important now than it has been for many years.

A foreign policy narrative focused on national interest is consistent with the wider politics of Brexit and would help to reconstruct a domestic foreign policy consensus.

The UK's most important foreign policy and security partners will remain its fellow members of the Euro-Atlantic community. However, the UK is more likely to be able to avoid being a 'policy follower' of either the US or the EU if it retains the ability, and will, to say no to both. At present, the UK is closer to France and Germany on most key foreign and security policy issues, and more distant from the Donald Trump administration in the US – for example, in their respective approaches to China, Iran, Syria, Ukraine, climate change and the World Trade Organization. But this position could be inverted in the future. One of the UK's key medium-term objectives should therefore be to maintain and develop its capacity (including intelligence and military capability) for working with a variety of allies.

There is widespread support for a foreign policy that is not selfish, and includes an important values dimension – lending a helping hand, where possible, to the poor and oppressed of the world. But, too often, the 'values' element of foreign policy is reduced to virtue signalling and symbolism – for example, the UK's strong commitment to the Arms Trade Treaty – with little to no impact on reducing human suffering. The experience of multiple recent interventions (developmental and military) in the broader Middle East has shown that well-intended actions can often have large negative consequences. Doing good, not feeling good, needs to be the guiding narrative for the ethical dimension of UK foreign policy.

On the Brink

The UK is now on the brink of one of the most important shifts in its international position since 1945. The low-alignment trade deal with the EU that is now the most likely scenario is set to lead to substantial economic disruption from 2021, involving significant losses to those most dependent on EU trade. It will also produce new economic opportunities, especially for those companies and individuals best placed to take advantage of the benefits of increased protection from European competition and, perhaps, new markets elsewhere. But it is not going to be an easy ride.

In this period of turbulence, the UK will need to use every instrument at its disposal to exploit these new comparative advantages. The government's commitments to increased emphasis on infrastructure and skills, industrial policy and a strengthened role for regional government, together with massive increases in R&D spending, all suggest that it has accepted the need for a more activist approach to economic development.¹ This reorientation is set to be deepened by the imminent transfer of many regulatory responsibilities from the EU to sovereign national control.

This impending repatriation of regulatory powers takes place alongside a wider global trend towards the securitisation of trade politics. With the revival of geopolitical competition – most clearly between the West, China and Russia, but also involving a range of other powers – regulation of economic activity is increasingly taking on a stronger security dimension. Some of the most difficult potential security threats now require policy responses using instruments – such as telecommunications regulation, foreign investment screening and student visa approval – that have previously been viewed purely through a liberal economic lens. When combined with the US's marked shift away from rules-based economic multilateralism towards 'America First' bilateralism, the UK's decision to 'take back control' of its economic regulations may be more the rule than the exception. During the 2019 election, the Labour opposition made much of the threat that the UK was headed for a subordinate economic and regulatory relationship with the US. A more likely scenario is that the UK is moving towards a situation of regulatory autonomy in relation to both its major partners, rather than a wholesale shift from one to the other.

Beyond 'The Rules-Based International System' and 'Global Britain'

But what does this mean for broader foreign and security policy? The new Integrated Review is due for completion by the autumn of 2020, well before the Brexit transition period ends. Considerable energy is bound to be consumed on the eternal, and important, issues of Ministry of Defence (MoD) modernisation and budgeting. Yet in relation to wider foreign and security policy, which determines what the armed forces might be called upon to do, leaders still often

1. For example, the Conservative manifesto commits the government to the 'fastest ever' increase in domestic public R&D spending. See the Conservative and Unionist Party, 'Get Brexit Done, Unleash Britain's Potential: Manifesto 2019', 2019, p. 40.

fall back on the time-worn slogans of support for 'The Rules-Based International System' and a 'Global Britain'.

There are good political reasons why parties like to use these slogans, yet any attempt to add precision soon exposes their inadequacy as a guide for action. As this author has argued before, there is no single rules-based international system (RBIS), but rather a series of systems that exist alongside, and often in tension with, one another.²

This is reflected in the UK's own policies, where successive military interventions without UN Security Council authorisation have been difficult to justify under international law. The process of leaving the EU itself, while conducted with close regard to international legality, is driven by a desire to reject rules-based systems which almost all other European states have been prepared to accept. Recent UN votes, particularly the May 2019 rejection of UK policy towards the Chagos Islands by a margin of 116 to 6,³ suggest that the UK's standing (including among its European allies) as an adherent to international rules is often called into question.

Moreover, the current leader of the UK's most important ally, the US, is driven by an instinctive opposition to multilateralism and rules-based systems, whether in relation to trade, collective security or combating climate change. Other key international players – including China, Russia, India, Turkey and Saudi Arabia – are also moving in a more nationalist (and less rules-based) direction in their foreign and security policies. Any UK attempt to sustain or develop international rules-based systems needs to cope with the realities of a world that is moving in the opposite direction.

Nor does the commitment to 'Global Britain' offer much of a guide for future foreign and security priorities. Since the end of the Cold War, and the lifting of the chronic security threat created by the Soviet military presence in the heart of Central Europe, the UK's foreign and security policy has moved in a markedly more global direction. Its more than £14-billion aid budget, greatly increased since 1990 and one of the largest in the world, is almost entirely spent outside Europe.⁴ Most diplomatic staff are deployed outside Europe.⁵ The armed forces, which were largely focused on NATO during the Cold War, have spent the last three decades involved in multiple campaigns in the Middle East and Asia. And the 1998 decision to recreate an aircraft carrier capability, primarily for use outside the Euro-Atlantic area, predates Brexit by around two decades. There is an argument for further shifting the UK's foreign policy posture

2. Malcolm Chalmers, 'Which Rules? Why There is No Single "Rules-Based International System"', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (April 2019).

3. Owen Bowcott and Julian Borger, 'UK's Suffers Crushing Defeat in UN Vote on Chagos Islands', *The Guardian*, 22 May 2019.

4. Department for International Development, 'Statistics on International Development: Final UK Aid Spend 2018', September 2019.

5. The British Foreign Policy Group (BFPG) reported that only 23% of UK diplomats overseas were based in Europe. See BFPG, 'Running out of Credit? The Decline of the Foreign Office and the Case for Sustained Funding', June 2019, p. 16.

away from NATO and Europe after Brexit, although there are also good arguments for moving in the opposite direction. But it is not credible to extrapolate a loosening of trade ties with Europe into an argument that Brexit provides ‘an opportunity to be a global player once more’.⁶ The UK will continue to be ‘global’ after Brexit, as it has been for at least the last four centuries. The more interesting question is how the UK can best pursue its national interests in areas outside Europe, with what capabilities and with which partners.

Yet foreign policy is still too often seen as a separate area of activity, focused on protecting the international order (the RBIS) through an active role in the world (Global Britain). The reforms introduced in the machinery of government in 2010, which created the National Security Council, and which were reinforced in 2017 with the introduction of ‘Fusion Doctrine’, were welcome in their recognition of the importance of integrating foreign, security and domestic policy instruments in pursuit of national security and prosperity. Recent proposals to give the Foreign and Commonwealth Office the lead role in all aspects of foreign policy, by contrast, could risk returning to the pre-2010 bifurcation of foreign and domestic policy at a time when so many security threats – such as terrorism, organised crime and ‘grey area’ threats from competitor states – require an integration of both.

The UK as a Middle Power

The costs of victory in two world wars, and the concurrent rise of the US as a global power, led to the eclipse of the UK’s century-long position as the world’s leading economic and military power. The recovery of continental economies from wartime destruction, together with the end of empire, added to the perception that the UK was in long-term relative decline.

The UK’s post-war relative decline was halted, or at least masked, during the two decades after the end of the Cold War. The collapse of Soviet power, and the lack of a credible challenge from China at the time, left the US in an unrivalled position – ideologically and militarily – as the world’s dominant power. It therefore strengthened the UK’s international position, as the middle power with the closest security links with Washington. For the UK, this period of increased ‘influence by association’ coincided with a long period of continuous, and relatively rapid, economic growth.⁷ The post-Cold War ‘end to boom and bust’ period between 1992 and 2008 reinforced domestic support for liberal economic policies (with most sharing in its benefits) even as it provided the resources for rapid increases in funding for public services.

The issue of relative decline has returned with a vengeance during the last decade. In contrast to Europe’s decade of stagnation since the 2008 financial crisis, China has emerged

6. Christopher Hope, ‘Britain to Become “True Global Player” Post-Brexit with Military Bases in South-East Asia and Caribbean, says Defence Secretary’, *The Telegraph*, 30 December 2018.

7. See Office for National Statistics, ‘Long-Term Profile of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the UK’, August 2013, <<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160108042245/http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/elmr/explaining-economic-statistics/long-term-profile-of-gdp-in-the-uk/sty-long-term-profile-of-gdp.html>>, accessed 30 January 2020.

as the world's second most important economic power, measured by GDP, and an increasing source of challenge to US, and broader Western, hegemony in international politics. After its post-Soviet collapse, Russia has returned to its traditional position as one of Europe's major powers, challenging UK (and broader Western) policies throughout its European and southern neighbourhoods. Beyond China and Russia, this period has also seen the growing geopolitical importance, and assertiveness, of medium powers such as India, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. All these states are moving in an increasingly nationalist direction, more repressive at home and more willing to pursue risky and competitive approaches in their foreign policies. Western capacity to shape their internal political affairs and respect for human rights is less than it was in the past, not only because President Donald Trump is clearly uninterested but also because of the increasingly multipolar nature of international politics.

Vulnerabilities at Home

The UK's departure from the EU is taking place at a time of accumulating problems with its post-Cold War economic model, including stagnant productivity and real wages, together with levels of inequality between regions – primarily between London and the rest of the country – that are among the highest in Europe. Levels of productivity in parts of Northern Ireland, Wales and the north of England are estimated to be lower than regional cities in Poland and Romania.⁸ The economy as a whole is more reliant on internationalisation than any other major OECD state, especially in relation to financial services, foreign ownership of domestic assets and large net capital inflows (the latter offsetting the largest current account deficit in the G7).⁹ Almost a decade of fiscal austerity has succeeded in reducing the budget deficit from its unsustainably high level after the financial crisis. But the societal cost has been high, with key public services, together with social safety nets, increasingly buckling under the strain.

One of the lessons of the Brexit vote is that large sections of the population believe that the country's leaders have become detached from the concerns of the country's citizens and local communities, more comfortable in Davos than in Doncaster, overly driven by the priorities of the global city in which they are based, and caring little about those parts of the country that have been left behind by globalisation. They have a point. The UK cannot retreat from the world – no country can. But it does need a foreign policy that is seen to be responsive to national interests and protecting those interests in an uncertain world.

It would be wrong to see the UK's societal malaise as being only economic in character. The last decade has seen growing public concern over a range of domestic security threats, including violent crime, child sexual exploitation, money laundering, cyber-enabled theft and narcotics trafficking.¹⁰ The threat from jihadist terrorism – a central security priority since 2001 – remains

8. Andy Bounds, 'UK's Regional Inequality One of Worst in Developed World', *Financial Times*, 27 November 2019.

9. Valentina Romei, 'UK Trade Deficit Hits Widest in Eight Years', *Financial Times*, 31 October 2019.

10. YouGov, 'Concern over Crime Doubles Since Start of the Year', 3 October 2018, <<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2018/10/03/concern-over-crime-doubles-start-year>>.

severe but is now being rivalled by the growth of violent far-right extremism. There is growing concern at the ability of rival states (especially Russia and China) to threaten the UK's critical national infrastructure through cyber attacks and sabotage. The disruptions caused by social media, and the difficult balance that is having to be struck between security and liberty in response, may be only a foretaste of the new security challenges posed by machine learning, enhanced cryptography and bioengineering.

All these challenges will have to be addressed at a time of intensifying fiscal pressures. The government led by Boris Johnson has made important commitments to security spending, promising to increase the defence budget by at least 0.5% annually in real terms, maintain the development aid budget at 0.7% of GNI and recruit 20,000 more police officers.¹¹ Given the many other demands on the public purse, it is likely that new investments in defence and security capabilities will need to be funded within these constraints.

Doing Good – Not Appearing Good

A commitment to put national interest at the heart of UK foreign and security policy need not contradict an acceptance that the UK, like other like-minded democracies, has a moral responsibility to do what it can to protect the security and prosperity of the most oppressed and disadvantaged of the world. This does not mean that the interests of foreign citizens should be given equal weight in the use of UK public resources. The first responsibility of the British state is the security and prosperity of its own people.

Where it can make a difference to the lives of the poorest and most oppressed people in other countries, the government has strong public support in doing so. There is a cross-party consensus in support of a high level of humanitarian aid, an area in which the UK remains a world leader in both quantity and effectiveness. This same generous spirit also helps explain why there was strong public support for humanitarian military interventions in Sierra Leone and the Balkans in the 1990s.

Yet it is vital that the UK and its allies learn from the experience of the repeated failed interventions since that time. The consistent lesson from recent efforts in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya is that no matter how much money is spent and how many bombs are dropped, it is extraordinarily difficult for Western powers to radically reshape the political culture and dynamics of foreign societies for the better. Even in the most supposedly 'fragile' societies, the staying power and legitimacy of local elites has defeated successive external efforts to impose peace settlements from outside. As a result, one of the most important ethical lessons from recent interventions is the need to avoid making things worse than they would have been: for example, through large injections of cash that fuel corruption and conflict (as in Afghanistan), or through regime-change interventions that precipitate vicious civil wars (Iraq after 2003 and Libya after 2011). A further ethical lesson is the need to ensure that interventions taken in pursuit of UK

accessed 27 January 2020.

11. The Conservative and Unionist Party, 'Get Brexit Done, Unleash Britain's Potential', p. 53.

national interest – for example, against terrorists who pose a threat to the UK – are conducted in a way that does not further destabilise host countries, for whom transnational jihadism is often only one of the problems that they face.

In keeping with its broader efforts to be an international good citizen, the UK has often been one of the strongest supporters of new ideas for multilateral treaties and regimes. Its diplomats played an important role, for example, in the establishment of the International Criminal Court, the Arms Trade Treaty and successive international environmental agreements. Most recently, it has pressed for multilateral action to tackle modern slavery and prevent sexual violence in conflict. Such initiatives are attractive to ministers, providing media-friendly opportunities to be seen to be doing something to respond to evident international evils. This very popularity, however, can be a trap if such initiatives are not allied with a realistic plan for making change on the ground, far from the comfortable conference rooms in London, Geneva and Vienna where new international commitments are usually made.

Six Priorities for UK Foreign and Security Policy

Given the multiple challenges to its prosperity and security that the UK is likely to face in coming years, and the limited resources available for tackling them, what should be the government's main priorities for action in the coming decade? This report suggests six.

Security Starts at Home

The first priority should be to respond to the pressing security threats, both state and non-state, to the UK homeland. Having (rightly) focused much domestic effort in recent years on counterterrorism, the state now needs to broaden its prioritisation to include those elements of organised crime that pose the greatest risk to public safety and confidence. The government's commitment to reverse the cut of 20,000 in police numbers since 2010 is a welcome sign that it takes this problem seriously. But it will be critical that these new resources are accompanied by the investments and reforms that are needed to make the police forces, and law enforcement more generally, fit for new types of security threats. This will also require substantive (if unglamorous) new investment in reversing the damage done since 2010 to the wider domestic security system – the courts, prisons, probation and other services vital to providing an integrated response to deteriorating security at home.

Much more thinking also needs to be done on how the return of state-based competition (most notably in relation to Russia and China) requires a set of new tools for protecting UK society from the threats that this could pose. Faced with the stalemate between their respective conventional military forces, and the unacceptability of major war, these powers have increasingly turned to other means – subversion and 'fake news', espionage, cyber attack, intellectual property theft – which often overlap with threats posed by terrorists and other non-state actors but are typically more sophisticated and harder to counter. In addition, new military advances – notably in longer-range conventional missiles – are also forcing a new focus on protection of

key UK-based defence assets, which were previously seen as largely invulnerable in the age of expeditionary warfare.

The Centrality of Neighbourhood

While the first line of defence against security threats must be at home, this is rarely enough in itself. Most security threats, including terrorism and organised crime, also have a strong transnational dimension. This is most clearly reflected in the UK's CONTEST counterterrorism strategy, which integrates efforts across both Whitehall's 'domestic' and 'international' departments. Even more clearly, the main risks of hostile state action come from states – most of all Russia and China – which also pose threats to the UK's European neighbours and allies. Maintaining strong security partnerships with these neighbours – sharing intelligence, building joint capabilities and, where necessary, taking concerted and integrated action – will be vital to UK national security.

NATO remains central to this joint security effort, helping to ensure that the UK is not alone in meeting these multiple challenges. The UK also benefits from, and should continue to strengthen, its bilateral and small-group security ties with its closest neighbours. Strong cooperative security relations with Ireland, the EU member state most likely to be adversely affected by Brexit, will be important. The UK will also want to prioritise strong relations with Nordic and Baltic states, Germany, the Netherlands and France. The departure from the EU is likely to reduce opportunities for multilateral cooperation on defence procurement and law enforcement, and one of the pressing post-Brexit challenges will be to mitigate the damage that occurs as a result. Part of the response may be to place greater emphasis on domestic defence procurement (instead of European collaboration) and immigration controls (in place of access to EU databases). In both areas, however, the temptation towards a more protectionist approach will have to be tempered by an assessment of the likely costs.

Increasing Capability for Acting Without the US

The UK is uniquely internationalised in key elements of national security. No other country services its primary strategic nuclear missile in an allied country, contracts a foreign defence company to jointly manage its nuclear weapons facility (Aldermaston), and welcomes foreign companies (many state-owned) to purchase and operate much of its critical national infrastructure (including nuclear power, rail, water and so on). While the West will remain central – maybe even more central – to the protection of UK economic and security interests, the UK's ability to effectively promote its national interests requires some rethinking of this uniquely high level of asymmetric dependence.

The need to do so is increased by the weakening of Western cohesion in recent years, and the risk that this trend could intensify in future. Even as the UK devotes as much effort as it can to promote Western unity, trends in both the US and Europe suggest that this cannot be taken for granted. US and European approaches to key international issues, economic and security related, could diverge further in years ahead. The risks of further fracturing within the EU,

perhaps because of a new eurozone crisis or a radically nationalist turn by a major member state, could further undermine the prospects for united action.

The US will remain the UK's single most important security partner, as it has been since 1941. After Brexit, however, the UK is likely to continue to differ from the US on some key foreign policy issues, as it often did during the Cold War and as it does now under President Trump (most notably over climate change, trade, Iran, Syria and Ukraine).

While the UK is leaving the EU at a moment when its foreign policy appears particularly aligned with those of its European neighbours, this may not always be the case. Under a different US president, and less sympathetic French or German leaders, the UK could find itself more aligned with the US on some key issues, even as it adopts a more European approach on others. In order to navigate this complexity, foreign policymakers will need a clear understanding of where the UK's own interests lie, together with a theory of influence that allows it to use its alliance relationships to promote and maximise those interests. The enduring strength of the Western alliance is that it is made up of independent states, sharing most interests and values but also maintaining their separate identities and independent political systems. It is a concept and construct which remains ideally suited for post-Brexit Britain.

At times, the internationalist nature of the UK's foreign policy discourse is so focused on the need to maintain its role and responsibilities – and the reluctance to adopt a distinctively national stand – that it fails to make a strong enough link to its national interests. In part, this reflects the history of a state which often subsumed national interest within a wider transnational imperial identity. Both world wars were fought by the British Empire, after all, not by the UK alone. Even today, influential thinkers remain tempted by the idea of the 'Anglosphere' and/or the 'special relationship' with the US as the dominant political identity within which future policy should be formulated.¹²

But Brexit need not mean that the UK is destined to become ever-more dependent on the US. Provided that it nurtures close alliance relationships with all the important Western powers, it does not have to become a satellite state of either the US or the EU. As the (very different) models of Canada and Singapore show, medium and even small states can maintain independent foreign policies if they are open, adaptable and pragmatic.

This principle will be especially challenging to translate into practice in relation to defence capability. In its force planning over the last half century, the UK military has too often assumed that, in all but the most limited scenarios, it would be operating as a junior partner of the US. In a world where US commitment to collective security is less certain than in the past, however, more needs to be done to ensure that the UK has the capability of using its armed forces independently, and/or in coalition with other non-American allies.

12. Michael Kenny and Nick Pearce, *Shadows of Empire: The Anglosphere in British Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).

It is not realistic to aim to have forces that can take on Russia or China in a full-scale war by themselves. But relatively modest investments in key enabling capabilities (for example, in relation to intelligence gathering, command and control) could significantly enhance UK capability for acting with European allies, but without direct US involvement, in a range of more limited security crises that could develop at short notice in and around Europe. These are precisely the scenarios – for example, in the Baltic, Black Sea or Balkans, North Africa or the North Atlantic – in which a more nationalist US administration could plausibly decide that it had no pressing national interest. Even if the UK has no such doubts about future US involvement, the enhanced ability of the UK and other European allies to mount a credible response could itself enhance deterrence, compared with a situation where NATO states rely on the US to lead the response to any crisis. Given the budgetary constraints likely to face the MoD in the 2020 Review, investing more in the capability for action, with European allies, would require making savings elsewhere. It is a trade-off that should, nevertheless, be taken seriously.

Being Prepared for Competition Without End

The post-Brexit UK will need its alliances more than ever as it prepares for a world where competitive geopolitics is on the rise. All-out war between the major powers remains unlikely. Even so, the world seems set for a long period in which China and (especially) Russia see their relationship with Western states in largely competitive terms, and vice versa, and in which this competition is reflected in low levels of mutual trust and understanding, punctuated by frequent crises. It is unlikely to be helpful to see Russian or Chinese interests as being misguided or illegitimate, suggesting that the UK and its allies can just wait patiently for their adversaries to see the light or appoint new leaders. It was always an illusion to believe that the rest of the world was set on an inevitable path towards Westernisation, and international events in recent years have further weakened this proposition.

UK policy towards these two powers, instead, needs to be based on a clear sense of its own interests, an awareness of the risks of undue dependence on competitors for key technological resources, and a readiness (and ability) to push back strongly when threatened. It also means a willingness to seek cooperation in relation to the main areas in which common interests exist or could be developed. It is a rough form of stability, very far from the triumph of democratic values that the US and the UK believed was in their grasp in the 1990s. But it is better than the alternatives.

Setting Clear Priorities Outside Europe

Beyond Europe, the UK's foreign policy priorities should be determined by a calculation of where resources can best be deployed in support of its interests and values. In most countries, commercial relations are likely to be the main driver for policy; in others, humanitarian considerations may be the most important. In some places, the need to counter direct security threats – including terrorism and narcotics trafficking – will take central place (for example, in relation to Somalia and Pakistan, where the density of UK-based diaspora links adds a further dimension of continuing interdependence). More broadly, strong relations with key

sub-Saharan states are set to rise in importance, both for humanitarian reasons and because of the growing risks that underdevelopment and conflict in these states could pose to Europe and the UK. While other policy instruments (such as diplomacy, development and security assistance) have global application, the ability to use significant military force outside the European neighbourhood should not be given a high priority. This does not rule out small-scale, ‘economy of force’, contributions to US-led operations. However, given the growth of capable regional military powers in both the Middle East and Asia, together with the inherent handicaps involved in fighting a long way from home, the risks of preparing for larger-scale global operations exceed likely benefits to national security, diverting resources from combating higher-priority challenges closer to home.

Building Effective Coalitions

The UK should support rules-based international systems where they work and are in its interests. But it should cease to promote a narrative which suggests that there is one single RBIS. There is not. Rather, a range of such systems exist, each of which continues to evolve in response to new challenges and new distributions of international power, and each of which is at times in tension with other rules-based systems.¹³ In a world where some of the most powerful states – including the US – are increasingly sceptical of universal treaties, efforts to tackle pressing global problems are more likely to succeed if they involve coalitions between major powers, including non-Western powers, than if they are based on rules-based systems that lack clear and binding obligations.

For example, in relation to the pressing challenge of combating climate change, global conferences have so far done remarkably little to persuade major powers to do what is required if the planet is to avoid catastrophic temperature changes by the end of this century. If the UK is to persuade others to match its own strong emission reduction efforts, new climate coalitions and alliances, together with new ways of persuasion, will be needed. One of the UK’s contributions in this regard can be its ability to lead research in the new technologies that will be needed if the transition to a low-emissions world is to be accelerated. Investing in competitive green technologies has the added advantage that it can contribute to national economic prosperity.

Conclusion

The hubris of the post-Cold War era was brought to an abrupt end by the West’s dual setbacks in both economic growth (the 2008 financial crisis and the slow growth that followed) and in international security (the failure of successive interventions, the revival of Russia as a capable and threatening competitor, the comprehensive challenge from China and the increasing unreliability of the US). Brexit adds a further challenge, both directly and because of the expectation that ‘taking back control’ will allow the UK to take action to address longstanding grievances and inequalities.

13. Chalmers, ‘Which Rules?’.

If the Johnson government is to address this brew of complex and interrelated problems – comparable to, if not greater than, anything the country has seen since the 1970s – it will need to be ruthless in focusing its foreign and security policy on activities and capabilities that can deliver real benefits for national prosperity and security.

About the Author

Professor Malcolm Chalmers is Deputy Director-General of RUSI and directs its growing portfolio of research into contemporary defence and security issues. His own work is focused on UK defence, foreign and security policy. His recent publications have included studies on: NATO burden-sharing and the 2% target; the 2019 spending round and the UK budget; the security consequences of Brexit; the rules-based international system; Russia–UK security relations; a ‘strategic scorecard’ of recent UK military interventions; cross-Whitehall spending allocations for defence, security and development; the UK’s Modernising Defence Programme review; prospects for, and implications of, a war in Korea; the UK and the North Atlantic; and implications of Brexit for UK foreign and security policy. He has been an Adviser to Parliament’s Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy since 2012, and was a Senior Special Adviser to Foreign Secretaries Jack Straw MP and Margaret Beckett MP.