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SO WE ASK OURSELVES: WHAT IS BRITISH FOREIGN POLICY ABOUT?

By David Dain

Let us start with first principles. We should not be pre-occupied with soul-searching about Britain’s historical vocation. Are we Great or Medium Power; are we Good or Bad Europeans; are our bilateral relations still special: these labels are distractions. [They are prisms which distort our vision. They do not throw much light on our real needs and policy choices.]

The best starting-point is Lord Palmerston’s dictum:

"the furtherance of British interests should be the only object of a British Foreign Secretary."

Thus we must identify first what interests do we have as a nation, and second, how do we best further them.

The answer to the first question is clear. Our most important interest is our own territorial security and the maintenance of peace in Europe. For some countries that might constitute a complete answer. For us it is only part. Britain’s interests overseas are substantial and they are wide. In part that is the legacy of an imperial past. History has bequeathed us unique ties with 50 Commonwealth members. It has left us with particular responsibilities for 14 dependent territories around the world. Britain has duties to fulfill. A rumbling volcano in Montserrat; oil exploration in the South Atlantic; securing a stable, prosperous future for Hong Kong.

But our internationalism is more than the residue of history. Modern Britain remains pre-eminently a nation of traders and travelers. 8.6 million British citizens live overseas. Three in five of our people travel abroad each year. And we live by commerce. We export one quarter of all we produce; a greater share than Japan or the United States, more than Germany or France. We are the world’s third largest outward investor: the biggest foreign investor in the US; the third largest source of private capital to the developing world. [In 1994 our total assets abroad exceeded 1.4 trillion. We had a net income of over 10 billion from our investments overseas.]

Britain’s economy is open and international. Only the US attracts more foreign investment. There is more US investment in the UK than in the whole Pacific region, more than in Germany, France, the Netherlands and Italy combined. We are the number one choice in Europe for Japanese and Korean investors. Britain is the world’s leading center for international bank lending, foreign exchange, aviation and marine insurance.

So Britain’s interests spread across the globe. These considerations give us an even greater interest than most other countries in political stability, freedom of trade, and freedom of passage throughout the world, not just in our own continent. Political stability also requires good government and a proper assurance of basic human rights. We have a moral and practical interest in promoting the values of liberal democracy. It follows that our foreign policy must be global.

It is why we have a permanent voice in the Security Council. It is why a strong, effective
United Nations matters to us. Not because we want to be a big player for its own sake. But because we must be active wherever our national interests are at stake; and they are at stake throughout the world. Furthermore the world needs, and is desperately short of, countries with a long experience of political stability, a tradition of moderation and a global perspective. Only a handful of states meet the criteria. Britain is one of them: The United States another.

These principles underpinning British policy would be familiar to our predecessors of a century ago. What of the modern setting, the context within which we must work today? How do we best promote our interests, the second question I posed in my earlier remarks?

Most importantly, the Nation State remains the basic building block of the international system. It is nation states to which most people feel their first allegiance. International relations are still principally about dealings between states. The conduct of foreign policy must reflect this.

But it must also reflect new global realities.

The electronic media, both instant and multinational, serves as a powerful focus for bringing public opinion immediately to bear on policy-makers. It demands their attention, making policy formulation more complex and multinational. The media spotlight requires governments to be open and accessible. An effective public information effort must run in parallel with diplomatic activity, and be an integral part of it.

Take the environment. The squandering of natural resources has become a matter of immense public concern. But national boundaries are of limited relevance to controlling fish stocks, preserving clean air, or providing fresh water. So countries have to work together to protect their common interest.

Or take the global market. What matters in high finance and broadcasting today is not location but speed of access to information. International capital flows and multinational corporations operate freely across the frontiers of nation states.

MULTILATERAL ACTION

In other words, the setting for policy has changed. We pursue our interests now in different ways from the past. In particular we do more through multilateral organizations than we ever did before; in the European Union, NATO, the UN, the Commonwealth. The US needs only two of these.

It is wrong for me not to touch on the dispute about Europe and Britain’s place in it. This argument will need to be pursued with clarity and common sense for a long time to come.

COOPERATION IN EUROPE

For centuries the affairs of our continent were marked by wars between states with global interests. Through shifting alliances we sought to contain the frictions of such rivalry. Maintaining a balance of power in Europe was our objective and often realized, most successfully during the nineteenth century after the Congress of Vienna.
Such a strategy did not eradicate distrust or suspicion between European states. One recalls Metternich’s remark on learning that the Russian ambassador had died, “Really, I wonder what his motive can have been.”

Nor did it provide an assurance of stability. Europe collapsed frequently into conflict. In the first half of this century combat finally erupted on a world scale.

In the nuclear age and with Western Europe no longer able to take world supremacy for granted, the classic concepts of the balance of power within Europe have lost much of their relevance. There is no strategic threat to the safety of the United Kingdom that would not also be a similar threat to France or to Germany. The interests that bind Europe together have become far greater than the interests that occasionally divide us.

In the minds of our policy makers in Europe, some truths thrust themselves through: Europe is not going to be a superstate. It is not going to disintegrate. Our task, with our partners, is to improve it, to tune it better as a motor for prosperity and stability. We shall not do that if we simply string together a set of negatives. We need less red tape and more free trade, tougher budget discipline and action against fraud. A practical not theoretical approach. We must get away from abstract designs and constitutional constructs of Europe which people do not understand or care for. But we must get away too from the notion that sovereignty is something untouchable, a blessing of chastity which we must keep unsullied by contact with those around us. Foreign policy is about exercise, not the freezing of sovereignty. By working with others we enlarge and maximize our sovereignty.

Even the most powerful sovereign states have lost some of their freedom of action. Nations are not the only actors in the modern system. We live in a less controllable, more interdependent world. As President Kennedy put it more than three decades ago: “No nation can build its destiny alone.”

That does not mean signing up to every scheme, every proposal from our partners in Europe. We have always stood slightly apart from Europe, because our horizons are broader. But we have always been engaged, because our interests demand it. We should not abandon that special role. Britain should aspire to something more than the status of an off-shore Switzerland. We cannot safely turn aside from the continent within whose boundaries one third of all the world’s trade takes place.

We are looking now at modest improvements in the institutions of Europe not new departures. We have pooled sovereignty where that is necessary to create a single market with a single set of rules evenly applied. We are cooperating together as nations in areas which touch most closely on the interests of sovereign states, like foreign affairs and defense, and fighting crime. The Common Foreign and Security Policy, built on an inter-governmental basis, provides an instrument for this cooperation where it is needed. [The development of common positions and joint actions is not constrained by institutional mechanics, but by the shared needs and interests of nations.]
The CFSP can give us new opportunities. Our policy towards the East, to Russia and its neighbors, is being implemented more effectively as we work together. Through our cooperation in Bosnia we are bringing aid to millions. We are moving steadily to the time when, by agreement not by majority voting, the members of the EU work as one in their efforts to spread to the East the stability and prosperity we take for granted in the West.

Choosing to play our part in Europe does not mean abandoning our Atlantic role. Our place in NATO remains fundamental to British foreign policy. Our membership of the Alliance represents a bigger pooling of sovereignty than anything seriously envisaged for the EU. If a NATO member is attacked in the morning Britain is at war in the afternoon. There would be no parliamentary vote on that, no Legislation, no veto or referendum; it is an absolute obligation. We are stronger with it than we could be alone. We are working now to extend the stability NATO offers to the east, just as we will to extend the benefits the EU can provide. Britain sits firmly at the heart of the UN, as we have for half-a-century. Despair over the UN only for those who believe that in 50 years you can change the nature of the world. There is no new world order. There is a slow continuous effort to cope with disaster, now more often the chaos of civil war than the cruder threats of invasion and occupation of one state by another. That is a harder task, and we have not yet learnt fully to deal with it. But thanks to the UN Namibia today is at peace. Mozambique is at peace. Cambodia has at least been rescued from disaster. The prospect for peace in Angola no longer looks so hopeless.

We cannot always calm the storms of conflict. In Somalia the UN had a failure. Bosnia remains poised between success and disaster. But what Britain and others are doing there, saving lives, reining in destruction, is right. [It is right that Britain sent a logistics battalion to support the UN in Rwanda, and is doing the same now in Angola.] It is right too that we look for ways to make structures and methods of the system; above all preparing ourselves better to diagnose earlier and react more effectively to the signs of conflict.

The commonwealth provides a further forum for the expression of Britain's special role in the world. It links us not just with traditional partners like Canada and Australia, but with some of the world's fastest growing economies, like Malaysia, Singapore and India; and some of the biggest contributors to UN peacekeeping, like Pakistan and Bangladesh. In the past it was too often a place for sterile debate over South Africa. With that divisive squabble over, the Commonwealth is set to flourish, as a unique instrument to promote democracy and good government across five continents; a club which bridges the gap between developed and developing countries, to cooperate on common problems like drug trafficking and money laundering, to mobilize support for free trade and UN reform.

BRITAIN'S BILATERAL RELATIONS

In all these different institutions, in a range of different ways, Britain is exercising her sovereignty. But in a world of nations all this work depends on relations between states. The concept of bilateral relations between Britain and another country sometimes seems empty, a fetish of the Foreign Office. But those ties are a shorthand for the essential framework of cooperation between nations.
No less, we see the importance of bilateral relations with the United States too. That relationship is founded on a firm basis of unique cooperation in intelligence and nuclear matters. But it goes much wider and deeper than that. Kissinger describes its intangible nature well in The White House Years:

(A pattern developed) ‘so matter-of-factly intimate that it became psychologically impossible to ignore British views. They evolved a habit of meetings so regular that autonomous American action somehow came to seem to violate club rules...It was an extraordinary relationship because it rested on no legal claim; it was formalized by no document; it was carried forward by successive British governments as if no alternative was conceivable.’

The was twenty years ago. But the links between Britain and America have continued to thrive, from the days of resisting Soviet expansionism to the more recent task of freeing Kuwait from Iraqi aggression. In commerce, Britain is the biggest foreign investor in the United States. As already mentioned, the US commits more investment to Britain than to the entire Asia-Pacific region. Our relations with crucially important countries across the world have evolved and thickened over the past two decades.

Since 1979 we have built the fullest commercial and political partnership with Japan of any European country. Our countries are working closer together than ever before, from the revival of the British car industry, to cooperation in aid programs, to a rapidly growing dialogue on security and peacekeeping matters, to exchanges of diplomatic secondments, Britain’s first such venture outside Europe, Japan’s first anywhere.

Not too long ago Britain was maligned for maintaining dialogue with South Africa. But during and after the apartheid years we have helped South Africa on the long transition on which she is now embarked. Against the expectation of our critics we have a special position in the South Africa of Nelson Mandela.

We have created a new partnership and a huge increase in trade with India as she liberates her economy. And we have balanced this with a closer relationship with Pakistan. With China we have seen slow but steady progress in one of the longest, most complex series of negotiations ever undertaken between two states, to secure a valid future for Hong Kong.

Ten years ago Britain and the Soviet Union trained missiles against each other. Today we are loaning British expertise to nurture democratic government and a market economy in Russia.

Seven years ago we had no diplomatic relations with Argentina. Today trade and investment are rising. We work together on fisheries, and are seeking agreements on oil exploration, with our differences on the Falklands unresolved but set to one side.

In 1968 we withdrew our military presence from the Gulf. This was treated as an abdication. In 1996 our presence there is solid and substantial, buttressed by our part in the Gulf War.