‘Back to the future? British foreign policy comes full circle’

According to Lord Palmerston, Britannia’s flamboyant mid-19th century Foreign Secretary, Britain had no permanent allies and no permanent enemies, but only permanent interests.

It was ever thus according to Professor Robert Tombs who charts the story of Britain’s foreign policy from the days of Napoleon to the present day, drawing striking comparisons along the way.

The full article can be read below with a link to the original beneath it.

Global Britain: allies, enemies, interests

Written by Robert Tombs

We are necessarily rethinking our global strategy not only due to Brexit but because of new dangers. Some history can help us not to look backwards, but to look forwards.

The recent Nato summit in Vilnius is an occasion to reflect on our place in Europe and the wider world. Lord Palmerston, one of our most effective Foreign Secretaries (and deadly enemy of the Atlantic slave trade) remarked in the House of Commons that Britain had no permanent allies and no permanent enemies, but only permanent interests.

Interests we indeed have, and broadly the same as his: an orderly international system in which we can feed ourselves by trade and support the principles of representative government and individual liberty, the raw materials of a peaceful world.

Permanent alliance – NATO

But today we also have the nearest thing to permanent allies, in Nato, which the British public overwhelmingly supports. Nato was largely a British invention, the work of Ernest Bevin in 1949—perhaps Palmerston's nearest modern equivalent. As a relatively small country, and one (until recently) with a fairly small population, we have always needed allies in time of emergency. This is not a sign of weakness. We have only fought one major war without allies in over three centuries, and we lost it.

Nato, as a defensive alliance of liberal states which does not interfere in internal politics, would have been the dream of Victorian statesmen. Professor John Bew—the biographer of Lord Castlereagh, who built just such an alliance to defeat Napoleon—now advises on global strategy in Downing Street, and he doubtless takes the long view. He helped formulate our 'tilt' to the Pacific, made concrete in the AUKUS pact with Australia and America, and followed up by accession to the CPTPP trading system, just now signed by Kemi Badenoch.

Yet Nato remains the bedrock of our security, and its maintenance the priority of our foreign policy. Thanks to Nato, we are free from direct military threat –as Palmerston never was, as his huge South Coast fortifications prove. When he first became a minister in 1808 (three years out of Cambridge) we had to spend 10 percent of national income on the navy alone—five times today's total defence budget. We have been able to slash defence spending and use the money for welfare—an enviable choice if you can manage it. But now, as

almost everyone agrees in principle, we must spend more to face new threats around the world.

Hold tight to those who can hurt you

Palmerston said something else: that we should cooperate most closely with the country that could do us most harm. For him, that was France, a potential invader and yet an ally against Russia and China. I have often thought that his dictum applies to our relationship with the USA. If Britain has had a global strategy for the last 100 years, it has been to make sure than America was our ally.

It has clearly worked on the whole, though not without cost. Naturally we sentimentalize it as a 'Special Relationship' but we should not be too taken in by our own propaganda. Especially not when a deeply troubled America is ruled by such patently inadequate politicians. Fortunately, our alliance works most effectively at a deeper level: that of the intelligence services and the armed forces, and it operates irrespective of the vagaries of presidents. The AUKUS agreement with Australia shows that it is very much alive.

America naturally wants us to serve its interests, hence its opposition to Brexit: it always wanted Britain as its spokesman in Brussels. Many British Remainers accepted this argument, which was already a major consideration when we first applied to join the Common Market: that is, that we should be in 'Europe' to have more influence in Washington. This is not the way a free country should direct its foreign policy.

'Declinism' of the FCDO

Since the beginning of the Ukraine war, British policy has been distinctive, right and brave: sending weapons when

America hesitated and Germany and France refused, and upping the level of support with missiles, then tanks, then aircrew training—the issue that seemingly annoyed the cautious President Biden. But it was reportedly the Defence Department, not the FCDO, that championed this policy, and it was backed by Boris Johnson. Indeed, the Foreign Office seems to have opposed getting out of step with Washington, Berlin and Paris.

Even its keenest defenders would hardly claim that the Foreign Office plays the same role as in the time of Castlereagh, Palmerston, Salisbury or even Bevin. Those who should be designing our policy too often seem to see Britain's natural role as subordination, despite its being, for the first time in history, Europe's leading military power. A former Foreign Office minister has said privately that they don't think British policy really matters: they just go through the motions.

After the Second World War the diplomatic establishment succumbed to severe 'declinism'—the wrong-headed belief that Britain had become a second-rate power—and this led them to champion entry into 'Europe' at any price. No one would deny that the FCDO was overwhelmingly anti-Brexit, both before and after the referendum, and must take some responsibility for the feebleness of Britain's negotiations.

Many diplomatic and political insiders lament the FCDO's declining quality and its lack of expertise. Many of its officials seem to know little of the languages, histories and cultures of the countries to which they are briefly posted, and—worse still—little about the country they represent.

Reform of the FCDO

Long gone are the days when the likes of Lord Stratford de Redcliffe, ambassador to Turkey for nineteen years, could play

a major role, knowing everybody and everything. A bygone age? Yet a recent Saudi ambassador to Washington served for 23 years. Improving Foreign Office recruitment, promotions and specialist training (not least in languages) is crucial, as is arranging postings of adequate length in major embassies and backing up diplomats with an expert research department.

This is not a question of resources, but of proper deployment and the emphasis on regional knowledge not vague 'managerial' skills. It seems strange that so many of the top ambassadorial posts are held by women. Is there a shortage of qualified men?

Comparable countries such as France and Germany seem far more willing to assert their interests. They have done so again by delaying Ukraine's future accession to Nato and preventing the British Defence Secretary Ben Wallace from becoming its Secretary General despite (or perhaps because of) his determined support for Ukraine. The EU and its leading 'axis', Paris and Berlin, have shown themselves to be unreliable allies.

Foreign policy challenges

We need a clear strategy, not only because of Brexit, but even more because of new and acute dangers. Perhaps we now have the beginnings of one. Britain has consolidated its ties with the Baltic countries. Sweden and Finland are joining Nato—a huge bonus for Nato, and one facilitated by Britain's security guarantee in May 2022. At the same time, we have the AUKUS pact and closer ties with Japan.

Declinists might say this is a huge over-reach for a 'medium sized power' whose armed forces have been run down. But as an island utterly dependent on global trade, and one of the world's most powerful states, we need to be active. What makes this global strategy possible is the flexibility of sea

power. We need far more than we have, but we should not underestimate our strength with the usual ‘declinist’ lament.

Future military strategy

At the height of British sea-power in the 19th century, the Royal Navy had 40 major ships; and today it has 31—infinitely more powerful and of course more expensive. What has changed is the rise of the United States and China.

Generals and distinguished old soldiers with seats in the Lords understandably argue for more tanks and more boots on the ground. But what will soon be Europe’s most powerful armies, the Ukrainian and the Polish, will not need token British battalions to hold off the Russians. We do not need to put major ground forces on the Continent. The US Marine Corps, comparable in size with the British Army, has given up its tanks.

Our European allies need naval and intelligence support. Russian submarines can threaten undersea pipelines and cables, as they have shown. Chinese submarines and warships may soon be in European waters too. We should concentrate on building up our naval forces, both surface and submarine, and equip a small highly equipped and mobile army that can operate anywhere. This is something that would have been obvious to Palmerston, and indeed to every British statesman over many centuries.

By Robert Tombs, 23/07/23

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