

David Cameron's pragmatic 'liberal interventionism' approach to foreign policy differs from that of his Conservative predecessors

With the UK embroiled in an ever lengthening conflict in Libya and commentators questioning the UK military's ability to carry out their commitments after 2015 following the cuts made in the Strategic Defence and Security Review it is surprising that the origins of Cameron's foreign policy remain under researched. [Pete Redford](#), together with [Matt Beech](#), finds that Cameron's foreign policy approach is much more pragmatically liberal in its outlook (as evidence by the UK's recent intervention in Libya) than that of the Conservative leaders that have come before him.



After the 2010 election, Cameron's Conservatives, albeit with their Liberal Democrat partners, were charged with the responsibility of determining British foreign policy for the first time in the post – 9/11 world. This is huge responsibility for this new, and younger, generation of "liberal" Conservatives. Therefore it is only right that academics are starting to analyse Cameron's approach to foreign policy and whether there are any Conservative foreign policy traditions and ideas that Cameron may draw upon.



The foreign affairs section of the Conservative party's [website](#) contains the following statement:

The Government believes that Britain must always be an active member of the global community, promoting our national interests while standing up for the values of freedom, fairness and responsibility. This means working as a constructive member of the United Nations, NATO and other multilateral organisations including the Commonwealth; working to promote stability and security; and pushing for reform of global institutions to ensure that they reflect the modern world.

Not only does the statement endorse the historic Conservative approach of 'promoting our national interests' but also maintains a more 'liberal' need to stand up for 'values of freedom, fairness and responsibility'. Conservatives have always been engaged in foreign affairs from MacMillan's '[Winds of Change](#)', Thatcher's engagement with Gorbachev, to Major's signing of the Belfast Agreement. The traditional approach taken by post war Conservatives, of engagement, is now being coupled with a new liberal Conservative approach which suggests interventionism which aims to take an active role in the world, championing the cause of democracy, supporting human rights and international law.

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In the post-war era Conservatives, faced with the diminishing global role of the UK, have maintained a pragmatic approach to foreign policy. This has revolved around the idea of promoting the national interest and engaging whoever necessary, whenever necessary. This clearly realist approach is one that was demonstrated by Thatcher and espoused by her foreign secretaries. The core tenets of this realist approach are still evident in Cameron's approach to foreign affairs but it is evident that his Conservative party have imported idealism in the form of liberal ideology in their foreign policy outlook. By subscribing to more idealist



liberal foreign policy themes and placing them next to traditional realist and

pragmatic conservative foreign policy Cameron and his party are indicating that their view of the UK's global role is different to that of their predecessors.

In the aftermath of 9/11 New Labour maintained that the attacks fundamentally altered British foreign and defence policy. The rise of international terrorism and the emergence of a home grown terrorist threat have further cemented this with the fear of terrorist attacks cemented in the British consciousness as the biggest threat facing the UK.

This view is also taken by Cameron's Conservatives who believe that the 9/11 attacks have indeed altered Britain's foreign policy. However, Cameron's view is in contrast to that of the three foreign secretaries in the article that served under Thatcher. To them 9/11 isn't the decisive shift in foreign policy that New Labour and Cameron's Conservatives see it as. They take an "archetypal Tory" view in that they are unsurprised by new events and that terrorism is ever present, just that throughout history it takes different forms.

It is worth noting that the Tory party in opposition, and more in line with their 'liberal' principles, were keen to highlight concerns about the way New Labour set about balancing personal liberty and security. The previous government's plan for 90-day detention without charge for terror suspects is a prime example of this with 187 Conservatives voting against the measure, including Hague and Cameron. It would be fair to 'assume that their conception of liberal Conservatism and emphasis on liberal rights played a part in the way they voted, despite traditional Conservative predilection for tough law and order policies'.

However, Cameron and his generation of Conservatives still follow many traditions practised by past Conservative governments, such as Euroscepticism and a belief in free market economics, but none more so than the emphasis given to the importance of the 'special relationship' with the US. Thatcher, in particular, did more than any other Conservative leader to place 'Atlanticism' firmly in Conservative foreign policy tradition. She romanticised an alliance born out of the Second World War and the defeat of fascism and maintained through the cold war battle of the free-market capitalism of the US and UK against Communism. However four foreign secretaries have taken a contrary view to the 'special relationship' as romanticised by Thatcherites with Lord Carrington describing it as 'demeaning', Lord Howe as 'misleading'.

Yet, despite this, it is the romantic version of history that has been emphasised by many a post-Thatcherite Conservative, including Cameron's Conservatives. William Hague describes it as "a relationship which remains the cornerstone of strategic thinking in London". Therefore it is safe to assume that with instinctive Euroscepticism and steadfast belief in free market economics, traditional Thatcherite support for the 'special relationship', and therein promoting the national interest, will remain a default position of Cameron's Conservatives. Nonetheless, with the emergence of the [BRIC](#) countries as global players it remains to be seen if this will maintain the case?

Cameron's Conservatism is interesting as it aims to transcend the traditional national self-interest approach and stress its liberal values of humanitarian responsibility to the vulnerable. Whilst in Opposition it was questionable if Cameron, with the hindsight of Blair's more muscular form of liberal interventionism, would be prepared to back up his liberal Conservative principles with military power but as we have seen with the Libyan conflict this may not be the case. In the long term it will be interesting to see what this means for future British policy towards Libya, and possibly, Syria?

This global view taken by Cameron's Conservative led coalition as an active member of the international community has clearly taken on liberal principles leading to notions of 'global citizenship, human rights and democracy'. With intervention in Libya currently being undertaken it is not a large intellectual leap to contemplate liberal interventionism aimed at upholding these rights. It remains to be seen if Cameron will see out his vision and not be constricted by the complexities of government and foreign policy but if he does it will demonstrate a clear break from the traditional conservative global view. One thing is clear Cameron and his Conservatives have set out their stall as liberal Conservatives, combining traditional Tory policy with Liberalism, whether they can carry out this vision remains to be seen.

The full article, British Conservatism and Foreign Policy: Traditions and Ideas Shaping Cameron's Global View, by [Dr Matt Beech](#) of the [Centre for British Politics](#) at the University of Hull can be found [here](#).