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The future of UK foreign policy: the world we face, and the world we would create

Report

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> The World We Face, and the World We Would Create

Mr Robert Cooper

Those who have dreamed of a perpetual peace have always been woken from their deep sleep by the roar of bombs. The natural condition of mankind is conflict and the natural condition of the state is war.

There are enough examples: Afghanistan, the Congo, Sudan over many years, not so long ago the Balkans. And risks are all around: in the Middle East, in South Asia, in the frozen conflicts in Europe, in the unpredictable activities of North Korea.

But something strange has happened: in amongst all these problems there is not the faintest smell of great power conflict. That is all the more strange when we consider that many of today's troubled places were in the past the scene of great power rivalry. Britain and France contested Sudan; the Balkans, where World War I began, has become a place where great powers cooperate to try and quieten conflict; and the six powers who try without success to reduce risks in the Korean peninsula are the same six who in various combinations fought three devastating wars there. Another six powers work together on Iran; Russia is part of the Quartet that backs US efforts at peace in Palestine. It is now more than fifty years since there was a great power War and we seem to live in a different world. Can it last?

There are three possible causes of this long peace. First is American supremacy. The USA is so far ahead of every other country in military capability that it makes no sense for any other country to consider contesting its position. Great power peace through unipolarity. Yet here is a paradox since the massive military capability that guarantees a US victory in any battle with its peers has not enabled it to master an impoverished country one tenth of its size.

The second explanation is the existence of nuclear weapons: a war to the death among great powers would become a nuclear war; and, fortunately, we seem to have understood that this would always be a war without winners. Great power peace through mutually assured destruction.

Third, there is globalization. The nineteenth century liberals, such as Cobden and Bright, believed that free trade would lead to peace because trade was more profitable than war. The premise was right but the conclusion proved wrong. But perhaps they were just ahead of their time. Perhaps we have now reached a critical mass of global prosperity from which we cannot retreat. Today a hint of trouble on the other side of the world shocks the financial markets, and causes cancellations in tourist bookings. What is more, the success of governments and the legitimacy of political systems seem to depend more on individual prosperity than on national glory. Deng Xiaoping's remark that it is glorious to be rich marked the turning point. Peace through mutually assured prosperity.

Or perhaps not. But when we remember the misery that war brings we ought to resolve to do everything possible to turn this long interlude into something more permanent. There must be a chance of doing this. And the recipe is not expensive. First we must preserve, for a time at least, American supremacy.

Only the Americans themselves can do that, and it will be achieved not by the kind of sentiments expressed in this short essay but by the powerful, primitive national emotions that in their time have made the world a dark and dangerous place. For a while at least this does not seem difficult. Americans still want a strong defence and America's lead if so great, its accumulation of technology, experience and material so far beyond any other country, that the next ten or twenty years – probably more – are guaranteed.

Second we must retain nuclear weapons: that looks all too easy. And we must retain the memory of what war, especially nuclear war, means. The real risk is not from the established nuclear powers, but that one of the not-yet-quite-a-great-powers like India or Pakistan might demonstrate that lesser powers today can cause great power levels of destruction. So we must transmit the memory to others too.

Finally, hardest of all, we must keep the global economy dynamic, regulated to avoid catastrophic shocks, and above all we must keep it open.

That however is not enough. Reason and materialism have not yet conquered national passion. At regular intervals we see incidents in the South China Sea or around the many disputed islands that could set off a chain reaction that might prove uncontrollable. If we are to keep safe the system which, perhaps by accident, we have built, it will need more rules than it has now. Only common understandings can keep ourselves safe from ourselves: solutions for Taiwan, agreements about behaviour on the high seas, understandings about where the high seas begin and end, agreements on who owns which bit of coral reef. Just as markets need regulation so do political relations. In Europe agreements about land borders took several centuries of war to reach. We must hope that young countries in Asia grow old more quickly.

That is not all. Dealing with climate change is going to require an unprecedented level of cooperation. And all this must happen just when the international

scene has widened to include a greater variety of countries and cultures; a moment when, for the first time, great powers may also be developing countries, grown greater than their former colonial masters; and their memories are not so much of war as of colonial humiliation.

All wars are dangerous; the civil wars of collapsing states risk creating terrorists that plague our peace, make airports ever more unpleasant and government ever more intrusive. But great power wars today would be like nothing we have ever thought of. It may be that the dream of a lasting peace is hopelessly naïve; but the alternative is unthinkable. Perhaps the best we could realistically hope for would be that we might stumble through quarrels and crises and misunderstandings and brinkmanship, as we did during the Cold War, and arrive at some approximation of this condition.

What if we succeed? What would the world look like? This is an important question since if we want to achieve a seemingly impossible dream will have to plan for it and know how its constituent parts look. One thing is certain: it cannot look too much like the 19th century, which was after all a century of great power conflict. That rules out the balance of power and the threat of war as an organizing principle. It does not however make military power irrelevant: US military dominance may be one of the vital elements guarding the peace; but its role would be to prevent rivalry rather than to contest it. And rivalry would mostly take other forms, primarily economic, as seems largely to be the case today. Military power, like nuclear weapons, would be a part of the background rather than a factor in the everyday hierarchy of nations – though it would give the USA a special position as the provider of the reserve currency of power long after the dollar has lost its position.

America's position as the dominant military power will be a source of power, but not, as it was in the past, because it threatens others. Rather it would bring authority for the USA as the most important provider of global security. Hard power will matter because it

brings soft power: not force but influence. Because security is the most important of all public goods the USA will remain the most important power. But it will be only one power among many, and the measure of each will be its contribution to global public goods. These take many forms, from the less significant roles such as the provision of accepted standards for food safety, to critical public goods such as leadership in climate change, or in setting standards in financial markets, or providing a reliable reserve currency. (Thus today Germany is more important than other European countries because of its role in sustaining the Euro). Honour and power will go above all to those who can create the rules and institutions of global governance. It is not after all so glorious to be rich, though it is pleasant. But just rich means being nouveau riche. Those who also want influence and respect must contribute to the community, take risks for it, provide it financial resources or social capital by bringing countries together for the difficult task of making it all work. That is what glory will mean in a less militarised world.

Leadership will be all the more valued because it will be much more difficult than the leadership that America gave the West, or France and Germany have given the European Union. The big players are more diverse, more suspicious, more jealous. As always the most important global public good will

be trust. Gradually we may even change our view of the state from the Weberian definition - the body which has the monopoly on force - to one more in keeping with the times: the body which has the local monopoly on making rules – since that will be the most important contribution each will have to deliver to the global system.

This is a fantasy world but we must imagine it if we want to bring it about. A British government which is quietly but sensibly giving up pretensions to a global military role should think about how it can win honour and influence in other areas. There are many where it has something to offer. One is intelligence, still an important component of global security and one where quality is as important as size. The UK has made a distinguished contribution in the past and can do so in the future too. Intelligence on nuclear proliferation, terrorism and cyber attack will be all the more important in a world where conventional war is less salient. In most other areas – rule making, standard setting, guarantee giving – size will matter and here the UK, like it or not will have to work with others, notably the European Union. That is perhaps bad news for some. But the good news is that the UK brings to the EU the hard headed sense of power and purpose that it sometimes lacks and can, when it chooses, exercise a decisive influence. ■