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The future of UK foreign policy: Sir Malcolm Rifkind

Report

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➤ Sir Malcolm Rifkind

Any debate about British foreign policy must begin by recognising that the UK's role in international affairs differs from that of most other countries in the world. For generations, Britain has maintained a global foreign policy. It has considered its national interests to extend well beyond its own shores, and viewed events overseas as ones that have a direct impact at home. This understanding has been reflected in the UK's approach to the world. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office maintains a wide network of embassies in all of the world's continents. Likewise, the Ministry of Defence retains the military capacity to deploy forces to any part of the globe in support of UN, NATO, or British interests.

In foreign policy terms, this is the exception, not the rule. Most countries do not adopt this approach, in part because they do not have the capacity to do so. For instance, smaller nations can not afford to extend embassies far beyond the diplomatic capitals of New York, Paris, Washington and London. It is also a question of priorities. China, Russia and India are all great powers in their own right. Yet they are all regional powers. The primary focus of Beijing, Moscow and New Delhi are relations with neighbouring nations. Accordingly, none of them have moved to develop the ability to deploy military force beyond their own theatre. That capacity remains unique to the United States, France, and the UK.

However, while Britain's engagement with the world has a long history, it has been placed in jeopardy by recent developments. The first threat is a creeping degree of scepticism about its benefits. Although a strong international presence is not the same as a Blairite effort to reshape the world through the use of military force, the two have become conflated in the mind of the public. The difficulties encountered by British forces in Afghanistan, not to mention the misguided intervention into Iraq, have given rise to a view that Britain either can't play a positive role in the world, or shouldn't seek to do so.

The second challenge to Britain's traditional international role is financial. Closing the record budget deficit, which topped 11% of GDP prior to the general election, will require real reductions in the overall spending of both the MoD and the FCO, especially the latter.

In light of these twin challenges, the question for the UK and its Conservative led Government is whether it wishes to retain a global approach, or resign itself to the lesser status. Is it still prepared to act like France, or is it content to have influence comparable with that of Spain?

I have always been of the view that the UK should aggressively defend its privileged position in international affairs, and this remains my view. Mistakes in the recent conduct of Britain's foreign policy have been pronounced, and financial pressures are real. Yet both of these are short term factors. The UK's long term interests demand that Britain remains actively involved on the international stage, and retains the tools it needs to do so. Why?

It is most certainly not, as some critics suggest, out of nostalgia for bygone imperial prestige. Indeed, the reverse is true. It not the past, but rather the years to come, that require the UK to maintain and develop its current connections.

Any nation's foreign policy should place national interests at its heart. For the UK, these interests are increasingly international. Britain's economy, the sixth largest in the world, is locked into a global trading system, and despite all of the last two years' upheaval, the UK continues to play a leading role in international finance. At a time of economic uncertainty, the UK simply cannot afford to turn its back on free trade, or cut itself off from economic decision making at the international level. Co-operation with trading partners, and participation in the affairs of international bodies such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, has never been more important.

In addition, the UK's primary security concerns are all international in nature. Other nations have to contend with the prospects of internal instability, either in the form of ethnic tension or unchecked military power. By contrast, Britain's primary focus is devoted to trans-national terrorist groups, the threat of nuclear proliferation, and the damaging effects that could result from uncontrolled climate change. The UK also has obligations to meet that prevent it from retreating from the world. As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, and a leading player in NATO, the EU, and the Commonwealth, Britain has already committed itself to a high level of involvement in world affairs.

It should also not be forgotten that the UK's international stature and prominence remains high. Many nations look to the UK for guidance and leadership by example. More and more British residents have family ties in other nations. Likewise, an increasing number of citizens live overseas, most prominently in the United States, the nations of the EU, and the Middle East. To suggest that the UK could discontinue its current level of international involvement alongside these countervailing trends would be mistaken.

Yet if engagement on a global scale is in Britain's interests, is it still within our capacity? Do financial pressures make such an approach an unaffordable luxury?

It is worth stressing that the budgetary challenge ought to be downplayed. While the UK's financial situation is of paramount domestic importance, it need not undermine foreign policy provided an appropriate approach to cutbacks is adopted. While the FCO will have to shoulder some of the cuts that are to be made across Whitehall, it would be wise of it to ensure that its own 'frontline services' be insulated. I speak of the UK's embassies and consulates, some of which might well become targets for closure in internal spending reviews. Everything must be done to protect this network, including its smaller missions, which provide tremendous value for money. While they may seem superfluous, closing them would send the erroneous signal that the UK is pursuing a policy of disengagement, and signal a growing disinterest to the region of which they are part.

That is not to say that the benefits of a broad internationalism need only be symbolic. The UK must derive tangible benefit from its overseas endeavours, and not just be seen to benefit. Ensuring that this is the case will require the UK seek out new areas of co-operation in the coming years. Indeed, this has already been established as a priority by the new Government. The Foreign Secretary noted the work yet to be accomplished in a speech in June, when he drew attention to the fact that the UK currently exports more to Ireland than it does to India, China and Russia combined. During his visit to South Asia, the Prime Minister drew coverage for his comments on Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban. Yet the press reports overshadowed what was a more important story. Within his first months in office, the British Prime Minister was visiting India in an effort to secure greater opportunities for domestic businesses.

That trip marked the first step in a major new initiative. Business delegations led the occupant of Downing Street are not new. What is new, is a whole scale effort to realise hitherto untapped opportunities. From the Foreign Secretary's determination to forge new ties with the states of the Gulf region, to the FCO's efforts to reinvigorate the Commonwealth, there is a concerted attempt to strengthen bilateral relations and institutional frameworks that have been under

utilised. The new Government is far more likely to be found building new links, than rehashing past debates such as how close London should be to Washington, or the extent to which the UK should integrate with the nations of Europe. In the long run, that emphasis will pay dividends, by reaffirming the benefits of a truly global policy.

The advent of a new Government inevitably leads to far reaching reviews of past policy. In some cases, substantive changes are needed. This is no less true for foreign affairs than it is for other areas. Yet the new Government has made clear, quite rightly, that any changes will take place within the establish boundaries of full engagement. No country with the economic, political and military interests of the UK, could expect to defend those interests by reversing such a policy, a point recognised by the new National Security Strategy. While there may be a need for a refocusing in the years ahead, there will not be a need for retreat. ■
