

Britain's foreign policy reset



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INTRODUCTION

In mid-December James Cleverly, the British foreign secretary, marked 100 days in office with a public question and answer session on Twitter.

Cleverly is the UK's seventh foreign minister in less than 10 years, a reflection of the political chaos that has characterized the leadership of the ruling Conservative Party as it has attempted to steer the country through the fallout from the Brexit vote, the COVID-19 pandemic and, now, the polycrisis of war in Europe, surging inflation and a recession.

The recent tumultuous nature of domestic politics in the UK has meant that the questions around what the country's foreign policy will look like after leaving the EU has been largely marginalized.

The Conservative placeholder for what would happen after Brexit was the grandiose-sounding "Global Britain" approach, which simultaneously meant lots and nothing. It signified that the government did not see Brexit as a retreat into isolationism but rather a chance to form new and dynamic relationships overseas — but it lacked detail on how that would happen.

A survey by the British Foreign Policy Group in 2022 revealed that more than a quarter (27

percent) of Britons polled had never heard of the term "Global Britain" and only 12 percent believed they fully understood what it meant. So where exactly is UK foreign policy heading in the modern age?

The architecture of British foreign policy apparatus was significantly changed in 2020 when the then prime minister, Boris Johnson, a former foreign secretary, merged the Foreign Office with the Department for International Development to form the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. This was touted as "an opportunity for the UK to have even greater impact and influence on the world stage¹."

Much more detail about what this new setup sought to achieve was published in 2021 in "Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy," a document that described the government's vision for the role of the UK in the world over the next decade and the action it would take up to 2025.

This was a thorough, 114-page document that had been years in the making and covered a wide range of issues, from counterterrorism to climate change, as it set out ambitions for the UK to "shape the world of the future."

However, one of the key difficulties in trying

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to shape the world of the future is that it is a vastly difficult concept to predict — and the world is inclined to push back against being shaped. Indeed, when Harold Macmillan, the British prime minister from 1957 to 1963, was asked to name the greatest challenge for a statesman, he replied, "Events, dear boy, events."

Britain has attempted a reset of its foreign policy approach at a time of arguably historic levels of global change and uncertainty. Beyond the unprecedented nature of events in Ukraine we also see a more isolationist US, China on the rise, and a more distant UK-European setup, while a host of dynamic, emerging powers in Africa and the Middle East compete as part of a globalized world in flux.

GUNBOAT DIPLOMACY

The UK rightly looks to its positions on global bodies as markers of its continuing influence. It is unique in being a permanent member of the UN Security Council as well as a member of NATO and of the Commonwealth. It ranks in the global top 10 in terms of numbers of diplomatic missions and in the top five for military expenditure.

Yet, as Defense Secretary Ben Wallace admitted in 2021: "It is obvious that Britain is not a superpower²." He cited as an example

During the visit of Boris Johnson to Saudi Arabia in March 2022 the PM lobbied for higher production of oil after Russia's invasion of Ukraine sent markets into turmoil.
 AFP

of why this is the case the fact that Britain had not been able to deploy a mass army for half a century. However, he highlighted a range of tools of influence the UK does have its disposal — "from soft to hard power, economic power, scientific power and cultural power" — as it tries to find its new place in the world order.

Britain might not be able to field a mass army but it has nevertheless shown a willingness to use its military strength to demonstrative effect in the modern age, a trend that is likely to grow as discussions around increasing defense spending to 3 percent of gross domestic product continue.

"Gunboat diplomacy" is a term that originated during the 19th-century period of imperialism, when Western powers — the US and those in Europe — would intimidate other, less powerful entities into granting concessions through a demonstration of superior military capabilities, usually represented by their naval assets.

Last summer the Royal Navy, led by the enormous aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth, carried out exercises with Singapore's navy as part of a so-called "Freedom of Navigation" exercise in the South China Sea.

The UK's use of its military assets to more overtly project power, or to support allies, is



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Recent large-scale conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan were perceived by the UK public as controversial and a strategic failure and produced a sense of apathy towards foreign policy. AFP



likely to be a central trend in this new phase of the country's foreign policy. Nowhere is this more evident than in the response to events in Ukraine.

The Russian invasion in February 2022 was described by the British Foreign Policy Group as a “generational event³” for the UK. The return of large-scale conflict in Europe led to an outpouring of public support for Ukraine and its people.

Across Britain, Ukrainian flags appeared, nursery schools ran fundraisers to support the humanitarian response, and a Disasters Emergency Committee appeal raised record-breaking funds. The government channeled much of this support into its “Homes for Ukraine” scheme, as part of which 104,000 Ukrainian refugees arrived in the UK, where sponsors agreed to house them for a minimum of six months in return for a monthly payment to help offset their costs.

In terms of direct military assistance, the UK is the second-largest donor to Ukraine, after the US. It has committed £2.3 billion (\$2.8 billion) so far and has pledged to match that amount in 2023⁴. The UK is also hosting a program, supported by several allies,

that aims to train 10,000 new and existing Ukrainian military personnel every 120 days.

This level of support from the UK is almost as important as the speed at which it was committed. This was recognized by the leadership in Kiev, which renamed streets in the country after former Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who led the efforts⁵.

THE DOMESTIC PARADOX

When Adm. Sir Antony Radakin, chief of the UK Defense Staff, delivered the annual lecture of the Royal United Services Institute think tank this year, he did not mince his words as he warned that Britons were living in “extraordinarily dangerous times⁶.”

Ukraine might well be a game-changer in terms of catalyzing a reinvigorated approach to UK foreign and defense policy but it is important to realize the context of the domestic paradox, which has undermined a prioritization of British foreign policy in the past.

Simply stated, polling of the British electorate reveals consistently low levels of interest in foreign policy compared with domestic issues, an apathy

that has been reflected among the country's political leadership.

Much of this is a result of the more recent large-scale conflicts in which the UK was involved, in Iraq and Afghanistan, which were controversial in terms of their origins, protracted in duration and, in the case of Afghanistan, seen as a strategic failure, as typified by the emergency evacuation of troops from Kabul in August 2021.

Both conflicts were seen by the British public as overly complex, with no clear "good guys," and overshadowed by a steady drumbeat of returning coffins and seriously injured service personnel. Ukraine is, in many respects, the opposite: A simple story of a plucky state defending itself against the aggression of its larger neighbor.

Writers for the influential Spectator magazine recently suggested that the job of foreign secretary, despite traditionally being viewed as one of the three biggest roles in government, was actually the easiest in the British Cabinet. The paradox is that so much of UK politics is currently affected by events and issues beyond the country's borders but this is not reflected in the attention paid to them by Westminster, the media or the interest of the public at large.

Even Ukraine, as important an issue as it is viewed by the British public, is considered one of political consensus rather than there being divergence between the UK's major political parties.

This is in stark contrast to the US, where more radical elements of the Republican Party regularly call for an end to financial and military support to Ukraine. This political divergence perhaps explained the need for President Volodymyr Zelensky to visit Washington in December, the first time he has left Ukraine since February.

The political consensus in the UK might not continue indefinitely, however, especially if parties try to explicitly link events abroad to those at home. For example, Nadim Zahawi, a former UK chancellor, faced great criticism when he suggested that nurses should drop their pay demands to send a "clear message" to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

It is also worth noting the traditional primacy of domestic politics when considering which parts of government will be hit hardest by the next wave of austerity, as the administration of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak attempts to clean up the economic mess left behind after the brief reign of his predecessor, Liz Truss.

RELATIONS WITH EUROPE

The 2022 survey by the British Foreign Policy Group found that the three most prominent security threats perceived by Britons were, in order, climate change, terrorism and the



rise of China as a world power. Such complex challenges are often hard to track against a government's record on addressing them.

For example, in terms of climate change, the UK hosted the 2021 UN Climate Change Conference, COP26, which reached landmark agreements on the use of coal and carbon dioxide emissions⁷. Yet the domestic political chaos of 2022 resulted in a big debate over whether Sunak, newly installed as prime minister, would even attend this year's COP27 in Egypt, so narrow was the political bandwidth he apparently had for nondomestic issues.

Perhaps the most obvious area in which domestic policy seeps into foreign policy is around the future of the UK's relationship with Europe. Britain's departure from the EU foreign-policy machine is part of this narrative but more interesting, perhaps, is whether any new mechanisms can better unite Europe's biggest powers, especially around areas of obvious cooperation such as counterterrorism, migration and climate change.

In a speech celebrating his first 100 days as foreign secretary, James Cleverly argued that the country needs to be "always thinking 10, 15, 20 or more years ahead." AFP

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Liz Truss was prime minister for only 44 days and history will remember her mainly for her disastrous economic policies during that time. What will be forgotten is that she visited the Czech capital in October for the first meeting of the European Political Community⁸, a new group dedicated to advancing security and energy cooperation across the continent.

Rather than focusing too much on the institutions of old and their inability to deliver — see, for example, the veto-prone UN Security Council — a more agile ability for like-minded states to come together to address specific issues might represent the future of a much more productive international order in the multipolar age.

THE FUTURE

Inconsistency of leadership makes the more nascent global groupings harder to sustain, and there is no doubt that recent constant changes at the top of government have impeded the UK's attempts to make progress in its foreign policy following the post-Brexit reset. The very fact that Cleverly decided to celebrate his first 100 days as foreign secretary is a case in point. But what was more interesting than his Twitter Q&A was a speech he delivered in London on Dec. 12.

In it, he promised to make a "long-term and sustained effort to revive old friendships and build new ones, reaching far beyond our long-established alliances."

In contrast to the slogan-heavy, short-term, reactive period that the UK has endured since the Brexit referendum in 2016, Cleverly made the argument that the country needs to be "always thinking 10, 15, 20 or more years ahead."

Changing gears to a vision that looks decades ahead as opposed to months is, of course, easier said than done in this 24/7 era of politics, in which having a minister in a post for 100 days is a considered a remarkable event deemed worthy of celebration.

Cleverly's speech was also a call for action. "Britain has leverage and it is my job to use it," he said. Expanding on what that leverage might look like, he cited the post-Brexit power to apply what he described as "sovereign sanctions" in response to the situations in Myanmar and Ukraine as illustrations of what the UK is capable of.

Geopolitics has always been the prime shaper of foreign policies in all countries. What Cleverly seemed to be saying is that the UK would be a better friend to its allies, both traditional and new, and a tougher opponent to its enemies.

"Backing words with action is exactly the kind of diplomacy that I want to lead," he added.



The domestic political chaos in 2022 rendered the presence of then-newly appointed Prime Minister Rishi Sunak at COP27 in Egypt in doubt until the last minute. AFP

Action might be what dominates the headlines surrounding this new activist approach to foreign policy. Indeed, Cleverly's speech was accompanied by the announcement of new sanctions on individuals in 11 countries, including Iran, Russia, Mali and Nicaragua.

However, the true test will lie in the trade relations it is able to secure. As set out in the government's original integrated review last year, the UK aspires to have the broadest presence of any European power in the Indo-Pacific, while deepening relations in East Africa and the Gulf based on trade, green innovation and science and technology collaboration.

With a general election due in the UK by January 2025, Cleverly does not have much time to test his hypothesis and, already, events have forced an update to the integrated review in 2023.

Yet if actions speak louder than words, then the next period for UK foreign policy might represent a seismic shift from the previous era.

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