

Bring back integrity to UK foreign policy

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On a hot August day in 2021, the world watched in disbelief as the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan. As the Americans withdrew their final troops from the country, chaos reigned over the streets of Kabul as tens of thousands of people all tried desperately to flee. For the UK, it was a moment of pride and pain. Pride for the professional way in which our embassy staff airlifted 15,000 people out of the country under the most treacherous circumstances. But pain too, in forgoing our obligations to a country where we had invested so much blood and treasure.

It was a humiliating moment for the West. We allowed Afghanistan to be taken over by our sworn enemy. And then we fled. This failure of the Afghan statebuilding project was, in part, Britain's failure. We had become unreliable allies, abandoning those who had risked their lives to fight on our side. Our efforts to train, equip, and build up the Afghan military had failed. We had to rely on the Taliban to guarantee the safety of British civilians wanting to flee. Adding insult to injury, our inability to get through to U.S. president Joe Biden made it plenty clear that our 'special relationship' was not very special at all. And to top it all off, we learned that foreign secretary Dominic Raab had opted for a beach holiday in Cyprus instead of doing his job. Taken together, it was a deadly combination of recklessness and selfishness that left us disgraced and dishonoured in front of the world.

Downing Street's handling of the Afghanistan withdrawal epitomised so much of what has gone wrong with British foreign policy under Boris Johnson's Conservative government: a failure of leadership, a lack of accountability, a breakdown in planning, and a tendency to wilfully ignore inconvenient truths.

But more than anything, Afghanistan symbolised a failure of integrity in British foreign policy. For decades, this sense of integrity has been a defining feature of modern day British foreign policy— we were known for being principled and pragmatic in equal doses. But this approach has changed. *We* have changed.

Starting with Brexit, and *because of Brexit*, our foreign policy has become more transactional and less ethical. By necessity, our policy decisions had to become more craven as we lost power and influence in the world. This was evidenced from the moment that Donald Trump became president of the U.S. Whereas we would have once stood alongside Angela Merkel in expressing deep disquiet with Donald Trump, both of Britain's Prime Ministers were forced instead to kowtow to him. First Theresa May and then Boris Johnson desperately sought his approval for a US-UK trade deal. This embrace of a man who ultimately tried to destroy his own democracy from the inside-out shows how far our foreign policy has strayed. Britain needs to change tack.

Understanding Britain's place in the world

To appreciate why integrity is so vital to our foreign policy, we need to first accept that we are no longer a superpower. For those who follow international politics closely, this is obvious. The U.S. and China are the only two countries that have the power to dictate the

terms of the geopolitical game. Unlike the EU, we are not an economic powerhouse. And unlike Russia, we are not a dominant military power. Nonetheless, according to a [2020 Delta poll](#), over a quarter of British voters still rate the UK as being *the most important country in the world*. Amongst Conservative voters and Leavers, this figure rises to 36%. This misplaced belief in the UK's place in the world likely gave many Brexiteers the confidence to leave the EU.

The difficult truth is that we are not nearly as influential as we once were. We aren't powerful enough to compel others to bend to our will like the U.S. or China. We absolutely need the cooperation and goodwill of other countries to achieve our foreign policy goals. We can't go around invalidating international treaties— like the Northern Ireland Protocol— within 11 months of signing and expect there to be no lasting consequences. And we can't afford to condone violating international law in a 'very limited and specific way' without damaging our international reputation.

Up to now, the Johnson government has mostly gotten away with its double-back-and-try-again strategy, but in doing so, the Prime Minister and his crew have been voraciously consuming political capital and goodwill that took decades to build up. This cannot go on indefinitely. Britain is not dominant enough to sustain such a purely transactional approach to our foreign policy.

On the international stage, we retain a legacy seat at many foreign policy tables—including as one of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. But we can't afford to take our presence there for granted. Unlike the Americans and the Chinese, and to a lesser extent, the Russians, we do not have an automatic right to a seat at the veto-holders' table. We are required to earn our place, year in and year out, and the way in which we have traditionally done so is to be viewed as useful— not just by the other major powers, but also by the rest of the world.

To the Americans and the Europeans, we are useful because we provide another vote for the Western bloc. But for everyone else, the British presence at these top tables is beneficial because we exercise moral power on the international stage. We defend our national interests, *but we also fight for what's right*. To the rest of the world, it is Britain's relative sense of integrity and reliability that secures us our spot as an influential foreign policy player.

As soon as we appreciate how important a role our values play in sustaining our global standing, it becomes obvious that the shift away from integrity will do great harm. Neglecting the moral dimension of foreign policy has undermined our greatest strength. If we don't restore integrity to its rightful place as the USP of Britain's approach to foreign policy, our influence will soon burn itself out.

How the Conservatives damaged British integrity

A successful foreign policy needs to project our values as well as protecting our military and economic interests. It should reflect our national identity as well as our national interests. For the United Kingdom, our global influence has long been predicated on being viewed as a benevolent power. Over the past two decades, there has been a remarkable cross-party consensus that ours is a country that stands up for human rights, spends generously on development aid, treats refugees with humanity, and fights for

institutions and norms to protect the most vulnerable overseas. With the exception of the Iraq War, which the Liberal Democrats opposed, there has been a striking degree of foreign policy consensus across the LibDems, Labour, and the Conservatives. But this consensus fell apart with Brexit, and broke down completely in 2020, when the 0.7% target for overseas aid was cut to 0.5%.

In fact, up until its dissolution and merger with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 2020, the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) was viewed as one of the world's most influential and progressive donor agencies. As one of the few countries in the world to consistently meet the Official Development Assistance spending target of 0.7% of GNI (a LibDem achievement of the Coalition years), Britain came to be known as a 'development superpower' because of its consistent championing and defence of the world's poor.

Within Cabinet, the international development portfolio came with substantial financial resources to get things done. In turn, this gave power to the DFID minister in internal policy negotiations with the FCO and the Ministry of Defence. At the risk of stereotyping two complex organisations, DFID's financial clout gave its morally driven technocracy a fighting chance against the realpolitik of the FCO. At times, this created an internally divided foreign policy—the left hand did not always agree with what the right hand was doing. But giving international development an independent voice and substantial financial resources also empowered the moral dimensions of our foreign policy—in some cases, allowing us to mitigate the harms caused by our foreign policy mistakes (like the Iraq war) as well as to advance cross-party causes (famine relief, girls' education, vaccination campaigns, climate crisis).

In practice, the UK's statutory commitment to 0.7% allowed us to project power softly, via partnerships with ministries of health, education, and agriculture around the world, as well as with like-minded civil society organisations. It bought us influence and respect with friends and foes around the world and embedded a sense of integrity into our foreign policy discussions. It has even allowed us to be viewed as [the most 'attractive' country](#) amongst the G20, according to a 2020 British Council survey of 20,000+ young adults across all of the G20 countries.

Our aid policy defines who we are at home, as well as abroad

Britain has long used development aid to project the best version of itself to a global audience. Aid money has allowed us to fund projects that directly reflect British values and then to amplify these values to the international community. In this space, we've been able to collectively reimagine a more just society, and to support this vision through development programming—even where the reality of implementation has fallen short.

But what we haven't fully appreciated is how our commitment to overseas aid has also defined us as a people. *The clarity of that moral vision in helping the poorest and most vulnerable around the globe helped keep us united as a country, in part by spelling out what we wanted for British society at home— fairness, equality of opportunity, and a healthy environment.*

Here's the thing about foreign policy: it's never really just about 'those people over there'. When our actions 'over there' diverge too far from what we promise to do at home,

we store up the hypocrisy only for it to eventually blow up in the future. When Boris Johnson's government voted down— twice— the chance to preserve the rights of unaccompanied child refugees to reunite with family members in the UK, he offended our sense of humanity. When the Tories repeatedly continued to sell arms to Saudi Arabia knowing that they were being used to prolong the war in Yemen, they made us look as if we were indifferent to other people's suffering. When Brandon Lewis, the Northern Ireland Minister, allowed that a proposed Brexit Bill would break international law in a "very specific and limited way", he ended up portraying Britain as a country that didn't care about the rule of law. When this Tory government makes it virtually [impossible for injured British soldiers](#) to claim the compensation that they are owed— despite having fought for us in Afghanistan and Iraq— they're also telling us that they will dispose of its soldiers when they are no longer useful.

It has been difficult to stand by and watch the Conservatives consistently violate core British values of compassion, humanitarianism, fair play, and rule of law— is this really who we want to be?

The values that we champion abroad need to be reinforced at home— and the values we champion at home should also apply abroad. We can't ask other countries to do what we ourselves are unwilling to do. And we shouldn't pretend that consistently violating our own moral code— even when it happens overseas — doesn't have an impact on our national identity.

Rishi Sunak's 2020 decision to cut the aid budget and break the parliamentary law that earmarked 0.7% of GNI to the aid budget was never properly called out by the media or by the opposition. In [one fell swoop](#), a life-saving malaria programme in Nigeria disappeared, peacebuilding work in South Sudan churches was ended, a [Malawi programme responding to violence against women and girls](#) was axed, and 725,000 school places for children around the world vanished.

Not only did we do huge damage to our global reputation, but the Tories very consciously drove a knife into the kind of country we wanted to be: compassionate, open, and decent.

Some will say that this vision of a values-driven foreign policy has only ever been an illusion at best. But I would argue that it has been a *necessary illusion* that has bound us together despite our differences across the political spectrum. It gave us the courage, the language, and the shared narratives that allowed us to stand up to global bullies, offer shelter to those fleeing war, and robustly defend human rights, rule of law, and democratic norms. Our national claim to a seat at the high table of global affairs has always been premised on these values and fighting the good fight. Liberal Democrats need to restore these basic norms of decency to our foreign policy agenda.

How can we bring integrity back into our foreign policy?

Restoring integrity is much harder than destroying it. But we can begin to do so with some common sense principles:

- (1) Treat your friends with respect
- (2) Keep your promises

- (3) Help the vulnerable
- (4) Accept a fair share of the burden
- (5) You break it, you own it
- (6) Minimise hypocrisy

Admittedly, this looks a lot like the advice I gave my five-year-old son when I sent him off to reception. But these six points also provide a solid foundation for foreign policy decision-making. They offer a simple moral compass when faced with ethically ambiguous situations— which are plentiful in the world of international affairs.

The principles are not set in stone. But each time they are violated, we ought to remind ourselves that there will be a cost, a repercussion, or a punishment to be borne out in the future. Those consequences might not come immediately, but they will come, eventually. Where we've had historically strong relationships and a huge store of political capital built up, it will feel as if bad behaviour and poor decisions have no consequences at all because there won't be any immediate retaliation. This has been the case with our EU neighbours. For example, when Boris Johnson recklessly provoked the French by sending out [navy ships](#) to deal with a minor dispute over fishing rights, the aim was to stoke the fires of his right-wing base. But he did so at the expense of making Britain look like an irresponsible power that was needlessly escalating conflict to create better political theatre.

As a close observer of British foreign policy, I've personally found it excruciating to watch a political party destroy our foreign policy credibility so casually.

So how could the Liberal Democrats do things differently?

Well, we would begin by showing some respect for our friends and partners. In the first instance, we wouldn't call the French '[turds](#)' in television interviews. We would keep the promises we make and help the most vulnerable by restoring international development aid to 0.7% of GNI in the next budget. We would also act fairly when it comes to the climate crisis burden. For example, I propose that we develop a policy to accept climate crisis refugees— especially those from island nations who expect to see their entire country vanish as sea levels rise. We need to acknowledge that we are the ones who broke this planet, so we need to take greater responsibility for cleaning up the mess that we've made.

Lastly, it's important to recognise that we can't always avoid hypocrisy when setting foreign policy. International affairs is an extremely uncomfortable space for purists on both the left and the right because ideological compromises are necessary. Making foreign policy requires a degree of pragmatism that the likes of Jeremy Corbyn, Nigel Farage, and Caroline Lucas would find hard to accept. Their respective visions of British foreign policy are all very different, but similarly impractical given our deep integration into the global economy and our close security partnerships with problematic regimes. It's hard to maintain a 'pure' foreign policy knowing that we buy a substantial proportion of our natural gas from politically corrupt countries like Russia. It also makes no sense to be anti-immigrant when we rely so heavily on foreign workers (like HGV drivers and seasonal fruit pickers) to meet our labour shortages. And it's difficult to call out Turkey for human rights violations when the Turkish government has accepted

millions of Syrian refugees and [prevented them from claiming asylum](#) in the EU and the UK.

But there are still some simple things the Liberal Democrats can do to minimise hypocrisy. For example, we will certainly have an easier time fighting sexual and gender-based violence at home and abroad without worrying that our leader has [blocked a law](#) on public sexual harassment while also being [accused of groping a journalist](#) at a dinner party.

Transaction-based politics hurts the UK

Even if you consider yourself to be a foreign policy pragmatist, there's a simple reason we ought to bring integrity back into our foreign policy: it's a space where we are placed to excel. The [British Council's 2020 survey](#) of young people in G20 countries showed that British values are the fourth most popular (after Canada, Germany, and Australia) within the G20. In fact, I would go so far as to say that we've been able to successfully pursue our national interests for this long *precisely because* our values and principles have universal appeal.

The current shift to transactional politics will hurt the UK.

If we can't restore the sense of reciprocity we once had with our friends and neighbours, our standing in the world will decline even further than it already has. After all, the key to our power used to rely on serving as the intermediary between the US and the EU. In that space between two powerful players, we were able to quietly exert influence. When the Tories championed to leave the EU, they also ended up weakening the US-UK relationship and contributed to the decline of Western power.

British foreign policy has always rested on the military alliance with the US and the economic might of the EU. When the US wanted to 'talk to Europe', they would ring up No 10. Up until 2016, Britain was the lynchpin to that relationship. For Washington, we could tactfully make the American position clear to the EU. To Brussels, we were able to reason with the Americans, and sometimes moderate their decisions. But in leaving the EU, we also degraded the 'special relationship' because we destroyed one of the things that made us so valuable to the Americans. In the stark world of transactional politics, we are less useful than we used to be.

Nevertheless, provided that cooler heads prevail and Boris Johnson stops threatening to tear up the Brexit deal that he only just negotiated, then the UK ought to restore our friendships across the Channel as quickly as possible. And here I really do mean 'friendships' rather than alliances. This isn't just about trade. Or security pacts. It's not a quid pro quo relationship. We have too much history for such a mean approach.

Our relationships with Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, Poland, France and the other EU27 extend far beyond the paperwork of blue or red passports. We are friends. Connected to each other through love, marriage, work, education, food, art, and culture. This is the real Global Britain.

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If Britain wants a liberal, forward-thinking foreign policy that we can be proud of again, then we need to bring integrity back into our politics. Not only is it the right thing to do, but it's also necessary for our own self-respect. We've failed to appreciate that our

foreign policy isn't just about people 'over there', it's also about who we are as a country and how we see ourselves. We can't demand others to do abroad what we refuse to do at home. We can't ask others to hold their leaders to account when we don't do so in the UK. We can't credibly tell other countries that they need to fight corruption when the Johnson government handed out £8 billion (out of £16 billion) of PPE contracts to companies '[run by friends and associates of politicians in the Conservative Party, or with no prior experience or a history of controversy.](#)' We can't empower others to change their societies and fight for democratic values when we ourselves are failing to do so in Britain.

And this brings us back to Afghanistan.

Ultimately, a foreign policy with integrity should reflect the values of our imagined community. We use it to help us define what we want to be, and what we definitely do *not* want to be. We do not want to be the country that abandons the [Afghan translators](#) who risked their lives for us. We do not want to be an unreliable ally. We do not ever again want to [rely on the Taliban](#) to guarantee the security of our citizens. And we definitely do not want to be the known as the country that [chose the beach](#) over the fall of Kabul.

We want to give people something to hope for, something to believe in. We want to give ourselves something to believe in. We need to bring back integrity to British foreign policy.