

St George's House Consultation: Britain's Place in the World

Summary

Much of the public debate on British foreign policy tends to focus on the UK's policies and priorities. Frequently this dodges two first order questions: what is Britain's status in the world post-Brexit and what is a realistic aspiration for its place on the world stage in the next two decades? This consultation aims to tackle the question of Britain's status in a multipolar, and increasingly competitive and contested, world. It will then consider three political trade-offs that flow from that assessment: the UK's relationship with the EU post Brexit; the relevance of the values agenda in an increasingly illiberal world order; the relative importance of Indo-Pacific relationships over the Euro-Atlantic.

Context

Official rhetoric around the UK's place in the world tends to be premised on a sense of exceptionalism about Britain's position in a rapidly shifting and increasingly competitive international environment. The UK undoubtedly remains influential by virtue of its historic role in creating the post-war order, its membership of the UN Security Council, the G7, NATO, the Commonwealth, its extensive diplomatic reach, and its role as an international donor. But the vision of 'Global Britain' is constrained by the limited size and scope of its military and economic authority relative to rising powers like China and, increasingly, India. It is also at odds with the sacrifices demanded by globalisation in terms of both economic and regulatory autonomy, and the need for close international cooperation to tackle both global challenges (climate change, AI, pandemics) and hostile state activity (China, Russia, Iran etc).

Not only has Britain changed, the world has changed. The international order and the post-war consensus that the UK helped to found are being disrupted by the rise of countries that do not share its liberal agenda. The Refresh of the UK's Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy (IR2023) describes a 'multipolar, fragmented, contested world', and frames China as an 'epoch-defining and systemic challenge'. The 2008 financial crisis, growing inequality within advanced economies and the COVID-19 pandemic have citizens to question democratic values and the prevailing economic model. This has polarised political choices between those advocating for a redoubling of an unsatisfactory status quo and those arguing for nationalist and protectionist policies based on nostalgic readings of history.

Britain's status

The starting point for this consultation is a level-headed and unvarnished appraisal of the UK's place in the world at this time of geopolitical change. It seeks to define where Britain sits on the spectrum of world powers (small, middle, regional, great and super-). It will inventory Britain's economic,



military, diplomatic, multilateral and soft power as they are projected to be over the next 20 years. By doing so it aims to situate the UK among its nearest comparators and competitors, and to identify where it can capitalise on its strengths in an increasingly volatile world. It will then seek to apply that lens to three distinct areas of UK foreign policy.

UK/EU relations

The UK has pursued a hard Brexit that has left it without a satisfactory mechanism for coordinating core security issues with its nearest neighbours – France and Germany – outside of NATO, which remains dominated by the US. With the US increasingly turning its attention to its interests in the Indo-Pacific, the consultation will explore what kind of security relationship the UK needs to have with Europe in order to protect its core security interests, as well as its long-term economic interests.

Euro-Atlantic vs. Indo-Pacific

While the war in Ukraine has refocused attention on the importance of Euro-Atlantic security, successive UK governments have sought to court new partners in the Indo-Pacific – firstly with the Golden Era of relations with China and second with the Indo-Pacific Tilt and efforts to court ASEAN. The consultation will explore whether the Indo-Pacific can ever substitute the importance of Europe as a partner on trade, security, values and global challenges. In particular it seeks to assess what the right balance of effort should be between these competing geographic priorities. This includes an assessment of whether the UK risks overreaching by seeking to be omnipresent across geographic and global priorities.

Values and influence

For many years the UK has been at the forefront of championing a liberal values agenda on the international stage. Recent initiatives include preventing sexual violence in conflict, girls' education, modern slavery, freedom of expression and anti-corruption initiatives. However, global democracy on the decline as measured by the major indices. Consensus-based measures once powerful in promoting respect for international law such as diplomatic pressure, isolation and sanctions are increasingly ineffective. Recalcitrant states are turning to China, Russia and others to counterbalance Western pressure. China is fuelling this by presenting universal values as a form of Western hegemony and seeking to reframe human rights in economic terms. Moreover, as reactions to Russia's invasion of Ukraine revealed, much of the Global South regards the liberal values agenda as hypocritical. The consultation will take stock of the liberal international values agenda in a multi-polar world.

