

Britain's Place in the World

Thursday 5th – Friday 6th September 2024

Programme Notes

Overview

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 foreseeable future?

This consultation on Britain's Place in the World aims to tackle the question of Britain's status in a multipolar, and increasingly competitive and contested, world. It will then consider the political trade-offs that flow from that assessment in three areas:

- i. the UK's relationship with the EU post Brexit;
- ii. the relative importance of Indo-Pacific relationships over the Euro-Atlantic;
- iii. the relevance of the values agenda in an increasingly illiberal world order.

The **objective** of the consultation is: *To define a realistic aspiration for the UK's place in a changing world, and set out the strategic underpinning of UK foreign policy for the next 15 years.*

The intent of the consultation is not to identify policies and priorities but to formulate a set of principles or overarching strategy for guiding UK foreign policy. The starting point is an attempt to reformulate Britain's self-perception by formulating an honest and realistic picture of the UK's position on the world stage and the UK's strategic role post-Brexit.



Session 1: Britain's status on the world stage

Objective: To form an honest and balanced assessment of Britain's status and role on the world stage taking account of the UK's size, strengths and limitations. To formulate a realistic definition of Britain's identity and role on the world stage.

Summary: Britain's traditional role in the post-war period as a bridge between the US and Europe and founder of the post-war order has been shaken up: first by Brexit; second by a shift in US focus from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Contemporary public discourse on Britain's place in the world tends to be polarised between a form of nostalgic exceptionalism on the one hand, and a form of declinism and post-colonial anguish on the other. The first narrative tends to be in denial about the UK's relative economic and military decline since 1945, while the second tends to be in denial about the UK's undoubted capabilities in new areas such as technology and climate change. This session focuses on Britain's status in the world post-Brexit and asks what a realistic aspiration is for its place on the world stage in the next 15 years. It aims to frame Britain's identity in the context of a multipolar, and increasingly competitive and contested, world.

Breakout groups

Group 1: Political and economic (including diplomatic)

Group 2: Military

Group 3: Technological

Group 4: Soft power

Questions: breakout groups

- How important is the UK in this sector? Provide a ranking.
- Who are the UK's closest comparators and what is the international context?
- What are the UK's strengths and weaknesses in the sector?
- How could the UK better use its strengths in this area?

Questions: plenary

- What kind of power is Britain (small, middle, regional, great and super-)?
- What kind of power should Britain aspire to be? What kind of role should Britain occupy on the international stage?
- What should be the primary role and identity of post-Brexit Britain?
- How can the UK meaningfully articulate its international role and status publicly?
- If the UK had an additional 12 billion to spend (0.5% GNI), how should the money be allocated between defence, development, diplomacy? What are the trade-offs?



Session 2: UK/EU relations

Objective: To reimagine the UK's relations with Europe over the next 15 years, assuming the UK remains outside the EU. To rethink the architecture of the UK's defence and security relations with Europe in the context of a more ambiguous US commitment to European security, including what future platforms and groupings may be necessary and how the UK should use them. To explore mechanisms for cooperation on other major shared challenges projecting out to 2040.

Summary: Britain's departure from the European Union has strained relations with Europe and left the UK without a satisfactory mechanism for coordinating core security issues with its nearest neighbours outside of NATO. Meanwhile, NATO is dominated by a US that has withdrawn from some aspects of its traditional role in international leadership. With the prospect of reduced US focus on Euro-Atlantic security this calls for a rethinking of security cooperation and architecture in Europe post-Brexit. This includes how the UK uses newer groupings such as the European Political Community and the Joint Expeditionary Force. It also calls for consideration of how to manage cooperation on shared challenges such as migration, climate change, the regulation of technology, authoritarianism, transnational threats, and relations with the global south.

Breakout groups

Group 1: Defence (esp. Russia, China, hybrid, cyber, espionage)

Group 2: Security (esp. terrorism, migration, disinformation, transnational threats)

Group 3: Global governance (esp. development, conflict, democracy, AI regulation)

Questions: breakout groups

- Where are the primary gaps in UK/EU cooperation on [defence], [security], [climate change] and [global governance]?
- How can the UK better use existing platforms to coordinate with Europe on defence, security and shared challenges in Europe?
- What new architecture does the UK need to participate in European decision making around defence, security and shared challenges from outside the EU?

Questions: plenary

- Is the EU a rival or a partner to the UK in an increasingly competitive world?
- Should the UK push for an independent European defence policy outside NATO?
- Should the UK push for closer cooperation with the EU on security, defence and shared challenges like climate change and global governance? If so, how?
- How might the UK change the domestic public discourse on Europe?



- **Session 3: Indo-Pacific vs. Euro-Atlantic**

Objective: To identify the tensions between Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific priorities. To assess how the UK should balance these competing geographic priorities.

Summary: There is a tension in UK foreign policy between the demands of the Euro-Atlantic area and those of the Indo-Pacific region. In recent years the war in Ukraine has refocused attention on Euro-Atlantic security. But successive UK governments have courted new partners in the Asia, including more recently under the Indo-Pacific Tilt. There is a risk that the UK overreaches by trying to be omnipresent across geographic and global priorities. This session will consider how to balance these competing priorities.

Breakout groups

Group 1: Euro-Atlantic – political and economic

Group 2: Euro-Atlantic – defence and security

Group 2: Indo-Pacific – political and economic

Group 2: Indo-Pacific – defence and security

Questions: breakout groups

- Where are the tensions between the UK's Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific priorities?
- How are the UK's geographic priorities likely to shift up to 2040, including in relation to significant political, military or economic events?
- How should the UK balance its relationships with China and the US?

Questions: plenary

- What are the trade-offs between investing in the Euro-Atlantic against investing in the Indo-Pacific?
- How should the UK balance its relationship between the US and China?
- What should be the UK's military posture if China were to invade Taiwan?
- Should the UK push for the defeat of Russia in Ukraine or accept an armistice?
- Does NATO need a new strategic purpose?



Session 4: Values and world order

Objective: To take stock of the liberal international values agenda in a multi-polar world. To assess how effective international measures are in upholding the values and norms that have defined the post-war consensus. To re-think the principles of a meaningful values-based foreign policy.

Summary: The UK has a long-standing reputation for championing liberal values on the international stage, including on issues such as girls' education, modern slavery, preventing sexual violence in conflict, freedom of expression and anti-corruption. At the same time global democratic standards have been in decline for some years. Some of the UK's closest allies and partners have pursued illiberal policies and witnessed a rise in nationalistic, isolationist and far right politics. Furthermore, the tools and levers that the UK and its allies and partners had for upholding international laws and norms such as diplomatic pressure, isolation and sanctions are increasingly ineffective as authoritarian states turn to China, Russia and others to counterbalance Western pressure. Meanwhile, China encourages the narrative that universal values enshrined in international law are a form of Western hegemony and is seeking to reframe human rights in economic terms. Moreover, as reactions to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the conflict in the Middle East reveal, much of the Global South perceives a double standard in UK policy.

Breakout groups

Group 1: The UN system and international law

Group 2: The future of liberal internationalism

Group 3: The efficacy of sanctions, isolation and conflict resolution

Group 4: The role of campaigns

Questions: breakout groups

- What core values must the UK uphold to preserve the international order?
- Is liberal international interventionism dead?
- How can the UK enforce international law in a multi-polar world?
- How do we avoid the risks of double standards?

Questions: plenary

- How important is it to protect the UK's national economic and security interests and an open international order governed by law between states compared to promoting democracy, human rights and protections for minorities in other countries?
- Do the UK's domestic policies and international values need to be consistent?
- Do we need to reframe the values agenda in the global discourse, including the decolonisation agenda?



Conclusions

Objective: To summarise the key themes of the discussion and stimulate a discussion on key areas of priority for the new government. To identify the core principles of a balanced and realistic UK foreign policy over the next 15 years.

Summary: The pace of international politics creates intense pressures to continually reset policies and priorities. However, without an agreed set of underlying principles or strategic underpinning, policy-making lacks strategic coherence. This session seeks to distil the conclusions of the preceding sessions into a set of basic principles about Britain's international orientation and a credible, confident assertion of the UK's place in the world.

Questions

- What is a sensible aspiration for Britain's role in the world?
- What are the core principles for an aspirational but realistic UK foreign policy?
- How can the UK make the best use of its domestic and international assets?

