

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

Thursday, 5th – Friday, 6th September 2024

REPORT



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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

a. Introduction

On 5-6 September 2024 some of the UK's most eminent foreign policy thinkers convened at St George's House in Windsor Castle for a Consultation on Britain's Place in the World. St George's House was founded in 1966 by Prince Philip. It exists to enable people of influence to come together privately to discuss issues of national and international importance. In the context of a newly commissioned Strategic Defence Review, the Consultation sought to reassess Britain's status, role and identity on the world stage and to identify the strategic underpinnings for UK foreign policy in three key areas:

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

This paper summarises the conclusions of the discussion, held under the Chatham House rule. It reflects the views and contributions made by senior figures from politics, government, academia and civil society during the Consultation. It is neither a verbatim record nor a synthesis. Instead, it seeks to draw out common threads from a wide-ranging Consultation to offer a contribution to the debate about UK foreign policy. Rather than making detailed policy prescriptions the paper draws on the perspectives of participants to frame the international context and set out a vision for British foreign policy out to 2040. It then aims to define the trade-offs and hard choices the UK faces in the years ahead and sketch out guiding principles for making foreign policy decisions.

b. Headline conclusions

The Consultation agreed that the strategic context has radically shifted since the West established the post-war international institutions. Global competition has intensified as the economic gravity has shifted Eastwards. The axioms governing the old order have been



upturned and are now under attack from Russia and China. The theatre of contestation has also broadened, stretching from the seabeds to space, while the strategic environment has become more ambiguous.

The Consultation concluded that the UK is a regional power with some areas of global reach and world class status. However, global competition and domestic neglect are eroding some of the UK's best assets. In the face of global economic and political headwinds and domestic fiscal pressures there will be a strong temptation for the UK to take a more narrowly self-interested approach to its international role. But a retreat into a defensive or insular position would see the UK caught between growing US/China rivalry and marginalised elsewhere, including by a more protectionist EU bloc.

The UK can remain competitive and relevant by protecting and using its strategic advantages, particularly its convening power and its strong reputation for thought leadership. In an increasingly volatile world, there is a clear demand for the sort of international leadership the UK does best – intelligent, pragmatic problem-solving and coalition-building on common challenges requiring a collective response.

Critical to any future role for the UK is its ability to forge and shape international alliances and partnerships. The UK must remain a leading member of NATO and invest in its strategic partnerships such as the Five Eyes intelligence sharing community, the Commonwealth, the G7 and G20, AUKUS, CPTPP, and the nascent European Political Community. Closer cooperation with the EU would strengthen UK influence on Euro-Atlantic security and improve the UK's relevance to the US.

The UK also needs a confident narrative about its place in Europe and the world: externally to maintain its influence, and domestically to justify spending 2.5%+ of GDP on defence as well as 0.7% (or even 0.5%) on ODA amid competing claims on public finances. This needs to go beyond the polarised narratives of exceptionalism and decline that characterise the public discourse.

Finally, governments of any stripe will need to make a convincing case for investing in the UK's international capabilities to deliver jobs and economic growth for ordinary people. Widening the public conversation about threats to the UK's safety, freedom and prosperity



would help build domestic support for spending on the capabilities needed to counter them. To be convincing, governments will also need to be consistent in applying at home the values they espouse abroad.

c. Guiding principles (summary version)

Six principles emerged from the Consultation that are essential for upholding the UK's global status. These principles are elaborated in further detail in section (4) below. The principles are to:

1. Ground UK foreign policy in a long-term, non-partisan **grand strategy** based on a hard-headed assessment of the UK's status, national interests, and the tough foreign policy choices we face.
2. Put **partnerships and alliances** front and centre in UK foreign policy, including resetting cooperation with the EU.
3. Preserve the UK's distinctive **openness**, while remaining resilient against exploitation.
4. Invest in the **expertise** for which the UK is well-regarded: science and technology, climate change, cyberspace, international development, intelligence, conflict prevention, and regulation.
5. Uphold the UK's **integrity** on matters of international law and universal values, by remaining consistent at home and abroad, and especially cleaning up the UK's own financial industry.
6. Pursue **comprehensive defence** by promoting a whole-of-society approach to defending against threats by involving public bodies, citizens, businesses and civil society organisations.



2. THE CHANGING STRATEGIC CONTEXT

a. The old strategic environment

UK grand strategy between 1945 and 1989 was defined by a sharp political, economic, military and ideological divide between the US-led free market democracies and the one-party rule and command economy of the Soviet bloc. It was also defined by the burgeoning economic, political, normative and rule-setting power of the European Economic Community (later European Union).

The UK's post-war role rested on its status as a victor in 1945. Together with the US it co-authored the rules of the post-war global order and acted as a bridge between the US and Europe. In the last three decades the global geometry of power has undergone a radical shift. The advent of the internet and social media, climate change, artificial intelligence, Brexit and the global financial crisis of 2007, the failure to uphold red lines in Syria, and the failed wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have all disrupted the prevailing order. They have eroded confidence in 'Western' leadership, competence and values. China, Russia, Iran and others have all moved in to fill the space vacated by the West. At the same time, the economic centre of gravity has shifted east and south with the rise of China and the growth of middle powers.

Many of the old axioms of international relations and the norms that defined the post-war global order have been overturned. The norms that defined the post-war order are now under direct attack from Russia (which seeks to undermine the order) and under challenge from China (which seeks to refashion the order to one more sympathetic to its authoritarian agenda).

b. The new strategic environment

The new strategic environment is more ambiguous than it was during the Cold War. Grey zones have blurred old boundaries. The new theatre of competition ranges from the seabed to space. It includes the Arctic and cyberspace. Hostile states' behaviour includes cyber-attacks, lawfare, sabotage, assassination, disinformation, democratic interference, and other means below the threshold of armed conflict.

Unlike the more binary geopolitical contestation of the past, today's challenges are both more complex and more distributed. Threats posed by states now sit alongside many other security threats that affect the geopolitical balance and international calculus. The new threats come from



transnational organised crime, climate change, terrorism, unregulated AI, internal conflicts, populism and authoritarianism.

Domestic political and economic pressures have challenged old certainties about US commitment to European security. The US has retreated from its traditional role in international leadership, playing a backseat role in Libya, failing to enforce red lines in Syria, presiding over a chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan and facing domestic resistance for its funding for Ukraine. That space has been filled by others. China uses development to build influence in the 'Global South'; Russia props up the Syrian regime and is making inroads in Africa; Iran is playing an ever-greater role in the wider Middle East.

The new geopolitical context is defined primarily by geostrategic competition between the US and China, which the West sees alternately as a partner, rival and adversary. The competition is not only an economic contest. It is a battle for whose vision of the international order will prevail: an order based on universal values that incorporate individual rights, national sovereignty, and international cooperation; or an order based on traditional state power and spheres of influence in which individual freedoms are sacrificed for the promise of collective economic prosperity.

The long-accepted rules of international peace and security, as defined in the UN Charter and international law, have also been eroded amid accusations of hypocrisy by the West, fuelled by Russia and China. The middle powers are not the only countries to be caught up in this great power contestation. The UK too faces growing pressures. Outside the EU there are serious questions about where the UK situates itself within this standoff and how it balances its economic interests with its security interests.

3. BRITAIN'S PLACE IN THE WORLD: STATUS AND IDENTITY

Contemporary public discourse on Britain's place in the world tends to be polarised at its furthest extremes between nostalgic exceptionalism and post-colonial anguish. The first narrative tends to be in denial about the UK's relative economic and military decline since 1945. US military officials have publicly stated that they no longer regard the UK as a serious military partner. Many of the UK's other international assets are legacy competences that owe more to historic status than present weight, such as Britain's permanent seat on the UN Security Council. The UK remains a top six economy, but measured in national income per head it is not in the top twenty.

Conversely, the narrative of declinism tends to be in denial about the UK's capabilities and expertise in sectors like science and technology, or its leadership in areas such as climate change. The UK has



major strategic assets, such as its convening power, diplomatic reach, intelligence capabilities, development expertise and the defence industry. Notable soft-power assets include universities and other educational institutions, the Royal Family, media brands, sport, notably the Premier League, creative industries, and commercial brands. The narrative of decline ignores the expectations of many international friends and partners for the UK to exert leadership and shoulder its international responsibilities. It also overlooks that redressing power imbalances created by colonialism is not served by the UK ceding its position to others who do not have an affirmative agenda to replace it.

A hard-headed examination would place the UK as a regional power with some areas of global reach and world class status. However, many of the UK's best regarded assets are under pressure from global competition and under-resourcing. Many are also legacy competences, owing more to Britain's historic role rather than its present status, such as its permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

The UK can remain competitive and relevant by protecting and using its strategic advantages, particularly its convening power and its strong reputation for thought leadership. In an increasingly volatile world, there is a clear demand for the sort of international leadership the UK does best – intelligent, pragmatic problem-solving and coalition-building on common challenges requiring a collective response. The Consultation arrived at six principles for preserving the UK's status on the world stage.

4. GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR UK FOREIGN POLICY

a. Grand strategy: UK policy needs to be grounded in a long-term, bi-partisan grand strategy. This needs to make a frank assessment of the UK's interests, strengths and weaknesses. It also needs to provide hard-headed answers the strategic questions the UK faces over the next decade and beyond. Questions such as where to position itself between US/China rivalry, including whether the UK would join US military action if China invaded or blockaded Taiwan; the relative importance of Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific commitments; and the merits of an independent European defence policy outside NATO. Other questions include the future role, if any, of military action in pursuit of humanitarian aims and enforcing global human rights standards. Outside of the security and defence sectors, the UK's grand strategy also needs to factor in the UK's interests on climate change, economic security, global trade, industrial strategy and technology.

b. Partnerships: At the core of the UK's international strength are its alliances and partnerships. This is a feature that distinguishes the UK and other democratic states from their more transactional



authoritarian adversaries. Partnerships are essential to tackle the world's most pressing challenges, such as climate change, illegal migration, transnational crime and hostile state activity, in managing AI equitably for the benefit of all, and in resolving conflicts. Addressing these challenges requires states to cooperate. The UK's convening power and experience are a strategic asset in joint international problem solving. Remaining visible, relevant, useful and pragmatic should be at the core of the UK's approach to diplomacy, development and defence. Partnership involves sustained investment in lasting relationships, especially with its most likeminded friends. This needs to start with the EU, with whom we have common interests in most areas of security, defence and foreign policy.

c. Openness: One of the UK's strongest assets is its openness – both for protecting the vibrancy of its democracy and projecting a positive global image. This includes transparent government, the availability of information, a free press, the independence of the judiciary, the defence of liberty, the accessibility of its institutions, a culture of tolerance, a welcoming attitude to outsiders, and a capacity for debate, humour and self-criticism. Openness attracts inward investment, tourism, foreign students and academic exchange, which distinguish it from its adversaries. However, openness is also a vulnerability. The UK should guard its culture of openness strenuously, while increasing its resilience to attack and interference from hostile states that seek to exploit its openness. It also means safeguarding the independence of its key institutions and civic space.

d. Expertise: The UK has well-regarded expertise in areas such as science and technology, cyberspace, intelligence capability, international development, conflict prevention, and international regulation. However, expertise needs sustained investment in areas such as tertiary education, technology, skills for civil servants and life-long learning.

e. Integrity: To be convincing abroad and continue to shape the global conversation, the UK needs to start at home. The UK needs to be unambiguously consistent if it is to maintain the moral authority to pursue a values-based agenda overseas. This means being consistent about domestic and international climate commitments; adhering to its international law and its treaty commitments; and cleaning up the UK's financial industry including in the Crown Dependencies and Overseas Territories. It also means preserving checks and balances on political power, restoring constructive political and public debate, improving democratic participation, and countering information manipulation.

f. Comprehensive defence: The UK's adversaries present threats across all facets of modern life, from critical infrastructure to information warfare. The response requires not only the state but



the whole of society. State and public bodies need to see their activity through a national-security lens, and act accordingly. This requires changes to laws, regulations, structures, procedures and budgets, notably regarding information sharing, contingency planning, cross-sectoral training and public messaging about threats and risks. It also requires a frank conversation about the changing character of security threats, as well as social innovation to involve citizens, businesses, digital networks, and civil society organisations in defending against them. Nordic models, particularly Finland, may offer a model here.

5. STRATEGY IN ACTION: THREE QUESTIONS FOR UK FOREIGN POLICY

The rest of this paper considers how those principles might be applied to specific foreign policy challenges: (i) with the EU; (ii) between the UK's Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific priorities; and (iii) the values agenda.

a. What should be the UK's strategic approach to Europe?

The majority (though not unanimous) view of participants was that Brexit has diminished the UK's international standing. Whatever the political benefits of greater sovereignty and independence, in strategic terms it has undermined the UK's traditional role as a bridge between the US and Europe. It has put up barriers to the export of goods to the UK's largest trading partner. It has strained relations with its closest allies. And it has dented the UK's reputation for competence and pragmatism. Events since the Referendum such as Russia's invasion and hybrid attacks, Trump's Presidency, COVID, economic insecurities, have changed the UK's geopolitical calculus and sharpened tensions with China.

The working assumption of the Consultation was that the UK will not rejoin the EU within the next 15 years and that the rest of the EU 27 will remain together. Despite polling data since 2022 indicating that most British people now think that Brexit was a mistake, there is little public appetite to relitigate the referendum. And without a major UK change of heart on the customs union, free market or freedom of movement there is little prospect of renegotiating a more favourable Trade Cooperation Agreement.

The UK nevertheless needs to normalise its relations with Europe post-Brexit, reviving bilateral relations with its closest neighbours and deepening relations with the smaller states. While this will



not in itself resolve the ongoing economic tensions it will improve the atmosphere for future conversations about trading arrangements. To renew relations and find alternative mechanisms for collaboration from outside the bloc the UK needs to be unequivocally part of the conversations with the EU. This could include joining European Council meetings, sending experts to EU coordination meetings, establishing an office close to the European Parliament, and setting up a new British House in Brussels to facilitate dialogue, improve the UK's image, and generate ideas.

The UK's departure from the EU has left a major gap in defence and security cooperation. There is currently no satisfactory mechanism for the UK to coordinate hard security issues with its nearest neighbours outside of NATO. NATO remains dominated by the US, whose wavering commitment to European security is likely to reflect a trend regardless of which party is in power. With the US increasingly turning its attention to its interests in the Indo-Pacific, the UK will need to find new coordination mechanisms with Europe on security where there is EU political will and where the UK has strengths, such as military capability (albeit diminished), cyber security and intelligence capabilities.

The UK cannot afford to take an insular approach to security or frame the EU as a strategic competitor on matters of security. In an environment of growing competition and stretched resources the UK will need to pool its capabilities with other EU partners. The UK could seek to fill gaps in European capacity where it has noted strengths, such as its strong defence sector, where Brexit has left gaps in defence-industrial production arrangements and R&D cooperation. For instance, the UK is currently excluded from the European Defence Fund, and the EU's the new European Defence Industrial Strategy seeks to steadily increase the quantity of defence equipment that can be produced within the EU. The UK will need to table an attractive offer to break down EU barriers to joint procurement with third countries.

The European Political Community (EPC) offers the UK an opportunity to coordinate strategic security issues with EU partners and European countries outside the EU. It is a forum in which the UK can exercise European leadership on Ukraine and coordinate on transnational threats such as illegal migration and serious organised crime. Outside the EU, the UK can also invest efforts into other existing mechanisms for cooperation such as the Northern Group and the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) (which the UK founded).

The long-term strategic basis for UK cooperation with the EU on defence and security would be a new defence agreement allowing for formal cooperation. This could also potentially pave the way for UK participation in EU military and civilian Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions. Finally, the UK could join France and Germany as Europe's other two major political powers



in the region to resurrect a European pillar of NATO, effectively consisting of closer E3 cooperation. Among other roles the UK could use this to restore the credibility and clarity of the escalation ladder. Neglect and the changing nature of the threat have left this ladder missing numerous rungs, denting deterrence and increasing the risk of miscalculation.

b. How should the UK balance its Euro-Atlantic vs. Indo-Pacific priorities?

The UK's strategic priorities between its near abroad in Europe and far abroad in Asia are not binary. The two theatres are intimately connected. The conflict in Ukraine is being enabled by arms sales from North Korea and sanctions busting by India and China. Conversely, the outcome of the war in Ukraine will shape how China approaches Taiwan. A Chinese invasion or blockade of Taiwan would have far greater global costs than even Ukraine or COVID. Preventing it should be a UK national priority.

The UK's core regional priority over the next 15 years will remain the Euro-Atlantic area. The area's proximity matters for security and economic interests. Russia will remain the most acute threat to the UK's security and to the democratic order for the foreseeable future, whether Vladimir Putin's rule survives until the 2030s or not. Any successor to Putin is likely to be another hardline nationalist. Some members of the Consultation see a possible opportunity to reset some aspects of the relationship with a post-Putin Russia given that the war does not serve the interests of the wider Russian elite.

However, the UK will remain heavily dependent on the Indo-Pacific region, the Gulf, and Africa for trade, investment and economic growth. Given that most of the world's major challenges require Chinese cooperation, the UK will have to engage with China politically. But the engagement is asymmetric. China has been unwilling to engage on issues of interest to the UK, including technology exports, cyber-espionage, intellectual property theft, and the manipulation of the Chinese diaspora in the UK. The UK is ill-prepared for the long-term effects of China's behaviour.

Regardless of party politics, the US is set on greater competition with China and will seek to co-opt the UK into supporting economic and security initiatives. This risks damaging the UK's efforts to pursue green economic growth and could affect the cost and variety of goods available to British consumers. US pressure over Huawei is a foretaste of future problems. In the event of a direct military confrontation between the US and China, there would be little UK public appetite to join military action. However, the UK would be duty-bound to apply sanctions on China and provide auxiliary military support, both of which would harm its economic interests.



The best way to ensure continued US commitment to European security is to show that the UK is relevant to US priorities in the Asia/Pacific region. The UK can make an important contribution to the defence and security of the Indo-Pacific through partnerships such as AUKUS and the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP), as well as technical assistance and defence diplomacy on issues such as China's base-building efforts in the South China Sea and the Pacific. The UK will also need to bolster its economic and security partnerships with India to help it defend against Chinese aggression. The UK can also be a force for greater European capability in the Euro-Atlantic to free up US capability for the Indo-Pacific. However, the UK cannot be a major military player or force-balancer in Asia. The UK will therefore need to pick its priorities carefully, especially as they compete for bandwidth with other regions such as the Middle East.

Ultimately it is not in the UK's economic or security interests to be dragged into a US confrontation with China. The UK must balance the national security threat from China, its duty as a key US ally, its relationship with the EU, and the protectionist element in the US/China rivalry. Alongside the EU, the UK should promote strategic guardrails to stabilise the US/China relationship and seek to build a framework for peaceful competition that fosters confidence-building and prevents miscalculation. This will need to include new mechanisms for managing arms control. The balancing act will be a formidable challenge. This is an area where the UK should cooperate with the EU as they are closely aligned on their China policies and share a common interest in preserving access to critical resources.

c. How can the UK uphold its values in an increasingly illiberal World Order?

The shifting geometry of power is leading to a profound shake-up in the norms and values that have defined the post-war consensus. There is a fundamental tension between the competing visions of the global order between authoritarian and democratic states. China champions the rights of strong nation states over and above the rights of the individual to guarantee its security and prosperity. But strong individual rights are fundamental to a stable international order. The liberal democratic view is that authoritarianism is inherently unstable and leads to insecurity, and that security is guaranteed by political legitimacy based on democratic choice and universal rights and fundamental freedoms. This is an irreconcilable ideological difference, especially since China seeks to export its authoritarian model, including by reshaping the international system around it, supporting authoritarian regimes, and selling surveillance technologies to other states.

Democracy is also being eroded by political, economic and technological factors that are leading young people in Western democracies to question the value of elections. The economic failures associated with the 2007 financial crisis and sustained cost of living pressures have damaged faith in



the benefits of free trade, globalisation and market-led economic systems. Trust in institutions and democracy by young people is particularly low. The failures of liberal interventionism in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, as well as the failures of the Arab Spring including Syria have similarly led to a crisis of confidence in the West's ability to enforce international law and have reinforced China's belief in its own authoritarian outlook. It is unlikely that Western publics will support major military interventions justified on humanitarian grounds in future.

In parallel, advances in technology are rapidly reshaping public perceptions of the world. The availability of real-time information is also reshaping global attitudes, for instance to the conflict in Gaza. The speed of the public response is forcing governments into ever more reactive policymaking. Technology is also creating echo chambers that have polarised societies and generating a growing divide between states. The 'Global South' is increasingly vocal in calling out liberal Western democracies for inconsistencies in its foreign policy while becoming less receptive to messages on universal rights. China and Russia are actively encouraging this, characterising the norms and values enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as alien Western values, and reinterpreting human rights as the right for collective economic development.

Changes in the global order call for a different approach to the values agenda. The old model of enforcing international norms through political and economic isolation is less effective in a multi-polar world. Sanctions on totalitarian regimes such as Sudan, Zimbabwe and Myanmar have been blunted by the ability of recalcitrant states to turn to the West's competitors and to other middle powers for support. In such cases sanctions are at best symbolic, and at worst tokenistic.

This does not imply that Western governments should over-correct for past mistakes by vacating the international space or giving up on protecting long-established norms. Instead, the UK should be smarter about how it operates, using intelligence, trade, education, and strategic communications to challenge autocratic behaviour. The UK should promote organisations like the G20 to advocate for a more inclusive global conversation about protecting the international order and to incubate ideas. The global south has been at the forefront of advocating for a more inclusive agenda and does not want to be dominated by China.

There is still a value for sanctions in countries like Russia, which are beholden to their populations - at least to some degree. Sanctions against Russia have deprived it of direct access to high-end technological goods on which it relied. Russia's attempts to reproduce such goods at home have failed, sending them towards China and the black market. Furthermore, Russia has given the US and Western economies the opportunity to test out economic measures. There has been significant innovation in this field, such as the secondary sanctions that are creating anxious choices for Chinese



banks. Furthermore, the enforcement of sanctions has become more refined. Together, this is ushering in a new array of economic statecraft measures, the beginnings of which are only starting to emerge. For Russia in particular, this has extracted a significant economic cost.

The UN remains the most effective system for upholding international law and governing global relations between states. However, the UN is only as good as the dynamics and relations between its dominant members. It has been vandalised by Russia and sidelined by the US under Donald Trump. For its part, China is increasingly seeking to remodel the UN into an organisation more sympathetic to its vision of the global order by installing officials in key positions and replacing standard language with formulations that act to muzzle criticism.

The UK should redouble its efforts to be a leading voice within the UN on issues such as climate, space, science and technology, the SDGs, conflict preventions and reform of the International Financial Institutions. This includes campaigning to promote British candidates into top UN positions and other multilateral institutions. Empowering and reforming the UN is also critical to engaging the global south. In the longer term the UN will need reform, including the composition of the UN Security Council, which no longer reflects the world fairly. The UK should be a champion for reform, as difficult as this will be, while not yielding its own influence.

Finally, the UK cannot afford to uphold international law abroad while abrogating it at home or applying it in ways that are transparently inconsistent. This means being scrupulous in observing the laws and treaties to which it has signed up. It also means holding its friend and allies to the same standards as its adversaries on matters of international law. Finally, it means cleaning up the UK's own financial system, which has been tarnished by scandals in the City of London and the Crown Dependencies and Overseas Territories. The UK should regulate the professional services industries more effectively, including the bankers, lawyers, accountants and others who service the world's kleptocrats and other malign actors.



6. APPENDIX

a. Participant List

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Former British diplomat

Lord Kim Darroch

House of Lords and former British diplomat

Tom de Waal

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Former Member of the UK Parliament and former Minister
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