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Great Britain's Foreign Policy Dilemmas

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Former U.S. secretary of state Dean Acheson's famous and controversial 1962 statement that Britain had "lost an empire and not yet found a role" captured the British dilemma well.[1] This was the case during the Cold War and, as will be seen, it still remains. To the present day, British foreign policymakers continue to view the United Kingdom as a major international power.

The general perception outside the United Kingdom—be it in Washington, Beijing, or Berlin—is somewhat different, however. Even within the European context, Britain was increasingly being left behind even before Brexit. To a large extent this occurred because of a lack of strategic foresight and intelligent decisionmaking and an inability to come to terms with an imperial past and transcend it. In the globalized world of the post–Cold War era and more than seventy years since the end of World War II, Britain continues to flounder and still finds it difficult to find a niche for itself. Yet the country has managed to continue punching above its real weight in global affairs.

This chapter outlines the major features of British foreign policy in the post–Cold War era. Subsequently it considers Britain's national interest in areas such as defense (including NATO issues) and some others. It also looks at the British position toward some international organizations, in particular the European Union. I begin by providing a brief analysis of Britain's Cold War foreign policy in the years from 1945 to 1990, when the country and its foreign policymakers were even more convinced than they were in the post–Cold War years that the United Kingdom naturally belongs to the world's selective club of great powers. Essentially Britain has remained caught in a Churchillian foreign policy framework.[2]

British Foreign Policy during the Cold War

Throughout the Cold War years, London's global influence, as well as Britain's role as an effective international power broker, allowed the United Kingdom to have a disproportionate influence in global politics. The country's network of global connections that went back to the era of empire and British hegemony, Britain's reputation as a trusted ally of the United States, and its military and foreign policy professionalism contributed greatly to the perception that the United Kingdom was much more influential than it really was. London's impressive expertise in all matters of intelligence and counterintelligence, and not least the country's high-quality armaments industry, also played a role.[3]

It makes sense to differentiate between three distinct phases of British foreign policy during the Cold War, as described below.

The Early Cold War Era (1945–56)

During these years Britain benefited from its World War II victor status and continued to be seen as a real world power. However, the domestic and external problems the country had to grapple with were piling up. The establishment of the welfare state, including the beneficial but also very costly National Health Service, and Britain's onerous far-flung commitments abroad greatly overextended the country.

Reliance on the United States was essential to avoid bankruptcy in the early Cold War years. Britain hoped to obtain a generous long-term loan from Washington; the loan it eventually received was much less generous and much more reluctantly extended than London had expected in view of

its wartime sacrifices and the new Soviet threat. An early Anglo-American effort to roll back communism was attempted in late 1948. In Albania, the infiltration of Western-trained saboteurs and resistance fighters with the intent to cause uprisings and bring down Enver Hoxha's communist state failed miserably, however. Already Britain's involvement in the Greek Civil War on the side of the anticommunist royalist forces had to be scaled back for economic reasons. Britain's reduction of its commitments abroad led to the dramatically announced Truman Doctrine of March 1947 and Washington's takeover of the fight against communism on a global scale.[4]

Despite Britain's victory over Nazi Germany, Germany continued to be a major headache for British policymakers. As one of the four occupation powers, London had to support the former enemy to prevent widespread starvation and help to reconstruct the German economy and reeducate the German people. Then, in the context of the Korean War, London was persuaded by the United States to agree to the expensive rearmament of the new West German state so that more forces would be available on the European continent if the Red Army were to invade. This latter scenario was seen as a distinct possibility.[5]

Furthermore, despite its economic predicaments and rising nationalist sentiments almost everywhere, Britain somehow still had to find the resources and the will to manage its far-flung colonial interests and military commitments abroad. The independence of India in August 1947, accompanied by a vicious civil war, and the return of Britain's mandate for Palestine (which also led to a major war) to the newly founded UN in 1948 started a process of decolonization that would continue through the 1960s and much of the 1970s. With the peaceful return of Hong Kong to China in 1997, Britain gave up its last major colony. The sun had finally set for good on the empire.[6]

To countenance its diminishing conventional military resources, Britain embarked on the top-secret building of its own atomic bomb in the late 1940s and subsequently its own hydrogen bomb. A first British test explosion occurred in 1954, and an H-bomb was successfully tested three years later. These were major scientific achievements, but they were very costly and essentially unaffordable. However, British policymakers were convinced, as were most American politicians at the time, that relying on nuclear weapons provided the country with much greater "bang for the buck" than the highly expensive upkeep of large conventional armies. Throughout the Cold War years, London actively sought to intensify its partnership

with the United States, but trust went only so far. The British did not wish to rely solely on the American nuclear umbrella; they found it much more reassuring to possess "the bomb" themselves. Prestige and Britain's international standing as a great power also seemed to require the possession of nuclear weapons.[7]

London did not see the need to join the continental European countries in the establishment of the supranational European Coal and Steel Community (Schuman Declaration) of 1952 and a few years later refused to participate in the formation of the European Economic Community (EEC). Giving up even a degree of sovereignty to a European entity was anathema in Britain. Anthony Eden, the prime minister, for instance, proclaimed that he felt it in his bones that his country had more in common with the old colonies of Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and South Africa than with its neighbors on the European continent. Already during these early years, the stage was set for Britain's never-resolved dilemma: whether to regard itself as a European country.[8]

The Post-Suez Years (1957–1970s)

During this second phase of Britain's Cold War foreign policy, the country's global influence diminished at an accelerating rate and the European question could no longer be ignored. Britain, France, and Israel's 1956 invasion of Egypt to undo President Gamal Abdel Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal proved to be a major disaster that clearly revealed the two European powers' fall from great power status. U.S. president Dwight D. Eisenhower, who had not been consulted, used economic pressure to make Britain abort the recapture of its old Suez Canal military base just a day before it would have been achieved. Without U.S. agreement, it appeared, Britain (and, by implication, France) was no longer in a position to embark on military adventures abroad.[9]

In the aftermath of the crisis, which in London led to the replacement of Eden with a new prime minister, Harold Macmillan, the two European countries drew important but very different lessons. While France came to believe that it had to develop its own power base, including nuclear weapons, since the United States had proved to be an unreliable and difficult ally, the British arrived at the opposite conclusion. The United Kingdom, it seemed, believed it needed to become an indispensable partner to the United States. British global influence could only be maintained, it was concluded in London, if the United Kingdom and the United States walked

hand in hand. From Macmillan to Tony Blair and beyond, this belief has been one of the main pillars of British foreign policy in the globalized world of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The United States appreciated this. Close relations were soon reestablished after the Suez Crisis. This cooperation could be seen, for instance, in a short-lived deployment of troops by the United States in Lebanon and British paratroops in neighboring Jordan to quell anti-Western uprisings there.[10]

However, the United States had no intention of sharing its global leadership role with the British. The United Kingdom was only consulted and cooperation only occurred when Washington believed this was in its interests. The United States had a much less romantic and a much more hard-nosed approach than the British to the "special relationship." In the second Berlin crisis in the late 1950s, which led to the building of the Berlin Wall in August 1961, and indeed during the dangerous Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, the British were hardly consulted by the United States. The British prime minister had become a mere bystander to the American-Soviet domination of global affairs.[11]

At the conference in Nassau (the Bahamas) in early 1961, Macmillan even had to beg President John F. Kennedy to sell Polaris missiles to Britain so that his country's own nuclear warheads could be deployed, were this to become necessary. Without the new Polaris delivery vehicle, there was no way that British atomic bombs could have been used.

Soon Britain had little choice but to move closer to Europe. Primarily for economic reasons, but also for political ones, Prime Minister Macmillan applied for admission to the EEC in 1961. French president Charles de Gaulle, who jealously guarded his country's predominant position in European affairs and viewed the Anglo-American "special relationship" with deep suspicion, issued a veto. When the new Labour prime minister, Harold Wilson, applied again in 1967, de Gaulle announced his second veto. It would take the old general's retirement in 1969 and the premiership of Edward Heath (1970–74) to ensure that Britain's third desperate attempt to become a member of the European Community succeeded in 1973.[12]

By this time Britain had moved away somewhat from its close partnership with Washington. Already Prime Minister Harold Wilson had refused to offer British troops to the American war in Vietnam, as had been repeatedly demanded by the U.S. president, Lyndon Johnson. Moreover, in the wake of the sterling crisis in November 1967, Wilson and his chancellor of the exchequer, Roy Jenkins, had concluded that Britain's commitments

east of Suez were unaffordable. Two months later Wilson announced that by the end of 1971 Britain would leave its military bases in the Far East and in the Persian Gulf (including its huge naval base in Aden, Yemen). Only Hong Kong would be maintained. London began to rebalance its global commitments and focus more on Europe. The withdrawal from the East did not please the United States, which would have to take over many of Britain's responsibilities there.[13]

Washington, however, had been encouraging the British to focus more on Europe, arguing that if Britain were to become a full member of the European Community (EC), this would actually increase rather than weaken Britain's role in world affairs as well as its importance for the United States. When Edward Heath's pro-European conservative government lost office in early 1974, the succeeding Labour government (again under Prime Minister Wilson) immediately and successfully demanded a renegotiation of the British terms of entry to the EC. In a June 1975 referendum, the British people were asked whether the country should remain a member of the EC (which the government supported); 17.3 million Britons voted in favor and 8.4 million were opposed, a clear 2:1 ratio for "staying in Europe."[14]

By the mid to late 1970s, Britain had given up most of its colonial possessions and military bases abroad. However, the majority of British politicians still regretted the loss of Britain's global role. In their heart of hearts, they deeply resented their replacement as the globe's major power by the United States. They also viewed West Germany's increasing influence on the European continent with great suspicion and a degree of envy. Britain's difficult domestic situation also contributed to the development of a certain beleaguered "bunker mentality" and resentment about the loss of world power status.

Since the mid to late 1960s, Britain's course had been driven by currency crises, economic difficulties, industrial strife, and social unrest. Poverty levels and social deprivation, particularly in the north of the country, were on the increase.[15] Moreover, in 1968, the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland commenced. Since the partition of Ireland in 1916, Northern Ireland—the six northern counties of the island of Ireland (except Donegal)—has been a British province, with 1.5 million inhabitants. In the late 1960s its population was divided approximately 60:40 between British loyalists and Irish nationalists, most of whom desired to bring about a united Ireland. From the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, the conflict became increasingly violent and, in June 1969, brought the deployment of British troops. This intervention,

however, soon inflamed the situation further. At the conflict's height, there were almost 35,000 British troops in the province and there was civil war in Belfast, Derry, and many other towns and areas. The regular television news about yet another bomb explosion and yet another shooting in both Northern Ireland and occasionally in England itself only contributed to Britain being seen as in irreversible decline.[16] Throughout the 1970s, the United Kingdom was frequently regarded as the "sick man of Europe." This was confirmed by an International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout in 1976, which Wilson's successor, James Callaghan, the new Labour prime minister, had to resort to in order to prevent British bankruptcy.[17] This humiliating episode left deep scars.

The Thatcher Years: Revival and Continued Impotence

This was the dire situation Margaret Thatcher faced when the Tories returned to power under her leadership in 1979. With her steely and robust personality, Thatcher had been able to overcome the many hurdles faced by the still patriarchal Conservative Party she would head as the country's first female prime minister. She was also determined to make Britain "great again" with the help of the forces of the free market and a strong anticommunist fervor. U.S. president Ronald Reagan happened to share many of her ideological beliefs, and strong personal links between the two politicians developed. The revival of special relations with Washington reinforced Thatcher's predilection to think in global rather than European terms.[18]

At first, it seemed that Thatcher had managed to strengthen Britain's domestic economy and the country's international standing during her twelve years in office. This perception was misleading. Her radical economic restructuring, including the sacrifice of much of Britain's out-of-date manufacturing industry and expertise and the wide-scale closures of coal mines, caused great social dislocation and hardship. This was especially evident in Wales, the Midlands, and in the north of the United Kingdom, including Scotland. Unemployment skyrocketed during Thatcher's first years in office and only very slowly came down again. Despite Thatcher's economic restructuring efforts, the skills of the country's domestic workforce, and Britain's long-term economic structures, did not improve noticeably. However, by means of a huge deregulation drive she managed to solidify the role of the City of London as the world's major financial center, whose only serious rival at the time was New York City's Wall Street. Soon the

1980s came to be characterized by financial greed and egotistical individual behavior, particularly in the workplace. "There is no such thing as society," Thatcher exclaimed in an interview with the magazine *Woman's Own* in September 1987.[19]

Britain's 1982 victory in the Falklands War against Argentina and the ensuing wave of British nationalism ensured Margaret Thatcher's reelection in a landslide victory in 1983 despite a poor economic record and high levels of unemployment. Thatcher's aim of making Britain "great again" proved unreachable, however. After all, the Falklands War was of more symbolic than real importance. Moreover, without U.S. satellite information about the whereabouts of Argentinian naval forces, victory would likely have been impossible. The United States had initially hesitated to support the British and attempted to mediate as a neutral arbiter before changing its mind. Reagan had priorities other than looking after his British ally. He was much more focused on America's own domestic economy and on overcoming the East-West conflict.[20]

When Reagan began negotiations with the new and progressive Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985, the British and the other European allies were hardly consulted. Bilateral U.S.-Soviet negotiations led to important reductions in the nuclear and conventional armament arsenals of both superpowers. Britain and France, Europe's two nuclear powers, were not invited to participate in the talks. Europe was ignored, despite the fact that short-range missiles were based on European soil and targeted European cities.

By the late 1980s, Thatcher and Reagan (and their spouses) had become personally close, but political relations between the United States and its European allies, including Britain, were strained. Thatcher never overcame her strong anticommunism and for a long time was not convinced that genuine rather than mere tactical change was taking place in the Soviet Union under Gorbachev. Instead, she warned repeatedly that the West needed to be alert and not let itself be seduced by Gorbachev's personal charm and his enormous popularity in Germany and other European countries (which she called "Gorbymania").[21]

By this time Thatcher had already antagonized her European partners with her increasingly strident anti-European rhetoric. She had begun her years in office by insisting on a rebate of Britain's net payments to the EC. Although Thatcher signed the 1986 Single European Act, she had no intention of giving up real sovereignty to the European Commission in

Brussels. She agreed with the elimination of tariffs and improvement of better trade because these measures merely seemed to create a huge free trade area in Europe. Anything else was beyond the pale for Downing Street. The Delors Plan of April 1989 (named for Jacques Delors, president of the EC from 1985 to 1994), which had been developed after the June 1988 European Union (EU) summit in Hanover, was strongly opposed by the British prime minister. The plan foresaw the creation of monetary union and a single currency, and eventually even political union, and thus went far beyond what Thatcher could endorse. Her crudely anti-European 1988 speech in Bruges in Belgium made clear her outright hostility and strong opposition to giving up any British power to a European entity.[22]

The following year, mass demonstrations all over Eastern Europe shook communism to its core. Although in principle Thatcher approved of this anticommunist wave, she was also highly disturbed about a change in the status quo, including Britain's still important role in the Cold War world. When the East Germans rose up and German unification appeared as a distinct possibility by November 1989, Thatcher was aghast. She talked about maintaining two German states for the time being. The German Democratic Republic (East Germany), she said, ought to exist independently as a separate democratic German state for a number of years. Yet the strong and unhesitating support by U.S. president George H. W. Bush for the democratization of Eastern Europe and German unification made Thatcher's position futile. She hoped that Gorbachev would never agree to the unification of the two German states. Thatcher also attempted to enter into an informal anti-German alliance with the French president, François Mitterrand, to undermine the move toward a united German state. Yet Mitterrand and then also Gorbachev realized how unrealistic this was, and eventually both gave their agreement to German unification, despite their strong misgivings. Bush's consistent support for German chancellor Helmut Kohl and the U.S. president's constructive relations with Gorbachev had been decisive. Thatcher was unable to uphold her opposition. In the summer of 1990 she accepted the inevitable and signed on to the unification of Germany, which took effect in early October 1990.[23]

Yet Thatcher's well-known attempts to prevent this outcome, her increasingly unreasonable anti-European tirades, and her ever-greater problems with a deeply divided cabinet undermined her authority, both in the country at large and, even more important, within her own party. Domestically, a new ill-thought-out poll tax was highly controversial and led to

vicious street battles between protesters and the police. The Conservative Party became convinced that Thatcher would be unable to win the next elections. The Tories under Thatcher had been trailing the opposition Labour Party for the previous eighteen months in the polls. The gap had widened to almost 14 percent, a dangerously high figure, even considering the unreliability of opinion polls.

Thatcher was also damaging Britain's relations with her close allies in Europe and across the Atlantic. Instead of cooperating with her allies in the momentous events in Eastern Europe, she had managed to antagonize continental Europe's most important country, Germany, and even her relations with Washington had plummeted. Relations with France and Moscow had suffered, too. She had to go, it was concluded on the conservative backbenches and in the conservative central office.[24]

In the annual contest for the leadership of the Conservative Party in mid-November 1990, Thatcher was ousted by her own party. Her former defense minister, the popular Michael Heseltine, threw his hat into the ring. He entered the leadership competition the day after Thatcher's deputy prime minister, Geoffrey Howe, had given a devastating resignation speech in parliament in which he severely criticized Thatcher's European policy as unreasonable and counterproductive.

Heseltine obtained enough votes to force a second round of voting. Thatcher reluctantly resigned instead of standing in a second round, which she may well have lost. Once Thatcher resigned, however, Heseltine lost out in the leadership contest against the much less flamboyant John Major, Thatcher's chancellor of the exchequer. Seen as a safe pair of hands, he became leader of the Conservative Party and succeeded to the premiership.[25]

The Post–Cold War Years

John Major's premiership from 1991 to 1997 must be seen as a transition period in British politics, though quite a prolonged one. His years in office were characterized by continued division between the pro- and anti-European factions both in Parliament and in his cabinet. He and his chancellor of the exchequer, Norman Lamont, also suffered from financial humiliation when the country's economy proved to be too weak to sustain Britain's membership in the European Exchange Rate Mechanism. The

country was ejected from this forerunner of the European Monetary Union on September 16, 1992. Although in April 1992, Major had won an entirely unexpected reelection victory against Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock, both his contemporaries and the subsequent scholarly literature have had few kind words about Major's accomplishments.[26]

Major, however, set in motion the Northern Irish peace process. It led to the negotiation of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 under his successor, which largely resolved the conflict. Yet British policy related to the war in Bosnia in the early to mid-1990s and Major's inability to control his ministers and impose his authority on Britain's policy toward the EU undermined his government. In the midst of much controversial discussion in August 1993, Major managed to persuade a majority of the House of Commons to ratify the Maastricht Treaty, however. The treaty would turn the EC into the EU and foresaw the establishment of a monetary union and a common European currency. Although the prime minister had obtained opt-out clauses for his country on a number of social and judicial EU clauses, many of his Euroskeptic ministers and backbenchers never forgave Major for what they saw as his betrayal of British sovereignty.[27]

Tony Blair's election as British prime minister in a landslide victory in May 1997 was greeted with relief. There was widespread jubilation that the Major government had been put out of its misery. The Labour Party was returned to power after more than two decades in the wilderness. Not surprisingly, expectations were running high in almost all respects. The 1997–2007 Labour governments led by Tony Blair and then by Gordon Brown from 2007–10 have defined Britain's role in the early twenty-first century.

The New Labour Era

When Tony Blair was swept into office in 1997, the country seemed to have been infused with new energy and optimism. There was tremendous hope at No. 10 Downing Street that Britain could creatively contribute to shaping the post–Cold War world. Not least, the new Blair government was keen to grasp the forces of globalization and run with them.

However, two decades later, Tony Blair is among Britain's most maligned and unpopular politicians.

The economic policies of the governments led by Blair and his successor, Gordon Brown, are now regarded as complete failures. The New Labour era is frequently interpreted as a time of missed opportunities and

unwise falling back to old policies. Regarding foreign policy, it was above all Tony Blair's fateful decision to invade Saddam Hussein's Iraq alongside U.S. president George W. Bush that has had profound repercussions. There was much domestic and global opposition to the war, and the fact that no proper UN authorization had occurred for the invasion did not help. Thus, by late 2002, it appeared that Blair was refocusing his foreign policy on the "special relationship" with the United States while neglecting everything else.[28] Although this assessment is quite justified, there is of course more to the New Labour years and Britain's post–Cold War foreign policy than the Iraq War. It makes sense to review Blair and Brown's foreign policy under the following two rubrics: (1) New Labour's foreign policy principles and (2) Blair's European policy and his attempt to act as a bridge between Europe and the United States.

FOREIGN POLICY PRINCIPLES. Tony Blair's foreign policy priorities fell within the realm of liberal internationalism, emphasizing the value of building international institutions to prevent global anarchy. The importance of democracy and normative values, such as social justice, are also emphasized for the workings of the international system in contrast to, for instance, old-fashioned secret diplomacy. Traditionally the Labour Party's liberal internationalism also refers to an antimilitaristic foreign policy with an emphasis on disarmament, collective security, and firm control of the international arms trade.[29]

Throughout New Labour's period in office, and in particular during the first five years, the principles of liberal internationalism and the extent to which they ought to be adhered to were vigorously debated among Labour parliamentarians. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the pursuit of a very different realpolitik by the Blair government put a certain stop to these debates. In this, as in many other respects, the 2003 invasion of Iraq was a real turning point in British foreign policy that can be compared in its significance to the fateful Suez adventure in 1956.

In its 1997 election manifesto, the Labour Party declared that it wished to return Britain to the heart of Europe, though Blair had no intention of joining the envisaged eurozone without a referendum. Nothing much was said about Britain's role in the European Common Foreign and Security Policy area. Instead, Blair emphasized that Britain's defense policy continued to be based on NATO and the country's independent nuclear deterrent. But the Labour Party emphasized a new moral dimension of the country's

foreign policy: If elected, Blair intended to ban the production and use of all antipersonnel landmines, and he wished to draw up new rules for Britain's extensive arms exports. The Labour Party also declared that it would again establish an independent ministry of international development (under the Tories, an Overseas Development Administration had been part of the Foreign Office bureaucracy). In addition, Blair professed his wish to support the reform of the UN and pay more attention to the British Commonwealth. The Labour Party also intended to "make the protection and promotion" of human rights a central part of its foreign policy, though exactly how human rights were to be defined and prioritized remained unclear. Blair came out in support of the establishment of an International Criminal Court for dealing with genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. The 1997 manifesto also emphasized the importance of paying more attention to global climate change. It intended to reduce Britain's output of carbon dioxide by 20 percent by 2010. On the whole, the Labour manifesto declared that Britain ought to be "a leading force for good in the world."[30]

Less than two weeks after Labour's election victory, the new foreign secretary, Robin Cook, set out the four main goals of the Blair government's foreign policy approach. He spoke of security, prosperity, quality of life, and mutual respect. With respect to the last principle, mutual respect, Cook emphasized that his country had "a national interest in the promotion of our values. . . . Our foreign policy must have an ethical dimension and must support . . . democratic rights." The new foreign secretary said that "the Labour government will put human rights at the heart of our foreign policy" and emphasized that it was the purpose of his mission statement to supply "an ethical content to foreign policy." The statement, he explained, "recognizes that the national interest cannot be defined only by narrow *realpolitik*."[31]

Cook's emphatic statement was sold as a radical departure. However, it soon clashed with the reality of British foreign relations in the contemporary world. Over time it made the foreign secretary seem like a hypocrite and exposed him and his foreign policy to ridicule. By the year 2000–01, references to an "ethical foreign policy" had been quietly dropped. In a 1999 speech he gave in Chicago, Tony Blair emphasized the notion of a "just war," such as NATO's campaign in Kosovo, which was "based not on any territorial ambitions but on values." He declared that the world needed "new rules for international cooperation" and that people were "witnessing the

beginnings of a new doctrine of international community." In the post–Cold War world, the prime minister believed that "our actions are guided by a more subtle blend of mutual self-interest and moral purpose in defending the values we cherish. In the end, values and interests merge." Deciding when not to observe the principle of noninterference and when to "get actively involved in other people's conflicts" was highly difficult. Blair suggested "five major considerations." First, it had to be investigated whether we are "sure of our case." Second, ask whether all diplomatic options have been exhausted. "We should always give peace ever chance," he pronounced. Then consider whether there were military operations that could realistically be pursued. Fourth, ask "Are we prepared for the long term?" rather than just focusing on exit strategies. And last, ask "Do we have national interests involved?"[32]

These were noble and in the abstract highly laudable principles. Four years later, however, it did not take British public opinion long to apply Blair's five conditions to the Iraq invasion. The Blair government's action was found wanting and in violation of its own rules of engagement. Henceforth the Blair government's foreign policy principles were derided and viewed with great cynicism. Blair's political and moral authority would never recover.

BLAIR'S EUROPEAN POLICY. When Blair became prime minister in early May 1997, he was regarded as the most pro-European prime minister since Edward Heath. His speeches as leader of the opposition and the Labour Party's 1997 election manifesto were viewed as strongly pro-European. Most of his European initiatives took place during his first term in office.[33] It is this period that is emphasized in the considerations that follow.

Soon after moving into 10 Downing Street, Blair announced that he wished to open a new chapter in Britain's relations with Europe. In a speech in the German town of Aachen, where he received the Charlemagne Prize (the *Karlspreis* in German) in May 1999, he said that it was his objective that "over the next few years Britain resolves once and for all its ambivalence toward Europe: I want to end the uncertainty, the lack of confidence, the Europhobia. I want Britain to be at home with Europe because Britain is once again a leading player in Europe. And I want Europe to make itself open to reform and change too. For if I am pro-European, I am also pro-reform in Europe."[34]

Already during the election campaign of 1997, Blair had emphasized that he not only wanted to pursue a more constructive policy toward Europe but also claimed a leadership role for Britain. "We will lead a campaign for reform in Europe," he said. "But to lead means to be involved, to be constructive, to be capable of getting our own way," and "we will stand up for Britain's interests in Europe," and "we cannot shape Europe unless we matter in Europe."[35] The new prime minister did not just wish to benefit from Europe economically; he also wished to catapult Britain into a decisive position with regard to the European policymaking process in Brussels.

Soon, Blair embarked on a rather more constructive European policy.[36] In June 1997, just over a month after his election, he signed the Amsterdam Treaty and thus also accepted the social chapters of the Maastricht Treaty, which his predecessor had strictly refused to adhere to. Still, the new Labour government continued to insist on the provision of a national veto in areas such as security policy, immigration, and taxation. In 1998, the Blair government managed to obtain parliamentary approval for anchoring the European Convention on Human Rights in British law. In the same year, Blair and Jacques Chirac, the French president, signed the Saint-Malo Agreement, which on the basis of close Anglo-French security cooperation laid the foundation for the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP).

The process of expanding the EU by admitting many of the former communist states was concluded with the EU summit in Nice in December 2000. Blair supported this process vigorously. Many institutional reforms that were later achieved, such as those incorporated in the Lisbon Treaty of 2007, went back to proposals made by Blair during his early years in office. Already in March 2000, Blair influenced the ambitious goals of the Lisbon EU summit, which inaugurated the Lisbon process. At the beginning of his premiership, Blair firmly intended to adopt the euro and abolish Britain's own currency, the pound sterling. Yet he grew increasingly cool toward this idea. Both within his own cabinet and in the population at large, there was a clear lack of support for replacing the pound with the euro. Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown personally did not view the adoption of the euro positively; it ran counter to British interests, he believed. The statement in the 1997 election manifesto was meant seriously. It said that "any decisions about Britain joining the single currency must

be determined by a hard-headed assessment of Britain's economic interests."[37]

Moreover, due to enormous domestic pressure, the Labour government promised the British people that a referendum would be held on the adoption of the euro. By the end of Blair's second term in office, the issue was off the table.

Blair was genuinely convinced that the policy of confrontation toward Europe that had characterized the Thatcher and Major years needed to be abandoned. Instead, London needed to find close allies in order to succeed with its ideas for reforming Europe in a constructive way. In the literature, this is often referred to as Blair's "step change." It occurred simultaneously with Blair's "new bilateralism" in 1998. The prime minister encouraged his ministers to establish good relations with their respective counterparts in the continental European governments. Although this was a sensible idea, it soon developed into a strategy of selective cooperation, as it appeared that the British ministers were only interested in cooperating with those of their European counterparts who shared their ideas and plans. This is often referred to as the first signs of a growing lack of enthusiasm for Blair's European policy (at least when compared with his first year in office).[38]

Above all, it soon became clear that London was only interested in cooperation if Britain could obtain a leadership role. This even applied to the Anglo-French partnership in the defense field, which in the context of the disastrous European policy in the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo had led to the Saint-Malo Agreement in 1998. It was Tony Blair who had taken the initiative to arrive at this important agreement, which was meant to increase the EU's military capacities for autonomous security policy activities without, however, questioning the existence and integrity of NATO. Blair and French president Jacques Chirac agreed on the creation of a rapid European Reaction Force (ERRF), which was meant to be 60,000 strong and operative by the year 2001. With this initiative European security policy received much-needed attention, including the promise of significant resources. Yet once again, the objectives were overly ambitious; there was an air of unreality surrounding the whole Saint-Malo initiative that turned out to be prophetic.[39]

After all, even during Blair's first term—and despite his many pro-European activities and initiatives during his first few years in office—it soon became clear that the he was not interested in giving up British sovereignty in important respects. The British prime minister instead pursued

a rather pragmatic course of action intended to combine supranational and traditional national competencies. Thus, Blair's European policy was clearly pragmatic. His at times close cooperation with conservative counterparts such as French president Chirac and Prime Ministers José María Aznar of Spain and Silvio Berlusconi of Italy was based on his pragmatism. Jean Monnet's objective of "ever closer union," as it appeared already in the 1957 Treaty of Rome, was not shared by Blair. In fact, he believed this was an unrealistic objective.[40]

In a speech in Warsaw on October 6, 2000, it became obvious that despite all his pro-European utterances, Blair was still thinking in traditional terms about Britain's European policy. Blair enthusiastically supported the expansion of the EU and the inclusion of the Eastern European states. He also referred to Britain's role in Europe and the future institutional setup of the EU. He emphasized that it was time "to overcome the legacy of Britain's past." Still, at the same time he referred to his country's traditionally close relations with the United States, which he believed were advantageous for the EU. "Our strength with the United States," he explained, "is not just a British asset, it is potentially a European one. Britain can be the bridge between the EU and the U.S."[41]

In the course of the election campaign of 2001, Blair could justifiably refer to some successful initiatives and demonstrate that he had indeed managed to turn Britain into a constructive and appreciated partner within the European Union. Blair, however, had not succeeded in turning the British into a more pro-European nation. He kept emphasizing that his pro-European policy by no means meant that he had turned away from the close alliance with the United States. He rejected the notion that Britain had to decide between Europe and the United States. "We shall remain the USA's firm ally and friend; but we are not going to turn our backs on Europe," he pronounced.[42] This was the high point of Blair's pro-European phase, though it was still firmly rooted in Britain's traditionally close relations with the United States.

During his second and third terms in office (2001–05; 2005–07), Tony Blair was unable to continue his careful pro-European policy. The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, in the United States, and Blair's decision to join President George W. Bush in the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, made this impossible. Bush's "war on terror" and the war in Afghanistan further strengthened Blair's relationship with Washington.[43] The hostile attitude of Germany and France toward the war in Iraq and much of Europe's

only lukewarm support of the war on terror, including the war in Afghanistan, drove a wedge between Blair's Britain and the EU. Blair had an increasingly antagonistic relationship with the German and French leaders. His close cooperation with U.S.-friendly governments such as Poland and several other Eastern European countries, as well as with Aznar's Spain and Berlusconi's Italy, undermined Blair's good standing and credibility in most other European capitals. U.S. secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld's differentiation between the countries of "old" Europe that were opposing the Iraq War and the nations of "new" Europe, which referred to the pro-American governments in Eastern Europe, Italy, Spain, and Britain, increased the deep division between Blair and the continental European countries.[44]

By 2003–04, not much was left of the ambitious "new doctrine of international community" that Blair had emphasized in his Chicago speech in 1999. The Iraq War did indeed hinder and delay the further development of a more coherent European continent. While George W. Bush in Washington observed this with satisfaction, Blair's European policy lost all credibility when he joined Bush in the violent toppling of Saddam Hussein.

When Blair resigned as prime minister in late June 2007 to make way for his designated successor, Gordon Brown, Blair's foreign policy had failed in many important respects. Brown, who always had been more Eurosceptical than Blair, made no attempt to introduce the euro in Britain. A referendum would have clearly failed to obtain the support of the British people. Brown himself did not believe in the project in any case. However, Brown pushed the Lisbon reform treaty of 2007 through Parliament, insisting that the changes called for in this treaty were not so substantial that a referendum was required. Ratification by the House of Commons was sufficient, he declared.[45]

Soon the global economic and financial crisis came to preoccupy the Brown government. Although Brown succeeded in keeping the crisis under control and preventing a worst-case scenario, his personal standing and his fortunes as prime minister never recovered from the onslaught of the crisis. After all, as Tony Blair's chancellor of the exchequer for the previous ten years, Brown had overseen the creation of the excesses of the housing market, Britain's economic bubble, and the City of London's profligate behavior, all of which greatly contributed to the Great Recession in the United Kingdom. In the general election of 2010, Brown was voted out of office.[46] After more than twelve years in power, the Labour Party was replaced by

David Cameron and Nick Clegg's Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government, the first coalition in Britain since the collapse of Winston Churchill's national government in 1945.

Outlook: The Road to Brexit

Owing to the global economic and financial crisis—the Great Recession of 2008–12—the new U.K. government that came to office in May 2010 pursued a policy of restraint. Austerity and retrenchment was the approach of the new ministers to cope with the crisis. The members of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government, led by Prime Minister David Cameron and Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, had little taste for attempting to creatively shape the post–Cold War world. Regarding Britain's foreign policy, the coalition government also looked backward, resorting to London's traditional approaches. Not least, the new government was keen on once again emphasizing the "special relationship" with the United States. Relations with the EU, however, deteriorated further. The prime minister's own Euroskeptical attitude and pressure from his backbenchers led him to refer frequently to the possibility of a British exit from the EU. Then, in a January 2013 speech, he announced that a referendum on continued British membership in the EU would take place if his party managed to win the next election. One of the questions the British would be asked to address was whether Britain should exit the twenty-eight-member organization it had joined forty years ago.[47] It made sense when the Cameron government soon began to further intensify Britain's bilateral relationships, and not just those with Washington.[48]

The coalition government entered into a closer relationship with France, largely for financial reasons. Both countries could no longer afford their still comparatively significant military arsenals. This led to intensified cooperation in nuclear technology questions in particular. Along with an ever-greater skepticism, if not outright hostility, toward the EU, the coalition government also discovered the Commonwealth again and emphasized Britain's links with its former colonies, not least in the economic and trade sphere. Naturally London attempted to use its long-standing links with India, its former crown jewel colony, to embark on more constructive trade relations. Like all Western countries, Britain was also keen on intensifying relations with China and Southeast Asia.[49]

While many of these policies made sense, they did not represent particularly creative or innovative steps. Neither did they indicate a new departure in Britain's foreign relations. Instead, Cameron's foreign economic policy consisted of a policy of delusion considering that Britain's most important export market by far was Europe. Membership in the Single Market and the customs union gave Britain real clout and genuine economic advantages that no other market could rival, including the American or Chinese markets.

Similar to the Obama administration in Washington and most continental European governments, London was glad to have ended its costly military engagement in Afghanistan. Although the United Kingdom cautiously supported developments in the Arab Spring in general and viewed them with sympathy, this was largely restricted to rhetorical support. Like all Western countries, the United Kingdom also strongly condemned the civil war in Syria but refused to get drawn into the conflict militarily. Due to skillful maneuvering of Labour leader Ed Miliband, Cameron lost a decisive parliamentary vote in August 2013. This encouraged the Obama administration in Washington to also defer a decision by asking Congress to decide whether it wished to declare war on the Syrian president Assad. This, however, weakly shifted responsibility to a gridlocked Congress that unsurprisingly failed to take action.[50]

Russia and Iran's increasing engagement in Syria was criticized by the United Kingdom as by most other Western countries. The same applied to Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and its hidden invasion of eastern Ukraine, which led to the imposition of severe sanctions on Russia. Yet the coalition government was too preoccupied with domestic and European affairs to play much of a role in the negotiations that led to the Minsk II cease-fire agreement of February 2015. It was the German chancellor and the French president, together with Russian president Vladimir Putin, who were the driving forces behind the agreement. The U.K. prime minister and foreign secretary were not among the parties who negotiated the complex deal.[51]

Similarly, the counterrevolution in Egypt was at first viewed skeptically in London, but this quickly changed once it became clear that the replacement of democratically elected President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood in July 2013 by military leader Fattah el-Sisi had positive results for Western policy. El-Sisi's forceful and ruthless suppression of all domestic dissent turned Egypt once again into a comparatively stable

pro-Western country. Little criticism of el-Sisi's undemocratic rule and repressive methods could be heard in London or elsewhere in the West. There was also very little appetite in London to become militarily involved in prolonged and intensive antiterrorist campaigns to fight al Qaeda and the new rising threat of the Islamic State in the Middle East or elsewhere. Humanitarian intervention generally took a backseat.[52]

One of the exceptions to this reticence to become engaged militarily was the short-term air force engagement in Libya in 2011. In cooperation with France, with the United States playing a less dominant role in the background while supplying crucial military equipment and ammunition, the Western engagement led to the toppling of Libyan strongman Muammar Qaddafi. This, however, caused a power vacuum in the country that in turn led to a vicious civil war. The West, however, withdrew and washed its hands of Libya and, in due course, Yemen and partially Iraq.

The days of Western leadership in international affairs clearly seemed to be over. Britain was no more interested in nation-building in the Middle East than were the United States or France. Leading from behind, if leading at all (a slogan inadvertently coined by one of President Obama's officials), was also quite appropriate to the conduct of Prime Minister Cameron's foreign policy. A more benign voice has explained, however, that under both Prime Ministers Brown and Cameron a "cautious pragmatism" dominated. It replaced Prime Minister Blair's preference for the "proclamation of grand strategic ambition."[53] It was certainly true that the absence of the latter was received with much relief by most Britons. Still, the euphemistic term "cautious pragmatism" in fact refers to a lack of international engagement and the near-absence of an important British voice in global affairs during much of David Cameron's years in office. It must be questioned whether this really served the best interests of the country.

While Cameron's foreign policy was unspectacular, to put it mildly, his major flaws and mistakes concerned Britain's domestic and European policy. Twice he risked the country's unity. He agreed to the request of a referendum on Scottish independence without specifying the necessity of a two-thirds majority as a minimum requirement for independence. A simple majority would be sufficient. The referendum, which took place on September 18, 2014, proved a nail-biting cliff-hanger, and during the last few weeks of the campaign, the likelihood of a victory for the independence movement in Scotland became a realistic prospect. The government had good reason to panic. Cameron threw all of his government's resources into

the campaign to keep Scotland within the United Kingdom. This included dramatic visits to Scotland by members of the royal family. In the end, Cameron was lucky. A narrow majority of voters in Scotland decided to reject independence and stay within the United Kingdom. Unity had just about been preserved: 55.3 percent of people voted against independence while 44.7 percent voted in favor of Scottish independence.[54]

Two years later, Cameron was less fortunate. The referendum on exiting the EU (Brexit) on June 23, 2016, resulted in an overall small majority voting for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union: 51.9 percent favored leaving the EU while 48.1 percent wanted to remain in the EU.[55] There were many reasons why so many Briton's voted in favor of leaving the EU. These included the formidable anti-European integration resentments that had accumulated over decades in the United Kingdom and the virulent long-standing anti-EU rhetoric of the majority of the British media, in particular the press organs owned by Rupert Murdoch.

Still, decisive too was the influx of refugees to continental European countries (in particular to Italy, Greece, Austria, and not least Germany) and the perceived danger that many of these people would join the large number of Eastern Europeans who had been flocking to the United Kingdom—or so it seemed. The vote was thus strongly influenced by anti-foreigner resentment—or as some scholars have put it politely, "anti-immigration populism,"[56] particularly in England outside London and in Wales. For in London, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, the "remain voters" obtained a clear majority in the referendum, but due to the negative vote in England and Wales the overall outcome resulted, as noted, in a small majority for the "leave" vote.[57] Incidentally, there also was a demographic dimension to the vote. Older white men voted overwhelmingly to leave the EU while the younger generation, those under thirty years of age, saw their future in a Britain well integrated into the EU. They voted overwhelmingly in favor of staying in the EU.

On the day of the failed referendum Cameron announced his resignation, and he retired within a couple of months, once his successor had emerged. Cameron, possibly one of Britain's most untalented prime ministers ever, was succeeded by the former home secretary Theresa May. Although having been one of Cameron's "remain" friends, she had played a dubious and cautious role during the referendum campaign, hedging her bets and making sure she would not offend the "leave" forces. She also was careful not to give Boris Johnson, the former mayor of London and her

strongest though quite unpopular rival, the chance to succeed Cameron. May made Johnson foreign secretary and thus a member of her team. She did not wish to create a strong rival outside her cabinet.[58]

The new prime minister now had the difficult task of negotiating an exit deal with the EU as well as a new relationship with Britain, either within or without the Single Market and customs union. This soon came to be referred to as a "soft" or "hard" Brexit. May triggered article 50 of the EU treaty for leaving the EU on March 29, 2017. She now had exactly two years to negotiate the exit terms and a new post-Brexit relationship with Brussels and the twenty-seven remaining EU members. May and her Brexit minister, David Davis, however, proved to be quite inept in their new roles.[59]

Moreover, May soon made her life a lot more difficult by calling a snap general election on June 8, 2017. The opinion polls had shown a favorable outcome, and May wanted to strengthen her overall majority to be able to negotiate with the EU from a much stronger position, both externally and domestically. At least that was what she said when dissolving Parliament only two years after the last election.

It backfired badly, however. May only very narrowly won the elections, with the Labour Party under its new chairman, left-winger Jeremy Corbyn, increasing its vote significantly. Instead of adding to the Conservative Party's seats in the House of Commons, the Conservative vote plummeted, leaving May with just a precarious three-seat majority. Only after she negotiated a deal with the highly conservative and religiously fundamentalist Northern Irish Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to tolerate her government and vote with it on a case-to-case basis was she able to form a new though weak government.[60] Only when the DUP's ten seats were added to the Conservative's three-seat majority was May able to preside over a small but functional overall parliamentary majority.

This naturally meant that the Northern Irish problem was again at the forefront of British politics. The DUP insisted that no new hard border should be established between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, whatever the outcome of the Brexit negotiations would be. While in principle this was also the view of Theresa May, in practice it proved to be a difficult problem to surmount because after the United Kingdom's departure, the new external border of the EU would now be the external border of the Republic of Ireland. The question arose of whether the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland could continue to be an open, invisible border even when the United Kingdom decided not only to leave

the EU but also the Single Market and the customs union. Yet the reintroduction of a hard border was not acceptable to anyone, certainly not to Sinn Fein, the Irish nationalists. Any such development threatened to lead to the resumption of the violent Troubles in the North of Ireland.

Ever since the Brexit vote, British policy has been in disarray. The May government has turned out to be highly disorganized. It also proved to have little aptitude to agree on a coherent negotiation strategy toward the EU. Consequently, negotiations between the British team, led first by Brexit secretary David Davis and then by Dominic Raab, and the EU chief negotiator Michel Barnier, a former French foreign minister, have made little progress. But the deadline of March 29, 2019, when Britain will have to leave the EU, needs to be met—unless the government and/or Parliament change their mind.

The decision by the U.K. government to honor the narrow referendum decision of June 2016 has led to a major change in the United Kingdom's relations with the outside world. Brexit may prove to be a major milestone in U.K. history. Britain's standing and influence in global affairs has already suffered a great deal.

NOTES

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EUROPE AND AMERICA

The End of the Transatlantic Relationship?

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