



‘Global Britain’: an attempt to retain power as global balance is disrupted

By Elisa Barwick

After the UK’s mid-2016 decision to exit the European Union, the British government, driven by the financial power seated in the City of London, launched an effort to fortify its position as a central player in global power politics. The plan to reinvent itself, utilising old imperial networks and the Five Eyes spy apparatus (USA, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand), was dubbed “Global Britain”; sometimes known as “Empire 2.0”. A March 2018 memo from the Foreign Office explained that the concept of Global Britain was “shorthand” for the UK’s determination to adjust to Brexit and “the pace of change in an ever more challenging global environment”, to “continue to be a successful global foreign policy player”, and to maintain a “global presence, active in every region”. A report released on 18 December 2018 by the Select Committee on International Relations of the British Parliament’s House of Lords, titled “UK foreign policy in a shifting world order”, declared that changes such as the digital revolution leading to greater interconnectedness, the shift of economic power towards Asia, the advent of new multilateral institutions and growing nationalism have “disrupted” the international order and the established balance of power, heightening the need for the Global Britain doctrine.

The campaign for “Global Britain” has been undertaken from a position of weakness, as the bankruptcy of the Anglo-American financial system is increasingly apparent.

In a 30 December interview with the *Telegraph*, British Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson expounded on the plan: “This is our biggest moment as a nation since the end of the Second World War, when we can recast ourselves in a different way, we can actually play the role on the world stage that the world expects us to play. ... This is our moment to be that true global player once more—and I think the Armed Forces play a really important role as part of that.”

Williamson announced that Britain would reverse the policy announced in 1968 by Prime Minister Harold Wilson, when it withdrew from its bases east of the Suez Canal, including from Singapore, Malaysia, the Persian Gulf and the Maldives.

“We have got to make it clear that that is a policy that has been ripped up and Britain is once again a global nation”, he declared. First Sea Lord Admiral Sir Philip Jones has repeatedly stated that the new doctrine “is nothing less than a new era of British maritime power” (“Whose methods will define the future of trade and investment, the UK or China?” AAS 5 Sept. 2018). Britain will establish two new overseas bases, Williamson announced, one in the South China Sea, likely in Singapore or Brunei, and another in the Caribbean, possibly Montserrat or Guyana, within a couple of years. In recent years Britain has been moving towards a permanent military presence in the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. It is also establishing new diplomatic posts. In April 2018 the May government announced nine new embassies, three in the Pacific (Vanuatu, Samoa and Tonga), four in the Caribbean and two in Africa. It has also been on a drive to recruit new members to the Commonwealth, even offering the USA “associate member” status.



British Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson with the since departed US Defence Secretary James Mattis. Photo: US DoD

Furthering the plan in the New Year, on 2 January Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt delivered a speech at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in Singapore, titled “Britain’s role in a post-Brexit world”. He demanded that Britain take advantage of its historical connections and alliances to take its rightful place in the world, and pointed to the shift of economic gravity towards Asia: “those connections are why Britain’s post-Brexit role should be to act as an invisible chain linking together the democracies of the world, those countries which share our values and support our belief in free trade, the rule of law and open societies”—but, he claimed, that doesn’t mean “forcing our values on others”. Last October, Hunt had announced the biggest expansion of Britain’s diplomatic network in a generation.

‘Our rules’-based order

The next day, discussing with the press the US plan to withdraw troops from Syria, Hunt regretted that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad would not be forced from power. He blamed Russia for spoiling the regime-change effort, and called Russia a “threat” to the “rules-based” international order. The Russian Embassy in London fired back: “We do not accept the concept of a ‘rules-based international order’. The international order must be based on international laws—legal norms agreed by all states.”

In an interview with Sputnik on 24 December, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov had warned that geopolitical games could lead to war between nuclear-armed powers, with “disastrous consequences for humanity”. The obsession with geopolitical ambitions by the USA and the UK has exacerbated confrontation and frozen channels of dialogue, such that “a situation may well arise when the price of an error or misunderstanding becomes fatal.” Real dialogue must be initiated, “based on the principles of mutual understanding and respect for interests”, Lavrov reiterated.

The new report from the House of Lords makes plain that the UK considers *its* rules the only viable rules of the game. It examines how the UK should enforce those rules if the USA, along with others, continues to evade them.

The report cites many experts and political leaders on the consequences of recent changes to the “global balance

of power". The majority of them spoke in favour of the existing order, but Dr Tara McCormack, a lecturer in International Relations from the University of Leicester, said that "the UK had itself weakened the rules-based international order through its 'military intervention and at times regime change'." Shadow Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Emily Thornberry said "we cannot just trot out the phrase 'the rules-based international order' and then not adhere to it ourselves". Former Australian Foreign Minister Prof. Gareth Evans pointed out that the UK's decision to leave the EU is as much a step away from international institutions as the USA's move away from promoting "liberal democratic values" and towards nationalism (pulling out of the Paris climate agreement and the UN Human Rights Council, and imposing tariffs, for instance).

Former National Security Adviser Sir Mark Lyall Grant told the committee that if a "rival governance system" were to be "established around China" it would "not be based on our value system", which would be "very damaging for us".

Foreign interference

The report openly brags of the UK's interference in other countries, via its "soft" power (political and cultural influence) and "hard" power (military and economic strength), and a combination of the two in its so-called "fusion doctrine" ("UK launches soft warfare blueprint", AAS 11 Apr. 2018). It encourages the use of as many channels and networks as possible to exert its influence—something that, if China openly said it, would be cited as grounds for war! "The Government should place a renewed emphasis on building alliances around the world and engaging with networks of likeminded partners", says the report, including to counter Russia and China. Both are threats, it asserts—Russia as a declining power, China as a rising one.

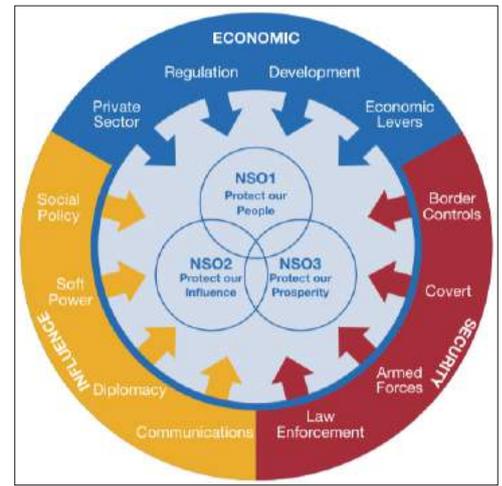
The report considers the soft impact of UK universities (apparently 55 current world leaders studied at UK unis) and Chevening and Commonwealth scholarships. The National Security Capability Review (June 2018) committed the government to creating "a cross-government soft power strategy" including the use of the BBC World Service, the British Council, and many other institutions and brands, the report recounts.

The 2018 Soft Power 30 report, put out by Portland Communications, ranked the UK in first place, and the Henry Jackson Society's annual Audit of Geopolitical Capability ranked the UK second after the USA in terms of overall geopolitical capability, and gave it top place in the category of "cultural prestige". In terms of "diplomatic leverage" it comes second, and it runs third in "military might".

The Commonwealth is emphasised as a key channel for global influence, as "democratic values run through all" its members, providing important "leverage" for the UK. Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Lord Hague of Richmond said that "the right policy for the United Kingdom" was "to be present at the heart of as many networks as it could", including "the UN, the EU, the Commonwealth and many other overlapping groups". India, the other major power outside of the USA, Russia and China, is stressed as a key asset to keep on side.

In the realm of cyber capabilities, dubbed the "poor man's weapon" as they equalise military imbalances, the report concludes that "The best way for the UK to deter cyber-attacks is to develop its own offensive cyber capabilities, and make clear its ability and willingness to respond." Again, such a statement would not be tolerated from Russia or China. New technologies have allowed an "asymmetrical

shift in the balance of power", a US government witness told the committee. The UK can be a global leader on the cyber front, the report proclaimed, convening "like-minded countries into a 'coalition of the willing' to establish 'rules of the road' in cyberspace".



A diagram of the new "fusion doctrine" from the UK's National Security Capability Review. Source: NSCR

Special Relationship on the ropes

The US-UK "Special Relationship", which has formed a "bedrock" for the UK's global influence since the onset of the Cold War, "is under disturbing pressure", says the House of Lords report. "The UK has struggled to influence the Administration" since the election of Trump. A Senior Parliamentary Researcher at the House of Commons, Matthew Jamison, wrote in an article for the Strategic Culture Foundation on 4 January, titled "The not so special US-UK Relationship", that the relationship is possibly at "its lowest ebb ever", due to British intelligence having "crossed a red line" by "interfering in the 2016 US Presidential election". This "will have tremendous consequences for the UK's position in the world going forward", said Jamison.

The Lords report recognises that the change in the USA is the result of a broader, global shift, which is "reshaping the international order. The foundations of British foreign policy—the construction and maintenance of a rules-based international order, the relationship with the USA and EU membership—are being challenged as a direct consequence of political and social wave caused by people's access to information, boosted by instant connectivity on an unprecedented scale and speed. Governments are responding to short-term demands of their citizens, who have been empowered by their access to information and opinion." (Emphasis added.)

Without the USA on side, dealing with the awakening masses to whom politicians are responding would be a far more onerous task. "[O]ur alliance with the United States remains our top priority and cornerstone of what we wish to achieve in the world", the Foreign and Commonwealth Office told the committee. The report therefore demands that the "government should reach out to those parts of American society which share our views and values", observing that "the UK and USA are deeply entwined through defence and intelligence links, and connections between officials, which should withstand political decisions by the Administration". If Trump is not re-elected the trend may not be enduring, the report conjectures, but if he or someone of a similar persuasion is elected in 2020 "the Government will need to place less reliance on reaching a common US/UK approach to the main issues of the day than has often been the case in the past." Hence the importance of the Global Britain mission in 2019, expanding the UK's reach in regions where it "does not have relevant capabilities".