Britain's Place in the World: A Labour Perspective

Ed Miliband
Leader of the Labour Party

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Robin Niblett

Thank you very much, Mr Miliband. Thank you for laying out a clear case – a case, as you said, for Britain to ensure that it remains fully engaged internationally. Obviously, you have made the point that the UK is not sufficiently engaged internationally at the moment. I’m going to take questions, we’ve got about 20 minutes or so. I said then I’ll hand over to Mr Miliband to take questions from the press.

But at the heart of your point about the UK having retreated from the world stage, having lost its influence, was the Conservative position on Europe, and specifically the in-out referendum. In fact, there is now, if they were to win the election, a date at which that referendum would take place. But you said it wasn’t a matter of principle, it was a matter of domestic politics. The Labour Party is also committed to an in-out referendum – not on the substance of a treaty, but if there’s a treaty that involves further handing off of sovereignty, then in that case there will be an in-out referendum. It might not happen, if you win the election, in the next parliament. It could happen in the next. How do you believe the UK can be influential under a Labour government in Europe if all of the time it will be trying to avoid further integration, because if the further integration happens, you can have a referendum taking place, not at a time of your choosing? How can the UK be influential under Labour if it has its own in-out referendum planned?

Ed Miliband

I didn’t realize you got to ask difficult questions, as well as the audience. I thought you were going to answer the difficult questions for me actually. Maybe we can make a deal.

Let me answer that directly. I think this is an interesting point. I don’t believe that is the direction actually that Europe wants to go in anymore. The reason why it’s important to, if you like, draw this line is that I think the British people don’t want to see further powers being transferred. It’s not what I want to see either. It’s not the direction in which I think Europe needs to go. I actually think we need more powers for national parliament. So if you like, Robin, what I’m doing is setting in place a lock which says there aren’t going to be further transfers of powers – and if there were, there would have to be an in-out referendum. I’ve said it’s unlikely to happen in the next parliament. I think it is unlikely. Personally, I think that message is understood. My sense is that there is not enthusiasm for taking further powers away from nation-states. I think that’s good because it then allows us to focus on the business of reforming Europe.

I just wanted to mention one other thing in relation to this referendum issue. I think the intervention from HSBC is very significant today. They say it’s the number-one economic uncertainty that our country faces, withdrawal from the European Union. This does go to a question of priorities and what is in the interest of our country. I think the last thing our country needs is two years of an internal debate about whether we should leave the European Union or not, when that isn’t what I want to happen.

I’ll add this. People disagree in politics, but when you see your opponents heading in a direction that is worrying for the country – I think it’s right to say this – I think what’s worrying is not simply the Conservative Party’s position on the referendum. I think it’s the fact that the centre of gravity of the Conservative Party is moving towards exit. That feels like the inexorable direction of the Conservative Party.

Now, my party in 1983 – that wasn’t a great election for us. We were committed to exit from the European Union. It was the wrong position to be in, and I think in a way the positions are slightly reversed.
Robin Niblett

Right, thank you. I’m now going to head out this way, then. That was my question.

Question 1

In your speech, you didn’t say a great deal about East Asia, a region which is obviously, in terms of its economic dynamism, increasingly important to the UK. There’s been a lot of concern on the part of some countries, particularly Japan and states in Southeast Asia, about the role of China militarily, in terms of expanding its naval presence in the region and a kind of process of creeping annexation of some of those territories in the South China Sea. How worried should the UK be about this development, in terms of its economic interests, and what role would a future Labour government play in addressing that concern?

Ed Miliband

We should always keep a watchful eye on those issues, and a government led by me would. Let me just say something, because you’ve given me the opportunity here, about the wider relationship with China. I think if you think about the challenges that the world faces – and the same applies to the US. We’ve got the special relationship with the US, but the same also applies to China. We can’t confront any of the big challenges the world faces unless we work with China. Just take the issue of climate change on its own, or take the issue of our own economy. I think it’s another area – and I think there is concern in the foreign policy community around this – where there hasn’t been the kind of engagement that I think is required.

So the answer has to be: we have to look at all of the issues that arise, but we’ve got to engage with China on human rights, on issues of foreign policy, but also, crucially, on these global issues that, frankly, need China to play its role and need China to step up to the plate. Actually, my experience on this – we had, I think it’s fair to say, difficult negotiations around climate change in 2009 with China – but my experience on this is that engagement is always better than disengagement. I think that has got to be the answer. The world is moving east and we’ve got to make sure that our focus moves there as well.

Robin Niblett

Do you think the government played it right or wrong on Hong Kong? This is, with China, one of those really difficult issues for any future government to be able to manage. To what extent, as you said, do you play through universal human rights? Where do you draw the line? Very important relationship. Do you think they played it right or wrong? How would you have played Occupy Central?

Ed Miliband

I think it was important – I think I said at the time – I think it’s important to speak up for what the protesters were calling for in Hong Kong. I think it’s really important that agreements are honoured. You’ve got to handle these things in a sensitive way but I think it was important to speak up for the kind of things people were talking about.

Question 2

You’ve been very clear that you won’t enter into a coalition with the SNP. What about less formal arrangements, such as confidence and supply and so on?
Ed Miliband

Let me answer that directly. If there’s a Labour Queen’s Speech, it’s for other parties to decide how they vote on the Labour Queen’s Speech. I’m not interested in coalitions or deals. I’m interested in putting forward a Labour programme. That’s the way the House of Commons works.

But I’ll just say this to you also, because I think it’s an important point. I think we do face a big choice as a country on this. You see, we can try and stir up English nationalism versus Scottish nationalism, which is sort of what the Conservative Party are trying to do. Or we can recognize that our country is a fragile thing, and I believe it needs a government that will speak up for working people in every part of our country. I believe it needs a government that is actually not going to say that somehow the interests of people in Scotland are wildly divergent from the interests of people in England, because the problem is – the problem about what the government is doing is it is not seeking to, if you like, unite the country. I believe it is seeking to divide the country. That is not the approach I’m going to take.

Question 3

What is the difference between Libya and Syria? You’ve just said that you did not regret voting against an intervention in Syria, when arguably if there had been a multinational intervention, now the situation would be nowhere near so bad. We would not have IS, we would not have had all the people dying, hundreds of thousands, and we would not have the refugees. From here, if Britain becomes less isolationist and according to your programme, would you be able to persuade the Americans and French and Germans and everyone else to now have some sort of intervention in Syria, to end this chaos and tragedy?

Ed Miliband

No two conflicts are ever the same, but you ask a very apt question. Let me try and answer that. I felt in relation to Libya – and I don’t regret the actions that we took, I stand by them – that there was an immediate humanitarian crisis in relation to what Colonel Qaddafi was doing. I felt that it was right to respond to the government’s proposition by saying that with UN backing – because there was UN backing. It’s true that Russia and China abstained but this went through the United Nations Security Council. That action was taken. I set out in that Libya debate – I gave a speech in the Libya debate which set out some of the criteria for intervention which I believe. One, it is an action of last resort. Two, is there regional support for intervention, which I think is incredibly important. One of the biggest lessons of the Iraq war: is there regional support? Thirdly, I did say at the time we need proper post-conflict planning, which hasn’t happened. That’s true. But that doesn’t, for me, somehow reverse the view I took at the time.

With Syria, it was a very different case. I want to be very clear about the case that was put to me in Syria in the summer of 2013. It was not actually a case about President Assad. We can come to that in a second. It was a specific case about chemical weapons. Should we engage in bombing in Syria, in the summer of 2013, in response to the use of chemical weapons? The use of chemical weapons was reprehensible, but the questions I was asking at the time – and indeed, the questions that likeminded people are asking right across the country, I think, and indeed across the world – was, is this the most effective way of dealing with chemical weapons? Because that is the proposition on the table. Are we going to get mired in a conflict when we have no way of knowing whether we’re going to get out of this conflict? What follows from that conflict? And, is there regional support? What is the legitimacy question? This legitimacy
question, post-Iraq – what is the biggest lesson I take out of the 2003 Iraq war? It’s actually a planning question, which we’ll perhaps come to in relation to Libya, but it is also this legitimacy question.

Now, that does not mean that Russia and China always have a veto on any action that would be taken. But action is much, much more likely to fail if there is not legitimacy, preferably through multilateral institutions. So that is why I didn’t think it was the right thing to do in the summer of 2013 in Syria.

Let me just also say this to you. Sorry, it’s a long answer. The situation in Syria is tragic. It is a tragic situation. But – and this is something important about my foreign policy – ‘something must be done’ is not a sufficient guide to foreign policy. That is a lesson that we’ve got to learn, because ‘something must be done’, without answers to the other questions, is, I’m afraid, a recipe not for success. So that’s the view I took about the two conflicts that you mention.

Question 4

My question is about your point regarding three main threats. You have enumerated nuclear proliferation, ISIL, Russia-Ukraine. You said the UK has not participated in the settlement, if you like, of the crisis in Ukraine. What is your position on how Russia could be contained in future? How the Ukraine crisis and the crisis of legitimacy over Crimea, do you think, could be solved?

Ed Miliband

This is a really important issue. In a way, I think if you think about the sort of changing shape of the world and the threats in the world, I think we should all take pause about what has happened in relation to Russia’s actions in Ukraine, and what has happened in Crimea and indeed more widely in Ukraine. So here’s what I think. I think the European Union was too slow off the blocks when it came to sanctions. We know some of the reasons for that, but if you compare the EU response with the US response, the US response was swifter, more comprehensive on asset freezes and a whole range of other things. I think hesitation was problematic.

What would I do now? I would certainly keep the sanctions regime in place. There is real doubts about whether the Minsk agreement is being honoured. I think we should be willing to step up the sanctions. I think we should be willing to step up the sanctions, certainly if there is further Russian aggression in Ukraine. But we should keep that possibility absolutely alive and on the table.

Now, it’s hard, this, because of the way in which different European countries are reliant on cooperation with Russia. But I think we should be under no illusions about the gravity of what happens if Europe looks like it is simply on the back foot and not responding properly to this. We’ve also got to make sure we uphold our obligations through NATO to other states.

Robin Niblett

You can’t have your cake and eat it. The problem with the EU is it is slow. Multilateralism is slow. The US, one country: fast. If we say, where was Britain in Minsk? Well, Britain, you could say, was letting Germany and France lead in Minsk because it was better for Britain to be behind rather than in front. We need to have Britain at the table, single country – how does that fit in with a multilateral EU approach?
Ed Miliband

No, but look, come on – I think the reality about what happened in relation to France and Germany – look, you can't be a country that's got one foot out of the European Union and expect to be a country that can be at the heart of decision-making in the European Union. If people think you've got one hand on the exit door, the view they take of you is, well, Britain's sort of on the way out anyway. I make this point and it sounds sort of – it's not meant to sound pat. When Britain comes calling at the moment, the rest of Europe thinks it's not coming to solve the problems of Britain or the EU, it's coming to solve the problems of the Conservative Party. Chancellor Merkel wasn't elected to solve the problems of the Conservative Party. I think it's really important, this point, that unless we are engaged and part of what is happening and are a full and committed member of the European Union, we're almost bound to be marginalized.

By the way, just on the other point – that was, in a way, what the European foreign minister was supposed to sort out, the 'who do we call' question. The fact you've got 28 countries can't be an excuse for not stepping up.

Question 5

My question is about Israel-Palestine, and thank you for what you've said. You voted with many for recognition of Palestine back in October. In my opinion, if nothing changes in the coming months, then there will be another conflict in Gaza and more settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. As prime minister, what will you do with France, the US and our Arab partners to save the two-state solution?

Question 6

What is going to be your practical approach to the Israeli-Palestinian issue, particularly when the UK and Europe are committing a great deal of aid funds for Palestinian development, but this development is showing very small results due to the increasing Israeli restrictions? It's becoming an urgent political and economic question for your country as well.

Ed Miliband

Thank you, it's really important that we took both of those questions. Thank you for your question – I know you've been outspoken on this issue – and thank you for your question, too. Let me deal with this in a little bit of length, because this is very important.

When you think about the problems that the world faces, this is the most intractable problem and in a way one of the most crucial problems to solve, because so much else, so much other conflict in the world – at least in part – can be traced back to some of the issues that are being faced between Israel and the Palestinian people.

I'm a believer in the two-state solution. I think time is running out for a two-state solution, because of geography, because of settlements, and frankly because of frustration on both sides. I've got to say, when I was in the region a year or so ago now, I think what shocked me the most was that there's a danger that both sides give up on the two-state solution. I had dinner with some incredibly eloquent Palestinian women who were saying: now we're in a sort of 50-year struggle around what a one-state solution looks like. That is deeply worrying. Again, being in Israel, I've got relatives in Israel. The amount of fatigue
around this issue and the amount of fatigue that solution is possible, is deeply worrying. So in that context, what can be done? And I'll come to your question on recognition in a sec.

I think engagement – that sounds like a platitude, it isn't. I think showing – there's a cliché that it takes both sides in the conflict to want there to be a solution. That is sort of true, but countries like Britain and the United States can have influence. Do we look engaged or do we look like, well, it's just up to you guys to get on with it and try to get peace talks restarted. I actually think John Kerry has played an admirable role in this because he's somebody who had respect from both sides. President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu both spoke to me about their respect for him. So one, you've got to engage. It's got to be clear from the British government that this is not just, well, it's your problem to solve. That we will engage with this, that we are committed to finding a solution. First point.

Second point, we've got to avoid some more dangerous shoals in this. Personally, I'm not in favour of boycotts of Israel. I think it will be a problem and I think it will actually make a solution less likely, not more likely. I think we've got to totally reject any attempt to delegitimize the state of Israel, which I think is also deeply worrying. Thirdly, we do need to encourage moderate voices on both sides. That's why we said that if there had been a vote – when there was a vote, I beg your pardon, at the UN, we wouldn't have abstained, as the British government did. We would have voted for recognition. That's why the principle of recognition is a principle we support. That's why we supported the motion in parliament a few months back.

I think the timing of when a British government and with whom should recognize a Palestinian state, I think has got to be done on the basis of what will contribute to the negotiations moving forward. We've always said that. It's the principle that we accept but the issue of timing and how it's done and who it's done with has got to be at a constructive moment in these negotiations.

The last thing I'll say on this is that in a way there's lots of reasons for pessimism on this issue – goodness knows – and no two conflicts are the same. Having said that, I meet regularly Peter Robinson and Martin McGuinness. For those who grew up in the 1980s, the notion that Peter Robinson and Martin McGuinness would be first minister and deputy first minister of Northern Ireland would have seemed absolutely ludicrous and just completely not to happen. So there's lots of reasons for pessimism but engagement – I'm actually very encouraged by the engagement that the United States is showing, not just Secretary Kerry but President Obama. They are clearly committed to doing everything they can to work towards a solution here.

Question 7

You mentioned the Commonwealth in passing. The Attlee Labour government set up the modern Commonwealth. The Wilson Labour government, exactly 50 years ago, set up the modern intergovernmental Commonwealth secretariat and got away from the idea of being some kind of relic of empire. The Blair government, as you said yourself, perhaps got too much embroiled in Iraq. What would be the legacy or the policy of a Miliband Labour government on the Commonwealth? Could you elaborate a bit? And what would you say to Commonwealth leaders in Malta in November, if you go there as prime minister?

Question 8

On Monday, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty starts its once-every-five-years review in New York. It goes on until the end of May, so any incoming UK government could have an opportunity to influence it.
A government led by you would do what to further Article 6, the nuclear disarmament clause that all the nuclear weapons states in the treaty are committed to?

**Question 9**

You mentioned that there were lessons to be learned from 2003, from the war with Iraq. Could one of those lessons actually be that you have to listen to the specialists who have knowledge on the history and the culture of a place? There is this famous meeting that took place in Downing Street when a group of academics were invited to brief Tony Blair, and I think what they all came away with is noticing how quickly his eyelids drooped when they all, in one form or another, suggested that invasion would be a wrong move to take. So will there be any attempt on your part to bring in people outside your administration who have knowledge of issues? Will your administration be able to do anything to reverse some of the cutbacks in university spending on regional studies and Middle East studies and all those sorts of areas that have actually been cut back rather drastically?

**Ed Miliband**

What's your question getting at exactly? Using –

**Question 10**

We had Hillary Clinton here talking about smart power, so basically actually using business as a way to reach the world as well.

**Robin Niblett**

The calling card of this government has been commercial diplomacy – the idea that the UK needs to engage with emerging powers. I’m sure they’d contest your view that they’ve retreated. The point has been made that they’ve visited all sorts of countries – China, India, Latin America, the Gulf. There’s been a big push around commercial diplomacy. Do you think it is the business of government? Can government succeed on that front? If you were to put the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, which is a key hallmark of this government, as a priority – a lot of opposition to it in domestic politics in the UK. Would that be a priority of the next government? That’s a lot to finish with.

**Ed Miliband**

We’ve covered quite a lot of bases. Let me do my best.

On the Commonwealth, I think it’s really good that you asked this question, because it goes to this point about the extent to which Britain – I wouldn’t say uniquely, but particularly – has an incredibly wide range of ways in which it can have influence. Not just the European Union, not just NATO, but the
Commonwealth too. So partly I’d say that the Commonwealth heads of government meeting is a chance to talk about those important issues that actually – where we can work together with members of the Commonwealth. We should be using every multilateral institution at our disposal to further our interests and, indeed, the interests of the world, and to pursue our values. So I think absolutely we should take the Commonwealth seriously as a way to do that. The whole nature of a genuine and hard-headed multilateralism is about saying you use all the institutions that you can, and the interesting thing about Britain is that we have lots of institutions that we can have influence in.

On your question: I’m a disarmer. I’m not a unilateral disarmer. In a way, I think we made good progress on this in government, because we were working with President Obama on multilateral disarmament. In a way, it’s a particular responsibility of countries recognized in the Non-Proliferation Treaty to be disarmers, to seek to further that process of multilateral disarmament. So that’s what I’d say to you. I’m absolutely uncompromising in my commitment to national security, my commitment to an independent nuclear deterrent, a continuous at-sea deterrent. But of course we should be working for multilateral disarmament, so that’s how I would want to use the five-year review.

On the question that was asked about Iraq and about lessons from Iraq, and indeed listening to experts, I don’t want to sort of re-litigate all the decisions and the meetings that were had. But of course, the fundamental point you make is right. Engagement with the foreign policy community is something I would take incredibly seriously and I know my team would take incredibly seriously, because government does not have infinite or the only wisdom. It is incredibly important to recognize that.

In a way, let’s just also level with each other about the experience. What does Iraq show? It shows a number of things, lessons that should have been avoided. I was not in favour of the Iraq war. But it also shows that it is easy to dismantle a state and much harder to put one back together again. That is really the biggest lesson, one of the biggest lessons that we take. But your general point must be right.

Then on your point about university spending, I won’t make a commitment to you today on university spending – I’ll get in trouble with Ed Balls if I did that. But the general point is important. And actually, it does take me to the question that was asked from my friend over here. I said that Britain should engage in all the multilateral institutions at our disposal, but we should also think about soft power and Britain’s soft power, because Britain has incredible soft power. The British Council, the BBC World Service – they’re independent organizations and important to see them that way, but they just have incredible influence. On the day that Nelson Mandela died, I went into the BBC and I did an interview. I didn’t plan to do an interview on the BBC World Service but they asked me and I did. I was thinking about it – there are people in South Africa listening to this now, the reaction to the death of Nelson Mandela. There’s very few countries in the world – probably no other country in the world – that can say that.

So we should be incredibly proud of that. We should be incredibly proud of ourselves. I’m not just saying it to be nice to the BBC, that are here, but we should be incredibly proud of that and we should recognize the reach and influence that we have. I say it’s better for Britain to engage, but the world wants an engaged Britain. The world absolutely wants a Britain that is going to engage.

That takes me to your last question, your second question. Necessary, but not sufficient, is my answer. Of course a British prime minister – and if I’m prime minister, I’m going to be batting for Britain, and batting for British jobs and British trade and all of those things. It is necessary as part of your approach to the world, but it is so insufficient. It is just insufficient. You can’t simply reduce your foreign policy to a trade mission. I’m not saying they have, but it’s about a lot more than that. So it’s important to do that.
On TTIP, we’re supporters of free trade. We’re supporters of TTIP. It’s got to be done with the right protections. People are raising legitimate issues about the NHS and other issues, and there has got to be those right protections in place. But one of my reasons for staying in the European Union is because of trade. I think it goes beyond that, it’s about strategic interests, climate change, terrorism, Britain’s place in the world. So free trade benefits our country.

Robin Niblett

Let me say a quick thank you, because I won’t have a chance to later on. Ed Miliband, thank you very much for coming, taking so many questions from our members. They were pretty wide-ranging, as I would expect from our members here. I’ll give you a chance to get back to the election in a moment, but a big thank you from us.

Ed Miliband

Thank you. Okay, I’ve got my friends from the press.

Question 11

There’s been some confusion this morning – can you clear it up for us? How much responsibility do you believe that David Cameron should take for the migration crisis, that you believe was in part caused by the lack of post-conflict planning in Libya? And secondly, if I may: what would you have done differently in Libya when Qaddafi fell?

Ed Miliband

Let me answer those questions specifically. I think the international community as a whole, including our government, bears some responsibility for the crisis that we see in Libya. I think that is undeniable. I want to be clear with you about that. Anybody who looks at the issue of post-conflict planning in Libya knows that it wasn’t properly done. There’s an important wider lesson here for the country, because we said after the 2003 Iraq war we weren’t going to make the same mistake again. We weren’t going to have a situation where we went into a country and then didn’t engage in that post-conflict planning that should have taken place. The fact is that the planning didn’t happen. I just want to be clear with the British people that if I’m a prime minister who decides to take military action, there has got to be a focus on that.

What should have been done? Let me deal with this –

Question 11

Sorry, just before you get on to that, can you answer the question about David Cameron? What responsibility should he take for the migration crisis, because of the failure of post-conflict planning? That was the question.

Ed Miliband

On the specific issue of the crisis that you see in Libya, I think the British government, along with other governments, didn’t engage in the proper post-conflict planning and that is, in part, the cause of some of the issues that we see taking place in Libya. As for the people trafficking that is taking place, and the
trafficking of people onto boats and all that, of course it’s the people traffickers who bear responsibility for
that. What was the other part?

**Question 11**

The second question was: what would you have done?

**Ed Miliband**

I think it partly goes to this issue of engagement and focus. I just don’t believe there was the necessary
engagement and focus from the British government, or necessarily from the wider European Union and
the wider international community. I think it’s pretty clear on this. There’s all kind of issues about the
enforcement of the arms embargo, what happens to oil revenues – a whole range of issues where there
hasn’t been proper focus. The reality is that the conflict happened, Qaddafi fell, and then the British
government and others disengaged. That is just a problem and it’s a lesson we said we wouldn’t repeat,
and we have.

**Question 12**

I’m just going to press you on the same point. You talk about the responsibility of the international
community. Do you also hold David Cameron personally responsible for what is happening in the
Mediterranean? And secondly, if I may, as Sky News understands, you’ve been engaging the services of
the leadership consultancy Enlightened Mind. Has it been helpful?

**Ed Miliband**

I’ll let other people make a judgment on those questions. I take advice from a range of people.

I want to be very clear on this. As far as what is happening in terms of the tragic scenes of people
drowning in the Mediterranean, that is the result of the people traffickers who are engaging in those
issues. But nobody can disagree with the idea that the failure of post-conflict planning has been
responsible for some of the situation that we see in Libya and indeed people then fleeing. So I think the
only people trying to whip up a big storm about this are the Conservative Party. If you look at my words,
if you listen to the speech I gave, it’s absolutely clear what I’m saying, which is about the failure of the
international community and the British government, and David Cameron, to engage in that post-conflict
planning which should have been done. By the way, David Cameron himself said in the House of
Commons in February, because I asked him about this in February – he said he wasn’t satisfied with the
post-conflict planning that had been done in relation to Libya. So the Conservative Party want to whip up
some kind of fuss that I’m somehow all about David Cameron – it is about David Cameron and his
responsibility leading the British government in the post-conflict planning that took place.

**Question 13**

I’d just like to put the Conservative response to all this to you directly. They say that this is, on the part of
the Labour Party, a deliberate attempt to politicize a tragedy. Isn’t that what you’ve done?
Ed Miliband

Nonsense. No. What this is about is saying very clearly to the British people that there is a huge issue we face as a country, which is learning the lessons of the 2003 Iraq war. Right? I thought that war was a mistake, and one of the reasons it was a mistake was because we hadn't engaged in the post-conflict planning that was necessary. The problem is that in relation to Libya, we've repeated the mistake, because we haven't done the post-conflict planning. I think people should just read my words. I don't think anyone in the foreign policy community or in the wider international community would disagree with what I've said about the failure of post-conflict planning.

Question 14

You talked a lot about exporting the values we have at home. Does that include continuing the policy of previous governments of exporting arms to countries with appalling human rights records, like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain? Or are you just going to put British jobs first?

Ed Miliband

There are rules in place around arms licences and arms exports and we should always be scrutinizing those rules, and the purposes for which they're used. I think that's something we should take incredibly seriously as a country. We should take our international obligations seriously on that. I'm not going to get into specific countries but we should take those responsibilities seriously.

Question 15

Are you not, by implication, suggesting that the prime minister has blood on his hands for the deaths of the refugees?

Ed Miliband

I think anyone who reads my speech would see that that is just very wide of the mark. I'm making a very important point, I believe, about post-conflict planning in Libya. Let the prime minister respond and tell us about whether he thinks post-conflict planning in Libya has been adequate, sensible, well done. But I don't think any of those things have happened. I'm not going to have a situation – I just want to be clear about this – where this country engages in military action, that somehow then the job is seen to be done the minute a brutal dictator falls, and then we depart the scene and lose focus on it. That is absolutely what happened. The whole foreign policy community knows it. I believe the country knows it as well. It is the biggest lesson of the Iraq war. I've said on many occasions that I will be a post-Iraq leader. A post-Iraq leader and a post-Iraq prime minister is somebody who learns the lessons of the 2003 Iraq war, and that's what I'm determined to do.

Question 16

Can you tell me what this postwar planning would have done and what it would have prevented? In particular, your foreign secretary – colleague – has said there's a difference in political culture in Libya and Tunisia which wasn't understood by the Foreign Office. Why does that have any bearing on what's happened in Libya?
Ed Miliband

For example, if we were in government now, it should be immediately reconvened, the so-called Friends of Libya group, which is about actually finding a way forward. We’ve got the UN special representative at the moment working on a six-point plan with the different parties involved in this conflict. But I’ve just got to say to you: you should make the judgment, you and others should make the judgment, has this been high up the British government’s political agenda? My sense is it simply has not. The first step to dealing with these issues and handling these very difficult situations is engagement on the ground, engagement with what is happening in Libya. I don’t feel that’s taken place.

Actually, in terms of the question of Tunisia, it’s actually the UN special representative who Douglas was citing today, who said precisely this: that no two conflicts are the same, that no two countries are the same, and lessons need to be learned about those differences.

I’m going to wind it up now. I want to thank Chatham House for having me here. I want to thank Robin. I want to thank all the foreign policy community, the journalists who are here. Can I just one say thing in conclusion to the people assembled here? I hope this is a dialogue that will continue, and it speaks to the question I was asked at the back. I hope this is a dialogue that will not just happen now and hasn’t just happened over the last few years, but will happen into government as well. Earlier on, we had Vernon Coaker, our shadow defence secretary, here. We will be a government which will be engaged with the foreign policy community. It precisely goes to the question that was asked at the back, which is that that makes for better policymaking and better outcomes for the national interest and indeed for the world. Thank you very much.