Transcript: Q&A

Britain's Place in the World

Lord Garden Memorial Lecture

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Question 1

Robin, do you accept that it is the British politicians' concentration on the domestic affairs that has caused this nation's external weaknesses?

Robin Niblett

I always say that I have the luxury of not having to be elected, so I can say what I like up on this stage about what I think is best for Britain, but I don't have to get elected in doing it. So that's a first point. If I had to be elected, my main priority would be domestic affairs. What I feel British politicians do not do well enough is connect domestic affairs to international affairs. It's so obvious actually, in a way. We've done quite a bit of polling at Chatham House with YouGov over the last four years on British attitudes toward what their ambitions should be. The British people are ambivalent. They want to be a great power but they don't want to commit British troops out to intervention. At the core of it is this idea that the world out there is dangerous, and somehow they expect the politicians to protect them. You can see why, if you go through my litany of risks.

But ultimately, our ability to protect ourselves at home will be hugely enhanced by intelligent engagement, and intervention at times, abroad. I suppose my key theme here – and this is the hardest thing for all British politicians to say – is that intervention will be more credible and more influential in collaboration with EU partners and sometimes new institutions than by itself. And with the US where it counts – we've got to pick our horses for courses. But I don't blame any British politician for focusing on domestic politics. What I blame them for is not connecting the domestic and the international.

Question 2

In the past, Britain has been great because of its colonial base, its Commonwealth base, backed up by an army and a navy at some strength. In the past few years we've had some comments from the United States and members of their Senate and government, indicating their concerns over the reduction in the power of the army and the navy. Surely if we're to retain our position in the world through influence, we must have more spend on defence, or at least 2 per cent GDP spend. I support that, by the way. But I'm curious to get your ideas now, thank you.

Robin Niblett

I was involved in chairing a NATO policy expert group in the lead-up to the Wales Summit, or Newport Summit, last year. We had a bit of a debate about the 2 per cent thing. In the end, we put it in our report. We also added a comment that, if I remember rightly, 20 per cent of the military budget should be applied toward equipment and procurement. Because what you find is that what you spend on is as important as how much you spend. If you're spending on keeping bases that were designed for another era of Cold War conflict, is that effective when you've got very subtle, complex forms of intervention coming from the east, from Russia, and also hybrid and complex threats coming from the south and Middle East?

So the content is as important as the quantity. But that being said, my view is if you don't put a target there, then it is a statement of withdrawal, in a way. It's a statement that military power doesn't matter. I'm afraid I'm a believer in deterrence. If you took the police off the street in London, we'd all get on very well at the moment but things change. The world at some level – sorry to go IR theory here, but as a British IR theorist once said – is an anarchical society. Ultimately, the society is there providing it has the protection. Two per cent is a statement by governments to say: we think defence is important. Not
intervention, not military attack left, right and centre, but that we need to treat this as a core part of our security.

It may not be influential – I think you said 'influential' at some point. As I said in my remarks, the reason why I think the EU needs to be in the inner core is that defence becomes an insurance policy. The US, in a way, has become our insurance policy here in Europe. But the influence may come less from defensive capabilities and more from the other ones I described.

**Question 3**

Could you make some comments about soft power, coming from two areas? One, the fact that we've got a universal language which we can project our culture through – the British Council and similar bodies; the ESU, for example. Secondly, the fact that we can project quite a lot of goodwill through this 0.7 per cent commitment through DFID, which is giving us great plaudits around the world.

Robin Niblett

Soft power being the power of attraction, the idea that people want to follow you in ideas rather than being forced or coerced, even by relatively benign things like trade policy – in that sense, you gave two examples. I would say that the foreign assistance has the benefit of enhancing our soft power but actually is perhaps even more important if it is spent effectively in connecting the domestic and the international security. Ultimately, the Department for International Development and many of the NGOs associated with it rightly note the importance of reducing poverty and meeting various Millennium Development Goals, and our sustainable development goals later this year.

But for it to be politically sustainable, it needs to be connected as well to citizens' and taxpayers' sense of security. I think this idea that Britain is using some of its resources – hard-earned, we're a country going through some very tough periods and tough cuts – but that we understand that helping other countries helps ourselves, is a very powerful and inclusive message. It's not a power-projection message, it's an engagement message which, in a world where every country wants to have its own voice and doesn't want to be told what to do, enhances soft power.

The English language, I don't know. I think it's great because we get – I get quite often to moderate a lot of thing, because people think we have this great facility with moderating. Sometimes, I know from my time in Washington, people think that what we say is more intelligent than what others say, just because we say it in English and we can command the language. These are useful advantages which should be used. But I also remember the Spanish spending a lot of time talking about the Hispanic region, *Latino Hispanoamerica*, we speak the common language. Well, it doesn't help Spanish soft power, in my experience. What Spanish companies have been able to do in Latin America is take advantage of that language more to go in and take advantage of business opportunities. It hasn't necessarily made the Spanish voice of the Spanish government, or rather Spanish policies, more influential.

In the end, English is used by America. America, you could say, has great advantages but America's power these days is being limited. The danger of the language one – I'll finish on this point – is that you could find just about every other country is able both to speak English, maybe not as well as we do but well enough to get done what they need to get done, but they also have their own languages to dominate their own regions or markets, and we can't play in that one as well. So as the study that we carried out together with the British Academy said, it is vital that we don't rest on our laurels of the English language and we
really invest, through universities, in our public institutions, our government departments, in language capacity.

Question 4

I wanted to ask you about the way you characterized British foreign policy. You talked about David Miliband and his thought of ‘hub Britain’ and you used the phrase ‘commercial diplomacy’ for David Cameron and the coalition government. Is that the phrase that you would still use, that you expect to be the dominant spirit of this government for the next few years? Or are you detecting something different?

Question 5

Your speech sounded like the opening salvo of the pro-EU referendum campaign. No doubt it can be challenged very strongly on many of the things that you said. However, we don't have time for that. So what I would like to just say is there was an underlying assumption throughout your speech that projection of power, influence in the world, is something 'good'. I have my doubts on that. I think one has to be careful what one wishes for. The other point that you never mentioned was the Commonwealth. I think you mentioned it once in your speech of 45 minutes. So perhaps you can say something about that.

Robin Niblett

Very good questions both. Where will this government go, having done hub and commercial diplomacy? Although this is now a Conservative government rather than a coalition government, I think this is going to be a government that wants to have a more balanced and rounded set of relationships. The slight downgrading, if I can say, of the US relationship – we’ll be solid but not slavish allies – of which there were quite a few opportunities taken, I think there is an effort to re-engage a bit with the US.

If the referendum ends up with Britain staying in the EU, then I think what Philip Hammond said here – sitting in this chair actually at Chatham House, on June 1st – about actually that Britain would lean forward in Europe, in the areas where it can be influential (I'll come to influence in a minute) – energy policy, single market, foreign affairs issues – will be where they'll go. So we will end up, I think, with a Britain that goes back to the traditional one I described, of trying tous azimuts, looking in all directions simultaneously, which is hub Britain.

The point I'm making is I think if you're in government – I haven't been in government, like many people here – but if you're in government, you've got to choose where you put emphasis. My concern is that governments in general – and this is a bipartisan, tripartisan comment – have not put as much effort as they should be doing into specific relationships in Europe in order to be able to be influential, even if it's going to be in three directions. Ultimately, I would be putting more emphasis back in Europe, given the context. But I think they'll go back to a more traditional approach. Commercial is useful but commercial hasn't worked out quite the way people thought.

I thought about this a lot, and I'm trying to write up what I'm saying here, so this was an action-forcing event, this speech, to try and make me get my thoughts together. They're not fully formed completely yet. But I have a paragraph in there, because I thought I had to answer that question. A lot of people say, what's Britain's role? What does that mean, role? Role is a pointless word, or even position. Ultimately, if a country can be influential beyond its shores, it should be, in my opinion. If you're a government, you represent your citizens. Your citizens want to make sure that they are prosperous, safe, healthy, etc. The world outside today influences enormously whether you are healthy, prosperous, safe, from climate to
terrorism to economic opportunity. Yes, there are plenty of domestic decisions that need to be taken – I listed them out in my speech. But if you have the ability to influence your external context, take it. Don’t be embarrassed about it. Now, don’t overplay your hand. The obvious thing: don’t intervene where intervention doesn’t help. Don’t play to old ideas that because we had colonial relationships, they’ll become useful relationships in the 21st century. That might be a subtext of your comment; I’ve heard other people make that point. But I think if you can be influential, do it. I think that’s useful.

Question 6

I’d just like to preface my remarks about Lord Garden, since this occasion is in his honour. I once had the privilege of talking on my own doorstep about foreign policy, when he was canvassing for a local Liberal Party in the very un-liberal constituency of Barnet. He had this whole range of experience in policy-making and command as well as think-tankery. Talking about foreign policy on the doorstep was something that very few of your colleagues, Robin –

Baroness Garden

He was supporting me, who was the Liberal Democrat candidate at the time.

Question 6

My question is about another topic which wasn’t mentioned in your lecture, Robin: the right to protect. Two of Tony Blair’s wars, as he liked to call them, or military interventions were undertaken in the name of the right to protect, in Sierra Leone and, very controversially, in Kosovo. David Cameron’s Libyan adventure was also boosted by the arguments for the right to protect. We haven’t heard much about it recently. Syria seems to have put a bed to it, as far as Britain is concerned. What do you think about that?

Question 7

Following on from that question, a hard question: the Baltic states and indeed Finland are absolutely convinced that Russia will attack them sooner or later. What effect will this have on Britain’s relationship with Europe, because they have no choice but, under Article V of NATO, to defend? If you take that further, and Russia is repelled or stopped, will it change Britain’s attitude to Europe?

Robin Niblett

Three very good questions. I didn’t answer the gentleman’s question about the Commonwealth. Let me just say something on the Commonwealth very quickly, having actually spent a day recently at the headquarters of the Secretariat here in London, because I was involved in a search actually.

The reason I don’t push the Commonwealth in my remarks – I’m very cautious about Britain rah-rahing the Commonwealth. I think the quieter that Britain is in the way that it operates within the Commonwealth, the better. If members of the Commonwealth collectively want it to be what it can be, I think it can be very powerful. Election monitoring, good governance, improving the role of women in economic development, teaming up with DFID – this is the kind of soft areas of change and influence that could be amongst the most powerful in the future. So I think the Commonwealth, if its members allow it to be what it could be, can be great. I have some scepticism that a sufficient majority of its most influential governments let it be all it wants to be, and Britain ends up maybe not being able to encourage it, therefore. So I’m a little ambivalent about it. Enough on that.
R2P, responsibility to protect. I think this was a very important adaptation to the UN system. The idea that governments are responsible for upholding the values and laws in the UN Charter, and that just because they’re governments and therefore they control the monopoly on violence doesn’t mean that they then can crush those laws, was an incredibly important evolution.

Libya has ended up damaging it. In my opinion – again, one has to be in the heat of the matter, and I wasn’t. But I sense there was a drift between protecting the civilians that needed to be protected, and taking all necessary means to do it, which is what the UN resolution allowed the governments to do in the Libya operation – but it did drift over into getting rid of Qaddafi. Once it did that, I think you ended up with a bunch of governments saying, hold on a minute. That’s not exactly what we thought.

So you’ve ended up with R2P being weakened as a concept at just the wrong moment. I think what is happening in Syria is appalling, and that it has been allowed to go on as long as it has. I know people say there is no good solution – well then, pick which bad solution. I’m on record as having advocated some type of intervention, both in 2012 and later, in Syria. I felt that letting things play out, which is the phrase I used, meant that it would play out very badly. I think they have played out very badly. I think R2P, the responsibility to protect, is a concept that should be retained.

I don’t think the Russian government is planning to invade anyone. Famous last words, yes? I say ‘anyone’ – let me rephrase that. I don’t think they’re planning to invade the Baltic states in the near future. That would be the diplomatic answer. That’s the one that’s on the record. I think in the end President Putin is a very intelligent man. Certainly, he knows how power works. I think he feels Europe is weak, Europe is divided. Governments don’t trust each other right now. The euro crisis has left, whatever happens with Greece, a deep well of distrust among the governments. In a way, if the MH17 plane hadn’t been shot down, I wonder if the sectoral sanctions would have been applied. I think he feels maybe he can wait and Ukraine will sort of drift back into his lap. If it does, it will be as a kind of failed state, and that will be fine by him. I think Russia is quite happy to have a group of semi-failed states as long as they are under their control – black holes, corrupt, not a problem. A cordon sanitaire around Russia – perfect.

So I think his view is more ‘I need to protect Russia’ than ‘I need to expand’. If he needs to get into hard power, it will be very subtle hard power. It will be corporate, it will be money, it will be corruption. It will be areas that Angela Merkel is very aware of, not just Britain and other governments. So I think ultimately he knows that if there were to be an attack on the Baltic states – I know there’s been some polling on this, Pew did a very interesting poll on ‘would you back your government if there were an attack on the Baltic states?’ Quite a few countries said: maybe not. Worth looking at that poll. But I think in the end, the governments would step up. They know that if a NATO member is attacked overtly and NATO did not stand up, this would be a moment that – I’m a big believer that governments learn from the past. They might make new mistakes and they might make mistakes that look a bit like the last ones, but governments learn. If you look at how we’ve handled the financial crisis, governments have not made the same mistake as last time. They’ve made some new mistakes but not the same mistakes. People have learned from the 20th century that you do not allow an attack like that to happen, not overt. I think ultimately this is a place where governments will step forward and I think President Putin knows that perfectly well.

Question 8

Two issues I’d like to raise. One is this issue of mercantilism, the second one is exogenous influences on governance. Robin raised this issue of mercantilism. Of course we know that it originated in 1776, the economic orthodoxy then, although it took until after the Second World War before it had any meaning.
Secondly, the exogenous influences – doesn’t this demand that we have a greater degree of transnational/supranational governance? I’ll leave it at that.

**Question 9**

If Britain pulls out of Europe, don’t you think there’s a danger of Frankfurt leapfrogging London as the financial hub of Europe?

**Robin Niblett**

I will comment on mercantilism quickly. I don’t think mercantilism works the way it used to, which is why China is being quite intelligent in the way it’s handling its rise. This is one of the lessons learned from the 20th century. Controlling territory doesn’t bring economic benefit the way people thought it did and the way in some cases it did in the 20th century. So one of the reasons I’m more optimistic about the 21st century than the 20th is that although there are a lot of tensions, and I’ve described them in my remarks here, and countries are out to win in the global economy, they don’t want to let mercantilism, if they can possibly help it, tip into war. Emotion, atavistic concerns, history, memory, can be more powerful often than economics. So I’m less worried about mercantilism, I’m more worried about emotions. As Dominique Moisi describes it, emotions in foreign policy can trump the most logical outcomes. But I think mercantilism is not as dangerous as it was. Forgive me, I think my jet lag has knocked off the exogenous influences part, but I’m sure it was a good point.

On Frankfurt leapfrogging London, I think somebody said earlier that my speech sounded like a salvo in the ‘In’ campaign for the Europe referendum. I’m sure it can be taken that way. I wrote a piece back in 2010 where I strongly argued that Britain needed to look beyond Europe and beyond America, to reconnect in particular with the rising midsized powers that wanted British partnership and that offered Britain economic opportunity. Ultimately, we should obsess less about Europe and about the US relationship as well, which I think is very strong and will remain strong, whatever happens.

The reason I wanted to say what I said today is that you can only do that reaching out from a strong base. I don’t think – I would say this, wouldn’t I? – I think that’s an objective statement. It will be seen as subjective by many but the reason I wanted to lay out the global context as clearly as I did was to try to provide the foundation for the argument.

If you’re going to provide a foundation for this argument, then I think one has to be very careful not to overplay the risks of being out of the EU. If Britain were to leave the EU, I think it would remain a strong, influential and economically potentially successful country. It has a growing population, it will be the largest population in Europe. Even if it left the EU, it probably would be as well. This gives it a certain material capacity. It would have to work harder to be successful if it were out, so governments would be more disciplined, the people might be more disciplined, etc.

I think on the financial side, this reminds you: if the UK were to leave the EU, the EU would be weaker. So you don’t transfer UK strength to European strength if the UK is out. So Frankfurt, yes, might take some of the business of London. But you’d end up with a potentially weaker City and a not-as-strong Frankfurt. That’s almost at the core of my message about the whole thing. It’s richer, safer, more influential – I didn’t say rich, safe. This is relative. We’re in a world of relative strength, relative power, and that’s what needs to be focused on.
So I think the City would come up with clever stuff. People want its talent. We can be attractive, all sorts of soft power, things that would keep us here that Frankfurt wouldn't have. But the City would be weaker – smaller, would lose certain types of business. The eurozone would probably pass clearing bank regulations, all sorts of things that would mean certain types of business would be lost. Remember, the UK did very well out of dollar markets when it wasn't in the US. You know better than I do on this stuff, back in the 1970s. So my key point: I don't want to overplay. That's why I'm trying to be as sober as I can about the benefits of 'In'.

**Baroness Garden**

Thank you very much. Can I just apologize again to those who I didn’t manage to call – the wealth of hands up show just what a thought-provoking lecture this has been. Thank you very much indeed, Robin. You’ve certainly added lustre to the Garden Lecture series, which has had some very distinguished speakers. You have certainly continued that distinction, so can we show our appreciation.