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Perspectives on the UK's Place in the World

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SUMMARY POINTS

- Confronted with the realities of domestic austerity and an uncertain international order, established middle-ranking powers – such as the United Kingdom – have experienced increasing difficulty in arriving at a settled foreign policy identity.
- The debate about the UK's place in the world has taken place throughout the last century and has long been framed by traditional narratives of exceptionalism and decline.
- Efforts to conceptualize the UK's place in the world have evolved over the last two decades: whether as a transatlantic 'bridge', a 'global hub' or, most recently under the coalition government, that of adapting Britain to a 'networked world'.
- Popular dissent across the Middle East and North Africa and the ongoing crisis in the Eurozone have served to both confirm and test the government's 'networked world' analysis and chosen policy responses.
- The challenge over the coming years will rest on the UK's ability to develop its capacity as an agile middle power, confident of its purpose and fully equipped to navigate an uncertain international order.

INTRODUCTION

It is no secret that we live in a world where economic might is shifting to the emerging economies and that the relative size of the economies of Britain and the rest of Europe are declining in relation to those powers. In this new landscape, where both threats and opportunities are more diffuse, there can be no suggestion that it is in our national interest for our role in the world to wither and shrivel away. This Government reject the idea of strategic shrinkage. We believe that this would be to retreat as a nation at the moment when a more ambitious approach is required.¹

William Hague, 26 May 2010

Framing the United Kingdom's place in the world has been a long-established concern for British policy-makers. Often regarded as a central element in setting forth a coherent foreign policy, the issue has continued to permeate debate under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government. Entering office in the midst of economic turmoil and at a time when the longer-term balance of international power is shifting eastwards, Prime Minister David Cameron and Foreign Secretary William Hague have sought to reorient Britain's international engagement accordingly. Such efforts have taken place against a backdrop of uncertainty however – whether the realities of austerity, the wave of popular uprisings across the Arab world, or the ongoing crisis in the Eurozone. All of this means that questions about the type of country the UK aspires to be have gained added resonance.

The analysis that follows begins by surveying the broader historical narratives – specifically those of exceptionalism and decline – that have framed the country's foreign policy since the Second World War. The paper then explores some of the specific images articulated in recent years to describe the UK's international engagement, focusing on notions of Britain as a transatlantic 'bridge' and a 'global hub', before assessing the coalition government's perspective, namely that of adapting Britain to 'a networked world'. The argument concludes by suggesting that, amid domestic retrenchment and at a time when the contours of the global order are uncertain, defining a settled foreign policy identity becomes an increasingly difficult proposition.

¹ William Hague, 'Opening statement, Foreign Affairs and Defence debate on the Queen's speech', *Hansard*, 26 May 2010, Column 174, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm100526/debtext/100526-0004.htm>.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE UK'S PLACE IN THE WORLD

The fascination with conceptualizing the UK's place in the world is far from a new endeavour; rather it is frequently framed in relation to periods of national uncertainty.² Why, though, has it proved so difficult a task for successive generations of politicians? Part of the dilemma lies in the country's unique combination of foreign policy assets – across the diplomatic, military, economic and cultural spheres – stemming from its legacy as a great power. Another element is the changing nature of British society – whether concerns about migration and multiculturalism,³ the social implications of austerity, or the rising tide of Scottish nationalism.

If one adds to this the self-assessment taking place among middle-ranking powers – now less able than before, relative to the established and emerging larger powers, to influence the contours of global order – the nature of the challenge becomes apparent.⁴ Indeed, the changing relative position of the UK internationally, as a result of shifts in the political and economic balance of power, as well as the increasing diversity of actors (both state and non-state), has significantly altered the context in which it operates, posing questions about its international identity.⁵ While the shifting global order has led some countries, notably China and Brazil, to assert a more confident identity, the same cannot be said of Britain. All of this means that policy-makers are faced with a delicate balancing act: juggling the reality of available resources within a changing global context, while keeping a mindful eye on the future.

Shifting narratives: exceptionalism and decline

More often than not, perspectives on a country's place in the world are shaped in the context of broader narratives about its relative international standing. This is certainly true of the UK, whose postwar foreign policy has been dominated by narratives of exceptionalism and decline.

Largely the preserve of the foreign policy establishment, the narrative of *exceptionalism* has been a characteristic of British policy-makers' attempts to define the country's international significance.⁶ In part, this stems from its imperial legacy, the understandable response to an inevitable loss of power being to inflate perceptions otherwise. However, it also reflects a deeply held belief among the political class in the UK's continuing ability to have significant influence on the key international issues of the day. In a description highly symbolic of the exceptionalist narrative, in 1948 Winston Churchill advanced the idea of Britain as being at the heart of three circles:

The first circle for us is naturally the British Commonwealth and Empire, with all that that comprises. Then there is also the English-speaking world in which we, Canada, and the other British Dominions and the United States play so important a part. And finally there is United Europe. These three majestic circles are co-existent and if they are linked together there is no force or combination which could overthrow them or even challenge them.

2 For academic perspectives on this debate, see Christopher Hill, 'Britain's elusive role in world politics', *British Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 5 (1979), pp. 248–59; William Wallace, 'Foreign policy and national identity in the United Kingdom', *International Affairs*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (1991), pp. 65–80; and Lawrence Freedman and Michael Clarke (eds), *Britain in the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

3 See, for example, David Cameron, 'PM's Speech to the Munich Security Conference', Munich, 5 February 2011, <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/pms-speech-at-munich-security-conference>.

4 Paul Kennedy, 'A history lesson', *The Economist – The World in 2010*, 13 November 2009, http://www.economist.com/theworldin/displayStory.cfm?story_id=14742217&d=2010. For the perspective of Canada, see Canadian International Council, *Open Canada: A Global Positioning Strategy for a Networked Age* (Canadian International Council, 2010), <http://www.opencanada.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Open-Canada-A-Global-Positioning-Strategy-for-a-Networked-Age-GPS-Panel.pdf>.

5 A comprehensive survey of this changing context is provided by Robin Niblett, *Playing to its Strengths: Rethinking the UK's Role in a Changing World* (London: Chatham House, 2010), http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Europe/r0610_niblett.pdf.

6 For perspectives on British exceptionalism, see Wallace, 'Foreign policy and national identity in the United Kingdom'; Timothy Garton Ash, 'Is Britain European?', *International Affairs*, Vol. 77, No. 1 (2001), pp. 1–13; and Andrew Gamble, *Between Europe and America: The Future of British Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003).

Now if you think of the three inter-linked circles you will see that we are the only country which has a great part in every one of them. We stand, in fact, at the very point of junction, and here in this Island at the centre of the seaways and perhaps of the airways also, we have the opportunity of joining them all together. If we rise to the occasion in the years that are to come it may be found that once again we hold the key to opening a safe and happy future to humanity, and will gain for ourselves gratitude and fame.⁷

At its core, Churchill's formulation was an attempt to find a distinctive post-war profile for Britain, unique among other powers in its capabilities and the contribution it could make. This perspective is consistent with the traditional 'island nation' identity, geographically detached though inherently outward-looking.⁸ As Britain's postwar decline became more apparent, this exceptionalism evolved. Both Edward Heath's characterization of the country as 'a medium power of the first rank'⁹ and Douglas Hurd's post-Cold War mantra that Britain 'punched above her weight'¹⁰ in international affairs captured not only the reality of Britain's middle-power standing, but also a reluctance to relinquish some elements of great-power status. Also indicative of exceptionalism has been a belief in the benevolent contribution, beyond protective self-interest, that Britain can make to world affairs. Churchill's conviction that Britain could 'hold the key to opening a safe and happy future to humanity',¹¹ was echoed in the late 1990s in Foreign Secretary Robin Cook's wish that the UK be a 'force for good in the world',¹² and more recently by William Hague.¹³

The alternative narrative of *decline* permeating UK foreign policy reflects the reality of the country's loss of great-power status.¹⁴ This has been a gradual process marked by the rise of other nations on the international stage, but also punctuated by specific moments highlighting British decline, whether the Suez crisis in 1956, the retreat from 'east of Suez', or Britain's economic problems in the 1970s. While the reality of relative decline is incontrovertible, not least at periods of economic weakness, this has often been compounded by those all too willing to pass judgment – a group that Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher referred to as 'an army of professional belittlers'.¹⁵ As Sir Nicholas Henderson stated in his valedictory dispatch as British ambassador to Paris, writing in 1979 at a time of British decline relative to France and Germany: 'Obviously there are no simple solutions and the difficulties are to be found as much in *attitudes* as in institutions.'¹⁶

Recent years have seen the narrative revived, with the media in particular sounding the declinist clarion.¹⁷ In part, this has been fuelled by military overstretch with the interventions in Iraq,

7 Winston Churchill, 'Speech at a Conservative Mass Meeting, Llandudno, 9 October 1948', reprinted in Randolph S. Churchill (ed.), *Europe Unite – Speeches: 1947 and 1948 by Winston S. Churchill* (London: Cassell, 1950), pp. 417–18.

8 See Gamble, *Between Europe and America*. Also Richard J. Evans, *Cosmopolitan Islanders: British Historians and the European Continent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) highlights the outward-looking disposition of British historians compared with their European counterparts.

9 Fred Emery, 'Mr Heath seeks new cordiality with US', *The Times*, 14 December 1970, quoting an interview with *US News and World Report*.

10 Douglas Hurd, 'Making the world a safer place: our five priorities', *Daily Telegraph*, 1 January 1992.

11 Churchill, 'Speech at a Conservative Mass Meeting', p. 418.

12 Robin Cook, 'Speech launching the FCO Mission Statement', *The Guardian*, 12 May 1997, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/ethical/article/0,,192031,00.html>.

13 Hague has stated: 'What I like to call our enlightened national interest is no narrow affair; it involves being a force for good in the world as well as seeking the best for our own citizens and society.' William Hague, 'Opening statement, Foreign Affairs and Defence debate on the Queen's speech'. On the normative aspects of British exceptionalism, see Peter Lawler, 'Moral Vision and British Foreign Policy', European Policy Research Unit (EPRU) Working Paper, No. 3, 1996, Department of Government, University of Manchester.

14 This dilemma was captured by Dean Acheson, US Secretary of State (1949–53), speaking in 1962: 'Great Britain has lost an empire and has not yet found a role.' Dean Acheson, 'Our Atlantic Alliance: The Political and Economic Strands', speech at the United States Military Academy, West Point, New York, USA, 5 December 1962.

15 Margaret Thatcher, 'Speech at the Lord Mayor's Banquet', Guildhall, London, 15 November 1982, <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/105054>.

16 Sir Nicholas Henderson, 'Britain's decline; its causes and consequences', valedictory dispatch (31 March 1979), reproduced in *The Economist*, 2 June 1979, <http://www.economist.com/node/13315108> (emphasis added). Henderson was later recalled by Thatcher to become British ambassador in Washington (1979–82).

17 For example: Will Hutton, 'Britain's no longer a world power, so let's be a better, fairer nation', *The Observer*, 26 April 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/apr/26/britain-super-power-will-hutton>; Philip Stephens, 'The end of Britain's post-imperial ambition', *Financial Times*, 21 October 2010, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/38e2d16e-dd45-11df-9236-00144feabdc0.html>; Gideon Rachman, 'A foreign policy of empty slogans', *Financial Times*, 27 June 2011, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/f8faa8a2-a0f2-11e0-adae-00144feabdc0.html>.

Afghanistan and Libya, as well as by the now decisive rise of the emerging economies. Culturally too, the shift has been noted among those chronicling the glossy optimism of Cool Britannia, fashionable in the late 1990s with the rise of New Labour.¹⁸ Perhaps most pronounced, however, has been the disproportionate impact of the financial crisis on the UK. This explains the emphasis that the current prime minister and foreign secretary have placed on the relationship between economic strength and diplomatic influence, and the coalition's attempts to imbue foreign policy with a 'new commercialism'.¹⁹ David Cameron has boldly asserted that '[e]conomic strength will restore our respect in the world, and our national self-confidence'.²⁰ To a greater degree than its predecessors, therefore, the coalition government has been prepared to engage with – if only to refute – the 'thesis of decline'.²¹

18 On the rise and fall of Cool Britannia, compare Stryker McGuire and Michael Elliott, 'London Reigns', *Newsweek*, 4 November 1996, <http://www.newsweek.com/id/103313>, with Stryker McGuire, 'This time I've come to bury Cool Britannia', *The Observer*, 29 March 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2009/mar/29/cool-britannia-g20-blair-brown>.

19 William Hague, 'Britain's prosperity in a networked world', Tokyo, Japan, 15 July 2010, <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/news/latest-news/?view=Speech&id=22540543>; David Cameron, 'Speech to the Lord Mayor's Banquet', Mansion House, London, 15 November 2010, <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/speeches-and-transcripts/2010/11/speech-to-lord-mayors-banquet-57068>.

20 Cameron, *ibid*.

21 *Ibid*.

CONTEMPORARY EXPRESSIONS OF THE UK'S PLACE IN THE WORLD

A 'bridge' between Europe and the US

*Strong in Europe and strong with the US. There is no choice between the two. Stronger with one means stronger with the other. Our aim should be to deepen our relationship with the US at all levels. We are the bridge between the US and Europe. Let us use it. When Britain and America work together on the international scene, there is little we can't achieve.*²²

Tony Blair, 10 November 1997

Following the tenor of Churchill's 'three circles' description, Prime Minister Tony Blair sought to express the UK's place in the world through the country's main spheres of influence, principally with the US and Europe.²³ Indeed, his focus on these two long-heralded pillars of British foreign policy emphasized the extent to which, by the late 1990s, the image of the transatlantic relationship had become firmly entrenched in national political culture.²⁴

In keeping with the exceptionalist narrative, Blair sought to position the UK as a 'pivotal power',²⁵ adept at marshalling its unique combination of international relationships in making the vital difference to whatever crisis might present itself; crises – whether with a humanitarian, security or economic dimension – that invariably came to be viewed, like Britain's interests, through a transatlantic lens. Applying the 'bridge' metaphor was far from new, however. Indeed, writing in 1975, in relation to improving North–South relations, Foreign Secretary James Callaghan stated that the British were 'the bridge builders'.²⁶ Though applied in different contexts, what united the Callaghan and Blair approaches was the sense that Britain had a distinctive ability to find common ground between other countries, acting as a diplomatic channel to shape common interests by dint of the persuasive power of its diplomacy, whether in multilateral fora or at the personal level between leaders.

These powers of persuasion and the utility of Blair's 'bridge' would see both their zenith and their nadir between 1999 and 2003. Rallying the US and European Union (EU) behind the cause of humanitarian intervention in Kosovo²⁷ and then, in the months immediately after 9/11, building an international coalition in an attempt to legitimize the 'war on terror', would highlight the value of such a strategy.²⁸ However, playing the transatlantic intermediary would prove unsustainable in the run-up to the Iraq war, particularly when no amount of institutional discussion or personal diplomacy could reconcile what were fundamentally different, and already entrenched, positions in Washington and the key European capitals. Indeed, as William Wallace has argued, by 2005 Blair's bridge had 'collapsed'.²⁹

22 Tony Blair, 'Speech at the Lord Mayor's Banquet', 10 November 1997,

<http://tna.europarchive.org/20050302152644/http://www.strategy-unit.gov.uk/output/Page1070.asp>.

23 Timothy Garton Ash, *Free World: Why a Crisis of the West Reveals the Opportunity of Our Time* (London: Allen Lane, 2004): pp. 36–53 explore the Churchillian antecedents of Blair's outlook.

24 Andrew Gamble, *Between Europe and America*, offers a historical perspective on the British outlook. On the dilemmas of viewing UK foreign policy through a US–EU lens, see Anand Menon, *Between Faith and Reason: UK Policy Towards the US and the EU* (London: Chatham House, 2010),

http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Europe/bp0710_menon.pdf.

25 Tony Blair, 'Shaping a pivotal role for Britain in the world', Lord Mayor's Banquet, Guildhall, London, 22 November 1999.

26 Jim Callaghan, 'Challenges and Opportunities for British Foreign Policy', Fabian Tract 439 (London: Fabian Society, December 1975), p. 10.

27 This appeal was passionately made by Blair in his Chicago speech: 'We need you [the US] engaged. We need the dialogue with you. Europe over time will become stronger and stronger; but its time is some way off.' Tony Blair, 'The doctrine of the International Community', Economic Club, Chicago, USA, 24 April 1999,

<http://tna.europarchive.org/20050302152644/http://www.strategy-unit.gov.uk/output/Page1297.asp>.

28 Christopher Hill, 'Putting the world to rights: Tony Blair's foreign policy mission', in Anthony Seldon and Dennis Kavanagh (eds), *The Blair Effect 2001–2005* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 384–409 provides a detailed assessment of Blair's efforts in this period.

29 William Wallace, 'The collapse of British foreign policy', *International Affairs*, Vol. 82, No. 1 (2005), p. 55.

If Kosovo and the months following 9/11 highlighted the potential benefits of the bridging strategy, then Iraq demonstrated its inherent weaknesses. As Robin Niblett has suggested, 'a British foreign policy that places an emphasis on trying to bridge differences across the Atlantic can find that this policy becomes an end in itself rather than the means to an end'.³⁰ This is certainly a charge that, post-9/11, was increasingly levelled at Tony Blair.

The UK as a 'global hub'

*I'm not sure the image of the UK as a bridge was ever right. It epitomised our ambivalent relationship with Europe, suggesting Europe was a bilateral relationship rather than an institution of which we are party. But with the rise of India, China and other emerging powers, the notion is even more inappropriate. I prefer to describe our role in the world as a global hub.*³¹

David Miliband, 4 March 2008

First articulated before the full scale of the 2008–09 financial crisis became apparent, Foreign Secretary David Miliband's characterization of the UK as a 'global hub' marked a nuanced, yet decisive, shift in attempts to frame the country's place in the world. In large part, it represented an example of the subtle revisionism in British foreign policy that followed the Blair decade in power; a necessary element of catharsis after a particularly divisive period in the country's foreign affairs during which the 'bridge' metaphor was a central frame of reference.³² Still very much in the exceptionalist mould, however, the hub metaphor again sought to tell a meaningful story about the UK's international engagement, reflecting the deeper realities of the changing global order at the start of the 21st century, but also placing an emphasis on Britain's comparative strengths.

Moving beyond a rigid focus on Britain's established bilateral alliances and institutional memberships – the cornerstones of the Churchillian and Blairite worldviews – the 'hub' metaphor recognized the shift in the geopolitical centre of gravity from West to East, as well as the growing influence of non-state actors, including citizens, in shaping both foreign policy interests and outcomes.³³ It can also be viewed as part of a deeper, still nascent, process of coming to terms with globalization in its current form, specifically characterized by uncertainty and the interconnectedness of global risks – what some have termed globalization's 'long crisis'³⁴ – in contrast to the more aspirational discourse of the mid-1990s.

In recognizing the growing diversity of state and non-state actors with an influence on foreign policy, such an outlook highlighted the changing distribution and nature of power, a trend necessitating new approaches to multilateral engagement. In Miliband's analysis, a key element of the UK's foreign policy should be to act as 'ambitious coalition builders [...] Our purpose will be to renew old alliances and forge new partnerships.'³⁵ This emphasized the changing nature of the multilateral order and its institutions; change necessitating not only efforts to re-energize existing

The weaknesses of Blair's 'bridge' have also been highlighted in Donald Macintyre, 'Chapter 11: Foreign Policy' in Patrick Diamond and Roger Liddle (eds), *Beyond New Labour: The Future of Social Democracy in Britain* (London: Politico's, 2009), pp. 188–214.

³⁰ Robin Niblett, 'Choosing between America and Europe: a new context for British foreign policy', *International Affairs*, Vol. 83, No. 4 (2007), p. 627.

³¹ David Miliband, 'Speech at the FCO Leadership Conference', Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre, London, 4 March 2008, <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/news/latest-news/?view=Speech&id=4616832>.

³² Michael Harvey, 'Notes on a post-Blair foreign policy', *New Statesman*, 19 February 2009, <http://www.newstatesman.com/uk-politics/2009/02/foreign-policy-blair-miliband>.

³³ David Miliband 'Change the World Keynote Speech', at the Fabian Society Conference 'Change the World', London, 19 January 2008, <http://fabians.org.uk/events/speeches/david-miliband-nyc-speech-text>.

³⁴ Alex Evans, Bruce Jones, and David Steven, *Confronting the Long Crisis of Globalization: Risk, Resilience and International Order* (Washington, DC/New York: Brookings Institution/NYU Center on International Cooperation, 2010), http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/reports/2010/01_globalization_evans_jones_steven/01_globalization_evans_jones_steven.pdf.

³⁵ David Miliband, 'Power dispersed, responsibility shared: Britain's role in building coalitions for change', Mansion House Easter Banquet, London, 22 April 2009, <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/news/latest-news/?view=Speech&id=16746598>.

international organizations, but also a willingness to embrace a multilateralism in which bespoke coalitions targeting individual issues would be of growing significance.³⁶ The emergence of the G20 and Prime Minister Gordon Brown's stewardship of the 2009 London G20 summit in the midst of the financial crisis offered a clear example of this development.

Such a perspective was far more akin to bridge-building in the Callaghan rather than the Blair mould – advocating Britain's abilities as an intermediary or a 'thought leader'³⁷ on the global stage, finding common cause and shaping common interests, but at the same time recognizing that the UK's unifying power lies in extending its focus beyond old allies. In 1975 Callaghan, after all, was writing in the broad context of fostering better relations between the developed and the developing worlds.³⁸

Despite the impact of the financial crisis on the UK, and the obvious challenge this posed to aspirations of acting as a 'global hub', the concept continued to permeate debate.³⁹ Asked during the 2010 general election campaign to describe the country's international role, William Hague responded: 'I'm searching for a better word than hub ... it's certainly a centre with many spokes coming out of it'.⁴⁰ Following 13 years of Labour government, however, the formation of the coalition government in May 2010 provided the opportunity for a subtle reappraisal of Britain's place in the world.

Adapting the UK to 'a networked world'

*Today, influence increasingly lies with networks of states with fluid and dynamic patterns of allegiance, alliance and connections, including the informal, which act as vital channels of influence and decision-making and require new forms of engagement from Britain.*⁴¹

William Hague, 1 July 2010

*What I have seen in my first six months as Prime Minister is a Britain at the centre of all the big discussions. So, I reject this thesis of decline. I firmly believe that this open, networked world plays to Britain's strengths, but these vast changes in the world do mean that we do constantly have to adapt.*⁴²

David Cameron, 15 November 2010

The dominant theme to emerge in the coalition's foreign policy, and the common thread running through the foreign secretary's pronouncements, has been of the UK adapting to 'a networked world'.⁴³ On the face of it, this perspective is similar to the analysis of the previous government. At its core it recognizes not only that power is shifting from West to East, but also that the nature of

36 Stewart Patrick, 'Prix fixe and à la carte: avoiding false multilateral choices', *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (October 2009), pp. 77–95, http://twq.com/09october/docs/09oct_Patrick.pdf.

37 Bronwen Maddox, 'David Miliband defends his role in Labour – and Britain's role on the world stage', *The Times*, 13 January 2010. On practical proposals for the UK to act as a 'thought leader', see Alex Evans and David Steven, *Organizing for Influence: UK Foreign Policy in an Age of Uncertainty* (London: Chatham House, 2010), pp. 14–21, http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Europe/r0610_stevens_evans.pdf.

38 Callaghan, 'Challenges and opportunities for British foreign policy', p. 10.

39 See for example: 'Britain's Place in a Changing World', discussion between David Miliband, William Hague, and Edward Davey, Chatham House, 3 March 2010, <http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Meetings/Meeting%20Transcripts/030310ukrole.pdf>.

40 Timothy Garton Ash, '9^{1/2} vital questions for our would-be leaders on Britain's role in the world', *The Guardian*, 21 April 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/apr/21/questions-leaders-britains-role-world>.

41 William Hague, 'Britain's foreign policy in a networked world', Locarno Room, FCO, London, 1 July 2010, <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/news/latest-news/?view=Speech&id=22472881>.

42 Cameron, 'Speech to the Lord Mayor's Banquet', 2010.

43 Hague, 'Britain's foreign policy in a networked world'; Hague, 'Britain's prosperity in a networked world'; Hague, 'Britain's values in a networked world', Lincoln's Inn, London, 15 September 2010, <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/news/latest-news/?view=Speech&id=22862713>; Hague, 'International security in a networked world', Georgetown University, Washington, DC, 17 November 2010, <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/news/latest-news/?view=Speech&id=117662682>; Hague, 'The Commonwealth in a networked world', Lowy Institute for International Policy, Sydney, 19 January 2011, <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/news/latest-news/?view=Speech&id=536166482>.

power is changing as well. States now have to contend with the 'fluid and dynamic patterns of allegiance, alliance and connections, including the informal',⁴⁴ as they seek to navigate the emergence of a 'networked world' – something that Anne-Marie Slaughter has suggested 'exists above the state, below the state, and through the state'.⁴⁵ This is certainly true of the UK, one of the world's most integrated economies and open societies, in equal measure able to reap the rewards of globalization and vulnerable to its risks.

The coalition government, like its predecessors, has also chosen to emphasize the UK's distinctive combination of foreign policy assets, suggesting that these ensure the country is well placed to pursue an active global role. The updated National Security Strategy, for example, highlighted the potential for 'informal influence' owing to London's strength as 'a world city, acting as a second home for the decision-makers of many countries'.⁴⁶ In a tone echoing Churchill, the NSS stated that '[g]eographically Britain is an island, but economically and politically it is a vital link in the global network'.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, the prime minister's confident assertion that Britain is 'at the centre of all the big discussions' reflects an exceptionalist outlook.⁴⁸

Much of the underlying sentiment remains similar therefore. There has, however, been substantive change, with the coalition's perspective differing from that of its predecessors in two important respects. The first relates to the emphasis that the prime minister and foreign secretary have placed on rejuvenating the UK's bilateral relations, particularly among the emerging powers. It is this that underpins the stated ambition that the country's 'foreign policy has to become more expeditionary and agile'⁴⁹ and that has provided the rationale for the new embassy strategy, which, despite surrounding budgetary pressures, has outlined plans to reorient and expand the UK's diplomatic footprint.⁵⁰ It also coincides with an initiative to improve fundamental diplomatic skills within the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, as well as plans to increase spending on language training.⁵¹ This emphasis on bilateral relations marks a subtle shift from the instinctive multilateralism of Gordon Brown and David Miliband, who more often emphasized the importance of global rules, values and institutions and the prospect of building a 'truly global society'.⁵² As far as instincts go, for Cameron and Hague the predominant currency to ensure success in a networked world seems to be a revived bilateralism.

Second, and building on this, the coalition has attached greater significance to promoting commercial diplomacy. Undoubtedly this stems from the nation's current economic situation and the need to stimulate growth and a return to prosperity at home. Indeed, if governing 'in the national interest' has become the coalition's animating mantra and deficit reduction its domestic motif, then infusing diplomacy with a commercial focus has become the foreign policy corollary.⁵³ William Hague has declared that supporting British business represents 'an existential mission' for

44 Hague, 'Britain's foreign policy in a networked world'.

45 Anne-Marie Slaughter, 'America's Edge: Power in the Networked Century', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 88, No. 1 (January/February 2009), p. 95.

46 HM Government, *A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The National Security Strategy* (Norwich: The Stationery Office, Cm7953, 2010), p. 21, http://www.direct.gov.uk/prod_consum_dg/groups/dg_digitalassets/@dg/@en/documents/digitalasset/dg_191639.pdf?CID=PDF&PLA=furl&CRE=nationalsecuritystrategy.

47 HM Government, *A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty*, p. 3.

48 Cameron, 'Speech to the Lord Mayor's Banquet', 2010.

49 Hague, 'The Commonwealth in a networked world'.

50 William Hague, 'Future Diplomatic Network', statement to Parliament, *Hansard*, 11 May 2011, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm110511/debtext/110511-0001.htm#11051175000970>.

51 William Hague, 'The best diplomatic service in the world: strengthening the Foreign and Commonwealth Office as an Institution', FCO, London, 8 September 2011, <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/news/latest-news/?view=Speech&id=652930982>.

52 See Gordon Brown, 'Kennedy Memorial Lecture', John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, 18 April 2008, <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.number10.gov.uk/Page15303>; David Miliband, 'Foundations of freedom: the promise of the new multilateralism', Wilberforce Lecture, Hull, 21 November 2008, <http://www.wilberforcelecturetrust.co.uk/images/uploads/08%2011%2021%20Wilberforce%20lecture.pdf>; and David Miliband, 'Power dispersed, responsibility shared: Britain's role in Building Coalitions for Change', speech at the Mansion House Easter Banquet, Mansion House, London, 22 April 2009, <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/news/latest-news/?view=Speech&id=16746598>. For a critical perspective on the coalition's bilateralism, see Yvette Cooper, 'Coalition foreign policy – an assessment and Labour's approach to Opposition', Chatham House, London, 13 December 2010, <http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Meetings/Meeting%20Transcripts/131210cooper.pdf>.

53 Michael Harvey, 'UK Politics: Forged in the Crucible of Austerity', *The World Today*, Vol. 67, No. 5 (May 2011), <http://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/twt/archive/view/107398>.

the Foreign & Commonwealth Office.⁵⁴ David Cameron, meanwhile, has stated that Britain 'should be messianic in wanting to see free trade and open markets around the world', and has led sizable business delegations to India, China, South Africa and Russia.⁵⁵

The marked shift in foreign policy outlook under the current government is therefore clear. Since assuming office, however, the coalition has been confronted with an unstable geopolitical and geoeconomic context. Indeed, the turn of events – especially the unexpected nature of the Arab uprisings and the as yet unresolved Eurozone debt crisis – has again served to highlight the complexity of international affairs and the challenges facing policy-makers in an 'age of uncertainty'.⁵⁶ In certain respects the wave of popular dissent across the Middle East and North Africa served to confirm the 'networked world' analysis. The uprisings provided a stark illustration of the changing nature of power, highlighting the 'fluid and dynamic patterns' of which the foreign secretary has spoken, albeit with perhaps less emphasis on the prominence of the nation-state than his analysis would allow. They also gave practical expression to what Zbigniew Brzezinski has characterized as 'the global political awakening', where '[f]or the first time in human history almost all of humanity is politically activated, politically conscious and politically interactive'.⁵⁷

That said, the wave of Arab uprisings led to a gradual shift in the coalition's approach. The instinctive focus on trade and open markets was combined with a greater emphasis on individual rights and the value of open societies; an evolution that chimes with the liberalism at the core of the coalition's foreign policy.⁵⁸ Military action in Libya, meanwhile, reopened debate about interventionism post-Iraq. As well as highlighting the constraints on such interventions at a time of domestic austerity, participation in the conflict underlined the government's determination that the UK remain an activist power on the international stage, acting to uphold values and the rules of the international order.⁵⁹

Unsurprisingly, in light of the ongoing Eurozone crisis, Britain's relationship with Europe is again at the top of the foreign policy agenda. It is too early to judge whether the prime minister's veto at the December 2011 European Council summit marks a turning point in the UK's relationship with the rest of Europe – the implications will in any case rest on continuing efforts to resolve the crisis and the longer-term consequences of this for the EU itself. The government's current approach, the different context accepted, is certainly distinct from the bridging strategy of the Blair years. Cameron's firm stance is underpinned by a belief that Europe should act 'with the flexibility of a network, not the rigidity of a bloc', while 'valu[ing] national identity and see[ing] the diversity of Europe's nations as [a] source of strength'.⁶⁰ The protracted crisis has undoubtedly highlighted the disconnect between the concerns of European citizens, the efforts of governments to forge collective – and decisive – action, and the more immediate judgement of the financial markets. While the coalition has undoubtedly succeeded in shifting the overall tenor of British foreign policy therefore, recent events – in Europe and across the Middle East – have underscored the imperative of being able to act with agility and flexibility in international affairs. At the same time they have served to reinforce the scale of the challenge in reorienting the UK to a networked world.

54 George Parker, James Blitz and Alex Barker, 'Hague vows to defend embassy network', *Financial Times*, 13 July 2010, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/82071b28-8eb4-11df-8a67-00144feab49a,s01=2.html>.

55 David Cameron, 'Speech to the UK Trade & Investment business summit', Lancaster House, London, 14 July 2010, <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/speech-to-ukti-business-summit/>

56 Evans and Steven, *Organizing for Influence*; Nassim Nicholas Taleb and Mark Blyth, 'The Black Swan in Cairo', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, Issue 3 (May/June 2011), pp. 33–39.

57 Zbigniew Brzezinski, 'Major foreign policy challenges for the next US President', *International Affairs*, Vol. 85, No.1 (2009), p. 53.

58 David Cameron, 'Prime Minister's speech to the National Assembly, Kuwait', 22 February 2011, <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/prime-minister's-speech-to-the-national-assembly-kuwait/>; Nick Clegg, 'An axis of openness: renewing multilateralism for the 21st century', Chapultepec Castle, Mexico City, 29 March 2011, <http://www.dpm.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/news/deputy-pms-speech-mexico-foreign-policy/>; Nick Clegg, 'Speech on the Arab Spring', British Council, London, 22 August 2011, <http://www.dpm.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/news/nick-cleggs-speech-arab-spring/>.

59 Paul Cornish, 'Defence Policy: A Test Case', *The World Today*, Vol. 67, No. 5 (May 2011), <http://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/twt/archive/view/107390>.

60 David Cameron, 'Foreign Policy in the National Interest', Lord Mayor's Banquet, London, 14 November 2011, <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/lord-mayors-banquet/>.

CONCLUSION

Set against a backdrop of global uncertainty and with a return to sustained prosperity still far from assured, the debate about the UK's place in the world seems unlikely to abate. Given Britain's history, its profile as an established power, and irrespective of whether its star is on the rise or on the wane, questions born of introspection continue to endure. Indeed, much of the country's postwar experience has represented a struggle for continuity while adjusting to the realities of relative decline.

In combination with the longer-term shift in the global balance of power, austerity at home and economic uncertainty in Europe have sharpened questions about the type of country the UK aspires to be on the world stage. The studied retort in these circumstances has been to invoke exceptionalist instincts. Such a stance is unsurprising, particularly when viewed with a political eye and when trying to reconcile popular British perceptions of 'great power' status with the reality of more limited national resources and an increasingly crowded international diplomatic space.⁶¹

At a time when the contours of global order are uncertain, defining a settled foreign policy identity becomes a more difficult proposition – all the more so when debate is steeped in historical context. As the coalition looks to the future, and indeed to a post-austerity vision, it would do well to cast off the shackles of both exceptionalism and decline. In adapting to a changing world, the animating question over the coming years then is this: at a time of economic restraint, how well can the UK develop its capacity as an *agile middle power*, confident of its purpose and equipped to navigate the uncertainties ahead?

⁶¹ On popular perceptions, see: Robin Niblett, *The Chatham House-YouGov Survey 2011: British Attitudes Towards the UK's International Priorities, Survey Analysis* (London: Chatham House, 2011), http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/0711ch_yougov_analysis.pdf.

APPENDIX: CONCEPTUALIZING THE UK'S PLACE IN THE WORLD – EVOLVING PERSPECTIVES

Winston Churchill advancing the 'three circles' (October 1948):

'As I look out upon the future of our country in the changing scene of human destiny I feel the existence of three great circles among the free nations and democracies. I almost wish I had a blackboard. I would make a picture for you. I don't suppose it would get hung in the Royal Academy, but it would illustrate the point I am anxious for you to hold in your minds. The first circle for us is naturally the British Commonwealth and Empire, with all that that comprises. Then there is also the English-speaking world in which we, Canada, and the other British Dominions and the United States play so important a part. And finally there is United Europe. These three majestic circles are co-existent and if they are linked together there is no force or combination which could overthrow them or even challenge them. Now if you think of the three inter-linked circles you will see that we are the only country which has a great part in every one of them. We stand, in fact, at the very point of junction, and here in this Island at the centre of the seaways and perhaps of the airways also, we have the opportunity of joining them all together. If we rise to the occasion in the years that are to come it may be found that once again we hold the key to opening a safe and happy future to humanity, and will gain for ourselves gratitude and fame.'⁶²

Harold Wilson on Britain's 'East of Suez role' (December 1964)

'I want to make it quite clear that whatever we may do in the field of cost effectiveness, value for money and a stringent review of expenditure, we cannot afford to relinquish our world role – our role which, for shorthand purposes, is sometimes called our "east of Suez" role, though this particular phrase, however convenient, lacks geographical accuracy.'⁶³

Edward Heath describing Britain as 'a medium power of the first rank' (December 1970):

'We shall be ourselves: an outward-looking people, a nation with world-wide responsibilities, a medium power of the first rank ... Our own interests must come first ... then Europe's and those of the North Atlantic alliance ... We shall be contracting in not contracting out. No one knows better than the British that you simply cannot afford to stop the world and get off ...'⁶⁴

James Callaghan outlining Britain's capacity to act as a bridge builder (December 1975):

'Britain's policy for the new multi-polar era is based on multilateral interdependence, upon partnership and not domination, aimed at a new partnership between the developed and the developing world'. [...] 'We have country by country connections throughout the world. We have the experience. In my opinion *we have the policy* which can enable Britain to make a contribution out of all proportion to our individual size and power to the problems facing the world. In these circumstances we may well have found the role for Britain which [...] Dean Acheson asserted that we had lost with our empire. We are the bridge builders.'⁶⁵

62 Churchill, 'Speech at a Conservative Mass Meeting', pp. 417-18.

63 Harold Wilson, 'House of Commons Debate on Foreign Affairs', 16 December 1964: cc 423-24, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1964/dec/16/foreign-affairs>.

64 Emery, 'Mr Heath seeks new cordiality with US'.

65 Callaghan, 'Challenges and opportunities for British foreign policy' (*emphasis in original*).

Margaret Thatcher's comments, following victory in the Falklands, on reversing British decline (July 1982):

'We have ceased to be a nation in retreat. We have instead a new-found confidence – born in the economic battles at home and tested and found true 8,000 miles away. That confidence comes from the re-discovery of ourselves, and grows with the recovery of our self-respect. And so today, we can rejoice at our success in the Falklands and take pride in the achievement of the men and women of our Task Force. But we do so, not as at some last flickering of a flame which must soon be dead. No – we rejoice that Britain has re-kindled that spirit which has fired her for generations past and which today has begun to burn as brightly as before. Britain found herself again in the South Atlantic and will not look back from the victory she has won.'⁶⁶

Reflecting in her memoirs, Thatcher describes Britain as a 'middle-ranking power' (1993):

'The truth – that Britain was a middle-ranking power, given unusual influence by virtue of its historical distinction, skilled diplomacy and versatile military forces, but greatly weakened by economic decline – seemed too complex for sophisticated people to grasp. They were determined to think themselves much weaker and more contemptible than was in fact the case, and refused all comfort to the contrary.'⁶⁷

Douglas Hurd's description of Britain's post-Cold War capacity for influence (January 1992):

'We have a formidable agenda in 1992 because the world will be a dangerous and complex place. In recent years Britain has punched above her weight in the world. We intend to keep it that way.'⁶⁸

Tony Blair's characterization of the UK as a transatlantic 'bridge' (November 1997):

'Strong in Europe and strong with the US. There is no choice between the two. Stronger with one means stronger with the other. Our aim should be to deepen our relationship with the US at all levels. We are the bridge between the US and Europe. Let us use it. When Britain and America work together on the international scene, there is little we can't achieve.'⁶⁹

Tony Blair's 'pivotal power' speech (November 1999):

'Nations need to have a sense of their place in the world. They need to know who their allies are; their points of international reference; their place and role in the power structure of the world's nations. [...] However, I believe that search can now end. We have got over our Imperial past – and the withdrawal symptoms. No longer do we want to be taken seriously just for our history, but for what we are and what we will become. We have a new role. Not to look back and try to re-create ourselves as the pre-eminent superpower of 1900, nor to pretend to be the Greeks to the Americans' Romans. It is to use the strengths of our history to build our future not as a super power but as a pivotal power, as a power that is at the crux of the alliances and international politics which shape the world and its future. Engaged, open, dynamic, a partner and, where possible, a leader in ideas and in influence, that is where Britain must be. But – and here is the choice – if we want this role, we have to reject creeping isolationism and an outdated view that a nation is only "independent" if it stands aloof.'⁷⁰

66 Margaret Thatcher, 'Speech at A Conservative Rally in Cheltenham', Cheltenham Racecourse, 3 July 1982, <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104989>.

67 Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London: HarperCollins, 1993): p. 9.

68 Hurd, 'Making the world a safer place: our five priorities'.

69 Blair, 'PM Speech at the Lord Mayor's Banquet', 1997.

70 Blair, 'Shaping a Pivotal Role for Britain in the World'.

Tony Blair re-emphasizes his commitment to the 'bridge' role following the invasion of Iraq (November 2004):

'For Britain, for once the word "unique" is fitting. We have a unique role to play. Call it a bridge, a two lane motorway, a pivot or call it a damn high wire, which is how it often feels; our job is to keep our sights firmly on both sides of the Atlantic, use the good old British characteristics of common sense and make the argument. In doing so, we are not subverting our country either into an American poodle or a European municipality, we are advancing the British national interest in a changed world in the early 21st century. And yes, we should be optimistic and confident of an ability to do it.'⁷¹

Gordon Brown describing the UK as 'the first multinational state' (November 2007):

'From the early years of this young century we can already discern what Britain, the first multinational state, has always known: that success requires that people of different races, religions and backgrounds learn to live in harmony with each other.'⁷²

David Miliband criticizes the 'bridge' role (January 2008):

'I know why we talked about being a bridge between Europe and America. Because they were talking past each other. But France and Germany now have good relations with America. That is good. But bridge was never quite right. We have global assets. A global language. Global businesses and NGOs. And global networks. That is why I talk about Britain as a global hub, promoting our values and interests on the global stage. We are members of the EU. Our most important bilateral relationship is with the US. And in China and India our links with Europe and America help us do that.'⁷³

David Miliband on the UK as a 'global hub' (March 2008):

'Some have stated that the UK's role in recent years has been as a bridge between the US and Europe. I'm not sure the image of the UK as a bridge was ever right. It epitomised our ambivalent relationship with Europe, suggesting Europe was a bilateral relationship rather than an institution of which we are party. But with the rise of India, China and other emerging powers, the notion is even more inappropriate. I prefer to describe our role in the world as a global hub. Britain has strong links around the globe and, just as the City has become a global hub for finance, Britain should see itself as a global hub for diplomacy and ideas. This means maintaining our relationships with existing powers, but also deepening our alliances with emerging nations, and not just between governments, but between businesses, universities, cities and citizens. It also means developing a reputation as a hub for new ideas and solutions to global problems.'⁷⁴

William Hague on the UK 'in a networked world' (July 2010):

'Put simply, the world has changed and if we do not change with it Britain's role is set to decline with all that that means for our influence in world affairs, for our national security and for our economy. Achieving our foreign policy objectives has become harder and will become more so unless we are prepared to act differently. [...] In this networked world the UK not only needs to be an active and influential member of multilateral bodies but we also need to ensure that our

71 Tony Blair, 'Prime Minister's speech to the Lord Mayor's Banquet', Mansion House, London, 15 November 2004, <http://tna.europarchive.org/20050302152644/http://www.strategy-unit.gov.uk/output/Page6583.asp>.

72 Gordon Brown, 'Lord Mayor's Banquet Speech', London, 12 November 2007, <http://tna.europarchive.org/20081210153123/http://www.number10.gov.uk/Page13736>.

73 Miliband 'Change the World Keynote Speech'.

74 Miliband, 'Speech at the FCO Leadership Conference'.

diplomacy is sufficiently agile, innovative in nature and global in reach to create our own criss-crossing networks of strengthened bilateral relations.⁷⁵

David Cameron rejecting 'the thesis of decline' (November 2010):

'Now, there are some who say that Britain is embarked on an inevitable path of decline, that the rise of new economic powers is the end of Britain's influence in the world, that we are in some vast zero-sum game, in which we are bound to lose out. I want to take that argument head on. Britain remains a great economic power. Show me a city in the world with stronger credentials than the City of London. Show me another gathering with the same line-up of financial, legal, accounting, communications and other professional expertise. You know even better than me that Britain is a great trading force in the world. Whenever I meet foreign leaders, they do not see a Britain shuffling apologetically off the world stage. [...]

In terms of our role in the world, the truth is that many other countries would envy the cards that we hold: not only the hard power of our military, but our unique inventory of other assets, all of which contribute to our political weight in the world: our global language; the intercontinental reach of our time zone; our world-class universities; the cultural impact around the world of the BBC, the British Council, and our great museums; a civil service and a diplomatic service which are admired the world over for their professionalism and their impartiality. One in ten of our citizens live permanently overseas, reflecting our long tradition as an outward-facing nation, with a history of deep engagement around the world, whose instinct to be self-confident and active well beyond our shores is in our DNA.

We sit at the heart of the world's most powerful institutions, from the G8 and the G20, to NATO, the Commonwealth, and the UN Security Council. We have a deep and close relationship with America. We are strong and active members of the European Union, the gateway to the world's largest single market. Few countries on earth have this powerful combination of assets, and even fewer have the ability to make the best use of them. What I have seen in my first six months as Prime Minister is a Britain at the centre of all the big discussions. So, I reject this thesis of decline. I firmly believe that this open, networked world plays to Britain's strengths, but these vast changes in the world do mean that we do constantly have to adapt.⁷⁶

William Hague on the importance of bilateralism in a networked world (January 2011):

'[O]ne of the defining characteristics of the new global environment is its networked nature. Today influence rests on a whole range of shifting economic and political connections between states, which have multiple ties and networks of their own – more akin to a "facebook" of international relations than to the rigid relationships of the past. Your Foreign Minister describes Australia's response to this world as "creative diplomacy". Our response in Britain is to say that we must avoid the strategic shrinkage of our international influence. We cannot allow our diplomatic presence in the world to wither, as it has done in some regions in the recent past. And we must ensure that Britain is fully connected to new economic and diplomatic networks, including by playing a leading role in the G20 and working to unlock the potential in the Commonwealth.

Because of the networked world, we will also pay much greater attention than previous governments to nurturing essential alliances and friendships, and to building new ones.

Strong bilateral relationships underpin our economy, our influence in world affairs and our ability to protect our security. They enable us to be more effective in multilateral bodies – whether it is the EU, the G20 or the UN Security Council. For it is a striking fact that while the world is becoming more multilateral, bilateral relations between states remain as important as ever. Tip O'Neill famously said that "all politics is local". I would argue that, ultimately, all foreign policy is bilateral. Multilateral bodies enable agreements which have the legitimacy and credibility of broad

⁷⁵ Hague, 'Britain's foreign policy in a networked world'.

⁷⁶ Cameron, 'Speech to the Lord Mayor's Banquet', 2010.

international agreement, and are a vital part of British diplomacy. But the decisions they reach are the product of a myriad of bilateral relations between them, and require effective bilateral diplomacy as well.

So we do not subscribe to the view that Britain has to choose between Europe or the United States or the Commonwealth, or to static notions of Britain as a “bridge” between different parts of the globe. Instead our foreign policy has to become more expeditionary and agile.⁷⁷

William Hague reflecting on the ‘networked world’ in the midst of the Arab Spring (May 2011):

‘The changes taking place in the Middle East and North Africa reflect global trends that are shaping the world around the United Kingdom. We need to adapt our foreign policy to the networked world of the 21st century in which economic might and influence is moving away from the handful of states that were dominant after the Cold War to a range of nations large and small; and in which no one nation can solve any global problem alone, from climate change to nuclear proliferation – with what the Deputy Prime Minister has called “the globalisation of many of our problems”.

This requires us to connect Britain up to the fastest growing parts of the world economy in commerce, soft power and in diplomacy. [...]

So the foreign policy of this coalition government has as its starting point the needs and interests of British people. It looks fearlessly at the world as it is now, but also as it is likely to be in decades to come. It rejects any notion of the strategic shrinkage of Britain’s role in the world, and instead is bent on diplomatic advance. It asks what we must do as a government and a nation to ensure that our people have prosperity and security, in the broadest sense, long into the future. And it is designed to create, over the coming years, the strongest possible basis for a Britain that is a confident, outward-looking and responsible global power for many years to come. It is the distinctive British foreign policy that we promised on our first day in office and which we will take forward with even greater vigour and intensity in the coming years.⁷⁸

William Hague cautioning against a ‘purely reactive’ foreign policy (September 2011):

‘One of the axioms guiding our foreign policy is that the nation that is purely reactive in foreign policy is in decline. We must lift our gaze to the future constantly; so that we do not neglect to put in place now the relationships and capabilities we will rely on to remain a prosperous, influential and secure nation in twenty years’ time when configurations of global power and influence will be very different from today. I consider it a central part of my mission as Foreign Secretary to seek a permanent and well-entrenched improvement in Britain’s ability to project its influence overseas, founded on a revived and reinvigorated Foreign Office that leads thinking on foreign policy across government and that places Britain at the centre of the new networks of the 21st century.⁷⁹

David Cameron expressing his view on Europe’s international standing (November 2011):

‘[W]hat kind of Europe do we actually want? For me, the answer is clear. One that is outward-looking – with its eyes to the world not gazing inwards. One with the flexibility of a network, not the rigidity of a bloc – whose institutions help by connecting and strengthening its members to thrive in a vibrant world, rather than holding them back. One that understands and values national identity and sees the diversity of Europe’s nations as [a] source of strength.⁸⁰

77 Hague, ‘The Commonwealth in a networked world’.

78 William Hague, ‘We will continue to fight terrorism wherever it rears its head’, Lord Mayor’s Easter Banquet, Mansion House, London, 4 May 2011, <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/news/latest-news/?view=Speech&id=591702482>.

79 Hague, ‘The best diplomatic service in the world’.

80 Cameron, ‘Foreign Policy in the National Interest’.

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