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Problems in British Foreign Policy

By Dr. Robin Harris



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Problems in British Foreign Policy

By Dr. Robin Harris

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Abstract

It may take years before the results of NATO's military operations against Colonel Muammar Qadhafi's Libyan regime can finally be judged, but the issues raised by the crisis are of immediate importance.

First, the way in which the operation has been conducted is a reminder of the importance to the United States of its European allies. The assumption which perennially surfaces in the U.S. State Department—that America should primarily be looking in its alliances to a Pacific or other non-European orientation—has yet again proved ill founded.

Second, Libya offers a bad model for the future. NATO's effectiveness and even existence depend on the recognition that it will often depend in practice on "coalitions of the willing." The willing, though, need to be led, and it is an even more fundamental principle of the Alliance—one rooted in history and in relative power—that such leadership must come from the United States.

“Coalitions of the willing” need to be led, and it is a fundamental principle of the NATO Alliance—one rooted in history and in relative power—that such leadership must come from the United States.

Third, the leadership role which, by default, has fallen to Britain and France is also likely to lead to problems because it fosters damaging illusions. In the light of Libya, for example, the U.S. may come to expect too much of Britain, and the British, for the sake of political image-making, may be tempted to indulge that expectation.

To achieve some diplomatic success without being overshadowed by America is a British political priority. Yet without the commitment of substantially more defense resources, Britain will be unable to do more than strike a pose, and the West can least afford posing because security threats—notably a rising China, a revanchist Russia, a still incorrigible Iran, and a mad, bad North Korea—are real, and only strong American leadership can meet them.

To face these and other challenges will require more, not less, U.S. defense effort. Any illusions, like that of the U.K.'s adopting a leading role in key regions, can only weaken the American national consensus that is required.

Britain's problems go beyond the financial and economic difficulties which, rather than foreign affairs, are the main preoccupation of British public opinion. They go to the heart of British foreign policy itself. To explain why this is so, one needs to stand back from events in Libya and look back some way into the past.

SECTION I

True and False Lessons from Libya

At the time of writing, the outcome of NATO's military operations against Colonel Muammar Qadhafi's Libyan regime is unclear. Indeed, it may take years before the results can finally be judged. But the issues raised by the crisis are several and of immediate importance.

First, the way in which the operation has been conducted is a reminder, if one were still needed, of the importance to the United States of its European allies. The assumption which perennially surfaces in the U.S. State Department—that America should primarily be looking in its alliances to a Pacific or other non-European orientation—has yet again proved ill founded.

This confirmation of the importance of its European allies to the U.S. means, by extension, that the effectiveness or otherwise of America's foreign and security policy is therefore bound up with how these allies manage their affairs, and particularly with how much they invest in their defense. Allowing pacifism or neutralism, let alone anti-Americanism, to gain a grip in Europe is therefore a risk that the U.S. cannot afford now any more than it could during the Cold War.

Second, however, Libya in different respects offers a bad model for the future. NATO's effectiveness and even existence depend on the recognition that it will often depend in practice on "coalitions of the willing." As in the case of Libya with Germany and Turkey, some NATO members will be highly unwilling, but at least they do not materially impede or seek to veto action once decided. The willing, though, need to be led, and it is an even more fundamental principle of the Alliance—one rooted in history and in relative power—that such leadership must come from the United States.

Allowing pacifism or neutralism, let alone anti-Americanism, to gain a grip in Europe is a risk that the U.S. cannot afford now any more than it could during the Cold War.

In the present operation, the U.S. has taken a back seat and has not even attempted the role of back-seat driver. Its messages have changed, for example, from open skepticism about applying a no-fly zone to emphatic support for one. President Barack Obama has even, in a joint newspaper article with United Kingdom Prime Minister David Cameron and French President Nicolas Sarkozy, signed up to the aim of régime change.¹

Yet that is not what U.N. Security Council Resolution 1973 actually proposes. The resolution was adopted without opposition but with five abstentions (including, significantly, the two other permanent members, Russia and China) precisely because it did not go as far as Britain and France (and now America) ideally want. Thus, it limits itself to authorizing Chapter VII action to enforce a cease-fire; protection of civilians (though excluding "a foreign occupation force of any form"); a no-fly zone; an arms embargo (which, despite allied frustration, presumably includes the rebels); and an asset freeze. The resulting uncertainties about exactly what current aims are and about U.S. intentions and willingness to give them effect more generally are obviously unhelpful.

Third, the leadership role which, by default, has fallen to Britain and France is also likely to lead to problems because it fosters damaging illusions. Of these, there are two subsets.

1. Barack Obama, David Cameron, and Nicolas Sarkozy, "Libya's Pathway to Peace," *The New York Times*, April 14, 2011.

The first is the subset of lingering illusions about France as an ally. France sees itself—particularly since the election of President Sarkozy in May 2007—as having a special sphere of interest in North Africa and is keen to ensure that is recognized both within the European Union (EU) and outside it. Asserting this claim, mainly in Libya against the country's traditional regional rival there, Italy (the colonial power), is thus settled French policy.

France is also now pursuing a commercial interest. No one—not even Tony Blair—flattered and fêted Colonel Qadhafi with such over-the-top extravagance as did Mr. Sarkozy in Paris in December 2007. For the same reason, once Qadhafi's days looked numbered, no power has bombed the Colonel's headquarters in Tripoli with greater gusto than the French. On top of this, Mr. Sarkozy has a presidential election to fight next year, and he badly needs a foreign policy success to prevent his losing it—or, on present projections, even reaching the second round.

Finally, although France is now less troublesome within NATO, and although Mr. Sarkozy (to his domestic political cost) has demonstrated sympathy for American culture, it is a delusion to think that French rivalry with the U.S. has been suspended. At a regional if not global level, such competition is and will remain strong.

A rather different but hardly less damaging delusion concerns the role of Britain—the second subset of illusions. Unlike France, Britain is a reliable and trustworthy U.S. ally of long standing. The explanation for this is well known. It is to be found in shared experience, culture, language, political system, and, not least, mutually beneficial intelligence and defense cooperation. The problem is that, in the light of Libya, the U.S. may come to expect too much of Britain and that the British, for the sake of political image-making, may be tempted to indulge that expectation.

The conditions for this to occur are obviously present. Many Americans are weary of foreign military engagements after Iraq and Afghanistan. They naturally want to see the U.S. do less and others do more to protect Western interests and maintain global security. The Obama Administration is a strong proponent of multilateral solutions

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At the same time, the rhetoric employed by David Cameron ever since he became Conservative leader has stressed how Britain does not want a “slavish” relationship with the U.S. To achieve some diplomatic success without

being overshadowed by America is a British political priority, even if a less frenzied and consuming one than that of France at the present juncture. Yet without the commitment of substantially more defense resources, Britain will be unable to do more than strike a pose, and the West can least afford posing because security threats—notably a rising China, a revanchist Russia, a still incorrigible Iran, and a mad, bad North Korea—are real, and only strong American leadership can meet them.

To face these and other challenges will require more, not less, U.S. defense effort, as Heritage Foundation scholars have recently demonstrated.² Any illusions, like that of the U.K.'s adopting a leading role in key regions, can only weaken the American national consensus that is required.

Britain indeed has more than enough problems of its own. These go beyond the financial and economic difficulties which, rather than foreign affairs, are the main preoccupation of British public opinion. They go to the heart of British foreign policy itself. To explain why this is so, one needs to stand back from events in Libya and look back some way into the past.

2. See “A Strong National Defense: The Armed Forces America Needs and What They Will Cost,” A Report by The Heritage Foundation, April 5, 2011, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2011/04/A-Strong-National-Defense-The-Armed-Forces-America-Needs-and-What-They-Will-Cost>.

SECTION II

Past Developments in British Foreign Policy

Although it may seem remote from today's rhetoric, it is worth noting that British foreign policy was based principally on national, and then imperial, self-interest for most of the country's history. Lord Palmerston's observation in the mid-19th century is well known: "We have no eternal allies and no permanent enemies. Our interests are eternal, and those interests it is our duty to follow."³

In truth, Palmerston and his successors did have views which stretched beyond the British equivalent of *Realpolitik*. Britain steadily promoted constitutionalism, though not revolution, in Europe and sought to uphold law and good government within its own dominions. From the late 19th century, Britain was also a satisfied and thus peaceful power, despite the need to fight an occasional war.

Britain's greatest Foreign Secretary, the Third Marquess of Salisbury, summed up the prevailing view: "Whatever happens will be for the worse, and therefore it is in our interest that as little should happen as possible."⁴ Unfortunately, the First and Second World Wars did happen; the Bolshevik Revolution and Nazism also happened; and from at least the mid-20th century, ideology has occupied, of necessity rather than by choice, a prominent—if not *the* prominent—place in the explanation and justification, if not always the day-to-day pursuit, of British foreign relations.

Britain is still and must remain a global power in the sense that it depends heavily on easy, safe access to resources, markets, investments, and allies far beyond Europe.

The elements of continuity with that older historical view in today's foreign policy are, though, twofold.

First, Britain is still, as in Palmerston's day, an independent nation, not part of a federation or confederation, despite the entwining bonds with the European Union. Thus, the country still has precisely definable national interests to be debated in traditional terms—for example, the balance of power.

Second, although Britain is no longer a great power, let alone an imperial power, it is still and must remain a global power in the sense that it depends heavily on easy, safe access to resources, markets, investments, and allies far beyond Europe.

Thus, in these two important respects, a traditional framework of analysis is clearly justified. But it is also manifestly insufficient.

One reason for this is that, equally obviously, Britain no longer holds a position of dominance however that may be measured, whether in economic, military, diplomatic, cultural, or demographic terms. The country is balanced in a shifting and somewhat unstable manner between, on the one hand, its American ally—through the "Special Relationship," which has been a prominent consideration since the 1940s and a decisive one since Suez in 1956—and, on the other hand, the European Union.

U.S. pressure on Britain to join in moves toward European integration has, since the 1960s, served frequently to conceal the tension between these two poles of attraction. This is once again the case under the present U.S.

3. Hansard, March 1, 1848, Third series, Col. 97, col. 127.

4. It was 1879, and Lord Salisbury was referring to the problems of Persia. Andrew Roberts, *Salisbury: Victorian Titan* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1999), p. 841.

Administration, which seems to perceive no threat to America's interests from a would-be United States of Europe into which Britain could ultimately be dragged.

The fact remains that, as of now, Britain is facing two ways, one through its crucial defense links with the U.S. and the other through its legal, regulatory, and institutional ties with the EU. At some point, the illogicality and unsustainability of that stance will have to be recognized. For the present, however, Britain hovers uncertainly—an uncertainty increased by the fact that an overwhelmingly Euro-skeptic Conservative Party is joined with a fanatically Euro-enthusiastic Liberal Democrat Party in a governing coalition.

The U.S.–U.K. relationship as the core of the NATO alliance held, not least in the course of the First Gulf War of 1990–1991, but rhetoric, and to some extent policy, veered for several years between contrasting extremes.

A further complicating factor is the degree to which foreign policy is nowadays expected to conform to the model of international liberalism. This reflects, in part, the idealistic approach that has long characterized American foreign policy and has advanced along with American global influence.⁵ But this approach has gone a great deal further since the end of the Cold War, with the primacy now given to a political but legalistic view of international

human rights. The rapid and accelerating progress of claims of universal jurisdiction, linked to the rise of new schemes for global governance and new powers for international courts, is reshaping foreign policy in ways that even its practitioners struggle to grasp.

The precise relationship between these varying factors—which can be summed up as national sovereignty, global interdependence, the U.S.–U.K. Special Relationship, European integration, and “ethics”—in recent years has been the subject of a lively, if not always illuminating, discussion between British foreign policy professionals and commentators. This, then, is the intellectual background to British foreign policy today.

The practical background, of course, is provided by the end of the Cold War. The Cold War imposed its own priorities. Britain's national interests were never perhaps as determined by them as were America's, but those interests were always pursued within the overall framework that the Cold War set. Then in the 1980s, under President Ronald Reagan and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, a joint strategy to win the confrontation was pursued with commitment and remarkably rapid success.

The Cold War had therefore imposed a clarity, even a simplicity, on policymaking. This clarity inevitably broke down afterwards. The contrast was heightened because of the deliberately different styles adopted by George H. W. Bush and John Major, Ronald Reagan's and Margaret Thatcher's respective successors. The U.S.–U.K. relationship as the core of the NATO alliance held, not least in the course of the First Gulf War of 1990–1991, but rhetoric, and to some extent policy, veered for several years between contrasting extremes. Ambitious, idealistic talk of a “New World Order” was succeeded in the early 1990s by an extreme reluctance to intervene—notably the failure to defend the population of Bosnia against genocide. Defense spending was sharply reduced in both the U.S. and the U.K.

Partly as a result of sustained pressure from Washington, the U.K. tried to re-engage with a reunited and highly assertive European Union, whose member countries, American policymakers hoped, would shoulder a greater share of Western defense spending and overseas commitments. (Naturally, they did not do so.) Mr. Major's attempts to place Britain “at the heart of Europe” (as he optimistically promised) similarly came to nothing. It was left to his Labour successor, Tony Blair, in 1997 to try to fulfil that, along with other current aspirations.

Mr. Blair's tenure of power provides, indeed, the crucial background to today's British foreign policy conundrums and predicaments. His successor, Gordon Brown, had little time to make an impact. Moreover, the bad relations which seem to have characterized his relations with President Obama—who may, admittedly, have been more anti-British than anti-Brown—prevented any distinctive reweaving of the strands of the Special Relationship. Then the global financial crisis, to which Mr. Brown claimed to know the answer, though his financial and regulatory failures were part of the problem, submerged everything else.

5. See, for example, Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), pp. 1–55, 804–835.

Consequently, it is, in truth, Tony Blair who set the framework which the new Conservative-led coalition government inherited in 2010. Since David Cameron has proudly described himself as “the heir to Blair,” one might, indeed, expect the latter’s footprint to be evident.⁶ And so it is.

Mr. Blair in his early years proved extremely skillful in avoiding any sharp choices between the United States and Europe. This was possible under President Bill Clinton by using the fragile but temporarily serviceable umbrella of the “Third Way”—linking left-of-center governments and parties on both sides of the Atlantic—to portray consensus where none, in truth, existed.

Tony Blair was frustrated in his desire to end sterling in favor of the euro, partly by his Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown’s reluctance to give up control of the country’s monetary policy and mainly by the fact that the change could not be made without a referendum, which would have been lost. But this setback arguably helped Mr. Blair’s wider strategy, because it meant that the one point of European policy on which British feeling was strong (hostility to the euro) did not get in the way of other maneuvers intended to please the Europeans.

Perhaps the most significant of these was moving Britain closer to the rest of Europe on defense policy, specifically the Anglo–French St. Malo initiative of December 1998. On that occasion, the British and French governments agreed that the EU “must have the capacity for autonomous action, backed by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them, and a readiness to do so, in order to respond to international crises.” To that end, the EU would “also need to have recourse to suitable military means...outside the NATO framework.”⁷ Mr. Blair was subsequently able to persuade President George W. Bush that this and subsequent developments—at the Helsinki EU Summit in December 1999 and at the Nice EU Summit in December 2000—were compatible with and would indeed take place within NATO. This then embedded a serious contradiction in Britain’s and NATO’s defense stance.

The British Prime Minister had also by this point imposed upon British and Western security thinking another concept replete with future difficulties. In the spring of 1999, NATO, principally at Mr. Blair’s urging, launched an air campaign against Serbia to prevent further atrocities and ethnic cleansing in mainly ethnic Albanian Kosovo. This could and arguably should have been seen as overdue action against Belgrade, justified and demanded by the series of wars it had launched since 1991 in the territories of the former Yugoslavia. But to sidestep the need for any clear authorization by the U.N. Security Council (which Russia would have vetoed) and because it was suited to the liberal audience to which President Clinton and Mr. Blair felt the need to appeal, the NATO mission was described as taking place as a “humanitarian intervention.” Surprisingly, the mission worked because, for reasons still unclear, the Serbian leader, Slobodan Milošević, suddenly crumbled.⁸ The precedent was problematic, but arguably the result had justified it.

Perhaps the most significant of Tony Blair’s maneuvers intended to please the Europeans was moving Britain closer to the rest of Europe on defense policy.

Mr. Blair, however, was not satisfied with this scrappy but satisfactory outcome and sought, on the basis of his triumph, to formulate a novel, generalized justification. In a speech in Chicago in April 1999, he attempted to spell out what he described as a “new doctrine of international community.” According to this analysis, and expressing the point more crudely than he himself did, this amounted to the contention that everything everywhere affects all of us, and so we have a duty—and, *ipso facto*, a right—to be as willing to mind other people’s business as our own. This law he saw applying to economic and technological innovation, but also to security. Specifically, he asserted: “We cannot turn our backs on conflicts and the violation of human rights within other countries if we want still to be secure.”⁹

6. Andrew Pierce, “Horror as Cameron Brandishes the B Word,” *Daily Telegraph*, October 5, 2005.

7. Joint Declaration issued at the British–French Summit, St. Malo, France, December 3–4, 1998.

8. He probably thought that he had sufficient grip on the Serbian–Yugoslav security apparatus to stay in power. He miscalculated, lost office, and was slipped out of Belgrade, to die in the course of a mismanaged trial before the International Criminal Tribunal on the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) at The Hague.

9. Tony Blair, Speech to the Economic Club, Chicago, April 24, 1999; Paul Eastham, “Blair the History Man Sets a New World Order,” *Daily Mail*, April 23, 1999.

Margaret Thatcher, who gave strong support to the Kosovo operation itself, later observed of this assertion:

We *may* believe that it is right to intervene to stop suffering inflicted by rulers on their subjects, or by one ethnic group on another: I am sure that it sometimes was, and is. And we *may* believe that we should be prepared to intervene in order to preserve our own security or the defence of an ally: I am convinced that we have to show resolution in doing so. But to pretend that the two objectives are always, or even usually, identical is humbug.

Unfortunately, the humbug has proved all too palatable. The result is that no clear distinctions or even cool calculations now seem politically avowable when the case for or against military interventions is being considered. This, as Mrs. Thatcher then warned, is a “prescription for strategic muddle, military overstretch and ultimately, in the wake of inevitable failure, for an American retreat from global responsibility.”¹⁰

Tony Blair’s attempt to make Britain a “bridge” (a popular metaphor at the time) between the United States and Europe failed as a result of the Iraq War, when he (rightly but fatally) chose to support Britain’s key ally, despite the opposition of “old Europe.” For well-known reasons, this became for him, as for other supporters of the war, an insurmountable political liability. Indeed, it so undermined his public credibility that he had to stand down early as Prime Minister in June 2007 when relentlessly pressured by Mr. Brown, who wanted to succeed him.

Tony Blair’s “new doctrine of international community” amounted to the contention that everything everywhere affects all of us, and so we have a duty—and, ipso facto, a right—to be as willing to mind other people’s business as our own.

But other aspects of Tony Blair’s legacy in foreign policy persisted. In fact, it can be said without exaggeration

that the doctrine of “international community,” or humanitarian (military) intervention, alongside a range of multilateral initiatives on poverty, climate change, and universal jurisdiction—encapsulated in the new International Criminal Court, for which Mr. Blair strongly pressed—remolded international relations and recast, in particular, British foreign policy.

10. Margaret Thatcher, *Statecraft: Strategies for a Changing World* (London: Harper Collins, 2002), p. 35.

SECTION III

Conservative Foreign Policy Thinking

In Opposition after 2003, having at first supported the Iraq War, the Conservative Party under Michael Howard opportunistically changed its tune when the dreadful aftermath changed public opinion. Had the Conservatives then focused their criticism on the planning for Iraq after victory, their stance might have made more sense; but by clambering on the bandwagon of criticism of America's and Mr. Blair's honesty and motives, they merely caused grave offense in Washington while damaging their credibility at home. It was even made known publicly that Mr. Howard would not be welcome in the White House, an astonishing snub for a Tory leader from a Republican Administration.

Relations remained at this level until the 2005 U.K. general election, which the Conservatives lost. Mr. Howard resigned and was succeeded as leader by his former adviser and long-standing protégé, David Cameron.

This background is crucial to understanding Britain's and Mr. Cameron's foreign policy stance today. From his predecessor, Michael Howard, he inherited a disposition to play down any perceived closeness to America. At the same time, among his younger advisers and friends were enthusiasts for that American brand of foreign policy which is, to some extent misleadingly, described as "neoconservative."¹¹

The Conservatives were in a dilemma. They wanted to exploit Tony Blair's perceived subservience to President Bush, damagingly summed up for British public consumption by the "Yo Blair!" exchange between the two leaders, which occurred at the St. Petersburg G8 Summit in July 2006 and was endlessly recycled in the British media. At the same time, the Tories were attracted in domestic policy, and thus potentially in foreign policy too, by the rhetoric of high-minded idealism, which seemed young, fresh, and new.

Although this had been concealed under Mr. Howard, the one point upon which the Conservative Party's "modernizing" faction, which the former leader had promoted and the new leader represented, was wholeheartedly and enthusiastically agreed was that Tony Blair (not, for example, Margaret Thatcher) was the model for the Conservative Party's rebirth. The template for the new Conservatives was, *mutatis mutandis*, New Labour. So they wanted to emulate Tony Blair in all things possible, and Mr. Blair gushed idealism. It was his trademark.

Mr. Cameron's pronouncements and, to a less identifiable extent, those of his then-Shadow Foreign Secretary and now Foreign Secretary, William Hague, have since followed these conflicting tendencies. Initially, while Presi-

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11. Although it is generally futile to contest the received use of terms, particularly when journalists have earned their laurels by their misuse, it ought to be of interest, at least as a corrective, that in the essays of Irving Kristol, collected by him under the title "Neoconservatism," not one deals exclusively with foreign policy. See Irving Kristol, *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea* (New York: The Free Press, 1995).

dent Bush was in the White House, the Tory distancing continued. Mr. Hague, for example, in Washington in February 2006 delivered a speech in which he warned of a “critical erosion” of American moral authority. He linked this to the alleged use of torture to extract information from terrorists (information of the sort that apparently led to the detection and elimination of Osama bin Laden, among others). Mr. Hague even suggested: “This has resulted in a loss of goodwill towards America which could be as serious in the long term as the sharpest of military defeats.”¹²

This message was, of course, formulated with a view to British public opinion. Opinion research showed at the time that 63 percent of those asked thought that Mr. Blair had tied Britain too closely to the U.S.¹³

David Cameron then chose the fifth anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks on America to deliver a still more strongly worded message. The intention was to show that Britain would henceforth distance itself from America, with whom Britain should have a “solid but not slavish relationship” and with whom Britain could not be seen as the “unconditional associate in every endeavour”—though Mr. Cameron also denounced “Anti-Americanism.”

Mr. Cameron explicitly criticized “neo-conservative” foreign policy and claimed that he, by contrast, was a “liberal conservative.” He added: “I believe that in the last five years we have suffered from the absence of two crucial qualities which should always condition foreign policy-making. Humility and patience.” In words which contradict, some might say, rather sharply the approach Britain is now taking in Libya and the Arab world, Mr. Cameron warned:

The ambition to spread democracy is noble and just. But it cannot be quickly achieved to suit a political timetable. Because it takes time, it cannot easily be imposed from outside. Liberty grows from the ground—it cannot be dropped from the air by an unmanned drone.¹⁴

This message, like that of Michael Howard, which it echoed, was probably not well received in the White House, but nor was it in the forefront of U.S. concerns. So, in order to gain advantage from the perception that the Conservatives were standing up to America, Mr. Cameron’s media advisers apparently intimated to the British press that it had created a serious split.¹⁵

In October of the following year, in a speech at a conference on security held in Berlin in the company of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Mr. Cameron elaborated on the direction of his new foreign policy thinking. He repeated his commitment to “liberal conservatism,” with which he now explicitly contrasted Mr. Blair’s doctrine of interventionism set out in Chicago in 1999. But he added the thought that states must put their “own national security first,” suggesting that the rule of law and strong institutions at home took priority and that “a state without a clear and confident national identity creates the space for ethnic conflict and extremism.”¹⁶ (Where that left multi-ethnic states like Bosnia, for example, or many Middle Eastern states composed of mixed, conflicting religious and weak national identities, he did not say).

The intention was to show that Britain would henceforth distance itself from America, with whom Britain could not be seen as the “unconditional associate in every endeavour.”

Mr. Cameron’s main criticism of recent interventions was that they had “failed to strike the right balance between realism and idealism.”¹⁷ More of the latter was needed. Concentrating on home affairs first and not allowing

ideals to squeeze out caution is a classic conservative message, albeit a somewhat old-fashioned one. In any case, this now seemed the settled (“liberal conservative”) Tory position.

Suddenly, however, it changed. Mr. Cameron, known to be an admirer of Harold Macmillan, might, in self-exculpation from the charge of inconsistency, point to Macmillan’s famous (but perhaps apocryphal) reply to

12. Alec Russell, “Hague Warns Bush Over US ‘Moral Defeat’ as Tories Seek to Mend Ties,” *The Daily Telegraph*, February 17, 2006.

13. Julian Glover and Ewen MacAskill, “Stand up to US, Voters Tell Blair,” *The Guardian*, July 25, 2006.

14. David Cameron, Speech to the British–American Project in London, September 11, 2006, at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2006/sep/11/conservatives.speeches>.

15. Andrew Pierce, “Cameron’s ‘Spin Team Made up Rift with Bush,’” *The Daily Telegraph*, March 15, 2007.

16. “David Cameron: Berlin Security Conference Speech,” October 26, 2007, at http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2007/10/David_Cameron_Berlin_Security_Conference_speche.aspx.

17. *Ibid.*

the question of what he feared most in politics: “Events, dear boy, events.” But the alteration was startling all the same.

David Cameron’s new advocacy of muscular interventionism can first be traced to a justified concern with the deteriorating situation in Bosnia. He told an audience in November 2007 in Washington that “there could be a new crisis in the Balkans by Christmas,” blamed Russian meddling, and called for a reinforcement of “the military presence in the region now.”¹⁸ This call passed without receiving much attention, but his next high-profile intervention made up for that.

In August 2008, Russia invaded Georgia, following a dispute about the breakaway region of South Ossetia. The British government’s response was critical but muted. Mr. Cameron, however, reacted with outspoken vigor. He even made a flying visit to Tbilisi. He publicly compared Russian action to the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968. He suggested that Russia be thrown out of the G8. He demanded that Georgia be granted accelerated membership in NATO.¹⁹ These initiatives, though appreciated by the Georgians, necessarily had little impact on events, but they signalled what can now be seen as a sharp about-turn in Conservative foreign policy thinking.

Conservative leader David Cameron had broadly followed the lead given by President Obama since taking office in January 2009.

Foreign policy did not figure prominently in the 2010 U.K. general election campaign. The Conservatives were uneasy about overstressing the issue of relations with Europe, despite the large public resonance it had, especially with Tory supporters. This was because Mr. Cameron had faced a wave of hostility at the end of 2009, generated by his refusal to adhere to what was deemed by many a firm pledge to offer a referendum, when in power, on the (European) Lisbon Treaty.

Otherwise, the Conservative leader had broadly followed the lead given by President Obama since taking office in January 2009. David Cameron had, in fact, strongly backed Senator John McCain, the Republican presidential candidate, but the Conservatives benefited politically from Barack Obama’s victory.

First, they did not have to try to repair relations with President Bush or apologize to a Republican successor.

Second, it fit into their determinedly liberal image to welcome the arrival of an African–American President—especially one who would enjoy bad relations with Gordon Brown.

Third, it allowed the Conservatives to modulate their approach to Afghanistan according to that of the new Administration, with every hope that it would not come to be the politically fatal quagmire Iraq had proved for Tony Blair.

David Cameron’s team of advisers admire President Obama’s approach to foreign policy—one which might be summarized as emphasizing multilateralism and downplaying American primacy. Like the U.S. President, Mr. Cameron has sought to disarm real or imagined critics by apologies and public expressions of “humility” (as urged in his speech of September 11, 2006).²⁰ In Opposition, Mr. Cameron indeed apologized repeatedly for the alleged misdeeds of the Margaret Thatcher years, including her government’s opposition to economic sanctions against South Africa (whose effective application at that time during the Cold War, as President Reagan also recognized, could have led to chaos or Communism).

In applying the technique to long-standing historical questions, David Cameron followed more closely still in the footsteps of Tony Blair. Mr. Blair, for example, apologized in 1997 for the 19th century potato famine in Ireland, which the British admittedly did not do enough to relieve but which we also did nothing to cause. He apologized, too, in 2006 for the slave trade, which Britain’s navy stamped out—except in those parts of Africa and Asia beyond the reach of the British Empire, where it continued to flourish.

18. James Kirkup and Alex Spillius, “Troops Must Halt Russian Threat, Warns Cameron,” *The Daily Telegraph*, November 29, 2007.

19. David Cameron, “The World Must Be Strong and United in Condemnation,” *The Daily Telegraph*, August 13, 2008; James Kirkup, “Cameron Criticises Russia’s Aggression,” *The Daily Telegraph*, August 26, 2008.

20. See Nile Gardiner and Morgan Roach, “Barack Obama’s Top 10 Apologies: How the President Has Humiliated a Superpower,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2466, June 2 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2009/06/Barack-Obamas-Top-10-Apologies-How-the-President-Has-Humiliated-a-Superpower>.

Soon after taking office, Mr. Cameron, attempting presumably to demonstrate his humility, told his audience in New York that the United Kingdom was merely a “junior partner” to the U.S. in 1940, a year before America even entered the Second World War, overlooking the Blitz and Dunkirk. This was not well received at home.²¹

The tendency to tell foreign audiences what one thinks they want to hear, being natural, is also one reason why national leaders usually stick to prescribed remarks. Mr. Cameron’s brand of politics, being heavily media-focused, is particularly prone to this, and he does not, it seems, use scripts—with the inevitable results. So in Turkey, whose increasingly Islamist government has strongly criticized Israel, he described Gaza as being like “a prison camp,”²² ignoring the terrorist threat which provoked the clampdown.

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In India, which he was said beforehand to be visiting with “humility,” he said about Pakistan: “We cannot tolerate the idea that this country is allowed to look both ways and is able...to promote the export of terror.”²³ This was and is a fair point, but it was not a point to make to an Indian audience—as the outraged response of the Pakistan authorities demonstrated.²⁴

To make amends, Mr. Cameron, in a visit to Pakistan this year, was keen to demonstrate “humility” there too, but he then fell into the trap into which he had slipped in New York earlier. Declining (perhaps sensibly) to give any prescriptive response on the vexed question of disputed Kashmir, David Cameron explained: “I don’t want to try to insert Britain in some leading role where, as with so many of the world’s problems, we are responsible for the issue in the first place.” As regards the issue of Kashmir itself, this was historically nonsensical.²⁵ It was also offensive to all those in Britain who believe that the British Empire’s legacy was broadly positive. It created a storm of press criticism.

The embarrassing incidents which seemed to plague Mr. Cameron’s diplomatic forays made the British government particularly sensitive to the need to react in a media-friendly manner to the crisis in the Arab world. Unfortunately, this is not how matters turned out.

21. Tim Shipman, “Cameron’s Historic Blunder: Fury as PM Says We Were ‘Junior Partner’ to the Americans in 1940,” *The Daily Mail*, July 22, 2010.

22. Nicholas Watt, “David Cameron: Israeli Blockade Has Turned Gaza Strip into a ‘Prison Camp,’” *The Guardian*, July 27, 2010.

23. Nicholas Watt, “Pakistan Must Not Be Allowed to Promote Export of Terror, Says David Cameron,” *The Guardian*, July 28, 2010.

24. As observed by one of Mr. Cameron’s strongest press supporters. See Charles Moore, “Cameron Should Speak Frankly About Britain’s Own terrorists,” *The Daily Telegraph*, July 31, 2010.

25. James Kirkup and Christopher Hope, “UK Caused Many of the World’s Problems: Cameron Enters Historical Minefield,” *The Daily Telegraph*, April 6, 2011. On Partition in 1947, the Hindu maharaja of Kashmir, faced with a *coup de main* organized by Pakistan, hastily decided to throw in his lot with India despite the wishes of the largely Muslim population. Whether Mr. Cameron thinks that the British should have fought the maharaja or the Pakistan army to stop this is unclear. See Lawrence James, *Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India* (London: Abacus, 1997), pp. 636–637.

SECTION IV

Britain and the Arab Crisis

Britain, like the rest of the Western world, was taken by surprise by the eruption and spread of revolt against corrupt authoritarian Arab governments at the start of 2011. Indeed, David Cameron's tour of Gulf states in February was simply conceived as a means of doing business—including arms business—with the rulers. Mr. Cameron's party thus included an embarrassing number of businessmen when Egypt was suddenly added to the schedule so that the British Prime Minister could be the first foreign leader to visit after the fall of President Hosni Mubarak.

The visit was predictably but damagingly criticized by those who said that there was a conflict between selling arms to repressive régimes and urging their people to take to the streets to overthrow them. Mr. Cameron, however, referred to the uprisings as "hugely inspiring."²⁶ In a speech in Kuwait, he went further. He criticized the traditional calculations of British policy in the region:

For decades, some have argued that stability required controlling régimes and that reform and openness would put that stability at risk. So, the argument went, countries like Britain faced a choice between our interests and our values. But I say that is a false choice. As recent events have confirmed, denying people their basic rights does not preserve stability—rather the reverse.²⁷

In its way, this is as clear a statement of the assumptions behind a liberal foreign policy as can be imagined. Whether, as expressed, it is a conservative policy is questionable. It is equally reasonable to question—even if one does not go so far as (in Mr. Cameron's words) to "claim that Arabs or Muslims can't do democracy," a view which he denounced as "a prejudice that borders on racism"—whether such unqualified optimism is sensible. There are legitimate reasons for apprehension about how well the cultural impact of Arab history and the intellectual impact of Islam prepare the people of the region to shift to liberty and democracy.²⁸

Mr. Cameron's remarks were made in Kuwait. A glance at the history and politics of the Gulf shows why worries of a specific kind are in order. Britain's involvement with the Gulf sheikhdoms is of long standing. To describe it, however, as based on colonialism in the ordinary sense is to mislead. It emerged in response to local requirements.

The era of British hegemony began in 1820 and lasted formally until 1971, when the Conservative government of Edward Heath—to Margaret Thatcher's dismay—gave effect to the previous Labour government's strategy of

26. Andrew Rawnsley, "Mr Cameron Gets a Lesson on the Need for a Proper Foreign Policy," *The Observer*, February 27, 2011. Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg sees what is happening in the Arab world as a mirror of what happened in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 and finds it "incredibly exciting." See "Egypt Protests: Wednesday 2 February [2011] as It Happened," *The Telegraph*, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/egypt/8300204/Egypt-protests-Wednesday-2-February-as-it-happened.html> ("It is incredibly exciting what is going on, it reminds me so much of the time when the Berlin Wall fell, the power of the people out on the streets....")

27. Nicholas Watt, "Arabs and Muslims Can Handle Democracy, Says Cameron," *The Guardian*, February 23, 2011.

28. This is a complex area—and certainly not one in which "racists" confront enlightened liberals. For example, on the problems faced by the Muslim world in coming to terms with modernization, see Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (London: Phoenix, 2002). On the poisonous influences entrenched in the political culture and experience of the Arab states, see David Pryce-Jones, *The Closed Circle: An Interpretation of the Arabs* (London: Phoenix, 2002). For the impact of Islam on the way in which Muslims view the world, reason, and human activity, see Robert Reilly, *The Closing of the Muslim Mind: How Intellectual Suicide Created the Modern Islamist Crisis* (Wilmington: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2010). A further obvious point is that to draw attention to problems is not to suggest that there are no solutions, merely to provide a basis for caution.

withdrawal “East of Suez.”²⁹ The British during that period had responsibility for the defense of Oman and the “Trucial States” (today’s United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar). Britain then helped turn these sheikhdoms into more or less modern states. Britain had originally been asked by the rulers to guarantee security in the face of mutual squabbles, piracy, and threats from Persia, to which were later added threats of Communist subversion.

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“democratic” or externally manipulated or a mixture of both, demonstrate the delicacy of the situation and the prudence which Britain and America would be wise to show.

Bahrain is financially and economically important in its own right. It is also home to the U.S. Fifth Fleet headquarters. It has a Sunni ruling family but a Shia majority population, which claims to suffer discrimination and (crucially) a large section of which is loyal to Iran. Iran retains a long-standing claim over the territory and has previously tried to overthrow the Al-Khalifa rulers.

Saudi Arabia, of far greater economic and military importance to the West, also feels threatened by any threat to Bahrain. Its own Shia minority is restive and lives in the country’s eastern province, home to its vast oil wealth. The violent suppression of protests in Bahrain in February and the entry of Saudi forces to maintain order in March are easy enough to deplore—and, indeed, in an ideal world might be deplorable—but whether the likely alternative is acceptable to the West is quite another matter.³⁰

Indeed, the easy rhetorical formula, currently followed by Britain, of calling for democratic reforms throughout the region comes up not just against legitimate considerations of strategic and economic interest, but also against the serious threat posed by Iran. Iran successfully saw off its own popular democratic uprising in 2009, when demonstrations against that year’s rigged presidential election were ruthlessly suppressed with little criticism from the U.S. and the U.K. and with no assistance offered to the democrats. This success has enabled Iran to take advantage of the current uprisings in the Arab world to advance its power.

Meanwhile, Iran remains by far the greatest source of danger. It demonstrates no inclination to slow down its preparations to become a nuclear power, which would also give a huge impetus to proliferation throughout the newly unstable Middle East. Iran has already made significant strategic gains. Egypt, an old enemy, is restoring diplomatic and political relations. Egypt has also ended the military quarantine imposed on Hamas-controlled Gaza.

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This, in turn, puts more pressure on Iran’s sworn enemy (and potential target) Israel. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and the conservative Gulf states are on the defensive in the face of Shia militancy.

One should finally mention the new opportunities provided by instability for Islamist extremism, which has not been crushed—though it was dented—by the elimination of Osama bin Laden. While it is possible to argue about the prospects of different brands of Islamists in different alliances gaining a grip in different Arab countries, it is clear, at least, that nothing in the new wave of democratic reform will improve the prospects of bringing order to, and expelling Islamist forces from, Somalia.

29. See Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 162. Mrs. Thatcher was also the first British Prime Minister to visit the region, in which she took a close and continuous interest.

30. Con Coughlin, “Why the Bahrain Rebellion Could Prove Calamitous for the West,” *The Daily Telegraph*, March 17, 2011.

Problems in British Foreign Policy

Meanwhile, the fate of Yemen, home to perhaps the currently most active al-Qaeda-linked terrorist movement, was in the balance even before the moves to oust President Ali Abdullah Saleh. If Yemen descends from ineffective repression into the chaos of a failed state, as Somalia has, that will represent a serious danger which the U.S. cannot afford to ignore.

SECTION V

Britain and Libya

Britain's historic links with Yemen are, in fact, much closer than those with Libya.³¹ Arguably, as a prime target of Islamist terrorists, Britain's interests are also more connected with events in Yemen. But it is Libya which now dominates British media coverage of events in the Arab world and seems almost wholly to preoccupy the British government.

Libya is an issue first and foremost of British domestic politics, and this fact has governed British government reactions to current events. The 1988 bombing of a Pan American aircraft over Lockerbie in Scotland, which killed 270 people, ensured that this would be so. Then in January 2001, a Scottish court sitting in the Netherlands found Abdul Baset Ali al-Megrahi, a Libyan intelligence agent, guilty. But there was never any serious doubt that Colonel Qadhafi was himself behind it.

This was not Libya's only act of international terrorism. Nor was it, indeed, the first Libyan outrage on British soil. In 1984, Woman Police Constable Yvonne Fletcher was shot and killed in front of the Libyan People's Bureau by one of Qadhafi's agents inside. The culprit was never brought to justice, but again, Qadhafi is clearly responsible. In the light of these events, it is perhaps surprising that there was so little adverse reaction to the decision in 2004 to bring Qadhafi's Libya in from the cold as a reward for abandonment of its weapons-of-mass-destruction programs.³²

The strategy was approved in Washington, but it was promoted and pursued most enthusiastically by Tony Blair. It was quite unnecessary, its terms were insufficiently rigorous, and it encouraged a corrupt complicity which stained the reputation of British institutions and of the country.

- It was superfluous because Qadhafi was acting from fear after he saw the consequences of defiance visited upon Saddam Hussein: He needed no rewards or inducements.
- Its conditions were too lax because the Libyan régime was never forced to free the hundreds of political prisoners, to move even tentatively toward liberty, or to allow proper investigation of its numerous terrorist crimes and assassinations.
- Finally, the strategy corrupted the countries that engaged in it because it allowed Libya not just an open door for investment and trade, but a door through which it could draw a range of powerful interests and individuals into the grubby business of sustaining Qadhafi, his family, and cronies in power and luxury. The consequences of this in British public life are still unfolding.³³

As the culmination of the rapprochement with Libya came the release, under still murky conditions, of the "terminally ill" Megrahi to return to Libya in August 2009. This did enormous harm to the standing of Britain in America. (The decision itself was made by the Scottish government, but it was clearly welcome to the Westminster government too.)³⁴ The release of Megrahi was sharply and rightly criticized at the time by David Cameron. Naturally, the whole question of the last government's relationship with Libya remains embarrassing for the Labour Party and has offered useful political ammunition to the Conservatives, now back in power. Libya could not be forgotten.

31. The last British troops left Aden in 1967 to the strains of a band playing "Fings Ain't What They Used To Be." Lawrence James, *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire* (London: Abacus, 2000), p. 587.

32. For a rare criticism at the time, see Robin Harris, "Gaddafi, the Tyrant with Blood Still on His Hands," *The Times*, March 23, 2004.

33. The Director of the London School of Economics has resigned after a series of revelations about the institution's links with Saif al-Islam, Qadhafi's son. Jeevan Vasagar and Rajeev Syal, "LSE Head Quits Over Gaddafi Scandal," *The Guardian*, March 4, 2011. Saif Qadhafi presented £1.5 million to the LSE. He received a Ph.D. from the institution in 2008.

34. Steven Swinford, "Don't Intervene Over Lockerbie, Envoy Told US," *The Daily Telegraph*, April 11, 2011.

That said, the outbreak of revolt there took the new British government as much by surprise as did revolts elsewhere in the Arab world. During the initial stages, it resulted in several high-profile failures, mainly deemed the fault of the British Foreign Office. The government's efforts to evacuate Britons caught up in the Libyan fighting were criticized as slow, cheese-paring, and incompetent. William Hague, the Foreign Secretary, then announced, on the basis of unconfirmed and (as it turned out) wrong reports, that Colonel Qadhafi had left Libya for Venezuela. Finally, an armed, secret "diplomatic" mission sent to make contact with the rebels was humiliatingly seized, held, and questioned on arrival.

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Since then, the game has been played with greater application and seriousness, and even to some effect. Mr. Cameron's early championing of a no-fly zone was rewarded with grudging support from the U.S. and then given U.N. Security Council authorization by Resolution 1973. Allied air attacks have prevented Qadhafi's well-armed and well-paid forces from overwhelming their opponents, have destroyed much of his arsenal, and have delivered several nearly successful strikes aimed, it seems, at beheading the régime.

These weeks of operations have not (at the time of writing) done more, however, than to impose a stalemate. The rebels are divided, untrained, and not well led, and the terms of UNSCR 1973, alongside other uncertainties, stand in the way of doing much about it.

Whether Qadhafi goes, whether Libya breaks up into its two traditional tribal-based units, or whether a single, friendly, broadly based government emerges remains at present in the realm of speculation. It is clear that Libya—with its oil wealth, relatively small population (7 million), lack of Sunni–Shia divide (which paralyzed post-Saddam Iraq), absence (so far, and despite Qadhafi's rhetoric) of serious Islamist presence, and potential reservoir of talent provided by talented foreign exiles—has the capacity to succeed as a country. It might even, on an optimistic scenario, become the model for a free, stable, and prosperous Maghreb.³⁵ But it might also, if the power struggle continues indefinitely, become one or more failed states, with all the trouble that could bring.

35. See Justin Marozzi, "After Gaddafi: A New Libya Emerges," *Standpoint*, May 2011, pp. 30–33.

SECTION VI

British Foreign Policy and Defense: The Missing Dimension

British foreign policy has been tested by Libya, but it will not rise or fall by the Libyan outcome. Despite the shift of media attention, the commitment of British forces to Afghanistan—10,000 soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines as well as hundreds of civilians—is a much more serious affair. Equally serious will be the consequence of what British, American, and other NATO forces leave behind them when combat operations are concluded (on present plans) by the end of 2014.

The British Defence secretary, Dr. Liam Fox, has rightly emphasized that “we cannot and will not forget about Afghanistan.”³⁶ But the pressure of that campaign, coming on the heels of Iraq, now competing with Libya, and soon perhaps elsewhere in the Middle East—a crisis involving either Lebanon/Syria or Iran or both is easy to envisage—has demonstrated again the folly of Britain’s recent defense cuts.

In Libya, NATO was already complaining of a lack of aircraft early in April,³⁷ but the air campaign has continued, so far with no end in sight. There are also now reports of a shortage of munitions. The Libyan campaign is the sort of conflict that the British Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) considered unlikely: a war fought from the air against conventional forces. Under the SDSR, Britain eliminated its force of Harriers and took the Ark Royal aircraft carrier out of service. This means that Britain’s aircraft now have to fly from Italy.

More generally, the decision to scale back Britain’s defense effort from what was already too low a level while attempting to project British power and influence in new areas is not now intellectually defensible.³⁸ Public expenditure cuts clearly should be directed at domestic programs and at the wasteful (and sharply increased) overseas aid program, and the Defence Review must be reopened.

The decision to scale back Britain’s defense effort from what was already too low a level while attempting to project British power and influence in new areas is not now intellectually defensible.

In Libya, so far, Britain’s luck has held. Despite exhaustion, the line also holds in Afghanistan. But the present British approach to foreign policy cannot and should not hold. Making high-flown declarations of principle, downplaying considerations of national interest, and then failing to provide the defense resources required to make sense of either while keeping all too close a focus on day-by-day media reports is a recipe for failure and humiliation. Right aims, as in the elimination of Qadhafi, are muddled with hugely over-ambitious ones, as in the mission to transform the Arab world into a democratic utopia, and then confounded with bad ones like trying to demonstrate political distance from the United States.

The Prime Minister has established, on the American model, a National Security Council.³⁹ It is high time that it did what it was formally set up to do: bring some coherence and more strategic sense to Britain’s external relations. And it is time, too, for the U.K. government to give foreign and security policy the attention and resources it deserves.

36. Liam Fox, “We Will Not—and Must Not—Forget About Afghanistan,” *The Daily Telegraph*, April 29, 2011.

37. Ian Traynor, “NATO Lacking Strike Aircraft for Libya Campaign,” *The Guardian*, April 5, 2011.

38. See Ted R. Bromund and Nile Gardiner, “Libya Mission Demonstrates That British Defense Cuts Must Be Reversed,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 3231, April 19, 2011, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2011/04/Libya-Mission-Demonstrates-That-British-Defense-Cuts-Must-Be-Reversed>.

39. The pledge dates from 2006 and was fulfilled when David Cameron formed his coalition government last year.



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