

# GLOBAL STRATEGY FORUM

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*The 26th in our series of expert comment and analysis, by GSF's Chairman, Lord Lothian PC QC. As always, the views expressed are those of the author and not of Global Strategy Forum unless otherwise stated.*

## **The Integrated Review Of Security, Defence, Development & Foreign Policy: The Moment For Common Sense?**

I very much welcome this Review, not least because I have high hopes that it will be robust and honest and even more, because it is urgently needed. As we face the uncertainties post-Brexit and post COVID-19, we desperately need a foreign policy. We almost certainly need a defence and security policy as well, but this submission concentrates on the foreign aspect.

The truth is that we have not had a foreign policy worth the name since we joined the then EEC in 1972 and probably for some time before that as well. We used the Cold War as a surrogate and relied on a pretty unsophisticated version of balanced aggression. We occasionally had short, sharp periods of diplomacy in reaction to crises such as the Falklands, but generally it was hard to avoid the impression that our foreign policy ran in neutral or as Churchill more pithily expressed it, *'adamant for drift.'*

In short, since I entered Parliament in 1974 we have been without a foreign policy. To begin with we seemed to think that just being in EEC/EU was a foreign policy in itself. If that was the case it was a pretty poor policy because the EEC/EU in most cases never had a foreign strategy other than do as little as possible. We also seemed to think that in most cases (the Falklands excepted), as long as our responses were aligned to those of the United States, no further strategy was needed.

I have made this case for some time and have been met with ripostes such as to look at British foreign policy in Afghanistan, in Iraq or in Libya where in each case positive action pursued British policy objectives. Yet at the time there was little indication of any strategic or consistent policy ('nation-building' was ephemeral) and with the benefit of hindsight, if there was a policy it was in each case a dismal failure. In the Middle East where, like it or not, we for historical reasons should have a moral imperative to participate, we have sat on the sidelines and wrung our hands.



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We have watched the proud lion become a crumpled one. As we have declined in terms of world stature, we seem almost to have become supine and directionless, as if it is no longer worth the effort. Yet even with a much diminished Foreign service we still have the means.

I hope that the key finding of the Review will be a firm call for a clear and unequivocal foreign policy based on core principles and objectives and tailored to our resources and capabilities. There will always be a tension between resources and objectives. This review has an almost unique capability to examine and influence the two. It is to be sincerely hoped that it will take this rare opportunity to do so.

The first objective of a foreign policy must be the defence of and promotion of the national interest. It is at least arguable that there is insufficient definition of 'the national interest' and it is to be hoped that this Review will look closely at this issue, particularly at the positive and negative aspects of it. Taking global humanitarian action can be more than simply altruistic, but can also protect against future problems that could damage the national interest.

We need more fully to understand what the limits of an acceptable national interest are. Presumably they must not be overtly partisan. This is not a simple debate and it is to be very much desired that this Review should address this question.

One simple test would be that where the 'national interest test' has been met theoretically, has that nation benefited? In the case of the US, following the Vietnam war where it undoubtedly did not,

from then on it has been increasingly difficult to make that argument in the conflicts that followed. Effective retreat from Afghanistan, similarly from Iraq, helter-skelter from Libya, stymied in Syria and Venezuela, alongside patently failed initiatives in Ukraine and Israel - these all hardly place actual benefit in pole position as a test of national interest.

We were on the edge of all this and while the opprobrium is not as great as it is for the US, nevertheless the UK could not avoid being caught in some of the muck flying in the slipstream. This suggests that in future the UK should pursue its own foreign policy except where it has a direct input into the policy it is sharing, an input which overtly has impact and one which clearly reflects the principles of our foreign policy.

By and large also it is a sound dictum only to become involved where we have a dog in the fight, or at least a dog whose interests we should protect.

We need, however, to try to identify the basic principles which should govern the formulation of a modern foreign policy, whether sole or shared.

One which is self-evident but often honoured in the breach is: not to get involved in disputes where you cannot win, or even at best draw. That is not to say necessarily that foreign policy must be governed solely by counting money or tanks. Both economically and militarily, Davids can still be found to beat Goliaths. In a world where one of the objectives must be to create a more peaceful and harmonious society, there have to be some basic rules.



**First**, regime change should be illegal unless it is endorsed by acceptable measures of international opinion. The failure to follow that principle too often ends up in the anarchic scenes witnessed in Iraq and more recently on its borders with Syria. And for some time in Libya as well, an illegal regime change led effectively to civil war where the promoters of regime change (such as Britain) hastily and somewhat ignominiously left the field while others by proxy began to battle with each other for the spoils.

**Secondly**, nation-building in someone else's country may have been a standard practice of empire; it doesn't work in independent nations or failed states. Equally, talk of freedom and democracy has little appeal when it is delivered along with bombs from a great height or at gunpoint backed by heavy military hardware. Undoubtedly in today's world it has a role to play, but we need to find a way to deliver it that does not smack of neo-colonialism or of Chinese-style vicarious empire-building. Lessons can be learned from the British Council in this regard.

**Thirdly**, we need clear objectives compatible with resources, with real give-and-take with the Treasury on the latter. Those objectives as far as possible should encompass a timeline. There is too much of a feeling at the moment that once an operation has begun, it must be funded to its finish however long that might be. This is a recipe for policy inertia. Afghanistan is a prime example of this - constantly and fairly lazily seeking new objectives to justify the retention of troop levels, as the government's stock answers to the following questions used to demonstrate:

Q: *'When will we get out?'*

A: ***'When the job is done.'***

Q: *'When will we know the job is done?'*

A: ***'When we get out.'***

Result: a stomach-creasing steady drain on resources. We need to devise ways to enforce this discipline.

**Fourthly**, when embarking on a strategic initiative we need to be sure that the strategy has been 'red teamed' to ensure that it has been considered from all angles. There may be occasions viz. the Falklands when time does not permit. These should, it is suggested, be the exceptions.

**Fifthly**, any effective modern foreign policy should take as much account of soft power as hard. These are most effective when they work together towards a common objective. In the formulation of a foreign policy, there should always be a clear indication that this has been done. Often it will be covert rather than overt and it should be shared only on a need to know basis where it is sensitive.

This list is by no means exhaustive but it seeks to indicate to the Review what, in the view of the author, might essentially be taken into account in developing policy.

Of course none of this can be written in stone. The way the world works does not allow for it. Within each policy should be an inbuilt area of flexibility which should equally be explored from time to time. Nor should we be frightened from time to time to admit that we have got it all or at least some of it wrong. In the modern world of communications, we have built a culture of infallibility which in the end gains little advantage but risks 'losing big'. It would be singularly refreshing to admit sometimes that we have got it wrong.



**Finally**, it will be clear from the foregoing that the sort of foreign policy being explored here will have little chance of success in an unregulated world. The last two decades could well be described as an 'age of the bullies' - of which there have been a number in history - none of them with happy endings. Looking back four years ago, we should not be living in an age where two bullies, the President of the United States and the leader of North Korea could have initiated a nuclear world war which could have engulfed us all - with the rest of the world shuttered in silence.

Nor should we accept a world where one power can annex a part of another country with no approval from the rest of the international community, whether that power is Russia in Crimea or Israel in the West Bank. In the face of such outrage the international community is silent because its means of rectification is curtailed by a United Nations whose ability to fulfil the widest ambitions of its founders is stymied by a mechanism designed to thwart it. It is not surprising when the rules were the epitome of 'victor's justice', designed to retain power firmly in the hands of the victors. Bad enough when the victors worked together, but once their interests diverged the power of the veto became an instrument of unaccountable tyranny.

And that is largely where we are today. We are desperately in need of a fundamental reform of the power of the UN where a single member can veto a policy initiative and where a single member of the Security Council can again single-handedly prevent the advancement of a vital security issue, or even stand effectively in the way of two bullies hell-bent on creating nuclear holocaust.

In my view this should become a central pillar of British Foreign Policy, to press for a genuine and fundamental reform of the UN, to remove the patent injustices and unfairnesses in the system. Of course, in order to make it work there must be recognition of military and economic might, but it must be in a way that does not continue the unchallengeable power that the current right of veto creates. Equally it must be accepted that in the modern world, 'one country, one vote' does not recognise the wider realities and brings the institution into disrepute.

There are too many vested interests at large for such proposals to have any chance of immediate success, but it is a worthy cause which needs pursuing. There is no reason that the UK should not pursue such reform.

As we emerge from the COVID-19 crisis, it is a good moment to seek such reforms. This is a global crisis in which there are no victors, just victims. Victor's justice no longer has an acceptable role to play. The moment for common sense may have arrived. Worth a try?

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*This article is a version of Lord Lothian's submission to the Government's Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy.*



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