



'A Post Neo-Conservative Foreign Policy'

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17th October 2006.

Time for New Partners

We might as well face it. British foreign policy is now in limbo. There it will remain until Tony Blair finally goes , until President Bush – or maybe his successor – somehow constructs a recovery strategy in America's Middle East policy and until the ‘renaissance of thinking’ about Britain's own position - which Blair himself, in a breath-taking act of self-disassociation on a Walter Mitty scale, has called for - gets under way. Whether this happens once Blair is replaced we do not know, although there have been hints from the Gordon Brown camp that he might marginally distance Britain, in some unspecified ways, from the ever-receding Bush dream of ‘A New Middle East’.

Meanwhile, while General Sir Richard Dannatt may ‘say what everyone is privately saying’ British policy remains hooked to Washington policy in a way which does nothing for healthy Anglo-American relations. Soon James Baker, the former Secretary of State and Republican chairman of Washington’s ‘Iraq Study Group’ - trusted adviser to the Bush family - will complete his travels and no doubt have quite talks with the President behind closed doors. We will have to wait outside and then be told what has been decided in the way of what Mr Baker has described as ‘the alternatives between ‘stay the course’ and ‘cut and run’.

This will be, I suspect, some kind of ingenious Dayton-model conference on Middle East security to which countries will have to be invited, such as Syria and Iran, who were frankly not on Washington’s original invitation list. Baker has reportedly been already talking to them. We’ll have to see whether any of this is possible while Mr Bush remains in the White House.

The Bridge that Would Not Stay Up.

Either way we here must be near the nadir of our influence on these affairs. It is all very different from the hey-day of Bush-Blair togetherness. The original idea, it will be recalled was for Britain to be a bridge, (or was it a pivot?) between America and Europe. But the bridge, if it ever stood up for a moment, is now a crumbling heap of concrete on the river bed.

On paper it looked good, like so many Blair designs. Britain would be a fully signed up member of the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy and at the same time *numero uno* in Washington, the unswerving friend from across the Atlantic, side by side with America in its democracy crusade. The bridge structure would wonderfully link the two.

The design was never going to work because the anchor points either side would never have supported it.

On the US side, for all the protestations that Britain was, or is, America’s trusted and equal partner, that was never the Bush team’s view. It was nice to have Britain on side and Blair was a great guy, and so on. But the Americans needed no middle man to interpret Europe to

them. They could see for themselves the virulent anti-Americanism in ‘old Europe’ and they anyway believed – wrongly, as it turns out - they could manage alone.

On the European side there was – and remains – disunity. The rhetoric is plentiful but the reality is slim. The EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy, which leading EU Ministers continue to describe daily as being essential to secure Europe’s influence on the world stage and which our own Foreign and Commonwealth Office still seems regard as their foreign policy priority (‘working through our European partners’ etc) is a feeble instrument and anyway little concerned with protecting and promoting Britain’s real interests, or enabling Britain to make its most effective contribution to global peace, stability and development .

Quite simply, while effective foreign policy needs partners and allies – more so than ever in this network age – our main European neighbours are the wrong partners and the CFSP ties us into the wrong partnership. If the capsized EU Constitution is dragged up and re-floated, as is clearly planned, the CFSP will be right there intact on the foredeck. Britain should stay as clear as it can.

The most obvious reason for this is that on most of the key international issues no coherent common EU position exists. With twenty five marvellously diverse nations, and twenty five different perspectives on the world, anything pushed through the CFSP filter is bound to be muffled, fuzzy and a fertile source of misunderstanding. This is so whether the issue is Iraq or Iran or Israel-Palestine or Lebanon, or Russia and how to handle Mr Putin, or China and weapons, or Turkey and enlargement, or the UN, or above all, how to talk to the Americans.

Trans-Atlantic relations have now fallen to their lowest point for decades. Far from the EU calming and clarifying trans-Atlantic disputes by speaking with one clear voice, it seems to be amplifying them so that what were once containable second class differences are being elevated into damaging first class rows. Despite Peter Mandelson’s protestations, and no doubt sincere efforts, the Doha round was sunk by the very existence of what the Financial Times described as ‘thirteen or fourteen EU Member States, periodically orchestrated by France’. None of this was, or is, at all in Britain’s interest.

America Needs Friends, but not Lackeys.

But there is a deeper reason for looking for something better than CFSP as a foreign policy vehicle.

For all its armed might America desperately needs real and trusted friends, not just to fulfil its awesome world responsibilities but to deliver security to its own citizens. Even the go-it-alone warriors in Washington are now coming to recognise this.

Less easy to swallow in Washington nowadays is the fact that true friendship and support mean more than tick-the-box compliance. True friendship means frankness, candour, criticism when appropriate (as long as it is basically constructive and not just born of ill will), compete mutual trust and respect and, even if occasionally, a restraining hand.

The EU does not get to Square One in any of these roles. The rhetoric of EU-US partnership may continue, but even if Javier Solana, the struggling would be EU ‘foreign minister’, could articulate a common European policy towards the Americans, which he cannot, why should he get more than a cold nod from the Administration? Why should Washington give a respectful hearing to an entity which it sees – not without justification – as basically anti-American , sounding less and less like a friend and partner and increasingly like a constantly

hostile bloc – a transatlantic neighbour from hell, picking a quarrel on every issue, large or small.

Sixty years ago Britain fulfilled the steadyng partner and friend role – at least up to a point. Then there was Kennedy's twin pillars idea in the Cold war context, although it was never phrase that could stand too much analysis. NATO, too, was going to be the binding link of equals.

But now all that is history and the question to be answered is where we look for the platform on which to gather a partnership or grouping which the American giant really will listen to and work with, and from which the world , and especially Britain, would so obviously benefit.

The starting point is to identify the countries which really are America's best friends, who are not all contorted with anti-American resentments, and who would be comfortable with a solid-two-way strategic relationship with the great superpower, not in a poodle capacity but at an equal and full-trust level.

A structure is to hand which could at least form at least the underpinning for such a platform. This structure, or network, is the 54 nation Commonwealth, which far from being a marginal institution, full of good works and nostalgia, is now emerging as the ideal model for international relations in the new conditions the world faces.

Today's Commonwealth now contains thirteen of the world's fastest growing economies, including the most potent emerging markets. Outside the USA and Japan, the key cutting edge countries in information technology and e-commerce are all Commonwealth members. The new 'jewel in the Commonwealth Crown' turns out to be the old jewel, dramatically repolished and re-set, namely booming India, the world's largest democracy with a population set to exceed China's .

This presents a picture so far removed from the old image of the Commonwealth, bogged down in demands for more aid and arguments about South Africa (or latterly Zimbabwe) that many sleepy policy makers find it simply too difficult to absorb. The unloved ugly duckling organisation has grown almost overnight into a true swan. Or to use a different metaphor the Commonwealth of today and tomorrow has been described as 'The Neglected Colossus'. It should be neglected no longer.

A Wider Commonwealth Role than Trade

The new story should not just be about bread and butter matters and new economic opportunities staring us in the face. The Commonwealth needs to be re-assessed in terms of its real weight in securing world stability, in balancing the dialogue with the U.S. giant, in linking rising Asia and the West, in helping to handle the prickliest of issues such as in the Middle East, in Iran and Central Asia and in the Eastern Pacific, in promoting better development links, in combining global energy security with climate security, in bringing small and larger nations, poorer and richer, together on mutually respectful and truly friendly terms and in bridging the faith divides which others seek to exploit and widen.

In all these areas the Commonwealth, reformed, reinforced, built upon and enlarged, offers, as the Indian Industry Minister Mr Kamal Nath, wisely perceives, 'the ideal platform'.

By accident as much as design the Commonwealth emerges from a controversial past to take a perfect place in this new order of thinking and acting. The fact that the Commonwealth now

has no dominant member state, or even a coterie of such states, far from being a weakness is now a strength.

Because the Commonwealth is founded on respect for nation states, each following its own path, yet recognising the imperative of inter-dependence, constant adjustment can take pace to new challenges, with partnerships and coalitions being swiftly tailored to each new scene.

This answers three dilemmas which Britain faces.

The **first** is that people want more than ever in an age of remote globalisation, to develop their own identities, to have countries and localities to love and defend and take pride in. They recognise the fact of interdependence but they long equally for ownership and a degree of independence. Superior ideas of supra-national government and super-states, along with sweeping dismissals of the relevance of the nation state, can play no part in resolving these deep and competing needs, and indeed utterly fail to do so when imposed by well-intentioned integrationists, as in the case of the EU.

Second, rigid bloc alliances cannot keep up with the kaleidoscope of change. This is what Tony Blair and his close colleagues have painfully discovered. The more that the European Union tries to draw its members into a rigid and unified political and military bloc the less effective it becomes. The more that the world is seen as clinging to a structure of blocs established in rivalry to each other the more the real criss-cross network of bilateral linkages between nations is neglected. Yet it is just this new and more flexible pattern which provides far the best guarantee of stability and security.

Third, the new texture of international relations is made up not just of inter-governmental and official contacts but of a mosaic of non-governmental and sub-official agencies and organisations. This takes time to grow, but grow it has under the Commonwealth canopy into an amazing on organizations and alliances between the professions, the academic and scholastic worlds, the medical, educational, scientific and legal communities and a host of other interest groups linked together across the 54 nation Commonwealth Group.

Filling a Dangerous Vacuum

The decline of America's 'soft power', reputation and influence almost across the entire globe, dragging Britain down some of the way with it, is a tragedy. The dwindling of Pax American leaves a dangerous vacuum. Into this vacuum, cautiously, subtly, but steadily are moving not the Europeans ,with their slow growth and their inward-looking mentality, but the Chinese – with cash, with investment projects, with trade deals, secured access to oil and gas supplies in an energy hungry world, with military and policing support and with technology. A replay in reverse of the fourteenth century is unfolding, when China retreated in on itself and Europe reached outwards to every corner of the planet. Now it is exactly the other way round.

The Chinese have been quick learners about the use of soft power in this new world and about applying the strategy laid down over two thousand years ago by Sun-Tzu of 'winning without war'. If only the neo-con intellectuals had read that!

The vacuum is one which ought to be filled not by the Chinese dictatorship but by the free democracies of the Commonwealth and its like-minded associates, from both North and South, banded together by a commitment to freedom under the rule of law and ready to make

real and common sacrifices in the interests of a peaceful and stable world and the spread of democratic governance in many different forms.

The Commonwealth possesses the vital attributes for dealing with this new world which the old 20th century institutions so conspicuously lack.

It stretches across the faiths, with half a billion Muslim members; it stretches across all the Continents, thus by its very existence nullifying the dark analysis of a coming clash of civilisations.

Better still if a more confident Commonwealth now reaches out and makes friendly associations with other like-minded nations, both in Europe and Asia. Japan, with some twelve percent of the entire world's GNP, and with its confidence and dynamism now restored, is ready to make links with the Commonwealth, especially with India and Britain together. The thread which binds the interests of these three nations together – Japan, India and the UK – is potentially a strong one, presenting us with untold new opportunities. We make a huge mistake in not building more strongly on our links with Japan, especially when it is dealing with its tricky and giant neighbour – a task which the new Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (incidentally very pro-British) is addressing with great skill and firmness

Australia and New Zealand also belong to this club, with booming India soon qualifying as it develops steadily improving ties with the Americans. In Europe the front-runners are Poland, the brilliant little Baltic three, the Czechs and maybe the Italians, if they keep their own house in order.

Admittedly this would be a geographically scattered grouping, not the sort of regional alliance our history books used to talk about. But in the age of the internet who cares? As partners they are only one click away from each other. Sit down this big and powerful grouping round the table with America's leaders and one would immediately have a partnership of real equality, frankness and mutual respect, with enough influence and clout as well to restrain America's wobblier impulses.

This would be a league or network of willing nations, races and cultures, able to establish an effective framework for world stability in ways which the soured and discredited EU-US 'partnership' is no longer capable of doing.

Britain's new foreign policy priority should be to build up this new kind of alliance, instead of dreaming about pivots, bridges with Europe and the like. The British remain good Europeans, as they have been all along, having saved Europe from itself more than once. But when it comes to twenty first century strategic linkages and alliances, the time has come to think afresh.

Salvaging the CFSP and topping it with a single foreign minister and diplomatic corps will neither restore a healthy Atlantic relationship nor safeguard Britain's wider interests. We need to build on our connections with rising Asia and we need to construct a partnership with the US that really works.

To play a part in this the Commonwealth Secretariat should be encouraged to develop its external wing in a much more powerful way than hitherto and perhaps have a nominated high official to work with the Secretary General and act as the Commonwealth's High Representative. That will of course been bigger budgetary contributions from the member states. But make such an emboldened Commonwealth the central platform of the

international future and there will then be an enlightened and responsible grouping on the planet, ready to be America's candid friend, but not its lapdog - a serious and respected force, both in economic and trading terms and in terms of upholding security and peace-keeping.

Energy Security and Climate Security Issues

An enhanced Commonwealth should also spread its wings on energy and climate issues. At present there is no global forum in which a variety of free nations, rich and poor, but all faced with the same problems of staggeringly high oil prices, energy security challenges and with the longer term need to curb carbon emissions and create a greener and cleaner long term environment, can meet together, exchange views and technologies, and develop some common clout in face of OPEC and the other giant producers.

The present energy and climate dialogue between the richer world and the developing nations is not at all healthy or constructive. The biggest developing countries, such as India and China, have remained predictably cool towards the idea they should now slow down their growth and use more expensive energy to compensate for all the carbon the already industrialised world has already dumped in the atmosphere.

India, China and America have half the world's coal reserves and they intend to burn them. Yet As the Indian Environment Minister was saying the other day 'We are developing countries. We cannot give any promise, any commitment to reduce further our carbon emissions'

The Commonwealth might be the forum – and no other exists – where these difficult divergences might begin to be reconciled.

A Key UK Priority.

It is the strengthening of this expanded Commonwealth network which the UK should now make its key foreign policy priority and together with which it should re-build its own foreign policy priorities. It should do so because this route offers far the best way both for a nation such as ours, with our history and our experience and skills, to make a maximum contribution to meeting the world's many ills and , even more, because it is the best way to promote and protect our own interests world-wide.

In particular the UK should consider transferring the administration of that part of its overseas development effort which at present goes through the EU from that unhappy channel to the Commonwealth system, and encourage both other Commonwealth members to do likewise and the Secretariat to develop the full capacity to handle this role. This single move would give the Commonwealth huge new prestige and resources, direct our aid efforts far more effectively to poorer Commonwealth member states, who are our closest friends and to whom we owe the strongest duty and greatly strengthen the UK's own prestige and effectiveness in the global development process.

And when the Prime Minister calls for children here to be taught a 'greater sense of British identity', it should really be 'British and Commonwealth identity'. That alone conveys the broader and outward-looking sense of interdependence and duty which is the true message with which young British children should carry in today's world.

Mr Blair is quite wrong to describe the British as 'reluctant global citizens' as he did in Manchester. We are outward looking by instinct and history. And his would-be successor

Gordon Brown is comically wrong in his narrow emphasis on ‘Britishness’. The whole secret of British influence in the world, which has been out of all proportion to our small size, has been to rise above nationalistic posturings and think, and teach our children to think, about a wider canvas.

Of course we must always be the best possible local members of our European neighbourhood – as, incidentally we nearly always have been, although some people forget this. I hope that the recently instigated Tory Movement for European Reform will mobilize all the huge stock we have of ideas for developing a more modern and flexible structure of European cooperation and for being good contributors to local and regional needs.

But Europe is no longer the world’s most prosperous region. It is our duty to build up our links, many of which were so strong in the distant past, with what are becoming the world’s most dynamic areas, to which both economic and political power are now flowing – and not just the bigger ones but the smaller nations as well , the struggling poor ones as well as the rapidly industrialising and increasingly high-tech ones .This is what an enlarged Commonwealth can do for us in a way that the European Union can never do and for which it lacks the reach and the right basic policy structure.

It as certainly not entered the minds of the Bush Administration that the USA is no longer the centre of the world, however many carrier fleets and missiles it may possess, and no longer the automatic ‘leader’ of the democracies - at the head of which it is so fond of setting itself. And I am not convinced it has entered the heads of policy-makers in London either.

Yet the member states of an organisation like the Shanghai Cooperation Group could now be as influential in resolving super-sensitive issues like Iran, nuclear proliferation or North Korean behaviour as the Atlantic powers. Everyone keeps repeating that power has shifted to Asia, as it has, but the policy-makers seem unable to follow through the implications.

Well it is time we woke up to what is happening and subjected Britain’s external relations priorities to a major re-alignment. And that is why a symbolic re-christen should now take place. The home of our able and experienced diplomats should be re-labelled the Commonwealth and Foreign Office – the CFO not the FCO. Small changes can signify a lot.

End

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