Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Secretary speech: "Britain is back East of Suez"

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It is a great honour to be speaking here at this Manama dialogue in this 200th anniversary year of the friendship between Britain and Bahrain.

I have just come from an audience with His Majesty King Hamad during which we hailed the strength of a friendship that has been unbroken, and that was inaugurated in 1816 by one Captain William Bruce, who rejoiced in the title of British Resident in the Gulf.

In between chasing slavers and harrying pirates he discovered that the milk from the local cows was a cure for smallpox.

As he said: “Of the truth of it I have not the smallest doubt. I have asked some 40 or 50 persons” which strikes me as a pretty solid piece of medical research.

Perhaps lured by this magic milk the British came in growing numbers to the region until 1861 when the UK and Bahrain signed a “treaty of perpetual peace and friendship” and through two world wars assisted by all sorts of formalities of friendship and fealty the relationship progressed until 1968 and then something went wrong. Not here. Not in the Gulf. But in London.

And so, Ladies and Gentlemen, I want us tonight to drag our eyes back from this splendid dinner to a less opulent scene – to Britain in January 1968, a nation in the grip of a freezing winter with debts so bad that we were dependent – as Harold Wilson put it – on the mercy of the gnomes of Zurich (apologies to any gnomes for his political incorrectness).

A Britain where the snow was so deep that kids couldn’t get to school; the Beatles were on the verge of breaking up and the national self-confidence had sunk like mercury in the thermometer and I want to take you into that Cabinet room where two powerful figures were battling over the direction – the whole orientation – of the country.

On the one side there was Roy Jenkins, the urbane Chancellor of the Exchequer, with his frog-like beam who yearned to take Britain into what was then called the European Common Market, even though the UK had already been rejected twice by “nos amis” and in the other corner there was the colourful and brilliant Foreign Secretary George Brown, the man who gave the euphemism “tired and emotional” to the English language.

A man who once went up to a lovely scarlet clad creature at an embassy soiree in Peru and asked for the honour of dancing a waltz and was rebuffed on three grounds. The first was that he was drunk, the second was that this was not a waltz but the Peruvian national anthem and the third was that his interlocutor was the Cardinal Archbishop of Lima.

Those were the two adversaries, Roy Jenkins and George Brown, and the argument went on in the Cabinet for 7 consecutive meetings, breaking sometimes for only a brief meal, lasting a total of 36 hours.

And what was that argument about? It was about Britain's role in the Gulf, and everywhere East of Suez; and whether the country, my country, could any longer afford it. Roy Jenkins said that British overseas expenditure was already £381 million a year (less than we give today in overseas aid to some countries these days) and he said this spending had to be cut back.

George Brown came back strongly. Yes, Europe was important, he accepted, but so was the rest of the world. And he made the key point that military and political partnerships went hand in hand with trade, and economic growth. On and on went the debate in tones that contemporaries described as "icy", "bad-tempered", "furious" until I am afraid Harold Wilson, the Prime Minister, summed up in favour of the defeatists and the retreatists.

George Brown lost; the flag came down; the troops came home, from Borneo, from the Indian Ocean, from Singapore, and yes from the Gulf and we in the UK lost our focus on this part of the world.

And so tonight I want to acknowledge that this policy of disengagement East of Suez was a mistake and in so far as we are now capable, and we are capable of a lot, we want to reverse that policy at least in this sense: that we recognise the strong historical attachment between Britain and the Gulf, and more importantly, we underscore the growing relevance and importance of that relationship in today's uncertain and volatile world.

We are here at the Manama dialogue – and I am following a stellar series of emissaries including the Prince of Wales and the Prime Minister to make a strategic point that was symbolised by the GCC inviting our Prime Minister, Theresa May to be guest of honour at their summit. That any crisis in the Gulf is a crisis for Britain – from day one; that your security is our security and that we recognise the wisdom of those who campaigned for a policy of engagement east of Suez - that your interests military, economic, political – are intertwined with our own.

Of course I don't believe we can run the Union Jack Flag back up on every outpost around the world even if anyone else wanted us to do so - and they don't - but we are reopening HMS Jufair, a naval support facility here in Bahrain, which His Majesty the King said he remembered from his childhood before our disengagement.

We are renewing military ties with old friends: Britain's Gulf Defence Staff is being located in Dubai. The Al-Minhad air base in the UAE provides a hub for the RAF. In Oman, the British Army is establishing a Regional Land Training centre – one of only four in the world – and creating a permanent present in the Sultanate.

We cooperate intensively with our friends in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere on counter-terrorism, in sharing military technology, in what is still a highly dangerous geopolitical landscape where the spores of terrorism can be incubated and are incubated not just in the Middle East, but in our own country as well.

And it is absolutely right that we should so share and cooperate because our interests and our problems are shared.

That is why Britain has in total 1,500 military personnel in the region and 7 warships, more than any other Western nation apart from the US. We are spending £3 billion on our military commitments in the Gulf over the next 10 years and that is deepening a partnership that is stronger than with any other group of nations in the world outside NATO.

Together with our allies in the Gulf, we are fighting together to defeat Daesh in Iraq and Syria, and we are winning. The RAF is the second biggest contributors to the airborne strike missions after the Americans. And together we have helped dramatically to reduce the footprint of that terrorist organisation.

We are steadily exposing the absurdity of their pretensions to be a caliphate. And of course we all know the immensity of the challenges we face in this region. Helping – when stability is finally restored – Iraq to rebuild and unify that country. And we all know, as the Prime Minister said only a few days ago, that we must be clear-eyed and vigilant about the role of Iran.

And yes, I believe that it was worth spending 12 years to negotiate the JCPOA, the nuclear agreement with Iran. I think it was a genuine achievement of diplomacy that has helped to make the world a safer place. And I think we must build on this foundation and try to develop a better relationship with Tehran. But that can only happen if Iran plays by the same rules, and exercises its influence by diplomacy and by dialogue.

And so when you look at what is happening in Yemen – where the hand of Iran is clearly visible – I of course understand Saudi concerns about security and the paramount importance of Saudi Arabia securing itself from bombardment by the Houthis.

But I must also share my profound concern – which I'm sure is universal in this room – about the present suffering of the people of Yemen and I think we can all agree on this key point: that force alone will not bring about a stable Yemen. And that is why we in London have been working so hard with all our partners to drive that political process forwards and the same

point – about the need above all for a political solution – can be made about every other conflict and struggle in this region.

Yes, it may very well be true that after months of barbaric bombing Bashar al-Asad and his Russian and Iranian sponsors are on the point of capturing the last of rebel-held Aleppo – perhaps within a matter of days, we can't know. But if and when that happens it will assuredly be a victory that turns to ashes, it is but a Pyrrhic victory.

Remember that two thirds of Syria is currently outside Asad's control, and that he is still besieging 30 other areas containing 571,000 tormented inhabitants. Surely to goodness, there can be no lasting peace in Syria, if that peace is simply re-imposed by a man who has engendered such hatred among millions of his own people.

And that's why there must be a political solution in which the people of Syria take the lead. Of course we can all work together to try and bring about peace and stability.

But ultimately it must be up to the people of those countries to find the leadership and the solutions from within themselves - to reach out across communities and to build unity with their own new and uplifting national narratives and the best way we can all help, all of us, the whole region is to answer the social and economic challenge to meet the demands of this amazingly young and growing population and what they need is the prospect of an exciting economic future. They need jobs. And it's here I think there is so much that we can do together.

And I think now is the time for us to recognise the wisdom of those "East of Suez" cabinet members around the table in 1968– to build partnerships and relationships that deliver for all of our constituents whether in the UK or in the Gulf. And now is the time for us in the UK to seize the opportunities of leaving the EU.

And let me stress as I have told so many representatives from the Gulf who have been to see me that though we may be extricating ourselves from the treaties of the European Union we are not leaving Europe. That would be geographically, culturally, physically, intellectually, aesthetically, morally impossible to do. You couldn't take Britain away from the European continent unless you towed us out into the middle of the Atlantic and tried to shell us, it's not going to happen.

We are going to be part of Europe we will be part of Europe's security architecture, we will be there to work for European peace and stability. And by the way, we will still be able to stick up for our friends and partners in the Gulf. But now for the first time since the 1970s we will additionally be able to do new free trade deals and we will be able to build on the extraordinary commercial relationships that already exist between the UK and the Gulf.

You may remember that I used to be Mayor of London. Look at the impact of the Gulf on London. The Shard – which I opened myself, at least twice. The only building in the world that looks as though it is actually erupting through the skin of the planet like the tip of a super-colossal cocktail stick erupting through a gigantic pickled onion. Owned by the Qataris as they own the Olympic village, Harrods, Chelsea Barracks.

The UAE owns the Excel exhibition centre and the Tidal Array, so much of our energy comes from that vital green investment in the Thames estuary. It is thanks to the Gulf that we have such vital pieces of transport infrastructure as the DP World Port. And of course the Emirates cable car, an indispensable mode of transport, thank you very much for that. And do I hear a small murmur of assent there from the audience? It is a little known fact that Kuwait owns City Hall itself. I didn't know it until today but I'm stunned to find out.

I don't know whether our Kuwaiti friends want to claim credit for all City Hall's policies – including the popular cycle superhighways which we are now extending but when you consider that we have 20,000 Gulf students in London and they are very welcome may I say, as are their fees when you think the academic exchanges, the cultural exchanges you can see why London is sometimes called the eighth Emirate. I think I may have made that up myself, but we're proud of it. And of course we get the ball back over the net in our own modest British way - Brits pay 1.7 million visits to the Gulf every year.

We export colossal and ever growing numbers of Jaguar cars and Land Rovers. Marks and Spencer is here in force. I was told just now we have done a big deal to sell Rolls Royce engines to Gulf Air. And it really is true that for the purposes of some golf bunkers we have managed to export sand to Saudi Arabia. It's true. And all that adds up to an export market for the UK in the Gulf region worth £20 billion per year, we sell more to the Gulf than any other non-EU export market, second only to the United States.

Almost 50 years since that famous disagreement in the British cabinet, which went the wrong way, I hope that we can conclude this evening that the conversation has ended in a triumphant vindication of George Brown, at least in this sense that Britain is back East of Suez not as the greatest military power on earth, though we certainly pay our share and we certainly have a fantastic capability.

Not as the sole guarantor of peace, although we certainly have a huge role to play. But as a nation that is active in and deeply committed to the region. And I want to stress that this is not just about politics, not just about trade, not just about strategic support. This is about building on and intensifying old friendships. Britain has been part of your story for the last two hundred years, and we will be with you for the centuries to come.

Thank you very much.

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