Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

The future of British foreign policy

2014-04-15

The Foreign Secretary William Hague’s address to the Lord Mayor’s Easter Banquet:

My lord Mayor, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is an honour to address you tonight.

It is an exceptionally turbulent time in world affairs, and I believe it will be so for some time to come.

But it is also a time of immense opportunity.

Crises always capture the headlines, but there is another side to the story.

For four years in our government we have had a steady purpose in foreign policy:

To build up Britain’s ties beyond Europe and our historic alliances;

To connect our country up to the world’s fastest-growing economies;

And to maintain Britain’s global role, for that is how we best protect our national interest.

I am proud of what we have accomplished so far:

Neglected alliances revived;

Our relationships in Latin America, the Gulf, Asia and Africa transformed;

Exports of goods and services up £50 billion since 2010;

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office stronger than it has been in decades;

And 14 new British Embassies, High Commissions, or Consulates opened around the world.

We are the only major European government that is expanding its diplomatic network in this way.

That is how we build the trust that enables us to work on vast global issues from climate change to free trade.

It is how we link our young people and businesses with opportunity across the world.

And it is how we forge the agreements we need at the United Nations and other international institutions.

So we have a long-term vision for the future of British foreign policy.

As a result, I believe Britain is now in a stronger position to make the most of all that this century has to offer, and that we can offer more to the world ourselves.

At the end of the 20th century some people thought that the end of Empire meant Britain would be in a state of permanent retreat internationally.

But in the 21st century we are the country that is at the top of the world's league tables of soft power, that has hosted a magnificent Olympics and Paralympics, that has met the UN target for development aid – and not many nations have - and whose economy this year is set to achieve the fastest growth of any nation in the developed world.

Our rapidly falling unemployment, the surge in inward investment and our reformed tax rates all present an immense opportunity to our partners in the world as well as to British people.

I am grateful to the British companies and institutions who are indispensable to this success overseas, to the Diplomatic Corps here in London and to all our partners, including in the European Union.

The reforms we advocate for the European Union will help the whole of Europe become more competitive, more flexible and more democratically accountable.

We have already in the last four years cut the EU's budget for the first time, ended our liability for Eurozone bail outs, achieved the biggest reform ever to the Common Fisheries Policy, secured political agreement to free trade deals with Singapore and Canada and we are reaping the benefits of the trade deal with South Korea, we've opened talks on free trade with the US and Japan and investment talks with China, established a unified European patent, cut red tape for the smallest businesses, and secured vital protection for non-Eurozone countries in Banking Union – part of how we protect the UK and the competitiveness of our financial services in this great City.

But the EU's institutions are not immune from 21st century expectations of responsiveness, accountability and democracy.

Institutions that prove to be impervious to change will prove to be without the means of their own preservation.

Therefore the British Conservative Party will have no hesitation at all, when we have tested the ability to reform and improve the EU, in submitting the result to a national referendum and the verdict of the people of this country.

As the United Kingdom we have every reason to face the world with confidence.

But to do this we have to overcome some of our own demons and doubts.

It has been a difficult decade for Western democracies:

We have endured a global financial crisis so intense it shrank world trade by a tenth in a single year, and caused the entire world economy to contract.

In Britain we experienced our deepest recession since the Second World War, three times as deep as that of the 1990s.

On top of this, we have lived through a demanding decade in foreign policy.

Tens of thousands of our Armed Forces served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

627 of these courageous men and women gave their lives in these conflicts. They and their families have our unending gratitude.

It is not surprising that some people feel we have done too much, and that our country was over-extended.

Some voices call for Britain to look inwards and turn away from its global role.

When the government proposed that we should be ready to take limited military action to deter the further use of chemical weapons in Syria, we faced a great deal of opposition.

But this has not in any way discouraged us from believing that Britain has international responsibilities.

The aptitude for self-criticism is one of our greatest strengths, and it allows us to rebound as a nation.

We are not like autocracies, prone to collapse under the weight of their contradictions or to become ever more oppressive.

We should always learn the lessons of history. That is why in Opposition I and others demanded and secured the Iraq Inquiry.

But our capacity for self-criticism must not become corrosive of our own values and our ability to defend them.

We are approaching the time, while learning every lesson, when we must reassert our sense of confidence.

Our economy is turning a corner. We are stronger at home, we have a clear purpose abroad, and we have the network and skills our country needs to prosper.

It is time to draw on our talents as the United Kingdom with new confidence about our place in the 21st century.

The British people are surely among the most tolerant, generous and daring people of all nations on earth.

Everything we have achieved we have won through bold engagement with the world over centuries.

Our NGOs blazed the trail on human rights, development and peace-building.

The campaign to abolish the slave trade took root here, as did the demand for an Arms Trade Treaty.

Our legal system is admired across the world, and companies on every continent choose to protect their interests and resolve their disputes under British law.

We have many of the world's best universities, and our media, musicians, artists and authors take British culture to billions of people around the world each year.

Our history is often one of hard power. But in the coming years we will do even more to unleash these rivers of soft power across the world, so that we cultivate influence that flows rather than power that jars.

On top of this, we are one of the few nations with the diplomatic network, the capabilities and the willingness to bring the world together to tackle vast problems, as we have done over the last two years on Somalia.

We use our huge experience in ending and preventing conflict to help other countries, as we have done recently in the Philippines.

Working with others we have been able to make progress in the nuclear negotiations with Iran that was unthinkable even a year ago.

And I am proud that Britain that is leading the campaign to end sexual violence in warzones, now with the support of 144 countries.

I have invited representatives of all those countries to London in June for a summit I will co-host with the Special Envoy of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Angelina Jolie. It will bring together civil society, judiciaries, and police from around the world, and be the largest event of its kind, at which we want to shatter the culture of impunity for those who use rape as a weapon of war.

Fewer than 50 countries in the world have not yet joined this campaign. If you are from one of those countries I hope you will ask your governments why they alone are standing on the sidelines, when we have it in our power to be the generation that saves millions of people from the horrors of warzone sexual violence, forever.

But this need for confidence applies not just to us in the United Kingdom, but to many other nations.

It is time to shake off a decade of doubt, while learning all its lessons, and to rediscover confidence in the power and longevity of our values.

There is an obvious and immediate challenge requiring strength and unity from not only western nations but from many others, and that is the crisis over Ukraine.

Last month Russia, a European country, annexed a part of the territory of its neighbour on trumped up pretexts and through an illegal referendum held at the end of the barrel of a gun.

By this act Russia violated the fundamental principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and the right of every democratic nation to choose its own future.

These principles have been built up over 70 years to avoid a repeat of the terrible conflicts of the 20th century that inflicted such grave suffering on Europe, particularly on Russia.

If we do not defend these principles in Ukraine, including over Crimea, they will be threatened elsewhere in Europe and around the world.

This would be immensely damaging for the long term prosperity and security of all nations - including Russia – which ultimately depend on a rules-based international system.

We have to maintain strength and unity and confidence now, or our resolve could be tested even more severely in the future.

That is why yesterday in the European Union we agreed to expand sanctions and to complete preparations for far-reaching economic, trade and financial sanctions whenever necessary in the future.

In recent days Russia has deliberately pushed Ukraine to the brink, and created a still greater risk of violent confrontation. We call on Russia to stop these actions and to condemn the lawless acts in Eastern Ukraine.

We want diplomacy to succeed, and for the Contact Group meeting later this week to produce steps to de-escalate the crisis.

We are at a crucial moment. Russia needs to choose whether it is open to diplomacy and de-escalation, and if it decides otherwise, we must be ready for a different state of relations with

Russia in the next ten years than we have enjoyed in the last twenty years.

Ukraine can be a bridge between East and West and be able to have good relations with Russia. But that does not entitle Russia to send in its armed groups, thinly disguised, to spearhead the occupation of buildings in multiple Ukrainian cities, to try permanently to destabilise the country and dictate the terms of its constitution.

My message to Moscow is that if anyone thinks they can do these things without serious long-term consequences then they are making a grave miscalculation.

Russia is already paying a serious price for its actions. And the longer it breaches the independence and sovereignty of Ukraine, the heavier the price it will pay.

First, we have already seen the flight of over $63 billion in capital out of Russia and the fall of the Russian stock market, as investors draw their own conclusions about the long-term implications for the Russian economy.

Second, President Putin's top objective in foreign policy is the creation of a Eurasian Union that would lock Russia's neighbours into its own economic and political orbit. But now all countries in the region can see the risks of reliance on a bullying neighbour that shows no respect for the sovereignty of other nations. So the Russian government is undermining its own foreign policy, including alienating the vast majority of the people of Ukraine for decades to come.

Third, Russia's actions will only strengthen the unity, relevance and common purpose of the NATO Alliance for the long term. Already we have agreed increased NATO's peacetime Baltic Air Patrols to reassure our partners. The NATO Summit, which we will be proud to host in Wales in September, will be even more strongly committed to strengthen capabilities and guarantee our common defence. And the case for increased defence spending, among NATO allies that have slipped below the threshold of 2% of their national income spent on defence, has become even stronger.

Fourth, it is now much more likely that European countries will take action to reduce their energy dependence on Russia. The UK will advocate the diversification of gas supplies to Europe, the boosting of investment in gas interconnections and terminals, and the development of indigenous energy supplies such as shale gas. We will urge the EU to take action to help Ukraine and neighbouring countries to ensure more resilient energy supplies for them. And ahead of the G7 Heads of Government meeting in June, which will exclude Russia, Energy Ministers will meet to discuss ways to strengthen our collective energy security.

And fifth, Russia's behaviour has laid bare the danger of the creation of concentrations of economic, political and media power that subvert democratic institutions, particularly in

South-Eastern Europe. We will increase our focus on supporting those institutions in European countries vulnerable to the pressure of creeping oligarchisation.

In all these areas the Russian government is now at risk of undermining its own influence, and steadily disconnecting Russia from the international community.

The Russian people stand to lose most of all, if their government continues on this path of the destabilisation of Ukraine.

As these events show, we are probably heading for a period of greater instability and sometimes greater dangers in world affairs.

Faced with such pressures the circle of countries bearing responsibility for upholding peace and security in the 21st century has to be widened.

Countries that now play a bigger part in the world economy, particularly those aspiring to join the United Nations Security Council, have broad enough shoulders to take on a greater share of the burden.

But nonetheless, it will remain vital that Western nations do not shrink from world affairs, and retain and reinforce their sense of purpose.

We must demonstrate renewed confidence in the strength of our values.

Democracy – even if it takes many different forms according to different cultures – will surely prove to be the foundation of the greatest human prosperity and stability over the long term. So let us be clear, democracy is not just an alternative to autocracy, secrecy and repression, it is infinitely preferable and superior to it.

Accountability, human rights and the rule of law, transparency, tolerance, free trade, and open societies –they are the themes that will prove to be the most in tune with the trends of the 21st century, and the best basis for the fulfilment of human ambitions and dreams.

So we have to advocate our values confidently and to make sure they emerge stronger from any challenge.

This means we have to maintain our patient long term support for countries in the Middle East and North Africa that have experienced political upheaval.

We have to do more to try to save lives in Syria and overcome the lack of international political will and unity. Just five countries, including the United Kingdom, account for more than 70% of all the aid that has been pledged through the UN for Syria this year. Britain has given over a billion dollars in aid so far. Other countries have to do more, because this crisis will get worse and the dangers to the region are growing every day. It is wrong for Lebanon,

Jordan, Turkey and Iraq to bear the burden without sufficient help and it is our duty to support them.

And we have to show resolve and imagination as never before to win the greatest prize of all of the 21st century, the full social, political and economic empowerment of all women everywhere.

In all these areas and more it is time for all nations that share these values to reject the psychology of decline, to have confidence in our democracy, to show collective leadership based on those values, to use our soft power to the full to persuade other countries to work with us in new ways, and to inspire the world with our efforts to improve the condition of humanity.

This will be our approach in the years to come, as the United Kingdom: expanding our diplomatic network, seeking new friends while nourishing old alliances, not surrendering to events, but retaining our belief in our ability with our allies and friends to shape the world and a more prosperous and secure future.

Further information

Follow the Foreign Secretary on twitter

@WilliamJHague

Follow the Foreign Office on twitter

@foreignoffice

Follow the Foreign Office on

facebook

and

Google+

Media enquiries

For journalists

Email

newsdesk@fco.gov.uk

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-future-of-british-foreign-policy--2