Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

The Future of the West: The UK's Evolving Role in the World

2013-11-20

Dr Hamre thank you so much, that's a very scary introduction. The bad news is that I'm going to talk for a little bit, and then I'm looking forward to listening to people's questions and comments–which may or may not be related to what I have to say. But the discussion afterwards is always the most fun part of it.

It's a great privilege to be here, and I'd not set foot inside this smart new CSIS building before now, so that's also a first for me and I'm thrilled to be here. Thank you all for coming at this rather early time of the day.

I'm going to speak for a few minutes about the UK place in the world and what we think we're doing; our perspective on some of the current issues, scampering a number of different subjects. Then we'll stop as soon as I can and we'll get into the fun part of it.

But today is rather a good choice of date for this discussion. At least from my perspective, the first is the point that John Hamre was making, in terms of diplomacy, today is important in that we are having another go to see if we can reach agreement on what we call a first step understanding between the P5+1 and the Iranian in Geneva. We think that's a very important opportunity, we the Brits and the rest of the P5+1 think this is the moment to try to reach that interim agreement and see if we can build on that and building something comprehensive if the Iranian side is serious about it. But I'll say something about that in a moment.

And the second reason, which a rather sadder one, which is why it's a rather important moment for me at least to say something about the United Kingdom and its diplomacy and our role in the world and its relationships, because today happens to be the 10th anniversary of the worst terrorist attack that British diplomats have ever sustained–and nothing compared I'm sorry to say to some of the terrible attacks that some of the Americans have sustained–in Istanbul ten years ago today. The Consulate General, when I was ambassador in Turkey, was attacked by a pick-up truck with two and a half tonnes of explosives, which killed ten of my staff and two of the policemen who were guarding our premises.

My foreign secretary and our permanent secretary of our Foreign Commonwealth Office are in Istanbul today commemorating that loss of life and that terrible event. Which is a reminder,

I think, of the risks diplomats, journalists, academics, and many other people face these days as they try to make a difference in some of the more dangerous parts of the world.

The United Kingdom, to state the obvious, has always been perhaps a trading nation and driven by geography to engage with the rest of the world beyond our natural borders. And over the centuries, we have developed networks of global interests and relationships, taking advantage also of the fact that we were the country in with the agrarian and industrial revolutions took place. We we feel we've got history as well as geography in our favor in establishing where we come from and to some extent where we are today.

We've got less than 1% of the world's population, but we've got the 6th biggest economy. And we've got trading links around the world. We're fortunate enough to have top table membership of all the major international bodies–Security Council, the European Union, World Bank, G8 (whose presidency we hold this year), and of course NATO. And we are proud to be acting as hosts for the NATO summit next year in Wales.

Our military is able to meet threats in the world wherever they arise, even very far away from home, on land, on sea, in the air and in cyberspace. We even like to think that our foreign service remains among the best in the world–of course I'm entirely objective in making that comment. But, we are the employer of choice of university graduates in the United Kingdom, beating the oil companies, investment banks, even the BBC. Which means we are still able to attract the best recruits. We can't always keep them, but some of us who can't be employed doing anything else stay to the end and the others at least have the experience of working for what we think is one of the finest diplomatic services, at least for a while.

And we are bucking the general trend which is that we are growing our diplomatic network. We are opening or we are reopening 20 embassies and consulates despite the fact that we've got a flat cash settlement from our Treasury in terms of resources. And we're trying to direct that towards emerging regions and continents–Latin America and Asia in particular. We've not got an embassy I think for the first time in many, many years in every ASEAN country and pretty well in every Latin American country.

And of course we have an unparalleled partnership with the world's most important and powerful democracy. It's often said but I think it bears repeating that whatever the United Kingdom sets out to achieve in the world, we have no more important partner in those endeavors than the United States.

In the 20th century that partnership played a very important role in facing down fascism and in subsequently winning the Cold War. And we think it's been instrumental in confronting and disrupting global terrorism since then. Even as we continue to strengthen our links in Asia and Latin America and Africa, our Special Relationship with the United States and the values

and the mutual respect on which its built remain vital in our ability to shape the world we live in.

And we see this in some of the ways we're squaring up to some of the challenges we're all facing today. Some like the Syrian civil war, the Iranian nuclear program, are pressing and urgent. Others like climate change are slower burning but their effects are no less devastating. And to meet them we need to wisdom to identify and tackle the root causes of these problems, the courage to take difficult decisions, and the strength of purpose to commit for the long term.

Iran

In Iran, just to look at some of the current issues, the P5+1 have steadily increased the sanctions pressure, while offering to enter into genuine negotiations, which is why we end up where we are today with the opportunity in Geneva today to make a real difference. It's a strategy, the effect of those sanctions, and perhaps now a determination on the Iranian side to recalibrate its own relationship with the rest of the world which has brought us back the negotiating table for serious and detailed talks. There are remaining gaps between the parties, but we think that they have narrowed considerably. And we think it bodes well for the outcome of the talks which have started today. If we get that right, we could see a preliminary deal either this week or in the coming weeks, which would give us the opportunity to build on that, to test the Iranians, to see whether they want the comprehensive settlement. Which will once and for all remove the risk of the Iranians developing a nuclear program which has a military dimension to it.

Syria

In Syria, perhaps even more pressing in terms of the humanitarian crisis which it has spawned, more than 100,000 have been killed (I don't need to remind this audience of that), there are 4.2 million people displaced internally, and two and a half million refugees in the neighboring countries.

British public opinion, like American and French public opinion, was skeptical about military action, even after the evidence of industrial scale use of chemical weapons. But the threat of that military action, in our judgement, did play an important role in creating the pressure for the plan on which we are now working to destroy Syria's chemical weapons. That plan is progressing better than most of us actually expected or even dared hope, but foreign policy–perhaps like legislation on Capitol Hill–sometimes seems a bit like sausage making. The process isn't always pretty, but what does count is the product.

And yet, despite moving ahead on the chemical weapons front, Assad continues to terrorise his people with more conventional means of destruction. And we urgently need a political

solution to end that bloodshed. And that's why Britain and America have thrown their full weight behind the move towards the second Geneva conference.

Syrian National Coalition's decision to attend those talks, in principle we think, is good news. There's no question of withdrawing our commitment to Syria's people. Quite the reverse. The United States, the United Kingdom, are the two biggest humanitarian donors. Our aid package–at 800 million dollars at the moment and counting–is the biggest we've ever made of its kind. We're feeding almost 350,000 people a month, and we've provided medical support to as many again.

We are working closely with Syria's neighbors like Lebanon and Jordan and Turkey to cope with the huge influx of refugees that they're having to shelter.

Somalia

2,000 miles south, a broad long-term approach is slowly paying off in Somalia. 10 years ago it was a failed state – much of the rest of the world had pretty much written it off. Today there are clear signs of progress. Somalia has witnessed a peaceful handover to a new president and parliament; the culmination of the most comprehensive political process this country has witnessed in a generation. AMISOM and Somalia's security forces have retaken territory from the Al-Shabaab. The economy is slowing reviving, even the diaspora is coming back.

The UK has put together two international conferences on Somalia. The first in February 2012 was instrumental in completing the political transition and providing an extra 5,000 troops for the ANISOM contingent. And by the time of the second conference in May of this year, the Somali government itself was able to draw up its plans for developing armed forces, police, justice system, and public finances. And as well as staving off hunger and disease, the UK development assistance is helping build up Somalia's economy by rehabilitating damaged infrastructure. And we think this approach is paying dividends because it pulls together the three vital strands of security, governance and growth. Because it is Somali-led, and because the international community has been and remains prepared for the long haul.

What happened in Nairobi and the Westgate attack was a horrible reminder of how much further there is to go, and what Al-Shabaab is still capable of. But such atrocities remind us of the dangers of allowing failed states to fester. We should redouble our determination to get Somalia back on its feet.

The unprecedented response to piracy in the Indian Ocean shows what's possible when the international community works together. In the first 9 months of last year, there were 99 pirate attacks. In the same period this year, there were just 17–none of them succeeded. This is the result of a united international approach. NATO, European Union, China, Russian Federation, Japan, India–all contributed to a naval effort. On land we've supported countries in the region to prosecute and punish pirates locally. And of course the effort that I was just describing, to

try to develop Somali's governance and economy, helps provide young Somali men with realistic alternatives to piracy. And we need that kind of coordinated response in other areas.

Kidnap for Ransom

For example, we can combat the recent growth in terrorist kidnapping by agreeing once and for all that we don't pay ransoms to terrorists. In the past 3 or 4 years, al-Qaeda linked organizations have extorted at least $70 million by kidnapping foreign nationals. Ransom payments fund terrorist recruitment and encourage more kidnapping and pay for outrages like the attack on the In Amenas gas plant in Algeria.

Kidnap for ransom is a major part of the terrorist business model. We can break it by refusing to pay.

This year, for the first time, the G8 countries, led by the UK and the US, made precisely that commitment.

My Prime Minister knows from bitter experience because we have lost lives in the process how difficult and emotive decisions like this can be, especially when your own nationals are among those held by the kidnappers. But he remains determined to suffocate this source of terrorist funding.

Women & Girls

Another tragedy that transcends national boundaries is the sexual violence that so often accompanies conflict and other emergencies. The statistics are sobering. In the hundred days of the Rwandan genocide, one sixth of the female population of Rwanda is estimated to have been sexually assaulted. Rates of sexual violence dramatically increase during humanitarian crises and military conflicts. Yet prosecutions are shockingly rare.

To tackle this impunity, the UK has put together a team of experts in fields like criminal investigation, forensic science and law to help local authorities gather evidence and build cases against perpetrators. The team has already deployed to the Syrian border areas and to Bosnia, Libya, Mali and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

And we are working at the political level to encourage other countries to adopt similar approaches. More than two thirds of UN member states have signed up to the Declaration of Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict which my boss William Hague launched at the UN in September in the General Assembly. Next year we will host a major forum on the issue.

This work builds on efforts led by Hillary Clinton under the American G8 presidency last year. Reports of widespread sexual violence in Syria, and of criminality in the aftermath even of Typhoon Haiyan, remind us of how urgently it is needed.

We are also committed to the wider task of empowering women and girls around the world. Depriving them of the chance to release their potential is not just morally wrong; but it holds up the economic development of whole countries. One of the most important ways of reversing this injustice is to support female leaders.

The Vital Voices project, established here in the US, Hillary Clinton, Melanne Verveer and others who are powerful advocates of the cause is one valuable programme – also supported by the British government – which makes a difference by providing training for women leaders who want to realize their potential but have been held back by problems which limit their capacity to do that in all areas: politics, business and society more generally.

Climate Change

One of the gravest international long-term challenges which I touched on just now is climate change. We think that the evidence is overwhelming. Climate change is happening. Human industrial activity is largely to blame.

Among the regions that will be hardest hit are some of the most volatile, like sub-Saharan Africa. Resource scarcity, combined with existing conflict and new extremes of weather, makes for a dangerously combustible mixture. In a networked world, it is everybody's problem.

In 2008, the UK became the first country to pass legally binding emissions reduction targets. We were instrumental in pushing the EU to set its own 2020 targets. We are keeping up the pressure for even more ambitious 2030 targets. What all of us need now is a global deal, backed by tangible commitments. President Obama's Climate Action Plan reinforces America's credibility in arguing for such a deal and is likely, we believe, to make a real difference here on the ground.

Thanks to his plan, in no small measure to the shale revolution, we can have confidence that the US will meet the carbon reduction commitments it made at Copenhagen. That is a good start. But we all are going to have to do a lot more if if we are going to avoid the worst effects of climate change.

Development

In the long run, the answers to many of our challenges are going to have to come from sustainable global development. In the UK, we are proud of the fact that we are the first major economy to meet the agreed target of spending 0.7% of our GNI on development assistance, a commitment we have maintained even as we've had to make some pretty stringent cuts in other areas of expenditure.

This is the right thing to do. We can't stand aside while three quarters of a billion people lack drinking water, and girls in Southern Sudan are more likely to die in childbirth than complete primary education.

We are in a position to help the poorest, and help them we should. That, by the way, is an assessment with which our citizens agree. Tax arrangements and an extraordinary culture of giving make America one of the most generous countries in the world. Brits are similarly charitable. Even in 2010, with our economies at a low ebb, the average British household gave $162 to overseas development causes, while its American equivalent gave $135. So both of us, making a huge contribution both domestically and internationally.

Development also helps our own economies, by opening up markets and creating opportunities for trade and investment.

It is also an important tool of national security. Ungoverned spaces breed threats like terrorism, crime, piracy, extremism, disease and uncontrolled mass migrations. We must help these countries before they become broken, which is why the UK has committed to spend a third of its foreign aid budget assisting fragile states.

Meanwhile, we have been looking hard at the effectiveness of what we do with our development assistance. We have moved funds away from under-performing programs and organizations. We have clamped down on corruption and put checks in place so that our citizens can actually see where their tax money goes when its spent on international development.

Some years ago we got rid of the requirement that food aid be spent on British produce. Because we think that the alternative approach, based on the market, means we can get more food to where its needed, more quickly and more cheaply.

Golden Thread / Beyond Aid / Partnerships

We know what the conditions are for genuinely sustainable development: peace, law and order, defensible property rights, accountable government. David Cameron has linked them together in what he calls the Golden Thread of development that will allow countries to escape from poverty and dependence.

This is not just a British idea. The High-Level Panel on post-2015 development, of which the Prime Minister was co-chair along with the Presidents of Liberia and Indonesia, has recommended global targets on open government, free political choice, the rule of law, property rights and free speech.

Putting these values into practice is a very ambitious program, but an essential one. Nowhere is our support more urgent today than in the Arab world. In the very early days of the Arab

Spring, the UK established an Arab Partnership, with $180 million of funding for projects to strengthen fundamental building blocks of democracy like media, like election observers, and legal and judicial systems.

This kind of work, and the other efforts needed to realize the promise of the Golden Thread, cannot be carried out by any one country acting alone. So we put it at the top of our agenda for the UK's Presidency of the G8 this year.

G8 members will help developing countries build their tax collection systems. The UK's own work shows what is possible: we helped Ethiopia increase its tax take sevenfold in less than a decade. Tax revenues pays for services and infrastructure, and by funding official salaries they reduce demand for bribes.

We must also face the fact that Western companies have not always behaved well in the developing world. Corruption perpetuates inequality, reduces confidence in governments, destabilizes the business environment and arrests development. The US has led the way with transparency standards for the extractive industry, requiring US-listed firms to disclose, project by project, the payments they make to foreign governments. The EU and Canada have recently committed to equivalent standards, so collectively now 83% of extractive companies are following the same code.

Governments don't have all the answers. We have always worked with the best NGOs, wherever they are based. In our case we are working with the Clinton Health Access Initiative to reduce the cost of anti-retroviral drugs in the developing world, and with the Gates Foundation to develop new technologies to make farming in poor countries more productive.

We also work with the private sector. For example, we have worked with Vodafone to bring cellphone banking to Kenya, a system which now has 17 million users and handles transactions representing nearly a third of Kenya's GDP.

Conclusion

The global distribution of power there is changing and evolving in a lot unpredictable directions. We are moving rapidly, as William Hague puts it, to a G20-plus world, where power and wealth are not concentrated in the hands of the same old few but dispersed around the globe.

We must be willing to form new partnerships on specific issues, accepting that we will not agree with these partners on everything. We works with China to help vulnerable countries like Bangladesh and Nepal prepare for natural disasters. That does not in any way prevent us from disagreeing openly and fundamentally with the Chinese government on human rights and the state's role in the economy.

Britain and America share a set of values: free speech, free enterprise, the rule of law. From Tunisia to Burma, these values continue to inspire people seeking change in their own political and private lives.

It must stay that way. We must show that our political and economic systems not only still function, but still represent the best path to liberty and prosperity.

This Friday marks a melancholy anniversary, in addition to the one today that I just mentioned given our history in Istanbul. Half a century since John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. In his inaugural address, one of those many memorable things he said was the following:

To those peoples in the huts and villages of half the globe we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves.

Fifty years on, the world is a different place. Much of Africa, for example, is now seen as an opportunity than just a developmental challenge. But that moral and strategic imperative remains. Because, as Kennedy summed it up:

If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.

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Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-future-of-the-west-the-uks-evolving-role-in-the-world