Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Secretary speech on rejecting decline and renewing Western diplomacy in the 21st Century

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Foreign Secretary William Hague said:

In 2011 Nancy Reagan invited me to take part in the celebrations of the centenary of the birth of President Reagan.

On a beautiful summer morning, with Condoleezza Rice and with Bob Tuttle, I helped to unveil a statue to him in London's Grosvenor Square.

I am proud we found a home in our capital city for Ronald Reagan – a great American hero, one of America's finest sons, and a giant of 20th Century history.

He was the President, who restored American confidence with inspirational leadership abroad and economic revival at home.

A man of conviction, who knew it was right to go to Berlin and say "Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall", when that seemed impossible.

The statesman who won the Cold War, Margaret Thatcher said, "by inviting enemies out of their fortress and turning them into friends".

And the man of warmth and compassion, whose words live on in our memories and will be remembered for generations.

Having taken part in that moving occasion, it was an even greater honour when Nancy Reagan invited me to speak here, at the Presidential Library they built together.

I thank her, and pay tribute to her: the equal partner in all President Reagan's endeavours, and the person he said could make him lonely just by leaving the room.

We also remember Ronald Reagan gratefully for his friendship and warmth towards the United Kingdom.

We are immensely proud of our alliance with the United States, and what our two nations stand for and have achieved together.

We remember Churchill and Roosevelt, and the triumph over Nazi tyranny.

And we think of Thatcher and Reagan, when the fall of the Berlin Wall unleashed the 20th century's single greatest advance in human freedom.

As a teenager I was motivated to come into politics by Margaret Thatcher's vision and leadership. In one decade, and with the indomitable will of one woman, she confronted multiple dangers facing Britain, and, put simply, she rescued our country.

Two months ago, we mourned her passing. But I know that here in the Reagan Presidential Library her memory will always be preserved and cherished.

President Reagan and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher were often controversial leaders, and both had bitter enemies as well as devoted followers.

But both stood up fearlessly for their countries and raised them in the estimation of other nations.

These qualities and this leadership will forever make them stand out in history.

And millions of people who still say they object to their policies, nevertheless still benefit from the prosperity and security they stood for and assured.

A few minutes ago I saw the piece of the Berlin Wall on display here.

Today, communism is like that piece of masonry: an artefact of a failed ideology, torn down and discarded - although we should never forget the gulags and deprivation in North Korea, where it clings on in isolation and decay.

I'm told of one family visiting here with their small daughter, who turned to her parents and asked, "what is communism?

It is because we stood firm in the Cold War that today's children can ask that question in tranquillity.

This Library is a place to be inspired by how that dangerous era - that long repression of the human spirit for the sake of a soulless and drab uniformity - was finally ended.

We live now in a world of almost unlimited access to information, at least in democratic societies.

But we need our libraries just as much as in distant times when they were the only storehouses of knowledge. And we need to take time to absorb the lessons they hold for us.

This Library reminds us of fundamental truths about humanity.

This place tells us that individual men and women can change the course of history through their ideas, example and constancy - as we all remember today as our thoughts dwell on Nelson Mandela and his family. We are not merely the victims of socio-economic trends; through our own will and determination we can accelerate positive change and avert disasters.

These walls remind us that change for the better does not simply arise in the world; it comes from powerful exertion and example. Millions of people can have good intentions but their efforts may be disconnected, ineffective or accidentally destructive without transformational leadership.

And this Library testifies that it is not enough to believe in our values, we have to defend them and be a beacon of them – all the more so in periods where those values are threatened.

Not all countries are willing to exert themselves to defend the freedoms they enjoy, but in the United Kingdom and the United States of America we are.

President Reagan in his Farewell Address to the nation told the story of an American sailor on the carrier Midway, patrolling in the South China Sea, in the 1980s. The sailor spied a small leaky boat full of refugees, hoping to get to America. Then one of the refugees stood up, and called out “hello, American sailor. Hello, freedom man.” Freedom man. That the United States still stands as a beacon of freedom in the world should be a cause of immense pride.

There is no greater bastion of freedom than the Transatlantic Alliance, and within it the Special Relationship, always solid but never slavish.

Our alliance is strong and enduring because it is built on the belief in human freedom, in democracy and in free markets and individual enterprise.

The ability to channel our power and ingenuity in defence of our values has led to many of our greatest achievements over the generations: the liberation of Europe, the Berlin Airlift, the founding of NATO, the end of the Cold War and our efforts side by side, even when dogged by controversy, in Kuwait, Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan and in Libya.

This is not nostalgia for the past or starry-eyed idealism: it is our hard-headed national interest.

And it is undiminished by the fact that both of our countries are adapting our foreign policy to the 21st century.

Some say it is not possible to build up our countries’ ties in other parts of the world without weakening those ties between us. But I say these things go together.

The stronger our relationships are elsewhere in the world the more we can do to support each other and our allies.

Foreign policy is not a zero-sum game – we can pursue parallel efforts keeping our alliance as Western nations at the centre of our thinking and endeavours.

The foundations of the Special Relationship are sunk deep on both sides of the Atlantic, like those of a mighty building: invisible to the naked eye, but forming an immensely strong and unshakeable structure.

Anyone holding office in Britain or the US feels the strength of those foundations beneath their feet:

It is there as a mainstay of our economies – and will be an even greater source of prosperity if we can fulfil the immense promise of a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership.

It is a pillar of our Armed Forces, who train together, plan operations together, and fight together.

It is there in our unique nuclear cooperation, and the trust between the Foreign Office and the State Department.

It is that fortifying source of mutual strength at times of decision and crisis; what Margaret Thatcher called the “two o’clock in the morning courage”, that only a friend or ally can furnish.

And it is the fundamental underpinning of our security.

We should have nothing but pride in the unique and indispensable intelligence-sharing relationship between Britain and the United States.

In recent weeks this has been a subject of some discussion. Let us be clear about it.

In both our countries intelligence work takes place within a strong legal framework. We operate under the rule of law and are accountable for it. In some countries secret intelligence is used to control their people – in ours, it only exists to protect their freedoms.

We should always remember that terrorists plan to harm us in secret, criminal networks plan to steal from us in secret, foreign intelligence agencies plot to spy on us in secret, and new weapons systems are devised in secret. So we cannot protect the people of our countries without devising some of the response to those threats in secret.

Because we share such strong habits of working together, political leaders in our countries can always share their thinking about how to maintain clear leadership, bold thinking and decisive foreign policy in a shifting world.

It is in that spirit that I speak here tonight, offering my thoughts about the lessons of foreign policy in recent years and how we should apply them for the future: being confident without being arrogant; leading without monopolising; and taking pride in own societies while deepening our understanding of others; in keeping with the finest qualities of our open societies.

We are living through sobering hours in world affairs.

Many Western nations face an immense economic challenge, accelerated by the financial crisis. We need to strengthen our enterprise economies, to educate our young people, and make new advances in competiveness, or we risk being left behind in the global race taking place around us.

This economic challenge is intensified by the surge forward of many emerging economies – which brings with it a challenge to our values.

We see this in modern kleptocracies, where those in power take the benefits for themselves within an imitation of a free-market economy.

Or in today's crony capitalist systems which discredit or damage free enterprise.

Or in those countries pursuing state capitalism without political freedom.

By failing to develop the open democracies or opportunity for all that go with a stable free enterprise economy, each of these is storing up social discontent for the future and will prove to be unsustainable.

We know that capitalism and free markets only work properly when there are safeguards against monopoly of power, when information is freely available and everyone who works hard or has a brilliant idea can share in success, underpinned by strong, independent political institutions.

Alongside these challenges in the world we can see the geopolitical landscape shifting and old certainties changing.

We see the diffusion of power away from governments and into the hands of citizens, speeded by technology.

We see the spreading of economic power and influence around the world to many more countries, many of which do not fully share our values.

This makes it harder in the short term to deal with the many crises and problems confronting us, which include a much more fragmented but still dangerous terrorist threat, on a wider front, from Afghanistan to the Horn of Africa and the Sahel.

Those problems also include an even more unsettled Middle East, where to old sores new dangers are being added: social and political turmoil, new variants of terrorism and extremism, dangerous sectarian tensions, growing humanitarian crises and the threat of nuclear proliferation.

Taken together, we are living through an exceptionally turbulent and unpredictable period in world affairs, which may endure for decades to come.

Facing all these threats and changes some people think and argue that Western nations face more pressures than they can cope with and must be less ambitious.

I draw the opposite conclusion – that it is time to reenergise and extend our diplomacy and seek to lead and work with others in new ways, and I want to set out five principles which should guide us through the turbulent decades ahead.

First, we must reject the idea that Western nations face inevitable decline.

Some predict gloomily that as emerging powers rise, so we in the West must fall.

But our free and open societies are better placed to make the most of changes in the world; to adjust to it and to cope with turbulence.

We are not threatened fundamentally by the interconnected world with its flow of information and the empowerment of citizens.

The demand for openness and change has hit autocratic states in North Africa and the Middle East so hard because they were so obviously failing to provide democracy, dignity, accountability and economic opportunity for their people.

But in different ways the same demand for accountability will make itself felt in many other countries, and is doing so already on several continents.

If these trends sometimes put us under pressure, think how worried it makes the autocratic regime that relies on keeping its people in the dark in order to stay in power.

And if state capitalism is an economic challenge, our response should be to revitalise our own countries through extending our lead in human capital, by reinforcing a culture of work, and by releasing to the full the ingenuity, dedication, loyalty and diversity that only a truly free society can fully benefit from and mobilise.

That is why in the United Kingdom in the last three years under our Coalition Government we have begun the biggest education reforms in our modern history; we are making it pay to work by reforming our welfare system; and have reduced jobs in the public sector by half a million already while creating a million and a quarter new jobs in the private sector.

We do not need to accept sleepwalking into decline any more than Reagan and Thatcher did before us. We need to remind ourselves of the advantages that we possess.

I sometimes urge British diplomats to imagine that we had just woken up today to find our country had been planted in the world overnight, and that we'd been given 60 million industrious citizens, a language that is spoken throughout the world, a seat on the UN Security Council, membership of the European Union, NATO and the Commonwealth, a diplomatic network that is the envy of many nations, a nuclear deterrent, some of the finest Armed Forces in the world and one of the largest development programmes in the world, all of which we have in the United Kingdom. And on top of that, we had all the ingenuity, creativity and resilience that is such an ingrained part of our national character. We would rejoice in our good fortune, not be filled with gloom that others have strengths as well.

Much the same and more could be said of the United States.

We have centuries of experience in building up democratic institutions - from our courts to our free media - that other countries wish to draw on and adapt from Burma to North Africa.

We have the soft power and cultural appeal to attract and influence others and win over global opinion.

We have our entrepreneurs, lawyers, scientists, journalists, academics, artists and activists sharing their knowledge and connecting with other nations, outside of government but forming part of our international contribution.

We have not yet exhausted all the means of building up and extending our influence.

It is not so much the relative size of our power that matters in the 21st century, but the nature of it, and how agile and effective we can be in exerting it.

So while it will inevitably be a time of anxiety about dangers and our collective place in the world, it is also a time to be fired by a sense of optimism and opportunity, and to extend our connections across the globe and use the inherent strengths of our societies to the full.

This leads to my second point: that in this turbulent and interconnected environment we need more engagement with the world, not less; and we must build more connections with other countries, adapting our global role, not pulling back from it.

At a time of spending reductions and financial pressures in the United Kingdom we have decided to do what some might feel is counter-intuitive and which has not yet been noticed by everyone.

And indeed we are the only European country to take this approach.

We have embarked on re-opening Embassies and consulates we once closed and opening new ones – up to 20 in total at the moment - spreading British diplomacy to places that have not felt it in decades, while significantly strengthening our presence in many other locations.

When I stood in Mogadishu two months ago and watched our flag being raised for the first time in 22 years, we were the first European country to open an Embassy there since all the calamities in Somalia of recent years.

Our diplomats at our new Embassy in Haiti, which opened two weeks ago, are our first there since the 1960s.

From El Salvador to Paraguay, and from Côte d'Ivoire to Kyrgyzstan, British Embassies are opening instead of closing.

We are reversing our retreat from Latin America.

We now have more diplomatic posts in India than any other nation.

And we now have an Embassy in every ASEAN country, one of the world's largest new markets.

We already have one of the most extensive diplomatic networks in the world, but we have decided to enlarge it.

We do this in part to facilitate the export of British goods and services, because it is only through the growth of trade that we will lift up the world economy.

But it is also because over the coming decades we need to do more to promote our values rather than assume we can impose them.

It is also because we understand that there are more centres of decision-making than ever before and we need to be present in them.

This reflects one of the paradoxes of the globalised world, which is that while retail products become more homogenised, people are also freer to be different, and we need to deepen our understanding of, not neglect, the culture, politics and identity of other nations and work with the grain of them.

That is why in the reform of my department I have brought back historians to the centre of the work of the Foreign Office, and am opening a new language school this summer, and we are investing much more in geographic knowledge, cutting-edge diplomatic skills and economic understanding.

We will all have to go further afield for our prosperity. We all face threats which if we do not address them at their source will affect us at home, and so we are extending our cooperation

in countering terrorism to new partners.

Not only is it not profitable to shrink away in the world, it is not safe to do so, for no nation or group of nations is going to increase the protection they offer to us. So we have to resist the temptation to turn inwards.

Our vision for Britain in the world is of a nation committed to an international, global role.

An outward-looking and reliable partner; that values and nourishes its traditional alliances with United States with European Countries but also with Canada, Australia, New Zealand, France, and the Gulf states.

A country that makes the most of every network it is part of, including the Commonwealth, and that makes the case for a reformed European Union that is more competitive, more responsive to the needs of its citizens and more effective in using its weight in the world.

And a nation that is expanding its diplomatic reach; a powerful force for development and human rights with a renewed ability to make the most of a world, not of blocs, but of networks.

This leads naturally to my third point, that we must be willing to create more overlapping networks of countries that work together on specific issues even when they differ with us on others.

That is to take nothing away from the importance of NATO, the cornerstone of our security. Multilateral diplomacy is vastly important in a world of 200 countries with so many connections between them.

But the ability of groups of countries to work together on the basis of strong bilateral relationships with each other is now more, not less, important.

Despite globalisation it is still nations, their leaders and their people who take the decisions that determine their futures.

And the problems of the world are now so complex and centres of decision-making now so diverse that we have to move on fully from the idea that we live in a world of blocs of allies who agree with each other about everything.

Instead, we will find that there are countries we need to work with us on some issues even though we disagree strongly on others.

Whether it is our close and successful cooperation with Liberia and Indonesia to move beyond the Millennium Development Goals;

Our work with Mexico on climate change;

Our successful efforts with the Russian, Indian and Chinese navies to counter piracy off the Horn of Africa;

Our work with Nordic-Baltic nations to promote freedom of expression on the internet;

Or our burgeoning cooperation with Brazil and China on international development.

While NATO played a vital role in the military intervention in Libya, the network of relationships between the UK, France, US, Qatar and the UAE was fundamental to its success. And now that Libya needs to move to the next stage of its stability, we formed a partnership last week at the G8 with France and Italy for our countries to collaborate on security reform.

So this new global reality requires Western countries to build up bilateral relationships not weaken them, open Embassies not close them, and deepen the skills of their diplomats not to rely on others to do it for them.

We need to be able to create new partnerships at speed, and few nations are better placed than ours to do so.

I believe that any country that does not invest in this way in bilateral diplomacy in this way is making a major error, and will be at a strategic disadvantage when it comes to defending their national interests over the long term.

Building these networks does not mean turning away from our traditional alliances – far from it. Doing so is essential to our security and success.

Fourth, we should always show leadership based on the values of our own societies, and all Western nations should be ready to join in doing so.

I am not one of those people who expect the US to do everything in the world.

I subscribe to the view that reliance on the US for security has become too great in some countries.

We have continued in the UK to spend 2% of our GDP on defence, and have never shirked our responsibilities in NATO and to wider peace and security. We retain the fourth largest defence budget in the world and have some of the best-equipped and deployable Armed Forces. We will continue to be a robust ally of the U.S. for the future and a first rate military power.

But I believe some European countries and others who are part of our transatlantic alliance yet have reduced their spending below that level, will ultimately have to increase it again.

When President Obama decided that the US would do certain things in Libya but leave it to others to take the lead, I thought it was a fair policy and an effective one.

Nevertheless there will be issues, and there are some now, on which only the US has the leverage and can deliver the resources to do what is essential.

It is an immense credit to the US that under different administrations it has been prepared to do so.

The single most positive fact in world affairs is that the United States - that has within it such a vast range of cities and states far removed from the most troubled parts of the world – is prepared to stir itself in the face of serious international crises because it has an intelligent understanding that it is not secure if its allies are not secure.

We have welcomed and supported for years the efforts by successive administrations to settle the Israel-Palestinian conflict, and I pay tribute to Secretary Kerry now for his efforts.

But other countries also have to show leadership on difficult issues, as our Prime Minister did at the G8 last week with new agreements on tax, trade and transparency; and as we have shown by leading a major effort over two years to turn around Somalia.

And in the networked, highly connected world, it is more important than ever to demonstrate leadership in upholding our values.

I am proud that I have come here having presided over the UN Security Council where I was pursuing our global campaign to end the use of rape as a weapon of war. Foreign policy is not just about resolving today’s crises, but also about improving the condition of humanity.

When our campaigns are based on our values we can stir the conscience of the world and change the lives of millions, and we should be inspired that we retain that capacity.

And I believe we need to particularly apply this to that great moral battleground and strategic prize of the 21st century – the advancement of full economic, social and political rights for women everywhere.

The United Kingdom and United States share an interest in making the most of the restless activism of our democracies. We will find that millions, indeed billions of people in other countries will aspire to do the same.

We must never water down our convictions in the face of a more complicated global landscape.

Far from it, we must strive at all times to live up to them ourselves so that we retain and strengthen our moral authority – an indispensable component of future influence and security.

Fifth, we must work over the long term to persuade other nations to share our values and develop the willingness to act to defend and promote them.

The truth is that many ‘emerging powers’, as we have come to call them, still have foreign policies based on non-intervention or driven by what we would consider a narrow definition of national interest, which limits their contribution to international peace and security.

They do not share our sense of a Responsibility to Protect, or readiness to intervene militarily as a last resort when human rights are violated on a massive scale.

We will not change this by lecturing them, or forgetting to develop our understanding of their cultures and societies. We will change it by inspiring them and their citizens to join us over time.

This requires not the exercise of tough lectures and hard power but allowing our soft power – those rivers of ideas, diversity, ingenuity and knowledge - to flow freely in their direction.

And in return we should be open to their own good ideas, understanding that we have no monopoly of wisdom, and indeed it is our greatest strength that we start from that assumption.

Our challenge is to find a way to accommodate new voices within international institutions while also increasing their effectiveness and strengthening a rules-based world and universal values – an expanded United Nations Security Council would only work if we can achieve this goal.

So we need to open the sluice gates of our language and values and let them flow across the networked world, drawing on all our immense assets and the advantages of the English language, to spread the best of our ideas across the world, and to bring talented young people into our countries.

Our two countries are the top destinations in the world for international students and the numbers in Britain are rising. The British Council is teaching English in more than 50 countries, and the BBC World Service has added 26 million to its audience figures in the last two year, reaching its highest ever levels – our influence in the world is expanding, not declining.

So these are my five proposals for Western nations:

Reject the psychology of decline, deliberately increase your engagement with the world, construct strong overlapping networks, do not be afraid to show leadership in the world based on our values, and persuade without lecturing more countries to work with us in defending and advancing these values. If we do all of these things we will possess influence that flows rather than power that jars.

We need to bring all this activism, resolve and understanding to bear on the pressing problems we face today.

We need to make every effort to persuade a new Government in Iran to pursue diplomacy over its nuclear programme, while not weakening our resolve to prevent proliferation.

We must take what may be the last opportunity to achieve a two state solution in the Middle East Peace Process. The region will be immeasurably more dangerous and unstable – for Israelis and Palestinians themselves - if we do not succeed.

Despite all the dangers, we should not lose faith in the aspirations of the people of the Arab world, and help those countries to make a success of their long transitions.

We need to press on with the new phase in our support for Afghanistan, so that the Afghan lead in security is underpinned by real progress in political reconciliation.

And all the time we must maintain our commitment to the development of poorer nations. In the UK we are proud that we are living up to our commitment to spend 0.7% of GDP on international development, for that way lies long-term security and prosperity for us all.

But of course the most pressing international crisis of all today is Syria, which presents a growing threat to the region and to our own security.

In Syria the demand for democracy and accountability has been met with state violence, murder and torture, destroying whatever legitimacy the Assad regime once enjoyed.

The tragedy of Syria’s people, millions of whom are now in desperate need, is the most complex and difficult crisis yet thrown up by the Arab revolutions but it is not one from which we can turn aside.

On its current trajectory, it is a crisis that will lead to even more death and suffering, a humanitarian catastrophe, the growth of extremism and the destabilising of neighbouring countries.

The answer, sooner or later, can only be a political solution, in which a transitional government is agreed in a settlement bringing peace and rights for all Syrians. That is what we hope for from a second Geneva Conference.

Yet there will be no such solution if the regime believes they can destroy legitimate opposition by force. That places a duty on nations dedicated to international peace and security, to bolster that opposition, saving lives and promoting a transition in the process.

Whether in Syria today or new conflicts in the future, we have to set a lead in confronting dangers and seizing the opportunities just as we did in the days of Thatcher and Reagan.

And we should do so not out of a sense of nostalgia or excessive idealism, but because that is the only way we ensure our safety and protect our values.

Winston Churchill once said, “the future is unknowable, but the past should give us hope”.

When we look at all that has been achieved since President Reagan held office, and remember the great advantages we have and the capabilities and freedom our nations have created over centuries, we should be fired with the confidence to build up our economies, adapt our foreign policy and renew our strength.

Never surrendering to events, but retaining our belief in our ability to shape them.

Never talking ourselves into decline, but confidently working to expand our diplomacy and prosperity.

Not returning to the past, but renewing our thinking, purpose and confidence in our values.

In the 21st century we must have the same breadth of mind to apply the best of the lessons of Ronald Reagan’s time: that decline is not inevitable, that global problems can be solved and that democratic values can prevail, and that even in the face of new threats and dangers, our countries can look, and go, confidently outwards to the rest of the world.

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