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Beyond Brexit: a Global Britain

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There is a sense in which the British cemetery in Kabul is a monument to the human spirit.

A triumph of hope over experience and as I stood there last Saturday on a chilly and foggy morning I felt the eerie pathos of the place.

It was here in 1842 that the Victorian catastrophist William Elphinstone was driven from his cantonment with a great rabble of camp-followers and it was not far from here that the knives of the Gilzais rose and fell until the British army of Afghanistan was wiped out – almost to a man

Of Britain's 19th century presence in Kabul there is now no legacy save this handful of broken gravestones, so defaced that you can hardly read the names of the dead except to see that one man had won a VC.

They fell into decrepitude during Afghanistan's civil wars and then the Taleban came and smashed them up again and then – almost incredibly - in the 21st century the Brits came back and repaired the cemetery.

And there on the walls are fresh names of the British dead of the 456 who gave their lives in the last 15 years from every part of the United Kingdom for the sake not of imperial glory but in the hope of improving the lives of the people of Afghanistan.

And when you look at those names you imagine the pain of their families today, back in Britain and the suffering of the many more who have been badly injured and you ask yourself what manner of people are we – the British that we have come back here – to this country thousands of miles from home?

And we keep sending our soldiers to lay down their lives? Why? With one in eight of the people born in this country now living abroad a bigger diaspora than any other rich nation, you ask yourself what impulse drives this astonishing globalism, this wanderlust of aid workers and journalists and traders and diplomats and entrepreneurs, because whatever that feeling is, it isn't xenophobia.

And I imagine there are people in this distinguished audience today who are wondering whether the next generation of Brits will be possessed of the same drive, the same curiosity, the same willingness to take risks for far flung peoples and places.

Because this is the year in which, as we periodically do, we did something that startled our friends and rivals. We voted to leave the European Union.

And ever since that extraordinary vote on June 23 there have been efforts to psychoanalyse the result and to impute bad motives to the British people and there have been plenty who have been only too quick to draw comparisons with populist movements across the world.

All I will say is that we should not let these glib analogies replace individual analysis.

In the famous words of Tolstoy [opening to Anna Karenina] “all happy families are alike, every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way”.

Discontent can have subtly different wellsprings. There were plenty of people who voted to leave the EU, and I count myself as one who thought on these lines, not because they disliked or feared foreigners, but because they believed in democracy.

And after 43 years, because they had still not come to endorse the finalite politique of the EU, and it is my passionate belief that there is no contradiction whatever between a trust in the nation-state as the key building block of the global order and a generous and open mindset towards the rest of the world, and so my message to all those who are wondering – as Metternich supposedly did on the death of Talleyrand – what we meant by that is that Brexit emphatically does not mean a Britain that turns in on herself.

Yes – a country taking back control of its democratic institutions.

But not a nation hauling up the drawbridge or slamming the door.

A nation that is now on its mettle.

A nation that refuses to be defined by this decision.

A country galvanised by new possibilities and a country that is politically and economically and morally fated.

To be more outward-looking and more engaged with the world than ever before.

When I speak of Global Britain – and the need for us to commit ourselves to the peace and prosperity of the world. I know that there will be some who are wary that this sounds pretentious, in a nation that comprises less than one per cent of the world’s population.

I know there will be cynics who say we can’t afford it. I say we can’t afford not to.

To those who say we are now too small, too weak, too poor to have any influence on the world, I say in the words of Robert Burns:

O wad some Power the giftie gie us

To see oursels as ithers see us!

Because there are plenty of people who do understand what this country can do and the effect it can have – and you will find them overseas.

Indeed, there are probably a lot of British people who would not recognise the image of Britain – of ourselves – as seen through the eyes of others.

I would not perhaps go as far as the people of Iran. Many of these, I am told, are still convinced that we are the Old Fox manipulating America and Israel in such a way as to be effectively running the world ourselves – a fact unbeknownst to most foreign policy experts.

But I have been repeatedly impressed by the way people around the world are looking for a lead from Britain, engagement from Britain.

And so whether we like it or not we are not some bit part or spear carrier on the world stage. We are a protagonist – a global Britain running a truly global foreign policy.

And my message to you today, and I serve due warning that this is the first in a series of speeches setting out our foreign policy strategy, is that this global approach is in the interests both of Britain and the world.

And there are three reasons why this is so:

The first is that it is in our interests to contribute to global stability; peace; order.

The security to invest that is the bedrock of economic growth. We have to acknowledge that the world is now not in good shape, indeed is more dangerous and volatile than for several decades.

We have the cult of the strongman. We have democracy in retreat. We have an arc of instability across the Middle East from Iraq to Syria to Libya.

Is it our answer to cower and put our heads under the pillow? Emphatically not.

We know vividly and tragically that events in Afghanistan can affect our lives here in London and that is partly why we are still there today.

It is in the interests of global order that we are at the centre of a network of relationships and alliances that span the world.

It is one of the great achievements of British diplomacy in the 20th century that – together with others - we effectively changed the basis and assumptions on which those relationships

work

It was Britain in 1815 that helped to create the balance of power system of politics, a system that was remarkably successful for about a century in keeping the peace, until it could not cope with the rise of new states in the European order.

And then we had the two world wars – which some historians now interpret as a single appalling event – and at the end of that, 1945, we had what you might call a translatio imperii. Hegemony had been transferred.

And what AJP Taylor said he was tempted to call “the war of the British succession” was won convincingly by the United States. It was in that idealistic post war period that on either side of the Atlantic there were attempts to build institutions that could answer these nagging questions of nations and nationalism.

A group of European countries responded to an instinct deep in the history of the continent and launched a project for a federal system of government, with a single court, a single legal system, and of course a customs union modelled on the zollverein that was the precursor to a unified German state.

It would be fair to say that Britain and America had a different approach and together they sought to create a new system based not on power, not on centralised and federal law-making but on rules embodied by genuinely global institutions.

Alongside our American ally, we were present at the creation of the United Nations, of the UN Charter, of Nato and later of the Helsinki Final Acts. And of course Europe and North America ultimately worked together to build this new world.

We stood together, with our west European allies, throughout the cold war and when that cold war ended 26 years ago we hoped that our rules-based liberal order would catch on and embrace the whole world. Alas, that vision has not really come to pass.

And instead the great attempt at a post war liberal settlement is under unprecedented strain. The hard reality is that other nations were not swept along by the euphoria that I remember so well, many of you will remember.

And there is a whole region of the world – the Middle East – where the nation-state system itself is in peril, where we are struggling against non-state actors who view the very concept of a global liberal order with contempt. It is precisely because of the intensity of these challenges that we need to redouble our resolve, to defend and preserve the best of the rules-based international order.

If we fail, then we risk reverting to an older and more brutal system where the strong are free to bully or devour the weak. Where might is always right and the rules and institutions we

have so painstakingly built fade away into irrelevance.

We cannot allow this to happen. And so it is right that we stand shoulder to shoulder with America, and others, in the fight against Daesh. We are the second biggest contributor to the air campaign after the US.

And that's why we work ever more intensively with our five eyes intelligence partners – the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand – in a network of like-minded democracies that spans the globe.

We work on security with our European friends – and as I have said before, our role is to be a flying buttress, supportive of the EU project, but outside the main body of the church.

Now is the time to build a new and productive relationship, based on friendship and free trade, and a new European partnership where we continue to develop our work on things that matter to all of us in Europe.

We are there with our EU friends – I've just been to a conference in Rome – in the fight against piracy off the horn of Africa and in dealing with the migration crisis in the Mediterranean.

Because we know that in keeping Britain safe our security depends on stabilising Europe's wider neighbourhood. The southern Mediterranean and the ungoverned expanses of the Middle East and along the eastern borders of Nato. There we find British troops already set to deploy in our enhanced forward presence in the Baltic states.

Our resolve to fulfil our Nato obligations will be unbreakable.

At the heart of this institution, Nato, the most durable and successful defensive alliance in history lies the security guarantee contained in the North Atlantic treaty article 5, that an attack on any one member "shall be considered an attack against them all".

And in offering that guarantee, President Elect Donald Trump has a point. It cannot be justified that one Nato ally – America – accounts for about 70 per cent of the alliance's defence spending while the other 27 countries manage only 30 per cent between them.

I want every Nato member to meet the agreed target of spending 2 per cent of GDP on defence and 20 per cent of their defence budget on new equipment. Britain already abides by this target and I note that Nato's most exposed members – including Estonia and Poland – do so as well.

But as Jens Stoltenberg, Nato Secretary General has pointed out, there is no contradiction between deterrence and dialogue. Britain is prepared to be tough with Russia. But that does not mean it is wrong to talk and to engage.

Yes, it is Britain that insists on our resolve to enforce sanctions against Russia for their occupation of Crimea and their hand in the war against eastern Ukraine. It is Britain again that has been the firmest in denouncing Russia's part in the destruction of Aleppo.

For all these reasons we cannot normalise relations with Russia or go back to "business as usual".

But as I have said time and again Russia could win the acclaim of the world by halting its bombing campaign of Syria, delivering Assad to peace talks, abiding by the letter of the Minsk agreements in Ukraine.

I know that neither the Prime Minister Theresa May nor I will relent in our pressure or in delivering those messages face to face.

But, as Global Britain our range is not confined to the immediate European hinterland as we see the rise of new powers. It is right that we should make a distinctive approach to policy-making as regards China and East Asia.

Our approach in that region must go beyond the quest for exports and commercial contracts, vital though they are.

The emerging balance of power system in Asia needs the influence of friendly countries – with our emphasis on the rules-based system - in order to reduce the risk of miscalculation and unwanted confrontation.

But one lesson that Britain has learned from centuries of evolutionary change in our own institutions is that you must be willing to reform a system in order to save it.

We should be realistic enough to accept that the international order needs to change. That is why Britain supports enlarging the permanent membership of the Security Council to other global powers, including India

And we were one of the first countries to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which is capitalised largely by China.

And then there are some great international institutions that do not so much need to reform, but simply to receive a new burst of energy.

That brings me to the second area where global Britain can make a difference.

Back in that post-war moment, the end of the Second World War, we not only helped to found Nato and the UN – it was JM Keynes who was instrumental in bringing to birth the Bretton Woods institutions, the IMF and World Bank.

And then next year we helped to found the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT).

Now the WTO, that over decades has helped to break down the folly of protectionism and open markets, a benign and transformative process that is not only good for Britain, since our trade amounts to nearly 60% of our GDP, but which is good for the world, lifting billions of people out of poverty in the last 40 years.

And yet the gossamer web of obstruction is growing thicker every year, and the political support for openness in trade is draining away across the world, and for the first time in decades trade is no longer growing as fast as global GDP, with volumes rising by only 2.8 per cent this year compared with an average of 5 per cent since 1990.

And since it is the world's poorest who will suffer most from this atrophy, it is our historic post-Brexit function, as the PM has said, to be the leading agitators for free trade. Again confounding those who are willing to misread Brexit by seizing the moment to campaign for openness and open markets across the globe beginning with some of those dynamic commonwealth economies that are already queuing up to do free trade deals.

And then there is the third way that Global Britain can do good for the world and for itself and that is in the projection of our values and our priorities; and we have enormous scope to do this.

We are not only the second biggest defence spender in NATO, we also have the largest overseas aid budget in Europe.

In the last five months I have seen going around the world how Priti Patel is making every pound count to change the lives of the neediest and to tackle the world's biggest and most intractable problems. Not just poverty and disease, but mass migration exhaustion of resources and the consequent extinction of species.

If I may be permitted to take one example that obsesses me almost as much as it obsesses my father, it is the tragic fate of the African elephant.

It is mankind's privilege to share the planet with these magnificent and curious creatures, these throwbacks from the Pleistocene, and it is heart-breaking to see that their numbers have shrunk from 1.2 m in the 1990s to a mere 415,000 today.

That is 110,000 elephants gone since 2006. In our lifetimes they could be gone altogether.

Animals who have filled our imaginations since childhood and whose every attribute is a walking metaphor and even if you don't care if they all get turned into umbrella stands and billiard balls.

Even if you don't mind if our great grandchildren grow up in a world without elephants - and I do mind deeply - let me suggest to you that the death of the elephant is a disaster that proceeds from other disasters.

Not just poaching, and the gangs that run the poaching are also of course the people who engage in human trafficking, but the massive growth in population that means a contest for resources that an elephant is never going to win.

The population of Africa is now pushing a billion and in many countries it is doubling every 20 or 25 years.

What is the answer to this population boom? - which, by the way, global population growth is another of those things that we thought had got better 20 or 25 years ago we thought we were turning the tide.

I will give you one of the answers.

I saw it in Pakistan the other day, which has itself its own population boom, they're heading for 200 million people, 250 million in the next few years where two thirds of adult women cannot read or write.

I saw what we're doing to tackle this, I stood in a DFID–funded classroom in the Punjab and asked the girls what they had been reading. You know what they said, Harry Potter – in Urdu. I asked them who was the headmaster of Hogwarts, and you know what they said.

Of course I suppose you could and I will make a commercial case for Britain's interest in this.

The more girls who can read around the world the more copies of Harry Potter you can sell.

But that isn't why your money - British taxpayers' money - is being used to teach 6m girls in the Punjab to read. It is about giving them the chance to take control of their lives.

All evidence confirms that wherever women are empowered and educated there are immediate improvements in the prosperity of that society and the stabilisation of the birth rate.

And with the world now likely to hit 11 bn people by 2050 - not 9 bn as we thought a decade or so ago, but 11 bn people - that British mission to educate young women and girls, to save them from the evil of modern slavery, to uphold our belief in equality wherever we go is as profoundly in our interests as it is of girls in the developing world.

We do not now run an empire and it is a relief, frankly to us, that we don't and perhaps to others as well.

We are not the greatest military power on earth.

We of course recognise the limits of what we can achieve on our own.

But we should never underestimate the catalytic power of our creativity and the sheer concentration of intellectual resources to be found on this island.

Of all the world's kings and queens and presidents and prime ministers one in every seven was educated in Britain.

Cambridge University alone has produced more Nobel Prize winners than every university in Russia and China added together and multiplied by two and in the words of a Russian spectator at the Olympic opening ceremony, Britain wrote the soundtrack of the world.

Britain is not just a link or a bridge between Europe and America, we are not merely the intersecting set of a complex Venn diagram, we have our own distinctive identity and contribution.

And of course like all nations who attempt to project their values overseas, we have our mistakes and our failures. We should have the wisdom to know our limitations and to face the world with humility.

But we should not let that proper sense of realism obscure the extraordinary things we are capable of doing.

I end with a conversation I had last week in Afghanistan talking to President Ghani, a highly intelligent guy – a Pashtun whose forefathers cut down our troops in the passes in 1842.

I have to admit that he embarrassed me, not because he railed at the British for the Durand line or for our colonial misdemeanours, no – he thanked me, profusely and repeatedly for the sacrifice of the 456 British troops who have given their lives and whose names I saw on that wall.

He was absolutely categorical that this time – this century - our legacy was positive and lasting.

Millions of girls we have helped to teach in Afghanistan fields that are now irrigated and clear of mines and some of the poorest and most isolated villages in the world now with the blessing of electricity thanks to the labour of British troops.

Since I felt a little bit nonplussed at being thanked for things I personally had no hand whatever in delivering I pass on those thanks to this distinguished foreign policy audience today.

Britain has not always acquitted itself well in Afghanistan and we in our generation have rightly found much to reproach in the vaulting jingo of our Victorian ancestors.

But in sticking up for a liberal international order in the confusion and discord of the early 21st century, I believe this country is overwhelmingly a force for the good with the potential to do even more and we should not be nervous of saying so.

Thank you very much.

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