



Robin Harris

**Why Britain
Needs a
Foreign Policy**

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2004

First published in 2004
by
Politeia
22 Charing Cross Road
London WC2H 0QP
Tel: 020 7240 5070 Fax: 020 7240 5095
E-mail: info@politeia.co.uk
Website: www.politeia.co.uk

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Address Series No. 13

Support for this study has been granted by the
Foundation for Social and Economic Thinking.

ISBN 1-900525-78-X

Cover design by John Marenbon

Printed in Great Britain by
Sumfield & Day Ltd
Station Street
Eastbourne
BN21 4RQ
www.sumfieldandday.com

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Does America Need a Foreign Policy? Such is the tongue-in-cheek title of a recent book by Henry Kissinger.¹ Dr Kissinger's answer, naturally enough, was 'Yes'; and his principal theme was that the United States needed to be clearer and more realistic about priorities than it had been. This was doubtless true. But it is understandable when a superpower – or, as the expression has it, a 'hyper-power' – fails to prioritise, for it faces formidable difficulties in doing so.² Such a power is, after all, global. Its interests are thus in play in every region. Its enemies can emerge in any quarter. It must be all-seeing, all-knowing, constantly calculating, constantly alert, always ready (even when reluctant) to intervene, always able at a pinch to enforce its will.

The British themselves faced such challenges in earlier years. Writing in 1879 about the defence of Persia, Lord Salisbury observed: 'Whatever happens will be for the worse, and therefore it is in our interest that as little should happen as possible'.³ Such is the lot of sprawling empires, past and present. Such is the fate of any power which has more to lose than to gain.

That is not, however, the problem for Britain today. Contemporary Britain is something of an oddity in historical terms, namely an important second-order power with a broad array of interests in different continents.

These interests are primarily economic. Britain is the world's fourth largest economy, and one uniquely dependent on trade. Much of that trade - about half, depending on your definitions – is with Europe. But we are also intensely involved in the more rapidly expanding markets outside Europe. For, example, the US is the UK's largest source of foreign investment and the UK is the largest foreign investor in the US. Because of these interests, Britain has a larger stake than other second-order powers in such matters as maintaining accessible energy sources, ensuring open sea lanes, and more generally in achieving a stable international environment.

To protect such interests, let alone to protect its own territory and its own citizens, Britain needs to employ its influence wisely and its power effectively, and to do these things it has to find allies when and where they are needed. In these, the fundamental tasks of foreign policy, Britain is assisted by the fact that the country is the historic hub of the English-speaking world. English is, of course, unchallenged as the global language

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of business and technology. So the fact that Britain's otherwise rather badly educated population can at least read and speak English gives British business a head-start. And Britain's centrality to what has been termed the 'Anglo-sphere' brings with it the hugely important benefit of close cultural and sentimental links with the United States – the world leader in all spheres of material progress.⁴

Modern Britain, as a medium-sized power, also enjoys two other advantages. One is that though we British have wide-reaching interests, we are not perceived as a global threat: others – our American cousins – now stagger under the White Man's Burden. The second advantage is the mirror image of the first; for we are not Benelux, nor Singapore; we are neither a Baltic, nor a Balkan state. We are large enough not to have to accept subordination to a powerful neighbour or patron.⁵ We are in no one's sphere of interest. We can, within limits, assert our own.

These circumstances do more than demand a well-calculated and carefully calibrated foreign policy: they also offer the potential for it. Such a policy should be central to the concerns of government. After all, most of the functions of the modern state could be contracted out to others. The development and implementation of foreign policy cannot.⁶ And yet in this respect Britain today is sadly deficient. British foreign policy is a muddle. Debate about it is, by and large, conducted in simplistic terms. The arguments employed are often trivial. The positions adopted frequently seem exaggerated poses.

This is a paradox. After all, in Tony Blair the country has a Prime Minister who is deeply interested, his critics would say obsessed, with international affairs. What has gone wrong?

Clues to the answer can be found in the official statement of what the British Foreign Office thinks it exists to do. Last winter, the Government published *UK International Priorities: a Strategy for the FCO*. It is not an intellectually impressive document.

The current Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, unexceptionably asserts in his foreword that the aim of British foreign policy is 'to promote our national interests and values [by being] active and engaged around the world'. Eight

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'strategic policy priorities' are then enumerated. Some of these do bear upon British needs – for example, securing a 'world safer from global terrorism and weapons of mass destruction'. Others, though, have no obvious connection with British national interest at all – like achieving 'an effective EU in a secure neighbourhood', or 'sustainable development, underpinned by democracy, good governance and human rights'. Moreover, on closer inspection, even such relative clarity as this quickly disintegrates into a list of disparate functions, ranging from 'increasing the effectiveness, legitimacy and co-ordination of the UN', to running the UK consular service, or indeed to handing out copies of a 'Torture Reporting Handbook produced by Essex University'. In short, the document does not just lack style: it lacks intellectual coherence. It is devoid of a philosophy.

Nor is this a mere literary defect. It goes to the heart of the problem. Those now responsible for devising and implementing British foreign policy do not really any longer believe in it. The activity seems to them pointless. They would rather be doing – and talking about doing – something else.

So it is that Mr Straw can observe:

'Foreign affairs are no longer really foreign [W]hat happens around the world is increasingly beyond the full control of states [A]s our country becomes more diverse, the FCO needs to engage with all its people and represent the full range of their interests, conveying a modern image of the UK abroad'.⁷

The Foreign Secretary thus, at one and the same time, denies the distinction between foreign and other policy; he despairs of the power of states to promote national interests; and he calls for more effort in advertising diversity and modernity – a plaintive echo, no doubt, of past New Labour attempts to portray a 'Cool Britannia'. It would be difficult to imagine a more flimsy or frivolous basis upon which to conduct foreign affairs. And it not just Mr Straw's own distinguished predecessors who would deplore it: so, one suspects, would the Quai d'Orsay.

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Aims of Foreign Policy

The proper aims of foreign policy have always been the subject of much debate, and doubtless they always will be. The terms of that debate have changed as states themselves have changed. The organisation, goals and values of the body politic cannot, after all, be disconnected from their external expression.

Within these debates it is, however, possible to distinguish two broad trends or schools. One, which for convenience sake can be called a 'realist' view, has been described as depicting 'international affairs as a struggle for power among self-interested states and is generally pessimistic about the prospects for eliminating conflict and war'.⁸ The other view, again sacrificing subtlety to brevity, can be described as 'idealist'. This represents an approach which stresses moral principle above power politics and sees policy as properly directed towards doing good within a wider international community, rather than the pursuit of state or national interest.

Realists, like idealists, appear in different shapes and sizes. The term *Realpolitik*, which came into widespread use to describe Bismarck's foreign policy in the second half of the nineteenth century, refers to one historically important variant. Bismarck scorned illusions about the motivation of states, shifted alliances when it suited, undertook war or maintained the peace, all in pursuit of the interests of Prussia/Germany. And more than that, he was articulate and successful enough to give explicit expression to his analysis.

In Britain during most of the nineteenth century another variant of realism held sway. Lord Palmerston's insight is well known: 'We have no eternal allies and no permanent enemies. Our interests are eternal, and those interests it is our duty to follow'. Palmerston did, in fact, have views, prejudices and even ideals, which influenced his foreign policy. He believed, for example, in the progress of constitutional government in Europe and, other things being equal, sought to promote it. But he did not confuse idealism with national interest or doubt that national interest should come first.⁹ After Palmerston's death, the underlying tensions between realist and idealist approaches to policy surfaced most famously in the dispute between Gladstone and Disraeli about the proper response to Ottoman atrocities in the Balkans. But it was realism rather than idealism which generally prevailed.

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Naturally, realism in an age of democratic states consists of something different from that which prevailed under pre-democratic ones. Moreover, the advance of the doctrines of liberalism alongside the widening of the franchise meant that the attractions of a morally based foreign policy grew. This was particularly so in the United States, and the debate between the two camps still finds most articulate and forceful expression there. A cluster of overlapping, but by no means synonymous, positions can be distinguished. In one camp, we find realists who place greatest emphasis on the inevitable inability to prevent conflict, because of the brute facts of human nature, and 'neo-realists' who are inclined instead to stress the inherent disorderly nature of the international system. The most influential practising, as well as theorising, extant realist is undoubtedly Henry Kissinger.

Dr Kissinger is, for example, sharply critical of some of the idealistic aspects of traditional US foreign policy.¹⁰ Interestingly, the other camp – American idealism – has been represented both by isolationism – a belief in US moral 'exceptionalism', and a corresponding refusal to soil one's hand in great power politics – and by utopian interventionism. Today, the latter fashion is in the ascendant. The conviction that the world can be remodelled by the forceful application of simple principles can be traced from Woodrow Wilson's 'Fourteen Points', to President Clinton's interventions in Somalia, the Balkans and Haiti, to some contemporary neo-conservatives' belief that the Middle East will be pacified and stabilised by the importation or imposition of democracy.¹¹ The last example is a useful reminder that realism and idealism are by no means synonymous with isolationism and interventionism, or even Left and Right.¹² That said, today's liberal idealists are nearly all ubiquitous interventionists.¹³

The intensity with which such matters are discussed in the US is a tribute not just to the vigour of American political culture but also to the urgent requirements of decision-making that of necessity face a global superpower. In Britain, where politicians gave up reading books some time ago, the predominant feeling among policy-makers is that the only good theory is a dead one. Yet, albeit in a somewhat muffled and muddled fashion, these same conflicting ideas about foreign policy have found expression here too – as the following sketch of events may show.

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Recent British Foreign Policy

From the late 1940s until the end of the 1980s, British foreign and security policy was almost exclusively dominated by the circumstances of the Cold War. All other considerations were necessarily secondary. It was, for example, in the name of an ill-thought-out strategy of strengthening the free West against the un-free East of Europe that Britain stumbled and blundered in the European Common Market, the EEC and the EU.¹⁴

Perhaps the most important consequence of the primacy of the Cold War in policy formulation was, however, the simplicity that it imposed upon British foreign policy discussion. This was manifested in two closely connected ways. First, because of the overhanging Soviet threat, there was an unspoken and bipartisan acceptance of the primacy of NATO and within it of US leadership. Doubtless, some voices on the far Left dissented. And some agents of influence, and some outright spies, subverted. But these opponents were a very small minority.

Second, there was an all but universal acceptance that the moral and the practical requirements of British foreign policy were in fundamental harmony. True, there were complaints even at the time about supporting the odd unsavoury dictator in a far-flung country for reasons of Western security. But essentially the struggle against the Soviet Union was one which pitted Western ideals, just as much as Western interests, against an enemy that was both morally deplorable and a great and present danger. The more that the truth got out, the greater the repulsion at the Gulag was. It may have worried the *The Guardian*, but it hardly shocked anyone else, when the leader of the Free World described the Soviet Union as 'Evil' as well as an Empire.¹⁵

The weakening and then the collapse of the Soviet Union changed the terms of discussion. There were calls to rethink the significance for Britain of the transatlantic link, as European integration accelerated. There was also a growing assault from various quarters – Right as well as Left – on the ideology of Cold War conservatism.

Perhaps if Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher had been in office in the early 1990s, intellectually satisfying and strategically viable solutions might have been developed.¹⁶ But their successors were temperamentally

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uninterested in such things. Both President George Bush Sr. and Prime Minister John Major were keen to prove themselves their 'own men', and thus – in contrast to their allegedly doctrinaire predecessors – pragmatists and practitioners of consensus. Indeed, doctrine and ideology of any kind were to be regarded as not merely superfluous but anachronistic.

Into this political and intellectual vacuum on the Centre-Right now flowed an odd mixture of often incompatible notions. Policy-makers in Washington and London seemed on occasion keen to support a new and ambitious internationalism, focused on expanding the role of the United Nations. President Bush spoke in Wilsonian terms of a 'New World Order'.¹⁷ In Britain, enthusiasm for international engagement took the form of Prime Minister Major's commitment to place Britain at 'the heart of Europe'.¹⁸

Yet, at the same time, when confronted by an immensely serious political, military and humanitarian crisis on Europe's and NATO's borders in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, the Bush administration and the Major government were paralysed. Pleas for intervention from Margaret Thatcher and others were scornfully rejected by the British Foreign Secretary, Malcolm Rifkind, as 'emotional nonsense'.¹⁹

Wise heads shook at the dangers of intervention. But, of course, British policy, which was to prevent by an arms embargo the Croatian and Bosnian victims of aggression from arming themselves, was indeed a kind of intervention – on the side of the aggressor.²⁰ Absolute non-intervention is, in the end, for major powers impossible. The insight is not original. While serving as France's ambassador to the Court of St. James at the time of Belgium's struggle for independence in the 1830s, Prince Talleyrand was a distinguished advocate of 'non-intervention' by the European powers. But asked in private what this actually meant, he replied: '[Non-intervention] is a metaphysical and political word which means much the same thing as intervention'.²¹ At least the Prince acknowledged the fact.

The Major Government demonstrated no real grip on foreign policy – whether veering from one stance to another in Europe, or mismanaging the relationship with America, let alone backing the wrong side in the Balkan fiasco. The Conservative Government could not explain its actions in terms of moral principle. Yet neither did it demonstrate any grasp of an alternative approach based on explicit pursuit of national interest. Somewhat

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surprisingly, it was only once left-of-centre parties took power in Britain and in America that intellectual engagement with post-Cold War foreign policy was undertaken – though with mixed results.

Seeing Tony Blair shaking the hand of Colonel Gaddafi, it is easy to forget that British policy under the new Government was supposed to be ‘ethically’ driven.²² For a period, when Robin Cook was Foreign Secretary, in certain respects it was. To his credit, Mr Cook took a robust view of genocide in the former Yugoslavia. But the Foreign Secretary was not only committed to remedying manifest ills: he was an enthusiast for a far-reaching and ambitious doctrine of human rights enforced by international institutions. Apart from its inherent impracticalities, pursuit of this approach brought trouble with the United States – notably over the new International Criminal Court, which Britain enthusiastically supported and which America resolutely opposed.

Mr Blair too publicly subscribed to the concept of an ‘ethical foreign policy’. But, as with so many complex and problematic ideas, it is not clear that the Prime Minister thought through its implications. From the start, idealist and realist tendencies in his make-up struggled for dominance and affected the conduct of affairs.²³ Thus in its early years, the Blair Government was a strong proponent of multilateralism – broadly, the view that any initiative should be undertaken, or at least supported, by the largest possible number of states. Some degree of multilateral co-operation is always likely to be necessary for a second- or third-order power in any considerable diplomatic or military undertaking. But the precise forum for such co-operation needs to be chosen carefully: the widest group may not always be the most favourable to the end in view. More importantly for Britain, as America’s closest ally, the adoption of multilateralism as a prevailing approach to the resolution of international disputes was bound to weaken the position of the world’s dominant nation, the United States. Even with the Democrat President Clinton in the White House, this was destined to create tensions. But with the election of a Republican President, in the form of President George W. Bush, it soon began to threaten Anglo-US co-operation at many levels.

Tony Blair had, in any case, already manifested a taste for more muscular policies and more controversial interventions than the UN was willing to

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swallow. The British Prime Minister was the driving force of NATO's campaign against the Serbs in Kosovo in 1999. Serbia's action against the ethnic Albanian population certainly required a military response. There was no way to prevent persecution and massive ethnic cleansing without the use of force. But it would have been possible to justify the action on a number of different grounds. Belgrade's action was in breach of UN resolutions. It threatened fundamental destabilisation of the surrounding countries, which were still trying to cope with the human consequences of Slobodan Milosevic's earlier wars. It was in the West's collective security interests to prevent a continuation of that instability. But Mr Blair deliberately chose to set aside these realist arguments and settled for an idealistic justification based on the need to cope with a 'humanitarian' crisis. This may have been politically attractive in that it helped assuage pacifist tendencies on the Old Left of the Labour Party. But it also set an alarming precedent. After all, who should in future decide whether and when national sovereignty should be overridden in order to protect the interests of a country's population? At the very least it would have been wiser to limit rather than extend the implications.

Mr Blair, though, in his high-minded enthusiasm, wished to go even further. In a speech in Chicago, he argued for 'a new doctrine of international community', which appeared to advocate ubiquitous interventions on the highly debatable grounds that 'we cannot turn our backs on conflicts and the violation of human rights if we want still to be secure'.²⁴

The Prime Minister was not, in fact, to know how soon events would put this doctrine to the test. The attacks on New York and Washington in September 2001 resulted in a new US activism - this time in the form of a global War against Terror, which quickly also became enmeshed in a campaign to achieve regime change in rogue states, beginning with Saddam Hussein. Undoubtedly, the realist in Mr Blair understood that British national interests required staunch support of America. But neither could the Prime Minister, as a card-carrying international idealist, dispense with his earlier desire to have every action endorsed by the UN. He thus pressed the United States to seek such endorsement long after it was clearly unavailable. Similarly, when under pressure to justify his stance towards Iraq - particularly after the failure to discover Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) - it was naturally to idealistic, humanitarian arguments that Mr Blair turned. The war in Iraq thus quickly came to acquire, in the Prime

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Minister's version, the same justification as Kosovo – that is, as an humanitarian intervention launched to free the population from an oppressive tyrant. And yet again, as in the case of Kosovo, Mr Blair seemed to relish the chance to introduce a utopian, internationalist element. Thus he proposed a still wider basis for such interventions:

'It may well be', Mr Blair declared in a speech in his constituency, 'that, under international law as presently constituted, a regime can systematically brutalise and oppress its people and there is nothing anyone can do, when dialogue, diplomacy and even sanctions fail, unless it comes within the definition of humanitarian catastrophe . . . This may be the law, but should it be?'

Leaving that momentous question ominously hanging, the Prime Minister then proceeded to urge a programme of rampant internationalism, which would hardly meet approval from the American President. Among other things, Mr Blair demanded tackling 'poverty in Africa and justice in Palestine', reform and strengthening of the UN Security Council, and all within 'a broad agenda of justice and security'.²⁵

Politicians often say more than they mean. But, taken seriously, such statements as this would suggest the removal of all ordinarily understood limits to interventions around the globe – not just in the face of threats of international terrorism and the proliferation of WMD, but wherever an apparent wrong can be righted or an alleged injustice remedied. Effectively, it would mark an end to national sovereignty, as that expression has been traditionally understood, and a transfer of ultimate responsibility for individual countries' internal affairs to some higher and unspecified authority. A supreme international law, a network of world courts, a global police force and a standing multi-national army are just some of the highly unsettling – and at present thankfully improbable – developments which such a world view might entail. There is no evidence in any of the pronouncements of the Prime Minister or the Foreign Secretary that they would regard the progressive creation of a single world government as what it would inevitably become – a grave threat to personal freedom.

Mr Blair has thus rashly opened a Pandora's Box from which any number of mis-shapen monsters may emerge. And, as they begin to crawl out, it is not

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at all clear that he or the Foreign Office have any idea how to deal with them. In short, Britain does not have a foreign policy. What might provide the basis for one?

Power and Principles in Foreign Policy

To be of value, any foreign policy must provide a guide to practical action. It has to offer a framework within which events can be analysed and choices made. For this reason the age-old debate about realism and idealism – as defined and examined earlier – cannot be avoided: it must be in some sense resolved.

On this fundamental matter, I have no hesitation in making a choice. Based on an assessment of both past experience and current circumstances, a realist policy is greatly to be preferred.

The realists are right: relations between states are, indeed, based ultimately upon power. Power, it is true, is not to be gauged in military terms alone. In recent years there has been much talk of the potential of ‘soft power’ – those other non-military programmes which can advance a state’s interests by persuasion and attraction – yet military resources are the fundamental component. It is ‘hard power’ that is decisive in a crisis.

States are not, therefore, like human beings, whose relations, at least in any kind of civilised conditions, are governed not by force but by law. States always exist in what might be termed a state of nature. They are driven by self-interest, for the simple reason that there is no higher society of which they are a part. ‘The World’ remains, and must always remain, despite all the talk of globalisation, a geographical as opposed to a political, legal or moral entity.

Past experience alone can teach all the necessary lessons. Whatever high-minded objectives are advanced or utopian schemes hatched, attempts to direct the action of states by anything other than a mixture of force and self-interest always fail. The experience of the League of Nations in the 1920s and 1930s is the classic example. But the UN was barely more successful in influencing events during most of the Cold War. Indeed, the veto exercised by the permanent members of the UN Security Council provides tacit

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recognition of the fact that great power interests cannot be overridden if international stability is to be maintained.

Transfers of authority to international bodies, which apply their own rules or even make their own law, introduce uncertainty and even, paradoxically, instability. The main exception in recent years has, significantly, been the GATT/WTO.²⁶ Countries have, by and large, been prepared to accept limits on their ability to restrict trade, because governments nowadays understand that such restrictions are self-defeating. Protectionism is the political equivalent of cutting off your nose to spite somebody else's face. Otherwise, though, international forums work best when they recognise the realities of power and respect the interests of sovereign states.

Counter-arguments

In answer to such assertions, an advocate of a foreign policy based on moral principles might be expected to advance one or more of the following criticisms – each of which should be taken seriously. The first is that basing a policy on the pursuit of national interest is inherently selfish. To this we can only plead guilty. But the crucial qualification is that the selfishness of states is not of the same kind as the selfishness of individuals.

The earliest proponents of realism in foreign policy were not dealing with democracies. Neither Machiavelli's statecraft nor Bismarck's *Realpolitik* was legitimised by reference to popular will. Democracy may not be the answer to every problem; it may even create some of its own; but it certainly makes a moral difference to the nature of government. In functioning democracies, government is regarded as a trust exercised on behalf of the nation. Democratic governments are not, therefore, free agents, any more than the boards of companies are free agents: both have very clear duties - in one case to electors, in the other to shareholders. The politicians who constitute the government at any particular time are morally bound to defend and promote the collective interests of the nation. If politicians wish instead to save or improve the world, then they can try to do so in their own right, as private individuals employing their own resources; but they have no legitimate authority to do so on the nation's behalf.²⁷

The role of self-interest in economics is now well and widely understood. Through its operation in markets, our society's needs are provided for at

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prices people can afford to pay. And, because the system is so efficient in allocating resources, we also grow more prosperous into the bargain. Self-interest in the international arena is to be understood as equally beneficial. Competition between states for capital and talent drives standards of living upwards. By contrast, both economic monopoly and power monopoly stultify.

The second common criticism nowadays is that the pursuit of national interest will lead to a spirit of isolationism and thus to a refusal by states to cooperate in ventures beyond their shores to deal with pressing dangers. Thus, last summer, the Foreign Secretary – echoing a Blairite analysis – asked rhetorically in a speech to the diplomatic corps:

‘Should . . . Governments pursue an active policy in the name of strategic imperatives, a dynamic approach which will promote change? Or should they take an alternative passive path, with no higher purpose than the maintenance of the status quo?’²⁸

Not surprisingly, having phrased the questions in this manner, Mr Straw preferred the second option. But this constitutes a great oversimplification of the arguments for, and against, foreign interventions. It is, as has already been argued here, quite false to suggest that a conservative (‘maintenance of the status quo’ in the Foreign Secretary’s words) foreign policy is necessarily passive. National interest, after all, does not exist in a vacuum. Countries – particularly countries like Britain with far-flung interests and responsibilities – have to be prepared to engage in an active foreign policy in several continents. The defence of British interests may involve on occasion the most vigorous and risky intervention of all – which is a full-blown war. It was in the unilateral defence of national interests (and national honour) that Britain under Mrs Thatcher fought the Falklands War eight thousand miles away in the South Atlantic in 1982. Probably not even Mr Blair, who has engaged in two wars so far, would have fought for the Falklands. After all, the Islands were merely British.

The real issue is, therefore: what sort of calculations, other than those of national interest, would warrant taking such risks? This question the advocates of a morally based foreign policy have, by and large, simply failed to answer. Realists, on the other hand, have no such problem, since they

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would easily agree with that arch-realist Lord Salisbury that: 'It's difficult enough to go around doing what is right, without going around trying to do good'.²⁹

This leads on to the third criticism, which is really a variant on the second. If national interest is the only standard justifying action – it is asked – will not terrible wrongs go unpunished? The honest answer is that some indeed will. It may simply be the case that no individual state, nor even a number of states, will be willing to intervene to prevent wickedness.

The most troubling example of this in recent years was undoubtedly the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. No one cared enough to intervene and hundreds of thousands died. In one sense, Rwanda is part of a specifically African problem: nowhere else could tribalism have resulted in such frenzied mass-butcherery; nowhere else in the world could such things occur without some neighbouring power intervening to stop the horrors. It was doubly unfortunate that the major European power within whose sphere of interest the crisis occurred, France, played a negative – indeed arguably a sinister – role.³⁰

It is clear enough, on the other hand, that a sensible pursuit of national interest by other states in the affairs of the former Yugoslavia should have led to a much earlier military intervention to stop the aggression from Belgrade. European countries had a strong interest in preventing the creation of destabilising flows of refugees. America also had an interest in demonstrating, as the Soviet Union lurched from one stage of its terminal crisis to another, that in another artificially created state Communist and extreme nationalist aggression should not succeed. Finally, the West as a whole had an interest, once the crisis spread in 1992 from Croatia to Bosnia, in preventing the growth of Islamic radicalism among a nation of grievously persecuted European Muslims. Why these various collective interests failed to prompt timely and vigorous action is a complicated story. But the important point here is that a failure of will by governments to take the steps which their real interests demand cannot be blamed on an approach to foreign policy that rests on the realities of national interest.

The fourth criticism that can be levelled at the realist approach to policy-making is almost exactly the opposite of the previous one – namely that such

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an approach will lead to war. Actually, wars waged on straightforward calculations of national interest are rare. Bismarck's wars were the exception not the rule, even for Bismarck – who spent the last twenty years of his Chancellorship successfully striving for peace in Europe. But nowadays, when most of the old-fashioned economic interests of war are outmoded, such conflicts are very unlikely indeed. Wars are too costly. And the assets to be acquired as booty are not worth fighting for. Saddam Hussein's attack on Kuwait in 1990 was altogether untypical – such a war could only have been fought by a rogue state, and it could only be fought for oil. More generally, the international system based on the UN today works quite effectively to prevent wars - perhaps sometimes even too effectively.³¹

On top of that, the balance of power still operates to restrain the ambitions of states. The principle of 'equilibrium', as it is also called, has never regained the role it had in previous centuries. The polarisation of the Cold War and later the unchallenged dominance of the American hyper-power – both underpinned by the nuclear weapon – fundamentally altered power politics. But nations may still group together regionally to restrain a potential predator, as both Russia and China have found. And we would be better advised to see the hostility to America of France and other continental European powers as an aspect of old-fashioned balance of power politics than of a new clash between cultures.³²

Finally, the military dominance of the US is itself a major force for peace. Contrary to far-fetched accusations from both wings of the political spectrum, America is not at all a warlike power unless it is terribly provoked, as it was by the attacks of 9/11. The subsequent action against Iraq would not have been undertaken without such prompting. Indeed, perhaps the greatest danger to future international peace and stability is that America will be so demoralised by its current experience as to withdraw from areas of potential turmoil – such as the Middle East and the Far East, where there are plenty of uneasy confrontations that could easily develop into armed conflicts.

There is a further qualification which needs to be made when considering issues of peace and security. Today's realists would argue that it is an oversimplification to distinguish in the traditional way *tout court* between the opposites of 'war' and 'peace'. They would question whether we are not

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already at war with forces or states that not only proclaim their desire to destroy us, but have acquired, or are about to acquire, the advanced weaponry to allow them to carry out their threats. The doctrines applicable to conflict have to reflect its realities. During the Cold War era the concept of deterrence overturned many assumptions about the acceptable limits on war. So, in the wake of 9/11, has the concept of pre-emption (perhaps better described as prevention). Clearly, in today's circumstances, the right of self-defence has to be extended beyond its traditional understanding.³³

Realists should, however, be prepared to concede one point of substance to the moralists. According to old-fashioned *Realpolitik*, war is seen an extension of politics by other means: it is to be considered as just another (albeit a costly and bloody) instrument of national interest. Such a view implies not merely that moral standards are applied differently when state interests are involved – which modern realists would argue – but rather that they are entirely inapplicable – which, surely, no right-thinking person should be prepared to accept. It may be difficult nowadays to describe a Just War, but we should not doubt that certain sorts of war are unjust, either because of their motivation or because of the means employed. Wars should not just be fought to make the world a better place. But neither should they be indulged in as guises for theft and murder.³⁴

Different Priorities

How might a foreign policy based on a realistic pursuit of British national interest actually look? We can say at once that such a policy would be characterised by the establishment of priorities, by the adoption of attainable objectives, and by the unhesitant and speedy exertion of all necessary force. Conversely, it would be marked by the unwillingness to surrender freedom of action, by a suspicion of grandiose projects, and by a distrust of high-minded multilateral initiatives. In more concrete terms, it is possible to demonstrate the workings of such an approach by reference to five current (and connected) preoccupations.

Military Focus

First, there is a problem which is not usually addressed as one of foreign policy at all, but in fact is so – what is referred to as defence 'overstretch'.

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History teaches that diplomacy on its own achieves little of note, except on occasion to enhance the standing of those who conduct it. Negotiations either reflect or have to be supported by force in order to yield a worthwhile effect. From nineteenth century 'gun boat diplomacy' to today's more delicately termed 'defence diplomacy', foreign and defence (or more widely 'security') policy have had to move in tandem. And in democracies at least, where civilians are in control, foreign policy has always to occupy the front seat.

But it follows, of course, that if foreign policy becomes unfocused, so will a country's defence effort. The classic features of this are a failure to make choices, an unwillingness to match objectives to resources and vice-versa, and a preference for multilateral undertakings encompassing as many powers (and so the passing of as many bucks) as possible. All these are to some extent evident in Britain's current defence posture.

British forces are at present heavily committed in the Balkans, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, Iraq and Northern Ireland. In all these areas, they generally acquit themselves well and the results are generally beneficial. Moreover, the aftermath of wars and the need to honour incurred obligations reduce our immediate freedom of manoeuvre. But some disengagement soon has to take place. New, unpredictably located threats are bound to emerge in the War against Terror (see below). Moreover, as the Chief of the Defence Staff has told the House of Commons Defence Committee, British forces would not under current circumstances be able to pursue a 'large scale' operation until 'just before the end of the decade'.³⁵ No major British national interests are now at stake in the Balkans or Sierra Leone.³⁶ In Afghanistan and Iraq Britain does have such interests, but in common with other countries. In fact, only in Ulster, where the political commitment seems weakest, is a unique and vital national interest involved.

Re-ordering our priorities over a period of years would allow Britain to be more effective in protecting its interests and also more ready to meet new threats. But the country's ability to do so will also depend on a willingness to invest more in defence – not less as, astonishingly, the Conservatives have recently appeared to envisage. And it will require procurement decisions to be made on the basis of real military need, not of politics – as the present Government fails to do, mainly because of its preoccupation with European defence projects.

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Europe

This leads neatly on to the second preoccupation - Britain's approach to the European Union. British policy needs to revert to what it was for several centuries, before becoming entangled in the EU's present legislative and judicial framework. Britain has long needed both to retain freedom of action and to acquire allies in order to maintain its interests. These dual preoccupations led to shifting alliances, and thus to the charge of perfidy. But they were extremely successful in preventing Europe becoming dominated by a single hostile power, or even a combination of such powers. And when, in the twentieth century, Britain could not pursue this balancing act alone, it drew in America to support the strategy.³⁷

Present policies, judged by these traditional criteria, simply make no sense. Britain's freedom to act is being increasingly constrained, as it reluctantly goes along with greater European integration, including the proposed new European Constitution.³⁸ The latter would require that Member States 'actively and unreservedly support the Union's common foreign and security policy in a spirit of loyalty and mutual solidarity'.³⁹ Yet this is a policy which Britain, as an ally of the United States, opposes today in almost every respect.

Still worse, despite a string of such concessions, Britain continues to lack allies in Europe, having failed either to find a way of breaking the Franco-German axis or of uniting the rest of Europe against it. A reordered policy would involve a fundamental disengagement from the European Union project in its present shape, followed by the implementation of a strategy to win over allies in Europe so as to ensure that our economic and strategic interests on the Continent were preserved. Britain's good relations with the Americans, which so enrage the French, are, by contrast, a source of attraction to the newer members of the EU. The latter have no compunction about recognising and profiting from American world leadership. These countries will be our allies, if we are prepared to make it worth their while.

America

The third current concern is Britain's relationship with America. The Anglo-US 'special relationship' is indeed in various respects special, based as it is on language, culture, experience and values. It is also immensely important

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to Britain, as successive British Prime Ministers have understood. It is not too much to say that upon American support depends Britain's continued role as the most important of the world's second-order powers. Military and intelligence collaboration are at the heart of this.

Contrary to Mr Blair's frequent assertions, Britain does have to choose between good relations with America and integration in Europe. Arguably, even more foolish than the present British Government's acceptance of the European Constitution has been its championing of European defence collaboration. The French, of course, with their outdated defence technology and (through bad relations with America) an inability to renew it, are delighted to involve Britain in this project. But it makes no sense for the British. France will never cease its drive to counter American predominance. Consequently, it will never cease, either, its pressure for a separate (and competing) defence, initially within NATO but ultimately outside it. Britain cannot be part of this enterprise without abandoning – and being abandoned by – the United States. Again, the present British Government's refusal to face realities lies at the root of a looming crisis which some future government will sooner or later have to face.

Britain's most important international role is as America's chief ally. For this, some sacrifices have to be made – including that of supporting the United States in the war it had decided to wage in Iraq, even though the case for it was questionable and the preparation for its aftermath inadequate. Co-operation does not, however, imply an attitude of subservience. When, in Iraq and elsewhere, Britain believes that its interests or its service personnel are needlessly jeopardised it should expect its voice to be heard.⁴⁰

We should also accept that the UK's and the US's interests are not always the same or, in particular instances, even compatible: a sensible, pragmatic policy would openly acknowledge that and in doing so put relations with America on a more realistic and sustainable basis. For example, there is no need for Britain to risk its traditional relationships in the Middle East by echoing America's unconditional support for Israel. We cannot assume either that America's interests will be the same as ours in Northern Ireland, given the powerful Irish lobby in the United States. We cannot even presume that Washington, under a different Administration, might not return to the policy it pursued in the 1960s and 1970s – and with which it flirted under President George Bush Sr. – of sacrificing Britain in pursuit of an historic deal with Europe.⁴¹

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In the long run of history, Britain's alliance with the US is conditional on a coincidence of the two powers' interests, which may last for decades but which need neither be absolute, nor indeed permanent. And even in the short run, some robustness in place of Mr Blair's dewy-eyed enthusiasm for every whim that comes out of the White House might yield dividends. Confusing personal friendship between leaders with the interests of allied states may play well in the US. But it looks like soft-headedness when viewed from the UK. It is important that the Americans too should understand this. The British will be less restless with the reality of Britain's playing second fiddle, if that instrument emits from time to time a distinctive tune. In such circumstances, Britain will be a more reliable ally. The fact remains that for the foreseeable future the alliance with America is the best option available, and Britain should adhere to it and use it – in our national interest.

NATO

A fourth area of concern, which stems from all three matters already mentioned, is the future of NATO. There was a time not so long ago when it seemed that the organisation would soon be redundant. America's enormous technological superiority on the one hand, and the obstructionism of France and Germany on the other, contributed to both sides considering a parting of the ways. And both sides nowadays also feel that they can enjoy useful relations with the former enemy – Russia – without establishing a common Western front. It was always in Britain's interests to resist these fissiparous tendencies. But in the circumstances prevailing just a few months ago, there was little that the British Government could do to restore NATO's importance.

Now new opportunities beckon. America's dallying with unilateralism and its surge of triumphalism have both sunk in the sands of Iraq. Yet France and Germany have had time to absorb the lesson of America's overwhelming and unchallengeable military superiority. On top of that, the smooth arrival of seven new NATO members has provided the US and Britain with a strong Eastern-Central European counterweight against the Franco-German axis.

This conjuncture is so important because NATO today offers more than a military alliance. It presents an alternative framework of legitimacy for

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interventions to the much less friendly forum of the United Nations Security Council. An extensive opinion survey performed in America and Europe has confirmed this. It showed that almost as many people thought that interventions performed under the auspices of NATO were legitimate as those conducted through the UN.⁴²

A realistic assessment of British military and political interests suggests, therefore, that an active British policy within NATO would yield greater benefits to the national interest than involvement in the various other international organisations which currently preoccupy government. Within a revived and active NATO, Britain could best deploy its advantages while making fewest concessions to opposing interests. It could benefit from closeness to America without risking absorption into American strategy. It could negotiate with European states on a basis of strength. And it could reduce today's constant and time-consuming diplomatic preoccupation with the UN.

Terrorism and WMD

But more than that, of course, NATO could be a useful framework within which to maximise Western efforts against the dual threats of Islamic terrorism and proliferation of WMD – which constitute our fifth, and most urgent, current worry. America is the prime target of the hatred of Islamists and rogue state rulers, and so there is a temptation for other countries to back away from support for the US. But to do so would not only be discreditable: it would also be a serious strategic error. America alone has the economic, technological and military resources to fight back against these often distant threats. And European countries, including Britain, are potentially even more vulnerable to Islamic extremism because of our large indigenous Muslim communities. Moreover, a rogue state with a nuclear weapon would be more likely to fire it at a second- or third-order country than at the mighty United States, because of the latter's fearsome power to retaliate (as well as its developing ballistic missile defence shield).

US intelligence sources are vital to Britain's security in monitoring the Islamist terrorist threat. The US is the only power with the reach to effect regime change in states that support terrorism or which might use WMD against us. And the US alone is rich and powerful enough to secure the support of countries, like Pakistan, that are prepared to engage the terrorists directly.

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Britain's own main immediate priorities in the field of counter-terrorism should be to achieve closer control over those of its own communities which pose a threat and to regain control over its porous borders. But beyond that we can try to ensure by our influence in Washington that messages are more suitable for the international audience than they sometimes have been. The justifications of American policy in the War against Terror should echo realism and not utopianism. Western public opinion outside America is affected less by talk of a better world than it is by the balance of advantage. And, similarly, in Iraq Britain should be prepared to argue for outcomes that may lack the attributes of pure democracy but which still ensure that whoever comes to power there poses no threat to us, our interests or our allies.

Restoring the Foreign Office

Sixty years ago, in rather different circumstances to be sure, the Marquess of Londonderry complained that the Foreign Office, which (as he asserted) should be the 'pivot of the Government, [had] not existed since the days of Sir Edward Grey'.⁴³ The fifty-two former diplomats who recently published a letter of complaint about Government policy towards the Middle East would doubtless echo that.⁴⁴ Their letter, in fact, bears witness to a serious breakdown of morale and discipline within the FCO. Behind this civilised revolt lies resentment, of course, at the way in which foreign policy is now made by Number Ten. Yet the less-than-balanced contents of the letter itself also indirectly reveal the way in which within the Foreign Office community today there is now no organising theory of policy at all. There are only departments, sections and desks with their own factional lines and prejudices - including the (increasingly dominant) European side infatuated with federalism and the (desperately peevish) Middle East side imbued with Arabism.⁴⁵ This is what happens when Britain does not have a foreign policy.

Yet the Foreign Office itself is not altogether to blame for its factionalism and disarray. For several decades now, the FCO has found itself largely friendless at home so it is no wonder that it looks for sustenance abroad. It has been the target of criticism from many different quarters. The progressive Left have considered it stuffy, snobbish and out of touch. The libertarian Right have complained that it truckles to tyrants. More recently still, and in the name of

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modernisation, diplomats have been expected to give prime concern to commerce, or – as the current ‘Strategy’ insists – to projecting a multi-cultural and inclusive image of Britain overseas. All this must be dispiriting for those involved. Few Foreign Office officials took up their jobs with the intention of becoming business consultants or public relations experts. Presumably, they thought they would be advising upon, and helping to implement, foreign policy. Under firm political direction, they should be given the chance, once again, to do so.

Palmerston was right. Britain’s national interests are, indeed, eternal; and it remains the abiding duty of government to defend them. What the country requires now is a foreign policy devised, and a Foreign Office engaged, to make that possible.

References

- 1 Henry Kissinger, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy?* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).
- 2 The former French Foreign Minister, Hubert Védrine, seems to have coined the term *hyperpuissance* (trans. ‘hyper-power’). It was not meant appreciatively, but the expression usefully reflects reality.
- 3 Andrew Roberts, *Salisbury: Victorian Titan* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1999), p. 841.
- 4 For the Anglo-sphere, see James Bennet, ‘The Emerging Anglo-sphere: America and the West’, *Orbis* (Winter, 2002).
- 5 Of course, some would argue that Britain is wholly subordinate to American power. But this is an exaggeration, despite our dependence on American support in many spheres. I deal later with the need to manage intelligently the Anglo-American relationship.
- 6 Neither can maintenance of law and order: but that too is regarded as something of an optional extra by a British government almost exclusively interested in welfare. See my *Criminal negligence: How current policies towards Crime, Policing and Punishment fail the Nation* (Politeia, 2003).
- 7 Foreign Secretary’s Foreword to *UK International Priorities: A Strategy for the FCO* (Cm 6052, 2003).
- 8 Stephen M. Walt, ‘International Relations: One World, Many Theories’, *Foreign Policy* (Spring, 1998).
- 9 Asa Briggs, *The Age of Improvement, 1783-1867* (London: Longman, 1971), pp 350-68.
- 10 Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), pp. 1-55, 804-35.
- 11 The 1992-93 Somalia intervention was originally sanctioned by President George Bush Sr., but it was much expanded and also internationalized under President Clinton.
- 12 In a recent polemical treatise, the leading American neo-conservatives Richard Perle and David Frum argue for a global programme of unilateral US interventions to stamp out ‘Evil’. This may be a noble aim. But in no ordinary sense is it a conservative one. Nor could, for example, a British conservative have written a book with such a utopian title (David Frum and Richard Perle, *An End to Evil: How to win the war on terror* (New York: Random House, 2003)).

13 For an analysis of these arguments - and for the articulation of a new variant - see Charles Krauthammer, 'Democratic Realism: An American Foreign Policy for a Unipolar World', 2004 *Irving Kristol Lecture*, American Enterprise Institute, 12 February 2004.

14 Whether European integration contributed anything to victory in the Cold War is extremely doubtful. But it has certainly contributed to American isolation in the post-Cold War world.

15 Actually, President Reagan described the Soviet leaders as 'the focus of Evil in the modern world'. But it was much the same thing (Speech to the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals, Orlando, Florida, 8 March 1983).

16 Lady Thatcher's thoughts about how the world might have been, and should have been, are contained in her book, *Statecraft: Strategies for a Changing World* (London: Harper Collins, 2002).

17 President Bush first propounded his dream of a 'New World Order' in his speech to the US Congress on 1 September 1990. In the same spirit, during the Gulf War Mr Bush would insist on repeated resort to the United Nations and on the assembly of a much wider coalition of allies than military considerations or even commonsense dictated. See Lady Thatcher's reflections in Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London: Harper Collins, 1993): 'The failure to disarm Saddam Hussein and to follow through the victory so that he was publicly humiliated in the eyes of his subjects and Islamic neighbours was a mistake which stemmed from the excessive emphasis placed right from the start on international consensus. The opinion of the UN counted for too much and the military objective of defeat too little' (p. 828).

18 Speech in Bonn, 11 March 1991.

19 Brendan Simms, *Unfinest Hour: Britain and the Destruction of Bosnia* (London: Allen Lane, 2001), p. 51. Simms' book is required reading for those who wish to understand the shortcomings of the last Conservative Government's foreign policy.

20 The desire of the FCO and the US State Department to keep artificial communist-created states like Federal Yugoslavia and the USSR together was also directed by a fear of right wing nationalism: so, in that sense, varieties of liberalism were at odds in these years.

21 Emmanuel de Waresquiel, *Talleyrand: Le Prince immobile* (Paris : Fayard, 2003), p. 576.

22 The new Foreign Office Mission Statement of 12 May 1997 more precisely argued that British foreign policy should have 'an ethical dimension'.

23 For a recent attempt to argue for a continuation of an 'ethical foreign policy', see: Nicholas J. Wheeler and Tim Dunne, 'Moral Britannia? Evaluating the Ethical Dimension in Labour's Foreign Policy', *Foreign Policy Centre* (2004).

24 Speech to the Economic Club, Chicago, 24 April 1999.

25 Speech in Sedgfield, 5 March 2004.

26 GATT: General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. WTO: World Trade Organisation.

27 This, incidentally, is one reason why we should object in principle to tax-funded overseas aid programmes. Other reasons are that such programmes result in misallocation of economic resources, and so inhibit wealth creation; that they do nothing to promote necessary economic reforms in recipient countries; and that they often result in the transfer of money squeezed from poor Western taxpayers to the benefit of wealthy Third World kleptocratic elites.

28 Speech by Jack Straw, London, 11 June 2003.

29 Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 834.

30 The extent to which France gave material support to the Hutu faction which committed the genocide is hotly debated: but French policy undoubtedly contributed to the carnage.

31 For example, had the Gulf War of 1991 been fought to a conclusion, the Iraq War of 2003 would have been unnecessary. Had Milosevic faced a Western military intervention in

1991-1992, he would not have had to be defeated again in both 1995 and 1999. Arguably, a greater willingness to wage war would mean that fewer wars had eventually to be waged.

32 Robert Kagan, in his influential study of the subject, seems to me to accept the Europeans' (in particular, the French) descriptions of their motives too much at face value (Robert Kagan, *Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (London: Atlantic books, 2003)).

33 In traditional theory, *Ius Ad Bellum* (the legitimacy of the decision to wage war) is distinguished from *Ius In Bello* (the legitimacy of the means adopted in waging it). The application of both is affected by the nature of the current international Islamist terrorist threat. See the following footnote.

34 For questionable but important arguments in favour of traditional Just War theory and its application, see Sir Michael Quinlan's articles in *The Tablet* – 'The Just War litmus test' (13 October 2001), 'Don't give up on the Just War' (19 August 2003) and 'Iraq: the indictment' (13 March 2004).

35 Testimony by General Sir Michael Walker, 24 March 2004 (Uncorrected Transcript).

36 Within Africa, Britain's national interest is involved not in Sierra Leone but in Zimbabwe. But the British Government effectively ignores the latter and concentrates on the former.

37 It can, of course, be argued that the cost of relying on the US was relinquishment by Britain of its Empire. But was there an alternative?

38 Anyone interested in understanding why this is so important in Tony Blair's view of things should read Robert Cooper, *The Breaking of Nations: Order and chaos in the twenty-first century* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003). Mr Cooper, a former adviser to Mr Blair, observes: 'The mark of a real international community, in which not just interests but also identity and even destiny are shared, will be that foreign policy becomes a part of domestic politics. This is already beginning to happen in Europe' (p. 150).

39 Draft European Constitution, Article 15, para 2. Martin Howe will examine the implications of this and other provisions in a forthcoming publication by Politeia.

40 This should not, however, involve the patronizing belief, apparently held in some British military and diplomatic circles, that Britain is possessed of a degree of subtlety that reduces everywhere the need for force. British troops are not well served when America is discouraged from eliminating those who pose a serious threat to coalition troops.

41 On US policy in the 1960s, see Lionel Bell, *The Throw That Failed: Britain's Original Application To Join The Common Market* (London: New European Publications, 1995), p. 107. On the Bush administration's shift towards Germany and a United Europe, see Thatcher, *Downing Street Years*, pp. 783-84.

42 Transatlantic Trends 2003.

43 Gordon A. Craig, 'The British Foreign Office from Grey to Austen Chamberlain', in *The Diplomats 1919-1939* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), ed. Gordon A. Craig and Felix Gilbert, p. 15.

44 Public letter 26 April 2004. The letter, inspired by the so-called 'Camel Corps' of the FCO, was rightly criticised for making no mention of the threat posed to Israel by suicide bombers and for failing to offer any solution – short of abject retreat – to the military crisis in Iraq.

45 During the crisis in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, the South-East European side of the FCO demonstrated how much it had similarly been captured by the dominant Communist and Serb elements in the region. The officials concerned provided consistently bad and biased advice, which was duly reflected in British policy.

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Britain at present lacks a coherent foreign policy and badly needs one. In *Why Britain Needs a Foreign Policy*, Robin Harris explains that such a policy should avoid the illusions of misplaced idealism. It should be based on a realistic analysis of power. Its aim should be the promotion of British national interest. Such an approach would allow Britain to address the major international challenges the country faces, such as the overstretch of its defences and the emergence of the European mega-state. It would also place the Anglo-US special relationship on a sounder footing and help the country cope effectively with threats of Islamic terrorism and Weapons of Mass Destruction.

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