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An Examination of the United Kingdom’s Diplomatic Power; Quietly Vanished or Holding Strong?

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AN EXAMINATION OF THE UNITED KINGDOM’S
DIPLOMATIC POWER;
QUIETLY VANISHED OR HOLDING STRONG?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In a world where the United Kingdom no longer has the coercive economic or military power to flex its muscle on the global stage, diplomacy may now be her only effective instrument for gaining leverage amongst the world’s multiple agents. This dissertation uses a literature search to assess historical drivers for change in diplomatic method and to analyse contemporary theories of state power. It then reflects the findings against the current international situation to draw conclusions on the potential for the new United Kingdom Government to influence future international decision-making through official diplomacy. It concludes that, whilst opportunity exists, successful outcomes require improved strategic thinking.
INTRODUCTION

In 1784, Great Britain had a national debt, in today’s money, of £302,000M; of £17,000M recovered in annual tax revenues, £10,500M went on interest payments; Government stock had been sold at huge discounts and interest rates were low; the war to retain sovereignty over the American colonies was lost. Into this challenging environment came a new Prime Minister, William Pitt the Younger. He settled to his task and delivered a strategy that quickly recovered the country’s finances and expanded trade. He did this with an ease and clarity more appropriate to a household budget. The opposition expressed the thanks of the country and declared the plan to be masterful.

Two and a quarter centuries later, the country holds a similar balance sheet but now the Government struggles to take control of a recovery plan; the last Prime Minister, like other Western economic leaders, bickered with bankers and watched helplessly as credit and trade was managed out of his reach. The reasons for the difficulties are well recorded if, perhaps, poorly understood; amongst them, the multinational realities of manufacturing and service industries coupled with widening liberal economies and transnational finance.

Driven by the agenda of the recent General Election, the political focus has been held on issues such as MPs’ expenses, electoral reform and a small part of National Insurance revenues. Foreign policy is unclear and international politics seem, to many, to achieve little. Again, a new, young Prime Minister has arrived; but is the United Kingdom Government now reduced to little more than a spectator in international affairs?

2 ibid., p 235.
3 Regulating Banks - Garrottes and Sticks, The Economist, Jan 30 2010, p 89.
DIPLOMATIC METHOD

Diplomatic relationships have been recorded since written history began. In the 12th century BC, Agamemnon sent a triple envoy to negotiate with Achilles in the Trojan War. Study of this ancient story provides a stark and early lesson on intelligent diplomacy. In choosing the three individuals, Agamemnon carefully selected people who he felt had the best likelihood of influencing Achilles; they knew Achilles from their formative years and had the advantage of his trust together with knowledge and understanding of his perspective; they were elite and held the authority to negotiate.

Many other examples of ancient diplomacy can be studied. According to David Milne, Thucydides’s history of the Peloponnesian War demonstrates policies built upon realpolitik underpinning strategies of negotiation and communication. In AD 50, the sudden emergence of Boudicca as a destructive agent against the Roman Empire can be seen in terms of an imperial failure to understand the motivators of people and, consequently, to extract failure from within existing harmony.

And whilst there is evidence of diplomatic engagement from 2500BC that cemented normative behaviour and equality in some regions, it is not until the 15th century that Europe first saw resident ambassadors in embassies. The role of these ambassadors, stated by an ambassador of the time, was to win and preserve the friendship of princes. Somewhat less liberally, he also championed the goal of the aggrandizement of his own state, driving the need for alliances and information. It is not difficult to see that these two roles may not sit comfortably with each other, outwardly seeking friendship on the one hand, inwardly seeking advantage on the other; diplomacy had to find the balance of self-interest and mutuality of benefit.

For Great Britain, alliances and information would become fundamental to her security. During Elizabeth I’s reign, Drake, Raleigh and Shakespeare were contributing to the golden age of the English Renaissance but spies, secret alliances and violence had become deliberate strategies for national security. Francis Walsingham is credited by some as running Great Britain’s first secret service. Such secret activity is usually considered outside diplomacy owing to its one-sided nature but it demonstrated a willingness and ability to adjust to the challenges of the era under the imperative of pragmatism. Intelligence, both open and secret, become part of the diplomat’s toolkit, providing advantage in understanding the interlocutor.

The introduction to this text played heavily on Pitt the Younger’s ability to act unilaterally in his financial strategies. Looking more broadly, there was no such independence from foreign affairs. In 1756, Great Britain played a part in the Seven Years War which stretched from the Americas, through Europe, India and the Philippines. At the end of the 18th century, the French Revolution and the American War of Independence were only parts of an ever changing environment in which European alliances were constantly being nurtured and replaced. With an eye on the threat from France, British strategies were regularly adjusted in the light of

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9 *ibid.*, p 102.
analysis and the diplomatic reports received\textsuperscript{12}. Areas of land, such as Belgium, were offered as part-exchanges; armies and navies were built and rebuilt. In these times, alliances were formed for a specific purpose and then abandoned to history when the purpose had passed. Sir Harold Nicolson’s assertion that only a small number of western powers could be entrusted to maintain global peace\textsuperscript{13} is built upon his belief that the balance of power constituted the very principle of state security. Lord Castlereagh, Foreign Secretary from 1812 to 1822, recognised that maintaining security by such a balance required him to not overbuild his alliances. Consequently, he sought to maintain an effective military equilibrium rather than an overwhelming dominance which he felt would be destabilising\textsuperscript{14}.

As industrial output increased and innovation and invention accelerated, military adjustments to meet the need became increasingly expensive. Various set against the Spanish, the French and the Germans\textsuperscript{15}, potential war needed constant alertness, reliable intelligence and dependable allies\textsuperscript{16}. If regents, ministers and civil servants could construct the policy, they were entirely dependant on diplomats to deliver success. Diplomacy was, essentially, bilateral, discreet and part of a grand strategy for a state’s survival.

The British Empire

On the back of the military power struggles briefly mentioned above, it would be easy to assume that the British Empire was the result of a Whitehall plan for annexation of various foreign lands as part of a grand strategy of domination. One comprehensive review of this Empire concludes that expansion was not directed or planned by ministers as an end in itself but was rather a result of opportunities for trade in many sectors\textsuperscript{17} or, as Niall Ferguson puts it, on the export of people and capital\textsuperscript{18}. Military and naval strength followed commercial pioneers to protect interests and, once established, these pioneers settled with their families, possessions and ceremonies.

In his detailed examination of the rise and fall of the British Empire, Lawrence James refers to a latter stage diplomacy of decolonisation with the attention of the Foreign Office heavily focused on an orderly and respectable withdrawal of control from its overseas territories and colonies\textsuperscript{19}, although decolonisation was not without its bloody episodes such as the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya\textsuperscript{20} or the violent struggles in India. In his diplomatic career, David Hannay frequently found that proud nations such as Iran and Afghanistan remembered the hand of British diplomacy in their troubled history and that such memories influenced their decision-making still\textsuperscript{21}. James believes that Britain’s strategies for decolonisation were admirable; he praises Whitehall and diplomatic staff saying that “few empires have equipped their subjects with the intellectual wherewithal to overthrow their rulers” and “none has been survived by so much

\textsuperscript{13}Derek Drinkwater, \textit{Sir Harold Nicolson and International Relations; The Practitioner as Theorist}, (Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), p 61.
\textsuperscript{14}Harold Nicholson, \textit{op cit}, p 76.
\textsuperscript{16}Garrett Mattingly, \textit{op cit.}, p 53.
\textsuperscript{17}P J Marshall, \textit{British Empire; an Illustrated History}, (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), p 23.
\textsuperscript{19}Lawrence James, \textit{The Rise and Fall of the British Empire}, (London: Abacus, 2004), p 544.
\textsuperscript{20}Huw Bennett, ‘The Mau Mau emergency as part of the British Army’s post-war Counterinsurgency experience’, \textit{Defense and Security Analysis}, Vol 23, No 2, June 07, pp 143-158.
\textsuperscript{21}David Hannay, \textit{Cyprus, the Search for a Solution}, (London: Tauris, 2005), p 239.
affection and moral respect”22. Ferguson points to British legacies of Common Law and cheap
and effective administrative structures as processes that were handed to the new rulers intact23.
These structures were non-venal and have, in many cases, remained intact to date. In Africa,
according to Richard Dowden, British decolonisation sits in stark contrast to Belgium, Spanish
and Portuguese empires which frequently ended in expulsion and violent riots. In Dowden’s
view, British decolonisation strategy aimed to provide new states with “an army, an airline, a
mace for its parliament and stamps.”24 As late as 1975, the Portuguese evacuated, panic-
stricken, from East Timor, allowing her to enjoy just 9 days of independence before being
invaded by Indonesia.

From all this, was borne a Commonwealth within a world in which, according to Henry
Kissinger, Britain was able to hold a position of 20th century foreign policy that “didn’t
proclaim moral absolutes, and its presumption to represent the common good was frequently
justified”. Today, the Commonwealth seems a poorly understood institution but, according to
New Zealand professor David McIntyre, it is cherished by small states yet remains vulnerable, if
disregarded, to obsolescence25.

World War One

A common assessment of the First World War is that it was a failure of diplomacy to maintain a
European balance of military power at peace26 although John Keegan concludes that the Great
War’s origins are “mysterious”27. At the beginning of the 20th century, there would have been
little reason for foreign policy to be totally committed to avoiding war. Posturing, preparing and
prosecuting war was the history of Europe and the primary objective of foreign policy was
rather to ensure that war was cost-effective and strategically beneficial28. A relatively recent
detailed history considers that the War was a deliberately chosen strategy with a
misunderstanding of the horror of the means to achieve the ends29 and concludes that British
policy-makers felt that a fight in the Somme was, as a route to peace, preferable to US brokered
diplomacy30. Thucydides had already noted that a feeling of war being inevitable often
delivered its own prophetic violence31.

In diplomatic terms, the years after the First World War are the most significant. Despite the
exhaustion of the fight, Great Britain continued to act across the world into the Middle East,
Turkey, Russia, Ireland and the Far East. In the view of Peter Mangold32, this policy was not
matched by resources and the imbalance may mark a decline of British power. For Correlli
Barnett, the decline is set at the door of Baldwin. Fondly remembering 19th century leaders as
men “hard of mind and hard of will”, he sees Baldwin as a weak man who acted on his religious
morals; “such were the rulers ... to which befell, after the Great War, the task of preserving the
power of England”33. For some, the 1920s marked a new diplomatic environment marked by

22 Lawrence James, *op cit.*, p 639.
23 Niall Ferguson, *op cit.*, p 361.
30 *ibid.*, p 149.
international organisations and public scrutiny\textsuperscript{34} but the agenda was still war and peace in sovereign states. The international club was small and exclusive, with conference diplomacy offered only to the great military powers.

**World War Two**

Chamberlain’s return from Munich in 1939 was momentous. It marked the dying moment of a European balance of military power as a policy for regional security and it would have given no comfort that heads of state summity could become diplomatically reliable. Following the War, Great Britain was, again, exhausted and broke yet, from the perspective of some in France, Britain, alone, was truly victorious. She had sacrificed her economy, her global presence and her independence in security; the “English felt that honour and fortitude would win through where the French knew that defeat was always ready to present”\textsuperscript{35}. Whilst British politics and finances were in turmoil, her diplomacy focused on a new special relationship with the United States\textsuperscript{36}. This diplomacy could not now be based upon British military strength or economic muscle; her history and her values were leveraged in diplomacy as the foundation of her nuclear weapon capability\textsuperscript{37}.

**Suez**

Although a principal power in Europe into the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, Great Britain had never been able to dominate the region without intelligently constructed alliances\textsuperscript{38}. What was new after 1945, and probably not recognised, was the new dynamic of being a junior partner to the United States; such inequality was not yet understood. Eden’s decision in 1956 to take control of the Suez corridor was to expose the balance of power within the special relationship. Although Great Britain had the military capability to complete the Suez operation, Eden’s actions violated international expectations\textsuperscript{39} and the United States was able to reverse the actions of an ally through economic power. This was no surprise to Ambassador Makins in Washington; his diplomatic despatch warning that President Eisenhower was unhappy\textsuperscript{40} was received in Downing Street but the implications were not understood\textsuperscript{41}. The Prime Minister, who had held the office of Foreign Secretary on three occasions, did not seek the advice of Foreign Office officials\textsuperscript{42}. Henry Kissinger believes that, if engaged, America may have shared London’s view that Nasser should be removed\textsuperscript{43}. Diplomatic effectiveness had been deliberately, though unwittingly, sidelined\textsuperscript{44}; failure followed.

**The Falklands**

The 1982 conflict in the Falklands provides several important lessons for effective diplomacy. Conventional wisdom is that the United Kingdom’s overt intention to degrade local military

\textsuperscript{34} John Baylis and Steve Smith, \textit{op cit.}, p 391.
\textsuperscript{39} Derek Drinkwater, \textit{op cit.}, p 208.
\textsuperscript{41} \textit{ibid.}, p 230.
\textsuperscript{43} Henry Kissinger, \textit{op cit.}, p 533.
\textsuperscript{44} \textit{ibid.}, p 229.
protection, as part of a defence review, was a tacit indication that she was losing interest in her sovereignty of the Islands but Argentina probably made the biggest blunder in assessment as it was she who went on to lose the fight. Argentina’s claim to sovereignty was not completely without validity. In 1936, John Troutbeck, head of the Foreign Office’s America desk, said that the seizure of the Falklands in 1833 made Great Britain look like “international bandits”. It is likely that this was known to diplomatic staff in 1982 when the United Kingdom constructed the policy principle that the wish of the Islanders was paramount. It may also partially explain why United States’ political support was measured and low-key. At the time, Jorge Luis Borges saw the Falkland Islands conflict as “two bald men fighting over a comb” but the Soviet Union believed that there was a future issue of resources at stake. In 1969, the United Kingdom had considered exploring for oil with the involvement of Argentina but Downing Street postponed a decision due to the imminent General Election.

Echoing Palmerston’s quote that “we have no eternal allies and no permanent enemies”, Lawrence Freedman reminds us that the loss of British lives in the Falklands does not mean that Argentina is excluded from interest in the Islands forever. For Argentina, as she now embarks upon a fresh round of diplomatic effort regarding the Islands, the path is complicated by the disastrous analytical error of judgment in invading almost 30 years ago. And for British diplomacy, broader engagement with Latin America remains under the shadow of this unresolved disagreement.

**Late 20th Century**

Traditional diplomatic activity was, on the whole, bilateral and often carried out quietly. Discreet activity allowed diplomats to avoid interference from non-participants, including the media and non-executives such as the House of Commons; it permitted negotiation where positions could change without loss of face; it permitted denial. Christopher Meyer notes that, in issues of war and peace, there is a fine line between negotiation and appeasement. US Secretary of State Powell felt that the White House was inclined to see the whole diplomatic apparatus “as appeasers”. Paul Sharp wrestles with the concept of appeasement for the greater good and he invites consideration that, if the outcome of the Second World War with its millions of dead, the post-war rise of Soviet communism and the demise of British prosperity had been clearly anticipated, politicians may have shied away from meeting the Nazi regime with force. In doing so, Sharp reinforces the case for a clear foreign policy with an effective diplomatic corps, able to contribute to analysis of present situations and assess long-term future outcomes.

For international diplomats of all countries, a discreet environment for negotiation and understanding was considered to be essential. Diplomats developed a sense of being part of a proud international profession, working to high political agendas set by state leaders and

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47 *idem*.
50 *idem*.
52 Christopher Meyer, *Getting Our Way*, Last broadcast 22 Feb 2010, 03:00 on BBC Four.
frequently focused on territory and war\textsuperscript{56}. In the United Kingdom, David Milne states that foreign policy was based on practicalities, not abstractions\textsuperscript{57}.

As the 20\textsuperscript{th} century progressed, it became clear that, for Great Britain, the power to dictate events had gone. British foreign policy had to seek to influence rather than control. Kissinger believes that London recognised that its power base had waned and he noted that Whitehall demonstrated an “extraordinary ability to adjust to changing circumstances” with British diplomacy becoming indispensable to US policy-making\textsuperscript{58}. According to Sharp, Ambassador Ormsby-Gore was invited to contribute to the analysis of the Cuban Missile Crisis\textsuperscript{59}. Reflecting Agamemnon’s principle when dealing with Achilles, Prime Minister Macmillan was aware that Ormsby-Gore was a long-time friend and confidant of President Kennedy, thereby maximising diplomatic influence on a powerful ally.

In David Milne’s view, US diplomacy had, on occasion, been weakened by intellectual thinking in Washington that failed to understand foreign ideologies and national imperatives. He uses the war in Vietnam as an example of a failure of strategic analysis leading to an inadequate strategy. Jonathan Caverley agrees, stating that the reliance on military force as the sole instrument of power led to failure\textsuperscript{60}. In Milne’s words “foreign policy requires a cognitive flexibility that too often eludes certain intellectuals with theories to prove”\textsuperscript{61}. In 1997, British Prime Minister Blair indicated the importance that he attached to London’s influence in Washington and stated that such influence remained based upon history and geography\textsuperscript{62}.

\textbf{Structures and processes}

The setting up of residential embassies with formal ceremony in the 15\textsuperscript{th} century ensured that ambassadors were seen as the authoritative representatives of their capitals with diplomatic immunity. They were supported by professional staff, had effective communications and worked with secret reports on grand strategic issues\textsuperscript{63}. In 1782, the Foreign Office in London was established and, in 1868, the current Foreign Office building was constructed as part of the strategy to impress and court others. The secret intelligence apparatus was incorporated into the foreign affairs office in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century and, after the Second World War, the foreign and consular services were merged, resulting in a single minister empowered to run policy and strategy across the full spectrum of foreign affairs.

More recent changes may be regarded as a reversal of such a cohesive foreign affairs machine, moving away from a structure with singular vision, policy and strategy under unified leadership. Even in 1946, Sir Harold Nicholson saw the dangers of foreign policy becoming unfocused, resorting to “catchphrases, slogans and comforting words”\textsuperscript{64}.

On becoming Prime Minister in 1979, Margaret Thatcher had no experience of foreign affairs and she quickly sidelined the role of the Foreign Secretary in government, even during the

\textsuperscript{56} John Bayliss and Steve Smith, \textit{op cit.}, p 390.  
\textsuperscript{57} David Milne, \textit{op cit.}, p 62.  
\textsuperscript{59} Paul Sharp, \textit{op cit.}, p 68.  
\textsuperscript{61} David Milne, \textit{op cit.}, p 67.  
\textsuperscript{63} G R Berridge, \textit{op cit.}, pp 2-6.  
\textsuperscript{64} Derek Drinkwater, \textit{op cit.}, p 116.
Falklands conflict. She did not have a high regard for those who were charged with advising ministers and had a “cruel, generalised condemnation of the Foreign Office”\(^{65}\).

By 1992, with the Cold War recently over and many challenges ahead, Michael Clarke noted that British foreign policy was not “directed at anything in particular”\(^{66}\).

Tony Blair’s informal decision-making processes further diminished in-depth analysis of the issues or the objectives. He established a small foreign policy “cell” in Downing Street and excluded a broad spectrum of participation. After a brief declaration of the politics of intervention in 1999 in a speech in Chicago\(^{67}\), he resorted to a superficial examination of each crisis as it emerged, preferring to discuss an issue quickly with his communications director, political advisor and just a single expert from the Foreign Office; the Foreign Secretary was a spectator\(^{68}\). The weakness of this “sofa government” was highlighted in Robin Butler’s report into the use of intelligence surrounding Iraq’s Weapons of Mass Destruction\(^{69}\).

In some cases, structural changes were implemented with good intentions but with degrading effects on foreign policy-making. Following the setting up of DfID in 1997, Clare Short was given control of the Department. With her very detailed knowledge of African issues, built significantly upon her husband’s long-term interest in the region, Short, with great determination and energy, drove forward a poverty-reduction programme, particularly in the Congo, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi yet there was little reference to those who worked outside of her Department\(^{70}\). DfID’s drive to reduce suffering was effective and, for example, with British encouragement and investment, Rwanda’s economy and central infrastructure were transformed\(^{71}\)\(^{72}\). However, some commentators now see widening inequality with no rural benefit\(^{72}\) and others see a real chance that conflict will return\(^{74}\). Whilst this demonstrates that development assistance can make a difference when driven forward with money and enthusiasm, elsewhere foreign policy was undermined. Sir Hilary Synnott, the British diplomat in charge of Iraq’s Southern Coalition Provisional Authority, reports that Clare Short was barely on speaking terms with Foreign Secretary Robin Cook and that her Department made no effort to develop a strategy to support United Kingdom policy in Iraq\(^{75}\). Into this vacuum, the Prime Minister’s Diplomatic Advisor became increasingly involved in decision-making and the Foreign Office had no senior official running Iraq strategy\(^{76}\). Ann Lane notes that DfID was far more comfortable discussing strategies with charities and non-governmental organisations\(^{77}\) than with other United Kingdom government departments.

\(^{67}\) Niall Ferguson, *op cit.*, p 364.
\(^{68}\) Unattributable and confirmed comment by Whitehall commentator at RCDS on 12 Apr 2010.
\(^{74}\) Phil Clark, attributable and confirmed comment at RCDS lecture on 18 May 2010.
\(^{76}\) ibid., p 136.
In June last year, a report recommended better interdepartmental co-operation including, amongst its 109 recommendations, the instigation of a National Security Council. Previous reports, including a Cabinet Office publication which criticised the Foreign Office for working to an unjustifiably high standard, had little impact on policy formulation, remaining non-specific and resorting to the language of management. At a special Foreign Office conference in January 2003, the country’s top diplomats returned to London expecting to discuss the burning security issues of the day such as Iraq. Instead, and to the dismay of senior diplomat Ivor Roberts, they were presented with an agenda, exclusively, of process and management reorganisation. Juergan Kleiner saw a tendency towards diplomats becoming no more than mid-level administrators sitting abroad. Over time, politicians of all parties avoided comment and analysis on foreign affairs, frightened that they might misread public opinion or misunderstand the issues. Commenting after the 2010 General Election discussion on foreign policy, Stephan Grubard saw only “banality”.

REFRESHING DIPLOMATIC METHOD

Henry Kissinger believes that the United Kingdom’s modern history of foreign policy has fluctuated between balance of power and collective security. Whilst a European balance of power can be argued to have been an effective strategy up until 1914 and a global balance as effective throughout the Cold War, its utility is now curtailed in the current fight against transnational terrorism or in the stabilisation of the world’s many fragile states. Traditional military power, either in utility or in deterrence, requires an opponent to see that something he values will be lost if he chooses to fight. This centre-of-gravity is difficult to find in an organisation such as Al Qaida and, if found, it is unlikely to be a material asset that can be destroyed to achieve definitive victory. Potential regional flashpoints exist throughout the world and states continue to seek military capability and military alliances but, in considering the potential for effective influence today, it is necessary to analyse what has changed and what has not.

New challenges

The 15th century’s anarchic world with shifting loyalties and borders is replaced now by a security defined in terms of individual freedoms of speech, religion and law, free from persecution, want and torture. New threats come from climate change, poverty, international crime, nuclear proliferation, cyber attack and disease. A recent report for the Centre for Strategic and International Studies found that critical infrastructures were under constant electronic attack including banking, financial services, energy, commodity markets, telecommunication, internet service provider servers, transport co-ordination, chemical

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79 Michael Clarke, *op cit.* p 70.
81 Christopher Meyer, *Getting Our Way*, Last broadcast 22 Feb 2010, 03:00 on BBC Four.
84 Comment, Britain needs its leaders to rise above banality, *Financial Times*, 27 Apr 2010, p 13.
85 Henry Kissinger, *op cit.* p 266.
87 IPPR, *op cit.* p 8.
production and service provision. Traditional violent threats against Western states are now predominantly from non-state actors in which the militarily weak are able to take sporadic action against rich nations despite their enormously capable armed forces. Although the risk of inter-state conflict has not disappeared, the threat is not perceived in Western capitals as being more than minimal in grand strategic terms.

Facing these challenges, the international system has also taken new shape. Today’s global stage of almost 200 states with, mostly, stable borders would be unrecognisable to our forefathers. Public and media scrutiny frequently sets the political agenda and has much to say to influence political opinion. The experience of Iraq and Afghanistan has undermined confidence in great military powers to win a stable security through force of arms and Harold Nicholson’s observation in 1942 that “security is a matter, not of idealism, but of power” seems an inadequate yardstick now. In a globalised international system, domestic and foreign affairs have become interdependent and porous borders have sprung up with easy international travel. Wealthy nations with traditional sources of power share liberal markets and open finance. With the end of the Cold War, state-centred strategic contests of ideology faded. Robert Cooper notes that yesterday’s strategies of balance of power or hegemony as the two principal instruments for national security must both now be replaced. Contrasting with traditional discreet and bilateral diplomacy, much of today’s negotiation and dialogue is carried out in multinational forums in the glare of publicity alongside non-governmental organisations and state-accredited technical experts often struggling with highly specific or technical issues.

It is this new world of international threats, global negotiating arenas and reduced military effectiveness that may provide an opportunity for the United Kingdom to manage an effective foreign policy. The alternative is to regard the world as a stage upon which to gaze and pass comment whilst looking on, confused.

Searching for influence

One hope that London may retain an effective international role is found in the concept of soft power described by Joseph Nye. In his book, Nye recognises that US foreign policy goals can no longer be primarily delivered through the coercive hard power of military or economic instruments. Real power, according to Nye, is not now the tangible instrument of weapons but is vested in the attraction of good ideas, the universal values of freedom, democracy and liberal respect that are attractive to human beings across the world. Furthermore, in Nye’s view, the careless application of military power can diminish soft power. Nye does not declare soft power to be new and cites France’s cultural influence across mainland Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries as an attractive force which underpinned its diplomatic method. W R Mead builds on this soft power theory to describe the “sticky power” of economic integration. In his thesis,
Mead argues that the successful adoption of liberal, peaceful relations is difficult to break away from\(^99\). In this way, soft power demonstrates a significant difference to hard power. In hard power, any underlying discontent, temporarily frozen or dormant, sits ready to re-emerge when awakened.

Fukuyama’s recent analysis leads him to believe that progress in foreign affairs is most reliably found in soft power and patience\(^100\). Martin Ivens notes that soft power is the key to success in Afghanistan\(^101\) and others see China’s growing influence in the world to be based upon the soft power of her non-interventionalist approach to international alliances in trade and politics which, with direct aid, is attractive to developing nations\(^102\). A successful Olympics, the current Shanghai world expo and the international Confucius Institutes\(^103\) all promote Chinese values and language. But soft power is not just the preserve of law abiding states; whilst Osama bin Laden uses destruction against his enemies, it is soft power that rallies his followers\(^104\).

Although soft power gives hope for British influence in international affairs, critical analysis also gives reason to be wary. In its application, soft power is fundamentally different to hard power. It cannot be formally allied with other states in a cumulative manner; it cannot be rapidly grown through government decree or spending; it cannot be hidden or administered through deception. Neither can it be projected against predetermined military aggression. Harold Nicolson would not recognise this new power; his firm belief was that good relations denoted nothing more than impotence\(^105\).

Soft power is a challenge for policy-makers who now have to tread the difficult path between overt self-interest and altruism. New communication networks with vocal groups of special interest and an eager media, mean that governments who wish to present the face of compassion, reasonableness and sound judgment must be consistent in their actions and their policies. Soft power is based on history, action and trust; it is not, as Nye makes clear, an image of style over substance\(^106\).

Modern state-level soft power falls beyond the arena of political decision-makers. The term “Public Diplomacy” has been coined to refer to the influence that a state applies to external public societies\(^107\). Public opinion is fundamental to soft power, recognising that foreign leaders will usually be responsive to the hopes and imperatives of their domestic populations.

There are reasons to be optimistic for British soft power. With the legacy of British historical action and the reach of the BBC World Service and the British Council, UK political statements, popular positions, analysis and policy have been widely communicated for many years. More recently, international visitors in tourism, commerce and further education have enhanced access to British culture and values.

**Military power**

\(^99\) Jan Melissen, *op cit.*, p 33.  
\(^103\) The Confucius Institutes are partnerships between the Chinese government and international universities, promoting Chinese language and educational, economic, and cultural ties. There are about 300 worldwide.  
\(^104\) The Bombs that Stopped the Happy Talk, *The Economist*, 30 Jan 2010, p 75.  
\(^105\) Derek Drinkwater, *op cit.*, p 66.  
\(^106\) Joseph Nye, *op cit.*, p 129.  
In a world where conventional military power is still sought as an instrument of power and British funding constraints are tightening, careful analysis of military investment must be made. As the use of legal force looks increasingly likely to be limited to UN-endorsed action or by invitation, it may be tempting to disinvest and rely on others. With regards to the United states, it is not useful to view her as having only the two international options of being Atlanticist or isolationist; if Washington feels that its friends are not sufficiently engaged, it is likely to swing to unilateralism, at least in strategy formulation. Writing in 1997, Rourke identifies the intangible effect of military capability on reputation which manifests as soft power on others, particularly close allies. At a recent conference in Iceland for small states to consider their role in the world, the Finnish Foreign Minister concluded that small states derive power from their “understanding of the importance of sustainable development” and their “non-threatening nature”. There is no empirical evidence to support such a claim which may, at least to some extent, look like wishful thinking. Whilst the UK still seeks to retain influence across the world, a demonstrable commitment to contribute to the military burden, in lives, funding and planning effort, is needed.

Multilateral diplomacy

Although multilateral diplomacy grew out of the early 20th century peace conferences, today’s multilateral forums are very different and often criticised as ineffective. Paul Cambon, a French diplomat at the end of the First World War, believed that any negotiation that involved more than four or five people could achieve nothing useful and, certainly, the grand strategy formed out of the League of Nations could not find a way to keep Hitler out of the Rhineland. Indicating a feature of future multilateral diplomacy, the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 included small and vanquished powers and introduced policy-making by voting and public discussion. Since that time, the number of international meetings and breadth of membership has exploded; the Europa Directory lists 1900 international organisations. Many of these forums are involved in low politics or highly specialised issues and issues go beyond sovereign territories to include international domains such as Polar regions, high seas and space. In this sea of organisations, professional diplomats, according to John Dickie, can be marginalised by technical and other delegates and, with the advent of summitry, become reduced to administrators, note takers and communiqué drafters.

In matters of high politics, multilateral forums are severely challenged. Swathed in publicity, delegates are always mindful of their domestic audiences and are not well-placed to explore issues, concede ground and reach mutually beneficial conclusions. As Kissinger notes, such debates can become political objectives in their own right with members using the act of leaving the room as a surrogate for success. In May 2010, the opening session of the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty saw a walkout by Western states, including the United Kingdom and, although probably not seen as a surrogate for success, it does still undermine traditional diplomatic method. Conference actions and words are aimed at public audiences and issues are

111 Derek Drinkwater, op cit., p 69.
113 John Baylis and Steve Smith, op cit., p 392.
114 John Dickie, op cit., p 228.
115 Ivor Roberts, op cit., p 17.
116 Henry Kissinger, op cit., p 599.
117 A President trots the globe, The Economist, 8 May 2010, p 56.
not considered under their own merit but are influenced by feelings borne out of other discussions and outcomes. Andrew Ward shows how Iceland’s ill feelings towards the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, because of their policies in response to the financial crisis, have distorted its negotiations with the European Union\textsuperscript{118}.

However, some commentators have been pleasantly surprised at the efficacy of the G20\textsuperscript{119}. The G20 gains advantage by its relatively small membership, its narrow remit to consider economic security, the immediacy of the financial crisis, the equitable share of the benefits to be had and the ability to implement economic strategies. In contrast, the environmental debate to address climate change issues demonstrates the challenges of large multilateral diplomacy on complex contemporary security issues. Despite wide agreement that carbon pollution must be reduced in order to address climate change, immediate economic considerations vie with distant threats. Delegates have difficulty funding action today in order to deliver benefit in years to come and they have difficulty taking action in one geographical region in order to benefit coastal regions many thousands of miles away. Multiple members, with multiple agendas and imprecise challenges, give rise to numerous actors with the power to spoil, procrastinate and block. Connie Hedegaard, the Danish minister who was president of the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Conference, felt that the conference was counterproductive and advised against a future summit as a forum for progress\textsuperscript{120}. Yvo de Boer, the UN’s climate chief, was equally pessimistic as he resigned in February 2010\textsuperscript{121}. Both recognised that negotiation required both time and diplomatic space; such is the new environment where the “strategy” and not the “policy” can become the diplomatic challenge.

Paola Subacchi believes that these new multiple agents of power are dictating the progress of a new order\textsuperscript{122} and Ben Webster highlights the perverse decision-making that can arise in such an environment. At a UN conference on endangered species, horse-trading and 2/3rd majority voting resulted in a one-off sale of existing supplies of blue-fin tuna, polar bears and elephants. As a result, and surely to no one’s surprise, illegal killing of these endangered species immediately rose in order to jump onto the back of this opportunity\textsuperscript{123}.

The United Nations, the European Union, the World Trading Organisation, the World Bank and the G20 are, perhaps, some of the organisations of highest prominence with United Kingdom membership. But of these five, the first two are, themselves, composed of a multiple number of sub-meetings and all have a complex network of internal informal negotiations and relationships that sit out of sight of public scrutiny. Much negotiation occurs in the margins, remarkably similar to the historical discreet, bilateral methods\textsuperscript{124}.

Although progress may be slow in such forums, part of the diplomatic challenge is to get issues onto the agenda. In this regard, London’s membership of the world’s principal organisations is a good start; authentic soft power may build on that.

\textsuperscript{118} Andrew Ward, Bank Dispute Sours Iceland’s Attitude to EU Membership, \textit{The Financial Times}, 25 Feb 2010.
\textsuperscript{120} Fiona Harvey, Climate Treaty Hopes Quashed, \textit{The Financial Times}, 9 Mar 2010.
\textsuperscript{123} Ben Webster, World votes to continue trading in species on verge of extinction, \textit{The Times}, 19 Mar 2010.
The European Union

The European Union is worthy of particular analysis. An optimistic view of the Lisbon Treaty is that it marks the end of an eight year negotiation towards a unified external front allowing member states to fall behind the combined power of twenty-seven nations in order to make a positive difference in the global arena. Europe sits close to many of the world’s critical maritime chokepoints such as the Baltic, the Arctic, Suez, the Gibraltar Straits and the Dardanelles; her Eastern frontier is adjacent to many of the world’s potential trouble-spots as well as to energy providers in the Middle East and Central Asia. An effective, powerful external outlook and strategy would seem to be a good idea and, in 2003, this looked achievable to Robert Cooper, subject to effective political leadership125.

The Union is not incapable of making progress. In the last fifteen years, she has welcomed fifteen new members, transferred enormous amounts of wealth across internal international boundaries, become the world’s biggest international aid donor, created a new global currency, led the political debate on climate change126 and she retains 30% of the world’s GDP. President Kennedy had, in 1962, already set the tone of America’s views on Europe saying that “the US looks on this vast new enterprise with hope and admiration. We do not regard a strong and united Europe as a rival but as a partner.”127 But not all members accepted this encouragement at face-value. In 1995, President Mitterrand stated that “We are at war with America. A permanent war, war without death. They are very hard, the Americans, they are voracious. They want undivided power over the world.”128 European external policy has not been unified across all member countries and the recent war in Iraq reminds us of this. Following the Lisbon Treaty, America has, again, encouraged EU progress and invited a more consistent, coherent and effective external outlook129 but it is not yet clear that Brussels can look up from the internal disciplining of member states to apply, instead, its efforts beyond its boundaries130.

In the opinion of some, the EU has only ever been able to respond to international events rather than shape them, weakened by lack of political will. Gardner and Eizenstat point to the failure to act in good time in the Balkans despite the recognised need, clearly articulated by European Council President Jacques Poos in 1992 who stated that the “hour of Europe has come”131. Such helplessness has been seen before; Demosthenes, criticising Greek political will remarked “It seems to me, men of Athens, that you have become absolutely apathetic, waiting there dumbly for catastrophe to befall you.”132

The United Kingdom’s unsettled position with regard to Europe over the last fifteen years has meant that no consistent use could have been made of EU structures for foreign policy133. A recent review by an Italian EU academic concludes that a comprehensive foreign policy that represents the security interests of twenty-seven member states is not achievable134. Pascal Vennesson believes that the military strategies of the UK, France, Germany and Italy are so

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128 Lucy Wadham, op cit., p 181.
133 John Coles, op cit., p 11.
134 Giandomenico Majone, Europe as the would-be world Power, (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2009), p 204.
misaligned that a common European military strategy in not possible\textsuperscript{135}. As well as diverging views on specific issues that, for example, sees France sell a warship to Russia despite the nervousness of Estonia\textsuperscript{136}, the EU’s policy-making apparatus is bureaucratic, prevaricating and confrontational. For example, despite wide-ranging agreement that regulation of hedge funds was needed, EU politicians delivered 1,600 amendments to the first proposal and, after receiving criticism from domestic finance companies, retreated into intense argument that ended with the European Parliament deciding that there was not enough evidence on which to agree any policy\textsuperscript{137}. The proposal is currently under discussion again.

The recent instigation of the new External Action Service with a High Representative for Foreign Affairs gives the EU the political machinery, budget and structures necessary to develop a more cohesive external diplomatic instrument, but success will depend upon whether politicians embrace or obstruct the new opportunity; the signs are not good. Despite the appointment of a High Commissioner for Foreign Affairs, responsibility for external policies lie across three different commissioners, each with their own staff and priorities; internal strife is abundant. Baroness Ashton and the President of the Commission, Jose Barroso, could not agree on 11 Mar 2010 on who should appoint the diplomats and Baroness Ashton continues to receive direct criticism for all aspects of her leadership and decision-making\textsuperscript{138}. It is most unlikely that the High Commissioner for Foreign Affairs will be empowered to lead an effective diplomatic instrument that gathers information, builds trusted external relationships and then influences policy and drives strategy. Complementing the dysfunction within Brussels, member states appear quick to develop national policies to their own interests\textsuperscript{139}. With the EU economic model in crisis, there can be no worse time to negotiate progress on external engagement\textsuperscript{140} \textsuperscript{141} but within the Union, there may be an opportunity for a fresh United Kingdom engagement.

Some Conservative politicians have been making slightly more favourable noises towards Europe with both William Hague and Liam Fox talking more warmly about military cooperation and George Osborne professing a desire for a “new, constructive, engaged approach”\textsuperscript{142} although grass-roots Tory opinion remains deeply sceptical\textsuperscript{143} with profound differences between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats\textsuperscript{144}. Deputy Prime Minister Clegg speaks four European foreign languages and has a Spanish wife; the recent announcement that he will be a representative abroad\textsuperscript{145} does, at least, seem in keeping with Agamemnon’s smart thinking.

CONCLUSIONS

Simon Hicks, an EU specialist from the LSE, sees the United Kingdom’s declining economy, her disappearing industrial base and her small military strength as insufficient to maintain a

\textsuperscript{136} Ben Hall, Paris Agrees to Sell Warships to Russia, \textit{Financial Times}, 2 Mar 2010.
\textsuperscript{138} Martin Banks, Ashton blamed again as divisions delay launch of EU diplomatic corps, \textit{Daily Telegraph}, 15 Mar 2010, p 15.
\textsuperscript{139} Tony Barber, \textit{Financial Times}, 20 May 2010, p 6.
\textsuperscript{140} Matthew Campbell, Europe Cracks in the heat of Greece’s Flames, \textit{The Sunday Times}, 9 May 2010, p 31.
\textsuperscript{141} Ben Hall, The day that tested limits of the Union, \textit{Financial Times}, 11 May 2010, p 9.
\textsuperscript{142} Nicholas Watt, Cameron looks for fresh start with fellow leaders, \textit{The Guardian}, 19 May 2010, p 7.
\textsuperscript{143} David Gardner, Global Insight - Cameron needs red meat to feed Euroskeptics, \textit{Financial Times}, 17 Mar 2010, p 6.
\textsuperscript{144} A not very odd couple, \textit{The Economist}, 15 May 2010, p 35.
national voice in international affairs but this fails to acknowledge the new world stage and new sources of power. With an international system consisting of almost 200 states whose existence is protected by international laws in an interdependent, globalised economy with complex governance systems, there is opportunity, if grasped, for effective actors to influence global affairs.

The issues of security have changed over the last century and diplomatic focus has moved beyond inter-state relationships to include non-sovereign spaces and multilateral agreements. Multilateral diplomacy has not replaced traditional bilateral dialogues but sits alongside it, often struggling to agree on strategies even where policy goals are agreed. Negotiation in the margins retains the characteristics of traditional diplomacy and is fundamental to both conference and summit progress.

Although the United Kingdom has lost much of its hard power, the utility of coercive power in securing national interests has, simultaneously, diminished. Military strength no longer has primacy in setting the international agenda or attaining stable security, yet an effective military capability remains essential as both a complement to soft power, as well as a critical component of it.

Prominent global forums, including the European Union, provide effective platforms from which to operate and, additionally, diplomatic posts continue to be the United Kingdom’s principal agents of power in foreign capitals. Whilst there is much discussion on the nature of the “special relationship” with the United States, there can be no denial that there are shared values and experiences. Influence in Washington can continue to be effective but it must find its source in soft power, intelligently nurtured and applied.

Diplomacy, at its heart, is a social science. Diplomats, as Freeman concludes, must be advocates, informants and counsellors. Their skills must drive clarity of thought, trust, understanding and insight. They operate in good and bad times, with ceremony and discretion, in peace and in war. They are agents of their state and, as such, must carry its authority. None of this is new.

In 1864, Abraham Lincoln wrote “I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me”. Perhaps above all else, the aim of foreign policy is to minimise such lack of control. Despite superficial appearances, Pitt the Younger was not free to act independently of international influences. His skill was to have the leadership qualities to indentify what lay within his field of influence and to mobilise his resources to deliver successful outcomes towards his vision. Today, the new Prime Minister faces immense financial challenges but in addressing these challenges, foreign policy cannot be switched off.

When looking externally, Government departments must lose neither cohesion nor common purpose. The recent instigation of the UK’s National Security Council may signal a new approach to policy alignment and for Defence, the forthcoming Strategic Review may help deliver a unified diplomatic posture.

Policy objectives and sources of power have changed beyond recognition yet diplomatic excellence remains key to giving today’s strategic leaders any chance of success. Understanding

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146 Simon Hicks, BBC Radio 4 Analysis, broadcast 16 Nov 09.
the new international context, the new nature of power and the timeless qualities of diplomatic method are all critical for effective influence. Public Diplomacy, especially, is receptive to soft power.

Great Britain has constantly adjusted her application of power in the past and she can continue to do so. Her historical legacy and her international memberships provide a good basis for non-coercive influence but it is vulnerable to disinterest or poor stewardship.

The building blocks of British soft power do exist but effective diplomacy also demands an intelligent balance of altruistic and national interest policies driven by rigorous strategic thinking with attendant analysis, vision, strategy formulation, execution and constant re-evaluation. There can be no lack of political will, no unbalanced resourcing and no confused thinking. Only from this basis can official diplomacy, deployed abroad, realise its power.

There is certainly much to do. NATO’s new strategic concept, Western policy towards engagement with Russia and Turkey, climate change, international terrorism and European political development are just a handful of issues in which intelligent thinking and negotiation are needed, with their sensitive interdependencies calling for the highest diplomatic performance.

In 2002, Correlli Barnett concluded that “British Power had quietly vanished ... like a ship-of-the-line going down unperceived in the smoke and confusion of battle”149. British power has certainly quietly changed but, if carefully invested with diplomatic method, it need not vanish yet.

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149 Correlli Barnett, *op cit.*, p 593.
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