Britain, the world, and Europe[1]

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Great Britain has lost an Empire and not yet found a role' – Dean Acheson, 1962

Quoted in Brinkley 1990: 599

Learning objectives

- To understand the nature and extent of Britain's key international relationships.

- To appreciate the ideas that have shaped British foreign policy.

- To explain the dynamics behind the Coalition government's 'Liberal Conservative' foreign policy.

Introduction

Britain is a major global political, diplomatic and economic actor by virtue of its imperial history, its membership of key **international organisations**, forward-leaning defence posture and the City of London's position as a leading financial centre. With such a vast web of connections have come real and lasting debates about the most appropriate role for Britain in the world, especially since decolonisation after the Second World War and the turn to Europe as a forum in which Britain tries to exert global influence through its **foreign policy**. Some suggest Britain should safeguard its national interest by working more closely with its partners in the European Union. Others argue that Britain should continue to think and act globally, particularly by cultivating the '**special relationship**' with the United States. In reality very few British leaders have wanted to make a decision in favour of one over the other, performing a difficult foreign policy

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[1] Thanks to Jeremy McIlwaine at the Bodleian Library Oxford for helping me access Churchill's 1948 Party Conference speech.

balancing act as a result. Although their language may change, it is clear that the leaders of all the main political parties continue to see Britain as a 'force for good' in the world by virtue of working the country's Commonwealth, US and EU connections. However, with the age of austerity prompting severe budget cuts across all departments of government a question remains. Can Britain any longer afford a globally engaged foreign policy when it does not have the means to back its good intentions with financial muscle?

Britain's global outlook

Former US Secretary of State Dean Acheson's scathing assessment of the state of British foreign policy in 1962 continues to rankle with British politicians of all the major parties. Membership of many of the world's leading regional and international organisations gives Britain a profile and influence that very few other states can match. However, the image of a former great power only slowly and reluctantly coming to terms with its fall from grace has come to characterise assessments of Britain's place in the world by observers from within and outside the country. In no small measure the criticisms act as a useful reality check to politicians from across the board who have continually claimed 'great' global status for Britain in the face of many facts to the contrary, not least the country's decreasing ability to finance an influential global role since the end of the Second World War in 1945. This chapter will study the tension between the rhetoric and reality in British foreign policy as they pertain to discussions about its role in the world, and some of the paradoxes this has thrown up over the decades since 1945.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office currently manages nearly 270 diplomatic posts in 170 countries, employing 14,000 staff in missions ranging from large embassies to smaller consulates (FCO 2011). Britain aside, France is the only other state that enjoys membership of all the institutions shown in Figure 2.1 *(note to ed: that figure can still be included and is still available online, albeit through a different link)*. However, membership of a given international organisation does not necessarily guarantee influence over its outlook,

policies, working methods or activities on the ground. Nor do the British seem as comfortable working with their partners in some international organisations as they do in others. For example, in the aftermath of the Second World War Britain was a founder member, and enthusiastic advocate, of the United Nations (UN) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) but was rather more hesitant about joining what since 1993 has been the European Union (EU). The EU was formerly known as the European Economic Community (EEC), created by France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg (the last three known as the Benelux states) when they signed the Treaty of Rome in 1957; Britain joined the EEC in 1973. Accounting for the organisational framework within which Britain's global relationships play out helps us to understand both the scope and limits of Britain's role in the world. It also provides crucial insights into the debates surrounding the nature and conduct of British foreign policy today when the financial resources being dedicated to government work across the board are being dramatically squeezed following the stringent government spending cuts announced in the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review.

The United Nations

Britain was one of the founder members of the UN in October 1945 and has an Ambassador permanently stationed at the UN headquarters in New York, heading the UK's Mission to the United Nations. Together with France, the US, Russia and China, Britain is one of five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council (the P5 of the UNSC), giving it an influential voice in helping the UN's effort to uphold peace and security around the globe through diplomacy, information gathering and the deployment of military force. Ten other states are voted onto the Security Council for a period of two years each, making for a total of fifteen states on the UNSC at any one time: the core or permanent members circled by ten non-permanent members (UN undated) (Figure 2.2 – *does this document still exist? Can find replacement if necessary*).

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Table 2.1 Use of the veto in the P5

Period	China*	France	Britain	US	USSR Russia	Total
Total	6	18	32	82	124	261
2008	1	–	–	–	1	2
2007	1	–	–	–	1	2
2006	–	–	–	2	–	2
2005	–	–	–	–	–	–
2004	–	–	–	2	1	3
2003	–	–	–	2	–	2
2002	–	–	–	2	–	2
2001	–	–	–	2	–	2
2000	–	–	–	–	–	0
1999	1	–	–	–	–	1
1998	–	–	–	–	–	0
1997	1	–	–	2	–	3
1996	–	–	–	–	–	0
1986–95	–	3	8	24	2	37
1976–85	–	9	11	34	6	60
1966–75	2	2	10	12	7	33
1956–65	–	2	3	–	26	31
1946–55	(1*)	2	–	–	80	83

* Between 1946 and 1971 the Chinese seat on the Security Council was occupied by the Republic of China (Taiwan), which used the veto only once, to block Mongolia's application for membership in 1955. The first veto exercised by the present occupant, the People's Republic of China, was therefore not until 25 August 1972.

The P5 members have an effective veto over substantive issues that come before the Security Council, giving them significant leverage in core UN discussions and debates (Table 2.1). Since the establishment of the P5 the heaviest users of the veto (Global Policy Forum

undated a) have been Russia (124 times) and the US (82 times). This reflects the geopolitical standoff between the Russian and American blocs that developed over nearly fifty years after the establishment of the UN during what was known as the Cold War. Britain has used the veto 32 times, the last time in December 1989 along with France and the US over a resolution on the situation in Panama. Other resolutions vetoed by the UK in the 1980s included such issues as sanctions against South Africa, where Britain exercised its veto on several occasions, and over the Falkland Islands (Global Policy Forum undated b). We can see that P5 members tend to use the veto where they deem resolutions to be potentially damaging to their vital national interest, usually but not always defined in security terms.

The European Union

Like many of the international organisations considered in this chapter, the origins of the EU lay in the determination of leading European nation-states after 1945 to avoid sliding into another destructive war, as had occurred twice in the first half of the twentieth century. The wider security context was also an important stimulus and was noticeable in American policy-making circles (see Lundestad 2000; McGuire and Smith 2008). As the Cold War between Russia and the US gathered momentum, Washington strategists wanted to see Europeans building up their national defences as a means of deterring a potential attack from the East, in the event that the 'cold' war turned 'hot'. Attention on the western side of the Iron Curtain became fixed on how to solve the 'German question' and in particular how to tie Germany into an institutional framework that would allow it to recover economically and politically without becoming once more an aggressive, expansionist power capable of destabilising the continental landmass of Europe as it had been under Hitler. Throughout the history of integration in western Europe we see economic means being used for political ends. The assumption of this 'functionalist' approach to integration (Haas 1958) is that creating interdependence between nation-states is a sound way of helping them see how damaging the selfish actions of one state can be to a whole community of states; furthermore, by working

together and 'pooling' sovereignty in international institutions states can achieve collectively what they would not be able to achieve alone.

Various British Conservative and Labour governments decided to remain aloof from Europe's integrationist experiments for over twenty-five years. Britain finally joined in 1973 under the Conservative government of Edward Heath, following two failed applications in the 1960s. Despite giving rhetorical support to the general idea of a 'United Europe', Westminster politicians have been cautious about involving Britain in a project they worried could potentially create a supranational political union. Britain was, however, a founder member of the intergovernmental Council of Europe, established in May 1949 with nine other states: Belgium, Denmark, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden (Figure 2.3). In September 1959 the European Court of Human Rights was established in Strasbourg to ensure that states meet the obligations they sign up to when they join the Council.

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In Britain, support for the Council of Europe was cross-party and came from such influential figures as wartime leader Winston Churchill (The Churchill Society undated) and Labour's Foreign Secretary at the time of its establishment, Ernest Bevin, who said it would inspire 'something new and hopeful in European life' (Bevin 1949).

The Clement Attlee Labour government of 1945–51 decided not to take Britain into the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC).

PROFILE: Clement Attlee

Clement Attlee (1883-1867) was leader of the Labour Party for two decades, 1935-55, and served as Prime Minister 1945-51, having been Deputy Prime Minister in

Winston Churchill's national coalition government during the Second World War. The Attlee governments are best remembered for putting in place a large scale nationalization programme in Britain and for founding the welfare state, including such key and enduring institutions as the National Health Service (NHS). Attlee largely left foreign policy in the hands of his ebullient Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin (1881-1951) although he took a close interest in British moves to develop an independent nuclear weapon and found the post-war international security architecture such as NATO. Attlee and Bevin have been called 'Cold Warriors' every bit as frequently as their Conservative peers from the time (see for instance Taylor 1990), showing the strength of the consensus about Britain's role in the world that emerged and consolidated in the early years after the Second World War.

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Formally created by the Paris Treaty of April 1951, the ECSC put control of the two industries vital to a nation's war-making capacity in the hands of a European decision-making body, the High Authority. Its founder members were 'the Six' that would later found the EEC: France, Germany, Italy and the Benelux states. When the Conservatives were returned to power under Winston Churchill in 1955 there were high hopes that he would alter Labour's negativity towards European integration. However, they continued the extra-European focus in the nation's postwar foreign policy by keeping Britain out of the EEC. Instead, in 1960, Britain helped found the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) along with Austria, Denmark, Norway, Portugal, Sweden and Switzerland. The Conservative administration in London saw EFTA as a means of protecting the British economy from the potentially harmful impact of being outside the trading bloc created by the Six; to the EEC Europeans, however, this move looked like a hostile effort to torpedo their ambitious designs at birth. Britain consequently lost a lot of good will it had built up among the countries of western Europe and form many years remained outside the EEC club (Ellison 2000). By 1960 it was fair to say that Europe was at 'sixes and sevens': the six of the EEC against the seven of EFTA.

[Insert M02UF2.1 to include M02UP2.3 and M02UP2.4]

The creation of EFTA could not disguise the increasingly evident weaknesses in the British economy, and civil servants and politicians in London soon began to notice a marked divergence between the performance of the British economy and those inside the EEC. Not just this, Britain's trade patterns were shifting markedly from Commonwealth states to states in western Europe. During the 1960s Britain twice applied twice to join the EEC but was rebuffed by France's use of the veto to block Britain's accession (Ludlow 1997; Daddow 2003). After the second '*non*' the British left their application on the table and the Conservatives under Edward Heath were finally able to take Britain into the EEC in 1973.

PROFILE: Edward Heath

Edward Heath (1916-2005) was leader of the Conservative Party 1965-75 and Prime Minister during a turbulent period at home and abroad in 1970-74, particularly with regard to the economy and fraught industrial relations. Heath served in the Royal Artillery during the Second World War and this strongly moulded his belief that international cooperation was necessary to overcome some of the worst excesses of nationalism and insecurity in international affairs. He was particularly exercised about how to resolve the 'German problem' in European and global politics. Heath was a critic of Eurosceptics who he believed yearned for Empire and wrongly kept Britain out of the early steps of European integration, and his maiden speech in Parliament in 1950 was on the virtues of Britain joining the European Coal and Steel Community. Heath was proud to have been the Prime Minister who finally helped Britain into the EEC in 1973 and tried to manage foreign policy expectations by talking of Britain as 'a medium power of the first rank' (quoted in Harvey 2011: 5).

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These troubled decades in Britain's European policy set the tone for much of what has followed, with the British routinely struggling to accept the idea of a European future and tending to opt out of new plans for integration, notably the single European currency, the Euro. The huge backbench rebellion by Conservative Members of Parliament in October 2011 over a proposal to hold a referendum on Britain's EU membership demonstrates the continued ability of the Europe question to be a thorn in the side of Britain's leading political parties (Taylor 2011; Watt 2011). Furthermore, the economic crisis in the Eurozone has reinvigorated Euroscepticism in Britain and this will continue to make 'Europe' a divisive and controversial issue in British foreign policy discussions.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization

In contrast to the EU, Britain is an enthusiastic participant in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), not least because of American membership. Being active in NATO allows London to express its fulsome support for Britain's bilateral relationship with the US, forming the axis which 'arguably runs at the heart of the alliance' (Beech 2011, 350). Britain was a founder member of NATO, set up in April 1949 to promote the goals of the Atlantic Charter: freedom, security and prosperity for signatory countries, built on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law (NATO 1949). The UK delegation to NATO is based in Brussels, headed by an Ambassador and staffed by civil servants from the Foreign Office, the Ministry of Defence and the three armed services: Army, Navy and Air Force. NATO membership was attractive to Attlee's postwar Labour government for two principal reasons.

The first and most immediate concern facing British foreign policy-makers when NATO was created was to safeguard the country's security against the potential of attack by Germany and perhaps more urgently Russia, as the Cold War heightened East-West tensions in Europe in the later 1940s. Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty set down the principle that 'an armed attack against one or more of [the signatories] in Europe or North America shall be

considered an attack against them all'. In this event all other NATO members would come to the aid of the party under attack, using armed force if necessary (NATO 1949). Following the terrorist attacks on US soil in September 2011 Article 5 was invoked for the first time in NATO history on 4 October 2011.

The second reason why NATO was attractive to Britain was that it had US membership. With the US on board the organisation had military as well as diplomatic credibility and played to the instinctive Atlanticism of British Foreign Secretary Bevin and Prime Minister Attlee. Essentially a product of the Cold War, since the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989 NATO has spent a good deal of time defining and redefining its role for the twenty-first century (Medcalf 2008). Since 2003 NATO has expanded both its membership (currently 28 countries) and its military infrastructure so that it can play a constructive part in what are known as 'out-of-area' operations in places such as the Balkans, Afghanistan, the Darfur region of Sudan and, more recently, the successful **intervention** in Libya under Operation Unified Protector from March to October 2011 (NATO 2011).

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) is an intergovernmental body dealing with early warning, conflict prevention, crisis management and post-conflict rehabilitation – the kinds of issues that military organisations such as NATO are ill-equipped to deal with. Originally founded by the Helsinki Act of 1975 at the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) it originally sought to promote dialogue between states of the East and states of the West. At the end of the Cold War the CSCE helped the newly independent states in central and eastern Europe make the transition to democracy and free market economies, as well as dealing with internal and external threats to their security and stability (OSCE, undated: 1). The OSCE has a comprehensive threefold definition of security, working across these dimensions to fulfil its missions: traditional political–military security, economic security and environmental and human security. The methods it uses are equally

wide- ranging, from dialogue and security-building, election monitoring and promoting press freedom, through to arms control and environmental activities. You can see in Figure 2.1 that the OSCE is the largest of the specifically security-focused international organisations with 56 members (as of March 2009). Crucially, it is the only organisation outside of the UN that brings the US and Russia to the same table.

As with the other international organisations covered here, the UK has a formal delegation based at the OSCE headquarters in Vienna and this represents the UK at the weekly meetings of the Permanent Council, works on arms control, and with the OSCE's human rights institutions notably the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) 'to promote human rights and democracy through project work, election observation missions and legislative advice in participating States'. The Coalition government has maintained New Labour's focus on promoting human rights in a rules-based international system, clearly set out in the Foreign Office's annual human rights report (for instance FCO 2010)

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

Britain has been a member of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) since 1961. The forerunner to the OECD was the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation, set up in 1948 to administer Marshall Aid funds from the US to help western European states recover from the ravages of the Second World War. The aim of the OECD is to help its members achieve sustainable economic growth and employment and more broadly to contribute to global economic stability and expansion by encouraging free trade practices in the developed and developing worlds (OECD undated a). The OECD also gathers together a huge amount of economic statistics, reports and publications that help London's decision-makers shape the country's foreign economic policy (OECD undated b).

Circles, pivots and bridges: ideas about British foreign policy

Understanding how Britain's external outlook is expressed through its membership of international organizations is one way of understanding Britain's place in the world today. For a more complete picture, however, it is important to appreciate how this practice has been influenced by shifting ideas about Britain's role in the world. In something of an ongoing cycle, ideas help inform the practice which impacts back upon ideas about British foreign policy, so disentangling the one from the other can be problematic. This section will trace the evolution of British foreign policy thinking by studying two periods. In the first and by far the longer of the two periods we see the big ideas about Britain's role in the world taking shape and entrenching themselves within the political class and public mind at large. This is the imperial period which lasted roughly from the end of the American War of Independence in 1783 to the middle of the twentieth century when Britain developed and managed a sprawling global Empire only to see it collapse after the Second World War. The second period began with the election of the Tony Blair-led Labour government of 1997 which tried, perhaps more than any of its predecessors, to help Britain come to terms with its decline as a 'great' global power. New Labour privileged the ethical dimensions of British foreign policy, making the case for a combination of hard-headed pragmatism and active interventionism to protect British citizens and innocent civilians from harm in trouble spots around the world. Paradoxically, however, ideas about Empire and Britain's status as a major global player have died hard in Establishment Britain and it is doubtful whether New Labour successfully managed to implement a truly post-imperial foreign policy for Britain. David Cameron's Coalition government has, broadly, accepted the fundamentals of New Labour's foreign policy thinking but badged it differently- 'Liberal Conservatism'.

From Empire to decolonisation

At its height in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the one idea that dominated British foreign policy thinking was the importance to Britain of possessing and expanding the British Empire. This Empire was constructed after the United States Congress declared in July 1776 that the thirteen American colonies which were then at war with Britain would

henceforth be independent from Britain, that is, not formally part of the British Empire. Instead of concentrating on its transatlantic Empire, the British threw themselves into fresh imperialist expansion in key strategic locations such as India and the countries of sub-Saharan Africa, such that by the years between the First and Second World Wars the British Empire stretched over one-quarter of the land surface of the earth and contained one-fifth of its population. As one scholar of Britain's role in the world has observed:

Empire for more than a century was the most important transnational space inhabited by the British and it had a profound impact on British politics, particularly on the way British people thought about race, and about the role of the British state in the world.

(Gamble 2003: 62)

It was both a formal and informal Empire. It was formal in that the British controlled the various colonies which made up the Empire and locked them into an informal economic sphere 'dominated by British companies, and a currency sphere in which the pound sterling was the accepted master currency'. The British maintained their domination of global trade by encouraging worldwide acceptance of the principle of the liberal economic order – the free movement of goods, capital and people (Gamble 2003: 79–80) backed by 'a sufficient exertion of power [notably the Navy's 'gunboat diplomacy'] to secure an open market in which contracts would be enforceable' (Clarke 1996: 13–14). It may seem anachronistic today, but politicians such as Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India 1899–1905, could contentedly claim in the Victorian era that the British Empire was 'the greatest force for good the world has ever seen' while academic historians such as J.R. Seeley at Cambridge could publicly talk of Britain's civilising 'destiny' without fear of contradiction or dissent from the governing elites in Establishment Britain (Schama 2002: 262).

In the years 1950–4 the Empire–Commonwealth accounted for some 49 per cent of Britain's imports and accepted 54 per cent of British exports (Kennedy 1985: 335); in 1956

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45 separate governments were controlled by what was then the Colonial Office (Cross 1968: 325). By 1960, however, Harold Macmillan (Conservative Prime Minister 1957-63) identified the growing strength of what he called 'this African national consciousness' which became in the minds of London's foreign policy makers a symbol that attitudes towards the necessity and desirability of Empires were changing at home and abroad. Macmillan observed that: 'The wind of change is blowing through this continent, and whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact . . . and our national policies must take account of it' (Macmillan 1960). One year later Macmillan applied to take Britain into the EEC, citing structural shifts in Britain's trading patterns from Commonwealth to Empire as a significant factor in the government's thinking about Britain's policy towards European integration (Camps 1964: 231). Continuing economic crises culminating in the devaluation of sterling in November 1967 helped prompt a second, and again unsuccessful, application, this time by Harold Wilson (Labour Prime Minister 1964-70 and 1974-76). Britain was finally accepted into the EEC club in 1973 and this lengthy process appeared to show that the country's leaders and public had come round to accepting the reduced role and status of a regional power, commensurate with its economic capabilities.

Another demonstration can be seen in the 1964-70 Wilson government's deep defence cuts which included withdrawing British forces from bases east of the Suez Canal in 1967 (Alexander 2003). This move appeared to indicate Britain's inability to cling to Empire as an outlet for its global power and prestige. Indeed in one interpretation it 'symbolized Labour's determination to leave the Empire behind' altogether (Gamble 2003: 209). However, while the rapid dissolution of Empire over a period of little more than twenty years from the retreat from India and Burma in 1947–8 may have signalled the end of the 'formal' Empire, the values and national purposes Britain had tried to inculcate through the possession of its overseas territories as far afield as Canada, Africa, Asia and Australia left a deep psychological legacy. Echoes of Empire continue to be heard in British foreign policy thinking to this day (Calvocoressi 2009: 177). The 'winds of change' might have blown

through the Empire, but had they blown through the corridors of the Foreign Office and Downing Street in London? When considering British foreign policy it is important to ask whether the Wilson years were quite the turning point they sometimes seem, given the persistence of great power pretensions from 1945 to the present.

Churchill's 'three circles' and Britain's 'great' world role

The Second World War proved how futile it was for Britain to hold on to far flung territories which drained vital resources from its economy at a time when national self-determination movements in Asia and Africa were bringing the ethics of imperial foreign policies into the realm of public and political debate the world over. Britain had already suffered serious economic upheaval with the end of the gold standard in September 1931 when the link between the one-to-one exchange value of the pound and gold was finally broken for good. For an economic system that had been in operation since the early eighteenth century and which had survived (just) the upheaval of the First World War, it was a sign of the economic turbulence of the times that the British had to admit defeat and that the pound was no longer deemed to be as valuable as gold. A more immediate and, in national security terms, potentially more devastating challenge to British power and prestige came from the rise of the Axis powers, Germany, Italy and Japan in the 1930s. The Second World War (1939–45) drained Britain economically. Historian Simon Schama estimates that fighting the war cost Britain £7,000 million ($7 billion), or a quarter of its economy, with defence spending accounting for some 10 per cent of gross domestic product by 1945 (Schama 2002: 540). By the end of hostilities the serious problems afflicting the economy in Britain typified the situation across Europe where all the major players were deemed to be on the verge of economic, not to mention political and social, collapse (Ellwood 1996).

How would the British react to being forced into relying on a now superior economic power, the US, to bail it out of its economic travails and help provide for its continuing national security against a potentially resurgent Germany and a hostile Russia? One idea that

took hold came from then Opposition leader Winston Churchill, in his speech to the Conservative Party Conference in 1948, the theme of which was how to provide for national security when 'the state of the world and the position of our country in it, have sunk to levels which no one could have predicted' (Churchill 1948: 149). In a short passage midway through the speech, Churchill suggested that the British had a unique role to play in the world by virtue of being 'the only country which has a great part to play in every one' of 'three great circles among the free nations and democracies' (all quotations in this section are from Churchill 1948: 153) (Figure 2.4).

[Insert MO2NF2.4 near here]

Churchill's first circle, 'naturally', was the British Commonwealth and Empire which he had earlier in the speech described as 'the foundation of our Party's political belief'. The second circle was 'the English-speaking world in which we, Canada, and the other British Dominions play so important a part'. Last on Churchill's list was 'United Europe' and this might have been symbolic, especially given the time Churchill spent in the speech discussing the need for close British ties with the US and his comments on the importance of Empire. But what gets forgotten about this speech is that prior to setting out his model Churchill had eulogised the principle of European integration and stressed that 'there is absolutely no need to choose between a United Empire and a United Europe. Both are vitally and urgently necessary.' More evident in the speech than any denigration of the European ideal was Churchill's view that, of all the countries in the world, Britain was uniquely placed to play an active global role by virtue of its worldwide diplomatic entanglements. Its European connections would provide a prop to, rather than the end of, the nation's outward-looking foreign policy agenda.

Churchill's approach to understanding Britain's role in the world has proved remarkably popular whichever main political party has been in power, Labour or

Conservative. Even as the British economy fell into a state of disrepair British leaders have never quite been able to give up on the idea that Britain can play out a globally important role for the good not only of Britain but the world itself. A few illustrations from across the post-1945 period nicely illustrate this gap between rhetoric and reality. Churchill's contemporaries such as Attlee and Bevin, overseeing the development of the atomic bomb and dealing with a host of imperial problems and military flashpoints around the world, did not disappoint those with exalted expectations of the role Britain could play globally after 1945, even as the facts of the matter were becoming clearer. For example, while negotiating a huge post-war US bailout to Britain, Foreign Secretary Bevin was adamant that the money would be used to prevent Britain becoming a second-class power and in fact that Britain could retain its power and influence with regard to the US and USSR (Taylor 1990: 74-75).

Returning to power after the Attlee-Bevin years, the Churchill governments of 1951-55 saw an opportunity to enact their global great power pretensions, even though by 1952 the Cabinet was openly debating the link between national poverty and foreign policy in times of economic downturn (Hurd 2010: 343). Churchill's Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden actively espoused the three circles model in his speech to the Party conference in 1953, evidence that 'the rhetoric lingered on' because it drew on an imperialist mentality 'which he shared with millions' (Hurd 2010: 346). Taking over from Churchill in April 1955, Eden (Prime Minister 1955-57) set about resorting to traditional and rather blunt instruments of British diplomacy in places such as Egypt. It resulted in the Suez Crisis, when a planned invasion cahoots with France to reoccupy the Suez Canal following renationalization in July 1956 by Abdel Nasser's Egyptian government had to be called off in November 1956 under considerable pressure from the US.

Suez marked the end of Anthony Eden's political career but it did less than might have been expected to end Britain's extensive rhetorical commitment to global power and

prestige. Harold Wilson, who as we have seen oversaw the symbolically important defence cutbacks from east of Suez, declared in 1964: 'we are a world power or we are nothing (quoted in Taylor 1990: 133) and this sentiment was echoed through even some of the darkest days for the British economy, including emergency loans from the International Monetary Fund, in the 1970s. Margaret Thatcher (Conservative Prime Minister 1979-90) did as much as any post-war prime minister, however, to demonstrate the continued vitality of great power pretensions beneath the surface of defence cutbacks and acceptance of a more coherent role for Britain centring on membership of the EEC. Britain's 1982 invasion of the Falkland Islands, 8,000 miles across the Atlantic, to reclaim disputed British territory that had been captured by the Argentinians in April of that year, led to her pronouncement in a speech at Cheltenham on 3 July that: 'We have ceased to a nation in retreat' (Thatcher 1993: 235).

Even though the outcome of the conflict was a close-run thing it helped Thatcher launch an attack on the 'decline' thesis and its political and public reception showed how the nation still yearned for 'the reproduction of past glories' (Taylor 1990: 123). Enthusiastically embracing the Churchillian guise of war leader Thatcher used this foreign policy adventure to claim that 'Great Britain is great again' (quoted Reynolds 1991: 261) and harked back to history to ram this point home at Cheltenham: 'we rejoice that Britain has rekindled that spirit which has fired her for generations past and which today has begun to burn as brightly as before' (Thatcher 1993: 235). John Major, Margaret Thatcher's successor as Prime Minister (1990-1997), continued like his predecessors to tread a fine line between recognising economic and political reality whilst at the same time advancing the case for a major **world role** for Britain. Reflecting in his autobiography on Britain's membership of the UNSC the (then) Group of Seven (G7) industrial nations, the nation's hugely effective armed forces, the 'special bonds' of Commonwealth and our 'close links' with the US, Major writes that 'our voice counted at the top table. I was determined to ensure that it should continue to do so' (Major 1999: 495-96). As with so many prime ministers and foreign secretaries from1945 onward, this snapshot of Major's foreign policy outlook shows how the British political class

has been hooked on the idea of maintaining global pretensions seemingly against all odds. The tensions that have emerged from aspiring to play out a 'great' global role in the face of severe economic problems have broadly come to be captured in the Establishment consensus that, in the words of Douglas Hurd (Conservative Foreign Secretary 1989-95), Britain had 'punched above its weight' in world affairs since 1945 (quoted in Harvey 2011). Had the time come by the end of eighteen years of Conservative government in 1997 to accept this assessment and reduce Britain's global great power pretensions in thinking as well as practice?

Updating the three circles model: Blair's 'bridge', 1997-2010

As we move further away from the war years 1939-45 we might have expected to see a drop in the popularity of the Churchill analogy as Britain's reduced resources shaped expectations about what was achievable externally. As Britain did less around the world this would ease pressure on the nation to be everywhere trying to do everything. However, we have already seen that leaderships on both the Labour and Conservative side were fixated by the idea of a great global role. What about a 'new' Labour leader in Tony Blair actively looking to refashion a 'new' image for Britain centred on 'constructive engagement' with the EU, reminiscent of Edward Heath's approach – would he fare any better? Tony Blair reshaped Churchill's three circles model to take account of the geostrategic context of British foreign policy at the turn of the twenty-first century. Blair replaced Empire with the US but made much the same kinds of claim as Churchill about Britain occupying 'pivotal' or special place in the world as an arbiter between Europe, the US and the wider world. Blair's thinking on foreign policy came to centre on the idea that Britain could act as a 'bridge' between Europe (meaning the EU) and the US. In this vision for British foreign policy Britain would maintain its centrality in world affairs by being a Churchill-esque point of contact between Brussels and the national capitals in Berlin, Paris, Rome and so forth on the one hand, and Washington on the other. Blair's thinking was plain to see in 1997, with the 'bridge' in place as a blunt fact of international life: 'We are the bridge between the US and Europe. Let us use it. When

Britain and America work together on the international scene, there is little we can't achieve' (Blair 1997).

Even in speeches where Blair pushed the British to accept a European future he could not resist the bridge analogy: 'we are stronger in Europe if strong with the US. Stronger together. Influential with both. And a bridge between the two' (Blair 1999b). Blair's unwavering public support for George W. Bush's decision to undertake military operations to overthrow Saddam Hussein in March 2003 caused huge controversy within European–American relations and Britain's decision to support the US aroused great hostility in other leading EU countries such as France and Germany. Undeterred, Blair was still expounding the 'bridge' idea in November 2004, albeit with slightly less confidence than he had done in previous years:

We have a unique role to play. Call it a bridge, a two-lane motorway, a pivot or call it a damn high wire, which is often how it feels; our job is to keep our sights firmly on both sides of the Atlantic.

(Blair 2004) (Figure 2.5)

[Insert M02UF2.2 here to include MO2UP2.6 and MO2UP2.7]

Tony Blair's successor Gordon Brown (Labour Prime Minister June 2007 to May 2010) had ably supported this approach to British **identity** and role in the world and, as expected, made little alterations to the policies and rhetoric devised by Tony Blair and his foreign secretaries. In appointing the strongly Blairite David Miliband as Foreign Secretary Brown signalled that little would alter under his stewardship. Indeed, Brown was so taken with trying to solve the serious economic crisis that hit economies around the world in 2008 that foreign policy took rather a back seat. Brown developed new priorities around such favoured ideals as aid and development to the poorest regions of the world, but on the 'big' issues such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Britain's relations with the EU and US Brown continued where Blair left off.

Siginificantly for our purposes in this chapter, Brown and Miliband alighted on the idea of Britain being at the 'hub' of global political and economic relations, indicating their Churchillian style conviction that Britain could yet enact an exceptional role in international politics (on Brown and Miliband see Daddow 2011: 243-53).

A 'force for good': British foreign policy from Blair to Cameron

In the previous section we saw how Tony Blair tried to update Churchill's idea of the three circles of British foreign policy for the twenty-first century. This went hand-in-hand with a whole host of other ways in which the New Labour government from May 1997 set about refashioning Britain for life in the fast-paced twenty-first century. 'New' Labour as the governing party liked to be known, wanted to fashion a 'New' Britain which could build on the best aspects of the country's past but also move beyond that in terms of a fresh appreciation of the nation's role in an era of globalization and complex interdependence. Churchill's 'three circles' were not quite forgotten but they were thought about in a new light. The question is: did Blair and his team succeed in forging a post-imperial foreign policy? We will take each plank of the New Labour foreign policy agenda in turn, and assessed how the government set about modernising British foreign policy by devising new ways of conceptualising and speaking about Britain's role in the world. We will suggest that the Conservative-Liberal Coalition government formed in June 2010 signed up to much, but perhaps not all, of what New Labour had in mind for British foreign policy.

[Insert M02NF2.5 near here]

Ethics and foreign policy

Just ten days into New Labour's governance of Britain, on 12 May 1997, Foreign Secretary Robin Cook launched a New Mission Statement for the Foreign Office, part of New Labour's wider approach to government which it wanted to be 'businesslike'. The New Mission Statement went hand-in-hand with a Strategic Defence Review (SDR). Published in July 1998

the SDR sought to align British military capabilities and defence posture more closely with its foreign policy objectives (McInnes 1998), and was built on the characteristic New Labour promise of 'radical change and solid planning' (Robertson 1998: 4). The SDR was updated in 2002 to account for the impact of the events of '9/11' on the global security environment (Cm 5566 Vol. I, 2002). The New Mission Statement set down four goals for British foreign policy, what Cook called his 'contract with the British people on foreign policy' (Cook 1997). The first goal of British foreign policy should be to safeguard national security, particularly but not exclusively through NATO membership. Cook's second goal was economic- to boost British prosperity by promoting UK business abroad and encouraging exports (the Coalition government has gone even further in this regard). The third goal was to protect the environment and improve the quality of life in Britain. The fourth goal was the most commented upon: 'to secure the respect of other nations for Britain's contribution to keeping the peace of the world and promoting democracy around the world . . . Our foreign policy must have an ethical dimension . . .' with human rights at its centre (Cook 1997). This latter goal went to the very heart of what New Labour felt 'modern' Britain should be about. It believed the country should command respect from other states in the international arena not because of its superior coercive power (the tenets of an imperial foreign policy backed by 'gunboat diplomacy') but because Britain stands out as a beacon, a 'force for good in the world' (Cook 1997).

Doctrine of the international community

In truth, Cook's idea of the 'ethical dimension' never really took off in a serious or sustained way, not least because Prime Minister Blair hesitated to give it enthusiastic backing over a prolonged period of time. Meanwhile, issues such as arms sales to countries with dubious human rights records soon took the gloss off Cook's high blown rhetoric and rather overshadowed developments that elsewhere had much positive impact (see for example Guardian 2001). Over New Labour's first term in office (1997-2001) the 'ethical dimension' was quietly dropped, yet New Labour remained rhetorically committed to the liberal idea that

Britain should act as a 'force for good' in the world. Blair's regular commitment of UK armed forces to military interventions for humanitarian purposes, for example in Kosovo in 1999 and Sierra Leone in 2000, stand out as hard examples of the expeditionary impulse in British foreign policy under New Labour (Daddow 2009). These operations were seen by Blair as instances of the 'international community' in operation. As he saw it, in an era of increased interdependence between states British national interests could be negatively affected by the actions of evil leaders, rogue states or destabilising intra-state conflicts in apparently remote parts of the globe. For example, drugs cultivated from poppies in Afghanistan could appear on Britain's streets because of the speed of modern day travel and the problems of policing porous national borders; terrorists were gaining ever easier access to the raw materials to make devastating weapons such as 'dirty bombs'. Blair believed collective action can and should be undertaken to sort out humanitarian crises and the problems of crime and international terrorism at source, if such action was judged likely to succeed. He went on to set out the 'circumstances in which we should get actively involved in other people's conflicts': Are we sure of our case? Have all diplomatic options been exhausted? Can military operations be 'sensibly and prudently undertaken'? Are we in it for the long term? And are there national interests involved? (Blair 1999a).

While controversial in some quarters, the 'Blair doctrine' garnered much support 'as the best way of defending our interests and the moral way of promoting our values' (Powell 2007). For instance, the Foreign Office's 2008 Mission Statement, 'Better World, Better Britain' updated and refined Labour's internationalist approach which continued to shape New Labour's foreign policy thinking under Prime Minister Gordon Brown and Foreign Secretary David Miliband from June 2007 to June 2010. Indeed, at the launch of Labour's 2008 National Security Strategy (NSS), Gordon Brown followed in Blair's footsteps by making the case for an 'all risks' approach to understanding and protecting national security because 'no country is in the old sense far away when the consequences of regional instability and international terrorism … reverberate quickly around the globe' (cited in McCormack 2011: 118).

A Liberal Conservative Foreign Policy

Before coming to power in 2010 Prime Minister David Cameron and Foreign Secretary William Hague were adamant that in government they would pursue what they called a Liberal Conservative foreign policy; 'Liberal, because Britain must be open and engaged with the world, supporting human rights and championing the cause of democracy and the rule of law at every opportunity. But Conservative, because our policy must be hard-headed and practical, dealing with the world as it is and not as we wish it were' (Conservative Party 2010: 109). Sceptical of what the Conservative Party election manifesto wrote off as 'grand utopian schemes' for remaking the world, Cameron and Hague sought to differentiate their approach from New Labour's and in the process also challenged significant elements of previous Conservative Party thinking (Beech 2011: 358). However, they could not escape the new interventionist 'paradigm' that had taken a hold of British foreign policy. The reason, said Hague, was the pragmatic realisation that the world had moved on and the Conservative Party had to move with the times: 'In Britain, [Tony Blair's] "Liberal interventionism' has generated much debate but to varying degrees all of us have subscribed to it' (Hague 2009). The major foreign policy crisis that the 2010 government initially had to deal with – Libya – proved him correct and entrenched the interventionist ideal still closer to the heart of British foreign policy thinking.

Thus, it seems fair to suggest that continuity rather than change has most been in evidence in the conduct of the Coalition government's foreign policy since 2010, which we can see in three main ways. First, the Coalition government has accepted New Labour's interpretation that globalisation hugely affects the UK national security by bringing problems from apparently remote parts of the world to Britain's door. Multilateralism continues to play a central part in British foreign policy thinking. William Hague in particular has trumpeted

the challenges facing foreign policy in a 'networked world' (Hague 2010) and sought to engage with new social media such as Twitter in a bid to reach parts of the national and international communities other Foreign Secretaries could not reach. For example, on 9 June 2011 Hague conducted a 'Twitter chat' on Libya. Insecurity as a product of porous national borders and the growing scale of transntional threats is what the government's Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) has sought to address (see below).

Second, the Coalition government has embraced the engaged New Labour interventionist posture and justified a 'war of choice' in Libya accordingly as being of benefit to the British national interest. Cameron and Nicolas Sarkozy's handling of the Libyan crisis was a good example of prominent European nations taking a lead in co-ordinating international efforts to combat human rights abuses, especially on Europe's doorstep where the Americans are less keen to tread. At the same time, a point of difference between Cameron and Blair, argues academic observer Justin Morris, is that Cameron is likely to be more cautious than Blair about intervening in the affairs of another state for acts that fall short of genocide and the Coalition's 'propensity to resort to force will be markedly less than that exhibited by the governments of Tony Blair' (Morris 2011: 341). After Iraq, the British public's appetite for interventions without clear and obvious purpose appears to be limited at best and this has served to limit any Blair-style adventures (into Iran for example) on the part of David Cameron.

Third, as outlined in the government's 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR), the Coalition government remains committed to pursuing a nostalgically-inclined 'great' role for Britain, echoing leaders back to Churchill and since, as we have seen in this chapter. Its opening line reads: 'Our country has always had global responsibilities and global ambitions' (HM Government 2010a: foreword). Even in times of stringent financial austerity the idea that Britain might retrench from its global outlook is anathema to Whitehall decision-makers. As a *Times* commentator noted of Hague's hugely ambitious July 2009 speech on doing everything from revivifying the Commonwealth to engaging more deeply with the emerging 'BRIC' economies (Brazil, Russia, India and China), 'Britain faces the question of

whether, after Iraq, financial crisis and recession, it chooses to be a shrunken power. Hague's answer is no' (cited in Daddow 2011a). Following the Eurozone crisis, even the idea that Britain might take on the role of a regional power (wholeheartedly inside the EU) with global interests is a discussion the government seems unwilling to have, referendum or no referendum on Britain's membership of the EU.

To knock the square peg of an enhanced global outlook into the round hole of financial crisis the government has sought to do what it feels it needs to protect its national interest on the world stage more strategically, reforming its working methods and increasing cross-department collaboration, particularly with regard to the role of the Department for International Development. Here we find echoes of the 1998 SDR's call for defence and foreign policy to be conducted jointly, more 'smartly' and in a more 'business-like' fashion. Early warning about the likely eruption of security threats, the government believes, will necessitate less frequent and costly action to rectify the consequences of such instability spreading disorder around the globe. Meanwhile, William Hague has committed himself to strengthening 'the long-term capability and international effectiveness of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office as an institution as the heart of government' (Hague 2011). After what he sees as the organisation's untimely decline during the Blair years, Hague's effort to put a gloss on the role of the FCO will face the same budgetary challenges as his government's wider attempt to carve out a leading role for Britain in the world.

Chapter summary

This chapter begins by exploring the history and legacy of Britain's key international relationships, focusing on its involvement in key international organisations: the UN, EU, NATO, the OSCE and OECD. It moves on to explore the key ideas that have shaped contemporary British foreign policy thinking, centring on Winston Churchill's alluring 'three circles' model of Britain's place in the world and New Labour's updating of that line of thought through its concept of Britain acting out the role of a 'bridge' on the world stage. The

final part surveys the transition from Labour to the Coalition government, particularly the continued emphasis on interventionism within British foreign policy discourse under the new guise of a Liberal Conservative foreign policy.

Discussion points

- Do you think Britain still warrants its place as a Permanent Member of the UN Security Council?

- How much global influence does Britain gain from its membership of (a) NATO and (b) the OSCE?

- Did the 2011 parliamentary debate on the referendum on Britain's EU membership demonstrate that Britain is still Europe's 'awkward partner'?

- What are the principal ideas that have helped shape British foreign policy since 1945? Are these ideas relevant today?

- Did the 2003 invasion of Iraq show that Britain still places too much emphasis on its 'special relationship' with the United States?

- Explain how Britain has tried to act as a 'force for good' in the world since 1997. Has it succeeded?

- How does a Liberal Conservative foreign policy posture differ from an 'ethical' foreign policy?

- What impact has 'globalisation' had on the definition of the British 'national interest' over the past two decades?

Further reading

Coverage of the general themes, issues and controversies in British foreign policy considered in this chapter can be found in Jamie Gaskarth (2013), John Dickie (2007), David Sanders (1990), Robert Holland (1991) and Paul Kennedy (1985), with a useful focus on the impact of decolonisation on Britain's image of itself as a Great Power in Heinlein (2002). On the strategic, political and economic dimensions of the British Empire see P.J. Cain and A.G.

Hopkins (1993) and Eric Hobsbawm (1990); on the notion of the 'two' British Empires see Marshall (2001) and Bayly (2001). Ferguson (2004) gives a good overview of Britain's wider imperial experiences. On the 'special relationship' and the myths that surround it see John Charmley (1995) and David Dimbleby and David Reynolds (1988), and especially John Baylis (1997) on the slipperiness of the concept. Britain's troubled attempts to come to terms with the idea of European unity are documented in John Young (2000) and Hugo Young (1998), while Daddow (2011b) traces New Labour's troubled attempts to reach a new consensus on the matter. Stephen George's famous thesis (1998) is that Britain has been Europe's 'awkward partner' – even after joining the organisation.

Good surveys of New Labour's foreign policy include Richard Little and Mark Wickham-Jones (2001), Mark Curtis (2003), Paul Williams (2005) and Daddow and Gaskarth (2011). Rhiannon Vickers shows the party political roots of this foreign policy trajectory within the Labour Party (2011), while Anne Deighton (2005) shows the strong links between Blairite and Churchillian thinking on British foreign policy. On the 'ethical' foreign policy see Nicholas Wheeler and Tim Dunne (1998) and for critiques of this agenda see Christopher Hill (2001) and especially David Chandler (2003). William Wallace (2005) critiques Blair's endeavour to situate Britain as a 'bridge' between Europe and America. Reflections on the SDR can be found in Cornish and Dorman (2009).

The foreign policy of the 2010 Coalition government is well covered in Dodds and Elden (2008), Beech (2011) and Morris (2011). The SDSR receives critical treatment in Dover and Phythian (2011), while the negative implications of Britain's gradual disengagement from the Europe's common effort at defence co-operation is charted in O'Donnell (2011). David Cameron explained the principles of Liberal Conservatism in foreign policy (Cameron 2006) as did William Hague before coming to office (Hague 2009).

On the causes and conduct of the American Revolution see Wood (2003). The history, structure and functions of the UN are detailed in Baehr and Gordenker (2005) and Thomas Weiss (2008) considers how to improve the UN machine. NATO's post-Cold War

identity crisis is well covered in Moore (2007), Smith (2006), Sloan (2010) and Webber and

Hyde-Price (2011). For an alternative approach to the OSCE's role in promoting security see

Sandole (2007).

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Useful websites

Britain in NATO: http://www.fco.gov.uk/resources/en/pdf/4103709/5476465/britain-in-nato.pdf

Council of Europe: http://www.coe.int/lportal/web/coe-portalEFTA: http://www.efta.int/EU: http://europa.eu/index_en.htmGlobal Policy Forum: http://www.globalpolicy.org/

NATO: http://www.nato.int/

ODIHR: http://www.osce.org/odihr

OECD: http://www.oecd.org/home/0,3305,en_2649_201185_1_1_1_1_1,00.html, including OECD statistics portal:

http://www.oecd.org/statsportal/0,3352,en_2825_293564_1_1_1_1_1,00.html

OSCE: http://www.osce.org/

OSCE YouTube channel: http://www.youtube.com/user/osceSDSR:

http://www.direct.gov.uk/prod_consum_dg/groups/dg_digitalassets/@dg/@en/documents/digitalasset/dg_191634.pdf

UK Delegation to NATO: http://uknato.fco.gov.uk/en/

UN: http://www.un.org/en/

[FIGURE LIST: CAPTIONS AND SOURCES]

Figure 2.1 Membership of international organisations as at March 2006 [same as last edition]

Source: Foreign and Commonwealth Office (2006) *Active Diplomacy in a Changing World*,

http://collections.europarchive.org/tna/20080205132101/fco.gov.uk/Files/kfile/ozintpriorities2006Chapt2.pdf

Figure 2.2 UN Security Council: functions and powers [same as last edition]

Source: http://www.un.org/Docs/sc/unsc_functions.html

Figure 2.3 Aims of the Council of Europe [same as last edition]

Source: Council of Europe undated. Reaffirmed in the Warsaw Declaration of May 2005 (Council of Europe 2005)

UNFig

Entropa, David Cerny, Justus Lipsius Building Brussels, 1 January to 31 June 2009.

[same as last edition]

Source: Author's photos.

Figure 2.4 Churchill's three circles [same as last edition]

Figure 2.5 Blair's 'bridge' collapses?