

Insight

UK foreign policy: Difficult choices

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Insights for the new Parliament

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The UK faces some difficult foreign policy choices. Previously accepted international norms are being challenged. The global balance of power is shifting away from the West. It seems likely the UK will be sailing these choppy waters outside the European Union. And the 'special relationship' with the US is particularly challenged under President Trump.

In the 2017-2019 Parliament, several committees thought hard about the UK's place in the world, concluding that change would be necessary:

- The Lords International Relations and Defence Committee found a state of "turmoil and upheaval" in which old alliances, assumptions and priorities "are all in question"
- Given the unpredictability of the US and China and the UK's departure from the EU, the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy believes the UK will have to chart a "more nuanced course"
- The Foreign Affairs Committee investigated the Government's 'Global Britain' agenda, raising concerns about the UK's diplomatic representation in European countries post-Brexit. One sign of the Foreign Office's post-Brexit planning has been the boost in its diplomatic presence across the continent.

Relations with the US: shakier ground?

President Trump will probably stand for re-election in 2020, despite the impeachment process. It is early days, but polls suggest a Democratic victory is certainly possible. Although the election could make a big difference to Europe, even a Democratic president might continue the process of turning away from Europe and focusing on Asia.

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If Brexit happens, the UK may increasingly have to decide whether to be closer to the US or to the EU; trying to bridge an ever-wider gap may be futile. The Lords International Relations Committee warned that the Government may in future need to place less reliance on reaching a common US/UK approach to the main issues.

The Iranian nuclear deal: sticking with the EU

So far, the UK has sided with the EU over the Iranian nuclear deal. President Trump withdrew from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal in May 2018, promising instead ‘maximum pressure’ on Iran. It has been claimed that US sanctions have “crippled” the Iranian economy. Iran has stepped up its nuclear programme in response, somewhat reducing ‘breakout time’ (the time needed to produce enough uranium for a nuclear weapon). The UK and the other signatories of the deal have tried to save it, but the EU’s financial mechanisms to bypass US sanctions may not be effective against US financial might. Meanwhile, tensions between Iran and the Sunni Arab states soared in September 2019, with attacks on a huge Saudi oil plant, raising concerns about the world’s energy supplies. The Royal Navy’s Operation Kipion, consisting of minesweepers and frigates, aims to uphold freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz.

Figure 1: Operation Kipion



Source: Ministry of Defence

Counter-terrorist military operations

Afghanistan and NATO’s Operation Resolute Support

There are nearly 1,000 UK troops deployed in Afghanistan, part of the NATO Resolute Support operation. They are stationed in Kabul, providing security and helping to train Afghan security forces. Peace talks between the US and the Taliban (excluding the Afghan Government) collapsed in September 2019. With significant ISIS and Al-Qaeda presence in Afghanistan and deep hostility between the Taliban and the Afghan Government, the future is not clear.

Global coalition against Daesh/ISIS

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The UK has about 1,350 military personnel contributing to the Global Coalition Against Daesh (ISIS) and RAF aircraft continue to conduct surveillance and ground attack sorties. The UK mission is called *Operation Shader*.

...in Iraq

The Iraqi Government declared victory against ISIS in 2017 but the aftermath has been very difficult. Massive reconstruction is needed; sectarian and Arab/Kurd divisions remain sharp. In October 2019, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis demonstrated against corruption and for jobs. More than 300 died as security forces used live rounds.

...in Syria

In October 2019, President Trump withdrew US troops from Kurdish-controlled areas of Syria, tweeting that ISIS had been defeated. The subsequent Turkish military offensive raised concerns about the humanitarian impact and about ISIS prisoners in Kurdish custody. Some argued this was a gift to Iran and Russia, sharply reducing Western influence in the Middle East. The move also called into question Turkey's place in the Western alliance.

...but still a threat

In October 2019 ISIS leader al-Baghdadi died in a US military operation. Nevertheless, the terrorist organisation is reported to be gaining strength in Iraq as well as Syria.

ISIS also has a presence in Libya, Afghanistan, South Asia and elsewhere. Although the group has been driven out of most of its former territory, it and al-Qaeda remain a threat.

Figure 2: UK forces committed to Operation Shader



Map of UK forces committed to Operation Shader (Ministry of Defence, September 2019)

Yemen: 'The world's biggest humanitarian catastrophe'

The UN says the conflict in Yemen has caused the world's biggest humanitarian catastrophe, leading to death and malnutrition on a vast scale. At the time of writing, there were hopes of a peace deal, but attention has focused on Saudi Arabia's contribution to suffering in the Arab world's poorest country and on the UK's role in arming the Saudi kingdom (the UK's biggest defence export market) and providing military advice.

Journalist Jamal Khashoggi's death in the Saudi Embassy in Istanbul also underlined Saudi Arabia's poor human rights record. In June 2019, the UK Court of Appeal ruled that

the UK Government should not license any sales to Saudi Arabia if the arms might be used in Yemen. The Government is working on reviewing licensing decisions in the light of the court order.

Russia: another test for the UK

Since it annexed Crimea from Ukraine in 2014, Russia has widely been seen as a threat to security in Europe. Russia has continued to integrate Crimea with Russian territory and to destabilise Ukraine. It is not yet clear how the election of Volodymyr Zelensky to the Ukrainian presidency will affect relations with Russia – he has pledged to end the war in the Donbass eastern region of Ukraine.

The UK has been one of the strongest nations in pushing for sanctions against Russia over Crimea. Brexit could change the balance in the EU over Russia sanctions and Russia could be a test case for the UK's new autonomous post-Brexit sanctions regime. Will the UK continue to pursue an assertive sanctions policy against Russia?

The Intelligence and Security Committee's report on Russian involvement in UK politics remained unpublished at the time of writing.

NATO

In response to perceived Russian aggression, NATO has adopted the Enhanced Forward Presence, to which the UK contributes some 950 troops. NATO faces problems, including arguments over European countries' defence expenditure, opposition to Turkey's purchase of a Russian air defence system, and an uncertain commitment from Donald Trump's USA. The UK hosted a Heads of State and Government meeting in early December 2019, marking NATO's 70th anniversary.

Hong Kong

There is no end in sight to the protests that have shaken Hong Kong in 2019. The UK Government has repeatedly expressed serious concern about the escalation of violence in recent months but has resisted pressure to grant British Nationals (Overseas) passport holders the right to live in the UK.

The UK and China are joint signatories to the Joint Declaration on the Question of Hong Kong but there are widespread fears about China's long-term commitment to its 'One Country, Two Systems' principle.

The situation in Hong Kong could affect wider UK/China relations.

Kashmir

In 2019, shortly after winning re-election, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi revoked Article 370, which guaranteed special status for the Indian-administered part of Kashmir. India has divided the state of Jammu and Kashmir into two new territories that are directly ruled from the federal capital, Delhi. Tensions within the region remain high.

UK Government policy is to encourage India and Pakistan to resolve the situation bilaterally.

A new National Security Strategy?

An opportunity to reassess the Government's foreign policy objectives and national security priorities may come with the next National Security Strategy review (NSS). Aligned with defence reviews, the last two reviews were held after the 2010 and 2015 elections. The Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy recommended the next

[full review](#) should take place alongside the next Spending Review. This suggests that work on the next NSS could begin early in the new Parliament.

International Development

0.7% Commitment and trends in UK aid

Since 2013 the UK has met the UN target of spending at least 0.7% of Gross National Income (GNI) on development aid. In 2015, the target was put [into law](#); the major parties plan to maintain the legally-binding target.

Government departments other than the Department for International Development (DfID) are spending more of the aid budget: now around 25%. [The National Audit Office has questioned](#) whether these departments can spend the money as effectively as DfID.

Brexit and aid spent through the EU

The UK's total international aid budget in 2018 was £14.6 billion, of which just under 10% was spent through the EU. It includes humanitarian aid and international development programmes.

Post-Brexit the UK will have to decide how to reallocate these resources. The recent [Political Declaration](#) on the future relationship between the EU and the UK suggests UK participation in EU aid programmes, something that 2019 election manifestos did not mention.

The UK will also have to decide how to use its [trade policies](#) to help less developed countries [post-Brexit](#).

Further reading

- [The Iran nuclear deal and rising tensions in the Gulf](#), House of Commons Library, 1 October 2019.
- [UK aid: frequently asked questions](#), House of Commons Library, 3 October 2019.
- 'UK General Election 2019: Britain's new foreign policy divide', Thomas Raines, Chatham House, 9 December 2019.
- [Syria: US withdrawal and Turkish incursion](#), House of Commons Library, 17 October 2019.
- [The Qatar crisis and regional ramifications](#), House of Commons Library, 15 October 2019.
- [Afghanistan: elections and cancelled talks](#), House of Commons Library, published 9 October 2019.
- [UK foreign policy in a shifting world order](#), House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee, 6 March 2019.
- [Global Britain](#), Foreign Affairs Committee, 20 June 2018.
- [Preparing for a changing world](#), POSTbriefs, 28 August 2019.
- [Brexit reading list: Global Britain](#), House of Commons Library.

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