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BRITISH FOREIGN POLICY IN THE COMING YEARS
Progressive Internationalism at a time of introversion

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Introduction

We are now less 100 days away from the next general election.

But tonight, in this esteemed setting of Chatham House I want to take the opportunity to focus not on the electoral politics of the next few months, but on the foreign policy challenges of the next few years.

In truth, as most of you gathered here tonight will know first-hand, much of UK foreign policy is reactive – and always has been.

But this is not to say British foreign policy need be without reason or strategy.

We may not be able to predict what events will dominate the international agenda in years to come, but we must do what we can to be best prepared to anticipate and respond to them.

Bobby Kennedy rightly said: “The future is not a gift. It is an achievement...Every generation helps make its own future.”

For our generation, making our own future seems an especially daunting task, in particularly turbulent times.

But we must continue to strive for that achievement.

So today I want to set out to you Labour’s approach to foreign policy.

I want to make the case that a progressive internationalist agenda is the right way forward at a time of growing introversion amongst the global public.

In my remarks this evening I want to cover four broad areas:

First, let me be so bold as to give my assessment of current global trends, including defining what I mean by introversion amongst the global public.

Second, I will set out the values and principles that underlie Labour’s approach to foreign policy –including what I mean by Progressive Internationalism.

Third, I will discuss contemporary examples of how Progressive Internationalism can be applied to contemporary situations.

And finally, I will set out why I believe we should reject a politics of pessimism and instead ensure the Foreign Office has the tools to advance a politics of Progressive Internationalism.

Understanding today’s global trend-lines

Any incoming government in May will need to advance its international priorities in the face of serious constraints, already much discussed in forums such as this:

- a recalibration of America’s global role, still likely to remain the dominant superpower, but operating under new constraints and challenges.
- a complex range of threats arising from the long crisis in the wider Middle East including Syria and Iraq, as well as the Sahel, northern Nigeria, Somalia and Kenya.

These threats include terrorism, organised crime and growing and already massive flows of refugees.

- and budgetary constraints, felt across Europe in particular, including the impact these are having on defence and development budgets, as well as traditional and public diplomacy.

But I would also argue that these constraints actually reveal broader forces at play.

They are being amplified by what I see as five key trend-lines defining today's foreign policy environment.

Let me address each of these in turn.

First, the return of geo-political competition among an increasing number of global actors.

The global financial crisis has accelerated a shift in power away from the West.

This has led to a renewed, if not new, struggle for position among different power centres.

In Asia, the competition between a rising China has spawned naval disputes with Japan and Southeast Asia and competition over natural resources.

Ukraine today is at the epicentre of an emerging fault line between Russia and the West.

And in the Middle East, the rise of ISIL is in part fuelled by regional powers engaged in a wider sectarian conflict.

Second, the current model of Global Governance has come under renewed and sustained pressure.

If the last two decades have been defined by a so-called coming together, many countries are now focusing on the challenges of interdependence, as well as its benefits.

America is pursuing greater energy independence, China is focused on stimulating domestic consumption and Germany is reassessing its relationship with Eurozone neighbours.

Third, the rise of Economic Warfare.

Although brutal and bloody wars continue to rage from Damascus to Donbas, another key battlefield has emerged in the economic sphere.

Today sanctions are increasingly being deployed instead of military strikes, competing trade regimes are mimicking the role of past military alliances, currency wars are at least as common as the occupation of territory, and the manipulation of the price of resources such as oil can be more consequential than conventional arms races.

Fourth, a fragmentation of politics and growing trend towards inequality within states.

Zbigniew Brzezinski has described how the world is experiencing a "global political awakening" that is constraining the ability of old elites to govern.

But although the desire for accountability and transparency is growing, this remarkable concatenation of political activism is not driving the world towards liberal democracy.

The most dramatic illustration of this being the Arab uprisings.

This fragmentation is underpinned by the global trend towards growing inequality within states, even as the rise of China and India is narrowing global income inequality.

Much of the dramatic drop in worldwide extreme poverty in recent years – from around a third to below 15% in 2011 – has been fuelled by Asia’s economic growth, not a global shift in national resources towards the poor.

And finally, let me set out one of the most significant trends that is defining the global environment in which foreign policy decisions are now being taken.

The first trend is a growing introversion among the global public.

Over the last decades, we have seen a public becoming increasingly sceptical about global involvement, let alone leadership.

In the face of TV images of terrorist atrocities ranging from Nigeria, to Paris, there is a growing sense that the threats we now face are so complex they are essentially insurmountable.

Claims that Britain – and the West more generally - is on a course of inevitable decline are used to justify a politics of retreat and isolationism based on an assumption that nothing we do abroad could anyway make a difference.

And here in the UK, following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and its aftermath, we have seen a collapse in trust that has permanently raised the bar of public legitimacy for future interventions, whichever government puts them before Parliament.

In Chatham House’s fascinating survey published only last week, there were positive signs of a shift in public attitudes, especially since 2005. But 60% of those polled still agreed with the statement: ‘The UK is expected to do too much internationally. The UK should do less and others should do more.’

But this is not simply a British – or even European phenomenon.

In the US, a recent Pew Research survey showed that for the first time since Pew began asking in 1964, more than half the respondents felt that "the US should mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along the best they can on their own."

Progressive Internationalism

So if these are the trends that will shape our global future – what are the tools that we can use to navigate this changing global terrain?

I don’t deny that some of the core interests of UK foreign policy are common between parties and governments – namely; defending the economic prospects and physical security of British citizens.

Promoting our core interest, in a concrete sense, means for example, ensuring we remain at the forefront of cyber capabilities; supporting multilateral disarmament while looking at ways in which a minimal credible deterrent can be delivered most efficiently and continuing to invest in our special forces and in our ability to support local and regional security forces.

In particular, we will need to continue to devote substantial resources to tackling the threat of terrorism – in all its forms. The work that our security services and intelligence agencies do in this area deserves our praise and respect, and will continue to be vital to our national interest in years to come.

But for an incoming Labour Government in 2015, led by Ed Miliband, this core interest will be pursued within a clear framework of progressive values and principles.

As Labour, we know that we do not have to shape these from scratch.

They are the principles on which the post-war European order was based – and which the post-war Labour government had a key role in creating.

It was a Labour Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin who hosted the first ever meeting of the UN General Assembly at Westminster Hall in 1946, which started the process of decolonisation with independence for India in 1947 and which was a founder member of NATO in 1949.

So let me set out to you those principles on which a progressive foreign policy will be based.

First – clearly, the experience of the last century has taught us that strength at home has been a contributor to peace abroad.

If we are unable to deliver broad based prosperity for our people – built on the foundation of an economy that works for working people - then the attraction of populism and introversion will grow.

Second, we have benefited from organised and sustained solidarity between likeminded states, unprecedented in history, based on common democratic values.

The willingness of this government to open the question of the UK's continued EU membership – indeed a Foreign Secretary who seems to support departure – undermines this basic principle of solidarity.

Other disintegrative forces also pose threats – the election of Syriza and potential Grexit, separatism in Spain or Scotland, an anti-euro Le Pen government in France.

NATO, the EU, the ECHR, the UN and the Commonwealth and our close relationship with the US are not simply groupings of convenience, but deeply rooted communities of fate.

These communities need to be defended and nurtured

Third, we must enhance the collective weight and impact of the main post-1945 global institutions and treaties – the UN, the IMF, the WTO, the NPT – and their related international norms - respect for human rights, the laws of war and intervening to combat genocide and repression, solidarity with the poor and dispossessed, rejecting forcible border changes and protecting freedom of navigation.

In particular, that means continuing to champion the creation of the UN Commission on Human Rights and advances in international justice that have already been truly transformative.

It means ensuring that our international and regional institutions are recalibrated to better tackle climate change. The UN summit in Paris later this year is our chance to demonstrate how this will work in practice.

And it means demonstrating our commitment to human rights not just through these global institutions, but by reflecting these norms and principles in the application of our own foreign policy priorities.

This year is of course, the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII, the founding of the UN and the establishment of that order based on clear norms.

None are perfectly applied, but all of them matter.

I believe these three principles – prioritising domestic strength, promoting the principle of solidarity and preserving global norms – are the basis of a progressive approach to foreign affairs.

And Progressive Internationalism is an actively, and consciously, engaged approach to promoting and upholding these principles on the international stage.

Progressive Internationalism: Contemporary Challenges

So how would Progressive Internationalism be implemented in practice.

Well let me offer a, by no means exhaustive, but certainly illustrative, examples of this approach.

First, let me begin with the region which is foremost in many of our minds today – the Middle East.

Richard Haas has suggested that for all the comparisons that have been made to WWI, or to the Cold War, “what is taking place in the region today most resembles the Thirty Years War...of Europe in the first half of the 17th century”.

In fact, the case of the Middle East sectarian divisions have been coincided with state failure on a scale seldom seen since the Second World War.

Political fragmentation and military confrontation are driving a region already in turmoil into potential further despair.

Given the current tendency towards fragmentation, we must accept the unfortunate reality that democratic transformations of other societies are beyond the means of outsiders alone to achieve.

In this tumultuous context, it is worth bluntly acknowledging that our first order priority, along with allies, must be to seek to do no further harm in the region already scarred by foreign involvement in various forms.

Clearly much has already been said about the fundamental error in the rationale for the 2003 invasion of Iraq – ridding Saddam of WMDs – but what has also subsequently emerged is the fact that removing Saddam and empowering the Shiite majority, without ensuring adequate safeguards for the Sunni Arab minority, exacerbated sectarian frictions within the country. Iraq became seen as a country supporting Iranian ambitions, rather than balancing them, thereby further destabilising an already volatile regional power-balance.

British foreign policy over the last decade has been conducted in this long shadow of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The priority for the next Labour Government will be ensuring that the next decade is conducted having learnt the lessons of that conflict.

The publication of the Chilcot report must be a turning point. That is why we want to see it published at the earliest practical opportunity.

None of us who have supported the establishment of the Chilcot Inquiry ever contemplated its work would still be unfinished after nearly 6 years and two general elections.

The continued delay has contributed to, rather than addressed the growing sense of introversion that many people feel about Britain's place in the world.

The Chilcot Report needs to be a bridge to a new chapter in British foreign policy, but its delayed publication is now a barrier to rebuilding the trust of the British public.

All of us who want Britain to have a progressive internationalist foreign policy have an interest in seeing the report published.

Learning the lessons from the Chilcot inquiry will mean that the next Labour government will turn the page on the last decade of foreign policy, not turn our backs on the world. Neither neo-conservatism nor neo-isolationism is the right way forward for British foreign policy.

We must learn the lessons of Iraq, but not be paralysed by it. That is why there is an urgent need for the Inquiry to conclude its work.

If we are to rebuild trust and secure public consent for Britain as an outward looking, engaged country, it is vital that the next government learn, and is seen to have learnt, the lessons of Iraq.

The consequences of Iraq already seem deeper and broader than those of the Suez crisis in 1956.

And the collapse in trust means that Iraq has permanently raised the bar of public legitimacy for future interventions, whichever government puts them before Parliament, as we saw in the vote on military intervention in Syria in August 2013.

More than a decade on, Iraq still holds difficult lessons for British foreign policy, but they are lessons that need to be learned. It would be futile to deny history, and it would be folly to repeat it.

Today in Iraq, the new government has already taken important steps and we should support it as it continues to do so. But we cannot be a substitute for the failure of local elites to take responsibility for their own future.

It would not be right therefore for outside powers to have the sole responsibility for liberating Mosul or other cities from ISIL. That is a job that has to be led by Iraqis, with the support of those people being liberated.

And in Syria, we must be clear that the choice is not between an Iraq 2003-style military intervention on the one hand, and doing nothing at all on the other.

None of us who cast votes in Parliament in August 2013 could guarantee that they would have given rise to an agreement to remove Assad's chemical weapons under UN supervision, but all of us should be grateful that it did.

More than 200,000 have died and over 2 million have fled, and while the conflict rages, the suffering of the Syrian people continues.

Today there is still some hope that the gap between what Russia and the West want for Syria is not unbridgeable.

So faced with military stalemate on the ground, well-armed jihadists opposition forces and the world's worst humanitarian crisis, it is right that the UN – and wider international community – are now looking at models of more gradual change than those anticipated by the failed Geneva I and II.

As well as this more recent Syrian conflict, long-standing conflicts continue across the region.

In Israel and Palestine, the passing of time seems only to bring heightened frustrations as opposed to calming tensions. Despite John Kerry's exhaustive efforts in 2013, the latest round of negotiations collapsed in April last year, and although we all await to see what emerges from the Israeli elections next month, their resumption is not currently on the table.

Never have prospects looked bleaker in the past decade, so it is right that the UK and our allies now explore ways to move forward negotiations.

Turning to Russia, it is clear that in recent months Russia has emerged as a real foreign policy challenge for Britain and its allies.

President Putin has calibrated his actions in Ukraine after the fall of the pro-Russian President Yanukovich on the basis of a seeming unwillingness of others to resort to overt military force.

But he appears to have miscalculated the concerted commitment of his adversaries to forceful economic-diplomacy.

In recent months, we have seen the economic underpinning of his aggressive foreign policy now being steadily undermined by the collapse in state revenues that reduced oil and gas prices is now bringing.

That is why the EU is right to be looking again at the sanctions regime in light of the recent rocket attack at Mariupol.

Ukraine today is at the epicentre of an emerging fault line between Russia and the West. The priority going forward must be to remain on guard against Russia's efforts to find and exploit weaknesses among its European neighbours. Especially given President Putin's apparent temptation to prey on European states weakened by recession and vulnerable to subversion, subsidy, and corruption.

At the same time, we must also make clear that to the Russian government that we continue to recognise our long-term underlying shared interests in cooperation rather than conflict.

But the crisis is not only about Russia, it is also about Ukraine.

Unless its economy and state can be reformed and modernised, stability in the region will remain elusive.

It is up to the Ukraine government to take the lead, making its own independent judgements about the path it wishes to follow.

So the EU – and the IMF most importantly, should be prepared to support a credible programme of economic reform in Ukraine.

Support for Ukraine, coupled with a firm and united front towards Russia, is the way to help end the conflict and encourage reconciliation between the West and Russia, who today sit precariously on either side of an emerging global fault line.

Although the Middle East, Russian aggression or even the reach of Brussels may dominate the headlines, I believe that the rise of Beijing will be fundamental in shaping our long term futures.

Governments in the past have struggled to decide whether to view China through the prism of a competitive global power, an economic adversary or an unstable exemplar of political fragmentation on a massive scale.

In fact, the UK's policy towards China, and Asia Pacific more widely, should include a strong focus on economics – exploiting new and dynamic markets.

But it needs to be about more than this.

It also needs to focus on how to ensure that China's emergence as a global actor is based on mutual respect, both for other nations but more importantly for the rules governing the international order, and economy, more generally.

Until recently, China and India were often bracketed together in UK policy discussions – defined mainly as markets and economic actors. Today, some increasingly bracket China as a security problem alongside Russia – both as rogue states not playing by the West's rules. This is not helpful.

China's territorial disputes do pose serious challenges for regional security. But, unlike in the Kremlin, many of its leaders seem aware that, if they push these too far, the backlash could harm their core interest of economic development.

There is much we can do to deepen cooperation with China in relation to other regions: cooperating to help stabilise Afghanistan and Central Asia, where China has growing economic stakes; working together to support African governments – improving aid quality, providing specialist support for UN peacekeeping. Engaging China as a partner, for example in the Middle East, is better than waiting for it to become a rival.

Our hope must be that economic consolidation and domestic political progress will reinforce, rather than undermine, China's historic caution towards external adventurism. Not because there is not a space for a successful and dynamic Asian-power, but because that power must be predicated on a respect for the rules of the international system that form the pillars of our collective global order.

Finally, let me turn to the issue of Europe and Britain's place within it.

Labour is clear that membership of the EU remains central to our prosperity and security.

At a time when great power struggles are once again emerging, and when economic warfare has once again become a central tool of foreign policy, it is clear that our membership

makes us stronger and helps promote our interests and values in this changing international context.

And yet, one of my greatest concerns as a prospective Foreign Secretary is that too often we are now seen by our European allies not as a leader and contributor, but as a potential problem and adversary.

In Opposition we have laid out a substantive reform agenda for the EU.

I gave a speech in this very room setting out Labour's vision for change in the EU in January 2013.

Including substantial reform of the EU budget.

Greater powers for national parliaments.

And changes to transitional controls for new member states.

I and my Shadow Cabinet colleagues have already begun building European coalitions for change.

I am clear that Britain needs a post-Cameron Europe policy, so in government Labour will set itself the task of reviewing, repairing, and resetting our country's approach to Europe.

That will include repairing relations with key allies, building relations with key Ministries across Europe as well as training and engaging more British Officials based in EU institutions that have seen UK influence and interests undermined for too long.

This government has presided over the biggest loss of British influence in Europe for a generation. Arguably at one of the most crucial times in our membership.

In the uncertain and unpredictable times we live in, the case for Europe and Britain's place at its heart is one that needs to be heard.

The Strategic Diplomacy Review

It is vital to ensure that departments across government are prepared and equipped to adapt to these global trends and contemporary challenges.

So today I can announce that on coming to office, an incoming Labour government would undertake a wide ranging review of how Britain projects both its interests and its values internationally.

This review commissioned by and reporting directly to the Prime Minister, would provide the backdrop to the National Security Council's existing work.

Importantly the review would ensure that aspects of foreign policy that don't fit neatly into a 'security' framework are given due weight, including, for example, the importance of our relationship with Europe and our strategy for engagement with other multilateral institutions.

Within the Foreign Office, a further Strategic Diplomacy Review would also be conducted to review the workings of the FCO itself and how it can best support that strategy for projecting Britain's values and interests abroad. This work would take place in parallel to the Strategic Defence and Security Review.

Battling against a politics of pessimism

It is clear that the in-tray of a future Labour Foreign Secretary would include many difficult and different challenges.

But I don't believe that policy challenges can be an excuse for a politics of despair.

I am confident that the UK, along with our closest allies, does have the capabilities and resources to advance a Progressive Internationalism in the interests of our citizens.

Let me tell you why.

It is certainly true that the position of Western – and especially US – strategic dominance established after 1990 is beginning to come under challenge.

But let me also put this to you - the US will continue to have the world's most formidable military for the foreseeable future, its economy remains one of the world's largest, its workers are not aging as quickly as those of Europe, Japan or China and no country seems to have the capacity for greater technological innovation.

And the UK continues to have a key role in our global future.

We will remain one of the most capable global powers for many years to come; with the world's fifth largest defence budget, the second largest aid budget and the fourth largest diplomatic network in the world.

The UK makes up a total of 1% world population, but 4.4% of world trade.

We are the 5th largest economy in the world and represent around 13% of world creative industries and 12% of all world's scientific papers.

And our networks stretch across the UNSC, the EU, the Commonwealth, NATO, strong alliances with the US, as well as historic links with key regions and countries – from the Gulf and parts of Africa to as far as Australia and New Zealand.

And I fundamentally believe that one of our greatest assets, which will be preserved for decades to come, is that we have the skills and the people able to deliver for Britain in the years ahead: the brave soldiers and doctors and NGO logisticians deploying to Sierra Leone to stem Ebola; our military personnel now operating in support of the Iraqi government; the diplomats around the world who are some of our best and brightest men and women; and the unparalleled reach and impact of the BBC World Service.

I am determined to support them in ensuring they have the resources needed to serve our national values and interests in the coming years.

Progressive Internationalism is about explicitly doing more to foster these assets and to integrate them as a policy objective with hard power and military assets.

So I do understand both the challenges, and the constraints, that we face as a country.

But I also have faith in the people who work to sustain Britain's international engagement and in the principles that should guide us in how we move forward.

The terrain is different, but the priorities remain the same.

CONCLUSION: Rejecting the myth of decline

So let me try and draw the threads of the case I have advanced tonight together.

The response to these contemporary challenges – the return of geo-political competition; the rise of economic warfare; the pressures on global governance; the introversion that accompanies the fragmentation of politics – are frankly too often framed through the prism of decline and a tendency towards pessimism.

It is true that these trends mean the UK will continue to face real challenges on the international sphere.

But those who counsel inevitable decline are driven by a politics of pessimism, not simply real-politick as they might try to claim.

But the role of leaders is to now persuade a war-weary society that an active and engaged British foreign policy remains the best way to promote and protect our values and interests.

Today there is a long way to go, and at times we and our allies have been caught wrong footed.

But we must continue to make the case that our institutions and alliances do provide a strength that our challengers cannot match – if we stay united.

Selling this case is difficult.

But it is necessary. Because political consent is a more important aspect of international affairs than ever before.

So as progressives at a time of growing introversion, we have a unique responsibility to reject those who try to promote a Little Britain – and in some cases Little England – approach that suggests we should simply turn our backs on the world.

Our shared task for government is to build consent for an outward-looking Britain which I believe is the best way to advance not just our interests, but also our values.

That is why, in this time of increasing introversion, I see it as Labour's task, as my task, and as the next Government's task, to continue to make the case for Britain to advance a foreign policy of Progressive Internationalism in the years and decades ahead.