

Britain's Place in the World: A Labour Perspective

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Ed Miliband

It is a great privilege to be here today.

Chatham House has always led the way in shaping new thinking on Britain's place in the world.

So with the general election less than two weeks away now, there is no better place to come to set out my case.

On how I will seek to reshape our great country's relationship with our allies and partners.

And how Britain can play its part in overcoming the great global challenges that we now face.

My argument to you today is a simple but important one.

The next Labour government will stand up for Britain and ensure that our country takes a strong and confident place on the world stage.

It is time to reject the small-minded isolationism that has characterised this government.

It is an approach that has shrunk our influence and weakened Britain.

We need a government that is outward looking, not inward looking.

Optimistic about our role, not pessimistic.

But just as we should learn from the mistakes of this government, so too we should learn from our past too.

Including the 2003 Iraq War.

Recognising that we are always stronger, more effective and have more authority when we work with allies across the world and seek to strengthen not weaken multilateral institutions.

So:

Standing up for Britain.

Speaking out for Britain.

And using Britain's influence in cooperation with others.

That will be the essence of the foreign policy of the government I lead.

And that is the approach I want to lay out for you today.

I know my first responsibility as Prime Minister would be to keep our country safe.

Because the threats we face are real.

Here at home and abroad.

From nuclear proliferation.

To ISIL.

To Russia and Ukraine.

To the changing balance of power between East and West.

To the on-going national security challenge that is climate change.

To the terrible and heart-breaking scenes we have witnessed in the Mediterranean this week.

And these challenges reflect powerful global trends that any government – Labour or Conservative - must now confront.

Forces that shape the world in which we all live.

Let me describe three of them.

The first concerns the very complexity of the global challenges that confront us.

The threats we face now are not generally the old threat from single states.

They cross borders and boundaries.

And they are more complex than the deeply dangerous but more traditional inter-state rivalry of the past.

It is true of the dangers of ISIL, motivated by an evil ideology that recognises no borders.

It is true of the mass migration caused by conflicts that stretch across entire regions, especially in North Africa and across the Middle East.

And it is true of climate change, which threatens the future of everyone, no matter where they live.

This means that they can't effectively be confronted by any single state.

Not the United States.

Not China.

Not the UK.

No country on their own.

But they can only possibly be tackled by concerted action by countries all round the world.

And it is not just the complexity and trans-national nature of the challenges we face that matters.

The second trend means that we confront them at a time when so many of the institutions that we have relied on in the past find themselves under strain.

From the EU to the UN, the multilateral institutions that were crafted after the Second World War face more serious pressure than they have known before.

Both from outside their institutions and from within.

With their reputation undermined by the challenge of a series of global crises to which they appear not to have been able properly to respond.

From Iraq more than a decade ago, to Syria today to the continued stalemate in the search for peace between Israel and the Palestinian people.

As well as the continued belligerence of states that seek to undermine the international order that these institutions are designed to uphold.

And a third trend makes this more difficult still.

For we live now at a time not only when international institutions are losing support but when individual states themselves also find it harder to act.

So many countries round the world are faced by serious budgetary constraints in the aftermath of the financial crisis.

Meaning that their capacity and willingness to respond internationally has been dimmed.

And others are undermined by deep and persistent struggles within their own population.

With rightful demands for greater democracy, greater accountability and greater equality destabilising old orders, without always leading straightforwardly to stable reform.

So in two weeks' time any government will be facing the same challenges.

Threats which cross boundaries.

International institutions under strain.

States in all parts of the world facing difficulties of their own.

These global trends are unavoidable.

But the crucial truth we must acknowledge is that the difficulties Britain faces in navigating this new global order are made far worse because of decisions being made by our government.

David Cameron has presided over the biggest loss of influence for our country in a generation.

And that has happened because the government he leads has stepped away from the world, rather than confidently towards it.

It is an approach that has shrunk our influence and weakened Britain.

And the evidence for that is all around us.

Take the situation of Russia and Ukraine.

Was there ever a more apt symbol of Britain's isolation and waning influence than when David Cameron was absent as the leaders of Germany and France tried to negotiate peace with President Putin?

And we have seen it this week with regard to the crisis unfolding in the Mediterranean.

In Libya, Labour supported military action to avoid the slaughter the Qaddafi regime threatened in Benghazi.

But since the action, the failure of post conflict planning has become obvious.

David Cameron was wrong to assume that Libya was a country whose institutions could simply be left to evolve and transform themselves.

What we have seen in Libya is that when tensions over power and resource began to emerge, they simply reinforced deep seated ideological and ethnic fault lines in the country, meaning the hopes of the revolutionary uprisings quickly began to unravel.

The tragedy is this could have been anticipated.

It should have been avoided.

And Britain could have played its part in ensuring the international community stood by the people of Libya in practice rather than standing behind the unfounded hopes of potential progress only in principle.

And by far the most important cause of our loss of influence is the position of the government in regard to the European Union.

With the threat of an in/out referendum on an arbitrary timetable, no clear goals for their proposed European renegotiation, no strategy for achieving it and a governing party riven with internal divisions over our future in the EU.

Including a Foreign Secretary who has openly advocated leaving the European Union.

All this poses a grave risk to Britain's position in the world.

Of course, the European Union needs to change.

There are demands for it to change in almost every member state.

On immigration, on benefits, on the rights of national parliaments.

And Britain should be leading the process of reform.

But this government's approach to Europe means that even when Britain's interests are shared by other member states, EU leaders are reluctant to support us because they think we already have one foot out of the door.

And our loss of influence in Europe leads to a further loss of influence in the world.

From the United States to China.

We are stronger as a leading partner in the EU.

And we are weaker when we are not.

One of the many mistakes of Euro-scepticism is to believe that we are somehow more influential with others if we depart the EU when the opposite is true.

It is precisely our influence within the EU which makes us more influential in the world.

And of course, none of this had to be the case.

David Cameron has pursued his strategy not because of any great political principle or ideal.

In fact, the irony is that he says he believes in staying in the EU.

He has done it because he has been pushed there by political forces in his own party and by his fear of other political parties in our country.

It is the rise of Conservative euroscepticism and UKIP that has led him to this position.

He has taken us to the edge of European exit because he has been too weak to control his own party.

And too anxious about the rise of UKIP.

A rise he should have challenged but pandered to instead.

And these problems have worsened dramatically in the last few weeks.

Because worried about losing power, the Conservatives are now trying to do everything they can to talk up the prospects of the SNP and pit English nationalism against Scottish nationalism.

Let me be clear: this is incredibly dangerous for our country.

We shouldn't be turning one part of the UK against another.

We should be standing up for the whole of the UK.

We shouldn't be sweeping away what binds us together in favour of emphasising what drives us apart.

Or trying to obscure the real issue of the election-the kind of country we want to be, both at home and abroad.

I believe the real task for Britain is not to divide between one nation and another but to build a United Kingdom that works for all.

Because that is a country that can then be more confident in the world.

And Labour is proud and confident as to what our country can achieve in the world.

We are and will continue to be one of the most capable global powers.

We have the world's fifth largest defence budget, the second largest aid budget and the fourth largest diplomatic network in the world.

And we have the skills and the people able to deliver for Britain in the years ahead.

Our military personnel who have served us so bravely in the conflicts of the last decade.

Diplomats around the world who are some of the best and brightest men and women serving any country.

And the unparalleled reach and impact of the BBC World Service and our other journalists.

With such talent and reach there is no reason Britain should shrink from the world.

So the goal of my government will be to ensure Britain is unified at home and strong and confident and outward looking in the world.

But to do that we need to re-engage.

To be willing to play our part both to secure our interests and pursue our values.

And we need to do so in the right way.

And as we seek to re-engage in this way we need to learn the key lessons both of this government and of the government that went before.

In particular learning the lessons of 2003 Iraq war.

There are a number of lessons:

For when military action is appropriate, for how we work through multilateral institutions and with regional partners and in ensuring there is always a plan for peace.

And these are some of the reasons I opposed the proposed intervention in Syria in 2013.

So we need to begin working with our allies and partners in the community of nations once again in a genuine and hard-headed multilateralism because that is what the times demand.

What the world needs now is an organised and sustained solidarity between like-minded nations.

Seeking to uphold international law.

That was the way we rebuilt after the Second World War: through NATO, the European Union, the ECHR.

Securing peace and promoting democratic values together.

And that is what is at stake today.

Labour was proud to play a crucial part in shaping that order in the past as we emerged from the Second World War.

The Labour government that I lead will always seek to do that in the future.

So what does this vision mean in practice?

What would be the concrete priorities of an incoming Labour government as we seek to restore Britain's relationship with the world?

There are, of course, many.

We must maintain our independent nuclear capability, with a continuous at sea deterrent.

We must work within the EU to help resolve the immediate crisis in the Mediterranean.

We must step up our efforts to help bring about the two state solution in Israel and Palestine that is desperately needed.

A secure Israel alongside a viable and independent state of Palestine.

This is, after all, a conflict that scars the region and the world and there can be no true stability in our world without its resolution.

These are crucial issues but let me outline three central tasks for you today in a little more detail.

First, our mission will start by restoring our commitment to international institutions.

The UN, NATO, the Commonwealth, and, of course, the European Union.

As I have explained, all of these institutions have faced serious challenges of late.

We will rebuild our influence.

That starts with the European Union.

I want a clear message to be sent to our European partners that an incoming Labour government will be serious about leading once again in Europe and serious also about reforming Europe.

We have said that in the unlikely event of a transfer of powers from Britain to the EU in the next Parliament, we will have an in/out referendum.

But we are sure that Britain's future lies inside not outside a reformed EU.

We will never put our national interest at risk by threatening to leave.

And we want to get on with the business of reforming Europe in a way that helps Britain and the EU as a whole.

We will charge all of our European Ambassadors with the pursuit of this clear European reform strategy.

We also need to look beyond the EU.

And that includes our commitment to NATO.

NATO is and must remain the foundation of our defence and security partnership and we will work tirelessly to ensure its greater effectiveness.

Western unity and resolve are essential, as we have seen in the face of Russian aggression in the Ukraine.

NATO needs to send the signals of deterrence required to prevent the line of confrontation being moved further west.

And that includes signals from across the alliance that even when times are hard at home we remain committed to our armed forces.

I am not going to set out a spending review today.

Indeed it is crucial that we complete our Strategic Defence and Security Review well before long term spending decisions are taken to ensure we avoid the mistakes of the poorly conceived SDSR of 2010.

But I want to be absolutely clear that amongst the reasons we reject the extreme spending cuts that the Conservative Party propose is that they would be truly catastrophic for the future of our armed forces.

The Institute of Fiscal Studies set out yesterday that they would mean at least 18% budget reductions for departments like the MOD – significantly more than the cut to Defence in this parliament.

Promises of protection for specific parts of the defence budget are meaningless in that world.

They simply will not be delivered.

That is why the prospect of these Conservative cuts alarms our allies abroad and our military personnel here at home.

Even Conservative politicians with defence expertise recognise the dangers of what is planned.

I am not going to pretend that there won't be difficult choices in the years ahead as we deal with the deficit.

And I will not repeat David Cameron's mistake of making promises before an election, in his case of a larger army, only to break them in government.

But we simply will not take the extreme approach our opponents propose.

I am not going to sacrifice the defence of our country on an ideological commitment to a significantly smaller state.

Indeed we are in the unprecedented situation going into this election.

It is now Labour that is much better positioned to find the resources that our armed forces need to maintain our security in the next Parliament.

So, first, we will recommit our country to the international partnerships that make it strong and that allow us to respond to the challenges we face.

Second, we will reconsider the place of military intervention in the way that we respond to the world's problems.

Today, we face failed states and civil wars across the entire wider Middle East region – from the western Sahel through to Somalia and Sudan, from Yemen to Syria and Iraq, and in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Many share key elements: weak and corrupt states lacking legitimacy, the growing influence of Islamist extremists, inter-state rivalry, and limited progress towards democracy.

And all this matters for the UK.

These conflicts are already spilling over into Europe through terrorism, growing illegal migration, organised crime – and all these will worsen if the conflicts intensify.

So we must respond at home and abroad.

We must do all we can to protect our borders, investing in capable intelligence and security services.

We must update the law surrounding internet communications, including with proper oversight.

And ensure robust controls to prevent people travelling to take part in the Syrian conflict and to ensure those returning are properly managed.

And we must respond by building partnerships abroad.

The challenge posed by ISIL's barbarism is the most pressing case.

Following a request from the Iraqi Prime Minister, it was right that the UK joined other nations in air strikes against ISIL targets in Iraq.

But military action alone will not defeat ISIL.

A long-term multinational political strategy, with regional actors playing a central role, is essential to tackle the rise of extremism across the region.

And as we do so we will learn the lessons of previous interventions.

Not seeking to solve the world's problems on our own but working with international, regional and local partners.

Any intervention must be carried out with a clearly defined strategy.

And this must include a comprehensive transition and post conflict strategy.

These are the vital lessons of our recent past and I will not forget them.

Third, we will put reducing inequality, tackling climate change and promoting human rights at the core of our agenda.

Not just because that is the right thing to do.

But because it is vital for the long-term interests of our country.

Labour will proudly lead the world in maintaining our commitment to giving 0.7 per cent of Gross National Income towards international development.

And when it comes to climate change, we will help set ambitious emissions targets for all countries, reviewed every five years, based on a scientific assessment of the progress towards the 2 degree centigrade goal.

We will set a goal of net zero global emissions in the second half of this century.

Have transparent, universal rules for measuring, verifying and reporting emissions with all countries adopting climate change adaptation plans.

And ensure an equitable deal in which richer countries provide support to poorer nations in their efforts to combat climate change.

None of this will happen by itself.

It will take concerted action by countries all across the world.

And require Britain to play the kind of role that I was privileged to shape at the Copenhagen summit during the last government.

The UN summit in Paris later this year will be our chance to demonstrate again how this can work.

And show what Britain can achieve.

And our commitment to universal human rights will also be at the heart of our foreign policy across the world.

We will appoint Lord Michael Cashman as our International LGBT Rights Envoy, to help work towards the decriminalisation of homosexuality worldwide.

And we will appoint a Global Envoy for Religious Freedom, and establish a multi-faith advisory council on religious freedom within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Our country faces a big choice in just under two weeks' time.

It is a choice between different ideas about how our country succeeds here at home.

But it is also a choice about our country's place in the world.

The Conservative view threatens to divide us internally and to weaken our position abroad.

A pessimistic isolationism.

That learns the wrong lessons from our past.

And undermines our nation's future.

Or a Labour view.

That says we are stronger as a country when we look boldly, confidently outward to the world.

Not turning in on ourselves or acting on our own.

But working with our allies, never for them.

A genuine and hard-headed multilateralism.

With our values at its core.

That's how Britain can succeed.

That's how Britain will make a difference.

I look forward to doing it together.