Still ‘pivotal’? Still the ‘first ally’?
The significance of Syria for Britain’s global role

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This paper explores the impact on Britain’s role in international politics of Parliament’s refusal to sanction participation in military action against the Assad regime in August 2013. It looks at suggestions that the ‘shadow of Iraq’ continues to hang over parliamentary, press and public opinion, colouring debates about the use of force overseas. It asks whether Syria proves Britain no longer has the stomach for a fight, and considers how foreign policy leaders and the active, elite public see Britain engaging with international affairs in future. In particular, it considers whether the ‘special relationship’ can survive if Britain ceases to be the ‘first ally’ of the United States. The prospect of military action in Syria proved contentious on both sides of the Atlantic. David Cameron’s parliamentary defeat arrested President Obama’s momentum and provoked calls for similar votes in Congress and in the French parliament that ultimately scuppered the intervention plan. Yet there is little sign that British leaders consider their international role constrained, nor of blowback from disappointed US allies. This paper asks, finally, to what extent the Syria experience undermines Tony Blair’s belief, before Iraq, that failure to support the US would mean the ‘special relationship’ came to an end.

Introduction

When parliament vetoed military action in Syria at the end of August 2013 it triggered a convulsion of national soul-searching about Britain’s global role. Long-established foreign policy commitments seemed under threat. Observers on both sides of the Atlantic wondered how the ‘special relationship’ with the United States could survive if Britain ceased to be an ever-reliable ‘first ally’ in times of conflict. They scoffed at the notion that a formerly great power could maintain a ‘pivotal’ role with its political elite so evidently reluctant to take on further foreign burdens. This sort of scepticism has a long history in the British foreign policy discourse, which has been dominated in the post-imperial era by rival narratives of continued exceptionalism and inevitable decline (Harvey 2011). While exceptionalists see closeness to Washington as a route to global significance, declinists think it a symptom of weakness, and note that Britain is quite clearly a junior and dependent partner of the United States. While exceptionalists believe Britain’s UN Security Council seat and power-projection capabilities magnify its influence across the world stage, declinists lament the country’s repeated embroilment in far-flung commitments it can no longer realistically afford. For
a brief period after the Syria vote the declinists enjoyed their ascendance. Perhaps, they wondered, Britain would finally break free of dependence on the United States, and retreat with dignity from a global role to a more modest middle power stance. Yet exceptionalism survived. Policymakers continue to speak as if Britain occupies a pivotal position at the heart of world events, bridging the transatlantic divide and helping to lead the world despite its reduced circumstances.

Against this backdrop, I ask in this paper whether anything has changed as a result of the Syria vote. I consider whether declinism has finally triumphed, or whether parliament’s refusal to endorse the use of force on this occasion had more to do with specific circumstances than general trends. There was certainly a specific element to the outcome of the vote, parliament’s first veto of military action since 1782. The new parliamentary prerogative thus established will likely have more lasting consequences nevertheless (Strong 2014). Next time policymakers seek to launch an overseas military deployment, they will know not to assume MPs’ approval. No future prime minister is likely to be surprised by a House of Commons vote, as David Cameron was, although they may still be constrained by parliamentary opinion. If the House of Commons has become a fundamentally declinist body, the declinist argument that Britain’s global role should be reduced will become self-fulfilling. If governments believe MPs will no longer allow them to support the US or seek a pivotal global role, then they may withdraw voluntarily, saving political capital for domestic fights. So far the present government is holding the exceptionalist line despite its humbling over Syria. Many of those who voted down that intervention made clear they were exorcising the ghosts of Iraq as much as addressing the present conflict. Most did not refer directly to broader questions about Britain’s global role. Some insist they did not mean to alter the general position, only to reject the specific proposal. Their decisions have consequences for Britain’s broader role conception, nonetheless. In this paper I seek to explore those consequences.

Britain’s sense of its global role governs its identity as a foreign policy actor, and so the interests it advances and the tools it deploys in their pursuit (Edmunds, Gaskarth and Porter 2014). In studying it, I employ concepts derived from both role theory and the interpretive school of International Relations. I begin by introducing a conceptual framework derived initially from Kalevi Holsti’s (1970) application of role theory to Foreign Policy Analysis, and modified using insights from work focused specifically on Britain by David McCourt (2011a) and Jamie Gaskarth (2014). I then contextualize the
Syria debate by tracing the evolution of exceptionalist and declinist narratives and their interaction with the concepts of ‘pivotal power’ and the ‘special relationship’. This sets the scene for a detailed analysis of the Syria debate itself, an analysis which reveals the crucial role played by the hovering ghosts of Iraq. Finally I ask how far the Syria vote has affected Britain’s role in the world. I conclude that it did not fundamentally alter the special relationship. Britain has been and remains the junior member of a “solid but not slavish” transatlantic partnership (Cameron 2006). The fact the Syria vote cast doubt on Britain’s ability to make credible threats was problematic. But while it may cause the US to seek additional allies elsewhere as it performs its own role as guarantor of the western world’s peace and stability, Britain's failure to endorse military strikes in Syria did not on its own erase American memories of decades of loyal support. It did however raise more fundamental questions about Britain’s ability to punch above its weight. Here the issue was not what Syria changed about the country's global role, but what it revealed. Britain is war weary. It has lost confidence in its ability to influence world events. Its public and parliamentarians distrust military proposals instinctively.

My main conclusion derives from these observations, and from the unquestionable importance of Iraq to any explanation of what went wrong on 29 August. Many of those who spoke and voted in the House of Commons that day were still fighting the political battles of ten years before. Declinism gave them a vocabulary, and helped them frame specific concerns about Syria in more general terms. Syria was in many respects a perfect target. Most MPs believed that the US was calling the shots, with Britain being dragged along in a supporting role. Most thought the UN weapons inspectors then operating in Damascus should be given time to complete their work. Intelligence could offer only judgements about the Assad regime’s likely responsibility for chemical weapons attacks on civilians, not cast-iron certainties, and few with memories of Iraq put great stock in intelligence any more. The legal case seemed shaky, and the government every bit as eager as Tony Blair before it to launch a military strike without UN Security Council approval. Yet while the declinist narrative drove the Syria vote, the vote represented declinism’s highest point, for exceptionalism survived and soon began to fight back. Declinism had nothing to gain from the Syria vote. Refusing to take that particular military action was the least Britain should have done, in the declinist account. While declinism helped the anti-intervention camp to frame its
arguments in line with one of the key traditions of the national foreign policy discourse, it was left no more advanced and no more influential after the vote than before.

Role theory and foreign policy

Kalevi Holsti first introduced the notion that states play particular international ‘roles’ to Foreign Policy Analysis. Adapting a framework used by social psychologists studying individuals, Holsti developed a four part model demonstrating how notions of role-appropriate behaviour affect foreign policy (figure 1).

For Holsti, every state sits within “a system of role prescriptions”, originating both from itself and from others, which set expectations that shape its “national role conception” and so determine the “attitudes, decisions, and actions” together comprising its “role performance” (Holsti 1970, 240). Subsequent studies failed to build the systematic classification schema Holsti hoped for. Nevertheless, this first wave of role theory scholarship proved fruitful both empirically and in terms of synthesizing FPA with social theory (Biddle 1986, 67). Naomi Wish simplified Holsti’s overly-complicated set of eighteen possible state roles by focusing on behaviour along two axes, ranging from co-operative to competitive behaviour and from high to low levels of status-seeking (Wish 1980). Stephen Walker interacted role theory with exchange theory to bring in external cues alongside self-conceived roles (Walker 1981). Marijke Breuning brought out one of Holsti’s original key points, the fact that “policymakers might conceive of
their nation playing different roles, or serving different functions, in separate issue areas, geographical regions, or sets of relationships” (Holsti 1970, 253, Breuning 1995, 237). States hold multiple roles simultaneously. Their behaviour cannot be predicted from any single role conception. That, in turn, was why Holsti’s classificatory ambition was not fulfilled.

Despite its failure to deliver a universal model of foreign policy, Valerie Hudson concluded that “national role conception research...is still a very useful approach to questions of national identity formation” within FPA (Hudson 2005, 18). This is especially the case given contemporary levels of interest in explanations rooted in ideas. Foreign policy studies that focus on role enactment, expectations, and audiences not only better explain foreign policy itself, but also promise closer integration with the broader discipline of International Relations (Thies 2010, 2012, 25, Thies and Breuning 2012, 1). A second generation of FPA scholars interested in role conceptions have built upon this observation. Cantir and Kaarbo, for example, demonstrated the significance of domestic political divisions for role identification and enactment (Cantir and Kaarbo 2012, 5). Harnisch emphasized the interaction between “role taking” and “role making” (Harnisch 2012, 47), while Jamie Gaskarth discussed the way role theory takes account of both structure and agency in foreign policy making, and the flexibility this offers to support empirical accounts (Gaskarth 2014, 562). Clearly there is a place for role conceptions within the contemporary FPA toolkit.

David McCourt’s work on Britain’s ‘role in the world’ offers the most pertinent application of role theory for the purposes of this study. McCourt argued that any attempt to define Britain’s “role in the world” (italics in original) inevitably reflects political as well as analytical considerations (McCourt 2011a, 151). McCourt further argued that any role conception identified through public debate was simultaneously constituted by it, and that the role performances that supposedly flow from the identification process also feed back into it (McCourt 2011b, McCourt 2011c). Collectively, McCourt concluded, these dynamics explain the British political elite’s obsession with constantly reconsidering the traditions underpinning the idea of a global role. Discussion is both inevitable, given the political nature of the topic, and necessary, because it is only through public debate that any notion of Britain’s global role is constituted at all. Whatever role Britain might adopt has little to do with hard power or objectively observable phenomena, and everything to do with the subjective images
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held in policymakers’ heads. We can access those images only by interpreting how different individuals have described the dilemmas they now face, and how they draw upon the traditions of exceptionalism and decline along the way. This in turn explains why any study based on the idea of Britain’s ‘global role’ must necessarily adopt an interpretive approach (Bevir, Daddow and Hall 2013, 163, Gaskarth 2014, 561).

Traditions of exceptionalism and decline

Dean Acheson’s oft-repeated complaint, that Britain “has lost an empire and has not yet found a role” (Acheson 1962), still resonates for students of contemporary British foreign policy. Gaskarth has identified no fewer than six distinct (and often contradictory) role orientations emerging from recent discussions over the country’s interaction with international affairs (Gaskarth 2014, 566). This variety further explains the political contests McCourt talks about. It provides rivals with opposing viewpoints to argue over. It ensures that no single over-arching narrative emerges in the foreign policy discourse to define Britain’s proper place in the world. For all the certainty and stability that defined national role conceptions during the age of empire, British foreign policy discourse has been dominated more recently by “defensive anxiety and existential angst” (Hadfield-Amkhan 2010, 6). Winston Churchill has much to answer for. His efforts after World War Two to ensure British representation at the top table of international affairs cast a lasting pall over his successors (Broad and Daddow 2010, 207, Daddow and Gaskarth 2011, 13, 16, Gaskarth 2013, 67). He argued Britain alone could unite the three great “circles” of the free world; Europe, the “English-speaking peoples” and the Commonwealth (Churchill 1948). That exceptionalist account of Britain’s place in the world has, in the ensuing decades, interacted and competed with a declinism grounded in pessimistic assessments of how influential a state can hope to be in such dramatically reduced circumstances (Harvey 2011). Both traditions recognize that Britain is no longer an imperial power. They disagree fundamentally on how it should now respond.

Douglas Hurd’s claim that “Britain has punched above her weight in the world” (Hurd 1992) remains the most succinct encapsulation of the exceptionalist narrative. Ted Heath’s suggestion that his country was “a medium power of the first rank” (Emery 1970) is more complicated because it is contradictory, since a medium power cannot by definition stand in the first rank of international affairs. Yet it too conjoins a realistic
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assessment of Britain's means and an ambitious account of its influence. No other leader has railed as vehemently against the declinist narrative as Margaret Thatcher, who celebrated victory in the Britain's last imperial conflict, the 1982 Falklands War, by declaring "we have ceased to be a nation in retreat" (Thatcher 1982). But most have maintained, at least rhetorically, a commitment to the idea that "Britain still carries far more clout in the world than its current share of the world population would suggest" (Hague 2009). The Major and Blair eras even saw an expansion of Britain's overseas involvement, driven by the new realities of an increasingly globalized post-Cold War world (Bevir, Daddow and Hall 2013, 164). The 2010 National Security Strategy focused on deficit reduction but remained bullish about the prospects for British leadership well into the twenty-first century. A sober assessment of Britain's relative material strength meanwhile, offers exceptionalists grounds for optimism. The country's military budget is still relatively large, in both absolute terms and as a share of its (also large) GDP (SIPRI 2013). Britain is small compared to the US, but it holds its own quite well compared to other powers of the next rank, states which could collectively be described as 'great powers' (Morris 2011, 326, Gaskarth 2013, 94).

Declinists, by contrast, emphasize that Britain is a (very) junior partner to the United States (Lehmkuhl 2012, 15). They lament that structural dependence on US support limits British policymakers' options (Hollis 2010, 34). Even David Cameron has admitted "part of getting the relationship right is understanding how best to play the role of the junior partner" (Cameron 2010a). Britain's dependent status is bad enough. It is exacerbated, however, by the fact that Britain's contribution is neither critical for the US, nor unique (Beech 2011, 351-352). David Cameron usually sounds like an exceptionalist, yet he observed in his first major foreign policy speech as prime minister that "Britain just cannot achieve the things we want to achieve in the world unless we work with the world's superpower" (Cameron 2006). Others have been more scathing. As early as 1986, Christopher Coker warned of a "depressing" failure of successive governments to meet the country's defence commitments in the face of economic decline (Coker 1986, 1). Alex Danchev exaggerated when he claimed "Britain is Belgium, though the British do not know it yet" (Danchev 1998, 164), but it is important to note that Britain's belief in its own leadership role has not always been supported by others (Barder 2001, 371). Both internal and external pressures shape national role conceptions. If those pressures do not align, role confusion results. This in turn opens
the way for the sort of prolonged public debate that defines the British foreign policy discourse. National leaders prefer a more exceptionalist account of the country’s global role than their overseas counterparts. This ensures no single agreed definition develops, and in turn that both rival traditions survive.

One set of foreign voices matter to exceptionalist and declinist accounts in equal measure, those emanating from the United States. Britain, the two traditions agree, has historically played the role of “faithful ally” (Holsti 1970, 267) in the transatlantic alliance. They diverge over whether this position remains sustainable. So frequently has the ‘special relationship’ been declared “dead” (Wallace 2005, 64) and then promptly resurrected that Marsh and Baylis termed it “the Lazarus of international relations” (Marsh and Baylis 2006). President Kennedy’s limited offer of Polaris missiles for use in British submarines in 1962 led The Times to proclaim the “probable end of the special relationship” (The Times 1962), but in practice the Cold War ensured continued cooperation. The Soviet collapse denied the US and UK a common enemy for the first time in fifty years (Baylis 1997, 223). Danchev, for example, argued that the special relationship had passed through evangelical and functional phases and entered, with the end of the Cold War, one of terminal decline (Danchev 1998, 158). During the war on terrorism, however, the US and UK embarked together on thirteen years of expeditionary war across multiple theatres, and developed their military interoperability to an unprecedented degree. President Obama is no natural anglophile, yet he periodically reasserts the continued specialness of the US-UK alliance (Obama 2010, 2013a, 2014), even blaming the common transatlantic political factor of “an especially active press corps” for the fact the “relationship is often analysed and over-analysed for the slightest hint of stress or strain” (Obama 2011). Obama recently heaped praise on the “renewed” Franco-US alliance (Obama and Hollande 2014). But, despite similar efforts on the part of the US to diversify its critical defence relationships, few states (including France) dispute Britain’s claim to be ‘first ally’ (Sperling 2010, 17).

Britain’s goal of ‘punching above its weight’ in the world is more vulnerable to declinist critique, from two perspectives. Firstly, Tony Blair’s argument, that Britain was a ‘pivotal’ power linking the US and Europe (Blair 1999, 2002, 21, 2004), suffered serious damage during the wars that dominated his later years in office. Building on Churchill’s framework, James Callaghan first suggested the British could be “bridge builders” between the old and new worlds (Callaghan 1975). Blair adopted the idea
enthusiastically, announcing in his first major foreign policy speech in government that “we are the bridge between the US and Europe” (Blair 1997). He was not the only contemporary advocate such an approach to British foreign policy, though he was perhaps the most prominent (Riddell 2003, 303-304). Yet even his allies have subsequently concluded that Blair under-estimated the depth of the transatlantic divide, and damaged his chances by treating the EU as an external counterpart rather than as an integral element of Britain’s foreign policy establishment (D. Miliband 2008a, 2008b). More significantly, he failed to sustain his bridge over the issue of Iraq. Reflecting on Blair’s decision to support President Bush while burning bridges with President Chirac, William Wallace concluded that the transatlantic bridge “has again collapsed, and...cannot now be rebuilt” (Wallace 2005, 55). Michael Cox, meanwhile, praised the sincerity and extent of Blair’s efforts to bring the US and Europe together, but also acknowledged their lack of success (Cox 2005, 218). Iraq proved Britain’s pivotal power could not bridge the most serious transatlantic divisions.

Secondly, while Britain retains links to far-flung places through the remaining overseas territories and the Commonwealth, its geographical reach is visibly much reduced. Harold Wilson insisted that the British “cannot afford to relinquish our world role” as he withdrew British forces from ‘East of Suez’ (Wilson 1964, 423-424). The fact of withdrawal, however, cast doubt over the continued existence of such a role. McCourt has argued that it was only by consolidating the country’s focus that Wilson was able to retain any sort of viable global ambitions (McCourt 2009, 454). From a declinist perspective, however, the residual influence left over after the abandonment of formal empire is not the same thing as an actual role on the world stage. Nor is Britain’s continued willingness to get involved in foreign conflicts. Bell points out that declining powers often seek to shore up their collapsing international prestige with small-scale, relatively low-cost shows of military force (Bell 2013). The fact Britain is beating a fighting retreat from the heights of its global power does not mean it remains a global player. From a declinist perspective it means quite the opposite.

Rhetorically, at least, the present government favours a broad global role. David Cameron maintains that “whenever I meet foreign leaders, they do not see a Britain shuffling apologetically off the world stage” (Cameron 2010b). Cameron implied his foreign counterparts were exceptionalists whether or not the British themselves agreed. William Hague has consistently rejected claims that Britain should accept a reduced
international status (Hague 2012, 2014, 20). David Cameron and Nick Clegg’s introduction to the 2010 National Security Strategy said “our national interest requires our continued full and active engagement in world affairs” (Cameron and Clegg 2010, 4). The reality of this commitment appears more complex, and the potential for confusion between rhetoric and reality renders the definition of Britain’s global role ambiguous, much as it did under Tony Blair (Gilmore 2014, 542). While the Strategic Defence and Security Review committed to maintaining Britain’s expeditionary warfare capability, it cut the size of the deployable force to brigade level (HM Government 2010b). Unlike divisions, brigades are not self-sufficient in terms of support and logistics. They cannot be deployed independently for extended periods of time. For all the government’s positive rhetoric, then, Gaskarth concluded that the SDSR represented in reality “a final recognition that the UK can no longer play a Great Power role” (Gaskarth 2014, 579). We might qualify that statement, to note that the UK can no longer play an independent Great Power role, but the underlying brute facts remain. Britain sent a division to Iraq in 2003. It cannot deploy such a force today.

While Britain’s leaders continue to assert their intention to play a global role, their commitment to fiscal austerity throws their capacity to deliver into doubt. A decade ago academics questioned the ability of US allies to afford the military interoperability that lies at the heart of Britain’s global defence strategy (Aldrich 2004, 745). Those doubts have not gone away (Bradford 2011, 15), although Aldrich’s prediction that the US would be forced by other states’ relative backwardness to act alone within a decade has not (yet) come true. Some observers have argued that felicities of its bureaucratic organization (Egnell 2006, 1041) or global anti-Americanism (McGwire 2006, 640) will enable Britain to sustain its global influence despite its declining hard power capabilities. It is difficult, however, to reconcile a large-scale reduction in Britain’s ability to deploy military force with its desire to retain a global leadership role (Morris 2011, 341, Oppermann 2012, 4). Defence scholars worry at the damage being done by spending reductions driven by fiscal rather than military needs (Cornish and Dorman 2009, 734, 2010, 395, 2011, 337, 2012), a distinction finessed by the National Security Strategy’s identification of fiscal profligacy itself as the country’s greatest threat (HM Government 2010a). Others have argued over whether financial shortfalls (Dorman 2010, 376) or failure in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (Oliver 2012, 157-158) represent the greatest threat to Britain’s future military capability.
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Figure 2: Exceptionalist and declinist accounts of the special relationship and Britain’s ability to ‘punch above our weight’.

If the exceptionalist narrative enjoyed the upper hand in debates over the special relationship prior to August 2013, the declinist thesis seemed stronger on the question of Britain’s broader global role. The two positions are not incompatible. Declinists generally do not believe the special relationship is dead, while exceptionalists accept Britain’s hard power capacity is not what it once was. They differ on the implications of these observations (figure 2). These are traditions divided by their expectations more than their analyses, in other words. While the exceptionalist narrative portrays the special relationship as a source of influence, for example, in the declinist account it causes undesirable entanglements that stretch Britain’s capabilities too far.

The 29 August debate

While both exceptionalist and declinist narratives featured, in different degrees, above all memories of Iraq cost David Cameron the Syria vote. Iraq shaped the debate’s other key arguments, around national interest, the special relationship, international law, and British values (figure 3). Troubling echoes of military misadventures under Blair dwarfed Cameron’s efforts to focus on the task at hand. There were too many similarities between the Iraq and Syria debates, and too many differences between Syria and the far less controversial intervention in Libya two years before. It was in many respects a perfect rhetorical storm. Long-established traditions of declinism
provided MPs with a broader conceptual context in which to articulate specific concerns about how the war in Iraq was waged, and in the process to de-legitimize intervention in Syria by association. Exceptionalism proved unable to defeat declinist arguments better-supported by empirical evidence derived from Iraq.

Figure 3: the key themes of the 29 August debate.

Cameron admitted that “deep public scepticism and war-weariness” made Britain wary of military action, but insisted regardless that its national interests depended on stabilizing the Middle East and punishing the use of chemical weapons (Hansard 2013, 1435, 1437). A handful of MPs agreed with Richard Ottaway that Britain’s leading role in international organizations required it accept certain responsibilities, including on occasion the responsibility to employ deadly force (Hansard 2013, 1459). Most took a more declinist stance. Cameron’s former defence secretary Liam Fox led a number of Conservatives who saw no national interest in joining a foreign civil war (Hansard 2013, 1452, 1521-1522). James Arbuthnot said “if the world wants us to act as the international policeman, let the world say so, because when we have done so in the past, the world has not tended to thank us” (Hansard 2013, 1464). John Redwood complained “in my adult lifetime in politics I think that we, as a country, have intervened too often” (Hansard 2013, 1476). Labour’s Paul Flynn, meanwhile, spoke for many of his parliamentary colleagues when he argued that Britain had no specific interest in upholding President Obama’s “foolish threat” to respond to the use of WMD with force (Hansard 2013, 1537). Parliament simply did not accept that Britain’s national interest was at stake in Syria. In making that judgement, it echoed
quite consciously the declinist view that Britain’s status no longer warranted the sort of
global commitments being asked of it, commitments which went far beyond its
capabilities.

Few MPs worried about damaging the special relationship by voting against
intervention in Syria. Cameron insisted British involvement “will not be determined by
my good friend and ally the American President; [it] will be decided by this Government
and votes in this House of Commons” (Hansard 2013, 1433). Unfortunately for
Cameron, many MPs did not believe him. Everyone present knew the government
recalled parliament early so military action could start before the end of the summer
recess the following week. Few could explain the move unless the US had asked the
government to get ready to act quickly. Kenneth Clarke later confirmed exactly this had
happened (Clarke 2013). Despite Cameron amending the motion under debate to rule
out explicitly the use of force without a further vote, too many MPs believed Britain was
being pushed into a premature strike. Ed Miliband warned against being “rushed to
judgment on this question on a political timetable set elsewhere” (Hansard 2013, 1447).
Several Labour backbenchers complained about Britain following a plan devised in
Washington, and recalled a similar sense surrounding the build-up to war in Iraq
(Hansard 2013, 1461, 1502, 1535). Plaid Cymru leader Elfyn Llwyd went further,
claiming that, regardless of the wording of the motion, a yes vote would mean military
action within days with no further parliamentary recourse. Crucially, this sense that
Britain was being dragged into a conflict according to US rather than British timelines
opened the door for the most explicit references to Iraq. Again the declinist view of the
special relationship as a source of undesirable entanglement provided MPs with the
vocabulary to critique the specifics of the Syria proposal. There is no necessary reason
for Britain to object to the US taking the lead on military planning, given its vast
superiority in terms of firepower and so likely leading role on military execution. But
dclinist interpretations of the special relationship stress not US responsibilities but the
UK’s loss of autonomy, and it was on that loss of autonomy that MPs chose to focus in
August 2013.

Iraq haunted parliament’s deliberations over Syria. Andrew Mitchell prefaced his
remarks by acknowledging “the spectre of the debate in 2003” hovering overhead,
while David Anderson thought he saw “the ghost of Tony Blair” similarly immanent
(Hansard 2013, 1473, 1535). David Cameron tried initially to deflect attention from
earlier controversies, insisting “this situation is not like Iraq” (Hansard 2013, 1427). Over Libya, in 2011, the argument worked, in large part because it was backed by a UN Security Council Resolution. Over Syria, with no Resolution, it did not. Blair’s former foreign secretary Jack Straw argued the Syrian situation mirrored Iraq far more than Libya (Hansard 2013, 1450). This observation struck home with many MPs, nine of whom from across the political spectrum stated explicitly that they had learnt from Iraq not to trust any government proposing to take military action (Hansard 2013, 1457, 1461, 1476, 1488, 1510, 1513, 1517, 1521, 1530). A handful urged their colleagues not to tar the entire British decision-making apparatus with a brush blackened by Blair, but they were very much in the minority (Hansard 2013, 1470, 1503-1504, 1520, 1543). Ed Miliband noted that UN weapons inspectors were working in Damascus and needed a few weeks to complete their report. While the government’s revised motion pledged to give them that time, the very fact it had originally proposed to short-circuit the inspection process again raised unfortunate comparisons to Iraq, as some speakers observed (Hansard 2013, 1443, 1490, 1535). Cameron over-reached when he pressed for a robust response, and then failed to ensure he could win a parliamentary vote before organizing one, a fundamental mistake. Toning down his proposal, even to the extent that MPs were no longer actually being asked to approve military action without a further debate and vote, proved insufficient to reclaim the ground lost. Here the broader questions surrounding Britain’s role in the world played little direct part. What mattered was Iraq, the particular concerns memories of that conflict raised, and MPs’ immediate desire not to repeat the mistakes of the recent past. Many of the conclusions they reached further supported the declinist narrative. But this aspect of the debate was less influenced than others by general issues, and more by very specific complaints. Iraq did not worry MPs because they were declinists, they were declinists because they worried about repeating the mistakes of Iraq.

Questions about the legality of a strike on Syria followed naturally from comparisons to Iraq. Menzies Campbell, a lawyer, long-time Liberal Democrat foreign affairs spokesman, and prominent critic of the earlier war, praised David Cameron for releasing a summary of the Attorney-General’s judgement on the legality of action in Syria, and compared his stance positively to Blair’s ten years earlier (Hansard 2013, 1456). Unfortunately for Cameron, releasing a summary rather than the full text of the advice was actually exactly what Blair had done. In the earlier case, Lord Goldsmith’s
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finely balanced discussion of the case for war in Iraq remained private until leaked in 2005. Its appearance made the more categorical summary note released in 2003 appear unrepresentative of the real legal position, fuelling already-widespread accusations of official perfidy. So the comparison proved more damaging than helpful. Labour shadow foreign secretary Douglas Alexander insisted only a UN resolution could legitimize war, as did Green Party MP Caroline Lucas and several Labour back-benchers (Hansard 2013, 1540, 1480, 1484). Gerald Kaufman complicated the picture further by complaining about the way UNSCR 1973 had been used as cover for “illegal” regime change in Libya (Hansard 2013, 1468). This was of course the exact complaint being made in Moscow and Beijing. Even in the unlikely event the government managed to secure a Security Council Resolution, Kaufman refused to support military action, fearing further ‘mission creep’. Generally speaking, those who made legal arguments opposed the use of force under any circumstances. By insisting on an approach more in keeping with international law they knowingly pressed for no action to be taken at all. They also explicitly rejected the exceptionalist argument put forward by successive British governments, that certain states have special rights to judge when military intervention can legitimately be undertaken without reference to the UN.

Hemmed in by attacks on his legal position, David Cameron again echoed Blair by appealing instead to fundamental British values, drawing heavily on an exceptionalist vocabulary. Britain was, he insisted, the “sort of country” that upheld international conventions such as the ban on chemical weapons, and protected civilians regardless of the niceties of UN approval (Hansard 2013, 1430). This argument won some support. Andrew Mitchell invoked the ‘Responsibility to Protect’, and warned that failing to intervene in Syria would offer “a clear lesson to human rights abusers and dictators who murder and terrorise innocent civilian populations” (Hansard 2013, 1474). Brooks Newmark similarly accused the UN of failing “to live up to its mandate to protect”, though his conclusion that “we therefore need to find a coalition of the willing” again raised unfortunate comparisons with Iraq (Hansard 2013, 1504). Clearly exceptionalism had not yet vanished from the House of Commons benches. From the Labour side both Pat McFadden and Mike Gapes resurrected the ‘hard liberal’ argument from ten years before, maintaining that the humanitarian situation in Syria necessitated outside intervention (Hansard 2013, 1523, 1528). Even as Nick Clegg admitted “Iraq casts a long shadow” he insisted “it would be a double tragedy if the memory of that war
now caused us to retreat from the laws and conventions that govern our world” (Hansard 2013, 1546). Although received more sympathetically than other parts of the government’s case, Clegg’s arguments still failed to strike a chord for many MPs. David Davis condemned the absence of a “clear moral imperative” for action. George Galloway criticized the claim that Britain and the US could act legitimately in the name of the international community despite Russian and Chinese opposition. Douglas Carswell compared the pressure to attack Syria to the silence that greeted the overthrow of Mohamed Morsi in Egypt. David Lammy warned that “liberal intervention can fail – and it can fail badly” (Hansard 2013, 1469, 1472, 1493, 1497). Again these arguments represented variations around a common theme. No British national interests were at stake, and Britain lacked the capacity in any event to mount an effective intervention other than as a very minor partner of the US. From that perspective, heavily coloured by declinist narratives, it seemed little good could come from parliament authorizing the use of force in Syria.

![Figure 4: distribution of speakers and votes in the House of Commons on the question of military intervention in Syria.](image)

MPs rejected both the Labour amendment and the underlying government motion, the latter by just thirteen votes. The distribution of speakers in the debate pointed to a more fundamental persuasive failure than this narrow margin implies (see figure 4). Sixty backbench MPs spoke during eight hours of discussion. Fourteen pledged to support either the government or military action. Thirteen remained undecided. Thirty-three were outright opposed. Although a significant proportion of Labour MPs
endorsed the principle of humanitarian intervention, few were willing to support David Cameron. Meg Munn, for example, spoke with great conviction during the debate on the need to intervene to stop the killing of civilians in Syria. She expressed little sympathy with the arguments against intervention, including those based on the lack of UN approval or on comparisons to Iraq. She could have been parroting the prime minister precisely. Yet she did not vote with him, abstaining on both divisions. Conservative sceptics John Redwood, John Baron and Edward Leigh toed the party line to vote down the Labour Party amendment, but then absented themselves from the final division, while four others refused either to support or to endorse Labour, then returned to reject their own government’s position. For government backbenchers, the first vote was a political one, the second one of conscience. For Labour, both were political. In the end the combination of Labour’s political discipline and the government’s failure to marshal its back-bench troops effectively ensured the motion failed. Not for nothing did early blame for the defeat fall upon the government whips.

After the vote, the search for perspective

Parliament embraced a declinist account of Britain’s global role during its 29 August debate, largely thanks to the legacy of the war in Iraq. For many MPs, the invasion of Iraq represented both the apogee of exceptionalism, and its moment of ultimate hubris. When Tony Blair (2001) pledged to stand “shoulder to shoulder” with the United States after the 11 September attacks, he surrendered Britain’s independence in the hope of gaining influence in return. Blair believed Britain’s ability to play its preferred role of ‘first ally’ in the ‘war on terrorism’ depended on his offering absolute public support to President Bush, raising any concerns only in private (Hollis 2006, 38). He made a strong commitment, including the deployment of British troops, to underscore not only the importance of the transatlantic relationship from Britain’s perspective but also the country’s willingness to pay a blood price in its defence (Kennedy-Pipe and Vickers 2007, 208). To an extent the strategy proved successful. Even erstwhile Blair critic and then-ambassador to Washington Christopher Meyer conceded that Blair’s loyalty to Bush granted Britain “the status of indispensable ally” (Meyer 2005, 250). From an exceptionalist standpoint, this was a desirable development, one that guaranteed Britain its long-sought ‘pivotal’ role. For the declinists, Blair’s blind loyalty was both unnecessary and dangerous. It was unnecessary
because the US, as a raucously democratic state, can cope with occasional disagreement among its allies, as Jason Ralph has argued repeatedly (Ralph 2011, 124, Ralph 2013a, 335). It is dangerous because of the foreign entanglements it implies. In the declinist account of the Iraq war, Britain abandoned potential allies in US domestic politics who would have rallied behind a more concerted push for peace, and in the process accepted the costs of a conflict it could ill afford. When MPs spoke of Iraq during the Syria debate, it was to this declinist account that they referred.

Declinist thought both encouraged parliament to veto military action in August 2013 and gained a significant empirical boost from the outcome. Political leaders tried to dismiss the vote as a minor hiccup in the grander discourse of Britain’s place in the world (E. Miliband 2013a). Commentators wondered openly whether the country’s switch from indispensable to unreliable ally marked the end of its long decline into irrelevance (Shapiro 2013). Several thought the special relationship was at risk. The Sun published a front page “death notice” declaring it had “died at home after a sudden illness...aged 67” (The Sun 2013). The Evening Standard warned “in future, it will be only fair for any US president to ask whether the British really can deliver” (Evening Standard 2013). BBC North America correspondent Mark Mardell echoed this concern (Mardell 2013). This was no mere knee-jerk reaction. Justin Webb, also primarily of the BBC, wrote in The Times six months after the Syria vote that Americans thought the “Brits have lost their moral spine”, with all but Blair “placed somewhere on a continuum of uselessness” (Webb 2014). Even Phillip Hammond, the Defence Secretary, warned parliament’s decision was “certainly going to place some strain on the special relationship” (Hammond 2013). All this was music to declinist ears. Some took the opportunity to dismiss the idea of a distinctive US-UK partnership as unrealistic and outdated nonsense (Hastings 2013, Hitchens 2013). Others re-emphasized the case for greater British independence from its more powerful ally (Alexander 2013, Milne 2014), or openly celebrated the prospect of a permanent break (Alibhai-Brown 2013). Declinists among the public and political elite pointed to parliament as both a symptom of and a cure for the difficulties they identified in Britain’s global stance. MPs had grown restive in the face of national overstretch. Their power and willingness to constrain foreign policy adventurism offered a much-needed corrective.

US leaders took a more circumspect view of parliament’s behaviour. British public opinion, too, seemed unconcerned about the longer-term consequences for the
special relationship (Ralph 2013b). Downing Street was more worried, quickly publishing a note of Cameron’s discussion with Obama immediately after the vote, emphasizing their joint determination to ensure the special relationship stayed strong (HM Government 2013). US ambassador to London Matthew Barzun wrote in The Observer how “odd” appeared the “rush by some to declare this relationship dead...because it is so contradictory to what I’ve seen”. He was particularly perturbed by the fact that “the very thing that is needed to prevent these hasty last rites is something for which we Americans often depend on Britain: perspective” (Barzun 2013a). John Kerry, visiting London in the weeks after the vote, told journalists that the US alliance with the UK was indeed special, noting “our bond...is bigger than one vote; it’s bigger than one moment in history” (Kerry 2013). Barzun followed up on this point, insisting “the idea that 13 votes on a Thursday night at the end of the summer could disrupt seven decades of cooperation, World War Two and the Cold War and all the stuff we are engaged on now, just is incredible” (Barzun 2013b). If London could not supply its own perspective, Washington seemed determined to step in.

The Obama administration’s behaviour was perhaps even more reassuring for the British than its rhetoric. Responding publicly to parliament’s decision, the president praised the virtues of a democratic foreign policy and promised to seek congressional approval himself before proceeding further (Obama 2013b). Once it became clear he could not win that level of domestic support, Obama withdrew the threat to use force in Syria. Britain’s parliament, at least indirectly, had vetoed not just British but US military action as well. Obama would not have risked submitting himself to congressional approval had Britain not already set an example, and had its parliament not already ruled out the use of force. As the Evening Standard’s Sarah Sands observed, “for those who believe in the arrogance of the US, it must have been a surprise to see that it needed British support after all” (Sands 2013). Christopher Meyer thought Obama’s decision to mimic Cameron showed “that the special relationship was never in doubt” (Meyer 2013). Boris Johnson, influential Mayor of London, mooted future Conservative leader and US citizen, agreed (Johnson 2013). The House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee thought the US decision not to act without the UK in Syria showed the superpower’s continued reliance on its junior partner (Foreign Affairs Committee 2014, 29). Exceptionalist commentators launched a counter-strike against their declinist rivals, labeling them “melodramatic” (Daily Mail 2013, Evans-Pritchard 2013) and
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calling their concerns about the special relationship’s end “wildly exaggerated” (The Independent 2013) and “surely overdone” (Cornwell 2013). The declinist bump from the initial vote proved short-lived, at least as far as the special relationship was concerned.

The national ‘soul searching’ over Britain’s broader role in the world (Osborne 2013), and in particular its ability to ‘punch above its weight’, proved harder to dismiss. Spectator editor Fraser Nelson concluded “Parliament has rejected the Prime Minister’s vision of this country’s place in the world” (Nelson 2013). Evening Standard deputy political editor Nicholas Cecil observed that MPs preferred for Britain to “punch its weight rather than trying to punch above it” (Cecil 2013). Others made invidious comparisons between Britain’s behaviour and the unwillingness of smaller European states (and Germany) to engage with even major issues beyond Europe’s borders (Evening Standard 2013, Cohen 2013). Former US State Department official Richard Haass warned on his Financial Times blog that “the UK is in danger of separating itself from both the EU and the US, an undesirable status for a medium size country that wants to play a world role but has few independent options” (Haass 2013). Much of this was in line with earlier declinist arguments, as some observers pointed out (Hawkins 2013). But the Syria vote gave the standard critiques of Britain’s outsized global role an additional cutting edge. Observers wondered how Britain could retain its UN Security Council presence (Foster 2013), or its “once-cherished role as one of the world’s foremost moral policemen” (Roberts 2013) if it refused to intervene in the affairs of other states. Those most sceptical of the idea that Britain represents, in Robin Cook’s much-criticized phrase, ‘a force for good in the world’ (Cook 1997), celebrated a retreat from “great power status” (Dejevsky 2014). Even the House of Commons Defence Committee, not typically regarded as a bastion of declinist thought, offered guarded praise for the Syria vote’s unintended development of a “realistic vision of the UK’s place in the world” (Defence Committee 2014). The committee left unspoken the declinist implication that reducing its global role would be in Britain’s best interests.

Ed Miliband maintained “last week’s vote was not about Britain shirking its global responsibilities, it was about preventing a rush to war” (E. Miliband 2013b, 308). William Hague, meanwhile, noted that Britain was still closely engaged in Syria, promoting a negotiated settlement and sending non-lethal assistance to rebel groups (Hague 2013, 159). Both claims rang hollow. Regardless of his exact intention, Miliband
did not just delay the decision about outside intervention in Syria. He ensured it did not take place at all. Hague would not have emphasized so emphatically his non-lethal policy options if more robust measures were still available to him. Syria shows that British foreign policy is now a legitimate target for partisan politicking, which means in turn that parliamentary arithmetic will determine future large-scale engagements in world affairs. This prospect clearly casts doubt on the country’s ability to fulfill its commitments (Burt 2014, 33). Coalition whips misjudged the parliamentary mood over Syria, and David Cameron misjudged Ed Miliband. From that perspective, the 29 August vote could be termed an “accident”. Yet, as the Financial Times’ Gideon Rachman noted, although “Miliband was not intending to send a signal that Britain’s global role has fundamentally changed…accidents can also be turning points, particularly if they reveal and harden underlying shifts in the political mood” (Rachman 2013). The Syria vote revealed how raw memories of Iraq still are amongst MPs. It hardened their conviction that parliament has not just a right but a duty to veto government proposals to intervene in world affairs. It raised serious questions about Britain’s willingness to punch above its weight in future, and about its leaders’ ability to maintain the special relationship with the United States. Declinism, on balance, did not gain a significantly stronger hold over the foreign policy discourse as a result of Syria. Instead, Syria revealed how powerful an influence it already exerted over those now in a position to make decisions about the overseas use of force. Hague warns that Britain’s “capacity for self-criticism must not become corrosive of our own values and our ability to defend them” (Hague 2014). He has some way to go to make that warning stick.

Conclusion

Although parliament’s veto of military strikes against the Assad regime owed much to the British foreign policy tradition of declinism, exceptionalism survived its defeat. The Syria vote was unusual. It represented a perfect declinist storm. It seemed so similar to Iraq, so nuanced as a decision, and so sudden after eighteen months of conflict, that MPs felt instinctively uneasy about allowing action to go ahead. Even David Cameron admitted they faced a finely-balanced judgement. Groping for concepts to help articulate their concerns, many MPs alighted upon warnings about the dangers of blind loyalty to the US or costly overstretch in far-off foreign lands derived from the declinist narrative. Several believed absolutely in the central tenets of declinism. But many voted
as much against the memory of the war in Iraq as against the prospect of intervention in Syria. Their complaints, though framed in general terms, almost inevitably referred back in some way to the earlier conflict. While the broader traditions of exceptionalism and decline undoubtedly influenced the Syria debate and vote, in the end both were governed primarily by hostility to the invasion of Iraq, just framed rhetorically in more general terms. Neither tradition stood to gain or lose much from the outcome, as a result. Neither was fundamentally tied up with the outcome of this one vote. While declinist scepticism of Britain’s punching above her weight struck a parliamentary nerve on this occasion, exceptionalism still holds sway in broader accounts of the special relationship. And the exceptionalist reaction spurred by declinist triumphalism in the aftermath of the vote seems largely to have shored up the status quo.

For all its drama, then, Syria held little substantive significance for Britain’s future global role. Britain is no less likely to seek to punch above its weight after the August 2013 vote than it was before. No viable alternative has emerged to the continued tension between post-imperial traditions of exceptionalism and decline, nor to the central place of the special relationship and pivotal power as pillars of the country’s foreign policy approach. As Jamie Gaskarth notes, there are no alternative “scripts” for Britain’s national role conception to those defined against the backdrop of empire (Gaskarth 2014, 567). Syria did not change this. It did not fundamentally alter the discourse surrounding the notion of Britain’s role. The broader system of role prescriptions within which British leaders operate remains intact. US and other foreign leaders agree with the heads of all three major political parties that Syria did not affect Britain’s place as ‘first ally’ of the United States. While its claim to ‘pivotal’ power seems more vulnerable, it is in turn based primarily on the special relationship, and so likely also to survive. Syria did reveal the extent to which Britain’s national role conception is deeply divided, largely over the echoes of Iraq. In fact, it arguably does not exist at all, such is the disconnect between rival narratives within the country and different outsiders’ perceptions beyond. Instead of a national role conception Britain often displays little more than national role confusion. That again is a major reason why its response to Syria has been so haphazard, and why memories of Libya played little role in a debate dominated by Iraq. Britain can intervene militarily overseas. It is willing to do so under the right circumstances. But it is a chastened and war-weary power nonetheless, haunted by earlier mistakes and willing not to act, not to prove itself at
every opportunity, in order to keep its commitments from escalating. Its role performance is inconsistent, and so its attitudes, decisions and actions are unpredictable, with one exception. The key trends dominating the contemporary discourse have constituted a new commitment to upholding the collective will of the UN Security Council. MPs showed over Syria that they trusted the Security Council ahead of the US and UK governments. When the Council refused to support intervention, so did parliament. To some extent this reflected a loss of trust driven by missing WMD and the publication of legal advice with critical nuances removed. To some extent, too, it reflected declinism amongst the political elite, their confidence knocked by austerity and too many years of war.

Neither feeling is necessarily permanent. A future parliament may regain confidence in Britain’s global role and prove itself more willing to support foreign policy adventures that lack the UN imprimatur. It will first have to exorcise the demons of Iraq and renew its faith in British power as a significant force in the world, and a force for good to boot. Perhaps the significance of Syria, then, is not that it has changed fundamentally the trajectory of British foreign policy discourse. For the most part it clearly has not. What it has done, however, is highlight the intensity of its most fundamental dilemmas, not quite constituting but perhaps accelerating an eventual reckoning between rival traditions of exceptionalism and decline.
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