Punching above our weight: Grand strategy in the United Kingdom

Introduction

1. My task this morning (apart from keeping everyone awake) is to talk about the nature, role and implications of grand strategy in the United Kingdom.

2. To begin with, I want to ask one question and make one observation that I’d like you to keep in mind as I go along. I’ll return to both in my conclusion, and perhaps you can reflect on them when we get to the Q&A.

3. To begin with, the question.
   a. On one level this is a slightly strange topic to include on this programme. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I think the questions of what role grand strategy plays in Britain and what is the significance of Britain’s grand strategic approach are interesting. But then I would. I’m from here, and I study British foreign and security policy.
   b. Over the course of this weekend we’re going to talk about grand strategy from a conceptual perspective. We’re going to consider the relationship between grand strategy and emerging power. We’re going to talk about grand strategy in the United States and China.
   c. Unlike the US, Britain is no longer a superpower. Unlike China, it has no prospect of achieving that status in the foreseeable future. Unlike emerging powers, it has no need to seek a fundamental redistribution of influence in the international system. Britain is much smaller than either the US or China. It is, perhaps unsurprisingly, quite happy with its place in the international system it helped to design.
   d. If grand strategy is about managing the international order, Britain does not need it. If it is about changing the international order, Britain does not want it.

4. My question, then, is can you have a grand strategy if you are not a grand power?

5. The observation stems from the fact that despite its relatively small size and its general satisfaction with the present international order, Britain clearly still wants to do grand strategy. It clearly does seek to play a major role on the international stage.
   a. There is in my opinion a peculiar pathology at the heart of Britain’s engagement with the wider world. We are obsessed with a belief best encapsulated by then Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd in 1992, that “Britain has punched above her weight in the world” and should continue to do so.
   b. This is peculiar because it is unusual – all states want to maximise their influence, but only Britain always wants to achieve more influence than it should, and considers that disproportionate impact a birthright.
   c. It is also peculiar because it is self-defeating – a state cannot by definition achieve influence disproportionate to its means. If it is able to achieve a desired outcome then it must have possessed the power to achieve it.
   d. It is pathological nonetheless because it infects every dimension of British thinking on grand strategy. It is an ideal shared by policymakers and opposition leaders, by bureaucrats, soldiers and spies, by newspaper editors, NGOs and ordinary citizens. The implication of the word ‘pathological’, that this is a negative aspect of Britain’s strategic approach, is intended.
6. Bearing in mind the question of whether Britain’s strategy can ever truly be grand in any meaningful sense, and the observation that for all its post-imperial weakness Britain continues doggedly to seek disproportionate influence over international affairs, I want now to talk about the three dilemmas I see affecting the nature, role and implications of British grand strategy.

   a. The first dilemma concerns Britain’s efforts to come to terms with history. Here I am interested in how the country has adapted to the death of empire, how it has sought to leverage its diplomatic status as a residual great power to maximise its global impact, and how far it has learned, or failed to learn, the lessons of its past. Along the way I will say something about the diplomatic resources British leaders draw upon in their efforts to do grand strategy.

   b. The second dilemma concerns the challenge of mobilising resources in an austerity age. Here I am interested in the material vestiges of great power, the shifts we see in British strategy following the 2008 financial crisis and the start of permanent austerity in 2010, and the prospects for the future given the size and nature of large spending commitments effectively already made. Along the way I will comment upon the economic resources British leaders draw upon in their efforts to do grand strategy.

   c. The third and final dilemma concerns the difficulty of doing grand strategy in an increasingly unruly democratic state. Here I am interested in the top-down and bottom-up routes to strategy-making, in the introduction of parliament into decisions about war and peace, and in the recent politicisation of strategy. Along the way I will discuss the political resources British leaders draw upon in their efforts to do grand strategy.

7. Finally, I hope to draw some conclusions about the challenges affecting British grand strategy in the present, and the prospects for its future.

   Coming to terms with history

8. Why, from a historical perspective, did Britain’s peculiar pathology develop in the first place?

   a. The United Kingdom once sat at the heart of a globe-spanning empire. At one time around a quarter of humanity was governed from London.

   b. Both in terms of the land area covered and the number of different modern-day states affected, Britain’s historic influence is widely distributed across the globe.

   c. It is simply impossible to explain the efforts of contemporary British policymakers without understanding the heights their predecessors commanded.

9. For all its spread and strength, and Churchill’s wartime suggestion that it might last a thousand years, the Empire faded quite quickly away in the second half of the twentieth century.

   a. Britain’s 19th-century dominance derived from its early industrial revolution, which made it rich and technologically far ahead of its rivals, from its heritage as a naval power and a trading nation that prepared it for a place at the heart of a global economic network, from its tradition of the gentleman adventurer that
gave it colonial conquerors and administrators, and from the fact its rivals took
time to catch up.

b. By the end of the nineteenth century rival powers were beginning to catch up,
most obviously the newly established state of Germany.

c. At the same time the modern phenomenon of nationalism was arriving in
British colonies. The Indian National Congress was formed in 1885, for
example.

d. The two World Wars left Britain critically weakened. It was bankrupt,
dependent economically and militarily on the United States, and unable to re-
assert its authority over colonies lost to Japan in 1941. The jewel in the
imperial crown, India, gained independence in 1947. Most of the African
colonies followed during the 1960s. The process was complete when Belize
gained independence in 1981.

e. Two particular moments underlined the extend of Britain’s diminishment.

i. The first arrived in 1956. Britain, with France, sought to engineer a
dispute between Israel and Egypt with a view to reversing the decision
of Egyptian President Nasser to nationalise the Suez canal, on which
Britain’s trading routes relied.

ii. Having failed to consult President Eisenhower beforehand, Prime
Minister Alec Douglas-Home soon found himself forced by US
pressure into a humiliating withdrawal. He resigned, and Britain’s
leaders learned never again to try to play an independent power role.

iii. The second moment began in 1964 and was complete by 1968. Harold
Wilson’s Labour government decided, as part of a broader programme
of defence spending reductions aimed at recognising the end of
Empire, to withdraw British forces from what was called ‘East of
Suez’ – essentially from Asia.

iv. For all Wilson tried to dress up the decision – CLICK – he insisted “we
cannot afford to relinquish our world role” even as he announced it –
the withdrawal represented a final recognition that the age of Empire
was over.

v. From a strategic perspective, Wilson’s decision was actually quite
sensible. Faced with a declining resource base and declining global
interests, he opted to rationalise Britain’s military commitments. The
withdrawal from ‘East of Suez’ marked the end of Empire, but also,
potentially at least, the end of imperial overstretch.

f. Nevertheless, all of this contraction still left Britain facing a very difficult
question, of what its place in the new postwar world order would be. Former
US Secretary of State Dean Acheson summed up the issue with his complaint
in 1962 that “Great Britain has lost an empire, but has not yet found a role”.

10. Acheson’s criticism highlighted both a historical problem constraining Britain’s
ability to adapt, and also the historical assets it capitalised upon in order to try to
carve out a new position. It explained the origins of the peculiar pathology of British
grand strategy, but also the means it uses as it continues to try to punch above its
weight.
11. For most of the period since the end of the Second World War, Britain has sought to leverage the diplomatic vestiges of its imperial position in order to maintain an influence in the wider world.

a. Winston Churchill first proposed a model in which Britain remained important globally because of its unique place at the heart of each of the key networks. He placed Britain at the centre of three overlapping circles. He thought these three circles together held the fate of the free world, and that Britain’s relations with each of them granted it a unique role in ensuring the peace and security of the free Western world.

i. The first circle he called the ‘English-speaking peoples’. This category included the so-called ‘white dominions’, former colonies in which the settler populations had become ruling majorities such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand. It was dominated, however, by the newly confirmed superpower, the United States.

ii. Churchill’s second circle was ‘United Europe’. This was categorically not the same thing as the European Union we see today, for one simple reason. Churchill thought Britain was ‘of Europe, but not in Europe’. He thought it was sufficiently close to and connected with the European continent to enable it to influence and benefit from collective European decisions. But he did not think Britain should formally align itself with its nearest neighbours.

iii. Part of the reason for this lies in Churchill’s third circle, the ‘Empire and Commonwealth’. Although the ‘jewel in the crown’ of the Empire had gone in August 1947, Churchill was an old imperialist who believed the remainder should be retained and counted a source of British strength. One of the main reasons he thought Britain better off outside of Europe was that he thought the residual Empire and the fledgling Commonwealth represented a viable alternative.

b. It is impossible to talk about Britain’s global strategic stance without considering Churchill’s model. Some version of the idea that Britain is uniquely placed to leverage a range of distinct international relationships has appeared repeatedly in leaders’ pronouncements ever since.

i. Tony Blair, for example, argued that Britain was a ‘pivotal’ power, ideally placed to bridge the gap between Europe and the United States (the Commonwealth by then did not warrant a mention).

ii. Blair’s problem, however, was that events surrounding Iraq in particular collapsed his bridging efforts. Faced with a choice between his desire for strong relations with the United States and to play a leading role in Europe, he opted for the former.

iii. His successors have largely let the subject rest, for now. But you can expect it to return to prominence if we do wind up having a referendum on EU membership. US officials have made it abundantly clear: Britain is far more valuable to them as an EU member than it would be if it left the EU. Britain’s closeness to the US, on the other hand, has long been a source of suspicion in other European states. President de Gaulle vetoed its first two attempts to join the European Economic Community in part because he feared Britain would prove more loyal to the US than to its new European partners. Somewhat
ironically, the ‘Gaullism’ that drove this decision shares a great deal in common with the peculiar pathology in the British context. Both are in effect political doctrines designed to rage against the death of empires.

12. The fact the Commonwealth has quietly disappeared from attempts to explain Britain’s critical central position at the heart of several international networks says something about its continued strategic (in)significance.

13. The European Union meanwhile raises domestic political problems, and the general reluctance of its members to risk undermining NATO by co-operating too closely on military measures – a reluctance enhanced by very real divisions between the leading European powers over the appropriateness and effectiveness of force as a foreign policy tool – renders its strategic significance limited.

14. The ‘special relationship’, however, is quite different.
   a. All five of the states Churchill identified as part of the ‘English-speaking peoples’ – the US, the UK, Australia, New Zealand and Canada – co-operate on intelligence matters under the so-called “five eyes” system. But the relationship between Britain and the US is the system’s closest part. As recently as last year, Edward Snowden’s revelations about the NSA’s PRISM programme revealed its reliance on intercepts gathered and processed by Britain’s GCHQ. Especially in the field of signals intelligence, the special relationship is hard-wired into Britain’s security apparatus. This makes it central to the country’s strategic stance.
   b. Despite its many hiccups, the ‘special relationship’ remains close militarily, too.
      i. The hiccups included Suez, of course, Harold Wilson’s refusal to send troops to Vietnam in the 1960s, the US invasion of Grenada under Ronald Reagan in 1983 and the British failure to support strikes against Bashar al-Assad in 2013. It probably helps that we have, since 1812, reversed our stance on burning the White House to the ground. We are now anti. In 1812, we were pro.
      ii. Britain’s nuclear weapons systems are based on US designs and maintained with US-made parts, an arrangement in place since the Mutual Defence Agreement of 1958.
      iv. Having sacrificed 632 lives in the ‘war on terrorism’ since 2001, Britain can claim to have paid a ‘blood price’ to ensure it remains the number one ally of the US.
      v. So significant is British support to US decision-making that President Obama was forced to cancel his own plans to intervene in the Syrian civil war when Britain’s parliament decided it could not take part.

15. The Commonwealth does not matter as much in strategic terms as Churchill hoped it would, while the value of Europe depends on whether the political passions it arouses can be tempered in the coming years. But the ‘special relationship’ is still a vital diplomatic resource underpinning British grand strategy. It ensures Britain gains a
hearing in the power centre of the Western world. It allows Britain to play a continued part in the maintenance of international peace and security, and so to justify its continued place as a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

16. So Britain’s belief in its own importance stems from its imperial past and is supported by the vestiges of its former prominence, particularly its close relationship with the United States.

17. Despite the importance of its past, however, Britain has shown a consistent ability not to learn from its own history, or at least to learn only those lessons it wants to learn.
   a. The Falklands War of 1982 offers a good example. The Falkland Islands are a small group of rocks in the Atlantic Ocean, southwest of the British mainland.
      i. Quite far south-west, actually.
      ii. Following decades of dispute over their sovereignty, they were invaded by Argentina in 1982. Britain despatched a task force that fought a two-month campaign ending in Argentine surrender and the collapse of the ruling military junta in Buenos Aires. Margaret Thatcher declared in the aftermath that “we have ceased to be a nation in retreat”. She won the 1983 election largely as a result of what she called the “Falklands factor”.
      iii. From this mythologised image of prime ministerial toughness, British leaders drew several lessons.
         1. It reinforced an aversion to appeasement first established in the 1930s.
         2. It convinced them Britain possessed the strength of character to win wars even when the material conditions were against them. US planners concluded at the time that they could not have succeeded in similar circumstances because they could not have provided sufficient trucks to move their troops across the islands. The British walked.
         3. Tony Blair first stood for parliament at a by-election in 1982. He was heavily defeated on the back of a surge in Conservative support following the victory. His colleague Robin Cook later reflected on whether Blair learned at this point that military victories bring electoral rewards.
   b. A second example stems from Britain’s more recent security operations, which have violated for me the fundamental rule of international politics. Can anyone tell me what is the fundamental rule of international politics?
      ii. Britain has invaded Afghanistan four times now. As this image of a victorious British army of 10,000 men returning to Jalalabad from battle in 1842 shows, it has not necessarily enjoyed the experiences.
      iii. Britain’s experiences in Helmand province between 2006 and 2014 closely mirrored those it faced in 1839-1842, 1878-1880 and 1919. The strategic motivation had changed – the 2001 invasion actually made the North-West Frontier Province of what is now Pakistan less secure and stable, whereas the earlier interventions were aimed at shoring it up when it was part of the British Raj. But the general rule remains. Afghanistan is the “graveyard of empires”. Britain could not pacify it.
The Soviet Union could not pacify it. The United States could not pacify it.

iv. Britain should have known better than to expect, as one Cabinet Minister expected, that it could bring Helmand under the control of the Kabul government without a single shot being fired.

c. A final example comes from the influence of one recent conflict upon another. In August 2013, following apparent chemical weapons attacks by the government of Bashar al-Assad on civilians in Damascus, parliament voted not to invade Iraq in 2003.

i. If you are confused, you should be. But that is exactly what parliament did. Looking at some of the reasons MPs advanced for opposing intervention in Syria in 2013, it is clear how many voted mainly to express their disappointment at the way their support for the Iraq War had turned out.

1. David Cameron argued ‘we must not let the spectre of previous mistakes paralyse our ability to stand up for what is right’.
2. Andrew Mitchell said ‘the spectre of the debate on Iraq in 2003 hangs over this debate’.
3. David Anderson saw ‘the ghost of Tony Blair’ similarly immanent.
4. Although Ben Gummer did not want to ‘allow the ghost of Iraq to influence our decision’, few of his colleagues felt the same.
5. Jack Straw closed the Iraq debate as Foreign Secretary in 2003. Comparing that situation to Syria, he concluded that ‘one of the consequences of the intelligence failure on Iraq has been to raise the bar that we have to get over when the question of military action arises’. The bar had not, in his opinion, been cleared.
6. At least nine MPs stated explicitly that after Iraq, in Roger Godsiff’s words, ‘they would never again believe one single solitary assurance given by any Prime Minister’ seeking to take Britain to war.
7. As Cheryl Gillan put it, ‘I cannot sit here and be duped again by any Prime Minister’.

ii. Parliament’s more recent decision to authorise air strikes against the Islamic State in Iraq showed it has not completely given up on the utility of military force. But the Syria veto raised the worrying prospect of MPs concluding that because one war was a bad idea, and because one government proved untrustworthy, all wars are a bad idea, and all governments untrustworthy. If that belief does indeed carry the day, the effect on British grand strategy will be significant.

18. The peculiar pathology underpinning British grand strategy owes its origins to the country’s imperial past, and in particular to its refusal to come to terms with the fact the Empire very much is in the past. Even as it clings to its imperial status, however, Britain has shown a remarkable ability either to ignore the lessons of the past, or to misapply them. From Britain’s ability to defeat militarily the second largest power in the world’s fourth most powerful region, it drew continued faith in its military prowess and strategic significance. From Britain’s history of difficult and bloody wars in Afghanistan it drew the conclusion that it could easily and without bloodshed
invade Afghanistan. From the fact invading Iraq was a bad idea it drew a sense of doubt in the utility and legitimacy of military action under any circumstances at all.

19. Britain remains a strangely ahistorical state, shaped critically by history.

Mobilising resources in an austerity age

20. The second dilemma of British grand strategy is the question of how best to mobilise its economic resources in an austerity age.

21. Here the key point is that, in relative terms, Britain remains a reasonably great power.
   a. It had the 6th largest GDP in the world in 2013 according to IMF and World Bank (behind US, China, Japan, Germany and France but ahead of Brazil, Russia, Italy and India).
   b. It had the 7th largest military budget in the world in 2013 according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (behind US, China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, France, Japan but ahead of Germany, Brazil and India).
   c. British military spending accounts for approximately 6% of NATO total – third largest behind US and France. It is relatively rare among NATO powers in that it exceeds their common commitment to spending at least 2% of GDP on defence.
   d. If grand strategy depends on the resources available for the promotion of national security, and the capacity of a state to mobilise them, then Britain from this perspective seems quite well placed to make an effective grand strategy.

22. However, a combination of declining relative GDP, fiscal deficit following the 2008 financial crisis and fiscal austerity imposed after the 2010 general election has rendered this position uncertain.
   a. If we look at how Britain’s position compares to other potential great powers over time, we can see signs of relative if not absolute decline. Britain is not keeping up with comparators in terms of wealth and so in terms of military resources.
   b. The most recent UK National Security Strategy concluded that “the largest single challenge facing the Government affects both national security and all other areas of public policy. Our most urgent task is to return our nation’s finances to a sustainable footing” p14.
   c. The associated Strategic Defence and Security Review included a foreword from the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister that said “we expect to continue with the fourth largest military budget in the world”. Clearly that expectation has not been fulfilled.

23. Austerity has had a number of concrete impacts.
   a. Firstly on the size of the armed forces. The army was reduced in size by 19% to 82,000 regular soldiers. This reduction is supposed to be partly compensated for by increasing the size of the Army Reserve from 19,000 to 30,000 – but recruitment has proven harder than expected and no increase has taken place. The Navy was reduced by 14% to 30,000 and the RAF by 13% to 33,000.
   b. In previous years Britain compensated for the small quantity of soldiers it could offer to joint operations with NATO allies with their very high quality. But the British armed forces learned far less from their experiences in Afghanistan this time around than their US counterparts. They have also
benefitted far less from technological advances. Whereas the US sought British involvement in the initial invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in part out of respect for the capabilities of British troops, that respect is at least partially diminished today. Britain’s SAS is still impressive. But Seal Team Six is more impressive still.

c. Secondly, austerity has affected the shape of the armed forces.
   i. The retirement of the GR8 Harrier jump-jet meant Britain no longer had an aircraft capable of operating from its remaining aircraft carriers. HMS Ark Royal was retired immediately and HMS Illustrious converted to helicopter duties before itself being retired earlier this year.
   ii. The reduction of tank forces by 40% and heavy artillery by 35% left Britain unable to deploy a full independent armoured division on a par with the one that was sent to Iraq in 2003.

24. Britain’s present military capabilities provide for one brigade-level ongoing mission plus one short-term complex intervention and one short-term simple intervention, or three short-term interventions, or a one-off intervention involving up to three of Britain’s six army brigades. All three scenarios represent significant reductions in force projection capacity compared to the position prior to 2010.
   a. It can no longer mount remote air operations of the sort that proved essential to securing victory in the Falklands War.
   b. It can no longer despatch an armoured division of the sort used in the Iraq invasion.
   c. Only its nuclear forces remain at full strength, but their future is in doubt.

25. Having said that, there remains cause for optimism about Britain’s capacity to project force overseas in future.
   a. The National Security Strategy involved a deliberate calculation that there was a greater short-term threat to the country’s ability to do grand strategy from the fiscal deficit than from the sort of challenges typically met by military force. It therefore prioritised immediate cost reductions while leaving open two key decisions that will affect Britain’s strategic stance in future: the continuation of its independent nuclear deterrent, and the introduction of two new large aircraft carriers into the Royal Navy’s surface fleet.

26. The Queen Elizabeth-class aircraft carriers will be by some margin the largest ships in the Royal Navy. They are closer in size to a US Nimitz-class carrier than to their Illustrious-class predecessors.
   a. Two Queen Elizabeth-class aircraft carriers were ordered in 2007. After the 2010 general election the present government tried to cancel at least one order, but found it impossible thanks to the poor way the contracts had been framed.
   b. The 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review instead proposed either selling or mothballing the second carrier while putting the first into service.
   c. David Cameron announced at the NATO summit in 2014 that the second carrier, HMS Prince of Wales, would also be brought into service.
   d. The carriers will potentially give Britain the ability to launch two independent air and amphibious operations anywhere in the world simultaneously. The carriers have been designed to complement directly the firepower of their still larger US counterparts. They are still problematic in several ways – for
example they are compatible with only the short take-off, vertical landing version of the F35 Joint Strike Fighter. But they will nevertheless be immensely powerful platforms for naval and aerial warfare once complete.

27. Britain meanwhile maintains a continuous at-sea deterrent nuclear capability in the form of four Vanguard-class submarines equipped with between 8 and 12 Trident nuclear-armed missiles. The Vanguard-class submarines are due for replacement no later than 2028. A final decision on replacing them will be made in 2016.
   a. Costs will be a major consideration. But costs have always been a consideration when it comes to Britain’s maintenance of a nuclear deterrent.
   b. Historically, British leaders have felt the credibility they gain by retaining independent nuclear weapons outweighs in value any immediate monetary costs.
   c. Post-war foreign secretary Ernest Bevin summed up the position still adopted by his successors today. Complaining of being spoken down to by the US Secretary of State, he concluded “We have got to have this thing over here whatever it costs…We've got to have the bloody Union Jack flying on top of it”.

28. For all Bevin’s bluster, and for all the dramatic increase in scale represented by the new aircraft carriers, the fact remains that neither renewal of the nuclear deterrent nor the final use of the carriers has yet been decided. Both options are expensive.

29. Both options are also clearly designed to grant Britain the status of a great power. That was Bevin’s point; Britain can’t treat with the US on an equal status without independent firepower. It was also part of the design brief for the carriers.

30. Yet the prospects for the future look quite good. And therein lies the second dilemma of British grand strategy. Clearly, Britain can (just about) afford some of the trappings of great power. CLICK But affording them is difficult. And, critically, the reason Britain wants nuclear weapons and an expeditionary military capability is not because it is a great power but because it wants to be a great power. CLICK The argument is not that Britain needs a strong military to play is international part. It is that maintaining a strong military will allow it to claim a particular international part. The peculiar pathology is clearly at work here.

31. One final observation before we move on. Britain’s nineteenth-century position was based in large part on the Royal Navy’s dominance of the seas. The growth of air power and the declining importance of international shipping to the nation’s wealth reduced the prominence of the senior service. But for all the economic difficulties they raise, both the new instruments of military power I have named, the Queen Elizabeth-class carriers and the new Successor nuclear submarines, will be naval instruments. Thanks in part to economic constraints, we may be witnessing an accidental shift in Britain’s strategic stance back towards naval power. CLICK Because it is accidental it can hardly be called a consequence of grand strategy. Strategy implies planning. But future British leaders will find themselves vastly more powerful in naval terms than they are on land. Perhaps that will become Britain’s new military USP.
32. The third dilemma of British grand strategy is that just as the country has grown better in recent years at doing strategy in a centralised, top-down fashion, the fragmentation of decision-making about the implementation of foreign and security policy has reduced its ability to implement a single strategic plan.

33. We’ve seen considerable innovation in terms of strategic decision-making under the present government. In part this reflects an effort to get better at strategic thinking. In part, too, it reflects a more short-term political effort to distinguish present policymaking practices from those adopted by the previous government. It is also a reaction to the relatively unusual political makeup of the current government, the UK’s first governing coalition in peacetime since 1931.

a. Formally the key decision-making body in British politics is the Cabinet. Under the doctrine of collective responsibility, each individual Cabinet member is assumed to support every government policy, and is expected either to accept that responsibility or to resign.

b. Under the Thatcher and Blair governments, however, we saw a shift towards greater centralisation of power in the hands of the prime minister. While Thatcher was known to brow-beat her Cabinet into submission, at one stage prompting the Defence Secretary to resign in the middle of a meeting, Blair preferred a more softly-softly approach. He liked to invite individual ministers for ‘chats’ on the sofa in his Downing Street ‘den’, gaining the support of key figures privately before presenting his decisions to Cabinet at *faits accomplis*.

c. In both cases, Cabinet ceased to serve as a decision-making body. While Thatcher at least maintained the form of traditional Cabinet government, however, Blair preferred a more *ad hoc* approach. During his decade in power British grand strategy was made primarily in small gatherings of trusted ministers, political advisers and officials from the military and intelligence services.

d. The only formal mechanism Blair regularly made use of was the COBRA committee, named after Cabinet Office Briefing Room A where it traditionally meets. This is the UK’s emergency management committee. It focuses mainly on short-term crises rather than the longer-term strategic picture.

e. The Cameron government sought to differentiate itself both from Blair and from Thatcher. Given the need to balance the interests and ideals of two very different political parties, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, it saw considerable merit in returning to a more formal style of collective decision-making. It would be far easier to keep both parts of the coalition onside if both were guaranteed a say in policymaking.

34. Hence the creation of the UK’s first National Security Council, formally a sub-committee of the Cabinet attended by military and intelligence chiefs when required. The NSC’s remit is to consider security threats from a strategic perspective. It has three sub-committees dealing with risk assessment and contingency planning, nuclear deterrence, and the UK’s relations with emerging powers. There is also a National Security Advisor, currently Sir Kim Darroch, although his resources and status are not at the level of his counterpart in the US.
35. The NSC is responsible for a second major innovation, the publication of a formal National Security Strategy and the establishment of a regular five year strategic planning cycle.
   a. The National Security Strategy adopts a risk management approach to assessing the UK’s global strategic outlook. It seeks to identify potential threats and to prioritise among them in terms of the likelihood that they will materialise and the consequences they would entail.
   b. The 2010 NSS established the ends of UK strategy as:
      i. To ensure a secure and resilient UK by protecting our people, economy, infrastructure, territory and ways of life from all major risks that can affect us directly; and
      ii. To shape a stable world, by acting to reduce the likelihood of risks affecting the UK or British interests overseas, and applying our instruments of power and influence to shape the global environment.
   c. It identifies fifteen priority risks, four of which are seen as being of particular concern (tier 1 risks):
      i. International terrorism.
      ii. Cyber attacks.
      iii. Accidents or natural hazards such as pandemics
      iv. An international military crisis between states.
   d. Some of this is waffle. There is something tautological about one of the stated objectives of the National Security Strategy of the UK being ‘security’.
   e. Nevertheless, there is sufficient differentiation among risks to enable some significant prioritisation. I have discussed already some of the implications of the 2010 National Security Strategy, and its accompanying Strategic Defence and Security Review, for the ways Britain resources its national security stance.
   f. Following these reforms Britain has a much more coherent top-down model for making grand strategy. It has a formal committee responsible for it, a five yearly planning cycle, an official statement of national strategy and a process for translating that into more concrete policy decisions.

36. Alongside this formalisation of the top-down approach to UK grand strategy making we have seen in recent years the growth of a new bottom-up dynamic.
   a. The British public has grown more interested in, and more sceptical about, grand strategy, because it is more aware of the costs of being a global power and less certain of the benefits in the face of complex international security dynamics. This has made the job of strategy-making hard.

37. The most significant manifestation of this trend lies in the increasing encroachment of parliament onto decisions about grand strategy that were once the exclusive remit of the government.
   a. When Prime Minister Clement Attlee committed British forces to the Korean War in 1950, opposition leader Winston Churchill urged him to ask parliament to approve the decision.
      i. Churchill knew MPs would vote in favour of the war. He was concerned, however, that the vocal complaints of a minority might give the impression internationally that Britain lacked the stomach for a fight.
ii. Sure enough, Attlee won the vote comfortably and Churchill’s point was proved. Whatever a few opponents might loudly argue, parliament clearly supported the action proposed.

b. The reason Churchill had to request a vote was that normally MPs were not involved in decisions about war and peace. The government would decide, and while parliament might be allowed a debate and a symbolic vote, its support was not necessary for a policy to go ahead.


d. Tony Blair broke the pattern by asking parliament to approve the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Blair knew removing Saddam Hussein was controversial. He knew he faced concern within his own Labour Party and talk of a leadership challenge. He knew only internal opposition could realistically threaten his hold on power. And he knew a parliamentary vote might win legitimacy for his policy and quieten domestic doubters. So he went ahead. And he won.

e. Blair’s concession prompted a wave of discussion in parliament and in the press about whether parliament’s role in security decisions should be placed on a formal footing. It was his choice to allow the vote in 2003, critics noted. He or his successors might not be so generous in future. Gordon Brown held a formal consultation on the question while he was Prime Minister, but with the war in Iraq winding down and that in Afghanistan in full flow throughout his premiership the question never really reached a head.

f. It fell to David Cameron to decide if Blair’s concession was a one-off or a precedent to be followed.

   i. In opposition, Cameron talked about giving parliament a formal role in deployment decisions.

   ii. In power he was as good as his word.

   iii. As troops loyal to Mu’amar Qaddafi bore down on Benghazi in March 2011, and the UN Security Council authorised the use of force to protect its civilian population, Cameron felt safe offering MPs a say. There was little chance they would say no – and sure enough, the vast majority voted in favour of the intervention.

   iv. The problem with this vote, however, was that it confirmed the precedent set in 2003.

      1. Cameron could have avoided a vote over Libya. There would have been complaints and accusations of hypocrisy given his statements in opposition that parliament should have a say.
      2. But the case itself seemed so clear-cut it he could probably have ridden out any backlash.
      3. By allowing a vote on a straightforward decision, he not only followed Blair’s precedent, he extended it.

   v. When Cameron contemplated intervention in the Syrian civil war in August 2013 that decision critically constrained him.

      1. Both parliament and the public doubted the wisdom of retaliating against the Assad regime for the apparent use of chemical weapons on civilians in Damascus.
      2. Cameron felt unable to avoid a parliamentary vote, however – he could hardly turn around after allowing a vote on an ‘easy’
decision and refuse to allow one just because of the possibility he might lose.

3. Even if he escaped significant punishment from parliament – and with Liberal Democrat coalition partners to keep happy there was no guarantee he could – there was no way the country as a whole would accept an action so obviously opposed by MPs as legitimate, particularly in the absence of UN Security Council approval.

4. Cameron could still have won the vote. After all, Labour opposition leader Ed Miliband broadly agreed that some sort of military response was warranted. Both men mishandled the politics, however. Together they failed to reach an effective compromise, hamstrung in part by a tight military timetable that required MPs to be called back to vote just days before the normal end of the summer recess.

5. When parliament said no to intervention in Syria, Cameron felt compelled to concede.

g. The British public, in other words, has begun to drift away from the peculiar pathology. It has begun to doubt the wisdom of Britain maintaining a leading global role. This doubt has been reflected in parliament. And parliament now has a say on individual decisions, if not on the general thrust of British grand strategy.

h. Parliament’s scepticism over action in Syria related in part to the complexity and uncertainty of that particular conflict. MPs did approve a limited air campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq in September 2014. CLICK. They clearly have not suddenly become hardline pacifists. But they are more ready to reflect public scepticism and less likely to take government proposals on trust.

38. The irony surrounding the systems of British grand strategy, then, is that just as the top-down process is growing more formal and structured CLICK, the bottom-up growth of constraints on individual actions is making the development of an effective strategic stance more difficult CLICK. CLICK Britain is getting better at making grand strategy just as it is getting less good at implementing it. CLICK

Conclusion

39. To conclude, then, I want to return to my original question. Can Britain do grand strategy given it is no longer a first-rank power?

40. To begin with, I think it’s important to note that Britain’s actual power status is in some doubt.

a. Two recent studies have insisted it remains a great power, or that it plays a specific ‘residual’ great power role.

b. It has considerable diplomatic and economic resources, and its peculiar pathological obsession with punching above its weight has forced it to concentrate on leveraging both for maximum advantage.

c. Ted Heath described Britain in 1970 as “a medium power of the first rank”. It’s a problematic definition. How can you be both in the middle and at the front? But it’s also potentially a useful one. Clearly Britain is not in the same
league as the US, or probably China. But it compares quite favourably to several other states we would normally think of as great powers. Even Russia, for all its recent belligerence and apparent strength, struggles to maintain an economy significantly larger than that of the UK. It is ironic that David Cameron has responded to Russian sabre-rattling by promising to commission the HMS Prince of Wales, given the Russian threat to European security remains a land-based one. But the fact remains that Russia, like Britain, is light-years behind the US in terms of military capabilities.

41. I also think it is relevant that Britain has gotten better at top-down strategic planning. While the NSC and the NSS operate only on five-year timescales that remain unsuitable for making decisions about long-term investments such as nuclear weapons and aircraft carriers, this still represents an improvement over previous *ad hoc* approaches.

42. At the same time, however, Britain has struggled to align the short-term politics of public spending, of military conflict and of its key diplomatic relationships with its longer-term strategic priorities. Its National Security Strategy is focused primarily on deficit reduction. Its parliament is obsessed with (not) fighting the last war. Its public is war-weary and fed up with austerity, and willing to blame its most vital strategic partnerships for its ills.

43. So just as Britain has grown better at strategic planning, its capacity to implement its plans has waned.

44. Britain, then, could well *do* grand strategy. CLICK. But it doesn’t at the moment. CLICK. And unless something dramatic happens – economically, diplomatically, militarily or politically – that position seems unlikely to change. CLICK Britain’s aspiration to punch above its weight will survive, and motivate individual decision-making. But its broader strategic significance will stay vague. CLICK.