

The Reality of Being a Force for Good

David Miliband

THE UK GOVERNMENT has set out its aspiration to be a ‘force for good’ in international affairs. It is fair to say that it could hardly argue the opposite, but this collection of essays takes the stated ambition seriously. The prime minister, for example, has said that his vision for the UK’s role in the world is that ‘we should bring this country’s strengths and expertise to bear on the world’s biggest problems’.¹ The foreign secretary has said she wants the UK to build a ‘network of liberty’.²

This collection takes those statements and asks two related questions: what should be the priorities? And how are they to be achieved?

Context

The global context for this effort is extremely challenging. There are some obvious factors. The first is that the world is still living through the coronavirus pandemic, which has turned lives and livelihoods upside down. For clients of the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in conflict zones and fragile states around the world, it is unclear whether a ‘post-Covid’ world is conceivable, given the spread of the virus, its mutation on a global scale and inequalities in vaccination coverage. At the time of writing, the race between vaccines and variants is being won in the UK, but lost in large parts of the world. And the consequences of the pandemic, such as those impacting supply chains and food prices, are pushing millions more families closer and closer to the edge.

But even before the pandemic, the tectonic plates of international relations were shifting in ways significant for a middle-sized European country such as the UK, which has extraordinary history and great assets but also a declining share of global GDP and big problems to address at home.

Economic power is shifting away from the political as well as geographic ‘West’. *Wall Street Journal* analysis estimates that total GDP of those rated ‘not free’ by Freedom House will be larger than that of Western democracies by 2022.³ The US, the most important country of the

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1. Boris Johnson, Prime Minister’s statement to the House of Commons, 16 June 2020.
 2. Liz Truss, ‘The Network of Liberty’, speech given at the Conservative Party Conference, 3 October 2021, <<https://www.conservatives.com/news/the-network-of-liberty>>, accessed 11 November 2021.
 3. Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, ‘When Democracy Is No Longer the Only Path to Prosperity’, *Wall Street Journal*, 1 March 2019.

democratic world and the closest ally of the UK, is undergoing a traumatic political period that is not yet closed. Its democracy remains under threat, to the extent that Freedom House has downgraded its rating of US democracy by 11 points in the past decade (putting it on par, on this index, with European countries such as Romania and Poland).⁴

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Meanwhile, the climate crisis calls for a fundamental rethink across all sectors of society about how the world can live sustainably. Partly as a consequence, people are on the move as never before – there are 272 million migrants, including the 82 million forcibly displaced as refugees and internally displaced persons.⁵

For these and other reasons, more and more countries (not just the strongest ones) are operating outside the confines, rules and norms of the multilateral system.

These are all global factors, affecting different countries unequally, but affecting all. Then there are specific factors affecting the UK. The UK's national income is lower than two years ago, and its national debt is significantly higher. As a consequence of Brexit, the UK is renegotiating the focus and mechanisms of its international political alliances. The country is facing constitutional challenges in Scotland and Northern Ireland that speak to its political integrity. Slashing the aid budget by a third – cutting a visible signal of global intent and a lever of influence – is an indication of the UK withdrawing from shouldering the burden on global challenges, despite the rhetoric of ‘Global Britain’.

This means that the desire to be a ‘force for good’ will be an unmet promise – what the Foreign Affairs Select Committee of the House of Commons less politely referred to as at risk of becoming a ‘superficial branding exercise’⁶ – unless it is properly defined, appropriately pursued and resourced.

How to be a Force for Good

The IRC comes to these questions with a particular lens. We are a global humanitarian organisation. We exist to help people whose lives are shattered by conflict and disaster to survive, recover and gain control of their futures. We work according to the humanitarian principles

4. Freedom House, ‘Freedom in the World 2021’, February 2021.

5. UNHCR, ‘Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2020’, 18 June 2021.

6. House of Commons, Foreign Affairs Committee, ‘Global Britain’, HC 780, Sixth Report of Session 2017–19, 6 March 2018, p. 15.

of neutrality, impartiality, independence and humanity. We are proud of our partnership with successive UK governments – first through the Department for International Development, now through the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) – to spend taxpayers' money wisely and with high degrees of effectiveness in some of the most difficult places in the world such as Syria or Yemen.

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The IRC, as a service-delivery organisation, is an agenda-taker from politics. We deal with the consequences of failed politics in many of the places we work, and we are dependent on political decisions about aid priorities and systems. But the vantage point of our more than 30,000 staff (employees plus volunteers) in 200 field offices around the world gives an interesting perspective on how countries can make a difference around the world. Our partnership with RUSI in putting together this collection is designed to bring the geopolitical perspective of a respected think tank to complement our ground-level point of view.

IRC and RUSI’s starting point for this collection is the assets that the UK brings to its international relations. History has gifted the UK political power, notably in the UN Security Council, which if it were being created today would not have the same five permanent, veto-wielding members. The UK has a large economy – the fifth largest in the world – and is headquarters to 22 of the world’s 500 largest companies.⁷ UK universities educate more than half a million foreign students a year,⁸ the majority of whom go back to their countries of origin but retain links to the UK.

The UK is also a remarkable global cultural exporter, from sport to the BBC to its artists and musicians. The English language is a soft power gift without compare. Institutions of government, including the FCDO and the military, and outside government, such as the courts and the legal system, are distinctive contributors to the global commons. And, of course, British people can be found all over the world, proud of their origins while working abroad. I am in that category.

7. Listed in Fortune, ‘Fortune 500’, 2021 list, <<https://fortune.com/fortune500/2021/search/>>, accessed 12 November 2021.

8. In 2019/20, there were 538,600 overseas students studying at UK universities – 22% of the total student population. See Sue Hobbie and Paul Bolton, ‘International and EU Students in Higher Education in the UK FAQs’, Briefing Paper No. CBP 7976, House of Commons Library, 15 February 2021.

In that spirit, and with that context, we argue for four priorities – and the sets of metrics for each – for the UK’s efforts to be a ‘force for good’ in the world. These four priorities speak to a simple proposition: that globalisation in its current dispensation is too unequal, too insecure, too violent and too unsustainable for its own good, and that for a country to be a force for good it needs to seek to redress these imbalances in alliance with other players (not just other countries, because companies, foundations and civil society are all part of the emerging ‘plurilateral’ system that former World Trade Organization Director General Pascal Lamy has described⁹).

Four Priorities

First, a force for good must be a leader in the management of the global commons and, above all, the provision of global public goods – benefits that are shared across the world and not confined to individual states.

Compared with peacemaking and the climate crisis, greater cooperation on strengthening global public health should be easy. The pandemic has put into sharp relief the interconnected nature of our world, and has exposed the flaws in the global system, which failed to properly respond. The result of this failure is deepening inequalities as the rich get jabbed while the poor miss out, and as the richest economies recover while the poorest are left to fall further behind. We need global leadership to ensure the recovery from the pandemic is just and progressive – otherwise it will not be a sustained recovery at all. And we must ensure that systems are put in place to ensure the next health crisis is handled better.

The diplomacy of peacemaking needs a reboot, to take account of the modern nature of civil wars – which increasingly involve internal non-state actors and external sponsorship of different elements of the fight. Conflict is the greatest driver of humanitarian need, poverty and instability. The World Bank has shown that conflict is responsible for 80% of all humanitarian need.¹⁰ It creates massive levels of displacement – look at the over 600,000 people displaced in Afghanistan in 2021 alone.¹¹ When left unaddressed, conflict can destabilise whole regions and set back decades of progress on poverty alleviation, democratisation and human rights. These protracted and increasingly complex conflicts require serious attention, patience, unity and political will from the international community. Global peace and prosperity is in all our interests, and requires diplomacy of a new kind, engaging non-state as well as state actors, and addressing root causes not just symptoms.

9. Pascal Lamy, ‘Looking Back, Moving Forward’, VoxEU, <<https://voxeu.org/article/looking-back-moving-forward>>, accessed 17 November 2021.

10. World Bank, ‘Fragility, Conflict & Violence: Overview’, <<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/fragilityconflictviolence/overview#1>>, accessed 17 November 2021.

11. UNHCR, ‘How Many Refugees Are Fleeing the Crisis in Afghanistan?’, news item, <<https://www.unrefugees.org/news/how-many-refugees-are-fleeing-the-crisis-in-afghanistan/>>, accessed 17 November 2021.

Above all, effective management of the global commons means greater cooperation on tackling the climate crisis, the ultimate threat multiplier. The end of the COP meeting at Glasgow cannot mean the end of its aspiration to help lead action to mitigate and adapt to the climate crisis. Climate change is a reality today and climate shocks are exacerbating global humanitarian need, particularly in the poorest countries. Low-income countries are up to 10 times more likely to experience climate disasters than wealthy countries and yet are less able to respond.¹² Furthermore, it is women, girls and other marginalised populations within these countries that are disproportionately affected. Real cooperation on climate change will never happen unless the founding idea of the 1992 Rio Summit – ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’ – is taken seriously, and the UK should put international diplomacy and domestic action at the heart of its efforts. From financial services to technological advances, there is scope for the UK to make an outsized contribution.

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Second, a force for good needs to be a force against poverty, especially and particularly against poverty of income, education, security and dignity for women and girls. We make this argument for reasons of history, morality and strategic interest. In a world of greater resources than ever before, the number of people in poverty is a pressing moral scar but also a structural weakness. When countries such as Afghanistan are on the edge of mass famine because its economy has been plunged into deep freeze by the withdrawal of Western aid (at the time of writing, 9 million people are estimated to be at emergency levels of food insecurity), there is a special responsibility.

The fight against global poverty and inequality is a central political struggle. It should be a guiding force for Western foreign policy and requires strong political consensus. The UK has historically been one of the most fervent leaders in seeking the eradication of extreme poverty – not just in funding, but in the technical and development expertise the UK has deployed, and in the strong focus on fragile regions. It is in those countries affected by conflict and crisis where the global fight against poverty will be won or lost, building the foundations for stability or further entrenching instability. Tragically, it is these countries which have already felt the brunt of the aid cuts. The cuts must become a historical aberration rather than a new norm.

Tackling global poverty must be guided by a clear understanding of the barriers that hold people in poverty and prevent them from being able to thrive. A big part of this is pursuing gender equality and justice for women and girls. Boris Johnson’s government has focused much of its

12. International Rescue Committee, ‘Watchlist 2021’, December 2020.

development attention on women and girls, particularly on education. This is to be welcomed. The logical extension of this policy is a fully-fledged feminist aid policy.

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The idea behind a feminist aid policy (which is practised by Sweden, France and Canada) is that it takes seriously the structural drivers of inequality suffered by women and girls. Such an approach would work to systemically alleviate poverty across the different drivers of economic, social and political inequality. It provides a clear strategic guide to both development and diplomatic functions and can incorporate our defence and trade departments, too. Above all, it makes a statement about the country the UK wants to be on the international stage and elucidates clearly what we stand for. The fact that the foreign secretary is also the women and equalities minister makes it a natural fit.

The UK can only do so much with its own budget. But ideas can go further. Too often my colleagues have experienced how the UN system fails to mobilise enough funding and get it to frontline responders and local civil society groups quickly enough. Expanding anticipatory finance could be key to unblocking the funding pipes, allowing donors to assign money before a crisis hits. Donors will have to work closely with the private and foundation sectors.

Third, the UK needs to be a force for the rule of law and against impunity. The UN Charter was inaugurated in London after the Second World War, and the prime minister of the time, Clement Attlee, called it humanity's 'first line of defence'. However, the past 15 years have seen a significant shift away from the 2005 commitment to the 'responsibility to protect' which represented the peak of the global commitment to accountability for violations and abuses against civilians in conflict. The combination of the global trend towards authoritarianism and more extreme assertions of national sovereignty has adversely affected nearly all international laws, institutions and norms, but perhaps none more than the protection of civilians and aid workers in conflict zones. Impunity – the capacity and willingness of armed actors to commit crimes without facing justice – now reigns supreme in conflict zones such as Syria, Libya and Ethiopia. When Russian forces bomb hospitals in Syria without even a proper UN inquiry, that is impunity. When Saudi fighter jets strike a school coach of children in Yemen and suffer limited consequences from its Western allies, that is impunity.

The UK's Integrated Review espouses the importance of spreading British values of democracy, liberalism and justice. Liz Truss, the new foreign secretary, talks of combating malign actors. But too often strong rhetoric on tackling impunity remains on the page, or has little effect in reality. Today, governments must come together to build systems and coalitions of countervailing power, to establish accountability for these blatant violations of the laws of war and international

humanitarian law. Johnson's idea of a 'Democracies 10' grouping of countries could provide a springboard for this effort.

There are practical steps such a coalition could take. It could establish strong mechanisms to independently investigate, report and assign attribution for abuses. It could follow the example of the German courts by prosecuting individuals under the principle of universal jurisdiction. It could mobilise sanctions regimes in a coordinated and targeted manner. Perhaps most importantly, these countries could build up the systems of accountability with their own governments and militaries to ensure we live up to our stated beliefs and international obligations to follow the Geneva Conventions and laws of war.

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Importantly, this requires disciplined and united coalitions across government, business and civil society, who must be convinced that all will benefit from a crackdown on impunity. The UK is well placed to take this forward.

Fourth, the UK should be a force for building an effective multilateral system. That will be especially the case if its seat on the UN Security Council comes under fire in the event of the French seat becoming a European one.

The aspiration for a 'rules-based order' after 1945 had three elements: rights for individuals irrespective of their nationality; commitment from all states to honour those rights; and international institutions to cajole, persuade and enforce those rights. The latter is what the multilateral system is meant to do.

In economics, the international financial institutions developed as real powerhouses of influence. In security, the UN Security Council took upon itself significant responsibility and power. After the use of atomic weapons in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Non-Proliferation Treaty was overseen by a powerful International Atomic Energy Agency. In respect of refugees, the UNHCR was set up and, in 1967, received a global mandate. In health, the World Health Organization (WHO) was created in 1948.

But it is evident today that the multilateral system is either absent or weak in too many areas. The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change works by consensus – which often means the lowest common denominator wins. The WHO has been shown in the coronavirus pandemic to be underpowered (and under-financed).

The UK, as a beneficiary in terms of its privileged position in the current system, has special responsibility to be a voice for strengthening the system. The right posture to achieve this is to be a voice for reform.

As foreign secretary, I set out the UK's well-developed case for reform of the UN Security Council (more members, better spread). But there is little chance of that being achieved. There are other priorities.

In the Security Council, the French proposal for the abandonment of the veto in cases of mass atrocity should be supported. The UK has actually not used its veto since 1989. Yet, Russia and China are both too quick to reach for theirs when their narrow interests are crossed. Even the threat of such a veto is used as a malicious negotiating tactic. It is a huge impediment to global peace and justice.

Following the French proposal would still throw up thorny issues to address. Who declares an atrocity? How would the agreement be enforced? Nevertheless, a voluntary suspension of the veto would establish a vital new international norm in favour of accountability and justice. Willing countries would be afforded a moral footing in their pursuit of action.

Given the shortcomings of the global response to the coronavirus pandemic, strengthening the independence, authority and financing of the WHO makes political as well as policy sense. While the WHO is the lead agency on global health, convening and coordinating national responses, it cannot do everything; and pandemics require leadership from heads of state and finance ministers, as well as health ministers.¹³

The UK (Still) in Europe

Then there is the question of Europe. The UK has left the EU. That is decided. But we have not left Europe. It is absurd to pretend that the EU and its member states do not exist (the recent Integrated Review had more references to the Arctic than to Germany). In climate policy, the EU is a superpower. Ditto in trade. In international development, its aid budget is larger than the UK's. And in politics and security, where the EU is weaker, its members will increasingly be doing more together.

Since the countries of the EU are liberal democracies like the UK, and seek to project many of the same priorities as the UK, it makes no sense for there to be no institutional connection between the UK and its nearest neighbours, in geographic and values terms. UK and EU cooperation, beyond bilateral links between London and the member states of the EU, makes sense for all the priorities listed in this essay. The aim should be to achieve mutual reinforcement in areas where the UK and the EU have shared goals. Such cooperation could reduce duplication, increase complementarity and deliver more weight in international forums. The UK is outside the EU room for EU discussions. But it needs to be in the room when it has a position.

13. Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response, 'COVID-19: Make It the Last Pandemic', May 2021.

Conclusion

Many commentators argue that the world is at an inflection point. They are thinking ideologically, politically and geopolitically. That remains to be seen. The UK certainly seems to be at such a point. We have separated ourselves from the international relationship that had the most impact on our economic, cultural and social life. That was the attraction of Brexit for its proponents. But it is not clear what comes next. Many, like me, fear it was an act of unilateral political disarmament.

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The biggest changes in national life in the UK have always been decided at general elections and in the House of Commons – in or out of the EU. But internationally, Brexit means we need to find a new point of influence and leverage. And we need to do so in the context of a global balance of power that is changing, in some ways quite fast.

Strong countries do not leave to guesswork what they believe in or what they stand for. And countries which are clear on what they believe in and what they stand for get stronger at home. That was always the argument made in the democratic world after 1945 for the strengthening of the ‘liberal’ (that is, ‘rules-based’) international order. The fact of a recession of democratic values at the same time as the retreat from international engagement should not be a surprise. The two go together.

This debate is important for the world and for the UK. We hope that this collection contributes to it.

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David has had a distinguished political career in the UK. From 2007 to 2010, he served as the youngest Foreign Secretary in three decades, driving advancements in human rights and representing the UK throughout the world. His accomplishments have earned him a reputation, in former President Bill Clinton’s words, as ‘one of the ablest, most creative public servants of our time’. In 2016, David was named one of the World’s Greatest Leaders by Fortune Magazine and in 2018 he was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

David is also the author of the book, Rescue: Refugees and the Political Crisis of Our Time. As the son of refugees, David brings a personal commitment to the IRC’s work and to the premise of the book: that we can rescue the dignity and hopes of refugees and displaced people. And if we help them, in the process we will rescue our own values.

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