



OPEN LABOUR +
**A PROGRESSIVE
FOREIGN POLICY**
FOR NEW TIMES

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**‘LABOUR’S HISTORIC
MISSION AS A PARTY
IS TO BE THE
KEEPERS OF OUR
BROTHERS AND
SISTERS AROUND
THE WORLD’**

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**Alex Sobel MP &
Professor Mary Kaldor**

Open Labour has spent most of its initial phase of existence preoccupied with domestic policy and internal party culture. The only significant foreign policy intervention was over Europe, which doubled as a domestic policy issue. Now with the UK out of the EU and a new Labour Leadership, it is a moment for Open Labour to extend its thinking to Britain's place in the world.

This pamphlet by Dr Harry Pitts and Professor Paul Thompson is the first in a series which we hope will grow into a holistic project creating a Foreign Policy framework the Open Left can unite behind, and that we can lobby the Labour Leadership to reflect upon.

We do not endorse all the points in the pamphlet but it offers an excellent basis for further discussion. Open Labour have always said we stand in the tradition of Robin Cook and it is now time to take up the mantle of Robin's biggest vision.

Rethinking Labour's Foreign Policy is very timely. The crisis that we are living through offers the opportunity for a new paradigm particularly in the area of area of security. We are all aware that the biggest threat to our security in 2020 is COVID-19 not an armed attack from some foreign power and that we face a range of existential risks such as Climate Change alongside the traditional fear of nuclear war.

The Open Left could pivot the focus onto the idea that the centrepiece of our foreign policy should be human security instead of national security. Actually human security is the only way to ensure national security because we are only safe if the planet is safe. It is not just about values, it is also about being realistic. The UK is no longer a great power and the British Government can no longer protect the safety of our citizens unilaterally; the only way it can be done by promoting a safer world based upon the international rule of law, human rights, human development, and global disarmament. This is something that smaller countries like Scandinavians have recognized for a long time and they have had an influence disproportionate to their size. Human security is about the security of individuals and the communities in which they live rather than about the security of states and borders. It is about both physical security, for example, threats from terrorists or war and also material security from such threats as poverty, disease, or climate change. Human security can be thought of as spreading the inside outside. Inside security is supposed to be based on the

rule of law and policing whereas on the outside, security involves war and protection against other states. In a rights-based society like Britain we enjoy human security at home and take it for granted that if there's an emergency the firefighters, police and the health service are all going to be there to help us. So in a global context human security is about spreading a rule of law and human rights and having the kind of emergency services that can participate in emergencies – pandemics, genocide and ethnic cleansing, flooding or famine. A human security approach to foreign policy would involve promoting a global human rights based rule of law and contributing to the existence of global emergency services. This work will also require a rebuilding of our global institutions which have been weakened by the growth of populism.

The issue of self-determination and occupation and annexation of territory is also one Labour needs to address from a human rights perspective. Labour (and Open Labour) MPs are centrally involved in international efforts to support self-determination in Tibet, Western Sahara, Kashmir, West Papua, Crimea, Chagos Islands and Palestine. The best way to support these issues is through a range of internationally supported initiatives, especially through the UN but also organisations like the European Union, the Organisation for Co-operation and Security in Europe (OSCE). Military Occupation tend to be associated with widespread violations of human rights. It is little known that Indonesian Forces have been

responsible for half a million deaths in West Papua since occupation. Too often Labour Leaderships have sought to tackle human rights without also tackling the political issues but the two are inextricable.

The UK still considers itself a major soft power player with the BBC, British Council, our global Universities and cultural institutions still being globally trusted and renowned. However another type of soft power is emanating a much bigger influence and that is China's economic programme. The belt and road programme includes expanding coal fired power Stations, oil pipelines and road building to strengthen China's economic dominance. It is now also intervening on our domestic politics with a major fracturing on the right of British Politics about whether Huawei should form a major part of the UK 5G network as well as the future of Hong Kong and Britain's responsibilities to its citizens. Labour's approach to China is a central question for the 21st Century. There's also the complementary issue of how we can use a range of measures including economic measures to show opposition to occupation, loss of democracy and transparency, and the creation of oligarchies as happened in Ukraine and which resulted in the annexation of Crimea with no real sanction.

The Former Shadow Foreign Secretary Emily Thornberry in her 2019 Conference Speech took on the growing trend of strongman politics- taking on strongmen of the Left and Right including Maduro. She drew significant

criticism from the Left for criticising Maduro, however this is the mark of where our Foreign Policy should be not be afraid to take on those who claim to be left and who oppose Washington but violate human rights- not falling into what Harry and Paul call a Two Camp approach. Labour also needs to take on strongmen closer to home not least Viktor Orban , the Prime Minister of Hungary, whose continued break with democracy, his racism and human rights abuses has elicited little action by the EU, likewise, we should be prepared to act in the Commonwealth; for example the case of with President Biya of Cameroon, who is violently supressing the Anglophone community.

Harry and Paul address the issue of intervention as a central part of this pamphlet. It is important to consider what stance a Labour Government would take in cases of massive violations of human rights, genocide or ethnic cleansing and Syria is the counter example of what happens when you don't intervene, with Russia filling the vacuum and once again becoming a major power far outside its immediate geographic sphere. The key issue is how intervention takes place. The NATO interventions in both Libya and Kosovo were considered humanitarian interventions but the means were airstrikes and actually airstrikes in themselves undermine human rights due to the often indiscriminate nature of the strikes and the difficulties of protecting people on the ground. . We were supportive of the intervention of Kosovo because its aim was to stop the ethnic cleansing

of Albanians and, in the end, all the Albanians were able to return to their homes.

Nevertheless the intervention did cause some collateral damage - some 500 civilians were estimated to be killed during the NATO air campaign; it took 78 days for Milosevic to concede defeat, during which ethnic cleansing speeded up; and the Kosovan Liberation Army greatly enhanced its political position inside Kosovo in contrast to the non-violent movement that organised Albanians throughout the 1990s. The Libyan intervention was the last large-scale liberal humanitarian intervention. Initially it stopped Gaddafi from killing his citizens with heavy weapons but it empowered the militias on the ground and left us with the long term problem of rival warlords carving up the country. Human security needs to be able to protect people from war and genocide but this cannot be done with the use of capabilities, such as air strikes designed for war-fighting. We may need to use force but it has to be protective and defensive and it has to be embedded in a broader political, economic and social approach.

The need for a real transformation in approach again is timely with the Government undertaking a review of defence and foreign policy. Its first act seems to have been to merge the FCO and DFID, a hugely retrograde step subjugating funds meant to alleviate abject poverty, mitigate climate change and provide human security to our old-fashioned conceptions of national interest. Whereas DFID does have a culture of human security, thanks to previous Labour Governments and,

especially, the legacy of Clare Short, the FCO is still steeped in past assumptions about the UK's global role, as well as short term commercial preoccupations. Nevertheless, the wider review provides an opportunity to re-examine Trident and consider a real shift in the nature of our services from classic armed forces to what one might call human security services which would include the military but would also include police, engineers, aid workers, or health workers and would be gender balanced and ethnically diverse; their central task would be to protect human security and in cases of war to dampen down violence rather than intervene on one side or the other. We now have in the Ministry of Defence a Centre for Human Security in Military Operations which is the sort of initiative Labour should encourage in the review. In the Gulf the UK military were commanding the EU anti-piracy mission which was based on human security principles; it meant they were arresting pirates rather than killing them and they were trying to help fishermen with fishing licences and so undertook a much more holistic approach.

These are the type of ideas we want to build on in future Open Labour Foreign Policy projects.



PAUL THOMPSON & FREDERICK HARRY PITTS

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Introduction: Moving Forward

Six months before she was assassinated by a neo-Nazi inspired by the anti-migrant messaging of the Leave campaign, the Labour MP Jo Cox penned a piece outlining the principles that should guide a 'progressive internationalism' for the left.¹ Commenting on Britain's 'withdrawal from the world', the piece surveyed the impasses of foreign policy thinking on the UK left and right. Cox reserved specific critique for the increasingly isolationist character of the government's approach to foreign affairs:

On Syria, on Europe, on Ukraine this government has been on the periphery: all victim of the same lack of long-term strategic thinking about British foreign policy and the absence of a moral compass. This flawed approach has not only damaged our ability to have an impact but also limits our capacity to be a force for good. The recent and sudden pivot in our relations with China (and the shame of being congratulated for not raising human rights), our relationship with Saudi Arabia, the rebadging of UK embassies as trade outposts and the lack of a comprehensive vision on a crisis the magnitude and complexity of Syria; all feel ill thought through and incoherent.

We now find ourselves in the situation where the recent Foreign Secretary most representative of this incoherent and often amoral approach to the world stage has somehow ascended to the top of the pile. Boris Johnson is a man who, in the midst of the chemical and explosive slaughter of civilians in Syria by the massed ranks of the Syrian and Russian airforces, suggested the UK work with Assad and Putin to defeat ISIS and reconstruct the country.² A man who, standing between the repressive theocratic Iranian regime and a fellow journalist, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, equivocated ineptly. The government he leads now augments this bumbling diplomacy with the revanchist desire to withdraw from economic and political union with our closest neighbours.

In the context of this generalised complacency, there is space for the Labour Party to offer a principled and internationalist alternative to a right seemingly sapped of energy in defending liberal democratic norms across the globe. But new strategic analysis of what is sometimes called 'foreign policy' – that ambiguous term that seems to cover everything from perspectives on global governance and its institutions and alliances, international political order, the regulation of international trade, to more specific attitudes towards particular states and conflicts - has been largely absent from the horizon of recent left policymaking. The election of Joe Biden as US President will likely inaugurate a partial American foreign policy reset that helps to counter the damage done by authoritarianism, populism and nationalism, creating space for Labour to rediscover its own internationalist sense of purpose.

Under the cloud of coronavirus, the appointment of Lisa Nandy as Shadow Foreign Secretary was an important first step in this endeavour. Whilst often associated with deep thinking about domestic issues, Nandy's interventions on foreign policy during the recent leadership election were by far the most interesting and astute. In a speech for the Royal Society of the Arts, Nandy attacked inwards-looking isolationism in favour of a broad vision of solidarity across borders and the defence of global norms and institutions.³

Liberated from Labour's equivocation of the last few years, Nandy criticised the doubt Corbyn cast on Russia's responsibility for a chemical weapon attack on British soil, and the then-leadership's call for 'dialogue' with Putin's internally oppressive and externally belligerent regime. In the long shadow cast by the Iraq war, Nandy suggested, Labour had lost the ambition and boldness of Robin Cook's ethical foreign policy, symbolised in the life-saving mission in Sierra Leone. It is now time, she argued, to 'move forward'. Inspired by Cook and by Cox, in this piece we consider what moving forward would mean.

Even as it exposes the risks and endangers the gains of global interconnectedness, and countries turn inwards in order to fight it, we contend that the coronavirus pandemic makes it more, not less, necessary to think and act beyond the nation-state. Existing efforts to coordinate response from international bodies have been weak. Even the EU has struggled to agree on a rescue and recovery package. Where the pandemic hits developing nations, the need for a coordinated response is all the greater. In the absence of such initiatives, the space will be filled by China and Russia, who are already taking advantage of the crisis to advance their interests against those of a rights-based international order.

Reading the latter as an ideological veneer cloaking free-market capitalism, rather than the precondition for a viable left and its demands, the 'two-campist' anti-imperialism of the recent Labour leadership has little to offer any future progressive foreign policy. As we shall argue, viewing the enemies of the West as the friends of the left, it possesses no conceptual or political framework for understanding the challenges the UK or its partners face in the 21st century. As Labour tries to leave all that behind, we consider how that might be done and what an alternative would look like.

Corbynism at Home and Abroad

Labour policymaking energy in the now distant days of Corbynism centred on John McDonnell's interesting array of economic proposals. Under Corbyn – or more precisely McDonnell – an initially basic anti-austerity politics developed into a popular and occasionally populist economic strategy that genuinely changed the conversation about investment, ownership and public spending in the UK. While not immune to criticism

over scope, priorities and feasibility that decisively undermined Labour's election offer, Labour's approach did involve some fresh thinking about contemporary capitalism. But the Party appeared keen to avoid open discussion of foreign policy, at least until Corbyn's Chatham House speech in reaction to the Manchester attack. Until the General Election defeat, the Party preferred to revel in the relative unity struck around bread-and-butter social and economic issues – albeit an at times uneasy unity undermined by the leadership's self-harming 'constructive ambiguity' on Brexit. But even as the magic spell of Corbynism's invincibility dissipated, the leadership election saw little direct debate over or criticism of what was by all accounts one of Corbynism's characteristic preoccupations – Nandy's salvos a rare exception.

Whilst the absence of innovative analysis is also characteristic of the Labour right, which has struggled to maintain its historic pro-US Atlanticism in the light of Middle East misadventures and the associated political damage to liberal interventionism, the most recent meaningful hegemonic force in the contemporary Labour Party has been Corbynism. It is thus the intellectual and organisational remnants of Corbynism that need to be challenged in order to resurrect an ethical and internationalist foreign policy for new times. The danger is that the legacy left behind by Corbyn's anti-imperialist equivocation will continue to obstruct the necessary reorientation long into the tenure of the new leader, precisely by leaving outdated positions unquestioned and undiscussed for fear of kicking up a fuss. Following the release of the EHRC report, there is a need to confront a broader worldview that often unwittingly incubated left antisemitism in the party.⁴

The dominant (though sometimes implicit) framing that drove Corbynism derived from anti-imperialist perspectives originally formed during the Cold War, national liberation struggles and opposition to repressive American interventions in South East Asia and Latin America in the 1960s and 70s.⁵ With the collapse of the Soviet block after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, this binary 'two campism' posed the West against the Rest.⁶ However, anti-imperialism was reshaped and revitalised by military interventions, notably Iraq, influenced by the neo-conservative defence of US hegemony as the guarantor of an often somewhat shallow conception of liberal democracy.

The invasion of Iraq inevitably cast a huge shadow over the legacy of Blair and New Labour, marginalising its modest, but undoubted, achievements in the domestic sphere. Foreign policy thus became the main territory of opposition to New Labour. The Stop the War Coalition (STWC), which Corbyn chaired from 2011 to his election as Labour leader in 2015, is characteristic of this opposition. The STWC had a broad base of support in its campaign against military action in Iraq and Afghanistan, but its political core is an alliance of the self-defined anti-imperialist left, ranging from the Socialist Workers Party, the Communist Party of Britain and the hard left of the Labour Party. What is notable about its politics is the complete lack

of interest in any conflicts not directly attributable to 'the West' and an inability to see any actor other than the US and its allies as having motives or powers. So, for example, Islamist attacks in Europe have typically been seen through a 'reaping the whirlwind' prism in which terror is wholly or mainly as a response to Western military intervention.⁷

The Stop-the-War worldview cannot accommodate situations where Western inaction, rather than Western intervention, has played a decisive role in unfolding violence. When the STWC discusses the Syrian conflict, it is almost wholly silent about the role of Russia or Iran, and even the Assad regime itself. The response of the Stop-the-War left to each and every major conflict the world over typically represents little more than a nostalgia trip getting the band back together for one last riff on the Iraq years. But contemporary conflicts do not sit easily with the Iraq complex of the left.

Whilst being right about the invasion of Iraq is not a sufficient condition of a serious left perspective on foreign policy, it was a primary engine of the ascendancy of Corbynism. Foreign policy played a large part in defining Corbyn's pitch for the leadership and the esteem in which he is still held by some supporters. Corbynism as a movement first manifested itself in a forceful and sometimes ugly way with the mobilisations against the tactical air support granted Syrian and Kurdish ground forces fighting ISIS in the wake of the Bataclan attacks.⁸ A review of foreign policy was quietly announced early into Corbyn's tenure – somewhat extraordinarily, knowing what we know now, convened by none other than Ken Livingstone.⁹ A further review of defence sputtered out under the stewardship of Emily Thornberry after also having to distance itself from Livingstone.¹⁰ When Emily Thornberry took up her Shadow Foreign Secretary role she announced that Labour would recommit to Robin Cook's 'ethical foreign policy' and focus on peace, universal rights and international law.¹¹ A number of missteps on issues such as Iran's role in Syria and the Russian chemical attack followed that hardly suggested the presence of a discernible ethics or strategy guiding policy.¹²

Meanwhile, since Hilary Benn's widely lauded speech on the night the Commons voted on air support for democratic forces fighting ISIS, expressions of a countervailing alternative view of foreign affairs have emitted only rarely from the non-Corbyn wing of the party. In the past five years, some Labour MPs have openly regretted toeing Ed Miliband's three-line whip and defeating the Cameron government's plans for limited strikes against Assad's air force and chemical weapons facilities in 2013 – a defeat that forced President Obama to rethink his own plans for action.¹³ Owen Smith, in his unsuccessful pitch for the leadership, extolled Labour's 'internationalist tradition of intervention'.¹⁴ Only Nandy among the last set of leadership contenders offered any substantial attempt to recuperate this tradition.

The ascendancy of Corbyn and his supporters to the leadership of Her Majesty's Official Opposition, meanwhile, meant a certain degree of muffling of anti-imperialist perspectives and previous links or affinities with the IRA or Hamas.¹⁵ If such positions were no longer explicitly articulated, neither were they left behind, Labour saddled with an evasive echo of previous perspectives manifested in Corbyn's unwillingness to identify and condemn Russia as responsible for the Salisbury attacks or criticise the disastrous record and actions of the Maduro regime.¹⁶ Clarity of moral or strategic purpose was buried in vacuous statements condemning 'violence done by all sides'.¹⁷ Meanwhile, the presence within Corbyn's close circle of two aides - Seamus Milne and Andrew Murray - with a long background in Stalinist politics reinforced these implicit perspectives and limited the scope of the party to develop an independent, internationalist outlook.

Where there was movement or compromise - as in the case of Trident, or NATO - it was largely through accommodation to inescapable political reality or the power of trade union leaders over the Corbyn project, typically directed by rank-and-file job concerns as much as any foreign policy overreach.¹⁸ Under Corbyn's leadership Labour therefore reached a strategic and ideological impasse on foreign policy, unable to go backwards or forwards and stricken by profound, but too often unspoken, contradictions that reared their head reactively rather than proactively. These impasses were sadly much too long in the tooth to be solved in time to develop principled and strategic responses to emergent situations in the Middle East and elsewhere. Now the Corbyn project is over, this has to change.

The Changed Landscape

The 'two-campist' positioning of Corbyn's intellectual and political milieu, which relates world events to a crudely caricatured clash between the West and the rest, is instinctive and reflexive rather than properly thought-through. It is an undertheorised posture automatically adopted in response to the vagaries and complexities of foreign affairs. Short of occasional contributions by formerly Corbyn-sympathetic freethinkers such as Paul Mason, little has been put forward by the left in terms of re-assessing the changed political and economic landscape.¹⁹ In his recent book, *Clear Bright Future*, Mason associates the collapse of the Western foreign policy order with the rise of the nationalist authoritarianism characterised by the likes of Putin's Russia and Xi's China.²⁰ In particular, Mason is refreshingly forthright for a prominent left commentator when criticising American isolationism in the face of Putin's actions in Syria and Ukraine. But Mason's thoughtfulness on defence and foreign policy, bemoaning a world of 'Westlessness' and suggesting that the left help save NATO, has inevitably distanced him from a left less adept at re-evaluating positions in the face of changing circumstances.²¹

In 2015, before he became one of Corbyn's lieutenants, Andrew Murray wrote in *The Guardian* that 'the possibility is now open for Britain playing a different role in the world, breaking with the policies and preoccupations of imperialism'.²² The problem is that 'imperialism', at least in the Western-centric way meant here, is no longer a very useful way of understanding global political and economic power relations. In the Marxist tradition the concept rested on the idea that the expansion of capital accumulation in advanced economies required the transfer of assets through exploitation or expropriation from what is now called the Global South. It had greater explanatory value when those processes could be linked clearly to specific forms of political and military power of dominant nations, such as the period of American hegemony. However, as Marxists such as David Harvey argue, the complex configurations of economic and political power in a globalised economy are much harder to capture through a single over-stretched concept.²³ Transfers of resources still of course take place, but transnational capital acts more through market mechanisms such as globally integrated production chains and financial networks. State power still reinforces or sometimes enforces economic transfer, but hegemonic power has diminished as new economic and political actors compete for resources and influence. Such power relations do not map easily on to a simple Global North/South binary divide, let alone a 'West versus rest' framing.

We need only consider the changing character and configurations of global powers to see this in full effect. Denuded of its previous empire, Russia has been reconfiguring its sources and scope of power, both in its remaining regional base and in wider conflicts. Setting Russia's military expansionism in Syria and Ukraine to one side, leaked documents from a Russian oligarch and Putin ally illustrate in detail how one firm sought to bolster Russian presence in at least 13 other countries through building economic, military and political links and deals with existing regimes and potential pro-Kremlin leaders.²⁴ Drawing on the wider Putin playbook, this involved direct and indirect exertion of political influence through the use of fake news and Russian-controlled non-governmental organisations. One document detailed how such influence was deployed to label civil society opposition to the Sudanese regime as "anti-Islam", "pro-Israel" and "pro-LGBT".

China, meanwhile, has a clear goal of rivalling and surpassing the US as the major economic power and of using that power to create forms of dependency in both advanced and developing countries. Whilst Chinese power has not previously been deployed overseas in as explicitly a political or military manner as that of Russia, this is changing, with the militarisation of the South China Sea and Indian Ocean and bases in Djibouti, Sri Lanka, Pakistan among others. As Jeffrey Henderson notes, this infrastructure could eventually support projects beyond protecting oil supply routes.²⁵ Generally, however, the Xi regime confines its powers

of physical brutality and digital domination to the domestic sphere, meted out against Uighur Muslims and pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) launched in 2013, and has since become the primary vehicle for asserting Chinese power abroad.²⁶ It even extends into Europe, including some of the Eastern and Southern members of the EU. The goal is to establish land corridors and seaports across three continents. Over 50 state-owned companies have been directly involved, including the China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO), which has secured majority stakes in nine overseas ports, including Piraeus, Greece. More broadly, the focus has been on investment in joint infrastructure projects. The China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China have committed over \$1 trillion. The initiatives help to redirect the flow of international trade and supply chains, sometimes followed up with military agreements that seek to avoid choke-points and territorial disputes. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) presents this as an alternative economic, political, and security interdependency, but the reality for many countries is that new forms of dependency are created in which many find it very difficult to repay debts, while domestic manufacturers struggle to compete with Chinese imports and labour. Among other things, this debt-trap diplomacy may allow China to extract strategic concessions over territory and resources such as in the South China Sea and parts of Central-Eastern Europe, producing twenty-first century versions of China's ancient 'tributary states' system.

The vast ambition and scale of the CCP's global project is underpinned by the Made in China 2025 industrial plan, which aims to render Chinese companies (whether state or privately owned) globally dominant in nearly all the cutting-edge technologies essential for advanced levels of economic development and prosperity in the 21st century. Additionally, with the China-led CEEC 17+1 initiative, which incorporates Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries that are both members and non-members of the EU, the CCP seeks (via promises of substantial investment) to disconnect eurosceptic CEE states from the EU and thus undermine its viability. Both these schemes are working in tandem with a strategy of corporate takeovers of (largely Western) European companies – including British ones - designed predominantly to acquire a major slice of Europe's globally cutting capacities in technological innovation.²⁷

As we indicated earlier, the coronavirus has provided an opportunity for both Russia and China to flex their soft power on the international stage – and, in China's case, to benefit from the likely post-pandemic 'fire sale' of European companies. Russia's strategy of cleaving off the sympathies of European countries from their partners parallels China's CEEC 17+1 initiative and has seen it deliver aid to Italy - as well as shipments of supplies to the US.²⁸ Meanwhile, China has used the crisis to effectively broaden its influence in countries such as Serbia (a CEEC 17+1 member), where a leading pro-government tabloid erected billboards thanking Xi Jinping for his support.²⁹

The Russian and Chinese examples decisively undermine many of the core assumptions of the Western-centric anti-imperialism a broad swathe of the contemporary left falls back on in place of a fully-articulated foreign policy. Far from two competing camps and their proxies, global influence and interests are fragmented around multiple overlapping and competing spheres. Whether Chinese or Russian geo-political strategies can be described as 'imperialism' or not, they are a major factor in the reshaping and reproduction of global dependencies and inequality of power and resources – the pandemic exposes this relationship. We could also add into the mix the strategic ambitions and associated economic, political and military power of other actors, namely the Gulf states and Iran. Such goals and actions are central to current conflicts in Syria, Yemen and elsewhere, and cannot be understood merely in terms of proxies of 'the West'. Whilst there has quite correctly been widespread condemnation of the character of the Saudi intervention to restore the Yemeni government and its role in the humanitarian crisis engulfing the country, for instance, less left-wing ire has been reserved for Iran's role in the 2015 coup and subsequent destabilisation via its Houthi proxies.³⁰ In such situations the left should be able to walk and chew gum at the same time, but instead maintains a solipsistic preoccupation with the often imaginary omnipresence of the extended West the world over.

None of this implies we ignore the ugly means and ends of past and present American economic or military power. However, the increasingly assertive presence of Russian, Chinese, Iranian and more recently Turkish ambitions not only in the Middle East but in Central and Eastern Europe, Africa, Latin America and elsewhere makes for a very different picture of global power than that upon which Corbyn's part of the left have dined for the last decades. The absence of clearly defined boundaries between state and corporate power make the predatory behaviours of these authoritarian regimes potentially dangerous in different ways. Their geopolitical strategies are frequently underpinned by the forging of alliances with 'local' despots like Assad and Maduro and helping these forces quell challenges to their rule, often represented by parts of the left as uprisings externally imposed or encouraged by the West. Anti-imperialism could renew itself around the analysis of these new tendencies, but the silence of the hard left on the intent and actions of regimes such as Russia and China is deafening. Actions that in other circumstances would be critiqued and condemned are either ignored, deflected through whataboutery, or treated as purely reactive to Western provocation, or alleged 'encirclement' in the Russian case. Indeed, given the nature of its internal institutions and overt external support for the populist right, the pro-Russian stance of much of the European hard left - including Die Linke in Germany and La France Insoumise - is one of the most remarkable features of contemporary politics.³¹

The reshaping of geopolitical alliances in the current period must be confusing to two-campists in the Corbynite mould. However much the left might force foreign affairs within the convenient framework of the Iraq conflict, contemporary geopolitical tendencies do not fit comfortably into a refurbished anti-imperialist framing, or at least in the inconsistently applied version of what passes as anti-imperialism on much of the contemporary left. A much more inchoate 'West' has tended to replace what could formerly, halfway credibly, be claimed as a specific notion of American imperialism. Within the two-campist dichotomy between good states and bad, the identification of and adherence to oppositional agents is even more confused. Instead of the national liberation movements that permeated the left imagination in the past, we are presented with a heterogeneous ensemble of embattled regimes bearing an association, however tenuous or historical, with socialism or communism (Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua), or other more powerful actors that find favour solely by dint of not being part of 'the West' (Russia, China, Iran).

An out-of-date and incoherent two-campism is thus completely out of step with real tendencies and threats. Trump's tenure in the White House led to major shifts in the international order, with the president cosying up to despots such as Putin and Kim Jong Un, whilst distancing the US from its traditional allies (the EU) and institutions (NATO). Rather than projecting a coherent future course for the US more broadly, it is clear that the balance of power and action in the Trump administration was fluid and contested, as more cautious elements tried to maintain traditional alliances and constrain some of the excesses of Trumpian isolationism. However, the basic trend will take time to undo: Trump's 'America First' populist nationalism, in step with a 'nationalist international' of governments cut from the same cloth, resulted in significant damage to rules-based, multilateral global institutions.³²

The urgency, as well as the difficulty and complexity of that task, is highlighted in the Syrian situation. In the vacuum left by US and NATO handwringing over the conflict, Turkish military power temporarily helped peg regime forces back whilst Russia played power-broker, cutting deals favourable to its client Assad. Against the backdrop of a brutal regime, the regional ambitions of Putin and the Iranian theocracy, and Turkey's vexed membership of NATO, the fallout of this pervading sense of 'Westlessness' in the Middle East is simply the real-world fulfilment of Trump's isolationist insistence as President on an end to 'endless wars'.³³ This is a call that at first glance would no doubt appeal to many leftists raised on understandable opposition to Iraq and other conflicts, and would not sound out of place in a Corbyn speech.³⁴ Indeed, some on the left favourably contrasted Trump's isolationism with Hilary Clinton's hawkish credentials during the 2016 Presidential campaign, and no doubt did so again with Biden this year.³⁵ But the consequences of such a stance – namely, that what is peace for one country may be the condition of continued war in another – expose reflexive contradictions in left foreign policy exemplified in the sorry situation in Syria.

Socialism and Liberalism

In developing a progressive foreign policy, it is incumbent upon the left to eschew a fashionable ‘insouciance’ about ‘bourgeois democratic rights’.³⁶ A foreign policy of the left should seek to recognise and expand what the late Norman Geras called those ‘tenets of liberalism not indissolubly bound up with capitalism’, namely its attempts to ‘set limits to the accumulation and abuse of political power...protecting the physical and mental space of individuals from unwarranted invasion’. It has done so albeit unevenly and imperfectly, historically through ‘evolving institutions and practices, political and juridical, to contribute to such ends’.³⁷

There was a voguish tendency among the Corbyn movement to pose socialism and socialists against liberalism, ‘centrists’ and the rights and institutions around which global order has been anchored.³⁸ Once these are dismissed, there seems very little worth preserving, or indeed deploying, where boundaries are crossed and ethical lines contravened. Such sections of the left do rightly criticise domestic departures from democratic norms such as suppression of rights to assembly, violations of due process and may even invoke the rule of law. This became particularly prominent at the tail end of the last Parliament, with Labour’s response to the wrecking ball taken to constitutional norms by Boris Johnson, Dominic Cummings and Brexit hardliners. Struggles over rule of law and legal and parliamentary process are likely to become even more profound as the current public health emergency reshapes boundaries between citizens and the state. While there is little evidence of any authoritarian intent or capacity on the part of the Government, Starmer’s lawyerly leadership should be well-placed to critique any such tendencies if they manifest themselves.

Whilst welcome, Labour’s steadfast commitment under Corbyn to human rights and rule of law at home was too seldom expressed beyond domestic borders. As Geras observed of past orientations of the left towards the relationship between liberalism and capitalism on the world stage:

Flawed as they may be, the capitalist democracies are democracies, whereas none of the would-be anti-capitalist countries, anywhere, has managed to sustain comparably good or better democratic institutions over any length of time. [T]he democratic institutions we are familiar with have yet to be improved on in any of those places that some leftists are given to casting an indulgent eye upon even while they seek to distance themselves critically from the political institutions of their own countries, institutions from which they benefit and which are superior. Unwilling to profess a clear allegiance towards what is democratically better, a certain type of leftist is always ready to make allowances for what is democratically worse.³⁹

This devil-may-care attitude with regard to liberal institutions stems, we might suggest, from a distance, or at worst an opposition, to the society that the left seeks a mandate to govern. For Michael Walzer, the hard left lives uneasily with an experience of multi-generational defeat that actively disengages and distances it from any sense of responsibility to the people through which it seeks to wield power. As Walzer asserts, the left, out of power and without hope of having it, suffer a kind of 'self-hatred' of themselves and those around.⁴⁰

As became painfully clear in Labour's catastrophic 2019 election result, Corbyn, too, carried the burden of being seen by some as 'a leader who does not appear to view this country, for all its flaws, as something that is worth defending'.⁴¹ Corbyn's response to the jihadist bombing of a concert in Manchester during the election of 2017 recovered some of this ground and indicated at the very least that he and his advisors realised that disavowal of common responsibility for public order cannot be the automatic response of the Leader of Her Majesty's Opposition. However, part of the distrust that Corbyn was held in by sections of the electorate was rooted in past perceptions, reinforced when it came to his response to the chemical attack by Russian agents on UK soil. As Walzer suggests, leftists' ambivalence about defending their own societies should be overcome through 'an engagement with our fellow citizens', at home and abroad. Thus the left should contribute constructively to debates about national security, and, says Walzer, 'act as if we won't always be powerless'.

What prohibits such a feeling of responsibility towards one's fellow humans among some members of the left? It is partly, we wager, the prioritisation of a principle that is not altogether incompatible with solidarity but for various reasons stands in its way in the calculations made by socialists over whether to call for the states in which they live to step in or step up in situations of human suffering: state sovereignty. To some extent, the international legal notions of Responsibility to Protect and Crimes Against Humanity imply a limit to state sovereignty.⁴² Of course, provision for this approach already exists, in post-1948 international law on genocide and in the contemporary doctrine of Responsibility to Protect affirmed by the UN General Assembly in 2005.⁴³

But the left sometimes chooses to raise its own legalistic arguments to the contrary – a feature, for instance, of Corbyn's rhetoric on the topic of intervention. This usually rests on the United Nations Charter article protecting the 'territorial integrity or political independence' of states against outside interference, which is placed above other purposes of the UN, such as humanitarian intervention and the defence of human rights.⁴⁴ But, as Walzer highlights, some situations arise whereby 'the violation of human rights within a set of boundaries is so terrible that it makes talk of community or self-determination [...] seem cynical and irrelevant'.⁴⁵ Kosovo and Syria are two examples of such situations contested on the left in living memory.

These knotty issues expose a contradiction which has become only too clear in recent years, as Russia has successively wielded the UN Security Council veto preventing action against the Assad regime in Syria. This is that the UN both exists to oversee and protect human rights across the globe whilst also on occasion being the biggest obstacle to the achievement of this aim. The veto is constantly wielded to prevent UNSC authorisation of humanitarian military action. Indeed, in recent years voices on the left – Corbyn among them – have appealed to the need for this authorisation apparently in full knowledge that the action proposed would fall before the veto for political and not juridical reasons – in the Syrian case, owing to the veto resting with an ally of the same brutal regime the action would target.⁴⁶

For a left seemingly unable to comprehend the contradictions posed by conflicts in what might feel far-flung corners of the globe, Brexit did, initially at least, bring to greater scrutiny issues about the nature and boundaries of national sovereignty. The long-standing Euroscepticism of Corbyn and some of his allies reflected a political horizon inherited from the old ‘socialism-in-one-country’ or Bennite ‘siege economy’ model based in the nation-state and its sovereignty. Tactical considerations meant that such Euroscepticism was muffled or sidelined. Nevertheless, it animated the Lexit position held by some Corbyn supporters.⁴⁷ Brexit was seen as an opportunity to establish the British state as a bulwark against global capital and repatriate powers and production to its shores. Even as hopes of a soft Brexit unravelled, Lexiteers became more assertive, uniting hipster Stalinists, Spiked ex-communists and Blue Labourites under a variety of banners such as the ‘Full Brexit’ and ‘Leave Fight Transform’ campaigns. This tendency is distinguished by the combination of anti-imperialism with a protectionist anti-rentier economics owing as much to conspiracism as Keynesianism.⁴⁸ Typical of the theoretical terrain occupied by a majority of the Lexit left, this critique of capitalism adopts the standpoint of the insider national community assailed by global or transnational forces.

This framing, posing the national against the global, highlights potential links between how the left approaches the domestic sphere and its foreign policy orientation. It establishes a standard against which the left judges the legitimacy of military or humanitarian intervention, even where sanctioned by an authority superior to the sovereignty of the country subject to the intervention. For leftists of Corbyn’s ilk, the moral and ethical horizon of what is right and wrong in such cases is the nation state. Transnational forms of power and accountability, identified inextricably with the liberal (or sometimes ‘neoliberal’) imposition of global order by capital, are seen as infringing this in the name of the ‘West’ against the rest. The opportunistic initial response of Corbyn and his inner circle to Brexit made clear the consequences of this understanding of the world. In so doing it exposed the contradictions this asked of Corbyn’s younger supporters in reconciling the two sides of an orientation within which the domestic and foreign cannot always be easily

separated. This rupture eventually reconciled a substantial swathe of Corbyn's former supporters with Starmer's more centrist and electorally viable candidature for the leadership – a crucial step in forging a new way forward.

American Restoration or Isolation?

Barring any legal machinations between now and the Electoral College, the next President of the United States will be Joe Biden. A former Vice President and Chair of the Senate foreign relations committee, Biden and his new Secretary of State will bring new strategic focus to US foreign policy and undo much, if not all, of the damage done by Trump in areas as diverse as climate change and nuclear proliferation. The question is whether, constrained by a possible Republican-controlled Senate, he will attempt to restore American influence over the global institutional order or partially continue US isolationism in the face of global challenges. Each approach holds implications for how the UK, and in turn Labour, reorient their foreign policy as Britain leaves the EU.

A 'Cold War' scenario of increased economic competition and geopolitical rivalry with China, commenced by Obama and continued by Trump, will be the major challenge of the Biden presidency. After Trump's abdication of US leadership over the liberal global order, Biden has proposed to wield renewed American hegemony in support of the forces of democracy against insurgent authoritarianism. Biden has stated an aspiration to establish new political structures bringing together liberal democracies in common cause against the contravention of democratic norms and human rights by countries like China, as well as the reinvigoration of existing structures such as NATO to deter Russian aggression.⁴⁹ In proposing new political spaces within which liberal values can be defended, Biden has also expressed the aim to link commitment to these values abroad with their extension at home. Whether he has the will, capacity and political space to do that remains, at this stage, an open question.

However, on other fronts, influenced by a new crop of "2021 Democrats" with less interventionist instincts, Biden might also mark a continuity with the post-Iraq timidity that set in among the liberal centre exemplified in the so-called 'Obama Doctrine' of indecisiveness and abandoned red lines on Syria.⁵⁰ By adhering to this aversion to intervention, Biden would in turn represent a continuation of the foreign policy inclinations of the supposedly warlike Trump, who in reality pulled troops out of the Middle East and only reluctantly played the role of global policeman when called upon to do so.⁵¹ For instance, Trump was convinced into strikes against Assad's airfields only following pressure from the UK and France following

regime chemical attacks in 2018. It may be that Biden adopts a similarly disinterested orientation towards the Middle East, with European partners like Emmanuel Macron acting as an occasional moral and ethical conscience guiding American power to intervene in the still fractious combination of jihadist terror, regime violence and proxy war specific to the region. A world in which the US withdraws from wielding soft and hard power, as we have seen in recent years, has the potential to wildly unravel, and Biden will likely need encouragement to reengage that power when feasible and justifiable in defence of human life and rights.

But Biden's presidency raises wider questions about the transatlantic partnership. Boris Johnson's original post-Brexit plan appeared to be to draw closer to a United States that under Trump lost commitment to the rights and responsibilities of Western liberal order. A new transatlantic partnership and trade deal with the US under President Biden seems altogether a more attractive proposition post-Brexit. But Democrat attachment to the Irish peace process and the President-Elect's own affinities with his Irish heritage may dampen the appetite of the coming administration to strike trade deals with a Tory government recklessly inconsiderate of the consequences of Brexit for the island of Ireland and its communities. Moreover, Biden's centrist presidency will represent a clear break with the period of populist insurgency with which Johnson, like Trump, is associated. As Biden cleaves more closely to the more stable, sensible leaderships across the Channel, these factors may deprive a Johnson-led government of a serious hearing from the new Democratic administration.⁵²

In time, this may create an opportunity for the Starmer-led Labour Party to reenvision and reforge the transatlantic partnership around progressive internationalist principles just as New Labour and the 'New Democrats' gathered around common points of domestic policy in the 1990s. But it should not be taken for granted that the American enthusiasm for a more independent and isolationist orientation towards the world will wane quickly. The responsibility also falls upon Europe, and its social democratic tradition, to assert itself over the course of events. As NATO ruptures further with the rift between Erdogan's bellicose Islamism and Macron's muscular secularism, it becomes even more crucial for the UK to remain in proximity to European plans for closer defence and security integration. Moreover, the UK in collaboration with its European partners must still play an independent role in providing aid and other resources in the Global South to light a path through what could be a decade as volatile and dangerous than the last, especially in the context of the current pandemic and its legacy. Voices calling for the hollowing out of aid budgets and international development assistance, or those who see state sovereignty as a sacrosanct principle separating out the problems of other parts of the world from ours, must not be allowed to dominate the conversation.

Ultimately, under any leadership right or left, the US remains the indispensable partner in any wider attempt to reconstruct the rule-based international system and counteract the expansion and influence of Chinese authoritarianism, Russian aggression and jihadist terrorism, among other issues. At the same time, however, one thing is certain: the US is most likely to take the UK seriously where its voice is amplified in concert with our European partners and their institutions.

Conclusion: Where now?

Any foreign policy perspective rests on a triple axis of values, interests and opportunity. Values are the underlying principles and preferences, typically espoused by different political traditions seeking to govern at national level and alongside partners internationally. Interests are more complex. Different political traditions will assert rival notions of the 'national interest', as evidenced in polarised debates between Remain and Leave 'factions' in the UK. The fact that interests are largely a matter of perception does not make them any less real, as they become the primary frame through which policies are articulated. Opportunity is a shorthand for what is commonly referred to as 'realpolitik'. States and those who govern them cannot simply do as they like in geo-political arenas. They have to collaborate, form alliances or simply accept that certain courses of action are not feasible in a given timescale. In addition, governments need to act with or build broad consent for international actions among the domestic population. Strategy is always a balance of these three factors.

Only oppositionalists outside the pursuit of power can afford to proceed on values alone, but they are nonetheless the underpinnings and ongoing basis for the rest and therefore the right place to start rethinking a serious left foreign policy for the twenty-first century. As previously noted, whereas Labour made substantial leaps in domestic policy led by John McDonnell and his team, foreign policy remained hamstrung by an anachronistic preoccupation with Iraq and an unquestioning acceptance that a reflexive pacifism is central to the Corbyn project. In this period of renewal, Labour must thus look beyond the intellectual hegemony until recently wielded in the Party by Corbynism to find resources for a left foreign policy based on underpinning values of solidarity and safeguarding even where this may sometimes require a challenge to the sovereignty of individual states. In this sense, the framework of 'human security' over 'national security' that Alex and Mary set out in their foreword has much to offer the contemporary centre-left.

As Alex and Mary suggest, some of the intellectual resources necessary for a comprehensive rethink already lie close at hand. Edging towards renewal, Labour should look in particular to the ethical foreign policies put forward by two sadly lost lodestars of the UK centre left, Robin Cook and Jo Cox. As Foreign Secretary,

Cook made a major 1997 speech setting out plans to ‘make Britain once again a force for good in the world’, with a focus on arms control, human rights and the environment.⁵³ Even before the Iraq War, in which his opposition to invasion led to his resignation as Leader of the House, this was a difficult period, with conflicts in Kosovo and Sierra Leone. Commitments to an ethical policy were sometimes difficult to square with other competing pressures. It is therefore worth remembering that the approach was to have an ethical *dimension*. It is this ethical dimension that most clearly defines the specifically progressive character of foreign policy, albeit grounded in what is possible.

We began with Jo Cox’s call for a ‘new progressive internationalism’. This charted a path for the rediscovery of ethical principles as well as the recommendation of proposals the party could adopt in their defence. One in particular that would respond to the perspectives raised in this piece would be Cox’s call for the establishment of a cross-party government advisor on mass atrocity prevention and the doctrine of Responsibility to Protect. Awaiting its second reading in the House of Lords, a Private Members Bill proposes to encode in UK law a process of genocide determination and response.⁵⁴ Labour should support this, and go further. An advisor along the lines Cox proposed would provide guidance and counsel in support of the use of a range of diplomatic instruments including in some instances the military to confront genocidal and totalitarian violence wherever and whenever it rears its head. In so doing, it would help defend a space of transnational human solidarity across borders, rather than indulging the comfort of the confines of an isolationist state sovereignty and, short of an overhaul of the veto itself, the ineffective legalism of the UNSC. Indeed, Nandy recently commissioned a report, led by Lord Collins, into reform of UN institutions partly aimed at overcoming the UNSC impasse.⁵⁵ The formation of the Labour Foreign Policy Group adds to this growing sense that the party is redeveloping a proactive, rather than reflexively reactive, foreign policy.⁵⁶

Such recommendations are only the beginning of what can be done in advance of violence rather than after, standing in shocked stillness as the horrors unfold. It is important to conceive of our capacity to intervene internationally as more than just a military issue. The UK has substantial reserves of soft power to wield of its own. As Nandy pointed out in her speech at the RSA, if ‘Global Britain’ is going to mean anything at all it means developing new partnerships and alliances to stand up for our values. Hong Kong is an immediate test as China tightens its oppressive grip, violating the terms of the joint declaration. The announcement of a path to citizenship for some Hong Kong residents by the UK Government is a welcome first step. Meanwhile, Labour has been commendably quick to condemn the Chinese repression of the Uighur population, its proposed human rights sanctions going much further than the government’s limp response to growing evidence suggesting grievous crimes against humanity.⁵⁷

However, it is clear that the UK cannot act alone, on this or any other front. There are some signs that a post-populist, open, global centre-left resurgent either side of the Atlantic will have a bigger part to play on the world stage than at any time since the mid-nineties 'Third Way'. This means thinking seriously about a coordinated left foreign policy for the contemporary age before, as in Syria and Srebrenica before it, it is once again too late.⁵⁸

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The Labour Campaign for International Development campaigns on development and humanitarian issues and is a socialist society affiliated to the Labour Party. LCID.org.uk | [@LabourCID](https://twitter.com/LabourCID)

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