

The United Kingdom

Notes for a Strategic Perspective

Carlos Ballesteros*

The United Kingdom's geopolitical positions are determined by multiple factors, outstanding among which are its imperial past, certain links between national pride and the role of the army, and a history of conflicts, differences, and alliances with the European continental powers. However, the U.K. foreign policy's main reference point, particularly after 1945, has been its firm ties to the United States.

It still sees itself as a global player in terms of world security and defense and on other issues that extend beyond Europe. The decline in British power after World War II prompted it to cooperate in international forums and play an important role in the UN Security Council as a permanent member with veto rights. At the same time, its membership in the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), as well as its identification with the United States' world view, has allowed it to develop a very active foreign policy in pursuit of its national interest.

Taking these coordinates into account, its international position is not an easy one. Its foreign policy-makers have managed to maintain independence on complex international issues, but without escaping the consequences of being a second-class power. The United Kingdom's foreign policy faces contradictions stemming from the need to preserve its special relationship with the United States, even as it continues to have an important role in Europe, with which it has organic links and where many of its most direct interests are defined. However, historically speaking, between Europe and the United States, the United Kingdom has always opted for

the latter on crucial international security issues. The European Union has served as a bulwark for the U.K. taking its distance from the United States on minor or less critical issues like Cuba, the Middle East, or climate change negotiations, on all of which it supports European Union positions.

Its foreign policy is two-sided, like Janus,¹ and subject to the eternal dilemma of being caught between the United States and Europe, although in the last analysis it always defines itself in the framework of NATO and in terms of its role as an ally of the world's main power in the UN Security Council. The United Kingdom's geopolitical position was defined after the 1956 Suez crisis, when, despite its own and France's veto in the Security Council, both had to accept the conditions laid down by the United States and withdraw from the Sinai in less than 48 hours. France chose to strengthen its position in Europe in alliance with Germany; Great Britain opted for establishing a "special relationship" with the United States. This was put to the test in 2003 when the U.S. invasion of Iraq brought down the Saddam Hussein regime, ratified by support from Tony Blair's government.

In recent history, U.K. foreign policy has been marked by the Blair government's activism (1997-2007), which began with the conflict in Kosovo and went into crisis with the Iraq war. It fell to Gordon Brown's government to re-legitimize British positions, particularly interventionism, with the concept of "the responsibility to protect," which permitted it to maintain troops in Afghanistan and Iraq.² However, after harsh criticism of the United Kingdom's subordination to the United States, Brown was forced to tone down the special relationship with the U.S. superpower without breaking the commitments taken on in Asia. In any case, the election of Barack Obama opened the door to a more diplomatic dimension in relations between the two countries.

* Professor and researcher at the UNAM School of Political and Social Sciences.



The United Kingdom's foreign policy faces contradictions stemming from the need to preserve its special relationship with the United States, even as it continues to play an important role in Europe.

These observations allow us to establish a context for the new circumstances arising out of David Cameron's election, putting an end to the Labour Party's long hegemony. U.K. foreign policy right now is facing the conditions created by the change in government, but it should be pointed out that, generally speaking, no sudden shifts should be expected, although a greater distance from the European Union can be. The new coalition government has outlined the U.K. international position as maintaining the nation as an active member of the global community and promoting national interests while continuing to be a builder of the United Nations and other international organizations, including the Commonwealth, as well as fostering the reform of global institutions to make them ready to meet the needs of the modern world.

These general positions agreed on by David Cameron and Nick Clegg have been developing into more specific orientations.³ The new foreign minister, William Hague, presented his proposal to Parliament for a "distinctive" foreign policy making Afghanistan the priority, but that, above all, putting forward greater coordination among foreign, defense, and security policies.

In fact, the coalition government's first big initiative has been to establish a new National Security Council. Other outstanding points are its backing for actions to prevent nuclear arms proliferation, a new commitment to the Middle East peace process, and the vow to convene a referendum on any measure that would broaden the powers of the European Union.

The new government's perspective coincides with that of the United States. At a May 14 joint press conference, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and U.K. Foreign Minister William Hague very precisely outlined the new strategic accord between the United States and the United Kingdom. The two particularly emphasized their common interest in guaranteeing that the Security Council would pass a resolution to make it possible to impose sanctions against Iran and stop its nuclear program; and Minister Hague committed himself to getting European Union backing for that resolution.⁴

The new sanctions against Iran approved June 8, 2010 by the UN Security Council definitively confirmed the permanent members' agreement on the need to prevent the advance of Iran's nuclear program. The United Kingdom maintained its backing for the strategic interests shared with Washington and contributed considerably to determining weighty sanctions against Teheran. For their part, Brazil and Turkey persisted in their attempt to sponsor alternative diplomacy and voted "no" as non-permanent members, while Lebanon, where the pro-Iranian organization Hezbollah has a great deal of influence, abstained.

The Iranian question and the episode led by Brazil and Turkey once again underscore the limitations of a Security Council subject to the will of the five great powers and their vetoes. The position of the European Union was also of interest: it proposed even more severe sanctions than those eventually passed by the Security Council. Last June 17, with just one day's difference, the European Union followed the United States in its position of imposing greater economic, financial, and technology transfer restrictions on Iran.

Obviously, Security Council members' attention, including that of the United Kingdom, is focused on the big Asian chessboard. There, greater forces, processes, and interests are deployed that make up a very dense, interlocking grid. In this regard, the United Kingdom has developed doctrines about crisis management and the concept of public diplomacy associated very closely with the idea of soft power.

To understand the U.K. position in the Security Council, it is important to observe its perspective about the reform

of that rough draft of international government. For the U.K. the number of permanent Security Council members should be increased to bolster its legitimacy. In principle, it would support integrating Germany, Japan, India, and Brazil, but given that it is very difficult to reach the consensus that would make this possible, the United Kingdom has proposed an intermediate option based on longer membership of countries through re-election. The expectation is that with time, this method would make it possible to increase the number of permanent council members.

The positions of the United Kingdom and the entire international movement on the Security Council lead necessarily to a reflection about the possibilities for greater political capacity to govern world forces and processes. The Security Council, and in fact, the UN itself and other international bodies, are the first step toward the conformation of a world interior policy. Of course, to get to that point, sweeping devel-

opments on the political and legal level through communication, deliberation, and cooperation are necessary. Undoubtedly, it is the Kantian proposal objected to by realism. But the truth is that the merely realistic perspective is not enough to deal with the world's problems. ■■■

NOTES

¹ In Roman mythology, Janus is the god usually depicted with two faces or heads looking in opposite directions: one looks back at the previous year, and the other looks forward to the year ahead. [Editor's Note.]

² Gordon Brown served as prime minister of the United Kingdom and Labour Party leader from 2007, after Tony Blair's resignation, to 2010. For more on Brown's "responsibility to protect" policy, see <http://web.archive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.number10.gov.uk/Page15286>. [Editor's Note.]

³ Clegg, a British Liberal Democrat, is deputy prime minister of the United Kingdom, lord president of the Council and minister for constitutional and political reform in the coalition government of Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron. [Editor's Note.]

⁴ For more about the press conference, see <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE64D5XA20100514>. [Editor's Note.]