

## Gordon Brown's foreign-policy challenges

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The opening weeks of Gordon Brown's premiership have brought a marked change of tone to the conduct of British foreign policy. The misconceived and counterproductive notion of a "war on terror" has been discarded, replaced by a new focus on winning "hearts and minds". While Tony Blair's rhetoric on international affairs was often strident and evangelical, Brown's public statements since he became prime minister [1] on 27 June 2007 have so far been much more measured. At his meeting with President Bush at Camp David [2], for example, Gordon Brown stressed the importance he attached to the transatlantic relationship, but without any of the gushing praise for the president that became such a feature of Blair/Bush meetings over recent years.

But while this change of language is welcome, the damage done to Britain's global reputation during the final years of the Blair government and the nature of the foreign-policy challenges facing Britain today require some substantive and not merely stylistic [4] breaks with the recent past.

Although United States and United Kingdom policy in recent years has been carried out in the name of security and counter-terrorism, the world today is more divided, dangerous and unstable than it was before 9/11. The way forward for the UK should involve a rejection of some core elements of the Blair approach [4] to international affairs. In its place is needed a foreign-policy agenda based more explicitly and consistently on multilateralism and common rules, one that seeks order through international law and social justice, re-links security and the human-rights agenda and strengthens global institutions.

### The middle east: a fresh agenda

Nowhere is a new approach more important than towards the broader middle east. Britain's standing in this region [4] has plummeted as a result of the Iraq war, Tony Blair's failure to be even-handed on the Israel/Palestine question and his refusal to condemn Israel's military assault on Lebanon in July-August 2006. A Brown government will need [5] to make major changes in its policies here if Britain is to regain the trust of local parties and an element of influence over regional developments.

The security and humanitarian situation in Iraq [5] is horrific and the chances of avoiding a further escalation of violence look very slim. A reinvigorated international effort to help do so

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requires a wider group of countries, particularly from the region, to come together behind a shared endeavour to help stabilise Iraq, however difficult it would be to achieve. A Dayton [5]-style conference would be useful here in helping to forge a common international position. Brown should promote this idea and challenge the unwillingness of the Bush administration [5] to engage seriously with either Damascus or Tehran over Iraq. The purpose of international pressure and support should be to help secure a new political compact and reconciliation process within Iraq itself. On the question of British troops, while Brown has rightly said that Britain will "not cut and run", he has hinted to President Bush that these troops will not remain indefinitely and that Britain will make decisions that are consistent with British interests. It is critical that Brown upholds this policy and does not provide political cover for a failed US strategy elsewhere in the country.

Afghanistan is similarly challenging [8]. Despite the election of President Karzai, warlords remain dominant in many parts of the country, development progress has been extremely slow and, far from being defeated, the Taliban once again constitute a serious threat [8] in the south of the country. Brown should press for a human-security agenda, a greater focus on human rights and the rule of law, higher levels of development assistance that are used more effectively, for more international troops to be deployed to the south, and a tougher line on the Taliban forces that operate brazenly across the Pakistani border. But policy in Afghanistan [9] will have to be constantly reviewed because, in truth, a new policy shift may come too late to make a decisive difference.

### **Iran: avoiding war**

It is the neighbouring state of Iran, however, that may well emerge as the single biggest foreign-policy test of Brown's premiership. This would be guaranteed if the Iranians withdrew from the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT [10]) or carried out a nuclear test, or if the US or Israel launched a pre-emptive military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities [11]. There is a real possibility that one of these scenarios will materialise in the next year or so. Indeed, there has been recent press speculation that the US vice-president, Dick Cheney, is pressing Bush to act over the next twelve months.

While it would be extremely undesirable for Iran to acquire a nuclear-weapons capability, this outcome is best avoided through creative and sustained diplomatic efforts. More hawkish voices, particularly in the US and Israel, argue that diplomacy will not succeed and that military force should be used to prevent this. But military action would be incredibly misguided [11] and dangerous. It would be most unlikely to destroy Iran's nuclear capabilities, but it would strengthen Iran's hardliners, provide a further stimulus to global Islamic radicalism and send oil prices through the roof.

(26 June 2007 [3])

Paul Rogers, "Gordon Brown's white elephants"  
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Brown should use all of Britain's diplomatic influence to dissuade the US and Israel [11] from adopting such a policy.

### **Israel-Palestine: a new approach**

A new approach is also needed in relation to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Following Hamas's takeover [11] of Gaza in June 2007, Britain initially appeared to be following the flawed US strategy towards the conflict. The US's "West Bank first" policy assumes that isolating and punishing Gaza while rewarding the West Bank and Mahmoud Abbas will lead to a decline in support for Hamas and an increase in support for Fatah, thereby enhancing the prospects for peace. Although this kind of approach might have made sense in 2005, when Abbas was elected Palestinian president with a landslide, it makes absolutely no sense today.

Whether one likes it or not, Hamas is now a central part of the Palestinian political scene. Stabilising Gaza and the West Bank and creating a more cohesive Palestinian political entity that can negotiate credibly with the Israelis requires a Palestinian national-unity government. That means an end to international efforts to play off different Palestinian factions against each other, an immediate lifting [13] of the economic boycott of the West Bank and Gaza and renewed efforts to secure a comprehensive Palestinian/Israeli ceasefire. It also means serious international pressure on Israel - of the kind that has been singularly lacking in recent years - to end its forty-year occupation [13] of the Palestinian territories. As a first step on the Israelis' part, there should be a halt to ongoing settlement activity, house demolitions, land confiscations and targeted assassinations, and a willingness to enter serious negotiations with the Palestinians.

The Arab League initiative [13] (which calls for full normalisation of relations with Israel in exchange for its full withdrawal from the occupied territories) represents an important opportunity to reactivate a meaningful peace process. British influence should be exerted in support of this proposal and in support of local actors working for peace. While the Quartet's new middle-east envoy [14], Tony Blair, is ostensibly tasked with helping to strengthen Palestinian institutions and while Gordon Brown has focused heavily to date on economic issues, progress will not be made on either without a re-energised political process that involves Palestinians and Israelis in substantive bilateral talks.

### **Darfur and the world: paths to progress**

Darfur is another critical test for the Brown government. To Brown's credit, he has already acted swiftly on this. He has identified Darfur as the world's worst humanitarian crisis and, together with the French, helped secure a new UN resolution [15] mandating the deployment of a United Nations-African Union hybrid force to the region. But UN resolutions will amount to little without a willingness to enforce them (previous UN resolutions have also called for an international force to be

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deployed but these have not been implemented). This time, tough words should be matched with firm action. If the Khartoum regime [16] seeks to block the deployment of the force (which is likely, given its track record), Brown should press for the immediate imposition of financial sanctions, an assets freeze and a travel ban on key members of the Sudanese elite. Comparable energy needs to be applied in support of new negotiations in Tanzania aimed at reaching a common position amongst the various Darfur rebel groups [16].

On global development, the Blair government's record is quite impressive, and there is much here on which to build. Brown has already indicated that this issue will remain a priority for his premiership and in his speech at the UN on 31 July 2007 he made an impassioned call [17] for greater international action to combat what he rightly termed a "development emergency", and the world's collective failure to make progress towards the internationally-agreed Millennium Development Goals [18]. Getting back on track with these will require an enhanced international effort on issues of aid, debt relief and trade - areas on which Brown focuses heavily in his development speeches. But it will also require fresh thinking and action on the issues of violent conflict, poor governance, corruption, the mismanagement of natural resources and state failure, which are often the primary obstacles to development progress [18] in Africa and elsewhere.

The other key issue crying out for a more decisive UK lead is climate change [18]. While in recent years the Blair government played an important role in calling for greater global action on climate change, Britain's record on curbing its own greenhouse-gas emissions has not matched its rhetoric. Building on the analysis in the Stern report [18], a Brown government should be making really deep cuts in its own emissions and working for an effective multilateral agreement on climate change to follow Kyoto after 2012 [18]. This agreement will obviously need to involve the Chinese, who are set to overtake the US as the world's largest greenhouse-gas emitter in the next few years.

## **The world's work**

If these are some of the countries and issues on which the Gordon Brown-led government should focus its diplomatic efforts, with whom should Britain work to best advance these foreign-policy goals? Under Tony Blair, the relationship with the US took precedence over all others, with highly damaging consequences. Brown has already shown that he will stay close to the US, but in a way that is less subservient [18] and unconditional than was often the case under Blair. There is also evidence of a welcome pragmatism in Brown's approach towards Europe. The prospects of Britain exercising beneficial influence in various parts of the globe will often be enhanced by working closely [19] with European partners. From the middle east to Russia, from the Balkans to China, and on issues like climate change and development, there is real scope for the European Union to play a larger and more progressive role, and Brown should commit to help develop [20] this role.

Britain under Brown should also forge closer political, economic and cultural ties with emerging powers like China, India, South Africa and Brazil. And it should work for effective multilateralism, including a stronger United Nations and a reformed set of global financial institutions. Effective and accountable global institutions [21] are indispensable for tackling a range of global problems.

A broader challenge for Gordon Brown is to revive the idea of a values-based or "progressive" foreign policy [22] after the catastrophe of Iraq. A commitment to values in foreign policy does not require a rejection of the idea of interests. But it does demand new thinking about the concept of the national interest in a radically changed global context. In a world that is much more interdependent and interconnected, the national interest needs to be defined more expansively [23] than previously, with a recognition that "our" interests - "our" security and

prosperity, for example - are likely to be dependent on achieving greater prosperity and security for others.

Nor should a commitment to values in foreign policy [24] be misconstrued as naivety about the ease with which those values can be advanced or realised in particular contexts around the world. The world does not change for the better simply because we wish it would. To have a chance of making a difference, values need to be complemented by well-thought-through policies. These need to recognise the extent to which actions of individual governments, international institutions and others are constrained and shaped by existing inequalities [24] of wealth and power. They also need to be rooted in a sophisticated understanding and analysis of the social, political, economic, cultural and historical context in particular societies.

In this sense, a progressive foreign policy is one defined by values but grounded in a realistic understanding of the diverse world that it operates within. Such a policy is distinct from the neo-conservatism [24] of the Bush administration, with its contempt for international law and global institutions, and from traditional conservatism, which tends to be highly sceptical of the idea that human rights and democracy have universal relevance or that it is our business or interest to promote them internationally.

Gordon Brown has been a central figure in the Labour government for over a decade, and a supporter [25] of some of Blair's most controversial foreign-policy decisions, including Iraq. But his early actions and demeanour on the global stage have demonstrated a seriousness of purpose and a willingness to think creatively. He now has a real but brief window of opportunity [26] to shift the focus and some of the priorities of British foreign policy. Such a shift could help restore Britain's rather battered global reputation, as well as enhancing its contribution to tackling a diverse and pressing set of global issues. He should act without delay.

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[26] <http://www.spectator.co.uk/archive/69317/on-the-road-with-gordon-in-the-search-for-hearts-and-minds.shtml>



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