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The return to Bevinite principles in a new era of Labour foreign policy



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The UK general election in December was momentous in many respects. It effectively sealed the country's exit from the European Union after 47 years of membership and reshaped the domestic political landscape. But it was also momentous in bringing to an end four years of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership. For many in the party, he was a beacon of socialist hope after the apparent conservatisation of Labour under Tony Blair, who had, it was said, surrendered to the ideals of free market capitalism. Yet while the defeat signals a substantial break with Corbynism under Labour's new leader, Keir Starmer, it is not in economics but foreign policy where the sharpest divergence is perhaps likely to come. After all, the leftward trajectory of Conservatives' economic policies under Boris Johnson, accelerated by the scale of government economic intervention necessitated by the Covid-19 outbreak, may reduce Starmer's incentives to move markedly rightward. As leader, Corbyn avowed many positions on foreign policy that were far from the recent historical mainstream of the Labour Party. He was (and continues to be) innately suspicious of British security services, evident in his [response](#) to the poison attack by Russian agents in Salisbury, when he called for the evidence to be given to the Russian

government for verification. He was (and continues to be) reflexively hostile to the US and sceptical of NATO. And on the nuclear deterrent, he declared at the start of his leadership that he would never use such weapons if he became Prime Minister. All of this was distinctly unconventional.

Foreign policy cuts to the heart of many of the internal divisions in the Labour Party. The 2001 Iraq War was an inflexion point that still haunts it today and cemented an isolationist tendency that was ascendant under Corbyn and aided his rise. The party's opposition to military intervention in Syria in 2013 under Ed Miliband – a move that ultimately blocked such action and influenced US president Barack Obama's decision not to intervene as well-demonstrated this shift even before Corbyn took over in 2015. Notably, his only two interventions in that debate, as a backbencher, were to call for greater co-operation with the regimes in Tehran and Moscow while opposing military action.

For others in the party, this Corbyn-esque (if not yet Corbynite) approach marked an over-reaction to the many failures of the Iraq War and created its own moral hazards. After all, not intervening does not guarantee that innocent lives will not be lost, as the subsequent tragic years of conflict in Syria (and elsewhere) has attested all too clearly. As Shadow Foreign Secretary in December 2015, Hilary Benn said in a famous speech in a debate on taking

military action against the Islamic State group (with Jeremy Corbyn sat next to him, now as party leader): “As a party we have always been defined by our internationalism. We believe we have a responsibility one to another. We never have and we never should walk by on the other side of the road.” Within six months of this speech, Benn was [sacked](#) after calling into question Corbyn’s leadership.

These are the deep divisions that Starmer and Lisa Nandy, Labour’s new Shadow Foreign Secretary, have to contend with. One difficulty is that on such issues there is rarely a middle ground or fudge that can be negotiated: military intervention, for instance, either happens or it does not. Any apparent modalities are simply anathema to the Corbynite wing, which opposes such action on principle.

By most accounts, both Starmer and Nandy appear more conventional on foreign policy than Corbyn and will certainly change the party’s direction on many issues, not least NATO and [Russia](#). Yet there have already been hints of greater boldness as well.

Nandy recently set out a firm [stance](#) against annexation plans of parts of the West Bank by the Israeli government, calling for a UK ban on imports of goods produced in such settlements if it goes ahead. This is a move that even Corbyn did not make formal policy as leader, despite expressing support for it.

More widely, little useful remained in the filing

cabinet from Corbyn's time, so the party will have to reformulate its position almost from scratch on many of these issues. The new leadership will also continue to have to make concessions to the Corbynite wing of the party, which remains a sizeable though much diminished force. At the same time, they will want to take a distinctive approach to the Conservatives while continuing with Starmer's call to avoid "opposition for opposition's sake". With all of these internal and external challenges in mind, it is worth considering how the party might go about developing a foreign policy in the coming years.

The world as it is

The start of a new era for Labour in foreign policy – especially one that is likely to be a distinctive break with the previous regime – is a good time to return to first principles. For Labour, those principles perhaps begin with its post-war foreign policy under Ernest Bevin, Foreign Secretary in 1945-51. Bevin's time in office coincided with a period in which much of the global institutional architecture of today, and many of the norms of inter-state behaviour, were established. It was also a period of intense uncertainty and disruption, not unlike today.

Above all, Bevin was a practical politician, largely uninterested in (and perhaps incapable of) soaring rhetoric and abstract ideology. His speaking style in the House of Commons reflected a methodical mindset – he would take issues sequentially and

assiduously address each point of concern in a debate – and a preference for frankness. As he [said](#), he preferred to “put the cards on the table face upwards”, crucial he thought to assuage any suspicions of his or the British government’s intentions.

Despite the immense differences, there are some similarities between the challenges that faced Bevin in 1945 and those of today. Then, like now, a return to the US isolationism of the pre-war years was a major British concern. At the same time, Bevin [bemoaned](#) a lack of unity among Western allies. And there was a proliferation of seemingly intractable issues that the war had not resolved and indeed, in respect of Germany and Korea especially, had created or exacerbated. As Bevin [said](#) in the Commons in November 1945: “All the world is in trouble, and I have to deal with all the troubles at once.” It was far from clear, indeed some deemed it probable, that after two world wars in three decades this would not be an interminable pattern.

Despite being a [self-declared](#) social democrat with a long history in the trade union movement, Bevin was not strongly party political. As Foreign Secretary, he met regularly in private with Anthony Eden, his Conservative predecessor, then in opposition. Nor would he brook, as he saw it, misled idealism from his own side. Responding to a [letter](#) published by six Labour MPs in the *Daily Herald* on 22 January 1948

calling for a “united democratic Socialist Western Europe”, Bevin said in the Commons:

“...it would be impracticable, indeed fantastic, to attempt to build the unity of Western Europe solely on a basis of united Western European Socialism... We need the help of all parties in all these countries, whether they are in the government or not...”

This reflects a common thread running through the Bevinite philosophy, and one that all political parties would do well to heed today: the world should be dealt with as it is, not as one would like or imagine it to be.

Labour’s heritage

This period was also one in which Labour made a lasting contribution to the multilateral global order whose most important institutions continue to operate – admittedly with varying degrees of functionality – to this day. Most notably, it was just after Labour came into office in July 1945 that the UN was established, in October that year, with the UK a founding member. Bevin made a firm case for multilateralism, arguing that “no one ever surrenders sovereignty; they merge it into a greater sovereignty”. Yet he also expressed concerns that the UN’s remit could be pushed too far. “It can only deal with the specific objective that the people feel is necessary for their security,” he said, not a sprawling remit. He argued firmly that such institutions needed strong public support and that they would not be

sustainable simply as the project of the political classes.

The formation of NATO in 1949 also owes much to Bevin's efforts. It followed directly from the Brussels Treaty, signed in March 1948 by the UK, France and the Benelux countries, an initiative that was animated by Bevin. This was just one of a number of defence and security treaties that he agreed with European allies during his time in office. The Brussels Treaty, whose organisational base was in London, included a commitment to collective self-defence, something which morphed into the famous Article 5 of the NATO agreement and continues to be in operation to this day. (Admittedly, the Brussels Treaty was not the origin of such a provision – it originated in the Inter-American [Treaty](#) of Reciprocal Assistance 1947 – but its inclusion was a major and lasting commitment to European security by the UK and others.)

Bevin also played an important role in the Marshall Plan, which aided Europe's and the UK's economic recovery in the post-war period. In June 1947, US Secretary of State George Marshall gave his infamous, though in fact vague, [speech](#) at Harvard which preceded the plan. He said:

"[B]efore the United States government can... help start the European world on its way to recovery, there must be some agreement among the countries of Europe as to the requirements of the situation and

the part those countries themselves will take in order to give proper effect to whatever action might be undertaken by this government.”

Less than two weeks later, Bevin put a proposal to the cabinet for closer economic relations with continental Europe, an attempt to show Britain’s willingness to co-operate with its European partners to ensure US engagement after an earlier standoffish approach to Europe. Then, in July, he chaired a conference of 14 European nations to discuss economic co-operation. All of this culminated in the setting up of the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (now the OECD), which would administer the Marshall Plan. Bevin jumped into action following Marshall’s speech, ultimately – combined with the establishment of NATO – helping to secure a decades-long US commitment to Europe and its economic well-being and security.

For these reasons, the multilateral system of institutions that is currently under threat, not least from the US under Donald Trump, ought to be recognised not as a set of distant bureaucratic organisations but part of the political heritage of the Labour Party, and indeed of the UK. The party ought to feel and display more ownership over them, including engaging more in how these institutions ought to develop and reform in future. After all, Clause 4(3) of Labour’s [constitution](#) says that it is “committed to the defence and security of the British

people and to co-operating in European institutions, the United Nations, the Commonwealth and other international bodies". Multilateralism, in other words, is part of Labour's DNA.

A moment of reckoning

The coronavirus outbreak presents a moment of reckoning for the existing global order, and for the UK in particular, which has been badly hit. As in 1945, the UK finds itself entering what appears to be a new era in global affairs with a large degree of uncertainty about its role. A Bevinite placing of the cards on the table face upwards is a good place to start: the UK cannot deny its global interdependence – indeed this should now be self-evident; it cannot pretend that it can solve what are in fact global problems alone; and the UK cannot imagine that (forgive the metaphor) it is immune to global threats nor inoculated through some divine exceptionalism. The coronavirus outbreak ought to have proven that to be the delusion it always was. What is required, by all parties, is a sober reckoning with the world as it is and an unsentimental assessment of the UK's place within it.

The Conservatives' presentation of the UK's role leads all too easily to the conclusion that the UK can only either be extraordinary or irrelevant – and, of course, the Conservative argument goes, it should choose the former. Yet this is fanciful thinking. As Lawrence Freedman wrote recently, the UK must

recognise “the limits of independence”, not just its freedoms, and abandon “the quest for a unique, exceptional role”. In 1950, the UK’s relative global power was greater than it is today, yet even then Bevin recognised that “the day when we, as Great Britain, can declare a policy independently of our allies and colleagues has gone”.

The lessons that can be drawn for Labour, and indeed the Conservatives, from the post-war period are several. First, we are far from unique in facing, as Freedman describes it, a world “beset by anxiety”. The scale of global issues today may be profound, but it is not unprecedented. Now is not the time for despair at our apparently unique historical bad luck in inheriting such problems, but a working through of practical solutions with willing partners.

Second, Bevin was quick to recognise the limits of his own ideals. Although a social democrat and trade unionist, he did not shy away from – and could not deny – the fact that much of the rest of the world was not. He was willing to work with those (within reason) who were willing to work with him. As he said in the Commons in November 1945: “It does not matter whether it is a small nation or a big one.” He did not wish to limit the UK to working only with the great powers but sought allies wherever he could find them. While Bevin was no Europhile after the war, he saw ‘the west’, and western Europe, as a valuable construction of alliances that ought to be

defended and bolstered. The implications for socialism, or any other -ism, were secondary to the national interest as he saw it and he did not pretend that the two were always coterminous.

Third, while Bevin appreciated the necessity of global co-operation, he also recognised its political limits. The UN ought to be supported, but its remit should be limited. He signed numerous defence and security treaties with European allies, yet he objected to deep economic and political integration. Politicians had to constrain themselves and the multilateral institutions that they created, and ensure that they served the purpose for which they were designed in order to maintain public support.

Above all, Bevin had a clear-sighted view of the UK's core interests: keeping the US engaged in Europe, both economically and militarily; working to ensure the stability and prosperity of other European nations, albeit with limits on the degree of UK integration; strengthening the UK's existing alliances; and supporting – and indeed helping to found – multilateral institutions. These remain central to British interests today.

Yet the UK now finds itself more isolated than it has been in the last half a century, having left the EU (with the undeniable damage that has done to relationships with member states) and with an increasingly destructive partner across the Atlantic. All political parties must take current circumstances

at face value and not pretend they will change dramatically any time soon. The UK, for the first time in 47 years, is not part of a major regional trade bloc, unlike the EU and the US (via the USMCA). The extensive network of trade (and other) agreements that the UK helped to build as an EU member now has to be rebuilt alone to the extent possible. The routine interactions that would otherwise have taken place with EU countries on a plethora of issues will now be less comprehensive and less regular. The UK has deinstitutionalised its relationship with the EU and the US is in the process of doing the same in other multilateral settings.

The West

Nevertheless, Bevin's basic insight still holds true: there is no alternative for the UK but the West – that is to say, mainly the US and Europe, but also other democratic partners – regardless of any political differences. The big picture has been largely absent from the Brexit debates, both in the UK and the EU. But the undeniable truth is that, whatever political decisions are made, there is an irrefutable interdependence that cannot be swept away even by the most hostile of personal or political relations. We are, for better or worse, stuck with each other. The US is perhaps slightly different, large enough to at least credibly imagine a lone course. The UK's task is not to try to convince the US that it could not go it alone, but that its interests are best served by not

doing so. These alliances have the advantage of still being highly institutionalised, albeit increasingly less so, and well ingrained in mindsets and identities of politicians and populations on all sides.

Rather than casting about for potential alternatives, which may or may not come to fruition in several decades' time, it would be better to refocus on the tried and tested formula of Western alliances. No doubt, these relationships need reinvigorating and to be given a new purpose. As Freedman puts it, the US and UK in particular need a new "shared project". Clearly, there are political limitations as far as the Trump administration is concerned, but even that should not stop the UK attempting to rebuild its relations with its European partners – as well as with other democracies – and begin to think how they form a common response to the issues of unilateralism, protectionism and deglobalisation, as well as climate change, migration and the role of China.

As former Labour leader John Smith said in his Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Lecture in 1993, "[cynics] will always find a host of reasons why change is impossible, even undesirable. Surely the lesson of history is that we must be grateful that the cynics were outnumbered by the people of vision back in 1945". Today, as in 1945, 'vision' does not amount to idealism or an unbending faith in a world yet to come, nor sentimentalism for one already

passed. Rather, it involves a clear-sighted view of the world: a US unwilling to lead, a China increasingly exerting itself beyond its region, multilateral institutions descending into ever more dysfunction, an ineffective European Union on the global stage and the UK more isolated than any other time in recent history.

The future

This makes for an unpalatable menu. Yet it is the understanding on which we must proceed. The UK cannot do much about domestic politics in the US; the best that can be hoped of Donald Trump is that he refrains from destructive acts. Yet even Joe Biden would not signal a return to business as usual. As Kori Schake [wrote](#) recently, he has far from an impeccable track record of decision-making when it comes to foreign policy.

China, too, must not be seen in simplistic terms. Yes, it has become more assertive, but it is also faces constraints, just as the US has done in recent decades. It is important not to buy into Trump-like hysteria, but we must also recognise the many illicit activities of Chinese state and state-sponsored actors, whether stealing intellectual property or intimidating neighbouring countries. Notably, China's economic power is increasingly being leveraged against governments that criticise it, most recently recently Australia and New Zealand. The UK ought to be at the forefront of seeking

reform of multilateral institutions. We have been nearing the point for some time that many simply cease to function. This indeed is what has happened with the World Trade Organisation's Appellate Court, and further threats have been made against the [World Health Organisation](#) and the [International Criminal Court](#). Plus, protectionist measures have been on the [rise](#) over the past decade, further calling into question the continuing effectiveness of the WTO. Unilateralism is increasingly preferred over UN mediation, especially among larger powers, not least the US. It is simply a recognition of fact that for many of these institutions it is a matter of reform or, at the very best, increasing irrelevance.

Relations with the EU have come to be seen simply in narrow, transactional terms as a matter of what the UK can extract at a minimal price to sovereignty. When it comes to foreign affairs, defence and security, the UK has rejected even the need for a treaty basis for future co-operation. The argument goes that the EU has relatively limited powers in these matters, which themselves are subject to unanimity, making it an ineffective and a relatively minor player. The UK, it is thought, can achieve what it wishes in Europe mainly through NATO and the E3 alliance with France and Germany. Yet, at a time when western alliances appear frail, near complete UK deinstitutionalisation from the EU only exacerbates this trend. One way or another, there

needs to be a formal forum for UK-EU interaction to ensure future mutual understanding and co-operation outside of a trade and economic context. There is no point relitigating the arguments of the Brexit saga. The UK has to learn to operate in this environment, with its most valued ally often AWOL and its erstwhile European partners alienated. It is a rebuilding exercise that will take time, perhaps several political cycles. Yet, unless it is built on stable foundations, any rebuilding will be shaky. The UK cannot luxuriate in its apparent historical glories. What is needed is a rational appraisal of the world as it is, the UK's place within it and the modest contribution that it undoubtedly can make to global peace and security.

All the world may appear in trouble once again, but for Labour – indeed all parties – there is a rich heritage to draw on. The successes that Bevin achieved in an arguably more troubled world were the result of frankness about the challenges, practicality in tackling them and modesty about the UK's capacities to do so. As a set of guiding principles, the party could do worse.

Tags: [Lisa Nandy](#) / [Jeremy Corbyn](#) / [Foreign Policy](#)



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