

Sir Stephen Lovegrove speech at the Council on Geostrategy

Introduction

Thank you very much for having me here today at the Council on Geostrategy. I've been impressed with the Council's work. I welcome the way you're challenging the status quo, and I support your mission "to strengthen Britain and re-assert our leadership in an increasingly uncertain and dangerous world". And it is an uncertain world, and it's one in which the pace of change is accelerating.

What I want to do today is take a step back from the immediate rush of events. It's easier said than done, as I've found in my first few months as National Security Adviser. But it's essential to make the attempt, and I'd like today to reflect – including in the light of events in Afghanistan – on some of the things that have changed, and on some of the things that haven't.

Afghanistan has been a feature of many of our lives, in different ways, for the past 20 years.

Over the weekend we remembered the devastating attack that took place in 2001 in the heart of New York City, in Washington DC, and in Pennsylvania. The events of 9/11 have shaped much of the last two decades of our foreign and security policy.

It is a truism that we all remember where we were on that day and I won't regale you with my own memories, save to say that I was working as an investment banker at Deutsche Bank – whose building adjacent to the twin towers was destroyed – when my colleague Paul on the research floor, where they had televisions, called me saying "You'd better come over. History is being made".

Indeed it was. Although none of us could have predicted that we would spend much of the next twenty years in Afghanistan and Iraq dealing with the consequences of decisions that were taken in the months that followed.

And, as a banker back then, I certainly didn't anticipate that I would be sitting in front of you now, exploring whether our withdrawal from Afghanistan would see us having to adopt a fundamentally different approach to national security.

But the juxtaposition of the anniversary of that attack with our withdrawal from Afghanistan – has naturally led some to pose difficult questions.

- To question whether the events of recent weeks herald the end of the long American century and whether American security guarantees can be relied on.
- To ask if NATO's relevance is reducing.

- To query whether they have terminally undermined “the West’s” – by which I meant the political West’s – values and credibility.
- To ask whether the limits of Britain’s independent agency have been properly and realistically calibrated and if we need a radical rethink of our strategy.

My answer to those questions is – firmly – no

That is not to understate the importance of the events of the last few weeks, nor the human cost.

There are implications that we need to consider carefully.

There is a debt that we owe to those who have sacrificed so much to deliver two decades of progress to the people of Afghanistan.

There is a need to ensure that events in Afghanistan do not become a call to arms for terrorists, at home or abroad.

We will work through both these challenges with our allies, partners and, I hope, with groups like this one.

But, I believe the fundamentals of the approach that the Government set out in the Integrated Review published earlier this year remain absolutely the right ones.

My proposition is that we have already changed a great deal in how we are thinking about security across Government. And today, I want to say more about what we mean by integration – the integration of our values and our interests; integration with our allies and partners; and integration across Government ensuring that we make best use of the full range of levers of national power.

The judgements on the global context were right

Let me begin by reminding you of the world that the Integrated Review described.

It describes an increasingly complex environment which is characterised by the need to confront a range of diverse and networked threats to the UK, its people and its interests.

It emphasises geopolitical and geoeconomic shifts, not least as a result of China’s increasing assertiveness and the direct threat posed by Russia.

It warned against a complacent defence of the status quo given the pressure that the international system is coming under.

It set out how the return of systemic competition means that we will need to confront adversaries and competitors across a range of activity, from legitimate economic competition to much more malign state threats, both covert and overt.

It recognised the transformational nature of technology and the potential risks of proliferation.

And it described how we will need to confront these emerging global challenges including by building resilience at home.

I doubt that many would challenge the validity of that diagnosis and assessment.

But do events in Afghanistan invalidate the vision of Britain in the world that the Integrated Review paints? Of a problem solving, load bearing ally, investing in and protecting our technological edge? Of a country more deeply engaged in areas of the globe where we have historic ties but where we have been less active in the recent past?

I don't think so. My judgement is that recent events demonstrate that we must double down on the trajectory the IR sets out.

We should strengthen our determination to build UK capabilities and work with partners to capitalise on the UK's great strengths.

How we do that of course will be crucial.

But I see nothing that fundamentally changes the strategy. In order to deliver security for the people of the UK:

- We need to pursue an energetic policy of promoting our interests overseas in order to safeguard them at home.
- We need to work with a wide range of allies and partners who share our values and our interests.
- And we need to assemble all the levers of statecraft to promote the UK's interests from trade to science and technology to diplomacy.

Interests driven and values led

The first component of this approach is to energetically pursue our interests.

And, in the era of systemic competition, it is impossible to divorce our interests from our values.

The nations of the UK are bound by shared values that are fundamental to our national identity, democracy and way of life. These include a commitment to universal human rights, the rule of law, free speech, and fairness and equality.

These are values that are shared by our closest allies and partners

They are values that helped us win the Cold War.

They are the values that have ensured the UK is – and will remain – a global power, including through our cultural influence.

The global release – finally – of the latest of the James Bond films, shows that the intelligence agencies can do soft power too.

Demonstrating by example that free and democratic government delivers greater security and prosperity for citizens wherever they are must be at the heart of the approach we take to competition in the 21st Century.

We do not defend these systems and values out of a sense of nostalgia, but because a world in which democratic societies flourish and fundamental human rights are protected is one that is more conducive to our sovereignty, security and prosperity as a nation.

The IR committed the UK to a more active role in shaping a future international order that remains open – fit for the challenges ahead, based on democratic values, and restored to a spirit of global cooperation.

Defending our values is at the heart of this Government's agenda. It is as important in our strategy towards China and Russia as it is in countering violent extremism.

This will not always be easy. Events in Afghanistan are good evidence of this. But our actions demonstrate our commitment.

The UK will not stand aside to let Afghanistan become a new centre for terrorism, either directed or inspired.

We will stand by the people of Afghanistan with humanitarian aid, pressing the Taliban to ensure a safe environment for its delivery and safe passage for those who want to leave. Creating the conditions for greater stability and security will allow us to better deliver our interests and vice versa.

That is why we will remain invested in the future of Afghanistan and will lead a concerted and coordinated effort from the international community.

Importance of working with partners: UK leadership role

The experience in Afghanistan reinforced that the challenges set out in the Integrated Review are global. They impact our partners in Europe, in the US, in the Indo Pacific as they impact on us and those in the immediate region. No country will be able to influence them alone.

I doubt any would seek to.

The need to work in partnership to maximise our impact was a key feature of the approach set out in the IR and it's an area where the UK has great strengths.

From our leading role in NATO, to our strong, strategic bilateral relationships, to our position at the heart of the Commonwealth, the UK has extraordinarily broad and deep international set of partnerships that improve our security and our prosperity.

The IR makes clear that we will continue to benefit from, and invest in, these alliances.

We have seen this year what we can achieve through these relationships.

We have delivered a G7 summit which brought together world leaders in Cornwall to discuss the challenges we face and agree how we will begin to address them.

We will soon host COP26 to ensure that we move ahead in tackling the universal threat posed by climate change.

And we will need to work closely with nations less familiar to us, at least in that guise: for example, Russia, China and Iran are all deeply invested in a stable Afghanistan.

Our approach is, and will always be, international. That is not incompatible with acting in our national strategic interests. Rather, it is central to doing so.

If we are able to prevail in this era of systemic competition, we will do so with allies and partners.

NATO, the US and Europe

NATO is, and will remain, the bedrock of our security. The collective security provided by the alliance is our first, last, and best, guarantee against any existential threat posed by any adversary.

It is the most successful military alliance in history and we are totally committed to our leadership role. We are delivering on that commitment every single day whether that's through our significant investment in the modernisation of the Armed Forces; through our contributions on the ground such as to provide an enhanced forward presence in eastern Europe; or through our drive to modernise the alliance so that it remains at the heart of our approach throughout the 21st Century.

Fundamentally, this alliance has been successful because it has bound US and European security together.

There have been rivers of ink spilt in recent weeks about the decline of both US power and its commitment to our shared security. Arresting though that commentary might be, it is only – and just – that: commentary. And it is wrong.

The US has unrivalled economic strength.

It has the most powerful military that the world has ever seen, and its protective umbrella continues to offer shelter to countries across the world.

Its soft power can be seen in every corner of the globe, and its values and way of life continue to be the ones that most ordinary people aspire to.

I have spoken candidly to counterparts from Europe and the Far East and not one of them has expressed any concern about the nature and firmness of any US security guarantee.

That is not to say that it is wrong or dangerous to ask the question, publicly or privately.

It is the hallmark of a mature, honest debate that we can do so. But it is important to be loud and clear about the answer. Our adversaries typically do not have allies that they can rely on. We do.

And the US always has been, and will continue to be, foremost amongst them.

Is the US's economic dominance likely to be challenged in the decades that come? Of course. But the idea that the US either is in terminal decline or has suddenly become uninterested in the world is eyewash.

I am proud that we have renewed our historic ties through the signature of the Atlantic Charter by the Prime Minister and President Biden in Cornwall. Our cooperation across foreign policy, intelligence and defence is unparalleled. And our partnership with the US enables the UK, and our European partners, to play a more active role than we would otherwise be able to.

That is not to say we won't sometimes disagree or have different areas of focus or emphasis. Like the US, the UK will always be guided by a clear-sighted assessment of our national interests.

But in this complex and interconnected world, our respective strategic interests will almost always align. I am reassured by my US contacts' commitments to working in partnership with us and I expect to see that commitment underscored in the Administration's forthcoming National Security Strategy, its National Defense Strategy and its Nuclear Posture Review.

□We need to accelerate this vital partnership further including in critical areas such as strategic planning, future force design, technological and industrial cooperation – and a systematic approach to reducing or removing barriers to sharing information, data and technology where it is in our mutual advantage to do so.

The US relationship is not the only one that matters.

We must also invest in our strategic, bilateral, relationships in Europe. The UK and France are the continent's pre-eminent military powers. Germany's economic strength gives it substantial global influence. And – let us be clear – our geographic proximity means that we will continue to face many of the same threats to our security. So, where our interests align and where we face common threats, we will work closely with our European allies and partners as sovereign equals or through a NATO framework.

As we always have done.

New partnerships

The relationships we enjoy with the US and our European partners are well developed. But we must take a global approach to partnering. I was delighted that the leaders of South Korea, Australia, India and South Africa were able to join the Prime Minister and other G7 leaders in Cornwall. We must redouble our efforts to build these global partnerships of countries that share our values and with whom we can work to promote democracy, free trade and free societies. I think the D10 (the Democratic 10) will be at the heart of that approach.

We need to demonstrate our commitment through our actions and not just warm words. The historic deployment of the Carrier Strike Group to Asia Pacific is a tangible example of both our desire to build these new relationships and the value that the UK can bring to them. And they are a 65,000 tonne demonstration of the UK's commitment and investment in the region.

Our commitment to working with a range of partners is not just demonstrated by the great grey hulls of the Royal Navy. It is evident every day.

- From our work with France in Africa.
- To the Joint Expeditionary Force which draws together like minded partners in Northern Europe, as demonstrated through Exercise BALTIC PROTECTOR. And I am delighted that Iceland has just joined the JEF.
- In our work with Caribbean and Latin American partners to counter serious and organised crime and disrupt the flow of narcotics before they reach the UK.
- Through our approach to global development including our leading role funding the WHO and global education.
- And of course there is AUKUS announced by the Prime Minister, the President and Prime Minister of Australia last night. There is no better example of Britain's new approach in action than this new alliance with Australia and the United States through which we will collaborate on a range of defence technologies, including cyber and AI.

Most notably, there is a commitment by the three nations to deliver a plan that will enable the Royal Australian Navy to field nuclear powered – not nuclear armed – submarines in the coming years. It is perhaps the most significant capability collaboration anywhere in the world in the past six decades.

This has been a project in gestation for some months – right through the Afghanistan drawdown – and is a powerful illustration of how we are building new long term partnerships rooted in Britain's values, its scientific and engineering excellence, and in our alliances.

There are only six nations capable of fielding nuclear powered submarines – ourselves, the other permanent members of the UN Security Council, and India. Australia will become the seventh, representing a significant commitment to peace and stability in the region, mirroring our own defence settlement, which saw a 10% uplift in spending agreed last year.

These are profound, strategic shifts, and collaboration on nuclear projects creates indissoluble bonds around which new matrices of collaboration can be built.

New approach to burden sharing

So we are already active globally, working with a wide range of allies and partners. But we need to do more.

In order to address the challenges we face, the UK and its friends will need to take a more structured and sophisticated approach to burden sharing.

The answer for the UK is in, to coin a phrase, “strategic ... partnering”.

We will strengthen our global partnerships with clearer agreements about how we can coordinate our efforts to face down these diverse and fast moving global challenges – whether they present in Africa, the Middle East, the Pacific or northern Europe.

This will not always be easy it will require some difficult choices and trade-offs. It will also require us to be clear about where we will lead, where we will support others. We must make our assumptions explicit. We need to clearly communicate. And we must be willing to be flexible to work with both old friends and new partners.

Integrating the levers of national power

Strategic partnering will require the UK to bring to bear the considerable and unique capabilities that we possess.

As I have noted, we are undertaking the biggest increase in defence spending since the end of the Cold War. The UK will spend 2.3% of GDP on defence this year which will cement our place as the largest defence spender in Europe. As Permanent Secretary of the MOD at the time, I know just how significant this commitment was to unlock the modernisation of the Armed Forces.

But the headline number alone is not the end of the story. The substance of the uplift matters too. There is now a plan for UK Defence. The equipment plan is in balance. We have taken difficult decisions to enable us to invest in new technologies which provide the UK with a strategic advantage. It will deliver a force designed around the strategic context of the 2020s, not the strategic concept of the post-9/11 period. And it will enable the Armed Forces to make a decisive contribution to an integrated, cross Government approach to national security.

We are making a similar investment in our ability to think strategically and drive this integration across Government. The UK is renowned as a thought leader and is envied for its ability to bring together the instruments of power. But we must not rest on our laurels.

That is why I have strengthened the strategic capability in the National Security Secretariat, and why I know MOD and FCDO are doing the same.

I want to drive a culture across the UK national security community of genuine insight and long-term thinking.

I want to ensure that we are well prepared to address the full range of threats we face at home and overseas, and build our resilience to these threats.

I want to ensure that we realise the vision in the Integrated Review of an adaptive approach to the challenges we face.

And I want to ensure that the Cabinet Office is properly working across government to champion thought leadership and set the agenda.

It is also why we are eager to learn from groups like the Council on Geostrategy.

We need new voices in the national security debate – a generational refresh and new types of expertise from subject matter knowledge of rising powers in Asia to the cross-over advice from world-class technical experts.

This will require a substantial cultural shift within the civil service to be far more open to bringing external voices into the policymaking process.

That will not be easy. It may not be quick. But I am up for the challenge and I hope today marks an important milestone in that process.

What have we learned and conclusion

Over the last half an hour, I have set out why I believe the fundamentals of the IR remain the right ones: a Global Britain that is problem solving, driven by both its interests and values, and works in partnership with others. But that is not to deny that there are lessons from recent weeks. So I want to conclude with five reflections:

- First, the importance of an integrated approach. Wars aren't won by numbers of troops or weaponry alone. The collapse of the larger and better-equipped ANDSF showed the importance of psychological factors like morale, expectations and faith in political leadership. And the techniques of hybrid warfare must be understood across Government. This is why I've focused so much today on the need to integrate across government and break down some of the traditional stove pipes.
- Second, the imperative that we are guided by clearly defined values and unshakeable belief that a democratic, secure and economically free system of government delivers the best outcome for citizens wherever they are. We must work with our allies and partners to categorically demonstrate this in ways which are tangible at home and inspire those who can deliver change overseas.
- Third, we need to be clear on the challenges, timelines and dependencies of ambitious interventions. We should be active but pragmatic. And we must be clear on the limits of what we can do, consistent in our objectives, and frank about where we are dependent upon others to support us. Fourth, that public consent for foreign policy, military

interventions and our wider approach to national security is a critical factor. Once support for the mission in Afghanistan ebbed away in the US, it became clear that it would come to an end sooner rather than later. That's why IR sets out a need to further develop public engagement capability. We must make the case for how international engagement affects people's real lives and helps make the UK safer and more prosperous.

- And, finally, the UK can make a difference. In the recent past, our Armed Forces, diplomats and development experts helped deny terrorists a safe haven to launch attacks against the UK. They enabled development that improved millions of lives and transformed Afghan society. They allowed a generation of Afghan women and girls to receive an education. The value that the people of Afghanistan attached to that was tragically apparent as the Taliban took power.

For the future, AUKUS shows the way. Working with allies, building on Britain's military and technical prowess, assuring the conditions for peace and prosperity.

Thank you.