

Speech: “An Invisible Chain” Speech by the Foreign Secretary

In 1826, my predecessor Foreign Secretary George Canning described the global balance of power as a “standard perpetually varying, as civilisation advances, and as new nations spring up and take their place among established political communities”.

This was an era when South American countries were seizing independence from Spain and Portugal.

The New World was beginning to upset the balance of the Old and Canning saw an opportunity for Britain.

An opportunity to rethink British diplomacy, to seek new allies across the Atlantic, and thwart old foes France and Spain.

Canning had his own bed in the Foreign Office and when not lying in it complaining about his gout, he ordered British emissaries to sign trade agreements with Mexico and Colombia.

Times have changed.

I have no bed in the Foreign Office and I am happy to inform you that I don't have gout either. Well, at least not yet.

But this country is at a pivotal, historic moment.

The global balance of power is shifting once more and Post-Brexit, our place within it as well.

And whilst at the same time our democratic values are arguably under greater threat than at any time since the fall of the Berlin Wall, I want to argue today that we can use our influence, our reach and power to defend our values by becoming an invisible chain that links the world's democracies.

Why We Should Reassess Our Global Role

With the backdrop of Brexit, there is no doubt that our role has to change.

It is a legal and structural change it will have a profound impact on our foreign policy and whilst our commitment to European security remains unbreakable, the nature of our relationship with our closest neighbours will naturally change and we need to ensure this is a change for the better, not the worse.

But it isn't just Brexit that's causing change, other events are even more significant.

Let's just take three examples:

First: the rise of China and the Asian powerhouse economies.

Their growth alters the balance of power with all the speed Canning foretold.

In 1980, China comprised just 2 percent of the world economy. Today its 15 percent.

By 2030, China is set to overtake the United States as the biggest economy in the world.

By 2050, the combined economies of China and India will exceed the GDPs of the entire G7 – the US, UK, Japan, France, Germany, Canada and Italy – put together.

Power always follows money so we must not underestimate the profound impact this will have.

Secondly there is a growing threat to democracy and democratic values.

Its now clear that the spread of democracy has slowed, gradually come to a halt, in some respects even gone into reverse.

We may be suffering what the scholar Larry Diamond described as “a democratic recession”.

Last year, according to Freedom House, 71 countries suffered “net declines in political rights and civil liberties” and this is a reversal of what seemed like the inevitable onward march of democracy and democratic values after the lifting of the Iron Curtain.

It is of more than symbolic importance that by 2030, for the first time in our lifetimes the world’s largest economy will not be a democracy and then we have to factor in something else, the growing threats to the long-established, rules-based international order.

It is not just within countries that we see change taking place. The interaction between countries is changing too.

Having a rules-based international order has made us more prosperous and successful than ever before in the history of humanity.

But it is now openly questioned.

Chemical weapons have been used to lethal effect in Syria and for the first time in our history, they have been used on the streets of Britain too.

Free trade is under threat with the World Trade Organisation facing the most severe challenge in its history. If new trade barriers were to appear after Brexit, that would make things even worse.

The international order that has existed since 1945 was, in large measure, a creation of Britain and its allies.

At its heart was a simple credo: namely that the best way to create stability

was to build a system where might is not automatically right, and one where every country, large or small, lives under the protection and security of the UN Charter.

By and large, it succeeded: for the first time in history, the bleak vision of Thucydides, that “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must”, was no longer always automatically valid.

The United Kingdom with its Empire declining and the United States in its ascendancy determined to find a better way. And through a pattern of alliances and multilateral organisations, that vision came into plain sight.

But today that system is under threat.

A new order is rising alongside the old.

The democratic values that once bound us together are threatened.

The post-war international order that we built to defend them is being questioned.

And people are turning to its architects and asking: “what now?”

In Britain, we’ve got to ask ourselves the same: what’s our plan? What’s our role? How can we strengthen and defend our way of life and the values we believe in?

Britain’s Future Role

To start, we must build on the strengths that are rooted in our national character.

We are the home of parliamentary democracy.

We have a profound belief in this country’s institutions that allow the peaceful transfer of political power.

As an outward-looking, seafaring nation, we have long known how to build alliances in every corner of the globe.

As a country endowed with the best universities, scientists, engineers, artists and authors – alongside, of course, the world’s language – we have immense reserves of soft power.

We have kept our promise to spend 0.7 percent of national income on overseas aid, giving this country the third biggest development budget in the world and our history has also created special bonds with the most powerful democracy, the United States, and the world’s largest democracy, India.

We have the closest of relationships with other parts of the English-speaking world, from Ireland to Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

The success of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting this year in

London, one of the biggest ever gatherings of its kind, also shows the enduring strength of our friendships within the world's most important north-south alliance.

Our network of friendships is unparalleled.

But it's underpinned by something more than shared history, shared language or shared culture.

Those friendships are underpinned by the values – democracy, the rule of law, separation of powers, respect for individual civil and political rights, a belief in free trade – bind us.

And when those values are under threat, Britain's role – I would argue – is to defend them.

Which is why to do so, we must become an invisible chain linking the world's democracies.

And we can have confidence that such an approach will work because alliances built on shared values are always more durable than those based on transactional convenience.

We must remember that the impressive progress of modern history has happened not by accident but by design.

Its continued success can't be taken for granted.

So it is up to us to strengthen our resolve, make the most of our unique position and forge an unbreakable chain that will hold those vital values that link our countries.

Raising Our Diplomatic Game

So how do we do this?

First, we must reinvigorate and expand British diplomacy.

In the past you may have heard of retrenchment and retreat. Not any more.

Today, I am announcing the biggest expansion of Britain's diplomatic network for a generation, including 12 new Posts and nearly 1,000 more personnel.

I can confirm that by the end of next year, we will open six new High Commissions in Lesotho, eSwatini (formerly Swaziland), the Bahamas, Tonga, Samoa, and Vanuatu.

We will base new Resident Commissioners in Antigua & Barbuda, Grenada, and St Vincent & the Grenadines (nice job for someone).

We will upgrade the British Office in Chad to a full Embassy and establish a new British mission to the headquarters of the Association of South-East Asian Nations in Jakarta.

Thereafter, we will open new British embassies in Djibouti and Niger.

By the end of 2020, we will send 335 more British diplomats overseas, and reinforce the Foreign Office in London with another 328 personnel.

We will hire another 329 locally-engaged staff in our embassies around the world.

In total, our network will gain 992 extra people, meaning we are represented in 160 countries – of the 192 countries of the UN, that's the same as France and only marginally less than United States and China.

At the same time, we will also strengthen our skills and expertise.

Over the next five years we will build on William Hague's far-sighted decision to reopen the Foreign Office Language School by increasing the number of languages taught from 50 to 70.

The 20 new languages will vary from the Central Asian tongues of Kazakh and Kyrgyz, to Shona in Zimbabwe and Gujarati in India.

Within the next ten years, we will double the number of British diplomats who speak a foreign language in the country where they serve from 500 at present, to 1,000, meaning that getting on for half of our overseas postings will be staffed by linguists.

We will also broaden the pool of talent we tap into for our Ambassadors.

As we regain control of our trade policy, it makes sense to open up applications to external candidates, so that one or two positions every year might be filled by people with important experience from outside the civil service, especially the world of commerce.

The strength of our network is its professionalism, and that's what I think has given us what I believe is the finest diplomatic service in the world.

But we must never close our eyes to the approaches and skills of other industries.

I am sure there are experienced, multi-lingual businesspeople who would welcome the chance to enter the service of their country at this critical time and the Foreign Office of the future will welcome them to some of our key Ambassadorial posts.

We will also ensure that those who champion Britain abroad better represent the country they serve.

So this year we launched a new university outreach programme, visiting every part of Britain, to encourage applications from under-represented groups.

This includes not just women and BAME candidates, but also those from backgrounds that have not traditionally felt comfortable applying for a career in the service.

Finally, a small but I think important detail, is something that indicates how I intend our diplomacy to develop.

When I arrived, we had secure phone connections in my office to the US, Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

I have now added Japan, France and Germany to the list.

It means a lot more technology in my office than in Canning's day – but also allows for the strengthening of important alliances that he would have thoroughly approved.

Diplomacy With A Purpose

Taken together, this amounts to a considerable investment in our service, its capacity and its future.

Adding links to the chain that will allow us to play our part in uniting those countries who share our values.

Now we must use that network to get to work.

First, we must redouble our efforts to defend the rules-based international order.

To do that, we need multilateral organisations that are fit for purpose.

Reforming out-dated and bureaucratic structures is the best way to make sure the institutions they serve do not collapse.

That means delivering UN reform, as advocated by UN Secretary General Guterres.

It means fairer burden-sharing in NATO, which continues to be the bedrock of European security.

It means WTO reform, so that we succeed in warding off the dangerous temptations of protectionism.

It means reforming the World Bank, so its governance reflects the changing balance of the global economy.

And it means reforming the structures of the Commonwealth, so there is proper accountability for the Secretariat and a more effective decision-making process.

To strengthen that invisible chain between the democracies, we must also ensure we are better at acting in concert when we face real and present threats.

That was shown to great effect after the nerve agent attack in Salisbury.

Then, far from buckling in the face of Russian aggression, 28 democracies came together and expelled 153 Russian spies.

The biggest coordinated expulsion in the history of diplomacy.

When we act in concert, we are strong.

When we act together, the price for transgression becomes too high for the perpetrator.

But this nimbleness of response often eludes us.

So I want our fine diplomats to find a way to do this more effectively.

And that means going beyond traditional diplomacy focused on other governments and creating new partnerships, including with the private sector.

Nor is it solely when we face security threats that we should strengthen the chains that connect like-minded countries.

We must be better at standing together to defend the values we share.

Whether that is: the prevention of sexual violence in conflict, the struggle against the illegal wildlife trade, or threats to freedom of expression.

Because access to fair and accurate information is also something we should remember is the lifeblood of democracy.

For that reason – and prompted in no small part by the tragic killing of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi – I am placing the resources of the Foreign Office behind the cause of media freedom. This campaign will be marked by a major international conference on media freedom that I will host in London next year.

And finally, as we strengthen our diplomatic efforts, we must never forget the importance of speaking from a position of strength.

Soft power matters but it is immensely more effective when backed up by hard power.

In the last resort, we need to be able to call on our fine armed forces, whose importance was recognised by new funding in the Budget this week.

So we will continue to spend at least two percent of GDP on defence, and we will replace our independent nuclear deterrent.

And we will continue to call on others in NATO to play their part too.

Conclusion

Almost 200 years on, Canning's law still holds: new nations rise and the global order changes.

The apparently inevitable progress of democracy since the fall of the Berlin Wall is no more.

Like Canning we must seize the opportunities that present themselves within

the tumult.

We must work to strengthen and defend our values across the globe.

And as we face our post-Brexit future, Britain has a role to play.

It is one that we are uniquely suited to deliver.

Remembering our responsibilities.

Not overstating our strength, but not understating it either.

Because right now our history, our networks and our unique combination of soft and hard power gives us a real ability to shape the course of history in line with our values.

So let's play our part helping to build that invisible chain between those who share our values.

And make it as strong and resilient as it needs to be as new nations rise and the world order is challenged anew.