

The Case for Progressive Realism

Why Britain Must Chart a New Global Course

DAVID LAMMY

This year, voters in the United Kingdom will head to the polls as Keir Starmer's Labour Party seeks to win power from the Conservative Party for the first time since 1997. It is difficult to overstate how much the world has changed in the intervening years. When former Prime Minister Tony Blair entered Downing Street 27 years ago, the British economy was larger than India's and China's combined. The United Kingdom still administered a major Asian city, Hong Kong, as a colony. The increase in global temperatures from the long-term average was less than half what it is today. And American dominance was so striking that some people saw the spread of the liberal democratic model as inevitable.

Today, the global order is messy and multipolar. China has become a superpower, with an economy more than five times as large as the United

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Kingdom's. But there has also been a shift in power to a wider variety of states since I was first a minister almost 19 years ago. As a result, geopolitics takes place on a much more crowded board. Countries described in these pages by CIA Director William Burns as the "hedging middle" are striking bargains and setting their own agendas in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Much of the news is grim: wars are increasing in scale and intensity. Democracies are on the back foot. Climate breakdown is no longer a future worry; it is already here. But the task of saving the planet has begun in earnest as states both compete and cooperate in an energy transition on which humanity's future depends.

Yet rather than seeing this world clearly and rising to the challenge, the Conservative Party has, over 14 years, turned the British government inward. Successive Conservative governments sank deeply into nostalgia and denial about the United Kingdom's place in the world. The government, for example, crashed out of the European Union without a clear plan for what to do next. It treated with contempt the country's global reputation for upholding the rule of law, threatening to imperil the Good Friday Agreement (which brought peace to Northern Ireland) and leave the European Convention on Human Rights. When China, the United States, and the EU built competing green industrial policies to claim the industries of the future, the British government failed to follow suit. Instead, it squandered the United Kingdom's climate leadership by tearing up net-zero carbon emissions commitments, throwing business plans into disarray.

Conservative officials proved especially callous in their approach to the global South. Over the last decade, they have undermined the United Kingdom's standing as a development superpower with a mismanaged merger of government departments that devalued expertise and forced cuts to crucial programs. And instead of fighting for the hearts and minds of the new global middle class, they addressed this group in often offensive tones, such as when then Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson publicly recited a colonialist poem by Rudyard Kipling during a 2017 visit to Myanmar. And the government compromised one of the United Kingdom's greatest strengths—its soft power—by attacking institutions such as universities, courts, and the BBC.

Fixing this damage will not be easy. The British economy is stuck in a quagmire of low growth. The British Army has fewer soldiers than at any point since the Napoleonic era. Many public services are on their knees. But if the Labour Party wins in the coming election, it can

deliver a decade of national renewal along with a clear-eyed approach to international relations: progressive realism.

Progressive realism advocates using realist means to pursue progressive ends. For the British government, that requires tough-minded honesty about the United Kingdom, the balance of power, and the state of the world. But instead of using the logic of realism solely to accumulate power, progressive realism uses it in service of just goals—for example, countering climate change, defending democracy, and advancing the world's economic development. It is the pursuit of ideals without delusions about what is achievable.

IN THE INTEREST OF JUSTICE

The path to a progressive realist foreign policy runs through two of the United Kingdom's great foreign secretaries. The first was Ernest Bevin. Born into crippling rural poverty and orphaned as a young child, he rose to become foreign secretary in 1945 after a career as a union leader and a Labour politician. A few weeks after taking office, Bevin was catapulted into negotiations on the new world order with U.S. President Harry Truman and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin.

Bevin was committed to realism, a politics based on respect for facts. This dedication proved pivotal to European security. He stiffened wavering American resolve during the 1948–49 Soviet blockade of Berlin by spelling out the stakes for U.S. officials, pushed for a West German state as an anchor for the West, and persuaded British Prime Minister Clement Attlee that the United Kingdom should acquire nuclear weapons. His crowning achievement was convincing a skeptical Truman administration to commit to a NATO alliance that explicitly declared that an attack on any member was an attack on all members—the treaty's totemic Article 5. Thanks to Bevin's work, the alliance has held firm. April of this year marked the 75th anniversary of NATO's creation.

But Bevin, like many great politicians, was a product of his time. He too breezily justified the wrongs of colonialism through claims that such measures were taken in the national interest. He also did not live in a world where the West had to cooperate with its rivals on climate change and artificial intelligence. Today, realism alone will not be enough to safeguard the planet.

To do that, democracies must also tap into the tradition of another great modern British foreign secretary: Robin Cook. When he came into power in 1997, Cook laid out a vision for a foreign policy with “an ethical

dimension,” even as he recognized that the United Kingdom’s security must always come first. Through the force of his convictions, he made climate change a core focus of the Foreign Office for the first time in history, brought human rights into the diplomatic mainstream, championed a global ban on landmines, and marshaled the British government’s allies to fight against war crimes in Kosovo. With Blair, he helped the United Kingdom become a superpower when it came to international development by committing the country to meeting the UN’s 0.7 percent aid target.

There was realism in Cook, too; he opposed the Iraq war, with warnings that now stand as prescient. Yet Cook’s vision of adding more ethics to foreign policy at times snagged on the limits of idealism, particularly when it came to hard choices about arms exports. But these limits do not mean idealism has no place in foreign policy. Just because someone is progressive does not mean that person cannot be a realist. Governments, likewise, do not have to choose between values and interests.

And the United Kingdom shouldn’t. In the spirit of Bevin, it must be realistic about the state of the world and the country’s role in it. Yet like Cook, the country should adopt a progressive belief in its capacity to champion multilateral causes, build institutions, defend democracy, stand up for the rule of law, combat poverty, and fight climate change.

COMING TO TERMS

A progressive realism worth its name begins by being honest about assumptions the West made in the past that turned out to be wrong. The broad consensus that economic globalization would inevitably breed liberal democratic values proved false. Instead, democracies have become more economically dependent on authoritarian states, with the share of world trade between democracies declining from 74 percent in 1998 to 47 percent in 2022. China provides a particularly stark case in point. The country was admitted into the World Trade Organization in 2001 under the hope that political reforms would follow economic ones. But the state became more repressive as the economy opened up.

The rise of China—which now has the world’s largest economy by purchasing power parity—has ended the era of U.S. hegemony. The world is shaped by competition between Beijing and Washington. Beijing challenges the U.S.-led order in nearly every domain, from developing the technologies and green supply chains of the future to sourcing and processing critical raw materials. But the competition is especially fierce when it comes to security. The Chinese navy has the greatest number of



warships in the world. According to a report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, China's shipbuilding capacity is approximately 230 times as large as that of the United States. Beijing's growing military power has, in turn, helped Russia's challenge in Europe. To compete with China, the United States will inevitably have to pay more attention to the Indo-Pacific. This shift will come even though Europe is worryingly dependent on U.S. support to stop Moscow's war against Ukraine.

China is not the world's only rising power. A broadening group of states—including Brazil, India, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—have claimed seats at the table. They and others have the power to shape their regional environments, and they ignore the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States ever more frequently. In the twentieth century, some of these states aligned with rival superpower-led blocs. But today, to maximize their autonomy, they strike deals with all the great powers. Their noted indifference to many U.S. pleas is partly the result of the chaotic Western military interventions during the first decades of this century. The failures of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya undermined the idea that liberal interventionism was, as Blair remarked in 1999, "a more subtle blend of mutual self-interest and moral purpose." Instead, it came to be seen as a recipe for disorder.

A British government that adheres to progressive realism will not repeat these errors. That said, the last decade has made it clear that

inaction has high costs, too. The fact that the United States did not police its redline against the use of chemical weapons in Syria not only entrenched Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's monstrous regime; it also emboldened Russian President Vladimir Putin. He concluded that the West no longer had the stomach to defend the rules-based order and, by annexing Crimea, applied the logic of what David Miliband, another former Labour foreign secretary, has called "the age of impunity." When the West responded to that provocation with only light sanctions, Putin came to believe he could fundamentally upend the world order in 2022.

The West is finally taking Moscow's threats seriously. European states increasingly recognize Russia as a long-term, generational threat that requires a long-term, generational response. This will demand the stamina and determination of Bevin. But the West has yet to win back support from many key countries. As Fiona Hill, a former senior director of the U.S. National Security Council, said in 2023, the war has become a proxy for a rebellion of "the rest" against the West. In UN General Assembly votes over the past two years, countries that collectively represent approximately two-thirds of the world's population have either abstained or voted against motions to censure Putin. Many of those countries have rebuffed Western attempts to persuade them, accusing the West of having double standards and noting that its interest in their needs has been erratic at best. Given the West's hoarding of COVID-19 vaccines and its inadequate action to mitigate climate-related loss and damage, they have a point.

NEAR AND FAR

Addressing the worsening global security situation facing the United Kingdom is the central task and first responsibility of British foreign policy. That policy will always be founded on the country's relations with the United States and Europe. These two powers are the rocks on which the United Kingdom builds its security, but the government's ties with both must evolve. Americans increasingly need convincing that Europeans do enough to protect their own continent's security. And as the United States becomes more focused on Asia, it will have less bandwidth for action elsewhere. The United Kingdom is ready for difficult conversations about burden sharing, as long as they are part of a serious process that reinforces collective security.

To handle these changes, it is ever more important that the United Kingdom develop closer foreign and security cooperation with the EU. Both parties must be honest about the gravity of this moment. From Ukraine

to Gaza and the Sahel, there is an arc of conflict and instability inside and near Europe's borders that affects the United Kingdom and the continent's interests equally. Yet the European Union and the British government have no formal means of cooperation. To address that problem, the United Kingdom must seek a new geopolitical partnership with the EU. The centerpiece of this relationship should be a security pact that drives closer coordination across a wide variety of military, economic, climate, health, cyber, and energy security issues—and that complements both parties' unshakable commitment to NATO, which will remain the foremost vehicle for European security. The United Kingdom should also double down on its close relationships with France, Germany, Ireland, and Poland. It should, for example, pursue a British-German defense agreement to go along with the similar Lancaster House treaties it signed with France in 2010.

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Above all else, the United Kingdom must continue supporting Ukraine. The future of European security depends on the outcome of the war there, and the British government must leave the Kremlin with no doubt that it will support Kyiv for as long as it takes to achieve victory. Once Ukraine has prevailed, the United Kingdom should play a leading role in securing Ukraine's place in NATO.

European security will be the Labour Party's foreign policy priority. But the British government cannot focus exclusively on the continent. Realism also means recognizing that the Indo-Pacific will be fundamental to global prosperity and security in the decades ahead, so the United Kingdom must strengthen its engagement with that region, as well. The country made a good start by helping establish AUKUS, a nuclear submarine and technology pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Yet the British government should treat the cooperation of AUKUS as a floor, not a ceiling. It must also build up other regional relationships, including by deepening its security partnerships with Japan and South Korea. India, with which the United Kingdom is intimately connected through countless family ties, is set to be the world's third-largest economy by 2030. But the British government has still failed to deliver a long-promised trade deal with New Delhi.

Then there is China. The United Kingdom's approach to the country has oscillated wildly over the past 14 years. Former Prime Minister David Cameron sought to create what he called a "golden era" of

engagement with Beijing in 2015, which swung to overt hostility when Liz Truss became prime minister in September 2022. British policy has shifted again under Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, who made Cameron his foreign secretary in late 2023, into confused ambiguity.

The United Kingdom must instead adopt a more consistent strategy, one that simultaneously challenges, competes against, and cooperates with China as appropriate. Such an approach would recognize that Beijing poses a systemic challenge for British interests and that the Chinese Communist Party poses real security threats. But it would also recognize China's importance to the British economy. It would accept that no grouping of states can address the global threats of the climate crisis, pandemics, and artificial intelligence unless it cooperates with Beijing. There is a crucial difference between "de-risking" and decoupling, and it is in everyone's interest that China's relationship with the West endure and evolve.

As the British Shadow Foreign Secretary, I have traveled extensively across North Africa and the Middle East, including to Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. All will be vital partners for the United Kingdom in this decade, not least as the country seeks to reconstruct Gaza and—as soon as possible—realize a two-state solution. From the beginning of the Israel-Hamas war, the Labour Party has stuck to progressive principles, urgently calling for international law to be respected in full by all parties. The United Kingdom cannot end this terrible conflict. But it does have the capacity to surge aid to support rebuilding, and a key goal for the Labour Party is to work with international partners to recognize Palestine as a state, as a contribution to securing a negotiated two-state solution.

Progressive realism acknowledges that, at times in the twentieth century, Western powers undermined the sovereignty of weaker states, especially in the global South. But in the twenty-first century, a Labour government would see its mission as supporting states' sovereignty against forces such as Russian neoimperialism, climate change, and corruption. This is why progressive realism seeks the same thing for Ukraine, Israel, and Palestine: for each to be a sovereign, secure, and internationally recognized state, at peace with its neighbors.

Furthermore, in today's world, Western governments must partner with the global South. There is a potential convening role here for a revitalized Commonwealth. Our government would, in particular, work to tackle the climate crisis, perhaps the most profound and uni-

versal source of disorder. The world's response so far—spending nearly \$2 trillion on the green transition last year alone—has at times been its brightest point of hope. But leading powers have still not done nearly enough to prevent disaster, and the scramble for critical raw materials, now at the heart of every great power's foreign policy, will not help poorer countries pay for the transition. Progressive realism demands a more cooperative approach. Realists recognize that if fairness is not part of a global climate bargain, it will fail.

Progressive realism also means recognizing that climate change is not the only threat to the planet. Technological change also contributes to the new world disorder by fueling inequality and populism. Movements that attack liberal values are rising on the back of social media websites that profit from algorithms built to amplify extreme positions. The emergence of artificial intelligence offers enormous potential for growth and innovation, but AI is already making it easier for bad actors to suppress freedom, disseminate misinformation, and undermine democratic processes. To minimize these risks, progressive realists must establish global guardrails for technology with the widest possible coalition of countries—before it is too late.

Finally, progressive realism means anticipating how the dynamics between continents are about to change. By 2050, more than one in four people on the planet will live in Africa. The continent can and will generate vast growth. Yet Cook would be dismayed to see the poverty that endures there, despite his generation's efforts. The next Labour government must therefore produce a new Africa strategy that does more than merely offer aid. The United Kingdom must once again become a leader in development, but to do so, it has to adopt a model that emphasizes trading with other countries to build long-term win-win partnerships—rather than following an outdated model of patronage.

FASTER GROWTH, SLOWER WARMING

To realize its ambitions, the next British government will have to revitalize its economy. It is shocking that the United Kingdom, historically a trading nation, now has the lowest levels of investment of any state in the G-7. A successful economy is the bedrock of our domestic prosperity and global influence, which is why Starmer has pledged that the country will generate the highest sustained growth in the G-7 if he is elected prime minister. The Foreign Office can help meet this target by revitalizing economic diplomacy. To that

end, if I become foreign secretary, I will make it a priority for every British ambassador in every relevant market to promote investment into the state. I will also convene a new business advisory council to ensure that the needs of companies inform our diplomatic thinking. To deliver prosperity at home, the United Kingdom must reestablish itself as a trusted and reliable partner—particularly with allies. That is why Labour will seek to improve the country's trade and investment relationship with Europe, as well as with India and the United States.

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Brexit is settled; a Labour government would not seek to rejoin the EU, the Single Market, or the Customs Union. Yet there are plenty of pragmatic steps we can take to rebuild trust and cooperation and reduce barriers to trade.

A Labour government would also invest in the green transition. Countries around the world are competing intensely to attract private capital for clean technology, a competition that has been sharpened by the U.S. Inflation Reduction Act and the EU's Green Deal. The United Kingdom should not be afraid to enter this race. A Labour government would, for example, create a new national wealth fund that invests in hydrogen, renewable energy, green steel, and other climate-friendly industries that provide a long-term return for taxpayers. Our key principle would be to use public investment to unlock further private investment.

But our approach to climate change would not simply be focused on domestic development. Climate diplomacy is at the center of progressive realism, and a Labour government would make advancing the fight against greenhouse gases central to our agenda. We would, for example, focus on reducing the emissions of our partners by seeking to establish a clean power alliance—in effect, a reverse OPEC—of states committed to leading the way on decarbonizing power systems. Our government would also help reform international financial institutions to provide far greater support for climate adaptation.

To become a green power, however, the United Kingdom needs to upgrade its reputation and its tools. The country should stop issuing new licenses to explore oil and gas in the North Sea. It must also decarbonize its electricity system by 2030.

Achieving the last goal will require a massive rollout of renewables. Labour's program involves tripling solar power, quadrupling offshore

wind power, doubling onshore wind power, and expanding nuclear, hydrogen, and tidal power. That means the United Kingdom must forge new overseas investment and regulatory partnerships. Because the resources needed to decarbonize economies stretch across borders, no country can go green without international cooperation. A Labour government would help foster such collaboration by creating a new network of climate and energy diplomats. They would help our government channel one of Cook's strongly held beliefs: that foreign policy must deliver better outcomes for all.

GREATER BRITAIN

Given the disorder, conflicts, and crises in the world, it is easy to despair. Wars are proliferating, and tensions between great powers are escalating. Climate change has subjected every continent to deadly extreme weather and provoked droughts and famines.

The United Kingdom, however, can navigate the demands of this new era. It has the world's sixth-largest economy. It is home to cutting-edge technology, services, leading universities, innovative legal sectors, and vibrant cultural industries. It has the potential for unparalleled partnerships and alliances. The country can thrive and restore its reputation as a net contributor to global security and development if it renews its alliances and recovers its self-confidence. It can once again choose to rise to today's generational challenges and navigate a new path, drawing from the best of its past.

To do so, the United Kingdom must draw from what is truly its historical best. If the government's response to the world's issues is rooted in the Conservative Party's nostalgia and denial, it will fail to deliver the multilateral agreements required to solve global problems. If progressives forget that diplomacy means working with those who do not always share democratic values, it will hurt British interests. If the government cannot sketch out a bold progressive vision, it will have forgotten its purpose. And if the state cannot guarantee national and regional security, it will have failed at its most essential task.

Progressive policy without realism is empty idealism. Realism without a sense of progress can become cynical and tactical. But when progressives act realistically and practically, they change the world. The United Kingdom urgently needs a foreign policy that brings together the best of Bevin and Cook. It needs progressive realism to kickstart an era of renewal, with a sharper and more hopeful vision for the country's role in the world. 🌍