

The Tipping Point:

# British National Strategy and the UK's Future World Role

By Bernard Jenkin MP and George Grant

Foreword by the Rt Hon. Bob Ainsworth MP

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When Bernard Jenkin approached me to ask if I would write a foreword for his paper on Foreign, Defence and Security Strategy, I agreed because this is a fundamental debate about the very nature of our country which we now must have, if rational and safe decisions are to be made to secure our future freedom, prosperity and security.

This paper correctly argues that the United Kingdom has reached a moment of decision: that we have to choose whether the UK will continue to have a global role or take on the role of a less significant nation. I agree with Bernard Jenkin's analysis that the government's stated ambition is for the former, but its defence and foreign policy decisions are leading us towards the latter.

I do not agree with everything in this paper, and you would not expect me to do so as we come from very different political perspectives, but it sets out why the UK's interests are global and so why its role should be global. This means that our strategic reach and capabilities must also be global. The threats and risks which we face are not predictable, and neither is the international situation. If we are to safeguard our interests, we need to retain a comprehensive range of defence capabilities to operate effectively overseas. We also need to maintain our diplomatic 'soft power' capabilities as well.

This requires the government to develop a coherent view about the kind of country the UK is, as well as about the role which the UK must play in global affairs. The government must face the consequences of the choices which it has made. This paper asks, if we do not maintain our global role, who will step into our place? Will other countries be willing to shoulder the responsibilities which we have abdicated? And are the other powers which will step into our place likely to make the world a better place than we would seek to do?

None of these questions were answered - or even asked - by last year's National Security Strategy (NSS) and Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR). The decision to reduce the defence budget while claiming there will be no strategic shrinkage was dishonest. The NSS and SDRS cannot stand as they are. We need, now, a debate about the threats we face and the size and the configuration of the armed forces we want to best meet them. I hope this paper will promote exactly that.

**Bob Ainsworth MP**  
**House of Commons**  
**London**  
**9th July 2011**

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**Bernard Jenkin MP**  
**House of Commons**  
**London**  
**14th July 2011**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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- **The United Kingdom is currently at a strategic tipping point. At stake is whether we wish to maintain our position as a global power with a global role, or whether we wish to become by default just another European country with only a regional one. A decline to regional-power status is not an inevitability; it is a choice, and one based upon erroneous assumptions about the nature of the geopolitical environment in which we operate, and the UK's proper place within it.**
- **Today, the UK is confronted by the additional danger that our government still aspires to the global role, but is cutting our capabilities to the point where only a limited regional role will be possible in the future.**
- **This incoherence is not just a consequence of pressures imposed by the ongoing financial crisis. It is also a consequence of the fact that this country lacks a proper national strategy. Last year's National Security Strategy (NSS) does not constitute a coherent national strategy. National strategy is altogether broader than national security strategy, and should constitute the conceptual framework within which the latter is directed and fashioned. National strategy seeks to further the national interest through the effective coordination of all instruments of power, be they economic, political, cultural, military or diplomatic. Good national strategy enables a country to respond effectively not just to pre-determined, definable threats, but also to strategic shocks that can materialise without warning, at any place and at any time.**
- **In order to craft an effective national strategy, it is essential that the UK first decides upon an appropriate world role. Without**

deciding what sort of power we want to be, we cannot properly determine what our interests are, or how best to protect and advance them. Since the end of the Cold War, the UK has failed to decide upon an appropriate world role. This problem has been exacerbated by ongoing guilt over our imperial past, and concerns about how we should engage internationally in light of it. It is time to move forwards from this. We rightly define ourselves as a tolerant, outward-looking liberal democracy, and this must underpin the world role we seek for ourselves.

- By virtue of historical legacy and present necessity, British national interests are irrevocably global. Broadly defined, these interests can be divided into two categories. In the first category are the physical, geopolitical interests that the UK has a direct and immediate stake in protecting. The second category, closely tied to the first, involves the less tangible but equally important efforts to promote British values and maintain the UK's position as a central actor in global geopolitics. We must recognise that promoting our values and pursuing our traditional interests are not objectives that stand in opposition to one another. As recent events in the Arab world have demonstrated, the notion that we can rely on so-called 'stable dictatorships' to safeguard our energy supplies and keep a lid on extremism is inherently false.
- The NSS produced a list of what it perceived to be the 15 most serious threats to the UK and British interests, broken down into three tiers of impact and probability. However, having sought to acknowledge and prioritise identifiable threats, it is defective in its failure to address the problem of strategic shocks that we do not predict but which compel a response. The Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) that derives from it thus falls short of what is required to ensure that the UK possesses the capabilities to defend and advance its interests effectively. None of the main military conflicts in which the UK has been involved since 1945 have been predicted and there is a simple lesson in that. We must retain a full spectrum of forces, not a bare-bones defence specialised for scenarios that may not and probably will not be the ones that we actually face. The conflict in Libya, a classic strategic shock, is only the latest manifestation of this reality.

- **Good national strategy must also recognise the critical importance of perceptions in international relations. As we visibly reduce our capacity to defend and advance our interests, and as the public and political will to do so dissolves away, we will find ourselves confronted more, not less often. It was the decision to withdraw our only naval presence from the South Atlantic in 1981 that prompted Argentina’s decision to invade the Falklands, perceiving that the UK no longer possessed either the capacity or the will to defend them. Likewise, a contributing factor in Osama bin Laden’s decision to attack the United States on 11th September 2001 was his perception of American weakness. To withdraw from the front line of global geopolitics will not make the UK more secure. On the contrary, the weaker we are perceived to be, the more often will our interests be challenged, and the more often will we be overcome.**
- **Those who believe that the UK can no longer afford to maintain a global role neglect the fact that power is an essential guarantor of prosperity. The reason why British citizens have been able to enjoy the social, economic and political freedoms that so many now take for granted over the past 50 years is because we have, working closely with our allies, retained the capabilities necessary to keep the threats to that freedom and prosperity at bay. At no time was this clearer than during the Cold War. Now that the Cold War has ended, Europeans have become dangerously complacent. We live in a highly uncertain world and these threats could re-emerge. As the outgoing US Defense Secretary said recently, we Europeans cannot continue to rely on the American security guarantee indefinitely, especially if we are not willing to contribute our share to that effort. It is for these same reasons that we must retain our nuclear deterrent.**
- **The UK needs a national strategy that enables us to guarantee our security and interests, and to deal with the unexpected when it occurs. This strategy must be based on a clear understanding of what the UK stands for, what sort of power we want to be in the world, and what we understand about the world around us. It must recognise that our interests are global, and that the threats to them are numerous, diverse and often unpredictable. Our national strategy must inform policy on what capabilities are necessary both to advance those interests and to defend them where necessary.**

- **We have no such national strategy at the present time, and the consequences of that fact threaten this country's security, its prosperity and its freedom. Deficit reduction is of incontestable importance, but making strategy with budget cuts as the primary objective is clearly the wrong way to go about it. It is not too late to redress this situation and to maintain a global role for the United Kingdom, but we need to act now.**

*“Hence to fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy’s resistance without fighting.”*

Sun Tzu

## TWO WAYS FORWARD

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*“Nations have no permanent friends and no permanent enemies.  
Only permanent interests.”*

Lord Palmerston

The United Kingdom in 2011 is at a strategic tipping point. We have to decide whether we wish to maintain our position as a global power with a global role, or whether we really wish to become by default just another European country with only a regional one. This choice reflects two opposing views of the UK's position in the world. Their underlying assumptions about the nature of the world and the nature of the UK are miles apart. A fudge between them is not possible.

One view – the limited view – is held widely across the political class, the media and in Whitehall. It holds that the UK has today already become merely a middling European power but retains delusions above its station. The UK comprises less than one per cent of the world's population, less than three per cent of its GDP, and possesses a fractional and dwindling proportion of its natural resources.<sup>1</sup> Those holding to this view believe that the UK should in fact embrace the consequences of relative decline.

They argue that rather than depending on hard power, the UK, like other smaller powers, should seek to exercise largely soft power influence with our allies, operating through multilateral institutions such as the European Union and the United Nations. We should uphold a strict view of international and human rights law, as the supreme codes of conduct, and our own international conduct should be governed accordingly. Overriding British independent national interests are therefore few, and our willingness – and need – to defend them is therefore limited. Collective security shields us. National defence and security capacity should be concentrated on territorial

and regional security. Policy should concentrate on threats to the British homeland, and on specific definable threats, such as those identified in last year's National Security Strategy.

The problem with this view is that it is ultimately dependent upon a benign and optimistic view of the world. It sees peace as the default condition. It is our great good fortune and our debt to past generations that the world can be understood as a relatively stable and secure place, at least so far as British interests are concerned. A proactive foreign policy is therefore seen as a throwback to a past age, and as likely to do as much harm as good.

The other view - the global view - is that the world is not naturally benign. We are surrounded by bad things that could happen. If there is peace, it is because those bad things are deterred or where required, pre-empted. It holds that the price of peace is eternal vigilance and that the UK occupies a pivotal position in international affairs in maintaining that vigilance, which we abdicate at our own peril. This view argues that we have the capacity and influence to help strengthen global security and stability for our own protection and to further our own interests.

This view also recognises that we have inherited special comparative advantages over other middle-sized states, a legacy of our imperial past. The status of English as the global language of business and diplomacy; our permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council; the international predominance of English common law; and the unique set of relationships offered by the Commonwealth represent just a few of our important comparative advantages. By themselves, these advantages are significant. Collectively, they continue to afford the UK a unique and extremely important place in the modern world.

Commensurate with this legacy, British interests today are correspondingly global. Above all, the UK is a globalised country that depends on free trade and international stability for its continued prosperity. In spite of its small size, the UK is the world's sixth largest importer and its tenth largest exporter, and London is the world's most important financial centre.<sup>2</sup>

Those who hold this view would like the UK to exercise influence multilaterally wherever possible, but are aware of the fragility and limitations of such instruments which failed before in the 1930s and can fail again. Indeed the crises in the EU and the UN today are warnings to us to be on our guard. So we must also be prepared to act on our own account, but where possible

in coalitions of like-minded societies. Though recognising the importance of soft power, this view recognises that there are limitations to its utility, and indeed sees that the term can easily create a false distinction because soft power without the aura of power that comes from hard power has no leverage.

Consequently, UK foreign policy must be concerned with influence in all its forms. It must always be proactive, dynamic and strategic. In this sense, the UK's national strategy must be Palmerstonian, mindful of his dictum that, "*Nations have no permanent friends and no permanent enemies. Only permanent interests*". The British must be ready and able to act unilaterally in the sovereign interest where necessary, recognising that the strategic priorities of our European or American neighbours, whilst frequently aligned, are not always congruent with our own.

Faced with the massive challenge of reducing our fiscal deficit, some argue that the government has no choice but to accept the limited view. If that is the case, then that should be a deliberate choice and it should be explained. Explaining such a choice would be problematic, reflecting neither the best interests nor the aspirations and values of the British people. That is why successive governments have not explained it openly. But today, that is not the most immediate danger.

The danger today is that the government is misleading itself. It wants what it is not willing to pay for. The UK has just embarked upon another military intervention on a strategic rationale entirely befitting a liberal democratic global power, whilst enacting the biggest cuts to defence capabilities in fifty years. UK core defence spending will be reduced by 7.5 per cent by 2015, though this actually amounts to a 17 per cent cut once the £38 billion in unfunded liabilities is accounted for.<sup>3</sup> There is little sign that the post-2015 uplift will be anything like sufficient to fund the proposed equipment programme. Most informed commentators are also clear that, even if the MoD started planning and spending now, 'Force 2020', the planned size, shape and structure of the UK's Armed Forces in 2020, will be unachievable until 2023-4 at the earliest, and would in any case require an increase in defence spending of 1-2 per cent of GDP.<sup>4</sup>

It is not just defence that is suffering however; spending on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will decline from £1,400 million to £1,165million by 2015,<sup>5</sup> reducing an already over-stretched diplomatic corps from 4,300 staff to fewer than 3,900.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, the coverage of the BBC World Service, one

of the UK's most important soft power assets, is being reduced in crucial areas of influence, with five full language closures and the end of radio programmes in seven languages, including Russian, Mandarin Chinese and Hindi.<sup>7</sup>

The government has insisted that *"Britain's national interest requires us to reject any notion of the shrinkage of our influence"*, whilst pursuing policies that threaten precisely this outcome.<sup>8</sup> This disconnect must not continue. It is time we recognise the very real tipping point at which we presently find ourselves as a nation, and it is time we make a clear choice. We need a coherent national strategy that is founded on a definite understanding of what sort of power we want the UK to be in the world, and we need to commit the resources necessary to match that ambition.

## THE NEED FOR A COHERENT NATIONAL STRATEGY<sup>i</sup>

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*“Strategy without tactics is the slowest path to victory. Tactics without strategy is merely the noise before defeat.”*

Sun Tzu

The incoherence between aspiration and reality that currently characterises the government's approach to foreign, defence and security policy stems not just from its efforts to deal with the UK's serious financial problems. It derives also from the fact that this country continues to lack a proper national strategy. The government will claim that it does possess such a strategy, the National Security Strategy (NSS), released in October 2010, but that document does not constitute a real national strategy, and nor can it. National strategy is altogether broader than national security strategy, and should constitute the conceptual framework within which the latter is directed and fashioned. National strategy seeks to further the national interest through the effective coordination of all instruments of power, be they economic, political, cultural, military or diplomatic. It is guided by a clear understanding of what the country stands for, what sort of power it wants to be in the world, and what it understands about the geopolitical environment in which it operates.

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i. Throughout this paper, 'National Strategy' is used as a synonym for 'Grand Strategy'. Strategy today is a term that is used very broadly. Every organisation, at almost every level, has strategies for dealing with perceived risks and taking forward opportunities. Businesses have strategies to implements plans. This paper is not concerned with these sorts of plans or lists of actions. It looks instead into the need we have as a country to devise and sustain a continuing process which can promote and defend our national interests. This was once defined as 'Grand Strategy'. Grand Strategy is not entirely shaped by any government. It cannot be. Grand Strategy studies all geopolitical factors that impact upon national interests as both risks and threats and which are, by definition, beyond the power of any government to control. The Chief of the Defence Staff has recently and very helpfully re-stated this meaning, distinguishing it clearly from either Policy or Operational strategy, and that meaning is followed here.

In addition to directing government action, national strategy also concerns itself with those forces that are not shaped by any government, because they cannot be. They are all those geopolitical factors that impact upon British national interests as both risks and sometimes as threats which are, by definition, beyond the power of any government to control. Ultimately, good national strategy is founded upon a recognition that the world is an inherently unpredictable place, in which threats to the national interest can materialise without warning, at any place, and at any time. It is the capacity of a country to absorb and react to these crises when they happen by which the true quality of its national strategy will be measured.

Though the NSS is in some respects an improvement on the efforts of previous years, not least in terms of its attempt to produce a model for prioritisation of threats and interests, as opposed to producing merely a 'laundry list' of issues, it fails in its ambition to provide a genuine strategy – hard choices, giving specific direction towards desired outcomes.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the NSS is defective in its failure to recognise the importance of preparing not just for those threats that can be anticipated, but also for those strategic shocks that cannot.

The Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) that derives from it thus falls badly short of what is required to ensure that Britain possesses the capabilities to defend and advance its interests effectively. By making the need to save money the primary concern that drove all other decisions, the SDSR has put at risk the very capabilities that the UK must retain if it is to guarantee its future prosperity. If the UK cannot defend itself and its interests where necessary, then not only this country's security, but also the way of life that its citizens take for granted, is put in jeopardy. This is not an over-exaggeration. The reason why we do not currently face existential threats to our security is precisely because we have retained the capabilities, working with our allies, to keep those threats at bay. These threats have not ceased to exist.

This failure to formulate a coherent and credible national strategy could have disastrous consequences for our security, freedom, and prosperity, all of which are closely interlinked. Because the UK's influence is so diverse and far-reaching, and because its interests are global, it remains particularly exposed to international shocks and instability. The fact that we are not presently confronted by existential threats of the traditional military variety counts for less than it did in a world where failures in the international financial system or disruptions to foreign energy supplies can bring a country to its knees.

So our government has a choice. Either the UK continues down its present course, pursuing an incoherent and cost-driven policy of deleting vital capabilities, eroding our global influence and leaving our future open to chance. Or it takes this opportunity to fundamentally reappraise the assumptions of the NSS and the decisions of the SDSR, as well as decisions taken with respect to the FCO, the BBC, and other vital enablers of British overseas influence, formulating a coherent and effective national strategy. This strategy must be based upon a clear identification of British national interests and objectives, to afford it the capabilities to pursue and protect them effectively and to respond to strategic shocks when they happen.

But we must be under no illusions. To reduce British influence and withdraw from the frontline of global geopolitics will not reduce the number of enemies this country faces, and nor will it make us more secure. On the contrary, the less well prepared we are to defend our interests, the more often will we find them challenged, and the more often will we be overcome. As the Romans famously observed, "*Si vis pacem, para bellum (if you wish for peace, prepare for war).*" Even accounting for the development of multilateral institutions such as the UN, the essentials of this reality continue to hold true today.

## DEFINING A BRITISH WORLD ROLE

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*“What then is the overall strategic concept which we should inscribe today? It is nothing less than the safety and welfare, the freedom and progress, of all the homes and families of all the men and women in all the lands.”*

Winston Churchill

One of the first and most important questions to answer when formulating national strategy is what we stand for as a country, what our values are, and what sort of power we want to be internationally. In short, we must decide upon an appropriate world role. Without a clear understanding of what a nation’s world role is to be, it becomes very much more difficult to formulate a coherent strategy that can prioritise national interests and give a clear guide to policymakers about how to safeguard and advance them. This in turn leads to a lack of focused and effective action that can result in a country being driven by events as opposed to helping shape them to its advantage. The self-reinforcing consequence of this development is that a country suffers a further atrophying of national self-confidence, in turn leading to yet more strategic incoherence and inaction, and so the cycle continues.

By contrast, national self-confidence about what one’s country stands for and what it believes about itself and the world leads to a clearer sense of what the national interests are and what needs to be done to safeguard and advance them. This in turn will tend to result in greater national self-confidence so developing a positive, self-reinforcing cycle in the right direction.

During the Second World War, the UK’s national strategy was focused and unrelenting. Guided by a clear sense of what the country stood for and where the national interest lay, the UK was able to direct its will and resources toward a single aim: the physical defeat of the Axis powers and the ideological destruction of fascism. Likewise, during the Cold War, the very clear existential threat posed by the Soviet Union and the concomitant

threat of Communist ideology focused and guided our national strategy accordingly.

This is not to romanticise British national strategy during these two periods, nor to pretend that there were not many inconsistencies and failures, both practical and ideological. It is certainly not to yearn for war or existential crises simply because they contribute to the formulation of clear national strategies! However, it is important to recognise that what made our national strategy clear and effective during these two conflicts was a recognition that ideas matter. What made Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union such threats to us was not merely their military strength, but the fact that their worldviews, both of which were radically opposed to our own, guided the pursuit of national strategies that led to confrontation.

Since the end of the Cold War in 1989, we as a country have struggled to formulate a national strategy that gives clear direction in a world where we are no longer confronted by conventional existential threats. The certainties of the Cold War have given way to a new kind of geopolitical environment where there are fewer threats to British interests but many more risks. These are in many ways more numerous, more diverse, less easily identifiable and, as a consequence, less easily countered. Risks can incubate threats.<sup>10</sup> This problem is compounded by quite profound disagreements amongst not just policymakers, but also the media and the general public, about what the UK should stand for as a country, what it should consider as its interests, what it should consider as threats to those interests, and what should be done about it. In large part, these disagreements are rooted in conflicting interpretations of our national past and its legacy in today's world.

Of course, many episodes in British history over the past few centuries warrant serious criticism, although maybe less than in the vastly more bloody histories of China, Russia or Germany, to mention but three other past empires. Behaviours which are today found obnoxious were once unexceptional, as in the history of many countries. It is entirely appropriate and indeed necessary that policymakers learn from these episodes. Fortunately, civilisation advances. It is quite right that we are sensitive to the impact of British policy internationally in light of our past which was a patchwork of good and ill. A far less appropriate response is to allow blanket guilt over that past to metastasise into the belief that the UK of today has little of value to offer the world, be it culturally, politically or economically. Ordinarily, this belief manifests itself in scepticism over British foreign policy, particularly when it involves value-judgements such as the promotion of

democracy. At its most extreme, this belief can mutate into a philosophy that holds the UK responsible not only for its own actions, almost invariably viewed as negative, but also for the actions of its enemies. Thus was the former Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, able to assert in the wake of the 7/7 London bombings: *“The suicide attacks would probably not have happened had Western powers left Arab nations free to decide their own affairs after World War I”*.<sup>11</sup>

This is to ignore the fact that though the UK is far from perfect, it is to this country’s great credit that it has largely slain its historical demons. Slavery has ended, racism is no longer tolerated, colonialism is finished, and the values of liberal democracy, including freedom of speech, respect for the rule of law, and individual liberty, have firmly taken root. Even a cursory glance at history, or better still at contemporary social and political realities in many other countries, should be enough to recognise that these are achievements of which we can be proud. So too the fact that the British Empire was actually the instrument that largely shaped the modern world, laying the ground for the spread of free trade, wealth creation, and the development of healthcare and education on an hitherto unseen scale. At great cost, the UK has also had to save continental Europe from itself three times in three hundred years. The UK should rightly define itself as a tolerant, outward-looking liberal democracy with a past that is both admirable and in places reprehensible, but compared to other great powers in history, considerably more the former than the latter, and this must underpin the world role we seek for ourselves.

## DEFINING THE UK'S NATIONAL INTERESTS

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*“Denying people their basic rights does not preserve stability, rather the reverse. Our interests lie in upholding our values.”*

David Cameron

By virtue of historical legacy and present necessity, British national interests are irrevocably global. Broadly defined, these interests can be divided into two categories. In the first category are the physical, geopolitical interests that the UK has a direct and immediate stake in protecting. These include, *inter alia*, safeguarding key trading routes; ensuring stability in global energy markets; and countering current and potential threats to national security. The second category, closely tied to the first, involves the less tangible but equally important efforts to promote British values and maintain the UK's position as a central actor in global geopolitics.

Clearly, what is and is not considered a British interest does in part depend upon what role one sees for the UK in the world, and what one understands about the world in which the UK operates. For instance, those who envisage a clear British national interest in pursuing a proactive and values-led foreign policy will have a very different view on the UK's appropriate world role from those who do not. The same applies in answering the question of whether the Falkland Islands should be considered a vital geostrategic asset in a demonstrably uncertain world, or a needless and expensive provocation to Argentina. This is why deciding on an appropriate British world role is so important when seeking to formulate national strategy.

Within the first category of national interests, however, certain key areas do stand out. For a globalised nation such as the UK, safeguarding international trading routes is particularly important, particularly along the littorals and at

key choke points such as the Suez Canal. This is not a task the UK can hope to fulfil on its own; it requires extensive collaboration with allies. The US Navy, in particular, remains disproportionately responsible for the maintenance of international maritime security, and cooperation with them remains essential on that score. Additionally, protecting UK trading interests may require the adoption of intelligent foreign and development policies that can address the cause of insecurity, and not just its symptoms.

As an island nation with limited natural resources, energy security must also be a priority. Although fossil fuels still dominate our consumption of energy, our own production is now in decline. UK coal production peaked as long ago as 1952, oil in 1999 and gas in 2000.<sup>12</sup> North Sea oil and gas reserves are declining, and the UK is increasingly dependent on energy imports. Like many other European countries, the UK is confronted with a major problem in that not only are global reserves of non-renewable energy sources in decline, but they are disproportionately located in some of the world's most autocratic and unstable states. Russia is the main source of the UK's coal imports, and the second largest supplier of imported oil, after Norway.<sup>13</sup> Three of the UK's biggest liquefied natural gas suppliers are Algeria, Egypt and Qatar.<sup>14</sup> Though the Middle East accounts for only two per cent of UK oil imports, down from 81 per cent in 1980, instability and uncertainty in the region has impacted hard on global oil markets, pushing the price of oil up from \$92 per barrel at the start of this year to \$118 at the time of writing.<sup>15</sup>

Consequently, the UK has a clear national interest in pursuing a foreign policy that seeks to reduce instability in key energy-producing regions, as well as mitigating the impact of that instability when it happens. Clearly, the UK must be looking to reduce its dependence on non-renewable energy sources, not just for the sake of the environment, but as a very real strategic interest.

With the rise of new poles of global influence, the UK also has a strong national interest in deepening ties with emerging powers such as India and China. According to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS), *"the global downturn has accelerated the shift in global market share towards emerging economies... [and] markets such as China and India [are] overtaking many historically important trading partners... in their importance for UK exporters"*.<sup>16</sup>

This category of tangible interests forms only one part of what the UK should be seeking to promote and maintain internationally, however. Equally

important must be a relentless and coordinated effort to maintain our position as a central and driving influence in global governance.

Operating within an international system that reflects British values and interests is clearly to this country's advantage. As a globalised, liberal democratic power, the UK needs an international framework that is open, not protectionist, and that seeks to uphold the rule of law. The world today has such a system, for all its many flaws, because the UK, along with key allies such as the US, played a leading role in making it that way after World War II. It is our great good fortune to live at a time when the world's strongest powers are amongst the most liberal and democratic. It was not always that way, and it may not be again, and we abdicate this position at our peril.

To that end, we must be utilising our place at the top-table of institutions such as the UN, NATO and the EU, as well as working multilaterally with international partners outside of those arenas, to protect and advance shared interests wherever possible. In particular, for the UK and its European partners to get much better at working together towards shared international objectives will be an important component of retaining our collective global influence in the 21st century. Moreover, in a world where the legitimacy of action – and its perceived legitimacy – is crucially important, collective solutions will ordinarily be preferable to unilateral ones, not least because they are more likely to receive the sanction of legitimising authorities such as the United Nations.

That being said, it is equally important that Britain retains the capacity to operate unilaterally where necessary. Effective cooperation with allies can greatly augment a country's influence internationally. Outright interdependence, on the other hand, will weaken its influence and ultimately reduce its efficacy as an ally. In today's world, for the UK to surrender its unilateral capabilities will only be to make it a vulnerable hostage to fortune.

Recognising that ideas matter, the UK must also be active in promoting abroad those values that have led to freedom and prosperity at home. Plainly speaking, the more liberal democracies there are in the world, the better is it for the United Kingdom. Indeed, for those who advocate multilateral institutions as the best arenas through which to conduct foreign policy, it should be recognised that these forums are the sum of their parts. The simple reason why the United Nations Security Council is often divided between its five permanent members, with the UK, France and the US on one side, and Russia and China on the other, is because the respective worldviews and

thus interests of these two groups are fundamentally different. If the UK is to exercise significant influence in fora such as the UN, then the more members there are who share its values the better.

As a globalised economy dependent upon strong and stable international markets for its own prosperity, the UK must also recognise that promoting democracy and the rule of law is good for business. It is an empirical fact that the world's most prosperous and stable states are democratic. They are also, to use a modified version of Kant's theory of *Perpetual Peace*, far less likely to go to war with one another. One of the underlying reasons for the UK's own success over its continental European rivals in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries was the greater political and economic liberties that it afforded to its citizens. Today, 18 of the world's 20 most prosperous states are democracies (the exceptions being Singapore and Hong Kong<sup>ii</sup>).<sup>17</sup> As importantly, so are 19 of the world's 20 most peaceful states.<sup>18</sup>

Certainly, if there is one thing that the unprecedented upheavals currently sweeping across North Africa and the Middle East have demonstrated, it is that so-called 'stable dictatorships', capable of safeguarding British economic and security interests in the region, are anything but. Likewise, the importance of keeping sea-lanes open, which requires stability along the world's littorals, may well require a proactive British foreign policy to address the conditions of poverty and poor governance that give rise to instability in countries such as Somalia and Yemen, which border the strategically vital Gulf of Aden.

There is a legitimate debate to be had about how the UK and its allies should go about pursuing a values-led foreign policy. Given that this is such an immature concept in the history of international relations, the fact that we are still not very good at democracy-promotion should not come as a surprise. One significant development currently taking place, however, is the effort to better coordinate our foreign, defence and development policies. From a strategic as well as a humanitarian perspective, it is vitally important that this process continues and deepens. In a poverty-stricken and insecure environment, the delivery of aid will not prove a long-term solution in and of itself, though it can certainly ameliorate short-term suffering. To be truly effective it must be coordinated with efforts at the political, economic and – where necessary – the military level, to deal not just with the symptoms of

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ii. Though technically a part of China, Hong Kong is frequently listed separately on a number of international indices measuring levels of social, economic and political development.

poverty and conflict but also with their underlying causes. Likewise, in order to achieve success in the kind of stabilisation operations in which British forces have so frequently been engaged in recent years, the application of military power alone is not enough.

In promoting all of these interests, the UK must make use of, and not squander, its important network of comparative advantages. The Commonwealth, for instance, represents a significant cultural and economic network that the UK should work hard to maintain and strengthen. Likewise, our 14 overseas territories should not be seen as an economic burden or some imperial throwback, but as vital strategic assets; outposts spread across the globe and in close proximity to some of its most geopolitically important areas. Whether it be in the Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean, the Caribbean, the Pacific or the South Atlantic, we depend upon our overseas territories to project influence, where necessary, in parts of the world where we would otherwise have no strategic presence whatsoever.

## IDENTIFYING THREATS TO BRITISH NATIONAL INTERESTS

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*“There are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don’t know we don’t know.”*

Donald Rumsfeld

Last year’s National Security Strategy produced a list of what it perceived to be the 15 most serious threats to the UK and British interests, broken down into three tiers of impact and probability.<sup>19</sup> At the top of this list were the four most serious threats, which included international terrorism; cyber attacks; international military crises; and major accidents or national hazards. At the bottom of the list were threats including a large-scale conventional military attack on the UK by another state; an attack on a UK overseas territory; and disruption to oil or gas supplies as a result of war, accident or major political upheaval.<sup>20</sup>

Having clearly identified the threats to UK interests for the foreseeable future, and driven by severe budgetary constraints, the government has also laid out those capabilities it believes will be necessary to counter these threats – and those that will not – in the Strategic Defence and Security Review. The decision to deprive the UK of an independent aircraft carrier capability was consistent with this rationale: *“In the short-term, there are few circumstances we can envisage where the ability to deploy airpower from the sea will be essential”*.<sup>21</sup>

Five months to the day after these words were published, on 19<sup>th</sup> March 2011, the UK began offensive operations in Libya, a development that has clearly exposed the dangers of planning only for those threats that can be

foreseen, and neglecting the possibility of strategic shocks that cannot.

In spite of government protestations to the contrary, the reason why British forces have been able to respond fairly effectively to the crisis in Libya has had much to do with geographical and temporal good fortune, and very little to do with the foresight of our national security strategy. Some of the key military assets to have been used in Libya, including the Nimrod R1 surveillance aircraft and the Type-22 frigate *HMS Cumberland*, were earmarked for decommissioning under the SDSR, and it was only on account of those cuts having not yet been implemented that they were still available for use in this operation. *HMS Cumberland's* ability to switch from anti-piracy patrol off Aden; to move fast over a long distance; be the first sovereign asset on station; re-role and undertake evacuation and then support further operations demonstrated the unique and formidable power of such a warship. Both *HMS Cumberland* and the Nimrods have since been decommissioned.

Other assets that could have been highly valuable, such as the aircraft carrier *HMS Ark Royal* and the Harrier jump-jet fleet, had already been put out of service. The argument that an aircraft carrier capability has not been necessary for the Libya operation belies the fact that this is only so on account of the availability of the airbase at Gioia del Colle in Italy and Britain's own Sovereign Base Areas on Cyprus. Had a similar crisis developed in a part of the world where friendly land bases were not available, the situation could have been quite different.

Moreover, sorties flown from Gioia del Colle or RAF Akrotiri – still less from RAF Marham in Norfolk – simply cannot monitor as effectively or respond as quickly as Harrier sorties flown from *Ark Royal* could have done, and as sorties from the French carrier *Charles de Gaulle* currently do. Ministers have asserted that the Tornado had to be used because it alone could deploy the new version of the Brimstone missile which Harrier – it was said – could not. This is factually wrong. It could and, ministers were plainly misinformed. Admiral Giuseppe di Giorgi explained on the record to the 2011 RUSI Maritime Conference on 6<sup>th</sup> July that Italy chose to use its own carrier-borne Harrier fleet rather than its air bases on land because the Harriers gave it vastly more flexibility, safety and precision than using its land-based aircraft. And furthermore Harrier cost 1/10<sup>th</sup> per hour over Libya the cost of Typhoon and 1/8<sup>th</sup> the cost of Tornado. The SDSR decision is therefore not only strategically incoherent and tactically riskier but also greatly more expensive.

As presently conceived, the NSS fails to appreciate the complexity and unpredictability of modern threats. The 'networked world' in which we now live affords the UK particular advantages, but also amplifies risks and vulnerabilities. Modern societies are utterly dependent upon high technology systems and the daily supply of commodities, food, manufactured goods and of energy. The fuel duty blockade in 2000 demonstrated the adage that we live within 48 hours of our last proper meal. The 2008 banking collapse showed just how fragile the global financial system really is. The ability to traverse oceans and continents within hours means that a terrorist movement in Asia can attack targets in Western Europe and the US. Terrorists and aggressors can leverage the political effects of their actions exploiting instant modern communications and 24-hour news coverage.

Security in the modern world is about being ready for strategic shocks which are beyond most people's imagination and being prepared for the unprecedented pressures which such shocks place on governments and institutions to respond accordingly. As the Secretary of State for Defence, Liam Fox, said recently, "*We live in a world in which our national and overseas interests are likely to be threatened in more places and by more people than at any time in the past.*"<sup>22</sup> We have predicted *none* of the main military conflicts in which the UK has been involved since 1945 and there is a simple lesson in that. We must retain a full spectrum of forces, not a bare-bones defence specialised for scenarios that may not and probably will not be the ones that we actually face.

Identifying threats is therefore not about making lists of things we think we can guess, but adopting a mindset which is ready to respond to the emergence of the 'unknown unknowns'. The SDSR axioms of 'flexibility' and 'adaptability' are the right ones, but they have to be more than just words. The UK must retain a degree of flexibility and depth of strategic capabilities that will enable it to absorb these shocks. Resilience is not necessarily having a plan to respond to this or that particular eventuality. It is about creating the pool of talent and resources to enable the nation to react effectively when the unforeseen occurs. Taken with a determination to exploit positive shocks and surprises to national advantage when they occur, this is in fact the essence of sound national strategy.

## THE POWER OF PERCEPTION

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*"I was told by a Russian general that the Soviets had been firmly convinced that we would not fight for the Falklands, and that if we did fight we would lose. We proved them wrong on both counts, and they did not forget the fact."*

Margaret Thatcher

Retaining the capabilities to safeguard British interests adequately is only one part of ensuring the UK's place in the modern world however. Equally important must be the *perception*, amongst both allies and foes, that we are ready and able to use those capabilities to defend our interests where necessary.

Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, who commanded the UK's Mediterranean Fleet during the Second World War, understood this distinction well. Informed of grievous losses of warships during the evacuation from Crete in 1941, he was asked whether he wanted to abandon the operation: *"It takes the Navy three years to build a new ship"*, he is said to have remarked, *"It will take three hundred years to build a new tradition."*<sup>23</sup> Today, it is the Chinese who seem to best understand this fact. Explaining China's decision to commission its own aircraft carrier, Lieutenant General Qi Jianguo, assistant chief of the general staff, said in June that *"All of the great nations in the world own aircraft carriers - they are symbols of a great nation."*<sup>24</sup> In and of itself, that is not sufficient reason to commission an aircraft carrier, but it adequately demonstrates the point.

*Pari passu*, the opposite applies with regards to our government's decision to voluntarily surrender the UK's own aircraft carrier capability for the better part of a decade. Indeed, the power of perception in international relations is one factor that the authors of the SDSR seem genuinely not to understand.

If a country is perceived as unwilling to protect its interests then it will find those interests being challenged and confronted more, not less often.

Few better examples of this reality exist than the case of the Falklands War of 1982. It is well known that what prompted Argentina's General Galtieri to invade was his perception that the UK, already in decline, was no longer willing to fight for 'Las Malvinas'. The decision in the British Government's 1981 defence review to withdraw *HMS Endurance* from the area encouraged this perception. This was taken as symbolic retreat, being the UK's only permanent naval presence in the South Atlantic.<sup>25</sup> Less well known, but even more revealing, is the impact that Margaret Thatcher's decision to recapture the islands had on the international perception of the UK far beyond Argentina. As she noted in her memoirs, the message received by the Soviet Union as a consequence of this action was that the UK was not the spent force that so many assumed us to be by the early 1980s.<sup>26</sup>

Though but one part of a broader and more complex analysis, perception also had its part to play in the decision of Osama bin Laden to attack the United States on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001. On first consideration, it is remarkable that bin Laden should have calculated that an attack on the foremost superpower in history would not lead to the destruction of himself and his ambitions, but would in fact further his objectives in the Middle East and beyond. A contributing factor that led him to this troubling conclusion was his analysis of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, and the American humiliation in Somalia in 1994, that the so-called 'great powers', though seemingly strong were in actuality weak, and that the use of force against them was an effective way to prosecute al-Qaeda's central objective of forcing the US to withdraw from the Muslim world as a precursor to the establishment of an Islamic caliphate. In his own words:

*"Using very meagre resources and military means, the Afghan mujahedeen demolished one of the most important human myths in history and the greatest military apparatus. We no longer fear the so-called Great Powers. We believe that America is much weaker than Russia; and our brothers who fought in Somalia told us that they were astonished to observe how weak, impotent, and cowardly the American soldier is. As soon as eighty [sic] American troops were killed, they fled in the dark as fast as they could, after making a great deal of noise about the new international order."<sup>27</sup>*

Proving this assumption to be false is in fact one of the main reasons why succeeding in Afghanistan is so important. Failure there could pose a threat

to British interests in the commonly understood sense that it might once again provide a safe-haven for terrorists as well as provoking major regional instability, including in neighbouring, nuclear-armed Pakistan. But failure in Afghanistan would also send out the extraordinarily dangerous message that bin Laden's central premise was correct: using violence to challenge and overcome Western interests is indeed sound strategy.

The UK's continued security, freedom and prosperity depend upon its ability to defend and advance its interests where necessary, and a clear perception amongst those who would challenge those interests that it is ready to do so.

# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POWER AND PROSPERITY

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*“How many divisions has the Pope?”*

Joseph Stalin

In such economically straightened times, however, the question asked by many is whether the UK can really afford to maintain the capabilities necessary to defend and advance its national interests, and to maintain its place in the world. There can be no question that addressing the UK's chronic budget deficit, which equated to 10.2 per cent of UK GDP in 2010, must be a priority, but how that is done is a matter of choice and priorities. Systematically eroding our ability to project influence and defend our interests cannot be the best way to do it.<sup>28</sup> For one thing, defence is the first duty of government, and it should not forget the fact. Second is the reality that it costs far less to prevent a war than to fight one. In addition to the 255 British servicemen who were killed in the Falklands War, the UK also lost six ships, with another ten badly damaged, and 14 aircraft, at a cost of £1.6 billion; a high price to pay for the withdrawal of one ice-patrol vessel.<sup>29</sup>

Deterring threats pre-emptively is not only cheaper than allowing them to materialise, it is also vital for the maintenance of British prosperity. Those who advocate drastic cuts to British defence capabilities on the rationale that the UK is not threatened militarily and the money could be better spent elsewhere make the dangerous mistake of forgetting this fact. During the Cold War, what prevented the Soviets from rolling into Western Europe was not the enlightened educational policies of Sweden and Switzerland, it was the strength of NATO military hardware and the nuclear deterrent. Though today the Soviet Union is gone, the principle remains the same: power is what underpins the freedom and prosperity that so many of us now take for granted. Indeed, in a conflict between the two, power will almost always prevail.

In 2010, only five of NATO's 28 members spent two per cent or more of their GDP on defence, the agreed minimum for NATO members. They were the US, the UK, France, Albania and Greece.<sup>30</sup> A number of analysts now maintain that UK spending has itself fallen below the two per cent threshold, to 1.8 per cent of GDP. The reason why so many European states have been able to neglect their defence responsibilities in favour of domestic considerations in recent decades is because they have benefited from the security umbrella provided by the US as well as a few key European nations including the UK and France. But Europeans are wrong if they think that they can take this security subsidy for granted indefinitely. It has long been clear that this unbalanced relationship of 'consuming' security without sufficient burden-sharing was unsustainable. Indeed, in his closing valedictory on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2011, the outgoing US Defence Secretary, Robert Gates, issued precisely this warning:

*"If current trends in the decline of European defence capabilities are not halted and reversed, future US political leaders - those for whom the Cold War was not the formative experience that it was for me - may not consider the return on America's investment in NATO worth the cost,"* he said. Gates warned that NATO risked being consigned to *"military irrelevance"* in a *"dim if not dismal"* future unless Europeans stepped up to the plate.<sup>31</sup>

Here too, the conflict in Libya has served to demonstrate the problem, not just for the UK, but for all European participants. In Gates's own words, *"the mightiest military alliance in history is only 11 weeks into an operation against a poorly armed regime in a sparsely populated country. Yet many allies are beginning to run short of munitions, requiring the US, once more, to make up the difference."* In March, all 28 NATO members had voted for the Libya mission, he said. *"Less than half have participated, and fewer than a third have been willing to participate in the strike mission ... Many of those allies sitting on the sidelines do so not because they do not want to participate, but simply because they can't. The military capabilities simply aren't there."*<sup>32</sup>

All European governments, including our own, must heed this stark warning, which affects the fundamental assumptions of Europe's security architecture. For the UK in particular, with all of our planning for a major future conflict based on our alliance with the US, such a development must weigh heavily on our strategic considerations. Though the transatlantic alliance naturally reflects the relative size of our two countries, we must ensure that we are able to bring those capabilities to the alliance that enable us to operate as a viable strategic partner.

It is for the same reason of wishing to guarantee our own security and prosperity, both independently and as part of our alliance relationships, that the UK must retain its nuclear deterrent. Considering the potential cost of that which it is designed to prevent, the UK's Trident nuclear missile programme represents a price well worth paying. Those who argue that the deterrent is worthless because it could never conceivably be used miss the fundamental point that we maintain it for that very reason: so we won't ever have to. The purpose of the nuclear deterrent is to prevent the emergence of precisely the kind of existential threats that would only be acted upon if that deterrent did not exist.

Those critics who argue in favour of replacing Trident, a continuous at-sea deterrent, with a supposedly cheaper land-based programme miss the point that locatable land-based facilities can be pre-emptively eliminated; undetectable submarines cannot. The UK does not possess Trident as a first-strike capability. The UK possesses Trident to make it absolutely clear to all adversaries that it possesses a guaranteed second-strike capability. That is the system's true value.

Those who argue that the UK should set an example to the rest of the world by decommissioning its nuclear-weapons systems delude themselves. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) obliges its signatories, including the UK, to work towards a nuclear weapons-free world; a laudable aspiration.<sup>33</sup> Four decades after the NPT came into force, however, there is little evidence that the world is moving in that direction. On the contrary, more and more state and non-state actors are seeking to acquire a nuclear weapons capability of their own. The Iranian regime would not reconsider its nuclear ambitions simply because the UK chose to abandon its own nuclear deterrent. A multilateral effort towards disarmament would almost certainly only be adhered to by responsible national governments, and certainly not by terrorist movements. Moreover such a move would only embolden those state and non-state actors seeking to challenge British interests by violent means.

## CONCLUSION: A QUESTION OF NATIONAL WILL

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*“No arsenal... is so formidable as the will and moral courage of free men and women.”*

Ronald Reagan

So our government has a choice. Either we continue down our present course, pursuing an incoherent and cost-driven policy of deleting vital capabilities, eroding our global influence and leaving our future open to chance. Or we must renovate fundamentally the objectives and the assessment methods of the NSS and the decisions of the SDSR and formulate a coherent and effective national strategy. This strategy must be based upon clearly identified national interests and objectives. It must underpin all aspects of policy. It must place the incontestable importance of deficit reduction in the context of the other risks and challenges facing the UK, bringing together fiscal, foreign, defence and development policy into a coherent whole. Such a policy must provide the UK with the capabilities and influence to pursue and protect our national economic and commercial interests as well as the ability to respond to strategic shocks when they happen.

The world is becoming ever more unpredictable. Threats can be as sudden as they can be severe. The UK must choose whether to engage actively with the world, or passively let events determine our destiny, with all the additional risks to our interests that involves.

If the UK is no longer to pursue a global role, the government should assess what additional risks we are exposed to, and which forces are likely to exploit a reduced UK global presence. What other nations do we expect to shoulder the security responsibilities and burdens which we have abdicated? Who would the US turn to as their key ally in Europe, or elsewhere, if the UK ceases to offer what they seek? The powers which take our place in the

global order are most unlikely to make the world a better place.

The strategic assumptions driving government policy at present are predicated upon an overly-narrow understanding of how risks and threats in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should be correctly assessed. The consequence of this failure, set in the context of the constrained financial environment in which the UK must currently operate, is that many of the capabilities necessary to safeguard and advance our national interests are being eroded, if not deleted outright. In the course of this process, the UK's aura of power has already been diminished. Admiral Cunningham's wisdom has been ignored. For the sake of our security, prosperity and freedom as a nation, this situation must be urgently reviewed and reversed.

There can be no question that addressing the UK's budget deficit is essential, but this is not the way to do it. The dangers inherent in neglecting our ability to project influence or to defend ourselves in times of economic austerity have been ignored before:

*"Time after time the services were told that the financial dangers to the country were greater than the military ones... The government seemed unable to face the fact that every million spent now reduced the chance of war, and that if war came it would not be spent in time, while the cost would be much greater."*<sup>34</sup>

So wrote the former First Sea Lord, Lord Chatfield, of his experiences in the 1930s in his appropriately titled autobiography, *It Might Happen Again*. Challenges to British interests are not necessarily predictable. Wars are rarely anticipated, except by those who plan to start them. Nonetheless, it is precisely because we cannot be certain what threats to our interests may emerge in the coming years that it is so vital to remain prepared.

The UK needs a national strategy that enables us to guarantee our security and interests, and to deal with the unexpected when it occurs. This strategy must be based on a clear understanding of what the UK stands for, what sort of power we want to be in the world, and what we understand about the world around us. It must recognise that our interests are global, and that the threats to them are numerous, diverse and often unpredictable. Our national strategy must inform policy on what capabilities are necessary both to advance those interests and to defend them where necessary.

We have no such national strategy at the present time, and the consequences

of that fact threaten this country's security, its prosperity and its freedom. It is not too late to redress this situation and to maintain a global role for the United Kingdom, but we need to act now.

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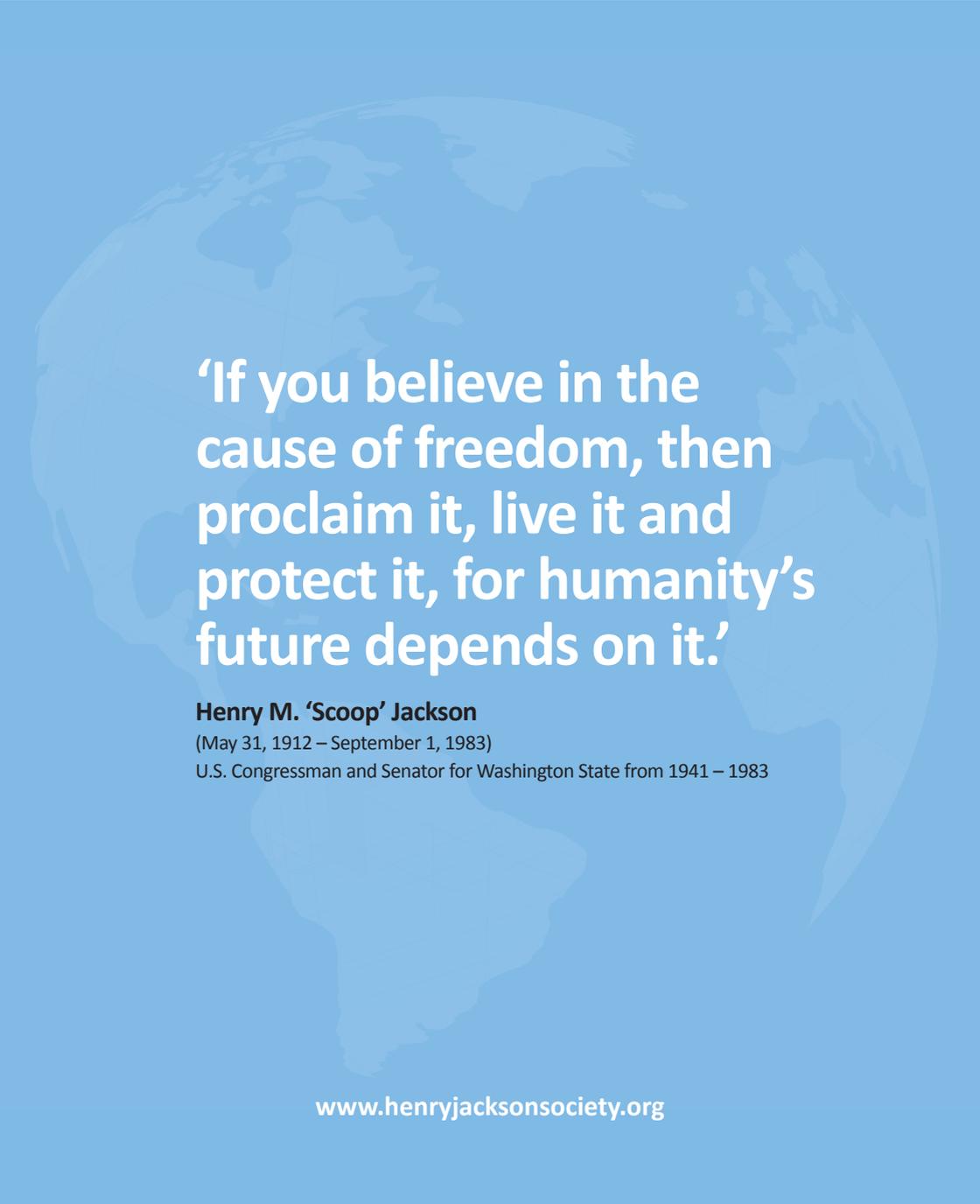
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**‘If you believe in the  
cause of freedom, then  
proclaim it, live it and  
protect it, for humanity’s  
future depends on it.’**

**Henry M. ‘Scoop’ Jackson**

(May 31, 1912 – September 1, 1983)

U.S. Congressman and Senator for Washington State from 1941 – 1983