

For all Rishi Sunak's desire to be a big world player, Brexit has ensured a walk-on part

Andrew Rawnsley

The Observer

3rd September 2023

Despite their 'Global Britain' rhetoric, both the UK's soft and hard power has diminished under 13 years of Conservative rule.



'Serious tensions': British prime minister Rishi Sunak (right) with Indian counterpart Narendra Modi on the final day of the G7 Summit on May 21, 2023.

For a leader who is under siege at home, travel abroad can offer an alluring escape from domestic woes. When Rishi Sunak flies east this week to attend the G20 summit in New Delhi, he will be glad to put more than 4,000 miles between himself and the cost-of-living crunch, public services that are falling over and grisly opinion poll ratings. His international peer group will treat him with more courtesy than do many of his own MPs. Performing on what is loosely called “the world stage” will be a salve to the prime minister's self-esteem.

What else it will achieve is moot. There is little expectation that this G20 will come to much, not least because of the divisions between its western and non-

western members about the war in Ukraine. It is being reported that Xi Jinping won't even turn up, scotching earlier talk from Number 10 of a bilateral between Mr Sunak and China's leader.

The world will become "more insecure and more unstable" over the next decade, cautioned Ben Wallace in the valedictory letter he wrote to the prime minister to accompany his departure as defence secretary. We may hope he's wrong, but a prudently robust foreign and security policy needs to be designed to address the peril that this warning will turn out to be accurate. The known risks include some highly scary ones, among them a wilting of western resolve to support Ukraine's struggle for freedom, Donald Trump returning to the White House consumed by a lust to take revenge on his opponents domestic and foreign, and a Chinese lunge at Taiwan.

This asks a question to which we currently have answers that are, at best, muddled: what precisely is the UK's foreign and security policy? Inconsistent is the politest description of the approach to the world pursued over 13 years of Conservative government. Under David Cameron, "follow the money" was the motto. Most of the emphasis was placed on drumming up business for Britain, and the diplomatic corps were told to regard themselves as a sales force for UK plc. It was epitomised by rolling out acres of red carpet for Russian oligarchs, which doesn't look awfully clever now, and the declaration of a "golden era" in relations with China, another concept which has aged extremely badly. During the time of Boris Johnson and the brief interregnum of Liz Truss, foreign policy was driven by the Brexiters' delusions that a happy-go-lucky Britain would be free to go it alone in the world and do as it pleased. That notion has been smashed by contact with geopolitical reality. The swaggering braggadocio about "Global Britain" has been quietly consigned to oblivion by Mr Sunak.

Both the soft power and the hard power of the UK have been diminished on the Tories' watch. Andrew Mitchell, the development minister, has confessed that we are no longer a "development superpower" because of savage cuts to the aid budget. The global reach of the BBC's World Service is declining amid reductions in its output and staff. The revolving chaos at Number 10, which saw three prime ministers in one year, had our ambassadors trying to persuade the world that the UK was not turning into a banana republic with lousy weather. While Mr Sunak is regarded as a more reliable performer on the world stage than his

immediate predecessors, he suffers from the widespread expectation that he will be booted off the cast list within a year or so. The perception that his days in power are numbered gives international interlocutors less incentive to want to develop relationships with him.

His allies respond that the prime minister has demonstrated he can put himself and Britain at the heart of major global debates by convening an international summit on the safety of artificial intelligence. It will meet at Bletchley Park, the Buckinghamshire home of Second World War code breakers, in November. Number 10 would like this summit to be regarded as a singular coup, with the potential to position Britain at the centre of efforts to regulate AI. That yearning rather betrays their anxieties about Mr Sunak being treated as a lame-duck prime minister abroad as well as at home.

The UK was an early mover in support for Ukraine and has made substantial contributions of arms and munitions, but the effort has underscored frailties in our hard power. Britain is running out of kit that meets the needs of the Ukrainians. The British army is shrinking to its smallest size since the end of the Napoleonic wars. Mr Wallace's parting shot was that a muscular military should be treated not as an optional extra but as an absolute imperative: "We must not return to the days where defence was viewed as a discretionary spend by government and savings were achieved by hollowing out." The appointment of Grant Shapps as the new defence secretary, his fifth cabinet post in 12 months, has angered some Conservative MPs and caused consternation among military figures because he has no expertise in the area. His loyalty to Mr Sunak and pedigree as a political attack-dog are the main reasons Mr Shapps landed the role. To some I have talked to, this appointment exposes the prime minister as a man who is not fundamentally serious about defence and security, even at a time of the largest war in Europe since 1945.

His friends depict Mr Sunak as a realist and a pragmatist who sees foreign policy through the prisms of problem-solving and relationship management. Number 10 is unapologetic about issuing an invitation to Mohammed bin Salman, the Saudi crown prince, to visit Downing Street this autumn. James Cleverly's recent trip to Beijing, the first by a British foreign secretary in five years, was defended on the grounds that the UK has to "engage" with big powers, even those with grotesque records on human rights and menacing global ambitions. That

inflamed the divide about China within the Conservative party. The former Tory leader Iain Duncan Smith was among those to accuse his own government of “appeasement” of Beijing. A withering report by the foreign affairs select committee complained that the UK government’s China strategy is so highly classified that details have not been shared with some relevant ministers and officials. It occurs to me that things may be even worse than the committee thinks. It could be that the China policy is being kept so secret because the government doesn’t actually have a plan with enough coherence to deserve to be called a strategy.

Mr Sunak is keen on closer ties with India. The economic growth of India is pacey, it has overtaken China to become the world’s most populous country and it is gaining geopolitical clout. Indian ambitions were highlighted by landing a spacecraft near the south pole of the moon and there are many familial links with the UK. Yet there are also considerable tensions in that relationship and at several levels. India has been strategically ambivalent on the war in Ukraine while massively increasing its purchases of Russian oil since Vladimir Putin ordered his brutal invasion.

Cleaving closely to Washington has for decades been the lodestar of British defence and foreign policy, but there’s a growing view within Whitehall that the US can no longer be regarded as an all-weather ally. Relations with Joe Biden’s White House are cool and the UK needs to be thinking about how it would handle a return to the Oval Office by Mr Trump. Just because that seems insane, it doesn’t mean it is entirely inconceivable.

As a cash-strapped, midsized power in a dangerously unpredictable and unstable world, the UK needs to be smart at making and keeping friends, especially with other liberal democracies with similar values. Which brings us to our nearest neighbours. Relations with EU countries have become less poisonous since Mr Sunak moved into Number 10. There’s been some recovery from the depths of distrust towards the UK which were plumbed under Boris Johnson. The main product has been the Windsor agreement, which resolved a two-year stand-off about the rules governing trade between the mainland UK and Northern Ireland.

Yet there's still a distinct frost. Mr Sunak has been unrequited in his desperate desire to secure a returns agreement with the EU covering migrants crossing the Channel or using other unauthorised routes.

Brexit has made Britain less relevant to the EU, and to all the other significant players of the world. There's no escaping that bitter truth, however many air miles Mr Sunak clocks up.

Andrew Rawnsley is Chief Political Commentator of the Observer