

**FROM THE EDITOR**

Countries need a sense of distance in their grand strategy, allowing them to rank priorities and develop a clear world view. That is the conclusion of Patrick Porter who dissects Britain's defence statecraft on these pages. He counsels against intervening on the periphery to protect the centre.

**In a domestic setting,** Russia's leader Vladimir Putin tried to buy security close to home with a dubious deal in the far-flung republic of Chechnya. But, as John Russell indicates on Page 10, failure on the periphery has led to insecurity in Moscow.

**And the fear of further** trouble in its southern border region is a factor in Russia's delicately balanced policy towards Iran, as the United Nations prepares to consider new sanctions. Annoy the government in Tehran and it might fund militants in Moscow's Muslim lands, reports James Nixey on Page 7. So better continue to trade in the defence and energy fields.

**But, in the last resort, the** Kremlin's grand strategy is America-centric rather than Iran-focussed, so a meeting of minds over Iran's nuclear aspirations seems unlikely.



Britain has not properly identified its national interests: its view is unrealistic and hyper-activity on the global stage produces problems. Unless it can identify what kind of country it wants to be in a tough economic situation, there will be trouble ahead.


**T**O DEFEND EVERYTHING IS TO DEFEND NOTHING.' This logic should appeal to Britain, given the material scarcity of the times. As it tries to rebalance limited resources with many commitments, the country is in the most important defence policy debate in a generation. Yet such restraint does not guide British statecraft.

In its current state, Whitehall's official vision has fallen prey to the error of Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli. As Lord Salisbury warned at the time, Disraeli was inflating Russia's threat to India via Constantinople because his maps were too small: threats that seemed near and great were remote. Space, as Salisbury saw, was a physical shield. A sense of distance was a way to think proportionately.

Even in our time, when the world is supposedly smaller, faster, and more globalised, Britain should use geography to discipline its concept of the national interest, and keep its powder dry.

**THREATS OUT THERE**

Grand strategy is a practical exercise. It aligns a nation's power with its interests and orchestrates ends, ways and means



# The Maps are too Small

to produce security for itself and ensure a way of life. If strategy is a child of weakness, as Edward Luttwak argues, at this time of competing demands on depleted national resources, it should be clearly set out in Britain. Yet it is not.

This is apparent in the National Security Strategy updated last June. Instead of a measured calculation of interests and power, the manifesto offers high-minded wish lists and presents Britain as a good citizen. It claims the country's security depends on a liberal, 'rules based' world order that upholds its values. This is a potentially bottomless concept.

The unifying theme of the document is not strategy, but globalism and complexity. It describes a world of interdependence and connectivity. Britain is endangered by globe-girding, chaotic processes such as state failure. Broken countries are incubators of extremism, disease, or crime.

The crises that supposedly originate 'out there' are manifold: pandemics, weapons proliferation, piracy, climate change or ideological militancy. They can reach British soil or threaten its interests by the vehicles of cheap travel, rapid communications, digital finance, the internet, or diaspora networks.

According to the document, Britain's security is directly

linked to the type of regime in other states. It cannot tolerate the illiberal. Therefore, London must scan the far horizons and take a forward-leaning posture, watching, engaging and intervening on the periphery to protect its core.

Geography comes up in the Strategy, but only in a perfunctory and generalised way. It asserts that Africa matters wherever there is extremism or violence, not a very discriminating test; Eastern Europe matters because Britain is engaged there; the Middle East matters because it is central to security and 'totemic' to extremists, and Afghanistan-Pakistan for its links to domestic terrorism. Central Asia, Eastern Europe, large chunks of Africa and the Middle East: these four spheres would strain a superpower, let alone Britain.

Defined this way, the country's interests have acquired an open-ended, de-territorialised and unbounded character. If British policymakers and their military advisers believe that the nation's interests are at stake wherever questions of order, values, stability or wealth are involved, all things are Britain's concern and virtually everything matters. For its failure to set and rank priorities, globalism is anti-strategic.

The ultimate symbols of this interdependence and vulnerability are the training camps that Al Qaeda used in

Afghanistan after they bought the Taliban regime. In a poor, neglected country far away, mass casualty terrorism took root and exploded on western soil.

Just how realistic is this world view? Britain's security is not necessarily linked to everyone else's in a web of interdependence. Land disputes in New Zealand or illiteracy in Botswana are at best marginal.

It has three flaws. It underestimates the shielding effects of distance. It wrongly claims that the country's interests are identical with its values. And it overlooks how forward-leaning hyperactivity can be the problem as much as the solution.

## LAW ENFORCEMENT BREAKDOWN

Contrary to received wisdom, September 11 2001 was not simply made possible by terrorist sanctuaries in Afghanistan. There was no straight line from the wastes of Central Asia to mass murder in New York. Flying planes into the World Trade Center depended on critical spaces in the First World, such as a flight school in Florida and an operational base in Hamburg. But for breakdowns in basic law enforcement and homeland security, it could have been averted.

As Marc Sageman argues, neo-jihadi terrorism – even the catastrophic and long-range variety – is effectively curtailed by international police work, border control, the building of databases and intelligence sharing, airport security and support for regional powers like Pakistan.

There may be a 'chain of terror' between the mountains of Pakistan and Britain's streets, but it can be disrupted at many points between. Even radicalised Britons need training and resources, and states can interfere with this. Military force from afar can be used effectively to molest any large-scale terrorist base. But we have intermediate alternatives to ambitious projects of armed nation-building.

Otherwise, we are left with a promiscuous notion of our vulnerability to failed states, and have prepared the ground for armed interventions in Sudan, Yemen, or the Philippines. That is not strategy, but a blueprint for endless war.

Moreover, the rescue of failed states may be irrelevant. Contrary to developmental theories, religious terrorism is not a by-product of Third World misery, and peace is not the twin of modernisation. Most terrorists are well-educated, professional cosmopolitans, who thrive in technologically advanced states rather than slums. And giving birth to market democracies is historically a bloody undertaking. Free elections and free markets are competitive processes that often accelerate violent conflict. In any event, most Islamist terrorism is limited, local and not directly threatening to Britain.

## MORALLY ACTIVE

What about liberal values? The idea resists geographical limitation. Some commentators claim Britain's values are its interests. This is false. There may be overlap, but often the country rightly compromises between the two. Britain does

not allow ideological differences to preclude relations with Saudi Arabia or China. The Good Friday agreement in Northern Ireland included the early release of paramilitary prisoners, trading justice for order.

Even when battling offensive regimes, liberal states often turn to illiberal allies. To roll back Argentina's invasion of the Falklands, Britain relied on Chile's President Augusto Pinochet. Geopolitics is not necessarily the enemy of high-mindedness. But altruism must be strategic. With limited power in an anarchic world, Britain cannot be actively moral everywhere.

A liberal interventionist posture and an expansive concept of national interest also has perverse effects. Acting abroad is not necessarily a prudent way to contain or eliminate problems. Interventionism encourages risky behaviour by others, and can incite the humanitarian catastrophes it aims to prevent. Adroit local players deliberately provoke their enemies into counter-atrocities to draw in outside intervention.

Expansion breeds resistance. For example, by increasing Atlantic security through ill-conceived NATO enlargement, the west has antagonised Moscow and heightened confrontation on its borders. Negotiated distance is wiser than encroachment.

## NARROWING HORIZONS

What should Britain do? It should narrow rather than extend its security horizons. It should re-territorialise its interests. A starting point could be its region and heartland – western and Central Europe – and its windpipe: the sea lanes to the Middle East.

If the economic foundations of American power erode further, and if the Asia-Pacific replaces the Atlantic as the focus of its geopolitics, the United States may over the next decades draw down its military protectorate and shift the burden of regional security onto European states. Britain will be an important part of this.

If the world becomes more multi-polar, western Europe may have to contribute more to guard the sea lanes and choke points of the Middle East, with greater reliance on that region's oil.

A focus on the 'commons', or spaces between states, is more limited and workable than surgically fixing states. Marrying its interests and values, the First World must also develop a new energy strategy to lower its oil consumption and disentangle itself from the region that has 'totemic status among violent extremists'.

Even if Britain does not refine its concept of national interest, the next government will probably still lack the appetite for adventures abroad. But the danger is that the country will be without a compass to distinguish core from periphery, the vital from the desirable. Ultimately, this is about identity: what kind of country does Britain want to be and have the power to be? If that question goes unanswered, and when the appetite returns, Britain will seek problems abroad – and find them.