



Akademik Eğitim ve Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi (AJESS Journal)

The Labour Government and the United Kingdom Foreign Policy (2024-Present): Continuity, Change and the Search for a New Global Role

Dr. Chorfi Fatima, University Oran 2, Mohamed Ben Ahmed, Algeria
fchorfi@yahoo.fr / chorfi.fatima@univ-oran2.dz

Article History

Received : 01.08.2026; Accepted: 30.09.2026; Published: 18.10.2026

Abstract:

The election victory of the Labour Party in the United Kingdom in 2024 marked a significant transformation in British political and foreign policy history after fourteen years of Conservative Government. The Labour administration led by Prime Minister Keir Starmer inherited a challenging international environment shaped by the consequences of Brexit, the war in Ukraine, increasing competition between global powers, instability in the Middle East, and debates concerning Britain's position in the international system. This article examines the foreign policy of the Labour Government from 2024 to the present by analysing its strategic priorities, diplomatic objectives, and international relationships. It argues that Labour foreign policy combines continuity and adaptation: continuity through maintaining Britain's traditional commitments to NATO, the United States, and collective security; and adaptation through rebuilding relations with European partners and promoting a more cooperative international role. The article also explores the historiography of British foreign policy and demonstrates that Labour's approach belongs to a longer historical debate about Britain's identity as a global power. Using both primary and secondary sources, this study concludes that the Labour Government has adopted a pragmatic internationalist strategy based on diplomacy, alliances, and multilateral cooperation.

Keywords: Labour Government, United Kingdom, Foreign Policy, Keir Starmer, Brexit, NATO, Diplomacy, International Relations.

Introduction

British foreign policy has historically been one of the most important instruments through which the United Kingdom has defined its international position. From the period of empire to the contemporary era, British governments have attempted to preserve influence through military capability, economic strength, diplomatic networks, and international alliances.

After the Second World War, Britain faced the decline of its imperial power but continued to seek an important role in world affairs. This ambition was maintained through its permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council, nuclear capability, membership of NATO, and close relationship with the United States.

However, Britain's international identity has always involved a strategic dilemma. The country has attempted to balance its Atlantic relationship with Washington and its geographical and economic connection with Europe. The decision to leave the European Union after the 2016 referendum transformed British foreign policy by forcing governments to reconsider the country's global role (Wall, 2020, p. 32).

The Conservative governments after Brexit promoted the concept of "Global Britain," arguing that leaving the European Union would allow Britain to expand its worldwide influence. However, critics argued that international influence depends not only on sovereignty but also on economic partnerships, diplomatic cooperation, and institutional connections (Geddes, 2021, p. 115).

The Labour Party's victory in the 2024 general election introduced a new phase in British foreign policy. The Labour Manifesto of 2024 presented a vision of "responsible internationalism" based on rebuilding alliances, strengthening security cooperation, and restoring Britain's international credibility (Labour Party, 2024, p. 18).

The Labour Government also declared that Britain's foreign policy would focus on security, economic stability, and cooperation with international partners (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office [FCDO], 2024, p. 5). This approach reflects the government's belief that national prosperity and security are closely interconnected in an

increasingly globalized and uncertain international environment (HM Government, 2025, pp. 10-12). Labour has emphasized that strengthening alliances, supporting the rules-based international order, and promoting international law are essential for addressing contemporary challenges such as armed conflict, terrorism, climate change, cyber threats, and economic instability (Ikenberry, 2023, pp. 94-98). The government has also committed itself to rebuilding Britain's diplomatic influence by restoring constructive relations with European allies, reinforcing the transatlantic partnership, and expanding engagement with emerging economies (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office [FCDO], 2024, pp. 6-9).

In addition, Labour views economic diplomacy as a key instrument of foreign policy, seeking to promote trade, attract foreign investment, strengthen supply-chain resilience, and support sustainable economic growth (HM Government, 2025, pp. 13-16). This integrated strategy reflects the growing recognition that economic strength, technological innovation, and international partnerships are fundamental components of national security in the twenty-first century (Baylis, Smith, & Owens, 2023, pp. 90-95). It also illustrates Labour's commitment to a foreign policy based on pragmatic internationalism, combining national interests with multilateral cooperation and the effective use of diplomacy and soft power to enhance Britain's global influence (Nye, 2004, pp. 31-35).

This article examines the foreign policy of the Labour Government from 2024 to the present by analysing its historical background, scholarly interpretations, diplomatic priorities, and relations with major international actors.

Historiography: Interpretations of British Foreign Policy and Labour Internationalism

The study of British foreign policy has produced different interpretations among historians and political scientists. One major approach emphasizes Britain's traditional role as a great power. According to this interpretation, British foreign policy has historically been shaped by the protection of national interests, the maintenance of international influence, and the use of strategic alliances.

Paul Kennedy argues that Britain's international position depended on economic resources, naval power, and the ability to maintain a balance of power among competing states (Kennedy, 1988, p. 151). This interpretation suggests that British foreign policy has always adapted to changes in the global distribution of power.

Another important historical interpretation focuses on Britain's relationship with Europe. Scholars have argued that British governments have often experienced tension between European cooperation and Atlantic orientation. While European integration became increasingly important after the Second World War, Britain continued to view the United States as a central strategic partner (Wall, 2020, p. 45).

The historiography of Labour foreign policy is particularly important for understanding the Starmer Government. Labour has traditionally supported international institutions, collective security, and diplomatic cooperation. Earlier Labour administrations often argued that Britain should actively participate in global affairs rather than retreat from international responsibilities.

However, historians have debated the relationship between Labour idealism and strategic interests. The foreign policy of Tony Blair's Labour government remains one of the most controversial examples. Some scholars argue that Blair attempted to give Britain an ambitious global role, while others criticize his close alignment with American foreign policy, particularly during the Iraq War (Dumbrell, 2006, p. 138).

This historical debate continues to shape scholarly interpretations of Keir Starmer's foreign policy. The current Labour Government has attempted to maintain Britain's global engagement while presenting itself as more cautious, pragmatic, and diplomatic in its approach to international affairs. Rather than pursuing an interventionist foreign policy, Labour has emphasized the importance of strengthening alliances, respecting international law, and resolving disputes through dialogue and multilateral cooperation. This approach reflects the government's belief that Britain's international influence is enhanced through effective diplomacy, strategic partnerships, and active participation in international institutions rather than through unilateral action.

At the same time, Labour has sought to balance continuity with change. While reaffirming traditional commitments to NATO, the Special Relationship with the United States, and support for Ukraine, the government has also worked to rebuild closer relations with the European Union and expand engagement with emerging powers such as India and countries across the Indo-Pacific. This broader diplomatic strategy illustrates Labour's intention to diversify Britain's international partnerships in response to the evolving distribution of global power (HM Government, 2025, pp. 12-18). Moreover, the government has linked foreign policy more closely to domestic priorities, arguing that economic growth, energy security, technological innovation, and national resilience are inseparable from Britain's international strategy. Labour therefore presents foreign policy not only as a means of protecting national security but also as an instrument for promoting prosperity, attracting investment, and addressing transnational challenges such as climate change, cyber threats, and global health security (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 2024, pp. 6-10). In this sense, Starmer's foreign policy represents an effort to adapt Britain's global role to the realities of an increasingly interconnected and multipolar international system while preserving the country's reputation as a reliable and influential international partner.

Recent studies of post-Brexit Britain highlight the difficulty of maintaining international influence outside the European Union. The concept of "Global Britain" was ambitious, but scholars argue that modern influence depends on cooperation, economic power, and international legitimacy (Geddes, 2021, p. 115). Therefore, Labour's foreign policy after 2024 should be understood as part of a continuing historical debate over Britain's role in the world.

Despite the growing literature on Keir Starmer's leadership, the historiography of British foreign policy under his leadership remains limited and fragmented. Existing studies primarily focus on contemporary political analysis, electoral strategy, or individual foreign policy issues, often comparing Starmer with Jeremy Corbyn or Tony Blair without situating his approach within the longer historical development of Labour internationalism. This study addresses that gap by examining Starmer Government's foreign policy as part of the evolving tradition of Labour internationalism, arguing that it represents a selective adaptation of earlier Labour principles to contemporary geopolitical challenges. In doing so, it contributes to the historiography by providing a historically grounded interpretation of continuity and change in Labour's international outlook during the Starmer era.

The Foundations of Labour's Foreign Policy

The foreign policy of the Labour Government is based on the idea of pragmatic internationalism. This approach supports an active British role in global affairs while emphasizing diplomacy, cooperation, and respect for international law. The Labour Party's 2024 manifesto stated that Britain must restore its international partnerships and strengthen its influence through cooperation rather than isolation (Labour Party, 2024, p. 18). This represents a significant adjustment from some previous post-Brexit approaches that emphasized independence from European structures.

The government argues that modern challenges such as climate change, cyber-security, technological competition, and international conflicts require collective responses. The Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office has emphasized that British foreign policy must combine security, economic growth, and diplomatic engagement (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 2024, p. 7).

According to Baylis, Smith, and Owens, contemporary international relations are shaped by multiple forms of power, including military capability, economic influence, technological strength, and diplomatic credibility (Baylis, Smith, & Owens, 2020, p. 92).

Economic security has also become an important part of Labour's foreign policy. Global supply chains, energy security, and technological competition are increasingly viewed as matters of national interest. The government therefore links foreign policy with broader economic strategy.

The Labour approach does not represent a complete break with previous British traditions. It rather attempts to modernize Britain's international role by combining traditional alliances with renewed diplomatic engagement.

Relations with Europe after Brexit

One of the most important challenges facing the Labour government has been the reconstruction of Britain's relationship with the European Union (EU) after Brexit. The withdrawal from the EU represented not only an economic and political transformation but also a major reconsideration of Britain's international identity.

For decades, British foreign policy attempted to balance two major strategic orientations: cooperation with Europe and the transatlantic relationship with the United States. Brexit intensified this historical dilemma by removing Britain from EU institutions and forcing the government to develop new methods of international engagement (Wall, 2020, p. 32).

The concept of "Global Britain" promoted after Brexit suggested that the United Kingdom could strengthen its worldwide influence by operating independently from European structures. However, many scholars argued that this approach underestimated the importance of regional cooperation and the economic advantages of European partnerships (Geddes, 2021, p. 115).

The Labour Government has adopted a pragmatic approach toward Europe. Although it has rejected returning to EU membership or the single market, it has emphasized rebuilding trust and practical cooperation with European partners. The government's foreign policy documents identify stronger European relations as essential for economic security, defence cooperation, and international influence (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 2024, p. 11).

Security cooperation has become a major area of renewed engagement. The war in Ukraine demonstrated that European security requires cooperation between Britain and its European allies. The Labour government has supported closer coordination with European states while maintaining Britain's wider global commitments.

The government's European policy also reflects the economic realities that have emerged since the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union (EU). Although Brexit formally ended Britain's membership of the EU, it did not eliminate the close economic ties that continue to link the United Kingdom with its largest trading partner. New customs procedures, regulatory differences, and border checks have increased costs for businesses and complicated trade, particularly for sectors that depend on integrated European supply chains. These developments have reinforced the importance of maintaining stable and constructive relations with European partners (Office for Budget Responsibility, 2025, pp. 46-50).

Brexit also created challenges for investment and labour mobility. Some international investors became more cautious because of uncertainty surrounding future UK-EU economic relations, while businesses experienced greater administrative burdens when recruiting skilled workers from Europe. Universities, research institutions, and industries relying on cross-border cooperation also faced new obstacles in areas such as academic exchange, scientific collaboration, and professional mobility. These economic realities have encouraged policymakers to seek practical solutions that reduce friction while respecting the post-Brexit political settlement (HM Treasury, 2025, pp. 28-33).

In response, the Labour Government has pursued a pragmatic strategy aimed at improving cooperation with the European Union without revisiting the constitutional question of EU membership. Rather than seeking to reverse Brexit, Labour has focused on negotiating sector specific agreements that facilitate trade, strengthen regulatory cooperation,

improve security coordination, and expand collaboration in research, innovation, and energy. This approach seeks to rebuild trust with European partners while preserving the United Kingdom's political independence outside the European Union (HM Government, 2025, pp. 15-19).

Ultimately, Labour's European policy reflects a balance between political realism and economic necessity. The government accepts Brexit as the foundation of the UK's relationship with the European Union but recognizes that long-term economic growth depends upon close cooperation with neighbouring states. By prioritizing practical diplomacy over ideological confrontation, Labour aims to reduce economic barriers, encourage investment, and strengthen Britain's competitiveness while maintaining a stable and constructive partnership with Europe. This strategy represents an attempt to redefine Britain's European role. Instead of choosing between European cooperation and global ambition, the government seeks to combine both approaches.

The United Kingdom, NATO, and Security Policy

Security policy remains one of the strongest areas of continuity in British foreign policy. Since becoming a founding member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949, the United Kingdom has regarded collective defence as the cornerstone of its national security and international influence. Successive governments, regardless of political orientation, have viewed NATO not only as a military alliance but also as a political community committed to preserving peace, stability, and the rules-based international order. Under the Labour government elected in 2024, this long-standing commitment has remained unchanged, reflecting the belief that Britain's security is inseparable from that of its allies (NATO, 2024, pp. 8-10).

The Labour Government has reaffirmed NATO as the foundation of British defence policy and the principal framework for ensuring Euro-Atlantic security. Through NATO, the United Kingdom benefits from collective defence under Article 5 of the Washington Treaty while contributing significant military capabilities, intelligence assets, and diplomatic leadership. Britain's strategic role within the alliance extends beyond territorial defence to include crisis management, deterrence, intelligence sharing, and military modernization. Labour has therefore continued to support increased defence cooperation with European allies while maintaining the indispensable role of the United States within the alliance. As the NATO Strategic Concept emphasizes, collective defence, deterrence, and cooperative security remain the alliance's three core tasks in an increasingly unpredictable international environment (NATO, 2024, pp. 9-13).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has profoundly influenced Britain's security policy and reinforced Labour's commitment to NATO. Since taking office, the government has maintained political, military, financial, and humanitarian support for Ukraine, arguing that Russia's aggression represents a direct challenge to European security, international law, and the principle of state sovereignty. British officials have consistently maintained that supporting Ukraine is essential not only for defending Ukrainian independence but also for preventing the erosion of the international rules-based order. Consequently, the United Kingdom has continued to provide military assistance, intelligence cooperation, training programmes, and diplomatic support in close coordination with NATO allies and the G7 (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office [FCDO], 2025, pp. 15-21).

The government's approach reflects the broader strategic objective of preserving European stability through strong alliances and collective action. Official security documents emphasize that modern international security depends upon defending democratic values, protecting national sovereignty, and maintaining effective partnerships with allies. Labour has therefore strengthened Britain's participation in NATO's deterrence posture while supporting greater European defence cooperation that complements, rather than replaces, the transatlantic alliance. This balanced approach seeks to reinforce NATO's unity while enhancing Europe's capacity to respond to regional security challenges (HM Government, 2025, pp. 18-24).

From a theoretical perspective, Labour's security strategy aligns closely with liberal institutionalist interpretations of international relations. G. John Ikenberry argues that the stability of the contemporary international order depends upon institutions, alliances, and shared rules that facilitate cooperation and reduce the likelihood of conflict among states. According to Ikenberry, alliances such as NATO provide legitimacy, predictability, and collective capacity that individual states cannot achieve independently (Ikenberry, 2023, pp. 95-101). Britain's continued support for Ukraine and its commitment to NATO therefore represent not only national security priorities but also a broader effort to defend the institutional foundations of the post-war international order.

At the same time, Labour recognizes that contemporary security extends far beyond conventional military threats. Cyber-attacks, artificial intelligence, disinformation campaigns, critical infrastructure protection, energy security, and technological competition have become central elements of national defence. The rapid digital transformation of economies and governments has increased vulnerability to cyber espionage, ransomware attacks, and foreign interference, requiring closer cooperation between government agencies, private industry, and international partners. Consequently, Labour has expanded investment in cyber resilience, technological innovation, and intelligence capabilities while strengthening collaboration with allies through NATO and the Five Eyes intelligence partnership (National Cyber Security Centre, 2025, pp. 12-18).

Energy security has likewise emerged as a strategic priority following the disruption of global energy markets caused by geopolitical tensions. Reducing dependence on vulnerable supply chains, protecting critical infrastructure, and accelerating investment in renewable energy have become integral components of Britain's national security strategy. Labour views economic resilience as increasingly interconnected with defence policy, recognizing that secure energy

supplies, resilient industries, and technological competitiveness are essential for sustaining military capabilities and national sovereignty (HM Government, 2025, pp. 30-34).

Barry Buzan and the authors of *The Globalization of World Politics* argue that modern security has expanded beyond the traditional military sphere to encompass economic, technological, environmental, and societal dimensions. Contemporary threats are increasingly transnational and require comprehensive responses involving military preparedness, economic resilience, diplomatic cooperation, and institutional coordination (Baylis, Smith, & Owens, 2023, pp. 90-95). Labour's integrated approach to security reflects this broader understanding by combining defence modernization with investments in cyber capabilities, technological innovation, energy resilience, and international partnerships.

Overall, the Labour Government's security policy demonstrates a strong commitment to continuity while adapting to emerging strategic realities. NATO remains the cornerstone of British defence policy, and support for Ukraine illustrates Britain's determination to uphold international law and collective security. At the same time, Labour recognizes that twenty-first-century security requires more than military strength alone. By integrating defence, technology, economic resilience, and international cooperation, the government seeks to ensure that the United Kingdom remains a leading contributor to European and global security in an increasingly complex and multipolar international system.

The United States and the Special Relationship

The relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom remains the cornerstone of British foreign policy and one of the most enduring bilateral partnerships in international politics. Since the Second World War, successive British governments have regarded close cooperation with Washington as essential to safeguarding national security, projecting international influence, and maintaining the liberal international order. Despite changes in governments on both sides of the Atlantic, the "Special Relationship" continues to shape British strategic thinking and remains central to Labour's foreign policy agenda (Dumbrell, 2006, pp. 25-30).

The foundations of the Special Relationship extend beyond shared history and language. It is supported by extensive intelligence cooperation through the Five Eyes alliance, close military collaboration within NATO, nuclear cooperation, and regular diplomatic coordination on major international issues. Joint operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, intelligence sharing on counterterrorism, and cooperation in cyber security and defence technology illustrate the depth of this partnership. These institutional links have created a level of strategic trust that few bilateral relationships in international politics can match (Baylis, Smith, & Owens, 2023, pp. 402-406).

Since taking office in 2024, the Labour Government has reaffirmed its commitment to the Atlantic alliance while seeking to pursue a more balanced and independent foreign policy. Prime Minister Keir Starmer has emphasized that strong relations with the United States remain indispensable for Britain's security, particularly in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, growing cyber threats, and increasing geopolitical instability. At the same time, Labour has argued that maintaining close ties with Washington should not prevent the United Kingdom from strengthening cooperation with the European Union or expanding partnerships with emerging global powers. This approach reflects Labour's broader objective of pursuing strategic flexibility rather than exclusive dependence on a single ally (HM Government, 2025, pp. 10-15).

The significance of the Special Relationship has long been debated by scholars of British foreign policy. Supporters argue that cooperation with the United States enhances Britain's global influence by providing privileged access to American decision-making, advanced military capabilities, intelligence networks, and diplomatic initiatives. According to John Dumbrell, the relationship has enabled Britain to exercise international influence beyond what its material capabilities alone would permit (Dumbrell, 2006, pp. 27-32). From this perspective, Britain's close partnership with the United States serves as a force multiplier that strengthens its position within global politics.

Critics, however, contend that the Special Relationship may constrain Britain's strategic autonomy. They argue that excessive alignment with American foreign policy can reduce Britain's ability to pursue independent diplomatic initiatives and may involve the United Kingdom in military interventions that do not always serve its national interests. The Iraq War of 2003 remains the most frequently cited example, illustrating how close alignment with Washington generated significant domestic controversy and raised questions regarding Britain's foreign policy independence (Wallace, 2013, pp. 118-123). Consequently, some scholars advocate a more balanced approach that preserves transatlantic cooperation while allowing greater flexibility in responding to international challenges.

The contemporary international environment has further complicated the relationship between London and Washington. Strategic competition between the United States and China has become one of the defining features of global politics, requiring Britain to balance its economic relationship with China against its security commitments to the United States. Simultaneously, conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, rapid technological change, cyber threats, energy security, and global economic uncertainty have expanded the range of issues requiring close Anglo-American coordination. These developments demand continuous consultation while also allowing room for Britain to pursue policies tailored to its own economic and diplomatic priorities (National Security Strategy, 2025, pp. 18-24).

Within NATO, Labour has maintained strong support for collective defence and continued military assistance to Ukraine, reinforcing Britain's role as one of the alliance's leading European members. Cooperation with the United States remains particularly important in defence planning, intelligence sharing, nuclear deterrence, and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and cyber defence. At the same time, Labour has argued that stronger

European security capabilities should complement rather than replace the transatlantic alliance, reflecting its commitment to burden-sharing within NATO and closer coordination with European partners (NATO, 2025, pp. 6-12). Ultimately, Labour's policy toward the United States reflects a strategy of continuity with adaptation. The government remains committed to preserving the Special Relationship as the foundation of British security and defence policy while simultaneously broadening Britain's diplomatic engagement with Europe, the Indo-Pacific, and emerging economies. This balanced approach seeks to maximize Britain's international influence by maintaining its closest strategic alliance while adapting to an increasingly multipolar international system in which diversified partnerships have become essential for achieving national interests.

Relations with China and Emerging Global Powers

China represents one of the most significant and complex challenges facing British foreign policy under the Labour Government. The United Kingdom views China simultaneously as an indispensable economic partner, a systemic competitor, and, in certain sectors, a strategic threat. This multidimensional relationship requires policymakers to reconcile competing priorities, including trade, investment, technological cooperation, national security, and the defence of democratic values. Instead of adopting an exclusively confrontational or accommodating stance, the Labour Government has pursued what it describes as a pragmatic and consistent policy that combines selective engagement with robust security measures (HM Government, 2025, pp. 18-21).

The Labour Government's approach differs from earlier debates that often oscillated between the "Golden Era" of UK-China relations promoted during the mid-2010s and the more confrontational rhetoric that emerged in subsequent Conservative governments. Labour has emphasized that economic engagement with China remains necessary because China is Britain's third-largest trading partner and a central actor in global supply chains, climate governance, and international finance. Nevertheless, cooperation is expected to occur only where it does not compromise British national security or strategic autonomy (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office [FCDO], 2025, pp. 14-18).

One of the principal concerns shaping British policy is technological competition. Advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing, semiconductors, biotechnology, and telecommunications are increasingly viewed as matters of national security rather than purely commercial interests. The controversy surrounding Huawei's participation in Britain's 5G network illustrated the broader challenge of balancing economic efficiency against strategic vulnerability. The Labour government has maintained restrictions on sensitive Chinese involvement in critical infrastructure while simultaneously encouraging investment from trusted partners and domestic technological innovation (HM Government, 2025, pp. 22-25).

Cyber-security has become another central pillar of Britain's China policy. British intelligence agencies have repeatedly warned about cyber espionage, intellectual property theft, and cyber-attacks targeting government institutions, universities, research centers, and private companies. Consequently, the government has strengthened cyber resilience through enhanced cooperation with intelligence partners, particularly within the Five Eyes alliance, while expanding investment in domestic cyber capabilities. These measures reflect an understanding that national security increasingly depends upon digital infrastructure and information security rather than solely on conventional military power (National Cyber Security Centre, 2025, pp. 10-16).

Economic security has also become an essential component of British foreign policy toward China. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerabilities associated with excessive dependence on global supply chains concentrated in a limited number of countries. Consequently, Labour has adopted policies aimed at increasing economic resilience through supply-chain diversification, investment screening mechanisms, and support for strategic domestic industries. Instead of promoting complete economic decoupling from China, the government supports what many policymakers describe as "de-risking"-reducing strategic dependence while maintaining mutually beneficial commercial relations (HM Treasury, 2025, pp. 30-35).

Climate change remains one of the principal areas in which cooperation between Britain and China continues despite strategic rivalry. As the world's two largest historical and current contributors to global greenhouse gas emissions respectively, the United Kingdom and China share significant responsibilities in achieving international climate objectives. British diplomacy therefore seeks continued collaboration with Beijing on renewable energy, carbon reduction, biodiversity protection, and the implementation of international climate agreements. This reflects Labour's broader argument that geopolitical competition should not prevent cooperation on global public goods where mutual interests clearly exist (FCDO, 2025, pp. 45-49).

Theoretical perspectives on international relations help explain this dual strategy of engagement and competition. Barry Buzan argues that globalization has created a highly interconnected international system in which states simultaneously compete and cooperate across multiple sectors. Economic interdependence does not eliminate geopolitical rivalry but instead creates complex patterns of mutual dependence that require careful management rather than absolute confrontation (Buzan, 2021, pp. 58-63). From this perspective, Britain's policy toward China illustrates the reality of managing strategic competition within an interconnected global economy.

Similarly, Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye's concept of complex interdependence suggests that economic globalization reduces the effectiveness of purely military approaches to international politics. Instead, states increasingly rely upon diplomacy, institutions, technology, and economic instruments to advance their interests (Keohane & Nye, 2012, pp.

18-27). Labour's China policy reflects this logic by combining economic engagement with regulatory controls, diplomatic dialogue, and security cooperation.

The rise of China has also accelerated Britain's efforts to strengthen partnerships with other emerging global powers, particularly India. Following Britain's withdrawal from the European Union, successive governments have sought to diversify international economic relations beyond Europe. Labour has continued this strategy by deepening cooperation with India in trade, education, defence, science, digital technology, and clean energy. The conclusion of closer economic agreements with India reflects Britain's recognition that future global economic growth will increasingly originate in the Indo-Pacific region (HM Government, 2025, pp. 40-44).

Beyond India, the Labour Government has expanded diplomatic engagement with emerging economies across Southeast Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Gulf region. Relations with countries such as Indonesia, Brazil, South Africa, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf Cooperation Council members have become increasingly important for trade diversification, energy security, investment, and multilateral cooperation. Britain's participation in regional dialogues and development partnerships demonstrates its intention to remain an influential global actor despite changing distributions of economic and political power (FCDO, 2025, pp. 50-56).

This strategic reorientation reflects the broader transformation of the international system from one dominated primarily by Western powers toward a more multipolar order. The growing influence of China, India, Brazil, and other emerging economies has reduced the relative dominance of the United States and Europe within global governance institutions. Labour policymakers therefore recognize that Britain's diplomatic effectiveness increasingly depends upon building flexible partnerships across multiple regions rather than relying exclusively on traditional transatlantic alliances.

Scholars such as Amitav Acharya argue that the contemporary international system is evolving into a multiplex world, characterized by multiple centers of power, diverse regional institutions, and shared leadership rather than a single hegemonic order (Acharya, 2018, pp. 3-12). This framework closely aligns with Labour's emphasis on pragmatic diplomacy, multilateral cooperation, and engagement with both established allies and emerging powers. Britain's foreign policy therefore seeks to preserve its global influence by adapting to an increasingly complex and competitive international environment.

Overall, Labour's policy toward China and emerging global powers reflects a strategy of selective engagement, strategic resilience, and diversified partnerships. Rather than viewing China solely as either a threat or an opportunity, the government acknowledges the coexistence of cooperation and competition. At the same time, it seeks to strengthen Britain's economic security, technological capabilities, and diplomatic relationships with rapidly growing economies across the Global South. This balanced approach illustrates Labour's broader objective of positioning the United Kingdom as an active middle power capable of navigating the complexities of twenty-first-century geopolitics while contributing to the stability of an increasingly multipolar international order.

The Middle East and Global Diplomatic Challenges

The Middle East continues to occupy a central position in British foreign policy because of its strategic location, historical connections, energy resources, major trade routes, and persistent security challenges. For the United Kingdom, developments in the region have direct implications for international terrorism, migration, global energy markets, maritime security, and the stability of the broader international order. Consequently, the Labour Government has maintained the Middle East as a priority area within its wider foreign policy agenda, emphasizing diplomacy, conflict prevention, humanitarian assistance, and cooperation with international partners (Prime Minister's Office, 2024, pp. 4-6).

Britain's contemporary engagement with the Middle East cannot be fully understood without reference to its historical legacy in the region. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the British Empire exercised extensive political, military, and economic influence across the Middle East through formal colonies, protectorates, and strategic alliances. The dissolution of the empire after the Second World War fundamentally transformed Britain's position. Although the United Kingdom no longer possesses imperial authority, historical relationships continue to shape diplomatic ties, security cooperation, and perceptions of British involvement among regional actors (Louis, 2006, pp. 731-736).

Under the Labour Government, official policy has stressed that British influence should be exercised through international law, multilateral institutions, and diplomatic engagement rather than unilateral intervention. This position reflects lessons drawn from previous military interventions in the region, particularly the Iraq War of 2003, which generated significant domestic and international criticism and raised broader questions about the effectiveness of military solutions in resolving complex regional conflicts (Prime Minister's Office, 2024, pp. 4-5). Labour leaders have therefore emphasized preventive diplomacy, humanitarian assistance, and support for negotiated settlements wherever possible.

One of the most significant diplomatic challenges concerns the ongoing Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The United Kingdom has consistently supported a negotiated two-state solution based upon international law and mutual recognition. At the same time, British policymakers have faced the difficult task of balancing support for Israel's security with concerns regarding civilian protection, humanitarian access, and the rights of Palestinians. Escalating violence and humanitarian crises have intensified calls for ceasefires, increased aid delivery, and renewed diplomatic initiatives. Labour's approach has largely emphasized de-escalation, humanitarian relief, and the importance of long-term political

negotiations as the only sustainable path toward peace (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office [FCDO], 2025, pp. 21-27).

Humanitarian crises represent another major dimension of Britain's Middle East policy. Conflicts in Gaza, Syria, Yemen, and other parts of the region have produced large-scale displacement, food insecurity, and severe humanitarian suffering. The United Kingdom has contributed financial assistance through international organizations, supported refugee programs, and worked with allies to facilitate humanitarian access. These efforts reflect Labour's broader commitment to combining moral responsibility with international cooperation in addressing global crises (FCDO, 2025, pp. 30-34). Security concerns also continue to shape British engagement in the region. The threat posed by terrorism, violent extremism, and regional instability has encouraged Britain to maintain defence partnerships with several Middle Eastern states while cooperating closely with NATO allies and regional organizations. Maritime security in strategic waterways such as the Red Sea, the Suez Canal, and the Strait of Hormuz remains particularly important because disruptions in these routes can significantly affect global trade and energy supplies. Protecting freedom of navigation and supporting regional stability therefore remain key British objectives (HM Government, 2025, pp. 41-45).

Energy security and economic interests further explain Britain's continued involvement in Middle Eastern affairs. Although the global transition toward renewable energy is reducing long-term dependence on fossil fuels, the region remains a major supplier of oil and natural gas to international markets. Political instability in the Middle East can therefore have immediate consequences for energy prices, inflation, and the global economy. In addition, the Gulf States have become increasingly important partners in investment, finance, technology, and trade, creating strong incentives for continued diplomatic engagement (HM Treasury, 2025, pp. 18-22).

The Labour Government has also sought to strengthen relations with regional organizations and middle powers within the Middle East. Cooperation with the Gulf Cooperation Council, dialogue with countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and Qatar, and engagement with broader international forums illustrate Britain's preference for coalition-based diplomacy. This approach recognizes that contemporary global challenges often require collective action rather than the unilateral exercise of power.

From a theoretical perspective, the Middle East highlights both the possibilities and limitations of contemporary British influence. Realist scholars argue that Britain's reduced material capabilities compared with the era of empire inevitably constrain its ability to shape regional outcomes independently. In a multipolar international system, even major powers increasingly face limits on their capacity to impose political solutions in complex conflicts (Mearsheimer, 2014, pp. 77-83). British policymakers must therefore operate within a context in which influence depends less upon direct control and more upon persuasion, partnerships, and institutional cooperation.

Conversely, liberal institutionalist perspectives emphasize that states can still exercise considerable influence through diplomacy, alliances, and international organizations. Robert Keohane contends that international institutions facilitate cooperation by creating frameworks for negotiation, reducing uncertainty, and encouraging collective responses to shared problems (Keohane, 1984, pp. 85-92). Britain's reliance on the United Nations, NATO, humanitarian agencies, and multilateral diplomacy in the Middle East reflects this institutional approach to international relations.

Joseph Nye's concept of soft power is also relevant in understanding Britain's contemporary role. Instead of relying solely on military capabilities, Britain increasingly seeks to influence regional developments through diplomacy, development assistance, cultural relations, education, and support for international norms. Such forms of influence can be particularly important in regions where coercive strategies have often produced limited or counterproductive results (Nye, 2004, pp. 5-11).

The challenges of the Middle East therefore illustrate the broader transformation of British foreign policy in the post-imperial era. Modern Britain no longer exercises direct authority in the region, yet it remains an important diplomatic actor with significant interests and responsibilities. Its influence increasingly depends upon coalition-building, multilateral cooperation, strategic partnerships, and the effective use of diplomatic and soft-power resources rather than traditional imperial or military dominance.

Ultimately, the Labour Government's approach to the Middle East reflects its wider foreign policy philosophy: support for international law, commitment to humanitarian principles, reliance on diplomacy, and preference for collective action. While Britain's ability to shape outcomes independently is more limited than in previous historical periods, it continues to play a meaningful role in addressing regional conflicts, humanitarian crises, and global diplomatic challenges. The Middle East thus remains both a test of Britain's international influence and an illustration of how middle powers seek to navigate an increasingly interconnected and multipolar world.

Conclusion

The Labour Government's foreign policy since 2024 reflects a strategic effort to redefine the United Kingdom's place in an increasingly complex and multipolar international system. Operating in the aftermath of Brexit and amid rising geopolitical competition, the government has sought to restore Britain's international credibility through a balanced foreign policy that combines national interests with renewed diplomatic engagement. Instead of pursuing radical departures from previous policies, Labour has adopted a pragmatic approach that recognizes the importance of adapting to new global realities while preserving Britain's long-standing strategic commitments.

A defining feature of this foreign policy has been the balance between continuity and change. The government has reaffirmed its commitment to NATO, the transatlantic alliance, and support for Ukraine, while simultaneously seeking

to rebuild constructive relations with the European Union through practical cooperation. At the same time, Labour has expanded engagement with emerging powers, strengthened partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, promoted economic diplomacy, and emphasized international law, climate diplomacy, and multilateral institutions as essential instruments of British foreign policy. This multidimensional strategy reflects the understanding that Britain's influence in the twenty-first century depends increasingly on partnerships, diplomacy, and international cooperation rather than unilateral action. The historiography of British foreign policy places Labour's strategy within a broader historical debate concerning Britain's international identity. Realist scholars have traditionally emphasized Britain's pursuit of great-power status through military capability and strategic alliances, whereas liberal institutionalists highlight the importance of international organizations, diplomacy, and cooperative security. More recent scholarship on post-Brexit Britain suggests that the country's global role is evolving toward that of an influential middle power that exercises leadership through coalition-building, soft power, and participation in international institutions. Labour's foreign policy reflects this evolution by combining traditional security commitments with a renewed emphasis on pragmatic diplomacy and rules based international order.

Ultimately, the Labour Government's foreign policy can be characterized as pragmatic internationalism. It seeks to preserve British influence while recognizing the constraints imposed by an increasingly interconnected and competitive global environment. By balancing security, economic resilience, multilateral cooperation, and strategic partnerships, the government aims to position the United Kingdom as a credible and constructive international actor. Although significant challenges remain- including geopolitical rivalry, regional conflicts, economic uncertainty, and the ongoing consequences of Brexit-Labour's foreign policy represents an effort to adapt Britain's global role to the realities of contemporary international politics while maintaining its commitment to stability, cooperation, and democratic values.

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