How Great is Britain? Power, Responsibility and Britain's Future Global Role

Justin Morris
Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Hull, Hull HU6 7RX, UK, email: *j.c.morris@hull.ac.uk*

Abstract

Hedley Bull argued that for a state to be classed as a great power it must be in the first rank in terms of military strength but also recognised by others to have, and conceived by its own leaders and peoples to have, certain special rights and duties. Adopting this approach, this article argues that Britain's great power credentials are far stronger than commonly appreciated and that, while the term is no longer in vogue, within government the idea that Britain is a great power remains an influential factor in determining British foreign and defence policy.

Key Words

- Britain
- great power
- responsibility
- Conservative-led government

Introduction

During the 13 years in which New Labour held power it exhibited an attitude to Britain's global role and particularly to the morality and utility of using military force which differed markedly to that which traditionally typified the Labour party. One consequence of this was Britain's entry into conflicts in Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Iraq and Afghanistan. These conflicts coloured the 2010 electoral backdrop against which foreign and defence policy was debated, but while much of the discussion focused on specific issues—such as the replacing of the Trident nuclear missile system, the building of new aircraft carriers and the funding and equipping of forces in the field—at its heart lay a much bigger question: in a period of shifting global power and massive national budgetary deficit, what role should Britain seek to play in the 21st century?

This article addresses this question. It argues that Britain's great power credentials are far stronger than is commonly appreciated and that, while the term is no longer in vogue, within government the idea that Britain is a great power is prevalent and an influential factor in determining British foreign and defence policy. The article considers a series of inter-related questions: first, what do we mean when we refer to a state as a great power and how does this influence our understanding of international politics? In answering this the article rejects realism's claim that great power status is wholly determined by material—and particularly military—capabilities, and instead argues that it involves both a material and an ideational dimension. Accordingly, the article endorses the English School's depiction of great powers, arguing that while they must possess extraordinary military strength, they must also recognise that they have—and be recognised by others as having—special rights and responsibilities with regard to the maintenance of international order.

The second section of the article considers whether, given the criteria established in the article, Britain should today be counted as a great power. It argues that, contrary to the prevailing narrative of decline and the fact that no state can match the might of the US, Britain is sufficiently powerful to meet the material benchmark demanded of a great power. In ideational terms it does not attempt to analyse the behavioural expectations that other states have of Britain, but instead demonstrates how successive British governments have acted in accordance with the notion that the country's power brings with it special responsibilities.

The final section of the article examines the extent to which the foreign and defence policies of Britain's new Conservative-led government are likely to be influenced by issues of power and responsibility. Prior to and in the immediate aftermath of the general election, Conservative leaders made repeated references to the fact that Britain remained a major world power with a global role to play. But the article questions whether key decisions made since the assumption of power have matched this rhetoric, and considers the implications of these decisions for Britain's continued claim to a seat at the top table of international politics.

The Meaning of Great Power Status

Determining which states should be classed as great powers is a complex business; whatever definition we devise is likely, as Martin Wight states, to be 'an abstraction in some degree removed from our complicated and unmanageable political experience' (Wight 1978, 48).

Even if the assessment is restricted to issues of material power the inherent difficulties should not be underestimated. Hence, while Kenneth Waltz advocates an essentially materialist determination of which states should be considered as great powers, he warns nevertheless that 'the economic, military, and other capabilities of nations cannot be sectored and separately weighed' (Waltz 1979, 131; see also Buzan 2004, ch. 5; Wohlforth 1999, 10–18). Despite these difficulties there exists an influential school of thought—realism—which shares John Mearsheimer's view that in analysing states the most important factors to consider are their socioeconomic (or 'latent') and military power and that 'a state's effective power is ultimately a function of its military forces and how they compare with the military forces of rival states' (Mearsheimer 2001, 55). Following this line of reasoning, Mearsheimer argues that to be classed as a great power a state 'must have sufficient military assets to put up a fight in an all-out conventional war against the most powerful state in the world' (Mearsheimer 2001, 5).

Mearsheimer's preoccupation with military power is a common theme in the International Relations literature and even those who challenge many of his other realist claims would nevertheless accept the importance of military strength, especially when considering which states count as great powers. Similarly, while scholars such as Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye (1989) contest realism's tendency to view economic power as little more than a foundation for military prowess, there is little support for the contention that a state can rank as a great power based on economic strength alone (Bull 1977, 201; Berridge and Young 1988, 232). In this sense economic power is a necessary condition—since without it states are unlikely, at least in the long term, to be able to maintain their military strength—but not a sufficient one for ascribing great power status. A similar argument can be made regarding what Nye calls 'soft power', essentially 'the ability to shape the preferences of others' (Nye 2004, 5). A state endowed with great soft power could not, on this basis alone, be said to count as a great power, but a state which is a great power in military and economic terms and which also has high levels of soft power will be further strengthened because its ability to attract followers reduces the resistance encountered when applying its material strength to the pursuit of foreign policy objectives (Nye 2004, 1–32). Hence soft power may be considered neither necessary nor sufficient to constitute a state as a great power, but it does nevertheless enhance the standing of those which possess it.

The global distribution of all of these forms of power is dynamic (Kennedy 1988). States' perceptions of and reactions to these shifts in power will depend on a number of factors, including: the extant degrees and nature of the power disparities; the rapidity and extent of relative rise and fall; and the policies (including ones of revelation or obfuscation) states adopt. One further factor is the extent to which states' positions are embedded within what Gerry Simpson refers to as 'legalised hierarchies' such as the UN Security Council (Simpson, 2004, ch. 3), something that serves only to complicate matters further because of the tendency of 'formal recognition [to] lag behind the growth or decay of power' (Wight 1978, 46). Such issues may serve to obscure our view of the power of states and the manner in which it is distributed within the international system, but it is these material factors that, for realists, are essential to understanding international politics and in turn for them determine which states should be considered to be great powers. But for other scholars, those who might broadly be said to adopt an English School approach, power and its distribution are necessary but not sufficient explanatory factors.

For adherents of the English School, if a state is to be counted as a great power it must, as Hedley Bull states, be: first, one of a group of states of comparable power; second, 'in the

front rank in terms of military strength'; and finally—and crucially—'recognised by others to have, and conceived by their own leaders and peoples to have, certain special rights and duties' (Bull 1977, 201–202; see also Buzan 2004, 61). The importance of this latter point stems from the notion that great powers are not just unusually powerful states, but collectively constitute an *institution* of international society (Bull 1977, ch. 9). Accordingly, great powers must conform to certain behavioural expectations and in particular must 'manage their relationships with one another in the interests of international order' (Bull 1977, 207).

The social element of this argument is crucial because, as Simpson explains, 'the directorate of the great powers can only arise [where there is] sufficient integration of states within a network of norms and expectations for the category to acquire any meaning' (Simpson 2004, 72). Viewed in this way, while great powers can be seen to compete and potentially fight, they are nevertheless expected to share a broader perspective in which their relations with one another and with the less powerful members of international society are defined in terms of societal objectives and not, as realists suggest, merely on the basis of narrowly defined self-interest (Brown 2004, 6). State practice provides considerable support for the contention that great powers should, in Wight's words, act as 'Great Responsibles' (Wight 1978, 44). From the Concert of Europe to the League of Nations and the United Nations thereafter, the role of the great powers has increasingly become one in which they have been called upon to act with restraint and in a manner conducive to the preservation of international peace and security (Clark 1989). Indeed, this was the very bargain that was struck when the UN Charter was agreed at San Francisco; the privileges accorded the great powers carried with them the shared understanding that it was primarily the responsibility of the great powers to safeguard future generations from the scourge of war (Goodrich and Hambro 1949; Russell 1958).

In Bull's classic formulation, great powers have 'a special mission [as] … custodian[s] or trustees[s] of the interests of international society' (Bull 1971, 145) and are required to 'accept the duty, and are thought by others to have the duty, of modifying their policies in the light of the managerial responsibilities they bear' (Bull 1977, 202). The policy modifications to which he refers relate both to the inter-state behaviour within this elite group, and to the ways in which the great powers behave towards the other members of international society. Regarding the former, Bull identifies the preservation of the balance of power, the avoidance and control of crises and the limitation of war as being the key issues, while in their dealings with other states he suggests that the great powers should individually exploit their local preponderances, respect the spheres of influence of other great powers and manage the behaviour of lesser powers by acting in concert with one another (Bull 1977, 207–227; see also Brown 2004).

It is notable that this framework of responsibility relates exclusively to the maintenance of inter-state order. Writing in the shadow of the Cold War, for Bull this restriction was necessitated by the inherent vulnerability of international order in an anarchic environment which lacked a centralised mechanism dedicated to its maintenance. The danger was all too apparent; where the preservation of order was dependent on the very same states that uniquely had the capacity to imperil it (Jackson 2000, 172–174), and in a situation in which the propensity to distrust was accentuated by the threat that the possession of great military strength posed (Booth and Wheeler 2008, 102), it would be unrealistic and potentially disastrous to expect the great powers to shoulder anything beyond responsibility for inter-state order. Moreover, the extension to the great powers of responsibility for maintaining intra-state order would, in addition to challenging state sovereignty, only be feasible where

agreement regarding acceptable standards of domestic behaviour could be secured. In the absence of such a consensus any attempts by the great powers to act pursuant to such a responsibility could only lead to conflict and thus serve to endanger inter-state order. Since for Bull inter-state order had to be prioritised over its domestic counterpart, such an approach could not be generally countenanced (Bull 1977, 93–98). In the post-Cold War era this prioritisation has, however, been challenged in theory and in practice; the question of whether, and if so how, great power responsibility extends beyond the inter- to the intra-state realm lies at the heart of the debate between the so-called pluralist and solidarist wings of the English School (Wheeler 1992 and 2000; Jackson 2000; Buzan 2004). More importantly—as so many of the conflicts and crises of the post-Cold War era have shown—it is a matter of contention between leaders of states both great and small.

Irrespective of the intra-English School debate over the actual extent of great power responsibility, recognition of the notion that certain states, by virtue of their great strength, are obliged to play a particular social role is the key distinction between the realist and the English School understandings of great powers. But two important caveats must be entered regarding the notion that great powers have special responsibilities. First, while this is a crucial definitional point, the distance which it creates between realism and the English School should not be overstated. The realist tradition does not wholly eschew the notion that great powers might seek to exert managerial influence over the system in which they operate and Waltz himself acknowledged that 'those with the greatest capacity take on special responsibilities' (Waltz 1979, 198). But the claim made is that such management is undertaken by the great powers because it is 'worthwhile and possible' (Waltz 1979, 195) rather than essential to or constitutive of great power standing. In similar vein, the English School's claim is not that great powers act altruistically or subjugate their interests to those of the wider society, for as Bull notes, 'the order they are maintaining … is their preferred order' (Bull 1980, 438) and it is the order that they sit atop.

The second caveat relates to the extent to which great powers actually live up to their responsibilities. Wight was sceptical about this, arguing that 'history affords little support for the assertion', before claiming that in fact it demonstrates 'that they wish to monopolize the right to create international conflict' (Wight 1978, 42–43). Bull's analysis was only a little more forgiving, claiming that while great powers 'can, and sometimes do [act to] sustain international order … [they] frequently act in such a way as to promote disorder' (Bull 1977, 207). Based on this approach Bull concluded that Napoleonic France and Nazi Germany were 'not properly speaking great powers' because they were 'not regarded by their own leaders or others as having … [special] rights and responsibilities' (Bull 1977, 202). Similarly, his analysis of the Cold War behaviour of the US and USSR led Bull to label them as the 'great irresponsibles' (Bull 1980). But these examples can be contrasted with the behaviour of the great powers during the post-Napoleonic Concert period, and with post-1945 attempts to build a peace based on the United Nations system (Simpson 2004, chs 4 and 6). In the latter instance great power co-operation proved to be short-lived, but it is notable that, at least in their initial dealings, the leaders of the great powers attached considerable weight to the idea that power gave rise to responsibility. In the words of President Roosevelt:

The hope of a peaceful and advancing world will rest upon the willingness and ability of the peace-loving nations, large and small, bearing responsibilities commensurate with their individual capacities … We cannot deny that power is a factor in world politics … [but] power must be linked with responsibility, and obliged to defend and justify itself within the framework of the general good (United Nations 1945, vol. 11, 108).

The Case for Britain as a 21st-Century Great Power

In light of the foregoing discussion, can Britain still be considered a great power? Relative to its previous pre-eminent position it is clear that Britain has experienced a period of significant decline (English and Kenny 2000; Gamble 2000a). This has led many to conclude that it can no longer be classed as a great power and consequently, for example, that it should no longer occupy a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) (Fassbender 1998; Annan 2005; Hurd 2008). Britain's decline is commonly seen as but one part of a broader process whereby power is moving inexorably from west to east (Mahbubani 2008; Zakaria 2008), but as some challenge this analysis (Cox 2010; Norrlof 2010) and timescales remain vague, it is necessary to examine more carefully just how powerful Britain currently is.

Before doing so, however, a number of points warrant further brief comment. First, while other states may have experienced increases in power in absolute terms and/or relative to Britain, it does not necessarily follow that rescission of Britain's great power status is appropriate. An alternative conclusion might, for example, be that the number of states classed as great powers should be expanded. Second, at its zenith the British empire was the largest the world had ever seen and so when Britain began to fall, it did so from a very great height. This fact is likely to influence our perceptions of British decline. Third, the height to which the United States has risen is likely to have a converse effect on our perceptions of and conclusions about British decline. Finally (and more generally), it must be acknowledged that 'decline' is a rather slippery concept; its measurement, meaning and implications can be skewed significantly by choice of methodology, source and time frame (Gamble 2000b). The following discussion should therefore be read with this in mind and despite the inevitable proliferation of statistics the focus should be on Britain's general standing rather than on its precise relative position. These observations having been made, we can return to our consideration of whether, despite the generally accepted narrative of decline, Britain actually continues to exhibit the attributes of a great power. In order to answer this question it is necessary to determine, first, whether Britain possesses, in absolute and relative terms, sufficient power to warrant the label and, second, to assess the extent to which British foreign policy reflects the sense of responsibility that such a position entails.

With respect to some traditional (and perhaps now less significant) indicators such as land mass, Britain has never ranked highly (79th in the world) and in others such as population (*c*.62 million) its position relative to other states has dropped markedly (from sixth in 1945 to 22nd today). In other regards, however, Britain's standing remains high, and while some analysis suggests that this will be short-lived (CEBR 2010), there exists a considerable body of evidence that points to Britain remaining a major economic force for many years to come (Rossi and Rollo 2010). In terms of specific indicators, according to the *CIA World Factbook*[1] Britain's GDP is currently the sixth largest in the world, and while this drops to 24th if considered on a per capita basis, in comparison with current or potential great powers,[2] Britain ranks second (behind the US). Britain is still the world's sixth largest manufacturing economy[3] and the City of London remains the world's largest financial market.[4] According to the World Economic Forum (WEF), the British economy ranks 13th in terms of competitiveness, but fourth in comparison with current or potential great powers. On the WEF's 'Network Readiness Index' which 'gives insight into overall [national] ICT readiness' Britain currently ranks 13th, but second (behind the US) in comparison with current or potential great powers.[5] British nationals and companies rank third globally in

terms of overseas (i.e. outward) investment and the British economy is the third largest recipient of inward international investment.[6]

This demonstrates that Britain remains a top-rank global economic player and, it should be noted, the international nature of its economic activities gives it a very significant interest in global order. But as the preceding discussion has shown, if Britain is to rank as a great power it must utilise its economic strength in ways that enable it to project power—and particularly military power—on a global scale. As might be expected, since 1945 the UNSC's five permanent members have habitually been the world's largest military spenders. Currently the US is, by an exceptionally large margin, the largest spender ($661 billion in 2009) and since 2007 China has risen to second in the ranking ($100 billion (est.) in 2009). France and Britain have similar levels of spending ($64 and $58.5 billion, respectively, in 2009) and since the end of the Cold War have spent more than Russia on defence (SIPRI 2010, 203). For Britain this level of spending amounted to 2.5 per cent of GDP in 2009[7] and while relative to the vast majority of other states this represents a significant financial commitment, historically it is a relatively low figure for Britain (SIPRI 1992, 264, 2002, 287 and 2010, 232–8). Despite this, Britain's military budget enables it to maintain a defence posture that successive governments have considered to be strategically and symbolically crucial for a globally involved power. Hence Britain is one of only nine states that possess nuclear weapons, and one of only five recognised to do so under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). It has consistently sought to maintain a capacity for power projection, particularly through the Royal Navy, and it possesses a highly developed and experienced intelligence capability, the abilities of which are significantly enhanced by its special collaborative relationship with the US (Aldrich 1998; Reveron 2006). It should also be noted that, in recent years, Britain has sought to utilise its economic strength in other internationally significant ways by, for example, more actively engaging in attempts to address the problems of development and debt in the developing world. Britain is a significant donor of international aid, its current level of annual donation (c.$13 billion) being exceeded in absolute terms only by the US (c.$25 billion). Britain's contribution accounts for approximately 12 per cent of total Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) donor spending. This equates to spending at a rate of 0.56 per cent of national income on overseas aid which, in percentage terms, makes Britain the most generous donor among current or potential great powers, and places it sixth overall among the world's donor states (OECD 2010).

In addition to its 'hard' economic and military power, it is important to consider Britain's 'soft' power. According to Nye 'the soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources: its culture … its political values … and its foreign policy' and, applying his approach, it is evident that Britain is able to draw on a wide array of soft power assets: English is among the world's most widely spoken languages and is established as the dominant language of international commerce (Bruthiaux 2003); world time is centred on Greenwich, facilitating communications with east and west; the 'Westminster Model' of government is widely replicated (in part or whole) around the world (Lijphart 1999); approximately one third of the world's population have their lives regulated by common law legal systems which have their roots in English law (Zweigert and Kötz 1998, 218); the Anglican Communion, headed by an archbishop appointed by the British state, has over 80 million adherents across 160 countries; and the BBC World Service is a global market leader with a global audience of 180 million people.[8] In cultural and sporting terms British recording artists are well established as a major global force, as are British-based producers of television programmes,[9] and football and cricket which have their origins in Britain are today among the most widely played and watched in the world, with the likes of Manchester

United and Lords cricket ground retaining iconic status. Intellectually and academically, Britain ranks second (to the US) in terms of Nobel Laureates won[10] and of the quality and international attractiveness of its universities,[11] and is seventh in terms of patents granted (by country of origin).[12] Commercially, Britain stands sixth in the table of countries with the most 'Fortune 500' companies[13] and British businesses collectively rank eighth in terms of global brand value (and fifth in terms of existing or potential great powers).[14] Britain also benefits from its involvement in a number of international organisations, with a permanent seat on the UNSC and influential roles in the Commonwealth, NATO and the European Union. These are among the soft power assets that make Britain attractive to others, enhancing its great power credentials. This attraction manifests itself quite literally in the high levels of tourists, migrants and asylum seekers that Britain draws to its shores,[15] but as Nye has shown, in the world of international politics its value lies in the facilitative effect that it has on Britain's pursuit of its foreign policies objectives.

This brief appraisal of Britain's (hard and soft) power reveals that, despite the prevailing view that it is a state in decline, it remains a very powerful international actor. But since, as set out above, great power status involves an ideational as well as a material element, it is now necessary to examine whether Britain has a foreign policy record and ambitions that befit a 'great responsible'. Since 1945 (and, of course, prior to that) Britain has been at the forefront when decisions of system-defining importance have been made and a sense of Britain's global role, premised on its unique combination of links with the US, Europe and the Commonwealth, has been a defining feature of British foreign policy (Sanders 1990). As one of the principal victorious allies, Britain played a key role in developing the United Nations system which still defines much of today's international political discourse and practice. Moreover, it is clear that in doing so British leaders saw the country as a great power, with all of the implications that such a status carries. So it was that, two years prior to victory, Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden addressed the House of Commons on the 'special responsibilities' of Britain, the US and the USSR and the need to 'devise machinery and agree on a policy which would enable us to give expression to that sense of our responsibility' (Russell 1958, 146), and in 1945 Prime Minister Winston Churchill told the House of Commons that 'it is on the great powers that the chief burden of maintaining peace and security will fall' (United Nations 1945, vol. 11, 108).

Decolonisation was another process of global significance in which Britain, as the world's largest imperial power, was assured a central role (Springhall 2001, 1–17). Motivated by strategic concerns, a sense of prestige and a desire to ensure appropriate levels of preparedness prior to independence, Britain initially sought to maintain its empire, but its post-First World War economic descent, accentuated by the costs of the Second World War, made this an increasingly unachievable objective (Butler 2002). British leaders maintained that it would be irresponsible to grant independence to states that were inadequately prepared for it and they cautioned that the likely outcome would be internal strife and external instability (Goldsworthy 1971). But advocates of decolonisation dismissed Britain's professed concerns as a ruse intended to slow the process and thus preserve imperial grandeur. When a largely unsympathetic UN General Assembly debated decolonisation the widespread perception was that Britain was more concerned with *realpolitik* than responsibility (United Nations 1960, 44–51). The loss of empire and subsequent acceptance of a diminished global strategic role, epitomised by the decision to 'withdraw east of Suez' (Pickering 1998), stand as testament to Britain's decline and to the rejection of its particular colonial understanding of its great power responsibilities.

Having lost its position on the top tier of international politics, the Cold War saw Britain overshadowed by the two superpowers, its role being defined primarily by its allegiance to the United States. But in the post-Cold War strategic environment, Britain sought to assert itself once again as a significant global actor. A Conservative-led Britain played a major role in UN-sanctioned operations in Iraq (1990–91) and in the former Yugoslavia (1992–95) while under Labour military engagements in Kosovo (1999), Sierra Leone (2000), Afghanistan (2001–) and Iraq (2003) showed a willingness to act with or without approval from New York. A sense of what motivated participation in these latter operations can be gleaned from the foreign policy pronouncements that followed Labour's assumption of power in 1997. In launching what (misleadingly) came to be labelled Britain's 'ethical foreign policy', Foreign Secretary Robin Cook spoke of the country becoming a 'leading partner in a world community' and a 'force for good in the world' (Cook 1997) while in more strident terms the 1998 Strategic Defence Review (SDR98)[16] spoke of 'a country both willing and able to play a leading role internationally' and which has 'a responsibility to act as a force for good' (para. 21). According to the SDR98, while Britain 'could of course … choose to take a narrow view of [its] role and responsibilities which did not require a significant military capability', this was 'not [a choice] the Government could recommend' (para. 59; see also Little and Wickham-Jones 2000). An indication of what a broad view of Britain's role and responsibilities would entail was given by Prime Minister Tony Blair when, during the Kosovo intervention, he expounded his 'doctrine of the international community' (Blair 1999). In this he stated explicitly that 'those nations which have the power, have the responsibility' to act and he set out the circumstances in which he believed force could legitimately be used to alleviate human suffering. In subsequent years Blair would see this line of reasoning, often in conjunction with what he perceived to be the responsibility of the powerful to maintain international order, as a basis for leading the country into conflict (Dunne and Wheeler 2001; Wheeler and Morris 2006).

The most controversial manifestation of his position was the 2003 war in Iraq. Here there was common acknowledgement of the need for the great powers to act responsibly, but there was discord over how this sense of responsibility should manifest itself. For Blair it was the threat which he perceived Iraq posed to international order and the interpretation he placed on previous UNSC resolutions that were the primary rationales for resorting to force, although it is clear that humanitarian concerns were also a significant factor (Blair 2004). For opponents of the war the resort to force was seen as either premature or unacceptable, and responsibility was equated with adherence to the voting procedures of the UN Charter (Morris and Wheeler 2007). The Iraq case raises questions about the great power credentials of all of the main actors, first because it suggested that some were failing in their responsibility to control crises and limit war, and second because collectively they failed in their responsibility to act in concert. Nevertheless, the case suggests that while there were very considerable differences over what responsible action entailed, for leaders such as Blair the notion that there existed an obligation to act in accordance with a sense of special responsibility was a powerful motivating factor.

The analysis presented in this section shows that materially (and militarily) Britain remains an unusually powerful state. To be unusually powerful is not, however, necessarily to be in the 'front rank', and since this requirement is central to both realist and English School conceptions of great power status, it is this test that we might expect Britain to have to satisfy if it is to prove its great power credentials. If this is the test then Britain, along with all other states, fails, because like all others Britain is very far from being able to match the military power of the US. But the conclusion to which this leads, namely that the US is the world's

only great power, is problematic in at least two ways: first, it involves a determination of the status of the 'otherwise' great powers by reference solely to the United States rather than by reference to the wider membership of international society; and second, it excludes certain states from one class (great powers) on the basis of relative strength, but in so doing it includes them in another class (which we might term 'other powers') in which their power differentials are more significant. States such as Britain might not be as militarily powerful as the US, but they are sufficiently powerful to pursue foreign policies that would be wholly untenable for other, far less powerful, states.

One solution to the categorisation problem posed by US predominance is to broaden our interpretation of the front rank criterion, thus enabling it to accommodate significant disparities in power. To the extent that differences in material strength have always existed between the great powers (Buzan 2004, 45–57) and thus the notion of a front rank has always had to be a somewhat flexible one, this approach is reasonable, but American military superiority is currently so pronounced as to render absurd any attempt to judge other states comparable to it. Consequently the most appropriate solution is to accord to the United States a status which, based on its unique military capability, it alone holds, but to continue nevertheless to regard as powers of special distinction those states that are sufficiently powerful to be categorically distinct from the vast majority of the membership of international society. In other words, when international society is characterised by what Ian Clark terms a '"deformed" balance of power' (Clark 2009, 222) it is necessary to employ a three-tier system of categorisation which—to use familiar labels—is based on the identification of superpowers, great powers and other powers. In such a system great powers are not in the front rank of military powers, for that is occupied by the superpower(s), but they do possess 'an ability to protect or advance [worldwide] interests by force' (Wight 1978, 52). Based on this approach, materially Britain is a plausible candidate for great power status.

The analysis in this section also demonstrates that Britain's leaders view it as a great power. Blair preferred to refer to Britain as a 'pivotal partner' rather than a great power (Wickham-Jones 2000, 19), but his coupling of power and responsibility and his willingness to employ force in response to the obligations to which he judged this gave rise bore all the hallmarks of great power action. It is also clear that a sense of Britain's status was prominent in Blair's mind when he made key foreign and defence policy decisions. Hence while he questioned the practical purpose of Trident he felt that 'in the final analysis … giving it up [would be] too big a downgrading of our status as a nation' (Blair 2010, 636) and he adopted such a strong Atlanticist approach in part because it gave Britain 'immediate purchase' (Blair 2010, 410). A similar approach can be seen from the former foreign secretary, David Miliband. He revelled in the notion that Britain 'punches above its weight', producing a checklist of great power credentials and intentions, but he nevertheless scrupulously avoided using the 'great power' label (Miliband 2009). These nomenclatural concerns—often coupled with the insistence that Britain sought collaboration rather than domination (Blair 2002)—no doubt reflect genuinely changed values, contemporary political sensitivities and material realities, but also the fact that, as noted above, other states (and commentators) have increasingly come to question Britain's great power credentials. The foregoing analysis suggests that such questioning underestimates Britain's case.

However others choose to judge Britain's global standing, pre- and post-election pronouncements from the Conservative party indicate that the notion that the country should seek to play a major global role is one that has continued salience. Consequently, the final

section of this article considers whether, under its newly elected Conservative-led government, Britain's great power credentials are likely to be enhanced or diminished.

A Foreign Policy for a Great Power?

On 13 April 2010 the Conservative party published its election manifesto, an 'Invitation to Join the Government of Britain' (Conservative Party 2010a). The manifesto's foreign policy section opens in somewhat guarded terms, stating that Britain:

possesses great assets and advantages—a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, a leading role in NATO, a strong relationship with the United States, a major role in the affairs of the EU, and Armed Forces that are the envy of the world. [It is] a global trading nation and home to the world's pre-eminent language (Conservative Party 2010a, 103).

Beyond this the manifesto makes no assessment of Britain's global standing, but it does note that '[i]n a world of shifting economic power and increased threats, the UK stands to lose a great deal of its ability to shape world affairs unless we act to reverse our declining status'. The question of how to present Britain's global position presented the Conservatives with a dilemma; leaving aside the accuracy of any such assessment, it would be politically untenable to suggest that after 13 years of Labour rule Britain's international standing was high, but at the same time too great an emphasis on British decline risked alienating key Tory constituencies and ran contrary to the foreign policy approach that the party was developing. A sense of decline and the need to arrest it were, nevertheless, prominent features in the speeches of Shadow Foreign Secretary William Hague in the build-up to the election (Hague 2009b, 2009c and 2010a). Rejecting the views expressed by some shadow cabinet members that Britain was a 'medium sized industrial power' or 'a regional power with global interests' (Neville-Jones 2007, 5 and 2010), he sought to emphasise the 'clout in the world' which assets such as those catalogued in the manifesto gave Britain (Hague 2009b) and he explicitly 'reject[ed] the "strategic shrinkage" of Britain's role'. Despite the economic and strategic challenges faced, Hague bullishly advocated the 'renew[al] and reinforc[ing of Britain's] engagement with the rest of the world' (Hague 2009c), insisting that the approach 'must not be to limp away disconsolately, but to pick ourselves up and make the most, systematically and strategically, of our great national assets' (Hague 20010a).

Hague acknowledged that, as economic and possibly military power migrate from their traditional western centres towards the east, maintaining this approach and securing such objectives would not be easy. 'How on earth', he asked, 'are we going to do it?' before providing an answer to his own rhetorical question in the form of his 'five themes' (Hague 2009b). According to these a Conservative government would, first, 'improve decision-making', relocating the 'Foreign and Commonwealth Office to … its rightful place at the centre of decision-making', creating a National Security Council and conducting a Strategic Defence Review (SDR10). Second, while its approach to the transatlantic alliance would be 'solid but not slavish', it would nevertheless reflect the view that 'the United States is and will remain indispensable' to Britain and that NATO rather than the EU must remain 'the ultimate guarantor of Europe's security' (Conservative Party 2010a, 110 and 2010b). Hague's third theme related to the broadening of Britain's alliance network and more active engagement with the Commonwealth (especially India), Japan, the Gulf and North Africa, and 'some countries of Latin America'. China and Russia were also identified as potential

partners, but in these cases tensions over the respective issues of human rights and behaviour towards neighbouring states were acknowledged as impediments to co-operation (Hague 2009b and 2010a). Identifying a whole panoply of candidates, Hague's fourth theme involved the 'effective reform of international institutions' with the aims being to facilitate greater international co-operation and to make institutions more relevant to today's world, more focused in their activities and more reflective of the contemporary distribution of power (Hague 2008 and 2009b). The final foreign policy theme identified was the need for Britain to 'uphold [its] own highest values' (Hague 2009b). This reflected David Cameron's comments regarding 'vital importance of moral authority', which had been voiced in criticism of what he perceived to be the moral deficiencies of the Blairite and neo-conservative policies of the preceding years (Cameron 2006). However, beyond this both Cameron and Hague were acknowledging that, if Britain's relative material power wanes, its ability to persuade will increasingly reside in its soft power and in particular the example it sets to others.

The Conservatives' foreign policy electoral pronouncements indicated that the future role which they envisage for Britain is that of a great power (although it is once again notable that they avoided use of the actual term). Having emerged from the 2010 general election as the largest party, they entered government in coalition with the Liberal Democrats, but the coalition's Programme for Government[17] provides very little insight into how the new government view Britain's role in the world. Now Foreign Secretary, William Hague has made a series of speeches on the theme of the 'networked world' (2010b, 2010c and 2010d), but other than being notable for their lack of reference to the previously ubiquitous 'liberal conservatism', these also added little to that which was said prior to the election. With only five months having elapsed since the election it is too early to judge with any certainty where in the world Britain will stand under a Conservative-led government, but some of Hague's own comments on the SDR10 (along with the preceding analysis) suggest a way in which we might meaningfully speculate. The review, he said, must be 'guided by the requirements of foreign policy and not solely by financial constraints' and it must be 'focused not on whether Britain should be able to project military force elsewhere in the world but how it will do so' (Hague 2009b). Reformulating these statements we might seek to test Britain's future great power potential by asking two inter-related questions: first, is Britain sufficiently powerful to project militarily on a global scale; and second, in utilising its power, is Britain able to demonstrate an appreciation of the wider responsibilities that the powerful have towards the maintenance of international order.

In addressing the first of these questions it is worth recalling the earlier analysis which showed that, despite the 2008 financial crisis and what appears to be the medium- to long-term eastward shift in power, currently Britain remains one of the most economically powerful states in the world. But as has also been shown, if Britain is to stand as a great power, its leaders must be able to demonstrate a willingness to translate the country's economic strength into projectable military power. A key indicator as to whether the new Conservative-led government is willing to do this is the SDR10 which it undertook during its first months in office. This process had two outputs, a National Security Strategy (NSS)[18] and a Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR).[19] The NSS argues that in 'a world that is changing at an astonishing pace, Britain's interests remain surprisingly constant' (p. 4) and is replete with references to the global nature of those interests and Britain's status. In order to promote its interests and values, the NSS maintains that Britain must be able to 'project power and … use [its] unique network of alliances and relationships' (p. 4) and it sets out two national strategic objectives: 'ensuring a secure and resilient UK' and 'shaping a stable world

[by] applying all our instruments of power and influence to shape the global environment' (p. 22).

Having set forth its strategic vision and goals, the government's SDSR laid out the means that would be available to pursue them. The Conservative leadership was insistent that the review would be driven by policy rather than costs, but with the coalition's Programme for Government identifying deficit reduction as 'the most urgent issue facing Britain' their assurances appeared somewhat unconvincing. Like Hague, Defence Secretary Liam Fox was a staunch advocate of a policy before costs approach to the review (Fox 2010a), but he nevertheless conceded that 'short-term reductions' in defence spending were inevitable (Fox 2010b). In defence of this concession Fox directed his fire at the previous Labour government's 'irresponsibility' and he was able to draw on a National Audit Office report on defence spending which indicated that the inherited deficit could be as high as £36 billion.[20] However, the concerns of Fox and Britain's most senior military officers regarding the increasingly Treasury-driven nature of the review became all too apparent when a letter he had written to Cameron on the matter was leaked to the *Daily Telegraph*.[21] Moreover, amid speculation over the defence cuts US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, expressed publicly her concern that too great a funding reduction would seriously debase Britain's defence capability and hence its contribution to NATO.[22]

The cut of 7.5 per cent (2010–15) that was eventually imposed was far smaller than many had feared and certainly more lenient than the 20 per cent-plus cuts imposed on many government departments.[23] Presenting the SDSR to the House of Commons Cameron insisted that this demonstrated the priority that his government gave to defence, and he declared his own 'strong view' that 'year-on-year real-terms growth in the defence budget' would be required 'in the years beyond 2015'. Echoing the SDSR, he claimed that Britain 'will continue to be one of very few countries able to deploy a self-sustaining, properly equipped, brigade-sized force anywhere around the world and to sustain it indefinitely if needs be'.[24] But despite Cameron's overtures, media coverage of the review, including among the pro-Conservative press, was largely hostile; the decision to continue with plans to build two aircraft carriers but to mothball one of the ships after three years, accompanied by cuts to the navy's Air Arm which would mean that no carrier would have fast jets to fly from it for 10 years, was widely criticised, while the postponement of the decision to build new Trident submarines until after the next election was seen as being driven primarily by political expediency, particularly given the Liberal Democrats' opposition to the nuclear renewal programme.[25] The SDSR raises serious questions over the willingness of the current Conservative-led government to utilise national resources in a way that will maintain Britain's ability to project power on a global scale. Nevertheless, given the government's insistence that it does intend to maintain such an ability, it is now necessary to consider the manner in which such projection might be undertaken.

In a major foreign policy speech in 2006 David Cameron set out what he termed a 'liberal conservative' approach to foreign policy. In this he stated that he was 'liberal because [he] support[ed] the aim of spreading freedom and democracy, and support[ed] humanitarian intervention' while his conservatism was founded on a recognition of 'the complexities of human nature, and … a sceptic[ism] of grand themes to remake the world' (Cameron 2006). Cameron asserted that he was 'a liberal conservative rather than a neo-conservative', identifying the latter as being based on three propositions:

a realistic appreciation of the scale of the threat the world faces from terrorism; a conviction that pre-emptive military action is not only an appropriate, but a necessary component of tackling the terrorist threat in the short term; [and] a belief that in the medium and long term, the promotion of freedom and democracy, including through regime change, is the best guarantee of our security.

This he contrasted with the five propositions on which a liberal conservative approach to foreign policy is based, namely:

that we should understand fully the threat we face; that democracy cannot quickly be imposed from outside; that our strategy needs to go far beyond military action; that we need a new multilateralism to tackle the new global challenges we face; [and] that we must strive to act with moral authority.

Having previously espoused views that were broadly sympathetic to the neo-conservative approach and the established party policy of the time (Cameron 2005), Cameron's 2006 speech demonstrated a far greater degree of circumspection, particularly with regard to the use of force. This new stance was firstly a consequence of fears that Cameron had come to harbour over the effectiveness of force as a means to democratisation. On this basis he argued that while 'the ambition to spread democracy is noble and just' it must nevertheless be accepted that 'liberty grows from the ground' (Cameron 2006); 'we cannot impose democracy at the barrel of a gun … we cannot drop democracy from 10,000 feet—and we should not try' (Cameron 2008). Cameron's more guarded approach to the use of force also stemmed from concerns over the associated reputational costs and the retaliatory actions to which it might lead. In assessing US-British post-9/11 foreign policy, Cameron concluded that while further attacks had been deterred, it had to be acknowledged that 'across the globe, terrorists are being recruited in increasing numbers and are active in many more areas than before' (Cameron 2006). The distinction that Cameron sought to make between the neo-conservative and liberal conservative positions has not been without its critics (Bew 2008; Dodds and Elden 2008, 358), but whatever view is taken of this, his stance certainly did mark a significant departure from the Conservative position over the Iraq War. At that time party leader Iain Duncan-Smith and Shadow Foreign Secretary Michael Ancram had asserted even more than the government that force was the only viable option,[26] and Duncan-Smith dismissed the idea that the war would become a 'recruiting sergeant' for terrorists as 'nonsense'.[27]

The Conservatives' attempts to distance themselves from neo-conservatism were also politically motivated, creating room within which they could criticise Labour's highly interventionist policies, especially under Blair. The irony of this is that the neo-con label fits Blair far less well than it does some of those who presided over his official opposition. Over Iraq, for example, Blair's motives for war were many (Bluth 2004), but while neo-cons were prone to cite democratisation as a basis for regime change, he sought to justify the war in terms of the preservation of international order, adherence to previous UN resolutions and humanitarianism. Moreover, on this final point the Conservatives' own electoral addresses echoed Blair's thinking; both Cameron and Hague stated their support for humanitarian intervention when they developed the idea of liberal conservatism (Cameron 2006; Hague 2009a), and while on other occasions they formulated the notion without such references (Cameron 2008; Hague 2009b), it seems clear that for the Conservative leadership it is an acceptable basis for military deployment. A significant difference is, however, apparent: for Cameron Britain should 'be prepared to intervene for humanitarian purposes', but it should

only be so where the action is designed to 'rescue people from genocide' (Cameron 2006), whereas for Blair systematic brutalisation and oppression which nevertheless falls short of genocide should be considered sufficient grounds for forceful intervention (Blair 2004; Wheeler and Morris 2006). On this basis Cameron's circumspection seems likely to prevail.

The perils of premature speculation have already been alluded to, but in terms of foreign and defence policy the strategic review, the spending decisions attached to it and pronouncements about power projection do provide some insight into the direction in which a Conservative-led government is likely to lead the country. It is clear that for the Conservative leadership the idea that Britain should play a major global role is a cherished one, but shouldering the material burdens that this imposes while also facing the challenge of deficit reduction creates an acute political dilemma. In addressing this the government emphasised the financial aspects of its predicament, but while economics may determine the ultimate size of the spending pot, the decision as to which department gets what is ultimately a political one. Amid extensive spending cuts defence did not enjoy the luxury of ring-fencing which was extended to areas such as health, and while it did fare relatively well, serious questions remain over the incongruity of the government's foreign policy aspirations and its willingness to commit material resources. In so far as the government does provide the assets necessary to project power on a global scale, it seems likely that the propensity to resort to force will be markedly less than that exhibited by the governments of Tony Blair. Cameron's preferences would appear to be for multilateralism over unilateralism and—to use the English School terms—pluralism over solidarism, and in advocating a more expansive approach to statecraft, his rhetoric suggests an inclination to eschew the use of military power in favour of greater use of economic and soft power options (Cameron 2006; see also Neville-Jones 2007, 10, 47 and 2010).

Conclusion

Since 1945 Britain's great power credentials have increasingly been questioned, primarily as a result of the general perception that, in material terms, it is no longer in the first rank of global powers. It is clearly the case that, judged either against its historical strength relative to others, or against the current might of the US, Britain has declined, but compared to all other members of today's international society it is remarkable just how powerful the country remains. More specifically, excluding the *sui generis* case of the US, it is clear that very few states have a greater ability than Britain to project military power on a global scale. How long this will remain the case is, however, open to question. In an age of fiscal austerity and faced with a major defence budget deficit, the 2010 SDSR instigated significant cuts in Britain's defence capability while at the same time proclaiming a determination that Britain's global role would not be diminished. Pursuant to this role the review states that Britain 'will in most circumstances act militarily as part of a wider coalition' but that it will nevertheless 'maintain [its] ability to act alone where we cannot expect others to help'. Big ticket items such as the aircraft carriers were ordered specifically to provide such ability (SDR98, para. 59)—at full strength they would give Britain the second most powerful navy in the world (Willett 2007) and would stand as a symbolically powerful statement of intent—but in so far as the SDSR signals a reduction in this kind of projection capability it significantly diminishes Britain's material great power credentials.

In ideational terms this article has not sought to analyse the behavioural expectations that other states have of Britain—and in that regard an important piece of the English School jigsaw is admittedly missing—but it has demonstrated that, while the great power label may no longer be in vogue, successive British leaderships have formulated foreign policies conscious of the fact that the country is a global power with global responsibilities. For some this amounts to little more than policy inertia based on a 'muddling through' mentality and 'inherited notions of indespensability and grandiosity' (Hill 2010, 12), but given the international nature of Britain's political and economic engagements there is much to commend the alternative view that for Britain 'a global role is … a necessity, not a luxury' (Niblett 2010, 18). There also exists a powerful political rationale for maintaining a global role, as Hague acknowledged when he commented that a predisposition to 'engage in and influence … world affairs … is an indispensable part of the British character' (Hague 2010a), a view that was corroborated by a recent poll indicating strong majority support among the British public for the country 'seek[ing] to remain a great power' (Chatman House/YouGov 2010).

'For God's sake, act like Britain', US Secretary of State Dean Rusk exclaimed on hearing of Britain's decision to withdraw east of Suez, utterly disbelieving that 'free aspirins and false teeth were more important than Britain's role in the world' (*The Economist* 2010b). Of course his phrasing says much of the political culture and strategic environment in which he was immersed, but it also throws into sharp relief the challenge that Britain faces today if it is to maintain its place in world affairs. Less than 25 years ago Britain spent approximately the same amount on defence as on health and education, whereas today education spending is twice that on defence and health spending three times as much (*The Economist* 2010a). The foreword to the SDSR opens by boldly stating that Britain 'has always had global responsibilities and global ambitions', but if this is to be anything more than rhetoric, if the responsibilities are to be met and the ambitions realised, the government must be willing to use the very considerable resources that are at its disposal to provide the military assets required. Only if it does so will the country have both the material and the ideational elements which are essential to any state that wishes to be a credible great power.

Notes

1.   Available at https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/. Figures are for 2009.

2.   For the purposes of this article this group comprises the current permanent members of the UNSC and those states identified individually as potential permanent members, i.e., Brazil, China, France, Germany, India, Japan, Russia, the US and Britain.

3.   'Out of the ruins', The Economist, 27 March–2 April 2010, 11.

4.   See   http://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/131B4294-698B-4FAF-9758-080CCE86A36C/0/BC_RS_compposition_FR.pdf.

5.   See World Economic Forum, Global Competitiveness Index, available online at: http://www. weforum.org/en/initiatives/gcp/Global%20Competitiveness%20Report/index.htm and World Readiness Index, available online at: http://www.weforum.org/pdf/GITR10/TheNetworked ReadinessIndexRankings.pdf.

6.   CIA World Factbook. See https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ uk.html.

7.   Comparative figures for the other major spenders for 2008 are US: 4.0 per cent, China: 2.0 per cent (est.), France: 2.3 per cent and Russia: 3.5 per cent (SIPRI 2010, 203). For Britain it should, however, be noted that this budget includes monies being spent on the conflicts in Afghanistan.

8.   BBC World Service Annual Review 2009/10, available online at: http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/ worldservice/pdf/bbc_world_service_annual_review_0910.pdf (accessed 15 October 2010).

9.   See Eurodata, 'One television year in the world', available online at: http://www.international- television.org/archive/2010-03-21_global-tv-euro-data-worldwide_2009.pdf (accessed 15 October 2010).

10.   BBC, 'Which country has the best brains?', available online at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/ magazine-11500373 (accessed 15 October 2010).

11.   See Times Higher Education, 'World university rankings 2010–11', available online at: http:// www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings/ (accessed 15 October 2010); and OECD, 'Education at a glance' available online at: http://www.oecd.org/document/52/ 0,3746,en_2649_39263238_45897844_1_1_1_1,00.html (accessed 15 October 2010).

12.   See World Intellectual Property Indicators 2010, available online at: http://www.wipo.int/ freepublications/en/intproperty/941/wipo_pub_941_2010.pdf (accessed 15 October 2010).

13.   See   http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/global500/2010/countries/Australia.html

(accessed 15 October 2010).

14.   Interbrand, Best Global Brands 2010, available online at: http://issuu.com/interbrand/docs/ bgb_report_us_version?mode=a_p (accessed 15 October 2010).

15.   See UNWTO, World Tourism Barometer, available online at: http://www.unwto.org/facts/eng/ pdf/barometer/UNWTO_Barom10_update_april_en.pdf (accessed 15 October 2010); UNHCR, 2009 Global Trends, available online at: http://www.unhcr.org/4c11f0be9.html (accessed 15 October 2010).

16.   Available online at: http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/65F3D7AC-4340-4119-93A2-20825848E50E/0/sdr1998_complete.pdf (accessed 1 August 2010).

17.   'The coalition: Our programme for government', available online at: http://www.cabinetoffice. gov.uk/media/409088/pfg_coalition.pdf (accessed 9 September 2010).

18.   A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The National Security Strategy, available online at: http://www.direct.gov.uk/prod_consum_dg/groups/dg_digitalassets/@dg/@en/documents/ digitalasset/dg_191639.pdf?CID=PDF&PLA=furl&CRE=nationalsecuritystrategy (accessed 18 October   2010).

19.   Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review, available online at: http://www.direct.gov.uk/prod_consum_dg/groups/dg_digitalassets/@dg/@en/ documents/digitalasset/dg_191634.pdf (accessed 19 October 2010).

20.   National Audit Office, Ministry of Defence: The Major Projects Report 2010, 15 October 2010, 4.

21.   Daily Telegraph, 'Defence cuts will have "grave consequences" ', 28 September 2010.

22.   The Times, 'Clinton sounds alarm over UK defence cuts', 15 October 2010.

23.   HM Treasury, Spending Review 2010, available online at: http://cdn.hm-treasury.gov.uk/ sr2010_completereport.pdf (accessed 20 October 2010).

24.   HC Debs, 19 October 2010, col. 799.

25.   Daily Telegraph, 'The navy lark: New carrier will be sold after three years', 19 October 2010; The Guardian, 'Cameron to delay Trident replacement', 19 October 2010; The Times, 'HMS igno- minious: £5bn carrier fiasco', 19 October 2010; and Financial Times, 'Trident to be delayed by up to five years', 19 October 2010.

26.   HC Debs, 25 November 2002, cols 63–72 and 26 February 2003, cols 276–285.

27.   HC Debs, 18 March 2003, col. 775.

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DefenceNews/DefencePolicyAndBusiness/DrLiamFoxOutlinesReformOfTheMinistryOfDefe nce.htm (accessed 13 September 2010).

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