

# THE PROSPECTIVE FOREIGN POLICY OF SIR KEIR STARMER

BY PROFESSOR AZEEM IBRAHIM



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The Henry Jackson Society  
Millbank Tower  
21-24 Millbank  
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Registered charity no. 1140489  
Tel: +44 (0)20 7340 4520

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By Professor Azeem Ibrahim

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BY PROFESSOR AZEEM IBRAHIM



## About the Author

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Professor Azeem Ibrahim is a Research Professor at the Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, and a Director at the Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy in Washington, D.C. He received his PhD from the University of Cambridge after which he completed fellowships at the universities of Oxford, Harvard and Yale. Over the years, Dr Ibrahim has advised over half a dozen world leaders on strategy and policy development; most recently he served as a foreign policy advisor to the Biden for President Campaign and an official advisor to the UK's 2021 Integrated Defence and Security Review and the G7 Panel on Economic Resilience.

Dr Ibrahim is also the author of the seminal books *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's Genocide* (Hurst 2016) and *Radical Origins: Why We Are Losing the War Against Islamic Extremism* (Pegasus 2017). He is a columnist at *Foreign Policy* magazine and has hundreds of publications, including in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Daily Telegraph*, *The Times* (UK), *Chicago Tribune*, *LA Times*, *Newsweek*, *National Interest*, *Yale Global*.

Outside academia, Dr Ibrahim has been a reservist in the IV Battalion Parachute Regiment (the UK's elite airborne infantry reserve) and a multi-award-winning entrepreneur. He was ranked as a Top 100 Global Thinker by the European Social Think Tank and named a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum. In 2019, he received the International Association of Genocide Scholars Engaged Scholar Award for his research on the Rohingya genocide.

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## About Us

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### About The Henry Jackson Society

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**The Henry Jackson Society** is a think-tank and policy-shaping force that fights for the principles and alliances which keep societies free. It works across borders and party lines to combat extremism, advance democracy and real human rights, and make a stand in an increasingly uncertain world.

## Acronyms

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**EU:** European Union

**NATO:** North Atlantic Treaty Organization

## Names

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**Robin Cook:** Labour foreign secretary from 1997 to 2001 and leader of the House of Commons until 2003. Tried to introduce the concept of an ‘ethical’ British foreign policy with an emphasis on human rights. Resigned over opposition to the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

**Tony Blair:** Labour leader from 1994 to 2007 and prime minister between 1997 and 2007.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** Labour leader between 2015 and 2020. His historic loss in the 2019 general election preceded Starmer’s election as Labour leader in 2020.

## Political movements and groups

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**CPS:** Britain’s Crown Prosecution Service – of which Starmer was Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) between 2008 and 2013.

**Haldane Society of Socialist Lawyers:** A formerly Labour and now independent fraternal society of lawyers with left-wing politics.

**Hard left:** a term associated with the left of the Labour party congregated around the (Socialist) Campaign Group, whose most successful recent advocate was Jeremy Corbyn.

**Labour Foreign Policy Group:** A membership organisation created in late 2020, after Starmer was elected leader of the Labour Party, to flesh out a vision for Labour’s foreign policy. It works with the shadow foreign affairs team to feed into policy development processes, but does not take collective positions on issues.

**Labour right:** associated with the politics and people of the New Labour years of 1994 to 2010, and between 2015 and 2020, a term associated with internal critics of then Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn.

**Soft left:** a term used, this century, to refer to Labour politicians politically between the hard left of the Campaign Group and the New Labour ‘right’.

## Executive Summary

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It is not possible to anticipate the future course of British politics, or the electoral success of the Labour Party. In the past two elections, Labour first overperformed expectations, then subsequently saw its worst performance in eighty years. Political life for much of the past half-decade has been dominated by Brexit, and although the United Kingdom left the European Union in January 2020, the aftereffects of this process are still apparent. The COVID-19 pandemic has also affected politics across the globe, favouring some leaders while diminishing the popularity of others.

Sir Keir Starmer was elected to lead the Labour Party in April 2020, in the depths of Britain's first wave of COVID. He has at various times since both trailed Boris Johnson's governing Conservative Party and outperformed them in polls. With any future election featuring numerous complications – from Liberal Democrat and Green parties, nationalist parties in Wales and Scotland, the new permutations of Nigel Farage's Brexit Party (now known as Reform UK), and a plethora of parties competing for Northern Ireland's seats in Parliament – vote splitting is possible. And with Labour and the Conservatives directly competing for the same types of voters in 'Red Wall' seats, predicting outcomes can be challenging.

Boris Johnson won his large majority of 80 in 2019 against a relatively weak Labour leader in Jeremy Corbyn. The Conservatives were able to win many working-class seats in the English north and midlands because they promised to “get Brexit done”, while Labour seemed equivocal on the issue. These predominately working-class seats could remain in Conservative hands at the next election, but it is likely that some or all of them will be won once again by Labour. It is therefore plausible that Keir Starmer and his Labour Party will form part of the next UK government, whether as an outright majority or as part of a coalition.

This being true, it is vital to understand what the foreign policy of a Starmer government might be, particularly in the light of the increased security risks facing the European continent. This policy would affect the United Kingdom's current commitments, and its allies, notably the United States. Akin to President Joe Biden, Starmer wishes to present his foreign policy as a 'return to normal', in contrast both to the foreign policy of his predecessor Jeremy Corbyn and also the current prime minister, Boris Johnson, whom Starmer has characterised as “Britain's [Donald] Trump” and as a member of an alliance of illiberal international leaders, including Viktor Orban, prime minister of Hungary, and the president of Russia, Vladimir Putin.<sup>1,2</sup> As this paper will argue, Starmer's individual claims and ideas may have some merit, but his prospective foreign policy is rougher and less well-formed than the Labour leader might suggest. It is based as much upon the dictates of Official Opposition politics in Britain and on Starmer's own tendencies towards doctrinaire legalism as on any coherent and active foreign policy prospectus.

As this paper will argue, although it is possible to construct a potential foreign policy for a prospective Starmer government – using fragmentary information culled from press cuttings, and from speeches, manifestos and Starmer's own biography – this evidence does not demonstrate a coherent worldview on Starmer's part. The Labour Foreign Policy Group, born of the Labour-affiliated Fabian Society, provides input and expertise into the policy development process, but is not an official policy-making body. It is certainly not enough to give Labour a coherent

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Adams, “In Blair's old seat, the regulars agree: ‘Corbyn doesn't understand us here’”, *The Guardian*, 15 December 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/dec/15/blair-old-seat-sedgefield-rejected-corbyn-perceived-unpatriotic>.

<sup>2</sup> Sienna Rodgers, “Starmer: PM spent recent years ‘courting the idea he is Britain's Trump’”, *Labour List*, 15 January 2021, <https://labourlist.org/2021/01/starmer-pm-spent-recent-years-courting-the-idea-he-is-britains-trump/>.

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foreign policy which it can immediately begin to implement upon entering government. While Labour under Starmer has shown good instincts on Ukraine, the assembly of policy on the fly and the difficulty in fleshing out other areas indicates that that far from possessing a worked-out foreign policy to hand, the Labour Party under Keir Starmer may struggle to assemble a foreign policy that is distinct and active upon assuming office.

Starmer's response to the war in Ukraine has seen rapid evolution in his positions, and a fleshing out of some of his beliefs. It remains however the case that, unlike Jeremy Corbyn, Keir Starmer does not have a decades-long political career full of statements of belief and advocacy of specific causes. Instead, Starmer, a career lawyer and former Director of Public Prosecutions, has constructed his foreign policy around a scattering of tent-pole episodes in recent political history, many of which occurred before he was elected to Parliament.

The way Starmer has reacted to several foreign policy events that have taken place since he was elected a Member of Parliament in 2015 – notably the Commons vote on British jets fighting the Islamic State group (ISIS) in Syria as well as in Iraq – have not painted his capacity to make difficult, non-ideological decisions in a favourable light. This report has concluded that, in the foreign policy arena, when faced with vital decisions of either military or power political importance, Starmer has not shown the ability to make difficult decisions. In office, it is likely he will not be able to make those decisions and will instead instinctively incline towards inaction.

After he was elected leader of the Labour Party in April 2020, Starmer and his first shadow foreign secretary, Lisa Nandy, began to develop a foreign policy doctrine for the post-Corbyn Labour Party. Nandy's replacement in December 2021 with David Lammy leaves this process in the air. It is the contention of this paper that under Starmer and his new shadow foreign secretary, this job is unfinished, and that much more must be done to make Labour's foreign policy ready for government.

If Starmer's foreign policy were enacted as it currently stands, and as it is presented, Britain would not lurch into a radical and untested foreign policy departure from the mainstream as it would have done had Corbyn been elected prime minister. Starmer has taken great pains to distance his views from those of his predecessor and his allies, emphasising his "unshakable" commitment to NATO and describing Corbyn's views on the alliance as "wrong".<sup>3</sup> There have been encouraging developments, especially recently, to indicate that Starmer's foreign policy would be more assertive and more serious than that of any Labour leader since the general election of 2010. But these are still fragmentary. Britain, were it to be led by Starmer at present, would lack a coherent foreign policy capable of standing up to and responding to upcoming crises. Starmer's platform still has serious gaps which will need to be addressed and filled between now and the next general election.

If no such effort is made, the Labour Party risks entering government unprepared and without the capacity to make significant foreign policy decisions. The current Government has supervised the production of the Integrated Review, a document and strategy which puts forward a vision for Britain in the world, something referred to by ministers using the bywords 'Global Britain'.<sup>4</sup> At the present time, Labour under Keir Starmer has no document nor a public strategy containing similar depth.

This paper therefore presents both a description of the foreign policy of Keir Starmer as it currently stands, and an analysis of how a Starmer government might be expected to react to

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<sup>3</sup> "Jeremy Corbyn was wrong on Nato, says Sir Kier Starmer", *BBC News*, 11 February 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-60333340>.

<sup>4</sup> "Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy", HM Government, March 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy>.

contemporary and future crises. It serves both predictive and cautionary functions. Its intention is as much to spur work in Labour-adjacent circles as it is to criticise; the intention is to prompt Labour to generate an assertive, active foreign policy which, instead of presenting reflexive opposition to the current Government, seeks to form a coherent vision for interacting with the world, something fit to put into practice the moment Labour enters government, and something robust enough to survive and shape Britain's response to contemporary and future crises.

The Conservative Government is in crisis, with Labour leading in all major polls by over ten points at the beginning of 2022.<sup>5</sup> In this situation of flux, an immediate election is not likely, but an eventual Labour victory under Starmer appears more plausible than at any other time. It is therefore especially urgent, with Labour's electoral chances appearing so good, that the party develops a foreign policy with depth and heft, capable of being implemented from its first days in government.

To explore these issues, this paper takes two distinct approaches. First, it will survey the foreign policy positions of Keir Starmer, as expressed by the Labour leader both in his political career and before. This includes some information relating to the world Starmer moved in as a young man and as an increasingly senior lawyer. By and large, however, this is mitigated by Starmer's public statements since entering politics. The second approach is more speculative, and seeks to extrapolate, from Starmer's statements and actions across a broader period, how Labour under Starmer could be expected to react to contemporary and future crises which are likely to arise during a plausible premiership. Each track approaches similar conclusions:

1. That foreign policy is not an overriding concern for Starmer, and that he has not built a strong foreign policy perspective or prospectus.
2. That most of Starmer's day-to-day foreign policy pronouncements are dictated by the requirements of Official Opposition politics. As such, his foreign policy opinions are largely determined by the advantage they convey in domestic politics.

On this basis, this paper advances that interim conclusions on how Starmer approaches foreign policy decisions can be drawn in two ways.

The first is that Starmer evidences a form of legalism, which dominates much of his life and most of his political career, divided into two main categories. Of them, one is an emphasis on process and formality, which dominate his public remarks about foreign affairs and the basic approach he has taken to both Brexit and to recent foreign policy crises like the Iraq War and intervention against the Islamic State in Syria.

The second is more recent and coincides with his becoming leader of the Labour Party and, therefore, a prospective prime minister. This paper will call this tendency 'strategic silence'. It contends that this is the politics of saying the 'right' things on international affairs, but proposing essentially no action. This allows observers, analysts and the public to cooperate in the creation of a sense that, in power, Labour would respond to undetermined crises and challenges in the 'correct' way because its foreign affairs spokespeople have signalled their adherence to certain foreign policy shibboleths held by the left, or popular with the British public. To Starmer's credit, Labour have moved away from 'strategic silence' on Ukraine and Russia; it remains to be seen if this will extend to other areas.

While Starmer and his team have proposed concrete action in response to Ukraine, including significantly increased global engagement, the trends identified above do not lend themselves

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<sup>5</sup> "UK's Labour take 10-point opinion poll lead over scandal-hit Johnson", *Reuters*, 14 January 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/uks-labour-take-10-point-opinion-poll-lead-over-scandal-hit-johnson-2022-01-14/>.

to activity in foreign affairs. And both indicate that far from Starmer having a foreign policy vision, his team instead has an absence at the heart of its foreign policy. Foreign policy itself is often instead used as a prism through which domestic politics play out.

Through this prism, it can be predicted that a Starmer foreign policy will:

1. Favour maintaining Britain's existing alliances, and even building mechanisms for cooperation, but be unlikely to establish new ones.
2. Evidence ideological support for Joe Biden's foreign policy and for the broad goals of the European Union.
3. Oppose the revisionist illiberal powers in Europe, including Viktor Orban's Hungary and Vladimir Putin's Russia.
4. Seek to work with other states on a case-by-case basis in relation to, for instance, climate change and decarbonisation.

Otherwise, few conclusions can be drawn. As such, it would be prudent for Britain's allies to consider whether Britain under Starmer would be an automatic partner in, for example, containing Chinese expansionism, or a new counterterrorism mission in the greater Middle East or the Sahel, or in carrying out strikes to punish the use of chemical, radiological, biological or nuclear weapons.

## Introduction

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This paper examines what a Labour government in Britain, led by Keir Starmer, may mean for international relations and the security of Britain's allies. It begins with an assessment of Keir Starmer's background and philosophy, and how his legal career – which preceded his entry into politics – may have affected his approach over recent decades.

The next sections examine individual conflicts and recent events of geopolitical significance, and either assess Starmer's expressed views on those questions or infer his thoughts from his biography and public stances. The final section examines future conflicts, of the kind Starmer is likely to face if he is elected Britain's prime minister, and what the implications of his leadership in these scenarios may be for Britain, and for Britain's allies.

Unlike that of Jeremy Corbyn, Sir Keir Starmer's view of foreign policy is not extensively documented, nor built upon a rigid ideology. Like Corbyn was, however, Starmer is a prospective prime minister, and one who – in the wake of the COVID pandemic upending British politics – is not unlikely to lead a government, even if a minority one. Starmer's worldview is legalistic, and although the dictates of Opposition politics have meant that he must opportunistically seize upon issues as they emerge, the premise of this report is that enough can be drawn from his previous record – as a barrister and Director of Public Prosecutions; in Parliament, as the Shadow Brexit Secretary; and as leader of the Labour Party – to generate a model of how he views the world, how he weighs specific global challenges and actors, and how he might react either to the demands placed on a head of government in normal times or to specific crises which may emerge during his time in office.

Unlike Jeremy Corbyn, Starmer's predecessor as Labour leader, Starmer's views are not extensively documented; and nor do they originate in factional fighting within the British left and the Labour Party since the 1960s. Instead, Starmer's views are a melange of his own political convictions; attitudes acquired in his legal career; and the causes he has picked up and been influenced by in this century, and especially since he entered front-line politics proper. These sources are diffuse – and Starmer did not spend his legal career opining on politics in a way which might have committed him to a particular political and foreign policy philosophy he could theoretically have brought, years later, to government. But nonetheless, consistent themes are visible throughout Starmer's working and political life, and they can be usefully drawn to predict the course of his possible actions in power.

Starmer is significantly motivated by a mainstream socialist concept of social justice, including economic redistribution and social fairness.<sup>6</sup> But in his work, this conception of social justice is largely indistinguishable from a broader legal sense of justice. Starmer began his legal career focusing on the newly emerging discipline of human rights. He edited a series of books with his mentor Clive Walker on injustice and travesties of justice, including *Justice in Error and Miscarriages of Justice*. In the course of his legal career, he was a significant member and secretary of the activist Haldane Society, now called the Haldane Society of Socialist Lawyers.<sup>7</sup> Starmer was also involved in international campaigns on questions of human rights, and has participated in international efforts to end capital punishment in Taiwan and across Africa, including after his entry into parliamentary politics and elevation to the Labour shadow

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<sup>6</sup> Keir Starmer, "A just society", KeirStarmer.com, <https://keirstarmer.com/plans/a-just-society/>.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Ashcroft, *Red Knight, The Unauthorised Biography of Keir Starmer* (Hull: Bite Back Publishing, 2021) p.83; David Renton, "In defence of lefty lawyers", *The Spectator*, 10 April 2021, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/in-defence-of-lefty-lawyers>.

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cabinet.<sup>8</sup> His maiden speech in the House of Commons defended domestic human rights legislation.<sup>9</sup>

Starmer's view of legalism has ensured that some of his harshest criticism of the current Conservative Government has come when it has seemed to conflict with his perspective on international law.<sup>10</sup> Due to Starmer's background in human rights law and activism, it is not surprising that, when discussing international relations, Starmer places emphasis on different states' human rights records.<sup>11</sup> His foreign policy revolves around questions of abuses of human rights and international law, as in relation to the genocide against Uighurs that the UK Parliament and the United States Congress have recognised is happening in China's Xinjiang province.<sup>12</sup> Starmer has written and spoken about how his experience in human rights law is a humane one, and that his motivations come from a desire to secure basic rights for those without them, as in his defence of the Human Rights Act in his maiden speech in the Commons. Although, Starmer said in an interview given to *The Guardian* before he began his political career, he would not consider himself a "bleeding heart".<sup>13</sup> In the international arena, where even a country as prosperous and influential as Britain cannot affect every human rights crisis in the world, Starmer's general concern for human rights could easily fall into a series of legalistic tests before he might be motivated to act.

The implications of this are various and mixed. Starmer is a critic of all states that abuse human rights, and a critic of the British Government when it appears to ally with states with poor human rights records. This does indicate a commitment to human rights in practice as well as in principle.

But as this paper demonstrates, Starmer's positions on human rights and international law are not currently backed up with many plans for action. Starmer supports human rights around the world, but has not proposed much that is concrete to ensure their protection and propagation. Starmer is never blind to human rights abuses when they occur in countries which are not part of the Western alliance, but inclines towards military isolationism. Practically, if not in principled terms, such a stance is likely to avoid challenging states known for human rights abuses and non-state groups. Starmer is a convincing and consistent critic of human rights abusers. But he is unlikely, in office, to leave himself military tools to confront them.

Starmer's career and writings indicate a generally legalistic and process-driven view of the world which would have effects on his foreign policy in office. Similarly, the political climate of this century in the British Labour Party has become increasingly anti-war and isolationist. Starmer is beholden to these trends and has been shaped by them himself. He was opposed to the Iraq War in 2003, considering it an 'illegal war', and opposed bombing the Islamic State group in Syria (ISIS) in addition to fighting ISIS in Iraq in 2015 on legal and process grounds.

Starmer's legalism is to an extent associated with the idea, long present in Labour circles, of an 'ethical' foreign policy. This was most famously advocated by Robin Cook, who was foreign

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<sup>8</sup> Owen Bowcott, "Keir Starmer visits Taiwan to lobby against death penalty", *The Guardian*, 29 September 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/29/keir-starmer-visits-taiwan-to-lobby-against-death-penalty>.

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Watt, "Keir Starmer defends Human Rights Act in maiden Commons speech", *The Guardian*, 28 May 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2015/may/28/keir-starmer-defends-human-rights-act-in-maiden-commons-speech>.

<sup>10</sup> Elliot Chappell, "WATCH: Government 'wrong' to break law on Brexit deal, says Starmer", *Labour List*, 8 September 2020, <https://labourlist.org/2020/09/watch-government-wrong-to-break-law-on-brexit-deal-says-starmer/>.

<sup>11</sup> Keir Starmer (@Keir\_Starmer), *Twitter*, 21 March 2021, 9.31am, [https://twitter.com/keir\\_starmer/status/1373567810224451587?lang=en](https://twitter.com/keir_starmer/status/1373567810224451587?lang=en); "Sir Keir Starmer demands how Boris Johnson can justify Yemen aid cuts while selling arms to Saudi Arabia", *ITV News*, 3 March 2021, <https://www.itv.com/news/2021-03-03/sir-keir-starmer-demands-how-boris-johnson-can-justify-yemen-aid-cuts-while-selling-arms-to-saudi-arabia>.

<sup>12</sup> "Starmer wants UK to impose China human rights sanctions", *BBC News*, 20 July 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-politics-53471804>.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Moss, "Keir Starmer: 'I wouldn't characterise myself as a bleeding heart liberal...'", *The Guardian*, 21 September 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2009/sep/21/keir-starmer-director-public-prosecutions>.

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secretary under Tony Blair between 1997 and 2001. Cook desired to act entirely in accordance with his interpretation of international law and in relation to perceived foreign policy values – mixing law and ethics, something Starmer also does. Cook’s values were suited to the post-Cold War unipolar world which preceded 9/11, where it could have been expected that multilateralism, under an American umbrella, might keep the peace and develop the world. But after 9/11, Cook’s view of the world became not only out of step with the nature of foreign policy as practised by the Labour Party under Tony Blair, but also increasingly directed by domestic British opposition to the Government’s perceived military interventionism. Starmer, with his heavy emphasis on law and diplomacy rather than hard choices and difficult realities, is not identical to Cook, but risks being similarly blindsided by events.

Under the presidency of Donald Trump, socialist and left-wing political parties across Europe and the world sought to criticise the policies of the United States as mercenary and incoherent. In some European states, this gave rise to a politicised anti-Americanism, a trend which had receded in the Obama years. Starmer fiercely criticised British cooperation with America, which he saw as being unduly close to President Trump,<sup>14</sup> and his vision of the world appears to accord far more with that of the Democratic Party and the administration of Joe Biden. He is not dogmatically anti-American. Nonetheless, Starmer’s own legalism and narrow focus on human rights may hamper practical cooperation with the United States in the Sahel, in countering a rising China and a revisionist Iran, in punishing the use of Weapons of Mass Destruction, or in fighting Islamist terrorism of the Sunni or Shia kinds.

Even ideological confederates of Starmer’s like Joe Biden’s Democrats may find Britain a less engaged, active and willing partner in counterterrorism, and a less willing partner in international security, if Starmer’s inclinations, as currently expressed, are translated into policy.

The final section of this paper considers future crises which are likely to affect the course of a Keir Starmer premiership. In doing so, the paper examines public statements, speeches, contributions to contemporary debates, and the ‘mood music’ of day-to-day politics. But without a comprehensive plan from Keir Starmer and his team on any manner of foreign policy questions, this activity can serve only as speculative rather than predictive. In this event, the paper will argue that although these indicators suggest a light-touch and absent British foreign policy under Keir Starmer as prime minister, there is still time and a chance for Labour under Starmer’s leadership to develop a doctrine and a practice of foreign policy – which is both realistic and just, legalist and pragmatic, and which would set up his party for an ambitious, active and fruitful time in government if it were elected to office by the British people.

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<sup>14</sup> Ailbhe Rea, “Keir Starmer discusses foreign policy and conversations with Barack Obama”, *The New Statesman*, 16 January 2021, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/the-staggers/2021/01/keir-starmer-discusses-foreign-policy-and-conversations-barack-obama>.

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## The Bases of Keir Starmer's Foreign Policy

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### International Law

Keir Starmer's view of international relations is steeped in his conception of international law. The legality or illegality of recent foreign policy practices inform his perspective on many of the foreign policy challenges of the twenty-first century, and has prompted his criticism of the current Conservative Government.<sup>15</sup>

Starmer was opposed to the Iraq War on the grounds that the invasion was 'illegal' under international law. He maintained that position as Director of Public Prosecutions, an appointee of the Labour Government which launched the war.<sup>16</sup> Starmer's opposition to the war in Iraq was largely phrased in terms of, and therefore was likely informed by, his view of international law.<sup>17</sup>

It is also worth noting that, for Starmer, the legal advice of the Attorney General Lord Goldsmith was not sufficient to provide a basis for UK involvement in Iraq, despite his advice not being public at the times Starmer made his comments.

This is not to say that international law is the only factor deciding his foreign policy decisions. When opposing the extension of Britain's aerial campaign against ISIS into Syria with the same rationale, Starmer suggested that the action was legal, but that he opposed it because of the lack of a 'ground force' to fight ISIS presented in the Government's plan for action.<sup>18</sup> This was an unrealistic and technical opposition, given that a ground force in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) was quickly created and used, and Turkish-backed rebel forces in Operation Euphrates Shield also stood ready to fight the Islamic State. And in any case, without foreign boots on the ground in Syria, ISIS was comprehensively defeated within several years by the SDF and the international Coalition. In retrospect, this defeat of ISIS was both necessary and quickly achieved, and the criticisms invoked to oppose defeating ISIS this way were unsatisfactory and not borne out.

Starmer continued to make this case after the vote was lost.<sup>19</sup> Because his opposition to the intervention against ISIS was coloured by Starmer's other considerations – namely an opposition to interventionism and war within Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party, and Starmer's own focus then on domestic politics – this could indicate a more varied pattern of judging foreign policy decisions, rather than strict adherence to international law.

It is the conclusion of this report that it is unlikely that a serious British intervention to defeat ISIS would have compelled Starmer's support. The most critical interpretation of these events indicates that 'international law' can be either discarded or used by Starmer, at least in Opposition and when out of Parliament, as aids to an opportunist or instinctive opposition to an action taken by a government he does not support. Similarly, it is also possible to imagine Starmer refraining from joining with American forces in the future, as he would have done over Iraq in 2003, because the US, in acting as a world-spanning superpower, does not comply with the letter of international law as he conceives of it.

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<sup>15</sup> "Labour will back new Brexit legislation if PM addresses concerns, says Starmer", *The Guardian*, 12 September 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/sep/12/labour-will-back-new-brexit-legislation-if-pm-addresses-concerns-says-starmer>.

<sup>16</sup> Keir Starmer, "Sorry, Mr Blair, but 1441 does not authorise force", *The Guardian*, 17 March 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2003/mar/17/foreignpolicy.iraq1>; Moss, "Keir Starmer".

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> "ISIL in Syria", *Hansard*, 2 December 2015, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2015-12-02/debates/15120254000002/ISILinSyria>.

<sup>19</sup> Keir Starmer (@Keir\_Starmer), *Twitter*, 13 January 2016, 4.16pm, [https://twitter.com/Keir\\_Starmer/status/687307221814919168](https://twitter.com/Keir_Starmer/status/687307221814919168).

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International law is complex, and interpretations of what is legal and what is not differ. But this is not true of Starmer's approach, which is rigid and not universally shared. The British Attorney General, Lord Goldsmith, advised in 2003 that the use of force in Iraq would be legal, a change to the position which he had previously held. This indicates that even within the British context, thinking about international law is flexible and subject to argument.<sup>20</sup> This is not something that Starmer acknowledges, with his claimed intention to legislate against the use of force by Britain which does not meet certain legal 'tests'.

## Human Rights

Starmer's time as a human rights lawyer has given him great credibility in human rights questions, and familiarity with international, UK and EU law on the subject. His time at Doughty Street Chambers, and his involvement at that chambers in training judiciary, other lawyers and police forces,<sup>21</sup> indicates both awareness of the growing body of human rights laws and regulations and a willingness to have it lead policy. In his work in private practice, Starmer campaigned against capital punishment, on human rights grounds, in Commonwealth countries and in Taiwan.<sup>22, 23</sup>

There is a cultural dimension to Starmer's, Nandy's and subsequently Lammy's focus on human rights. Especially in a Europhile Labour Party, Starmer's adoption of human rights language and his continued interest in European ideas of human rights could signal increasing cultural affinity to Europe and its human rights focus, in contrast to a government prompted by the need to secure post-Brexit opportunities and make friends with whoever it can.

In practice, Starmer and his party are willing to use the language of human rights – near continually – but not necessarily to follow through with the policy changes that the language might be thought to entail. In Nandy's 2021 conference speech, for example, the list of those who have had their human rights abridged whom Labour “stands with” includes “the Uyghurs in China and the trade unionists in Columbia ... the children of Palestine and the anti-racist campaigners in Charlottesville”. Paragraphs later, however, this is undercut with the statement that “Engaging with a Chinese Government is essential to progress on climate change while standing firm in defence of human rights, freedom and security”, essentially indicating that promoting human rights in some countries, especially economically or militarily significant ones, may be secondary to other objectives.<sup>24</sup> This is a pragmatic necessity, but suggests that if he were in office, Starmer may well moderate his universalist human rights rhetoric to pursue cooperation with human rights abusing states in order to achieve individual objectives.

## Genocide

Starmer has commemorated the victims of genocide in Srebrenica<sup>25</sup> and has also spoken in support of the Rohingya in Burma,<sup>26</sup> and his foreign policy team has also condemned both current genocides and past atrocities.

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<sup>20</sup> Helen Pidd and Helene Mulholland, “Lord Goldsmith changed legal view of Iraq war in two months, says adviser”, *The Guardian*, 26 January 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2010/jan/26/iraq-war-illegal-chilcot-inquiry>.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ashcroft, *Red Knight*.

<sup>23</sup> Keir Starmer (@Keir\_Starmer), *Twitter*, 4 October 2016, 12.16am, [https://twitter.com/Keir\\_Starmer/status/783083213212168192](https://twitter.com/Keir_Starmer/status/783083213212168192).

<sup>24</sup> “CONFERENCE SPEECH: Lisa Nandy MP Labour's Shadow Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs”, *Labour.org.uk*, 27 September 2021, <https://labour.org.uk/press/conference-speech-lisa-nandy-mp-labours-shadow-secretary-of-state-for-foreign-and-commonwealth-affairs/>.

<sup>25</sup> “Sir Keir Starmer MP”, *Remembering Srebrenica*, <https://srebrenica.org.uk/memorial-day/messages-of-support/sir-keir-starmer-mp>.

<sup>26</sup> “Sir Keir Starmer and Anna Soubry condemn “genocide” facing Rohingya at Eid reception in Parliament”, *Human Appeal*, 18 September 2017, <https://humanappeal.org.uk/news/2017/09/sir-keir-starmer-and-anna-soubry-condemn-genocide-facing-rohingya-at-eid-reception-in-parliament>.

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One member of the Labour Foreign Policy Group has drawn together public statements from Starmer and Nandy to indicate that there should be a formal position established in law which positions Britain in opposition to genocides and mandates actions in cultural and economic domains to punish genocidaires.<sup>27</sup> This is considered in light of Starmer's statement that Britain needs a strong internationalist and moral position on contemporary issues.<sup>28</sup>

But as above, there are indications that preventing and punishing genocides is not always near to mind – last year, Starmer proposed a 'Prevention of Military Intervention Act' as an attempt to limit 'illegal wars', in many ways hamstringing the current strong ability of the UK executive to use military force in fast-moving situations, and coming close to enshrining the convention which derailed intervention in Syria in August 2013 in law.<sup>29</sup> In practice, this was likely a piece of rhetoric, but it indicates, among sparse public statements, hesitation to use force on Starmer's part, even possibly in the situation of ongoing genocide, like in Burma and Xinjiang.

With genocide-prevention and punishment increasing pillars in international politics, especially as a rallying point for the world's democracies, Starmer could find his tendency towards non-intervention drawn into conflict by new and emerging genocides. A United States which attempted to take more effective action to oppose the possibility of new genocidal conflict in the Balkans or in Burma, or in the Middle East, may have to contend with Britain's moral support but little or no practical assistance from a government led by Keir Starmer which had embraced the spirit as well as the letter of his proposed Prevention of Military Intervention Act.

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<sup>27</sup> Phil Entwistle, "Genocide Amendment: Britain must take this chance to draw a line in the sand", Labour Foreign Policy Group, 8 February 2021, <https://www.labourforeignpolicy.org.uk/post/genocide-amendment-britain-must-take-this-chance-to-draw-a-line-in-the-sand>.

<sup>28</sup> Keir Starmer, "'Britain can, and must, be a moral force for good in the world' – Starmer's Fabian speech", *Labour List*, 16 January 2021, <https://labourlist.org/2021/01/britain-can-and-must-be-a-moral-force-for-good-in-the-world-starmers-fabian-speech/>.

<sup>29</sup> Patrick Wintour (@patrickwintour), *Twitter*, 12 February 2020, 11.55am, <https://twitter.com/patrickwintour/status/1227561983416860677?lang=en-gb>.

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## The Foreign Policy Positions of Keir Starmer

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### The Iraq War and Interventionism

Starmer opposed the Iraq War contemporaneously and has repeatedly reaffirmed this opposition. Later, after the end of the international mission in Iraq, Starmer *de facto* supported aiding the Iraqi Government in fighting ISIS, claiming that the United Kingdom needed to “be part of [a] strong international response” to the terror group.<sup>30</sup>

Nonetheless, Starmer has referenced the Iraq War repeatedly, both obliquely and directly, in his criticism of ‘illegal wars’.<sup>31</sup> Starmer characterises military actions of this sort as actions his government would never launch – and may legislate against.<sup>32</sup> Some commentators have suggested that this was electioneering on Starmer’s part in order to win the Labour leadership, and has been effectively backpedalled.<sup>33</sup> This might be considered a sign of inconsistency, but consistency is there: and Starmer’s opposition to the war in Iraq is consistent. It seems unrealistic to suggest that he would relent on the subject; when asked, in relation to contemporary conflicts, Starmer has demonstrated little willingness to intervene militarily in individual conflicts, including in the collapse of the international mission and the UN-recognised government in Afghanistan, beyond accepting more refugees.<sup>34</sup>

David Lammy, when elevated to the position of shadow foreign secretary, made more comment on the ineptitude of the then-foreign secretary Dominic Raab in dealing with the Afghan evacuation than on any affirmative statement of what could have and ought to have been done differently:

*This evidence raises the most serious questions of competence during a moment of international crisis. The Foreign Secretary must urgently come to the House and address these claims.*<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, after a chemical weapons attack by the regime of Bashar al-Assad, in a series of events which culminated with Britain, the United States and France striking targets in Syria to punish Assad, Starmer disagreed with the decision to bomb Syria, but failed to offer an alternative course of action, simply stating that a “concerted and effective international response [was] needed”.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, Lammy, while not a front-bench MP, opposed the strikes against the regime of Bashar al-Assad’s chemical weapons programme, citing the lack of a vote in Parliament, the voting down of a separate amendment related to refugees, and the lack, in his view, of a British “strategy” for Syria.<sup>37</sup> This was also an example of where Lammy considered the prime minister acting in concert with the United States during the Trump presidency to be an example of him having “taken orders from Donald Trump”.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> “ISIL in Syria”, *Hansard*.

<sup>31</sup> KeirStarmer (@Keir\_Starmer), *Twitter*, 3 January 2020, 1.53pm, [https://twitter.com/Keir\\_Starmer/status/1213096060320702469](https://twitter.com/Keir_Starmer/status/1213096060320702469).

<sup>32</sup> Patrick Wintour (@patrickwintour), *Twitter*, 12 February 2020, 11.55am, <https://twitter.com/patrickwintour/status/1227561983416860677?lang=en-gb>.

<sup>33</sup> John Rentoul, “Keir Starmer is an unconvincing Blairite with an authenticity problem”, *Independent*, 7 August 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/keir-starmer-tony-blair-blairite-labour-monarchy-b1898737.html>.

<sup>34</sup> “Keir Starmer delivers statement in parliament on Afghanistan”, *Labour.org.uk*, 18 August 2021, <https://labour.org.uk/press/keir-starmer-delivers-statement-in-parliament-on-afghanistan/>.

<sup>35</sup> “David Lammy responds to Foreign Office whistleblower comments”, *Labour.org.uk*, 7 December 2021, <https://labour.org.uk/press/david-lammy-responds-to-foreign-office-whistleblower-comments/>.

<sup>36</sup> Graeme Demianyk, “Syria Chemical Weapons Attack: US Denies Being Behind Missile Strike After Trump Warned Of ‘Big Price’”, *HuffPost*, 8 April 2018, [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/dozens-killed-in-reported-chemical-attack-on-syrian-rebel-enclave\\_uk\\_5ac9cd82e4b09d0a119493d1](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/dozens-killed-in-reported-chemical-attack-on-syrian-rebel-enclave_uk_5ac9cd82e4b09d0a119493d1).

<sup>37</sup> David Lammy (@DavidLammy), *Twitter*, 14 April 2018, 10.15am, <https://twitter.com/DavidLammy/status/985084179653283840>.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

An American administration which wished to depose a destabilising and aggressive dictatorial regime could not expect British support under Keir Starmer.

## Israel

Under Jeremy Corbyn, Starmer's predecessor, the issue of Israel was a contentious one within the British Labour Party. Internal debates often shaded into areas considered antisemitic. Starmer has pledged to root antisemitism out of the Labour Party, and to adopt definitions of antisemitism which include comparisons of Israel and Nazi Germany.

Starmer and Nandy "welcome[d]" the Abraham accords between Israel and its neighbours.<sup>39</sup> And they support a two-state solution.<sup>40</sup> Although Britain and the Labour Party in Opposition naturally have little to do with the governance of either Israel or Palestine, debate on the issue remains heated in Labour circles, and it is from this internal conflict that the relevance of Israel to Labour and Starmer is generated. Starmer's condemnation of Israeli military activity in Gaza, in the course of calling for both sides to cease fire,<sup>41</sup> must be enough to deter criticism from within the party; but, as Leader of the Opposition, it is not enough to license the broad anti-Israel feeling in Labour which he associates with antisemitism,<sup>42</sup> and which Starmer has made a mission, since his leadership campaign in 2020, of rooting out.<sup>43,44</sup> Labour also advocates ceasefires whenever conflict emerges, although there's no indication it would do more than advocate these things if a similar conflict between Israel and Hamas broke out with them in government.<sup>45</sup>

With the lack of a broad-based international effort to move towards a new peace agreement between Israel and Palestine, there appears to be no basis upon which Labour could participate in an international effort to move the two parties towards a two-state solution. Nonetheless, if an initiative of this kind was proposed by an American administration, Britain under Keir Starmer could be expected to support such an initiative.

## China and the Asia-Pacific

On China, Nandy believed, and Lammy and Starmer continue to believe, in greater strategic independence, presumably from both United States and China, in any increasing of Sino-US tensions.<sup>46</sup> Nandy has called for a more "strategic" foreign policy.<sup>47</sup> Labour's foreign policy team has not claimed that the Government is escalating a conflict with China, although this is in part the implication of their views. Labour favours working with allies to deescalate the South China Sea, a policy largely pursued by the current Government and the focus of the Integrated Review.<sup>48</sup> China largely has been a source of criticism for the Government – particularly for its 2015 deals under Cameron, only abandoned recently, in relation to Britain's 5G network.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Jeremy Sharon, "UK Labour leader 'welcomes Israel-Arab diplomatic normalization'", *The Jerusalem Post*, 29 September 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/international/uk-labour-leader-welcomes-israel-arab-diplomatic-normalization-680626>.

<sup>40</sup> Lisa Nandy (@lisanandy), *Twitter*, 18 May 2021, 9.26pm, <https://twitter.com/lisanandy/status/1394751388308082696>.

<sup>41</sup> Keir Starmer (@Keir\_Starmer), *Twitter*, 12 May 2021, 5.46pm, [https://twitter.com/keir\\_starmer/status/1392521568266358786?lang=en](https://twitter.com/keir_starmer/status/1392521568266358786?lang=en).

<sup>42</sup> Lisa Nandy (@lisanandy), *Twitter*, 16 May 2021, 10.54am, <https://twitter.com/lisanandy/status/1393867420847198211>.

<sup>43</sup> Kate Proctor, "Labour leadership rivals back '10 pledges' to tackle antisemitism", *The Guardian*, 21 January 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/jan/12/labour-leadership-rivals-back-10-pledges-tackle-antisemitism>.

<sup>44</sup> "Keir Starmer's statement in response to EHRC's report into anti-Semitism", <https://labour.org.uk/press/keir-starmer-statement-in-response-to-ehrcs-report-into-anti-semitism/>.

<sup>45</sup> Lisa Nandy (@lisanandy), *Twitter*, 15 May 2021, 7.25pm, <https://twitter.com/lisanandy/status/1393633686738939906>.

<sup>46</sup> Lisa Nandy (@lisanandy), *Twitter*, 26 July 2021, 4.10pm, <https://twitter.com/lisanandy/status/1419676593589571589>.

<sup>47</sup> Elliot Chappell, "Nandy: Government must take 'far more strategic approach' to China", *Labour List*, 16 September 2021, <https://labourlist.org/2021/09/nandy-government-must-take-far-more-strategic-approach-to-china/>.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Lisa Nandy (@lisanandy), *Twitter*, 15 July 2021, 10.53am, <https://twitter.com/lisanandy/status/1415610423550820353>.

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Nandy, when in office, also frequently criticised the Conservative Government for its silence on individual aspects of China's international presence, for example the disappearance of tennis player Peng Shuai, and the question of a boycott of the 2022 Winter Olympics.<sup>50,51</sup> Lammy has reaffirmed Labour's call for, and subsequent support of, a diplomatic boycott.<sup>52</sup>

There are limits to Labour's willingness to act against the Chinese state. As noted above, Nandy and Starmer indicated willingness to cooperate with China on certain subjects, namely climate issues. Labour's China policy must also be read through the prisms of non-interventionism and multilateralism. Some Labour members have advocated for the underlining of British support for freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, including British military presence on exercises in the South China Sea.<sup>53</sup>

But if China invaded Taiwan, or stepped up its campaigns in the South China Sea, it is difficult to predict the response of a government led by Starmer. Starmer's position is nuanced. He supports cooperating with China on areas where that is necessary. He claims to disagree with the Chinese Government and has supported sanctioning the country for specific misdeeds.<sup>54</sup> If China were to invade Taiwan, however, this would be an act out of proportion with the responses previously supported by Starmer's Labour Party. It is urgent that Labour develops a plan for how to react to such a significant act of aggression, which Starmer's Labour Party seems unprepared to meet.

Sam Goodman, a current China analyst at Hong Kong Watch and a former political advisor to the Labour Party, has written for the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) about the flexibility of Labour's China policy, and how Labour frontbenchers have cooperated with Conservative backbench hawks to urge diplomatic boycotts of the 2022 Winter Olympics and to support 'genocide clauses' in the Trade Bill. Goodman argues that this is in pursuit of demonstrating Labour's 'flexibility' in dealing with China.<sup>55</sup> This flexibility and nuance is welcome, but so too are indications of Labour's possible policy if redlines in the South China Sea or over Taiwanese autonomy are breached. This has not been evidenced to date.

## Russia

The Labour Party under Keir Starmer is fiercely critical of Russia. Starmer has criticised Russia's foreign aggressiveness, its dirty money and its involvement in foreign wars, although much of this criticism centres not on what the UK Government ought to do to contain Russia, but instead on two domestically orientated fronts. The first is the fact that the Conservative Party appears to have connections to some Russian money; and the second is the extent to which the Government has not released reports on the threats posed by Russia to the UK, with the insinuation that the two are connected.<sup>56,57</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> James Gray, "Peng Shuai: 'Deafening silence' of UK Government gives China permission to act with impunity, says Lisa Nandy", *iNews*, 19 November 2021, <https://inews.co.uk/sport/tennis/peng-shuai-missing-chinese-tennis-player-government-house-arrest-lisa-nandy-1310419>.

<sup>51</sup> David Hughes, "Lisa Nandy calls on ministers to threaten China with Olympics boycott over Xinjiang abuses", *Wigan Today*, 7 July 2021, <https://www.wigantoday.net/news/politics/lisa-nandy-calls-on-ministers-to-threaten-china-with-olympics-boycott-over-xinjiang-abuses-3298951>.

<sup>52</sup> David Lammy (@DavidLammy), *Twitter*, 6 December 2021, 7:19pm, <https://twitter.com/DavidLammy/status/1467936836123250693>.

<sup>53</sup> Christian Le Miere, "Safeguarding the Waters", Labour Foreign Policy Group, 4 June 2021, <https://www.labourforeignpolicy.org.uk/post/safeguarding-the-waters>.

<sup>54</sup> "Starmer wants UK to impose China human rights sanctions", *BBC News*, 20 July 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-politics-53471804>.

<sup>55</sup> Sam Goodman, "Getting Tough: Labour's Role in Shaping UK China Policy", *RUSI*, 13 January 2022, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/getting-tough-labours-role-shaping-uk-china-policy>.

<sup>56</sup> Lisa Nandy (@lisanandy), *Twitter*, 21 September 2021, 10:11am, <https://twitter.com/lisanandy/status/1440242181889949707>.

<sup>57</sup> Lisa Nandy (@lisanandy), *Twitter*, 18 June 2021, 12:06pm, <https://twitter.com/lisanandy/status/1405844478687072260>.

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Before he was shadow foreign secretary, David Lammy was a critic of the Conservative Party and its associated people for their apparent Russian connections, alleging that the Conservatives were themselves in receipt of hundreds of thousands of pounds of Russian money,<sup>58</sup> and speculating without evidence that Dominic Cummings, Boris Johnson's former special advisor, may have been a "Russian spy".<sup>59</sup> In office, he condemned Russia's troop build-up on its Ukrainian border, and the subsequent invasion.<sup>60</sup> In a speech given at Tufts, Lammy described Putin as taking "advantage of unsuccessful Western interventions, the decline of American hegemony, and a newly multi-polar world" to invade Georgia, annex Crimea, and keep Bashar al-Assad in power. Lammy in turn praised greater European unity, a u-turn in defence policy, and a revitalised NATO, calling for "a radical re-think in foreign policy". His particular focus was the domestic policies which weakened the West's response to Putin; "dependence on Russian oil and gas", "dirty Russian money", and a belief "Putin could be moderated and influenced by our engagement".<sup>61</sup> Criticism was also made of "parts of the left" – including "members of my own party" – that had "falsely divided the world into two camps"; the West and its victims. The West must now "equip ourselves for the task of a sustained confrontation, not just with Putin but with Putinism and its imitators", building on the unity shown so far to develop "new structures" to "maintain a common approach".

In government, international allies could also expect a Labour Party which is more willing to release reports and undertake government business with negative repercussions for the relations between the United Kingdom and Russia than the current Government has been. Labour has supported the Conservative Government's sending of small arms to Ukraine in 2022.<sup>62</sup> Starmer has referenced Attlee, Bevin, and Healey's stand against communist aggression as a parallel for the Labour Party's stance on current Russian aggression, noting that "bullies respect only strength" and discussing with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg how the alliance can work to counter Moscow.<sup>63</sup>

During the winter of 2021-22, as Russia built up forces on Ukraine's border, Labour under Lammy and Starmer were notably clear in their criticisms of the Russian state, and support for Ukraine's independence and self-determination. Starmer's shadow defence secretary John Healey visited Kyiv and said in an interview with *POLITICO Europe* that Britain had a "special responsibility" to Ukraine as a guarantor of the Budapest agreement, and that the Conservative Government was incapable of offering the leadership required in such a crisis. Healey said "if we can't rebuild some of the trust and confidence that Labour in government would be strong enough to defend the country, it would not be able to win a general election".<sup>64</sup>

Starmer has written that Russia has "committed repeated acts of aggression, provocation and interference", and that Labour "stand resolute in our support of Ukrainian sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity". His conclusion was that diplomacy must be the primary tool used to resolve the conflict, but that Britain will need "to work with allies to use

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<sup>58</sup> David Lammy (@DavidLammy), *Twitter*, 26 July 2021, 5.12pm, <https://twitter.com/davidlammy/status/1419692019593711619>.

<sup>59</sup> David Lammy (@DavidLammy), *Twitter*, 3 November 2019, 7.43am, <https://twitter.com/davidlammy/status/1190897283543576576?lang=en-GB>.

<sup>60</sup> Ashley Cowburn, "'Putin needs to de-escalate now': Minister warns cost of Russia invading Ukraine would be 'catastrophically high'", *Independent*, 7 December 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/ukraine-russia-foreign-office-commons-b1971361.html>.

<sup>61</sup> David Lammy, "David Lammy speech - 'Foreign policy in an Age of Authoritarians'", *Labour Party*, 31 March 2022, <https://labour.org.uk/press/david-lammy-speech-foreign-policy-in-an-age-of-authoritarians/>

<sup>62</sup> Nick Duffy, "UK sending weapons and military personnel to Ukraine for 'self-defence' as fears of Russian invasion grow", *iNews*, 17 January 2022, <https://inews.co.uk/news/politics/uk-sending-weapons-troops-ukraine-self-defence-fears-russian-invasion-grow-1407475>.

<sup>63</sup> Keir Starmer, "Under my leadership, Labour's commitment to Nato is unshakable", *The Guardian*, 10 February 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/feb/10/labour-nato-british-left-ukraine-keir-starmer>.

<sup>64</sup> Esther Webber, "UK Labour says Boris Johnson 'Incapable of leading' in Ukraine crisis", *POLITICO Europe*, 21 January 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/uk-labour-says-boris-johnson-incapable-of-leading-in-ukraine-crisis/>.

our collective resources, including sanctions, to show Russia the actions it takes will have consequences.” Finally, Starmer entwined offering firm support to Ukrainian independence with a need to “get our own house in order by playing our part in ridding the West of its dependence on the loot of Russian kleptocracy”.<sup>65</sup> Starmer has emphasised this need for “immediate action against dirty money at home” repeatedly, backing an economic crime bill, reform of Companies house, and further actions against Russian assets.<sup>66</sup> These are welcome statements and Starmer’s article provides steps that, if he were in government, would be active, serious and conducive to good policy on Britain’s part to oppose and punish Russian aggression against Ukraine.

As Russia sent troops into Luhansk and Donetsk, Starmer demanded further action in terms of sanctions, exclusion from financial mechanisms, and an end to Russian money influencing British politics.<sup>67</sup> Subsequent to the invasion, Labour has continued to develop its policy positions. Starmer has supported continued provision of weaponry to Ukraine, while demanding Britain “ramp up” sanctions that “have to cripple its ability to function”, and supporting uncapped entry of Ukrainian refugees.<sup>68,69</sup> Lammy has called for the Russian ambassador to be expelled, alongside “expelling Russia from the United Nations Human Rights Council” and establishing “a special tribunal to personally prosecute Putin and his gangster regime”.<sup>70</sup> Maintaining a stance against direct intervention throughout, Labour figures have been careful to state their unequivocal support for military protection of NATO members.

## The Indo-Pacific

Keir Starmer welcomed AUKUS, the new security pact between the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom.<sup>71</sup> This support indicates that he would be willing, as prime minister, to emphasise and maintain alliances with fellow English-speaking democracies, including alliances tilted against Chinese expansionism in the Indo-Pacific region. Some members have suggested that the Royal Navy ought to be more involved in protecting freedom of navigation and protecting the arteries of the global economy from incursion.<sup>72</sup>

Allies can therefore expect support from a Britain led by Keir Starmer in the maintenance of this alliance and others like it, but not necessarily that Britain will take a more active role in resisting increasing Chinese aggression. Subsequent to the invasion of Ukraine, Labour figures have emphasised that this tilt must not result in a downgrading of European security.

## Afghanistan

Labour supported the NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan but has been a serious critic of the nature of the withdrawal.<sup>73</sup> It has largely confined its blame to criticism of the Government for

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<sup>65</sup> Sir Kier Starmer, “Britain must stand firm against Russian aggression”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 January 2022, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/01/21/britain-must-stand-firm-against-russian-aggression/>.

<sup>66</sup> Keir Starmer, “Under my leadership”.

<sup>67</sup> Sienna Rodgers, “Starmer welcomes new sanctions against Russia but tells PM “go further”, *Labour List*, 22 February 2022, <https://labourlist.org/2022/02/starmer-welcomes-new-sanctions-against-russia-but-tells-pm-go-further/>.

<sup>68</sup> Gavin Cordon, “Starmer calls for new sanctions to ‘cripple’ the Kremlin”, *The Independent*, 22 March 2022, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/ukraine-kremlin-nato-government-russia-b2041440.html>.

<sup>69</sup> Matthew Taylor, “Starmer: refugee numbers should be ‘uncapped’”, *The Spectator*, 13 March 2022, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/starmer-refugee-numbers-should-be-uncapped->.

<sup>70</sup> Rowena Mason, “Labour calls for Russian ambassador to be expelled after Bucha atrocities”, *The Guardian*, 5 April 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/apr/05/labour-calls-for-russian-ambassador-to-be-expelled-over-alleged-war-crimes>.

<sup>71</sup> Elliot Chappell, “Starmer welcomes new UK, US and Australia military partnership”, *Labour List*, 16 September 2021, <https://labourlist.org/2021/09/starmer-welcomes-new-uk-us-and-australia-military-partnership/>.

<sup>72</sup> Le Miere, “Safeguarding the Waters”.

<sup>73</sup> “Keir Starmer statement on events in Afghanistan”, Labour.org.uk, 27 August 2021, <https://labour.org.uk/press/keir-starmer-statement-on-events-in-afghanistan/>.

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unpreparedness, and the holidays taken by ministers and civil servants during the withdrawal. It has claimed it would take considerably more refugees than the current Government plan.<sup>74</sup> Under Starmer, Labour has not taken an official position on whether the entire mission in Afghanistan was worth embarking upon, but has offered ‘strategic silence’ – in part for reasons of political tactics. Nor has it said whether Britain, under its leadership, would or would not mount comparable missions in the future. Given the direct relevance of Afghanistan as a military lesson, both in terms of future missions which might be necessary in that country, and other counterterrorism activity in the Sahel in which Britain is involved, Labour’s lack of a firm statement on this subject is difficult to parse.

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<sup>74</sup> Hannah Rodger, “Afghanistan: Starmer savages refugee plan and attacks Raab over beach holiday”, *The Herald*, 18 August 2021, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/politics/19520736.afghanistan-starmer-savages-refugee-plan-attacks-raab-beach-holiday/>.

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## The United States and the Special Relationship

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### Donald Trump and the American Right

Under Starmer, Labour was a consistent, thoroughgoing critic of the Trump White House and its international actions. Keir Starmer described Donald Trump's remarks on Muslims as "repugnant"<sup>75</sup> and claimed that the Prime Minister engaging with the President of the United States was evidence he was "out of step with Britain's interests".<sup>76</sup> Starmer also opposed individual actions of the Trump presidency, including the so-called 'Muslim Ban'. Pointedly, Starmer criticised Trump's ordering the killing of Qasem Soleimani in Baghdad in January 2020.<sup>77</sup>

Much of this was doubtless carried out for the benefit of domestic politics – both because Donald Trump was widely unpopular in Britain, but also because associating the Government with such an unpopular foreign leader tars the UK government with the negatives of the latter. Nonetheless, this also indicates a possible intensification of ordinary Labour Party hostility to American Republicans, something built as much on cultural issues as on foreign policy, but which could have a significant effect if, as prime minister, Keir Starmer had to deal with a Republican president, or Republican majorities in the United States Congress. A close relationship, like those enjoyed by the majority of recent British prime ministers, could not necessarily be counted upon if Starmer was prime minister coincidentally with a Republican president.

### Joe Biden and the Policy of Jake Sullivan

In contrast, Starmer identifies quite significantly more with the Democratic political perspective in the United States. He declared his optimism at Biden's inauguration and forecast numerous issues upon which Britain and the United States could cooperate.<sup>78</sup> Starmer claims great affinity for the ideas of Biden and his National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan who believe that, *inter alia*, foreign policy ought to be conducted at least in part with a focus on its effects on 'left behind' areas – namely, he supports Biden's calls for global corporate tax rises<sup>79</sup> and greater green investments. How much this is intended as a contrast to two Conservative prime ministers forced to cooperate and associate themselves with Trump remains to be seen.

It seems in many respects that the bond between Labour under Starmer and the new Biden administration is sincere and strong – except in relation to Afghanistan (although even this was unspoken).<sup>80</sup> Keir Starmer's former shadow foreign secretary Lisa Nandy described Joe Biden as "woke" and an "inspiration" for Labour<sup>81</sup> and Lammy has tweeted that he believes America is "back", with Biden's ascent to office.<sup>82</sup>

It is likely therefore that, as Biden attempts to build alliances internationally – and to supplement existing ones – he would have the support of the Labour Party under Keir Starmer. This would

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<sup>75</sup> *Daily Hansard*, www.parliament.uk, 18 January 2016, [https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/cm160118/halltext/160118h0002.htm#160118h0002.htm\\_spnew1](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/cm160118/halltext/160118h0002.htm#160118h0002.htm_spnew1).

<sup>76</sup> "Keir Starmer's speech to the Fabian Society's New Year Conference", Labour.org.uk, 16 January 2021, <https://labour.org.uk/press/keir-starmer-speech-to-the-fabian-societys-new-year-conference/>.

<sup>77</sup> Keir Starmer (@Keir\_Starmer), *Twitter*, 3 January 2020, 1.53pm, [https://twitter.com/Keir\\_Starmer/status/1213096060320702469](https://twitter.com/Keir_Starmer/status/1213096060320702469).

<sup>78</sup> "Keir Starmer outlines 'optimistic' future for UK with Biden as president", *The Guardian*, 16 January 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/jan/16/keir-starmer-outlines-optimistic-future-for-uk-with-biden-as-president>.

<sup>79</sup> Keir Starmer (@Keir\_Starmer), *Twitter*, 14 May 2021, 2.29pm, [https://twitter.com/Keir\\_Starmer/status/1393196897343614977](https://twitter.com/Keir_Starmer/status/1393196897343614977).

<sup>80</sup> Keir Starmer (@Keir\_Starmer), *Twitter*, 24 August 2021, 4.24pm, [https://twitter.com/Keir\\_Starmer/status/1430189344191619075](https://twitter.com/Keir_Starmer/status/1430189344191619075).

<sup>81</sup> Jessica Elgot, "'Woke guy' Joe Biden is an inspiration for Labour, says Lisa Nandy", *The Guardian*, 20 January 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/jan/20/bidens-inauguration-is-a-source-of-hope-says-labours-lisa-nandy>.

<sup>82</sup> David Lammy (@DavidLammy), *Twitter*, 21 January 2021, 8.27am, <https://twitter.com/DavidLammy/status/1352170959575404544>.



not differ from the current tack taken by the Conservative Government, which has supported Biden on environmental issues and in the Indo-Pacific region with AUKUS, and has refrained from publicly criticising the American stage-management of the collapse in Afghanistan. If the Biden administration were to attempt to create a more active foreign policy, either with military interventionism or assertive defence of Pacific allies at the forefront of the policy, it remains to be seen how much assistance a Keir Starmer-led UK government would offer.

## **Global Britain and the Integrated Review**

The Integrated Review, titled *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*, is a strategy document intended to develop a vision for a post-Brexit Britain which, by 2030, will become “a stronger, more secure, prosperous and resilient Union”, a “problem-solving and burden-sharing nation with a global perspective”, and a “superpower” in science and technology, development, soft-power and more.<sup>83</sup>

Although criticised by some as a vision born of a Conservative government and not a UK government, in practice the Integrated Review is a robust document with intellectual heft and realism in grand strategy. The Labour Party criticised the Integrated Review when it was released, but does not dissent entirely from its conception of grand strategy, including preparing for a multipolar world, systemic competition from China, and threats to the present international order. Instead, the timbre of criticism from Lisa Nandy largely consisted of highlighting the Conservative Government’s apparent hypocrisy and failings in living up to the message of the review:

*There is a yawning chasm between the Government’s words and its actions. It wants to uphold international law but repeatedly breaks it. It lauds the importance of conflict resolution and counter-terrorism while cutting those programmes in Syria and Iraq. It preaches peace in Yemen but sells arms to Saudi. It wants to build alliances but antagonises our allies. It wants to lead on climate change but has no plan for net zero.*<sup>84</sup>

Subsequent to its publication, defence spokesman John Healey has referred to ‘Global Britain’ as “the prime minister’s vanity plan, not a national strategy for Britain to be a force for good in the world. It took security and prosperity in Europe for granted”. Particular criticism was devoted to its failure to foresee events in Afghanistan or Ukraine, and its proposal to cut tanks, personnel, and transport aircraft.<sup>85</sup> In an article for *The Guardian*, Healey described the Ministry of Defence as “a uniquely failing department”, and pledged Labour would “commission the National Audit Office to do an across-the-board audit of MoD waste”.<sup>86</sup>

Labour has no competing document or strategy of the same depth. Nor does it appear to evidence the institutional muscle to develop one. Labour does not seem to dissent from the broad aspirations of the Integrated Review, and much of Labour’s criticisms are the stuff of domestic partisan politics. Nonetheless, it would be preferable if Labour were to present an augmented strategy document of its own, otherwise international allies and partners could remain largely uncertain about how closely Labour under Keir Starmer would hew to the large-scale grand strategic vision of the Integrated Review.

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<sup>83</sup> “Global Britain in a Competitive Age”.

<sup>84</sup> “Lisa Nandy comments on the Government’s Integrated Review of security, defence, development and foreign policy”, Labour.org.uk, 15 March 2021, <https://labour.org.uk/press/lisa-nandy-comments-on-the-governments-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy/>.

<sup>85</sup> John Healey, “The Tories ignored Labour’s warnings on Russia – then came the invasion”, *The Guardian*, 16 March 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/16/tories-ignored-labour-warning-russia-invasion-ukraine-putin-review-defence-spending>.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

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## Sir Keir Starmer and Global Crises

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### Climate Change

Starmer has repeatedly spoken about combatting climate change but appears to see its problems almost exclusively through the prism of UK domestic politics. He has affirmed his party's commitments to net zero targets, to 'green growth' of various forms, and pledged £28-billion of investment per year.<sup>87</sup> Before COP 26, Starmer and his team spoke very minimally on new international requirements to decrease emissions, hemmed in as they are by the Paris Accords which mandate that individual countries set and enforce their own targets. After COP 26, one member of the Labour Foreign Policy Group characterised the summit as a series of missed opportunities, notably the failure to agree language in the communique that implied the ending of coal use.<sup>88</sup> Despite this language, Labour under Starmer has broadly said little about encouraging or pressuring other countries to decarbonise, notably China and India, and said virtually nothing about the possible challenges associated with a changing climate in the near term, except to claim that these things indicate the value of swifter decarbonisation in future.

How, for example, Labour would deal with waves of climate migration on the scale of the Mediterranean refugee crisis remains unclear. This is something prompted especially by recent events, notably the collapse of Afghanistan and the migration which is expected to result, and the trouble at the Belarus–Poland border. With the EU largely moving away from any semblance of a welcoming posture, and instead acting strongly to encourage each individual member state to defend the EU's collective external borders, this is a subject which requires much thought from Labour, a traditionally and increasingly vocal pro-migration party, whose young activists tend towards open borders. This is not something any current front-bench figures have advocated. But they must instead set out clearly and thoroughly their own strategies for dealing with the predicted waves of migration, caused either by climate change or by the collapse of states for other reasons.

### Future Pandemic

Keir Starmer has expressed determination in public statements that the COVID-19 pandemic or something like it must not be allowed to happen again or to affect Britain in the way this pandemic has. He has repeatedly advocated more significant restrictions than the current government, and has demanded the creation of a 'lessons learned' enquiry. This augers well for Labour in government taking steps to survey and prevent new pandemics, and to implement the lessons learned from this one.<sup>89</sup> But much Labour policy serves domestic reasons, and much of the demand by Labour for a quick enquiry is based on the hope and expectation that such an enquiry would embarrass the current Government. Similarly, the closest Starmer has come to a statement on the post-pandemic world largely consists of domestic concerns.<sup>90</sup> Starmer has criticised the UK Government's slowness in donating vaccines to the less economically developed

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<sup>87</sup> Chloe Chaplain, "Labour pledges £28bn green investment each year as Rachel Reeves says she will be 'the first green chancellor'", *iNews*, 27 September 2021, <https://inews.co.uk/news/politics/labour-green-investment-rachel-reeves-green-chancellor-conference-climate-change-1220339>.

<sup>88</sup> Frances Leach, "COP26 agreements come up short for people in the world's most vulnerable communities", Labour Foreign Policy Group, 18 November 2021, <https://www.labourforeignpolicy.org.uk/post/cop26-agreements-come-up-short-for-people-in-the-world-s-most-vulnerable-communities>.

<sup>89</sup> "Bring forward Covid public inquiry, says Keir Starmer," *BBC News*, 12 October 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-politics-58873906>.

<sup>90</sup> "Full text of Keir Starmer speech on A New Chapter for Britain", Labour.org.uk, 18 February 2021, <https://labour.org.uk/press/full-text-of-keir-starmer-speech-on-a-new-chapter-for-britain/>.

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nations, which have suffered low vaccination rates and high infection and death rates from COVID-19.<sup>91</sup> This might indicate that Labour would pursue a more globally equitable vaccine strategy if a similar pandemic arose if they were in government. But Labour has so far made no public statement about pandemic surveillance in the future, or about regulation of the world's bio-laboratories, each of which might be useful in detecting or preventing future pandemics.

## Nuclear and Biochemical Proliferation

Labour does take note of future security threats, including ransomware, the decentralisation of the use of offensive drones, and the spreading of weaponry from states to non-state actors.<sup>92</sup> It has no stated plans to deal with any of these threats, except to work with allies, and to “build bridges”. Similarly, although in different circumstances, Starmer claims we need to “engage, not isolate Iran”.<sup>93</sup>

## International Terrorism

### *Salafism*

Labour under Starmer considers the Salafism of ISIS to constitute Britain's most serious terror threat, but it sees this through the prism of cuts to the armed forces and international aid.<sup>94</sup> Starmer personally did not support bombing ISIS in Syria, although he may have tacitly supported fighting ISIS in Iraq – or at least refrained from commenting against it in 2015. Lammy, meanwhile, opposed fighting ISIS in Syria in 2015.<sup>95</sup> Although Labour has claimed the UK Government needs a more serious plan for fighting the entrenched Salafist Islamist terrorism, especially in Afghanistan, it has not yet provided its own.<sup>96</sup> As in other areas of foreign policy, there is a bias towards stasis in the Labour approach. Labour under Starmer has not significantly criticised the current Government's policies for opposing domestic Salafist extremism within its broader Contest and Prevent strategies. In terms of fighting Islamist groups like ISIS, with Operation Inherent Resolve largely over by the time Starmer took office, there is a notable absence of detail in Starmer's and his shadow foreign secretaries' statements of what Labour would do in government to militarily combat a terrorist group like ISIS.

### *Shia Islamism*

Starmer condemned the American assassination of Qasem Soleimani as being as ‘irresponsible as [it is] counterproductive’.<sup>97</sup> He has not spoken about Shia jihadism. He claims it is necessary to ‘engage, not isolate’ Iran.<sup>98</sup> This is a position which biases towards stasis and inaction. There has been no systematic acknowledgement by Labour of the connected network of Iranian proxies and Shia jihadist groups which operate across the Middle East. Likewise, Starmer and his shadow foreign secretaries have proposed no action to counteract Iranian attacks on oil tankers, and the oil processing systems of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other oil-related nodes in

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<sup>91</sup> “Labour calls on UK Government to guarantee equitable access to vaccines”, Labour.org.uk, 29 September 2020, <https://labour.org.uk/press/labour-calls-on-uk-government-to-guarantee-equitable-access-to-vaccines/>.

<sup>92</sup> “CONFERENCE SPEECH: Lisa Nandy”.

<sup>93</sup> Keir Starmer (@Keir\_Starmer), *Twitter*, 3 January 2020, 9.51am, [https://twitter.com/keir\\_starmer/status/1213035108367847425?lang=en](https://twitter.com/keir_starmer/status/1213035108367847425?lang=en).

<sup>94</sup> Lisa Nandy (@lisanandy), *Twitter*, 4 March 2021, 12.40pm, <https://twitter.com/lisanandy/status/1367454971562766345>.

<sup>95</sup> “Labour MPs against airstrikes on ISIS targets in Syria”, *Council for Arab-British Understanding*, <https://www.caabu.org/news/news/labour-mps-against-airstrikes-isis-targets-syria>.

<sup>96</sup> Lisa Nandy (@lisanandy), *Twitter*, 24 August 2021, 6.34am, <https://twitter.com/lisanandy/status/1430040747479347201>.

<sup>97</sup> Keir Starmer (@Keir\_Starmer), *Twitter*, 3 January 2020, 1.53pm, [https://twitter.com/Keir\\_Starmer/status/1213096060320702469](https://twitter.com/Keir_Starmer/status/1213096060320702469).

<sup>98</sup> Keir Starmer (@Keir\_Starmer), *Twitter*, 3 January 2020, 9.51am, [https://twitter.com/keir\\_starmer/status/1213035108367847425?lang=en.1213096060320702469](https://twitter.com/keir_starmer/status/1213035108367847425?lang=en.1213096060320702469).

the global economy. In government, it is unclear how Labour would react to increasing Iranian support for a broader campaign of violence among Yemen's Houthis, or Lebanese Hezbollah, or Shia jihadist groups in Iraq, all of which could affect British firms and British trade.

## War

Starmer did propose, during his leadership campaign in 2019–20, a 'Prevention of Military Intervention Act' as an attempt to limit 'illegal wars'. This would decrease the current strong ability of the UK executive to use military force in fast-moving situations, and come close to enshrining in law the convention which derailed intervention in Syria in August 2013. What Starmer would do in practice in the case of another war is a mystery. Britain is not engaged in Afghanistan or Iraq, and so these are not wars Starmer could possibly inherit. Current foreign troop deployments include British involvement in UN peacekeeping in Mali, although Starmer has not given an opinion on the necessity or desirability of this mission. Meanwhile, Starmer believes the use of drones must be 'transparent', although it is not clear he has given their use much practical thought beyond the legal and political aspects.<sup>99</sup> If wars broke out in which Britain was not automatically involved, it is so far uncertain how a Starmer-led government would respond. This ambiguity is not positive.

## Implications for Allies

Starmer has written, and Nandy has said, that Labour is the party of NATO, of the armed forces, and of "rebuilding our alliances".<sup>100</sup> Lammy has subjected Russian claims on Ukraine to the test of whether they "respect" the "sovereignty" of NATO allies as well as Ukrainian territorial integrity.<sup>101</sup> In response to the Russian troop build-up on the Ukrainian border Starmer emphasised Labour's "unshakable" commitment to NATO and his pride in the role the party played in its formation, putting it in the same phrase as the NHS as a legacy to take pride in. This is welcome language, particularly when coupled with a strong rebuke of those on the left who would equate "the right of a sovereign nation to determine its own future, even to exist" with "vicious aggression".<sup>102</sup> Subsequent to the invasion, Lammy has condemned the prospect of "one sovereign UN member state" being "carved up on a whim", viewing it as a threat to peace worldwide.<sup>103</sup>

Starmer also welcomed the UK's membership of the new AUKUS pact with the United States and Australia, despite the Labour conference subsequently condemning it.<sup>104</sup> In the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Labour strongly criticised the government for failing to invest in the armed forces, and called for "a post 9/11" style increase in spending on defence, emphasising the need to reverse cuts and "honour our NATO obligations in Europe".<sup>105</sup>

Similarly, the talk of rebuilding alliances was one deployed extensively by the Biden administration before it took office, and has not been put into good practice since then.

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<sup>99</sup> Keir Starmer, "Drone strikes in Syria must have independent scrutiny and transparency", *The Guardian*, 8 September 2015, [https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/08/drone-strikes-syria-independent-scrutiny-transparency?CMP=gu\\_com](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/08/drone-strikes-syria-independent-scrutiny-transparency?CMP=gu_com).

<sup>100</sup> "CONFERENCE SPEECH: Lisa Nandy".

<sup>101</sup> David Lammy (@DavidLammy), *Twitter*, 17 December 2021, 6.59pm, <https://twitter.com/DavidLammy/status/1471917999309340674>.

<sup>102</sup> Keir Starmer, "Under my leadership".

<sup>103</sup> Lammy, "Foreign Policy in an Age of Authoritarians".

<sup>104</sup> Elliot Chappell, "Starmer welcomes new UK, US and Australia military partnership", *Labour List*, 16 September 2021, <https://labourlist.org/2021/09/starmer-welcomes-new-uk-us-and-australia-military-partnership/>; Adam Forrest, "Labour members declare Aukus military pact 'dangerous' threat to world peace", *Independent*, 27 September 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/labour-aukus-pact-world-peace-b1927877.html>.

<sup>105</sup> Dan Sabbagh, "Labour calls for increase in defence spending in response to Ukraine war", *The Guardian*, 20 March 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/mar/30/labour-calls-for-increase-defence-spending-response-to-ukraine-war>.

The Biden administration announced the sending of 500 additional troops to Germany and the withdrawal from Afghanistan in the same month, April 2021, where the pretence of strengthening alliances was counteracted by the reality of letting them lapse.<sup>106</sup> Britain does not have the United States' unilateral capacity either to act or to undermine action. Britain does not have the dozens of major military bases maintained by the United States, nor the same aid budget. But with sufficient willingness, it can still be a useful player – as shown by its leading role in the Ukraine crisis. Starmer is pro-European. He does not wish to rejoin the European Union, but has expressed a desire for Britain to remain close to Europe, and in the light of the Ukraine conflict David Lammy has called for “a new UK-EU security pact”.<sup>107</sup>,<sup>108</sup> Other calls for structures to maintain economic pressure have referenced the Cold War “Coordinating Committee for Common Export Controls”, suggesting that further development of international bodies may be a priority.<sup>109</sup>

Current allies of the United Kingdom are unlikely to see a deterioration of relations with Keir Starmer as prime minister. New structures of alliances proposed by the Biden administration, for example any organised grouping of major democracies, will likely meet with Starmer's approval. But for Labour, these bodies are likely to constitute less a framework for action and for the shaping of a peaceful, prosperous world order that has been threatened by China and other revisionist powers, than another forum for the sort of diplomacy supported by both Labour Party members and Labour Party members of Parliament.

Unlike the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn, allies need not fear a Keir Starmer premiership. But they are unlikely to see an active Britain, one led by anything other than the ideals of human rights and a strong sense of international law and the necessity of following process. So far, the evidence of an assertive foreign policy waiting to take shape under Labour is absent, and lacking.

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<sup>106</sup> Laurenz Gehrke, “US to deploy 500 additional troops to Germany this year”, *Politico*, 13 April 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/us-to-deploy-another-500-troops-in-germany-this-year/>; Missy Ryan and Karen DeYoung, “Biden will withdraw all U.S. forces from Afghanistan by Sept. 11, 2021”, *The Washington Post*, 13 April 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/biden-us-troop-withdrawal-afghanistan/2021/04/13/918c3cae-9beb-11eb-8a83-3bc1fa69c2e8\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/biden-us-troop-withdrawal-afghanistan/2021/04/13/918c3cae-9beb-11eb-8a83-3bc1fa69c2e8_story.html).

<sup>107</sup> Chris Lloyd, “Sir Keir Starmer on Labour's Brexit position: ‘We have left the EU – there is no case for rejoining’”, *The Northern Echo*, 30 March 2021, <https://www.thenorthernecho.co.uk/news/19198588.sir-keir-starmer-labours-brexit-position-we-left-eu---no-case-rejoining/>.

<sup>108</sup> Lammy, “Foreign Policy in an Age of Authoritarians”.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

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## Summary

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The essential basis of Keir Starmer's foreign policy is legalism and process, respect for human rights, and consensus-based diplomacy and multilateralism.

This foreign policy doctrine stands partially opposed to perceived American unilateralism and British support in Iraq and Afghanistan, and stands against individual actions against terrorist threats, like bombing ISIS in Syria and killing Qasem Soleimani. Starmer's view is that these things may have been justified if they were handled in the correct legal way, and if they were in accordance with international institutions and the processes of exhaustively planning out such interventions before making them.

This model does allow nuance, but it is still largely predicated against action of any kind. It relies more on the force of diplomatic condemnation, and a willingness to take refugees and to conclude agreements, than on the threat of force in extremis, or the possibility of threatening force to guarantee peace.

On the contemporary crisis in Ukraine, Labour has shown that it could formulate a strong and coherent foreign policy which connects action in defence of democracy and self-determination with its domestic anti-corruption agenda. This is welcome and encouraging. It is something upon which Starmer and Lammy can build in order to prepare for government.

At present, Labour still spends much time 'sounding good' on major issues and signalling the right way on Saudi Arabia, the American right, China, Russia and other threats, but it appears to have less that is serious either planned or stated. At the moment, it gives no indication of how it would react in government to nuclear proliferation, or to newly emergent threats from Iran, North Korea, China or any other hostile foreign actor. On terrorism, it has little to offer except international cooperation. On the possibility of major refugee flows as the result of conflict and climate change, it has little to say except half-decade-old slogans about refugees being welcome. If Europe closed its borders en masse to a tide of migrants from Afghanistan and its neighbouring countries, it is impossible to tell what policy Labour would favour. This is a problem worth addressing – the lack of seriousness in a British political culture which is more insular and identity focused than previously, where foreign affairs are not dealt with in public or seriously debated between parties, and where crises like the ones in Syria can turn into largely political exercises for domestic reasons.

Britain has not participated in major international military actions since the last decade. The Integrated Review aims to revitalise Britain's defence and international presence by focusing on niche areas in development and science where Britain can outperform its status as a second-rank power. This view of the world can accord with Starmer's instincts, but it is possible that he will forego foreign affairs entirely to focus on redistribution and social justice at home. Unlike Corbyn, Starmer is not a threat to the post-war liberal world order, but he could in office do little to arrest its decline at the hands of aggressive revisionist powers, or face numerous crises for which he currently has no publicly available plan. It is incumbent on the Labour leadership to develop strategies for these eventualities, and it will matter far beyond Britain's borders if the Labour Party achieves power before it has done so.



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By Professor Azeem Ibrahim

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The Henry Jackson Society  
Millbank Tower, 21-24 Millbank  
London SW1P 4QP, UK

[www.henryjacksonsociety.org](http://www.henryjacksonsociety.org)

