

Blog: 'Punching below our weight' - UK foreign policy

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Before the horrendous deaths of 900 refugees in the Mediterranean on April 19th, foreign policy has hardly featured in this year's election campaigns.

It's disappointing, though unsurprising, that it takes an international crisis for foreign policy to be taken seriously in an election. So far, UK voters and the media seem not to mind that we haven't seen a comprehensive foreign policy in any party manifesto. Apart from the Tory-Labour scrapping over Trident, questions on international issues have barely featured in public debates. The NHS is top of the policy agenda for women [alongside the cost of living](#), while young people are worried about [affordable housing](#) and employment, and older voters concerned over welfare and immigration issues. Foreign policy has been relegated to the [back-ends of political manifestos](#), amongst bland statements about 'the global challenges we face', with few concrete proposals of how to address them. Though immigration and the European Union have been dominant throughout the election run-up, there's been no clear strategy on managing existing European relations and commitments, whatever the outcome of an exit referendum.

Beyond the election however, our fading international presence hasn't gone unnoticed. The New York Times published an article on Monday, reporting the growing sense that [Britain is losing its reputation](#) for 'punching above its weight' and being Washington's go-to ally. In January, the European Carnegie Centre said the UK has been '[wrong on just about every major strategic issue in the past fifty years](#)' and regular foreign policy analysis reminds us of the UK's disastrous intervention into Iraq and Afghanistan under Blair, and how it's been handled subsequently by [Cameron](#). Not to mention our absence from the tragic conflict in Syria and feeble record of accepting refugees (less than 100 of the 4 million who've left Syria, compared with 30,000 accepted by Germany); the confused strategy towards Russian aggression and the Ukraine, with David Cameron's noticeable absence from talks in February; and inaction over the growth of ISIS and its savvy recruitment of British youth.

So why have politicians been so vague on foreign issues? The Tory-led Coalition is determined to distance itself from Labour's track record in the Middle East, reducing military and defence budgets, launching light air campaigns in Libya and Iraq and increasing ties to Saudi investment. Though Ed Miliband has been highly critical of the government's absent leadership on the international stage especially with regards the drowned migrants, and [laid out a decent understanding of the challenges](#), his only clear proposals include appointing an LGBT Rights and Global Envoy for Religious Freedom (which seem direct appeals to voters from those communities), alongside general statements about re-committing to our membership of the EU and NATO. The Lib Dems, once strongly outspoken against the Iraq War, have lost influence in the Coalition, with [only one Lib Dem peer to nine Tory ministers in the FCO and DFID](#). At least we know where sensationalist UKIP stand – scrapping DFID and leaving the EU. And there's no doubt what the

SNP would do to Trident and military spending. In contrast the Greens, who have a unique opportunity to provide moral leadership in the absence of a chance to govern, have so far offered only wishy-washy critiques of Western intervention, an unsubstantiated policy of increasing DFID's budget, and broad statements on improving international relations through dialogue, nonviolence and the protection of human rights.

In short, there is a glaring lack of vision about how our leaders would deal with the real international challenges affecting the UK in the coming years. While election campaigns focus on domestic issues to drum up votes, external events and increasing threats are not going away. In lieu of a clear-cut foreign policy, greater onus is now on our international development efforts (with its recently secured 0.7% of GDP funding) to strengthen our global impact and relationships where diplomacy is failing. DFID initiatives need not only to think about reducing poverty and increasing sustainability, but where it is appropriate for them to strengthen the UK's leadership and impact on security and defence, and post-conflict and stability issues, to ensure we don't lose our footing altogether.

Though the leaders have a last chance to propose clear foreign policy proposals during tonight's final TV debate, I suspect they'll concentrate on domestic issues most likely to swing key votes. Long-term then, we need to see strong leadership and thoughtful proposals on international issues from whatever jigsaw puzzle makes up our new government and foreign policy offices. They must do this to rebuild our reputation abroad, restore relationships with key allies and demonstrate our abilities – diplomatic, political, economic and military – to address conflicts, threats, and opportunities that affect UK voters at home and abroad.

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