



HOUSE OF LORDS

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

UK FOREIGN POLICY IN CHANGED WORLD CONDITIONS INQUIRY¹

Roundtable discussion with early-career experts

1. On 27 June 2018, the International Relations Committee held a roundtable with 18 early-career experts working on international relations. The event was held under the Chatham House Rule, with participants taking part in a personal capacity and not representing specific organisations.

Technological change

The role of the internet

2. Participants acknowledged that the proliferation in digital communications tools have been a 'double edged sword'. On the one hand in some situations they had allowed collective action to undermine elite authority, most recently with the #MeToo movement. On the other hand, some governments had effectively harnessed them to extend state control.
3. Some participants were cautious not to overstate the role of the internet, arguing that it had not changed the fundamentals of international relations in and of itself. For example, one participant noted that while the internet had allowed the world to witness alleged human rights violations in Myanmar, wider political conditions mean it had not changed the likelihood of international intervention.
4. Participants said that new technologies had resulted in many people around the world having access to curated information, which in turn had furthered social divides leading to some of the instability present in international affairs today. States now had to spend more energy and resources on domestic concerns, limiting the scope for international diplomacy.
5. Participants said that curated information had led to the further polarisation of politics and contributed to the undermining of trust in both domestic and international institutions.

Foreign propaganda and disinformation

6. Participants said the definition of propaganda was contested—'where you stand depends on where you sit'. Propaganda was not new: it was an age-old state strategy. But the use of technology by actors from outside a country to influence elections had risen in recent years. Microtargeting was a new phenomenon. Bots currently account for half of online

¹ <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/lords-select/international-relations-committee/inquiries/parliament-2017/foreign-policy-changing-world/>

traffic—they are a standard part of online life—and it was challenging to identify they were being used for propaganda.

7. Participants said that US elections had been more of a target than the recent German or French elections. Some thought that English-speaking states were more vulnerable to manipulation from other countries, but some noted that, as a legacy of the Cold War, countries speaking Germanic languages were also at risk, giving the example of the recent Austrian election.
8. Participants said that social media could change the mood of an electorate. It was less about garnering individual votes, and more about setting the discussion and agenda. Fake videos on YouTube and Instagram, and the use of WhatsApp to share material, were increasingly problematic when seeking to challenge fake news.
9. Participants noted that there had been a rise in populism globally, and a lack of interest in expert opinions. There were different cultural contexts to disinformation, for example between Europe and Latin America. Some such campaigns were based on justified, existing grievances. In the US, it was suggested that the rise of populism resulted from the changing nature of work—automation had led to a decline in skilled manual jobs, resulting in dissatisfaction with work and a rise in support for populist rhetoric.
10. Participants noted the vulnerability of countries, societies and groups within them to propaganda. The increasing distrust of experts and national institutions across the world meant that people were more susceptible to alternative narratives to those of the traditional news media. For example, after the chemical attack in Douma, disinformation from Russia and Iran had spread and had been believed even in Western countries. The willingness of people to accept alternative narratives was a concern for the national security consensus in the UK.
11. Participants discussed whether the UK should seek to influence public opinion overseas, or should only seek to counter propaganda. The UK's narrative of facts on regional, national and international issues mattered, and was part of standard diplomacy. While the UK should not disseminate disinformation, the provision of verifiable facts was valuable.

Regulating cyberspace

12. It was argued that the internet was a challenge to the Westphalian system of states—it was not something that states could control. While there were some physical elements to the internet—such as servers—the internet essentially transcended borders.
13. It was noted that internet standards were already set on an international basis, by consensus. This is a largely technical area, but one that had many value-based elements to it. It was suggested that to be effective, the setting of internet standards needed the engagement of multiple states.
14. Several participants argued that 'soft law', i.e. non-binding instruments, should first be sought to regulate cyberspace given the difficulty of finding consensus and the overlap between domestic and international law.

15. Participants were sceptical about an international agreement on behaviour in cyberspace. There had been an agreement between President Obama and President Xi, which had led to a decrease in cyber-attacks, but recent incidents such as the attack on Lockheed Martin showed the limits to the efficacy of such agreements.
16. The EU was seeking to lead on the creating of rules for technology, but was not the base for the major technology companies. This limited the EU's attempt to be a rule-setter. However, other participants argued that the size of the EU market meant that it still had a prominent role to play in the regulation of new technologies.

Understanding cyber-attacks

17. Participants said that cyber capabilities had 'lowered the threshold for' for conflict because of the ability to hide actions and the difficulty of attribution.
18. Participants said that cyber-attacks raised a problem of definitions: the metaphors used to define cyber events tended to be highly militarised. Some questioned whether cyber crimes were in fact acts of war. Hacks tended to be branded as 'warfare', which in turn implied that states, not companies, should take responsibility for the fallout. This was different, for example, to data breaches, where companies were held accountable for the secure storage of clients' data.
19. It was not clear whether international law applied to cyber issues. The NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence had produced a manual which asserted that international law did apply.
20. Participants said that attribution was a challenge in the case of cyber-attacks. Some thought it might be time to review the scope of NATO Article 5, as the definition of war was shifting. Others said that discussion over the definition of war was a constant, and that ambiguity had the advantage of giving states flexibility in response.

The role of private companies

21. Participants said that the need to protect critical infrastructure and the emergence of the internet of things brought with them public safety issues, and a role for the state. How governments went about ensuring quality and safety online and in the cloud was increasingly important. For example, there was a concentration of risk in certain companies, such as Oracle.
22. Participants said that technology companies were in many cases writing the rules by influencing legislators, made possible by open societies with elected representatives willing to engage with citizens and businesses. In developing countries, some companies were experimenting with how to influence elections; for example, technology companies can control search results and the access to online advertising for certain candidates. It was much harder for developing countries to combat this than developed countries. Democracies were very susceptible to such manipulation.
23. Participants said that states and companies needed to work together on cyber issues. A greater state role was needed on the rules of the internet to avoid technology companies dominating, and to acknowledge that issues such as attacks sponsored by a hostile state

require actions by both companies and the state. Some participants also raised the need for greater use of anti-trust powers by governments to ensure that technology companies were not dominant and anti-competitive.

24. Participants noted that many of the largest technology companies were not in the West, thus limiting the prospects for cooperation to regulate them. Moreover, some participants noted that the relative level of control that China had over its technology companies gave Beijing a comparative advantage.
25. One participant noted that the public had more trust in some technology companies—happily giving away their data—than they did in some states. Other participants, however, said trust in private companies had been eroded by recent controversies concerning data privacy.

Opportunities

26. Participants identified some opportunities stemming from new technologies. There had been an increase in government transparency and engagement, and governments could provide services digitally. There was also an opportunity to use technology in providing and tracking development assistance—for example through mobile banking. Developing countries were able to leapfrog old technologies. Digital technology had also enabled better reporting from conflicts—for example the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and conflict analysts were using digital media effectively.

The UK and cyber security

27. Participants said the development of better UK cyber security capabilities—such as the National Cyber Security Centre and government funding for tech start-ups—meant that the UK now had a range of possible responses to cyber-attacks. The UK had done some good work in getting companies to take cyber threats seriously. The UK was more engaged than the US in this area and the UK should continue to seek to influence the US. Participants also spoke of the need for more cyber education for UK citizens.
28. One participant said that the UK should use its cyber security capabilities to support less advanced partners to development their resilience to cyber attacks, in particular the security of critical infrastructure. This could, according to some participants, form part of the UK's overseas development funding.

Emerging technologies

29. Several participants noted that a state's ability to innovate in creating new technologies was increasingly critical to its foreign policy power. This was particularly true with the potential advent of quantum technologies and artificial intelligence.
30. One participant suggested that the UK could play a leading role in the establishment of ethical norms in the use of likely increasingly sophisticated autonomous weapons systems. Another participant said that the UK should consider establishing official principles to deal with the development of artificial intelligence.

Changing power relations

The US and China

31. Participants noted that China has already risen, with one participant arguing that Beijing is already a consequential actor with the ability to shape norms in the Asia-Pacific region.
32. Participants said that there were now two poles, the US and China, but they were asymmetrical. Countries looked first to the US, then to China. The US's inability—or unwillingness—to participate in world leadership was shifting this balance further. The US was failing at economic statecraft, such as spending on aid and education, in part because Congress was sceptical about development assistance. There was also a decline in trust in the US.
33. Economic statecraft was a form of power used increasingly by China—for example the One Belt One Road initiative—and Russia. Some said that China had the advantage of being able to plan long-term, while the US could only plan two to four years ahead. Others thought China's growth was unsustainable, as it was based on debt; its overseas investments aimed to give work to State Owned Enterprises and export its unemployment.
34. Participants noted that the US and Chinese economies were interlinked. The US's hope that closer economic ties would see China embrace Western values had not materialised, and was an unlikely prospect. Participants discussed whether Chinese values were being transferred to the West. Some said there was little evidence that Chinese values were being transferred. China had put little effort into promoting its values, focusing on economics. Many states agreeing deals with China do not share Beijing's values. It did, however, invest considerably in promoting its image online, with the aim of being viewed positively. It was possible that it would in future use its economic statecraft as a basis for the promotion of its values. Others thought that the decline of multilateralism, and desire on the part of many states for economic engagement but political unilateralism was perhaps influenced by China. A different view was that liberal democracy as an idea remained resilient: examples were given of the regional efforts to support the winner of the election in the Gambia and maintain democracy, and efforts in Saudi Arabia and the UAE to open up in some areas and make life more attractive to young people.
35. Several participants noted that while China was increasingly prominent in global affairs, the United States was divided as to what role it wished for itself in the world, with some seeking to reduce US overseas commitments and break down international agreements.
36. Several participants noted however that while China had become more powerful and would continue to do so, it was still somewhat limited by its reputation as an autocratic regime with questionable commitment to international rules and standards.

China and technology

37. Participants said China's strength was its access to data. Privacy rules, though an important protection for citizens, put Western countries at a disadvantage in the development of technology. China was investing heavily in quantum computing, on an unrivalled scale. This

was an area where China was in the lead. However, it was unclear whether Chinese AI would work outside the cultural context in which it was designed.

38. Participants said China had an 'innovation problem', stemming from it being a closed society. However, it was a successful 'bad actor', able both to steal technology and get Western firms to provide it with intellectual property in return for market access.

Russia

39. Participants said that Russia is a declining power, but noted that it retains both a strategic nuclear capability and an ability to significantly disrupt, as proven in recent years. It was also noted that Russia was falling behind on some new technological advances, including drones and artificial intelligence.

Non-state actors

40. It was noted that non-state actors, from private technology companies to terrorist organisations, would become increasingly powerful in a more multipolar world, and this would have implications for the ability of states to reach agreements between themselves.

Capitalism

41. The 'long run data of capitalism' was a monopoly of power and concentration of capital. Capitalism and wealth-concentration inevitably led to a lack of trust and populism. Multinational companies also had increasing power and interests in developing countries.
42. It was suggested that antitrust enforcement against major companies was necessary to safeguard US democracy. This would also affect international relations, because domestic populism often spills over into foreign policy.

Multilateral organisations

43. Participants discussed the impact of US opposition to the rules-based international order, with some arguing that the multilateral system would likely be able to sustain a single term of President Trump but that it may not be able to survive a full eight years as it is currently constituted.
44. The decline of the US provided an opportunity for a group of countries to step up and play the role of 'enforcer' on multilateral issues. It was not certain that this would happen. It was a perfect moment for the EU to step up, and the EU saw the opportunity, but it was suffering from a lack of coherence and agreement between its members. Brexit had also had an impact: Participants thought the UK should work with the EU on foreign policy, security and defence, but the debate had become toxic. The EU needed unity and cohesion, especially vis-à-vis the US, and bringing in an outside state, as the UK would soon be, would be difficult.
45. The World Bank and the IMF were in some areas able to curb China's economic influence by providing an alternative source of finance.

The limits of the West and values

46. It was suggested that Western states increasingly lacked the will and strategy to project their international objectives: they had economic constraints, a lack of government 'bandwidth', and a lack of internal and international consensus on international security priorities.
47. Participants said that human rights had fallen of the international agenda. The West no longer advocated human rights, and there was a lack of confidence and/or will to engage on these issues internationally. Western governments had also lost confidence in democracy as a system. Greater honesty was needed: Western governments were guilty of 'tokenism', selling arms to autocracies and then claiming to have raised human rights issues.
48. Participants discussed the limits of the Western democratic model in the context of the challenges of new technologies. In particular, participants noted that the most open societies were often the most at risk from disruption both from cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns.
49. It was suggested that the current UK government was more reluctant to raise human rights than had been the government of David Cameron. Some participants suggested that it might be necessary for the UK to be selective about which human rights issues to raise with which countries, and be realistic about the value of the relationship with countries such as Saudi Arabia to UK interests. On the other hand, it was suggested that human rights were an area where the UK was well positioned to act as a spokesperson and watchdog after Brexit.

Participants

50. The following individuals participated in the roundtable.
 - Mr Gavin Baird – Google
 - Ms Alice Billon-Galland – European Leadership Network
 - Mr Sebastian Brixey-Williams – BASIC
 - Officer Adam Coffey – RUSI
 - Mr Nick Crawford – IISS
 - Mr Edmund Downie – Fulbright Scholar
 - Mr Craig Dunn
 - Ms Mailynd Fidler – Yale Law School
 - Ms Leah Machett – Harvard Belfer Center
 - Ms Nikita Malik – The Henry Jackson Society
 - Ms Lindis Norlund – London School of Economics
 - Ms Meia Nouwens – IISS
 - Ms Khanh Ha Phan – University of Nottingham
 - Mr Lincoln Pigman – King's College London
 - Ms Erin Schulte – King's College London
 - Ms Erin Simpson – Oxford Internet Institute
 - Ms Armida van Rij – The Policy Institute, King's College London

- Ms Julia Vassileva – University of Oxford