

Britain's Post-Brexit Foreign Policy Is Becoming Clearer - And It's Not Pretty

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Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

The likely shape of British foreign policy post-Brexit is slowly emerging five months on from the 23 June referendum, and the picture is extremely concerning from any ethical viewpoint. Britain is on course to ignore human rights in its foreign policy even more than in the recent past. And, if recent speeches by military leaders are anything to go by, it is even threatening to increasingly use its global military power to secure its financial and economic interests.

The past few months have seen a striking rise in the tempo with which British ministers are seeking to sell arms and do trade deals with the unelected, authoritarian regimes of the Arabian Gulf. In September, Theresa May hosted the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Al Thani, [saying](#) that his country was a 'natural partner' of the UK which was seeking to promote investment and 'defence' (i.e., arms exports). The meeting followed Defence Secretary Michael Fallon hosting Qatar's Defence Minister to discuss joint military training in which Fallon also [announced](#) the creation of a new Deputy Defence Attaché role in Qatar 'which will ensure strong and continued defence engagement'.

Last month, Theresa May also hosted the King of Bahrain, Hamad bin Isa al Khalifa, notorious for his country's brutal crackdown on dissidents and the Shia community. The Prime Minister [reiterated](#) the UK's 'firm commitment to the security of the Gulf' - government code for continuing support for the regime. Royal visits have also been made to [Oman](#) and the [United Arab Emirates](#) and the government has [reaffirmed](#) its commitment to building two new military bases in Bahrain and Oman.

Meanwhile, Britain has struck an extraordinary new [special relationship](#) with the military rulers of Egypt, who overthrow a democratically-elected government in 2013. In August, Theresa May spoke with Egyptian military ruler General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and '[discussed](#) a new chapter in bilateral relations between the UK and Egypt'. Since late 2015 numerous ministerial meetings have been held to promote military cooperation.

These repressive states do what Whitehall wants in the post-Brexit world: they buy our arms, house our weapons, support our power projection, and invest in the UK, all unencumbered by democratic distractions at home.

It is not just the Arab states in the Gulf that British elites are cultivating afresh. So too Israel. Brexit 'creates a real opportunity for Israel and the UK to work even more closely together', the UK's ambassador, David Quarrey, [said](#) in Tel Aviv last month. 'With Israel I see the opportunity for closer cooperation on trade, investment, technology, science and security', Quarrey said. While UK rhetoric continues to [criticise](#) Israeli settlement building in the occupied territories, it applies no real pressure to bring this about. Rather, it is increasing

arms exports: in the three months from April-June this year, the UK [exported](#) a massive £65 million in military equipment to Israel compared to £9.5 million in the whole of [2015](#).

The indication is Britain will promote arms exports post-Brexit even more vigorously than in the recent past – not an easy goal given Britain’s existing status as the world’s second largest arms exporter. The reason is that Ministers appear to [regard](#) arms exports as part of the UK’s newly-found ‘engaging with the world’. Equally worrying is that the government has not even [indicated](#) that, after leaving the EU, it will remain bound by the (already embarrassingly weak) EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports.

Since June, the government has been constantly highlighting its plan to increase the military budget every year until the end of the decade. It is also [engaged](#) in a massive £178 billion military re-equipment programme – a project that does not sit easily with ‘austerity Britain’ – and is constructing two large aircraft carriers, the largest ships ever in the Royal Navy, to increase Britain’s ability to project force around the world. All these factors are seen by Ministers as evidence of Britain’s re-engagement with the post-Brexit world.

Britain’s increased power projection capability looks even more worrying in light of two remarkable speeches recently given by the head of the Royal Navy, the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Philip Jones. In a speech to an audience in Washington last month, Jones [said](#), in reference to the Gulf region in particular:

‘Now that our Government seeks to extend the UK’s economic partnerships post-Brexit, the Royal Navy stands ready once again to be melded and aligned for best effect with our nation’s growing global ambition’.

Jones went on to infer that Britain’s possession of Trident nuclear weapons, which are of course housed by the Navy, is a signal of Britain’s new role in the world. He said:

‘This continued investment [in the Navy] is a powerful sign that far from being a diminished nation, withdrawing from the world, the United Kingdom has both the intent and the means to protect our interests, shoulder our commitment and support our partners across the globe’.

In July, Jones delivered an equally remarkable [speech](#) to representatives from the City of London at the Mansion House. Jones noted ‘Britain’s continuing, and indeed growing, position of global maritime leadership’ and the government’s commitment ‘for the work of the armed forces to more closely support the UK’s own prosperity’. He went on to say that the Navy, ‘at the height of Empire and beyond...has always been the guardian of maritime trade’, noting that ‘it was naval power that opened China and Japan to Western markets’ – referring to the brutal British conquest of China. Then Jones added:

‘Now, as the government looks to extend the UK’s economic partnerships, as signified by the creation of a new Department for International Trade in the last two weeks, the Royal Navy’s role in supporting prosperity rises to the fore once more.’

At the same time Jones highlighted Britain’s new ‘carrier strike’ capability: ‘The introduction of the first of two new aircraft carriers into the Royal Navy next year is a huge opportunity

for the UK to signal its continuing ambition in the world’.

The meaning of this from the rest of Jones’s speech is clear – the head of the Royal Navy is seriously saying that British sea power and military force will protect and enhance British financial and commercial interests, including those of the City of London, especially in Asia. This is a clear exposition of the return of imperial gunboat diplomacy that Britain may be envisaging in the post-Brexit world.

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