

Balance of Competences Review – Foreign Policy Report

Evidence contribution by Sir Alan Munro

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1) I participated in the two discussion groups organised respectively by the FCO and the MOD in early 2013 to consider the extent to which membership of the European Union provided beneficial support to the pursuit of the UK's foreign and security policy objectives outside Europe.

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2) In both sessions the view was expressed by myself and several other participants that as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and one of the world's leading economies the UK continues to have a significant role in international action to pre-empt and resolve regional disputes, focuses of tension and humanitarian crises, particularly where these could have an impact on issues of national security or prosperity.

3) In approaching these challenges the UK still finds herself in a position of privilege, with the options of acting in unilateral, limited multilateral or wider alliance modes. It is however becoming increasingly evident that while there is still scope for the UK's unilateral diplomatic/military engagement in situations where strong historical connections, the legacies of former empire or current Commonwealth factors predominate (eg the Falklands dispute with Argentina, Sierra Leone civil conflict), or on a bilateral or trilateral basis (eg in company with the US and occasionally France as in two Gulf Wars, Afghanistan, initially in Libya and now across the Sahel), opportunities to exert an individual British influence on such a basis are diminishing.

4) Instead a contribution by the UK can more effectively be deployed, often in a leading role, in company with partners in international alliances. This may involve NATO (as in the Balkan conflicts and also Afghanistan). But there is a growing role too for joint action through the European Union with its recently instituted and centralised capabilities for common diplomatic and military engagement, a development which has the additional merit of US blessing.

5) Prominent examples where integration of national policy into a broader and more influential EU front best serves the UK's purpose include diplomatic engagement and dialogue in Syria and over the Arab/Israel peace process, negotiations to establish free trade agreements, and discussions with Iran over nuclear policy and regional security. Those in the military arena include the UK-coordinated naval operation to suppress maritime piracy out of Somalia together with the physical protection of aid programmes to help stabilise this failed state, as well as joint military training programmes and endeavours to establish a measure of European coordination in the field of military equipment sales.

6) There are of course disadvantages and deficiencies in the European option. Of particular significance is the delay factor in achieving consensus over joint policy among 27 sovereign states with conflicting national agendas. This may require initial action to be taken on an expedient basis by a limited core of EU members while a common approach is being sought. But this does not invalidate the value or impact of joint European intervention in a scene of crisis or threat, and the visible contribution which the UK can make within it. We are no longer talking of Pax Britannica.