“Gulf Security is Our Security”: Global Britain and UK Gulf Strategy, 2010-20
Joe Devanny and Philip Berry
Department of War Studies, King’s College London, Strand, London, UK

ABSTRACT
“Global Britain” has become the framing concept for post-Brexit foreign policy pursued by successive Conservative prime ministers. Despite exaggerated rhetoric to the contrary, this has not led to a significant shift in Britain’s Gulf strategy, but rather intensified the pursuit of the existing network of bilateral relationships underpinned by security cooperation, defence exports and inward investment. A modest uplift of UK military presence in the Gulf has not demonstrably increased UK influence in the region or over the regional decisions of the Trump administration. This leaves the UK more exposed to risk from deteriorating relations between the US and Iran. It also highlights the delicate balance between Britain’s increasing focus on pursuing domestic economic objectives and its modest defence, diplomatic and security contribution to stability in the Gulf. As Saudi Arabia and the UAE pursue increasingly active and independent regional policies, the UK must reappraise commitments implicit in its interdependent trade- and security-focused strategy to prepare for the possibility of difficult choices, both between allies and about the nature of UK involvement in future regional conflicts.

Introduction

Soon after assuming office in July 2016, the government of Prime Minister Theresa May (2016–19) invoked the phrase “Global Britain” as a framing concept for UK foreign policy in the wake of the 23 June referendum vote to leave the European Union (EU) (Daddow 2019). Five months later, Boris Johnson emphasised Britain’s global leadership in his first major speech as Foreign Secretary (2016–18): Britain was ‘not some bit part or spear carrier on the world stage. We are a protagonist – a global Britain running a truly global foreign policy’ (Johnson 2016a). Despite his idiosyncratic rhetoric, this ambition was not a departure from the strategy of the previous administration under David Cameron (2010–16). Nowhere is this more apparent than in UK Gulf Strategy.

The phrase “Global Britain” endured in UK foreign policy rhetoric after Johnson replaced May as prime minister in July 2019 (Johnson 2020a). Part slogan, part insight into the self-perception of the Conservative political elite, “Global Britain” is an indication of how the May and Johnson administrations wanted to present Britain’s place in the
world – to British voters and the world beyond. Consistent with the main lines of national strategy since 1945, it invokes a sense of Britain being more than a merely European power, but this vaguely defined global role has been complemented by neither a clearly articulated conception of Britain’s core interests, nor a persuasive explanation of national strategy to achieve them.

Following his December 2019 general election victory, Johnson pledged to conduct in 2020 what he described as the “biggest” integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy since the end of the Cold War (Devanny 2020a). This review was postponed as government addressed the Covid-19 pandemic emergency and further dislocated by associated rescheduling of a multiannual spending review into 2021. The review offered policymakers an opportunity to answer difficult questions about the nature and extent of Britain’s global role, thereby breathing life and substance into “Global Britain”. Sharply prioritizing between competing interests, the Johnson administration could use it to determine whether Britain was best served by retaining traditional policies or adopting new approaches, including regarding the UK’s Gulf strategy. Early indications, however, suggested that the review was undermined by bureaucratic infighting, reportedly pitting a conventional faction against a more radical group keen somehow to push Britain from an “ambient” to a leading global role (Fisher 2020). Undermining the integrity of the integrated nature of his review, Johnson pre-empted its conclusions in June 2020 by announcing that the Department for International Development (DFID) would be taken over by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), clearly signalling a subordinate role for development in his administration’s still vaguely-defined conception of the national interest (Johnson 2020b).

This article explores one dimension of Britain’s strategic challenge: formulating a coherent approach to the Gulf states and wider Middle East, a region of abiding UK strategic interest. Ironically, Britain’s abandonment of its protector role in the Gulf in 1971 was a key moment in its transition away from significant global commitments. How successive governments have understood and managed this transition is an important strand of the contemporary history of UK foreign policy, and this historical legacy is visible in the current shape of UK Gulf strategy.

The article focuses on the period since 2010 under successive Conservative or Conservative-led administrations. It begins, however, by placing contemporary Gulf strategy in a longer historical perspective. This approach highlights several continuities in Britain’s Gulf strategy, as well as the impact of contingencies (not least the centrality of the “special relationship” with the United States) and critical junctures (Suez in 1956; withdrawal from east of Suez in 1971) in shaping the strategic approach of different administrations. Britain’s persistent post-war problem has been reconciling a legacy of global commitments with the reality of straitened economic circumstances and middle power status.

The relatively consistent, if often implicit, strategy for the region has emphasised trade and investment opportunities, buttressed by a network of bilateral security relationships. The latter, however, has been underpinned by ambiguous (or perhaps ambivalent) interpretation of implicit political commitments made by Britain to the region’s political leaders, a phenomenon highlighted by Britain’s equivocal response to successive regime changes in Egypt between 2011 and 2013.
UK foreign policy is often presented as a tripartite concern for security, prosperity and promoting British values overseas. UK Gulf strategy provides an example of how tensions within this framework are resolved in practice, namely by prioritising a narrow conception of security and prosperity over values-driven diplomacy.

Since 2010, Britain’s strategic (re)engagement with the Gulf states has occurred against the backdrop of civil unrest in the region, prolonged instability and restructuring of geopolitical order throughout the broader Middle East. The influence of external powerbrokers has been challenged by assertive regional players, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (Bianco 2020, 2–3). Under both the Obama and Trump administrations, a perception spread that the United States, the region’s major external power, was disengaging, just as its geopolitical rivals, China and Russia, were enhancing their regional roles. There is, in fact, a lively debate in the academic and policy literature about the merits of such a shift in US regional strategy, noting the high costs of its extensive military presence, the limited influence it brings over regional partners, and the extent to which the region is less critical to US national strategy than it was previously (Ashford 2018; Gause 2019; Blagden and Porter 2021). In this context of US reappraisal of the benefits of its much larger regional commitment and footprint, UK strategy must be self-aware: despite long, multi-faceted and broadly favourable relationships with the Gulf Arab states, British influence is sharply limited (Roberts and Bianco 2019, 56).

The article’s focus on the development of one strand of national strategy needs to be situated in the context of relevant literature in foreign policy analysis and security strategy. We embrace the pragmatic ethos and policy engagement implicit in Sil and Katzenstein’s principle of “analytic eclecticism”, clarifying the practical challenges facing decisionmakers by employing a variety of insights derived from different paradigms within international relations theory (Sil and Katzenstein 2010).

In the neoclassical realist approach articulated by Taliaferro, Lobell and Ripsman: ‘leaders define the “national interests” and conduct foreign policy based upon their assessment of relative power and other states’ intentions, but always subject to domestic constraints’ (Taliaferro et al. 2009, 25). Others have employed neoclassical realism to explore the impact of conceptions of national identity on UK foreign policy (Hadfield-Amkhan 2010). Recognition that conceptions of identity help to shape the determination of interests raises, in the UK context, the vexed cultural and constitutional question of the relationship between Englishness and Britishness – the contested shaping of the “national popular” evident particularly in contributions from writers under the umbrella of the New Left (Nairn 1981; Matthews 2013). Emphasis on the polyvalent and shifting, diachronic nature of the national interest and interplay between state and social forces in defining it, is not, therefore, an exclusive insight of neoclassical realists. It is discernible in starkly different literature, such as state theory (Jessop 2015). As the cultural theorist Stuart Hall argued: ‘what the nation “means” is an on-going project, under constant reconstruction’ (Hall 2005, 25).

Hall’s reflection is instructive in another sense. It emerged from consideration of the issue of heritage, the relationship between national past and present. Christopher Hill has noted the persistence in Britain and France – both former imperial powers – of struggle with the question of “how to conduct themselves in a world in which they are in limbo, neither ‘Great Powers’ in the nineteenth-century sense nor average states of the middling
rank” (Hill 2016, 394). This argument has also been made critically from the left, for example by Tom Nairn: ‘Retired imperialists like Britain and France want to go on being examples: their meaning must be made to survive their loss of power, as compensation and continuity’ (Nairn 2006, 139).

The impact of history on a nation’s conception of its present identity, interests and the best policies to pursue them, is widespread throughout the literature. Even where scholars, such as Steve Yetiv, invoke the notion of ‘reactive engagement’ to emphasize an absence of coherent, self-conscious strategy – in Yetiv’s case regarding US policy in the Middle East (Yetiv 2008, 193–194) – reactions are no less bounded in nature, shaped by context and history. As Patrick Porter has recently argued about US grand strategy, even a ‘system on autopilot … carries a preprogrammed code’ (Porter 2018, 24). Ariane Tabatabai recently pursued a related theme, explaining historical continuities between pre- and post-revolutionary Iranian security strategy, and invoking William Faulkner’s phrase: ‘the past isn’t dead. It isn’t even past’ (Tabatabai 2020, 3).

With this historical sensibility and following a constructivist approach, Oliver Daddow assesses “Global Britain” rhetoric as an Eurosceptic twist on traditional conceptions of Britain as a significant international actor (Daddow 2019, 5). His argument that traditional strategy received a post-Brexit twist is consistent with the interpretivist position he had advanced earlier with Mark Bevir and Ian Hall, according to which traditions ‘change as individuals make a series of variations to them in response to any number of specific dilemmas’ (Bevir et al. 2014, 43). Interpretivism is useful as a tool to explore the interplay between rhetoric and decisions, particularly in its notion of “ruling narratives”, namely ‘the beliefs and stories by which elite actors make sense of their world. These narratives provide a background against which elites construct their world-views, including their views of their own interests. Ruling narratives thus inform the policy choices that elites and states make’ (Bevir et al. 2014, 53). Daddow and Gaskarth offer an interpretivist explanation of an incremental shift in traditional UK strategy, reshaping ‘remnants of the “great power” tradition … to account for the promotion of values alongside the protection of interests’ (Daddow and Gaskarth 2014, 179). Interpretivism improves our understanding of the fluid, overlapping conception of values and interests and the structuring impact of elite beliefs about identity in determining their contingent form. And as Jonathan Gilmore has argued, foreign policy premised in uncritical conflation of values and interests is liable to suffer from inconsistency or worse (Gilmore 2014).

Interpretivist emphasis on elite narratives and continuities between post-Brexit and traditional British strategy calls to mind Porter’s argument that successive US presidential administrations have been “predisposed toward the status quo with little critical evaluation” and lacked self-consciousness about the impact of received wisdom on policy appraisal. For Porter, US policymaking is dominated by a “logic of habit” to the detriment of the application of an instrumental “logic of consequences” and heavily shaping the application of a normative ‘logic of appropriateness’ (Porter 2018, 11–13).

This article employs a historical approach to evaluate the extent to which Porter’s argument reads across to the case of UK Gulf strategy in the form of enduring, exclusive elite narratives about national identity and determination of national interests. As Perry Anderson has recently observed, the dominant electoral force in modern British politics has been the Conservative party, in government for most of the period since 1874
(Anderson 2020, 67), but as the state theorist Bob Jessop has noted, narrowly party-political explanations are insufficient to account for the complexity of a state that is embedded in broader social relations: ‘state power is an institutionally and discursively mediated condensation (a reflection and a refraction) of a changing balance of forces that seek to influence the forms, purposes, and content of polity, politics, and policy’ (Jessop 2015, 20). This article does not offer a totalizing account of the impact of complex social relations on the development of British Gulf strategy, but proceeds with a sense of the socio-economic factors that have shaped it and the parallel conviction that it would be misleading to spotlight the political dimensions of Britain’s strategic tradition whilst neglecting this broader context. This can be illustrated by a counterfactual: were Britain to pursue an alternative economic strategy that reduced its relative dependence on inward investment, the economic dimension of its Gulf Strategy would be modulated differently, potentially recalibrating the wider strategy.

Readers should bear these broader theoretical concerns in mind over the following sections that examine the strength of continuity in UK Gulf strategy and the influence of inherited assumptions on current decision-making. Mirroring Porter, this article argues that British foreign policy is deeply ingrained and, whilst change is possible, it is only likely “in conditions shocking enough to undermine assumptions, and even then”, only with a government that is ‘determined to overhaul’ existing policy “and absorb the political costs of doing so” (Porter 2018, 45–46). The political cost and structural barriers to revising British Gulf strategy are undoubtedly much lower than those implicit in revising its US counterpart (Lynch 2017). There is little evidence that Johnson’s government is interested in doing so, but there are indications that his adversary, Labour party leader Keir Starmer, is more sceptical of the strategic status quo (Devanny 2020b). This potentially critical political juncture for Britain’s Gulf strategy is considered in the conclusion.

**UK Gulf Strategy**

Since 2010, the UK has prioritized its commercial, diplomatic and security relationships with the Gulf Arab States. This intensified regional focus, underpinned by long-standing political, economic and security ties, indicates that British politicians considered the Gulf as a source of opportunities and validation of the “Global Britain” brand. Britain’s objectives are both narrowly economic and focused on enhancing regional security. To date, Britain’s strategy for the Gulf and wider Middle East has been pursued with relatively few structural constraints from the legislature or visibility in civil society, with two exceptions: a 2019 legal ruling restricting UK arms exports connected with the Yemen conflict; and enduring, post-2003 national anxiety about protracted elective conflicts, particularly the nature of Britain’s military involvement in Iraq, Libya and Syria.

**UK Gulf and Middle East strategy prior to 2010**

Britain’s role as an influential external power in the Gulf developed throughout the nineteenth century, motivated, on the Gulf side, by protection-seeking, and on the British side by concerns for maritime security and imperial communications. These
arrangements were cemented in a series of treaties or “exclusive agreements” between Britain and Gulf Arab states throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Bahrain (1880); the Trucial States (1892); Kuwait (1899); and Qatar (1916). Oman did not sign such an agreement but became increasingly dependent on Britain after 1861 (Zahlan 1989, 9–10).

Britain was driven by a desire to protect its route to India and bring maritime security to the Gulf. Although Britain controlled defence and foreign affairs for the protected states, it was largely uninterested in internal affairs. British official presence in the Gulf Sheikhdoms was minimal. Britain was also little interested in territory away from the coast, leading to boundary confusion into the twentieth century, intensified by the onset of oil exploration. Boundary tensions arose from the territorial interests of regional powers, principally the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq. Another consequence of oil discovery was the arrival of the United States, first in Bahrain (1931), then Saudi Arabia (1933) and Kuwait (1934). US arrival caused disquiet in London, lest it undermined Britain’s regional position, especially regarding oil (Davis 2009, 114). Fear was well founded, as the US ultimately replaced Britain as the region’s pre-eminent external power (Said Zahlan 1989, 15–19, 28).

As a waning imperial power post-1945, UK strategy became preserving balance between rival regional powers, safeguarding UK interests and preserving the independent identities of smaller Gulf States protected by Britain. Until the Suez crisis, the UK had effectively calibrated regional cooperation with Washington. According to Rosemary Said Zahlan, this was characterized by “muted rivalry”. The UK prevented the US from establishing a diplomatic presence within the smaller Gulf states, carefully navigating competing interests, for example in the Buraimi dispute (Said Zahlan 1989, 143). Even during successful cooperation, such as the coup d’etat in Iran (1953), the relationship was often strained (Smith 2014, 430). Despite strains and muted rivalry, Simon Smith notes the surprising persistence of UK influence in the region in this period, stemming in part from ‘the importance which American policy-makers placed on the British presence and their own reluctance, in the context of the ongoing Vietnam conflict, to extend overseas commitments, let alone attempt to replace the British in the Gulf’ (Smith 2012, 161).

The 1956 Suez crisis saw Prime Minister Anthony Eden (1955–57), in collaboration with France and Israel, launch a failed covert mission to regain control over the nationalised Suez Canal in Egypt. Angered by lack of consultation, the US successfully exerted diplomatic and economic pressure on the UK to reverse its position. The event underlined UK decline as a global power relative to the US (Dumbrell 2006, 53–4). It also precipitated political debate about the costs and benefits of the UK presence in the Gulf (Smith 2016, 330–6).

Until the late 1960s, Britain’s political commitments were still global, placing increasing pressure on its strained finances – particularly as the decades of decolonization saw increasing counter-insurgency operations and failure to keep defence expenditure within budgetary limits (Palliser 2002, x). Britain’s early post-war strategy involved political and security commitments in Europe, the Middle East and the Far East, but during a series of defence reviews from the late 1950s onwards the prioritization, size and longevity of these commitments were challenged. The relative weight of such long-term strategic considerations in determining Britain’s presence in the Gulf, however, is a matter of considerable historical debate (Smith 2016, 329–30).
The review process had commenced under Conservative governments, but the UK withdrawal from “East of Suez” was decided by Harold Wilson’s Labour government in 1968. According to one historian, this marked ‘the beginning of Britain’s transformation into a modern, medium-sized world power’ (Dockrill 2002, 226). The then US President, Lyndon Johnson (1963–69) expressed “deep dismay” at the withdrawal, describing it as ‘tantamount to British withdrawal from world affairs, with all that means for the future safety and health of the free world’ (Smith 2014, 435). The decision caused Washington to question Britain’s continued value as an ally.

Successive generations of British politicians have struggled to reconcile inherited conceptions of Britain’s role with this diminished standing. Indeed, Boris Johnson explicitly criticised Wilson’s decision in a 2016 speech in Bahrain. Decrying “defeatists” and “retreatists”, Johnson proclaimed: “Britain is back East of Suez” – adding that ‘crisis in the Gulf is a crisis for Britain, from day one . . . your security is our security’ (Johnson, 2016b).

Britain’s reduced presence in the region after 1971 saw its replacement as the Gulf’s external protector state, a reality confirmed by the 1980 “Carter Doctrine” that the US would defend its regional interests with military force (Ulrichsen 2017, 1). Washington had initially adopted a “twin pillar” external-balancing strategy, relying on Iran and Saudi Arabia as regional partners, but was forced to commit more directly after three events in 1979: the Iranian revolution; domestic uncertainty in Saudi Arabia following the seizure of the Grand Mosque; and the potential regional implications of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The US created a rapidly deployable military force in 1979, upgraded as Central Command in 1983 (Zahlan 1989, 144–5). The US further increased its regional presence and defence relationships in subsequent decades (Ulrichsen 2020b, 5).

Of course, the UK never entirely left the region. It facilitated the rise to power of the late Sultan Qaboos in Oman and supported Oman’s successful counter-insurgency campaign in Dhofar between 1963 and 1975 (DeVore 2012; Young 2019, 11–12). The Royal Navy has contributed to regional maritime security since the Iran–Iraq war commenced in 1980. UK armed forces also contributed to the international coalition that liberated Kuwait in 1991. Not on the same scale as the US military footprint, UK deployments are nonetheless complemented by close bilateral diplomatic and trade relations, particularly in significant arms deals, defence agreements and joint exercises. In military education too, the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst has trained generations of officers from the region, including several heads of state and members of their families (BBC 2014).

The pejorative label of “retreat” from the Gulf is exaggerated, but it is true that Britain’s regional position suffered, first following Suez’ and subsequently after its exit from ‘East of Suez’. From the 1960s onwards, reflecting the importance of commercial diplomacy to Britain and opportunities presented by oil-rich Gulf states, trade became a more prominent feature of bilateral relations. According to the late Lord Wright of Richmond, the former head of the Diplomatic Service (1986–91), reflecting on his time as UK Ambassador in Saudi Arabia (1984–86): ‘it’s an obvious fact that, with a country as rich as Saudi Arabia, commercial work played a very, very large part of my job. But I regarded my job, my ambassadorial job, as advising British businessmen about what was going on in Saudi Arabia, and trying to help them to meet the people they ought to meet’ (Wright 2000, 20). The controversial Al Yamamah arms deals (1985–88) are
collectively the largest-ever UK defence exports contract. They are widely regarded as having been integral in the survival of UK military aviation industry. It is worth noting, however, that Britain only secured the contract because Saudi Arabia’s first choice, the US, refused to upgrade the Kingdom’s air force (Jones and Stone 1997, 11–12). Prior to 1979, this was also a major UK objective in Iran. According to one former senior diplomat, UK policy towards Iran “depended on getting as much business out of Iran as possible” (Burton 2008, 9).

The 2003 invasion of Iraq is the defining event in UK Middle East policy under the New Labour governments of Tony Blair (1997–2007) and Gordon Brown (2007–10). Blair had entered office prioritizing the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP), working closely with successive US administrations. There was much continuity in UK Gulf policy during the New Labour years – security cooperation, trade and investment – but some have criticised a perceived lack of overarching strategy in this period (Roberts 2014, 669).

UK Gulf Strategy since 2010

Since 2010, Britain’s bilateral relationships in the region have diversified and intensified, militarily and commercially. The 2015 national security strategy committed to a “permanent and more substantial” military presence in the region (HM Government 2015). There are currently around 1,500 UK military personnel stationed permanently in the region — a much smaller contingent than the circa 55,000 US personnel deployed there (Gibbons-Neff 2020), but constituting Britain’s largest overseas deployment, larger, for example, than its contribution to NATO’s enhanced forward presence in eastern Europe. Most UK personnel are involved in ongoing military operations against Daesh. In addition, over 100 armed forces personnel are based in Saudi Arabia (alongside a similar number of civilian defence officials and a larger number of contractors), and a new UK regional defence staff is based in Dubai.

The Royal Air Force (RAF) operational headquarters for the region is Al Udeid (Qatar) and the RAF partners with the Qatari Emiri Air Force in a joint squadron — the first such partnership for the RAF since the Second World War (Forces Net 2018). The RAF also uses Minhad (UAE) and Al Musannah (Oman). In 2018, the UK opened a new naval support facility in Bahrain — symbolising Britain’s “return” to the region as the Royal Navy had vacated its previous base following Bahrain’s independence in 1971. The Bahrain facility hosts the UK maritime security contingent of four mine countermeasure vessels and one type 23 frigate (Brooke-Holland 2020, 3). In 2019, a joint defence agreement was signed with Oman that secured access to the port of Duqm for Britain’s new aircraft carriers. On signing this agreement, Britain’s then defence secretary placed it explicitly in broader strategic context, repeating the mantra that: ‘Gulf security is our security, and it is crucial that we expand our horizons and become a truly global Britain after we leave the European Union’ (HM Government 2019).

The UK relationship with Gulf states is broader than defence and security issues. According to David Cameron, “commercial diplomacy” was “a key plank” of his strategy, describing the UK diplomatic network of 196 missions as “196 potential shop windows in which to advertise Britain” (Cameron 2019, 146). With active encouragement through reciprocal ministerial and royal visits, the UK is a significant destination for Gulf states’ sovereign wealth funds, including large investments in central London properties, stakes in national retail businesses, financial institutions, critical infrastructure and even football clubs. Gulf capital inflows are an important offset to the UK’s persistent, increasing
trade deficits. The scale of commercial interaction between Gulf states and Britain during Cameron’s premiership is evident: bilateral trade increased by 39% between 2010 and 2012. In 2011, Britain ‘exported more goods and services to the Gulf than to India, Russia and Mexico combined’ (Oxford Business Group 2012). In the energy sector, according to the most recent government figures, the UK imports over 40% of its liquefied natural gas from Qatar (UK Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) 2019, 12). This demonstrates a shift in bilateral relations since the protectorate era, amplified during the global financial crisis, with Britain arguably needing Gulf investment ‘more than the monarchies needed to invest in the UK’ (Roberts and Bianco 2019, 60).

Bilateral relationships were cultivated at the highest level, particularly under Cameron’s premiership, with the prime minister leading several trade missions to the region – affording the Qatari prime minister the honour of being the only foreign dignitary at the time to stay the night at the prime minister’s stately home, Chequers. Cameron led a February 2011 diplomatic and trade delegation to Egypt, Oman and Qatar, including representatives from eight defence and aerospace companies – reportedly the first UK trade mission to Oman in sixteen years. Cameron was criticised for this trip, pursuing defence contracts during the early months of the Arab Spring (Barker 2011). He refused to concede any tension between commercial diplomacy and promoting human rights or democracy, claiming during a subsequent (2012) visit to Saudi Arabia that: ‘I am a supporter of the Arab spring… The idea of moving towards more open societies and more democracies is good for the Middle East and north Africa’ (Peel and Blitz 2012). As discussed below, Gulf states were unconvinced by Cameron’s rhetoric.

Cameron’s Gulf strategy was consistent with top-level national security objectives, particularly emphasis on the integral relationship between security and prosperity. Critics have questioned the strategic value of the UK-Saudi bilateral relationship (van Rij and Wilkinson 2018) and whether it is supported by public opinion (van Rij 2019), but Cameron’s government consistently prioritized security, stability, trade and investment, with significant overlap between these categories.

Intensified pursuit of commercial deals and inward investment was closely aligned with security diplomacy. For example, in addition to extensive Qatari investment in UK property and infrastructure, a bilateral security memorandum was agreed in November 2014, covering enhanced cooperation in digital intelligence, cyber defence and counterterrorism – associated project costs were reportedly to be paid by Qatar (Jones 2014). Although the UK is perceived as a highly capable state actor in digital espionage and offensive cyber operations, it is not the only potential partner for regional states looking to improve (and use) their respective cyber capabilities: in the last 20 years there has been a concerted, region-wide effort to improve digital surveillance (and increasingly offensive cyber) capabilities, with assistance from both external state and non-state private-sector actors, and there was notably a cyber dimension to the start of the Qatar crisis in 2017 (Devanny 2020c; Kurtz and Ach 2020; Sexton and Campbell 2020). This again highlights a potential fork in UK strategy, the uneasy coexistence between Britain’s role as a competitor for trade and investment and its diplomatic interest in shaping regional (and global) norms shaping competitive behaviour in cyberspace.

Britain’s pursuit of trade and security agreements with Gulf states, however, has been complicated by UK tolerance for regional opposition groups. In the wake of the Arab
Spring, the UAE and Saudi Arabia pressed the UK to harden its policy towards the Muslim Brotherhood, a political Islamist organisation that is banned in several Gulf states (Roberts and Bianco 2019, 62). When Britain failed to alter its stance towards the organisation, the UAE reportedly responded by excluding British Petroleum from bidding for oil contracts and opted not to purchase Typhoon fighter aircraft. The Cameron government, responding to this pressure, launched a 2014–15 inquiry into the Brotherhood (Ramesh 2015). Regional relationships under Cameron were also tested by Britain’s role in brokering the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran, which was ill-received in Gulf Arab state capitals (Blair 2013).

More recently, the UK has adopted a studiously neutral position during the ongoing regional dispute in which Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have blockaded Qatar (Ulrichsen 2020a, 67–100). To date, the UK has maintained its commercial, diplomatic and security ties with all parties, but further deterioration in relations between Saudi Arabia/UAE and Qatar could compel the UK to adopt a less equivocal, more exposed position. Continuation of existing UK strategy in the region depends on resolving this crisis, but the UK appears to lack the influence to do so. This shortcoming is not UK-specific. Even the US government has so far failed to end the dispute (Ulrichsen 2020c).

Cameron’s trade diplomacy and related defence agreements with Bahrain were also controversial. Between 2011 and 2015, the UK agreed arms deals with Bahrain worth £45 m covering a wide range of weaponry including machine guns, assault rifles and anti-armour ammunition, according to the Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT) organisation. Whether the causally significant factor was the imperative of the Arab Spring or the UK’s urgent trade diplomacy agenda, it is striking to contrast this with the total figure for the three years prior of £6 m (Gallagher 2016).

The Cameron government pursued a similar approach to Saudi/Emirati military intervention in Yemen, offering both diplomatic and defence assistance. On 27 March 2015, the day after intervention commenced, the then UK Foreign Secretary underscored the deep UK support to the Saudi air force: ‘We’ll support the Saudis in every practical way short of engaging in combat’ (Foster 2015). This commitment was evident in accelerating arms exports to Saudi Arabia as the intervention continued.

At times, Cameron’s regional ambitions were constrained by perceived limits imposed on UK policy by the Obama administration’s priorities. Alistair Burt, a foreign minister with responsibility for the Middle East and Afghanistan, had wanted to become involved in the MEPP between 2010 and 13, but was reportedly informed by Cameron’s staff that this was not a British priority because it was not a priority for Obama (Hughes and Gold 2016).

Burt’s experience illuminates the occasional tensions between the Obama and Cameron administrations. Obama reportedly did not share the enthusiasm for Anglo-American relations of his predecessor, George W. Bush. As one UK official recalled, under Obama the UK was considered “[just] another coalition partner”. This was reflected in Obama’s strategic priorities: pivoting away from Europe and the Middle East towards the Asia-Pacific (Schiavenza 2013). The Gulf states also noted Obama’s failure to support Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, provoking uncertainty about US commitment to respond to similar political developments in the Gulf (Lynch 2012, 94). This uncertainty was reportedly exacerbated by regional perceptions that the US had
failed adequately to consult its Gulf allies over the JCPOA – tensions became bad enough for both sides to express frustrations publicly (Ulrichsen 2020(b), 7–8).

Cameron also felt constrained by what he described as the overly “traditional” views and insufficiently “can-do” spirit of British officials (Cameron 2019, 276). He deprecated the reluctance of the Obama administration to take bolder action, particularly regarding the Syria conflict, describing Obama’s “handling of Assad [as] … still the thing I regret most about his entire presidency” (Cameron 2019, 466). The 2011 Libya intervention, of which Cameron was an early advocate and about which Obama was more equivocal, demonstrated the limits of the US–UK partnership to deliver more than short-term outcomes when undermined by a deficit of strategic patience, absence of well-developed, jointly held long-term objectives, burden-sharing arrangements, or foresight about likely second-order (especially regional) effects of half-hearted intervention. Tellingly, Obama later partly blamed Cameron for Libya’s post-intervention chaos (Goldberg 2016). Throughout, Gulf states and particularly the UAE have engaged more actively, exhibiting greater strategic patience in the Libya conflict (Roberts 2020).

Cameron’s broad approach to the Gulf has been continued by his Conservative successors. In December 2016, Theresa May addressed a GCC meeting in Bahrain, outlining her ambition to develop the existing relationship, enhancing mutual security, prosperity and social progress. Optimistically pledging that Britain would continue to be their “partner of choice”, May announced a series of new initiatives, including: a GCC-UK strategic partnership, which by April 2019 had completed nine meetings of its joint consultative committee; a Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism and Border Security and a National Security Dialogue at GCC level; a British defence staff in Dubai; greater UK support for developing regional cyber security, including by basing a UK Cyber Industry Representative in the region; and, more modestly, a British military officer seconded to the Bahrain Ministry of Interior’s bomb-disposal unit (May 2016).

Shortly after May’s speech, the then Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson publicly strayed from this script, commenting at a conference in Rome that Saudi Arabia and Iran, as well as other regional states, were “puppeteering and playing proxy wars … twisting and abusing religion” for political purposes, and lacked “visionary leadership”. These remarks earned Johnson a coded rebuke from Downing Street and he was soon back “on-message” in a trip to the region (Elgot 2016).

In mid-2019, UK courts ruled that the government’s process authorising arms export licenses to countries involved in the Yemen conflict was unlawful, judging that it was insufficiently rigorous in considering the potential for UK arms to be used in breach of international humanitarian law (Cobain 2019). Since the intervention began, UK defence exports to coalition states totalled over £4.6bn (US$6bn), with over 6,000 UK contractors and 80 RAF personnel embedded with Saudi forces alone (Cobain 2019). This created a relatively rare domestic political divide on regional strategy, as the Labour opposition advocated reversal of UK arms export policies (Devanny 2019).

Reflecting on the interdependence of US and UK policy in the region, a 2017 parliamentary report observed that American predominance in the region could not be relied on over time and recommended that the UK should focus on its national interest, where possible contributing to regional security and “supporting democratic institutions where they emerge” (House of Lords International Relations Committee (HL IRC) 2017, 11).
The UK is arguably pursuing exactly this approach to the region, including by deploying armed forces, but this strategy is not without risk.

The US dimension in Britain’s Strategy

The special relationship with the US has been the bipartisan cornerstone of post-war British foreign policy. Gulf and wider Middle East strategy has been no exception. Pursuit of close alignment with and influence over US decision-making theoretically allowed Britain to mitigate post-imperial loss of international status. As the junior partner, this policy came at a price. For Robin Renwick, the “price of consultation has always been presence and participation” (Renwick 1996, 394). Britain has strived to demonstrate value as a partner by deploying its military in support of the US, the most recent major deployments being in Afghanistan and Iraq. Whilst the degree of British influence in Washington is contested, a uniquely broad and deep relationship exists across diplomacy, defence, nuclear, and intelligence issues, underpinned by adherence to a shared set of values (Marsh 2013, 189).

However close, there has always been friction in the relationship but it has endured, leading some to refer to its “Lazarus-style quality” (Marsh and Baylis 2006). Nevertheless, the impact of Brexit and the erratic Trump presidency, during which traditional alliances have been routinely and publicly criticised, has amplified these frictions.

In the Gulf, the UK cannot ignore sentiments prevalent in Washington, but for several decades retired British diplomats have occasionally criticized their government for not recognizing that Britain’s core role as a ”loyal partner” to the US is not incompatible with a more independent Middle East policy, particularly regarding Palestine and the MEPP (Walker 1996, 14).

The US role as the region’s major external security provider has been stable for decades, but has been increasingly questioned in recent years (Ashford 2018; Gregory Gause 2019; Karlin and Wittes 2019(a); Blagden and Porter 2021). This is part of a debate about US grand strategy encompassing a wide array of topics, including: the cost of the post-9/11 forever wars; reduced importance for the region in US energy strategy; the breadth of US alliance commitments; and a perception that the US should “pivot” towards Asia and embrace great power competition, with the necessary switch to “off-shore balancing” and a smaller, “right-sized” and “sustainable” commitment to the Middle East consistent with more “realistic” policy objectives (Ashford 2018, 130; Gregory Gause 2019, 8). All these issues predated and will outlast the Trump administration. British strategists should not assume with confidence that the Biden administration will sustain the US footprint in the region at current levels (Biden 2020, 72). Some form of US retrenchment is certainly possible and, in whatever form it might take, could alter the environment in which British strategy operates (Wertheim 2020; Wright 2020). The historical reality is that the “asymmetrical” relationship has been trending downwards and it is likely to continue to suffer, at best, “benign neglect” by the US government (Mumford 2018, 196; Dobson and Marsh 2014, 267).

UK–US divergence under (and after?) Trump

The Trump presidency’s regional strategy was inconsistent, with Trump often at odds with senior figures in his administration. Trump’s impulsive tendency was exemplified in his reaction to the 2017 Qatar blockade. He initially supported it, condemning Qatari support for regional terrorism. After reported State Department and Pentagon intercession, Trump then endorsed a negotiated truce (Ulrichsen 2017, 2; 2020b, 8). Regarding
the central question of whether strategic disengagement from the region is desirable, the administration combined rhetoric about reducing military commitments with policies that delivered an increase in the number of personnel deployed in the region, particularly since the deterioration of relations with Iran under the campaign of “maximum pressure” (Gregory Gause 2019, 12).

The Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, were reportedly concerned by Trump’s lacklustre response to 2019 maritime attacks in the Gulf and the drone attack on a Saudi oil plant – which were widely blamed on Iran. Washington’s credibility as guarantor of Gulf Arab states’ security has been undermined (Kirkpatrick and Hubbard 2019). These doubts were compounded after the US assassinated Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (Al Quds Force) commander Qasem Soleimani in January 2020, in response to the killing of a US contractor and assault on the US Embassy in Iraq, underlining the impression that Washington was only willing to defend its own interests in the region (Ulrichsen 2020(b), 11).

It was clear from the tone of UK government responses to the Soleimani assassination that London considered the targeted killing as prejudicial to its regional objectives, including salvaging the JCPOA, Iraqi domestic security, and broader regional stability. Notwithstanding, the Johnson administration made a clear political judgement – based on Trump’s irascibility and perhaps thinking about a post-Brexit trade deal – that it was unwise for Britain to publicly criticise Trump’s action (Landler 2020). Parliamentary outriders were left to argue that prior warning, at the least, would have been welcomed (Davies 2020).

This episode underlined the difficulties facing the UK when crafting independent policies in the Gulf. Despite perceived retrenchment, the US is still the foremost external power in the region and Britain’s closest ally. Britain was nonetheless forced to react with everyone else to the news of Soleimani’s assassination, just as it scrambled in October 2019 to deal with the implications for its military personnel of Trump’s abrupt decision to reduce the US military presence in northeast Syria (Haynes 2019). The Johnson administration’s consistently muted response has been shaped by a traditional interpretation of Britain’s subordinate relationship with the US, and by the post-Brexit need for a trade agreement. If the Biden administration follows through on campaign statements that it would pursue a more limited, counterterrorism-focused strategy in the region, relying less on large deployments and more on special operations forces, intelligence assets and cooperation with local partners, then the UK would again be required to consider the implications of such a shift for its regional force posture.

The Soleimani assassination was not the first time that Britain tried subtly to distance itself from Trump’s Gulf policies. Following seizure of a British tanker by Iran in July 2019, London was initially reluctant to join a US-led coalition to protect freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz (formed in response to the above-mentioned maritime attacks in the Gulf in May and June 2019). Instead, the then incumbent Foreign Secretary and Conservative Party leadership contender Jeremy Hunt, citing UK commitment to the JCPOA and opposition to US “maximum pressure” on Iran, called for European action to protect shipping (Seligman and Johnson 2019). After Johnson succeeded May as prime minister and sacked Hunt, however, normal business was resumed and Britain joined the US-led operation (Sabbagh 2019).
Differences with the Trump administration on the MEPP did not cause serious problems for Britain, largely because the issue had been overtaken by other regional priorities, such as responding to the Iranian nuclear programme and sponsorship of regional proxies, and the protracted conflicts in Syria and Yemen. The “Peace to Prosperity” plan – culmination of Jared Kushner’s deeply flawed and one-sided MEPP contribution – raised serious doubts about the Trump administration’s commitment to a two-state solution, but successive UK prime ministers – arguably since Tony Blair’s resignation in 2007 – have calculated that there is neither room nor realistic prospect of success for a British alternative to any given US administration’s MEPP policy. The recent rapprochement between Israel and the Gulf Arab States – pragmatically aimed at Iran, but also reflecting regional uncertainty about US regional strategy – including significant public shifts by Bahrain and the UAE, calls into doubt the continued validity of Rosemarie Said Zahlan’s judgement more than a decade ago, that: “Persistent policy decisions which view the Arab–Israeli situation as distinct and different from the Gulf expose the region to great danger and will invariably collapse” (Said Zahlan 2009, 8). There is, of course, potential for blowback and reversal, for example in one of the Arab states to announce closer ties, Sudan, in which the civilian-military transitional government is fragile and rapprochement with Israel is domestically unpopular (Ulrichsen and Cafiero 2020).

But just as Britain must adapt to US choices, the US does not act in a vacuum. This has been demonstrated by opportunistic Russian intervention in Syria after 2013 and steadily increasing Chinese regional diplomacy and investment (Gregory Gause 2019; Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) 2020). Equally, no external power should neglect Gulf states’ agency – a mistake made by both superpowers during the Cold War in the Middle East (Buzan and Waever 2003, 199; Kupchan 2011, 218). Regional decisionmakers, particularly Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud and the influential Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, have demonstrated increasing appetite for risk and willingness both to support regional proxies and to deploy militarily themselves. This is also apparent in the intra-GCC crisis precipitated by the 2017 blockade of Qatar – and Qatar has itself pursued an active, adaptive and coherent foreign policy (Hubbard 2020; Ulrichsen 2020(b); Roberts 2017).

As Geoffrey Gresh has argued, regional elite threat perceptions – primarily regarding Iran – will be likely to shape Gulf Arab states’ security diplomacy and ties to external powers in the near future, with the US above all, but also including the rising regional influence of China (Gresh 2015, 169–173). Whilst Iran has long featured as a perceived threat to the Gulf Arab states, contemporary security dynamics have seen Turkey rise in priority as a regional actor with interests sharply divergent from the Saudi-Emirati axis (England, Pitel and Kerr 2020). Turkey’s status as a member of NATO provides a further complication to US and UK responses to this regional development.

Even if Biden satisfies proponents of a return to “offshore balancing” and less extensive regional objectives, the US military presence in the region might be reduced but it will not disappear (Ashford 2018; Gregory Gause 2019; Satloff 2019; Lustick 2019; Karlin and Cofman Wittes 2019a and 2019b). How states in the region perceive the credibility of US security guarantees is, however, subject to greater uncertainty. It will depend significantly on how the Biden administration behaves: reactively or pro-actively, consistently or erratically. This is the US-specific context in which Britain’s Gulf strategy
must operate. Assuming such a shift in US posture under Biden produced neutral or positive consequences for regional stability, it might conceivably create some limited opportunities for Britain to exploit, but assuming the opposite – heightened regional instability in the wake of US retrenchment – the UK would need to adjust its short-term force protection and other risk-management efforts whilst revising its strategic assessment of the longer term benefits of its current policies.

There is finally an ongoing US debate not simply about increasing defence expenditure by European allies, including Britain, but also about where European allies add most value: by focusing more on collective defence in Europe or by contributing out of area, such as in the Gulf or Pacific. Just as in the late Cold War period, alliance decision-making should follow relative threat perception, determining whether Russian threats to Europe outweigh any external threats to the Arabian Gulf states, calculating that the US can address purely regional threats solely with the assistance of regional partners (Kupchan 2011, 186). Analysed from this alliance perspective, less geopolitically expansive priorities might be suggested for Britain than when analysed from a narrower starting point premised in one interpretation of the national interest, prioritising the trade and investment gains of a regional security presence that might not otherwise be strategically justifiable in its present form.

Conclusion

The Conservative and Conservative-led administrations since 2010 have followed a traditional British Gulf strategy, largely deferring to the US. They differ perhaps from previous administrations in modestly uplifting UK military commitments and more vigorously pursuing trade and investment. None of the bilateral defence and security agreements signed in recent years comes close to overturning the Wilson government’s decision to withdraw from Britain’s political commitments and military bases East of Suez. Rather, they reflect the importance of the securitized strand of Britain’s bilateral relations with the Gulf Arab states, notably the evident synergy between defence and security cooperation and trade and investment.

UK strategy has been adaptive and responsive, including to the aspirations and strategies of the Gulf states themselves. Indeed, the defence and security agreements signed over the last decade have been made possible by the respective strategic and investment decisions made in the region, particularly in Abu Dhabi and Doha. In this light, it is unsurprising that the UK has maintained, at least overtly, a neutral stance vis a vis the contending parties in the ongoing intra-GCC crisis. The UK has enjoyed long and mutually rewarding bilateral relations with all parties to that crisis and there appears to be no room for it to adopt the role of disinterested mediator between them.

Successive Conservative prime ministers have invoked the phrase “Global Britain” as a convenient shorthand for Britain’s continued intention to pursue the traditional role of active and prominent global power. From an interpretivist perspective, this is unsurprising given the ingrained continuity of post-war strategy and the beliefs about Britain’s global role that are curated and transmitted within the foreign policy elite and Conservative party. Post-Brexit and suffering the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic, Britain’s need to secure trade deals and investment will only intensify. Its need to negotiate separate deals from a position of diminished influence will mean that its diplomacy is more exposed than at any time since accession to the European Economic
Community in 1973. Might this compel Johnson’s Britain to pedal even more softly on non-trade-related issues, lest he exacerbate Britain’s problems? If diplomacy is about making difficult decisions, then the economics and geopolitics of Brexit will make these choices sharper and more difficult. This will shape Britain’s bilateral relations with the Gulf states, already marked by a significant prioritization of trade and investment opportunities over issues such as human rights.

UK strategy can continue to create mutually beneficial opportunities with the Gulf states, but British influence in the region must not be overestimated. This is equally true in the possible future in which Keir Starmer becomes prime minister having overturned Labour’s severe defeat of 2019. Since 2015, Labour’s Gulf policies in opposition have tilted further towards human rights than arms deals. A Labour government would not secure domestic reforms in the Gulf states, but it might decide that the risk of lost trade and investment was acceptable to signal departure from Conservative pragmatism, implementing what a past Labour foreign secretary described as “an ethical dimension” that puts human rights “at the heart of” foreign policy (Cook 1997). This would represent a different interpretation of how to pursue Britain’s interests in the Gulf, with economics deprioritised in favour of values, but without a similar tilt away from Britain’s economic model the concomitant loss of trade and investment would need to be offset elsewhere.

Similarly, whilst security cooperation with the Gulf states is important to Britain, it is less so than is suggested by Conservative rhetoric that “Gulf security is our security”. If, as seems likely under a Conservative government, Britain’s regional strategy remains unchanged throughout the 2020s, then effective implementation will require coordinated and energetic commitment from the prime minister and senior ministers. They must cultivate personal diplomacy at least as vigorous as David Cameron’s, directed by clear appraisal of the complementarity of hard- and soft-power instruments in the integrated pursuit of diplomatic, security, trade and investment objectives. Government relations come first, but the strategy will fail if it does not also engage all parts of society, both in Britain and the region.

Notes

1. The late Sir Antony Acland, former head of the British diplomatic service (1982–86) said of the Suez crisis that it made Arab states “feel we were devious and certainly less powerful . . . It showed that we were something of a toothless tiger.” See Sir Antony Acland, British Diplomatic Oral History Programme, 2001, 5–6, https://www.chu.cam.ac.uk/media/uploads/files/Acland.pdf
2. Interview with former Cabinet Office official, 11 January 2018.

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Notes on contributors

Dr Joe Devanny is a Lecturer in National Security Studies at King’s College London and deputy director of the Centre for Defence Studies at King’s.
Dr Philip Berry is a Lecturer in War Studies and an assistant director at the Centre for Defence Studies at King’s College London.

ORCID

Joe Devanny http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6031-2397

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