

# MIDDLE POWERHOUSE: A NEW BLUEPRINT FOR BRITISH INTERNATIONALISM

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## SUMMARY

- Britain's foreign policy is stuck in the past. It remains shaped to the post-cold-war order, unable to adequately address the challenges and conflicts which are shaping a new geopolitical reality. Since 2016, Brexit and two Trump presidencies in America have exacerbated this stagnation.
- The new prime minister, Andy Burnham, has set out a vision for widespread domestic improvements. But, to make this happen, he will also have to revamp Britain's partnerships overseas.
- The British government must pursue a more innovative approach to its foreign policy. Britain should build new forms of cooperation with European and other allies; position itself as a leader among coalitions of middle and emerging powers; and help improve the effectiveness of multilateral bodies.
- The country can also lean on existing expertise in climate change, science and technology, and global finance to become more resilient against China and the US, while promoting new initiatives to address global problems.
- Most importantly, Britain should renew—not retreat from—its longstanding commitment to internationalism and take the lead in shaping cross-border cooperation to deliver concrete results.

# Innovation, not restoration

When Andy Burnham gave his first speech as Britain's new prime minister on July 20th, he said he was "acutely conscious that [he was] the sixth person in the last ten years" to walk into 10 Downing Street. Since 2016, Britain—a country previously known for its relative political stability—has seen unprecedented churn in its prime ministers. Unfortunately, this revolving door of governments coincided with a period when the world around Britain was changing rapidly, and disruption hit the country's two most important relationships, with the EU and America. Amid the turnover of leaders, Britain has failed to adapt its foreign policy to a radically different context.

As a result, Burnham and his foreign secretary Ed Miliband now face some fundamental and unresolved questions about Britain's place in the world. The past ten years have seen Britain's exit from the EU and dramatic changes in US foreign policy under President Donald Trump, both of which have affected Britain's global standing. In the longer term, the country has failed to adjust as the world moves from a post-cold-war order marked by broad cooperation to an environment characterised by competition and conflict. This is exacerbated by leading powers such as China and the US, which are increasingly using control of essential goods and strategic chokepoints to exert pressure on their rivals.

Britain is thus at a disadvantage; the country is exposed at a time when international uncertainty is intensifying. Britain is vulnerable to disruption of essential supply chains and coercion by rival powers. Outside the EU and without reliable US backing, it lacks the scale to resist pressure from the assertive countries on which it depends for AI, pharmaceuticals, critical raw materials and components for clean technology. Tariffs and other trade restrictions are blunting its economic potential. It also faces the impact of daunting global problems, including climate change and the unrestricted development of AI, as collective action to solve them is falling short.

Amid the global turbulence, Burnham has said he wants to focus on domestic issues such as promoting nationwide growth and opportunity through reindustrialisation. But these goals could be threatened by the country's fragile position in a tightly interconnected world. At the same time, Burnham must contend with declining domestic support for Britain taking on an ambitious international role. There is growing scepticism among parts of the British population about whether the country's traditional commitment to an open, rules-based order continues to serve their interests: what began with the Brexit vote in 2016 has continued with the rise of the populist-nationalist Reform UK party.

Britain's inherited foreign policy playbook, centred on a commitment to multilateralism and the transatlantic alliance, has thus lost both effectiveness abroad and credibility at home. This is a problem for Britain, which needs functioning international partnerships to fulfil key national objectives. It is also a problem for Britain's allies, above all other European countries. Britain's assets, from scientific and financial expertise to diplomatic weight and global connections, allow it to make a powerful contribution to the efforts of like-minded partners that are similarly grappling with a radically changed international environment.

This paper argues that Britain needs a new way to strengthen itself against coercion, rebuild international influence and regain domestic support. It can do so by positioning itself as an innovator in international cooperation. In place of its traditional adherence to established frameworks and relationships, it should embrace a more flexible and dynamic approach to global partnerships for a world in flux. At the same time, Burnham and Miliband need to more clearly articulate how a renewed vision of international cooperation advances a specific set of British interests and concerns. This will require breaking away from an ingrained tendency for Britain to present its goal as the preservation of the international system for its own sake.

The paper shows how Britain can implement a more innovative, flexible and focused vision of international cooperation, using three concentric circles of partnership. First, with Britain's closest and most like-minded allies, especially the EU; second, with a wider range of middle and emerging powers that are gaining influence in a more multi-aligned world; and finally, with the collective institutions that remain at the centre of the multilateral system. Across these different areas, Britain should put itself at the centre of moves to renew international cooperation in ways that can still deliver shared benefits, even at a confrontational time.

## The changing global order

After Britain joined the European Economic Community in 1973, its international strategy came to be defined by close ties with the US, membership of the EU and a prominent role in the multilateral system. Indeed, Britain has traditionally had an outsized role in global governance. It has permanent membership of the UN Security Council and holds a central position in the Commonwealth. It was also involved in setting up the World Bank, the IMF and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, as well as later the World Trade Organisation (WTO). And British policymakers have long touted the country's attachment to the idea of a rules-based order. They tend to think of Britain as a steward of the international system, with British interests seen as indistinguishable from the preservation and effectiveness of the order itself.<sup>[1]</sup>

But this approach to international cooperation is now challenged on all fronts, and Britain is lonely and exposed. The very system of laws, norms and institutions governing international relations that Britain played a leading role in establishing has broken down. The rise of geopolitical competition, a resurgence of inter-state wars and the use of economic interdependency as an instrument of coercion have fundamentally changed the character of global politics.

China has emerged as a formidable power that uses mercantilist methods to try to achieve dominance in a raft of industries that are critical to future global prosperity and security. Russia's invasion of Ukraine was a direct challenge to the UN charter's rules on the use of force, and participants in contemporary wars routinely flout the laws on the conduct of hostilities. As its permanent members spar, the UN Security Council seems powerless to have any impact on wars in Ukraine, the Middle East, Sudan and elsewhere.

The international system is increasingly stalemated. As global power shifts away from the West, many emerging powers question the legitimacy of its presumed leadership role. The WTO is hobbled by the lack of a functioning appeals system and powerless to stop the US and China using tariffs and export restrictions for

geopolitical ends. Global cooperation on climate and health through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process and the World Health Organisation (WHO) has been insufficient to deal with accelerating global warming and the risk of future pandemics, and recent summits and negotiations show how difficult it is becoming to reach consensus.

As countries increasingly focus on their own security, progress on global development is falling behind UN Sustainable Development Goal targets. There is also a glaring absence of any international process to control the potentially huge risks posed by the rapid development of AI.

Most strikingly of all, the US—which has long stood as a central reference point for British foreign policy—has turned dramatically against many aspects of international cooperation. Under Trump, America has become an unreliable ally, pursuing a transactional approach to foreign policy and putting its commitment to traditional security structures such as NATO in doubt. Trump’s support for Ukraine against Russia has fluctuated unpredictably. The idea of a Western values-based alliance has been undermined by US threats to annex European territory and by the US adoption of a civilisational vision, with American officials interfering in European politics to promote far-right and nativist causes. With the creation of his Board of Peace, Trump turned his back on a Western tradition of liberal peacemaking. He has often embraced a personalist and extractivist approach to conflict resolution, with a focus on obtaining US access to oil and critical minerals.

The US has also rejected action on climate change and withdrawn funding for a slate of international institutions. It has abandoned a liberal vision of support for human rights and democracy, and repeatedly resorted to armed force in violation of the UN charter. America has thus adopted a vision of economic statecraft focused narrowly on the interests of the American people and used tariffs as a political tool against allies and rivals alike, undermining the central precept of the international trading regime. Trump has threatened to punish European allies for regulations that harm US technology companies, impinging on their ability to regulate digital services and AI. He also briefly imposed an export control directive that suspended foreign use of two Anthropic AI frontier models.

As these changes unfolded, Britain’s departure from the EU left it outside the bloc that is its largest trading partner and closest geographical neighbour, with which its supply chains are most closely integrated. Britain is excluded from EU trade agreements and internal EU discussions on defence, economic security and broader foreign policy, as well as from intra-EU coordination meetings in multilateral forums. But in a more transactional world, size and weight matter. To resist coercive pressure from assertive rivals, countries need to be able to mount a credible threat of retaliation. Their success here depends on the assets they can deploy, the size of their economy and their dominant positions in key sectors—all of which Britain compromised with Brexit.

## Implications for Britain

Against this backdrop of an unravelling global order and fracturing alliances, Britain is in danger of being held back by old habits—for example, relying on a rules-based economic and trade system to adequately

protect its interests, and assuming that a Western alliance led by the US will look after its security needs. This lack of foresight has made Britain vulnerable to the impact of global developments such as conflict in the Middle East, over which it has little influence. It still relies on an unpredictable US for its defence against Russia, and is ill-prepared to defend itself against trade restrictions and other forms of pressure from China or America.

## Vulnerable security and industry

As Burnham has acknowledged, Britain's status as a large middle power with an open economy and strong trading links means that its strength at home and its strength in the world are indivisible. Global disruption has consequences not only for domestic security but also for prosperity.

Wars in Ukraine and the Middle East have led British citizens to recognise that prices and jobs are directly affected by events overseas. Britain's vaunted relationship with the US did not buy it any influence over Trump's costly decision to attack Iran. Moreover, Britain's dependencies on unreliable partners are more problematic in a transactional world. On defence, Britain relies on the US for key elements of its nuclear deterrent and other weapons systems such as F-35 jets, Apache helicopters and C-17 transport planes. But it appears to have done little planning for an alternative strategy at a time when Russia has stepped up its threats against Britain.

On AI, which is likely to be a key source of national power and influence, Britain allowed its most promising start-ups to be bought by US companies, at the price of losing control of its technological ecosystem—an approach that prompted the leading American scholar, Tim Wu, to write that Britain was “curiously at ease” with its own dependence. Meanwhile, British industry is reliant on access to Chinese rare earths across a range of sectors vital to the nation's economic future and security, including defence, automotive, clean energy, healthcare and advanced manufacturing.

These vulnerabilities and dependencies could stand in the way of Britain's economic revival. Burnham has said that he wants to focus on domestic policy, but his goal of reindustrialisation and promoting growth in Britain cannot be achieved without consideration of its international partnerships. Given the interconnectedness of the global economy, the kind of industrial strategy the government wants to pursue must have an international dimension. Preserving and building Britain's role in advanced manufacturing and other strategic sectors depends on access to inputs, investment and markets overseas. Burnham's predecessor Keir Starmer went some way towards recognising the implications of a riskier world by launching an industrial strategy that aimed to promote Britain's economic security by reducing supply chain vulnerability across eight sectors including clean energy, life sciences and advanced manufacturing.

## Compromised industrial sovereignty

Following on from Starmer's approach, Burnham has promised to rebuild Britain's hard power by reinforcing industrial sovereignty—directing procurement towards Britain's own defence industry and promoting

investment in technology from shipbuilding and energy to AI and quantum. But domestic production cannot meet all the country's essential needs, and reindustrialisation requires inputs from overseas. In some respects, the government has recognised that British self-sufficiency is not an option, and that it would be more realistic to strengthen Britain's position in other ways.

For example, AI minister Kanishka Narayan, who attends cabinet meetings, has set out a thoughtful strategy. Rather than seeking to establish a sovereign stack, he suggests that Britain should focus on areas of national advantage where it can establish a degree of primacy, including specialist chips and professional and scientific applications. On its own, though, Britain does not have the scale to stand up to potential coercion from great powers like China or the US, or the market size to secure reliable supplies of critical materials, technology and investment. Britain's approach to resilience is held back by the absence of a clear plan for working with partners on these issues.

## Loss of influence

Britain's weakened position in a more transactional world heightens the risk of coercion and dependency. But Britain is also failing to exercise the influence it could have in promoting international action on urgent global challenges at a time when multilateral cooperation is falling short. The AI revolution threatens to create new dependencies while posing risks of an unknown scale through unregulated development of an extraordinarily powerful technology. Climate change, global health threats and humanitarian crises impact Britain directly and indirectly through global instability and migration.

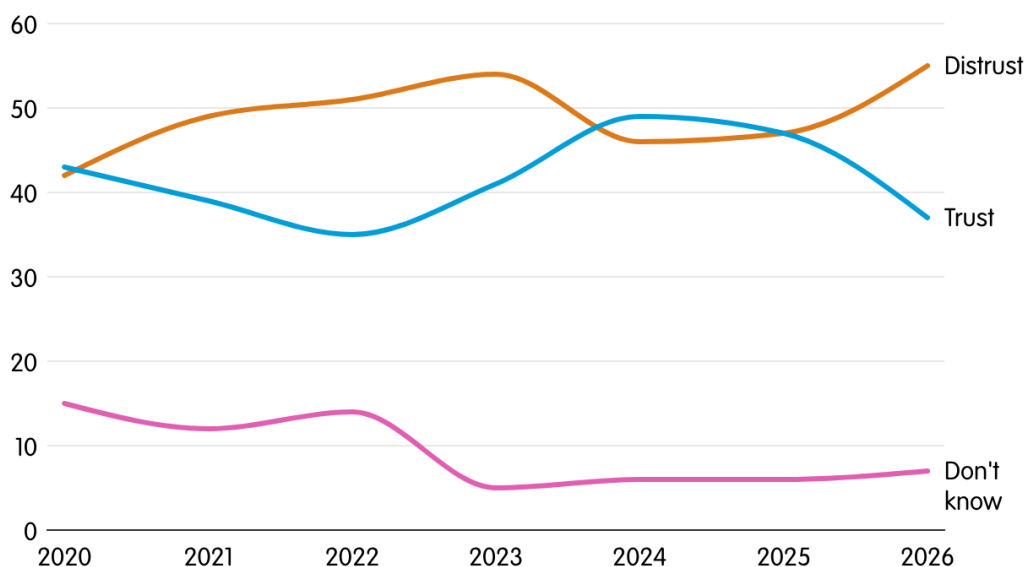
As a globally influential country and in line with its proclaimed values, Britain has also traditionally aspired to act on a principle of solidarity to help relieve suffering around the world. New forms of international action on these problems are needed as multilateral mechanisms falter, but Britain is at risk of punching below its weight. For example, influential observers say that Britain's more isolated international position, financial constraints and recent political turmoil have cost it influence in bodies such as the IMF and World Bank.

## Public disillusionment

Britain's international approach is not only out of step with today's more dangerous world—there are signs that the British public is increasingly losing faith in it. Opinion polls show declining trust in the British government to pursue a foreign policy in the national interest, while Reform UK (which led in political polls over much of the last year) calls for a politics of national self-interest with strong echoes of Trump's anti-internationalist rhetoric.

As former prime minister Gordon Brown has argued, the rise of political nationalism across the world and the declining effectiveness of international cooperation are linked: people turn to exclusionary nationalism in part because they feel that global cooperation is not helping with many citizens' most pressing concerns.

### Proportion of Britons who trust the government to pursue a foreign policy in the public interest By year, 2020-2026. In %.



Source: British Foreign Policy Group  
ECFR · ecfr.eu

However, this connection creates a political opportunity for Burnham. His pledge to bring government closer to all of Britain's people provides him with an opportunity to increase public backing for Britain's international role. The new prime minister can achieve this by showing that international cooperation benefits people both in Britain and overseas, and demonstrating that focused global efforts on issues such as climate or debt can still be effective. He should ensure his mission to redistribute power and opportunity around the country incorporates a vision of Britain's global engagement. But this vision needs to be rooted in the concerns of the broad mass of the British population, rather than the country's inherited role in the international system.

There is some basis for thinking this could work: the Rockefeller Foundation has published an opinion poll showing that a slim majority in Britain supports international cooperation, even if it involves compromising on some national interests. The challenge for Burnham is to re-establish the idea in citizens' minds that the government is centring their concerns in both its domestic and foreign policy.

## Rediscovering Britain's strengths

Despite its loss of direction and influence in the last ten years, Britain's global profile provides a basis for it regaining a leading role in international cooperation. Britain retains broad membership across multilateral bodies, ranging from the UN Security Council, the G7 and the G20, to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF). It has an extensive track record of building institutions and setting the agenda on tackling global problems, and the global reach to establish a central role in new coalitions. These coalitions should aim to secure their members' resilience

and drive action on global problems in the face of declining global leadership from the US.

Britain played a key role in mobilising action through the G20 in response to the 2008 global financial crisis. It has also been influential in helping shape the global response to climate change, including commissioning the 2006 Stern Review. On AI, former prime minister Rishi Sunak organised a safety summit in 2023, testifying to Britain's history of innovative responses to emerging risks. Britain is also recognised as a leader in some key areas at the heart of modern economies, including scientific research, AI development and financial services. Its history and reputation as a country committed to the rule of law enhance its credibility as a reliable partner and its international standing.

To harness these residual strengths, Britain needs to divest from its old vision of the international system and adopt an innovative approach to international cooperation that accounts for how the world has changed. Instead of harking back to a fading Western-dominated rules-based order, it should invest in the forms of cooperation that can be effective in a more unpredictable and transactional global system.

Above all, Britain should prioritise creativity and flexibility in international cooperation. At a time of rapid change and destabilised alliances, new coalitions are needed to respond to emerging challenges in a more dynamic way. Countries ranging from Canada to the Arab Gulf monarchies, from Ghana to India, are trying to adapt to current risks and opportunities by building new and pragmatic partnerships to defend their interests and extend their influence. Britain should join them. Instead of seeing itself as a custodian of the system, Britain should position itself as a leader among those countries that are forging new ways of cooperating to achieve core national interests and promote international action on shared problems.

## A new model for cooperation

To see what an innovative approach to international cooperation could involve, it is helpful to divide Britain's partnerships into three broad concentric circles of engagement. These circles represent different levels of cooperation, based on the degree of trust and the shared interests involved.

In the first circle are Britain's geopolitical allies: countries that share similar values and a common strategic vision based on their historic membership of the US-led "political West". The EU has a privileged place within this circle, given its size and proximity, while the US has a special status as a necessary but less trusted partner.

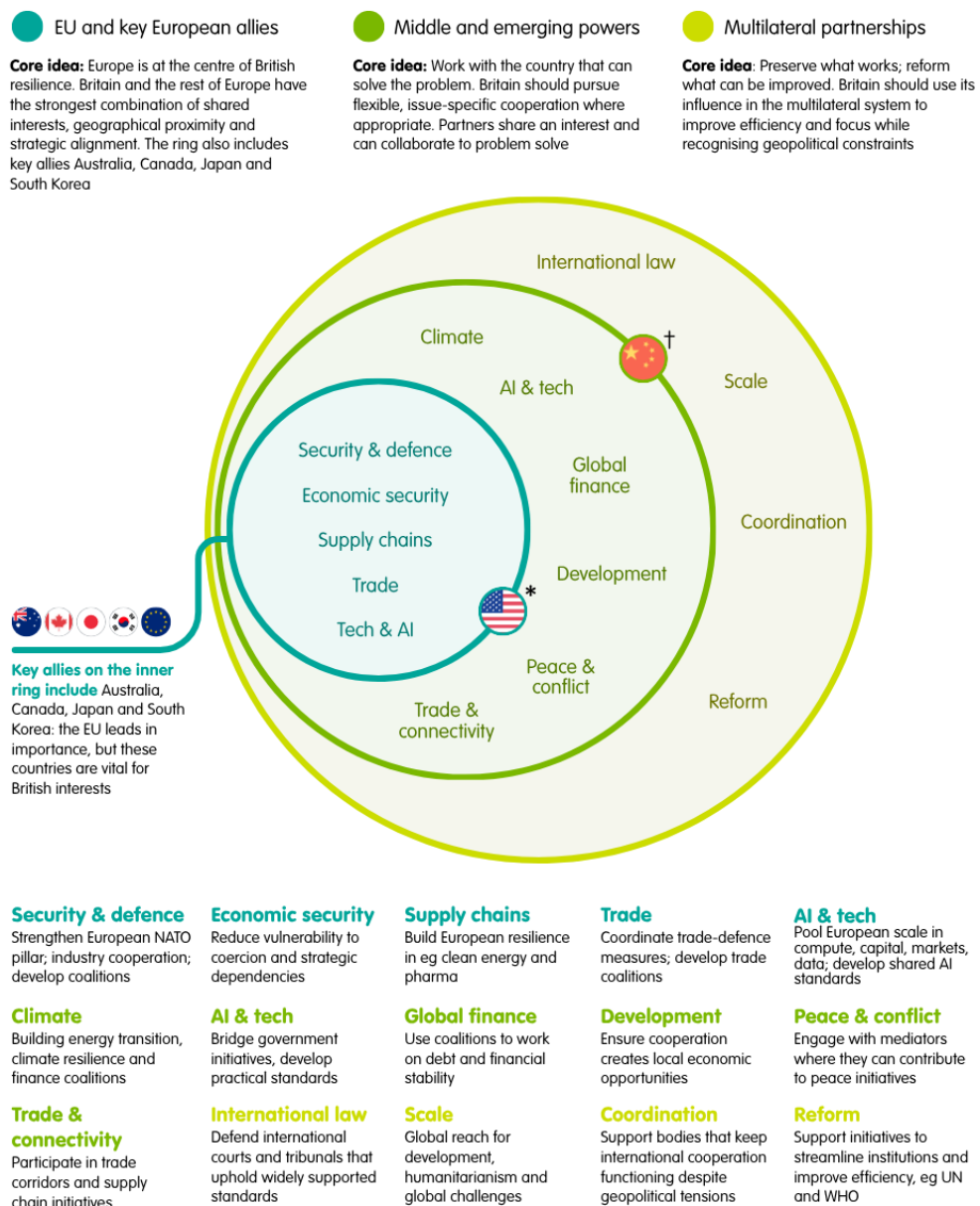
In the next circle are middle powers and emerging countries from beyond the West. They are less strategically aligned and more likely to hedge between the US, Europe and China—but they are also influential actors, with whom Britain (and Europe more widely) must work to secure its interests and address global problems.

Finally, the third outer circle comprises the formal institutions of the multilateral system, including both consensus-based UN bodies and international financial institutions in which Western countries retain a leading role. All three levels are important, but cooperation is likely to be less deep as it moves away from the

central ring. The following sections lay out how a strategy of innovation and flexibility could play out at these different levels.

## How Britain can take a more innovative approach to foreign policy

### A proposed concentric ring model



\*America falls between being a key ally and a power that Britain can still work with  
 † China falls between being a power Britain can work with and a power that requires careful management

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## The central circle: Britain's most strategic partners

Britain's relationship with the US has long been its geopolitical anchor. But that relationship has lost its dependability just when security threats and the risk of economic coercion are rising. Now the risk of coercion extends to the US itself.

This creates a complex situation in which Britain must balance its continuing reliance on the US with other partnerships that give it greater independence and promote its security and resilience. Britain is not alone in this predicament; Canadian prime minister Mark Carney identified this in a speech at the World Economic Forum summit in Davos in January 2026. The first circle of partners for Britain is therefore its fellow anxious US allies in the West, who share a similar strategic vision and democratic values that provide a basis for mutual trust.

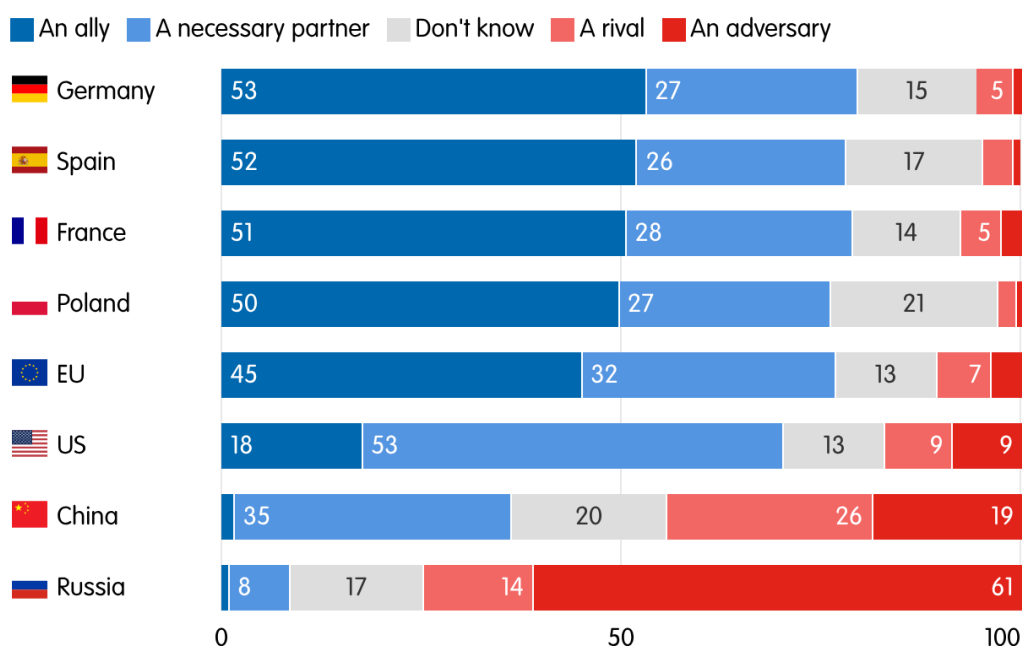
It is neither desirable nor feasible for Britain to sever its alliance with America. The US remains central to British security, intelligence, trade and technological development. Strategic cooperation between G7 partners including the US continues in areas such as critical minerals supply chains and development corridors. Britain should therefore work to increase its independence and leverage in case the countries' interests diverge. As Carney's speech indicated, Burnham will find natural partners in those disconcerted American allies that individually can neither do without America nor withstand any pressure it exerts.

### *Get closer to the EU and Europe*

Among these allies, the EU and its member states should take central place. Britain's links and shared interests with the EU are stronger than with any other potential middle-power partners. British and EU policies overlap on issues like the Russian threat, climate change and supply chain resilience, although there is some divergence. For example, Britain (which is less exposed to job losses resulting from Chinese trade practices than some EU member states) has been more hesitant to take defensive measures against China. It has also adopted a lighter-touch approach to digital regulation.

But British positions may be changing, as focus shifts to the risks of supply chain coercion from China as well as other hostile actions, and as concerns about AI mount. Overall, ECFR polling shows that a majority of Britons see France, Germany, Poland and Spain as allies, and 45% see the EU as an ally, compared with only 18% for the US.

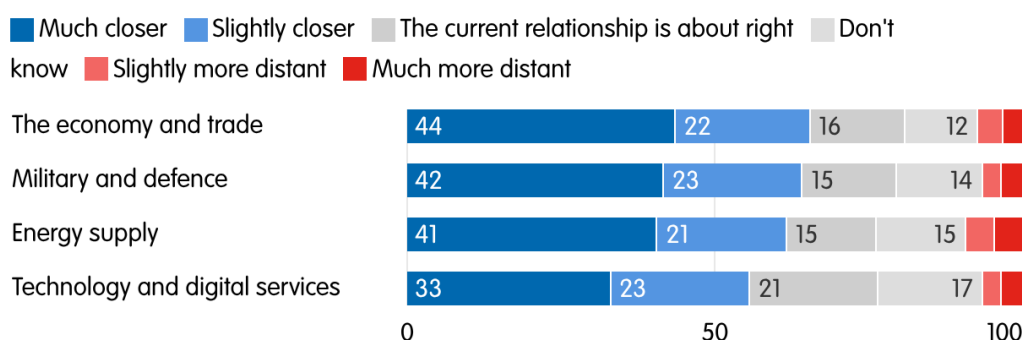
**Generally speaking, thinking about each country or entity, which of the following best reflects your view on who they are to the UK? In %**



Source: Online opinion polling by Mandate research for ECFR, May 7th-14th 2026  
ECFR · ecf.eu

A majority of Britons also say that Britain's future relationship with the EU should either be much closer or slightly closer on the economy and trade, military and defence, energy supply, and technology and digital services.

**Thinking about the UK's future relationship with the European Union in the following areas, would you say it should be closer or more distant, or is the current relationship about right? In %**



Source: Online opinion polling by Mandate research for ECFR, May 7th-14th 2026  
ECFR · ecf.eu

In the period since Brexit, the EU and its member states have adopted a security and resilience agenda that matches Britain's strategic interests. The EU has overhauled its defence policies to respond to the threat posed by Russia, adopting measures to facilitate an extra €800bn in military spending by its members. Already, member states—led by Germany, which has spent by far the most—increased their defence spending by almost 63% between 2020 and 2025. The EU is also actively debating how to enhance its resilience against economic coercion, including through reindustrialisation proposals such as the Industrial Accelerator Act that are similar to those being explored in Britain. As part of this, it is clearly moving towards adopting a tougher trade relationship with China that prioritises economic security.

Britain and the EU should build on progress made through their security and defence partnership (SDP)—which was concluded in May 2025 and covers security and foreign policy issues—and work more closely to strengthen the European pillar of NATO. This could be achieved through expanded minilateral groupings like the JEF or “coalitions of the willing” which have developed in response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine. After the EU agreed that Britain could participate in the Ukraine Support Loan, Britain and the EU should prioritise resuming negotiations for wider defence-industrial procurement cooperation through the EU's Security Action for Europe programme.

Besides the SDP, cooperation on economic security is an important area for collaboration—but it is the most prominent missing element in the reset negotiations. Each side has an interest in preserving its freedom from great power dependency in key sectors. Britain and the EU face similar vulnerabilities to dominant suppliers and have intertwined supply chains, enhancing the benefit of working together. Yet a 2025 study found that the EU cooperates more deeply on economic security with Canada, Japan and South Korea than with Britain.

The EU is large enough to become the centrepiece of a bloc that holds its own against great power competitors. Together, Britain and the EU have the capital, market size, talent and advanced manufacturing capacity comparable to other powers. Britain also has capacities to help the EU advance its economic security agenda: expertise and leading companies in areas such as financial technology, life sciences and nuclear reactors. Burnham should use his interest in reindustrialisation and economic security to deepen cooperation with the EU on shared joint procurement initiatives and collective action against coercion—for example, by coordinating trade-defence measures or working together on independent payment systems.

Another area of crucial importance to Britain's security and prosperity is technology, particularly AI. Britain's goal of building leverage through its own capabilities in key areas rather than pursuing an autonomous stack could be more easily achieved by working with other European countries to acquire the scale in compute infrastructure, access to capital, markets and data it needs to build its capacity more effectively.

### *Find other like-minded partners*

Working with European partners would help Britain build networks that extend beyond Europe and bring together a wider group of like-minded middle powers. On trade and related economic issues, for example, these could include established allies such as Australia, Canada and Japan. Britain should use these networks to build coalitions around specific issues, including by engaging countries in Asia and beyond that

support a broadly liberal and rules-based approach. Here the CPTPP and the EU can form the nucleus, with Britain building on its membership of CPTPP to act as a bridge between the two.

However, there are reasons to be cautious about the likelihood of such middle powers achieving a new and cohesive form of global trade governance. They espouse a range of views, and some are reluctant to appear to challenge US hegemony. Britain should take practical steps to secure supply chains with trusted partners, for example in clean energy. This is vital for Britain and the EU because of the importance of clean energy to national resilience, security and economic growth; the two could work together on partnership agreements with third countries such as Brazil, Canada, Japan and South Korea to coordinate demand and financing in areas like batteries, wind turbines, grid infrastructure and green steel. They could follow a similar approach with pharmaceuticals. On AI, too, cooperation between Britain and the EU might facilitate wider initiatives for working with like-minded middle powers on increasing capabilities to resist coercion and developing AI standards for responsible AI deployment.

### *Define Britain's future impact*

Most of the steps outlined here have the advantage that Britain and the EU (and configurations of member states) could work together on practical initiatives that do not require formal institutional changes in their relationship. This would avoid breaching the red lines that have bedevilled the “reset” talks so far. Burnham should advance an agenda of economic cooperation by framing the relationship explicitly in economic security terms. More innovative rethinking about how Britain and the EU cooperate would also fit with the EU's recent interest in new forms of partnership—such as proposed “associate membership” for Canada.

At the same time, Britain—with its international links and flexibility outside the EU—can take a prominent role in extending initiatives on supply chains and technology to bring in other like-minded partners. In pursuing an agenda of cooperation with these countries, Britain's goal should be to use a series of practical initiatives to protect the interests it shares with its partners in a more hostile world.

## The middle circle: Partners of opportunity

Over the summer of 2026, Britain—like most of the rest of the world—felt the impact of climate change through heatwaves, wildfires, drought and other extreme weather events. Countries are increasingly ready to launch military action in defiance of the rules on the use of force; there were more inter-state conflicts in 2025 than since 1946. Recent incidents involving security breaches by frontier AI models show the importance of international action to set guardrails on this rapidly developing technology. High levels of debt in many countries are holding back their ability to invest in essential services, raising the risk of instability. And other global risks—from the danger of pandemic disease to illicit financial flows—threaten the well-being of populations in Britain and elsewhere.

## *Engage with emerging powers*

A foreign policy model which centres UK cooperation with the EU and other like-minded powers should therefore only be the start of Britain's renewed international involvement. Britain also needs to play a major role in tackling the above global problems, both because they represent a threat to direct British interests and for reasons of global solidarity.

To prompt action in these areas, Britain needs to engage with a wider group of influential middle countries and emerging powers such as India, Turkey, Gulf countries and South Africa—all of which are essential to building effective coalitions. Moreover, as the weight of global economic activity moves away from the West, engagement with this wider group of countries is essential for Britain's trading reach and influence.

As multilateral institutions face increasing pressure from hostile powers, underfunding and the sheer scale of global issues, they are losing momentum. This means that other countries are increasingly switching to different formats such as more informal initiatives and coalitions, with emerging powers from the global south often assuming a greater role than in traditional multilateral bodies. These initiatives represent a different vision of middle-power agency. They are based around emerging countries that see themselves as under-represented in the traditional institutions of the fading Western-led order and are seeking to assert a greater role for themselves in shaping the terms of cooperation.

For example, Qatar, Pakistan and Turkey increasingly lead in conflict mediation; India, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are cooperating on regional trade corridors; and countries like Barbados, Brazil and Ghana are promoting new forms of partnership to address health and development challenges. As part of a pragmatic and innovative approach to cooperation, Britain should align itself with new initiatives which have valuable goals for both Britain and its potential partners, and steer these initiatives in a more constructive direction.

It should back peace initiatives led by mediators such as Qatar while also encouraging participants to address root causes of conflicts in a way that makes peace agreements more durable. Britain should also support and invest in emerging trade corridors, such as in Syria, that promote regional prosperity and help supply chains divert around chokepoints like the Strait of Hormuz. At the same time, it should direct its participation and investment to create local connections that promote opportunities and development. Britain is well-placed to influence the development of such dynamic initiatives by encouraging emerging middle powers to act in harmony with collective rules, and steering these coalitions in more inclusive directions.

## *Build on British expertise: Climate, AI and financial regulation*

Britain should particularly look to build or support new coalitions in areas with significant global needs and where it can make a distinctive contribution, based on its particular interests and areas of specialisation. From a domestic perspective, Britain should focus on a few priority areas to ensure it can overcome its own resource constraints and create a compelling narrative about the core goals of its international engagement. This approach would also help reinforce the notion that Britain is an influential global actor in key sectors and highlight the capabilities of its institutions and companies.

Based on Britain's track record of institutional innovation and expertise, the government should concentrate its efforts on climate change, science and technology, and global finance—areas in which it already plays an influential role. These also fit with Britain's leadership in scientific research, aspects of AI such as chip design and security, and financial services. The government spotlighting these in Britain's international engagement would promote innovation in response to urgent global challenges and boost its profile as a leader in fields that are important for Britain's future prosperity. Britain should put them at the heart of its efforts to shape new coalitions for action—and its presidency of the G20 in 2027.

## Climate

On international climate policy, coalitions of like-minded countries are increasingly driving implementation of concrete objectives to ensure they are suitably prepared for longer-term climate resilience action. As it stands, Britain is co-chair of the Powering Past Coal Alliance, hosts the London Climate Action Week and was an active participant in the Santa Marta conference on Transitioning Away from Fossil Fuels. Under Starmer, the British government launched the Global Clean Power Alliance but failed to follow through with sufficient attention and resources, while the EU pursued a rival initiative with its Global Energy Transition Forum. Britain needs to reinvest in the alliance, perhaps merging it with the European forum, and develop it as a central vehicle for countries to work together on transforming energy systems, decarbonising industry and mobilising finance for energy transitions in developing countries.

## Artificial intelligence

The US and China remain central to any meaningful international agreement on AI, and direct talks between them will play an essential role in determining how far frontier models are subject to international oversight. But Britain's track record in AI security and its prominent role in AI research mean it remains influential in steering global discussions on what governance of AI could look like. British expertise can credibly bridge the plethora of governance initiatives and identify fertile areas for international regulation—including rules on how AI is deployed in different sectors, or protocols in areas like biosecurity.

## Global finance

Under Trump, the US has scaled back its agenda for this year's G20 to focus on what America describes as the organisation's "core mission of driving economic growth and prosperity to produce results". Before stepping down, Starmer had planned to follow this with a similarly focused agenda, centred on driving global growth and reinforcing global stability. Burnham should maintain this momentum by pledging to strengthen the financial system by addressing global imbalances, improving the G20's framework for developing country debt and coordinating action against illicit financial flows. This would meet the government's goal of stabilising global finance to benefit a variety of countries. At the same time, it would boost the fiscal space for developing countries to pay for essential public services in line with an emerging focus in the global south on achieving sovereignty in health and development.

## The outer circle: The world acting together

Even at a time of institutional stagnation and geopolitical tension, several multilateral organisations continue to fulfil an irreplaceable function.

The UN Security Council has unique legitimacy in peace and security. UN development agencies and the World Bank have unmatched reach and a comprehensive approach to addressing humanitarian and development challenges. The World Bank and the IMF played a key role in keeping the world's economies afloat during the pandemic. Although Britain—and other leading countries—is cutting development spending, the government is aware that coordination by multilateral bodies still helps maximise global impact. As such, Britain is increasing the proportion of its development spending that goes through multilateral bodies to ensure its contributions are as impactful as possible.

On trade, many governments continue to recognise the value of international rules. Trade protectionism is rising, but the proportion of world trade conducted on WTO terms remained at 72% in 2025. Many states thus continue to use the WTO to manage trade disputes even in the absence of a functioning enforcement mechanism. Similarly, the WHO remains the only body able to offer impartial scientific advice on global health, and the COP process is the central forum for setting goals and assessing progress towards limiting climate change—despite recent summits facing difficulties in reaching a consensus on meaningful declarations. Beyond these high-profile forums are a host of more technical coordination bodies that keep international processes functioning despite geopolitical tensions.

Besides their remaining value, however, many multilateral institutions face a legitimacy problem. And bodies like the UN Security Council are based on a distribution of global power reflective of 1945, rather than the reality of today. Governments in many global south countries seek stronger rules on global health that oblige advanced industrial countries to make commitments on vaccine sharing that go far beyond the limited steps they took during the covid-19 pandemic. Tackling these issues is not easy: for example, efforts to reform the UN Security Council have gone nowhere, and significant changes to voting shares at the IMF and World Bank are likely to founder on US opposition.

Similar difficulties attend efforts to get to grips with large-scale geopolitical questions through new or revised treaties. A resolution on the WHO's Pandemic Agreement is being hindered by disagreements over an annexe that would detail obligations on sharing vaccines, diagnostics and other technology. The recent WTO ministerial meeting in Cameroon seemed to indicate that efforts to tackle major trade issues through consensus, or even to rethink the underlying principles of the trading system for an economically pluralist world, have stalled. In all these areas, serious attempts to continue reform demand political engagement at a high level and even so seem unlikely to make much headway.

### *Support multilateral institutions*

Considering the above, Britain should use its tradition of leading on institutional development to increase the effectiveness of global institutions and prevent their further erosion. At the same time, Britain needs to be

realistic about the limits posed in the contemporary geopolitical environment. It should distinguish between operational reforms, which aim to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of institutions and are more likely to succeed, and those that involve more consequential political interests. For the latter, the obstacles facing any reform effort are much greater.

British representatives to international institutions could use their position to pursue reforms on the level of restructuring, consolidation and mandate refinement, for example supporting the UN80 process launched by UN secretary-general António Guterres. This aims to streamline the UN system and ensure it uses a smaller budget more efficiently. Britain could also steer the WHO towards a clearer focus on its central responsibility of health guidance and standard setting, and ease the integration of plurilateral agreements within the WTO framework. Britain's influence at the World Bank means it can continue supporting financing for climate change mitigation, despite the reduction in the bank's climate finance target. For the moment, however, it should limit the effort and resources it devotes to larger-scale political reforms.

### *Champion international law*

International law is being challenged in many ways. Countries from Russia and Iran to America and Israel are flouting rules on the conduct of hostilities and trying to undermine institutions like the International Criminal Court (ICC). However, the fundamental principles of international law remain widely supported. Recent conflicts in Gaza, Iran, Sudan and Ukraine show how the unsanctioned use of force often creates greater instability, rather than achieving any stated goals. Indeed, recent polling by the Rockefeller Foundation showed that, faced with frequent armed conflict and widespread violations of humanitarian law, people around the world see preventing war and conflict as the priority for international cooperation. A survey by Lex International found that 71% of people across a range of countries wanted stronger enforcement of international law.

Britain should therefore continue to support the core principles of international law, especially the prohibition of aggression and the acquisition of territory by force. Britain needs to recognise that many countries continue to back these principles and understand how violating these laws can have damaging consequences. Over the last few years, there has been a lively debate about whether Britain is too legalistic in its approach to international affairs; some leaders and analysts in Britain and Europe argued that the attack by America and Israel on Iran in February 2026 could be justified on grounds of realism.

But the conflict has instead laid bare the damage that a military adventure which is not justified by self-defence can do to British interests. Britain can thus stand by its core legal principles both as a matter of self-interest, and because the country wants to adhere to traditional rule of law values. As part of this commitment, Britain should support bodies such as the ICC which is under attack by Trump's America.

# A renewed internationalism

This paper set out a programme of innovation in international cooperation that would update, rather than abandon, Britain's traditional commitment to internationalism. The point is not to forsake Britain's belief in the value of broadly open and stable frameworks for managing international relations. The paper instead sought to discover the best way of renewing cooperation at a time when many countries no longer see traditional structures as effective or representative.

Where appropriate, Britain should link coalition initiatives to UN-based collective mechanisms—for example, by referring back to the UNFCCC's Conference of the Parties for climate action. Projects on supply chains or trade corridors developed with like-minded partners should incorporate a commitment to predictability, transparency and inclusivity by expressing an expansive vision of mutual benefit, rather than a narrow transactionalism.

This approach is, against a backdrop of growing political polarisation around international institutions, more likely to win domestic support for an ambitious vision of international engagement. The Brexit vote in 2016 and the rise of the populist-nationalist Reform UK show that significant parts of Britain's population have lost faith in the political system. Burnham should work to ground Britain's international cooperation in a plausible vision of its own interests, and in the impact the country could have in mobilising action on core global challenges. This, rather than backing a seemingly unthinking programme of supporting multilateral institutions for their own sake, is the best way the government can maintain the British public's backing for a more expansive international role.

Britain benefited greatly from the post-1989 global system and many policymakers have invoked the rules-based order as a goal worth defending. But restoring a fading order is not the right foundation for a sustainable policy on international cooperation in a changing and unpredictable world. Instead, Britain should put its experience, expertise and diplomatic influence on the side of innovation in international politics. While it should lead on preserving and reforming the most effective international institutions, Britain must focus on areas where other countries are investing their energy where possible—and which are most likely to produce concrete results.

Burnham's aim to redistribute power and opportunity around the country provides an impetus for the government to implement a vision of Britain's global engagement rooted in the concerns of the British population, rather than the country's inherited role in the international system. Working with European partners to create a hub for like-minded collaboration, and engaging with dynamic middle and emerging powers to pioneer new coalitions based on shared interests, should be at the centre of British efforts to renew its role as a creative driver of international cooperation. Most of all, Britain should aim to reinforce its enduring value to its citizens, and to the world.

# About the author

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[1] This point was made by several participants in a closed-door roundtable of policymakers and analysts convened by ECFR in London on October 16th 2025.

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