

Speech to the House of Lords – 20.08.21

‘My Lords, the terrible debacle in Afghanistan confirms—indeed, the debates in both Houses of Parliament today confirm—that the world has reached the end of an era. Among other things, it cannot rely any longer just on American security guarantees. That also has major security implications for the increasingly dangerous situation in Taiwan.

That offers a clear lesson that western security pundits have been rather slow to grasp. President Biden himself says that America

“cannot afford to remain tethered to policies created in response to the world as it was 20 years ago.”

Nor can we. As the noble Lord, Lord Berkeley, observed a few moments ago, my noble friend Lord Hague said that we must not give up on all responsible overseas intervention. That is right, but are we playing the intervention role in the right way and in the right country context?

In truth, our long intervention in Afghanistan was of the classic, old-fashioned military occupation kind, of the sort that worked in past centuries—although only with great difficulty in Afghanistan—but in this revolutionary digital-power age influence, persuasion and peace-making, or peace imposing, work in completely different ways. The lessons are old, but the digital age has magnified those factors a thousandfold. The battlefield now lies almost entirely in the realm of continuous psychological warfare, the undermining and deconstructing of hostile visions, new, ever-deeper and much better intelligence links, and persistent demoralisation and division of the rival camp.

Sheer size of weaponry and defence spend are no longer enough, if they ever were. General de Gaulle once wrote:

“Nothing lasts unless it is incessantly renewed.”

Security and stability within nations now rests on completely changed foundations, as does the prevention or swift suppression of armed and violent conflict. Those foundations depend on the domination of communications, the domination of cyber superiority and constant news and information superiority—plus, of course, carefully targeted funds in the right areas—as much as, or more than, having troops on the ground.

In Afghanistan, account has now to be taken of the entirely altered distribution of world power: hard, soft, smart and sharp—whatever you will. Of course we want America as a partner, but America is no longer the automatic leader in this field. I realise that all this is difficult for the traditional policy and planning mindset to grasp, but to root out medieval dictatorships and the lawless terror methods that they use, we must now—and this is difficult—work with, at least on this front, China, Russia and Asian and African powers generally, and the new networks that govern and are reshaping the modern world, including the worldwide Commonwealth network.’