

## Opinion – Labour’s Embrace of Realism: Progressive or Problematic?

Written by Seán Molloy

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# Opinion – Labour’s Embrace of Realism: Progressive or Problematic?

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SEÁN MOLLOY, MAY 2 2024

David Lammy’s promotion of a signature new approach to foreign policy, “Progressive Realism”, is a significant departure from previous Labour Party foreign policy discourses. This is so not because of its content, but because of its unusual emphasis on *theory*. Lammy peppers International Relations (IR) theory and Foreign Policy Analysis terms throughout his recently published article ‘The Case for Progressive Realism’ in *Foreign Affairs*. An array of concepts such as multipolarity, geopolitics, soft power, the balance of power, globalization, hegemony, liberal interventionism, the rules-based order, burden sharing, and collective security crop up throughout the text. The presence of theory in UK foreign policy discourse to this extent is highly unusual; Robin Cook’s ‘New Mission Statement for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’ in 1997, to take one prominent example of an agenda setting statement of Labour foreign policy, contained only one or two passing references to then fashionable Globalization theory, and the only mention of Realism was that New Labour’s approach would supply “an ethical content to foreign policy” in contrast to Realpolitik’s narrow definition of the national interest.

The embrace of theory is significant in that it suggests that Britain under the next Labour government will not only chart a different global course, but that it will also navigate the global political oceans in a *new* manner. Despite the somewhat hagiographic treatment of Robin Cook throughout the article, Lammy is clear that his predecessor’s worldview has been eclipsed. Progressive Realism marks an advance on previous Labour foreign policy – according to Lammy – precisely because it renounces globalization’s naivety about the positive effects of trade within the international community and instead accepts, à la Realism, that IR is dominated by competition for economic advantage and the pursuit of security.

The addition of the adjective “Progressive” indicates that Lammy’s is a different variant of Realism from the Realpolitik rejected by Cook. The core of Lammy’s argument is that Progressive Realism will steer a path between the Scylla of the liberal internationalism, with its reckless interventions in the first decade of this century, and the Charybdis of inaction typical of the second decade. Realism is found in the acknowledgment of the importance of responding to the threats posed by the challenge of China’s rise to power, Russia’s revisionism, and the growing decoupling of regional middle powers from the West. In response to these developments, Labour proposes a revitalisation of the Western Alliance via greater commitment to NATO and a rapprochement with the EU to protect European security. The progressive quality is represented by a vow to place fairness at the centre of Labour’s foreign policy, a virtue that finds itself expressed in two objectives: firstly, that the UK should become a Development Superpower; secondly, that the UK should prioritise responding to the global threat posed by climate change. The combination of progressive aims and Realist means together with the ‘tough-minded honesty’ of Realist logic, Lammy asserts, avoids both empty idealism and the cynicism of Realism at its worst.

The potential positive contribution of Progressive Realism is further brought home by means of a contrast to the foreign policy of the Conservative government, a hotch-potch of ‘nostalgia and denial’ that made a mess of Brexit and trashed the UK’s reputation as a power synonymous with the rule of law while also squandering the UK’s leadership of efforts to counter climate change and undermining of its status as one of the primary players in international development within the Global South. Progressive Realism’s combination of a coherent theory that stresses power and competition with a commitment to fairness, will fix the damage caused by the Conservatives’ inward-facing

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callousness and denial of the modern world’s complex realities.

The combination of Realism with progressive aims is not unusual: Niccolò Machiavelli, for example, concludes *The Prince* with an exhortation to unify Italy and bring an end to the oppression of its people; the UK’s most significant Realist theorist, E.H. Carr ends his classic *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*, with a radical proposal to transform the political and economic landscape of Europe along progressive lines. What separates these theorists from Lammy’s Progressive Realism is that both Machiavelli and Carr were willing follow the logic of Realism further than Lammy is prepared to accept.

At the heart of the difference between Realism and ‘Progressive Realism’ is the complex relationship between means and ends. Machiavelli does not shy away from what the progressive end of liberating Italy *requires*: the Italian Messiah who will unify Italy must emulate political leaders such as Cesare Borgia who achieved the progressive aim of bringing order and justice to the Romagna by use of both force and fraud. Borgia knew what he wanted and *how* to act within his environment to achieve his ends. Realism, in short, recognises that politics quite often involves making strategic decisions in imperfect circumstances that require choices and courses of action that are repugnant but necessary if the progressive end is to be achieved. One may not need to act in the manner of a latter-day Cesare Borgia or Italian Messiah, but any state operating in the twenty first century hoping to achieve ambitiously progressive ends will require a similar level of awareness about what is *necessary* in the contemporary international context to secure positive results in relation to climate change and development.

The problem with Progressive Realism in this regard is that it mistakes the existence of mechanisms like the Balance of Power and institutions like NATO and the EU for the means to achieve progressive ends or even as ends sufficient in themselves. The mere presence of NATO and/or greater institutional links between the UK and EU is not going to have much effect on how China and Russia will act. Equally, Lammy is silent on *how* these institutions will assist the UK in its quests to marshal Western states *and* their adversaries under the banners of development and arresting climate change. What is required in the case of China and Russia is a plan of action akin to the George Kennan’s Realist policy of containment: a wide-ranging strategy that clearly outlines an identifiable set of parameters within which the Western powers should operate. Kennan’s clear blueprint for checking Soviet power (occasionally distorted but never wholly abandoned until the end of the Cold War) is in stark contrast to Progressive Realism’s wholly *unrealistic* strategy in which the UK ‘simultaneously challenges, competes against, and cooperates with China as appropriate.’ Similarly, climate change solutions and the achievement of development superpower status will also require detailed plans rooted in a solid understanding of what is possible for the UK to achieve in the prevailing circumstances of twenty first century international politics – detailed plans that are notably absent from Lammy’s promulgation of Progressive Realism.

The spectres of Chinese power and Russian aggression haunt Lammy’s article. Lammy’s response to the rise of China and the war in Ukraine has the unfortunate effect of highlighting a continuity between Labour’s Progressive Realism and the Conservative policies they condemn. Simply put, the era in which the UK can hope to challenge or compete with China has passed but, much like his Conservative counterparts, Lammy cannot quite bring himself to apply Realism’s ‘tough-minded honesty’ to the UK’s current status in the international pecking order. Lammy is aware that the UK’s relationship with China must be part of a wider Western response to the rise of Asia’s superpower, but this knowledge is not squared with a realistic assessment of ‘the West’ as it currently exists or of the UK’s place within it. The UK remains a significant power but it is not the power that determines Western policy. The UK will have to cut its cloth according to American measure: any competing, challenging, etc., of China will be determined by the senior partner and junior partners like the UK will have to follow suit.

Although unacknowledged by Lammy, UK foreign policy will also have to deal with turbulence *within* the West itself. Navigating choppy waters caused by friction between the behemoths of the USA and the EU will be a complicated task that will inevitably consume post-Brexit UK foreign policy resources and effort: having removed itself from the EU, the UK no longer occupies the role of being a bridge between the EU and the US but is now an unmoored state that will have to learn quickly how to steer between the competing demands of both.

Invidious choices will also inevitably arise between the *types* of goals pursued under the banner of Progressive

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Realism. Lammy makes the unequivocal claim that European security will be the Labour Party’s foreign policy priority. Threats to European security are, however, global in terms of the parties likely to be involved in any conflict (hot or cold) and will per force involve trade-offs. Lammy, for example, recognises the importance of India to the UK’s future foreign policy – but does not acknowledge that India will likely exact a price for any future assistance. If the UK wishes to secure India’s support in its efforts to preserve European security, or in its efforts to expand its influence in the Indo-Pacific, it might have to offer more than references to ‘countless family ties’ to China’s only rival in the region. India’s current enthusiasm for Russian oil suggests that the task of securing Indian support for UK in international politics – and especially its ambitious plans to address climate change – might be more complicated than Lammy is willing to admit.

The dilemmas facing UK foreign policy cannot be solved by the combination of a mechanistic Realism and the profession of progressive aims. Realism requires a critical perspective to achieve what is desirable within what is necessary; key to unlocking this critical perspective is an unflinching willingness to examine the UK’s own power in absolute and relative terms. Progressive Realism marks a degree of progress over Tory incoherence in foreign policy in that it recognises the need for both Realism and Progress in IR. Nonetheless, it must evolve a greater capacity for genuine insight derived from Realism’s tough-minded honesty into the nature and limits of British power if it is to serve as an adequate basis for UK foreign policy, certainly in an era of polycrisis that threatens to cascade into meta-crisis.

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### About the author:

**Seán Molloy** (@SeanMolloyIR) is Reader of International Relations at The University of Kent. Dr. Molloy has published two books: *The Hidden History of Realism: A Genealogy of Power Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2006) and *Kant’s International Relations: The Political Theology of Perpetual Peace* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017). Dr. Molloy has been awarded a British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship to investigate the role played by Marx and Hegel in E.H. Carr’s theorisation of the role of ethics in IR. He was a Principal Investigator on the Leverhulme supported Classical Realism Meets Critical Theory international research network. He can be found on Twitter @SeanMolloyIR.