

A Recessional Power: How Britain's Claim to Be a Great Power Has Been Fatally Undercut

Written by Chris Ogden

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CHRIS OGDEN, OCT 12 2020

Great powers are those top tier countries whose influence reaches across the world with global consequences for all other countries. With an empire that stretched across the globe, Britain enjoyed this position throughout the latter centuries of the last millennium as its economic, military and cultural power allowed it to hold sway over two thirds of the world. This was Britain in its pomp, an all-reaching, all-dominating power whom the rest followed.

By the middle of the twentieth century, this position had been gradually overtaken by the rampant emergence of the United States (US) and the Soviet Union. Britain was still powerful economically and militarily but no longer enjoyed its previous preponderance to dictate world affairs on its terms alone. As the Cold War progressed, new great power contenders undercut its status further. With Japan first and then China, East Asia emerged as the focal point of global influence, and closer to home the European Union also reduced Britain's elite status. While the fortunes of these others have ascended, Britain's trajectory has been recessional – a reality that runs counter to the oft-cited and self-confident narrative of “global Britain”.

Observers have noted many factors as being essential to being a great power. Waltz noted the “Five Criteria” of population and territory, resources endowment, economic capability, military strength, and political stability and competence as all being essential to identifying a great power. Other scholars have added extra great power measures such as soft power, leadership of international forums, state capacity, and strategy and diplomacy. On most – if not all – of these measures, Britain has now dropped out of the premier league of world affairs.

First among these is economic prowess, which the current government celebrates through the oft-repeated mantra of Britain being the world's 5th largest economy. Such a claim is only true if taken in current dollar terms in 2018, with France and India poised to soon overtake Britain. Notably, in purchasing power parity terms in current dollars – a more commonly used and more representative measure – Britain ranked 9th in 2018, and again looks set to be soon overtaken by France. This decline looks to be accelerated with its economy predicted to contract by 11.5% in 2020, the steepest fall of any member country of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. A looming no-deal Brexit, if it were to come about by the end of 2020, would lead to at least a further 3% fall in Britain's GDP, again hastening the country's relative economic decline.

In military terms also, Britain's star has waned. As reviews have repeatedly shown in the last decades, the preparedness, funding and scale of the country's armed forces are all in decline, and it now ranks 8th in terms of spending in 2019 versus being ranked 3rd across the 1990s and 2000s. Due to such a degeneration, Britain is no longer able to wage war independently and is instead a medium-sized partner that can only piggy-back its way into war based upon the prowess of others – almost exclusively the US. In the post-9/11 Iraq invasion, Britain's preparation was deemed to be ‘wholly inadequate’, as was that in Afghanistan, both portents for the country's experience in 2020 with the lack of Personal Protective Equipment to deal with Covid-19.

On the multilateral stage, whilst Britain is a permanent veto member in the United Nations (UN) Security Council, it has lost its autonomous voice in international deliberations, whereby it has not used its veto independently since 1972 (concerning Southern Rhodesia – one of its last colonial outposts). It is also one of the lowest contributors to

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UN Peacekeeping Operations, contributing only 246 personnel in March 2020 versus 6,658 from top-ranked Ethiopia. According to diplomats, there has been also been a “palpable decline” in Britain’s influence in the UN since the 2016 Brexit vote as it lost its valuable association with the European Union, which had “added-value” to its diplomacy (especially with China and India). As Brexit became the country’s myopic foreign policy issue pre-coronavirus, it also gave the world the ‘impression that the UK has checked out of world debates’ and is a global outlier.

Notwithstanding a lingering cultural cachet in the linguistic, music and artistic realms, which acts as a deep-seated soft power repository (but which is nevertheless dwarfed by the US, and increasingly China and India), Britain’s claim to great power status now rests more upon what it was than what it is. This pedigree was built upon a deep-rooted narrative that because the country was of importance in the past, it is therefore still powerful today and will be so again in the future. The country’s claims for showing international leadership, displaying stability and competence in its domestic governance, and having a clear strategic understanding all emanate from this heritage and associated narratives. Tellingly, this narrative has often been honed through a selective, *ad hoc* and simplified re-telling of history.

The coronavirus has shed light on the weakness of Britain’s political system and an approach to the pandemic that has been peppered by ill-conceived initiatives and frequent U-turns. These included officials not recommending to then recommending the use of face masks, to heavily funding but then abandoning the government’s coronavirus contact tracing app. The limitations of such an approach have fallen into sharp relief, whereby bad policymaking has immediate real-world life and death consequences. The Covid-19 crisis includes myriad examples of such incompetence, from a delayed lockdown that cost tens of thousands of lives, to a testing system that frequently “fudged” targets, to a “world-beating” tracing system decried as an ‘utter shambles’. A hollowed out political discourse, undecipherable slogans and vapid soundbites – such as “turn the tide” and “stay alert” – have accompanied these failures.

Such ineptitude has had a significant negative impact upon how Britain is regarded in the world. After the reversal of the ill-advised “herd immunity” strategy, commentators noted how Britain’s reputation took a ‘global pasting after newspapers worldwide reported ... on confusion and internal divisions’. Reports such as these from its peers show how Britain’s soft power credentials are quickly deteriorating. Such criticisms also highlight the absence of another great power trait – that of competent, stable and consistent national leadership, and the ability to craft and shape international responses. In a recent global opinion poll, Britain ranked in the bottom five globally in terms of how happy the country’s electorate is with the government’s handling of the pandemic, whilst the satisfaction of electorates in Asia was universally higher. In autumn 2020, on a domestic level, 49% of Britain’s population considered the country to be a force for good (down from 59% in 2019), whilst – more tellingly – 38% thought that the country ought to ‘stop pretending it is an important power’ (up from 33% in the previous year).

In unison with this international decline, the upsurge in BLM (Black Lives Matter) protests as a result of the extrajudicial killing of George Floyd has called into question the very basis of Britain’s national narratives that celebrate the glory days of Empire. Frequently taken as the blueprint for a post-Brexit Britain, the BLM protests have remembered a dark history that is rarely taught in British schools, and which celebrates jingoism, subjugation and exploitation. Such an Empire-centred perspective on Britain – and its place in the world – is deeply inward-looking, backward-facing and facilitated by institutional inertia. It is also a narrative that rests upon past rather than current or future competence and effective leadership, which through its celebration of colonialism and imperialism is anathema to the world’s developing countries.

Britain’s international standing has been further debased by its new internal market bill. As Northern Ireland Secretary Brandon Lewis recently admitted, it ‘does break international law in a very specific and limited way’. Designed to allow London to reinterpret the special trading arrangements made for Northern Ireland, as part of the wider withdrawal agreement signed with Brussels in late 2019, the bill has led to deep criticism from an array of former British Prime Ministers. This condemnation included Boris Johnson’s predecessor Teresa May who pertinently asked ‘how can the government reassure future international partners that the UK can be trusted to abide by the legal obligations of the agreement itself?’ Despite such reservations, in late September 2020, the bill was

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passed by the UK's House of Commons, leading to assertions by observers that it was 'a "flagrant breach" of the UK's international law obligations' and served to "'undermine the UK's negotiating position" in any future treaties with other countries and destroy our reputation for being trustworthy'.

Going further, Kim Darroch (a former ambassador to the US) has stated that the bill is 'hugely damaging to our international reputation'. Such actions make Britain an illegitimate actor in the eyes of the international community by being a country that is willing to knowingly break an international agreement and cannot be trusted to adhere to other agreements now or in the future. They also serve to reduce its diplomatic credibility on the world stage, fatally undercutting the recognition from other countries that is necessary for great powers to hold sway in the international system. Senior leaders in the US have already noted how Britain's actions will essentially derail any successful outcome in negotiations for the much-touted US-Britain free trade agreement. As argued by Ian Dunt, a country's reputation is hard to build, and 'it is much easier to throw it all away than it is to create it' yet this is precisely what Britain has done via its conduct of the Brexit negotiations, along with its pandemic response.

From this basis, Britain's claims to still be a great power on the international stage as an influential, necessary and respected country appears to be – at best – highly questionable – and at worst – self-evidently erroneous. Much of this decline rests upon the performance of its competitors, most notably in the Asian sphere where China has rapidly ascended into the ranks of the great powers, followed in time, it appears, by India, with Japan somewhere in between. Elsewhere, Russia remains a pivotal – if highly volatile – arbiter of international affairs, as does the US notwithstanding its own largely declining fortunes vis-à-vis its peers. Britain's decline is thus not only visible in terms of ever-reducing material and diplomatic capabilities, but also in that these are in decline relative to other major international actors.

As these other countries rise, Britain's downward trajectory will only deepen and in time will mark a relegation from the ranks of the great powers. Such a relegation will be exceptionally difficult – if not impossible – for its leaders to rectify, especially when faced with the giant economies of Asia, and those of the European Union and the US, for whom Britain is quickly becoming a *persona non grata*. It remains to be seen if such a decline can be accepted by Britain's elites – and Britain's people –, but doing so will be the first step to finding a new role in global affairs that realistically fits with the realities – not the fantasies – of the country's status. Only then will it be able to regain recognition and legitimacy among its global peers, itself the lynchpin of determining how countries are regarded and respected in international relations.

About the author:

Chris Ogden is Senior Lecturer / Associate Professor in Asian Security at the School of International Relations, University of St Andrews. His latest book *Great Power Attributes: A Compendium of Historical Data* (Edinburgh: Fifth Hammer) can be downloaded for free here.