Interview – Alan Philps

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Alan Philps is a writer, editor and journalist. He has held senior editorial roles with several newspapers and magazines, including as a correspondent for Reuters, then The Sunday Correspondent, Foreign Editor for the Daily Telegraph, Contributing Editor for The National and most recently as Editor of The World Today. He is co-author, with John Lahutsky, of 'The Boy from Baby House 10'. Prior to his journalistic career, Philps studied Arabic and Persian at the University of Oxford.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

The study of China and how this resurgent power can be accommodated within existing governance structures is the issue of the moment. For some time, China watchers have been divided into two camps – those that see China dominating the world and others that see it collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions. The former camp now holds sway in Washington DC. This is not surprising. The previous consensus that rising income would usher in democracy in China – as it has done in Taiwan and South Korea – was starry-eyed wishful thinking. Now that Washington has drawn the global battle lines between democracy and autocracy, I am keen to read more judicious assessments of China. An example of this is Yu Jie's piece in the first issue of The World Today since I left, while not ignoring the grim development of the surveillance state that China is selling around the world. The issue of China's place in the world cannot be understood without looking at the existing structures dating from the post-war period when the United States dominated the global economy. We recently had a G7 summit in Britain. This grouping had seemed an anachronism, its legitimacy having been sucked away by the G20. But the G7 is now reborn as the spearhead of the liberal democratic fightback against Chinese autocracy. Is this the way forward? I am no expert on China, but I do know that the leadership in Beijing have all studied how the Soviet Union collapsed when the Communist Party loosened its control of the political sphere and they are not going to follow that example.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

The Iraq War of 2003, which we now know was launched on the false premise that Saddam Hussein was developing weapons of mass destruction, educated me about the power of military and security lobbies and the limited clout of diplomats. When the war was being planned, I had not openly opposed it – it was clear that the policy of sanctions in place since 1990 was killing the country. Sanctions were, in the words of a veteran United Nations official, a form of genocide. Far from weakening the regime of Saddam Hussein, they were strengthening him. Something had to change, and I felt the war would be over very quickly. That was true, but having been in Bagdad in 2003 it was clear the Anglo-Americans had no idea how to put the country back together again. The optimistic narratives built up by the Pentagon, the CIA and their favoured academics, and echoed by Britain's Labour government, turned out to be all worthless. Trust in government in Britain has yet to recover. I was based in Jerusalem at the time, and similarly became sceptical of the power of diplomatic activity which seemed geared more to managing problems than resolving them. I acquired a neuralgic response to the phrase 'peace plan'. Many Israel/Palestine peace plans came and went, but always lacking a mechanism to enforce the necessary element of justice.

What lead you to pursue a career in journalism? Did you study linguistics with such a career in mind and how did it prepare you?

The best journalists are often those who have failed at everything else. Take Max Hastings, former editor of the Daily Telegraph and the Evening Standard. The army did not want him – too undisciplined no doubt – and he became a war correspondent, at which he excelled. When I started, journalists were expected to be literate thugs rather than educated types. I scraped in to secure a Reuters traineeship thanks to international events. I had studied Russian at school – there was a 'thaw' in the Cold War at the time – and then studied Arabic and Persian. Russian was a requirement to work in the USSR – very few people spoke fluent English and you needed to be able to read between the lines of Pravda. I would not say the same for Arabic – very few British people reach fluency in Arabic, because educated people in the Arab world speak English too well, and getting to grips with the diversity of dialects and the elevated style of modern standard Arabic requires many years of hard slog. Still, at that time, after the oil price shock of the 1970s, Reuters thought it needed Arabic speakers. In any case, anyone going into an international career (and other people too) should learn a foreign language, if only to exercise the brain, understand more about their own language and as a courtesy to their hosts abroad. But there is no getting away from the fact that Germans are learning English from the age of 8 or even earlier because their parents know they need it to get on in the world. Their English is always going to be better than a British person's German. But that should not stop the Anglo-Saxons having a foreign language.

During the course of your career in journalism, you have experienced expulsion from two countries, Russia and Iran. In your view, to what extent does fear of expulsion or other consequences limit the activities of journalists operating between countries? How far have technological changes, particularly in relation to conducting long-distance interviews, overcome this challenge?

In Iran I wrote something ill-considered which was interpreted as insulting a martyr of the revolution and was subsequently used by the mullahs as an excuse to close down the Reuters bureau. Setting aside my juvenile mistake, the temptation for a resident correspondent to self-censor for fear of being expelled is undeniable. To be kicked out is to lose interesting work that may have required learning a difficult language and, harshest of all, returning to the newsroom. There are many examples of self-censorship, most notably in the Soviet Union under Stalin in the 1930s when a series of foreign correspondents waited to write what they knew until they had left the country. The calculus has changed now.

The internet and worldwide encrypted communications mean that scoops from Russia tend not to be worked up by the resident correspondent. It was Belling Cat, the Netherlands-based online investigation team, that revealed the identities of the poisoners of Sergei Skripal in Salisbury in 2018 and of the team that tried to murder the Russian opposition figure, Alexei Navalny. This was done at distance, with local technical and journalistic help, and the deployment of some bitcoin to purchase information from data brokers. Not the core skills of the foreign correspondent. Ironically these days, with fakery clogging news feeds, one of the key roles of a resident foreign correspondent is to tell the news desk that the story they want written is rubbish and that they should not touch it.

You have recently edited your final issue of the The World Today, after nearly a decade in the role. A key topic covered in this issue is the UK government's 'Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy'. In terms of the debate surrounding Britain's role in the world, to what extent does the Integrated Review represent a coherent shift in orientation from Europe to the Indo-Pacific region?

The key word here is coherent. Governments far and wide are focusing on this region as the new cockpit of the world, just as Europe was in the 20th century. Even NATO is expressing alarm at the 'shocking' rate of China's military modernisation, to demonstrate to the United States that it is on board with the new challenge. The problem for Britain is that it is a country still finding its way after the decision to leave the European Union, while under the leadership of a prime minister who likes to say yes without looking too closely at the detail. The result is stronger on slogans – such as 'Global Britain' – than on strategic coherence. Given the ructions of Brexit and Covid, it is perhaps unfair to ask for oven-ready strategies at this stage. But Britain's armed forces are now so reduced in size compared to America's that Washington has been lowering its expectations of what tasks its ally can perform. It should also be remembered that the Indo-Pacific shift is often seen in Britain as a reversal of its 1971 retreat from 'East of Suez'. That policy was a dramatic example of the former imperial power's declining global ambitions, resulting in the need to find an alternative in membership of the European Economic Community (EEC). It should be remembered that both

choices – withdrawal from East of Suez and joining the EEC, as the European Union was then known – were driven by financial pressures, which may turn out to be decisive in shaping policy once more.

Another key topic that has featured in The World Today is that of the renewed commitment of the United States, under the Biden-Harris administration, to combat climate change. Over the longer term, how realistic do you think it is to expect that the signatories of the Paris Agreement on climate change will live up to their commitments?

The Biden administration lost no time in making clear its commitment to addressing global warming by appointing John Kerry as special envoy on climate change during its first week in office. The haste to make progress is admirable, but it reveals a longer-term uncertainty. The US electoral cycle never stops, and it is quite possible that next year the Democrats could lose control of Congress, which would hamstring the Biden agenda. John Kerry is a dogged negotiator and one of the architects of the Paris climate change agreement but that does not guarantee success: as Secretary of State, he also invested a lot of time and energy is pursuing a doomed Middle East peace agreement. There are surely some positive signs in US politics, notably the presence of younger Republican politicians who take climate change seriously, but their time is not yet, given that Donald Trump can still seem able to pull the party's strings. Optimists point to US cities taking action to address climate change that the federal government has not been able to do, but these initiatives are easily stymied by fossil fuel interests which argue that natural gas, a potent contributor to global warming despite its 'natural' brand, is a clean fuel. Internationally, the key issue is China. Only with the US and China working together is there a realistic prospect of global progress towards meeting the Paris commitments. But with China now seen in Washington as an adversary, any partnership will always be liable to be unsettled by events such as the crackdown on Hong Kong, the threats to Taiwan and the treatment of the Uighur minority. If the Paris commitments are to be met, it will require huge amounts of political will and focused diplomacy, and maybe the time when the US could click its fingers and the rest of the world would salute has passed.

Looking back at your time as editor of The World Today, what was the most significant challenge you encountered during this role? What sort of challenges and opportunities do you expect the publication will have to contend with in the decade ahead?

The magazine was first published in 1945 with the aim of broadening debate on foreign affairs beyond diplomatic professionals and so prevent another world war. That objective still holds good. We aim to publish the most accessible content produced by Chatham House and to reach, in addition to the institute's core audience, a younger readership as well. The magazine is artfully illustrated and as free of jargon as we can make it. So far so clear. The question is how a publication which comes out six times a year can achieve these goals in a fast-moving news environment led by social media. A part of the answer is segmentation. The World Today has been publishing more topical pieces online between the publication of the magazine, when the more reflective articles appear. So the magazine reader gets a satisfying immersive experience in print, while the website is kept fresh between issues.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

As an outsider with zero academic credibility, I hesitate to give advice to scholars of International Relations. All I would say is that if you want to reach an audience beyond your area of speciality, you need to step outside the academic lexicon and ask yourself: how can I tell a person who is interested, but not an expert, something they did not know and wished they had known?