

## **Punching above our weight – the changing role of Britain in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Natalie Samarasinghe, Executive Director UNA-UK, remarks at GlobalNet21 event on 25 March 2014 at the House of Commons

---

I am delighted to be here today with GlobalNet21, my fellow panellists and with you all to discuss the changing role of Britain in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

What is Britain's role in today's world? This question will be the main focus for much of our work at the United Nations Association over the next 12 months.

On 28 June we will be hosting an event at Central Hall Westminster to explore this question in more detail: can Britain still cut it on the world stage? Where does British power and influence lie? What approach should it take to global crises? What principles should underpin British foreign policy? I hope you will all join us to continue today's discussions.

This is a good time for us to reflect on Britain's role in the world.

In the coming months, the UK will gear up for a general election; Scotland will hold a referendum and there will be another Strategic Defence and Security Review. At the international level, 2015 has been set as the deadline for major agreements on international development and on climate change. States will also review the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and assess progress on gender equality - 20 years after the UN set out its major action plan for women. In 2015, the UN will also mark its 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary. A decade on from the last major reform push, this is a timely opportunity to look at whether our international machinery is still fit for purpose.

These activities alone make for a packed foreign policy agenda. But they are not occurring in a vacuum. The past few years have seen a rapid succession of events with global repercussions, from the financial crisis to unrest across the Middle East and North Africa. The threat of conflict between big powers – which had seemed increasingly remote after the end of the Cold War – now feels much more real, with events in Crimea and tensions between Japan and China.

Unfortunately, at a time when so many issues need urgent attention, many states are increasingly reluctant to look outwards. Across the world, leaders are struggling to balance economic recovery with political stability, and freedoms with security. The sheer scale and pace of developments seems to have put governments on the back foot. Struggling to catch up, they either opt for inaction or act in haste.

Together, these factors have produced a severe deficit in leadership. The world is not only more multipolar. It is also more polarised. So what does this mean for Britain? What role can and should it play?

We often speak about Britain punching above its weight. The country's influence has changed considerably over the past 100 years. But by most measures - wealth, trade, firepower - Britain is still a powerful country. British influence has always been a combination of soft and hard power. Today, the balance between the two may have shifted, but Britain continues to enjoy a unique position in global affairs.

A crucial aspect of this is its membership of the various bodies and groups that make up the international community. It has a seat at the top table at the UN Security Council. It is a key player in the EU and in the Commonwealth. It is also a major aid donor and is respected for its skills in diplomacy.

So we at UNA-UK believe that the UK should play an active role on the world stage, and that it has the means to do so, as a leader, an example and a convenor. In terms of leadership, the UK has demonstrated on many occasions that it can use its

influence to put issues on the table. The Foreign Secretary's Preventing Sexual Violence initiative is just one issue where it has done so.

The UK can also lead by example. One area where we think it could do more is UN Peacekeeping. At the moment, although the UK is one of the top financial contributors to UN peacekeeping and heavily involved in created peacekeeping mandates, it has very limited involvement in the practical side of peacekeeping. It could do much more to share its expertise, provide training and strategic advice.

In terms of setting a good example, there are two areas where the UK could exert more influence. Firstly, it should make every effort to multiply its efforts internationally. The UK's push for aid effectiveness at the UN was a commendable exercise with useful outcomes. But its impact will be limited if it does not coordinate more with other donors. Secondly, the UK must ensure that it is walking the talk. The UK grounds its positions on other countries in international law. Its influence is strengthened immeasurably when it abides by its own obligations, and when it is responsive to UN mechanisms as well as to its own civil society, whether that is investigating allegations of complicity in torture and rendition, or adopting a measured tone when responding to issues raised by UN special rapporteurs.

And finally, the UK could play a greater convening role, bringing together the various constituencies it is a part of to forge solutions. This includes encouraging change from within – such as in the UN Security Council.

The next 12 to 18 months present a real opportunity for the UK to articulate a coherent foreign policy at home, and to adopt a progressive stance on global issues. It should use this time to ensure it has the right mix of hard and soft power approaches, and to ensure that its policies match the threats it is likely to face.

Successive UK governments have supported the establishment bodies like the UN, and treaties like the European Convention on Human Rights, because they believed that these systems and structures would increase Britain's influence. Having created much of the international system, Britain is, unsurprisingly, better than many others at navigating it.

It should use the opportunities these systems and networks present to secure positive outcomes for itself and for the world.