In a global environment where states remain key decision-makers notwithstanding the spread of interdependence and the growing salience of non-state actors, the UK will continue to play a leadership role in world politics and in shaping the international environment in the years to come. It will have to adapt its projection and resources to reflect its decline, a process the country already underwent through the loss of empire, and will thus have to negotiate its global roles with other international players, but devising and implementing foreign policy will continue to be a key function of national government.

This, in a nutshell, is the core argument of Jamie Gaskarth’s 2013 analysis of British Foreign Policy. To an extent, the argument is less interesting than the book itself. A broad and ambitious endeavour, theoretically solid and empirically rich, Gaskarth’s work certainly merits to be included in any reading list on British politics in general, not just foreign policy. Furthermore, it would be inspiring to scholars of the foreign policies of other countries, such as France and Germany. In short, it is a rewarding book which offers interpretations of recent history and politics which are of interest beyond the topic in itself.

Firmly embedded in Foreign Policy Analysis, the author offers a synthesis of the literature on systemic change, globalisation, regionalism, and the rise of non-state actors. While recognising the salience of these trends, the analysis rests on the assumption that states and their governments remain principal agents of foreign policy, and thus a key subject in order to understand international life. The book explores British foreign policy and how it has changed during the past decades. The timeframe focuses mostly on the period from the 1990s onwards, offering interesting remarks on the end of the Thatcher era, through to the internationally activist years under New Labour, up to the first years of the Tory-Liberal Democratic coalition government during 2010-2012. There are also plenty of incursions into the past, placing British foreign policy in a broader historical context and tying the UK’s international relations to the evolution of the British sense of identity.

The first chapters offer a political and social background to foreign policymaking, with useful dissections of institutional models through which decisions are taken, highlighting also different governing styles of Prime Ministers and Foreign Secretaries. The role of identity in foreign policy also merits a chapter, arguing that identity performs a series of important functions in foreign policy by providing ontological security to the community, helping define what identity is to be represented...
abroad, shaping the logic of international behaviour, thus helping policy-makers take
decisions, and by locating Britain’s role in the international community.

On this basis, the second half of the book examines how successive governments
constructed foreign policy by focusing on three stimulating contexts: ethical, military
and economic. This choice of themes allows the author to address controversial issues,
such as military intervention, responsibility to protect, arms sales, the promotion of
commercial interests, defence budget cuts, and British membership of international
and regional organisations.

The balance between theory and empirical material is possibly the most
outstanding feature of the book. Each chapter can stand alone theoretically, and
is written in an accessible style with indications for further reading useful for the
less expert reader. Empirical material ranges from official documents and reports,
statistical and empirical data giving material substantiation to notions of what it
means to be a ‘trading nation’, speeches and quotations from political actors tying
foreign policy choices to personalities and narratives, and numerous interviews with
practitioners in key positions.

In his analysis of Britain’s role in the world (in chapter 5), the author notes a
striking feature. Despite many controversial foreign policy choices, most notably the
military intervention in Iraq, and deepening internal fractures, which can be ascribed
largely to growing wealth disparities and internal cultural diversity, there has been
relatively little dissent on what remains, in Gaskarth’s view, an elite driven foreign
policy. The role of identity provides a powerful explanation for the absence, so far, of
such divisive politics. British foreign policy is not shaped merely by material factors
but by identities and responsibilities derived from multiple institutional memberships
of international and regional organisations.

Gaskarth places the agency of the government choices in a context which
is shaped and influenced by the roles and identities derived from institutional
membership – the UN Security Council, the Commonwealth, NATO, the European
Union. A theoretical narrative explains the roles these institutional memberships
play in shaping the choices made in London. However, there are two areas which
could have warranted further elaboration.

First of all, institutional membership is treated in abstract terms, with no attempt
to evaluate the relative weight of each membership. After all, each of the institutions
referred to are important and reflect particular global roles the UK has played as
a world Power, former empire, key security and defence actor, and member of
the largest world market and most integrated regional organisation. Each of these
institutions constrains and empowers the UK’s foreign policy in different ways, and
the book would have benefited from a more thorough treatment of this aspect. The
research carried out in the book does not investigate whether and how any of these
institutional roles influenced British positions in practice.

Secondly, what is particularly striking is the near absence of the role of the EU
in shaping, constraining or enabling national foreign policy choices. The EU is just
mentioned in constraining the UK’s trade preferences alongside the WTO, but does
not receive a mention even when discussing policies in which Brussels does have a
role to play, or in which cooperation with other European states is a regular event.
This follows the author’s starting points about the primacy of states and governments
even in an age of interdependence. Indeed, on foreign and security matters the EU
remains an intergovernmental organisation in which states – and Britain particularly – often hamper the formation of common positions.

Yet after over two decades of cooperation on Common Foreign and Security Policy, there are a few areas in which European capitals do consult with each other and that interaction shapes national positions. For instance the EU now regularly coordinates European sanctions’ policies even outside the UN framework. The UK, France and Germany (and the US, Russia and China) let the EU’s diplomatic service lead the preparatory negotiations which led to the ground-breaking agreement with Iran. And when the UK falls out of line, thus preventing a common EU position, it frequently follows a consultation with its EU partners, for instance when the UK and France decided to interrupt the arms embargo to Syria in order to arm some rebel groups there. In other words, the EU does represent an institutional context in which even UK policy is shaped – or against which UK policy is shaped. This aspect seems underestimated in the book. This appears to reflect Gaskarth’s view that multilateralism should not be overestimated, as policy “continues to be made and implemented hierarchically by the state” (p. 39). Foreign policy is influenced by other actors and trends, but decisions are still in the hands of the government.

Understanding the impact and relative weight of European integration would shed light on how and to what extent national governments do retain control over policy. Most importantly, the relative weight of the EU vis-à-vis other institutional relationships would also merit greater attention. A recent Chatham House report, for instance, argues that Europe has become an ‘inner circle’ for Britain despite the resistance of its political decision-makers to recognise and invest in that relationship. Gaskarth’s preference seems to be to treat the EU as one of many circles influencing British foreign policy. One may infer that, seen from London and through the prism of national foreign policy making, the EU by and large plays a minor role. NATO too seems to have little role in the case studies despite the analyses of British military interventionism conducted in the framework of NATO – Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Libya. The UNSC, the various G-7 or G-20 formats, and the IMF conversely get more attention.

This critique does not take away from the overall value of the book; but it would have been enlightening to include a couple of cases in which key alliances such as the EU and NATO are examined to ascertain their relative weight vis-à-vis British autonomy in shaping its foreign policy.

Domestic political dynamics also feature quite prominently, in the form of an analysis of the decision-making system and practices in the UK, including from historical and institutional perspectives. The author mentions some of the current challenges to British foreign policy, most significantly to the Union through the Scottish independence movement, but also sketches the challenges to foreign policy by a multicultural society in which controversial international decisions have led to dissent. British participation in the Iraq war and its consequences (on the British left, on British Muslims, and in trust in British institutions) is one critical recent case. As pointed out above, the role of identity is seen as the glue which so far has ensured that dissent and societal change would not undermine the government’s ability to pursue a foreign policy agenda.

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1 Robin Niblett, ‘Britain, Europe and the world. Rethinking the UK’s Circles of Influence’, London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, October 2015.
It would be interesting to know how the author, with the benefit of hindsight from 2015, would treat the debate on British membership of the EU, which has heated up considerably since the book was published in 2013, the role of Euroscepticism across all political parties in influencing government policy, and the consequences of this malaise on the unity of the UK. Extending the logic of the analytical structure of the book would lead one to conclude the EU referendum is likely to be little more than a distraction, in light of the UK’s proven ability to play a global role. This may well be how this debate will be treated in the history textbooks of the future. Even so, the current political debate raises questions about the role of identity and whether such identity is changing to an extent that it can no longer be seen as one of the factors enabling British foreign policy.