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Report

British Foreign Policy and the 2017 General Election

*Chris Doyle**

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UK Parliament approves June 8 general election [Reuters]

Abstract

A surprise British general election was called on the basis of the major British foreign policy issue of the day, Brexit, but as yet, foreign policy has barely figured as an issue. This is remarkable given that the shape of Britain's future place in the world is at stake.

Introduction

The shock that resounded around the United Kingdom on 18 April when Prime Minister Theresa May called an early general election was extraordinary. At face value, there was a strong case given that her Conservative party was 21 points ahead in the polls⁽¹⁾ and its primary opposition, the Labour party, was in free fall. May had relentlessly denied for months that she would risk such an early election and proclaimed at every chance she would last a full term of five years. That she and her intimate close circle of advisers kept this such a closely guarded secret was an impressive feat that previous British administrations typically would have failed to do. Even senior cabinet colleagues were inly informed just before her announcement.

This could allow May the next five years with a sizeable majority, assuming the polls are right, to push through the sort of Brexit deal that she wants. A decent majority in the House of Commons would give her the ability to ignore the more fringe elements in her Parliamentary party who could hold her to ransom when her majority was just a mere 17. Theresa May's team have worked hard to get her supporters into the available winnable seats.

By holding elections on 8 June 2017, it also means that the next elections would be held in theory when a deal with the EU had been signed and sealed, and Brexit complete. A

2020 election could have been a distraction at the most sensitive period of a trade negotiation with the EU.

The polls have not proved reliable in recent times yet the stand out feature has been the dominance of the two main parties and the failure of the others to progress. The far-right party UKIP vote collapsed in the May local elections, possibly because many voters saw it as a single-issue party, namely leaving the EU. Opponents of the Conservatives claim that it is because the Conservatives have tried to steal UKIP's thunder by adopting their policies. The Liberal Democrats are barely bettering the derisory 8% vote share that they got in their drubbing of 2015. Many are surprised given that they are the only party in England committed to overturning the referendum result. The Scottish National Party is facing an unusual battle, in that it is the Tories not Labour in Scotland who form their primary opponents. The SNP cannot realistically expect to get the 56 out of 59 seats they did two years ago.

Is this election about Brexit?

This is meant to be an election over Brexit, the manner of leaving the EU. Yet frequently the feedback from doorstep canvassers and activists is that Brexit is not an issue that is raised. Discussion over Europe in fact is limited.

There are various possible reasons for this. Firstly, there is no realistic chance that the decision to exit will be overturned. This is not on offer from either the Conservatives nor Labour. The option is there to vote for the Liberal Democrats who would but they admit they have no chance of victory or even getting into a coalition again. Secondly, Theresa May will not reveal her negotiating hand conscious that this will weaken her position in the forthcoming talks that commence 11 days after the elections. Thirdly, the Labour party could not coalesce around a single strong position that could have put the Prime Minister on the defensive. Yet Brexit will matter in this election not for the specifics but for the quality and type of leadership on offer. The overseers of the May election campaign had their reasons for over repeating "strong and stable leadership." In times of uncertainty this is what much of the British electorate is looking for, and polls suggest overwhelmingly it is May not Jeremy Corbyn, the Labour party leader, who they believe provides it. Her dour managerial style and tough aura compensates for the apparent lack of charisma. Moreover, in England and Wales 421 out of the 574 constituencies voted to leave the EU. The polls indicate that the Conservatives are more trusted to handle Brexit more effectively.

Nobody foresaw Brexit in Westminster and there were no contingency plans for it. The last twelve months have been an emergency rush to flesh out a strategy under intense pressure and scrutiny, conditions far from conducive to a successful transition away from the EU. Britain remains a member of a variety of core alliances such as NATO, the

Commonwealth, the G7 and the five eyes intelligence sharing network, yet exactly where it stands in the global hierarchy is very much at stake.

A massive Conservative majority is obtainable according to the polls. This would allow May as close to a free hand as she could dream of in the negotiations with the EU. Even a majority of 50 would give her considerable leeway. Less than that and the hardliners in the party on both sides start seeing their influence and currency increase, able to hold her hostage. The future of various Cabinet Ministers, not least Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, may well depend on how empowered May feels. Johnson is cut from a very different cloth and is arguably her chief rival and lightning rod for backbench criticism. Sacking him may be appealing not least given his gaffe-prone political career, but keeping your enemies close or travelling in faraway lands may be an attractive proposition.

What is not clear is whether the election result will make any difference to the positions of the EU parties. Even if the Prime Minister enters the talks with a huge mandate, it is dubious as some believe that this will weaken the EU hand at all. At best, it may encourage the belief that if a divorce deal and a free trade deal are signed, that May could deliver Parliament.

What changes to other aspects of the British foreign policy?

Will this electoral exercise change the dynamics of British foreign policy? The answer is probably not noticeably. Assuming the polls are accurate, it will be a Conservative government under Theresa May. A hard Brexit will ensue where Britain will not be part of the single market. A divorce deal with the EU may prove very tough not least because of the poor atmospherics between the negotiating parties. Theresa May outraged many in Brussels by accusing the EU Commission of interfering in the British elections.

Much of this may be pre-talks sabre rattling. As the talks progress, all sides know a properly worked out deal is far preferable to none, and that a free trade agreement is ultimately to the economic advantage of all.

What is left is a series of bland statements about global Britain, intended to demonstrate that a Conservative government will not be isolationist and inward-looking. Trade is at the epicenter of this approach. "We will be the world's foremost champion of free trade," proclaims the Conservative manifesto.⁽²⁾

The future of overseas military interventions

A year ago, the foreign policy debate included issues such as the Chilcot report into the Iraq war of 2003. This sadly is no longer debated, so discussion on if, when, and how to intervene overseas has been limited. Back in January May had declared that "the days of Britain and America intervening in sovereign countries in an attempt to remake the world in our own image are over."⁽³⁾ Nevertheless, were the Conservatives to achieve the sizeable majority May craves, a vote to authorise strikes in support of the United States against Syrian regime targets has not been ruled out. The aim would be to give the government the freedom to act without waiting for a further vote in Parliament. Opponents jumped on this admission. The Shadow Foreign Secretary, Emily Thornberry, claimed that to "follow Donald Trump's lead with blind loyalty, no matter where it takes us, and no matter what our other allies think."⁽⁴⁾ Perhaps the most serious opposition to any intervention will come from fellow Conservative politicians, some of whom actively oppose expanding British military engagement.

The future of the UK-US relationship

Incredibly perhaps, the future relationship with the US appears so far not to be a major issue in this British election at all. Theresa May received considerable domestic criticism for appearing to rush to the court of King Donald within days of his inauguration in what many saw as paying homage. That she extended an invitation to President Trump for a state visit later this year rubbed salt in the wounds. The new US President is not widely respected in British political circles let alone by the public but the realists understand that Trump cannot be ignored. None of this was helped by the multiple leaks from US intelligence circles to the American media about sensitive details of the Manchester bombing. Jeremy Corbyn has tried proclaiming that "pandering to an erratic administration will not deliver stability."⁽⁵⁾ A similar warning was issued in a report by an eminent cross-party select committee of the House of Lords in May, claiming that President Trump "has the potential to destabilise further the region."⁽⁶⁾

Middle East policy?

There has been limited to zero debate on key Middle East issues such as Iran, Syria, Libya, Yemen and Palestine. Few votes will be decided on these but a gulf exists once again between the parties. Corbyn would advance dialogue and relations with Iran, whilst shrinking reliance on the Gulf states and suspending weapons sales to Saudi Arabia. Neither party has a coherent position on Syria if this means a strategy to end the conflict and rebuild the devastated state. On Palestine, May has adopted an extremely anti-Palestinian position, and insists that Britain will celebrate the 100th anniversary of Balfour with pride. Corbyn has been a long-term supporter of Palestinian rights, and Labour has committed itself to recognizing a Palestinian state.

The Manchester bombing

The bombing in Manchester on 22 May paused the whole election for three days but refocused debate on foreign policy, on counter-extremism and to what extent British foreign policy failures were to blame. Jeremy Corbyn insists that foreign policy failures are an issue. "Regime change wars in Afghanistan Iraq, Libya, and Syria – and Western interventions in Afghanistan, Somalia and Yemen - have failed in their own terms, and made the world a more dangerous place."⁽⁷⁾ His opponents laid into this argument, the Prime Minister accusing Corbyn of making an "excuse for terrorism."⁽⁸⁾

In theory security and counter terrorism should play into Theresa May's hands. She was Home Secretary for six years and seen as a hardliner on such issues. Yet Jeremy Corbyn's consistent and principled opposition to all the wars of the 21st century may carry weight given the devastating impact that followed in their wake.

Conclusion

What is clear is that these elections that started as a debate on the scale of a Conservative landslide have changed, with the Labour party a mere five points behind in polls on 26 May.⁽⁹⁾ Theresa May still has the edge in terms of perceived leadership over her opponents but in policy terms, the two main parties are offering hugely contrasting approaches to the world even if both uncertain and confused. The Conservatives tout a hard Brexit but with little to no public strategy as to how this is to be achieved and what it means for Britain. The Labour party position is even more opaque on Europe.

Foreign policy decisions will not be driven by these elections where debate on the key international crises is minimal. Little may be learnt over the 60-day period. More likely it will be determined by events and circumstances, by the exigencies of Brexit, trade and security. The absence of any major policy debate means that Britain will main reactive and less prepared to engage effectively in developing the vital solutions to dangerous global crises.

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*Chris Doyle is the Director of CAABU (Council for Arab-British Understanding).

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