The Prospective Foreign Policy of a Corbyn Government and its U.S. National Security Implications

DR. AZEEM IBRAHIM
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Dr. Azeem Ibrahim is a Research Professor at the Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College and member of the Board of Directors at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence at the Department of War Studies at Kings College London University. He received his PhD from the University of Cambridge after which he completed fellowships at the universities of Oxford, Harvard and Yale.


Outside academia, Dr. Ibrahim has been a reservist in the IV Battalion Parachute Regiment and an award-winning entrepreneur. He was ranked as a Top 100 Global Thinker by the European Social Think Tank in 2010 and named a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum.
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Dr. Azeem Ibrahim has developed a well-deserved reputation as a thoughtful analyst of the threats and challenges facing modern society.

His study of Jeremy Corbyn’s foreign policy beliefs and prejudices will add to that reputation and deserves to be read by all those interested in, and concerned by, contemporary political developments in the United Kingdom. Dr. Ibrahim not only offers his own views and conclusions but backs them up with copious factual extracts from Corbyn’s own statements, speeches, and actions over many years, during a time when he must have had little expectation of taking leadership of the Labour Party and being seen as a potential prime minister.

Dr. Ibrahim demonstrates how Corbyn’s worldview is warped and lacks any ethical foundation. He provides numerous illustrations indicating that Corbyn has no belief in universal human rights and is prepared to excuse atrocities and persecution if they are carried out by governments he approves of, such as Maduro’s Venezuela or Putin’s Russia.

He concludes that Corbyn, if he were to obtain power, would do grave damage not only to the United Kingdom and the West but to the cause of democracy and liberal values throughout the world.

Dr. Ibrahim acknowledges that if Corbyn became the UK’s prime minister there would be serious limits on his power to deliver the kind of foreign policy he believes in. A substantial majority of Labour members of Parliament would disagree with any attempt to take Britain out of NATO and would not share any enthusiasm for tolerating the Kremlin’s aggression in Ukraine.

It is also highly unlikely that any Corbyn-led government would have a majority in the House of Commons, and it would thus need the support of at least some opposition MPs to win votes in Parliament.

However, President Trump has shown how much can be done simply by a combination of tweets, speeches, and executive orders. That is how he has pursued much of his policy on international trade, on climate change, on China, and on Russia.

Corbyn as prime minister would have little of the global power of a US president, but serious damage he could do. His speeches and statements would be reported throughout the world and bring comfort to unpleasant regimes in Moscow, Caracas, Tehran, and Beijing. He could also weaken the UK’s impressive intelligence agencies by depriving them of funds and ordering them to change their investigative priorities.

Azeem Ibrahim has a distinguished academic background. His report should be read in the White House and the State Department and in other capitals. Hopefully, it will be read in the United Kingdom as well and help ensure that Corbyn is never entrusted with power.

Sir Malcolm Rifkind was a Minister at the UK Foreign Office from 1982-86. He then served as Defense Secretary from 1992-95 and as Foreign Secretary from 1995-97. From 2010-15 he served as Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee, with oversight of the UK’s intelligence agencies.

He is a Visiting Professor at the Department of War Studies, Kings College, London.
ACRONYMS AND NAMES

The information below provides a short list of individuals and groups mentioned in the paper who may not be immediately recognizable to readers.

ACRONYMS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initials</th>
<th>Title</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AAM</td>
<td>Anti-Apartheid Movement</td>
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<tr>
<td>CND</td>
<td>Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPB</td>
<td>Communist Party of Britain (successor to the CPGB)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPGB</td>
<td>Communist Party of Great Britain</td>
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<tr>
<td>EC</td>
<td>European Community</td>
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<tr>
<td>EEC</td>
<td>European Economic Community</td>
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<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>IRA</td>
<td>Irish Republican Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KLA</td>
<td>Kosovo Liberation Army</td>
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<tr>
<td>NATO</td>
<td>North Atlantic Treaty Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>OPCW</td>
<td>Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons</td>
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<tr>
<td>PCE</td>
<td>Communist Party of Spain</td>
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<tr>
<td>PCI</td>
<td>Italian Communist Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>SDLP</td>
<td>Social Democratic and Labour Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>SNP</td>
<td>Scottish National Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWC</td>
<td>Stop the War Coalition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWP</td>
<td>Socialist Workers Party</td>
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INDIVIDUALS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tony Benn</td>
<td>A leading left-wing politician in the British Labour Party in the 1970s and 1980s. His supporters were often called Bennites.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seumas Milne</td>
<td>Jeremy Corbyn’s spokesman and influential advisor. Previously a member of the hard-line, pro-Soviet elements in the CPGB and has a long record of supporting Russian president Vladimir Putin’s actions, both within the former Soviet Union and more widely.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Len McCluskey</td>
<td>Leader of the British trade union Unite. Very influential over Corbyn, not least as Unite provides most of the funding for Corbyn’s private office and has provided him with a number of policy advisors who previously worked for the union.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Pilger</td>
<td>Australian journalist who made his reputation exposing the crimes of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. Now writes predictably anti-Western, anti-“imperialist” articles, often cited by Corbyn in support of his positions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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## POLITICAL MOVEMENTS AND GROUPS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Summary</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Tribune Group</td>
<td>A left-wing grouping in the British Labour Party, important from the early 1960s to the early 1980s, which lost influence after that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Left</td>
<td>An umbrella term for a wide spread of left-wing groups that emerged in the 1960s. Most had concerns about the USSR and tended to make anti-imperialism their core policy. Some were openly Trotskyist in their politics, others more eclectic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eurocommunism</td>
<td>The policy developed in the 1970s by the Italian and Spanish Communist Parties, which became very critical of the USSR and adopted a focus on universal human rights. Both parties backed opposition movements within the Warsaw Pact states.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scottish National Party</td>
<td>Now a broadly left-of-center party that argues for Scotland to be independent of the UK. On other electoral issues it has similar policies to the Labour Party, so the two are effectively competing for the same segment of the Scottish electorate, leading to strained relations between them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Democratic and Labour Party</td>
<td>The Northern Irish sister party of the Labour Party. Notionally supports the nonviolent unification of Ireland, and its MPs used to sit with (and vote for) the Labour Party in the UK House of Commons. It competes with Sinn Féin for the vote of the Catholic nationalist communities in Northern Ireland.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sinn Féin</td>
<td>The political wing of the Irish Republican Army (IRA). In the period from 1968 to 1991, its senior membership overlapped with that of the IRA. It contests UK parliamentary elections but refuses to send MPs to the House of Commons, as it believes the 1922 partition of Ireland to be illegal. In practical terms, it has come to supplant completely the SDLP in the voting preferences of the nationalist segment of Northern Ireland.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communist Party of Great Britain</td>
<td>Founded in 1920 and formally dissolved in 1991. By the 1970s, it was largely irrelevant in UK politics but remained important in some trade unions and in the type of organizations and campaigns set up by the wider British left at various times.</td>
</tr>
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Given the current state of UK politics, with the Conservative government focused almost exclusively on Brexit and the resulting electoral uncertainty, the likelihood of a government headed by Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn has increased substantially. The last UK-wide elections—in 2019, for the European Parliament—suggested that in England and Wales, the vote was spread relatively evenly across four political parties (in Scotland, the nationalist SNP dominated, meaning that each seat was contested by five main parties). In addition, with the “first past the post” electoral system, predictions of who might win a general election are problematic. The UK electoral system means the party with the largest number of votes in each constituency gains the seat in the House of Commons and it is feasible for a party with an overall lower share of the vote to win more seats than this would indicate depending on how evenly their votes are spread across the country. With two major parties, this is rarely a problem, with four (or five) more or less evenly sharing the vote, there is a real risk of an outcome (number of MPs) that is very different to the actual share of the votes.

On this basis, it is essential to consider what might be the foreign policy choices of a Corbyn government and how this might affect the United Kingdom’s allies, especially the United States. Corbyn seeks to present his foreign policy as one of support for the oppressed, of opposition to wars and invasions, and as an extension of former Labour foreign secretary Robin Cook’s “ethical” foreign policy. As this paper makes clear, this framing is deceptive—and consciously so. Corbyn has a long record of supporting human rights abusers, as long as they are, in his terms, on the right side, and opposed to U.S. or Western imperialism. Even his vaunted support for the Palestinians falls away when they are attacked by the Bashar al-Assad’s regime rather than Israel. Equally, while it is true that he would seek to end the UK’s current support for Saudi Arabia, he would simply replace it with support for Iran.

If a Corbyn foreign policy will not be an attempt to promote human rights and international cooperation over issues such as climate change, then what will it be? This paper argues that in Corbyn’s worldview, a small number of anti-imperialist states (Russia, Iran, Syria, Venezuela, and China) and a larger number of anti-imperialist movements (such as Hamas and Hezbollah) are threatened by the United States and the “West.” The latter is a rather amorphous concept but appears to include the major states and shared institutions of the post–World War II international order (including military alliances such as NATO and diplomatic and economic alliances such as the European Union). As shown below, Corbyn has tended to assume an automatically pro-Russian stance over a range of issues, including tensions within the former Soviet Union, Syria, and how the Vladimir Putin regime in Russia describes bodies such as NATO and the EU.

If Corbyn’s foreign policy is enacted, this suggests the Corbyn government will play a disruptive role. Some of this will be defended as a correction away from Saudi Arabia and Israel (but toward Iran instead). In other ways, his models of international politics and international trade mean he sees little value in multilateral organizations, so there will be another force pulling apart these long-standing alliances. This is not to argue that such bodies should be beyond criticism, or that they would not benefit from reform, but the key is that Corbyn has no interest in such nuances. These organizations support imperialism and capitalism and must, to use his own words, be defeated.

To explore these issues, this paper takes two approaches. First there is a consideration of the underpinnings and logic behind Corbyn’s view of international relations. That this largely focuses on the debates and disputes between relatively small sections of the British left in the late 1970s may be a surprise to some. However, the views held by Corbyn and his close advisors were all formed in this milieu, and to understand their likely future choices it is essential to explore the intellectual underpinnings. This is followed by brief discussions of Corbyn’s actual response to a number of international issues. These provide evidence for what his views actually mean in practice, and a number of themes recur:

1. He has a binary worldview, with imperialism and capitalism on one side and opposition to them on the other.
2. He condemns human rights abuses by those he sees as supporting imperialism but is dismissive of the abuses carried out by regimes he himself supports. He tends to see any domestic opponents of such regimes not as legitimate protesters but as agents of Western imperialism.

3. He identifies a number of states (such as Russia, Venezuela, Syria, Iran, and, sometimes, China) as the core anti-imperialist states and seems to believe they are constantly being threatened by the U.S. and the wider West.

4. There is never any nuance in his positions, so the messy, brutal civil war in Syria is reduced to an anti-imperialist Assad government struggling against jihadi and Western-sponsored opposition groups. Missing is any reflection of the peaceful initial revolt against Assad or why over 11 million people have been forced from their homes and many have fled the country.

5. The views of his advisors are very important and there are important issues where it is clear they have led him to change his position as a result of their influence. With Putin, Corbyn was initially critical but has increasingly come to support the regime and repeat its arguments. Over nuclear disarmament, he has moved from lifelong opposition to the UK possessing nuclear weapons to support for renewal of the UK’s Trident missile system. If we are to understand how Corbyn will frame a given issue, we need to understand the likely views of his close associates.

In turn, this offers insights into the likely foreign policy of a Corbyn-led government:

1. In economic terms, he will support a degree of autarky and the UK’s removal from the world economy so he can carry out his desired economic reforms.

2. In terms of international organizations, we can assume the UK will withdraw from the EU (despite opposition from most of the Labour Party) and will play a negative role in organizations such as NATO, the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. Outright withdrawal from all these bodies is unlikely due to opposition both within the Labour Party and elsewhere in the British political system.

3. We will see a clear break with the traditional Western preferences for Israel and Saudi Arabia in Middle Eastern policymaking. This may be a much-needed rebalancing, but, in reality, it will be replaced by close support for Iran.

4. We can expect a greater tolerance for the Putin regime’s actions and worldview, and presumably, backing for Russian actions in Ukraine and possibly other former Soviet republics.

How far any of this can be converted from rhetoric to practical action is debatable. There are constraints within the British political system and, in reality, these positions lack majority support among Labour Party members of Parliament. But even if it remains rhetorical, it will represent a major shift in UK foreign policy. And even if the change is limited to the words used, the U.S. will find a Corbyn-led government’s choices and attitudes a major departure from the UK’s traditional views.

The implications for security and possible military cooperation are substantial. Some of Corbyn’s close advisors were long-term supporters of the USSR and seem to have decided that Putin’s Russia is an acceptable successor. Here, they may not be able to implement an active policy change (toward open support for Russia or Iran), but they can be expected to act to stop any attempts to challenge Russian expansionism. In addition, in the sharing of security information, the UK government will cease to be a reliable partner. Again, the practical issue is less that a Corbyn-led government would actively side with Russia (or its allies) and more that it might block or undermine any actions it sees as inimical to Putin’s interests.

In light of the above, it would be prudent for the U.S. national security establishment to give serious consideration to downgrading or even suspending a Corbyn-led government from the Five Eyes intelligence alliance and temporarily demoting its NATO membership. There is a serious risk that any information passed to either Corbyn or his close allies could be compromised, especially if it involves Russia or Iran.
INTRODUCTION

This paper considers what a Labour government in the UK led by Jeremy Corbyn might mean in terms of international relations and U.S. national security. It starts from a consideration of the ideas that have informed his worldview and then looks at how he has responded to events over the last two decades. The final section looks at how his responses reflect his theoretical underpinnings and what might be the practical implications for UK foreign policy and, by extension, U.S. national security.

Corbyn’s view of international relations closely follows the debates and disagreements of a very small section of British politics from the late 1970s—within the Labour Party the ideas of the Tribune Group and those MPs closely associated with Tony Benn; the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB); and what can be clustered together as the New Left (a spread of views developed by various Trotskyist groups and those who had no formal party identification). As we will see, there are important differences among these groups, but some themes emerge consistently. All had a preference for a model of economic relations that tended toward isolationism and autarky (for some this was seen as a needed response to weaknesses in the UK economy, to others it was a desirable outcome in its own right). This made them hostile to the European Economic Community (EEC), the forerunner of the current European Union (EU), both on economic grounds and because they believed it was a political project designed to support wider U.S. imperialism. In turn, all these groups tended to view specifically the U.S. (and, more generally, the “West”) as the root cause of all international problems and to align themselves with what were seen as anti-imperialist movements (even if they disagreed as to which movements met this criterion).

This had implications not just in orientation but in their approach toward human rights abuses. As we will see, they were willing, rightly, to expose and condemn such abuses by the U.S. or its client states, but this did not indicate any commitment to universal human rights. When a movement or state they supported carried out abuses, they either ignored them or carefully placed them into context—usually stating that the abuses were a response to some form of provocation or imperialist action.1
As this paper shows, in the main Corbyn closely reflects this mindset. There are states and movements he supports, and he is usually blind to their human rights abuses, even while he is prepared to criticize such actions by states he does not support. In effect, if your abuser is one of his supported regimes, then you have no rights and should have no expectations. So Corbyn, often rightly, has condemned this or that action by Israel toward the Palestinians but remains silent when Palestinians are massacred by the Assad regime. 2

Thus, to understand Corbyn’s approach to foreign policy, we have to revisit the debates and ideas of what was a very small spectrum of the British political process from the late 1970s and early 1980s. In no other modern setting do the divisions and analyses of groups that mostly no longer exist and that mostly had no mass appeal even at that stage, matter. This alone should be a warning about what his ideas will mean in practice and the extent to which they try to fit the global changes in the last forty years into a very narrow model.

Consequently, Corbyn’s model and practice for international relations are not particularly based on a theoretical development. 3 They more directly reflect whether regimes and movements are considered anti-imperialist. The group of anti-imperialists (states such as Iran, Syria, Russia, Cuba, and Venezuela) is deemed to be under threat by the “West,” which wants to overthrow them for all kinds of nefarious reasons. This is not a policy framework but more akin to the type of conspiracy theory that so often takes root within populist political movements. Supporters of this view tend not to want to deal with any facts but rather to obfuscate them. In particular, any crimes that are carried out by “anti-Western” states in their own geopolitical interests are to be supported, regardless of whether their own population, or those who live in the countries they have invaded or meddled in, might actually be opposed to these actions. In a number of instances—such as the wars in Syria and the former Yugoslavia and the current chaos in Venezuela—Corbyn seems uninterested in the messy details, preferring to deal in broad generalities. 4

The core of his beliefs is that if you are oppressed by an anti-imperialist state that he supports, then you have no rights. As a result, he has a consistent record of support for Serbia in the Balkan Wars (it was seen as socialist) 5 and for Assad in Syria (anti-imperialist), and supports the actions and interests of what are seen as the primary anti-imperialist states: Iran, Russia, and Venezuela. 6 In practice, this makes him every bit as cynical in his formulation of international relations as those he claims to see as callous, self-interested supporters of regimes such as Saudi Arabia.

This is not the ethical foreign policy of the Labour foreign secretary in the late 1990s, Robin Cook, redesigned and updated. It is a foreign policy that accommodates dictators, aligns with human rights abusers, and denies human rights to those who oppose these regimes. This is the key concern; it is not a nuanced critique of, say, liberal interventionism or other models of Western foreign policy—it takes the most cynical aspects of the latter but picks a different group of friendly states.

In addition to a deep suspicion of U.S. motives in Corbyn’s longtime policy circles—again not always incorrect—there is also an enduring suspicion of most post-1945 multilateral bodies. Thus, opposition to NATO was standard and shared even in those sections of the left that had concerns about the motives and actions of the USSR. Equally, the EEC was seen as a capitalist club and something to “defeat.” 7 There has usually been limited support for the UN, but this is selective, generally in an obstructive rather than affirmative way. When it comes to Syria, this has meant denying Russian involvement in some attacks, 8 and Corbyn did not accept Assad’s and Russia’s responsibility for an attack on a UN convoy until the UN had conducted an investigation. He also did not want to accept Russian responsibility for the Skripals’ poisoning in March 2018 until the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) had conducted its investigation. However, since it was completed (and supported the view of the UK government), Corbyn has been silent. Running through many of his speeches is an insistence on a state’s right to act as it sees fit domestically 9—if it is a state he supports. In many ways this is a return to a nation-state model of international relations, but his list of favored and rejected states is different from the list promoted by those on the right who tend to share this view of the international order. 10

In turn, U.S. officials can expect a very different response from the UK in respect of Russian actions, Middle East policy and more generally within various multinational bodies such as the UN and NATO. Some of these changes may reflect the mindset of the Trump administration and its greater tolerance for Putin’s regime and suspicion of international bodies. On the other hand, Corbyn’s pro-Iran, pro-Venezuela attitudes will provoke significant differences. Equally—though this is outside the scope of this paper—his domestic economic policy will be the total opposite of that promoted by the Trump administration. Even a Democratic administration, if it wins the 2020 elections, will find the UK has become a less predictable ally.

The final section of this paper considers what all this means. It clearly does not set the UK on a road toward an ethical foreign policy; instead it reshuffles the diplomatic pack. We could expect the UK under Corbyn to be less tolerant toward Saudi Arabia but instead turn a blind eye to the actions of Iran (both domestically and internationally). We can probably expect less engagement with the international bodies that regulate the world economy (admittedly not always very well). We can also probably predict what Corbyn will say on most issues, as he has a clear list of those he supports and those he opposes. How this can be turned into practical diplomacy or international economic relations is more opaque.
MODELS AND PRACTICE OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The use of a model or frame of reference to inform foreign policy is not unusual. Nor, unfortunately, is it rare for such a frame to lead to poorly judged decisions. The British state managed to create the disaster of Suez in 1956 using a model of its self-adopted imperial role and importance in the world. New Labour in the UK and the George W. Bush presidency in the U.S. used the model of liberal interventionism to justify the invasion and post-conflict management of Iraq. More recently, the belief that there is no formal international legal framework, so states must act in their perceived self-interest, has made a return—with predictable consequences.

Thus it is not, in the abstract, a problem that Corbyn and his advisors have a model of international affairs and use this to inform their decisions. The consequences can be severe, however, if such a model sometimes fails to generate an appropriate policy in a particular environment. The sensible question is, does it vary based on the circumstances? There is a case to argue that the Bill Clinton/New Labour foreign policy model worked in ending the conflicts in Yugoslavia and Sierra Leone even if it also informed the heavily criticized decision-making in Iraq.

CORBYN’S INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS FRAMEWORK AND ITS PRO-SOVIET INFLUENCES

Corbyn’s understanding of international relations can be best described as a combination of the New Left’s framing of international politics and a Bennite framing of international economic relations. Thus, opposition to Western “imperialism” tends to be his dominant
Opposition), he was happy to sponsor “early day motions” criticizing UK Parliament who has no formal role in the Government or the Opposition, he was happy to sponsor “early day motions” criticizing Putin’s wars in the Caucasus. Such motions are often used in the House of Commons by backbench MPs as a means to raise issues relevant to their own constituencies, to signal their opposition to an aspect of current political policy, or to raise an issue they feel is particularly important but is being overlooked. They almost never influence government policy, meaning that they are popular with those MPs who are on the fringes of their particular political group.

The contrast between this criticism and Corbyn’s current approach to the wars in Ukraine, annexation of Crimea, and use of chemical weapons in the UK is stark. This shift reflects the background of some of those around Corbyn who came from a pro-Soviet, Stalinist political tradition, and this has had a direct impact on his current set of international policies. It also reflects the deliberate choices by the Putin regime to stress the importance of the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany as a means to create a link back to the USSR and the extent that current regime generally presents a favorable view of Stalin in popular media.

Corbyn has managed to unite disparate strands of the UK left around him, in part because he offers them a route to influence but also because their old debates about the nature of the USSR, and about reform or revolution, have largely been rendered obsolete by events. Thus, the political and economic strategy of the CPGB (now the Communist Party of Britain, CPB) and the traditional interest of some of the Trotskyist movements in gaining a foothold in the mainstream Labour Party find renewed relevance with Corbyn in charge. Usefully, Corbyn leads a major political party and, at least for a while, seems to have support from people focused on pragmatic concerns such as austerity or tuition fees, allowing them to draw on a much wider electoral base than would ever be attracted to their own policies.

These varying elements came together in a British political campaign, the Stop the War Coalition (STWC), which emerged shortly after the 9/11 attacks on the U.S. It was founded by individuals with links to the CPB and the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party and supported by left-wing Labour MPs such as Corbyn. As such, it was a typical example of the type of organization set up by parts of the British far left to campaign on a specific issue. However, the substantial public opposition in the UK to the planned Iraq War briefly gave the group wider support and, by early 2003, it was able to mobilize over 1 million people to march in London and Glasgow.

Since then, the STWC has shed most of this wider support and returned to the type of arguments typical of the New Left’s interpretation of anti-imperialism. Contentiously, some senior members have indicated support for groups in Iraq (like al-Qaeda) attacking U.S. and UK forces, and backing for the Muammar al-Qaddafi regime in Libya from 2011 to 2012. Since 2012, the STWC has offered support for Assad in Syria. Corbyn remained a committed member even as the STWC reverted to the simplistic anti-imperialism of the New Left. In many ways, the intellectual strands in the STWC leadership encapsulate the core of Corbyn’s approach to international relations. Equally important, the ability to claim that he was right in opposing the war in Iraq allows Corbyn to claim that taking a similar anti-Western approach in every other situation is equally correct.

Thus, Corbyn’s model of international relations is one of anti-imperialism and support for states such as Russia, Iran, and Syria, combined with visceral dislike of Israel as the classic imperialist state. This “Zio-centric” worldview is one reason for the anti-Semitism that Corbyn’s Labour is riddled with, as anyone who is Jewish and fails to sufficiently renounce any support for Israel is by definition a supporter of imperialism. Yes, there is support for Palestine and the rights of Palestinians, but only when these are threatened by Israel. Massacres of Palestinians by Assad (both the current Syrian dictator and his father), when they are allied with the opposition in the Syrian civil war, are not condemned, and indeed, not even mentioned.

TRADITIONAL MODELS AND UNIVERSAL HUMAN RIGHTS

This framing by Corbyn is at variance with the more usual models of international relations. Very broadly, the main academic debates in traditional models of international relations have tended to be between how state-centric the international order really should be and the dispute over whether there are meaningful extra-national legal systems, the human rights/liberal interventionist model, and its more useful critics. The human rights model, in turn, has tended to cause a divide between those who believe it should sit at the center of any international order and those who believe it should replace the traditional interests of nation-states. The latter tend to argue that issues such as climate change and the growing international refugee crises need to be dealt with because these are now the real threats to the established states and their existing elites. The former draw on post–World War II decisions to enshrine the idea of universal human rights in the UN charter and related documents.

This was a response to the crimes of Nazi Germany (and its allies), Stalin’s Soviet Union, and the deliberate targeting of the wider civilian population by all the powers involved in the war. At its core, it sought to keep states from declaring that rights were possessed...
only by particular sections of their population (whether this distinction was made on the basis of ethnicity, religion, social class, political allegiance, or gender). However, the concept was rejected by the USSR (and in practice ignored by many states) on the grounds that such a framing of rights was based on liberal capitalist norms and not on the realities of social class and society.

Even if only the closest adherents of the USSR in the UK fully accepted this interpretation, the view that rights were inalienable was not widely accepted on the far left. A classic defense of the universalist tradition in human rights was written by Leszek Kolakowski in response to the British communist historian E. P. Thompson. Kolakowski noted that Thompson always had an explanation for any crime by the Soviet Union, seeing it as a product of excessive zeal or an unfortunate overreaction to Western pressure. On the other hand, similar acts by the U.S. and its allies were readily condemned, with no equivocation. Kolakowski wrote that when I say “double standards” I do not mean indulgence for the justifiable inexperience of the “new society” in coping with new problems. I mean the use, alternatively, of political or moral standards to similar situations and this I find unjustifiable. We must not be fervent moralists in some cases and Real-politikers or philosophers of world history in others, depending on political circumstances.

Models of international relations are useful; they can provide a tool for understanding and action, but they can always be flawed in application. Both the traditional “realist” models and those based around liberal interventionism have been criticized for their assumptions and their practical implications. However, simply saying you reject these models is not enough; what matters is what you intend to replace them with. This means we need to understand Corbyn’s model and consider the sort of actions and approaches to which it leads.

**INGLENTIAL STRANDS BEHIND CORBYN’S MODEL**

Corbyn’s model of international relations (and, critically, that of his advisors) can be traced to three strands that were relatively common on the British left from the 1960s to the 1980s. These have overlapping elements but also some key differences, and the strand that dominates may have significant implications in its practical policy application. The strands can be roughly grouped into the views of the Labour Party left, the CPGB, and the more fragmented “New Left.”

**FROM THE LABOUR LEFT**

One strand is drawn from the concepts of the Labour Party’s own left from the 1970s and 1980s. Practically, this is often associated with the leading politician Tony Benn. However, it can be more validly seen as the basic framework of a number of Labour politicians who were also part of the then-powerful Tribune Group. In international relations, this strand tended to support calls for nuclear disarmament (unilateral, if needed, by the UK). It called into question the motives and role of the U.S. but also criticized the Soviet Union, especially for human rights abuses and military adventurism. Of particular relevance, there were Labour MPs who supported some multilateral institutions, like the UN, but were often critical of bodies like NATO or the EEC, while some others were in favor of both. It should be noted that Corbyn personally had few links to this tradition at its height, having only been elected to Parliament several years after Tony Benn failed to become deputy leader of the Labour Party in 1981.

This strand also had an economic model that tended to be suspicious of close engagement with wider trading blocs (again, such as the EEC). This had various intellectual strands behind it, including that of the New Cambridge economics group, which argued that the UK economy was so weak that only a degree of protectionism could safeguard jobs and the standard of living. This analysis was subsequently reflected in the Alternative Economic Strategy jointly developed in the early 1980s by Labour politicians and individuals associated with the CPGB.

**FROM THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF GREAT BRITAIN**

The next strand relevant to understanding Corbyn’s worldview is the legacy from the CPGB itself. A number of former members are now his close advisors, and all have a background in the CPGB factions that were most vocally pro-Soviet. This group tended to see the world as a clash between the U.S. (which was always wrong) and the USSR (which they did sometimes criticize but saw as basically correct and, at worst, responding badly to U.S. pressure). They also opposed multilateral groups such as the EEC and NATO, which they believed were effectively fully aligned with the U.S. Clearly, their support for the USSR meant some affinity for states both inside and outside the Warsaw Pact that were broadly pro-Soviet, and for any anti-imperialist struggle, as long as the opponent was the U.S. or one of its allies. Many members of this group came to support the Putin regime from the end of the 1990s, seeing it as some form of legacy regime of the Soviet state.

By the late 1970s, the CPGB no longer had any practical influence over UK politics. Electorally it was completely marginalized, but it
retained a role in some British trade unions, and organizationally it played a leading role in some of the wider groups that drew together the British left. The relative importance of these groups changed over time, but in the late 1970s and early 1980s two of them, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM), were supported by a substantial minority of the UK population and drew support from most UK political parties. In each, the CPGB provided a significant degree of organizational support. Equally, and typically for many on the British left at the time, Corbyn was heavily involved in both movements.

The CPGB itself was dissolved in 1991 after the fall of the Soviet Union. It produced several contending successor movements, and one, the CPB, secured ownership of the CPGB’s buildings and its newspaper, the Morning Star. CPB membership was made up of those who regretted the fall of the USSR, often describing it as a major tragedy.

As we discuss below, former CPGB members have come to have disproportionate control over how Corbyn frames foreign affairs, and he has become notably more supportive of the Putin regime’s actions as a result. A long-standing aim, set out in the CPGB’s British Road to Socialism, was to realign British foreign policy to one of “co-operation with socialist states and progressive forces in the capitalist world, and support for the national liberation movements. It should … withdraw from NATO.” More pertinently, the CPGB was committed to influencing the Labour Party to move to the left, so it adopted an “Alternative Economic and Political Strategy” that would remove the UK from NATO and the EEC, creating the basis for a more profound shift to what was often described as “Actually Existing Socialism” (the form of economic, social, and political order in the Warsaw Pact countries).

FROM THE “NEW LEFT”

A more disparate strand comes from the ideas and groups that emerged from the 1960s New Left. This incorporated individuals who were members of various Trotskyist groups and those who remained outside the formal structures of the British far left. The legacy is complex, but it can be summarized as a greater or lesser degree of opposition to the Soviet Union (and to the CPGB), along with a focus on the importance of anti-imperialism and anti-Americanism. If the CPGB saw the world as split into two camps, the Soviet bloc and the bloc dominated by the U.S., the New Left tended to split the world into imperialist and anti-imperialist nations (or movements). In this, one side was good (anti-imperialism) and the other bad (imperialism); the U.S. was the primary actor, and the other side was responding to its aggressions. Thus, any anti-imperialist movement was seen as desirable and worthy of support simply due to this designation.

The ready conflation of Zionism with imperialism and the resultant blurring of the lines between criticism of the Israeli state and anti-Semitism flows from this binary understanding. This has led to the anti-Semitism that is prevalent among a number of Corbyn’s supporters, as, by their definition, anyone who is Jewish and does not fully reject Israel or Zionism falls outside the “community of the good.” This binary belief is important and is shared by many around Corbyn. In this view, a criticism of this or that act of the Israeli state is not enough—any hint of tolerance for it is sufficient to invalidate any other views held by that individual or group. As we will discuss below, this has serious implications for the framing of international policy and the retention of a commitment to universal human rights.

Of less importance in terms of international relations is that some of those around Corbyn have also been influenced by the arguments of Italian theorists such as Antonio Negri, whose non-Marxist strand of left-wing thinking draws heavily on the ideas of anarcho-syndicalism that were important in the early years of the twentieth century. As such, it has more of an impact on the economic ideas of these Corbyn associates (in particular, the role of automation). In terms of international relations, Negri’s views are mostly indistinguishable from the standard New Left approach.

FROM EUROCOMMUNISM

In the UK left in the 1970s and 1980s, there was little reflection of some wider trends in the thinking (and practice) of the European left, as befits an essentially Anglocentric, insular, political project. Given their absence, there is no need to say much, but we can draw out one important issue. When the Italian (PCI) and Spanish (PCE) communist parties were developing their ideas of what became known as Eurocommunism, this had little impact on the CPGB (apart from a small group of writers around the magazine Marxism Today) or on the Bennite left. This is problematic for two reasons. First, the PCI, in particular, returned to the concept of universal human rights (as opposed to the class-based approach that underpinned the Soviet legal system) as they steadily dropped any remnants of orthodox Marxism-Leninism. The practical effect was that the PCI and the PCE supported the Helsinki Accords and the Czech dissident group Charter 77. This support actually was more important than it seems, as it stressed the idea that all have rights, not just those deemed to be suitable by a ruling regime (with this subject to change at any time). Second, the PCI (and even more the PCE) came to the view that the Soviet Union was a greater threat to stability and peace in Europe than the U.S. or NATO. To them, the division of Europe into two competing blocs was a major issue that had to be resolved, in part by the Soviet Union reducing its military threat to Western Europe. This position varied over time, but it saw the PCI offer practical and moral support to dissident movements such as Solidarity in Poland and condemn the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.
CORBYN’S POLITICAL ACTIONS ACROSS VARIOUS REGIONS

It is useful to explore the practical meaning of an intellectual model that prizes support for anti-imperialist states (or movements) above all else and has no commitment to universal human rights. This section covers Corbyn’s approach to a range of international issues and related themes, such as the UK’s retention of nuclear weapons. It also discusses his differing approaches to nationalist movements in Northern Ireland and Scotland. It ends with a discussion of his approach to the European Union, as that seems to draw together both his economic and political framing of how the UK should interact with the wider world.

BOSNIA

Corbyn himself has said little directly about the wars in Croatia and Bosnia that followed the breakup of Yugoslavia after 1990. To most observers, the main driver of the ethnic cleansing was Serbian president’s, Slobodan Milošević, willingness to adopt a narrow Serb nationalist perspective, created the dynamics which led to massacres in eastern Croatia and across Bosnia to buttress his rule in Serbia and that of his allies in eastern Bosnia. However, to some of Corbyn’s supporters, the wars in Yugoslavia were an attempt to destroy a socialist state and, according to Katie Hudson, then chair of CND, “the truth is that Milošević was no hardcore Serb nationalist but a lifelong socialist, whose commitment was always to a multiracial, multi-ethnic Yugoslavia.”

Corbyn expressed support in a parliamentary early day motion for Hudson’s book, Breaking the South Slav Dream. Hudson’s thesis was that Milošević was acting reasonably to keep Yugoslavia together and was not guilty of any war crimes. Equally, the breakup of the...
Yugoslav state after 1990 was due to Western intervention, not the actions of regional leaders. U.S. pressure for economic liberalization in the decade after Marshal Tito’s death had encouraged Croatia and Slovenia to weaken their ties with the Yugoslav state. In turn, this led to their secession and to Milošević’s efforts to hold the old state together.

Corbyn has since met individuals such as Marcus Papadopoulos, who claimed that “there was no siege of Sarajevo, there was no genocide at Srebenica,” and who uses Islamophobic language to describe the Muslim communities in Bosnia. The denial of Serb war crimes was a major element of this discourse, and later, Seumas Milne, now Corbyn’s press secretary, asserted that the post-Milošević Serbian regime dug up bodies unrelated to the war in Bosnia to provide the evidence needed for Milošević’s conviction at The Hague.

KOSOVO

Concerning the conflict in Kosovo, Corbyn was much more vocal. This conflict had started as a low-level process (compared to events in Bosnia) of resistance to remaining in Yugoslavia on the part of the Muslim majority and of some ethnic cleansing by the Serb authorities. By the late 1990s, it had escalated to something approaching full-scale civil war. One problem was that the main resistance group to Serb control, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), was widely seen as also engaged in substantial criminality and this, combined with the region’s relative isolation, limited outside support as intervention was geographically much harder than it had been in Bosnia. Nonetheless, as part of the wider peacemaking process in the former Yugoslavia, a cease-fire was agreed upon in October 1998, and this was formalized in the 1999 Rambouillet Accords. The standard response on the far left was to denounce this as another attack on the “socialist” state of Serbia designed to do little but provide a pretext for a subsequent NATO-led assault. Instead, Serb-led ethnic cleansing carried on (to be fair, there were plenty of attacks on ethnic Serbs, too), and some 300,000 Kosovars were displaced from their homes and about 2,000 killed before the NATO military intervention started. During the military operations, many more Kosovars were displaced from their homes by Serb forces, and 13,517 were killed or went missing.

Corbyn called for the NATO intervention to be stopped because of the risk of civilian casualties, because it violated state sovereignty, and because it was not endorsed by the UN Security Council. Subsequently, left wing journalist John Pilger published an article claiming that the death toll was just 2,788, an assertion he has maintained since then, arguing that this includes those killed by NATO bombs and by the KLA. In effect the Kremlin’s main international propaganda channel, continues to repeat this claim. Corbyn then signed an early day motion supporting Pilger’s contention that there were no mass murders in Kosovo in the period up to 1999 and noted the ongoing pollution caused by NATO’s use of depleted uranium. That Pilger’s views about the death toll have been comprehensively rebutted was of no apparent concern to Corbyn.

In combination, Corbyn’s responses to the events in Bosnia and Kosovo point to several core themes in his foreign policy model. Fundamentally, he sees the Milošević regimeas some form of socialist, anti-imperialist state, and the various conflicts that arose after 1991 as products of Western attempts to undermine it. This is the view promoted by Katie Hudson, which rejects any argument that the root causes of the war include Milošević’s use of Serb nationalism to create a basis for his own regime. In contrast, yes it is true there was a residual attachment to the ideals of a multi-ethnic united Yugoslavia, but it was found among those trying to sustain the idea of a multi-ethnic Bosnia and not among the Bosnian Serb nationalists engaged in ethnic cleansing. In neither Bosnia nor Kosovo has Corbyn shown identification with the Muslim population, and his associates downplay or deny that Serb war crimes took place in Srebenica or in Kosovo.

This is not to say that criticizing either the wartime resistance by forces supporting both the Bosnian state and the KLA is invalid. Elements of both have been found guilty of war crimes since the conflict ended. Equally, it is valid to criticize Western diplomacy, especially the appeasement of Milošević in the early stages of the wars with Croatia and Bosnia. But thisnuance is not the point of Corbyn’s critique, which views Serbia as a socialist state and believes that its opponents, the West and the Muslim communities, became the enemy and were wrong. In this view, once you are wrong, you have no rights.

SYRIA

Corbyn’s opposition to the U.S.-UK invasion of Iraq is well documented and was shared by a substantial segment of the UK electorate at the time. The long-running Chilcot Inquiry definitively refuted the Tony Blair government’s arguments for the war and the conduct of postwar restructuring. Corbyn’s policy toward Syria draws heavily from this experience: He was right then, so he must be right now. But there is a subtle twist to his position. In the run-up to the Iraq War there were very few in the UK who actually supported Saddam Hussein; the debate was on the wisdom of the George W. Bush administration’s chosen course of action, which was backed by the UK. On Syria, it is less that Corbyn is opposed to Western actions and more that he is supportive of the Assad regime and its backers in Russia and Iran.
This has meant demonizing the Syrian opposition as stooges of the U.S., allies to the Saudis, and jihadis. His close policy advisor, Seumas Milne, managed to extend this to an argument that the United States was responsible for ISIS: “A year into the Syrian rebellion, the US and its allies weren’t only supporting and arming an opposition they knew to be dominated by extreme sectarian groups; they were prepared to countenance the creation of some sort of ‘Islamic state’ — despite the ‘grave danger’ to Iraq’s unity—as a Sunni buffer to weaken Syria.” In a similar manner, Corbyn intervened in a debate in May 2013 on the EU arms embargo on Syria to warn against “supplying arms to people [the Syrian rebels] we do not know” and made a link to “the way the USA raced to supply ... arms to [the] opposition in Afghanistan in 1979, which gave birth to the Taliban and, ultimately, al-Qaeda.”

Since then, senior members of the StWC have followed the arguments of people like notionally pro-Palestinian polemicist, Max Blumenthal and linked the Syrian White Helmets to al-Qaeda or ISIS rather than treating them as an unofficial humanitarian group doing its best to offset the impact of regime (and Russian) bombing. The White Helmets openly acknowledge they have received U.S. funding for their work and, predictably, that is enough for them to be described by the far left as a tool of U.S. imperialism laying the groundwork for their work and, predictably, that is enough for them to be described by the far left as a tool of U.S. imperialism laying the groundwork for a U.S. invasion.63 The Russian state-sponsored news agency Sputnik has since described them as “Soros-sponsored.”64 But acceptance of U.S. funding was not unusual for many humanitarian groups, at least before the Trump presidency; even the Palestinian Red Crescent has taken such support and used it to treat Palestinians wounded in Israeli actions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

After the Assad regime used chemical weapons on a suburb of Damascus in 2013, Corbyn appeared on the Russian state TV channel RT to express openness to the theory that the Syrian opposition had actually dropped the chemical weapons.65 At the same time, his now-key advisor Seumas Milne was writing that the trigger for the buildup to a new intervention — what appears to have been a chemical weapons attack on the Damascus suburb of Ghouta — certainly has the hallmarks of a horrific atrocity. Hundreds, mostly civilians, are reported killed and many more wounded, their suffering caught on stomach-churning videos.

But so far no reliable evidence whatever has been produced to confirm even what chemical might have been used, let alone who delivered it. The western powers and their allies, including the Syrian rebels, insist the Syrian army was responsible. The Damascus government and its international backers, Russia and Iran, blame the rebels.”66

The reality, of course, is that the Assad regime had been using chemical weapons before the August attacks and continued to do so afterward.67

Corbyn’s approach to Syria repeats some of the themes noted earlier. Once a regime is deemed anti-imperialist, its victims retain no rights to dissent or resist. The reality—of a messy, nasty civil war that was spawned from a peaceful revolt against the Assad regime but saw war crimes by every faction and became an international arena for the wider Iranian-Saudi conflict—is missing.68 Equally, the almost 6 million refugees who have fled the country,69 and the further 6 million internally displaced,70 go missing from Corbyn’s narrative. Instead, we are given a narrative of imperialism and anti-imperialism, one that glosses over the role played by Russia and Iran, with the Russian presence deemed acceptable as long as it is for peacekeeping purposes.71 After an attack by Russian planes on a UN aid convoy in September 2016, Corbyn could not actually bring himself to blame the Russians for the attack directly, instead presenting it as some awful, random accident.72

As noted above, in the context of Syria, StWC ceased to claim that its concern was the impact of wars on other countries and, in the context of Syria, became apologists for the Assad regime. In its view, Western intervention in Syria was not questionable because it was ill thought out or badly implemented but because it was an attack on a regime the StWC supported. Attempts by Syrian refugees living in the UK to challenge this narrative or alignment have been silenced by the StWC and its supporters.73

IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA

The binary, non-reflective model can also be seen in Corbyn’s response to the tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, two powers whose relationship has formed the major dynamic in the Middle East since 1979.74 Western policy has tended to share the Saudi antagonism toward Iran, going as far as to offer fairly open support to Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein during his long war with Iran from 1980 to 1988.75 Equally, there has been a willingness among Western leaders to overlook domestic repression in Saudi Arabia while condemning the brutality of the Iranian regime. Furthermore, it is true that both Western States, and bodies such as the IMF, have overemphasized the recent reform agenda of the Saudis while enforcing sanctions against Iran that have caused domestic reforms there to falter.

This strongly suggests that a human rights–based foreign policy by a
Western power should aim for some degree of equivalence, holding both Iran and Saudi Arabia responsible for their actions domestically and internationally, offering support for democratic reform movements in both, and equally accepting that both regimes do have their own dynamics, concerns, and worldview.

This is not what Corbyn does. Yes, he has been very critical of Saudi Arabia, but this is not matched by a similarly critical approach to Iran, for which he has expressed support. In effect, for Corbyn, Iran has joined Russia and Venezuela as a key state resisting Western imperialism and has become worthy of support regardless of its actions. The Scottish writer Sam Hamad has suggested that:

Corbyn could easily be described as a lobbyist for the Iranian regime. In the same sleazy manner as the Tory politicians, so hated by Corbyn and his supporters, who claim to support “human rights” in Saudi Arabia before selling them weapons and the means to maintain their domestic tyranny, Corbyn has strongly advocated that such relations be transferred from Saudi’s brutal theocracy to that of the Iranian regime.

Hamad’s 2016 article was written several years after the Iranian regime had crushed internal dissent (the Green Revolution), and its own Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and proxy militias were involved in sectarian violence in Iraq and Syria. Corbyn’s criticism of the Saudis may represent a needed balance against the foreign policy of Conservative and Labour governments, but his interest in human rights does not extend to the victims of the Iranian regime or its proxy states. Thus, as above, the crimes of a state he supports go unchallenged, certainly downplayed, while the crimes of a state he opposes are clearly labelled as such. Again, we come back to the same argument: He is not making a case for a different approach to the crimes of a state he supports, which others may represent a needed balance against the foreign policy of Conservative and Labour governments, but his interest in human rights does not extend to the victims of the Iranian regime or its proxy states. Thus, as above, the crimes of a state he supports go unchallenged, certainly downplayed, while the crimes of a state he opposes are clearly labelled as such. Again, we come back to the same argument: He is not making a case for a different approach to the crimes of a state he supports. In the first framing, one cannot selectively apply principles of opposition to oppression in one area while supporting or ignoring it in another. But this is what Corbyn has done: While he wants a British government to end the oppression of Palestinians and end Saudi Arabia’s vicious war in Yemen, he has also been one of the most consistent voices in advocating that nothing be done to aid Syrians fighting for democracy (and their lives) against Assad and in backing Iran’s domestic and international policy.

**RUSSIA**

One common criticism of Corbyn is that he rarely changes his mind and that his entire intellectual framework remains stuck in the 1970s. However, there is evidence that he has changed his views toward Putin’s Russia. In the late 1990s, he signed a number of early day motions condemning Putin’s war in Chechnya and the resulting human rights abuses, but over time this has shifted. Now, with Syria and with the use of chemical weapons in the UK against the Skripals, he is happy to match the rhetoric of RT. In the latter case, he was prepared to call into doubt Russia’s involvement in the poisoning, and Miline told the UK press:

I think obviously the government has access to information and intelligence on this matter which others don’t; however, also there’s a history in relation to WMD and intelligence which is problematic to put it mildly. … So I think the right approach is to seek the evidence; to follow international treaties, particularly in relation to prohibited chemical weapons, because this was a chemical weapons attack, carried out on British soil. There are procedures that need to be followed in relation to that.

Critically, Miline quite deliberately linked the failures of British intelligence in the run up to the invasion of Iraq (where their findings had been used to support claims that Hussein had weapons of mass destruction) to the verity of their findings after the attack in Salisbury.

Even after the OPCW had indicated that the likely source of the nerve agents used was Russia, Miline and others continued to demand further proof while supporting the arguments advanced by RT and other pro-Kremlin news outlets. At the same time, Corbyn demanded that any intelligence that implicated Russia be shared with them. In his view, since the Western intelligence agencies had been wrong about Saddam Hussein having weapons of mass destruction, they must be wrong now. However, even if the intelligence information had been partly redacted, providing it to Corbyn would have made it easy for the Russian security forces to understand the processes used to gather the information and the likely sources.

As leader of the opposition, he could make such demands but not do much more. He was, no doubt, briefed on confidential terms as to what the UK government knew, but the government could have presented this information in a manner that would have been hard to pass on (and of limited use if it was). If he were prime minister, then in a similar situation, he would determine what should happen, and the risk is that such intelligence would indeed be shared with the Russians. This calls into serious question the extent to which routine
intelligence-sharing with the UK could be sustained during a Corbyn-led government.

This shift toward Russia is important. As noted earlier, a key group around Corbyn has a background in the hard-line, pro-Soviet factions of the old CPGB. One of these, Seumas Milne, has written extensively—and invariably supportively—about Putin’s actions in Crimea, Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria. In isolation, some of his claims may have some validity, but taken together they present a very consistent view, and one that Corbyn has embraced. For example, about the annexation of Crimea, Milne wrote that Russia’s actions were “clearly defensive” and that “western aggression and lawless killing is on another scale entirely from anything Russia appears to have contemplated, let alone carried out — removing any credible basis for the US and its allies to rail against Russian transgressions.” In effect, Putin was right, and even if he was not, then at least he is not as bad as the Western leaders.

Milne framed the earlier attack on Georgia as a legitimate response to U.S. expansion: “By any sensible reckoning, this is not a story of Russian aggression, but of US imperial expansion and ever tighter encirclement of Russia by a potentially hostile power. That a stronger Russian aggression, but of US imperial expansion and ever tighter...”

Russia has now challenged that, and the consequences have been played out in Ukraine for the past year: starting with the western-backed ousting of the elected government, through the installation of a Ukrainian nationalist regime, the Russian takeover of Crimea and Moscow-backed uprising in the Donbass. On the ground, it has meant thousands of dead, hundreds of thousands of refugees, indiscriminate shelling of civilian areas and the rise of Ukrainian fascist militias. Again NATO (and/or the EU) is held to be clearly to blame, as “NATO’s eastward expansion was halted by the Georgian war of 2008 and Yanukovych’s later election on a platform of non-alignment,” he wrote. “But any doubt that the EU’s effort to woo Ukraine is closely connected with western military strategy was dispelled today by NATO’s secretary general, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who declared that the abortive pact with Ukraine would have been ‘a major boost to Euro-Atlantic security.’”

In a way, this is different from Corbyn’s original mindset of imperialism against anti-imperialism. As with Assad’s Syria, this has morphed into open support for a state, and one that has engaged in aggressive actions against the other independent republics that emerged from the fall of the Soviet Union. What is similar, though, is the lack of concern for the human rights of those who are deemed to be on the wrong side. Members of the Muslim Tatar ethnic community in Crimea reported that their citizenship had been revoked and their rights denied shortly after the Russian takeover, but this has not been challenged by Corbyn or his advisors.

VENEZUELA

The success, or otherwise, of Venezuela’s social reforms during the Hugo Chávez era is probably one of the most contentious issues in both international politics and the assessment of social policy. To the George W. Bush presidency (and its supporters), Chávez was clearly wrong; the U.S. government made various attempts to end his presidency, seeing his regime not just as a close ally of Cuba, but also as an attempt at a conventional Marxist-Leninist dictatorship. On the other hand, the regime set itself the goal of gaining control over oil revenues (which had previously been taken out of the country and held by a small group of families) to fund a cluster of policies designed to alleviate poverty. Drawing a balanced view of the outcomes of Chávez’s presidency is not easy, as the economy remained oil-dependent, and there was high inflation. However, education was expanded, and the poverty rates dropped from 61 percent of the population in 1997 to 33 percent in 2007. Whether or not Chávez was redefining socialism away from the old Soviet model is debatable, but his failure to reform the economy in time undermined his other reforms when the price of oil started to collapse after 2010. Nonetheless, aspects of his approach attracted widespread support—and an interest in how to apply them elsewhere. Not surprisingly, his regime also attracted the support of those from the New Left tradition, since Chávez presented himself as anti-imperialist and as someone who rejects the Washington Consensus (that the only acceptable route for a developing economy was to open itself up to international competition and privatize key services) on development policies. His successor, Nicolás Maduro, lacks his deftness at balancing these issues, and Venezuela’s state revenues, like those of other oil-based economies, have declined substantially. The result has been a shift to open authoritarianism, alliances with Russia and Iran, and an economic crisis that has seen over 3 million Venezuelans flee the country since 2014 and many more displaced from their homes.

Chávez also consistently managed to obtain democratic mandates for his actions, whether by elections or referendums. While there have been doubts about the validity of some of these results, on balance he clearly had substantial domestic support and was prepared to abide by the outcomes. In contrast, Maduro first arrested the main opposition leaders in 2013 and then set up a “Constituent Assembly” in 2017 to...
bypass parliament after he had suffered an electoral defeat. He then called a presidential election that was boycotted by the opposition due to fears of fraud and ongoing state-sponsored violence. The result was rejected by almost every other Latin American government, and Maduro has since called for fresh elections to his Constituent Assembly (currently only including members of the ruling party) in an attempt to legitimize his victory and further sideline parliament. 96

By any reasonable definition, this is a coup and a destruction of conventional democracy, and it has been challenged as such by most external powers, though China, Russia, and Iran have stood with Maduro. Corbyn (and his supporters) have ignored this assault on democracy and the domestic political violence by the regime, continuing to support it on the grounds that Venezuela is an anti-imperialist state. As with the Balkans and Syria, Corbyn believes that if you are being oppressed by a regime he supports, then you have no rights and are most likely a tool of U.S. imperialism. That the Trump presidency has challenged Maduro seems to be sufficient reason to dismiss all the other states (and international bodies, such as the EU) that have not recognized the results of the 2018 Venezuelan presidential election.

SCOTLAND & NORTHERN IRELAND

Corbyn’s approach to international relations can also be readily explored in his different responses to Irish and Scottish nationalism and their calls for either unity within Ireland or independence from the remainder of the UK. The issue here is not whether either goal is correct, but how Corbyn has responded.

In the context of Northern Ireland, he has a long history of sympathy for Irish republicanism, expressed politically by Sinn Féin, but also through the terrorism of the IRA and its various spinoffs. Corbyn has repeatedly argued that his contacts with hard-line Irish republicans were necessary, as to end a war one must talk to the other side. What is clear is that he made no effort to contact any of the loyalist groups that also were making a slow move from paramilitarism to democratic politics. In general, his record suggests that he was supportive of Sinn Féin’s policies but had no direct contact with the IRA—as such (but this is not a clear distinction given the cross-over of individuals between the two organizations). However, there is equally no record of close involvement with the democratic nationalist party in this era, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), which sent MPs to Westminster and generally supported the UK Labour Party. In effect, he has been sympathetic toward Irish republicanism and seems well aware of the internal debates it has had about ending its terrorist campaign, but he has simply reflected the shifting position of Sinn Féin toward the peace processes in Northern Ireland. Thus, he opposed the mid-1980s agreements between the British and Irish governments, but enthusiastically accepted the Good Friday Agreement (which was negotiated with close attention to the wishes of Irish republicans, among others).

In contrast, his approach to Scottish independence can be characterized as tone deaf. He has made no effort to engage with the Scottish National Party (SNP) and seems unaware of why that party holds the views it does. This cannot be simply because the SNP is an electoral competitor to the Labour Party, as Sinn Féin has also taken seats off the SDLP and thus reduced the wider non-Conservative bloc in the House of Commons (Sinn Féin does not sit in the UK Parliament, as it believes the 1922 partition of Ireland was illegal). On the peace processes in Northern Ireland, he has simply followed the shifting line adopted by Sinn Féin. There is now some evidence that his opposition to EU membership has caused problems with Sinn Féin, as it wishes the UK to retain membership in the EU and opposes anything that threatens the current all-Ireland arrangements.

One explanation is that when Corbyn formed his political views, the issue of Scottish independence had little interest outside Scotland, while the IRA’s bombing campaigns made the issue of Northern Ireland very much relevant. More generally, the wider UK far left all supported some form or other of Irish republicanism, and it is likely he simply absorbed this. At the same time, most of the organized UK left was opposed to Scottish independence on the grounds it would fragment the British working class. Thus, Corbyn’s current worldview again reflects the norms of the 1970s British left, and he has a closer understanding of the dynamics of a political party with past involvement in terrorism than one with a long-standing commitment to democratic change.

NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Corbyn has been a lifelong member of CND, and several of his officials were previously senior members. Thus, one would expect that his first manifesto for a general election would at least challenge renewal of the UK’s nuclear missile deterrent, known as the Trident, even if it did not call for immediate abolition of the UK’s nuclear weapons. Instead, the manifesto actually, in contrast to the position of the SNP, supported renewal of the Trident. The SNP’s views are relevant here, in part because Britain’s submarines are based in Scotland, and in part because the 2017 general election included a contest between the SNP and Labour for votes in Scotland.

As with Russia, where Corbyn has changed his mind, one can trace the reason to his close associates. In this case, Len McCluskey, leader of the Unite union—Corbyn’s principal financial backer—is
pro-Trident, as the renewal would benefit Unite members by creating some jobs. In this respect, the issue is not whether unilateral nuclear disarmament or shifting defense spending from the Trident to conventional weapons is a good idea; it is how the change came about. A lifetime's commitment was overturned due to the views of a powerful member of Corbyn's inner circle. And, at least in Scotland, the policy probably cost him votes, as the SNP was able to stress that it was consistent in arguing for the Trident's removal.

**MULTINATIONAL INSTITUTIONS: THE EUROPEAN UNION AND NATO**

Corbyn has been a long-standing critic of the EEC/EU, forming part of a very small group of Labour MPs who have found common cause with the larger group of British Conservatives who have been obsessed with this issue for many years. In reality, he goes beyond the Eurosceptic tradition in British politics; in a speech in 2010, he called for the EU to be defeated. Here, the EU was grouped with bankers and the IMF as a threat to living standards, and he declared that “we will not be silenced by these people. We will win through. We will defeat them, and we will win that decency that we want in this world.” This moves Corbyn's attitude from traditional British Euroscepticism to the type of view found more commonly on the extreme right of British politics.

As discussed above, this opposition to the EU (and in its earlier forms, the EC and the EEC) is based on both economics and politics.

By the late 1970s, there was sustained concern over the state of the UK economy. Underinvestment meant it was not competitive globally and, in particular, imports far outstripped exports. This weakness led to a number of divergent proposals. To the right, the solution was to reduce workers’ rights, end the influence of trade unions, and diminish the role of the state. To some on the left, the solution was partially to remove the UK economy from the international trade networks while it rebalanced itself and dealt with these structural issues. Those in the latter camp, organized as the New Cambridge Economics group, took a mostly left-Keynesian view of the economy and saw protectionism as a temporary move to be implemented while major reforms were enacted. Once the Thatcher government started to carry out its economic policies, some on the left (especially the Tribune Group and the CPGB) created an Alternative Economic Policy, which tended to support converting the economic isolation proposed by the New Cambridge Group into a permanent state for the economy. In effect, the only way to ensure the economy could work for most people was by having a degree of separation from the world economy. Since even at the time, this was the opposite of the EEC's approach, this inevitably meant calling for the UK to withdraw from membership.

The other historical strand to Labour Euroscepticism was political. Some of this was a framing, shared with the Conservative right, about loss of “sovereignty” and having to accept decisions made outside the UK, but it went deeper. In effect, in their view, the EEC/EU is, and has been, a capitalist institution that acts as one of the agents of Western imperialism. In addition, there is a (flawed) belief that EU membership is incompatible with a broadly social-democratic domestic economic policy.

Thus, whether Corbyn personally voted Leave or Remain in the Brexit referendum of 2016 is irrelevant; what matters is that his view of both international politics and international economics means he can see no reason why the UK should remain a member of the EU. While in the 1970s, there were those who saw a shift to some form of trade barriers as a sensible short-term response to deep-seated problems, that is not Corbyn's understanding: He actually wants a degree of permanent economic isolation from the wider world economy.

Fundamental opposition to NATO has also been a consistent strand in Corbyn's approach. In part this simply reflects the traditional Soviet description of NATO as a tool of imperialism. More recently, as discussed in connection with Russia, a typical argument of those around Corbyn is that NATO is responsible for the various wars in Georgia, Crimea, and Ukraine. This is said to be due to its expansion, which first entailed incorporating the former Warsaw Pact states (such as Poland), and subsequently involved offering cooperation agreements with former constituent parts of the USSR. Underlying this idea is a view that Russia (as the legal successor to the USSR) has a sphere of interest that still includes the former Soviet republics and members of the Warsaw Pact. In turn, this approach opposes these states' developing their own foreign policy and trading links. Of note, not only are these arguments stock in trade for those around Corbyn, but they also form part of the views of the newly emboldened nationalist right in Europe and are staples for RT and other pro-Kremlin news agencies.
As stressed in this paper, Corbyn’s model of international relations is not one of international cooperation, universal human rights, and cooperation on issues such as climate change or the growing global refugee crises. He is suspicious of existing multilateral institutions, he has no commitment to the human rights of those oppressed by regimes he supports, and his ability to broker international cooperation on anything is doubtful.

If Corbyn becomes prime minister, the U.S. will be faced with a former ally that sees Iran, Russia, and Venezuela as close allies and is supportive of the Assad regime in Syria. This goes well beyond seeking to correct the problems that have been caused by too-close ties with the Saudis, Israel, or right-wing governments in regions such as Latin America.

There is a core theme to this reframing of the UK’s foreign policy. It is supportive of the Putin regime, and thus a Corbyn-led government is likely, at the very least, not to support wider efforts to respond to Putin’s aggressive acts. Furthermore, there are clear security implications. A number of Corbyn’s close officials are former CPGB members who are quite open about their nostalgia for the USSR and make clear their belief that the Putin regime is some form of successor to the Soviet Union. There can be no guarantee that intelligence shared with a Corbyn government will not simply be transferred to Russia.

This was particularly clear in the immediate aftermath of the Skripals’ poisoning with the nerve agent Novichok by Russian security forces. Corbyn called for all the intelligence to be shared with Russia, despite the strong risk of revealing sources and methods, even if the information was partly redacted. In addition, because of the misuse of intelligence to support the attack on Iraq, he clearly placed more trust in the assertions of the Russians than in those of Western intelligence agencies even, presumably, after he had been briefed confidentially on what the UK government knew. If he was prime minister, he could choose to share such information.

RELATIONS WITH THE REPUBLICAN AND DEMOCRATIC PARTIES

If Corbyn becomes prime minister and President Trump is still in power, the two will likely disagree fundamentally about a transfer of UK support from Saudi Arabia and Israel to Iran and about other issues, such as Venezuela. However, there are points of agreement—perhaps surprising, given their notionally separate political backgrounds. Both are suspicious of multilateral bodies, in particular the European Union, and both are sympathetic to Putin’s Russia. It is unlikely these shared elements will offset their major ideological differences, but it may mean the UK will play a disruptive role in multilateral organizations similar to that adopted by the Trump administration, even if there is little practical cooperation.

A Democratic administration may also find it hard to work closely with Corbyn. It might be more accepting of a policy of distancing the UK from the Saudis (possibly even from Israel, though this would cut across a consistent strand in U.S. foreign policy). However, it is unlikely that any shift to support Iran will be welcomed. Equally, it is unlikely that a Democratic president will share President Trump’s ambiguity toward Putin’s regime, making this a potentially major breach in traditional UK-U.S. cooperation.

The extent to which these issues become major disputes or minor disagreements will probably depend on how far a new Democratic president personally disagrees with the policies followed by the Clinton and Obama administrations. Presumably someone who was part of those administrations, and shares their wider worldview, will find it hard to work with Corbyn. Someone who has some reservations about the foreign policy choices in those years might find it easier to work with him at a policy level, but concerns over the sharing of confidential information will remain.

ISRAEL AND ANTI-SEMITISM

As noted, Corbyn will not just alter this policy bias, but there are deeper concerns. To many around him, Israel is the key imperialist state, and anti-Semitism has become common among his supporters. In domestic political terms, there is now substantial evidence of just how widespread this has become with concerns about growing antisemitism widespread in the UK’s Jewish

SECURITY

As noted in the section on Russia, there would be serious security implications to dealing with a Corbyn-led government. In response to the poisoning of the Skripals, his initial demand was to share the intelligence reports with the Russians, as they had the right, in his view, to verify the claims. This is troubling on two levels. First, again, there is the automatic distrust of the West and the willingness to find a legitimate explanation for Russian actions. Second, such material, even if redacted, would have allowed the Russians to work out both the sources and the analytic methods used to gather the material.

In the circumstances, he could do nothing but demand this transfer of material. At worst, he (or his advisors) could have passed on the summary material they were given. As prime minister, he would have far more freedom in this regard. The U.S. intelligence agencies would have to operate on the basis that any material provided to a Corbyn government could be passed to the Russians (or Iranians). This is a radical departure from the practice that has been maintained for the last sixty years, regardless of the notional political differences between the UK and U.S. administrations.

However, the main change will be at the level of policy formulation and how the UK interacts with the US and its traditional allies. A Corbyn-led government would be, at the very least, far more understanding of the demands of Putin and the Kremlin regime. Thus, in any instance where there was a need for speedy decision-making, or a robust defense of one of NATO’s eastern members, this would not be forthcoming. As noted previously, even when Corbyn and his advisors have criticized Russian actions, this always comes with a caveat, the presentation of a context that explains what happened. No such subtlety is used when critiquing Western actions or responses.

A final major shift will be in the UK’s actions toward Israel. In the main the British, reflecting wider EU foreign policy, have been less pro-Israeli than is the norm in U.S. politics. The extent of this divergence has varied over different UK administrations, but acceptance of Israel’s right to exist, even if linked to strong reservations about its actual policies, has not even been a matter of debate.

As noted, Corbyn will not just alter this policy bias, but there are deeper concerns. To many around him, Israel is the key imperialist state, and anti-Semitism has become common among his supporters. In domestic political terms, there is now substantial evidence of just how widespread this has become with concerns about growing antisemitism widespread in the UK’s Jewish
community. In international terms, it means that any revision of UK policy toward the Middle East will not just be a reversion to a more skeptical position about Israeli policies, but a change to fundamental opposition to the state of Israel.

When this is linked to a shift in support from Saudi Arabia to Iran, the result for the U.S. will be a traditional ally whose foreign policy now fundamentally diverges.
SUMMARY

The basic framework of Corbyn’s model of international relations is fairly clear. States and/or movements that contest the power of “imperialism” are worthy of support. Thus, a movement such as Hamas is not to be criticized or treated as a terrorist organization, as it is also “an organization that is dedicated toward the good of the Palestinian people and bringing about long-term peace and social justice and political justice in the whole region,” as Corbyn said in 2009.113 His policy choice is to support Hamas, not Fatah, as in Northern Ireland he identifies with Sinn Féin but not the SDLP.

This model of international relations, in the form of StWC, opposed not only the U.S.-UK intervention in Iraq, but also a range of international actions before and since. The underlying framework is that such intervention is a priori bad, and there is no distinction drawn between disastrous interventions such as Iraq and those that did stop something far worse from happening, such as Kosovo or Sierra Leone.114 Such a model allows no nuance: The actions and institutions of the “West” are wrong, but no such outright barrier is offered to aggression by the Putin regime: Its actions in Crimea or Ukraine need to be carefully studied and caveats offered to avoid outright condemnation so, as with the old CPGB’s response to Soviet actions, there is some criticism, but also a pedantic use of context to justify the actions. If this fails to be sufficient, then the old claim that the ‘West’ was worse can be used.

Memorabilia supporting British Labour Party leadership contender Jeremy Corbyn is offered for sale ahead of his arrival at the Town Hall on August 18, 2015 in Middlesbrough, England. (Ian Forsyth/Getty Images)
More worriedly, this mindset fails to make a distinction between a favored state and its inhabitants. If people under a regime deemed to be anti-imperialist revolt, they are quickly dismissed as pawns of imperialists (or, as discussed above, as terrorists) and readily demonized. Equally, Corbyn’s criticism about the intervention in Libya is not that it was mishandled, and that the post-conflict situation predictably slipped out of control, but that it was, in his words, “regime change”—and this is the core of the complaint.

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As discussed above, this is a consistent theme. Milošević’s Serbia was deemed a socialist state struggling to hold together the popularly supported concept of Yugoslavia. Thus, first the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and later the conflict in Kosovo were framed as foreign-inspired revolts against a just state. More recently, the Syrian opposition to the Assad regime is dismissed and their suffering ignored, since the regime is seen as anti-imperialist. The same pattern is developing in Corbyn’s response to the civil unrest in Venezuela.

Thus, Corbyn relies on his specific opposition to the Iraq War and his long support for some anti-imperialist movements to claim his approach to international relations is far more decent than that inspired by the traditional models. In practice, it results at best in a different set of acceptable and unacceptable regimes, and in little or no sympathy for those unlucky enough to be the victims of a regime viewed as acceptable. As noted above, none of the leftist strands that inform Corbyn’s model of foreign policy had a concept of universal human rights—and this shows in their practical application.

Working from these findings, we can start to make some judgments as to the likely foreign policy preferences of a Corbyn-led government.

However, first it is useful to acknowledge that many who support him have expectations that this will be a focus on human rights, climate change, and international cooperation over the refugee crisis. As with elements of his domestic policy (where an end to economic austerity is widely supported), many will vote for a Labour government in the hope that it will rebalance the UK’s foreign policy away from too-close links to U.S. interests—a dogmatic position that can be as misleading as the automatic anti-Americanism of much of the far left—reduce UK support for regimes such as Saudi Arabia, and challenge Israel’s policies in the Middle East.

The reality is they will largely be disappointed. If we take just one issue, yes, a Corbyn-led government will be more willing to challenge Saudi Arabia over its domestic and international human rights abuses, but this will come at the cost of a closer relationship with Iran. Whether Iran or Saudi Arabia is actually worse is a moot point, but the UK will not challenge both—instead, it will simply switch partners. In Latin America, again, it is debatable whether the Maduro regime is worse than some of the right-wing authoritarian states that the U.S. and its allies have propped up over the years. This really doesn’t matter; it is failing its own people. Under Corbyn, the UK will take a position where the injustices inflicted by Maduro on the Venezuelan people will not be its concern. This is realpolitik, admittedly with a different list of favored states than at the moment, but it is every bit as uninterested in the abuses committed by British allies as the current UK government. The British people will no doubt be assured of the benefits of quiet diplomacy in influencing Iranian policy, in the same way that such tactics are currently held to affect the behavior of Saudi Arabia.

In addition, Corbyn’s distaste for established international bodies does not bode well for the UK’s ability to cooperate on key international issues. That many of these bodies need reform and reflect vested interests is true, but they exist and can be used. Equally, they often reflect the dominant norms of their constituent parts. Many left-wing supporters of Brexit point to how the EU handled Greece by imposing economic reforms and massive cuts in social spending as a reason to leave the EU. This does reflect the economic orthodoxy of the current EU. However, electorally the EU (both as a parliament and in terms of its member states’ politics) is currently dominated by the center-right. In the past, the center-left has dominated, leading to very different policies, but a Corbyn-led UK government will do little or nothing to restore that situation.

Corbyn’s attitude toward the EU reflects his views on both international politics and economics. In terms of international politics, he sees the EU as just another tool by which imperialism can enforce its desires. In terms of economics, it is the antithesis of the protectionist, managed trade model that was the core of Bennite economics in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Thus, his strong preference for the UK to leave the EU is not just a feeling that the 2016 referendum should be respected—it happens to fit both his political and economic models of international relations. He has no interest in retaining EU membership, regardless of all the warnings about the economic consequences.

So the UK’s foreign policy under Corbyn will be different: more suspicious of international coordination, more suspicious of established international structures, and with a new list of regimes that the UK will seek as likely allies. And it will be much the same. The UK will have as little interest in the human rights abuses of Russia or Iran as it currently has in those committed by Saudi Arabia. This will be framed as progressive but, in reality, it is a turn toward insularity—at a time when the world needs global solutions.
At this stage, it is not clear how much this rhetoric will influence practical actions. Corbyn’s views are a minority in the parliamentary Labour Party and, given the fragmented nature of British politics, it is most likely he will be in charge of a government lacking an overall majority or will be in a formal coalition with smaller parties. In either case, his partners are unlikely to support some of his policies, not least because the other non-conservative parties in the UK tend to be pro-EU and mostly supportive of the current international order. Lacking a majority of his own MPs and dependent on the votes of parties such as the Liberal Democrats or the Scottish and Welsh nationalists, Corbyn may find his scope to reshape British foreign policy limited. However, while there may be barriers to what he can do in practice, his stated views and opinions will suddenly carry far more weight outside the UK than they do at the moment.
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ENDNOTES


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