Britain Moving Forward: A Conversation with UK Parliament Member Tom Tugendhat on the UK Election

TRANSCRIPT

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BEN JUDAH: My first question and the place I'd like to begin is, what's your sense of what happened to Britain's position in the world and British foreign policy since the referendum?

TOM TUGENDHAT: Well, the truth is that the past two or three years have been not great. I mean, they have seen Britain consumed by an internal dialogue about not just our relationship with our closest 27 trading partners but also an internal dialogue about what it means to vote in certain ways - you know, one of the main power centers in the U.K. in a debate about, you know, the nature of the Supreme Court, the executive versus the legislative, the nature of devolved administrations and nations and so on. So there's been a whole series of debates that have actually consumed the U.K. best - couple - last two or three years. And that's why this vote that we've just had - the election of a Conservative government with an 80-seat majority - has been so important because it really clarified so much. It's really - it's like - you know, it's like putting a huge fan in front of a smoke machine and just clearing away all the smoke. And suddenly, we have - we're able to see beyond ourselves and beyond our shores again.

JUDAH: What kind of foreign policy visions were in contrast in the election in the U.K. between Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn?

TUGENDHAT: Well, a very crude level. The foreign policy visions were a sort of a - what I would call the sort of liberal internationalist democratic one that the Conservative Party has been espousing for years, and from Mr. Corbyn, a somewhat confused, defeatist, rather angry vision that somehow our enemies are right, you know, whether it be Russia or Venezuela, and that, in fact, you know, we should be apologizing to them. So I think that's one of the reasons why coming off the defeat was so great for him - because people just felt that it was deeply unpatriotic of him. And so the change has been really quite noticeable. So there's been a big divergence there in foreign policy, and it's been very important to see that actually, the number of people who've come out and taken a greater interest in foreign policy because of the elections is actually quite important.

JUDAH: How would you characterize kind of the prime minister's foreign policy views? Where does he sit in these different British foreign policy traditions? What should we expect from that sort of empowered Boris Johnson not just towards the European Union but towards the world?

TUGENDHAT: Well, I think this is the big question. I can tell you what I'd like to see. What I'd like to see is I'd like to see a prime minister of the United Kingdom who's once again an actor on the world stage. Now, I think he's got a real chance to do this. You know, if you look around the world, Boris Johnson is now one of the most powerful international figures. Why do I say that? Well, he has the confidence to know that he has a pretty much guaranteed full five-year term ahead of him during which he can pass anything through his legislature. Now, President Trump has only got a year or so left of his term. President Macron has only got a year or two left; Chancellor Merkel - again, not very much longer - and so on. So around the world, there are various different world leaders who have a different form, you know, of stability. Even Prime Minister Trudeau, who, of course, was just reelected, doesn't have the kind of majority that guarantees him freedom of action.

So in many ways, Boris Johnson is the leader in the G7 - and, in fact, wider than that - who has some of the greatest freedom around. In fact, pretty much him and Prime Minister Modi are the two who've got the most ability to shape their environment. Now, I think what that means for
Prime Minister Johnson is it gives him the opportunity to really get Britain back onto the world stage because the sort of things that he hasn't been able to do - or, in fact, no prime minister has really been able to do for the last two years - it is to be competent in the domestic agenda and therefore focus on - abroad. And as a former foreign secretary, I very much hope he does.

JUDAH: So we had, like, a lot of talk that this is going to be a radical reforming government that really wants to change the Westminster machine. What do they want to do, and what do you think needs to be done to change how Westminster operates to project power abroad?

TUGENDHAT: Well, it's too soon for me to say what the government wants to do because the plans that they have let - that slip that were - are pretty vague at this stage. And so it's not easy for me to be able to be certain. But I can tell you what I'd like to see. I'd like to see a British foreign policy that is coordinated into a proper strategy that is actually working to deliver the fundamental intent of every government, which is the prosperity and happiness of the British people. You know, that is the strategic intent of her majesty's government at home and abroad. And so I'd really like to see that happening. I think it really can because, you know, I think that the U.K. is in a position now where the big reforms inside the U.K. can be made. So you know, whether that's bringing together the arms of influence abroad under a single strategic direction by the foreign secretary - so, you know, aid, trade, defense and diplomacy and intelligence, even - brought together so that they actually coordinate both at home and abroad but also, you know, bringing together other areas of influence - so whether that be, you know, education, finance or whatever it happens to be. You know, there's a whole series of areas where now with the majority, with the power, with the influence that we've got, the U.K. government is free to actually take the kind of decisions that need to be taken.

JUDAH: What do you think that Boris Johnson's win now means for the U.K.-U.S. relationship? Or what would you like that to look like in the years to come?

TUGENDHAT: Well, I think it's positive because the U.S. relationship has, as you know, been the foundation of Britain's liberty for the last 70 years in terms of our defense relationship. But I think it can be much more than that. I think the commercial relationship between our two people is based on a similar, if not quite identical, understanding of the rule of law and intellectual property and respect for individual rights. It's something that allows us to be pretty confident we can share a lot more closely a relationship than many others could. So I look forward to the U.K.-U.S. relationship becoming much more than it has been to date. Now, clearly, there are issues within the U.S. system at the moment which may delay such a deepening of the relationship, but with any luck, they can be overcome. And I very much hope that the U.K. will become again a very important commercial as well as a security ally of the United States.

JUDAH: What do you think the U.K. could do in Washington to have a stronger embassy and pursue the trade deal that the prime minister has set as a priority?

TUGENDHAT: Well, I think there's an awful lot that we can do on that. And I think bringing forward the trade deal is a huge priority. But actually deepening the security relationship is also fantastically important. And we're really at the beginning I think of a very important chapter in our common history.

JUDAH: So you've spoken a lot before how you'd like to see a more kind of centralized super foreign ministry recreated or created in the U.K. Is that an agenda that you're going to be advancing in the months and years to come?
TUGENDHAT: Yes, it is. Look, I'm not particularly bothered as to whether or not there exists a separate department for international development, for example. Just in the same way as I'm not - I wouldn't advocate that the ministry of defense be rolled into the foreign office. But I would say that all on the foreign influence should need to be coordinated, so that means having an empowered foreign secretary, empowered foreign office that's able to give the strategic direction that the country needs in order to bring the coordination together. That also means, I think, upgrading the national security adviser's post from being a diplomat and senior civil servant - and the last few have been very senior and very impressive civil servants - to actually a political appointee because I think the reality is that the national security adviser is in many ways a ministerial appointment.

And so I would strongly advocate that it be somebody who can genuinely advance the political agenda, whether that's bringing together the combined efforts to defend against, for example, foreign corrupt influence in the United Kingdom. And we've heard reports, of course, in the United States of foreign influence in elections. We've had similar reports in the United Kingdom. We've had reports of, you know, corruption and dirty money spreading through the U.K. much as we have through the United States and indeed other jurisdictions. We had various indications at various points that actually many areas that sound as though they're divided - you know, sound as though these are foreign policy and these domestic policy - are actually very closely connected. And so I'd very much like to see those brought together. And I think that means changing the way we structure ourselves in Whitehall and in some ways bringing political oversight into areas that have traditionally been held by civil servants.

JUDAH: So what do you think the kind of top three priorities should be sort of going forward for Britain and the world?

TUGENDHAT: Sure. OK. Well, look, I think there are three things that the United Kingdom should do immediately. The first - and I think we should announce this tomorrow - is to announce that we're going to begin talks with the TPP countries or rather the CPTPP countries as they're now called. You know, the reality is that world scale shipping prices are now at pretty historic lows. And the cost of shipping is not a significant cost in trade. And so the fact that Mexico, Japan, Chile and others, Australia and so on, are part of this trade group shouldn't have us concerned. We should actually be reaching into that sort of alliance because that sort of looser alliance than the European Union, a purely trading bloc, is the sort of relationship I think we should be building. And I think announcing that we were looking to do that would have an effect on its own. And it would shape the way that the European Union saw us because, let's face it, the U.K. has had the harder end of the talks in recent years because the divorce agreement, as it were. However, the next stage is going to be much harder for the European Union because the European Union has, of course, 27 countries, all of whom have different interests and all of whom have something different to lose with the U.K.'s departure.

So actually finding a way to make sure that everybody realizes that not only are we leaving, but there will be implications to that departure I think is a very important thing to do. And I think it will also change the focus to the United States because, of course, while many of us are very keen to have a very close trading relationship, commercial relationship with the United States, the reality is that we don't want to be sitting, as it were, as the last - you know, as the last person at the ball waiting for somebody to ask us to dance. We want to be quite clear that we're popular in our own right. And I think that means reaching out. So I think that's the first thing to do. The
second is to look around the world and to realize that the world is changing - now, for various reasons, some of them perfectly understandable, traditional reasons and some modern economic reasons. The two major power blocs, as it were, the United States and China, are having a very different effect on the global economy and geopolitics. You know, the United States is moving away - I mean, we notice it most of all, of course, in terms of sort of military engagements in the Middle East and things like that. But actually, the United States is in many ways stepping away from many other organizations - the U.N. a bit, NATO a bit, the World Trade Organization. You know, since President Obama, the United States has been blocking appointments to the appellate body of the WTO, which is now no longer quorate. And on the other side, China is seeking to influence - in fact, take control - of many of the international organizations that make up the U.N. but also make up other international structures. And that too is having an impact.

Now, I think that the United Kingdom has a particular responsibility here, along with others - countries like Canada, Australia, India, perhaps even some countries in South America and countries like Japan and South Korea - to build up a sort of a grouping of the mid-ranking Democratic powers. I don't mean one of the two hegemons, but I mean those who are democracies and successful multi - you know, successful international trading powers but are also - but rely on - those countries that rely on the rule of law really for their success but are not those who can impose the rule of law or its absence on anyone else. And those countries, I call the mid-Dems, the mid-ranking Democrats. And if we can bring together groups of - a mid-Dem group of 30 or 40 countries, then what we can do is we can start to defend many of the principles of the international order that has enabled us all to prosper over the last 70 years without needing absolutely the Pax Americana or indeed the total buy-in of a new mercantilist China. And now the third thing - the third thing that I would do is I would look very, very hard at home.

And this is where as a chair of the one-nation group in the U.K. Parliament, which is a conservative group of people who talk about the one nation of the United Kingdom, I would set a very strong one-nation agenda because, as we know, the separatist movements in the United Kingdom have not gone away. The Scottish National Party did rather better than I would have liked in the recent general election. And within the United Kingdom itself, there is also internal division - as there is in many countries - on concentrations of wealth and power in different parts of the country. And so setting a proper one-nation agenda, by which I mean bringing the country together, both in terms of the Union and in terms of the U.K. economy, I think is hugely important because countries that are divided are easy to pick apart. And if we allow ourselves to, that will be hugely damaging, not just for the United Kingdom actually but also for many of our partners because, of course, the division of the United Kingdom would have major implications for Eastern European defense and their advance on NATO. It would have massive implications for the Commonwealth and indeed for the United Nations.

JUDAH: So what steps toward kind of bringing England and Scotland closer together do you think could and should be taken? We've seen talks recently over the last few days, or rather sort of leaked to the press, that possibly reforming the House of Lords to create greater representation of members of devolved assemblies - you know, sort of curious what your thoughts were on that idea or on other potential reform.

TUGENDHAT: Sure. That's not a new idea, the sort of - the idea of, you know, turning the House of Lords into the sort of council of the isles while the House of Commons becomes a sort
of an English Parliament or something like that or a Parliament of the United Kingdom. You know, there are various discussions that have been going on around that for the best part of the last 20 or 30 years. So these ideas aren't entirely new. I mean, I think the key thing to do is to make sure that we prioritize investment in Scotland. You know, it's certainly true that for the last 40, 50 years, most of the infrastructure investment has gone into the places where it has generated the quickest and most obvious returns, and, of course, that - London, really, and urban centers. And that's why Scotland, yes, but actually many other parts of the United Kingdom have really suffered in recent years because we're not putting the same amount of investment as we should into buses or, you know, rural transport as we are into urban transport because you simply don't get the same bang for your buck.

JUDAH: Now kind of moving on or backwards towards Europe, I'm really curious to know what your thoughts are of President Macron's vision for a European security council including the U.K. as a way of potentially rebuilding a lot of the security and foreign policy relationship that would have been damaged or lost through Brexit. Do you think this is something that the U.K. should seize with both hands? What would you like it to look like? Or do you think it's potentially a distraction?

TUGENDHAT: Well, I'm cautious at this stage. I mean, I'm cautious because there is already, as we know, the United Nations Security Council. And I think that's the - you know, that's the correct forum for international decision-making. But I do think it's important to have a structure within which European countries can discuss foreign policy coordination. You know, let's not forget that NATO, though a very important forum for tense discussions, also includes countries from around the world - most notably, of course, Canada and the United States - but there are many other partner countries that take up - take interest to other parts of the U.K. as well for very, you know, understandable and correct reasons. So having a structure within which the E3, as it was traditionally called - that's France, United Kingdom and Germany - were able to discuss security would sound like a sensible idea. Whether or not I'd call it a security council or whether or not I would give it that sort of formal, established status, I think I'd be cautious because what I would hate to do is to devalue the existing Security Council or the existing NATO alliance in favor of something that is, at this stage, anyway, rather more experimental.

JUDAH: So what do you think of the main kind of threat facing Britain as we go into this new premiership coming from abroad? Do you think the threat from China has perhaps been understudied in the U.K.? What about the threat from Russia? I'm very curious to hear your thoughts on international terrorism and the situation in the Middle East.

TUGENDHAT: So international terrorism is sadly going to be a constant problem, and it's one that's going to require a lot of coordination to combat. And in many areas, we're doing well with this and in a few, sadly, we're having, you know, issues, as we saw in the London Bridge attack recently. But working with partners and allies around the world means that we're in a much better place on that than we used to be. Now, that doesn't mean that there's any room for complacency. There certainly isn't. But we're not in the same situation as we were 15, 20 years ago around the time, say, of 9/11. Now, the problems that international terrorism can bring, including - sorry - including destabilizing migration can be really problematic, as we saw in 2016 as people moved across Europe. And this is where, you know, looking at the actions of countries like Russia is extremely concerning because what they're doing is they're trying to, in many ways, bring down the stability of the West by using such forces against us - mass-migrant movement.
But the reality is Russia is actually a relatively weak country. It's been so stripped by its corrupt leadership who have left its security forces and its intelligence services really short of the capability to act by simply robbing them blind. And so, you know, in many ways, Russia has gone from being a great power to being, you know, a petrol station with a government attached. And that's extremely sad because it's the Russian people who are suffering, and they really shouldn't be. Instead, what should be happening is Russia should be a hugely powerful and important member of the international community. China is different. China is a truly great power, but it's trying to find its place in the international system. And this is something where I think the United Kingdom and the United States have a very important role in supporting China's place in the world because the truth is, you know, the largest or second-largest economy in the world - there's no question that China should have a seat on every top table. And there's absolutely no question that its voice should definitely be heard. The question is, how do you ensure that voice without seeing - well, without seeing many of the organizations that through which that voice is heard being challenged, and, in fact, sometimes being found wanting? And that's where I think the United Kingdom has got a really important role in supporting China fitting into the system rather than trying to replace it. I think that the work that the U.K. government did in helping to establish the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank was hugely important.

JUDAH: So what would that mean for Britain's relationship with Belt and Road? And to what extent do you think that Brexit allows the U.K. now to have a different China policy from the rest of the European Union?

TUGENDHAT: Well, I think that Brexit does allow Britain to have a different China policy. But, in fact, you know, Britain's quite regularly had a different China policy. And I think it's worth just being slightly cautious about Belt and Road. Belt and Road is more of a branding exercise for many, many disparate Chinese actions not - which are not in any real sense coordinated. They are, in fact, just commonly branded. So I think one should probably be slightly cautious about not getting too excited about Belt and Road. But I think it's certainly true that what we've got to do is we've got to be very cautious and recognize that the sort of mercantilist principle of the Chinese government where they're taking over, you know, ports in Sri Lanka and having huge infrastructure investments into parts of Africa and South Asia mean that their influence is a lot stronger around the world than it might otherwise have been. And we've got to recognize that this is important to many people, but it's also - you know, it poses challenges to the way in which the world works.

JUDAH: You've been very vocal about Hong Kong, of course. I'd love to know your thoughts on the situation there now and what you think the new government should do about the rights of Hong Kong citizens who might have rights that have been neglected by the British government?

TUGENDHAT: Well, I think it's, first of all, very important to say that Hong Kong is unquestionably part of China. Nobody disputes that. And it's not for me or, indeed, anyone else to make any claim or to make any statements about Hong Kong which doesn't recognize the sovereignty of China in Hong Kong. But that doesn't mean that Britain doesn't have a role under the Sino-British declaration. As you'll remember, the British government has responsibilities that it's agreed to, committed to at the time of handover and that exist to this day. And one of those is a report every six months, but another is the legacy of British Nationals (Overseas), as they're called, which is sort of a class of U.K. citizens overseas, a class of U.K. passport-holders overseas. And I think that's something that the U.K. really should look very clearly at because the - those British Nationals (Overseas) have rights under, you know - or they should have
rights under our system but, in many ways, don’t. And so I would like to see us recognizing that, you know, those citizens actually have the ability to come and, you know, live in the United Kingdom or study or whatever it is, and they’re not just simply cut out because of an accident of history.

JUDAH: You know, there's a lot of talk in Washington at the moment about Xinjiang and about what's happening to the Uighurs. Do you think Britain could and should do more there?

TUGENDHAT: I think it’s important that we highlight this issue because the reality is, the plight of the Uighurs is going to affect many of us, if not directly, then by the rise in terrorism that this is going to inspire in other parts of the world. I think it’s extremely important that the U.K. is clear in standing up for those who are most oppressed by the Chinese state at the moment - and that, sadly, is the Uighur population - and calls out that abuse when we see it. And, sadly, too few of our Muslim friends have been astute in doing so. In fact, the silence from some countries has been completely deafening.

JUDAH: You’ve stated in the past about how Britain needs to forge a new special relationship with India. What would that look like?

TUGENDHAT: Well, I think the relationship with India is really quite extraordinary because it’s one that is already very deep, and yet the trade relationship, as it were, the formulaic - you know, the legalistic relationship is not particularly easy. And that relationship exists because of the living bridge between us. You know, the number of British people of Indian origin and the number of people of the United Kingdom who now live in India is a very, very deep, very proximate relationship and one that really has a huge benefit, I think, to both sides. So I am looking at how we can build on that and how we can make sure that we are, you know, actually ready to make the most of this for everyone. I think there’s a whole range of areas that we can look at, whether that's considering how the service economy can be opened up for both or whether or not the U.K.’s capital markets can be seen to support the growth of the Indian population. I think that would be extremely interesting to see what we can achieve together.

JUDAH: Coming back to Parliament to wrap up, what do you think the Foreign Affairs Committee should be doing over the next few years, and will you be running again to be the chair of the committee?

TUGENDHAT: Well, I’m planning to run again. I mean, it’s too early to know whether it’ll be a Conservative chair, and - but I suspect it will be, and I’m intending to run again. The - I think that there’s a few areas that, really, we need to be working on. The first, as a committee, I think we need to be working - looking at the structure of the Foreign Office and the Whitehall aspect. The second is, how do we work with our European partners? How do we reinvent our diplomatic missions in Europe, which most of them - in fact, all of them - geared to the last 40-year relationship as part of a member of a club, and now these are standalone relationships, but, of course, they are fundamentally networked. And then other areas I think we really need to look at is the mid-Dems question. How do we work together with those countries that are absolutely part of the international rules-based system but are not large enough to really push their influence around? And I think those three areas will be a very good place to start. But there is one other area that really is very close, I think, to the British people’s heart, which is, how do we support the protection that we need in terms of climate change in order to make sure that the international foreign policy is coordinated to deliver the results that we need? Now, the U.K. is already a world leader in this in terms of carbon-free energy production and also the maritime
reserves that have been established around the world and so - and often in U.K. overseas territories, British overseas territories. So how we make this work is, I think, hugely important, and I think that's where we're really going to be focusing at the Foreign Affairs Committee.

JUDAH: Tom Tugendhat, thank you for joining us.