Is Britain Still a Global Intelligence Power?

TRANSCRIPT

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A video of the event is available: https://www.hudson.org/events/1825-video-event-is-britain-still-a-global-intelligence-power-62020

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Ben Judah:

Hello and welcome. My name is Ben Judah. I'm a research fellow at the Hudson Institute. I'm thrilled to be joined here today by Sir John Sawers GCMG, the former Chief of Britain's legendary Secret Intelligence Service also known as MI6. Today, Sir John is the Executive Chairman of Newbridge Advisory. And in the course of his career at British diplomacy, has been Britain's permanent representative to the United Nations in New York and Her Majesty's Ambassador to Egypt.

Thank you for joining us here today for discussion on Britain, in world defense.

Sir John Sawers:

Thank you, Ben. It's pleasure to be with you.

Ben Judah:

Thank you. Let's begin, not where discussions of Britain often do in looking back from 1945, but in a far more useful comparator, I think, which is London's position at the end of the cold war. So I guess my first question for you is, do you think that Britain is more or less of an intelligence power than it was in 1990?

Sir John Sawers:

Well, that's not a straightforward question to answer. I think in the Cold War, the intelligence was not playing this lead role, it was a defense based conflict with a passive defense on both sides, nuclear arsenals, and so on, and lots of major exercises, intelligence supported that.

I think what's happened since 1990 is that the threats we face, whether it's terrorism or cyber or the more complex actions of hostile powers like Russia or Iran, I see intelligence has become the dominant and most important element of the Western countries defenses giving you advance warning of what is happening. It's intelligence methods that are crucial to dealing with the threats of the 21st century.

In that regard, I think Britain is a very significant intelligence power, in some ways, more capable on the intelligence side than we were 30 years ago.

Ben Judah:

So brings me to my second question, which is, the UK more or less serve intelligence partner to the US than in 1990?

Sir John Sawers:

Well, the role of intelligence has changed quite significantly, as I say. I think the alliance that we have between the United States and the United Kingdom is very deep and very profound. The Five Eyes partnership between our two countries with Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, it finds its greatest depth in the cooperation amongst the Secret Agencies, the National Security Agency in the US, Government Communications Headquarter here at Cheltenham, in the UK, and counterparts in the other three, Five Eyes Capitals, where they basically divide the world up between them.

When I was Chief of MI6, some of the most serious terrorist threats against the United States, were foiled by British intelligence. And that if it had not been for British intelligence, they will almost certainly
have led to mass casualties in the United States itself. So to that extent, I think the UK is a really important partner to America, and to many other countries in the intelligence and security world.

Ben Judah:

There's been this transformation in intelligence and in intelligence gathering. But do you think that Britain is more or less secure than it was in 2010 looking back over the last decade?

Sir John Sawers:

Well, 2010, that's an unusual date to start. But I think Britain is pretty secure at the moment, there's no major existential threat facing the country as it was during the Cold War. The threat of terrorism is going to be with us for many years to come, but it's not an enduring week by week threat on the streets of the UK.

So I think, by and large, the UK is quite secure. We've got defense in depth in the sense that our geography is quite helpful. Our partnership with European countries on security and intelligence helps keep some of the threats that might face the UK at bay and at a greater distance. In some ways, the biggest threats are against things like cyber attacks, and also the things that take you by surprise, like pandemics, where intelligence doesn't have a huge role to play except in retrospect.

So I think Britain is a pretty secure country. And in some ways, it's that security that led to, in my view, what might turn out to be a misguided decision to leave the European Union in the sense of, "Well, we're fine off on our own. We can go our own way. We don't need that depth of partnerships with Europe because we're not facing any serious threats at the moment."

Ben Judah:

What were the most difficult challenges that emerged that the Intelligence Services had to deal with over the last 10, 20, or 30 years? What were the toughest to get a handle on?

Sir John Sawers:

Well, in some ways, the toughest challenges were reorganizing ourselves and adapting to the changing nature of the threats. Some of it is about the threats themselves. The others are about the way those threats were delivered. For example, after 9/11, when by far the biggest focus of Western governments, including the British government, was defending ourselves against terrorism, we had to get involved in a whole new type of operation, penetrating non-governmental organization, ie. Terrorist cells. It wasn't hostile governments that were threatening us so much as terrorist organizations. And we had to regear ourselves for that challenge.

When I was chief, in some ways, the biggest single challenge was to make sure we had the technology that we could deploy in order to transform the way we did our espionage. That the old style way of sending an intelligence officer overseas with a false passport, a false name, and a false identity that just became completely unsustainable in the era of biometrics.

And in many ways, the most successful developments in intelligence was the use of data analytics, which of course, is now a standard in the world in which we live. But 10 or 12 years ago, when I rejoined MI6 as the Chief, this was the new technology. It became transformative as to how we and our counterparts in places like the CIA or French Intelligence Service transformed the way in which we did our operations.
And getting that technology right, having a shift of the culture, so that instead of the most important person in the intelligence operation being the agent in the field, the operator in the field. Actually in some ways, the most important operator, that most important member of the team became the technical analyst, who was looking at the data and managing the data and telling the agents in the field where the opportunities lay.

Ben Judah:

So moving out from Cheltenham or GCHQ, it’s the wider world. From your perspective, looking back at British foreign policy in the Middle East over the last few decades, were mistakes made?

Sir John Sawers:

Well, when you look with the benefit of hindsight, there are always mistakes made. Probably the biggest single one, which stands out, of course, is Iraq. In 2003, under the leadership of George H. W. Bush in 1990-1991, there was a very deliberate limit to the conflict against Iraq after they invaded Kuwait.

In 2003, I think there was an element of hubris both in America and in Britain about what would happen after Saddam Hussein was ousted. I think when we look back, it’s when major powers overreach that they lose their confidence, they lose that authority they have in the world.

There’s no doubt that both Britain and America overreached in Iraq in 2003. It meant that our own people became less interested and rather alienated from being engaged with the world and trying to improve the quality of governments and leadership around the world. And I think it also gave strategic opportunities for countries like Iran, which that wasn’t obvious in 2003, but the Iranians were very skillful in the years afterwards in turning the overthrow of Saddam. Of course, it was the Iran’s biggest enemy in the region, integrated strategic opportunity for Iran.

So that undoubtedly was a mistake. It doesn’t mean that everything that the Western in the Middle East was a mistake, far from it. But you asked about mistakes. And I think we have to identify that as one.

Ben Judah:

So moving on to Syria and the Syrian civil war. Where are the hinge points where things could have gone differently?

Sir John Sawers:

People identify the use of chemical weapons by Saddam in the summer of 2013 as a hinge point. Actually, I go back 12 months. I go back to the middle of 2012 when the civil strife and the civil conflict had been raging for about 12 months. We had a strategic decision to take in the West as to whether we were serious about intervening and supporting the opposition to overthrow the Assad regime or whether we weren't prepares to do that.

Both in Washington and in London, and in various other capitals, the principal leadership pulled back from the sort of all-in approach that we adopted in Iraq, or even the less interventionist, but still effective means of dislodging a regime that we used in Libya.

But then adopted the runs halfway house of supporting the opposition sufficiently to keep the conflict going, but insufficiently to overthrow the regime. And in a sense, we got the worst of both worlds. Then when David Cameron unwisely took the decision to intervene in Syria after the chemical weapons attacks around Damascus, took that to the House of Commons and was defeated. Barack Obama then
backed down. That then was really the end of any prospect of Western policy prevailing in Syria. It created an opening for Vladimir Putin and the Russians to step in and become the main shaper of that conflict and indeed of the outcome, and we can see that outcome today.

So there were turning points there, both in the summer of 2012, and again, in the late summer of 2013. Hindsight’s a wonderful thing. It’s difficult to get these things right, but we’ve ended up in a position where Syria isn’t a dreadful situation because of the length of the conflict. Assad is still in power and millions of Syrians have been forced from their homes and well over a million have been killed. And that’s a pretty bad outcome.

Ben Judah:

You mentioned Vladimir Putin. So moving northwards, when did you see or feel the renaissance in the threats and capacities post by Russian Intelligence beginning after the cold war?

Sir John Sawers:

Well, when Putin came to power in end of 2000, beginning of 2001, he did so fortunately for him at a time when oil prices were rising, he’d taken over Russia at the end of a really pretty devastating decade for Russia. The chaos of the 1990s and the Yeltsin era. We can look back on things we might have done differently in the 1990s, but most of the fault lay with the Russians themselves. I think the situation they got themselves into.

Putin invested, first of all, in rebuilding Russia’s military, in particular, their strategic deterrent, their fundamental defense, then he rebuilt and modernized the armed forces. In parallel, he put great weights on the intelligent services as his fundamental source of support. So they’ve got a lot of resource, a lot of support to develop new techniques. And they became the central power in the Putin regime.

I think some of the things that we identify, in some ways Putin was reacting to what the West was doing and saying. I do think, for example, the 2008 NATO Summit Declaration, paving the way for Ukraine and Georgia, 2007 or 2008, I can’t recall, to join NATO, was a direct contributor to the 2008 Georgian Wall, which the Russians provoked. Likewise, as I say, in Syria, in a sense we created the opportunity, for Putin to intervening in Syria.

Then in Ukraine, which was the most extensive Russian military intervention of recent years. In a sense, it was all disarray in how Ukraine should be integrated into the West, into the European union, into NATO, that led to the conflict in Ukraine. I think Russians completely misunderstood what was happening in Kiev at that time. I think they could not believe that the ordinary people of Ukraine they’ve risen up against the Russian supporting governments of Yanukovych. They thought it must’ve been a CIA, MI6 plot to overthrow one of Russia’s closest allies. And what they felt was, in a country that was a central part of Russia’s sphere of influence, if you like.

But Russia and Putin, intervened one sense successfully absorbing Crimea into Russian territory, creating the insurgency in the Donbass. But there's not really been any way out for Putin from that. I think Putin is learning from this. What we're seeing more recently is hos projecting power using deniable mercenaries, like the Faulkner battalion. He's taking a very active use of cyber methods to attack the integrity of elections, not just in America, but around Europe as well.

We see the rather brazen operations of the GRU, the military intelligence branch in Russia, like the attempt to kill Sergei Skripal in sorcery a few years ago. The attacks on the international chemical weapons' organization in the Hague. Is that attempt by Putin to push back the boundaries, but limiting
the degree of confrontation with the West. He wants to do it in a swing insidious way and undermine the unity and integrity of the West rather than actually confront it head on.

**Ben Judah:**

So how would you characterize Russian Intelligence capacities now? Are they stronger or weaker than the cold war KGB? What is the scale of Russian intelligence operations in Britain? It’s been said that it may be higher than during the cold war. I’d love to hear your thoughts on that.

**Sir John Sawers:**

Well, there’s a limit to what I can say, and I have to remind you that I’m a bit out of date and that I stepped down as Chief of MI6 over five years ago. But there’s no doubt, the Russian Intelligence Services are in the first division of intelligence services in the world. They are very serious set up, they have great resources, they have some very capable people and they should not be underestimated.

Now, whether they are more capable of less capable than they were in the 1980s, in a sense that’s a theoretical discussion. But there’s no doubt that they’re very powerful inside Russia, there are serious influence, probably more so on the top leadership now than they were back in the 1980s. The 1980s, the Communist Party was the most serious organization in Russia, and the KGB and the Red Army were important parts of the delivery of Communist Party power.

Now, there’s no party structure. There’s no real principle structure is run through the intelligence services. As we’ve seen, there’s been no letup in Russian Intelligence operations in the West. You see that in the United States, you see it here in Britain and around Europe, and you see it in developing countries as well. So the Russian Intelligence Services are a means through which Russia projects its power internationally, as well as keeping control at home.

**Ben Judah:**

What do you make of the debate around, so called, collusion between the Trump campaign and Russian Intelligence?

**Sir John Sawers:**

Well, I’ve got nothing new to say on that. That’s been investigated very extensively. I think it’s quite clear that Russia sought to intervene in those elections in 2016. This isn’t new. Russia has a long history of intervening in Western politics. In my own country, the Soviet Union supported the infiltration of the Trade Union Movement had its own spokespeople on the ground. In France and Italy, the Communist Parties of those countries were backed and in a sense, orchestrated by Moscow. In Germany, the peace movements in the 1980s had a lot of Soviet influence behind them.

So this attempt by the Russians to intervene and undermine Western politics is deep in their culture. I think what you saw in 2016 was America facing what Europeans have faced over many years. Now, are they trying to get one candidate elected over another? I'm not sure they were. I think what they were doing was trying to de-legitimize the election and make the American people less trusting of the election process and of their own institutions. And to some extent, they’ve been successful in that.

**Ben Judah:**

So moving further East, how much of an intelligence threat was China under your tenure?
Sir John Sawers:

Well, China has been growing challenge over the last 30 or 40 years. I think under the guidance of Deng Xiaoping, from end of the ’70s really, China was pursuing an approach which he characterized as hide and bide, hide capabilities, bide your time, never show leadership. That we're a developing country. We ease ourselves into the world and establish our own strengths.

I think with hindsight, 2012 was a turning point with the election. There was all selection of Chu Chin Peng is the new leader of China. I don't think we fully understood it at the time, but he has transformed the direction of China from the Deng Xiaoping approach, which was pursued by his two successors, Jiang Zemin and Hua Guofeng.

I think under Xi Jinping, we’re now dealing with a different type of China, but also a much more powerful China. In some measures, the Chinese economy is already bigger than the American economy and the European economy. Certainly, they don't have the same defense capabilities, but their capacity to disrupt our defense capabilities is growing. They certainly have a much more active intelligence effort, not just aimed at ethnic Chinese people in Western countries, but actually more assertive and effective challenge.

So we do need to take China very seriously. I think it's a mistake to equate the China’s from China with the threat we faced from the Soviet Union. But we do also need to recognize that this is now not just a China, which is trying to become part of the existing international system tweaked to suit Chinese needs. They're looking at a more fundamental means of defending their own interests, advancing their own interests, which is not compatible with some aspects of the international system.

Ben Judah:

Do you share the assessment that China is a threat to Britain?

Sir John Sawers:

Well, I think it's a real challenge for Britain. I think what we've learned over the last few years, there's two things about China. One is that, we do not want to be dependent upon China any more than we have to be or we are already. We want to reverse that if we possibly can.

But secondly, China, is not a power that is cut off from the world. We need China to help address global challenges, whether it's the challenge of the pandemic, we're in the midst of at the moment, whether it's the challenge of climate change where China and United States and India are going to be the three biggest problem countries in some ways, in terms of the scale of the contribution each is making to the changes in our climate.

And we're going to need China's cooperation in places like Africa, if we're going to provide debt relief to Africa. It's no point just Western governments or Western companies providing that debt relief, China has to as well. And as we've seen, from his performance on the Belt and Road initiative, the concept of debt relief, isn't part of the Chinese thinking at this stage. If someone owes them money and they can't pay, well they just grabbed the assets, which is a very negative approach and damaging to development.

So there are a series of issues where we have to be able to work with China, at the same time, they are a power which is very, very different from Western powers. They're moving, as I say, in a direction where
they are assessing themselves, both at home and abroad in a way, which is incompatible with Western interests.

What we see in Xinjiang and what we're seeing in Hong Kong, they're made threatening noises, they're making about Taiwan, their creation of military bases in the South China sea. All these are actions that we need to be very concerned about and find a way to push back against China role.

**Ben Judah:**

What is the significance of what is happening in Hong Kong? And do you think Britain is taking major risks here?

**Sir John Sawers:**

Well, I think what's happening in Hong Kong is very significant. We negotiated here with Deng Xiaoping back in the 1980s, a concept for the future of Hong Kong with one country, two systems. That was the basis on which Hong Kong was returned to China in 1997 when frankly, we had no alternative option. We couldn't just hang on to it after the lease on the new territories came to an end. And it worked pretty well for 20 years.

But the style of Xi Jinping rule is not to allow for criticism, not to allow for popular expressions of political views, and certainly not to allow the people to elect their own leaders. And that's really been the fundamental issue in Hong Kong is who chooses Hong Kong's leaders.

I think what we're now seeing with this new national security law, is a very serious challenge, the biggest so far to the structure of one country, two systems. When you talk to the Chinese about this, they say, "You in the West, you always talk about the two systems. You always forget about the one country, and that Hong Kong was part of China." But they got a half a point there.

But at the same time, they are ignoring their commitments there made in the basic law and in the treaty with which Hong Kong was returned to Chinese sovereignty, where they would allow the people of Hong Kong to autonomous rule over the society for 50 years. We're not even half way through that. And it's been corroded very severely.

Now, what should Britain do? I think frankly, Britain has been distracted this last few years. We've not taken seriously enough some of the challenges around the world. We're distracted by Brexit and our own domestic divisions. I think we do need to take a more serious stance here. I was glad to see the Boris Johnson government signing up to a joint statement with Australia, Canada, and the United States, supporting the position of Hong Kong under one country, two systems. I think we should be increasingly active on that front.

**Ben Judah:**

So moving on to pandemics. Were pandemics a topic that MI6 worked on in the past or under your tenure, and how has the pandemic make us rethink the role of an intelligence service? I'm thinking of how the Mossad in Israel has been sourcing PPE and other such instances.

**Sir John Sawers:**

Of course, in a national crisis, the intelligence agencies are always turned to for some of the most difficult tasks. I don't think this crisis is any different. But you asked me, what were we doing on pandemics when I was Chief from 2009-2014, the answer was, we weren't doing anything on...
pandemics. We were consumed with the terrorist threat. We were consumed with the threats from hostile powers like Russia and Iran. We had the rising challenge from China. A whole series of other things that we were very engaged in.

Pandemics were part of the national security threat picture that was drawn up by the Cameron government, I think in ... I can't remember 2010 or 2011. It was out there. It was one of the most serious threats. But it wasn't one on which the intelligence agencies were tasked. This was a challenge with domestic health services and critical infrastructure of the UK to deal with. And actually, we developed quite a good plan in 2011 for dealing with pandemics. The sadness is they wasn't properly implemented or seen through the following eight or nine years.

Ben Judah:
You're staying on Brexit. Has intelligence or security corporation been effected by Brexit? Are there any risks, especially when it comes to data sharing, or other starch issues of a no deal or a bad deal Brexit?

Well, the short answer is that so far the Brexit issue has not impacted on intelligence cooperation and intelligence sharing. The European Union is not a means for sharing or assessing intelligence. It's all done between the agencies of the UK and our counterparts in France or Germany or Italy or Spain or Poland or wherever. It's not done through EU structures.

As the UK is probably a net contributor of defense and intelligence to the continent of Europe, those countries have been very keen to maintain that cooperation as have we, because the continent of Europe is defense in depth, if you like.

There are two things that I worry about. You mentioned data, that is one of them. The rules for data sharing in Europe are really set by the European union. And when we were around the table, we had a voice on that. Our approach was rather different. Say from the German approach. We valued privacy, but we gave security at least as high a priority in the debate on how you protect and use data.

In Germany, partly because of their history, they were much more focused on privacy than they were on security. Now, around the table, we managed to create rules that we were both content where we could both live with. With Britain not around the table, European Union will make its own decisions about the data sharing rules. It may come up with something which is less concerned and less focused on the needs of exchanging data for security purposes. And I think that would be a longterm loss.

My second concern is that, the UK Agencies and our counterparts on the continent are very keen to preserve the cooperation that we have because it's mutually beneficial. But if the Brexit negotiations end up in serious disarray, with a perception that the EU is deliberately trying to damage the UK economy, which is possible, then I don't see how the level of defense and internal cooperation can continue unchanged. That is not a threat. It's just a statement of fact.

I think there's a reasonable chance of us coming through this. There's a lot of argument going on. There's a lot of some posturing you might say. I think frankly, UK position isn't really a tenable for an overall agreement and nor is the European union position. Both sides have to come together if we're to find a consensual way forward. But I do think that's entirely possible. I think it's the best outcome for Britain and for the European union and certainly the best outcome for continued cooperation on the issues which I have devoted my life too, of intelligence, security, defense, and foreign policy.
Ben Judah:

Staying on line, Britain's capacities. Has the UK invested enough in its own domestic intelligence capacities or is it let them slide somewhat of the expense of over reliance on the Five Eyes Intelligence Alliance?

Sir John Sawers:

No, we don't have over reliance on the Five Eyes. That's a complete misreading. Britain has, by far the second most powerful set of intelligence agencies within the Five Eyes Alliance, second to the United States. And as I say, we contribute a huge amount to American Intelligence and the American Security. So there's no sense that we are punching below our weight.

There was a period in the 1990s, when the threat from the Soviet Union had gone away. When I think there was some underinvestment in the intelligence agencies. But 9/11 led to a reversal of that. As I was saying earlier, the threats that a modern Western country faces these days, whether it's cyber or attempts to undermine our democratic institutions, terrorism, it's intelligence agencies which are in the forefront of this. And that's been recognized throughout the last 15 years by steady increases, even after the global financial crash of 2008 in the budgets of the intelligence agencies.

So comparatively, we've done pretty well as a community, as an intelligence community here, and we've done at least as well as our counterparts have done in the Five Eyes and in other countries that value intelligence cooperation.

Ben Judah:

So talking about Five Eyes going forward, is there more that the UK could do to formalize or expand Five Eyes into a broader diplomatic Alliance? Or does Five Eyes, as some people might say, make us more vulnerable to American pressure?

Sir John Sawers:

No, I don't think. I think your last point is not right. As I say, I think in terms of disrupting direct threats on our national territory, the UK has contributed more to the United States and the United States has contributed to the UK. I'm not bragging about that. It's just a statement of how things have unfolded over the last 10 years. Because a lot of the terrorist threats against America have been channeled through the United Kingdom, for example, the threat from Yemen to send a cargo plane via the UK into a USS space and explode it. It was in the battle land in the United States. That was followed by British intelligence and our cooperation with Saudi Arabia. Likewise, the most sophisticated bomb produced by Al-Qaeda disrupted by a UK operation, which otherwise would have led to a passenger plane going from the UK to United States being blown up as soon as coming into the land in New York. And it's not just those one during my tenure as chief. Back in 2006, you had the liquid bombs attack. Again, planes flying from the UK to the US, which was disrupted because of the effective work of the UK Domestic Security Service, MI5.

So I think, we in the UK have contributed enormously to the prevention and disruption of terrorist threats in the United States. And we continue to contribute a huge amount in operations against hostile powers. Iran is a good example. It was the UK and British intelligence that unearthed the loss of the
secret activity that was going on inside Iran and led much of the efforts to slow that down, both at a political level and as an intelligence level. So I think membership of the Five Eyes Alliance is an asset for all members of that Alliance.

Now, we're not solely cooperating within the Five Eyes. We work closely with countries like France and Germany, Spain and Italy, with the Israelis who have a very effective intelligence efforts, and with friends in the Arab world, and in parts of Asia as well. So it's a wide ranging partnership. I don't think you can expand the Five Eyes. The Five Eyes is based on a level of fundamental trust between countries that fought together in the first and second world Wars, and it has evolved from there.

You can't just conjure up that level of trust amongst other countries. You can negotiate treaties, you can have agreements to exchange information, but that fundamental level of trust has to be built through historical experience. But I think, UK more than punches its weight within the Five Eyes. And we're very active in working with other countries and partners in the Western world as well.

Ben Judah:

So staying at home, do you share the assessment voice by Sir Richard Dearlove, the government led by Jeremy Corbyn would have been a threat to national security?

Sir John Sawers:

Well, Richard Dearlove will say what he wants to say. I think Jeremy Corbyn was a leader of the populace left, with very poor credentials to be prime minister, very little understanding, proper understanding of the strategic and security threats the United Kingdom faced.

Frankly, the outcome of the last election in the UK, six months ago, it was largely determined because Jeremy Corbyn was not a suitable figure to become prime minister of the UK. And that's for a whole host of reasons. Had he been elected, then obviously the system would have tried to make it work. We see in other countries, leaders who are not that well geared to or suited to being leader, the system, the structure, the institutions will come in behind them and make it work. I'm glad to say that Jeremy Corbyn wasn't elected.

Ben Judah:

So looking forward now into the future, I'm very interested in what it would take to make global Britain more than a slogan. What do you think the UK has to do to restore its reputation? What does Britain have to do to make its foreign policy more effective? Are there new institutions that need to be built around Five Eyes or maybe around the E3 in partnership with France and Germany?

Sir John Sawers:

Well, I would take a step back from that. I think the times, in my professional lifetime, when we have been most effective, most influential, most powerful in the world, when two things had fallen in place. When we've had respected and really effective leadership at home. And when our UK economy has been performing in a very strong manner. We had it in the 1980s when Margaret Thatcher was prime minister. We had it again, from the late '90s through till 2010 when Tony Blair and then Gordon Brown were prime minister.

I think, in those 20 year periods, Britain was a really effective player in the world in a way in which we're not at the moment. I think for Britain to become, once again, respected and influential and powerful, we
need to have demonstrably capable leadership. This is not a criticism directly at Boris Johnson, but he has to step up to being an effective leader and have powerful people in the top levels of government, which he doesn't have at the moment.

And we've got to get the UK economy going, and that will be a real tall order after the recession caused by COVID, and after the turbulence caused by us leaving the European Union. So I think restoring Britain strength abroad and in the world, that work begins here at home, on the economy and on leadership.

**Ben Judah:**

Is there more that needs to be done towards rebuilding the foreign affairs, rebuilding our diplomatic capacity? Is that work there that needs to be started too?

**Sir John Sawers:**

Yeah, all the institutions by which you project power in the world needs to be running effectively. I think we can identify two parts of that which have done really well. The first is our international developments effort, where deferred has been one of the world's leaders, both in the operations and contribution is made and in its intellectual influence. And I think in the intelligence world, we played a really leading efforts as well.

I think our diplomacy and our defense is not at the same level of investment. I think the foreign office has suffered from not having the same uplift to its budgets, for example, as the development budget and the intelligence budget have had. I think he wants to be really effective. You've got to support all four branches of your international efforts, which is defense, foreign policy, intelligence, and development effort.

At the moment, there's a bit of a gap there because the foreign office should be playing a leading role, but a bit like the state department in the United States, it's so suffered, it's been so squeezed out, by a combination of a powerful center of government working with the power agencies in the US, in this case of the Pentagon and Langley and so on.

In the UK case, a lot of the soft power has been delivered through the development budget rather than through diplomacy. So there's more to be done there, I agree.

**Ben Judah:**

What do you see as the future of the Transatlantic Alliance?

**Sir John Sawers:**

Well, I'm optimistic. I think this Alliance is not an Alliance of politicians or a transactional Alliance. It's a fundamental identity of culture and values of legal systems, a belief in the rule of law, a belief in independent institutions. Democracy is not about elections. It's about a whole fabric of values, which are underpinned by our institutions and by our legal system. And I think that will remain in place.

Is going through a turbulent period at the moment, both in Europe and in America. We're going through a nationalist phase. I think that is partly a consequence of the economic disruption since 2008, the inequality in our society, in some ways, the failures of some of the foreign policy ventures of the last 20 years, like Iraq and Afghanistan.
So I think we're going through a difficult phase at the moment. I think in some ways, this pandemic awful as it is, is making ordinary people look at governments and realize, "Actually, they're rather important for my safety, rather important for my quality of life." We need to get this right. We need experts to be respected.

There was a time during the Brexit campaign here where one of the leading Brexiteer said to dismiss the experts. People have any time for experts. The sad truth was, he was probably right at that time. Well, there's certainly a time for experts now. They're desperate and craving for experts to help them through this COVID crisis. I think, we might see one of the silver linings from this big black cloud of COVID being a return of respect and expectation, a respect for governments and for public servants, and an expectation of real serious competence at the hands of government, rather than a political posturing.

Ben Judah:

Now, I just want to ask two final questions to wrap up. What recent move in British foreign policy have you been the most proud of and what is the threat on the horizon you're the most concerned about?

Sir John Sawers:

Well, when you look in the last 20 years, I think what we achieved on Iran was very significant. I think in the wake of the rising intelligences picture of Iran working to build nuclear weapons, back in the early 2002, 2003 period, we instituted a process led by Britain, France and Germany, working with Iran. We made some progress at that time. It was set back when there're political changes in Iran in 2005. And we brought in United States, Russia, and China. And we orchestrated pressure through the United nations when I was ambassador of the UN to build up the pressure on Iran. Much of that was led by the UK, the intellectual effort, the shape of those sanctions was largely shaped by the UK.

We were glad when John Kerry, Bill Burns, and others were engaged in the negotiations with Iran. I think that's 2015 agreement with Iran was an important step forward, which we contributed to a great deal.

Now, I actually think the decisions by the President Trump's administration on Iran have not been well thought through. In some ways, we had to have a weaker Iran, but one which is even less capable of becoming part of the international community, and the defenses we had against Iran, developing nuclear weapons have been set to one side. So I think we’re in a worse position on Iran now than we were five years ago. But we'll see how that the dossier evolves.

I think, in terms of the future, I think the biggest challenge is how we manage the relationship with China. I think the United States’ approach that has been right on identifying the scale of the problem we face. It's been wrong in some of the confrontational approaches that is adopted, but certainly, the views in Britain and in Europe have been hardened over the last six months or so the last couple of years. The European Union recognizes China as a strategic rival, systemic rival.

I think the performance of China over COVID, has lead to people recognizing that it was quite a problem here with China. So that is the biggest single challenge we face. I think ultimately, it would be for the United States to shape that relationship with China. They're going to be the two most powerful countries in the 21st century. We've got to live in a world where we can coexist and actually cooperate with one another, rather than being endless confrontation with each other.

Now, it takes two to tango. I think there's a problem in Beijing. I think they may also be an attitude in Washington which is relishing this confrontation. But I think the outcome of this over the next decade, it's not just going to be the next year or also be a decade long effort to put in place a cooperative
framework where we’re not relying upon China, but we can deal with China and China doesn’t feel threatened by us. So it resorts to aggression itself.

We have to find a way of coexisting, which is not comfortable, but it's inevitable that given the facts of the relative power of the both America and China.

**Ben Judah:**

Sir John Sawers, GCMG, thank you very much for joining us today.

**Sir John Sawers:**

Thank you very much. Thanks, Ben.