The UK in the World:
From 'Internal Colonialism' to 'Global Britain'

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Thank you so much to Sarah and Saskia for inviting me to speak to you all today. Instead of a traditional academic presentation, opening with an outline of the central argument and its structure, I am going to present some narrative reflections on the UK in the world, from which I think a distinctive and important argument emerges. As mentioned, I work at SOAS. These days the School goes by 'SOAS University of London', having formally abandoned the full 'School of Oriental and African Studies' because of the troubling connotations of the term 'oriental'. As some of you may be aware, SOAS was founded in 1916 as the 'School of Oriental Studies' (African studies came later), primarily offering education to colonial administrators, civil servants, and spies. The School initially specialised in languages but extended its remit to include Orientalist anthropology, history, studies in arts, culture, religion and philosophies, and later development, economics, and politics. Notable alumni therefore include not only those anti-racist and anti-colonial figures of whom the School remains proud today – Paul Robeson and Walter Rodney, for instance – but also the white supremacist (in the strictest sense) politician Enoch Powell, who learned Urdu at SOAS in order, he hoped, to lead a 'reconquest' of India and save the collapsing British Empire (Heffer, 1998: 111).

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Today SOAS is known for its continued regional focus, across its provision in the humanities and social sciences, on the world beyond the 'West' – especially Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. It is also, it should be acknowledged, associated with a spirit of collaborative staff and student political activism that extends from staff strikes and student occupations to initiatives to decolonise the curriculum (Malik, 2017) and struggles to protect the School's cleaners from the UK's outsourcing economy and hostile immigration regime (see, for example: Chakrabortty, 2017).

I mention all of this because I am going to allow my own experience at SOAS to frame my comments today on the history, present and future of the UK in the world (though I should add at this point that my expertise lie in the somewhat 'presentist' disciplines of politics and international relations – I am by no means an historian and this is reflected in my reliance on better-informed scholars for my historical comments in this talk).

Slide 4   The Palestinian-American scholar and activist Edward Said opened his most influential book, *Orientalism*, which excavates precisely the global imaginary that underpinned an endeavour like SOAS at its inception, with a discussion of Arthur Balfour (Said, 1978: 32-36). Balfour, who among his other political roles served as Prime Minister from 1902-1905 and as Foreign Secretary from 1916-1919, tends to resurface in public debate at those moments, like the present one, when conflict intensifies in Palestine-Israel, because his 1917 'Declaration' constituted a pivotal moment on the road to the establishment of the state of Israel in what had previously been claimed as the 'British Mandate of Palestine'. For Said, though, Balfour is a key figure of high British imperialism for understanding Orientalism as the social construction of non-Western 'Others', subjects incapable of self-governance because they are trapped in perpetual, sensuous experience and incapable of rational, objective and scientific thought.

Slide 5   A speech Balfour gave in the Commons in 1910 is dissected by Said in *Orientalism* because it neatly illustrates the conscious connection imperialist Britain made between *knowledge of* the non-Western Other and *power over* them. Balfour frequently asserts that Egyptian civilisation has been 'great' and that he does not see the relationship between coloniser and colonised in this case as one of 'superiority and inferiority', yet he also asserts that Egyptians are incapable of self-governance, and have 'never, apparently, desired it' (Balfour, 1910). Balfour's attempted moral justification for British colonial control is based on the argument that absolutist, non-democratic government is surely better wielded by an Enlightened western power over 'Oriental' peoples than by those peoples themselves.

Slide 6   Later in his book Said shows how such a view continued to animate nominally postcolonial western power in the late twentieth century (Said, 1978: 46-48). The late Henry Kissinger, Said points out, both divided the world through a binary of west and east, and justified the former's domination of the latter on a similar epistemological and Slide 7 moral basis to Balfour. Cultures of what were then called 'Third World' countries are, for Kissinger, essentially incapable of self-governance because they are 'pre-Newtonian' and incapable of properly appreciating the 'empirical reality' that informs western reason and consequently also western – especially, but not only American – foreign policy. While Kissinger, like Balfour, is attracted to what he perceives as the 'flexibility' of this irrationalism, he also sees it as a justification for the construction of a US-led world order.

Slide 8   Said's linking of Balfour to Kissinger in the long tradition of Orientalist foreign policy imaginaries provides a useful entry point for the reflections and argument I am presenting today. There are two sources for my recent thinking on the topic of this talk, both related to my role at SOAS.

     First, unlike many of my colleagues, I have no regional specialism Asia, Africa or the Middle East. I convene generalist modules in International Theory and in Foreign Policy Analysis, and specialise in the development and application of critical theories of international relations to explain world politics at the global level. My empirical focus is in fact on the UK's post-Cold War foreign and security policies in general, and its 'War on Terror' – and attendant political culture – in particular. Since joining the School in 2021, I

have convened our undergraduate and postgraduate modules in foreign policy analysis (FPA).

As a field of academic study, rather than the kind of practical skill that is employed daily by FCDO officials, FPA has quite specific roots in a behaviourist turn in the wider discipline of International Relations (IR) as it developed in the USA in the mid-20th century. In other words, the foundational, canonical texts associated with FPA were largely aimed at the scientific study of how and why human individuals and their decisions shape the foreign policies of states. This may not seem like a particularly radical approach, but given the preponderance within academic IR of self-proclaimed 'realists' – who insist that states are universally driven by the fundamental forces of objective self-interest and international anarchy, treating them as 'black boxes' whose internal social processes matter little to their foreign policies – the emergence of FPA was something of a departure. It was also, however, a branch of behaviourist social science that was born in the midst of the Cold War, when the study of IR at elite US universities was largely aimed at furnishing the state with theories and frameworks for more effectively exerting foreign policy dominance on the world at large. Typically of mid-20th century IR scholarship (and some much more recent work), FPA was rooted exclusively in Western or even narrowly US-centric conceptual paradigms, and was aimed largely at understanding how *US* foreign policy-makers arrive at *their* decisions, while generalising findings as though these processes represented something more universal. In considering how SOAS – as a former school for colonial administrators, now better known as a hub for global perspectives and radical, critical thinking in the humanities and social sciences – might deliver a module in FPA, I have therefore thought a lot over the past couple of years about how we might understand, explain, and analyse foreign policy differently than the traditional frames of FPA allow. This different approach, which aims to destabilise some of the overarching assumptions about Western states' foreign policy elites as decision-makers, and even about what Western states and their foreign policies *are* as geopolitical entities and actions or approaches, has shaped what I want to say about the UK today.

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The second project from which this talk emerged is a chapter I have recently written (Whitham, 2024) for a forthcoming textbook: *An Introduction to UK Politics*. I was invited to contribute the book's final chapter, on 'Britain in the World'. The book's overarching theme is of UK politics understood through the concept of 'assemblage'. This popular academic concept signifies the tendency of social things not to take the form of unified, monolithic, neatly bounded entities but rather of messy networks of overlapping actors, agents, institutions, narratives, and events. The concept of assemblage has been especially prevalent in international relations research in the last decade, since, it is argued, it can present us with a more accurate picture than the 'black box' model of the so-called 'states system' that has traditionally informed the field. Understanding states and their politics as assemblages-in-the-world enables us to analyse their exercise of power through the messy ways in which they constitute the international together.

A key question that these two overlapping projects – the teaching, and the textbook – led me to focus on was what we might call an 'ontological' one; what actually *is* the UK as a social and political entity 'in the world'? I am now going to briefly outline the answer I offer in my chapter on 'Britain in the World', and I would then welcome comments and

questions on this answer. My view is that if we start down this ontological path of asking what the UK *is* in the world, we soon arrive at the initial answer that it clearly does not have immutable characteristics, but is rather the always-emergent result of a set of historical processes and events, influenced, constituted and performed by a range of actors, groups, institutions, traditions and social structures, as well as other states or assemblages.

Slide 10   It is now commonplace to understand the contemporary UK as a product of colonialism and empire. A slew of important and influential recent books, from Satnam Sanghera's *Empireland* to Kojo Koram's *Uncommon Wealth* – have highlighted the reconstitution of Britain and Britishness through the rise, decline, and fall of the British Empire around the globe. But the roots of the colonial impulse can be found a lot closer to home. In thinking through these two projects I have undertaken, one conclusion I have drawn is that to understand how 'colonial legacies' shape the UK and its role(s) or place(s) in the world today, we should proceed from the fact that the UK as such was and remains a colonial endeavour. This requires a blurring of what are traditionally considered 'foreign' and 'home' (or 'domestic') affairs.

Slide 11   Britain, and later the UK, are *products* of conquest and colonisation as well as instigators of it. There is a colonising impulse at the heart of the UK; it is an always-already colonial political project or assemblage. One classic work of historical sociology, Michael Hechter's (1975) *Internal Colonialism* provides a useful entry point to this reassessment. This effort at excavating the social roots of ethnicity takes as its case study the formation of British national identity from the 16th to the 20th centuries. Hechter traces the concentration of governmental power in Wessex, and later London and the home counties, that makes the formation of a British nation-state possible. He draws upon the core-periphery model we are more used to encountering in the 'world-systems' theories of international relations, to show how a process of internal colonisation sees one set of 'distinct cultural practices' at the core imposed upon the periphery in the creation of a single nation (Hechter, 1975: 5). In the case of England, then, Britain, and then the UK, this was the imposition of Anglo-Saxon cultural practices and power upon other peoples – from the Picts to the Frisians – and, in a still-ongoing project, upon what Hechter calls the 'Celtic fringe' in Wales, Scotland and Ireland. The UK in its current form has existed for barely a century, since the liberation of the Irish Free State from this internal colonialism and subsequent establishment of the Republic of Ireland.

Slide 12   Crucially, the internal colonialism thesis posited by Hechter is tightly connected to overseas or 'external' colonialism. From the annexation of Wales to the 1801 establishment of a 'United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland', internal colonialism took place in tandem with 'external' colonialism and the formation of British Empire organised around English rule and Anglo-Saxonism, from America to Asia. It also rested on a related racial logic, with Celts represented as essentially, culturally, and racially inferior. In this regard, Hechter's analysis is consistent with the later – and recently very popular – work of Cedric Robinson on the emergence of what he calls 'racial capitalism'. This emergence, Robinson notes, includes as one of its engines 'Anglo-Saxon chauvinism, the earliest form of English nationalism' (Robinson, 1983: 34). This Anglo-Saxonism persisted well after the Union of 1801, taking the form, later in the 19th century, of

working-class racial prejudice against Irish workers in England, for example (Robinson, 1983: 39).

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This line of thinking undermines the central premise of FPA that foreign policies are simply the actions, or rules governing the actions, of nation-states. While FPA approaches do seek to open-up the 'black box' of the nation-state, to explore questions of national identity among other things, they tend still to work on the assumption that these states are essentially bounded and minimally internally cohesive, sovereign entities and actors. Nation-states are, in a sense, not what they claim to be. They are not culturally and politically cohesive entities acting with one voice on the international stage. They are shifting and contested political and cultural settlements, and in many cases – including the UK – an emergent outcome of conquest and colonisation. Such settlements are intrinsically unstable, and consequently more open, than either FPA or political leaders would have us believe. This is not difficult to see in the case of the UK, where future of the Union is almost continuously in question, and where issues relating to administrative and political devolution, cultural and linguistic protection, and of course secession and independence, remain very much alive in the 21st century.

Thinking about the UK's histories and roles in the world in this way blurs the lines that we often project onto nation-states when we analyse foreign policy. On this view, Britain, and then the UK, was always an inter-national or transnational, and a colonial, endeavour. It was, and still is, an emergent arrangement of socio-political and economic power. The ongoing contingency of that arrangement of power – that assemblage, to draw on the academic discourse I mentioned earlier – is evident in the recent history of devolution, and in the rise of nationalist and independentist political movements in Scotland and Wales, for example, but also of movements to restore or protect cultures and histories in regions of England, including Cornwall. These movements seek to push back against the Anglo-Saxon chauvinism and internal colonialism of which Robinson and Hechter wrote.

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'Global Britain' as a foreign policy narrative following the 2016 Brexit referendum can be understood, as Srdjan Vucetic suggests, precisely as an extension of the Anglo-Saxonist project. This post-Brexit foreign policy narrative is rooted in a 'British, and specifically English, exceptionalism' (Vucetic, 2021: 13), a national identity centred on Anglo-Saxon political culture as separate from and superior to Europeanness. According to this narrative, the superiority of Anglo-Saxonism lies in an essential orientation to freedom that Europeans neither possess nor, to borrow Balfour's earlier formulation with regard to Egyptians, have ever even desired.

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As Oliver Turner (2019) has pointed out, the exceptionalism of 'Global Britain' as a foreign policy narrative lies in the fact that it supposes other states – including those perceived as 'great powers' – have any interest in the UK 'being everywhere, doing everything'. He suggests that as a narrative, it is likely to find more purchase with domestic audiences in search of a post-imperial and post-Brexit 'painkiller' than in international relations. In this sense 'Global Britain' may be more about reasserting British (and by extension specifically English) exceptionalism and national identity, in a conversation between the UK's political elite and its people, than it is about a serious foreign policy agenda.

Slide 16　On this view, the Anglo-Saxonism of Britain, and consequently the UK, remains intact, and not only in domestic, national issues like the concentration of power in Westminster and the resistance to Scottish independence or further devolution. It is also manifest in foreign policy. Most importantly, and perhaps most obviously, this takes the form of 'Anglo-America'. Anglo-America has been understood by Vucetic, Katzenstein (2012) and others as a specific social relation and political space that has been positioned since at least the 19th century as the heart of the 'West'. The UK and USA are tied together by commitments to Anglo-Saxonist ideas around freedom that diverge sharply from what used to be called the 'European Social Model'. This more libertarian orientation to rights and freedoms is expressed through, for example, widespread domestic preferences for marketisation and privatisation and hostility to social welfare and collectivism, and international preferences for the pursuit of what these states view as their national self-interest and security above and beyond any multilateral commitments or democratic norms. Anglo-American exceptionalism in this regard was the key bone of contention in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, where the USA and UK appeared set on war irrespective of international opinion.

Slide 17　The concluding remarks in my essay on 'Britain in the World' (Whitham, 2024) focus on this issue: the overlapping cultural, racial, and political-economic power structures the underpin the so-called 'special relationship'. The UK's alignment with the USA on controversial foreign policy matters, including for instance its abstention earlier this month on a UN Security Council resolution that would have demanded an immediate ceasefire and the release of all hostages in Gaza, is not simply a matter of choosing 'national interest' over humanitarian values, of preserving 'strategic alliances' or supporting US global hegemony, on this view. Rather, it is a manifestation of Anglo-America as a political-economic assemblage-in-the-world, of which the UK is an integral part. This way of conceptualising the UK in the world refuses sharp distinctions between interiority and exteriority and locates the colonising impulse throughout the UK's past, present – and perhaps future – as a political-economic space. On this view, UK foreign policies are better understood as constituent parts in the global assemblage of Anglo-America, itself at least as much a racialised, colonial, power bloc as a strategic or political partnership.

Slide 18　Though there is more to be said on the implications of all of this for teaching, learning, and knowledge production around foreign policy and its analysis, I will leave my comments here for now and welcome any questions or comments.

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Presentation slides overleaf.

Presentation slides

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'We have got, as I think, to deal with nations who, as far as our knowledge goes, have always been governed in the manner we call absolute, and have never had what we are accustomed to call free institutions or self-government […] But after 3,000, 4,000, or 5,000 years […] it is not thirty years of British rule which is going to alter the character bred into them by this immemorial tradition. If that be true, is it or **is it not a good thing for these great nations—I admit their greatness—that this absolute Government should be exercised by us? I think it is a good thing**. I think experience shows that they have got under it a far better government than in the whole history of the world they ever had before, and which not only is a benefit to them, but is undoubtedly a benefit to the whole of the civilised West' (Balfour, 1910).

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Henry Kissinger
(1923 - 2023)

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'**The West is deeply committed to the notion that the real world is external** to the observer, that knowledge consists of recording and classifying data–the more accurately the better. **Cultures which escaped the early impact of Newtonian thinking have retained the essentially pre-Newtonian view**. Although this attitude was a liability for centuries […] it offers great flexibility […] **Empirical reality has a much different significance for many of the new countries than for the West because in a certain sense they never went through the process of discovering it**' (Kissinger, 1966: 528, cited in Said, 1978: 46-47).

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SLIDE 8
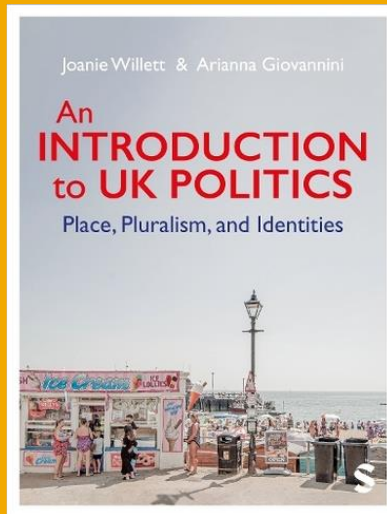
Reflections on 'the UK in the world': Source 1

- Convening undergraduate and postgraduate modules in foreign policy analysis (FPA) as SOAS
- Beyond the state as 'black box' and realist IR paradigm
- Bringing national identity formation into the picture
- Does the textbook definition of 'foreign policy' adequately capture colonial legacies?
  - '*a set of actions or rules governing the actions of an independent political authority deployed in the international environment*' (Morin and Paquin, 2018: 3 [emphasis in original]).

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SLIDE 11

INTERNAL COLONIALISM
The Celtic fringe in British national development, 1536–1966
Michael Hechter
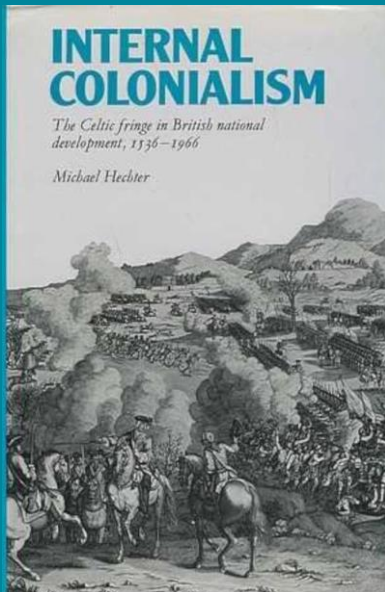
'It must not, however, be assumed that this colonial type of development is to be found only in those areas subjected to ninenteenth century overseas imperialism. Simultaneous to the overseas expansion of Western European states in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were similar thrusts into peripheral hinterlands' (Hechter, 1975: 31).

'These internal campaigns were not in any sense coincidental to overseas colonization. There is reason to believe both movements were the result of the same social forces' (Hechter, 1975: 32).

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Connecting 'internal' and 'external' colonialisms

'The [sixteenth-century] discovery of precious metals in America and the extensive Atlantic-oriented trade which soon followed suddenly placed England in a most geographically strategic position […] Almost concurrently, and on another Front England annexed Wales (1536), attempted to extend English influence […] in Ireland, and tried to arrange for diplomatic alliance with Scotland through the device of marriage' (Hechter, 1975: 67).

'One of the defining characteristics of the colonial situation is that it must involve the interaction of at least two cultures – that of the conquering metropolitan elite (cosmopolitan culture) and of the indigenes (native culture) – and that the former is promulgated by the colonial authorities as being vastly superior for the realisation of universal ends' (Hechter, 1975: 73).

'For whatever it is worth, it would have been inconsistent with the tenets of Anglo-Saxonism to detach the English worker from a racial hierarchy that was quite adequate in locating the deficiencies of the Irish "race." The Irish worker having descended from an inferior race, so his English employers believed, the cheap market value of his labor was but its most rational form' (Robinson, 1983: 39).
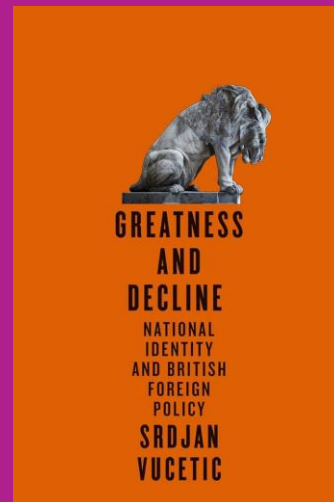
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'The net effect of all three of these unions [of 1536, 1707, and 1801] was to deny each Celtic territory the exclusive right to determine the policies which would govern it. This is what is usually meant by the term 'sovereignty': there is no question that the unification of the British Isles represented a loss of Celtic sovereignty' (Hechter, 1975: 68).

- Textbook definition of foreign policy: '*a set of actions or rules governing the actions of an independent political authority deployed in the international environment*' (Morin and Paquin, 2018: 3 [emphasis in original]).

- Taking internal colonialism into account unsettles a) sovereign 'independence' of the UK nation-state as a coherent and unified authority, and b) separability of the 'international environment'.

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'Britain's bid to "be everywhere, do everything," I argue, was never simply a function of the ruling elite's obsessions; rather, it emerged from British and (mostly) English society as a whole, and, more specifically, from the deep-rooted, routine, and (mostly) unreflective discourses through which "Britain" became a presence in the everyday lives of its citizens, elites and masses alike. To again put it rudely and crudely: whatever the circumstances of the kingdom's relative decline, "the British" configured themselves as a special edition of humankind' (Vucetic, 2021: 4).

GREATNESS
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NATIONAL IDENTITY AND BRITISH FOREIGN POLICY
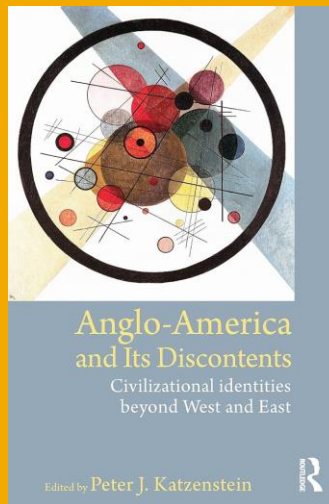SRDJAN VUCETIC

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Turner (2019) 'Global Britain and the Narrative of Empire'

- 'Global Britain' as a 'narrative of empire'.
  - Not an explicit injunction to restore the British Empire but offers a kind of autobiography of 'who' Britain is to be in the world: 'a familiar, soothing story about the UK as a nation with truly global attributes and aspirations', which can put the whole world into the service of its own national interest.
- Global Britain as a 'painkiller' to follow Brexit, as the Commonwealth was to Empire.
- Though 'seductive and comforting' to some, it is flawed and unlikely to be efficacious for three reasons.
  - 1: As a 'painkiller', it is really a domestic narrative, unlikely to find external buy-in;
  - 2: It is fundamentally 'regressive' – oriented toward a past that no longer exists;
  - 3: It fails as a foreign policy narrative because its bombastic framing 'fundamentally contradicts the understandings and preferences of international partners about what the modern day UK represents'.

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'Led by the British Empire until the beginning and by the United States since the middle of the twentieth century, Anglo-America has been at the very center of world politics' (Katzenstein, 2012: 1).

Anglo-America and Its Discontents
Civilizational identities beyond West and East

Edited by Peter J. Katzenstein

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'To close this chapter with a final provocation: perhaps 'Britain' does not exist in the world at all – at least as a singular entity or 'actor'. As the discussion and examples in the chapter have shown, Britain has – at least since the end of the Second World War and the end of empire – often acted in tandem with the USA, its vastly larger (economically and militarily) and more powerful ally. It has also followed American economic, cultural, and political trends (often by contrast to wider European norms). In thinking Britain as an assemblage-in-the-world, we might reconceptualise it as part of a wider global assemblage: Anglo-America. [...] It is at once a 'civilizational identity' and a powerful global force, which has been able to dominate and steer the wider imagined community of 'the West'. But even if we accept this analysis, it raises many new questions today. In the post-Trump, post-Brexit age – an era of resurgent nationalisms and parochialisms in Anglo-America – and with an ascendant China and broader Global South challenge to the authority of 'the West', will Anglo-America, and its British component, matter very much in the world of the near future?' (Whitham, forthcoming 2024).

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Thank you!

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