



International Relations and Defence Committee

Uncorrected oral evidence: Multilateralism

Wednesday 1 July 2026

11.30 am

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Members present: Lord Houghton of Richmond (The Chair); Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon; Lord Alderdice; Baroness Blackstone; Lord Bruce of Bennachie; Baroness Crawley; Lord Darroch of Kew; Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie; Lord Grocott; Lord Lamont of Lerwick; Lord De Mauley; Baroness Prashar.

In the absence of Lord Robertson of Port Ellen, Lord Houghton of Richmond was called to the Chair.

Evidence Session No. 5

Heard in Public

Questions 45 - 53

Witnesses

Moazzam Malik, Chief Executive, Save the Children and former British Ambassador to Indonesia, ASEAN and Timor-Leste; Dr Oliver Stuenkel, Senior Fellow at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

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Examination of witnesses

Moazzam Malik and Dr Oliver Stuenkel.

- Q45 **The Chair:** I formally start by welcoming Ambassador Malik in the room and Dr Stuenkel, who is beaming in. Thank you very much indeed for making yourselves available to speak to the committee and offer your perspectives on the role of non-Western rising powers in a multilateral system.

This is the fifth evidence session that we have had on this particular inquiry, which, as I hope you are aware, is to explore the future of the multilateral system and the United Kingdom's role within it. The session, when we say, "Go", will be streamed live on the parliamentary website. A transcript will be taken of the exchange, and, once available, we will send you a copy of the transcript. If there are any subtle amendments you wish to make to what you have said, that is your occasion to do it. Internally, I remind committee members that, if they have any specific relevant interests, they should declare them when first speaking.

The session is now live. Can I ask you to take a couple of minutes each to introduce yourselves, and then we will start the questions? Dr Stuenkel, give us a little bit about your background, not yet into the subject matter itself.

Dr Oliver Stuenkel: Thank you very much. Good morning. It is a pleasure to be here. Thank you for the invitation. I am a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. I am also at the Belfer Center at the Harvard Kennedy School, where I co-ordinate a study group on the geopolitics of the global South, and I am a professor of international relations at the Getulio Vargas Foundation in São Paulo, Brazil. I look at non-Western perspectives on global order and the role that countries such as Brazil, India and China seek to play in global order.

The Chair: Thanks very much. Ambassador Malik?

Moazzam Malik: Thank you, Chair. First, apologies for being late. It has been quite an adventure. We had somebody on the train tracks. I got to Westminster and the road was closed for PMQs. I got to Central Lobby, and it was closed for the procession of the Speaker. I feel a bit like James Bond having managed to get here on time.

I am currently chief executive of Save the Children UK. I spent much of my career working for the UK Government at DfID and the Foreign Office. I was ambassador to Indonesia and the ASEAN. I was director-general for Africa before I left HMG four years ago. At various points in my career, I have overseen the UK's relationship with the UN development and humanitarian system and with international financial institutions.

- Q46 **The Chair:** Excellent. We have about 55 minutes. We will all have a question, so do not spend too long in the narrative of the answer. Clarity and brevity will get us there. Can I start, and I will come to Dr Stuenkel first? The Finnish President, Alexander Stubb, recently characterised the

international order as being composed of three blocs: East, West and South. He asserts that the latter group of states will be a “swing voter” when it comes to the future of the international order. How useful is this framing? Are US-led West and Chinese-led East in a race to win the influence of the rising South?

Dr Oliver Stuenkel: Thank you very much. The framing overstates coherence on all three sides, particularly when viewed from the global South. There are profound divisions within what Alexander Stubb calls the global West, particularly between the United States and the majority of Europe, on the key issues that concern the international order nowadays, be it climate change, future pandemics or the war in Ukraine, as well as divergence vis-à-vis multilateralism and development aid. You also have significant differences and divergence within what may be called the global East, and the same also applies to the global South.

The underlying premise perhaps of a global West being a pillar and supporter of global order is also somewhat misleading, particularly when seen from countries such as India or Brazil. The major disruptor or threat to the international order does not, in that view, come from either the East or the global South but mostly from the United States. Both in the East and South, there is a sense of ownership that is at times underappreciated in the West of global order itself. A country like Brazil sees itself as a founding member of the structures, rules and norms of the system, so in a way it does not see itself as a newcomer to an existing order but very much a part of it, not only since 1945 but since the Hague conferences, for example, where developing countries fought for the principle of national sovereignty. While occasionally it may make sense to use this, perhaps looking at some UN vote here or there, it simplifies and occasionally also distracts us from the major challenges that global order faces.

The Chair: Excellent, many thanks.

Moazzam Malik: I, too, agree that this framing is overly simplistic. In my experiences working with countries across the world, most countries are determinedly non-aligned. If I think about Indonesia, it wants to have relationships with China, with the West, in its region, with India and with Africa. The same is true of India and Pakistan. The same is true of Nigeria, Kenya, and indeed partners across Europe. This framing is much too simplistic. You can see it in those conversations with those sorts of countries, but you can see it also in issues. If you think about climate change, it does not neatly map on to these sorts of divisions. There are all sorts of alliances out there. You can see it similarly with institutions. If you think about where the World Health Organization is today and who is investing in those, there is not a China-led bit, a US-led bit and a global South bit. Actually, the alliances run in a much more complex kind of way.

Q47 **Lord Darroch of Kew:** There are rising concerns, including among some of the witnesses we have seen in this inquiry, that if there is a competition between the West and China for influence in the global

South, particularly in the rising powers of the global South, China is winning that competition. To what extent do you think that is a well-founded judgment or assertion? How successful has China been in courting the rising powers of the global South? That is for either of you, but perhaps the former ambassador to Indonesia might like to start.

Moazzam Malik: Thank you. China has been successful in courting countries in the global South. That is a long-standing policy approach. Every year, the first visit that the Chinese Foreign Minister makes is to Africa. That has been the case for some 30-odd years. That is a very determined policy. The belt and road initiative has had traction across a bunch of countries across the world. It has led to real investments. Equally, in my experience, in working with those countries, in places such as Indonesia, Kenya, Nigeria, Pakistan and elsewhere, they do not see it as a zero-sum game. They want to engage with the Chinese, but equally they want partnership with the World Bank, they want partnership with the UN and they want to be talking to the United Kingdom. They still watch the English Premier League. They want to watch Hollywood movies. There is a diversity to and a sophistication in their engagement with the world. It does not necessarily mean it is always simple. There are choices that they need to make just like others need to make. It is very clear that they see China as a rising power. It is the principal trading power for pretty much all these countries that we are talking about and a principal source of investment, but not an exclusive one or an exclusive source of defence alignment or, indeed, of anything.

Dr Oliver Stuenkel: Thank you for the question. I agree with that. The dominant strategy across the global South is one of pragmatism, of seeking to hedge and diversify. That goes beyond the West against China. For Brazil, signing and ratifying the EU-Mercosur trade deal and looking at additional opportunities with the UK, Canada, Japan and others is just a way of diversifying away from what is currently seen as a somewhat unpredictable United States. At the same time, it also means gaining greater leverage when sitting down with China. Brazil, despite being the biggest recipient of Chinese investment in Latin America, has made a very conscious decision not to join the belt and road initiative. Why? It is because it still wants to not be overly dependent both economically and diplomatically on China. At the same time, amplifying ties to Europe is also seen as a way to hedge vis-à-vis the United States. In the same way, seeking to increase ties to India is seen as a means to increase leverage vis-à-vis China, the United States and others.

China's silent approach has been in many parts of the world quite successful. The Chinese Government are very good at speaking the language of the global South. They do not oftentimes come across as interventionist. At the same time, there is ample concern in many countries in the global South about what the trade war between the United States and China means for them, and oftentimes that is being flooded with overly cheap industrial goods from China. The view is very nuanced. It is not political. It is seeking to avoid wanting to make a choice. Oftentimes, I feel that in regions such as Latin America the

greater the US pressure the easier it will be for China to be seen as a reliable and predictable partner in times of turbulence. That is also valid for Europe.

As a final point, even though the United States leads when it comes to the most capable large language models in artificial intelligence, I see that countries across the global South are probably closer to the Chinese digital ecosystem just because the language models are cheaper. In that sense, China may have an advantage in bringing these countries into the digital ecosystem. Even though China is dominant from the trade perspective, from the defence perspective the West still tends to play a dominant role.

Q48 **Baroness Blackstone:** Could you tell the committee what perception you think the big, new, more powerful non-Western powers such as India, Brazil, Indonesia and perhaps South Africa, too, have of the multilateral system? Do they think it is legitimate as it is? Do they think it is effective? We need of course to bear in mind, as you already said, Dr Stuenkel, that these blocs do not hold one simple view that they all agree with; they are going to be diverse. You may want to look at them in turn.

Dr Oliver Stuenkel: There is a perception that the current system—this is of course generalising a bit—is still the best thing that we have. Very few countries in the global South are seeking to overthrow the system. There are some radical countries that are not participating much like North Korea perhaps. At times when you speak to US diplomats—this was particularly true prior to Trump, of course—there was a perception about whether these countries will join and support, but they are very much part of it. As I said initially, there is a strong sense of ownership and the desire, of course, to reform. It is natural that countries seek greater space, greater responsibility and greater decision-making power, but I would not necessarily view that as a desire to opt for radical change.

The demand of countries such as India or Brazil to be part of the UN Security Council is quite interesting. That is very pro-status confirming in a way. They are not saying, "Let's get rid of the UN Security Council and produce something different". They seek, in that sense, to be part of the global diplomatic elite in a way to reaffirm in their views the legitimacy of these structures. Many countries in the global South still see, despite all its faults, the UN as their best bet and as a place where they can make their case.

Perceptions vary significantly, of course. The WTO's dispute settlement does not work. That is the consensus in the global South and the global North as well. Security Council deadlock is oftentimes seen as a symbol of the lack of functionality of the international system. In the nuclear field or the WHO, there is a perception of how these institutions are crucial when it comes to aid. In general, there is no desire to completely reinvent the wheel, and that is perhaps best symbolised by the fact that the new institutions that have been created like the BRICS development bank, officially known as the New Development Bank, or the AIIB, are not really doing something fundamentally different. They seek to provide

more decision-making powers to global South Governments. There is a surprising element of support for the preservation of most of the elements of global order.

Moazzam Malik: I agree with much of that. This group of countries that we are talking about—the emerging powers—all have concerns about legitimacy and effectiveness, but I do not think there are outliers in that. Much of the world worries about legitimacy and effectiveness. But, as Dr Stuenkel said, all these countries see the international system as present as highly relevant. All these countries have been on and off the Security Council. Most of them have contributed troops to UN peacekeeping or other multilateral peacekeeping at various points. India is seeking a permanent seat. Brazil just hosted the COP last year. Indonesia volunteered troops for the UN-mandated ceasefire stabilisation process in Gaza. South Africa is using the International Court of Justice to pursue claims. All these countries are active in the international system, but they all seek greater voice, they all seek greater representation, and they are also seeking for the system for international co-operation to better reflect their priorities. In that, they simply reflect their national interest. They are interested in their long-term security and prosperity, and in how the international institutions can serve those ends for their people. In that, I do not think their approach is any different from anyone else.

Q49 Lord Bruce of Bennachie: Thanks for your answers so far. It is hardly surprising, I suppose, that the international institutions that we are talking about are now 80 years old, and the world has changed dramatically since then. I want to explore what could be done in the way of reform either of those systems or alternatives or both, and in particular what the UK's role could be. In some of the briefing notes that we have had, people picked out one or two countries such as Nigeria, but if we look at the world 15 or 20 years from now, some countries that are not very significant now could well be much more significant. You came from Indonesia, which is already significant. There is Malaysia, Ethiopia and so forth.

How do we shape a system that gives those countries that we have not yet identified, and even smaller, weaker countries, more of a voice? In particular, what is it that the UK could do that might be positive and in our interest, where we have influence? We cut our aid budget. We are at the moment dismantling our diplomatic service by getting rid of 30% of it. To my mind, the merger of the FCO and DfID could have been an opportunity to strengthen our diplomatic representation, not slash it or at least cut it back to one as opposed to two organisations.

What can we do or can we ensure that the UK has influence that might be relevant to those countries and in the British national interest to do it? I say that having chaired the International Development Committee for 10 years and travelled all over Africa and Asia. What surprised me was how positive the attitude was towards the UK as well as how disappointed they were continuously about the UK's lack of engagement and visibility with them. Now that we are slashing our aid, that is true in spades.

Moazzam Malik: First, I fundamentally believe, given my experiences working for Her Majesty's Government over the best part of 25 years, that a well-ordered international system is in the UK's national interest. We are a very open economy. We are an open society. We cannot build walls high enough to keep the world out. That is true of the UK. It is true of other countries around the world, too. Therefore, our long-term prosperity and security depend on our ability to mediate our choices and differences through these international institutions. I fundamentally believe that a well-ordered international system is in the interests of our future as a nation.

That said, as you noted, the system is 80 years old, and has grown to be somewhat haphazard and fragmented. That makes it very difficult to navigate. In the climate space, there are more than 70 funds, institutions and instruments today. In the health space, there are more than 80 institutions, funds and instruments. That makes it practically unnavigable. If you are a Health Minister, a Climate Minister or a Finance Minister sitting in Kathmandu or Addis Ababa, trying to make sense of this system is really extremely difficult. We also have to understand why the system has come to be as it is. It is not that someone set out to create chaos. People set out with good intentions. Where they spotted gaps, they innovated, and we had sticking plaster on sticking plaster on sticking plaster. We have this very fragmented international system.

Trying to do something about it has proved very difficult. I was involved with efforts to reform the humanitarian system more than 20 years ago working with Hilary Benn, who was Secretary of State at that time, and subsequent efforts at DfID and the Foreign Office. I have learned that each bit of this system has its vested interests and champions. That is us, the US, Europeans, as well as many developing countries and many countries in the global South. Therefore, approaching the exercise of reforming the system is not a technical question. It is a deeply political one. It is about what kinds of alliances you can build that bring together enough of those vested interests to secure change. The Secretary-General's agenda for reform today, UN80, is hitting exactly those buffers, and the inability to build coalitions that can lead to even simple mergers. Gavi and the Global Fund, or UNDP and UNOPS, are two of the very obvious ones that are mooted, but even those are proving quite difficult.

What can the UK do? We have influence, we have equities and we have investments. We are influential in the UN. We are a P5 country. We are a top five shareholder in most international financial institutions. Now, outside the European Union, we have the opportunity to build those alliances and partnerships to try to secure change, but it requires sustained effort on our part to reform. In doing so, we can deliver real impact on issues that matter to the UK. Reforming the health architecture would reduce the risk of pandemics and communicable disease. We are hearing of an Ebola case around Liverpool at present in a hospital there and we have had a case elsewhere in Europe. Similarly, building alliances that lead to the reform of those 70 institutions in the climate space and

stronger climate action might give us a better shot at dealing with both mitigation and adaptation pressures.

Dealing with public services in global South countries through action on debt relief might help deliver better services to vulnerable communities and indeed stem the risk of unplanned migration. At Save the Children, we are working with FCDO funding, the World Bank and UNHCR, to try to help refugee communities access national education systems in the countries in which they are located. That will give them and their kids a better prospect at a future, and deal with some of the risks and harms of unplanned movements that we have been experiencing. This is fundamentally in our interest. We need to take a long-term perspective and build the alliances that we need to secure reform and more effectiveness in the system. That also means giving up some space. That was the second part of your question in terms of shareholding and so on.

Lord Bruce of Bennachie: Lord Grocott might follow up on that.

Dr Oliver Stuenkel: I agree with the ambassador that the UK's reputation in the global South is quite positive. There is a perception that UN Security Council reform is virtually impossible. That is just because it is an incredibly complex context. It is largely due to the posture of some permanent council members—the UK is not one of them—that are quite opposed, particularly Russia and China, which is a bit ironic considering that they are also part of BRICS. The UK posture is quite positive in that sense. It involves openness, compared to the other members, towards reform. At the same time, that is a somewhat low-cost enterprise given the low likelihood of reform. Even though numerous countries such as Brazil and India frequently emphasise the need to reform, there is also a tacit understanding that the likelihood of big-ticket reform on that front is small. Perhaps there is some greater opportunity for expanding the size of non-permanent members or things like that, but large-scale reform is less likely.

Where there is more space perhaps is quota reforms at places like the World Bank and the IMF. Some progress has been made there. There can be more progress. I also think that that is not too detrimental to UK national interests given that these are fairly small changes. The UK has an opportunity vis-à-vis coalition building at the UN General Assembly. After all, the kinds of coalitions emerging today, as the ambassador underlined, are less rigid. We are no longer in a world of blocs and rigid alliances, but much rather in a world where the coalition on climate involves a particular set of countries. On something else, on Ukraine, it is very different. That, in particular, requires a large diplomatic presence, because the UK will not have traditional partners that it works with on every issue, but it has to constantly navigate, build and preserve very different types of coalitions at the same time in different issue areas. That is a very strong argument in favour of maintaining a strong diplomatic presence.

Finally, there is an opportunity to show openness and partner and be part of new institutions—the UK has done that such as with the Asian

Infrastructure Investment Bank—as well as to project itself as an agile country that is not held back by a large bureaucracy. One benefit of no longer depending on the agreement of 27 other countries is being willing to engage more quickly and effectively when particular global challenges emerge.

The Chair: Right. Lord Grocott, you are also going to come in on this question.

Lord Grocott: Yes, it has been covered to some extent, but perhaps I can sharpen up the question. It seems there is pretty universal agreement that the structure that was right in the 1940s, the architecture of the international communities, is unlikely to be one that mirrors the requirements of the 2020s or wherever we are at the moment.

My specific question is: do you agree that any reform, particularly in relation to the Security Council and the permanent members, may be good for the world, but it would involve a diminution of the status, rank or however you want to describe it of the United Kingdom? To some extent, it is frequently described in terms of being a permanent member of the Security Council. If a new Security Council with five permanent members were to be established today, would Britain—let us be cautious in the language—and France both be automatic choices for two of the five places? I think we would all give the answer no. How do we balance what I could almost call common sense dictates that there must be some change in the architecture if it is going to reflect the world as it is now, not as it was then? That will involve, inevitably, some diminution of the rank, status and influence of the United Kingdom.

Moazzam Malik: In some respects, you have already hinted at the answer to your own question. Our position in the Security Council and a bunch of other institutions reflects our past rather than our present and our future. We may be fighting hard to hang on to our past. The rest of the world can see our present and our future. It feels slightly odd to our partners around the world for us to be hanging on for dear life to some of these roles. That said, I do not think adjusting our position in the international system necessarily means diminution. It may mean a spreading and sharing of power and influence, an expanded Security Council with more permanent members, and opening up the shareholding in the World Bank to allow some of those rising powers to take a greater stake in the way that Dr Stuenkel hinted at. In doing that, the humility and the partnership that we bring to the table can reinforce our influence and role in the world.

I do not think it is a zero-sum game. The UK is still very influential. We have more PhDs per 1,000 people than any other country in the world. We have some of the best universities in the world. People are interested in our sports and our culture. They want to come and visit Britain. They are interested in our legal systems. They are interested in doing business with us. They are interested in our role in international institutions. Our diplomats have influence in New York, as I saw two weeks ago when I was there. They have influence in Geneva. They have influence

elsewhere, too. We invest in language training still in a much more ambitious way compared to many other countries. I do not think it is a zero-sum game. Actually, taking a progressive position that recognises our future can in fact reinforce our influence and attractiveness as a partner rather than be diminutive.

Dr Oliver Stuenkel: I would like to add to that. I fully agree with the ambassador's reply. The UK influence remains quite significant. From a global South perspective, I see this in conversations with highly talented 20 year-olds who think about where to pursue their postgraduate studies at a time when obtaining a visa to enter the United States can be a challenge and where there is a lot of concern about the long-term professional perspectives for immigrant workers. The UK, for many of these people, if it had not been part of the top three choices, has emerged even more prominently as an alternative. I say that not because UK universities are in any way inferior to US options; it is just that, in terms of quantity, the majority of global South talent would end up studying or pursuing a PhD or similar programmes in the United States just because of the size of the educational system there. That is a tremendous opportunity.

I also see that among the top 0.1% financially in the global South, especially in Latin America, where possessing real estate in Miami is a very common way to go about things and where a lot of concern about that more limited access, uncertainty about visa requirements and so on produces a search for alternatives, and where Europe, and in particular the UK, emerges quite frequently.

I also agree with the statement that ceding a bit more space in traditional platforms does not mean giving up influence. There are many informal ways, be it through agenda setting, for example, that the UK can retain its relevance, particularly in a world where countries all over are seeking to diversify their strategy. I was part of a government debate in Brazil about how Brazil should adapt to the emergence of AI and retain its digital sovereignty in the face of a concentration of power in China and the United States. In those cases, the UK could be an interesting interlocutor for a country of how to deal with this very challenging environment and how to diversify partnerships and not see digital sovereignty threatened.

Q50 **Lord Alderdice:** You have already identified that those that we are describing as non-Western rising powers have substantial differences in their perspectives and culture between them. Even with that, to what extent are these non-Western rising powers pushing back against the liberal elements of Western multilateralism? How important should liberal values be when the UK engages with non-Western states that may or may not share them?

Dr Oliver Stuenkel: There is, as you pointed out, profound division vis-à-vis countries in the global South when it comes to liberal values and positions. We see that quite prominently in the paralysis of BRICS or BRICS+, where countries such as India and Brazil were quite opposed to

expansion, particularly the inclusion of countries such as Iran. That has led to a situation where, in the current conflict in the Middle East which included one BRICS country, Iran, attacking another BRICS member, the United Arab Emirates, there is virtually no capacity for BRICS to make any statement of relevance, considering its deep divisions. There is obviously no cohesion when it comes to that.

In some cases, in particular democracies such as Brazil, India and South Africa are natural partners in a lot of these discussions. At the same time, of course, concern about national sovereignty is very present in the global South, which makes it difficult to use specific terms. This is something that I have worked on a lot. "Democracy promotion" is not an expression that is widely accepted or utilised in many countries in the global South because it is seen as inherently interventionist. At the same time, there is a lot of concern about ways to balance combating fake news with preserving free speech. These are crucial issues, and I would even say that the future of democracy on these very challenging issues such as technology is fought in the global South just as much as in Europe. You have the largest democracies from a population point of view in the global South, and they are very committed to preserving that. To many, the democratic nature of their government systems is very much part of a national identity.

There is ample space to co-operate on these issues. A key example is that most countries across Latin America see Europe as a natural partner when it comes to curtailing the potentially negative impact of the internet on democracy, internet governance and AI governance. In Brazil, the legislative proposal that has been submitted is pretty much the European model. In other cases, you have Argentina, which very much pursues a US strategy. I still think this is an area of tremendous potential for co-operation. The global South should not be seen as an inherently anti-liberal bloc. There is a constant concern about national sovereignty and that liberal arguments could be used to undermine the sovereignty of other countries. As long as that concern has been taken care of, many countries in the global South can be partners of the UK and other European countries on that front. I would certainly not recommend the UK to perceive the world as being ultra-transactional and pragmatic, and therefore liberal issues should be cast aside. Quite the contrary, on many fronts, this is the reason young people across the global South see an opportunity to pursue studies in the West and have the desire to pursue their careers there rather than in places like China. Retaining that element as part of a foreign policy strategy is absolutely crucial and in no way diminished by the fact that we now live in a much more fragmented, transactional and turbulent world.

Moazzam Malik: We are certainly seeing a contestation play out around values, but I do not think it is as simple as liberal versus illiberal, in the way that Dr Stuenkel explained, or indeed the West versus the non-West. Instead, what I see is a body of norms, standards and law that reflects values and interests that have been built up over many decades and in many instances is embodied in national law by all the countries in the

United Nations, reflected in their domestic legislation. I see both countries that we might identify as liberal and those that we might identify as illiberal being guilty of breaching that body of norms, standards and law, in many instances.

This year, more than 1,000 humanitarian workers have been killed. That is three times more than in the preceding three years. It has happened with impunity. There is lots of hand wringing in statements but no action on the part of those one might imagine to be liberal as well as those one might imagine to be illiberal. In Gaza, Israel imposed a humanitarian blockade in 2008. As a DfID official, I was sent to assess this, came back and advised Ministers of the day that we would not tolerate this humanitarian blockade if this was Myanmar or any other country around the world. We chose to live with it for 20 years, and that humanitarian blockade is still in place. Our partners see that. We may think of ourselves as liberal. Our partners would see us as an inconsistent country that has traded off our values and indeed our interests.

Similarly, in Sudan, where I was two or three months ago, we are seeing a brutal conflict play out. It is a country that I have been visiting for 20 years. Nathaniel Raymond, who gave evidence to the IDC a few days ago, argued that the genocidal intent in El Fasher was entirely apparent and that the UK Government knew it and indeed traded off that against interests in the Gulf. We see it in the aid cuts that Lord Bruce mentioned, which will lead to 60 million fewer people next year receiving UK support in health education than was the case in 2019, and it has a real impact. I was in Somalia last year. The UK is closing a project on gender-based violence that supported girls who had been victims of rape and sexual crimes. There is no alternative for the closure of that programme.

This is not new; this goes back a long way. Some of the most difficult conversations that I had as a diplomat related to Ukraine and to Covid-19. As I was phoning up presidential advisers across Africa to invite them to support our position on Ukraine, the response that I invariably got was, "We don't need your lectures. We understand international law. We recall your adventurism in Iraq without a Security Council resolution. Thank you. We will work out how to handle this on our own". Similarly, with Covid-19, some of the most brutal conversations I had were ringing people up and saying, "Hey, we would like to collaborate with you on access to vaccines and so on", and having prominent African leaders say to me, "You guys have cornered the market. You put your own interests first. You didn't worry about us. We don't need you. Please go away". It was literally in those terms from a very senior adviser to the African Union.

The challenge for us here is not liberal and illiberal. The challenge for us here is that there is a body of international norms, standards and law. How do we adhere to those in a consistent way over time, which may involve some very difficult short-term trade-offs that are actually necessary for our long-term interests, security and prosperity? Our partners see it. We may delude ourselves, but our partners see it; they

know the trade-offs and the choices that we are making, and they remember.

- Q51 **Baroness Prashar:** Can I pursue this a little further? You have begun to touch on some of the issues that I am going to ask you. Is the emergence of a non-Western multilateral organisation such as BRICS a challenge or an opportunity for the UK? How do you think we should engage with it?

Dr Oliver Stuenkel: As I commented before, BRICS is not a blueprint for an alternative global order. It is not supposed to be that. It is part of countries' efforts to diversify their partnerships. For many years I have joined BRICS summits. I have been part of intra-BRICS co-operation at university level. My sense is that the least visible area has paradoxically been the most important, which is bureaucracy-to-bureaucracy ties that have amplified significantly in the context of BRICS. One comment that I have heard from many Brazilian Government officials, mid to high level, is that it was thanks to BRICS that they travelled for the first time to India, South Africa, Russia and China, and it helped them globalise their outlook and move away from a more Western-centric worldview, which may have been adequate for the latter part of the 20th century but which is no longer adequate. When you look at Brazil's trade patterns, it exports more to China than to Europe and the United States combined.

As a platform to exchange ideas, potentially to co-ordinate occasionally votes in multilateral fora, to explore opportunity and to amplify co-operation in the economy, the BRICS Business Council promotes ties between entrepreneurs, companies and agencies. It is much more about intra-BRICS ties than about challenging established international norms in any way. As the ambassador said, there is a distinct sense that many of the threats against the rules and norms are not coming from the global South but emerge due to double standards and the selective application of rules and norms.

It is certainly important not to overemphasise the geopolitical relevance of BRICS and the potential to move together on issues like going against the dollar or having a joint currency. Most of that is exaggerated. That does not mean I would dismiss BRICS. I am quite supportive of it, and I have spoken publicly in favour of Brazil continuing to be part of it. Just because it is necessary to have a dialogue with other BRICS countries, one does not necessarily have to agree with them all the time. I was also opposed to inviting Iran. That has happened now. I still believe that not only Brazil but the vast majority of other countries can continue to see value in it, despite it being largely described as irrelevant in the Western academic and public discourse.

Moazzam Malik: I do not think we have anything to fear. The Non-Aligned Movement has been around for many decades. BRICS has been around for a while. We have had the G7, NATO and Five Eyes. We have our own groupings. The Small Island Developing States, which emerged recently, has proved to be quite an interesting grouping. Very recently, we have a so-called G8, a group of eight Muslim countries that is

emerging, stretching from Indonesia across to Egypt. I met many of their perm reps in New York a couple of weeks ago. I do not think we should worry about the fact that countries come together on the basis of their interests and their values, which do not always align even within the groupings.

There are opportunities in three respects for us. For my money, the pre-eminent institution that we should think about is the G20. Outside the formal international system, as a grouping, the G20 is for me the most interesting grouping out there. It represents 85% of global output and more than 80% of global emissions. If one can agree ways of co-operating internationally, which has been largely economic in the past but has the potential to broaden from that, and if you could secure that agreement around international co-operation in the G20, you have a shot at taking it through the rest of the world and in through other institutions. The UK has the chair of the G20 next year.

Secondly, we need to think about issues. For us, the grouping with NATO and AUKUS is very important for security. In the past, the Cartagena process was very important for us on climate action. We should be thinking about what sorts of alliances and groupings we want to be part of on the basis of our interests in terms of security and prosperity.

Thirdly, we should be thinking about institutions. Earlier Dr Stuenkel mentioned the AIIB. This was a new multilateral bank spawned by China with a range of partners from the global South. In the coalition Government that came to power in 2010, there was a big debate in Whitehall about whether we should engage with this. We chose to engage with it. The Americans were very upset with us. The Japanese and others were very upset with us. Actually, our participation and shareholding in the AIIB has led to a multilateral institution that operates to international standards, that has adopted the codes of practice from the World Bank and others, and that operates in a predictable, consistent kind of way, in a way that we would welcome on the international stage.

Our engagement won kudos when I met the Japanese executive director in the World Bank. Two weeks ago, we reflected on this, and he said, "You were right and we were wrong". Equally, soon after the AIIB experience, a second institution was spawned out of Beijing, the Multilateral Cooperation Center for Development Finance, the MCDF. Again, a big debate ensued in Whitehall. Actually, on every rational metric, it made sense for us to engage. The geopolitics of it meant that we chose to sit it out because we were worried about how this would be seen in terms of our relationship with Beijing and China. There are opportunities in terms of the G20, thinking about the groupings that we participate in, and leaning into institutions so that they operate to international standards.

The Chair: We have done very well. We have five minutes to go and two more questions. I want to check that both witnesses are happy and available to drift on. I am a military man and a bit of a timings fascist. Are you happy to stay with us?

Dr Oliver Stuenkel: Yes.

Moazzam Malik: Yes.

The Chair: By all means do be quite precise on the last couple of questions, because I am sure you and we have other things to be getting on with. Let us do the questions full justice.

Q52 **Lord Lamont of Lerwick:** My question is very similar to Baroness Prashar's but has more emphasis on the regionality of organisations. Do you think regional organisations are becoming increasingly important? Some people say they are more agile than the bigger, wholly international institutions. Do you share this view? Do you think the UK has the right perspective on this?

Moazzam Malik: We are seeing a proliferation of regional and plurilateral mechanisms. As that contestation in the multilateral systems becomes more acute and difficult, countries still want to solve the problems that they face, and if they cannot do so in multilateral fora they turn to regional fora. We are seeing organisations such as ASEAN and the African Union develop, though often the stated achievements are in excess of the reality. We are also seeing that in the trade space. With the WTO stuck, we are seeing plurilateral trade agreements. There are real opportunities for the UK to engage with those regional bodies such as through the CPTPP, the trade arrangement that is seen as one of the most progressive in the world, which we have lent into and has incredible potential for the future. Similarly, joining the ASEAN as an observer member was an important step that the UK took a few years ago. So I do think there are opportunities here on the regional side, but they will not solve the problems that the multilateral system is needed for.

Dr Oliver Stuenkel: I have nothing to add. I wanted to mention the UK-ASEAN initiative as well. The overall trend is certainly towards regional co-operation. However, it cannot be enough. There will at the same time be minilateral initiatives that involve countries from different regions. In the case of Latin America, there are lots of divisions on regional challenges, oftentimes amplified by ideological polarisation where left-wing Governments have trouble co-operating with right-wing Governments. This is a particular Latin American challenge, yet the trend given the global fragmentation clearly opens an opportunity for regional co-operation, no doubt.

Lord Lamont of Lerwick: Dr Stuenkel, you referred earlier to the possibility of BRICS having had discussions about developing its own currency, which is probably unrealistic. I remember discussions it floated about having a payment system of its own to rival that of the United States, which led to a ferocious reaction from the United States Government. Is not the reality that if these regional organisations go too far they tread on the toes of and get a very robust answer from the United States?

Dr Oliver Stuenkel: Yes, certainly. The strong response by the United States against BRICS led to some surprise within BRICS, given the very slow speed of this going forward. I do not see much potential for now in a BRICS-led process that could somehow undermine the dollar. There are wildly different preferences when it comes to the future of the dollar within BRICS countries. A lot of this is of a symbolic nature, just like the recent decision by the Brazilian Government to issue Panda bonds. It is seen much more as a symbolic gesture to diversify and signal to Washington that it has alternatives rather than a strategic financial bet. For now, the likelihood of friction emerging there is limited. I continue to believe that the greatest threat to the dollar comes from Washington, either by an unpredictable posture on sanctions or by a lack of fiscal discipline by digital currencies that could at some point lead to a diminished role of the dollar, but not in the short term, and for now, I believe, not led by regional organisations around the world.

Q53 **Lord De Mauley:** The danger of going last is that all your sandwiches will have been eaten, but let me give it a go anyway. You have answered questions approaching this subject from a variety of angles. Dr Stuenkel, in particular, has been positive about the views among non-Western rising powers about the UK's continuing influence. Can I bring it back down to what the UK can do about all of this? First, does the UK possess the expertise, strategy and capabilities to engage with non-Western rising powers successfully within multilateral fora? If not, or perhaps more importantly, if it could be improved, what do we need to do?

Dr Oliver Stuenkel: I mentioned that a strong diplomatic footprint is more important than ever. I was part of a Brazilian delegation in Brussels a few years ago, and was a bit taken aback by the language of Europe willing to help Brazil overcome its significant challenges. The idea that the West leads the way and can altruistically help the non-West is not the right approach. The UK has largely been able to steer clear of this kind of rhetoric but to project itself as a partner and to identify specific areas where co-operation is possible and where exchanging expertise or working together on technical issues is possible. That requires regional knowledge that goes beyond being friends or having a productive relationship with the largest power in a particular region and then believing that that is enough.

The classic case is that some countries around the world believe that Brazil, for example, is in any way representative of Latin America and that having Brazil on board means having all of Latin America on board, which is of course not at all the case. It is a very fragmented region, so that requires a strong diplomatic and political commitment to even small countries, which, as the ambassador just pointed out, in some areas like a group of small islands, have significant capacity to shape the agenda. Having that global diplomatic network is a key strategic asset and should be defended at all costs. Diminishing that, especially now, is counterproductive. There is a lot of opportunity, as I said, in how, for lack of a better term, middle powers countries that cannot compete head on in areas such as AI with Beijing and Washington have potential to identify

areas where they can work together. As the Canadian Prime Minister, Mark Carney, suggested, countries that have regional influence and occasionally global influence in particular areas but are not great powers have the potential to work together. In that area, the UK may be a powerful mediator, facilitator, convener and agenda setter.

Moazzam Malik: First, on the UK's attractiveness, the UK is an interesting and influential country to our partners, but we must not delude ourselves. Visas are an enormous issue. Talk to people across Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Trying to get to Britain and navigate our visa process, as you will know better than I do perhaps, or as well as I, is very painful. We must not delude ourselves. We have to keep working at this in terms of building our relationships.

Your question was about whether we have the strategies, capabilities and expertise to rise to this challenge. I might be so bold as to say, no, we do not. In April 2024, I published an eight-page pamphlet with Lord Sedwill and Tom Fletcher calling for the reform of how the UK does international affairs. I reread it this morning before coming to the committee, and I would be so bold as to say that the conclusions that we reached in that process are still highly relevant to where we are. First and foremost, we need a much clearer assessment of our interests in the international space. If you walk around Whitehall today, as has been the case throughout my career, and the Foreign Office, and ask, "What is the point of the Foreign Office?" the answer you get is, "It's in our national interest". The national interest is just a malleable blancmange that depends on whatever who is sitting in the Foreign Secretary's seat decides on that day. We need to codify that and set out why we are engaging in international affairs and what it is about our long-term security and prosperity that depends on international engagement.

DfiD was successful because it had a very clear mandate: eliminate world poverty. That might have been super-stretching and difficult. The purpose of the Ministry of Defence is clear: protect the realm. The purpose of the Ministry of Education is clear: better educational outcomes. You might have wild debates about how to go about that, but we need a purpose for our Foreign Ministry.

Secondly, we need to invest in expertise. A very prominent, still-serving diplomat who is an old friend referred to King Charles Street having become a giant private office. If you work in King Charles Street, the headquarters of the Foreign Office, that is what it feels like. Everybody runs around serving the Minister of the day. We have become world class at rearranging deck chairs, not actually prosecuting the long-term interests and objectives that will benefit the British people. We need deeper expertise. We are too generalist. We need people with expertise in conflict, in climate and in health so that we can show up and deliver outcomes for the British people. Other countries do this better. Singapore keeps its ambassadors in place for at least double, if not triple, the time that the UK does. Other countries invest in expertise in a way that we do not. We can learn from that.

Thirdly, we need a strong presence, as Dr Stuenkel suggested, in a wide range of countries across the global South. We should particularly look at our presence and the level of our engagement in the G20 countries. If this is our pre-eminent grouping, we should look at our diplomatic and wider platform engagement in those countries. If you look at it, it is very variable. It is very strong in some places and a bit patchy in others. If this is where the contestation is to be won or lost, we should approach these in a consistent way.

Fourthly, our Whitehall structures need attention. The NSC has become pretty moribund. Even when it worked well, when I was serving in Whitehall, it failed to take account of economic issues. We engage internationally both for security and economic interests. It really needs attention. It has become very sporadic.

Our delivery structures are inadequate. We have 12 different agencies in the international space. They do not co-ordinate, from SIS to the Westminster Foundation for Democracy to the British Council. We do not have a consistent approach to what we are trying to do in the international space.

Lastly, we are heading to a place where we will spend 10 times as much on defence as we do on soft power. We are heading towards 3% plus on defence, and our international development budget is languishing at 0.3% from next year. Given the things that actually threaten the long-term prosperity and security of the British people, I am not sure that a ratio of one to 10 on soft versus hard power is the right place for us to be. I would argue that we need to be investing in our global presence, including in the multilateral system, using the levers at our disposal. We have a lot of homework to do, and I commend my pamphlet to you again.

The Chair: Thank you for that. I was about to congratulate you on the self-regulating nature of time and all the rest, but then we had that burst at the end. I will task the secretariat to discover the pamphlet and circulate it round because it might be a rich source of potential recommendations. Certainly, that was a very enlightening session, and your ability to clarify the complexity of our chosen inquiry was spot on. I thank the two witnesses, Ambassador Malik and Dr Stuenkel, for your insights. I remind you that you will receive a transcript for any small corrections if necessary. I officially declare the public session closed. Thank you very much.