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UK NATIONAL STRATEGY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

TURNING POINTS AND IDEOLOGICAL
DEVELOPMENTS, 1850–2025

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Lucy Smith is the 2024-25 Heywood Fellow. She is supported by a small team.

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One of the signal tasks of national strategy is to look beyond the immediate pressures a country faces at any given moment, in favour of situating it within the larger sweep of its trajectory of development. Any claims that national strategy makes about where it believes the country is — and ought to be — heading are necessarily informed by an understanding of how it reached the point where it finds itself today. What a country is 'like' domestically and on the global stage (its national identity), its characteristic features and various 'moving parts', the attributes it has at its disposal and how it uses them, are not just arbitrary endowments but the specific result of changes that the country has previously made (and did not make). At every stage, formulating a national strategy for the future means reckoning with the past. Yet being aware of the conditioning role that a country's background plays for its forward development is not to suggest that this background should be seen as a burden to be tolerated, or an inhibiting constraint to be overcome. Instead, a strong sense of history can be a highly effective tool to gather insights about what works (and what does not), and what succeeds (and what fails) within the particular national context at stake. National history offers a rich trove of 'natural experiments' conducted within the same underlying societal unit at different times: data-points of comparative evidence and causal explication, matchable (and unmatchable) patterns, replicable (and irreducible) processes. What is needed is a common analytical approach that captures what is happening in each of these cases in comparable terms, and can make sense of them in historical sequence.

In our previous paper [*Long-Term, National Strategy: Designing a Contemporary Practice of National Strategy*](#), we argued that a robust national strategy for the UK is one that draws on the country's historical experience. The purpose of this paper is to set out a framework for how to do so: an approach to understanding the UK's strategic history in a way that can generate insights for future strategy development. In the first instance, engaging with the context in which the UK's current strategic thinking is taking place means comparing the 'view from 2025' with the 'view from previous years' — and coming to an informed stance on *which* years offer especially useful points of strategic comparison. A key motivating factor for choosing these points is that they should not just offer interestingly and relevantly contrasting foils for the UK's situation in 2025. Rather, it should also be possible to join them all together into a *longue-durée* narrative: to present the UK's strategic circumstances today as a plausible direct or indirect cumulative consequence of how it responded to its equivalent circumstances at each of these previous points, one after the other. Put differently, the kind of narrative at stake here is a narrative about *strategic choices that matter*. The 'outcomes' of past strategies become immediate 'inputs' into the strategies that follow them, right up to the 'inputs' into

strategic choices today, whose 'outcomes' will be the 'inputs' into the choices of tomorrow. What this framework is meant to explain is how (and how far) past decisions can limit or enable present and future ones — either permanently or temporarily, and over shorter or longer timeframes — and why national strategy is marked by cases of continuity at certain points in time, and discontinuity at others.

This analytical framework becomes especially important if 2025 is seen as a point where the UK ought to be undertaking a strategic 'rethink'. A key question when deciding whether, and how, to revise national strategy is how far the new framework should aim to fit with the results of equivalent processes in the past. Part of the core appeal of seeing 2025 as a 'pivot' moment, and of using the occasion to say something new about how the UK should 'do' national strategy, is to depart from previous strategies in several clear, well-signalled ways. It is a way for any government to issue a serious, high-level statement of its national intentions. It can opt to partly or wholly reject a received national orthodoxy, 'turn the page' on its predecessor's way of doing things, and carve out a new identity for the country. However, if the new national strategy does not at least partly align with what went before, it risks ignoring the persistence of the challenges that past iterations sought to address, and abandoning much that is still worth preserving in established strategic thinking. At worst, it could earn the UK a reputation for being mercurial and unreliable, undermining its stable commitment to alliances and treaty obligations, and leading to stagnation and uncertainty around public investment projects as well as its fiscal and regulatory landscape — a reputation that the UK has historically strenuously sought to avoid. What policymakers should have in mind is what kind of balance the new strategy framework is trying to strike between continuity and discontinuity: in parts conservative, in parts radical, or a more nuanced blend across the board, and so on.

The idea of a UK national strategy is closely tied to the existence of the UK as a country — as a discrete society, but above all as a nation-state within the global order. In theory, the idea that the UK has a relatively distinct, established national strategy — and the more-or-less conscious national agency to develop, follow, and implement this strategy — can be extended back as far as it is possible to point to the existence of a single, relatively cohesive UK (or at earlier times English, Scottish, Welsh, and Irish) society overseen by a set of durable, well-defined 'national institutions'. In that vein, it is possible to identify strategic content and direction, even strategic disputes, associated with key events in UK history: English encroachment into and co-option of Wales, Scotland, and Ireland; the break with papal authority and the creation of the Church of England; the contests over parliamentary versus monarchical authority during the English Civil War; the codification of rights in the wake of the Glorious Revolution; and the UK's ever-shifting alliances to maintain the balance of power between its European neighbours. But the project of identifying a clear strategic direction that shapes the activities of UK society and its institutions, especially one expressed in both 'national' and 'strategic' terms, becomes significantly more meaningful starting from the mid-nineteenth century. In response to several key weaknesses revealed in the UK's

existing institutions through a series of both domestic and foreign pressures, the UK state's capabilities were significantly improved and professionalised, including notably in 1855 through the creation of an open, merit-based, politically neutral Civil Service in the wake of the Northcote–Trevelyan report.

At the same time, taking the 1850s as the starting-point for a recognisably 'modern' understanding of national strategy (and national policymaking more broadly), the 175-year sweep of the UK's activities as a country since then reveals several equally clear changes in its strategic direction. These have included changes in the UK's strategic *worldview*, through which policymakers have 'read' the UK's situation at home and abroad. This includes the UK's transformation from the preeminent imperial superpower of the 1800s to a 'middle power' bastion of Global North multilateralism by the late 1900s, and from a free-trading 'nightwatchman state' in the late 1800s to a protectionist welfare state in the early 1900s. They have likewise involved changes in the sense of strategic *purposes* that has driven the UK and its policy institutions, in the policy effects and goals they have intended and aspired to. For instance, the aims of public education have changed from basic mass provision in the late 1800s to preparation for technical expertise and cutting-edge research by the late 1900s, while energy imperatives have moved from coal and oil independence in the mid-1900s to decarbonisation in the early 2000s. And these changes have also impacted the UK's strategic *assumptions*, the 'starting premises' for the UK's policy thinking and 'anchors' for its policymaking behaviours. The balance of UK–US, UK–EU, and UK–Commonwealth relationships that undergirded late-1900s diplomacy has become unmoored if not upended by the early 2000s, while the 'neoliberal' turn in the late 1900s was rooted in a comprehensive rejection of early-to-mid-1900s Keynesianism in favour of monetarist political economy. Separately or in combination, these changes have led to moments of reorientation in what the UK has sought to achieve strategically, both internally and at the global level. These, in turn, have reconfigured the UK's pattern of major strategic 'plays', which endow it with a range of strategic commitments and entanglements, and which undergird the rest of UK policymaking.

Taken together, these factors intuitively suggest that UK national strategy since the professionalisation of its national policymaking can be divided into a set of periods or phases: prolonged moments or stretches of time during which the UK's orienting worldview, purposes, and assumptions remained relatively consistent and stable. The UK's contemporary or prevailing recent approach to national strategy then also becomes representative of a particular period in which the UK finds itself *right now*, including the strategic worldview, purposes, and assumptions that (uniquely) distinguish it from any other period. Putting the UK's current national strategy into historical context means developing an account of what the periods of national strategy since the 1850s are: *how many* of these periodic strategic equilibriums there have been; what *characterises* them; how they *join together*; and what *lasting effects* each of them has had on the approaches to national strategy taken in subsequent phases. Taking seriously the idea that each of these periods can be marked out by a similar set of benchmarking features or modelling principles makes

it possible to carry out comparative analysis between present and past moments in UK national strategy on an equivalent, 'like for like' footing. The same framework can also help determine whether the UK's current national strategy is in a moment of intra-periodic stability (equilibrium) or inter-periodic transition (dis-equilibration and re-equilibration).

Periodisation in the history of UK national strategy

The first key feature that constitutes one of these strategic periods is that each one has to be bookended by relatively clear-cut *beginning- and end-points*. We can think of the relationship between each period and the moments when it started and finished in terms of both 'positive' and 'negative' mutual definition: (1) each period is defined by different path-dependent ways of doing national strategy, described in terms of a prevailing *strategic ideology* (an 'ism') that shapes the guiding mentality of national strategic thinking and the intentional approach of national strategic action, and the points dividing them are effectively caesuras, or breaks, that mark the moment of change from one strategic ideology to another; or (2) each point is defined by a *critical juncture*, a transformative strategic national event, and periods are the interstitial 'gaps' between them, with their characteristic ideologies shaped by the 'afterglow' that each juncture sheds on their subsequent strategic thinking and action. What unites these two perspectives is that the points in question must be not only strategically significant but also strategic *turning points*. If they are significant, it only means that strategic national decisions have to be taken in response to them (as opposed to blithely carrying on as if nothing had happened). But this does not necessarily mean that the way national strategy is conducted itself changes and evolves as well — which is the key difference between strategic activity taking place within the same period (under the same strategic ideology) versus different periods (under different ideologies). To count as turning points, key moments must be associated with either exogenous or endogenous (other-imposed or self-imposed) 'watershed' events, trends, or other major societal developments, which forced a shift in the focuses and processes of national strategy and a break in their path-dependencies — to the extent that there is 'no going back' to previous ways of strategic thinking and action.

Starting in the 1850s, it is possible to identify eight key moments that fit this description of strategic turning points (see fig. 1). What becomes immediately clear is that the beginning- and end-points for the periods of UK national strategy vary considerably in length. Some, such as the Suez Crisis or Black Wednesday, were shorter-term shocks that lasted a matter of weeks, or even concentrated their most intense effects into only a few days. Others took the form of longer-term 'slow burns', whose transformative impacts were drawn out over multiple months, as with the Indian Rebellion and the Great Recession, or even several years, as with the collapses of the League of Nations and the USSR. Their status as turning points, and a sense of their sheer scale, was also not equally obvious at the time they were happening. Some were associated with such sheer devastation and financial costs that the scale of their strategic consequences could not be overlooked, like the

mechanised warfare of WW1 or the Great Depression. Others, like the Berlin Crises or the Mediterranean migration crisis, have only fully become identified as turning points retrospectively, with their transformative effects on UK national strategy appearing as more of an emergent property — or even as a characteristic they are consciously endowed with *ex post* by national policymakers. Of the developments that comprise these turning points, it is easier to find ones that fit the profile of strictly exogenous than endogenous ‘watersheds’, although in several cases there are palpable elements of both at play.

Figure 1 — *Turning points in the UK's strategic history*

1853–58	Crimean War (1853–56), cholera pandemic (1853–54), Indian Rebellion (1857–58)
1873–82	Long Depression (1873–79), European ‘Scramble for Africa’ (1876–82)
1905–15	Diplomatic crises (1905–13), advent of modern warfare (1914–15)
1929–37	Great Depression (1929–33), collapse of the League of Nations (1933–37)
1956–61	Suez Crisis (1956), Berlin Crises (1958–61)
1973–76	Oil Crisis (1973), sterling crisis and IMF bailout (1976)
1988–92	Collapse of the USSR (1988–91), Black Wednesday (1992)
2007–16	Great Recession (2007–9), Mediterranean migration crisis (2013–15), Brexit (2016)

This is, of course, a somewhat simplified periodisation. As we argue in our paper [National Capacities: A Model for National Strategy](#), a country like the UK can be seen as a societal ecosystem. It is a complex entity made up of many smaller entities, which engage in different kinds of activity across a number of different social domains (each of which comprises a number of interrelated social systems) — classically, the economy, politics, law, and culture; but also including vital areas of social engagement such as education, infrastructure, caregiving, and the country's natural environment. Each of these domains develops partly in parallel to every other, and partly through interaction: their activities diverge and converge, with some areas that are wholly independent and separate, and others where they intersect and overlap. Viewed historically, it is undoubtedly possible to construct an equivalent series of prevailing ideologies and critical junctures for each of these domains by themselves. Yet there is no guarantee that the resulting evolutionary timeline and periodisation would look exactly the same for all of them — not least because there may well be moments that represented quite serious turning points

for the ways of thinking and action *within* certain domains that did not register as equally transformative (or at all) in other domains. Giving a periodisation for the UK as a whole, then, is necessarily a matter of 'averaging across' to find junctures that acted as turning points more-or-less across the whole of UK society.

With that in view, it is notable that the events in question are above all economic and political in emphasis, even though they often also have, for example, legal, cultural, or other social content. This is straightforwardly because creating a historical overview of the UK's national strategy necessarily gives a preeminent role to the policymaking activities of the UK state, which in the first instance concern decisions over public funding and governance that shape the respective (legal, cultural, etc.) policy environments to which the other domains respond. One analytically effective way of finding junctures that can relatively easily 'average across' multiple domains of UK society is therefore to find moments that significantly transformed the overall funding or governance landscape for the UK — which in many cases also amounted to moments where the UK found itself under some kind of quasi-existential challenge, often but not always due to exogenous factors. At the same time, even factoring in their society-wide effects, not all of these turning points had the same degree of impact on the prevailing ideology of UK national strategy. Some were strong enough to inject certain disruptive amendments that modified the UK's strategic ways of thinking and action but not bring about a total overhaul, whereas others were so strong that they forced a far more comprehensive re-evaluation. In that respect, some of these turning points should more subtly and accurately be seen as inflection points or 'pendulum swing' moments, where specific national strategy approaches oscillated in and out of favour — sometimes coming back in and out again several times.

Second, the particular strategic equilibrium that the periods after each of these turning points represents is the prevailing ideological approach the UK's policymakers took during the relevant block of time to *mobilising its national capacities*: its people, means, resources, capital, and institutions. (For a fuller discussion, see our paper [National Capacities](#).) These five national capacities are factors that a country like the UK deploys to achieve social outcomes — inputs into a series of interlocking input–output processes spread across its functionally distinct domains and systems of social activity. In each period, the UK's strategic worldview constitutes a **diagnosis** of the latest state of its national capacities: whether the state they are in right now is net 'positive' (assets) or 'negative' (liabilities), and whether they are currently in a dynamic of growth or decline over time. This is both an absolute assessment of the UK's functional national 'wellbeing' as a country (internal, domestic), and a relative assessment of how it scores against its benchmarking international competitor or partner countries (external, global-comparative). The UK's strategic purposes set the country certain **objectives** that policymakers aim to achieve within (at most) a medium-term horizon, which may include more-or-less specific targets for how the UK's national capacities (and hence its functional 'well-being') should look different — better, greater, stronger — as a result. Again, these objectives may be absolute or relative, oriented towards

improving either the inherent state of the country or its global ranking. Lastly, the UK's strategic assumptions consist in a series of '**big bets**' that forecast, or hypothesise, what will (need to) be, become, or remain the case so that its objectives stand a reasonable likelihood of success — or which capacity levers the UK can (must, should) pull to achieve these objectives. These may be bets about the present and future state of the UK itself, or about the global context in which it is operating at any given time, which in all cases are strongly connected to the prevailing ideology that forms the tramlines of strategy making for the period in question.

Identifying how the UK's national strategy differs from one period to the next means understanding the approach that policymakers in each period take to deploying the UK's national capacities. Which capacities do their strategic diagnoses focus on (positively or negatively)? What kinds of capacity-generation do their strategic objectives target (or ignore) and prioritise (or deprioritise)? And which capacities are upweighted (or downweighted) in their strategic 'big bets' about what they should (or should not) rely on and take for granted? At the same time, grasping the UK's national strategy approach in any period also means understanding the balance policymakers strike between mobilising the capacities spread across its various social systems. Each period has its own balance between 'big picture' comprehensive national strategy and a series of more granular national strategies dedicated to specific policy areas, some more familiar than others (see fig. 2). The relationship between these can be both 'top-down' and 'bottom-up': policymakers can develop an overarching national strategic ideology that sets the country's overall direction, from which flow more circumscribed approaches to, for example, defence, the environment, industry, or skills; or they can develop these system-specific strategies first, and then collate them into a more-or-less cohesive amalgamated national-level ideological settlement. In either case, the UK's national strategy across different periods can be marked not just by changing emphases on its various national capacities, but by shifting skews towards particular social domains, systems, and policy areas, and away from others.

Figure 2 — *Strategies across social domains and policy areas*

Economic strategy	Business, employment, and industrial strategy — Commercial and trade strategy — Consumer strategy — Financial strategy — Fiscal and monetary strategy
Political strategy	Defence strategy — Diplomatic and foreign strategy — Governance strategy — Policing and security strategy
Legal strategy	Citizenship and migration strategy — Constitutional strategy — Crime and justice strategy — Regulatory strategy
Cultural strategy	Arts, entertainment, and sports strategy — Communications and media strategy — Faith and belief engagement strategy

Education strategy	Innovation, research, and science strategy — Learning and skills strategy — Teaching and training strategy
Infrastructure strategy	Energy, power, and utilities strategy — Housing strategy — Transport strategy
Care strategy	Family and parenting strategy — Health strategy — Social care strategy — Welfare strategy
Environmental strategy	Biodiversity strategy — Climate and green strategy — Rural strategy

Third, gauging the effect of key turning points means carefully tracing (in)consistencies and (dis)continuities between the UK's strategic approaches before and after the transformative events in question. In general, national strategy development is an iterative process, whereby the outcomes of past efforts act as the framing conditions for subsequent strategic activities. Part of every strategic diagnosis in the present is the inheritance the UK has been dealt by past strategy making, and the eventual success or failure of its current strategic objectives and 'big bets' creates a legacy that future strategy making has to take into account. Within each period, this iteration broadly takes the form of a closed 'feedback loop', which keeps national strategy moving forward along the same general trajectory of development. But the force of each turning point is precisely that this 'feedback loop' is no longer automatic: policymakers decide (or are forced) to consider whether, and how far, to reject the inheritance and turn away from the legacy of prior strategy. This means that the UK's strategic evolution from one period to the next is more complex than simple patterns of either linear growth or 'cyclical' seasonality, and cannot be analysed in terms of perfectly cumulative 'stages' or eternally oscillating 'waves'. Yet this does not mean that UK national strategy follows a perfectly stochastic 'random walk', where the move from one period to another sees all the UK's received strategic wisdom discarded and new national strategy starting wholly from scratch.

Instead, any transition from one national strategic ideology to the next sees a mixture of ways of dealing with its cardinal elements. Some come to an end of their strategic lifespan: they may be overtly dropped or quietly deemphasised, their associated objectives may have been sufficiently achieved in the previous period, the past diagnoses and 'big bets' they rest on may now appear flawed or outdated, and so on. Some elements are carried over into the new strategic approach: previous objectives might not have been met, new ones may be set that explicitly build on prior achievements, or their underlying diagnoses and 'big bets' still hold true. And some elements are wholly new additions, typically where past strategic activities proved less than successful, or the turning point revealed various deficits in the last strategic approach. In this vein, there are innovations in the UK's

national capacities that are the result of its strategic ideology in a certain period — some of which remain in place and even play major roles in later strategic periods (for instance: mass education, the NHS, financial deregulation), while others are deliberately abandoned with the shift from one period to the next (for instance: industrial nationalisation, social housing programmes, the Empire). To capture this ‘reshuffling’ of strategic priorities over time, it is possible to define a ‘3×x’ framework that describes the (1) diagnosis, (2) objectives, and (3) ‘big bets’ associated with its ‘top x’ (fairly commonly ‘top 5’) strategic challenges in each period, and compare how they develop. (For further details, see our paper [Long-Term, National Strategy](#).) Of course, the existence of a limited number of ‘top x’ strategic challenges does not rule out other lower-priority strategic activities that carry on alongside them. Often changes in the ‘top x’ reflect concerns that slide into the background rather than ending entirely, or rise in urgency where they previously garnered only marginal strategic interest.

The rest of this paper gives an overview of the major periods of UK national strategy, starting with the professionalisation of its policymaking processes in the 1850s. In each case, it offers a more detailed explication of the key moments that sparked the end of one strategic period and the start of another, with reference to the particularly dramatic or powerful effects these had on the UK’s national capacities at the time. It provides an overarching characterisation of the distinctive strategic ideology in evidence in national policymaking during each period, with commentary on whether this ideology was more or less clearly pronounced in the strategic thinking and action at the time, and tracks the sequence of these ideologies from period to period. It offers a summary breakdown of the strategic ‘picture’ across the UK’s various social domains, systems, and policy areas, specifically the strategic policymaking activities of the UK state (which were often complemented, followed, or pre-empted by strategic activities in other parts of UK society beyond the formal scope of policy). For every period, the paper draws out an indicative ‘3×x’ framework to capture the UK’s historical strategy: a brief overview of the diagnoses, objectives, and ‘big bets’ that marked UK strategy making for its highest priorities in the wake of each ‘watershed’ moment. For each period, the paper identifies the major national strategy legacies for the UK’s national capacities (its people, means, resources, capital, and institutions), especially where these created or enhanced strategic capabilities of the UK state that survived into later strategic periods.

The heyday of *laissez-faire*: from the 1850s to the 1880s

The **Crimean War** saw the UK join France and the Ottoman Empire to halt Russian expansion, but exposed profound flaws in the UK's military apparatus, logistics, and medical care. The **cholera pandemic**, the last of several in the 1800s, revealed the weaknesses of the UK's urban sanitation systems, where contaminated water contributed to widespread disease transmission. The **Indian Rebellion** broke out against East India Company rule, nearly overthrowing the UK's imperial authority in India before being brutally suppressed. All three were critical for UK strategy: the Crimean War showed that the UK could no longer rely on its outdated institutions to sustain superpower status or unilateral force projection in Europe; the pandemic demonstrated the need for public investment to catch up with the new realities of UK population management; the Rebellion revealed the fragility of indirect imperial governance and colonial loyalty.

The first period of 'modern' national strategy that began in the 1850s was dominated by an entrenched (if somewhat passive) mid-Victorian approach of 'nightwatchman' **marginal interventionism**. The challenges raised by the Crimean War and the Indian Rebellion exposed key deficits in the calibre of the UK's bureaucratic and military personnel, in the oversight and processing capabilities of imperial institutions, and — together with the cholera pandemic — in the availability of effective logistics and infrastructure within the UK and across the British Empire. As a result, mid-Victorian national strategy was defined by a focus on improving the quality of public service recruitment, setting up formal mechanisms for direct central coordination and control, and projects of large-scale public investment (see fig. 3). As a strategic ideology, marginal interventionism was clear in its strategic intent, though fairly limited in scope: update the operations of the UK state where strictly needed to keep the imperial ship afloat.

The UK's economic strategy in this period rested on unilateral tariff reduction and adoption of free trade (after the 1846 repeal of the Corn Laws), underpinned by adherence to the gold standard, a post-1844 Bank of England monopoly on currency issuance, low direct income taxation balanced by strong reliance on customs and excise revenues, and a leading role for private enterprise in fostering industrial growth (with limited government facilitation). Politically, the UK's diplomacy supported its commercial interests through free trade treaties, while its defence strategy prioritised naval supremacy at the expense of a smaller professional army, and a commitment to isolationist neutrality only occasionally broken to maintain the European balance of power. This was coupled domestically with extension of political participation to the urban male working class (Second Reform Act 1867). The mid-Victorian period saw major legal reforms, including the stepwise codification of criminal law and prison expansion, and a rapid succession of regulatory legislation to cover nascent industries (for instance: Factory Act 1867, Coal and Metalliferous Mines Regulation Act 1872). Penal transportation was ended

(1868), to be replaced by state encouragement and subventions for mass emigration to British colonies. The UK's cultural strategy echoed the tenets of *laissez-faire* and liberal individualism, with limited active state patronage for the arts or national heritage, but with the strong growth of a moderate press fostered by the repeal of newspaper duties (1853–61) and judicious maintenance of libel laws. Over the same period, a careful increase in tolerance for denominational and religious pluralism took root, alongside continued establishment of the Church of England.

Education was a lower strategic priority during this period, with the modernisation of (for instance) universities and learned societies — and the emergence of new bodies — taking place without central steer; only for schools were some efforts made to expand coverage and accountability to boost labour efficiency and social order. Social infrastructure, by contrast, ranked much higher, with a mixture of major flagship projects (for instance, the London sewer system) and local authority empowerment (for instance, Artisans' and Labourers' Dwellings Improvement Act 1875) to clear slums, reform sanitation, solve overcrowding, and provide access to clean water and gas lighting. This was accompanied by growing consolidation, safety regulation, and partial state oversight over mines and railways. For caregiving, public health became a strategic concern for the first time (Public Health Act 1875), with the introduction of compulsory vaccination, medical officer posts, and sanitary boards, and the expansion and low-level regulation of care institutions (for instance: asylums, workhouses). Meanwhile, welfare provision remained at its post-1834 Poor Law Amendment minimum, albeit supplemented by growing charitable bodies and philanthropy. Lastly, mid-Victorian environmental strategy was restricted to questions of heritage and landscape conservation (for instance, the Commons Preservation Society 1865) as well as resource stewardship issues around forestry and agrarian management, both within the UK and across its colonies, tied to changing responsibilities of agricultural landownership.

Figure 3 — The UK's priority strategic challenges under marginal interventionism

Diagnosis	Objectives	Big bets
The UK's prosperity and influence rest on global commercial leadership , secured through open markets, cheap imports, and dominance in exports with comparative advantage	Promote free trade norms, expand overseas demand, secure market access through diplomacy not conquest	Free trade fosters peace, prosperity, and UK leadership without costly coercive empire-building or entangling commitments
Continental entanglements drain resources, while security lies in the UK's natural insular geography and maritime dominance	Avoid alliances, maintain 'splendid isolation', preserve the global system's balance of power, protect imperial lifelines	Naval supremacy guarantees deterrence, shields commerce, and secures the UK's decision-making autonomy from European conflicts

Diagnosis	Objectives	Big bets
Industrial growth drives wealth, power, and social progress, while private enterprise unfettered by state interference is a tried-and-tested way to foster efficiency, innovation, and productivity	Encourage entrepreneurship, expand manufacturing, limit state regulation to essentials (for example, preventing gross abuses)	<i>Laissez-faire</i> capitalism and private competition deliver sustained industrial growth, employment, prosperity, and global dominance without heavy government intervention
Industrialisation creates risks of disorder and disease , while progress requires shared effort across society beyond central state capacity	Combine state, municipal, and philanthropic investment into hybrid coalitions to expand and improve housing, schools, sanitation, and transport	Mixed provision balances social stability and civic voluntarism to deliver progress without relying heavily on central bureaucracy
Expanding empire and bureaucracy demand expert administrators and officers, while amateur patronage has proved insufficient for effective service	Cultivate cadres of skilled professional elites in the civil service, military, medicine, and engineering through training and examinations	Specialised, meritocratic elites provide efficiency, prestige, and legitimacy, sustaining the UK's governance and global leadership without undermining existing social hierarchies

The period of marginal interventionism left several major legacies on the UK's national capacities. For the UK's people, the main outcomes were a rise in public literacy, a partial expansion of collective bargaining and political voice, and advances in public health that increased their available human capital, even though disparities of class, gender, and place persisted, and many people remained dependent on precarious urban wage-labour or workhouse relief. The UK's means expanded dramatically, especially in the form of its infrastructural and technical base (for instance: rail, steam, telegraph, mechanised industry), creating globally pioneering capabilities above all in production and transport. For its resources, the UK intensively exploited its domestic coal and iron stocks, while increasingly relying on foreign and imperial imports and complex global trade flows to supplement its food and raw material needs.

At the same time, the UK's capital developed with the growing maturity of its financial markets (especially through London's globalising role), while legal reforms, the growth of insurance, and increases in global influence and scientific prestige boosted mercantile and philanthropic confidence, unlocking large-scale industrial, colonial, and infrastructure investment. Finally, among the UK's institutions, state intervention and professionalisation grew via civil service reform, municipalisation of services, and educational and public health bureaucracies, which shifted the UK towards a more capable administrative state while maintaining its fundamental market orientation. From the perspective of state strategy making, among the most significant inheritances from this period were departments for imperial administration such as the Colonial Office (1854–1966) and India Office (1858–1947) and the first legal architecture for colonial 'home rule' (for instance, for Canada in

1864), as well as more short-lived early efforts at central supply management (for instance, the Control Department 1870–75).

Hegemony under threat: from the 1880s to the 1910s

The **Long Depression** was a prolonged global downturn marked by deflation, trade slumps, and intensified competition, challenging the UK's free-trade economic model. The '**Scramble for Africa**' saw rival European powers expanding their colonial presence on the continent, threatening the UK's trade routes and imperial interests. Taken together, these events were key turning points for national strategy: economic stagnation undermined entrenched assumptions about the UK's undisputed industrial and financial dominance, while colonial competition exposed the risks of complacency around its resource market security and cross-territorial communications.

The strategic period that followed the comparatively long turning point of the late 1870s and early 1880s was characterised by an initially diffuse but increasingly urgent **protective imperialism**. In the wake of the Long Depression and 'Scramble for Africa', the UK faced growing pressure to improve the living and working conditions and political recognition of the working class, and increasing commercial and diplomatic competition from new challengers (and alliance networks) in the global system. This contributed to a *fin-de-siècle* national strategy dominated by the expansion and restructuring of state functions, with greater social provisions balanced by more intensive governance of dissent, and attempts to mesh greater integrity with greater decentralisation within the Union and across the Empire (see fig. 4). Protective imperialist strategic ideology started out as a fairly reticent, even reactive modification of marginal interventionism, but grew increasingly deliberate and expansive as the period went on (and the UK's challenges intensified).

Economically, the UK's strategic commitment to free trade came under growing pressure from campaigns for tariff reform, given the declining global status of UK manufacturing. The state's economic capabilities and role increased, through direct mediation of industrial relations (including with the newly emerging trade unions) and rising direct income taxation to fund defence and later social reform (for instance, the People's Budget 1909). The UK's political strategy reaffirmed its commitment to naval supremacy, along with some mid-period army reforms after the Boer War (1902), while the aim to contain Germany led to a shift from isolationism to a network of *ententes* and alliances (Japan 1902, France 1904, Russia 1907). Meanwhile, domestic franchise extension (Third Reform Act 1884) was coupled with the growth of cabinet government and central administration, including the professionalisation of policing and the intelligence services to cope with Irish nationalist and suffragette militancy. Legal strategy continued the previous processes of codification and regulation, with criminal law increasingly applied to labour disputes, morality, and public order questions, and expanding regulations for

work (Factory Acts 1878, 1901), housing standards (Housing of the Working Classes Acts 1890, 1909), and food safety. Colonial emigration continued to be encouraged, while immigration was first targeted for restriction (Aliens Act 1905), and constitutional sovereignty was rebalanced to favour the House of Commons over the Lords (Parliament Act 1911). Late-Victorian and Edwardian cultural strategy increasingly recognised a role for state support of galleries, museums, and heritage preservation (for instance, the founding of the National Trust 1895) as a way to foster national prestige, with a turn to national efficiency that linked cultural renewal with military and productive strength.

In this period, education strategy moved into a more interventionist mode, with school education made compulsory up to age 10 (1880) and free via a government 'fee grant' (1891), and eventually reorganised under local authority provision (1902). State support for applied science and technical education grew (Technical Instruction Act 1889), along with new opportunities for women's and civic community access to university learning (for instance: Birmingham, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester), to raise the UK's skills competitiveness and its domestic and imperial administrative and productive efficiency. Infrastructure strategy continued to rely on local council-led housing, sanitation, and utilities provision, boosted by new strategic visions for urban planning by local authorities (for instance, the Garden City movement after 1903). Active efforts were made towards nationwide electrification in urban lighting (1882) and transport (1890), with twin pushes for expansion and regulation of both established transport links (for instance, railways) and new modes (for instance: motor vehicles, underground). Caregiving was one of the major areas of strategic change during this period, with the Liberal welfare reforms dramatically increasing state provision of school meals (1906), pensions (1908), labour exchanges (1909), and National Insurance for health and unemployment (1911). These were supported by tighter regulation of child welfare (Prevention of Cruelty to Children Acts 1889, 1904) and medical health (school health inspections 1907). Finally, *fin-de-siècle* environmental strategy largely continued previous focuses on conservation and resource management, with some limited state response to the post-Great Depression agricultural decline through protections for rural tenants (Agricultural Holdings Act 1883).

Figure 4 — *The UK's priority strategic challenges under protective imperialism*

Diagnosis	Objectives	Big bets
The UK's global supremacy faces challenges from other empires , so national prestige and security demand aggressive empire-building to secure markets, raw materials, and bases to project global influence	Expand territorial control and infrastructural connectivity, consolidate and refine imperial administration, project global military (especially naval) power	Overseas expansion and stronger administration ensure economic security, domestic national unity, and global leadership in a competitive age

Diagnosis	Objectives	Big bets
Rising German and US competition threaten the UK's industrial leadership , trade advantage, and imperial cohesion	Protect domestic industries and workers, strengthen imperial economic links, counter rivals' protectionism	Tariff reform and imperial preference will safeguard prosperity, reinforce the Empire, and resist relative decline
Widespread poverty, poor health, and insecurity undermine workforce efficiency, social cohesion, and military readiness by fuelling unrest	Introduce targeted social insurance, health measures, pensions, and worker protections to build resilience and loyalty across UK society	A limited degree of welfare provision enhances productivity, secures working class allegiance, and prevents social fragmentation without dismantling the foundations of liberal capitalism
The Central Powers' naval buildup and military strength are a threat to European balance, imperial security , and the UK's global interests	Strengthen ties with France and Russia, deter German aggression, contain potential conflict, preserve the balance of power	<i>Entente</i> diplomacy, underpinned by naval supremacy, will ensure deterrence and allow gradual rearmament to safeguard imperial security without immediate conflict
National competitiveness and civic order require disciplined, efficient, knowledgeable, and skilled populations	Establish free universal schooling to raise literacy and numeracy, train productive workers, and instil patriotism	Educated citizens enhance industrial capacity, social stability, and imperial strength in an era of growing democratisation

The effects of protective imperialism on the UK's national capacities saw a number of key developments from the era of marginal interventionism. For the UK's people, further expansions to suffrage, rising educational standards, and the spread of urbanised clerical and managerial professions were complemented by the beginnings of social citizenship (pensions, insurance), which increased human capital and social inclusion, though inequalities persisted and gender rights remained limited. Its means benefited from the transition to electrical power, steel-based industry, and modern communications (telegraphy, telephony), which deepened the logistical and technical infrastructure that were key preconditions for mass mobilisation. The UK's resources continued to skew heavily towards the Empire and global markets for raw materials supply, especially with its ongoing agricultural decline and new import patterns, supported by reforms to company and contract law and rising disposable incomes, while domestic resource exploitation remained intense.

Capital remained dominated in the UK by the financial pre-eminence of the City of London, supplemented by increases in structural public borrowing for defence and social policy and municipal utilities investment, while debates over free trade versus tariff reform heralded a shift in the UK's approach to capital protection and allocation. Institutionally, the UK state matured into a manager of social risks (for instance: pensions, insurance), while the scope of local government and professional bodies expanded, and civil society organisation (for instance: NGOs, trade unions, trusts) acquired central roles in national strategy. For state strategy

making, the primary inheritances from this period were bodies designed to harmonise the various branches of military activity across the Empire, above all the Committee for Imperial Defence (1902–47) and the Army Council and Chief of General Staff (1904–64), and a host of public administration and planning boards to oversee state health and welfare provision.

Back to the old versus in with the new: from the 1910s to the 1930s

Before WW1, the UK confronted repeated **diplomatic crises** — the Moroccan disputes, Balkan tensions, and German challenges to UK naval supremacy — which eroded the stability of the European balance of power and drew the UK into a web of entangling alliances. The outbreak of WW1 introduced **modern industrial warfare**: mechanised weaponry, mass mobilisation, trench stalemate, and total economic commitment. Crucially, the UK could no longer rely on diplomatic 'splendid isolation' but had to find new forms of continental engagement and alliance management, while the new forms of warfare revealed the scale of resources and the industrial-military capacity required to wage total war.

After the watershed of the late 1900s and early 1910s, the UK entered a period of interwar strategic transition, perhaps best described in consciously hybrid terms as **entrenchment-retrenchment cohabitation** — hardly a clear strategic ideology as such, but nonetheless an approach that persisted for an extended stretch of time. WW1 drained the UK's manpower, raw materials, and financial reserves, even as it spurred explosive technological innovation (for instance, in aeronautics, chemicals, communications, and manufacturing), which together tested the limits of its established structures' ability to handle processes of mass mobilisation — as well as their popular legitimacy. In response, interwar national strategy attempted an uneasy compromise between increasing central coordination and planning and restoring fiscal and monetary discipline, while making moves towards greater social recognition through democratisation and colonial retrenchment (see fig. 5). Overall, this was a period of weak UK national strategy, even if this was not strictly for any lack of attempted decisive action — it was more that financial and government uncertainty led to most of these attempts falling at various respective hurdles relatively quickly and severely, which prevented any of them from gaining more lasting purchase.

In this period, UK economic strategy eventually moved decisively away from free trade towards 'Imperial Preference' tariffs (Import Duties Act 1932), while state fiscal capacity (income tax, excess profits duty) and redistributive interventions (for instance, unemployment insurance) continued to expand. However, other WW1-era measures around public spending, state control of key industries (coal, munitions, railways, shipping), and suspension of the gold standard were later abandoned with damaging results for industry decline, unemployment, and unrest (1921–22 'Geddes Axe' retrenchment, deflationary 1925–31 gold standard

reintroduction). Political strategy saw the UK's naval-led military doctrine supplemented by emergency conscription to mobilise a mass land army, followed after the end of the war by diplomatic efforts to encourage disarmament (Washington Naval Treaty 1922) and support the fledgling League of Nations. Domestically, the UK extended the franchise to all adult men and most women (Representation of the People Acts 1918, 1928), expanded civil service planning and police emergency powers to meet social needs and manage unrest, while partly or wholly ceding imperial authority over several colonies (Ireland 1921, Egypt 1922, six British 'Dominions' 1931, Iraq 1932). Interwar legal strategy turned codification efforts towards labour law, regulating minimum standards for housing, safety, and working hours, and legislating against professional discrimination (for instance, the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919). At the same time, the UK introduced immigration controls in response to post-WWI refugee flows (Aliens Restriction Acts 1914, 1919). In the cultural domain, war propaganda laid the groundwork for strategic state engagement in cultural production, above all through the creation of the BBC (founded 1922, charter 1927) as a state-regulated broadcaster, and setting minimum quotas for UK-created films (Cinema Act 1927).

The UK's interwar education strategy largely continued in the vein of its *fin-de-siècle* predecessor, with the steady expansion of universities, new technical colleges, a reorganisation of secondary schooling (Hadow Reports 1926, 1931), and a rise in the school leaving age to 14 (Fisher Act 1918). The state also increased its strategic engagement in innovation (for instance, the Advisory Council for Scientific and Industrial Research 1915) and providing public funding for applied sciences (aviation, chemistry, signals). For infrastructure, strategic nationalisation (coal, rail) during WWI gave way to private control with mixed results (coal 1921, 'Big Four' rail companies 1923), while a mixture of subsidies for council housing (Addison Act 1919) and a planning focus on private suburban building (Housing Acts 1930, 1935) fuelled a nationwide construction drive. Local authorities took on a greater role in utilities provision (electricity, gas, water), with central coordination focused on road-building, air travel, and the creation of the National Grid (Electricity Supply Act 1926). Interwar caregiving strategy tended to seek local-led solutions with varying levels of state backing for public health concerns, above all asylums, doctors' clinics, and infant and maternal health services (Maternity and Child Welfare Act 1918), and saw a concerted shift away from unemployment insurance towards means-tested 'dole' provision (Means Test 1931). And apart from a temporary surge of WWI-era agricultural subsidies (Corn Production Act 1917, repealed 1921), the UK's environmental strategy consisted of greater organisation of conservation efforts (for instance: Forestry Commission 1919, Council for the Preservation of Rural England 1926), with stronger emphasis on replenishing depleted resources (e.g., timber) and wildlife protection as new principles of countryside management.

Figure 5 — *The UK's priority strategic challenges under entrenchment–retrenchment cohabitation*

Diagnosis	Objectives	Big bets
Wartime sacrifice, democratic pressures, and social movements make prolonged political exclusion untenable , so government legitimacy requires extending the vote	Expand suffrage broadly to men and women, integrate masses into constitutional and parliamentary politics, preserve institutional stability	Enfranchisement of new voters strengthens their loyalty, moderates radicalism, and legitimises parliamentary democracy against revolutionary and authoritarian alternatives
Rising Irish and Indian nationalism challenges imperial control, but coercion alone risks instability, global criticism, and incurs unsustainable costs	Grant limited autonomy (for instance: dominion status, Indian reforms), carefully manage transitions, preserve imperial unity through adaptation	Conceding partial self-government within the Empire sustains loyalty, reduces unrest, and preserves the UK's global influence
WW1 has revealed the catastrophic dangers of unrestrained power politics and militarised nationalism , indicating that security needs a collective approach	Promote international arbitration, disarmament, cooperative security, and peaceful conflict resolution through League of Nations structures	Multilateral diplomacy will prevent another world war, preserve European and global peace, and sustain the UK's global moral authority without large-scale military entanglements
Economic instability and inflation undermine the UK's financial credibility, trade position, and sterling's role as a global reserve currency	Restore pre-war gold parity, stabilise sterling, reassure global investors, defend and strengthen the status of London's financial sector	Gold standard guarantees confidence, attracts capital, and restores the UK's central role in global financial relations
Vast increase in the UK's WW1-era debt and deficits threaten its long-term stability, attractiveness to global investors, creditworthiness, and capacity to project global power	Balance government budgets, curb expenditure, restrain welfare, reduce debt burden, preserve confidence in sterling	Fiscal retrenchment secures credibility, sustains the UK's international financial leadership, and projects economic reliability despite relative decline

Despite its overall flavour of incompleteness and uncertainty, the ideology of entrenchment–retrenchment cohabitation did produce some major changes in the UK's national capacities. On the people side, it led to near-universal political enfranchisement, mass schooling, and broadened welfare coverage, all of which contributed to expanding the UK's human capacity, though unemployment and interwar hardship limited the immediate social potential of these shifts. Fuelled by WW1, the UK's means underwent rapid advances, with widespread diffusion of automobiles, aviation, cinema and film, electricity, radio, and suburban housing, and key medical innovations (pharmaceuticals, radiology, surgery). The UK's resources continued on a similar trajectory from the protective imperialist period, with the Empire remaining the backbone of the UK's supply network (despite rising unrest and insecurity) as its agricultural base continued to decline, while the rise of oil challenged its energy dependence on coal, and new resources emerged with the spread of data collection, housing, the media, and welfare.

For the UK's capital, the combination of wartime debt and interwar crises strained its fiscal flexibility, until it was forced to trade financial credibility (via retrenchment) for industrial competitiveness, imperial loyalty, and trust in industrial relations, even as the extension of state provision and positive rights shored up its social legitimacy. The standout institutional effect was that the UK state consolidated as a manager of welfare, infrastructure, and the economy, partly due to realignment in the party system (Labour rise, Liberal decline), and partly as new cultural and planning bodies institutionalised mass democracy and social citizenship. The main state strategy developments in this period were the Cabinet Office (1916–), initially envisaged as a secretariat to support military coordination but later gaining other strategic functions, alongside new bodies to support imperial administration (for instance, the Dominions Office 1925–47) and renewed attempts to coordinate national resource distribution (for instance, the Ministry of Munitions 1915–21).

Planning from the centre: from the 1930s to the 1950s

The **Great Depression** caused mass unemployment, trade collapse, and financial strain, undermining the UK's trade model and global economic leadership. Meanwhile, the **League of Nations** — founded to limit conflict, steward global disarmament, and foster dispute resolution — broke down as fascist Japan, Italy, Nazi Germany, and Falangist Spain defied its authority, revealing the failure of early internationalism and collective security. Together, these forced the UK to retreat into protectionism, managing the Empire as an economic bloc, and domestic stabilisation, while reorienting from multilateral diplomacy towards accelerating rearmament as it prepared for direct confrontation with aggressive revisionist states in Europe and Asia.

From the early 1930s onwards, the UK turned decisively towards a strategic approach characterised by **total mobilisation**, a relatively swift ideological change that put to bed the previous period's protracted uncertainty. The Great Depression created urgent pressures towards public sector investment to regalanise the UK's national output, while the collapse of the League of Nations symptomatised the rise of new or returning challengers (and alliances) in the global system — now exacerbated by ideological tensions between communism, fascism, and liberal democracy. The UK answered these with a national strategy that pivoted decisively towards active state intervention and centrally-planned public provision, both for pre-WW2 rearmament and post-WW2 reconstruction, and started to recast its global role from one of imperial dominance to more alliance-based multilateral influence (see fig. 6). The period of total mobilisation saw a pronounced uptick in the strategic intentionality of the UK state, characterised by conscious efforts at compounding and layering its perceived policy successes by continuously reapplying and deepening its chosen approach.

Under total mobilisation, the UK's economic strategy was defined by the Keynesian consensus on counter-cyclical public investment, coupled with nationalisation of

key industries (coal, iron, steel) and central planning (for instance, the Ministry of Supply 1939), above all through rationing and wage and price controls. This evolved into the 'Butskellist' post-WW2 settlement of a mixed economy, a welfare state funded by highly progressive taxation, and targets around full employment and growth. Politically, the UK shifted from interwar disarmament and League of Nations internationalism to rearmament and cross-ideological alliances (US, USSR), which grew into a hybrid post-WW2 approach of bilateralism (US 'special relationship'), multilateralism (NATO 1949), and internationalism (UN 1945), especially on espionage and nuclear capability (1952). Meanwhile, the exhaustion of the UK's imperial governance led to independence for India and Pakistan (1947). UK legal strategy saw major restructuring of citizenship rules to lower restrictions on Commonwealth immigration (British Nationality Act 1948), along with continued professionalisation of policing and gradual limitation of capital punishment (Homicide Act 1957). The previous focus on regulation also continued, above all targeting consumer, housing, and labour protections, and creating statutory frameworks for nationalised industries. Culturally, the UK essentially continued the interwar formula of proactive state engagement, with the emergence of new strategic institutions (Ministry of Information 1939–46, Arts Council 1946), and the launch of ITV as a part-private alternative to the BBC (1955).

The UK's education strategy during this period built selectively on its interwar trends, with its centrepiece being another secondary education reform (Education Act 1944) that established universal free schooling, raised the leaving age to 15, and introduced the tripartite grammar–secondary modern–technical school system. This was accompanied by high government investment in R&I (especially on aerospace, cryptography, nuclear, radar). For infrastructure, the WW2-era experience of economic planning led to far-reaching nationalisation of major utilities (air travel 1939, electricity and gas 1947–8, rail 1948, nuclear 1956), together with a strengthening of local authority services. Alongside this, massive road expansion took place via the national motorway system (1959) and urban reconstruction via planned communities (New Towns Act 1946) and local authority-administered 'council estates'. Caregiving was a central strategic focus for the UK during this period, above all through the creation of the National Health Service to provide universal free-at-point-of-use medical care (1948), along with the introduction of child benefit (Family Allowances Act 1945). The Beveridge Report (1942) informed an expansion of pensions, sickness, and unemployment benefits (National Insurance Act 1946), which was backed by a shift away from institutionalisation towards community provision for disabled and elderly care. Finally, environmental strategy expanded beyond its conservationist parameters for the first time, with the creation of National Parks as dedicated green spaces and expansion of public access to land (1949), and early measures to curb air pollution (Clean Air Act 1956). Permanent agricultural protections and subsidies also reappeared for the first time since the 1850s under the rubric of ensuring food security (Agriculture Act 1947).

Figure 6 — The UK's priority strategic challenges under total mobilisation

Diagnosis	Objectives	Big bets
Aggressive rearmament and withdrawal from international bodies by Axis powers threaten European stability and imperial security, while appeasement risks defeat	Expand and modernise military production, rapidly rebuild armed forces, prepare UK society for the costs of total war	Large-scale rearmament ensures credible deterrence, survival in conflict, and the UK's continued great power status within the global system despite its economic weakness
Totalitarian regimes and authoritarian ideologies, first fascist then communist, jeopardise liberal democracy , the stability of the global order, and the UK's capacity for unilateral independent action	(Re)forge a wartime democratic–communist coalition to defeat fascism (Allies), then forge a new set of democratic alliances to contain communism (NATO)	Durable alliances guarantee survival, uphold democracy, deter enemies (Germany, USSR), and preserve the UK's influence as a linchpin in world affairs and global security arrangements
Economic collapse in the Great Depression and the UK's WW1 experience show that market <i>laissez-faire</i> is insufficient for ensuring stability, recovery and reconstruction , employment, or growth.	Nationalise key strategic industries, apply Keynesian fiscal policies for demand management, secure full employment, and direct UK development through state planning	State-led economic management ensures long-term prosperity and growth, social stability, and industrial modernisation while preserving the compatibility of democracy and capitalism
Poverty, unemployment, poor health , and educational inequality undermine democratic legitimacy, productivity, and social cohesion	Establish universal welfare by implementing the Beveridgean social insurance plan, establish the NHS, expand and reform education, provide cradle-to-grave protections	Comprehensive welfare creates healthier, more loyal citizens, legitimises democracy, and strengthens national resilience for an advanced industrial society
Rising nationalism and economic strain make imperial control unsustainable , while repression risks instability through unrest and international backlash	Manage decolonisation, grant independence pragmatically, preserve the UK's ties and influence through the Commonwealth	Controlled withdrawal sustains the UK's global presence, avoids costly conflicts, and transforms the Empire into a voluntary, cooperative post-imperial network

Total mobilisation effectively perfected the legacies of state entrenchment on the UK's national capacities that began to emerge during the previous period of cohabitation. A mixture of war mobilisation, the Beveridge reforms, the NHS, and education reforms provided clear new boosts to the UK's people, while the post-WW2 construction push created several new modern planned communities, though factors such as enforced rationing constrained human capacity through their detrimental effects on national wellbeing. The UK's means benefited from many of the innovations of wartime scientific research, which were subsequently diffused through advances in architecture, aviation, civil engineering, electricity, and consumer durables, even as the UK lagged behind its global competitors in industrial modernisation. The UK's resources experienced a drastic restructuring as the accelerating decline of the Empire cut previously reliable resource flows, even

while the burgeoning welfare state fostered growth in new domestic resources (education, health, housing).

Meanwhile, historic levels of national debt and sterling weakness limited the UK's financial capital, while schooling divisions reinforced unequal distributions of educational capital, even as the UK consolidated legitimacy and trust by building up its welfare delivery, knowledge prestige, and social rights. Institutionally, the UK state rose to become the primary social manager and provider in UK society, completing a trajectory it had pursued through previous periods, while the post-WW2 settlement institutionalised the UK's mixed economy along with key frameworks for benefits distribution, cultural integration, and industrial planning. The UK state continued previous efforts to join up military strategy, first through a Ministry for Co-ordination of Defence (1936–40) and Joint Intelligence Committee (1936–), then later by fully reorganising the Ministry of Defence (1947–); at the same time, it significantly retrenched the role of the Foreign Office and colonial apparatus, and began to develop structures geared towards the domestic economy (such as the Unemployment Assistance Board 1934–40).

Retreating from Empire, advancing at home: from the 1950s to the 1970s

The **Suez Crisis** saw the UK, France, and Israel invade Egypt in response to its nationalisation of the Suez Canal, only to be forced into a humiliating withdrawal under pressure from the USA and USSR, exposing the UK's diminished global status. The **Berlin Crises** centred on the USSR's attempts to curb capitalist-democratic 'Western' influence in Central and Eastern Europe, culminating in the building of the Berlin Wall. Both were turning points for the UK's geopolitical strategy: they revealed the UK could no longer intervene as an independent global power, including over its claimed (post-)colonial sphere of interest, underscoring the primacy of NATO and multilateral US-European alliance-building for the UK's security, the value of deterrence over assertive dominance, and incentivising a managed divestment from its global and imperial commitments.

The abrupt shock of the Suez and Berlin Crises in the late 1950s and early 1960s prompted a revision of the UK's post-WW2 strategy towards a relatively coherent and consistent approach of **embedded liberalism**, which acted as a partial extension and partial modification of its total mobilisation predecessor. The challenge in this critical juncture was above all to the UK's inherited status as a global superpower, with the emergence of the US and USSR as bipolar hegemonies and the erosion of the UK's financial and logistical ability to maintain its imperial governance and quash anticolonial resistance. The UK's embedded liberal national strategy thus above all took the form of a realignment in foreign policy towards both Atlanticist and Europeanist participation and partnership, accompanied by domestic moves towards cultural renewal and social emancipation — including female empowerment and postcolonial immigration to support post-WW2 growth

(see fig. 7). Though initially an enforced response due to the UK being wrong-footed by a key ally (and global rival), it soon grew into a positive, proactive ideology that intentionally aimed the UK's historically reduced capabilities at a carefully-chosen set of domestic and foreign policy targets.

The UK's economic strategy maintained Keynesian demand management to balance growth and inflation, targeting full employment through tripartite government–business–trade union wage bargaining, and merging or subsidising state-controlled industries to maintain competitiveness. It also aimed to diversify trade towards the Commonwealth, USA, and EEC, although sterling's status as a global reserve currency was eroded by balance of payments crises, devaluation (1967), and volatility after the collapse of Bretton Woods (1971). For its political strategy, embedded liberalism above all meant accelerating decolonisation ('Winds of Change' 1960) and retrenchment of the UK's global commitments ('East of Suez' 1968), along with consolidation of its international orientation towards the US/NATO and Europe. This was accompanied by a defence doctrine that emphasised nuclear deterrence over conventional forces (H-bomb 1957, Polaris 1968), and an increase in state bureaucratic and security capabilities, along with police modernisation (Police Act 1964). The UK's legal strategy saw major departures from its previous approaches, with widespread liberalisation of criminal law, including abolition of the death penalty (1965), legalisation of abortion and decriminalisation of homosexuality (1967), and advances in equalities legislation to combat sex and racial discrimination (1965, 1968, 1975–76), yet also reversing course on migration to restrict entry from the Commonwealth (1962, 1968). At the same time, it continued expanding regulation of consumer goods, employment standards, equal pay, and industry. Embedded liberal cultural strategy saw broad continuity, with widespread expansion of the institutions established in previous periods as part of state-led nation-building (Arts Council, BBC, ITV, National Trust), against a backdrop of growing secularism and religious diversity.

Education strategy was a major point of change during this period, with the expansion of comprehensive schooling (1965) and a further rise in the leaving age to 16 (1972), rapid enlargement of universities through new 'plate glass' institutions to target mass higher education (Robbins Report 1963), and systematic moves to improve technical and vocational learning (Industrial Training Act 1964), in part through the creation of polytechnics (1965). Meanwhile, state investment in the sciences continued (aerospace, computing, nuclear), supported by the creation of the UK's first group of research councils (1965). The UK's infrastructure strategy was dominated by rationalisation and restructuring of its existing state-led approach for coal, electricity, gas, sewage, and water provision, as well as large-scale modernist house building and urban planning (such as high-rise estates), and a systematic reduction of rail services (Beeching cuts 1963) in favour of road building, motorway expansion, and national bus services (1969). Caregiving strategy was centred on consolidating the key innovations of previous periods, with National Insurance expansion and the creation of new welfare benefits (Supplementary Benefit 1966, Family Income Supplement 1971), even as healthcare planning prioritised concerns

around efficiency, modernisation, and funding pressures (such as the introduction of prescription charges). Wider care liberalisation also saw reforms of families policy, including around divorce and separation (Divorce Reform Act 1969). Lastly, this period saw the emergence of the UK's first modern environmental strategy, with the growth of NGOs focused on animal welfare and biodiversity, the incorporation of green spaces into urban planning, and early policy debates on the ecological impact of industrial pollution. The UK also continued previous agricultural subsidies to support food security, targeting inclusion in Common Agricultural Policy subsidies as part of its EEC membership applications.

Figure 7 — *The UK's priority strategic challenges under embedded liberalism*

Diagnosis	Objectives	Big bets
The Empire is becoming unsustainable amid rising nationalist movements in the UK's remaining colonies and economic constraints, while immigration is reshaping the demographics and cohesion of UK society	Manage a full, orderly, and peaceful decolonisation of the rest of the Empire, preserve the UK's influence through the Commonwealth, integrate migrants while containing social and racial tensions	Controlled withdrawal plus selective immigration policies allow the UK to sustain its post-imperial identity, with a new global presence and new bases of domestic social stability
The UK's power is diminished and declining , which means that its survival as a global power depends on balancing the US alliance, European integration, and Commonwealth links	Anchor NATO, pursue European Community membership, sustain Commonwealth leadership	Strategic triangular balancing maintains the UK's global relevance and safeguards its security, leveraging partnerships to preserve influence
Economic growth, stability, and fairness require a state–market partnership that offers better outcomes for employment and social order than underregulated <i>laissez-faire</i> capitalism.	Maintain full employment, welfare provision, and nationalised strategic industries while encouraging private sector dynamism in other parts of the economy	A managed mixed economy guarantees prosperity and stability, balances efficiency with equity, and gives social legitimacy to democratic capitalism
Industrial decline, deteriorating infrastructure, and housing shortages create urban decay and threaten living standards, creating conditions for social unrest	Expand suburban housing, redevelop inner cities, improve transport and amenities	Planned urban renewal delivers modern living standards, stimulates economic dynamism, and social stability in a post-industrial society
The UK's modern advanced economy and liberal democracy demand skilled, educated citizens , who are not being trained in adequate numbers by existing provision	Expand schools, widen university access, reform vocational and technical curriculums, foster equality of educational opportunity	Broad education expansion produces a globally competitive workforce, supports intragenerational social mobility, and boosts the legitimacy of liberal democracy in increasingly complex mass society

The effect of embedded liberalism on the UK's national capacities was to turn the 'mere survival' effects of total mobilisation towards new and promising

achievements of domestic flourishing and social progress. The UK's people benefited from rising prosperity (including car and home ownership) and life expectancy, mass education, immigration, and (in some cases radical) cultural and legal reforms that further expanded their human capacity, though chronic unemployment and unrest strained social cohesion. For the UK's means, the most pronounced advances came in household, media, and medical technologies, as well as large-scale civil engineering projects for housing and amenities, while other areas of industrial modernisation lagged behind the UK's global competitors (for instance: the French *trente glorieuses*, German *Wirtschaftswunder*). The loss of imperial possessions acted as a significant shock to the UK's external resource base, forcing it to seek new interdependencies through diplomatic and trade partnerships, although the discovery of North Sea oil provided a belated (and much-needed) prospect of energy security.

The UK's capital underwent first decline and then restructuring through its rapid decolonisation, lack of fiscal resilience, and weakening trust in mediating demographic and labour disputes, offset by persistent legitimacy through enhanced social and welfare provision, and new forms of global cultural influence (arts, fashion, music, publishing) and research reputation. Many of the UK's post-WW2 institutions endured, partly by implementing targeted adaptations that expanded their statutory duties, although signs of growing structural fragility began to emerge through the fragmentation and militancy of trade union power, short-term policy swings that undermined planning credibility, and protracted debates over EEC membership. The main strategic state bodies created during this period were designed for economic planning, such as the National Economic Development Council (1962–92) and the short-lived Department of Economic Affairs (1964–69) and Industrial Reorganisation Corporation (1966–70), with particular focus on setting prices and incomes (for instance: the National Board for Prices and Incomes 1965–70, and the emergency Pay Board 1972–74 and Price Commission 1972–80). These were accompanied by some central policy coordination bodies, such as the Central Policy Review Staff (1971–83) and No. 10 Policy Unit (1974–), and a strengthened Cabinet Office.

Revolution against the state: from the 1970s to the 1990s

The **Oil Crisis**, triggered by OPEC embargoes, led to soaring energy prices, inflation, and economic stagnation in the UK, exposing its vulnerability to global resource shocks. Soon after, **sterling collapsed** amid deficits and inflation, exacerbated by the end of the Bretton Woods system, forcing the UK to request an **IMF bailout** — the first for a major developed power. Crucially, these crises shattered deeply-held assumptions about the UK's postwar economic stability and highlighted its declining capacity to sustain global financial leadership, which prompted a re-evaluation of the UK's industrial profile and its underlying fiscal and monetary policies, and a search for new anchors of domestic stability and renewal of the UK's global role through global markets and institutions.

The UK's particularly acute experience during the mid-1970s global crises laid the groundwork for the strategic turn towards **neoliberal sovereignty** — easily one of the clearest and most decisive changes of course in the UK's history. The oil and sterling crises highlighted key areas of dependency and declining global competitiveness in the UK economy (agriculture, energy, manufacturing), while the nadir in industrial relations that accompanied the mid-1970s stagnation showed the limits of inherited models of corporatist and 'mixed' economic management. Neoliberal sovereigntist national strategy offered a radical rethinking of the role of the state, with particular emphasis on boosting output through competition, deregulation, and a reduction in government oversight and ownership — accompanied by a selective mixture of assertive national sovereignty and transnational convergence in 'core' policy areas (for instance: military, monetary policy, as well as ecology and the media) (see fig. 8). As a strategic ideology, it was associated with a conscious intent to rein in the role of the state, which had steadily grown in scale and scope over the course of several preceding periods of national strategy.

Economic strategy underwent one of the profoundest transformations in UK strategic history during this period, with Keynesian management abandoned in favour of monetarist inflation targeting, fiscal retrenchment to reduce public borrowing, marketisation and privatisation of nationalised industries (airlines, gas, telecoms), and a shift from trade union-aligned job protection to entrepreneurialism and labour market flexibility. This was combined with deregulation of the financial sector ('Big Bang' 1986) and increased trade integration with the EEC, including sterling management via global markets and the European Monetary System (1979). UK political strategy saw strong centralisation of authority (for instance: abandoning devolution, local government cuts) and executive empowerment, along with expansion of policing and counterterrorism to deal with urban unrest (such as Brixton 1981), industrial disputes (most notably the miners' strike 1984–85), and sectarian violence (the Troubles). Meanwhile, the UK stressed trade-aligned diplomacy, maintaining its balance between independent sovereignty (nuclear deterrence, Falklands War 1982), Atlanticism, and Europeanism. UK legal strategy partly reversed course from embedded liberalism, emphasising tougher sentencing and non-carceral 'community service' (Criminal Justice Acts 1982, 1988), narrowing citizenship rights for Commonwealth migrants (British Nationality Act 1981), and deregulating and restructuring employment law (1980, 1982, 1984, 1988). However, this was balanced by further strengthening of consumer protections as well as anti-discrimination and integration frameworks. Cultural strategy became a lower priority for the UK, with state support continued but extensively defunded (for instance, the Arts Council), heritage protection commercialised (National Heritage Acts 1980, 1983), along with further diversification of radio and TV broadcasting (such as the launch of Channel 4 in 1982).

Neoliberal sovereigntist education strategy saw a push to centralise and standardise school learning, including through a National Curriculum and nationwide testing, combined with the introduction of grant-maintained schools

and more parental choice (Education Reform Act 1988). The focus on vocational learning continued (Youth Training Scheme 1983) and the binary university–polytechnic system was kept in place and expanded, but the systematic withdrawal of state funding for applied research shifted emphasis towards industry links and market partnerships (defence, IT, science). Infrastructure strategy was marked by extensive (actual or prepared) utilities privatisation, including telecommunications (1984), bus services (1985), electricity, energy, and water. This was accompanied by a systematic transfer of council housing to private ownership under ‘Right to Buy’ (Housing Act 1980), and further reallocation of public investment from housing and railways towards motorways and road-building. UK caregiving was reoriented from universalism to efficiency in resource allocation, with new general management introduced to the NHS (Griffiths Report 1983) and benefits made subject to means-testing (Social Security Acts 1986). Meanwhile, families policy emphasised traditionalism and halted previous liberalisation trends, especially towards homosexuality (Section 28 1988). Environmental strategy continued to focus on conservation and industrial pollution, now bolstered by international ecological diplomacy (for instance: on acid rain, ozone layer depletion). It added new initiatives around local waste management, rural tourism, and targeted regeneration of deprived urban areas, while continuing to rely on agricultural support via the EEC Common Agricultural Policy.

Figure 8 — *The UK's priority strategic challenges under neoliberal sovereignty*

Diagnosis	Objectives	Big bets
The UK's declining global influence requires new forms of integration into proximate global partners to maintain trade, investment, and political relevance	Strengthen economic and political ties with EEC and later EU, shape policy from within, secure market access, ensure the UK remains integral to European decision-making	European integration compensates for the UK's relative decline, anchors it in a stable regional order, and preserves both economic competitiveness and political clout
The inefficiency and fiscal strain of state-owned industries and an extensive public sector hinder the UK's growth , while free-market mechanisms and private ownership deliver efficiency by offering better incentives for productivity	Reduce the size and scope of public sector activity, privatise key industries to encourage innovation, promote competition, and deregulate markets	Market liberalisation revitalises productivity, encourages domestic and inward foreign direct investment, and restores the UK's competitiveness in an increasingly globalised economy
Powerful trade unions act as a drag on economic reform, and fuel industrial instability that threatens investment	Restrict union power, increase labour market flexibility, reduce strikes, encourage productivity, and enhance employer authority in industrial disputes	Limiting union influence stabilises industrial relations, ensures economic growth, and strengthens the UK's capital market competitiveness

Diagnosis	Objectives	Big bets
Manufacturing decline shifts economic importance to financial services, as global financial markets dominate growth and national prosperity	Support service sector expansion, deregulate banking, attract mobile global capital, modernise corporate finance, and encourage innovation	Financial sector growth drives economic recovery and offers a renewed route for the UK to maintain global relevance despite the loss of its industrial base
Declining conventional power and global commitments require selective, credible, and decisive deployments of armed forces to project power autonomously	Maintain professional, mobile armed forces, conduct limited interventions, regularly demonstrate military capabilities, and uphold international credibility	Ensuring military readiness deters aggression and preserves the UK's global influence without unsustainably overextending its resources

Neoliberal sovereigntist ideology led to a profound reshaping of the UK's national capacities. The human capacity of the UK's people was significantly reconfigured, reduced on the one hand by unemployment, the decline of several of the UK's longstanding secondary and tertiary industries (with particularly negative effects in Northern England, Scotland, and Wales), and inequality and dislocation caused by welfare retrenchment, but extended on the other with new skills choices and lifestyle options fostered by educational reforms and a burgeoning consumer culture, and expansions of individual rights and personal freedoms. UK means saw extensive modernisation of financial, IT, media, and telecommunications infrastructure, supported by new commercial incentives for technological development, while the shift towards privatisation of housing and transport provision reoriented priorities from mass coverage to efficiency and market viability. The offset in the UK's resources that began in the embedded liberal period intensified under neoliberalism, with new forms of energy extraction and provision, privatised utilities, leisure and consumer goods, and knowledge-intensive and service resources replacing losses from declining industries (coal, shipbuilding, steel).

The development of the UK's capital skewed especially strongly towards economic credibility, geopolitical prestige, and soft power, bolstered by financial deregulation, sales of state assets, new defence investments, and intellectual property protections; while loyalty and trust among communities that were severely affected by state retrenchment collapsed into demographic and industrial unrest. Finally, the reorganisation of state functions through a mixture of governance centralisation and outsourcing via privatisation had lasting effects on the UK's institutional architecture, with accountability, monitoring, and oversight through regulatory agencies replacing direct state control in many areas of society, and industrial relations skewed firmly against labour interests with the weakening of trade union power. The neoliberal sovereigntist period saw far less development of state strategy capabilities than previous periods, and in fact the removal of several legacy bodies from (especially) embedded liberal strategy. Nevertheless, economic institutional innovation included the Securities and Investments Board (1985–97) and a strengthened role for HM Treasury, while legal EEC harmonisation units emerged across Whitehall.

Light touch at arm's length: from the 1990s to the 2010s

The **collapse of the USSR** ended the Cold War, dissolving the bipolar order in favour of unquestioned US dominance, removing the UK's central strategic framework of containment, and opened new questions about its future relations in and beyond Europe. **Black Wednesday** saw sterling forced out of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism after speculative attacks, fracturing the UK's economic credibility. Together, these were crucial turning points: the USSR's fall demanded a recalibration of the UK's global role towards a more flexible alignment with the USA and the 'Western alliance', while Black Wednesday tilted confidence in the EU and the European integration project towards greater scepticism, and created pressure for further economic liberalisation.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, which inaugurated the brief 'end of history' paradigm, the UK's strategic approach shifted to one of **distributed managerialism**, which advanced core tenets of neoliberal sovereigntism while adding new directions for the horizontal and vertical diffusion of inherited state functions. The fall of the USSR and the capitalist and democratic turn in (most of) the former Soviet Bloc erased one of the longest-lasting pillars of modern UK national strategy, and weakened the rationale for many of its key strategic capabilities (such as conventional armoured and mechanised land forces), while the sterling crisis of 'Black Wednesday' challenged the neoliberal compromise on monetary management. The UK's 'end of history' national strategy answered these with several strands of diffusion and downsizing in national functions, including shrinking defence from conventional deterrence to asymmetric expeditionary warfare, shifting public management to 'arm's-length' technocratic independence, and inaugurating a programme of place-based policy decentralisation (see fig. 9). The UK exhibited a similar level of intentionality under distributed managerialism as under neoliberal sovereigntism, although the range of targets rapidly grew as its strategic approach osmosed into different policy areas, and as new challenges arose over the course of this period.

UK economic strategy maintained several key elements from its predecessor, above all inflation targeting, labour flexibility, 'light-touch' financial regulation, privatisation, and European single market integration. However, it balanced this with measures to boost state accountability and support, including Bank of England independence (1997), a statutory minimum wage (1999), public-private partnerships to fund social investments, and an opt-out from adopting the Euro (1992). Politically, strategy was dominated by major governance reforms (Human Rights Act 1998, House of Lords reform 1999), devolution settlements for Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and Greater London (1998), and continuing the trend towards community policing and centralisation of security (2001, 2005). Diplomatically, the UK shrank its armed forces, advocated EU enlargement, and pursued an 'ethical foreign policy' of active humanitarian and anti-terror intervention (Kosovo 1999, Sierra Leone 2000, Afghanistan 2001, Iraq 2003). The UK's legal strategy largely built on its neoliberal

sovereigntist precursor, with significant penal expansion through ASBOs and other community orders (1998), managed immigration via a points-based system for non-EU entrants (2008), and stronger consumer rights and workplace protections (Equality Act 2010). Against this backdrop, the most notable change was a restructuring of judicial oversight (UK Supreme Court 2009). Culturally, UK strategy was marked by extensive liberalisation of media ownership, public and private investment in creative and digital sectors, and cultural heritage subsidies through National Lottery funding (1994) and free museum entry (2001). Multifaith inclusion and recognition was significantly expanded, although faith engagement also became linked with national cohesion, identity, and counter-extremism measures (Prevent 2003).

The UK's education strategy was characterised above all by a mass expansion of the university system, including the conversion of polytechnics into universities (1992) and introduction of rising tuition fees (1998, 2004), while state funding for R&I (particularly focused on biotechnology and digital) became subject to regular excellence reviews (Research Assessment Exercise 1992). This period also saw a major promotion of lifelong and vocational learning (apprenticeships, NVQs), while schools policy largely entrenched neoliberal reforms, including testing, league tables, and parental choice, along with the introduction of academies outside local authority control (2000). Infrastructure strategy also continued along recognisably neoliberal sovereigntist lines, including rail privatisation (1994), limited housebuilding, partial transport modernisation (for instance: Oyster system 2003, Crossrail approval 2007), and major airport and motorway expansions. It also featured a sustained emphasis on consumer choice and competition in the privatised utilities, under the aegis of new regulators (Ofcom, Ofgem, Ofwat). Caregiving saw a major strategic shift towards 'workfare' activation (New Deal 1998) and measures to support low-income parents and families, including Sure Start (1998), working tax credits (2003), parental leave rights, and expanded childcare provision. Meanwhile, reforms to medical and social care targeted hospital building and waiting time reduction, while increasing the role of private and voluntary provision to promote competition (for instance: PFI hospitals, Independent Treatment Centres). The UK's environmental strategy was significantly expanded to capture new ambitions around limiting carbon emissions, tackling climate change, and fostering biodiversity and biosecurity (Climate Change Act 2008), along with globally-agreed targets for pollution control and renewable energy use.

Figure 9 — *The UK's priority strategic challenges under distributed managerialism*

Diagnosis	Objectives	Big bets
Price instability undermines growth, investment, and fiscal credibility, while monetary discipline is the key to providing economic confidence and long-term financial stability	Maintain low, predictable inflation, stabilise the economy by anchoring public expectations, protect sterling's credibility in domestic and global markets	Credible, rules-based monetary policy ensures the UK's attractiveness to potential investors, and giving monetary control to an independent Bank of England helps maintain global trust

Diagnosis	Objectives	Big bets
Political interference and short-termism reduce efficiency and accountability, while specialised institutions staffed with independent experts improve performance	Delegate operational authority to autonomous regulators and agencies, ensure professional management, depoliticise technical decision-making	Technocratic autonomy improves policy implementation, enhances credibility, and optimises governance capacity and democratic accountability without over-politicisation
State-only provision is inefficient , while private sector expertise and capital improve service quality, innovation, and cost-effectiveness	Collaborate with private partners to deliver education, healthcare, infrastructure, and welfare services efficiently and effectively	Mixed delivery models achieve better outcomes, reduce state spending, and leverage private creativity while maintaining public oversight
Global instability, terrorism, and failed states threaten security and the UK's authority as a global power, while deployment of military force alone is insufficient to command legitimacy	Conduct targeted humanitarian interventions, steer security to counter terrorism, uphold international norms, protect national and allied interests	Limited military action combined with multilateral engagement can contain threats effectively, while reinforcing the UK's moral and strategic influence among global partners and public opinion
Centralised governance alienates local areas and regions, risking the UK's overall political legitimacy and social cohesion	Establish devolved institutions (London, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, English regions), negotiate a mutually satisfactory transfer of central powers, enhance regional representation and accountability	Devolution strengthens legitimacy, reduces separatist tensions, and sustains UK unity in a more democratic, pluralist society, while allowing for localised policy autonomy and responsiveness

The UK's national capacities evolved under distributed managerialism in a way that largely extended the effects of neoliberal sovereigntism. For the UK's people, the expansions of human capacity secured by concerted initiatives in secondary and tertiary education, health and social care, and welfare, were supported by civil liberty protections and sustained growth in real incomes and employment stability, although efforts to boost integration, national diversity, regional identity, and representation were limited by enduring demographic and place-based disparities. The ongoing changes to the UK's means, especially in communications, financial, and transport infrastructure, continued in a largely similar modernising direction, now supplemented by mutually reinforcing advances in digital, IT, and media technologies (for instance, online connectivity). Meanwhile, this period saw an intensified shift of the UK's resource base towards a globally leading position in quaternary and quinary industries (creative, high-tech, knowledge-intensive, precision, services), along with an expedited diversification of energy sources towards renewables and a new awareness of resource sustainability imperatives.

UK capital continued its previous tilt towards specific strengths in financial and intellectual capital, although these continued to suffer from access asymmetries, while the UK's legitimacy and trust were boosted by moves to enhance public accountability (such as referendums), social investments, and ecological activism,

yet worsened by intense policy contestation over the UK's international diplomatic and military commitments. Lastly, a mixture of devolved governance, growing compliance obligations due to EU membership, extended reliance on regulatory agencies, and public-private partnerships enhanced the complexity of the UK's institutions, converting national policy implementation from a decision over central directiveness to a multilevel coalition-building approach. State economic management during this period largely built on the capabilities introduced under neoliberal sovereignty, such as through the Bank of England Monetary Policy Committee (1997–) and the Financial Services Authority (1997–2013). Yet there was also a return to more embedded liberal policy coordination bodies with the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit (2001–10, 2021–) and Strategy Unit (2002–10), and to pre-WW2 military and police coordination through the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism (later the Homeland Security Group, 2007–).

Conclusion: national strategy after the 'polycrisis'

The **Great Recession** saw a US subprime mortgage crisis metastasise into a global sovereign debt crisis, which — in the UK — triggered a financial crash, austerity, and long-term stagnation in growth and productivity, undermining trust in global markets. The **Mediterranean migration crisis** strained Europe's borders and social infrastructure, which exposed divisions over asylum, security, and integration, feeding into growing ideological polarisation. In turn, **Brexit** marked a decisive rupture in the UK's longstanding European commitments and engagements. In combination, they have marked another critical strategic juncture for the UK, challenging established assumptions about economic prosperity, resilience, and stability, exposing the limits of cross-border solidarity, and forcing a redefinition of the UK's global orientation to balance sovereignty with interdependence.

The protracted 'polycrisis' from the late 2000s to the mid-2010s set the conditions for the UK's current strategy making activities. The impact of the Great Recession has been to constrain the room for manoeuvre in the UK's public finances, and inhibit growth and productivity, while an uptick in sources of global insecurity (climate, conflicts, public health) has raised resource costs, fuelled migration pressures, and highlighted the limits of downsizing and outsourcing national functions. To date, it is difficult to pinpoint a clear and decisive strategic ideology that characterises the UK's approach to national strategy since the 2010s — at least, one that can match the complexity and originality of several preceding approaches (notably: total mobilisation, neoliberal sovereignty). Certainly, the UK's ongoing strategic response shows some signs of the direction in which its emergent ideology might point: a renewed focus on national sovereignty (on data, energy, food, technology), and a redefinition of autonomy and global interdependence in terms of integrated homeland security, adaptability, readiness, and resilience. Alongside this, there has been a notable reliance on crisis-response leading to large-scale state activism, retrenchment, and hesitant reorientation, which adds up to

something of an ideological lack where a distinctive national strategy approach should be.

Among the key features of this lack are: (1) a 'wait-and-see' reactivity to major crises that crowds out a growing underlying desire for activism on the UK's entrenched problems; (2) a relatively well-developed sense that the UK state needs to undergo extensive restructuring, but far less clear-sighted conviction about what this restructuring would be (or how to achieve it); as part of this, (3) a specific understanding of the need to prepare for rapid technological change but uncertainty about how to do so; (4) a fragmentation of public discourse that makes it difficult to identify decisive directive 'steers' across UK society for a large number of strategic concerns; which translates specifically into (5) a specific uncertainty about how to adjudicate between very different visions of the role the UK should (expect to) play in the global system; and finally, (6) a sense that the UK faces some major ineluctable choices and trade-offs in its strategic opportunities and priorities, but insufficient confidence to actually make them conclusively.

Given the scale of the challenges the UK currently faces, the need to devote state resources to building out its strategic response to the country's latest turning point more fully is growing increasingly acute. In this light, how might we see the UK's current (relative lack of a) clear national strategy through the lens of its own history? How might this history offer guidance for the UK's policymakers to develop a new strategic ideological approach for the country, now and in future? What stands out, in general terms, is that the idea of crafting a national strategy in a coherent, intentional way is not a new phenomenon in the history of UK policymaking — although there are certainly times when thinking nationally-and-strategically has been a more or less conscious and explicit consideration in the minds of policymakers themselves. Over the last 175 years, the UK has moved through several extensive changes in its strategic ideology: from a *laissez-faire*, maritime-imperial national strategy of state stewardship during the late 1800s to an era of state-led mobilisation, social investment, and multilateralism in the early-to-mid-1900s, then into marketisation, state retrenchment, and globalisation in the late 1900s. (It is worth observing that there are policymakers across the UK's increasingly diverse ideological spectrum who consciously or unconsciously hark back to elements of all three of these strategic incarnations as they seek to develop their own new approaches for the challenges the UK faces today.)

Yet cutting across these major changes, the history of UK national strategy also evinces a number of clear continuities: elements of its approach that have remained constant from one period to the next, which successive strategic ideologies may have reframed and repurposed, but never ultimately removed. Some of these are easily identifiable within the bounds of the UK's various policy areas. Economically, commerce and finance, especially sterling and the City of London, have played central roles as instruments of strategy, while the UK has been caught in a persistent tension between free-market orthodoxy and pragmatic state intervention. Politically, the UK's long-run foundations as a maritime power have underscored a series of more-or-less enduring overseas partnerships, especially with

the USA, and a careful negotiation between taking on global commitments and marshalling limited means. Legally, the UK has tended to deploy law as an instrument for both social order and economic governance, with a clear preference for incremental rather than wholesale reform. Culturally, the UK has oscillated between hands-off facilitation and selective state patronage, albeit with a consistent thread of using the latest innovations (especially in communications) to foster national cohesion and strategic projection.

The UK has regularly invoked education as a key strategic necessity, but its approach has exhibited a contrasting pull between prioritising elite qualification (higher learning) and raising the baseline of mass skills (school, technical education). For infrastructure, the UK has continually ranked transport and energy above other amenities and utilities, although its strategy has been characterised by long episodes of underinvestment followed by waves of 'catch-up' prioritisation. On caregiving, the UK has maintained a long-lasting role for both charitable/private and state provision, with a variable equilibrium of their respective responsibilities, albeit with a pattern of crisis-driven acceleration of state expansion. Finally, the UK's environmental strategy has historically been highly reactive and localised, only belatedly gaining equivalent strategic weight to other policy areas, and is often driven by unavoidable responses to visible crises (such as: flooding, smog, species loss).

Aggregating across these policy areas, a couple of synthetic patterns come to the fore. It is rare for the UK to adhere to any pure strategic doctrine, with a form of pragmatic hybridity its more commonly preferred state of ideological affairs: even under extreme *laissez-faire* or marketisation, the UK state has intervened with targeted industrial, military, or social interventions when strategic (for instance: imperial, or public health) interests required it. That said, access to global markets remains the backbone of UK strategic thinking across its various periods — whether under unilateral free trade, interwar 'Imperial Preference', or neoliberal financialisation. To that end, the UK's global security posture has pivoted from imperial policing (1800s) to alliance leadership and great-power coalition (1900s) to more specialised influence through its diplomatic, intelligence, and nuclear capabilities (2000s). The UK also has a pronounced tendency towards ideological continuity: major crises (economic collapses, pandemics, wars) are often the catalysts it needs to change course, above all to trigger episodic leaps in state activism, capabilities, and responsibilities, some of which become and remain institutionalised well after the crisis passes (for instance: nationalised industries, regulatory agencies, welfare state). These institutional legacies, in turn, are hugely significant, as they create often unexpected or unforeseen path dependencies that profoundly shape the UK's later strategic options (notably: the BBC, Bank of England independence, Cabinet Office formation, NHS creation).

As policymakers deliberate on how to develop a new approach that can act as the next link in the UK's strategic ideological chain, a helpful starting-point is to anchor their efforts in these relative constants. Of course, each turning point raises its own unique considerations that any successful subsequent national strategy must

respond to — and the 'polycrisis' is no different. But even so, policymakers face the question of which of the choices available to them right now promises to best reflect and build on what have proven to be the most enduring ingredients of the UK's strategic identity up to now. That heuristic approach is a vital tool to help fill in the UK's current ideological lacks: where to be activist and where to be reactive, how to restructure the state, how to face technological change, which 'steers' to take and which to ignore, what vision of the UK's role in the world to follow, and ultimately which choices win and which therefore have to lose. Once these gaps are filled in, UK strategy makers have a further challenge to confront: how to combine the decisions they take into something more than just a fractious, incidental strategic settlement, and craft them into a coherent, adaptable strategic approach.

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