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**Russian threat through the prism of British competitive
liberalism**

Master's thesis

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Declaration

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on 02.06.2023

Artem Samborskyi

References

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Abstract

The thesis is aimed at addressing the existing lack of academic understanding of the United Kingdom's foreign policy towards the Russian Federation, which stems from insufficient conceptualization of the current posture of Britain on the international stage and lack of in-depth research of the reasons behind the apparent animosity between London and Moscow. Specifically, the work answers the question of why the Russian Federation is designated the most acute direct threat to the United Kingdom and its "most urgent" foreign policy priority. The thesis is comprised of three major parts, each dedicated to a specific source of explanations of the mentioned research problem. Namely, the first two chapters constitute a document analysis of governmental, publicly available British thinking on the matter and academic literature shedding light on the theoretical dimension of the problem, respectively. In turn, the third chapter is a double regional case study of the practical aspect of the Russo-British competition, which highlights on-the-ground, independent causes of the rivalry. The findings suggest that the causes behind such status of Russia lie in the fact that it threatens and harms all vital British foreign and domestic interests, diametrically opposes the UK's vision of the world in theoretical and practical terms, and is a political, economic, and cultural competitor of the UK in multiple regions.

Abstrakt

Diplomová práce je zaměřena na řešení stávajícího nedostatečného akademického chápání zahraniční politiky Spojeného království vůči Ruské federaci, které pramení z nedostatečné konceptualizace současného postavení Británie na mezinárodní scéně a nedostatku hloubkového průzkumu důvodů za zdánlivým nepřítelstvím mezi Londýnem a Moskvou. Konkrétně práce odpovídá na otázku, proč je Ruská federace označována za nejakutnější přímou hrozbu Spojeného království a je její hlavní zahraničněpolitickou prioritou. Práce se skládá ze tří hlavních částí, z nichž každá je věnována konkrétnímu zdroji vysvětlení uvedeného výzkumného problému. Konkrétně první dvě kapitoly tvoří analýzu dokumentů vládního, veřejně dostupného britského myšlení v této věci a akademické literatury osvětlující teoretický rozměr problému. Třetí kapitola je zase dvojitou regionální případovou studií praktického aspektu rusko-britské soutěže, která poukazuje na místní nezávislé příčiny rivality. Zjištění naznačují, že příčiny takového postavení Ruska spočívají ve skutečnosti, že ohrožuje a poškozují všechny životně důležité britské

zahraniční a domácí zájmy, je v teoretické a praktické rovině diametrálně odlišné od britské představy o světě a je politický, ekonomický a kulturní konkurent Spojeného království ve více regionech.

Keywords

liberalism, global competition, Britain, Russia, non-liberalism, strategy

Klíčová slova

liberalismus, globální konkurence, Británie, Rusko, neliberalismus, strategie

Title

Russian threat through the prism of British competitive liberalism

Název práce

Ruská hrozba prizmatem britského soutěživého liberalismu

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I thank my parents for constantly reminding me that I must finish what I start and my girlfriend for her support and her cheering for me. And I also thank Mr. Riegl for his understanding and indispensable mentoring that much contributed to this thesis.

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Introduction

The twenty-first century was off to a promising start in terms of international security and cooperation. The end of the Cold War marked the triumph of the liberal international order cultivated for the last seven decades chiefly by members of the NATO alliance (Glaser, 2019:84). At last, the entire world witnessed the supremacy of democratic statecraft, civil society, human rights, free trade, and other common attributes of liberalism. It seemed that no serious obstacles were left in the way of Fukuyama's "end of history" and Kant's "perpetual peace", meaning that all previously non-liberal states would gradually evolve into proper democracies, and, consequently, indefinitely abstain from offensive wars against each other.

Indeed, emerging post-colonial states in Africa and Asia, as well as the Russian Federation (RF) and the other fourteen new republics in place of the collapsed Soviet Union, to the best of their ability attempted to accede to the prosperous West and attain the facets of a liberal state, first of all, the economic ones. Even yesterday's finest enemy of the "free world", the RF, hastily shattered communist beliefs while shifting to, in the words of its first president, "people's capitalism" (Malyutin & Samoilova, 1999). Along with the liberal ideas spread the real-life institutions, both NATO and WTO expanded immensely on account of the developing nations, while the creation of G20 showcased ever-intense international cooperation. Nearly all existing states, including authoritarian giants like the RF, China, and Iran, saw an obvious benefit in free trade and open markets.

However, attentive observers would notice that certain liberal pillars were taking a much weaker root around the developing world than the other ones. For a wide array of reasons, the expanding liberal internationalism largely failed to instill its "social purpose" at a similar pace: such concepts as representativeness, multi-party system, non-interference, and the sense of security community encountered major problems while trying to establish themselves in cultures, peoples and states different even moderately from the Western world (Ikenberry, 2018). Moreover, numerous societies and their leaders openly questioned whether the liberal doctrine is actually the only legitimate path for human societies. When faced with such a problem in a threatening context, like in Iraq or Libya, the liberal states decided to use military force to purge the international system of such destabilizing actors. Such actions arguably yielded short-term results but only postponed

the now-evident clash of the liberal block with more powerful foes of certain ostensibly universal liberal values.

Long before the open confrontation between the West and authoritarian powers, liberal scholars wrote how “the very constitutional restraint, international respect for individual rights, and shared commercial interests that establish grounds for peace among liberal states establish grounds for additional conflict in relations between liberal and nonliberal societies” (Doyle, 2005:465). In the present day, the mentioned conflict assumed the shape of international security discontent, which a part of the public and even the scholarly community compare to that of the Caribbean Crisis or interbellum. While the US continues to be the world’s sole superpower (Bekkevold, 2023), the typology of Weaver and Buzan says that in the post-Cold War world China and the RF have been the only nonliberal great powers, i.e. states that arguably could compete with the collective West militarily, and, with the Chinese economic surge, economically (Buzan & Waever, 2003:9). Today these two states lead, as their respective authorities claim, the fight against the alleged Western hegemony for the sake of a just multipolar world (Suny, 2023; Bekkevold, 2023).

While the indisputable leaders of the two camps, the United States and China, naturally play the main roles in the ongoing contest, their seeming “number two’s”, the United Kingdom and the Russian Federation, execute their unique policy strategies and perform tasks essential for the ultimate goals of their blocks. Unfortunately, the latter pair received considerably less attention, especially with regard to the mutual interaction and rivalry between the RF and the UK. That is against the backdrop of the RF being referred to as the main security threat in the British foreign policy doctrine and, on the other hand, accusations against “Anglo-Saxons” as the main architects of the “neocolonial unipolar world order” appearing in the newest Russia’s Foreign Policy Concept (“Global Britain”, 2021:26; RIA Novosti Krym, 2023). The outcome of this showdown might to a big extent shape the rest of this new, so far nameless, era of international relations.

To better position the conflict in focus within the general theatre of international relations as well as present the goals of this thesis and interpret their relevance, it is best to begin with a brief background of precisely the bilateral relationship between the UK and RF.

The relationship between the relatively democratic administrations of Boris Yeltsin, the first elected Russian president, and Western leaders on the other, seemed to be indeed

promising at first glance: mutual state visits by the president and the queen were a symbolical reflection of a tangible thaw in the Russian-British relationship (Owen, 2022:202). Shortly after, UK prime minister John Major openly called for the European Community (EC) “to widen its imagination” and give membership to, among others, new states in eastern Europe, including the RF, membership of which, he argued, would “banish utterly” the threat of nuclear war (Mance, 2018).

Even more remarkable nuances about the UK’s view of the RF in the 90s have been concealed until recently. One of the batches of declassified documents released by the British National Archives in 2020 contained a file on a suggestion coming from the Ministry of Defence (then headed by Malcolm Rifkind) for members of the Cabinet to invite Yeltsin’s the RF to become an “associate member” of the alliance, which would purportedly prevent the RF from falling back to authoritarianism and make it a “normal member of the western family”. For this occasion, the very category of NATO’s associate member states would have needed to be created. This idea was voiced at a strategy seminar at Chequers (the Prime Minister’s country residence) in January 1995. However, it did not find the support of the majority of the Cabinet and was tempered by UK analysts and diplomats as unrealistic (Woodbridge, 2020). The same rationale of a realistic assessment applied to Major’s proposal on Russian engagement with the EC, saying that the RF as a member of the EC would only drag it down economically while dominating militarily, as another declassified contemporary Foreign Office memo stated (Mance, 2018).

Nonetheless, the post-Cold War strategic optimism did manifest itself in the creation of the Permanent Joint Council (PJC) in 1997, then replaced by the still formally existing NATO-RF Council in 2002. Coupled with inquiries on the RF’s prospects of joining NATO made by Putin, the since immutable next president, himself, these events instilled in some a thought that the centuries-long stand-off between the West and Moscow could be settled once and for all (Rankin, 2021). This would be done via the integration of a “stable democracy” (presumably established in the future RF) into an “inclusive security management institution concerned chiefly with risks”, which is what NATO seemed to be to some scholars at the time, and not into an “exclusive alliance focused on threats” (Keohane, 2002:108). However, these hopes proved to be short-lived as a gradual deterioration of the British-Russian relationship began in the early 2000s, when it became clear that the RF was not capable or willing to even mimic the Western way of life, both

domestically and on foreign soil. Russian reaction to NATO operation against Serbs, the poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko in 2006, the infamous Putin Munich speech, the Russian invasion of Georgia, followed by Western airstrikes on Gaddafi forces, and the start of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2014 were all just a few of the milestones in the path to the overt ideological and material clash of the two states. In less than a decade the characteristic of the situation between the UK and the RF, given by their top officials, evolved from “respective disagreement” in 2009 to an “all-time low” in 2017 (Kendall; Beattie).

A lot had been said about the history and reasons behind the rift between the global West and the RF but very few observers thought that the rivalry would escalate to the present level. Integrated Review 2021 (IR21), a prime document guiding UK’s foreign policy, designated the RF as “the most acute threat to our security” (HM Government, 2021:26). Short of one year afterward, the RF launched a full-scale conventional war against Ukraine and proved the designation to be true. Since then, the UK has been spearheading the European resolve to assist Ukraine in all ways possible, including sending large quantities of lethal weaponry, providing training grounds for soldiers, a staunch diplomatic back-up, and more.

The commitment of the UK to the fact that, in the words of Boris Johnson, “Putin must fail” may seem to have apparent moral and legal grounds, both from a human perspective and that of international law (Pike, 2022). However, these very grounds are not so obvious for many countries of the world which have been more than reluctant to take a decisive pro-Ukrainian stance, and more broadly condemn Russian revisionism elsewhere. Therefore, there must be distinctive characteristics and rational calculations influencing the UK’s choice to vehemently oppose the illegal invasion, lead the Western support of Ukraine, and overall fiercely confront Russian foreign policy across the globe. Indeed, these are cursorily laid out in the IR21, as well as in its updated version published in March of 2023 (IR23), and can be generically put under the label of “**competitive liberalism**”, whose nature will be extensively defined within the respective divisions of the thesis. Moreover, the UK authorities took it upon themselves to push back the RF across the world in all strategic arenas, meaning geographic and conflict-level distribution.

However, the nature of this epochal shift from the rather estranged stance on Russian matters the UK took before 2016 to the leading hawk position under and after Johnson received little scholarly attention while raising numerous questions from the public (e.g. Landsman, 2023). For its part, this work poses the **research question** of why, within the framework of British competitive liberalism, Russia's revanchist and anti-liberal activity across the globe is considered the main direct threat to the United Kingdom in the short and medium term and the "most urgent" (HM Government, 2023a:3) priority.

It will do so by exploring practical and theoretical nuances of the threat the Kremlin presents as well as the UK's counteractions. Specifically, in this view, this thesis assumes three core tasks to provide an extensive answer to the research question. To **collect and interpret** a relevant contemporary volume of official documentary and oral sources from the UK Government and its representatives in order to characterize the new British stance towards the Kremlin is the first action point. Then, this work will **develop and reflect** upon the subject of British competitive liberalism from an analytical and theoretical perspective and **place it within** an evolving system of international relations. Finally, to **indicate** and **illustrate** practical manifestations of this posture and **uncover** otherwise undetected incentives behind the present Kingdom's view of the RF is the next logical task the thesis will fulfill in the form of a double regional case study.

Upon an introduction, the thesis consists of a methodological section, a literature review on the given research topic, three major chapters to reach the mentioned objectives, and a conclusion. The first two chapters cover, correspondingly, official documentary and oral sources of the British policy towards the RF, and the foundations of one in the theory of international relations and political science. The third chapter is intended to disclose the unspoken parts of the rationale for the mentioned policy using two comparison regional case studies of on-the-ground actions of the UK countering the RF. A discussion and conclusion mark the final section of the work.

1 Methodological-theoretical framework

Naturally, the methodology section of the thesis follows the formatting and content guidelines traditional to the field of political science and international relations. The research design choices made in the course of making this study are deemed to be the most suitable to accurately and comprehensively address the designated research tasks and then answer the main question. The non-quantifiable character of the research subject and inquiry dictates the pertaining study to be fully qualitative, which it is. That is, it attempts to capture and understand the context in which the studied actor operates and replicate the way of thinking the actor assumes in the given context.

Ontologically, the thesis assumes the view put forward by Justin Rosenberg, who argues that IR, as a separate scientific discipline, has grounds to have a distinctive ontological position. To him, at the core of this ontology lies “the co-existence and variation of multiple societies, the pressures, and opportunities this creates that lead to interaction, the innovation of new forms which emerge from the process of hybridization and finally the dialectical structure of the overall process itself” (Rosenberg, 2016:147). In the context of the present theme, it leads to the understanding of the UK and the RF as pre-existing entities that inevitably interact with each other.

Speaking of epistemological approaches, in social sciences, including its political field, qualitative studies are traditionally thought to have a clear link to the so-called interpretivism, which carries presumptions that the researcher can only observe, perceive and explain the world from his or her subjective point of view (Keman & Woldendorp, 2019:319). The vast array of outside criticism common for qualitative interpretative research is taken into account and addressed with a systematic scientific attitude, proper and well-trained use of respective research methods, clear definition of concepts, and detailed elaboration of inferences made within the research to allow for replication.

The underlying research problem presented within the introduction section allows for a composition of achievable research tasks, which require making specific empiric observations and interpreting them in order to build patterns and answer the research question. Therefore, the thesis is inductive in its character, meaning the exploratory approach is utilized to build a theory or argument upon the mentioned observations.

Document analysis and case study are the two particular research tools used to craft this thesis. The former is mainly exploited in the first two chapters, in which documents like IR21/23, Defence Command Paper (DCP), House meetings transcripts, academic literature, policy briefs, and other texts are selected and analyzed to pave the way for the understanding of the UK's foreign policy rationale towards the RF. In turn, the latter makes multiple appearances in the third chapter of the study, examining practical manifestations of the anti-Russian countermeasures and displaying the reasoning behind them. There is a total of two cases that are analyzed following a structured focused comparison approach. This approach implies the analysis in both cases consists of answers to an identical set of questions relevant to the research inquiry (Ruffa et al., 2020).

1.1 Conceptualization

To speak of a field-specific framework, the confines of international relations and other social sciences inevitably pose the question to a researcher about what approach or school of thought to choose in order to obtain the necessary presumptions on how the field functions, what to research within the realm of international politics and how to properly conduct that research (Laudan:1978). An obvious example would be the approaches to the study of international relations commonly known as realism, liberalism, constructivism, and others. Drawing on the article by Sil and Katzenstein (2010:412), the author of this thesis gives a preference to analytical eclecticism as an “intellectual stance a researcher can adopt when pursuing research that engages, but does not fit neatly within, established research traditions in a given discipline or field”. In other words, the theme of the thesis and the wider trends in international relations are best studied by not clinging to rigid and often abstract principles of a particular research tradition, but by meaningfully overlapping useful concepts and mechanisms from different strains of IR thought.

For instance, even merely in IR21/23, one can trace apparent references to a liberal understanding of the world in the form of praise of human rights, free market, and open borders, while also clearly see a purely realist sense of lethal danger emanating from the rivaling states like the RF and China, who are said to ramp up and utilize their might to strike the United Kingdom. To properly inform the research tasks, the present study will simultaneously make use of concepts usually attributed to different research traditions, including, for example, “liberal” soft power, “realist” balance of powers, and such abstract social phenomena, typical for constructivism, as ideology and worldview. Analytical

eclecticism allows the researcher to better grasp substantive, not analytical, real-world problems, which the question of the relationship between two great powers rightly is. In addition, the thesis utilizes such overarching concepts as a superpower (as in Munro, 2013) and polarity (as in Græger et al., 2022:6).

2 Review of academic literature on the contemporary British-Russian relations

The existing volume of academic literature focusing specifically on the modern British strategy towards the RF is very scarce and mostly covers the period prior to the pivotal events of February 2022. One of the exceptions is the article by Magill and Rees (2022) that provides rather a superficial review of the British defense policy shortly following Russia's full-scale invasion. The paper largely anticipates the conclusions made by IR23, underscoring that deterrence and containment of the RF became an even more obvious “long-standing, core policy interest” (98). Unfortunately, the authors do not engage in the topic of the wider motivation behind the UK’s policy of deterrence against the Kremlin.

Another article overviewing “Britain in a contested world” characterizes IR as a more realistic approach to the world, in which “threats from Russia are growing”. Importantly, the author associates the excerpt from IR21 mentioning states “investing in novel nuclear technologies and developing new warfighting nuclear systems ... to seek to coerce others” with the RF, thus affirming the argument about British opposition to coercive politics as one of the fundamental drivers behind its policy (Reiss, 2021:184). Further, the paper concludes that IR21 is “far more ambitious, forward-thinking and positive about what Britain can achieve than comparable documents issued by predecessor governments have been” (190).

The piece by Tracey German views the British-Russian relationship against the backdrop of Brexit and the related referendum. While describing the modern history of bilateral relations, German says that at the moment there is “a marked absence of mutual trust” between the states (2017:1). Further, the article recalls how the perceived threat from the RF increased while comparing the text of the British national security doctrines from 2008 through 2015 when the first mention of the potential undermining of the rules-based order by inter-state competition came up (3). According to German, the UK’s concerns about the RF revolve around “the apparent return of traditional, state-based threats, the use of force to achieve strategic objectives and the potential challenge to the ‘rules-based international system’” (4). The article argues that Brexit prompted vulnerabilities in the UK’s posture against the RF, which translated into alleged interference of the latter in the domestic politics of Britain (7). Developing this idea, it is reasonable to attribute the increased

exposure of the UK to external threats, the result of the secession from the EU, to the subsequent need to make its foreign posture more robust and assertive against the challengers, in particular the RF.

Going forward, there is a relatively exhaustive article by Maxine David (2011) examining the British view of the Kingdom's relationship with the RF since the latter achieved independence in 1991 through 2011. David rightfully focuses on the mutually-benefiting economic connections between the two countries and prospering trade which accompanied them almost uninterrupted during the mentioned period. Importantly, the author underscores the first major deterioration in the bilateral relations which came around the early 2000s and stemmed from mutual resentment coming from, on the one hand, British "disappointment" in Russia's inability to fully cherish the Western values, and, on the other, the Kremlin's offense at being perceived as a "student" to be taught proper conduct by the foreigners.

Further, David states that "for other Western European members, there have been far fewer flash points in the bilateral relationship [with the RF] despite perceived differences over values", which in turn echoes the argument made by this thesis about the UK's having complex non-economic underlying reasons for its discontent for the RF (206). Besides ethical differences, the article also claims that the unpredictable foreign conduct of the RF was perceived as a threat to British trade and economic stability as early as 2008, following a brief war between the RF and Georgia (207).

Finally, one of the works to most closely resemble the tone and message of the third chapter of the current thesis is the research paper brought about by Council on Geostrategy, a British independent non-profit think tank. The work is an excellent case study on how big of importance a region adjacent to the RF can be for the United Kingdom in military, economic, and ethical terms. In this work, the mentioned region is the Black Sea, whose significance the authors mainly attribute to "the UK's pervasive maritime presence, essential to uphold the openness of all European seas" (Lanoszka & Rogers, 2022:9). Following the extensive historical review of the Black Sea's importance to the UK, the article asserts that the main reasons for one have not drastically changed over centuries: the dominant power in this region would have the upper hand also in Eastern Mediterranean, in turn making a strategic threat to the British activity on Cyprus, over

Suez and even in the Indo-Pacific, overall undermining the major trading routes so essential for Britain. Further, the work cites growing pressure on the UK to uphold regional security as it's the Western country that could allocate the most resources towards this goal.

Most importantly, the authors conclude that the Russian win over the control of the Black Sea would be “very bleak: local allies and partners would face a confident, bossy and imperious Russia, while freedom of navigation and maritime law would be under greater duress, and, due to sanctions, commercial opportunities would significantly shrink” (22). It would force the UK to allocate much more funding to defense than it does now and undermine the entire idea of the “Indo-Pacific” tilt laid out in Integrated Review. In this way, this paper is the perfect demonstration of the deeper region-specific rationale for the UK to perceive countering the RF as the top priority.

3 Official stance and public rationale

This chapter will focus on one of the main sources of the novel British policy toward the RF, which is government papers, parliamentary records, speeches, and personal statements. It is done in order to infer the refined reasoning behind the mentioned policy, which may not be found within a single quote, document, or text.

3.1 Programming speeches, white papers and governmental reports

It is most appropriate to set off this chapter with the analysis of a pivotal speech delivered by Boris Johnson in December 2016, at the dawn of his cadency, to the member of Chatham House. Made upon his visit to Afghanistan, it was the first foreign policy speech of the then Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, who three years later would lead the new epoch of the British foreign policy. Nonetheless, even then one could see glimpses of fundamental features Jopnson's view of the British place in the world has. "To those who say we are now too small, too weak, too poor to have any influence on the world, I say in the words of Robert Burns: O wad some Power the giftie gie us To see oursels as ithers see us! [...] We are a protagonist – a global Britain running a truly global foreign policy" (2016:3). This is the first mention of "Global Britain", the term to later become the title of the Integrated Review. After setting the tone, he explained what drove this vision: the desire to contribute to global security, foster world trade, and spread liberal values (Johnson, 2016:6-7).

Now, and perhaps already in 2016, it was clear to the British authorities that the RF is the biggest threat to all three domains and needs to be pushed back with the new strategic thinking. Remarkably, during his speech, Johnson mentioned the RF seven times, more than any other country after the UK itself. While reiterating the leading voice of Britain condemning Russia's actions in Ukraine and Syria, he underscored that there is no going back to "business as usual" with the Kremlin (6). This address, titled "Global Britain: UK Foreign Policy in the Era of Brexit", set the pace for the vector seen now, in 2023.

Speaking of governmental documents, official doctrinal directions of the UK's contemporary foreign policy are accumulated chiefly in a series of policy white papers.

Pivotal here is the document titled “Global Britain in a Competitive Age”, which is another name for Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy (IR21): an overarching piece composed by Boris Johnson’s cabinet in March 2021. It was described by the latter as “the largest review of its kind since the Cold War” and sought to set out the country’s vision in the mentioned sectors up until 2030 (“PM outlines”, 2020). Within the context of this thesis, this document serves as the main source of British political rationale with regard to foreign policy, in particular towards the RF, and ideological values. IR21 was a qualitative and quantitative overhaul compared to the National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015 (NSS&SDSR) as the United Kingdom, once departed from the European Union (EU), regained itself an opportunity to build a more unconstrained, non-negotiable posture on the international arena. The main message behind this epochal shift may be illustrated by a passage from the IR21: “the nature and distribution of global power is changing as we move towards a more competitive and multipolar world” (HM Government, 2021:24). In all four previous versions of the National Security Doctrine published in 2008, 2009, 2010, and 2015 respectively, the word “multipolar” was not used once.

Although IR21 contained twice as few mentions of the RF as its predecessor, NSS&SDSR, the context of these mentions was radically different. While NSS&SDSR talks about continuing cooperation and engagement with the RF “notwithstanding our differences”, IR21 for the first time ever called the RF the most acute direct threat to UK’s security and mentioned systemic competition as the trend in a global environment (Prime Minister’s Office, 2015:18; HM Government, 2021:24,26). As the opposite of the democratic, liberal state IR21 used the term “opportunistic” and reads that such states seek to gain strategic advantage by “exploiting and undermining democratic systems and open societies” (29). In this regard, the paper uses the Salisbury attack, carried out by Russian intelligence agents, as an example of such actions (61).

Upon closer examination, it is evident that the RF directly harms all three most important domestic interests of the British nation as these are listed in the IR21: sovereignty (as in sovereignty of individuals, meaning personal liberties), security, and prosperity (HM Government, 2021:13). The first implies, besides others, protection of “the ability of citizens to protect their individual sovereignty within the rule of law” and of their rights and liberties. One example of Russia’s breach of this principle is the assassination of at

least two British citizens (Yevgeniy Litvinenko in 2006 and Dawn Sturgess in 2018) both claimed to be committed by Russian hitmen as per official London statements (Wright, 2021). This adds to the already mentioned more overt and bold attempt at the assassination of Sergei Skripal, also a British citizen, in Salisbury in 2018. Similar to Litvinenko's murder, this attempt was politically motivated as the Kremlin was trying to show off its resolve to haunt the alleged traitors of the RF. Furthermore, IR21 reads that sovereignty also includes "the ability of the British people to elect their political representatives democratically in line with their constitutional traditions, and to do so free from coercion and manipulation" (HM Government, 2021:13). There has been at least one case of the RF violating this realm, in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, according to the 2020 "Russian Report", which acknowledged the truth behind open-source commentary on the RF funding influence campaigns to support the side of independence seekers ("Russia", 13).

The next key interest, security, was the most vulnerable to Russian influence already in 2021. Naturally, "the protection of our [British] people, territory, CNI, democratic institutions and way of life", IR21 reads (HM Government, 2021:13), is undermined by every major violent territorial dispute, especially on European soil, like the one over Crimea and Donbas. More globally, the RF has been undermining it by being the second biggest "systemic competitor" to the rule-based liberal world order the UK vows to promote.

At last, the third declared key interest of the UK, prosperity, is rightly claimed to be mutually reinforced, and weakened, by the security dimension. One way the RF acts to exploit this link is through its attempts to gain a foothold in the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. For instance, the military base and port in Tartus endanger traditional UK bases on Cyprus while the deal Moscow made with South Sudan to build a military base on the shore of the Red Sea might be severe the most important trade and security communication of the United Kingdom (Gurjar, 2022; Lanoszka & Rogers, 2022).

In total, the RF is the sole state actor that actively harms all three most important national interests of the UK. This state of affairs only worsened by the time the needed update to IR21, Integrated Review Refresh 2023 (IR23) was released in March 2023. The Russian renewed invasion of Ukraine is stated to be the main driver behind the update and

addressing it is framed as “the most pressing national security and foreign policy priority in the short-to-medium term” (HM Government, 2023a:8). Furthermore, IR23 sets out the objective “contain and challenge Russia’s ability and intent to disrupt the security of the UK, the Euro-Atlantic and the wider international order” as the first headline strategic conclusion of the updated blueprint (11). Further reasoning behind the entire counter-Russia strategy includes highlighting the deepening Russian cooperation with Iran and China as well as the Kremlin’s violation of “the norms and principles that contributed to a stable and predictable European security order” (40). IR23 also accuses Moscow of weaponization of energy and food supplies and underlines Russia’s malign activity in the Arctic and space. The document’s bottom line is that “our collective security now is intrinsically linked to the outcome of the conflict in Ukraine”, which indicates how much value is assigned to the Russian offensive actions against its neighbor and how these are perceived as existential to the UK too (8).

The other forming document source on the British assessment of the RF runs as a supplement to IR: Defence Command Plan (DCP) titled “Defence in a competitive age”. Published also in March 2021, it highlights the hard-power threat posed by the RF, e.g. the one to “the UK’s ability to support our forces and protect our interests in Europe, the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East” through precision strikes and potent air defense (Ministry of Defence, 2021:10). More generally, DCP underscores that the RF benefits from a deteriorating security environment across the globe, which manifests itself in “the weakening of arms control architecture, the global proliferation of advanced weaponry and increased threat of nuclear coercion” (26). Importantly, DCP allocates specific attention to the freedom and security of maritime navigation, in particular in the Black Sea, vowing to ensure one together with regional partners. This is an example of the importance freedom of trade plays in the UK’s playbook. In addition, DCP mentioned “Russia’s military interventions in the Mediterranean” (29). Overall, DCP defines the RF as the greatest threat, an unpredictable and capable actor at all three conflict layers: nuclear, conventional, and sub-threshold.

The next piece appropriate to review for the given purpose is a report presented by the International Relations and Defence Committee of the House of Lords in January 2023. Titled “UK defence policy: from aspiration to reality?” it, similar to IR23, aims to provide the necessary reconsideration of the content of IR21 and DCP in the backdrop of the

Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent economic turmoil. The report concluded that IR21 was vindicated for giving the RF the status of the most acute security threat (The House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee, 2023:22). However, the Committee questioned the allegedly excessive emphasis the Review put on subthreshold threat level emanating from the RF while underpaying attention to the conventional military dimension of warfare and competition. The report underlined the dangerous assets of the RF in the “cyber, nuclear, space, maritime, and underwater” realms (35).

In this regard, the paper delivers a critical note that according to UK officials and London think tank representatives, the narrowing gap between the West and its competitors, mainly China and the RF, in the realm of technologies was the driver behind the main “bet” proclaimed in IR21/23 and DCP, which is an investment in science and technology (S&T) as a way to sustain “strategic advantage”. The corresponding passage in IR21 directly implied that the investment in this sector is intended to deliver the means to prevail in the systemic competition and “the tools and influence to shape a future international order based on democratic values” (HM Government, 2021:35). Therefore, the conscious calculation of the declining strategic advantage over external adversaries, including the RF, was one of the incentives behind the radical shift towards a more robust hard-power, tech-fuelled, posture of the United Kingdom.

Further, this report by the House of Lords mentions how the Ukrainian forces showcased the ability of advanced technology to defeat mass, citing the widely unexpected success of the Ukrainian defense (The House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee, 2023:80). Thus, it is conceivable that the UK leadership sees benefits in the opportunity to both test and advertise its existing and emerging military technologies on the Ukrainian battlefield by simultaneously inflicting casualties to the RF.

Another valuable piece the Libraries offer is the minutes of the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy meeting that took place in December 2017. While the subject of the discussion was the need for a new NSS, then UK’s National Security Advisor Mark Sedwill noted that the threats from the RF “have probably become troublesome more quickly and broadly than was anticipated at the time [in 2015]” (Sedwill, 2017:7). The discussion mentions how the increasing potential of the RF in unconventional warfare also shapes the British response in the form of, in the words of the NSA, modern deterrence,

meaning “being able to deploy a range of different capabilities that exploit our adversaries’ vulnerabilities, not necessarily to respond in an area where they have sought to exploit ours” (24).

3.2 Parliamentary debates and public statements

Another crucial source of official British thinking on the RF is records of Parliamentary debates, traditionally known as Hansard and displayed to the public on the namesake of the UK Parliament webpage. For the purpose of this work, the author reviewed all the debates in both Houses since December 2016 (the date of Johnson’s speech discussed prior) in search of oral statements from British lawmakers and other officials that would contribute to accomplishing the research tasks of the given thesis. It is especially relevant since the UK parliament, both labor and conservative wings, has been remarkably united in its attitude towards the RF at least since the beginning of the full-scale war against Ukraine.

A testament to the counterbalancing nature of the British stance towards the RF can be found in the passage delivered by Conservative MP Alec Shelbrooke on January 6, 2022:

“We must come to some conclusions. As the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar) said, the cold war exists again—it started the moment that Putin walked into Crimea. The invasion of Crimea changed the last 25 years of policy at NATO in Brussels [...] My right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough said that it is realpolitik, and it is. We must realise that we are in a cold war and that we must increase defence spending. Counterbalance is the only way to stop the situation escalating”

(House of Commons & Shelbrooke, 2022)

Among other examples of the rationale behind the power leap announced by Integrated Review, another Con. MP drew parallels between the weak position Britain had found itself in during the early stages of World War Two and the understrength it, he said, the UK has today: “We cannot abdicate our own national strategy to NATO or the US. It means creating our own machinery of government and a culture in our Government that can match the capability and determination of our adversaries in every field of activity” (House of Commons & Jenkin, 2022).

Another Hansard record shows that the British establishment sees the Russo-Ukrainian war as pivotal for an entire series of armed conflicts in Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the

Caucasus: “...the Government should now make it clearer to the British public that the outcome of the Ukraine conflict has implications for the future of Georgia, Moldova and the various bubbling conflicts in the Balkans, where Russian influence in Serbia and Serbian Bosnia has been very strong” (House of Lords & Wallace, 2022).

Going back to pre-February 2022 times, the passage delivered by Lord Ashdown during a House of Lords sitting in January 2018 shows the prior awareness of the shifting tendencies in the international arena and the relative decline of the Western advantage. He said: “The American century was one of the few periods in history when the world was monopolar and dominated by a single colossus—when all the compasses had to point to Washington to define their position for or against. Now we are moving into a multipolar world, more like Europe in the 19th century than the last decades of the 20th” (House of Lords & Ashdown, 2018). The same debate had another MP giving now seemingly prescient prediction that

“They [the RF, Iran, North Korea, and China] were not content with the status quo, nor with the stewardship of those who control it. [...] The world suddenly seemed a significantly less stable and certain—and a more dangerous—place. As I finished my time as CDS [Chief of the Defence Staff], therefore, my historical judgment was that inevitable change, often accompanied by violence, looked a far better descriptor of mankind’s future”

(House of Lords & Hughton, 2018)

Another interesting take during that debate was voiced by The Earl of Sandwich, who stated that “Georgia, Ukraine and the Baltic states are on the front line of the new Cold War” while questioning the preparedness of NATO for conventional warfare against the RF (House of Lords & Montagu, 2018). This showcases how the world is perceived as a space contested between two “camps” of states, similar to the times of rivalry between the capitalist and communist sides.

In their turn, the Libraries of both Houses also serve as an important source of official documentation on the reviewed topic. Namely, the Library of the House of Commons contains a report drafted by the House’s Defense Committee titled “Russia: Implications for UK defense and security” (2016). The main purpose behind the report is, it is claimed, “Russia’s increasing military capability and its changing intent—made evident by its

actions in Crimea, Ukraine and Syria” and examination of the needed response (7). The report concludes on a definite note that “Russia is reinforcing itself for the prospect of future conflict with the West. If the West does not respond appropriately to such actions, it will be poorly equipped to deter such a conflict or successfully resist if one breaks out”, the assessment now vindicated (12). Moreover, the authors “recommend that the Government designate Russia as a high priority, and set out how the mechanisms within Whitehall will ensure that external advice is disseminated and acted upon at the highest levels” (32). Coupled with the excerpts like “Russian actions in Ukraine have created a deep instability within Europe of a type not witnessed since the end of the Cold War”. the line of thought of the British authorities is clear, as are the reasons for such conclusions (45).

Going to public statements, one of the most clearly defined coming from British high-ranking officials to characterize their policy towards the RF was given by Amanda Milling, then Minister of State for Asia and the Middle East on February 24, 2022: “there can be no normalization in our relationship with the RF while it threatens the UK and our allies. [...] while the Russian Government continue their aggressive behavior, we will actively deter and defend against the full spectrum of threats emanating from Russia” (House of Commons & Miling, 2022).

In this regard, the comment by the head of MI5, Ken McCallum, about “a contest of different worlds now taking place, sometimes visibly, sometimes invisibly, between the liberal democrat model West and the more authoritarian model nations” presents interest (McCallum, 2022). It is plausible to say that the threat to the UK mentioned by Miling is in other terms the particular way the RF takes part in the “contest” claimed by McCallum, which, consequently, requires an evenly or more fierce response from the UK.

Materials presented within this chapter contain the core rationale for the British view of the RF, which is that the Kremlin’s victory in the clash of liberal and authoritarian systems, as seen by the British authorities, will have permanent fatal consequences for the United Kingdom as a first-rate power, a country with democratic liberal values and a state not wishing for a change in global leadership.

4 The theoretical and ethical dimension of competitive liberalism

At the level of powers such as the United Kingdom, decision-making in foreign policy is rarely a product of sporadic, hasty, and ill-conceived choices. On the contrary, the sheer position the UK has been holding on the international stage throughout its history forces it to constantly maintain a vision of its doctrine with regard to the relations between states. In modern times, far from always this vision has been successful, or at least realistic, as in the famous words of once Secretary of State Dean Acheson “Britain had lost an empire, but not yet found a role” (Brinkley, 1990:599). However, this chapter aims to show that in early 2023, it is possible to say that the UK foreign policy practitioners managed to assemble a comprehensive, pragmatic, and at the same time value-powered image of the country’s foreign policy in theoretical and ethical terms against the backdrop of a challenging world.

It is reasonable to begin by introducing the theoretical tenets of the British political parties, as “foreign policy is domestic policy and domestic policy is foreign policy” (Seldin, 2021). The UK is one of the most famous examples of a parliamentary system led primarily by two parties, the Conservatives and Labour. With these two sharing significantly more than half of the seats in both chambers of the Parliament (“State of the parties”, UK Parliament), it is reasonable to mention only them. In his book on the subject of British political ideologies, Robert Leach gives a useful account of how these two strains of thought have a unique inherent understanding of a desired foreign policy. While he rightly notes, that in the case of Labour, “socialism is essentially about domestic economic and social policy rather than foreign policy” (Leach, 1998:161), he asserts that for Conservative, “the emphatic assertion of British interests has been a consistent theme in defence and foreign policy since 1979” (125). In turn, another research distinguishes between two major foreign policy dimensions of “British Militarism” and “Liberal Internationalism”, which are attributable to the voters of the Conservative, and Labour parties, respectively and this way influence the decisions of their candidates (Reifler et al., 2011:263). The article explains that British militarism expresses itself in “Conservatives' unequivocal support for a strong and sovereign Britain, and the party's historic willingness to use force to achieve these ends” (257), which sounds very fitting for the realist understanding of power politics and anarchy. In turn, liberal internationalism can be

generally associated with humanistic concerns (248). Upon major simplification, one could correlate the mentioned two paradigms with realist and liberal approaches in the theory of international relations.

Notwithstanding these parallels, it is important to note that the UK authorities have traditionally not been too faithful to a particular set of abstract ideas, and rather “shied away from hubristic foreign policy doctrines in favour of pragmatism and empiricism” (Allen, 2020:19). This view is also backed up by scholarly opinions on the weak strategic culture of the UK, or rather the absence of one. In his essay, Paul Kornish explains how “in the UK, paradoxically, the most decisive cultural influence upon strategy is not to have a strategic culture, at least not in the sense of a coherent and discrete framework of ideas which is authoritative and generally applicable, which can endure as circumstances change, which is manifested in the behaviour of strategic actors and which has some degree of predictive power” (2013:371). Therefore, it renders implausible the assumption of the UK having any entrenched historic resentment or hostility towards the RF, the idea of which serves as a basis for calls to “wipe it [the UK] off the face of the Earth” coming from Russian MPs (“Necro Mancer”, 2023).

While it is useful to have a retrospect of the past partisan division on the foreign policy of the UK, the reality of 2023 dictates epochal changes to it. As well put by Michael Allen, “the traditional cleavage between a ‘realist-conservative’ approach to foreign policy that highlights the objective, morally neutral pursuit of the national interest, and the ‘idealist-liberal’ insistence that values should shape policy preferences is breaking down” (2020:19). The reason behind this merge stems from the now widely recognized (including in IR21/IR23) fact that there is direct competition, often violent, between two distinct sets of states that have a radically different view of the values that should shape the international system. And this competition demands its participants to wield convincing arguments as to how and why their values should be the ones to build international order upon. On the side of non-liberal countries, the RF perhaps makes the most attempts to instrumentalize its self-proclaimed ideals and principles in the realm of international relations (Cockerell, 2023), which prompts a natural rift with Britain’s aspiration (MacDonald, 2021) to be a soft power superpower.

4.1 Post-Thatcherism

Still, prior to analyzing the theory and ethics of the contemporary foreign doctrine of the UK and its opposition to that of the RF, it is vital to trace the recent evolution of British thinking on this. As the general consensus holds the view of the RF and USSR as separate, although successive, polities, this passage will focus on the post-Cold War times.

For the first six years after the dissolution of the Soviet empire, in charge of the UK was the Conservative government led by John Major. The author of a seminal work on British politics holds the view that Major largely preserved the “Thatcherite legacy”, stating that “there have been few discernable differences in policy and ideas”, and not mentioning any that would concern foreign policy (Leach, 1996:131). Indeed, Prime Minister Major inherited two foreign policy ideas that would directly influence future bilateral relations with the RF. First, it is the optimism with regard to Euro-Atlantic expansion to the east, which expressed itself, for example, in his already mentioned hopes of RF’s accession to EC and NATO. This followed suit of Thatcher, that made a large contribution to the fall of communism in countries like Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia (Berglof, 2013). Although RF never came close to joining the Western family, Major’s Government’s positive view of the “new democracies” (Sharp, 1997) eventually resulted in Britain’s support of NATO expansion, the process later becoming one of the main arguments backing the Russian aggression.

The second aspect is Thatcher’s prioritization of the relationship with the US over Europe, and her view of the States as the main guarantor of UK security and lobbyist of British foreign interests (Bulmer-Thomas, 2013). During his cadency, Major preserved this position, once saying that the bilateral relations were “a very close relationship, it is a very hard-edged relationship. It is based on shared instincts, it is based on shared interests” (“Mr Major’s Comments”, 1994). In the present day, this special friendship constitutes the bulk of what is referred to as “Anglo-Saxon alliance” in the lingo of Russian officials, almost always in the context of allegations and animosity.

4.2 Liberal interventionism

After post-Thatcherism followed the more well-known era of liberal interventionism. This period encompasses the golden age of liberal international order and, in the UK, was represented by 10 years of the premiership of Labour’s Tony Blair. With regard to

relations with the RF, these years laid the further foundation for the subsequent gradual deterioration of British image in the Kremlin's eyes due to the missteps, both farfetched and not, of Western actions in Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan, and other countries. On the other hand, this was the prime period for economic convergence between the two countries, in addition to the personal relationship between Blair and Putin being more than warm (Quinn & Davies, 2022). The term liberal interventionism itself was mainly coined by the famous so-called "Chicago Speech" delivered by Blair in 1999, in which he advocated for and explain in detail his vision of a just intervention in the affairs of another state ("Doctrine of the International Community"). To be more specific, the term liberal interventionism describes the peak ambition and, consequently, overstretch of the ideology of liberal internationalism, which is oftentimes used as a synonym for the former (Hug, 2020:5). Ralph (2011:306) claims that Blair's liberal internationalism "added definition to the so-called 'ethical dimension' of British foreign policy", and that is precisely what is being analyzed within this chapter.

4.3 Liberal internationalism

Here, I must make a necessary digression into the nature of liberal internationalism, as it is one of the key concepts of the theory of international relations and practical foreign policy that allows interpretation of the contemporary British stance on the RF. This exact wording emerged only in modernity and is usually tightly associated with the so-called "Wilsonianism": the set of foreign policy objectives and principles set out by the 27th president of the United States Woodrow Wilson. In his fundamental study of this phenomenon, Tony Smith proposes the following elements to

"...constitute its essence: (1) cooperation among democratic governments, (2) linked through economic openness, (3) negotiating differences and common interests through well-structured multilateral institutions that foster a robust sense of the importance of economic integration, international law, and a commitment to mutual defense, and (4) dependent on an America that willingly assumes the responsibilities of leadership of a community of nations pledged to peace through collective security, even if this means going to war to preserve it"

(Smith, 2019:26)

This package of concepts is the core of liberal internationalism. Little known is the fact that the rudiments of this ideology took first roots in the UK considerably before Wilson's years: most prominently with the nineteenth-century figures of Richard Cobden, W. E. Gladstone, and John Stuart Mill (Sylvest, 2009:7). Of course, Britain only managed to fully embrace the spirit of liberal internationalism after the end of WW2 and demolition of its empirehood (Venosa, 2021). Still, upon firm entrenchment of the currently standing international order, the ideology in question continues to be the guiding theoretical concept and ethical ground for the foreign policy practitioners of the Kingdom up to the present day.

In the context of UK foreign policy towards the RF and the world, of interest for this thesis is **one critical variable** tightly affixed to the concept of liberal internationalism. This is the question, or rather a dilemma, on how the already established liberal democracies should approach the task of the spread of democracy to the less progressive societies. This question brings one even more back in time, to the year 1795, to the moment when the driving force behind the liberal perception of international relations was first pronounced by Immanuel Kant in his seminal work "Perpetual Peace".

"Now the republican constitution apart from the soundness of its origin, since it arose from the pure source of the concept of right, has also the prospect of attaining the desired result, namely, perpetual peace"

(Campbell & Smith, 1903:125)

In short, Kant based his optimism about the end of all wars on the premise that among representative republics the reasons for war would naturally cease to exist as the cost and misery of waging one will always outweigh the potential benefits for each individual citizen, who collectively decide on this matter. On the above-mentioned question, Kant's position is ambiguous as he simultaneously condemns wars waged by liberal states against the rest and encourages liberal republics to demand "its neighboring nations enter into the pacific union of liberal states" (Doyle, 1995:98-99).

In his analysis of Kantian logic with regard to the relationship between liberal and non-liberal states, Doyle resorts to concluding that "Kant's republics— including our own— remain in a state of war with nonrepublics" (1995:102). Furthermore, in his interpretation

of Kant's thinking of just and unjust states, Doyle writes that "liberal republics, also are prepared to protect and promote— sometimes forcibly—democracy, private property, and the rights of individuals overseas against nonrepublics which, because they do not authentically represent the rights of individuals, have no rights to noninterference (102). This interpretation of Kant's system of rights faced a fierce critique, one example of which is the piece by Georg Cavallar, who despite dismissing the possibility that the German thinker would agree to "fight one violation of rights [human rights abuses] with another one [intervention]" (2001:241), allows for a possibility to justify a liberal intervention into another state through the prism or equating constitutions of certain despotic polities to a state of nature, thus forfeiting their rights to be considered a "moral person" and then to sovereignty (242).

Coming back to the cadency of Tony Blair, we may never know what exact epistemological grounding his approval of liberal (or at times called humanitarian) interventions was, but on the lower levels of conceptualization, according to Smith, it rested upon three critical concepts: democratic peace theory (DPT), democratic transition theory (DTT), and the responsibility to protect (R2P) (Smith, 2019:156). Taken together, the ideas behind these concepts, Smith explains, allowed post-Cold War America and its liberal allies, including the UK, to justify the overthrow of governments guilty of genocides or serious human rights abuses with the subsequent establishment of a democratic government (2019:157-158). Using this rationale, Blair committed Britain to four wars in ten years, and, as a result of three of them, successfully contributed to the overthrow of the incumbent regimes (Blair, 2010:224). This sheer fact instigated great fear in the Kremlin and later served as another argument in favor of justifying its actions first in Georgia in 2008 and later in Ukraine from 2014 until now (Nikitina, 2014).

4.4 Liberal conservatism

While three years (2007-2010) of Gordon Brown saw practically no change to the foreign outlook of his incomparably more famous predecessor (a similar case as with Thatcher and Major), the ensuing era contained significant shifts. The bloody setback in Iraq, where Britain lost nearly two hundred soldiers (Hall & Doherty, 2023), prompted further evolution of liberal internationalist thought into what Cameron and his coalition made up of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats called liberal conservatism and proclaimed to be their ideology while in office (Honeyman, 2017). There very several crucial indicators that

allow concluding that this was the time the UK's vision of liberal internationalism began turning from an overtly offensive to a moderately assertive view of the implementation of liberal internationalism. First, it manifested itself in the collective Western decision to only intervene in the Arab Spring uprising in Libya after the respective UN Security Council resolution. Then, on an unprecedented scale, before authorizing the use of the military against Assad's forces in Syria Cameron put the question to vote in the House of Commons in a failed attempt to legitimize the decision. This had never happened prior, as PMs do not have any legal obligation to seek approval on the use of military force in Parliament (Honeyman, 2017:2). These two instances showcase how the British elites began being more realistic about their ability to impose democracy from outside, for various reasons.

In the context of the evolution of British-Russian relations, Cameron's liberal conservatism further continued distancing and mutual misgivings of the two states. With regard to Libya, Russian authorities got the impression that they were "fooled" about the real implications of the Security Council's resolution and did not anticipate actual airstrikes ("Putin recalled", 2019). In Syria, Moscow witnessed an open intent of the British Prime Minister to attack a long-standing ally in the Middle East, along with the Russian naval base on its shores (Borger, 2011), while at the same time, perhaps the fear and hesitance to go all the way with this intent.

Finally, in 2014, during his last years in No.10, Cameron faced perhaps the biggest foreign policy challenge of his cadency: the Russian annexation of Crimea and the instigation of hostilities in Eastern Ukraine. While the details of the UK's response to this will be touched upon in the next chapter, from the theoretical perspective, Cameron's answer to this can still fit within the margins of liberal conservatism in foreign policy: although the UK led the charge in terms of sanctioning the RF for this move, it categorically rejected a military response and provided no military aid to Ukraine at that time (Alexander, 2014). Further, the UK abstained from taking part in talks between the RF and Ukraine within the so-called Normandy format (Watt, 2015).

4.5 Status anxiety

After Cameron, the Conservative's epoch continued under Theresa May, who assumed the PM post in 2016. In the chaotic atmosphere of Britain's painful divorce from the EU and Donald Trump's ascend in the US, May made a first vague attempt to give a new meaning

to the UK in the world by inventing the concept of “Global Britain”, which would only much later become the name for a new state grand strategy. The early formulations were as ambitious as they were equivocal:

“I want us to be a truly Global Britain – the best friend and neighbour to our European partners, but a country that reaches beyond the borders of Europe too. A country that gets out into the world to build relationships with old friends and new allies alike”

(“Read Theresa May's”, 2017)

In spite of the promising opening, for May the domestic side of things turned out to be on order by a wide margin more important and interesting than foreign affairs (Bloomfield, 2019). Instead, she fully delegated the task of making the new strategy a coherent and tangible thing to Boris Johnson, who acted as Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs. However, in an attempt to instill reason and coherence to the British foreign outlook, Johnson eventually faced critical objection from May, who preferred to “look at foreign affairs through the viewpoint of a somewhat desperate door-to-door saleswoman” (Sengupta, 2019). Overall, McCourt & Glencross probably offered the best summary of the UK foreign policy during May’s reign, “status anxiety” (2018:2). This anxiety, however, did not alter the UK stance on the RF, even more so, during his time at the Foreign & Commonwealth office Johnson allowed himself to speak the most hostile language in regards to the Russian leadership heard in decades. An example of his words serves as an illustration of the first signs of a “counter-attack” of sorts of the Western liberal foreign policymaker, compared to the cowed language of Cameron’s cabinet:

“As for his reign in Moscow, he is allegedly the linchpin of a vast post-Soviet gangster kleptocracy, and is personally said to be the richest man on the planet. Journalists who oppose him get shot. His rivals find themselves locked up. Despite looking a bit like Dobby the House Elf, he is a ruthless and manipulative tyrant”

(Johnson, 2015)

4.6 Competitive liberalism

Boris Johnson succeeded May in 2019 and continued his life mission of formulating the new grand foreign thinking of Britain. So far, Johnson has arguably played the main role in

reshaping the strategic posture of the UK after Brexit. He began doing so already since 2016, but only once he assumed the top governmental post, “Global Britain” began to “take shape and to seem more real, and more realistic, than it initially did” (Kundnani, 2022). The pivotal point, when one could say that the new thinking took a solid form, was the release of the long-awaited Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy (IR21) in March 2021. This document embodied a revision of all pillars of the British foreign policy: some aspects saw a complete overhaul, some were enhanced and some almost disappeared. Overall, IR21 (and its refresh in 2023) produced a foreign policy approach that would preserve an inherent liberal outlook of the UK but also prepare it for an “intensifying competition between states”, thus inciting a natural label for such a vision — competitive liberalism.

Since the content of this seminal document concerning the RF has already been discussed in the previous section, here it is mandatory to outline the **main changes** competitive liberalism brought to then view it against the backdrop of the Russian positioning. This thesis lists them as follows:

- Systemic competition. Acknowledgment of the environment of “systemic competition, including between states, and between democratic and authoritarian values and systems of government” (HM Government, 2021:17);
- Rival camps. Introduction of the “attacking” authoritarian set of states and the “defending” democracies: “authoritarian states seek to export their domestic models, undermine open societies and economies, and shape global governance in line with their values” (28). A similar message has not been relayed since the end of the Cold War;
- Righteousness and determination to prevail: the UK underlines that “liberal democracy and free markets remain the best model for the social and economic advancement of humankind” (3) and wants to eventually “shape a future international order based on democratic values” (35);
- Acknowledgment of the other, third position. Admission of the fact that some states and societies do not share the liberal values but deserve to be cooperated with and do not pose a threat to the UK: “not everyone’s values or interests consistently

align with our own; expanding group of ‘middle-ground powers’ are of growing importance to UK interests as well as global affairs more generally” (HM Government, 2023a:9). This constitutes a pronounced step away from the universalism of liberal values under Tony Blair;

- Self-agency and intent to lead. Contrary to all doctrines since Major’s cadency, Johnson’s vision openly states that “we will lead where we are best placed to do so” (HM Government, 2021:6), indicating global aspiration and ambition to be a global catalyst.

In her turn, Liz Truss could hardly introduce change to foreign strategy in less than two months of her premiership (September-October 2022) and was quickly followed by the cadence of the incumbent PM Rishi Sunak, under whom the “refresh” of IR21 was released (IR23). It can be said that IR23 provides necessary elaboration and does not alter the pillars of Johnson’s “Global Britain”, although this now-famous expression is not mentioned once in the updated document (Brooke-Holland et al., 2023). With regard to the RF, IR23 continued to hold a firm and confrontational tone. The United Kingdom continues to be guided by competitive liberalism to this day.

4.7 The Russian Federation, realism and multipolarity

A detailed description of the evolution and specificity of the British foreign policy doctrine was needed to highlight its opposition to that of the RF and the subsequent designation of Russia as the first-priority threat for the UK. Since a comprehensive description of Russian foreign policy does not serve the purpose of this thesis, this subsection will overview the key points of extreme theoretical and ethical antagonism between the two states in the realm of international politics. For a general portrayal, it suffices to say that the RF is most commonly referred to as an example of a state guided by the realist perspective on international relations, be that classical or structural strains (Shakleyina & Bogaturov, 2004; Feinstein & Pirro, 2021; Tsygankov, 2022; Edinger, 2022). Besides, some researchers acknowledge the constructivist (ideological) underpinnings of Russian realism (Beshenich, 2022; Callaway, 2021). However, the sole best-suited source of the Kremlin’s vision of its foreign doctrine is the respective official white paper under the title Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (FPC23), with the last version published on March 31, 2023, and the previous one dating back to 2016. Upon review and comparative

analysis, the following aspects can be considered sources of fundamental discord between the UK and RF from a theoretical and ethical perspective:

1. Attitude towards the ongoing trend of instability in the international arena. FPC23 describes as follows: “Humanity is going through an era of revolutionary change. The formation of a more just, multipolar world continues.” (President of the Russian Federation, II.7). In turn, IR23 presents the same matter in a negative light, calling systemic competition the “main driver of the deteriorating security environment” (HM Government, 2023a:8);
2. Challenging and delegitimization of the current wealth and position of the UK. FPC23 several times implicitly mentions the Western nations under the label of “colonial powers” and accuses them of exploitation of other nations: “The non-equilibrium model of world development, which for centuries ensured the outstripping economic growth of colonial powers by appropriating the resources of dependent territories and states in Asia, Africa, and the Western Hemisphere, is irreversibly becoming a thing of the past” (President of the Russian Federation, II.7);
3. Rejection of the rules-based world order in British interpretation and the emphasis on international law instead: “The international legal system is being tested for strength: a narrow group of states seeks to replace it with the concept of rules-based world order (the imposition of rules, standards, and norms in the development of which the equal participation of all interested states was not ensured” (I.9);
4. Arbitrary and biased interpretation of international law: “...decisions of interstate bodies adopted on the basis of the provisions of international treaties of the Russian Federation in their interpretation contrary to the Constitution of the Russian Federation shall not be enforceable in the Russian Federation” (IV.21);
5. Opposition to the British domination in trade and finances. The RF stated its intent to “adapt the world trade and monetary and financial systems to the realities of the multipolar world and the consequences of the crisis of economic globalization, primarily in regard to reducing the ability of unfriendly states to abuse their

- monopoly or dominant position in certain areas of the world economy, expanding the participation of developing states in global economic governance” (IV.39:1);
6. Total rejection of the British reading of humanitarian values: FPC23 reads that the RF will prioritize “neutralization of attempts to impose pseudo-humanistic and other neo-liberal ideological attitudes, leading to the loss of traditional spiritual and moral guidelines and moral principles by mankind” (IV.19:9). Instead, it endorses the concept of “traditional spiritual and moral values”, mentioned several times within FPC23 (III.48:2; IV.56:3);
 7. Opposition to the “globality” of Global Britain: Russia’s remarks about states that are “accustomed to think according to the logic of global domination and neo-colonialism” plausibly hint at, among others, the UK and its vision of itself. Further, FCP23 alleges that such “neocolonial” states use the imposition of “destructive neoliberal ideological attitudes” in an attempt to retain the dominating position (II.8:1). This echoes the British intent to “protect open societies and democratic values where they are being undermined”, delineated in IR21 (HM Government, 2021:12);
 8. Determination to dismantle the superpower position of the US: “elimination of vestiges of dominance by the United States and other unfriendly states in world affairs, creation of conditions for the abandonment of any state from neo-colonial and hegemonic ambitions” is one of the policy goals stated in FPC23 (President of the Russian Federation, IV.19:1). At the same time, IR23 calls UK’s relationship with the US “an absolutely essential pillar of our security” (9);
 9. Imprudence on Ukraine. The text of FPC23 is completely void of any mention of Ukraine and the war the RF wages against it. The only place this is implicitly addressed is the paragraph that affirms Russia’s right to use its armed forces for self-defense purposes, which is then, it is stated, linked to Article 51 of the UN Charter (President of the Russian Federation, IV.25). Thus, in its main policymaking document, the RF clearly disowns any responsibility for the current war and therefore rejects the legitimacy of the comprehensive Western reaction to it, so heavily emphasized in IR21/23;

This chapter aimed to construct a comprehensive image of the current position of the UK in the international arena through the lens of the theory of international relations and then contrast the critical counterpoints between it and that of the RF. It can be concluded that the current underpinning ideological framework of British foreign policy is liberal internationalism, while on the lower, conceptual level, it is competitive liberalism that guides short- and medium-term decision-making of the Government (see Appendix no.1). On the other hand, the RF, using the wording of FPC23, “pursues an independent and multi-vector foreign policy course dictated by its national interests” (President of the Russian Federation I.6), thus continuing to be a textbook example of a realist power. The core reason for the fierce competition between the UK and RF comes down to the fact that the RF acts as the anti-West to change the global disposition (Lukyanov, 2023), which is synonymous with the notion of the liberal world order existential to the status of the UK. Along with the power reshuffle, the RF aims to dismantle other attributes of liberal internationalism vital for Britain, such as economic and financial globalization, humanitarian principles, international human security, and the ban on offensive wars. All of this prompted the status of the RF as the most acute threat to the UK.

5 Regional cases

5.1 Case study No. 1: the Arctics, the Baltics, and Eastern Europe

This region is naturally of the highest importance for any European power that would undertake the task of deterring, attacking, or countering the Russian state. For the UK, an unbroken line from the Norwegian-Russian border in the High North, through the Baltic states, Russian near-vassal Belarus, and to the contested islands in the mouth of Dniro is the closest resemblance of a “frontline” it has with the RF. It is the closest to the British homeland geographically, currently bears the most political and economic value, and is the place of the decisive acts of the contest between the Kremlin and the liberal world.

5.1.1 How does Russia practice its anti-liberal policy in the region?

The Kremlin has several essential points of interest along the mentioned line. In the Arctic, the RF is the player with the largest military capability in the region and the biggest share of potential profit from the expansion of the Northern Sea Route (NSR). Besides, the Kremlin sees the “growing role of the Arctic in global climate change, which affects almost all countries in the Northern Hemisphere, and the presence of huge natural resources in the region” (Eremina, 2021:14). Speaking of the NSR, apart from the economic benefit, it embeds a wider conflict related to international law, which is illustrative of the fundamental disagreement between liberal and non-liberal perspectives. Namely, under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), “Russia asserts the right to administer the Northern Sea Route as an ice-covered area and regards the route as internal waters” (Odgaard, 2022:92). Despite the gradual retreat of floating ice and the growing commercial traffic, the RF does not recognize the NSR as a strait under the international law of the sea, which otherwise does not contain an unambiguous definition of the term, thus giving the Kremlin an opportunity to claim full sovereignty over the transit route. In extensive and close cooperation with China (Mekhdiev et al., 2021), the RF attempts to exploit gaps in legislation to precipitate future regionalization of global trade and navigation, thus undermining core British interests.

In the Baltics, Russia is posed for further escalation of tensions with the NATO states, including the UK, given the context of its war against Ukraine and the path of global competition. Russia aims to maintain and project hard and, to a lesser extent, soft power

capabilities in the Baltic region. A constant military build-up in forwardly-deployed bases in Kaliningrad as well as along the border with Estonia and Latvia is an attempt to sustain a permanent overwhelming advantage over the corresponding NATO forces, which enables a presumably swift attack and occupation, whenever necessary (Boston et al., 2018). In terms of soft power, Russia's extensive use of Russian ethnic minorities in Estonia, Latvian, and Lithuania in its informational warfare campaigns (mostly revolving around alleged oppression of minority rights) allows a "possible use of Russian minorities as a pretext for violating the sovereignty of the Baltic countries" (Brauß & Rácz, 2021). The Baltic countries are an exemplary case of Russian informational warfare and the spread of its strategic narratives to exploit the existing sentiment in part of the population in foreign countries.

In turn, Belarus in recent years has been gradually losing the attributes of a sovereign state in exchange for Russian patronage and guarantees. This process was especially precipitated after Lukashenko's alleged victory in the presidential elections in the spring and summer of 2020 (Leukavets, 2021). As a result of the highly disputed vote count and subsequent violent shutdown of massive protests, the majority of Western countries decided to not recognize the results of the elections, and favored the main opposition leader, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, as the legitimate representative of the Belorussian people instead. On the contrary, the RF was satisfied with the conduct of the elections and has been heavily engaged in absorbing Belarus in all spheres of governance (Leukavets, 2021).

Besides the overt support of authoritarian and oppressive regimes, Moscow's activity in Belarus constitutes attempts to force Lukashenko's regime to participate in the war against Ukraine as much as possible. Such measures are manifested in Lukashenko's approval of the use of Belorussian military airfields for Russian jets that operate against Ukraine and of the use of Belorussian territory as a staging ground for one of the attack axis of the Kremlin's initial onslaught in February 2022 (Lvovskiy, 2023). By doing this, Russia further undermines the integrity of the international community and law, showing that not only one state considers waging an offensive war against another sovereign state normal. Additionally, Russia uses Belarus to create hybrid pressure on Poland and, to a lesser extent, Lithuania, via migrants and other non-lethal means, (Grzywaczewski, 2021).

At last, the Russian actions in Ukraine are arguably the biggest blow to the tenets of international liberalism in the last few decades. One of the most tangible and all-beneficial achievements of the Post Cold War world order was an effective ban on the conventional wars of conquest, i.e. offensive full-on wars that are waged to capture foreign territory. Although the ban has not been complete, and certainly applied to various parts of the world to different extents, the superpower, as well as all great powers, abode by it. The RF was first to decisively break this rule and fully invade neighboring Ukraine in 2022 with what looks now as an attempt to, at maximum, install a puppet regime, or at least annex some ground. Although the RF had already annexed Crimea, and orchestrated and directly participated in the war in Donbas, these actions still lacked some elements of a clear state-on-state conventional war. The Russian officials frame it as the pinnacle of their aspiration to alter the Western-dominated system of international relations and reshuffle the power (Tsvetayev, 2022).

5.1.2 How does this practice threaten the UK's interest in the region?

In the High North, according to the latest UK Arctic Policy Framework, competitive liberalism is about “maintaining the Arctic region as one of high cooperation and low tension” (HM Government, 2023b:9). Russia’s pursuit of exclusive cooperation and exploitation of the bulk of the region together with China is directly opposite to the liberal notion of global and inclusive trade and freedom of movement. Russian militarization of the region also goes against the British interest.

In the Baltics, against the backdrop of Russia's offensive posture, the UK now has to allocate more attention to reinforcing NATO’s eastern flank, as London cannot allow the weakening of the main security pillar of the liberal camp and increased vulnerability of certain member countries of the Alliance. While in Belarus, the UK is faced with the overt denial of democratic procedures and violent oppression of the local population. Moreover, Belarus’ puppeteering from the Kremlin involves threatening a close British ally in the region, Poland.

However, the most important battle between, among others, the British and Russian global strategic interests takes place in Ukraine. Should the RF succeed in subduing or even restricting the sovereignty of a recognized democratic state, as well as keep the annexed territories, the world community would witness the impotence of the liberal camp to

protect one of its members and enforce the rules of the “rules-based world order”. Thus, the UK’s alliance-oriented security posture and dependence on free trade, as well as the status of the soft power superpower would suffer massive harm. From the regional perspective, defeat in Ukraine would further force the UK to drastically increase military spending to make up for the shifted balance of power on NATO’s eastern flank. Additionally, from the perspective of global trade and military reach, even partial Russian victory and its full control of the Black Sea might significantly threaten the British positions in the Eastern Mediterranean and the “Royal Route” through Suez (Lanoszka & Rogers, 2022), thus engendering the economic stability of the British homeland and the British bases on Chagos and Singapore, effectively denying the Indo-Pacific tilt.

5.1.3 How does the UK respond within the tenets of competitive liberalism?

In the Arctic and the Baltics, the UK is the founder and leader of the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), which is a military stand-alone collaboration with eight other Northern European and Baltic states. As per the British Strategic Command, “this agreement exists at both the political and military level, and brings together the full range of military and wider-government capabilities in order to ensure regional stability” (Beckett, 2021). Through the flexibility and speed of response, such a configuration allows the UK to proactively counter potential Russian incursions in the region while not relying on the full NATO consensus and bureaucracy. Additionally, in Poland and Estonia, the UK contributes personnel and equipment to two permanent NATO forward presence battlegroups (“NATO’s military presence”, 2022).

Speaking of global trade and finance flows, although indirectly the UK does support the American stance on the legal debate regarding the status of the NSR, which holds that the NSR is a strait and should be equally accessible to all states. This opinion is hinted at the UK’s Arctic Policy Framework, which reads that “we stand ready to protect and, where appropriate, assert our rights against those who wish to challenge the international order and freedom of navigation” (HM Government, 2023b:6).

In Belarus, the UK openly supported the anti-Lukashenko protests in the summer of 2020 and since then suspended its recognition of Lukashenka as a legitimate head of the state. Moreover, the UK government actively supports the vision of Svetlana Tikhanovskaya as

the leader of the Belorussian opposition and therefore the sole legitimate representative of this nation (“PM meeting with Svetlana Tikhanovskaya”, 2021).

When it comes to Ukraine, the moment the United Kingdom began spearheading the Western rush to assist this Eastern European state with repelling the Russian onslaught roughly coincided with the publication of Integrated Review. Then, by the spring of 2021, military analysts and intelligence agencies across the globe were becoming more and more concerned with the signs of Russia’s military build-up beside the border with Ukraine. As tension raised to the edge in January 2022, the UK made an unprecedented step by donating thousands of anti-tank grenade launchers (NLAW) to Ukraine. These weapons later played a major role in initially repelling the grandiose quantities of armored vehicles around which the Russian military based their initial plan of a full-scale invasion (Martin, 2023).

Ever since February 2022, “the United Kingdom has been front and centre of the international response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, building an international coalition which continues to provide unprecedented financial, military and diplomatic support to President Zelensky and the Ukrainian people”, rightfully noted by Number 10 spokesperson (Rathbone, 2022). This was manifested several times in the UK “crossing the red line” and breaching unspoken taboos on the extent and nature of support Western powers could provide Ukraine with without fearing to provoke Russia’s disproportionate response. These “taboos”, among others, include delivery of anti-ship Harpoon launchers, uranium cannon rounds, and long-range missiles (Macaskill & James, 2023). This way, the UK leads the international military support of Ukraine by publicly neglecting the Russian threats and setting an example for other liberal states. One of the reasons for London to invest in the Ukrainian military capabilities is the high “returns” in the form of the diminishing size and power of Russia’s conventional army, which immensely impacts its reach worldwide and thus benefits the British interests.

5.2 Case Study No. 2: South Caucasus, Central Asia, and Mongolia

This case study encompasses a wide area that is adjacent to the southern and eastern, i.e. Asian borders of the RF. Despite generally belonging to drastically different subregions in geographical, cultural, and economic contexts, it makes sense to view them collectively for

the purpose of the thesis, as the UK engagement with the RF in these states has common traits and underpinnings, allowing for a generalization and contrasting against the European case.

5.2.1 How does Russia practice its policy in the region?

Through the prism of Russian realism, the countries of South Caucasus (Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan), Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan), and Mongolia are realms of the Kremlin's privileged interests, i.e. sphere of influence. This view stems from both Imperial and Soviet legacies, which manifest themselves in cultural, political, and, to a lesser extent, economic domination of the RF in most of the mentioned states. Within its overarching strategy, the Kremlin views these countries as the vital base of political support (e.g. through the support in the UN General Assembly), young workforce, and even fresh citizens, as well as space for guaranteed military outreach (Berls, 2021).

In South Caucasus, Russia is in the state of a frozen political and military confrontation with Georgia, from which it broke away and recognized as independent states two provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008. This constitutes a classic example of Russia's exploitation of the principle of self-determination of people to its own political benefit, which contrasts with the logic of the rules-based international order. Speaking of Armenia, it is host to one of the few Russian foreign military bases and one of its de-jure allies within the CSTO. The RF also holds strong economic ties with Azerbaijan, which is why the Kremlin has not decisively taken either side in the conflict around Karabakh. Another reason for that is that it does not wish to push Azerbaidjan too far into the Western or Turkish sphere. For the liberal block especially, Azerbaijan is one of the very few "access points" to the Caspian Sea and Central Asia (Iskandarov et al., 2019). Also, by leveraging the Karabakh issues, Moscow also tries to undermine the relatively liberal government led by Pashinyan (Goble, 2018).

In turn, Central Asian authoritarian regimes play a vital role in the shallow facade of political support of "Eurasianism" and the wider "just multipolar world" as in the Russian interpretation. Using cultural links, the dependent status of the economies, and interpersonal relationships with local elites, the RF manipulates the local leadership to at least formally share pro-Russian values and vision (Umarov, 2022).

To a lesser extent, the same applies to Mongolia, although this East Asian state stays aside for the RF for several reasons. First, Mongolia is a democratic, relatively liberal country, ranked as a “flawed democracy” in the EIU Index and called “free” by Freedom House (“Democracy Index 2022”, 2023:5; “Mongolia”, 2023). Second, the Russian influence in the country is heavily contested by that of China. Second, the transit routes of oil and gas between the two giants of the non-liberal world pass through the Mongolian territory, thus dissuading both states from an overt push for undisputed domination. In this sense, Mongolia is a key country influencing the bilateral relationship between the RF and China. Recently Russian officials voiced plans to create an “economic corridor Russia - Mongolia - China”, hinting at the further strengthening of the trilateral dependence (Sleptsov, 2022). Russian authorities perceive the Western (including British) influence in Mongolia in the following way: “The US and Western countries are actively using soft power in Mongolia, actively pushing the Russian language, Russian education and imposing Western values on Mongolian society” (Berezhnykh, 2019). In turn, the spirit of the cultural relationship between Ulan-Bator and Moscow relies upon the so-called traditional values and the shared memory of World War Two (“Good neighbors and a single spirit”, 2019).

5.2.2 How does this practice threaten the UK's interest in the region?

IR23 puts “contesting malign Russian influence on the world stage” as one of the pillars of its updated Russia strategy. In the same paragraph, Southern Caucasus, Central Asia, and Mongolia are collectively mentioned as the area where the UK will aim to “boost their prosperity, security, and resilience to Russian interference” (HM Government, 2023a:42).

Specifically, in Southern Caucasus, the Russian peacekeeping initiatives in Karabakh prevent Baku from fully securing the region and thus slow down the expansion of the British energy-sector companies in the territories captured by the Azerbaijani forces (Dowsett, 2021). In Armenia, Moscow constantly blackmails the local liberal government due to its dependence on the Russian military force and economic ties (Batashvili, 2019). In turn, the longevity of Central Asian authoritarian regimes, based on corruption and Russian support, hinders the development of civil society and, therefore, liberal values in these countries, making them unable to willingly choose a democratic rule. In Mongolia too, Russian influence aims to strengthen the economic interdependence of the country and thus narrow its political options.

5.2.3 How does the UK respond within the tenets of competitive liberalism?

On this “Asian” flank of its Russian strategy, the UK has limited abilities to project hard power to advance its interests due to geographical positioning, far from the British homeland, and void of any maritime connection. Thus, here London relies exclusively on soft means, such as economic levers, diplomacy, NGOs, and educational or good governance initiatives. Although the UK is not a major player in these regions, it manages to challenge the RF wherever possible.

When it comes to Southern Caucasus, the main pillar of the local British anti-Russia strategy is deterrence and containment of the Russian military presence and threat in the region. In Georgia, the country which suffered significant territorial and human losses at the hands of the RF, the UK does so by “using our regional defence team in Tbilisi and drawing on cross-government expertise, and multilaterally via our engagement with NATO, in particular through our contribution to the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package, and by encouraging EU action on hybrid threat to the region” (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2019).

Then, within the theme of the Karabakh conflict, the UK makes attempts to weaken the Kremlin’s position in the niche of the main peacekeeping player by actively trying to broker a peaceful settlement between Azerbaijan and Armenia with no regard to Moscow’s opinion or the presence of their peacekeepers. The visit to South Caucasus by the UK Minister for European Affairs Leo Docherty is one example of these efforts (Murshud, 2023). Importantly, the UK openly favors the current balance of power between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which is heavily leaned in favor of the latter, especially after the latest war in Karabakh in the autumn of 2021. It is manifested in the recognition of the disputed territories as rightfully Azerbaijani territory and the absence of open condemnation of the ongoing advances of the Azerbaijani army in the region (Embassy of The Republic of Azerbaijan, 2023). Besides heavy investment in the oil and gas sector of Azerbaijan, which itself is a competitor of the RF in this market, the UK bets on the most capable military and political force in the Southern Caucasus to balance against Moscow.

In Central Asia, even more remote from the UK than Southern Caucasus, the British strategy has also received a noticeable impulse since the publication of IR21. For instance,

in the context of soft power, in 2021 British Council announced the creation of Creative Central Asia Network (CCAN), an association of content creators and artists that fosters the development of youth and civil society in the region (“About Us”, 2021). The role of the region in the wider framework of the British anti-Russian strategy is noticed even by former MPs, one of whom said that “Central Asia should be an integral part of the UK’s strategy – a link between our commitments to promoting security in Europe and expanding economic and political influence in Asia” in the backdrop of the attempts of the local leaders to gradually leave the Moscow’s orbit (Ottaway, 2022). Speaking of economic influence, UK Department for Business and Trade encourages British investment in the region using the narrative saying that “Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the resulting impact of international sanctions, Central Asia is once again finding itself as a corridor for the supply trains and trade routes linking Europe to Asia through the Caspian and Black Seas” (“The rise of Central Asia”, 2023). This way, the UK attempts to build more tangible links with Central Asian governments and replace the Russian capital.

In Mongolia, the UK also tries to alleviate the Russian (and Chinese) economic pressure by offering cooperation and investment in the fintech sector (British Embassy Ulaanbaatar, 2023). Mongolian officials openly state the hopes they have for the UK to bolster their economic independence. In one of the bilateral public events involving the British envoy to Mongolia, Deputy Prime Minister of Mongolia Amarsaikhan Sainbuyan said that “we seek an enhanced economic independence which requires a greater sense of energy security, transport and infrastructure opportunities in domestic power generation.” In his turn, the British Trade envoy, Daniel Kawczynski, promised active British investment with government support at the Mongolia-UK business forum (Munkhzul, 2022). Besides economics, the positive influence of the UK is noticeable in more soft-power realms, such as the creative industry, where the Mongolian government expresses the desire to replicate British success stories and hires British consultants (Clarence-Smith, 2022). This comes in the absence of similar developments from the Russian side, despite the shared history and border, and might significantly hinder Moscow’s cultural weight in the long run.

5.3 Comparison

The two reviewed cases provide an example of how Russian and British national interests and foreign strategies clash in the European and Asian theatres, respectively. The nature of the threat the RF emanates in the European case is for the most part military, hard-power

force opposing British allies and the UK itself (see Appendix no.2). In turn, in Asia, the threat to the UK interests is the overall “soft” malign activity of the RF, its support of authoritarian regimes, its exploitation of less-developed countries, and the obstacles the Kremlin creates for UK businesses and diplomacy (see Appendix no.3). The UK’s transition to a more robust and ambitious stance on Russian matters manifests itself in the actions undertaken to counter the mentioned threat since 2021. Both cases demonstrate that the Russian policy practice directly opposes the UK's on-the-ground interests and aims, which underpins its status as the most acute direct threat in the framework of British competitive liberalism.

6 Conclusion

This thesis inquired about why is the RF considered the main direct threat to the UK and the “most urgent” foreign policy priority. A comprehensive answer to this question was sourced from the official documentary sources of the Crown and affiliated people, theory of international relations, political science, and practical observations of the foreign conduct of the UK. Put in a single statement, the response to the mentioned inquiry is that the Russian Federation is viewed this way by the United Kingdom due to 1) its total opposition to the British vision of the international system in ethical and practical terms; 2) the threat it poses to the UK’s vital external interests in international security, free trade, and liberal values 3) the threat it poses to the key UK’s inner interests of sovereignty, security, and prosperity; 4) numerous on-the-ground areas of competing cultural, economic and political interests, not always colored by ideology;

The design of the thesis aimed to fully grasp all the nuances of such a broad inquiry and thus contribute to the fields of international relations, international security, and political science by providing insight into British foreign policy thinking. The thesis partially closes the existing gap in understanding the subjective reasons behind the deep division and warlike animosity between the UK and the RF, while also contributing to the picture of the global competition between liberal and non-liberal actors.

The limitations of the work can be attributed to, first of all, publicly inaccessible government papers, analysis of which would have otherwise contributed to the understanding of the British foreign policy rationale. The same also applies to other confidential information related to the practical policymaking with regard to the RF, e.g., the content of meetings of UK diplomatic staff with British investors overseas (as in the Azerbaijani case). Second, the scope of the thesis does not capture those drivers of the British foreign policy that are tied to personal beliefs, emotions, and interests of individual policymakers due to the difficulty of researching or assessing such matters. Third, in terms of Russo-British competition in the field of economics and trade, no in-depth analysis is included in this thesis due to the methodological constraints of a qualitative study and shifted focus. And fourth, the two presented case studies naturally do not capture the entire array of the on-the-ground reasons behind the British stance against the RF, for instance,

those related to the Middle East and North Africa, as well as Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

Speaking of possible vectors of further research on the topic related to contemporary Russo-British relations, the most obvious gap in this realm concerns the Russian perspective on the UK and the analysis of the specificities of Moscow's strategy towards London in contrast to that towards the rest of the Western countries. Additionally, there is a lack of meaningful reporting on the economic impact of the global trade and markets being jeopardized by the Russo-Ukrainian war, as felt by the UK specifically, and the ramifications it has in the domain of international relations. The UK's role as the liberal soft power superpower is another area needing fresh academic contribution.

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List of Appendices

Appendix no. 1: Guiding concepts of the foreign policy of the post-Cold War UK (figure)



Appendix no. 2: Main axis of conflict interaction between the UK and the RF in the Arctic, Baltics and Eastern Europe (figure)

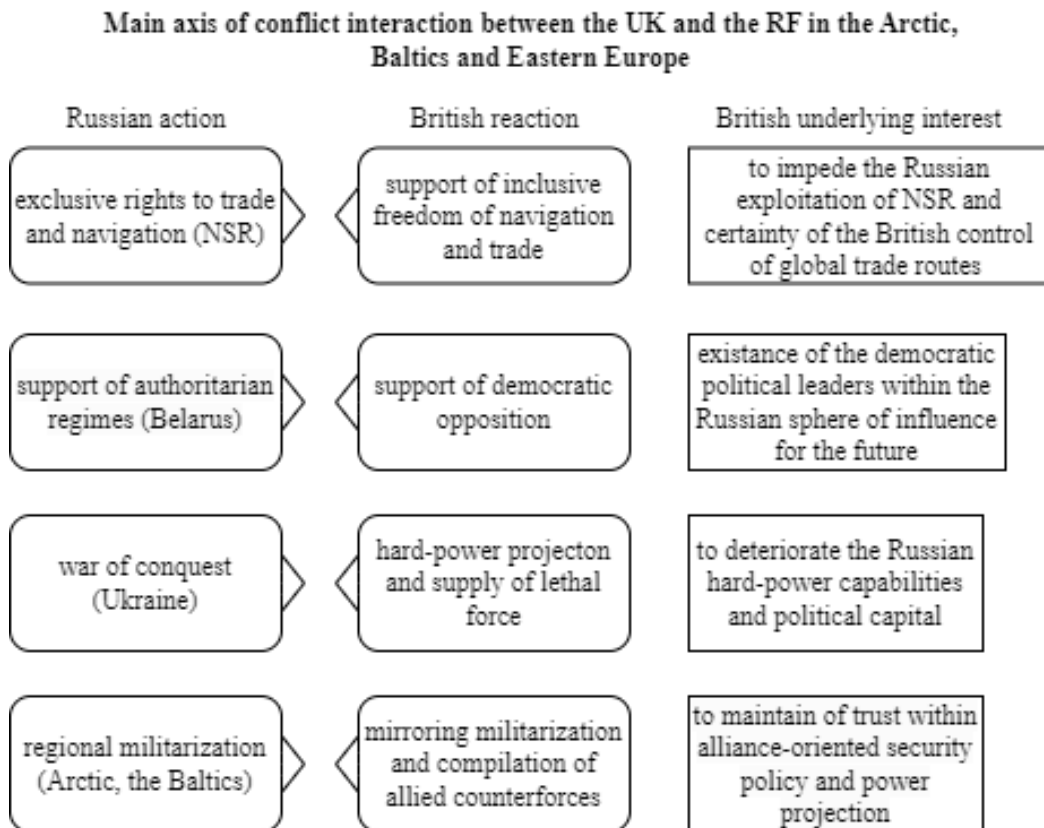


Figure 2. Made by author

Appendix no. 3: Main axis of conflict interaction between the UK and the RF in the Southern Caucasus, Central Asia and Mongolia (figure)

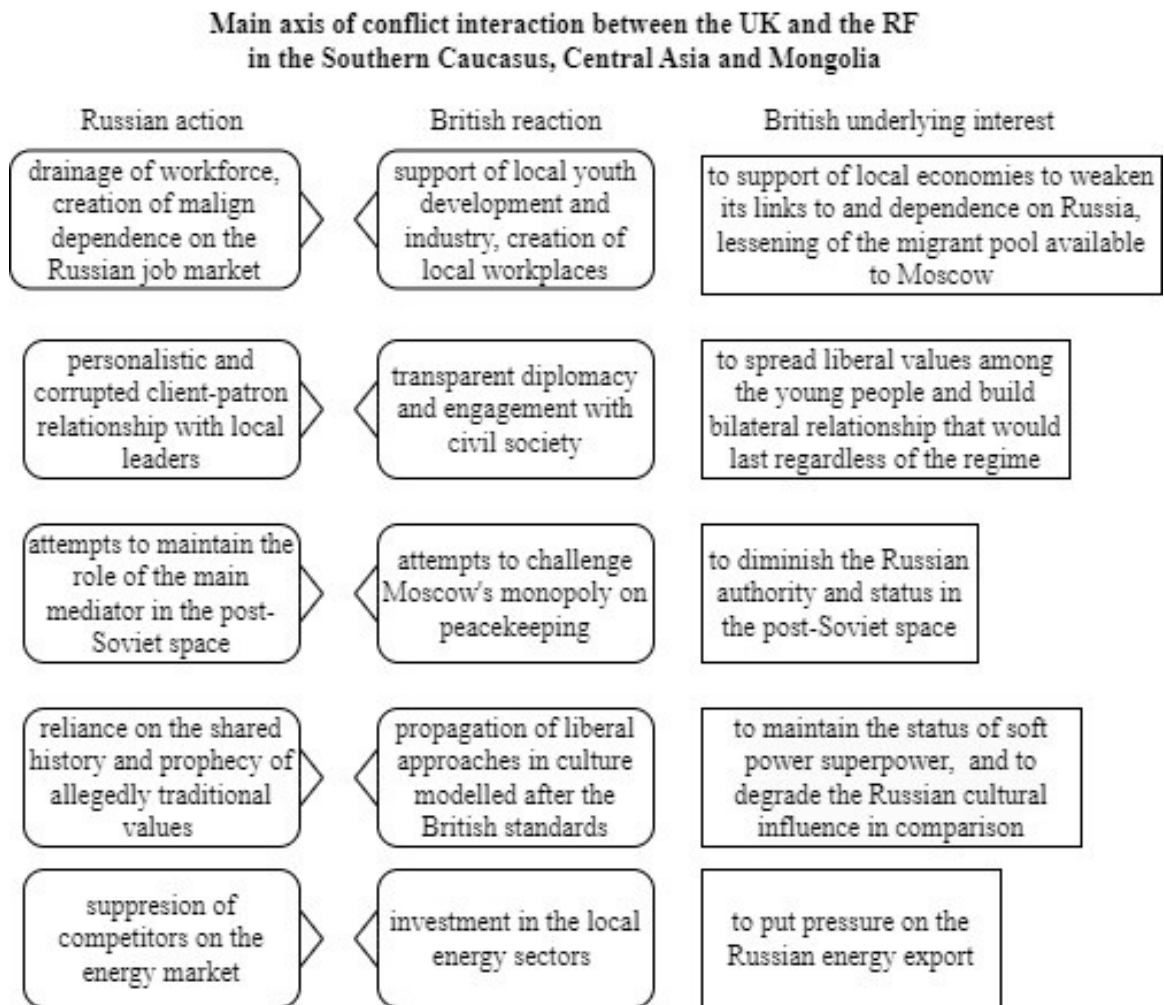


Figure 3. Made by author