

# The UK's Place in the World: Past Power, Present Puzzles, Future Potential

Ed Smith, former chair NHS Improvement.

Where does Britain stand in the world today? It's a question rarely asked with the seriousness it deserves. Politicians talk about "Global Britain" as though a slogan can mask the fact that influence, like muscle, atrophies when neglected. If we benchmark the UK against key global powers; China, India, the USA and regional forces like Brazil, Australia, and Nigeria, the picture is more complicated. Not bleak, but certainly sobering.

## Raw Materials and Food Security: A Nation of Dependency

The UK is an island of consumers, not producers.

We import most of our raw materials. What oil and gas remains in the North Sea are dwindling.

Our food security has improved since wartime rationing, but we still import about 40% of what we eat and labour shortages and supply chain fragilities revealed during COVID have not gone away. Farming is in a difficult place.

Compare this with the US, Australia, Brazil or Nigeria... nations that sit atop vast natural resources and export surpluses. Even China, despite resource vulnerabilities, has built strategic alliances to lock in supply with its global investment in the Belt and Road programme.

The UK, meanwhile, has chosen trade deals over self-sufficiency and now finds itself exposed.

## Population Pressure

We are one of the most densely populated countries in Europe. That brings stress to housing, transport, water, and the NHS.

While the USA and Australia have room to expand, and even India is investing in smart urbanisation, Britain's overbuild of the South

East contrasts with underinvestment in the North and Midlands. Levelling up was a slogan not a delivery plan.

What now?

## Public Spending and Borrowing: A House with Structural Cracks

The UK has borrowed heavily. First to cushion austerity, then to prop up COVID recovery, and now to pay for cost-of-living interventions and



unfunded public sector pensions and irrecoverable student loans

With productivity flat and tax revenues under strain, we have been and will continue to mortgage future resilience. Compare that to Germany's fiscal discipline, or the US's advantage in borrowing its own currency and we're caught in a bind: needing to invest but afraid to spend with a debt mountain already.

### **GDP Growth per Head: The Hidden Recession**

Economic growth headlines often mask a more relevant metric: growth per person. Here, the UK is trailing. Productivity has stalled since 2008. Real wages are stagnant. Unlike the US, which fuels growth through innovation, or Ireland, which attracts tech giants through tax strategy, the UK is grinding along.

Emerging nations like India and China are growing faster... albeit from a lower base. The UK is neither catching up nor pulling ahead. We are just... standing still-which in reality, means we are going backwards.

### **Diplomacy and Reach: Still Punching Above Our Weight, But for How Long?**

The UK retains many trappings of a top-tier nation: UN Security Council seat, NATO leadership, the Commonwealth,

world-class universities, a globally trusted legal system.

But our reach no longer matches our grasp. Brexit has cut our influence in Europe. Soft power remains strong, but is underfunded. Trade deals are patchwork.

China expands through investment; the US through security; the UK through nostalgia.

The strategy feels tired.

### **Government Effectiveness: National Confusion, Local Starvation**

Britain's government machinery is creaking.

Constant ministerial churn. Policies made for headlines, not implementation.

Local government, where many of life's basic services sit is underfunded, undervalued, and often ignored.

Compare that to federal systems like Australia or the US, where localities have real autonomy.

Or even China, where command structures, while authoritarian, at least delivers to many if not all.

The UK lurches from centralisation to fragmentation, with little clarity about who is responsible for what and how they are really held accountable.

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## **Innovation and Growth: World-Class Ideas, World-Class Bottlenecks**

In science, Britain still shines. We produce Nobel prizes, lead global research, and invent technologies the world wants.

But, we are poor at turning those breakthroughs into scaled, commercial success. It's the British paradox: discovery without diffusion.

The US gets this right. Linking research, capital, and regulation. China too. The UK talks about "levelling up," but doesn't back innovation clusters or support scale-up with enough muscle.

**S**o **Where Does That Leave Us?**  
In global terms, the UK remains a mid-weight power with heavyweight history. But history is no foundation for strategy. We are neither the workshop of the world nor the political pivot of Europe.

We have extraordinary assets; language, law, learning, and legacy but we have yet to decide how to use them.

Regionally, we are outside the EU looking in.

Economically, we are outpaced by Asia. Politically, we are distracted by ourselves.

## **The Way Forward?**

We need to stop thinking like a former empire and start behaving like a future-focused nation.

Understand that funding precious public services like the NHS, means the health of the nation depends on the wealth of the nation.

### **That means:**

Investing in resilience; food, energy, and infrastructure. Decentralising governance;

trusting regions to deliver.

Fixing the productivity puzzle; skills, automation, and meaningful incentives. Backing innovation all the way to market; not just lab work.

Reengaging with Europe; pragmatically, not politically.

The UK has the brains, the institutions, and the soft power to matter in the 21st century. But only if we stop mistaking slogans for strategy.

We are not lost. But, we are drifting. It's time to reset the compass.