

Situation Estimate



Sunak and British Foreign Policy

Determinants and Priorities

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December 2022

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Dimensions for Strategic Studies

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Introduction



Pardon may be sought for those who believe that the appointment of Rishi Sunak as the new Prime Minister of the United Kingdom will have a positive impact on Britain's foreign policy. For many, his accession to the post of prime minister is an important moment in the country's culture, and a milestone even for the Indian diaspora in Britain and ethnic minorities in general. Although his enormous personal wealth makes him a member of the global elite rather than an ordinary person, the image of an Indian prime minister in Britain has been a source of great excitement. Is it possible -besides the symbolism of that scene- to expect to see major changes in the UK's foreign policy?

First: Factors Affecting Sunak's External Agenda

A set of key factors that will influence the foreign policy agenda of British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak will arise:

1. Work experience:

Unlike his predecessors, Boris Johnson and Liz Truss, Sunak has very little experience in foreign policy. He has never held a post in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the commonwealth. This may mean that the 42-year-old man will be the status quo prime minister differently from his predecessors and is unlikely to pursue foreign policy goals radically different from those set by senior officials in the Foreign Office. It should also be noted that Sunak has no history of specific foreign policy positions, apart from minor differences in international finance and the link to domestic monetary policy.

2. Political background:

From the perspective of political trends, it can be said that Sunak - unlike former UK prime ministers- does not seem to be a strong supporter of Neo-conservative politics in the Middle East. He is not decisively a Neo-conservative, which means that he is unlikely to support the hard-line and aggressive agenda of the American right, and would be less enthusiastic about the sanctions imposed on Russia, China, Iran, and others, especially secondary sanctions.

Despite his outspoken support for Ukraine, as evidenced by his surprise visit to Ukraine in November 2022 and his meeting with President Vladimir Zelenski, he will not display the same enthusiasm and passion as former Prime Minister Johnson, but Sunak will be under considerable pressure from international financiers to pursue a negotiated settlement in Ukraine.

3. Race inheritance:

Much has been said about his Indian background and Hindutva activists have been seen celebrating the appointment of Sunak. None of these issues; however, is likely to have any impact on his foreign policy. The UK's intimate relationship with India and P.M. Modi (despite its problems) dates back to before Sunak and even to the years of former British Prime Minister Cameron. Therefore, Sunak will not have to do much for a relationship that is enduring and stable for long decades.

After Brexit, Sunak may be looking to build on the existing relationship with India, but this will be the result of economic imperatives rather than Sunak's background. There is also little to suggest that he (or his wife) would prefer India in international politics, or vice versa. For Sunak the main issue regarding India is to redouble efforts with the US to keep Modi away from his close ties with Russia and Iran (and the leverage he has for rapprochement between India and China).

4. Political rivalry within the Conservative Party:

One of the factors governing Sunak's foreign policy is the multiplicity of rival blocs within the Conservative Party. There are many right-wing-military blocs that support the war in Ukraine, and others that are anti-European Union in support of Brexit and call for a focus on local affairs, and those that have links with the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and others. There is tension between those who talk about the war with Russia and China and those who are more interested in domestic economic policy and retaining their seats in the 2024 election. These currents were reconciled in a rather flimsy way by trying to blame Russia and the Ukrainian war for Britain's economic problems.

Opinion polls indicate that the public does not believe the narrative of "blaming Russia"⁽¹⁾. A recent poll by Ipsos Mori revealed⁽²⁾ that 64% of British believe that conservative government economic policies contribute to the rising cost-of-living crises.

In addition to stabilizing the economy, Sunak's main task is to reduce the magnitude of the conservatives defeat in the 2024 elections, leaving him very little room for competition, or freedom of movement to pursue a foreign policy path that helps conservatives in this regard.

(1) George Eaton, Why the Tories can't blame the Ukraine war for the living standards crisis, New Statesman, 21 March 2022, visiting: 14-12-2022. Link: <https://bit.ly/3hjRCxf>

(2) Keiran Pedley, Gideon Skinner & Cameron Garrett, Two-thirds of Britons do not trust the Conservatives to reduce the cost of living, IPSOS, 29 March 2022. Visiting 14-12-2022, link: <https://bit.ly/3hsYus3>

Second: The foreign policy directions and priorities of Sunak:

Within the framework of the above factors and considerations, it can be said that the foreign policy of British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak will be based on a number of basic orientations and priorities, including:

1.Economic Priority:

As the UK experiences severe economic crises with cost-of-living implications, Sunak is expected to place a high priority on addressing the deterioration of domestic finances, which has been hit hard in recent months. There are no decisive indications that there will be a noticeable change in the UK's strategic approach to current global issues; because fundamentally, the new Prime Minister's position will depend on the economic situation and the need for financial stability in the UK. His position will be driven by the UK's economic interests, not by what should be the principles and responsibilities of the state on the global arena.

2.Middle East:

With regard to the Middle East, Sunak will try to maintain Saudi Arabia's harmonious with the West, not only because the Kingdom is an old ally and a large market for British goods, but also because the Saudis have started hedging their bets with the West, and have tended to tighten relations with China and Russia. Sunak does not want Riyadh to drift away in the orbit of Moscow and Beijing, and the United States is likely to rely on Sunak in this regard, in light of the great fears in Washington about Saudi Arabia's recent transformations, given the historical role of Saudi Arabia for more than half a century as a guarantor of the petrodollar system based on linking oil exports to the dollar, which has had the greatest impact⁽³⁾ on the stability and dominance of the American currency globally.

(3) Nick Giamb Bruno, Petrodollar System Flirts with Collapse... What It Means for Gold, Oil, and the Dollar, International Man, visiting 14-12-2022, link: <https://bit.ly/3WbO5zu>

The war in Ukraine has exposed the weakness of the West: Moreover, as alliances have shifted, the Gulf states have more power, thanks to the trend of oil prices rising to the highest level, with the West getting increasingly concerned about the future and impact of the oil price on the economy, especially after Saudi Arabia challenged Western dominance by reducing oil production through OPEC +. Such a move harmed Western economies during a critical period for Western governments struggle to control economic conditions as the cost of living rose after the rise in energy prices. It also challenged the dominance of the dollar earlier in the year by considering accepting payments in CNY.

To underscore the importance of the Gulf states in British foreign policy, it should be noted that Sunak has not publicly condemned Qatar despite the recent protest over Doha for hosting the World Cup. Sunak believes that Qatar is a major investor in the United Kingdom; and he will not put this at risk. Besides, there are many representatives of the Conservative Party who have close relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, and they will be under pressure to criticize Qatar at the moment due to popular pressure, or at least to reduce the useful public relations that Qatar may receive. It is clear that they were not part of the media campaign targeting Qatar at the very least. Some, however, may resort to a policy of gestures, because of the British media attack on Qatar and its criticism of what they claim to be violations of human rights in Qatar, against the background of organizing the FIFA World Cup. All that can be characterized as hypocrisy and double standards.

3. "Arab-Israeli" conflict:

In sensitive issues such as Israel and Palestine, Sunak is unlikely to change course in any way. The first thing he had done after taking office was to abandon his predecessor's controversial plan to move the UK embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. And that does not mean Sunak is in any way pro-Palestine. He, for example, said: Jerusalem is Israel's "historic capital". Moreover⁽⁴⁾, the United Kingdom's foreign policy towards this region is not determined by a single individual, including the Prime Minister. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, together with right-wing think tanks such as the Policy Exchange and pro-Israel lobby groups, have greater influence when it comes to Israel and Palestine.

(4) Middle East Monitor, UK: Sunak says Jerusalem is Israel's 'historic capital', August 17, 2022, visiting 14-12-2022, link: <https://bit.ly/3WiwSEQ>

Conclusion




Under the aforementioned considerations, Sunak, as prime minister, will seek to fix the British economy first, limiting the electoral damage inflicted on the Conservatives until the next general election, as many view Sunak as “the embodiment of the globalized economic and political system” () that is trying to save the economy that He is in a dying state, especially as Sunak is seen as a safe and reliable candidate, an image the Conservatives hope will make him more attractive to the British public than Johnson or Lisa Terrace..

Since domestic politics is the first priority, Sunak is likely to be a domestic prime minister and is unlikely to make a fuss on any major foreign policy issue. Also, given his lack of real foreign policy experience, he would be more dependent on senior officials in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office



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