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The British Election: Some Possible International Consequences

By Paul Michael Hedges

Synopsis

Some initiatives of the new Conservative Government in the United Kingdom may have potentially negative national and international repercussions, including for Southeast Asia. Three prominent examples are highlighted.

Commentary

THE BRITISH Conservative Party, under Prime Minister David Cameron, has had a surprise election win following their coalition with the Liberal Democrats and now wish to push ahead with some previously blocked initiatives. Some of these may have international impacts beyond the United Kingdom, three of which are of particular significance: a referendum on Europe; the British Bill of Rights; and, counter extremism policies.

It is too early to say what all of these will look like or their outcomes, therefore some broad predictions and indications are advanced.

Europe: In or Out?

The UK has often seen itself as somewhat different, and slightly divorced, from mainland Europe. Nevertheless, since 1973 it has been part of what is now the European Union (EU), but recent years have seen a growing Euroscepticism. In 1973, entry into Europe, although opposed by many, was done for several basic reasons: a united mainland Europe was starting to outpace the UK economically; the trading advantages of the Commonwealth were not as profitable as predicted; the so-called special relationship with the United States was not a major trading advantage.

While some aspects of the EU have not worked in the UK's favour, it remains the main trading partner and most businesses seem keen to keep the relationship. Indeed, many international corporations are considering or have threatened relocating to the mainland if the UK leaves the EU.

Nevertheless, there is much popular suspicion, and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) has grown from nothing to a substantial political force mainly based on its opposition to the EU and

immigration. The Conservative Government has promised an in-out referendum by the end of 2017 and says its position will rest on planned renegotiations of treaty obligations.

Consequences of leaving Europe

The referendum is arguably a dangerous and populist move done to sway potential UKIP supporters and keep Conservative Eurosceptics on board. Exiting the EU will almost certainly do substantial economic damage. Eurosceptics argue that if the UK leaves it will be able to negotiate free trade agreements with the EU meaning that nothing will change; however, a more realist position suggests that the Germans and others would not forgive the UK for exiting and that such privileges would be withheld.

This question is also complicated by the clear Scottish desire to remain in Europe, and if the UK as a whole leaves then cries for a referendum on Scottish independence will return with renewed force, potentially splitting the country further.

British Rights or Human Rights?

Partly, unhappiness with Europe is a perception that British law is regularly overruled in favour of foreign criminals and terrorists by EU directives on Human Rights enforced through the Human Rights Act (HRA) of 1998. This is a perception fuelled by Eurosceptic politicians and elements of the media, whereas, as a piece of British legislation, the HRA operates within the remit of the national legal system.

Indeed, now cases where there are potential conflicts between British law and international Human Rights legislation – specifically the European Human Rights Convention of 1953 – can be handled by the UK Supreme Court rather than being passed to the European Court in Strasbourg. Under judicial review it may also raise issues where it seems the UK is not fulfilling its international obligations, but any changes are only at the discretion of parliament; a high profile case of this type concerned the UK government refusing prisoners the right to vote. Nevertheless, the Government wishes to repeal the HRA and introduce a British Bill of Rights.

The proposed British Bill of Rights will probably not substantially affect legal rulings because if it makes international Human Rights standards enforceable in British law it will essentially restate what already happens. It is, though, arguably very dangerous because it certainly gives the impression – and the rhetoric coming from the Conservative Party backs this up – that the UK does not have to respect any international Human Rights it does not like or finds politically inconvenient.

As such, its message to the world is that Human Rights are more or less optional and countries can pick and choose. It will therefore greatly weaken the perception of the UK's moral authority on the international stage if it wishes to criticise Human Rights abuses in other countries, and may greatly weaken the international rule of law in this regard.

Countering extremism?

The government has made clear that it wishes to have new laws which restrict what it terms "extremism". As announced, they contain measures targeting incitement to violence and hate speech, therefore it is not clear what it adds to existing legislation. It is also clearly aimed at one particular demographic (despite some protestations to the contrary): the Muslim community. Like the Prevent agenda, a previous UK government anti-terrorism/ extremism measure, it seems likely to increase tensions and suspicions from within this community.

Indeed, there seem to be no positive measures to promote belonging or cohesion, simply punitive measures criminalising anyone who can be branded by the very vague label "extremism". It is therefore likely to be counterproductive and push further numbers of young people into militant action or groups nationally and globally who feel further victimised by Western governments.

Outlook

While I have suggested that these three policy areas are likely to have negative consequences, I do

not wish to suggest that every policy of the new Conservative Government is flawed on a national or international basis, or even that most of their policies will have negative consequences. Nevertheless, it seems clear that these three high profile initiatives which have international aspects are potentially detrimental both to the UK and to the global community.

For Southeast Asia, a UK outside the EU will be a less attractive business partner; no longer a potential gateway to Europe and weakened economically. Likewise, without the UK, the EU would lose some of its prestige as a financial and economic centre. The same will be true in terms of diplomatic leverage: Europe would be weakened militarily and economically; and, the UK would be an isolated voice. However, the UK would be likely to seek trading agreements and partners with the region, especially Commonwealth nations.

Regionally, the UK is a strong advocate of human rights and this is unlikely to change, however, other countries may feel more able to challenge it and suggest that it is in no position to lecture them. Finally, if more British citizens join militant groups the immediate impact is likely to be in Iraq and Syria. This may, though, have a knock-on effect in terms of the perceived effectiveness of groups like ISIS/ Daesh encouraging militant groups in Malaysia and elsewhere.

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