

# On the fall out from the Syria vote: it's time for peac...

Published: January 13, 2026, 8:31 am

---

It would be hard not to comment on the fall out [from the Syria vote in the House of Commons last night](#).

Let's start by saying the obvious: the aim has to be peace in Syria. And the recognition has to be that eventually this will be a political, and not a military process. Peace will, eventually, have to reign in that state. I am well aware it is not. I am well aware that there are atrocities going on - and not just the use of chemical weapons, abhorrent as that is. And the atrocities are, I am sure, on all sides. That is what happens in civil war. It disgusts us, and rightly so.

But this is a civil war: atrocities are particularly acute it seems in such conflicts. The ability of the human being to inflict pain on those closest to them is well known. And the question always has to be how can that process be mitigated and dialogue, reconciliation and healing begin?

I think the Commons recognised that last night. It realised that the case for escalating a civil conflict did not exist - especially when in the confused state of that war the evidence of blame for the latest atrocity is not absolutely clear.

That, I think, has enormous significance. The implication of rejecting the US demand for action, for example, is enormous: it may be safe to assume the 'special relationship is dead'. Politically it's as important to note that the neoconservative logic that has dominated that relationship for so many years may have died with it. No wonder Michael Gove was reported to be incandescent with rage.

But if that is the case then the UK's military spending - way out of proportion to our size - needs to be curtailed. There is no point spending a fortune on the machinery of war (for our defence needs are limited) when we are no longer willing to go to war whenever the Pentagon demands.

Trident is the very obvious focus for this consideration: parliament would not sanction supposedly limited war against Syria. Is there any chance at all it would ever, in that case, sanction the release of nuclear missiles? I think not. And the precedent for doing

so on the basis of the Royal prerogative is, I think, now dead. Miliband's finest moment yesterday was in keeping a cool enough head to ask about that issue in the immediate aftermath of the announcement of the results of voting. This is a scheme now simply waiting to be scrapped.

And whilst we will still need armed forces their focus does, surely, have to change if we are not willing to go to war any more? Isn't it time for the UK to take a lead in peace-making? What then is the use of two new aircraft carriers? As helicopter ships they may have a role for delivering aid and peacekeeping troops, but why are we equipping them for fighter planes intended to launch missile attacks when it is fairly clear that parliament is increasingly reluctant in the light of evidence and experience (not just Iraq, but Libya too) to engage again and again in conflict which does not appear to deliver anything like the intended consequences and can clearly cause harm?

More fundamentally, a re-appraisal of just what the UK is might be in progress. A country that is not even sure it is a country any more - and the Scottish independence vote gives good reason for doubt on that issue as I do not see a 'No' vote as anything like a foregone conclusion - has a real problem in projecting itself as an international force. I'm not convinced we are. Our economy has changed. Our economic legacy is tainted by being a major contributor to the global financial crash in 2008. Our self perception has changed. Our standing as a major nation based on the legacy of the Second World War is now history.

Now this could be seen as a blow to the UK - but only, if truth be told, for a tiny minority in the Westminster bubble. Beyond that no-one really thinks we're now a major power. But the dividends of becoming a peace-monger (albeit, I stress, an active one, with the forces needed to undertake that role) are enormous. Cancelling Trident alone releases valuable resources that will reduce the demand for austerity. Changing military procurement across a wide range of issues would have much the same effect. A defence force costs less to run than an offence force: peacekeeping, whilst obviously costly, is much cheaper than maintaining forces for aggression.

The reality is that there are wounds at home that need healing as well as wounds internationally. Last night's vote on Syria was, I think, pivotal in the history of UK foreign relations. Staggeringly a Prime Minister failed to get his way on going to war - not least from his own party. The history of the Blair years has come home to roost: aggression first and questions later is no longer acceptable. That's why we need to now question why we might be aggressive at all in future.

The UK has an enormous role to play in foreign policy, but not, I might suggest, the one it has played to date. And it will be all the better for it, because some of the bravado of the super-power has sustained a political elite willing to ignore the needs of people in this country. That bravado will disappear if the bubble of UK supremacy is burst. A more

humble UK may well be a better UK and Im for one, would welcome that.