British foreign policy has tried to punch above its weight for the past half-century, while balancing between different sets of international allegiances. For Winston Churchill, Britain’s loss of empire could be compensated by playing a role in ‘three circles’ – the British Commonwealth and Empire, as it still was, the transatlantic Anglo-Saxon partnership, and the links with our continental European neighbours. Later, as the Commonwealth connection shifted from apparent asset to apparent burden – which happened in the course of the 1970s, as the problems of Rhodesia/Zimbabwe loomed over British governments, and as the strength of the African governments within the Commonwealth replaced deference to Britain with demands on Britain – the preferred image shifted from three circles to two stepping-off points, the United States and Western Europe, with Britain acting as the ‘bridge’ between them.

This long-term balancing act has required British prime ministers and foreign secretaries to be highly acrobatic: dashing from capital to capital, promoting summits, UN resolutions, multilateral compromises. Harold Macmillan was the first Prime Minister to make constant travel a feature of Britain’s claim to exceptional international influence; Beyond the Fringe wonderfully caricatured his 1959 election broadcast, in which he gestured at a large globe to show how far and how often he had travelled to promote international order. Tony Blair has done more: Peter Riddell recounts (in Hug Them Close) that in the eight weeks after September 11th 2001 alone Blair covered more than 40,000 miles, on 31 flights, with 54 meetings with foreign leaders. And in support of this continued world role British troops have been more actively deployed than any those of any other European power – including France since the withdrawal from Algeria in 1962.

It’s been very difficult for successive prime ministers to maintain the balance which they claimed was essential to the maintenance of Britain’s influence and prestige. Harold Macmillan proclaimed the ‘Winds of Change’ within the Commonwealth, and attempted to take Britain closer to what he called ‘the Common Market’; but the Pentagon’s cancellation of Skybolt tripped him up, and he fell out of the European circle as he reached to hold on to the American. Harold Wilson maintained his balance astonishingly well in his first term as Prime Minister, declining to commit British troops to the mistaken US war in Vietnam without upsetting Washington too much, and renewing Britain’s application to join the EEC. But in his second term both he and Jim Callaghan were pulled back from closer cooperation within the European Community that Britain had now joined by the divisions within their own party.

It’s now virtually forgotten that continental governments welcomed Britain’s inexperienced new prime minister in 1979, as a political leader who approached European cooperation
without ideological pre-conceptions. Partly because of the patronising attitudes that Chancellor Schmidt and President Giscard d’Estaing adopted towards her, and partly because of their stubborn defence of the indefensible arrangements for the Community budget, Mrs. Thatcher acquired such pre-conceptions. Her balance tipped further towards the west as her personal relationship with President Reagan deepened – to bring her down when the first President Bush declared that Germany was America’s preferred ‘strategic partner’ in Europe, and when her overt antagonism to German re-unification antagonised her own Cabinet. Since then we have been through two further cycles of Prime Minister coming into office declaring their intention to put Britain ‘at the heart of Europe’, and ending up by leaving it at the margins: first with John Major, and now with Tony Blair. The current Prime Minister, at least, has succeeded in putting Britain in the hearts of the American public, with his powerful articulation of the goals of Western policy to American audiences; but this has not brought him the influence over US foreign policy for which he hoped.

In 1997 it looked as if both ends of the bridge had collapsed. John Major’s government had little credibility with the Clinton Administration in Washington; while other European governments had delayed the end game of the negotiations for the Treaty of Amsterdam until after the British election, in the confident hope that the Conservatives would lose. And, on winning the election, New Labour reasserted these ‘guiding light’ principles of British foreign policy – as Tony Blair described them to the Lord Mayor’s banquet on November 10th 1997. British foreign policy, he argued, should aim to be

Strong in Europe and strong with the US. There is no choice between the two. Stronger with one means stronger with the other.
Our aim should be to deepen our relationship with the US at all levels. We are the bridge between the US and Europe. Let us use it.

My contention is that the bridge has again collapsed, and that it cannot be rebuilt. It cannot be rebuilt because the assumptions on which the claim that Britain could wield exceptional influence in Washington were already weak, and have now been shown to be without foundation. Long-term trends in world politics, since the end of the Cold War, and within American domestic politics, have left British governments without levers of influence over US Administrations or appeals to shared values that resonate with the US electorate. With Blair, as with Macmillan and Thatcher before him, the cultivation of a special relationship with Washington has proved to be incompatible with close mutual relations with our continental neighbours – even more difficult now that our neighbours no longer depend on American troops in Europe for security against a shared Soviet threat.

Meanwhile, the domestic base for foreign policy has grown more difficult. The absence of any attempt by the Labour Government to persuade its public that Britain’s commitment to the European Union is in the national interest has allowed the Eurosceptic press to entrench a sullen resistance to closer European integration, which threatens to make it impossible to win a referendum on the Constitutional Treaty, let alone on joining the Euro. Yet the Iraq war and its aftermath, and the aggressive and anti-European nationalism of the Bush Administration, have made British voters more sceptical about further subordination of British foreign policy to US-led objectives.

I fear that our present Prime Minister’s credibility with our European partners cannot be re-established. He has invested too much personal and political capital in the American commitment to reverse course, even though that investment has brought him so few of the concessions in US policy which he aimed to achieve. Personal relations, unfortunately, have become a major factor in international politics, as heads of government have succumbed to the glamour of global diplomacy and have usurped the roles of their foreign ministers and diplomatic services; new directions in foreign policy have to await new leaders, without the baggage of past reputation and remembered snubs and slights. I also
conclude that he has lost the ability to persuade the British electorate to accept either a continuation of Britain’s ‘special relationship’ with the United States or a shift back to a closer partnership with Europe. I want therefore to set out an agenda for an incoming Prime Minister, on which to reconstruct a domestic and international foundation for a coherent foreign policy. And I recognise that this will not be easy, now that both ends of the bridge on which successive Prime Ministers have loved to parade have given way.

The end of Atlanticism
The concept of an Atlantic Community based on shared values, and on shared resistance to a common threat, grew out of the Second World War and the subsequent division of Europe. It was always something of an illusion that Britain was uniquely-placed within this community, except as the offshore island from which US aircraft and troops could be despatched to re-secure Western Europe. The German-American relationship was as central during the Cold War, and the Italian-American relationship had deep roots and hidden depths. Britain nevertheless established, and struggled to maintain, a privileged position within NATO, underpinned by the continued deployment of British ships and troops around the world, and by special nuclear and intelligence ties to the USA.

15 years after the Cold War ended, neither NATO as an organization, nor Europe as a region, are central to US security. The Bush Administration would like to use NATO as a source of reinforcement for US operations elsewhere, as in Afghanistan and Iraq; but the absence of consultation over foreign policy or strategy – the atrophy of NATO as a political alliance, with serious political consultation – can only make consent more difficult to win. Coalitions of the willing can only follow the direction given by their leader; while the costs to Britain of maintaining its position as the most willing, in most American military operations, can only rise. NATO remains valuable as a framework for cooperation among the forces of its member states, and for integrating ex-socialist states and armed forces into a multilateral framework for regional security – and, perhaps, for handling an uncertain and still-partly hostile Russia. But we should recognise its limits.

Several of the most severe crises in NATO’s history have been over differences in handling the Middle East: in 1956, 1967, 1973, 1979-81, and again in 2002-3. That makes it peculiarly difficult to maintain the alliance, under an American leadership which sees the ‘Greater Middle East’ as its primary theatre of operations. At the most general level, of course, European governments agree with Washington that the new wave of Islamic terrorism presents a common threat. Yet understandings of that threat, and of the appropriate range of responses to the threat, now differ widely. The gap in understanding is widest on the Israel-Palestine conflict, on which the Bush Administration – and the bulk of the American public – see little wrong with continuing expansion of Israeli settlements, and deny the long-term threat to Israel of occupation and military domination. But differences on the underlying causes of terrorism, on how to promote reform within Arab regimes, on relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia, run deep. European states, with 15 million Muslims amongst their populations, for whom the Arab and Muslim world begins some 15 kilometres from Gibraltar, and a ferry-ride from Brindisi and Syracuse, have legitimate differences of interest – as well as of perception – from the USA; it’s sad that the estimated six million Muslims within the USA have not yet exercised their weight in the American domestic debate.

The struggle against terrorism from within the Muslim world, and the parallel struggle to promote modernization within Arab societies without provoking revolution, is likely to remain a dominant issue in global politics for the foreseeable future. It is not a struggle in which America and Europe will find it easy to stand shoulder to shoulder. The religious intensity with which American politicians and media talk of ‘Islamo-fascism’, their identification of a single global terrorist threat, are not shared in Europe. Divergences in
attitudes to oil consumption and energy conservation, and to the relevance of these issues to policy towards the Middle East (as towards Russia) pull Europeans and Americans further apart.

This is not an issue on which British political leaders can sit in the middle; their public, and their interests, are firmly on the European side. Our Prime Minister hoped that his public support for the Bush Administration’s approach to Iraq would gain an American commitment to push forward with the ‘Road Map’, the path to a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict. He also hoped that it would gain Britain influence over the reconstruction of post-conflict Iraq, and the management of relations with its neighbours. In both of these, without coordination of British diplomacy with our European partners, he has failed.

He has failed, too, to shift American policy towards multilateral cooperation in general, and the UN in particular. This is not surprising; the sheer weight of American military power, and the absence of any coherent diplomatic counterweight, makes the costs and delays of multilateral cooperation much more evident the Washington policy-makers than the benefits. Closer cooperation with other European states – who collectively contribute, with Britain, some 40% of the UN’s budget, and nearly 50% of its peacekeeping budget – and with the major states of south and east Asia, in strengthening international institutions and supporting the rule of international law is the only way to persuade any US administration that multilateral cooperation serves its interests.

The Atlantic Community rested as much on what John Ruggie has called ‘embedded liberalism’ as on the Soviet threat. The shared values which President Roosevelt and Winston Churchill proclaimed in the Atlantic Charter included ‘freedom from want’: defined as ‘the object of securing, for all, improved labor standards, economic advancement and social security’. That Rooseveltian commitment to full employment and social welfare, which reached its apogee in the ‘Great Society’ programme of Lyndon Johnson, has been under sustained attack for the past twenty years within the United States. Advocates of minimal government, of ‘the market state’, have set out to destroy Rooseveltian welfare – with only partial success, but creating an economy and society very different from what it is possible for European societies to become. Whoever wins the Presidential election, the character of the American domestic debate will continue to diverge from the European.

Among British economists, and political leaders, it is a long-established assumption that America represents the future, and continental Europe the past. Under this government, as under its predecessors, ministers have travelled across the Atlantic to learn, and across the Channel to preach – from Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer down. Yet Britain cannot become like America – whether our political leaders want us to or not. We live in a crowded island, in cities, where land is expensive and in short supply and where it is impossible for the middle classes to move out. America’s high labour mobility, the suspicion of government that comes from self-governing communities a thousand miles and more from Washington, the hollowing out of America’s cities: none of these are options for us, any more than they are options for the similarly tightly-packed Dutch or Germans. We need active government; we depend on a higher degree of social peace among urban communities; we need good public transport. For all British discontent with French and German resistance to accept the Lisbon Agenda for economic reform, the balance of British policy will remain on the European side of this widening transatlantic divide.

**The end of the European project?**

It would be easier to reconstruct the foundations of British foreign policy if the EU provided alternative firmer ground. But we have also to recognise the underlying weaknesses of the
EU: the loss of a sense of shared direction, the unresolved tensions between new members and old, northern states and southern, and the decline in both the legitimacy and efficiency of the Brussels institutions. The Constitutional Convention suffered from the underlying lack of consensus on whether there still is a ‘European project’, and what that project might now be; the text it has produced reflects the underlying disagreements.

Britain shares the responsibility for these accumulated weaknesses. With the creditable exception of the 1998 initiative on European Defence, this government has done little to attempt to reshape the European agenda. There were initial attempts to rebuild closer partnerships with Paris and Berlin, and intermittent attempts to create limited coalitions with other governments. But prime ministerial priorities more often lay on the other side of the Atlantic; while the concentration of European policy-making authority in No.10, combined with the rapid succession of Foreign Office ministers for Europe, has left British policy without a clear rationale which could be grasped either by foreign governments or by the domestic audience. In the European Union, Britain often punches well below its weight.

Coherent direction within a 25-member European Union requires both strong and trusted institutions in Brussels, and collective leadership by the governments of the largest states. Sadly, the Commission has lost respect in most national capitals over the past ten years. It suffers simultaneously, a senior official from one continental government recently remarked, from institutional arrogance and endemic inefficiency – though, to be fair, the quality of some of its Directorates-General has been consistently higher than others. We may hope that the new College of Commissioners will show more discrimination in promoting new policies, and more rigour in raising standards of administration, in spite of its burden of 25 under-employed members.

Confusion in Berlin, and deep suspicion from Paris, have compounded Britain’s difficulties in building European partnerships. President Chirac appears to have seen Tony Blair from the outset as a rival, rather than a potential partner; personal relations have been famously bad, with complaints from Paris that Blair did not treat Europe’s most experienced statesman with sufficient respect. French domestic debate on Europe has become as confused as British. Globalization, and the Lisbon Agenda, are seen as threats to France; the press debates whether ‘les Anglo-Saxons’ (by which they mean the northern member states) have captured the EU, and whether the European project – as defined by the French – is therefore dead; there are calls for the creation of a core group from those most committed to European integration, without admitting that France is itself among the worst in implementing EU legislation and is flouting the rules of the Growth and Stability Pact. Officials on both sides of the Channel recognise that there are underlying common interests, most of all in common foreign policy and defence, and attempt to maintain good relations; but the gulf between the two domestic debates, and the poor rapport between political leaders, place major obstacles in the way of closer cooperation.

The German government is slowly pushing through a painful process of employment and welfare reforms, while struggling to narrow the deep divide between its former west and former eastern Länder. My sense is that British ministers have preached too readily to German politicians, without understanding the different context and style of German politics; and in the process have lost the chance to build an effective partnership. But the German debate is also confused and contradictory, with fears of competition from the new Eastern members leading to demands that they should raise their taxes, and that Western Europe should deny the new members the regional funds it provided for the Mediterranean states when they joined the EC.

There’s therefore little basis for the moment for consensus among major states about priorities for European cooperation, either within the EU or outside it. The recent re-
emergence of a Franco-German partnership has been built upon resistance to change: to reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, to further pursuit of the Lisbon Agenda, to greater generosity towards the new members. The courting of President Putin by Chirac and Schröder, most recently in their joint visit to Sochi, displays either a deeply cynical throwback to 1960s Gaullism or as frivolous approach to common foreign policy as that of Mr. Berlusconi. If a future Prime Minister wants to rebuild the European framework for British foreign policy, it will require sustained effort and active persuasion to generate support for shared interests, towards governments themselves without a sense of strategic direction: as sustained and persuasive an effort as our current Prime Minister has devoted, in vain, to deepening Britain's relations with America.

Weakness on the Home Front
Thirty years ago, Enoch Powell extended his mistrust of continental European entanglements to mistrust of the United States, as a country dominated by domestic lobbies and unconcerned with the United Kingdom's legitimate interests. Much of the British public, and much of our media, now seems to have reached the same point. Whether or not there was a Faustian pact between Blair’s no.10 and the Murdoch Press, as has been rumoured, that support would be given in return for an absence of enthusiasm from ministers about Britain’s European commitments, it is undeniable that the government has made no effort to counter the rabid Euroscepticism of the right-wing press, nor to inform the electorate of the advantages of European integration. Britain in Europe, the organization intended to make the case for Britain to join the Euro, was held back in masterly inactivity by No.10. Several months after the announcement that we are to have a referendum on the Constitutional Treaty, no senior minister has spoken in public about why it might merit support. At both ends of its own Atlantic bridge, the government is now hemmed in by the mistrust of its press and public. We are drifting towards a situation in which a Labour Government that set out declaring that it would ‘end the isolation of the past twenty years and be a leading partner in Europe’ will lose the referendum on the Constitutional Treaty, provoking another crisis in Britain’s relations with the continent.

Mrs. Thatcher once attempted to address the question of redefining Britain’s identity, setting up an enquiry to consider the teaching of history in schools and its contribution to a sense of shared national identity. She was defeated by the discovery that different versions of history were taught in English and Scottish schools, under separate curriculum authorities, by the suggestion by the enquiry team that we needed a version of British history which – as their chairman put it – would ‘explain to every child in an English school how they came to be British’ (thus needing to touch on the Opium War, the slave trade and the conquest of India), and by the interim conclusion that it was impossible to explain the complicated history of the three kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland without placing them in their European context. The result was that history teaching – and the question of Britain’s identity – has been left to one side. All that my children, and most of their contemporaries, learned of 20th century history in school was about the Russian revolution and the Nazi period in Germany: not a sympathetic foundation for understanding how Britain relates to its continental neighbours.

The government is hemmed in, too, by general reluctance – among the Conservative Party as well as others – to support substantially higher spending on foreign policy and defence. The commitment to ‘deepen our relationship with the US at all levels carries significant costs: in terms of defence equipment and troop deployments, of diplomatic and intelligence personnel and activities. Britain’s armed forces are now very tightly stretched; it is difficult to see how future equipment requirements necessary both to maintain compatibility with American operations and to operate alongside other European forces can be afforded.
How do we rebuild?
The first step is to acknowledge that the 'special relationship' is dead: that Britain’s relations with the United States have particular strengths in limited areas, but that we delude ourselves if we imagine that British leaders – without the support of other governments – can shape American policy. Many other states have special relations with Washington: Israel, Australia, even Saudi Arabia. We are not as special as successive prime ministers have wanted to believe, as they – like other foreign visitors – are swayed by the glamour of visits to the White House and weekends at Camp David. Competition for influence in Washington with other European states is counter-productive; America’s allies have to work together if they are to exert any leverage on that introverted domestic debate.

The second step is to invest in rebuilding multilateral relations with our major European partners, and in shaping the agenda of the European Union. As I’ve suggested above, this will not be an easy task. We face suspicion and incoherence in Paris, domestic distractions in Berlin, frivolity in Rome, and believers in the old European project in Brussels. It will require a collective effort by the government as a whole, with the Foreign Office and the Treasury as fully engaged as No.10. It will also require ministers to move beyond a defensive approach to a constructive search for solutions where British interests are shared with others: for an overall redistributive budget package, for example, rather than a defence of Mrs.Thatcher’s rebate of 20 years ago. Britain’s record in practice is already much better than we are given credit for; the embittered rhetoric of our nationalist press, and the reluctance of British ministers to draw domestic attention to our European engagement hides our excellent record in implementing EU legislation, and our leadership in defence cooperation. We will have to set out more clearly our own priorities for the future development of the EU: that it should step back from the sort of detailed regulation of domestic policies which within the United States are left by Washington to the states, and should pay more attention to macro-economic policy and to external relations in the widest sense. And we will have to engage actively in promoting debate within other European capitals, in some of which we will find a much warmer response to this agenda than others.

The third step is to invest in persuading the British public that European integration is in Britain’s interests, and that cooperation with other European governments is the necessary foundation for British influence over global political developments. That means talking about Britain’s European history and identity, as well as challenging the anti-European message put out by large sections of the British press. Winston Churchill devoted himself after the war to reshaping popular understanding of British history, as the story of The English-speaking peoples, in support of the special relationship he wished to claim with Anglo-Saxon America and the White Commonwealth. It’s high time that the weight of the Government Information machine, the efforts of the Department for Education and Employment, and the speeches and writings of political leaders, attempted to redress the balance. Edward Heath, the only Prime Minister since Harold Macmillan to have made Europe a greater priority than America, briefly attempted to promote closer links with the continent, and better understanding of the continent, through exhibitions, exchanges, funds for conferences – all cut back soon after a divided Labour Government returned to power. That sort of effort is needed again.

Two centuries of hostility between France and Germany have been overcome partly through the manipulation of symbols and images: the joint military parade in Rheims, the President and Chancellor standing hand-in-hand at Verdun. British governments, in contrast, have carefully avoided investing our engagement with the continent with any domestic symbolism. The French government this year recognised the growth of Franco-British military cooperation by including British forces in its July 14th parade;
I know of no plans for Britain to reciprocate this gesture. The oldest and closest joint force in Europe is the British-Dutch marine amphibious force; could that not be given the publicity of sharing guard duty at Buckingham Palace, marching perhaps behind a Dutch military band? Britain must now be approaching the end of its repeated celebrations of the Second World War; it might educate public opinion if we also celebrated the tenth anniversary of joint British-French operations in Bosnia, ensured that the 200th anniversary of Trafalgar is not purely a national(ist) celebration, or even in 10 years’ time – dare one say it – remembered the crucial contribution to victory at Waterloo of Hanoverian and Brunswick regiments, of the Dutch troops in the reserve and the Prussians who ensured Napoleon’s defeat.

There are some further elements that government should introduce into the British public debate. We need some more honesty about defence overstretch, and about the logic of closer European cooperation – and integration, or forces and of equipment – over the next 10-15 years. We should address the advantages and disadvantages of the network of UKUSA Agreements, and of their compatibility with the development of closer European cooperation in foreign policy and defence; rather than renewing without debate arrangements that date from the early days of the Cold War, before the majority of Britain’s population were born – as the government is attempting to do again this year. I recognise that nuclear and intelligence cooperation with the Americans represent one of the greatest taboos in British politics; it’s time that we broke that taboo. It may be that the continuing advantages outweigh the costs; but after the transatlantic confusions on intelligence matters over the past two years it is time for a more open debate.

None of this shift in British policy – and in the articulation of British policy, at home as well as abroad – will be easy. I want to argue, however, that – to coin a phrase – there is no alternative. We have to recognise that the assumptions on which British foreign policy have rested for the past forty years, since Harold Macmillan attempted after Suez to re-establish a privileged but dependent relationship with the United States, and a closer but hesitant relationship with the European continent, have now collapsed. We have no choice but to rebuild, on a different foundation.