

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

### **QI Panel:**

#### **Book Talk: Someone Else's Empire**

March 25, 2024

12:00-1:00 PM EST

#### **Anatol Lieven 0:40**

Welcome, everybody. I'm Anatol Lieven, director of the Eurasia program here at the Quincy Institute. It's my great pleasure today to welcome Tom Stevenson. Before I do, if questions, which I hope you will have for Tom, please put them in the q&a at the bottom of your screen, and I will pass them on. We'll come come to that in about half an hour. So, Tom, welcome. It's great pleasure to introduce you today. I've been reading you for years, Tom Stevenson is contributing editor at the London Review of Books, which in my biased opinion, is now probably the most interesting intellectual journal in the English speaking world today. And he writes regularly on energy, defense and international politics, for the Financial Times, and the BBC, amongst other places. And he has reported from Ukraine, the Middle East and North Africa, for these, these publications.

So we're here today to discuss his book, Someone Else's Empire: British Illusions and American Hegemony, which I hope you will all run out and buy. So Tom, welcome. On the subject of British illusions, I might begin with a anecdote of my own. Back in 2000, early 2008, I was invited to an international affairs think tank in London, as one of the discussions of the New Labour government's National Security Strategy. And the the very title itself, of course, was an imitation of the American NSS. And when it came to the discussion, I pointed out to this audience of, you know, Junior ambassadors, colonels and brigadiers from the the army, sort of undeclared people from the intelligence services and so forth. But if you're talking about British strategy, and an absolutely critical question, which wasn't mentioned, of course, in the NSS, was the terms and limits of, if any, of Britain's commitment to the alliance with the United States and to US policies in various parts of the world, this, of course, coming soon after the invasion of Iraq. And so I said, I would really like to hear the views of members of the of the audience on this subject. And the response was most remarkable. They looked at the ceiling, they looked at the floor, they looked out the window, they didn't look at me, and they took great care not to look at each other. There was a dead silence. And this silence, went on and on, until the chairman of the meeting, coughed in a somewhat embarrassed fashion, and changed the subject.

So I wanted to begin by asking you, I mean, in your view, how far are these British illusions about Britain's role in the world and Britain's role in relation to the United States? How far are these illusions genuine? I mean, are they real illusions? And how far are they, shall we say, either constructed illusions or willful willed illusions in your view in Britain?

#### **Tom Stevenson 4:27**

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

Again, as always, thank you for having me. It's a real pleasure. You know, that's, I think, an excellent question, and it's one that the book does, does try to address and my answer is really, that I think what began as a self conscious attempt to remake Britain's position in the world, has since turned into an illusory attempt to understand that position. And what I would say what I mean by that is that there was a time when the more fundamental questions of whether for example, Britain could refer to itself as a global power and the the catchphrase, for those who don't know, and last few years has has the British government has tried to put forward is global Britain, this idea is very much been tried tried to be put to the fore. There was a time when these questions were looked upon with a certain degree of self referentiality. But in my view, they have since sort of drifted over into the illusory realm. And you could sort of have a good debate to think about when that really took place. I mean, I'd like to start really the, at the beginning on that, at the height of British Empire at the pump, as it were, and was also one of the great thinkers of that period. In the early 20th century, it was a great British diplomat, you know, one of the foremost minds in the foreign office at the time in 1907. He had said that the general character of England's foreign policy, he said England, we will today say Britain, of course, is determined by two things, two immutable conditions. The first was Britain's geographical situation on the ocean flank of Europe as an island state, which also had vast overseas colonies and dependencies. And the second was that the survival of that system was bound up. This is why we as an independent community, we bound up with the visit, possession of preponderance see power, those are the two pillars. Well, within one generation, the preponderance the power was gone by the 1930s, that was very clearly blind belong to the United States. And within two generations, the vast overseas colonists dependencies were gone, too. It was clear, I think, to everyone in said British policy, foreign policy community, as we would call it today, by the 30s, that the game of willpower was one of the sub continental style scale powers, you needed the scale of a United States of a contemporary China, or Russia, the population, the landmass, and so forth.

And with or without the vast overseas colonies that Britain was possessed, that was no longer possible. Still, there had to be some sort of evolution in understanding. And that took place with a great deal of difficulty through the loss of empire, mostly in the 1960s. And Dean Acheson, former Secretary of State in 1962, was responsible for actually not one but two comments that really struck Britain despite the fact that he was notoriously an anglophile. The first was that Britain had lost empire and not yet found a role. And the second most lesser known, which he wrote to us, Ambassador, Robert schnitzel, also in 1962, was that the key for the US perspective was to try to get Britain to act in a new role as a lietunant of the United States. Both of those comments ended up being consequential even though they were taken badly in Westminster and in London. But the central argument of my book is that something like that schema, in fact, did take place, Britain gave up on the idea of being a residual great power, struggling with the new lay of the land internationally, and ended up finding a new role which was bolting itself to the US. That required sort of fitting into a specialist niche, you know, not having the military power, not having the economic might, you know, Britain had found ways to make itself useful, you know, partly in the patchwork of European politics, partly as you know, a reliable gratis mercenary later, certainly, by the time that Iraq that comes to be true. And so there was a real transformation, I think, at first self conscious and then to some extent

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

unconscious. So that the real the trend of the late 20th century for Britain was not a resurgence of Britain as an independent European power, but really a kind of new surrogacy. and Britain responded ultimately, I think, to the magnitude of, of the 20th century end of American power in the 20th century by seeking to become an eternal ally of the United States, contrary to law promises, famous assertion that Britain or a state can have no permanent allies only permanent interests. The move was to make the United States permanent.

### **Anatol Lieven 9:11**

On that score, could I ask, I mean, are we even really very useful to the United States anymore? Because our military contribution in Iraq and Afghanistan was to put it mildly, not impressive. And, of course, as you suggested, much of the importance of Britain for America, over the past two generations has been Britain's role in the EU, you know, to to influence the rest of Europe and block things that America didn't like. And of course, since Brexit that is over, so what what does Britain actually do for the US these days?

### **Tom Stevenson 9:54**

I think it's it certainly would be a mistake to argue that Britain was somehow critical to the functioning of American power. And that if only British political elites were to get their act together, you know, from the point from a critics perspective, get their act together and withdraw their cooperation with that, that this would have some sort of, you know, grand world or two ordering consequences for the US global project as it exists on shore, talk about the the extent to which it still exists. I think that would be a mistake. In fact, in Britain, there is still very much and I think here again, questions of illusions or other delusions come in, there is still very much this idea that Britain can play a Greece to Rome can play the wise adviser to the United States can position itself as a guiding hand behind the scenes, you know, having seen it all, we've done it in the past itself. But in fact, certainly Britain's practical contributions are reasonably limited.

Nonetheless, while they are limited, I still argue that they they exist, and that they are real number of ways. The most prominent I think is the probably the earliest, which is also in which is in terms of the provision of intelligence, best services. This is today primarily in signals intelligence, rather than human intelligence. But still, what Britain could offer in 1945, and still today was a degree of geographic scope, which the US did not have, while the US was incomparably larger, and of course, had and still has its own formal, in fact, international empire and overseas territories, the British Overseas Territories, even though many of them are relatively unpopulated, we're still extremely useful as listening posts. Cyprus is perhaps the best example of this, Diego Garcia is another there are others in the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, which, and indeed initially in what were once called the white dominions, especially in Australia and New Zealand, although of course, that's something which has since morphed through the five eyes agreement, and also through now more recently through orcas that was very useful. And it was practical, you know, it was it's proved very handy. In fact, even as we see in contemporary events, if you look at Gaza, to have the logistical fact of the British bases on Cyprus on hand to be made useful for the Americans. Another I think important factor has been

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

a way to avoid American diplomatic isolation. At certain key moments, when the US has wanted to flex its muscles, or has taken taking it decided that some issue is very important. And much of the world disagrees, it has been useful that the UK has been on hand both to provide a certain veneer of multilateral action, and also sometimes the Marshall multilateral action, whether that's within Europe, you know, or in the Commonwealth, or elsewhere. So that's been another fact.

And then the other is that there's been a sort of provision of reinforcements. Today, Britain's armed forces are somewhat ramshackle and unable to fulfill, you know, even quite basic needs, because of the general economic malaise, which is setting within the country, which is primarily a domestic fact, as well as a secular, you know, matter of international global economy. But still, you know, at times having 10%, reinforcements of a relatively high tech military force, and one which is critically actually subject to fewer constraints in terms of transparency, then the United States forces out themselves is useful. British Special Forces and so on, actually aren't subject to many of the checks that the limited checks that are in place in the United States. So that, you know, that's sometimes that's useful, that was useful during the war on terror, for example, that we're on terror, several times. And in fact, it's only now many, many years after the fact now the stakes are lower than the, you know, right at the margins, there are prosecutions and scrutiny of the actions of British Special Forces during those wars. So that's handy too. So in a number of limited, but I still I would counter important ways Britain has found its way found a way to make itself useful, while again, not wanting to entertain some of the more grandiose visions of you know, wisely guiding the youthful American project.

### **Anatol Lieven 14:08**

Indeed. And when it comes to limits, are there any limits anymore? You mentioned Gaza. I have been very struck, I must say, by the conformity of both party leadership's and most of their parties in in Britain to the American line are on Gaza to I think, a much greater extent than would have been the case 30 years ago, you would have seen much more pushback, actually among the Conservatives as well as labor. So, I mean, is this a fair portrayal as far as the Gaza issue itself is concerned? And more generally, I mean, what are the limits, if any, to to this some usefulness?

### **Tom Stevenson 15:10**

Yeah, I mean, I think limits in terms of British enthusiasm for tacking on to whatever the issue of the day is, the United States, I think have more or less been removed, what I would call strategic Atlantis ism is now dominant in much of Europe. So it's not a trend that is completely confined to Britain as a particular case, and I think one can see, one can divine also somewhat similar pattern in Australia, at least, it's not totally dissimilar. And that reflects, you know, the sheer power of US global project. But in the UK, I think partly because the anxiety for global influence. And in London, for example, the need to avoid being seen as what one British diplomat many years ago in the 60s, colonial was described as a greater Sweden, there is the the idea of avoiding being a greatest Sweden is still you know, very keenly felt, whereas I mean, the irony, of course, is that being a great to Sweden, for most of the citizen citizens of the UK is

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

sort of an unattainably positive goal completely out of reach. But nonetheless, that anxiety is there. So cribbing, to the US line, standing behind Washington and nodding, I think is very much the dominant style in British politics, if it can be said to be a style in foreign policy at all in the UK, so much so really, that even in official strategic documents, written in London, it's amazing. There's direct cribbing from the US lines, I mean, not quite literally officials read American strategic documents and copy out phrases, sometimes. And certainly concepts, we see that in multiple, many, many examples. So there's, that's there, they stand behind the United States and nod and combined with a sort of a reflexive bellicosity a very easy resort to force, internationally, wherever it is possible. And fortunately, in Britain, it's less and less possible, but wherever it is possible, you know, that's still very strong. And so I think, really, there's a kind of a, there's a real question now, in the, in the in terms of Britain as it in the European context, there's a question of a kind of strategic competition between Britain and Germany, in terms of the intellectual culture and the political culture, you know, it's a sort of a race to the summit in terms of who can prostrate themselves more. That's the mood of the current moment. And of course, the summit in this case is really a chasm of smug mediocrity.

### **Anatol Lieven 17:33**

Yes, in one question, actually from from the audience's is about this in the it is, after all, generally acknowledged, even within the British security elites that Iraq turned into a disaster. And, of course, the British intelligence services played their own role in that, you know, the dodgy dossier, and so forth. Have you found any worry in the security establishment in the uniformed military, about the potential disasters into which this left hand roll could lead Britain but but also, I mean, specifically, the British armed forces?

### **Tom Stevenson 18:25**

I must say that I have not it is not that there is not deep concern within both the security establishment and within the armed forces themselves. But the concern is very much about what a perception of declining British capability. And that goes back to Iraq as well. Because in Iraq, it was clear, it was clear, I mean, to almost everybody, within the first couple of years that it was a complete disaster. But what happened in the British context was peculiar, which is that the British armed forces, and to some extent, the intelligence services, went into that war, believing that they could offer the United States real experience in terms of counterinsurgency. The line again, and again, was like we've done this before. We're experts because of Northern Ireland. And they really believe that, and unfortunately, within about a year, that was to turn out to be more or less completely fraudulent. In fact, American generals had to sort of basically stop listening to the British wherever they could, because it was a disaster every time they listen to them, that was completely exposed. And then while the war itself was a strategic disaster, and a moral disaster and a terrible crime, it was also a practical disaster for the British army. Because time and again, were British forces were actually given something practical to do. They ended up making a hash of it. And as a result of that, there was a great deal of soul searching that happened in Britain about the war. But primarily it happened in terms of why were we not able to do a better job with the tasks we were given, not in terms of the general strategic disaster, sort

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

of general strategic questions. How do we get into this war? How does our foreign policies connect the same with the United States. And that relationship keeps leading us into these kinds of troubles.

And I think that's continued. Whether it's Libya, Yemen, or indeed Gaza, meaning for four and a half million dead in the global war on terror wars, Britain very often deeply involved in them on, you know, in a in a relatively marginal sense in the strict way, but nonetheless, deeply involved. Those questions have been subsumed under the questions of how is it that we can increase our capability so that we aren't embarrassed in front of American generals? That's very much been the idea. And so where there's a transition, right, in Vietnam there is, although it's a myth that Britain was not at all supportive of that war and provide no support to the United States, there was a great deal of reluctance to send troops or to be directly involved at scale in Iraq, that by the time we reach that is completely overturned in favor of completely enthusiastic support, and a desperation, in fact, to be involved at every at every turn. And when Iraq turns out to be a debacle, the soul searching and the recriminations even that go on a very much about why we failed to have the right equipment, why we weren't able to impress with counterinsurgency, and that sort of thing. So I think that's very much ended up being the that's the that's the defining question. And it remains the question. The question today is, how can we get more money into the system and make sure we do a better job, so we aren't so embarrassed.

### **Anatol Lieven 21:21**

This is somewhat off topic. But I didn't cover Iraq. But I did spend a good deal of time in Afghanistan. And we're, of course, Britain, previously had been so involved. And it struck me so forcibly that on the one hand, so much of British behavior and attitudes do go back to an unacknowledged Imperial nostalgia, you know, for when Britain was a world power. And yet, I was amazed that officers from regiments with, you know, Afghan battle on us on their regimental flags, had made no effort seriously to study Afghanistan, or the British experience in Afghanistan, or what that might teach us today. And all too often, I mean, not everyone by any manner of means is an excellent book by Mike Martin, for example, Captain, the British Army about how men but all too often just just repeated platitudes about building democracy and freedom and so forth. I found that on this this, and partly, of course, it does, demolish this idea of being, you know, Greeks to the American Romans and teaching them things if, if, in fact, we do not actually study our own our own history and experience. What what do we have to offer in terms of advice? It's like, you know, the famous attributed remark about Tony Blair, by one of his advisers that when it came to Iraq, the Prime Minister lives in a historical zone.

### **Tom Stevenson 23:16**

Yes, absolutely. I mean, I think that's right. And without, I mean, my book is not a full historical or sociological account of that process. But my initial thought would be that Imperial nostalgia does remain an unusually potent force in Britain beyond even post Imperial Spain or Portugal. And yet, it is almost a storybook version. And I think that sort of accounts for that gap between the reality of the traditions and the history and the understanding of them, which I think is

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

unfortunately quite hollow. And, you know, more generally, the idea of tradition, and it is a multigenerational tradition in Britain, has been to view foreign policy, even when it sort of has a conjuncture with imperial history as a sort of technocratic predilection. It's something either for extremely anorak, specialists, or for eccentrics, or for liars. And so the central questions are not political questions, which one can argue over and debate and bring up historical examples for they are to be left outside the realm of national politics? You know, it's almost as though the the Conservative Party and the Labour Party and indeed anyone else who wants to entertain national life, have made in a tacit agreement that politics stops at the channel. And the rest is for the defense intelligencia for ideology professionals. So that you know, the few foreign policy questions which do get raised or forced themselves to the fore as they did in Iraq, when it was inevitable that these things must be discussed. They do so in a sort of a figurative way. They become disguises for domestic political battles, or for some other sense of culture. War. And I think one can see that process also work in the United States in some ways, but in Britain, it's very advanced. So I think that is sort of probably part of the picture as well.

### **Anatol Lieven 25:10**

I mean, you've probably answered this already. But one question from the audience, will Labour's predicted victory in the next British elections make any significant difference? Do you think to Britain's Foreign and Security policies?

### **Tom Stevenson 25:29**

I do not think that it will. In fact, I think that, on the contrary, we already have every indication that the plan is not to do so labor leaders from Kia Stahma, down, if we look, for example of Gaza, which is, you know, inevitably been the the issue, that issue or issue have said multiple times that they in Britain in the British Parliament, they would not be able to vote for any substantive statement on say, the issue of a ceasefire, because it's an election year. And what is meant by that is that they expect to be in power, and they don't want to have, you know, legally formally committed to Parliament, any position that they have no intention of taking when in government. And I think that gives us a, you know, a very clear idea of that there. In fact, there was a time when even the Conservative government or the more right wing forces in Britain were seemed more likely to be willing to mount a challenge on nationalist grounds to Britain's general foreign policy, position, the same idea of, you know, narrowly national interests for interest, for example, local nationalist rejection of the idea of global a global outlook, you know, as perhaps something that's cooked up by the finance guys in the arms, the arms companies, there was a brief period when that looked like it might be in, you know, a future matter of surveillance. It did not work out in that way. And if anything, the Labour Party, I think, has, you know, really stuck with the idea of foreign policies of technocratic ins idiosyncrasy? It's to be produced in Conclave, you know, in principle, there was a time when Jeremy Corbyn was a Labour leader, a man very much to the left of the internationalist tradition of the socialist tradition, where a real political challenge could have been launched, had he in fact, been able to marshal the kind of a national level political coalition that could govern. But the trouble with that, I think, ultimately, was that vested interest in the country, more able to defeat him politically,

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

whether that's media, business, and so on, it was simply too daunting of a challenge. And that, you know, ultimately, Britain and Ireland and its political life is relative, relatively parochial and relatively inward looking, even though its foreign policy decidedly, is not. So I am somewhat pessimistic about, you know, the labor position on that side, I see it very much as a business as usual party. That's clear very, very much in, in the Gaza debates, for example, I mean, just rounded off. I mean, in fact, it was someone from the Defense Intelligence from Rusi, which is the most prominent military and intelligence think tank in the United Kingdom, David Livingston, who say, Well, look, you know, the differences between the conservative labour, the Scottish Nationalist Party, the Liberal Democrats, over guards are actually tiny. And you know, it's a pity we can't really the whips offices can't get around and get everyone to craft a statement that everyone can agree to. And he's right, the political differences among the national parties are, in fact tiny on this question. And on many other questions, including the relationship with the United States.

### **Anatol Lieven 28:30**

What are the possibilities in the long term of other political revolt against this? Of course, one of the factors one sees it here in America as well in Michigan, much more strongly, I think, in northern England, it is, of course, the presence of a growing Muslim population, which is most decidedly not happy with American policy in the, in the Middle East. And there was the one by election does not a general election make, but there was the Rochdale by election, do you think going to play an important role at some point in future?

### **Tom Stevenson 29:17**

Well, you know, the potential is there. And I would say it is not only say for example, the Muslim population in the United Kingdom, it is also what I would describe as a remarkable gulf that exists between general the opinions of the general population very well polled on Gaza or on practically any other question that you might fit into the idea that the rubric of Anglo American power globally but especially on Gaza, because it's such an important decision emotive topic, there is a chasm between general popular opinion and the opinion within parliament and within the national political class. It is a night and day difference and it's remarkable So there is a question as to for how long that sort of shift can remain, you know how long that there can be such a great degree of misalignment? There's an enormous amount of support for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, there's an enormous amount of support for checking the use of force internationally. Again, and again, we see it, and yet at the level of national politics, it is simply not reflected. And so that is something that which that contains the possibility, you know, what one could imagine that, that some sort of change could be possible, you know, at least in principle, you know, some sort of real political challenge couldn't be launched about these questions. And Britain also has the international magnitude, it is not a country that is completely constrained in its relationship with the United States, should it wish to it could adopt a policy of what I would call principled non cooperation, you know, in the way that to give an extreme example, Iceland does, you know, are even a much more limited example, Finland does, even though it's a member within the NATO alliance, and so on. That's entirely on the card, and it



## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

would be supported by the general population, and yet we don't see it. My majority agenda and I would put to this question is that, perhaps more powerfully than political change is the sort of level of economic changes which is the real decadence, the sense of the false economy, in terms of the state, as practically a religious tenant has become so powerful within Britain, that there's a real question that that fear about capacities does end intruding inevitably on policy, that is simply the inability that we as the capacities of the British state, not only to provide, you know, a live professional army, but also to provide, you know, decent public services and so on, become so, so extreme. And that's very much the trend, that these questions really are forced to the fore nationally, that, you know, the incapacity to maintain the law that Britain currently plays, ends up expressing itself politically, one way or another, that seems to me to be it quite likely, at some point.

### **Anatol Lieven 32:05**

We have a couple of questions. One, can you think of any recent examples of disagreement that have, in any way shaken this relationship on the part of the British, and specifically, the fact that of course, contrary to all the promises before and during and after Brexit? Britain has made, I don't mean us promises, I mean, by British politicians, Britain has made no progress on a new trade deal with the United States is having any effect that you have observed?

### **Tom Stevenson 32:50**

You know, actually, it's been remarkable how little effect that has had, because during the heady days of the Brexit, campaigning, you know, the idea of new trade deals with, with, especially with the United States, but also with, you know, internationally, was very much part of the national psyche, the idea that Britain was sort of going to have its wings fried by leaving the European Union, which in my view, was always fanciful, was nonetheless very prominent, and the fact that that simply has not, you know, that has not taken place whatsoever, eventually, there's going to have to be some very serious compromises which Westminster politicians have not wanted to have to make, in order to get a decent trade deal with the United States, a bullet is going to have to be bitten on on these questions. And that I think, has not fully sunk in yet. But this has really not intruded in terms of a challenge to whether or not Britain should have some other kind of role, I think, because of that inherent ambivalence with regard to having recently taken a divisive, but nonetheless, a, you know, fundamentally completed decision to leave the European Union, the idea that one could return to being a modestly prosperous, you know, European state playing some kind of financial Hong Kong style role to the European continent as a whole as a central focus, you know, that's, that's become less and less likely and seen as less and less realistic. So, you know, it's an excellent question as to why that hasn't there has not emerged a kind of anger or a feeling of betrayal. You know, this idea that, you know, British politicians do not say, we helped you guys out in Iraq or whatever else, and therefore, why are you treating us? You know, why are you treating us roughly? And I don't think it's likely that that will that will happen, that will happen either, but there are there are certainly some real compromises, they're going to have to be made and it's going to be ugly in some

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

respects for Britain economically apart from anything else. So it will be interesting to see how that develops.

### **Anatol Lieven 34:58**

I mean, on that score there is, of course, a real possibility that Donald Trump will be the next US President. And I mean, not just from Trump, but, you know, wider sections of the Republican Party and some sections of the security elite, saying that America must really reduce security commitments in Europe in order to concentrate on what they regard as a far greater threat from China. How much concern is this causing in Britain? And are there any? Is there any serious thinking about how Britain would act in these circumstances? I mean, the the the logical thing, of course, would be precisely to try for serious integration into European security. But of course, Brexit makes that considerably more difficult.

### **Tom Stevenson 35:58**

That's absolutely, in my view, the attitude within the British sort of Security, Defense Nexus, and indeed, among politicians, is that most find Trump's politics and general style to be distasteful and abrasive. However, I do not see that they necessarily view a Trump presidency, in quite the same terms, as is even the case in say, Germany of having already been through a Trump presidency once. There's no doubt that there are concerns. But I think the general attitude has often been that while Trump may talk a tough game, he represents continuity in terms of the American global position more than revolution. It's obviously true that that Trump is a different kind of President than Joe Biden is. And, you know, one could say an awful lot about that everywhere from Eastern Europe, to Iran, to China and so on.

But nonetheless, I think the view is that certain interests will end up coming to the fore in the United States, even with the Trump presidency, that the talk of isolationism, while not completely false, is still sort of a term of abuse wielded by you know, perhaps the permanent elements in the foreign policy community, rather than necessarily being an accurate description of the Trump worldview. It's possible, of course, that that perspective could turn out to be completely mistaken for various reasons that are, you know, sort of indigenous to the US to United States politics. But there is not really an even though I think many foresee the likelihood of Trump of a second Trump presidency, it is not treated as a coming apocalypse, there are certainly real concerns. But I think some also viewed as a potential opportunity, you know, a way to remake NATO with even greater British influence, try and use that as an excuse to shoehorn in 3% military spending as a percentage of GDP even despite the decline elsewhere. So it's somewhat of a mixed bag. And of course, on the right, there are admirers in you know, the right is, nonetheless is Cendant, in some respects on the Conservative Party, if not in national life in its totality. And there are plenty of you know, Trump admirers who liked some of what they hear. And you know, don't mind don't mind too much of it. Incidentally, sorry to have to add this on. But I would say that there couldn't be a rude awakening there, because not just Trump, but also in the Biden administration, the prospect of future confrontations with China is taken very seriously. And I heard Colin Powell, for example, who is the former Undersecretary of Defense, say very clearly

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

that the expectation in Washington is that in the event of any kind of confrontation with China, at any stage of the escalation ladder, the expectation is that Britain will be along for the ride. And I don't know if that's fully appreciated in the UK, except among, you know, the real specialists in terms of defense and intelligence.

### **Anatol Lieven 39:10**

Yes, I have a hideous feeling that naming our second aircraft carrier assuming it's even capable of sailing, the Prince of Wales was a singularly bad omen, everyone remembers what happened in December 1941. In the far east, we might have chosen, you know, Warspite, or another name for it. A question, how important is the merging of personnel and institutions when it comes to this? Well, relationship to call it that. We see that this has gone very far. Indeed, I mean, to the point I think, was complete symbiosis in the financial world in the think tanks, foreign security think tanks anyway, in Britain in the in sections of the media and obviously in the intelligence services, how important is this interchange of personnel and careers? And what if any fields are not merged so far?

### **Tom Stevenson 40:32**

Well, I think within this society of, let's say national security clocks, this sort of thing is treated as very interesting. And it also, you know, it's very important for careers and so forth. We see frequently that, you know, senior American think tankers, academics, and so forth, come on, come over and pick up, you know, prominent positions in the British think tanks, you know, that sort of thing, prominent positions in national life, and have a lot of respect for doing so. It doesn't happen as much in the other direction, for obvious reasons. But I think the idea that in institutions like Chatham House, which is probably the foremost, you know, let's say diplomatic style, think tank, with some Mandarin propensities in the UK, ISI, you know, these kinds of institutions really do value, a sense that they are well integrated into the American foreign policy community, even though in fact, the structure of the US foreign policy community and you know, people who are actually able to international security and so forth is completely different than theirs. In Britain. It's far more transparent in many ways. As I said before, foreign policy in Britain is still largely meeting conclave in a way that's not quite true in the US. So that's that. And I think the other question is, when it comes to over military power, which is that for many years now, if you look at say, the really advanced, you know, j two directorate in the US military, and so forth, the idea of interoperability has been treated as very important for the future, and something that seem, you know, within the context of proxy forces, working with partners, all of that sort of thing. And Britain has tried as far as possible to take the lead on those matters, to make military systems, personnel, communications systems, all of that as far as possible, so that they fit into the jigsaw without, you know, too many rough edges. So that's, that's an important trend as well. And that's something that we see now also becoming a trend in the new security relationships with Japan and with Australia and so forth. So I think British, you know, in Britain, that's that's taken us something that's been a success.

### **Anatol Lieven 42:51**

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

From that point of view, a question, how important is the nuclear relationship in this regard? And can in fact, Britain be sent to have an independent nuclear deterrent? Or is it simply part of America's nuclear forces?

### **Tom Stevenson 43:08**

This is, in fact, a sensitive issue in the UK, because it is always maintained by Prime Ministers by sending them as the civil service that Britain has an independent nuclear deterrent, and is always referred to in those terms, what Britain of course has, is nuclear weapons, deterrence is ultimately a conceptual matter. With regards to the independence, there's just no question. And we've had the data for a long time that all of the systems are totally dependent on maintenance and production capacities in the US. And even aside from that, there isn't a need for a kill switch on every launcher that can be operated in Washington. This simple strategic fact is the cause of everything that we've been discussing the political and for matters of exigency. Britain is Britain, British nuclear forces remain a small, well placed addendum of America's overall nuclear picture in a way that say French nuclear forces do not quite even though even France is obviously not free to decide when and where he uses nuclear weapons without consulting any other nuclear power. Certainly the United States first among them, but during need to an even greater extent really is dependent on that. So when we see for example, there has been recently a true reversal in terms of British nuclear weapons policy, which is that having had years of steady decline in terms of the number of warheads, and so on, there now are clear plans in place to include increase the nuclear arsenal of the UK. That's, you know, a major decision that was taken, it was taken outside of Parliament, it was taken without any kind of popular really any kind of popular consultation it was just announced by the government, and it is now in place. So that's there. The big worry i think is and perhaps this is even a worry in Washington, you would have to tell me is whether Britain is any longer seen as ultimately reliable in these questions, because there have been scandal after scandal in terms of the warhead assembly plants that have to be nationalized, that end up getting delayed for six years, you know, treatment facilities that have their capabilities set back, you know, the hosting of intelligent sites by private contractors, which turned out to, to end up being a debacle, you know, the facilities for handling uranium, and so on. All of this stuff has been a very serious problem. And so, there's, I think there's a need and does recognize that in Britain, there's been a new recent initiative, that there's a need to get the house in order. But yeah, it's to get the house in order in order in order so that Britain can continue to serve, ultimately, as part of the overall picture directed by the United States, in terms of its the global nuclear imbalance.

### **Anatol Lieven 45:49**

It seems to me there certainly is concern in an American security establishment about mean, frankly, just how good as well as how numerous the different branches of the British armed forces are today. But of course, this is, to some extent, a problem created by America itself, because in you know, following America's agendas, Britain over the past couple of generations, you know, swung from its Cold War to configuration, to, you know, global interventionism,

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

hence, these aircraft carriers, which are breaking down regularly and don't have enough escort vessels, because in the end, we couldn't generate either the money or the industrial base to do this properly. At the same time, of course, funding this and funding, you know, the renewal of the of the nuclear deterrent, even though as you've said, with multiple problems, to a great extent, strip the army. And, of course, as a result of Afghanistan, Iraq, there was then this concentration on the US, or sorry, on British Special Forces, which are indeed, I mean, pretty good. But now, of course, we are thinking that because of what's happened in Ukraine, actually, we need a much bigger, conventional army. But the melancholy fact of the matter is that Britain just cannot financially do these four things simultaneously on, you know, on anything like an adequate scale. And so, in area after area, we find that, you know, the capability is just not there. Now, as is often said, there is an answer to this, this is equally true of the French and the Germans and the Italians, which is, of course, really pooling European military resources. But that requires, of course, very hard choices about who does what, and who gets what, which it seems, I mean, once again, not just us, but I mean, all European countries are incapable of making that.

### **Tom Stevenson 48:30**

I think that's quite fair, it's hard. I would to go further on what we were saying before, I would say that the main force restraining or acting as a kind of counterbalance to the general strategic direction that Britain has taken, and indeed, the main force restraining international bellicosity in Britain, which is a historically important trend is not necessarily a counter political movement, but economic malaise. I think I would go so far as to say that is the central the central fact there. And with regard to European I mean, to put it in French president Emmanuel Macron terms, strategic autonomy, I think, you know, that has ended up being more a paradigm for funding European, especially French arms companies than any kind of real perspectives. And so in Britain, there are for example, Britain is still a member of the three forum with France and Germany, there are, you know, residual forms of cooperation. And, of course, in NATO, which have not been damaged by Brexit. But, you know, the idea of either under the United States or simply in alliance with it, Europe emerging as a false, you know, fourth power alongside the United States, Russia and China. And that sort of level is, I think, still not taken seriously, either in Britain or anywhere in continental Europe. And critically, it is also I think, not taken seriously in the United States. If European strategic autonomy in the full meaning of that term were to become a realistic prospect, I think we would see some level of concern about the United States because it would start to challenge American interests. Right now, the United States is the dominant military power in Europe, as it has been, you know, at least since 1989. And one could argue a good, you know, a long time before that, as well. And that remains the case. So, NATO politan ism, you know, strategic Atlantis ism, still remain, I think the most likely path forward, even if there are some in the new US, perhaps on the right, who like the idea of Europe, Europe becoming an independent power is like the UK and eternal ally of the United States, but capable of really holding its own so that the US can focus on China

### **Anatol Lieven 50:57**

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

In the results of it seems to me, I mean, a fundamental would you call it dysfunctional unreality and macrons thinking, because if indeed Russia is to be portrayed as a mortal threat to Western Central Europe, I mean, not not just to Ukraine, obviously, that's obvious. Then the idea that Europe is going to do without the United States becomes ridiculous, right? And on that score question, I mean, Britain's policy on Ukraine, which has sometimes seemed actually to get ahead of the of the US, when it came to Boris Johnson's famous or notorious trip to Kyiv, in which he, how critical this was, I don't know, but in which he certainly argued very strongly against a peace deal at that point. Was this just Boris? Or do you think he was also acting on behalf of America in this regard, on behalf of the Biden administration?

### **Tom Stevenson 52:07**

You know, that's an interesting question. And it's one to which I don't feel that I can necessarily offer any particular knowledge I on, you know, that particular act, I am inclined to believe that the peculiarities of Boris Johnson are more likely to be in play than anything else. That said, I mean, look, I mean, to start with, obviously, Ukraine, his political independence now from life has been and still is very gravely threatened by Russia. And, you know, that's, that's an absolute necessity. But the strategic environment in which the the war is taking place is also a first order concern. You know, that's true in serious analysis, I think of any war, whether it's from Ethiopia, to Ukraine to wherever. So, you know, the general idea of looking at as say, and I would insist that, say, citizens of the UK or the US that our first response responsibility is to scrutinize the actions of the state to where we are citizens, even if that scrutiny ends up coming to the conclusion that the current policy is correct. So in Britain, I think the idea has very much simply been, again, to follow the US line provide whatever support there can that can be provided, support the Polish position as far as possible, that's also been important within the European context.

And then I think, in terms of expert opinion, or opinion within the British defense intelligentsia, the idea has really taken hold that one can have a completely hawkish position with do with Russia, far beyond even, you know, the idea that Russia has to be defeated in Ukraine. The idea of using the war to try Russian power in a more permanent sense is very popular. If you look at someone like his downline, for example, at King's College London, you know, her position has always been has some influence and so on. That, you know, any, any move towards future negotiations should be avoided, because it would be too embarrassing considering the past rhetoric, or else because the prospect of freezing the war is acceptable, because then Russia would continue to have too much influence. And one could certainly see why those ideas are popular, but they remain remain, I would say unchallenged in a way that is perhaps not even true in the US today. You know, so that's interesting idea that Russia really has to be knocked down to the ranks to the great powers or it can't be allowed to have any zone of strategic interest. That sort of thing is absolutely clear. So whether Johnson, you know, was carrying a message from Americans acting on his own behalf or didn't know what he was doing. You know, I think it's an interesting historical question one day and difficult to answer. But what is true is that the general attitude in Britain is very much to be, you know, full throated in support of moving toward a greater involvement in European politics more generally, against any kind of

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

settlement or even negotiations with Russia, on any score, and that's probably going to have to be a position that becomes more malleable in the future as the realities of the war kick in.

### **Anatol Lieven 55:00**

Yes, although I was struck by the fact that I thought her contribution of 14 main battle tanks to Ukraine was pretty pathetic after all our rhetoric. And then I discovered that actually, that's 1/10 of our entire tank force, or possibly actually much more, given the suspicions that many of the tanks won't actually move, and would need to be cannibalized. I mean, is this what? So there's not really something you talked about in your book, but the, the obsession with Russia, which, objectively speaking does not actually threaten Britain, I mean, Britain as a country at all really directly. The idea of the Russian Navy landing in Britain is a trifle fanciful, given what's happened to the Russian Black Sea Fleet? Is this once again, something that has come down from Victorian times and the great game? Or where does it come from? Because clearly, I mean, this was present long before the invasion of Ukraine.

### **Tom Stevenson 56:12**

Certainly, absolutely. I think that's much more a simply a Cold War relic. I mean, in Britain, to an unusual extent, the intelligence services in particular really have been, you know, organized around the idea of the threat of Russia having assets in Russia, and so on, even to a greater extent than the US, which necessarily had more global purview than the UK did, ultimately going to be the left tenant or the junior partner. So I think it's primarily a legacy of that. But as you say, I mean, the idea of Russia as a threat to Britain is, I mean, in conventional terms is absurd. And in nuclear terms, there's just no context, Russia has, you know, half the nuclear with almost half the nuclear weapons in existence, Britain has, you know, a couple of 100, even if they're going to be increased. So, you know, there's no serious challenge there. But nonetheless, politically, that idea, you know, I'm taking an anti Russian position or organizing national security around the threat of Russia, organizing, say, Arctic military exercises, that sort of thing, retains an importance, far beyond its, you know, practical necessity. And, you know, in some respects, that's been good, because in the initial phases of the war in Ukraine, British Solidarity was treated as a great positive and had been had certainly, you know, I was in favor of it Russia, you know, certainly preventing the initial Russian attack on Ukraine, very important. But it's something that needs to be watched. Because, again, it's there, we get into the questions of illusions and delusions, because the specter of Russia or Britain is a strategic competitor with Russia, which it isn't for me. But on both ends of the scale, neither as Russia was a real threat to Britain, or as Britain as a real competitor with Russia in military terms, remains. And so yeah, it's an important part of how a national the whole approach to national security is organized, and one which has a slightly descended idea about it.

### **Anatol Lieven 58:10**

A question to me from from one of the audience, which really, I think reflects the merging that we've been talking about, someone asks, when I say we, what do you mean Kemosabe? And

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

the old Lone Ranger phrase, am I talking about the US or the UK? Or both? I suppose the answer is both. I mean, we are both British citizens. So I use we in that sense, I am now of course, resident in Washington are working for us think tank. But of course, actually, when I was working for a think tank in London, and the you mentioned Ruth downland, I also spent seven years at the Department of War studies in in Kings. And there it's very clear that for most people, when they say we they mean, the United Kingdom and the United States. Both. So I suppose the answer is both. I'm merged more than you are. I think, perhaps one final question from the floor. So we're almost out of time. A verdict is expected tomorrow, I think on the extradition of Julian Assange, Assange, I never know how to pronounce him. This is a pretty stark reminder of British and European subservience in general. Will there be any serious outrage on the part of progressive elements, at least in Britain and more widely in Europe? If the verdict goes as it's generally expected to?

### **Tom Stevenson 59:45**

There's no doubt that that will be yes, I mean, it is, as you say, a very stark reminder of the realities and of, you know, the, the exigencies that subordination puts in one put on one's plate. So, again, it's a little bit like the situation with regard to the war in Gaza, in that popular opinion would be fully in favor of simply releasing Assange, perhaps not decorating him. But there's no question that there is no democratic, even plausible support for extraditing Assange or even convicting him anything. And yet, yes, the it has been followed. The we'll have to wait and see what the final result is. But the situation doesn't look good, as with Gaza, you know, you can get massive rallies, showing enormous amount of support from the progressive, organized primarily from the progressive side organized primarily from the left within Britain, but nonetheless able to get mass support. And although their work, it's unlikely that there will be massive street rallies in the same way in the case of Assange, who is ultimately an important one person. Still, that's the way that wind is blowing. So there's, there's no question some elements within the press on the progressive side, some who still, you know, at least put on a good front of believing in the old freedom of expression stuff, you know, will will take serious language about it. And yet, it will ultimately be left to the, you know, military intelligence, defense, intelligence and think tank world to make decisions on these things. And that will set the tone there will be anger, there will be opposition, and because foreign policy security questions which the essential nation's case is taken to fall into because of how it played out, because it operates in that world. It is it has been kept apart from democratic decision making, in the same way that the Iraq war or general British foreign policy in general is. So that's how it's how it's going to end up being viewed.

### **Anatol Lieven 1:01:55**

Well, Tom, thank you so much. We're out of time, I'm afraid but this has been a truly fascinating discussion. Perhaps I might end with one rather depressing comment from from the audience, a schoolboy definition of empire that I read years ago, the pleasure of living with one's inferiors. On which sharp note, thank thank you for this discussion. And many thanks to the audience for your participation. I'm sorry, I couldn't get to every every question and I look forward to seeing you all. And Tom again soon. Thank you.



**Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**