



## Discursive statecraft: Preparing for national positioning operations

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By James Rogers

During the G20 Summit in September 2013, a Russian spokesperson reportedly described the United Kingdom (UK) as ‘just a small island’ to which ‘no one pays any attention’.<sup>1</sup> While reported differently by different media outlets and denied by the Russian government, this remark had political impact. When David Cameron, then British Prime Minister, heard about it, he felt compelled to respond, challenging ‘anyone to find a country with a prouder history, a bigger heart or greater resilience’.<sup>2</sup> While his response was eloquent, the damage had already been done: Britain was on the defensive, forced to stand up for itself after a nasty jibe.

The UK was struck again a couple of months later. As Cameron visited the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in December 2013, an editorial in the *Global Times* appeared. It declared that Britain was ‘easily replaceable’ in the PRC’s foreign policy, not least because it was ‘no longer any kind of “big country”’, ‘but merely a country of old Europe suitable for tourism and overseas study, with a few decent football teams.’<sup>3</sup> There was no prime ministerial reply this time: the Chinese tabloid’s dig at Britain was probably deemed unworthy of censure, even though, as an official mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), it is hard to believe that the *Global Times* was acting independently of its political masters.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Osborne, ‘Britain’s Cameron embroiled in “small island” row with Russia’, *Reuters*, 06/09/2013, <http://bit.ly/bceisirwr> (found: 06/04/2021).

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Wintour, ‘David Cameron: UK may be a small island but it has the biggest heart’, *The Guardian*, 06/09/2013, <http://bit.ly/dcumbasibihtbh> (found: 06/04/2021).

<sup>3</sup> As reported by the Associated Press. See: ‘As Cameron visits, China paper criticizes Britain’, *AP News*, 03/12/2013, <https://bit.ly/31OITaO> (found: 06/04/2021).



In both instances, Russia and the PRC attempted to provide the UK with a new position in the international order as a weakened power. Such statements should not be dismissed as ‘just words’. They are a form of ‘discursive statecraft’, if not outright political warfare, which is designed to redefine meaning in international relations. Consequently, these ‘positioning operations’, when undertaken by unfriendly countries or hostile regimes, often aim to destabilise their target, force it onto the backfoot, and stir up domestic political tensions.

For different reasons, positioning operations can also be undertaken by allies and partners. While such interventions are rarely intended to be destructive, they can have a deep and lasting political impact. Recall the famous words of Dean Acheson, then United States (US) Secretary of State, in 1962 when he asserted that ‘Great Britain had lost an Empire but not yet found a role’.<sup>4</sup> His words have reverberated ever since.

If the UK is to compete during an era of what the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, released in March 2021, describes as ‘intensifying geopolitical competition’, the country needs to better understand the discursive statecraft of its friends and foes.<sup>5</sup> Although, in previous periods of great power struggle, Britain’s sheer material power could compensate for strategic errors of judgment, it is not guaranteed to do so in the future, particularly if the UK’s relative power declines. Moreover, Britain’s political and economic system – liberal democracy and the market economy – has come under mounting challenge, not least by authoritarian opponents equipped with technologies with the potential to shape perceptions at a scale of which the twentieth century’s totalitarian propagandists could only dream. The UK’s openness, lack of national cohesion, and unpreparedness have also made the country more vulnerable to discursive statecraft than it might otherwise be.

This Primer explains why Britain should improve at understanding and responding to discursive statecraft, particularly in the form of positioning operations, if it is to succeed in the twenty-first century. It builds on recent British strategic thinking and outlines why HM Government should pay more attention to political actions that are designed to strike at the foundation of the meaning that defines the UK’s international role and position. Until British policymakers and strategists know how other countries, not least Britain’s most powerful rivals, but also its strongest allies and partners, may be attempting to (re)position the country in the international system, it will be harder to respond to their behaviour or needs.

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<sup>4</sup> Acheson’s exact statement was: ‘The attempt to play a separate power role – that is, a role apart from Europe, a role based on a special relationship with the US, a role based on being head of a “Commonwealth” which has no political structure, or unity, or strength – that role is about played out.’ See: Gavin Hewitt, ‘US-UK: Strains on a special relationship’, *BBC News*, 20/04/2016, <http://bit.ly/uusoass> (found: 06/04/2021).

<sup>5</sup> ‘Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy’, Cabinet Office, 16/03/2021, <https://bit.ly/3vX8RGY> (found: 06/04/2021).

## 1.0 The Integrated Operating Concept 2025 and political warfare

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The Integrated Operating Concept 2025 (IOC 2025) is the Ministry of Defence's doctrinal contribution to HM Government's Integrated Review.<sup>6</sup> According to General Sir Nicholas Carter, Chief of the Defence Staff, the IOC 2025 represents 'the most significant change in British military thought in generations.'<sup>7</sup> This is because, firstly – and similarly to the Integrated Review – it accepts that the strategic environment has become far more competitive over the past decade:

Our adversaries and rivals engage in a continuous struggle involving all of the instruments of statecraft, ranging from what we call peace to nuclear war. Their strategy of "political warfare" is designed to undermine cohesion, to erode economic, political and social resilience, and to challenge our strategic position in key regions of the world. Their goal is to win without fighting: to achieve their objectives by breaking our willpower, using attacks below the threshold that would prompt a war-fighting response.<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, the IOC 2025 marks a significant change because it alters the British Armed Forces' operational focus. In the post-Cold War era, the armed forces focused on expeditionary operations; from now on, they will focus on 'operating' in so-called 'grey zone' conditions – conditions defined neither by peace nor outright war. The UK military will now adopt a more dynamic posture which goes beyond traditional warfighting; instead, the British Armed Forces are gearing up to engage more actively in political warfare.

Undoubtedly, the IOC 2025's focus on political warfare is a welcome move, especially since the UK has failed to fully-comprehend its strategic significance until relatively recently.<sup>9</sup> However, British policymakers and strategists need to go further if Britain is to succeed in protecting its interests. The risk now is that the UK focuses too much on political warfare, while overlooking competition that takes place in a higher, but more abstract, plane. While political warfare generally invokes the pursuit of specific tangible

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<sup>6</sup> Integrated Operating Concept 2025, Ministry of Defence, 30/09/2020, <http://bit.ly/ioc2025> (found: 06/04/2021).

<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Carter, Speech: 'Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir Nick Carter's annual RUSI speech', Ministry of Defence, 05/12/2019, <http://bit.ly/cofdsgsncars> (found: 06/04/2021).

<sup>8</sup> Integrated Operating Concept 2025, Ministry of Defence, 30/09/2020, <http://bit.ly/ioc2025> (found: 06/04/2021).

<sup>9</sup> Although General Carter pointed to the importance of propaganda during a lecture to the Royal United Services Institute in January 2017, it was not until December 2019 that he identified 'political warfare' as a strategic problem with which the UK must deal. See: Nicholas Carter, Speech: 'Dynamic Security Threats and the British Army', Ministry of Defence, 22/01/2018, <http://bit.ly/dstatba> (found: 01/01/2021) and Nicholas Carter, Speech: 'Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir Nick Carter's annual RUSI speech', Ministry of Defence, 05/12/2019, <http://bit.ly/cofdsgsncars> (found: 06/04/2021).

objectives – such as igniting rebellion or breaking an enemy’s will to fight – more discursive forms of political struggle can have even greater impact. For this reason, Britain must lock horns with foreign governments that are attempting to alter the political discourses and narratives that give meaning to the world.

It is at this point that two challenges must be overcome if HM Government – and not just the Ministry of Defence – is to become more effective in securing British interests in an era of intensifying geopolitical competition. First, British policymakers and strategists ought to prepare to actively engage in discursive statecraft – a form of competition broader than political warfare; second, other government departments – not least the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office – ought to become fully involved in what should become an integrated national effort.

## 2.0 Towards discursive statecraft and positioning operations

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Ultimately, all geopolitical struggle has a potent discursive element: it is a political and ideological battle over whose ideas and values will prevail and define international relations. Political warfare may be ‘propaganda in battledress’ – as Britain’s Political Warfare Executive defined it in 1942 – but it is also part of a broader form of competition which dresses in civilian clothes.<sup>10</sup> Although such narrative-shaping activities may not involve direct (or even indirect) military attacks, discursive statecraft is no less dangerous or effective, particularly when pursued by authoritarian powers bent on the revision of the prevailing order.

Discursive statecraft results when countries seek to articulate concepts, ideas, and objects into new discourses to degrade existing political and ideological frameworks or generate entirely new ones. It could be likened to offensive soft power. In the final instance, such efforts are designed to (re-)structure how people can think and act, as well as what can be said and thought. This can involve the projection of vast new ideological or geostrategic formations, such as ‘democratic liberalism’, ‘Soviet communism’, ‘the West’, the ‘non-aligned’, and ‘the Third World’, during the Cold War. But it can also involve positioning operations to alter and restructure another country’s understanding of its place in the world and encourage its leaders (and other nations) to accept new narratives about the target.

A positioning operation is a specific form of discursive statecraft, calibrated by a protagonist to redefine a target’s role and position it in such a way that it serves the protagonist’s interests. However, the nature of these political operations depends on whether the protagonist is friendly or hostile: friendly interventions might attempt to reinforce an ally’s or partner’s self-perception and confidence, or encourage it towards a

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<sup>10</sup> ‘The Meaning, Techniques and Methods of Political Warfare’, Political Warfare Executive, 1942, <http://bit.ly/tmtamopw> (found: 06/04/2021).

course of action compatible with the protagonist's interests; political attacks from a hostile power might instead attempt to 'objectify' the target, to the extent that it becomes indifferent to the hostile protagonist's advances and interests. So, for a rival or enemy protagonist, the objective is typically to 'objectify' the target, while for an ally or partner, the aim is usually to 're-subjectify' it.

To be effective, a hostile positioning operation would need to involve a three-step process:

- *Deactivate* the target country's existing identity through tactics such as:
  - The desynchronisation of its historical narrative;
  - The questioning or demolition of its self-perception of its international relevance; and
  - The delegitimation of its international status and role;
- *Construct* – if possible working in tandem with disgruntled or separatist domestic political forces – a new identity for the target, connecting it to new or pre-existing (but often marginalised) historical myths;
- *Encourage* the adoption and spread of the new position, both:
  - Domestically (inside the target country), particularly among disgruntled and separatist elements; and
  - Internationally, among the elites of other countries.

A 'friendly' positioning operation, meanwhile, would attempt to reinforce or remodel the target's national self-perception and identity.

Consequently, as Box 1 shows, a series of questions might be asked to identify how a particular protagonist might attempt to 'position' a specific target (in this case, the UK).

### **Box 1: Questions to help identify national positioning operations**

1. How is the UK – as a power – depicted in official foreign government discourse (such as in official statements by the regime, the ambassador, and by the country's press)? Are these depictions friendly, indifferent or hostile? Are they crude and formal, or sophisticated and expansive? Can integrated chains of meaning be detected, with historical, geographic and conceptual components?
2. Is it possible to determine why the foreign government seeks to shape and position Britain in such a way?
3. Is it possible to identify whether foreign leaders, officials and/or agents are attempting to articulate and project this depiction at the national and international



levels?

4. And can any instances of 'objectivation' or 'subjectivation' be identified? How do British leaders, politicians, and officials respond to it? Has their behaviour been modified by the attempted positioning? And has the protagonist succeeded?

Moreover, positioning operations can take several forms. Some are exclusively discursive, others involve non-discursive elements (they can involve political warfare); and some strategies are crude and 'formal', while others are more sophisticated and 'informal' – they become expansive.

A good example of a relatively informal, more strategic – and therefore expansive – approach is when governments seek to bestow entire new identities on their rivals. During the early 1980s, for example, Ronald Reagan, then US President, attempted to delegitimise the Soviet Union by framing communist ideology as 'the epitome of evil in the modern world.' By extension, the Soviet Union was cast as an absolute enemy – the 'evil empire' – which, ultimately, had to be overcome.<sup>11</sup> As Reagan expanded his discursive offensive, culminating in his cry to the Soviet leadership from beneath the Berlin Wall in 1987 to 'tear down this wall', he re-positioned the Soviet Union not only as evil, but also as a prison.<sup>12</sup>

A cruder but more formal strategy were the attempts of successive US administrations to position several countries during the 1990s as 'rogue states' and during the early 2000s as part of an 'axis of evil'. These clear and defined terms were landed on Iraq, Iran, North Korea, and/or Serbia, in an attempt to render each an international pariah, an object ripe for remedial military intervention.<sup>13</sup>

As geopolitical competition intensifies, it seems logical to assume that foreign positioning operations will also increase, both in scale and sophistication. So that the UK is prepared, British policymakers and strategists need to identify why and particularly *how* foreign powers – especially those that have shown hostility towards British interests, such as Russia and the PRC – are attempting to position the UK. Further, given the broader changes in the international system brought about by the rise and resurgence of the PRC and Russia, the UK should also focus on how its traditional allies and partners – not least the US, Germany and Japan – might be attempting to position

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<sup>11</sup> Ronald Reagan, Speech: 'Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, FL', Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, 08/03/1983, <http://bit.ly/ratacotnaoe> (found: 06/04/2021).

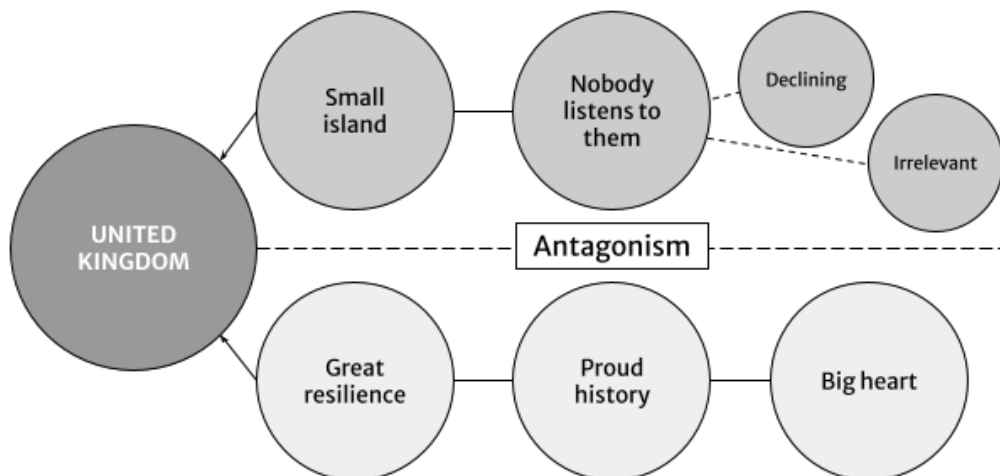
<sup>12</sup> Ronald Reagan, Speech: 'Remarks on East-West Relations at the Brandenburg Gate in West Berlin', Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, 12/06/1987, <http://bit.ly/roewratbgiwb> (found: 06/04/2021).

<sup>13</sup> Alexandra Homolar, 'Rebels without a conscience: The evolution of the rogue states narrative in US security policy', *European Journal of International Relations*, 17:4 (2010), pp. 705-727.

Britain, not least to harness British power and/or redirect it in support of their own interests.

### 2.1 Uncovering foreign powers' national positioning operations

Using the toolkit of discourse theory, it is possible to identify and understand more comprehensively the character and, potentially, the impact, of foreign positioning operations.<sup>14</sup> In a nutshell, discourse theory is designed to facilitate understanding of the formation of modern political ideologies and discourses. To return to the introductory example of the reported attempt of a Russian spokesperson to position the UK in 2013, as well as the British prime minister's response, two different articulations can be identified and contrasted:



Clearly, both articulations result in two mutually antagonistic threads, or ‘equivalential chains’, whereby each signifier is rendered equivalent to the rest.<sup>15</sup> Insofar as both speakers appear to have selected each of their signifiers (‘small island’, ‘great resilience’, and so on) to evoke additional – albeit quasi-subliminal – concepts and ideas, they give rise to (and draw off) a broader formation of meaning. The smaller circles – ‘declining’ and ‘irrelevant’ – provide examples to depict these possible signifiers.

<sup>14</sup> For an overview, see: David Howarth *et. al.* (eds.), *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis: Identities, Hegemonies and Social Change* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000) and Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> These concepts are borrowed from the Essex School of discourse theory. To simplify, a ‘chain of equivalence’ forms when a number of different concepts or ideas are articulated together. As each component enters the chain it becomes synonymous with the next to the extent that the meaning of all components within the chain are modified, often leading to a new dominant framework. See: Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 129-132.



This results in a discursive confrontation: just as the Russians attempted to reposition the UK, the British pushed back in an attempt to re-establish the *status quo ante*. The Russian spokesperson attempted to ‘objectify’ Britain as a small island that should be ignored, while Cameron sought to re-subjectify the UK as a great, proud and resilient nation with much to offer the world.

Of course, this is a simple example of positioning operations in action, confined to a handful of signifiers from two actors from a particular moment in time. What matters are broader and more deeply penetrating national positioning offensives, which inculcate numerous actors and agents, both foreign and domestic, playing out over a prolonged period of time. If HM Government is unaware that these positioning operations are underway, or how the UK’s rivals (and allies and partners) might be trying to frame it, British policymakers and strategists may themselves get drawn into foreign positioning operations, to the extent that they lose sight of Britain’s interests or place in the world.

### 3.0 Conclusion: Where next?

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This Primer has argued that Britain needs to better understand the art of discursive statecraft, particularly in terms of positioning operations. Building on the IOC 2025, it sets the scene for a series of policy papers to be published by the Council on Geostrategy during Spring 2021. This series aims to shed light on the specific attempts of foreign powers – friendly and unfriendly – to position (or reposition) the UK in accordance with their own national interests. As Box 2 shows, these papers will look at the activities of hostile revisionist states such as the PRC and Russia; the behaviour of more friendly countries like Germany, Japan and the United States; and will culminate in a paper which will explain how Britain should respond to the national positioning challenge. 🌐

#### **Box 2: Upcoming papers in the national positioning series**

1. *Discursive statecraft: Preparing for national positioning operations* – James Rogers
2. *How Russia ‘positions’ the United Kingdom* – Dr Andrew Foxall
3. *How China ‘positions’ the United Kingdom* – Matthew Henderson
4. *How allies and partners ‘position’ the United Kingdom* – Dr Philip Shetler-Jones
5. *Discursive statecraft: Resisting national positioning operations* – James Rogers





### About the author

**James Rogers** is Co-founder and Director of Research at the Council on Geostrategy, where he specialises in geopolitics and British strategic policy. Previously, he held positions at the Henry Jackson Society, the Baltic Defence College, and the European Union Institute for Security Studies. He has been invited to give oral evidence at the Foreign Affairs, Defence, and International Development committees in the Houses of Parliament. He holds an MPhil in Contemporary European Studies from the University of Cambridge and an award-winning BSc Econ (Hons) in International Politics and Strategic Studies from the University of Wales, Aberystwyth.

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14 Old Queen Street  
London SW1H 9HP

0044 (0) 20 3915 5625  
[info@geostrategy.org.uk](mailto:info@geostrategy.org.uk)

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