Punching above our weight is just what Britain needs
(Nigel Biggar, The Times (London), February 1 2017)

Here’s how the story goes. Under Tony Blair and then David Cameron Britain sought to punch above its weight — and got roundly beaten. Under Blair we got caught up in an American neo-imperialist fantasy of remaking the world in our image, and came crashing to earth in the sectarian anarchy of post-invasion Iraq and a Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan. Under Cameron we attempted smarter intervention in Libya but reaped civil war, boatloads of refugees and a new breeding-ground for Islamic State.

So the moral of the story is clear: we British must get real, forswear our lingering imperial pretensions, stop playing poodle to the US, and leave the world’s policing to the UN.

It’s also one that unfriendly powers are keen to play back to us. In 2011 a British diplomat in China was told: “You have to remember that you come from a weak and declining nation.” And two years later Vladimir Putin’s official spokesman said that Britain is “just a small island . . . No one pays any attention to them.”

They’re wrong. The UN is no substitute for states — its power to enforce international law is limited to the troops that states loan it. And not infrequently that power is reduced to the impotent venting of moral indignation. Think Syria. So if we did retire from global policing, we couldn’t surrender responsibility to the UN; we could only surrender it to other states. But if some states must carry it, why not us?

Britain should continue to punch above its weight. Even at the height of our imperial power we seldom fought alone and often paid others to do our fighting for us. Among Wellington’s troops at Waterloo, Britons were a minority. In 1999 Mr Blair — most unpoodle-like — skilfully manoeuvred a reluctant President Clinton into putting American military muscle behind intervention in Kosovo.

By all means let’s have postimperial modesty but let’s refuse postimperial sulking. Just because we can’t be No 1 any more doesn’t mean that we’re nothing. If we really were a little island of no consequence, Russia and China wouldn’t bother trying to unnerve us. We continue to have significant power, hard and soft, and we have a moral obligation to use that power to best effect. Punching above our weight isn’t delusional; it’s canny.

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