

Sunak Made History But UK's Stature's Getting Unmade

Britain is being forced to gradually reconcile to the limits of its influence in the world today

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As the old year took one last breath and exhaled, it seemed to blow a raspberry straight at Rishi Sunak, Britain's first non-white prime minister, its richest ever and its youngest in 210 years. With a roster of crippling public sector strikes and the British people facing the biggest drop in living standards on record, a history-making PM now seemed to have the unenviable task of helping a former sea-faring empire sharply trim the sails of its ambition.

It didn't help that a new poll, commissioned by the country's newest broadcast channel GB News, had found that a majority – 57% – of the British public believe “nothing in Britain works anymore.” GB News, which is on the right of the political spectrum, Sunak's home territory, had also ascertained that Boris Johnson is regarded as the “most competent” of 2022's three PMs. For Sunak, three percentage points behind Johnson's 32 on that poll, nothing seemed to be working particularly well anymore.

Being downbeat on the India FTA: Even a much-hyped free trade deal with India, originally meant to be signed by last Diwali, is on the backburner. Once, it would have been considered a shoo-in for a British Indian PM, someone whose tribe has been hailed by Narendra Modi as a “living bridge” between the UK and India. But after UK trade secretary Kemi Badenoch's December 11 dash to Delhi to attend the first formal round of negotiations since July, she has struck a noticeably downbeat note. Badenoch has insisted that “timelines are not helpful” and forthcoming elections (due in faraway 2024, for god's sake!) could knock trade deal completion off the calendar.

It has been left to Alastair Campbell, sharp-tongued spinmeister to former Labour PM Tony Blair, to note the tell-tale signs of British decline. “Our standing in the world (is) so reduced,” Campbell recently wrote, “that when Joe Biden asks the French president, Emmanuel

Macron, rather than a ‘special relationship’ British leader, to have the honour of the first state visit of his time as US president, we are so settled in our inward-looking decline that the evident snub barely registers.”

Perhaps. But some say the acerbic analysis disregards a quite different reality, one that is guiding the low-key actions and rhetoric of Sunak's government: Realisation that Britain isn't a great but a medium power.

And on helping Ukraine: New research by the thinktank Chatham House on its UK in the World Initiative indicates the thinking. There is a push for post-Brexit Britain to understand the limitations of its influence and reach and incorporate this within the so-called Integrated Review of Foreign, Security and Defence Strategy. Sunak's government is currently updating the March 2021 review, completed under Johnson, which was bursting with effervescent words and phrases and zippy ideas about the “world-beating” qualities of “Global Britain”.

But Sunak, a scant two months into the job, appears to have either decided on a narrower, more realistic focus, or been forced to reconcile himself to it. For instance, he has asked for something akin to a “Goldman Sachs dashboard” on the Ukraine war, in the words reportedly used by a senior bureaucrat to describe Sunak's desire to assess Ukraine's progress and the use of Britain's steady stream of military supplies.

Not only is this caution rather different from the boosterism of Boris, it may indicate the more prosaic instincts of a former Goldman Sachs hedge fund manager – to recognise that

Ukraine and Russia may be at an impasse and plentiful weapons, just like purple prose, may be a waste.

Leaving self-delusion for self-deprecation: The push towards middle-powerdom would seek to build on strengths with Britain reasonably aspiring to the core competencies of a host of countries. Like Japan, it could demonstrate key economic strengths and smartly navigate relationships with both the US and China. Like Turkey, Britain could play a unique security role.

And like Canada, it could attract business and people because of its vaunted openness. Even though Britain's handling of migration issues has annoyed countries as disparate as India and Albania, Sunak's rise to Britain's biggest political job has also demonstrated its commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion.

The chances of a smooth transition are middling. Britain would need to abandon self-delusion for a double order of self-deprecation. Perhaps something along the lines of Sunak's jokey take on the British condition at his first holiday season reception at 10 Downing Street?

Having gone past his predecessor Liz Truss's 45-day record in office, Sunak said the UK had gone from having the shortest-serving PM in history to just the shortest (he claims he's 5'7”). It may be a sign of the times that there is a greater sense of realism as both Britain and its leader contemplate themselves.

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