Research Paper

Ontological Insecurity and the Decline of the UK Empire: A Study of National Identity under the New Labour Government (1997-2007)*

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Abstract

This article investigates whether the United Kingdom experienced a significant identity crisis, both geographically and historically, during the New Labour government (1997-2007); it argues that the United Kingdom, which was traditionally regarded as a dominant global superpower, can no longer sustain such a role in the complex and evolving dynamics of the modern world. In this regard, the key question raised is "To what extent were New Labour's policies under Tony Blair shaped by social factors such as trauma, anxiety, and status?" Using a mixed methodology, the article hypothesizes that the UK government struggled to assert material power, while addressing societal anxieties linked to its waning status as a middle power in the international society. The historical analysis traces the roots of the UK's self-perception, connecting this behaviour to a state of ontological insecurity—a national identity crisis in contemporary times to act as a great power in international society. The article concludes that this sense of ontological insecurity under the New Labour government (1997-2007) originates from the loss of Britain's prodigious power status to the United States after World War II, along with the gradual erosion of British influence over former dominions, colonies, and other territories.

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1. Introduction

Historical evidence suggests that the formation of a British identity was largely tied to the British Empire when England and Scotland existed as separate kingdoms. In 1496, King Henry VII of England, inspired by the overseas exploration successes of Spain and Portugal, commissioned John Cabot to lead an expedition in search of a northwest passage to Asia through the North Atlantic (Ferguson, 2004). However, England made no significant efforts to establish colonies in the Americas until the latter part of the 16th century during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (Canny, 1998). Nevertheless, a significant milestone came earlier during Henry VIII's reign with the 1533 Statute in Restraint of Appeals, which declared that "this realm of England is an Empire" (Koebner, 1953). This declaration marked the beginning of a transformative period, during which Britain evolved into a major power and developed a new social identity as an ontologically secure state in the international society.

One of the key factors in the development of British social identity as a global power was the expansion of its colonies. Meanwhile, although England left behind Portugal, Spain, and France in launching overseas colonies, it achieved its first modern colonization, referred to as the Ulster Plantation in 16th-century Ireland, led by locating English Protestants in the Ulster region. It is also evident that England had already colonized part of Ireland following the Norman invasion of Ireland in 1169 (Canny, 1998; Kenny, 2006). Moreover, the colonization of India played an important role in shaping Great Britain's social identity as an Empire by offering England's most critical and lucrative colonies (James, 2001, p. 7). At this time, new settlements were established in St. Kitts (1624), Barbados (1627), and Nevis (1628), (Canny,

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1998, p. 221). In less than a decade, the Royal African Company also provided a monopoly to the British colonies on the supply of slaves in the Caribbean (Lloyd, 1996, p. 37). As agreed, the company had to transport more slaves across the Atlantic than any other countries, and significantly increased England's share of the trade and the market, from the average of 33% in 1673 to 74% in 1683 (Pettigrew, 2013).

This article aims to argue that the origin of UK's sense of ontological insecurity resides in two historical traumas. The first trauma refers to London's loss of long-standing historical narratives as a great power to the United States after the Second World War, while the second consists of the gradual loss of British dominions, colonies, protectorates, mandates, and other territories ruled or administered by the United Kingdom and its predecessor states. With the fall of the British Empire, the gradual shift of power between the UK and the US took place. London has gradually set the stage for Washington to articulate its desired identity as an independent social being as well as an emerging great power in the international society. This article explores the rise and fall of the British Empire, aiming to shed light on how and why its decline contributed to a sense of ontological insecurity within the British government under the New Labour government (1997-2007).

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Broadly speaking, Ontological security refers to the need for a stable, recognized identity through acknowledgment by societal forces (Innes & Steele, 2013). It arises when individuals or states fully accept each other's unique identities. Without this mutual

recognition, ontological insecurity can lead to identity crises and conflict (Fehl & Kolliarkis, 2015). Without recognition, self-identity and fulfilment remain unattainable. This argument assumes that without achieving a sense of ontological security, no sense of self-identity and self- fulfilment will be truly constructed. Ultimately, Ontological security discussions signify how states often risk their physical security and material gain in search of ontological security to protect their national identity and territories. In contrast, the mainstream IR theories such as structural realism have maintained a foundational focus on physical security to account for phenomena such as the security dilemma and arms races (Gilpin, 1981; Wivel, 2011). Central to this materialist paradigm is the argument that the international system operates within a decentralized and competitive framework, pushing states to engage in a continuous conflict for survival. In this anarchic and self-help system, states exist in a condition of profound uncertainty regarding the internal motivations of other actors (Milner, 1992, p. 75; Waltz, 1979, pp. 88–114). Mearsheimer (1994, pp. 9-11) contends that states are often presented with compelling justifications for war. Furthermore, the decentralized nature of the international system limits the capacity of weaker states to impose punitive measures on aggressors, resulting in an unending pursuit of power among states. According to this argument, states generally adopt revisionist strategies—either internally or externally oriented—to secure their survival and safeguard their autonomy (Davidson, 2006, p. 2). Consequently, dominant theoretical insights within international relations posit that power transitions inherently destabilize the global order, frequently culminating in arms races and heightened security competition (Organski, 1958; Powell, 1999).

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This article focuses on highlighting the role of social factors in influencing states' behaviour. To achieve this, it primarily analyses private statements, interviews, speeches, and research papers sourced from archival documents, aiming to uncover how social factors shaped the behaviour of the New Labour government. From this view, there is a better chance that policy outcomes are relevant to policymakers' convictions. The paper specifically examines the themes, concepts, and words that are concerned with status, identity, dignity, and self vs. other under the New Labour government. In particular, this study uses content analysis of words, sentences, and dialogues to understand how UK elites employ speech to distinguish themselves from others in the international society. By examining official documents, interviews, and archival records, the article highlights how the New Labour government emphasized self-other narratives to position the UK as an exceptional power deserving ontological security.

This study is a mix-method research, taking into account research objectives and research method from both qualitative and quantitative methods for gaining a more in-depth understanding of states' behaviour, attitudes, and beliefs. In fact, due to the novelty of the article's theoretical framework, UK's long history, and the dearth of data on UK's true intentions toward other states, a process tracking approach will be deemed inclusive. The internal dynamics of the UK decision-making process has a bearing on the outcomes and therefore the influence of the UK on other actors. Therefore, the author will randomly utilize official speeches and interviews by UK's elites. This random analysis was conducted by examining primary sources of 43 official speeches (British Archive, 1997-2007) delivered by UK's governmental elites namely Tony Blair-the leader of the New Labour government, Johnson, Alan-Home Secretary speech, and Gordon Brown- the leader of the Labour

party from 1997 to 2007. Through this analysis, conducted by the INVIVO program, this paper uses several first-hand interviews and speeches delivered on public to infer how much the New Labour government has focused on key normative concepts such as people, Britishness, or British value. According to the content analysis provided, it is evident that the UK government and mostly the New Labour prime minister have heavily focused on four keywords such as people, New/New Labour, Britain/British and, the world. The UK Prime Minister Blair has repeatedly utilized the above-mentioned key words more than 3500 times over time.

Thus, this research incorporates quantitative data from the UK to highlight the strength of national and ideational sentiments within the country. It also demonstrates the extent to which UK decision-makers are shaped more by normative factors, such as national sentiments, than by material considerations like economic benefits. This analysis suggests that while the New Labour government initially established its doctrines with the aim of enhancing security, the economy, society, justice, and healthcare, it appears that the UK government has gradually shifted its priorities. Greater emphasis has been placed on crafting a new role identity for the UK as a pivotal global power, with less attention has been devoted to its foundational commitments, casting violence and mistrust towards other sovereign states under Tony Blair in support of British values as a moral obligation to bring peace and security.

3. Review of Literature: The Rise of the British Empire (1496-1853)

The gradual erosion of the slave trade monopoly between 1688 and 1712 played a pivotal role in enabling independent British slave traders to grow. This development highly increased the total

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number of enslaved individuals transported from the Caribbean to Britain (Pettigrew, 2007). A particularly noteworthy period in British modern history emerged at the close of the 16th century, when England and the Dutch Empire started to challenge the Portuguese Empire's dominance in Asian trade. During this era, England utilized private joint-stock companies to finance exploratory and commercial voyages. This initiative led to the establishment of influential entities like the English (later British) East India Company in 1600 and the Dutch East India Company in 1602.

In examining the 18th century, one can observe a pivotal historical moment, during which Great Britain emerged as the preeminent colonial power on the global stage, with France serving as its primary rival in imperial calculations (Pagden, 2003, p. 90). Meanwhile, it was easily evidence how the British Empire reached a significant juncture as Great Britain, alongside Portugal, the Netherlands, and the Holy Roman Empire, and became embroiled in the War of the Spanish Succession. The conflict, which persisted until 1714, concluded with the Treaty of Utrecht, signalling a reconfiguration of European power dynamics. Interestingly, Philip V of Spain renounced his descendants' claim to the French throne, marking a critical shift in Spain's geopolitical influence as it relinquished its European empire (Shennan, 1995, pp. 11–17). This evolving balance of power among Britain's rivals pushed the nation into a transformative period, enabling it to construct a distinctive and independent imperial identity.

The signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1763 had significant implications for the future of the British Empire. A pivotal outcome was Britain's ability to capitalize on unique opportunities in North America as France's colonial dominance came to an abrupt end,

marked by the acknowledgment of British claims to Rupert's Land (Lloyd, 1996, p. 37). With France's decline and Britain's newfound control over New France, a significant French-speaking population came under the British rule. Additionally, Florida was ceded to Britain, while Louisiana was transferred to Spain. For Britain, the weakening of French influence was essential to securing its position as a global power. Furthermore, Britain's decisive victory over France in India solidified its status as the world's leading maritime power during the Seven Years' War (Pagden, 2003, p. 67). To increase its dominance, Britain's ambition to expand territorial holdings globally became a critical aspect of its rise to absolute power.

British expansionism was predominantly marked by war and conflict. The British victory over Napoleon left the nation without any significant international rival, except for Russia in Central Asia (Parsons, 1999, p. 401). However, fears of Russian expansionism and its formidable naval strength posed a looming threat to Britain's growing influence. This tension escalated in 1853, when Russia invaded the Ottoman Balkans, sparking concerns over Russian dominance in the Mediterranean region, as well as the Middle East. These anxieties prompted Britain and France to intervene in support of the Ottoman Empire. Together, they launched a campaign in the Crimean Peninsula to neutralize Russian naval power. The conflict resulted in a decisive defeat for Russia (James, 2001), and the Crimean War (1854–1856) showcased Britain's adoption of modern warfare techniques (Royle, 2000). Notably, this war emerged as the sole global conflict between Britain and another imperial power during the era of Pax Britannica (James, 2001).

The foundation of British power rested on its unmatched

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maritime dominance, which enabled it to assume the role of a global enforcer, a period often referred to as the Pax Britannica (Porter, 1998; Johnston & Reisman, 2008; Songhaus, 2004). This dominance also gave rise to a distinct foreign policy approach termed "splendid isolation" (Parsons, 1999, pp. 254–257). However, many scholars argue that Britain's identity as a great power facing little to no significant rivals was insufficient on its own to maintain full control over its colonies. Instead, its status as a global force was further reinforced through economic influence over nations like Argentina and Siam. This form of indirect control over foreign economies eventually became known as Britain's informal empire (Porter, 1998; Marshall, 1996).

4. Ontological Insecurity: The Fall of the UK Empire (1900-1997)

By the early 20th century, Britain struggled to sustain both its metropolitan centre and its expanding empire. Balancing 'splendid isolation' with expansionism became untenable (O'Brien, 2004). Meanwhile, Germany emerged as a dominant military and industrial force in Europe, seen as a likely opponent in future conflicts. Its naval aspirations extended to the Pacific (Murray, 2019), while the Imperial German Navy threatened Britain closer to home. To counter Germany's growing naval power, Britain allied with Japan in 1902 and later with long-time rivals France and Russia in 1904 and 1907 (Lloyd, 1996). The war-induced global shift of the 20th century spurred the rise of the United States and Japan as naval powers, alongside independence movements in India and Ireland, forcing Britain to revise its imperial strategy (Goldstein, 1994). Under mounting pressure from emerging powers challenging its dominance, Britain faced a choice between aligning

with the United States or Japan. It ultimately declined to renew the Anglo-Japanese Alliance and signed the 1922 Washington Naval Treaty. This decision established Britain as a naval partner with the United States, but also created a new maritime competitor (Louis, 2006, p. 302).

The contention over the British Empire's national and overseas security was also a critical concern in Britain, as it was essential to the British economy to protect the UK's position after the Great Depression (Lee, 1996. P. 305). Nevertheless, according to Murray (2019), Britain has acceded to recognizing Washington's rise as a great power due to its cultural similarities as an English-speaking country. In this argument, powers' desire for great power status through conflict-driven activities does not necessarily reside in radical power transitions. For instance, while major powers like Wilhelmine Germany, Imperial Japan, Weimar and Nazi Germany, and Soviet Russia pursued assertive and interventionist measures to challenge Great Britain's dominance, the United States was able to peacefully establish its identity as a great power in the post-World Wars era (Chavoshi & Saeidabadi, 2021). Therefore, the power transition between the US and the UK was also followed by the rise of the liberal international order (LIO) with the supremacy of a new great power titled the United States in the globe.

After 1945, Britain was left with exhausted factories and infrastructure, with its currency reserves and overseas investment consumed, and a government that kept committed to costly schemes of social improvement after the war. Ten million working days were lost in strikes in 1977 and this number increased dramatically between 1992 and 1993 (Hartley, 1994, p. 40). From a wider perspective, the rise of the United States is known as the rise of the Atlantic Alliance. However, for a former great power like

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Great Britain, joining the newly formed EEC would offer a new economic structure for the alliances. Therefore, the Washington 'Atlanticists' would tackle the concerns regarding the times in which Britain was to stand in a world that drastically required membership in a trading block after the rise of the United States as a great power (Hartley, 1994, p. 38).

More concretely, although the United Kingdom rose triumphantly over the Second World War, the consequences of the conflict were extensive and profound both domestically and internationally. As Darwin (2012, p. 343) details, most of Europe as a continent that had controlled the globe for centuries, was in complete devastation, and became home to the armies of the United States and the Soviet Union, who now possessed the balance of global power in the new world order. Economically, Britain was also trapped in a historic quagmire. Britain was left bankrupt, with insolvency only averted after the negotiation of a US$4.33 billion loan from Washington in 1946 (Brown, 1998). At the same time, anti-colonial sentiments were increasing dramatically in the colonies of European nations. This condition became complicated by the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. Largely, both nations adopted opposing instances against European colonialism.

At such times, with the gradual fall of the British Empire, many British politicians assumed that the British dominating social identity as a great power was competent to precede as a world power at the head of a re-imagined Commonwealth (Darwin, 2012. p. 343). However, by 1960 they were compelled to acknowledge that there was an irresistible 'wind of change' blowing among the former colonies, and Great Britain was no exception. For many decades, British domination had invigorated strong national

sentiments and encouraged the local authorities to fight for their right to an independent state. Therefore, what seems to be left was only the British priorities to change the policies on maintaining an enormous zone of British influence (Darwin, 2012, p. 366) and ensure that the former colonies would continue as stable non-Communist governments (Frank, 2002). In this context, while other European powers such as France and Portugal waged extensive and unsuccessful wars to sustain their empires safely, Britain instead adopted a policy of peaceful disengagement from its colonies. Nevertheless, a series of violence also occurred in Malaya, Kenya, and Palestine (Abernethy, 2000, pp. 148–150).

During this period, British colonies throughout the African mainland declared independence in the next decade, concluding in 1966. However, Namibia was an exception and was late to gain independence in 1990. In the following decades, numerous other countries across the globe proceeded to achieve independence from Great Britain, with some states leaving colonial rule at specific times, whilst others achieved independence through a long process launched by dominion status. Aside from a scattering of islands, the process of decolonization that had been initiated after the Second World War was entirely shaped by 1981. The fading power of the Empire was on the rise when in 1982, Britain demonstrated its determination to protect its overseas territories when Argentina sought to invade the Falkland Islands, citing a long-standing territorial claim that traced back to the era of the Spanish Empire (James, 2001, pp. 624–625). Interestingly, for a few years, the British assertive response to retake the Falkland Islands during the Falklands War assisted Britain in reversing the downward trend in Britain's status as a world power for a while (James, 2001, p. 629).

Nevertheless, in the last decades of the 20th century, although

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Canada, Australia, and New Zealand were granted legislative independence by the Statute of Westminster 1931, vestigial constitutional links sustained the English-speaking countries' final constitutional links with the former empire. Surely, what seems to be vital is that the gradual fall of the great British Empire with the rise of a new dominating power called the United States has shifted Britain's distributive capabilities and opened the floor for the US to jump into the global stage as a great power. Therefore, scholars have argued that the fall of the British Empire, which was accelerated by the Suez Crisis of 1956, approved Britain's decline as a global power, and the transfer of Hong Kong to China assured the end of the British Empire on 1 July 1997 (Brendon, 2007; Brown, 1998).

5. The Rise and Fall of the Empire: The Origins of UK's Social Anxieties

As noted earlier, the early eighteenth century marked the apex of colonialism and the expansion of the European powers throughout the world. It was the beginning of what Hobsbawm (1989) famously called 'the Age of Empire'. However, knowing that Britain was successfully raised as one of the champions of the world war, the British understanding of the 'self' was no longer identical to its previous role identity as a great power. This key objective, as we argue, is underpinned by the principles and dynamics behind the UK's new role identity as a former power. In this setting, a rational-materialist explanation might suggest that the state inherently desires 'survival' and that competition among states would result in conflict. Yet, for Britain, the linking of the military actions to achieving physical security was nothing more

than a talk shop. For Realists (Mearsheimer- offensive realism), the overall objective of the pivotal power is to gain power, and that is the reason for which great powers such as the United States adopted offshore balancing in South Asia. However, constructivists such as Alexander Went (1999) have a different understanding. In this view, states as individuals are anthropomorphized and attribute human characteristics or behaviour to states in international society. States as individuals desire ontological security.

Laing (1960) and Giddens (1984) structuration theory offers a framework for understanding the motivations, desires, and incentives of agents. In this theory, Laing (1960) maintained that individuals desire ontological security. Later, Mitzen (2006), by referring to states' historical narratives and need for continuity, elucidated that states as individuals desire ontological security to achieve a meaningful understanding of self via routines and continuity. Conversely, Kenneth Waltz underlined that "survival is a prerequisite to achieving any objectives that states may intend to follow" (1979). Yet, from a social perspective, 'insecurity' hardly denotes an individual's physical security. Therefore, from a non-physical perspective, we argue that individuals feel insecure about how they desire to be. Therefore, the sense of incompatibility with individuals' current identity features, causes them to feel anxious. Whenever we refer to an individual's 'insecurity', we mean that his/her survival is at risk, 'insecurity' in this sense means that individuals feel uncomfortable with who they are and who they desire to be.

It can be argued that the root of the United Kingdom's sense of aggression also stems from the loss of its status and dignity as a great power. Drawing from the discussion above, it appears that the UK harbours a longing to return to its former glory as a leading

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nation, resisting any characterization as a middle power. Although a 'New British History' began to take shape in the 1980s, successive governments have never lost sight of the aspiration to reclaim greatness. During this period, critiques of the Anglocentrism inherent in traditional historiography emerged alongside a new approach, suggesting that future British history should adopt a more genuinely multinational perspective, incorporating the distinct histories of England, Scotland, and Wales (Koditschek, 2002). Following from the earlier premises, Britain suffers from a lack of ontological security as a great power. Britain constantly desires to get recognition from the existing great powers to act as a pivotal power in the international society. Thus, the source of UK's feeling of ontological insecurity resides in two driving forces: First, the experience of the fall of the great Empire and the feeling of trauma. Broadly speaking, the experience of trauma is a painful ontologically feeling among the actors in a society. Caruth (1996) describes trauma as an unconscious experience of sudden or catastrophic events, an uncontrolled response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event (Caruth, 1996, pp. 91-92). In this endeavour, as indicated in figure 1, past events or states' collective traumas can shape states' present behaviour — pushing actors to adopt provocative policies to reclaim their social status (Charoenvattananukul, 2020, pp. 182–185). Second, a lack of a biographical narrative, routines, and a sense of continuity as a great nation. These factors serve as an additional driving force for the British to achieve ontological security, maintaining their independence and a stable social identity.

Figure 1. The Experience of Trauma and the Struggle for Recognition and Ontological Security
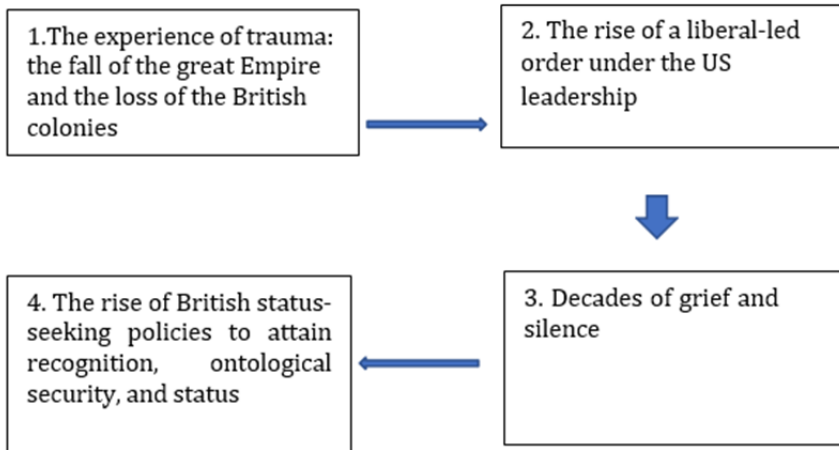
Source: Author

Clearly, although the collapse of the British empire has never put Britain into major physical issues to fight for its survival, it has indeed left a profound psychological impact on Britain's understanding of itself as a great nation. Thus, even though the United Kingdom always feels in a privileged position as a nuclear-weapon state (NWS), this argument does not simply signify that material factors are secondary. From a social perspective, the British image as a great power was superseded in a Hegelian fashion with a new emerging social order (the USA). This new social order (the master) has constructed the US as a great power with a dominating social being as Murray notes. However, what seems to be missing from Murray's argument is that although the fall of the British Empire did not usher into a radical conflict between the US and the UK, the unexpected shift of power between the US and the UK later defined a new social identity for the UK and subordinated the UK position into an inferior position. The

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damaged and new social identity, inflicted on the former British Empire, has been followed by a series of economic and territorial losses. For instance, the traumatic feeling of losing a great Empire was also preceded by a couple of other traumatic events such as the Statute of Westminster giving Dominions constitutional autonomy (1931), the Declaration of Indian Independence, and the partitioning of India and Pakistan (1947).

The following section will explore the ways in which the lingering anxiety of losing an empire continued to resonate during the New Labour government led by Tony Blair, with a particular focus on the importance of historical narratives and the need for continuity in shaping state's behaviour. By addressing the concept of ontological insecurity within the context of British foreign policy under Blair, the discussion will consider the extent to which the New Labour government was shaped by social factors, such as the pursuit of status, in its efforts to attain ontological security.

6. The New Labor Government (1997-2007): The Anxiety of Losing an Empire

The New Labour party witnessed a landslide victory at the general election after eighteen years of the Conservative government in 1997. The New Labour government could win a total of 418 seats in the House of Commons. This victory was named the largest victory in the party's history (Barlow & Mortimer, 2008, p. 226). Surprisingly, the New Labours experienced a victorious jump in 2001 and 2005. Since then, Tony Blair has become Labour's longest-serving Prime Minister and the first prime minister who won three consecutive general elections in the United Kingdom. Blair (1997-2007) was also known as the first Labour leader to

succeed in a general election since Harold Wilson (1974) after the Second World War. On the eve of the New Labour government, the term New Labour was first coined by Blair in his October 1994 Labour Party Conference speech (Morgan, 1998). This slogan was part of the slogan known as 'New Labour, New Britain' (Driver & Martell, 2006, p. 13). The New Labor government was marked as the beginning of a new area in Britain. During this time, Blair took several modernization steps and later announced that "parties that do not change die, and [Labour] is a living movement, not a historical monument" (Faucher-King & Le Galès, 2010). During his speech, Blair denounced Clause IV of the party's constitution and declared the modernization process of the party. Blair decided to leave the Labor government's nationalism. Instead, he embraced market economics. In this policy, Blair promised a balanced market and public ownership to reinforce wealth and justice (Driver & Martell, 2006, pp. 13–14.). The New Labour developed to become the Third Way, a platform designed to provide an alternative "beyond capitalism and socialism" after Margaret Thatcher (Kramp, 2010, p. 4). This form of political doctrine was later expanded to show the party's progress and attract voters from various sides (Driver, 2011, p. 108).

With the rise of the New Labour government (1997-2007), British foreign policies adopted profound discursive shifts and strategies. These strategic shifts have drastically altered domestically oriented doctrines, cherished by Thatcherism toward Blair-ism with a more internationally active role identity. Having passed a period of Thatcherism, with a benign overseas foreign policy, Blair took on an aggressive doctrine in the international society. Under Blair, with Britain's benign political intervention after the Suez crisis, London attempted to reform and back away

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from an old British benign political approach in various places. Since then, a series of new role-making discourses expanded in Britain.

Since the transformation of the United Kingdom's political landscape in 1997, there have been concerns for recognition by external powers as indicated by the New Labour elites. Jonathan Powell, during the election campaign of 1997 argued that Tony Blair, on the advice of his chief of staff, decided to say "I am proud of the British Empire". However, he was stopped by his fellow advisors at the last minute. During the same event, Blair also went on by announcing that he would ensure that Britain "provide[s] leadership to the world … ." (Kampfner, 2004, pp. 16-17). Similarly, Blair as prime minister, to the Lord Mayor's banquet in November 1997, described his political vision as– "the big picture" - for Britain and the world, so that it is 'standing in the world … [would] grow and prosper.' Blair did not stop here and set his argument with enviable clarity. He maintained that Britain's principal strength resides in its capacity to use its historical alliances so that "others listen" … . "I value and honour our history enormously". Blair (1997) surprisingly continued by emphasizing that 'the British Empire must be used to expand the United Kingdom's global sphere of influence via the commonwealth and through our English language'. Compellingly, the new prime minister sought to construct a new image for the UK by centralizing Britain in the middle of the world decisions. Therefore, having an Empire in the past has been frequently utilized to refer to the United Kingdom's Empire history as a proud history.

> Again my vision for post-Empire Britain is clear. It is to make this country pivotal, a leader in the world. To use the strengths of our history to build our future. With the US as our friend and

ally. Within the Commonwealth. In the United Nations. In NATO. To use the superb reputation of our Armed Forces, not just for defence, but as an instrument of influence in a world of collective security and cooperation. And to lead in Europe again. Not so that we 'don't get left behind.' That is a weak reason. It is because, for four centuries or more, we have been a leading power in Europe. And we have at times been critical to the survival of not just Europe but the world. It is our destiny (Blair, 1997).

Henceforth, the strategies employed by the elites and decision-makers were international reformation to garner approbation from international audiences. In other words, Britain must look outward. As the world's second-largest importer and exporter of foreign investments, Britain plays a decisive role in the international society. Britain had to reconstruct its strategic partnership with the United States, which other UK governments such as Blair had wrecked. The British leaders from Blair to David Cameron had been constantly anxious about gaining recognition and respect from the United States as significant others. Blair (1997) argued that "When Britain and America work together on the international scene there is little we cannot achieve "We must never forget the historic or continuing US role in defending the political and economic freedoms we take for granted … . Magna Carta to the first Parliament to the Industrial Revolution to an Empire that covered the world".

From a European lens, as Faucher-King and Le Galés noted that the 'New Labour's leadership was convinced of the obligation to accept globalized capitalism and join forces with the middle classes, who were often hostile to the Unions' (Faucher-King & Le Galés, 2010). As a result, this period is mostly referred to as the era
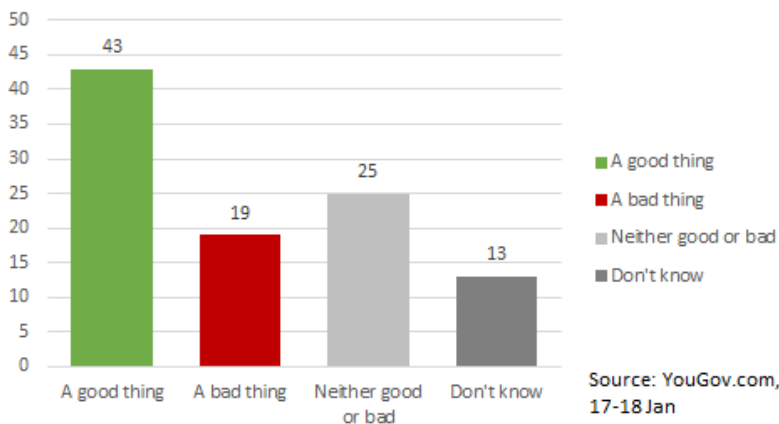
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of shaping British policy direction for the 21st century. As a result, the New Labor government aspired to provide a middle way between the neoliberal market economics of the New Right (known as economically efficient) and also the so-called ethical reformism of post-1945 Labour (Vincent, 1983, p. 93). At the domestic level, New Labor has revolutionized the traditional beliefs in attaining social justice. Instead of achieving social justice for the working-class population through 'mass "collectivism", Blair was much affected by the ethical and Christian socialist views as a new form of liberal socialism. Liberal socialism was an attempt to incorporate liberal principles into socialism by achieving liberty, equality, and solidarity (Adams, 1998, p. 140). Kettell (2011), in 'New Labour and the New World Order_ Britain's Role in the War on Terror', explained that although both Europe and the United sustained close friendships, the issue of decolonization and the United Kingdom's decline remained a critical issue in 1997. Here, Britain found the right moment to reclaim its former position and its name as a former great power.

In addition, according to the surveys conducted in the UK, the United Kingdom's citizens also feel widely proud of their history and many of the issues concerning the UK's behaviour also reside in the British people's sense of past imperial nostalgia. According to the figures provided, for most British people, the long-lasting history of the great kings and queens is still a resource of British pride and identity. Therefore, the salient point is to understand that the British are hardly detached from history as traumatized (ontologically insecure) actors. Therefore, to understand the UK government's provocative behaviour, we are required not to discount the role of the past and the sense of continuity in constructing the UK's understanding of 'self' today. In this regard, to understand states' foreign policy behaviour, it is vital to take a

closer look at the UK's civil society behaviour and the point of departure is a critical analysis of existing quantitative surveys (YouGov, 2016).

Britain's sense of inferiority as a middle power stems from its loss of status as a former empire. While not blaming the United States for its current position, Britons collectively feel the loss of their past dominance. The decline of the Empire in the 20th century has fostered a perception of injustice since 1945. As indicated in figure 2, 1,741 British adults revealed that 51% of men and 35% of women viewed the Empire positively. Older respondents tended to hold more favourable views than younger ones. Across most regions, 41% to 45% saw the Empire in a positive light, though Scotland differed, with more considering it negative (34%) than positive (30%) and expressing regret (36%) rather than pride (34%). Among political groups, Labour supporters were unique, with more viewing the Empire negatively (30%), although 28% still held positive views. Overall, many believed the Empire's impact on colonies was more positive than negative.

Figure 2. British Citizens' Perception of the British Empire

Source: YouGov, 2016

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The feeling of nostalgia and regret plays a significant role in motivating British decision-makers to seek new roles for the UK as a decisive power within the international system. This perspective suggests that British authorities are heavily driven by a desire to revive and reshape Britain's influence as a pivotal force on the global stage. As Kettell (2011, pp. 11-13) highlights, there is an underlying ambition within the UK government to redefine Britain's position internationally. From the New Labour standpoint, this process is viewed as a collective effort aimed at reversing the political and economic decline experienced in the post-war era, with the goal of re-establishing a transformative role in global affairs. Prime Minister Blair (2009) asserted that the United Kingdom must maintain its ability to play an active role internationally and retain its status as a global player (The New York Times, 2009 Jun. 27). In his view, a nation's success is closely tied to its standing in the world, as he emphasized that influence translates to power and prosperity (Independent, 19 June 2009).
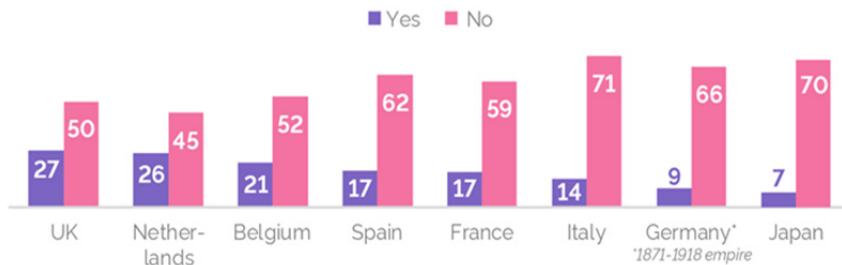
Figure 3. Trauma and the Feeling of Inferiority in the United Kingdom
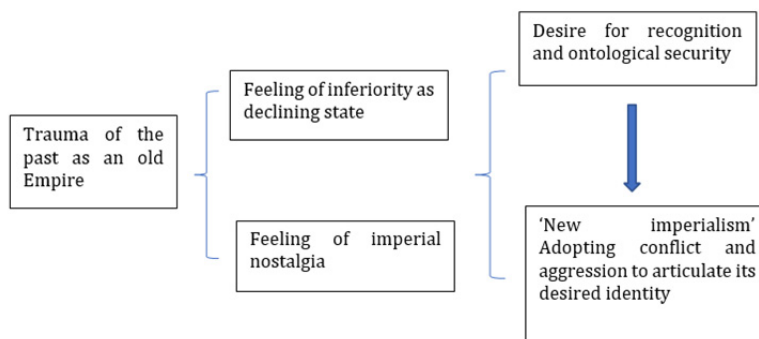
Source: Author

Clearly, besides strong nostalgic feelings and the sense of a glorious past among the British government, the feeling of the revival of the British past identity is still a noticeable sentiment among the British people as indicated in figure 3. A YouGov survey conducted in 2020 compares attitudes towards former empires in eight countries namely Britain, France, Italy, Spain, Belgium, Japan, the Netherlands, and Germany from 1871-1918. According to this survey, people in all countries hardly have a uniquely romantic view of their former empires. Many of the former empires responded negatively to the question ʻWould you like to have an empire?ʼ For instance, Italy and Japan experienced 71% and 70% opposition, respectively, while France stood at 59%. Interestingly, Britain and the Netherlands demonstrated the strongest nostalgic sentiments about their former empires, with 27% and 26%, respectively—the highest among the eight countries analysed. As indicated in figure 4, nearly a quarter of British respondents expressed a desire for their country to still have an empire today.

Figure 4. How Different Empires Might Aspire to Build Their Own Empires

Source: YouGov, 2020

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Three key conclusions can be drawn from this analysis. First, the UK government aimed to transition from an older foreign policy approach to a so-called 'new era' (YouGov, 2020). While nostalgia for the former Empire does not necessarily translate into a desire to dominate, British society harbours strong nationalistic and sentimental ties to its past. Feelings of imperial nostalgia and pride are deeply embedded within Britain's collective identity. Consequently, it is reasonable to suggest that, following the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the emergence of the unipolar moment, the UK government largely oriented itself toward maintaining a special relationship with the United States, regarded by some as the modern equivalent of a "New Rome" (Kettell, 2011). Second, the trauma of historical decline and imperial nostalgia motivated Britain to seek recognition and ontological security by asserting itself as a pivotal power in global affairs. Lastly, Britain's assertive behaviour extends beyond purely material interests. To fully grasp the roots of New Labour's sense of ontological insecurity and its confrontational tendencies during 1997-2007, it is necessary to look back through history and explore the sources of British pride from a sociological standpoint. In this framework, Britain yearns for recognition, status, and ontological security as a way to recapture a sense of its historic significance or perhaps even to reverse the dynamics of its subordinate relationship with perceived global powers.

7. Ontological Insecurity: British Interests and Values (1997-2007)

On a deeper level, the Labour government advocated for a host of British interests and values at the international level and expected to operationalize those norms and values through aggression and conflicts. Under Blair, the British foreign policy discourses were

hardly in favour of the position of middle power for Britain. Indeed, the consciousness of being inferior to the great powers had been collectively embedded in the hearts and minds of the British decision-makers. Nevertheless, what makes this period particularly significant is the attention drawn to the notion of Britishness and British exceptionalism. As we delve into more detail, it is evident that for Blair, the middle states such as Australia have already taken the position on the globe. He contends that any attempt by Britain should be a strategy to supersede its former overseas norms and values and adopt conflict-driven policies as a strategy to construct a new role identity. This strategy could assist the UK to become a 'major European power with global interests and responsibilities in the international society' (Hollis, 2010, p. 31).

More important than ever, Britain systematically organized an aggressive foreign policy to reconstruct the previous British so-called 'middle power'. This discursive change was a collective endeavour to redefine a new role identity for Britain as an emerging international power to articulate its own legitimized great power position as a hegemonic stabilizer beside the United States. At this time, Britain constantly attempts to routinize its relationship with the established powers to ensure its social identity and cognitive stability in the international society. Therefore, constructing new British FP discourses was not achievable unilaterally without the US's shoulder-to-shoulder coalition (Dyson, 2009, p. 21). As a result of the historical context in which it emerged, Blair built his foreign policy on basic principles with close ties with the U.S. Blair followed a new activist philosophy of "interventionism" (Holland, 2012) along with the US and the UK and takes on a new level of strategic cooperation in the international society. Consequently, Blair built a close relationship

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with Bill Clinton, and later formed a strong political alliance with George W. Bush, particularly in the area of foreign policy. Blair's rush toward the US was later interpreted as pivotal steps toward a new form of strategic partnership. Bush admired Blair and the UK and in his post-9/11 speech, he announced that "America has no truer friend than Great Britain" (Whitehouse, 2001).

With close collaboration between the US and the UK, Britain primarily follows two major doctrines to establish its desired social identity as an independent entity within the international community. This approach involves employing aggression to achieve recognition, ontological security, and status. Two key points warrant attention here. First, under the New Labour government, the United Kingdom sought to position itself as a "moralizing force", promoting the expansion of democracy along with British norms and values. Second, the UK actively emphasized humanitarian interventions aimed at dismantling dictatorial regimes and so-called rogue states, with the goal of fostering peace and security in other nations through conflict-driven actions as indicated in figure 5.

Figure 5. On the Rise and the Fall of the British Empire (1946-1997)
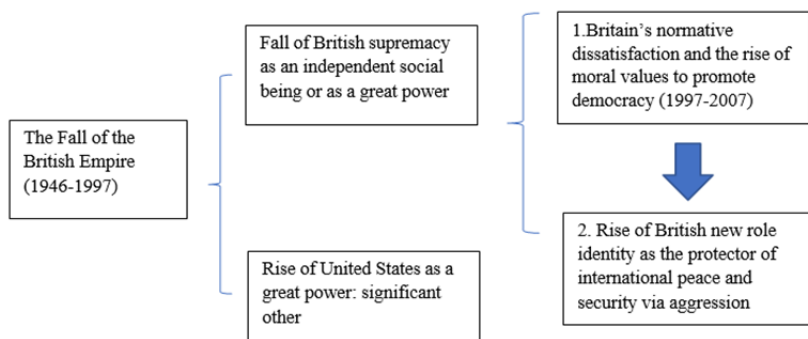
Source: Author

Meanwhile, Blair's position was to retrieve its decisive role identity as a socially recognized state in the eye of the more established powers such as the United States. Blair (1999) declared that "Britain will never be the mightiest nation on earth", however, he continued by announcing that "we can be pivotal and Britain does not have to choose between being strong with the US, or strong with Europe" since we should be confident enough to be with both, Blair said. In this part, he also went on by detailing that Britain's relationship with the US due to a range of reasons such as cultural and historical closure entangled both nations and encouraged them "to preserve democracy and freedom in Europe". Based on this view, this strategic commitment originated from a "deep-rooted commitment to political pluralism and freedom" as he mentioned (Blair, 1997). Blair envisioned a new "meaning" for the British by focusing on its national security priorities under the Labour government and through its special relationship. At this time, Britain mostly strived to make "progression and justice", as he declared to "implement change with the generations" in the UK (Blair, 1997).

Although the policy of territorial retrocession could enhance the UK's national position on the paper nation's standing, the UK government intended to associate its norms and national interests with the wider world. In this view, most nations' national security interests were framed by what the UK defined as a common national security interest. Accordingly, Britain deconstructs its previous role as a benign political actor and frames new British roles to prescribe British-based values and norms as a new narrative for other states. Britain has actively situated in the Middle East with undemocratic regimes to destroy the existential threat of all 'rogue states' in the international system. Combining British

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values and norms and reflecting them as a dominating rhetoric, formulated against extremists such as the Taliban and Saddam Hussein were defined as part of an initial commitment to stabilize the Middle East through the US and UK coalition. Surely, constructing a legitimized dominant power grounds itself in defending ideational factors such as British identity, dignity, honour, and status.

Based on a random analysis, conducted by examining 43 official speeches delivered by the UK's governmental elites namely Tony Blair- the leader of the New Labour government, Johnson, Alan-Home Secretary speech, Gordon Brown- the leader of the Labour Party from 1997 to 2009, it was inferred how much the UK has focused on nationally oriented key terms such as people, brutishness, value or war. According to the content analysis provided below, it is evident that the UK government and mostly the New Labour prime minister have heavily focused on four keywords such as people, new and Britain/ British and the world and Prime Minister Blair has repeatedly utilized the aforementioned terms for more than 3500 times during his office. According to this analysis, although the New Labour government built its initial doctrines based on security, economy, society, justice, and health, the New Labour UK government put less focus on its nature commitments as a New Labour government compared to other commitments as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1. Randomized Analysis of the Frequency of the Words Utilized by the UK Elites (1997-2007)

Word	Length	Count	Weighted Percentage (%)
British People	6	969	1.05
New Labour	3	729	0.79
Britain	7	686	0.74
British	7	568	0.62
World	5	565	0.61
Government	10	512	0.56
Labour	6	512	0.56
Country	7	445	0.48
Public	6	361	0.39
Party	5	345	0.37
Change	6	321	0.35
Values	6	271	0.29
Education	9	230	0.29
Social	6	220	0.27
Economic	8	215	0.27
Poverty	7	215	0.27
National	8	161	0.19

Source: Author

In addition, according to figure 6 (see below), the notion of Britishness and the British role identity as a new form of movement with new commitments to the international society, stand at the centre of the word cloud. Subsequently, the central words such as Britain, people, world, government, and political change are tightly surrounded by other keywords such as education, poverty, service, control, Europe, health, justice, children, and economy in a belt shape.

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Figure 6. Randomized Analysis of the Frequency of the Words Utilized by UK New Labour Government 1997-2007

Source: Author

Based on the information provided, the concluding arguments should have twofold significance. First, the UK government has formalized its foreign policy discourses around the British nationalistic sentiment as a former great power (inferiority complex) and the United Kingdom mainly desired to define itself in the military and strategic campaigns of the US to attain recognition. Second, the UK government as an individual desired a different form of security. As discussed earlier, to acquire ontological security, states might act conflictual to mitigate their social anxiety as a small or middle power and might put their material interests in jeopardy to articulate their desired identity. In this regard, the UK New Labour government has consciously adopted the conflictual act from 1997 to 2009 and put the UK's government's material

interest at risk by participating in more than ten international conflicts to achieve ontological security. Meanwhile, to prove to the world that the United Kingdom had been on track with other great powers, the old Empire acted conflictual since 1997 to mitigate its social anxieties as a middle power. The feeling of ontological insecurity pushes Britain to seek provocative behaviours. Therefore, once Britain's need for a sense of ontological security was not well responded to by the established powers, London discursively utilized its collective memories, and historical narratives (mostly resided in the past) and adopted them.

8. Conclusion

By the early nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the United Kingdom had achieved a notable degree of recognition and ontological security as a preeminent global power. However, this status began to erode progressively, particularly with the emergence of the United States as a dominant power during the Second World War. In this regard, this study attempted to utilize various historical narratives to demonstrate the ways in which feelings of ontological insecurity intensify when states experience the loss of territorial possessions and the decline of their historical narratives as great powers. Employing social theories on International Relations (IR), the article contends that the UK government's foreign policy often originates from an inferiority complex typical of middle powers, coupled with a sense of marginalization from global affairs.

As a result, this article sets the stage for examining the UK's foreign policy strategies, particularly its contentious actions following the rise of the New Labour government. The author

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contended that with the emergence of New Labour, the UK embraced a new social identity as a state grappling with trauma, seeking to re-establish itself as a central global power in alignment with its broader ambitions. Utilizing perspectives from ontological security discussions in international relations, the article proposes a fresh theoretical framework to investigate the roots of the UK's confrontational behaviour under Tony Blair. In addition, this articled attempted to understand how the experience of ontological insecurity is shaped by specific temporal and spatial contexts, aiming to assess the extent to which New Labour's policies under Blair were influenced by social factors such as trauma, anxiety, and a desire for status as a major power.

Additionally, this article also identifies potential avenues for future research, particularly addressing the prospect of emerging conflicts between China and the United States from a social perspective. This article highlights the role of social factors in shaping the behaviour of states. It can be further expanded to explore how ontological insecurity leads to provocative actions as states attempt to mitigate states' perceived insecurities in the international hierarchy. Such an argument would imply that China's experience of ontological insecurity has the potential to heighten tensions and contribute to conflict in Sino-American relations.

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