

A Power Abroad

British foreign policy is not what it used to be. Since the general election last year it has become more self-confident and, although the policy itself may not have changed much, Britain has begun to carry more weight around the world.

There are several reasons for this. One is simply the longevity of Mrs Thatcher's premiership. She has outlasted most of the people who were in power when she became prime minister: Carter, Brezhnev, Giscard, Schmidt, to name only some of the most prominent. In all probability, she will also outlast Reagan. She has experience and - abroad at least - respect as an elder statesperson.

Another is the halting and perhaps reversal of Britain's long relative economic decline. The weakness of British foreign policy used to be the weakness of the British economy. It was hard to take seriously a country that always seemed to be in economic difficulties and was a strong candidate for being the sick man of Europe. Now that the economic growth rate is high by current international standards, Britain is back in the game.

It is also true that many of the other key countries have internal political uncertainties. Reagan is on his way out and no-one knows who will succeed him or what the next American administration will be like. Gorbachev is still feeling his way at home and his promised reforms may not come off. France will be preoccupied for much of this year with the presidential election in the spring, and possibly elections to the national assembly to follow. Kohl in West Germany shows little interest in leadership in the wider world and the Germans have lost some of their bite since their economy has been growing so slowly.

Those factors come

together to reinforce some of Britain's traditional historical and geographical advantages. The United Kingdom does have if not quite a special, at least a very close relationship with the United States, reinforced by the common language. The Americans and the advance of computer technology have made English unquestionably the first language of the world. Britain has gained from that.

The old quarrels with the rest of the European Community are over. Britain has ceased to be a grudging member complaining about the terms of entry. It is accepted by the continental Europeans that London's links with Washington can be of benefit to Western Europe as a whole. Thatcher knows that she can speak with more authority to the Americans if she has the backing of the other Europeans. Paris and Bonn would not dissent from that view.

East Europeans from Moscow to Budapest would not dissent either. They regard Britain as in a pivotal position and Thatcher as a leader with some clout. After all, she did not *invent* her relationship with Gorbachev, but it exists. It is as much his doing as hers.

There are also Africa and the Middle East where the historical ties remain very strong. No outside country is in a better-position than Britain to try to do something about the future of southern Africa and it may be that Thatcher's visit to Nigeria in January was the beginning of a more active policy. It is striking that despite Thatcher's opposition to sanctions against South Africa, the British government is giving increasing support to the frontline states. Relations with Mozambique have become especially close.

British diplomatic activity in the Middle East has been deliberately stepped up, partly because there has long been a Foreign Office belief that the Israeli treatment of the occupied territories is storing up trouble for the future, but also because of a fear that the American admini-

nistration will do nothing to offend the Jewish vote in an election year. Therefore the diplomatic momentum towards a peace conference has to be kept going by the Europeans.

One may dispute whether British foreign policy in all those areas is right or wrong, or even how it should be defined beyond a general desire to maintain stability. But it has become harder than it used to be to argue that it is



Making waves in the world

not of much consequence and is -all based on posturing.

For historical reasons Britain is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, a body that may have acquired new importance since the Soviet Union is again showing an interest in it. The four other permanent members are the Soviet Union, France, the US and China. Britain has a working relationship that ranges from the close to the respectful with them all. Given Britain's links with the rest of the world, developed and underdeveloped, that is not a bad position to be in. Most foreigners see that, even if many Britons do not. •

Malcolm Rutherford