

The new politics of intervention

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While the role of Britain's armed forces in territorial self-defence has diminished since the end of the Cold War, the political appetite for intervention has grown. All Britain's major political parties have embraced the case for a 'Responsibility to Protect', the doctrine that countries have a moral responsibility to intervene, where they can, to halt massive abuses of human rights. As one of the world's leading democratic powers, it is argued, the UK has a particular responsibility to do so.

The humanitarian argument for military intervention is not new. Yet, during the Cold War, fear that local conflicts could escalate into Great Power confrontation – together with the sensitivities of developing countries just emerging from colonialism – supported a strong norm of non-intervention. The major powers united to condemn the overthrow of Idi Amin in Uganda (by Tanzania) and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia (by Vietnam), despite their strong humanitarian rationales.

The aftermath of the 1991 war to expel Iraq from Kuwait marked a partial turning point. While they rejected the option of full-blooded regime change, and stood by as Saddam brutally re-imposed his authority in Shi'a-dominated southern Iraq, the US, UK and France used air power to back the creation of a Kurdish 'safe haven'. A few months later, President Bush senior dispatched US troops to Somalia in an effort to stem the catastrophe unfolding there.

This interventionist trend was reversed under President Clinton, determined to assert the primacy of US domestic and economic concerns and instinctively more sceptical of the utility of military force. While the Kurdish safe haven remained in place, US troops were rapidly withdrawn from Somalia. Neither the US nor the UK were willing to support action to halt the Rwandan genocide in 1994. The UK and France (although not the US) deployed significant forces to Croatia and Bosnia during 1992-95 as part of a UN peacekeeping mission, but their limited remit prevented them from ending Europe's most damaging conflict since 1945, which went on to claim 200,000 lives and led to three million refugees fleeing to Western Europe. It was only in 1995, after years of atrocities, that the US stepped in to broker the Dayton accord, backed up by the threat of military action.

A revolution in foreign affairs?

Moral revulsion at these events had a profound political effect, and helped ensure that the new UK government that took office in 1997 embraced a more interventionist approach. As the Kosovo crisis deepened in late 1998 and 1999, President Clinton remained reluctant to take action that would risk the lives of US service personnel. But Prime Minister Blair pushed for a robust approach to the threat of another Serb campaign of ethnic atrocities, urged that a threat to use US ground forces had to be made, and pledged a large part of the British Army to support such an effort. At the height of the crisis, and in a direct public challenge to US

caution, he used his speech to the Economic Club of Chicago to argue for a new 'doctrine of the international community', directly challenging existing norms of non-intervention.

Whether it was this threat that produced success, or pressure from Russia on Belgrade to accept a settlement, the result was widely seen as a vindication of humanitarian intervention. Within weeks, an international peacekeeping force was in place under a UN mandate, and Kosovo's refugee population was returning home.

Fuelled by the success of Kosovo, Blair went on to sanction the use of British troops in Sierra Leone, helping to turn the corner in the fight against rebel forces, and subsequently committing substantial resources to train local security forces. After years of neglect, the Sierra Leone intervention was widely believed to demonstrate that a relatively small and timely military commitment can have a transformative effect on the prospects for peace in fragile developing states.

Strong support for military intervention in Kosovo and Sierra Leone helped to consolidate the government's reputation as being 'strong on defence', even as it continued (like the Major government before it) to give the armed forces a low priority in budget allocations. It thus helped to protect the government from the renewal of past Conservative charges that it could not be trusted on defence. At the same time, the emphasis on human security as a rationale for military action garnered widespread support from constituencies that had been more sceptical of intervention in the past. The government's decision to establish the Department for International Development, and to commit itself to sharp increases in aid, gave further credibility to the view that development and security commitments were mutually reinforcing rather than competing objectives.

Iraq – a step too far?

As the histories of Tony Blair's premiership are written, it is above all on Iraq that his foreign policy, and in particular his commitment to liberal interventionism, will be judged.

For many commentators, Iraq was simply a step too far, discrediting the concept of humanitarian intervention and seriously undermining the credibility of the Labour government. Yet, if the decision to invade Iraq is to be criticised, it cannot be viewed in isolation from the broader interventionist turn of the last decade. All three major wars of this period share significant features and all three posed many of the same dilemmas. Classifying Iraq as a 'bad war', while arguing that Kosovo and Afghanistan were 'just wars', fails to recognise these similarities, and conceals the risks to international security posed by all these operations, even if, in some, these costs were outweighed by tangible gains to human security.

The government's opponents do not always do enough to acknowledge that the invasion of Iraq was informed by genuine concern for human security, as were the invasions of Kosovo and Afghanistan. Even by the standards of other authoritarian regimes, Saddam Hussein's government was exceptional in the extent of the brutalities it had committed against its own people. Under his rule, Iraq had launched wars against two of its neighbours, made substantial progress in building nuclear weapons, and actually used chemical weapons against its own population. A minority of British MPs were deeply critical of the policies of appeasement pursued towards Saddam in the 1980s. Many more felt that the US had missed the chance to depose Saddam in 1991, when a few more days of military action might have brought his regime down, foreshortening the agonies of the Iraqi people by twelve years. For advocates of

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regime change, the subsequent focus on claims that Iraq continued to possess Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) was a tactical necessity (albeit based on claims that were widely seen as credible at the time) in order to show that Iraq posed a continuing threat to international peace, and was thus a legitimate target for UN action.

At the same time, all three wars were characterised by a willingness to intervene without the support of a wider international coalition, in the belief that the US (or a US-led coalition of the willing) had the legitimate right to intervene to enforce its own vision of what was needed to combat massive human rights abuses or other international law breaches. After all, it was in Kosovo, not in Iraq, that the post-Cold War precedent of attacking another sovereign state without UN authorisation was established.

Afghanistan was the intervention that was most clearly tied to the direct security interests of the intervening states, a fact recognised by the UN's authorisation of military action in the aftermath of the September 2001 attacks on the US. Even in this case, however, the military effort to overthrow the Taliban was organised on a national US basis, and little effort was made to involve other countries with an interest in Afghanistan. Many states were threatened by the use of that country as a safe haven for terrorism, and the aftermath of 9/11 could have provided an opportunity for a genuinely international coalition. The subsequent empowerment of NATO is a step forward in this respect. But the difficulties now being experienced in recruiting a wider group of countries to the security effort have their roots in the US's initial reluctance to share decision-making.

The similarities between the three campaigns go beyond humanitarian motives and unilateralist actions. The initial stages of all three were also characterised by an underestimation of the challenges of post-conflict reconstruction. Lamentably inadequate provision was made to limit looting and criminality in the immediate aftermath of the enemy's collapse. Far too little was done to provide for the range of capabilities (military and non-military) that are needed to build viable states from the ruins of dysfunctional or non-existent ones.

Most damagingly, perhaps, was the failure to understand the deep political challenges that regime change presents to occupying powers. A naive faith in the healing power of democratic elections, combined with a dose of externally-driven 'governance reform' initiatives, cannot substitute for real understanding of the specific circumstances of the societies in question, and clear plans that start from these realities rather than ignoring them.

In the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq, domestic schisms are further exacerbated by interventions from neighbouring states who have not shared US and UK objectives. It remains hard to see how stability in either country can be achieved without accommodation with these key neighbours (most of all with Iran, which has benefited considerably from the overthrow of Saddam and the Taliban, but now fears the consolidation of a US military presence on its borders).

The prospects for long-term stability are greatest in the Balkans, where renewed large-scale conflict seems unlikely and the regional environment is most conducive to prosperity (not least through access to jobs in the EU). Yet even here there is little cause for triumphalism. NATO forces have successfully stopped the bloodshed and allowed physical reconstruction to take place. Thirteen years on from Dayton, however, the prospects for nation-building in Bosnia remain problematic, and it remains highly reliant on heavy-handed action by the international community to deter fragmentation.

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Most recently, the recognition of Kosovo by the US and leading EU states, together with the Russian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (that the US decision helped to precipitate), has eroded the normative case for maintaining a unified Bosnian state. Further fragmentation is not inevitable, either in Bosnia or within Kosovo itself. And EU leverage is considerable in a region that is now indisputably within its sphere of influence. But the controversy surrounding the recognition of Kosovo has further tarnished the presentation of the 1999 invasion as a simple case of humanitarian intervention – demonstrating once again the power of unintended consequences in shaping the outcome of wars.

Not an aberration

Rather than seeing the Iraq war primarily as an exception to the rule of Labour's just wars, therefore, it is important to recognise its continuity with previous interventions – in domestic political as well as strategic terms. In all three cases, decision-making was informed by a general sympathy towards the use of military force for humanitarian purposes, as well as an instinctive Atlanticism.

A commitment to oppose an invasion during early 2002 might have made a difference, strengthening the hand of Secretary of State Powell against the Cheney/Rumsfeld axis. Such a policy would have been popular amongst many in Whitehall, and overwhelmingly popular among Labour's own grassroots membership. Yet, if the US had nevertheless insisted on going ahead with the invasion – the most likely outcome in this hypothetical scenario – a British decision to stand in opposition, only a year after 9/11, would have been a profound shift in strategic orientation, which could not have been justified simply on the basis of tactical disagreement on the invasion's timing.

Nor would it have escaped Blair's calculus that withdrawal of support from the US would have been a major domestic political risk, opening up the Party's right flank to Conservative attack, and thereby threatening one of the key tenets of New Labour's electoral success. Subsequent events add plausibility to this analysis. Despite the strength of disquiet within his own party, the reputational damage done by the failure to find any Weapons of Mass Destruction, and the growing problems in Iraq itself, Labour achieved an unprecedented third term at the polls in 2005. Perhaps, as in Germany, Blair could have achieved a greater majority on an anti-Bush ticket. It seems unlikely.

The costs of the 2003 Iraq invasion continue to be felt. It has been the most questionable and expensive of the three major interventions of the last decade. It has led (so far) to a much higher level of casualties (civilian and military) than the other campaigns, reflecting both the intensity of resistance and the corresponding ferocity of the US response, as well as the subsequent unleashing of sectarian conflicts. Fighters flocked to Iraq from across the Arab world, turning it into a new training ground for international terrorists.

In Kosovo and Afghanistan, by contrast, external intervention took place only after internal conflict had been under way for some time, and after (in the case of Afghanistan) it had been repeatedly used as a base for terrorism. In Afghanistan and Kosovo, intervention created the conditions for the return of millions of refugees to their homes, as security conditions on the ground improved. In Iraq, intensifying conflict led to two million Iraqis leaving their country, and a further 2.8 million being forced to leave their homes.

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Even so, many Iraqis will still say they supported the invasion. Kurdish and Shi'a leaders, in particular, had lobbied hard for foreign intervention. And, despite the massive human costs of the last five years, there is reason for hope that the worst may be over. Levels of violence are falling, and the authority of the central state is gradually being reasserted. The Iraqi army is becoming more capable, and becoming more confident in its ability to manage without front-line US troops. Many difficult issues remain to be resolved, and an escalation in sectarian conflict remains a real possibility. But some form of stabilisation seems more probable than it did only a year ago.

Fatal distractions

Since it is they who have suffered most, it should ultimately be up to Iraqis themselves to judge whether the invasion was 'worth it' in terms of human security. For the US and UK, however, a retrospective assessment of the invasion also needs to take account of its wider international impact. The decision to intervene without UN approval, and in the face of active opposition from many regional states, constituted a damaging blow to US and UK moral authority. Nor is it easy to overstate the extent to which Washington's post-9/11 agenda became dominated by one single crisis, to the detriment of many other pressing challenges. The massive investments required for Iraq diverted scarce resources from Afghanistan, allowing the Taliban to regroup for the offensive that is now under way. The difficulties that the coalition faced on the ground undermined support for the US's democratisation agenda for the region. Autocratic leaders were able to argue, with some credibility, that if Iraq was democracy in action, they wanted no part of it.

Nor, given recent events, can one ignore the impact of US and NATO military interventions on relations with Russia. NATO interventions in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq, along with the decisions to install missile defences in Poland and enlarge NATO eastwards, all had their own distinct rationales. But the cumulative effect of these decisions encouraged the hardening of the Russian position under President Putin's leadership. When NATO was engaged in military operations against Serbia without UN authorisation, most Russian leaders scoffed at suggestions that it was a purely defensive alliance open to all (it was certainly not open to Russia). When it was proposed that this alliance should extend to Georgia and Ukraine, the position of hard line nationalists was further strengthened.

Looking back at the cumulative impact of these decisions, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the US would have been in a stronger position if it had followed the more 'realist' approach of President Bush senior, rather than following the triumphalist approach of his son. This would have meant focusing military intervention on the priorities most clearly linked to US national interests and/or humanitarian necessity (i.e. Kosovo and Afghanistan), while seeking non-military ways to address the problems of Iraq, Georgia and Ukraine.

It is still not too late in relation to Ukraine, where many of its leaders and most of its population are not convinced of the case for NATO membership. While denying Russia a veto on Ukraine's NATO membership, existing members should now actively seek other ways to support Ukraine's democratic gains. In particular, a clear path towards EU membership would help cement these gains in a way that is less provocative towards Russia, and with wider appeal across Ukraine's political elites. Today's Finland may be a useful model: sharing a long border with Russia, part of the Russian empire throughout the

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nineteenth century, but now a prosperous democratic EU member. Its citizens, like those of Ukraine, are rightly sceptical of the advantages of NATO membership.

Interventions not made

Has one of the costs of the focus on Iraq and Afghanistan been that opportunities for successful intervention elsewhere have been missed – for example in Sudan or Somalia, Zimbabwe, Burma or Kenya? If this were the case, the opportunity costs of current interventions would be even greater. In the cases of Sudan and Somalia, in particular, there is more that could be done (were the military resources not tied up elsewhere) to strengthen the capacity of African states to contribute to the peacekeeping missions that have already been agreed for these countries. The UK could contribute more technical experts and trainers to UN peacekeeping missions in Africa, and could invest much more in reform and enhancement of African security forces. Its reluctance to do so stems, in part, from the overstretch created by deployments in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Yet all these crises also bear testimony to the limits to intervention in today's post-colonial world. For several years now, Darfur has appeared to present the strongest case for forcible intervention. Horrific levels of human suffering – hundreds of thousands of deaths by most counts – have continued. Yet international sanctions have failed to produce change on the ground, and the Sudanese government continues to block the deployment of the peacekeeping force already sanctioned by the UN. As a result, there are periodic calls for 'no fly zones' and other military options, up to and including invasion.

Sufficient US and UK military resources are not available for such options. Nor is there any chance that an invasion of Sudan would be sanctioned by the Security Council. Even if they were, however, the more fundamental questions that a Sudan invasion would pose are: what happens afterwards? What would be the post-war political dispensation of Darfur, and what would its relationship be with Khartoum? Would the US create another occupation authority, and how would it deal with probable armed resistance? These are, of course, precisely the questions that were not answered properly in the case of Iraq.

This is not to say that humanitarian military intervention never has a place, in Africa or elsewhere. But it is only going to work in the long term as a means of reinforcing politics – for example in support of a legitimate elected government, such as in Sierra Leone – rather than as a replacement for it.

A balance sheet

Humanitarian intervention has had real achievements over the last decade, most visibly in contributing to human security in sub-Saharan Africa and the Balkans. Yet, where such interventions have been accompanied by a marginalisation of international institutions and a disregard for wider legitimacy, they have created new risks.

In extreme circumstances of human emergency, there can be a strong case for intervention even when faced with a single Security Council veto from Russia or another power. But such a case needs to be used with greater caution than in the past decade. Multilateralism is not simply about putting a UN 'face' on US or Western decisions. Its real value is in involving a wide group of key states in decision-making, and subsequently in

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implementation. No country has a monopoly on wisdom, and the UK has been at the forefront of recognising the need to expand the Security Council to include important rising powers such as Brazil and India. The legitimacy of future interventions will depend in large measure on whether these new powers – together with China, now on course to be the world's second superpower – are part of the coalition supporting them.

Towards a new Defence Review

A new Defence Review is likely after the next general election, whichever party is in power. It should be an opportunity for fresh consideration, not only on how to balance the MoD's books, but also on the wider question of how defence fits within wider national objectives. The Government's recent National Security Strategy (Cabinet Office, 2008) has made clear that some places are more important than others to UK interests, and that the UK should focus on trouble spots where our armed forces can make a real difference. The prime example of this in the recent past is Afghanistan, where the rapid growth in UK military deployment after 2006 helped fill a dangerous gap left by the US 'surge' in Iraq.

A new Defence Review also needs to be aware of the continuing risks of inter-state conflict. The last two decades have been characterised by a widespread assumption that we have moved from a world of war between states to one in which conflict takes place mainly within states, with the role of NATO armed forces accordingly being primarily for intervention to stabilise those states. While the risk of war between major powers is less than in the 1980s, however, it is not zero – as the recent Georgian crisis made all too clear. Today's conflicts involve a complex amalgam of non-state and state actors, and can escalate into inter-state violence.

In a period of tight defence budgets, some argue for the UK to focus its efforts on the immediate demands for 'stabilisation' capabilities, if necessary at the expense of 'insurance' provision for inter-state warfare. This would, however, risk giving too much weight to fighting today's important war at the expense of possible future vital ones. If such a reorientation is not chosen, difficult choices will have to be made to cut Britain's capacity for simultaneous overseas operations. A more selective approach to intervention is likely to be the result. Given the experience of the last decade, this may be no bad thing.

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