

Editorial

The transformation of foreign policy

Rachel Briggs

Ten years ago when I started working at the newly formed Foreign Policy Centre as a starry eyed graduate, I remember being swept away by the scale of the challenge we had set ourselves. In brainstorming sessions to write our prospectus in those first few weeks, we talked about 'democratising foreign policy' and 'bringing foreign policy home' with missionary zeal as if we were embarking on a national campaign comparable to the Stop the War or Drop the Debt coalitions.

But in time, working in the thick of these debates, those sentiments came to feel mundane and everyday. We accepted without question the idea that foreign policy should be open to the same kind of scrutiny and public engagement as health or education; that the private sector is a valid actor, alongside the state; and that foreign policy needed to encompass new issues, such as the environment, travel advice or foreign public opinion. Five years later, I moved on from foreign policy to take up a position at Demos, where in those days the organisation's staples were public services, gender and the monarchy. While I was busy building Demos' international network, I assumed the ideas we had developed were becoming just as uncontroversial to mainstream policy makers as they had been to that young, idealistic team of '98.

In some ways, foreign policy has moved on leaps and bounds. The environment is now one the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's (FCO) main priorities. The FCO's recent reorganisation sees it structured along thematic rather than geographical lines, something we had advocated all those years ago. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and private companies are now in and out of the Department for International Development (DfID) on a daily basis and carry out much of their work overseas. And foreign policy has become an issue that matters in general elections, although largely for the wrong reasons in recent years (Iraq and terrorism).

While the foreign policy of today is, in many ways, unrecognisable to that of the 1990s, the challenges we and many others marked out around the time that Labour came to power in 1997 are so profound that it will be many years before we have worked through their full implications and made all the necessary reforms. This special edition of *Renewal* is an attempt to stop, take stock, and lay down some of the next steps for policy makers working in foreign policy, international development and security. It is far from comprehensive – to be so would require a whole year's worth of journal space – but it picks out some of the most pressing and interesting issues and seeks to weave them

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together into an agenda for the next phase of work ahead. It maps four key shifts: the rise of new actors in foreign policy, the emergence of new non-traditional issues, the changing world order, and the need for a new international system to deal with resilience.

The rise of new foreign policy actors

Arguably the most significant shift in foreign policy during the ten years I have been an observer is the arrival of a raft of new actors, from NGOs and aid agencies, to private companies and citizens. While the big decisions about foreign policy are still made in Downing Street and the FCO, it cannot be denied that these organisations now have a real say in how foreign policy is made and delivered on the ground. The Foreign Secretary himself made this point in a lecture to the Fabian Society which highlighted the fundamental shift in power from governments to people (Miliband, 2008), and in this issue Alex Evans and David Steven stress the limitations of a centralised response and the government's reduced capacity to act given the nature of the new risks and challenges we face.

While the involvement of non-state actors is an inevitability, making these relationships work in practice is not without problems. This is perhaps best illustrated by the case of NGOs. One of the major changes when Labour came into power in 1997 was the establishment of DfID, with its leading Minister occupying a seat in the Cabinet, and the government's commitment to substantially increasing the UK's international development budget. This was, of course, warmly welcomed by the NGO world, but a decade later the relationships have proven to be problematic. As Hannah Lownsbrough argues, NGO dependency on government funding is not always a good thing. In many cases, it has encouraged a short-termism as NGOs become subject to the same constraints as civil servants, funding mechanisms are often highly prescriptive and money comes with significant bureaucratic burdens.

Alongside these organisational problems lies the more serious risk of capture as NGOs find themselves in the position of potentially campaigning against a government that funds them: the dilemma of biting the hand that feeds you. Lownsbrough argues that this has had a number of impacts beyond the most obvious. First, the more radical NGOs have chosen to opt out of government funding altogether, and as a result are often left out of discussions with government. There is also the danger that those who are funded by government will lobby hard on key issues central to their campaigns, but will choose to remain strategically silent on others for the greater good of their wider strategy. This means that there is little 'aspirational' campaigning from the NGO sector, the kind of public dissent that challenges the government to make huge leaps forward rather than take iterative baby steps.

Another new actor in foreign policy is 'faith'. In the US in particular, faith has come to dominate politics in a way that seems almost alien to the UK political community, as Stuart Croft shows. For this reason, we tend to assume that these are marginal concerns pursued by individuals and organisations far removed from the mainstream of American life and politics. This is far from the truth. The *Left Behind* series of books about those 'left behind' after the Rapture of the saints has sold more than seventy million copies in the US, and in a 2006 poll for the Roper Center, 84 per cent said they personally believe that Jesus is the son of God.

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It has been widely considered that faith has risen up the political agenda in the US with the arrival of a highly religious President Bush and after the atrocities of September 11. In fact, religion has been on the political agenda for years. Despite the Clinton administration's reserve on religion, the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 made the provision of religious freedom a core aim of American foreign policy, to be monitored and promoted by the State Department.

More specifically, the Christian right continues to be a vocal presence in foreign policy debates, seeking to stop alliances of convenience with countries such as Pakistan, protect Christians living around the world wherever they are, and see that their religious values are reflected in the work of organisations such as the United Nations (for example, in not promoting the use of condoms to combat HIV and AIDS, hostility to gay rights, and support for Israel). Faith was also a constant thread running through the speeches of both US Presidential candidates.

Perhaps the most significant new actor in foreign policy has been Al Qaeda and its associated or influenced affiliates around the world. Transformations in communications and access to ideas, weapons and travel, have made possible the rise of home grown terrorists many steps removed – if linked at all – from Al Qaeda's central command. Only in the current context could such individuals have so much impact. Sian Jones highlights the dynamics of this phenomenon in Denmark, where there is growing concern about Danish radicals who seem to be well organised, highly interconnected and with some international connections. The rise of these networks – at once local and global – poses many obvious challenges for our centralised and border-sensitive police forces.

The changing world order

It has become common practice to say that everything changed on 11 September 2001. But in fact (and as we were all saying *before* September 11), it was the end of the Cold War that brought about the most significant shifts in world order, and these are the pieces that we continue to pick up today as we struggle to reconstruct the balance of power.

While the Cold War period was dominated by the bipolar politics of the US and the USSR, the key countries to watch now are the US and China, which is emerging onto the world stage at breathtaking pace. China's ambitions to play a major leading role are perhaps best exemplified by the new fashion within the country to measure what they call CNP – Comprehensive National Power. As Mark Leonard says, measuring CNP is practically a national sport amongst policy wonks who compete for the best CNP Index, with new indicators being invented on a near weekly basis.

But as Leonard's piece also reminds us, we should caution against simplistic and caricatured accounts of China; it is a large and complex country and there is no shortage of internal debate about the best future course for China, from the so-called 'neo-comms' who favour an assertive nationalism, to the liberal interventionists, and finally the pragmatists who will support any idea that advances China's interests. These kinds of lively debates are so often absent from Western analysis of China, which tends to give just a snap shot and fails to dig below the surface. Leonard also shows how China is adopting and adapting western concepts – multilateralism, soft power and asymmetric war – as ways of projecting national power, and in so doing turning them on their head.

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For now, China appears to have decided to enter the world, becoming more active within global institutions and investing heavily in certain parts of the world, notably Africa. But there are those who believe that its long term strategy is to recreate the world order in its own image, and the establishment of special development zones in Africa, and the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and East Asia Community are good examples of this.

One of the key assumptions made at the end of the Cold War was that we were moving from a world where conflicts happened between countries to one where they were predominantly intra-state. As Malcolm Chalmers reminds us, while the risk of war between major powers is less than it was in the 1980s, it is not zero. The recent Georgian crisis is a timely reminder of that fact. This, alongside the financial and moral challenges raised by the UK's participation in interventions during Labour's three terms in power, make a Defence Review after the next election highly likely and desirable. The UK's armed forces are stretched, and the current global financial crisis suggests there won't be additional money in the pot any time soon. The finance and the politics require a major reassessment of the UK's role in the world on these matters.

The need for a new international system

The nature of global risks and growing interdependencies necessitates a new international system capable of managing these risks and building local, national and global resilience. Advisors close to Obama have also endorsed what they call a 'Concert of Democracies', which has echoes of McCain's 'League of Democracies'. If such a system were to come into being it would strain further relations with China, Russia and other authoritarian states, countries that the US needs to keep on side (see Rachman, 2008).

Alex Evans and David Steven argue that whatever the system, it must not be overly centralised as this would create expensive and inflexible systems that leave out the non-state actors who are increasingly important. It is a system that must be characterised by resilience, for which they adopt a definition offered by the *Harvard Business Review*. It states that resilience results from being able to face up to reality, improvise in the face of unfamiliar challenges, while finding a source of 'meaning' that encourages long-term thinking. In other words, being able to change is critical; resilience is not simply about standing firm in the face of adversity. This of course necessitates collective action, people seeing that their individual self interest is best served by acting together, which requires a sense of solidarity and a common purpose or mission. The resilience of the international system and its relevance to everyday lives has come to the fore in the light of the current financial crisis.

This brings us full circle to where Robin Cook started in 1997 with his 'ethical foreign policy' (Cook, 1997). It was an attempt to begin to articulate a set of common values which would help countries to navigate together international challenges. It never survived the Indonesian hawk jet affair, but if it had had the chance to develop, it would have opened up important discussions not just about what kind of detailed policies we wanted to pursue, but about who we are as a nation, what we stand for (together) and how we wish to meet our own needs.

As we dispatched the Foreign Policy Centre prospectus to the printers, we really did

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believe that foreign policy would be democratised and opened up to scrutiny and debate. We thought that the new actors would hold the government to account, question old assumptions and begin to work together in new and interesting ways. Some of these changes have certainly started to happen, and the fact that foreign policy can now make or break an election campaign is good news indeed. But as Lownsbrough's piece reminds us, there is still a long way to go until it faces the same kind of scrutiny as education or health.

In fact, one of the key challenges is to ensure that these new actors continue to voice dissent as they move from the cold pavements of Westminster to their warm leather seats around the table. We proved more than a decade ago that idealism can get you a long way, although we were only ever making suggestions for other people to enact. The task in hand is substantial, and if the diverse range of foreign policy actors think big and don't let their aspirations die, they really do have the ability to make that change happen.

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