The Civilian Surge: Liberal Foreign Policy, Intervention and the Internet

https://www.e-ir.info/2008/03/10/the-civilian-surge-liberal-foreign-policy-intervention-and-the-internet/

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British foreign policy under the stewardship of David Miliband has maintained its universalist outlook but shifted its agenda from a distinctly top-down approach to a grassroots drive for what Miliband has called a 'Civilian Surge'. [1]

This subtle shift is in part brought about by Miliband's progressive liberal ideology but also by his interest in and support for new technology – Miliband was the UK's first Minister to write a blog and has helped create YouTube and Flickr channels for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

But for all his enthusiastic rhetoric, is Miliband's drive for a bottom-up approach to foreign policy the right one? This series of essays will first of all examine the ideological and practical aspects of engaging and empowering civil society through new technology. It will also question whether a 'civilian surge' can be realised as a tangible programme of activity and if so, can it successfully deliver foreign policy objectives – particularly in light of Miliband's stated commitment to liberal interventionism.

The Civilian Surge

Miliband outlined his vision of a grassroots-based foreign policy in January 2008 in a speech to the Fabian Society inLondon:

"We live in a world where despite repression and injustice there is a civilian surge – more people wanting and able to shape their own lives. Progressives can speak to this condition … through collective action and radical liberal commitment to individual freedom in a market economy."[2]

This worldview, according to Miliband, creates a "new purpose to foreign policy." and at the heart of this new purpose is what Miliband calls a 'civilian surge'.

The use of the term 'surge' and its analogy with President Bush's military surge[3] in Iraq is significant as it indicates that while Miliband sees his new bottom-up foreign policy as a grassroots-led initiative, its aim is still to create and support regime change in non- or semi-democratic regimes.

This link is made explicit in a blog post written by Miliband where he places the idea of civilian surge conspicuously within the framework of what he calls '"Devoir d'ingerence" – or the obligation to intervene'.[4]

While the devoir d'ingerence can be traced back (as Miliband notes) to the liberal progressive, Bernard Kouchner —now Miliband's French counter-part— it is of relevance here due to the impetus given by new technology. In particular technology such as the Internet and globalised collaborative opportunities opened by the social web.

The power of blogs, video-sharing sites such as YouTube, photo-sharing sites such as Flickr and a myriad of social networks form a central platform for empowering the individual, removing barriers to free speech and overcoming traditional media censorship. They are the tools of the civilian surge.

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The ideology of the civilian surge

From an ideological perspective, it can be argued that Miliband's notion of civilian surge is a logical extension of the enlightened liberal individualism that has formed a central element of Modernity since the French and American revolutions.[5]

Traditionally, progressive foreign policy relied on supportive NGOs, civil society institutions or official government programs to foster democracy overseas. These were the "political or social institutions designed to encourage the cooperative spirits of human nature" that were born of the original drive for modernity 200 years ago.[6]

For Miliband, the Internet takes this progressive ideology to the next stage, allowing individuals to organise themselves into more effective horizontal 'joined up' networks, build homegrown pro-democracy communities and directly establish an authentic homegrown mandate for democratic civil society.[7]

This removes the need for direct intervention by third party players such as states, NGOs or civil society institutions – thus reducing the cost, bureaucracy and risks of introducing and running foreign-supported pro-democracy networks.

Miliband recognises that a civilian surge facilitated by the Internet offers real opportunities for the next stage of progressive foreign policy: people could recognise and shape their individual liberty without reliance on the hitherto effective but limited effects of wider foreign pro-democracy institutions.

The reality of the civilian surge

Miliband evokes the link between Internet-enabled societies and the revolutionary origins of democracy by quoting Thomas Paine in his Fabian Society speech:

"At the beginning of the American Revolution, Thomas Paine called on his fellow colonists to forge a new society where power was dispersed among the citizens. 'Let the crown … be demolished,' he urged, "and scattered among the people whose right it is." [8]

The world that Paine envisaged is now a reality due to the Internet and its ability to connect like-minded individuals, share news and information globally and start re-distributing the balance of power between authoritarian states and citizens. The Internet, Miliband observes, is both fuelling and satisfying "the demand for credible democracy"[9].

One topical example is Iran: a country with 800,000 bloggers out of a total population of 70m, making it the second most prolific blogging nation behind China.[10] Bloggers in Iran represent most political denominations with pro-democracy Reformists writing the vast majority of political blogs since Ahmadinejad's regime began rejecting Reformist candidates for the national elections.[11]

The Reformists' experience demonstrates how the Internet and blogging is opening up the type of democratic debate associated with Miliband's civilian surge. Reformist bloggers perform two key functions.

Firstly they create an alternative public sphere in which political – and significantly, pro-democratic – debate can take place. Iran's mainstream media is rated ahead of only Turkmenistan, North Koreaand Eritreain Reporters Without Borders' global press freedom index[12] so this virtual environment has become vital for pro-democratic debate.

Secondly, blogs are being used as tools to promote democracy and subvert the authoritarian regime's election process. For example, analysts suggest it is still possible that some Reformist candidates will be allowed to stand in the elections, but any decision will be made by the Guardian Council will leave this decision until late in the day.

This will mean that conservative candidates who have had longer to produce campaign material will have a distinct advantage. However, with a strong online following it is possible for the Reformists to mobilise support via the Internet.[13]

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Conclusions

In this essay I set out to understand better British foreign policy in relation to Miliband's vision of a civilian surge and examine whether his notion of an authentic grassroots approach to democracy building fits within the ideological and practical framework of liberal progressive values.

In conclusion, the ideology of engaging and empowering civil society through new technology fits closely with the progressive liberal individualism associated with Western society. Miliband himself draws parallels with the self-determination afforded by Modernity by associating his contemporary civilian surge with Thomas Paine's assertion of individual rights and the shift of authority from the state to the individual.

The reality of this ideology is tested through the example ofIranwhere bloggers are currently challenging the authoritarian regime. While the bloggers represent a political minority it certainly appears that a civil surge is both opening an alternative public sphere for open pro-democratic debate while acting as a tool to overcome the anti-democratic limitations imposed by the state during elections.

While Miliband's vision of civilian surge appears to fit within a progressive liberal view of democracy, the question remains whether it can support an interventionist foreign policy. This will be explored in greater depth in the next essay.

[1] Miliband, D. 2008. Civilian Surge with reshape global politics. Speech to Fabian Society's Change the World conference, 15 January 2008. [Internet] <http://fabians.org.uk/events/new-year-conference-08/miliband-speech-NYC-08/speech> [Accessed 9 March 2008].

[2] ibid.

[3] For a live discussion of the Iraqi military surge and President Bush's The New Way Forward policy, see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iraq_surge

[4] Miliband, D. 2008. Liberal Interventionism. [Internet]. <http://blogs.fco.gov.uk/blogs/david_miliband/archive/2008/01/20/15844.aspx#comments> [Accessed 9 March 2008].

[5] See John Schwarzmantel, Age of Ideology. Schwarzmantel defines Modernity as emerging in Western society post-American and French revolution.

[6] ibid.

[7] See David Wilcox, Why Bother with Membership in Future? Cited in: How online communities can make the net work for the VCS [pdf].

[8] Miliband, D. 2008. Civilian Surge with reshape global politics. Speech to Fabian Society's Change the World conference, 15 January 2008. See: http://fabians.org.uk/events/new-year-conference-08/miliband-speech-NYC-08/speech. [Accessed 9 March 2008]

[9] Miliband, D. 2008. Liberal Interventionism. [Internet]. <http://blogs.fco.gov.uk/blogs/david_miliband/archive/2008/01/20/15844.aspx#comments> [Accessed 9 March 2008].

[10] Fifield, A. 2008. As polls loom, Iran takes its battles into the blogosphere. [Internet] <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/340ee7fe-de42-11dc-9de3-0000779fd2ac.html> [Accessed 9 March 2008].

[11] ibid

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[12] ibid.

[13] ibid

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