

What have been the Central Objectives of British Foreign Policy since the end of the Cold War?

Written by Adam Groves

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ADAM GROVES, DEC 3 2007

With the end of the Cold War, Britain's position in world politics was ambiguous and the future direction of its foreign policy uncertain. Torn between the increasingly divergent interests of Europe and America, the familiar charge that Britain had lost an empire and was struggling to find a role seemed difficult to dismiss.

In this essay, I will critically assess Labour's attempts to define a new role for Britain in the post Cold War era. Robin Cook's pronouncement that British foreign policy would have an 'ethical dimension' with 'human rights at the heart' of it (Cook, 1997a), was deemed to be a 'radical transformation' by academics and the media alike (Dunne and Wheeler, 1998: 868; Observer, 18/5/1997).

The implication in Labour's foreign policy was that a moral stance was sometimes in the greater national interest, and that narrow economic or political gains should not be given preference over the human rights of people in other countries. Whilst Cook's 'ethical dimension' was not declared a 'central objective' of British foreign policy by the government, it became the focal point for media organisations and NGOs as they sought to hold Labour accountable to its mission statement.

I will use case studies to investigate how ethical Labour's arms-export policies, 'humanitarian' interventions and global economic practices have been. I shall conclude firstly, that although Labour has successfully raised the profile of ethics within foreign policy, it has often failed to reconcile ethical principals with financial interests; secondly, that misguided policies have often meant that ethical principles have not produced ethical outcomes; and thirdly, that a reliance on status-quo neo-liberal practices have undermined both the ethicalness and effectiveness of foreign aid and development projects.

An Ethical Dimension to Arms-exports?

For an 'ethical dimension' to exist in Labour's foreign policy, it is widely accepted that arms-exports to

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countries committing gross human rights abuses must be carefully vetted, controlled and, when necessary, prevented (Dunne and Wheeler, 2000: 64). In an interview with Radio 4, Robin Cook confirmed Labour's manifesto promise that they 'would not sell equipment [to] be used in internal repression' (Cook, 1997b). However, during Labour's first term in office Cook came under criticism for doing just that in both Indonesia and several African states.

Britain has one of the largest arms industries in the world, accounting for almost a quarter of global arms exports and employing some 400,000 people across the country (Abrahamsen and Williams, 2001: 253). In 1997, Indonesia accounted for over 10% of Britain's arms exports (Kampfer in Dunne et al., 1998: 861) many of which were subsidised by the British government (Dunne et al, 2000: 74).

Indonesia's record as a corrupt and undemocratic state which commits horrendous human rights abuses is well documented by NGOs. Pilger reports that the 200,000 estimated to have been killed since Indonesia invaded East Timor is now considered 'conservative in demographic studies' (1999). However, in its first year in office Labour approved 64 export licences to Indonesia (Herring 1999: 7), and most controversial among them were 16 Hawk jets which were due to be delivered in 1999 (Guardian, 8/9/1999: 4). On this issue, the government at first sought to reconcile the tension between its commercial and ethical policies. Despite the fact that Cook had highlighted the sale of Hawk jets to Indonesia as 'disturbing' as far back as 1978 (in Pilger, 1998: 140), when in office he denied that they posed any threat to the people of East Timor (Cook, 1997b). Following aggressive flights over Dili by Hawks in July 1999 however, the foreign office was forced to take another line. They claimed that the order was a matter of inheritance rather than one of ambition, and that the contracts could not legally be revoked.

The contradiction that this sort of deal posed for a foreign policy centred on human rights was eventually accepted by the government, and the contracts terminated following extensive criticism from NGOs (Dunne et al., 2000: 67; Guardian, 8/9/1999). Dunne and Wheeler argue that the Blair government 'failed over Indonesia' in that it sacrificed the pursuit of human rights for the sake of narrow economic advantage (1998: 868). It is notable that according to a recent annual report on the arms trade, the value of exports sent from Britain to Indonesia increased from £2 million to £40 million between 2000 and 2004 (Dunne and Wheeler, 2004: 18).

The Labour government faces similar contradictions between British arms exports and its ethical foreign policy all over the world. A report by Action Aid revealed that Labour has sold weapons to 14 African countries where there is internal conflict (Pilger, 2005) whilst Herring alerts us that the Labour government has given 289 arms export licences to states 'with a continuing record of serious human rights abuses' (1999: 7).

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Whilst academics and NGOs have recognised certain areas of progression with regards to banning the sale of anti-personnel mines and torture equipment, the general consensus is that the application of Labour's 'ethical dimension' to arms-exports has been less than impressive. Dunne and Wheeler suggest that the government's policies have 'begged some very large questions about Labour's commitment' to internationalist human rights (2004: 17).

Intervention and the 'ethical dimension'

In a speech to the Economic Club in Chicago in 1999, Tony Blair laid out five criteria for resorting to humanitarian intervention. These were: a clear case; the exhaustion of diplomatic solutions; military feasibility; viability of staying for the long term and finally that national-interests should be irrelevant (Blair, 1999). Dunne and Wheeler highlighted the 'glaring omission' from this list of criteria: the question of authority from the UN (2004: 21). Instead, the Prime Minister referred loosely to the 'doctrine of international community...the belief that partnership and co-operation are essential to advance self-interest [in] global security and disarmament issues' (Blair, 1999).

Dunne and Wheeler identified that Blair's 'doctrine of international community' echoed fundamental claims of the English School. They suggested that his belief in shared values could lead to the government imposing certain ideals upon states which 'failed to live up to the international human rights regime' (2000: 61).

Blair's government has become renowned for its invasion of Iraq in 2003. However, the ethical dimension to his foreign policy with regards to intervention, can also be defined by actions in another major engagement; Kosovo. The asymmetrical warfare between Albanian militia and Serb forces which began in 1996, gradually developed into a genocide and humanitarian crisis. The sight of over 100,000 Albanian refugees on the move in 1999 alerted the world to a humanitarian disaster on Europe's borders and western leaders began preparing public opinion for military intervention (Wheeler, 2000: 258-259).

There was a general consensus in Britain over the legitimacy of action in Kosovo. The lack of a clear UN mandate (due to threatened vetoes from Russia) did little to alter the international view that intervention would be 'ethically and morally unquestionable' (in Wheeler, 2000: 264). Many believed that far from weakening the UN, Britain and its NATO allies were upholding the humanitarian values embodied within it (Dunne and Wheeler, 2004: 22). However, international public opinion was not strong enough to commit ground troops to the region, and the ensuing air campaign merely incited further Serb atrocities (Chomsky, 2004: 56-57; Wheeler 2000: 269) resulting in the largest flow of refugees since the Second World War. Although there is a clear case to criticise NATO's action on

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this count, it assumes that had the bombing not taken place the Serbian-led massacres would have stopped. Whilst it is possible to contest whether the consequences of the Kosovo intervention were ethical, there is little argument that it was a 'just war, based not on any territorial ambitions but on values' (Blair, 1999). (Wheeler, 2000: 269)

However, a similar consensus did not exist on the need for a campaign in Iraq. Neither British public opinion nor the non-permanent members of the Security Council were persuaded of a convincing humanitarian or security justification for defying the UN. (Dunne and Wheeler, 2004: 30). Blair's decision to pursue the same firm stance as he had followed in Kosovo ended him in 'exactly the wrong place' (Leonard, 2003). Dunne and Wheeler have concluded that, 'in the aftermath of the Iraq war Britain's 'moral standing has fallen considerably' (2004: 8).

International Relations, by its very nature, is uncertain (Doyle, 2000: 58). Both the Hutton Report and Foreign Affairs Committee (2002-2003: 54) have concluded that Blair acted in 'good faith' whilst advocating the Iraq war. However, although British foreign policy (in terms of intervention at least) has been judged to have been guided by ethical principles, this has not consistently resulted in ethical outcomes.

An 'ethical dimension' to Economic Foreign Policy?

Former head of International Development, Clair Short, argues that poverty is the biggest moral challenge facing the world today (in Abrahamsen et al., 2001: 254). The Labour government has responded to this challenge by producing high profile debt relief initiatives hailed by some as 'audacious moves [which] could herald the end of the debt crisis as we know it' (Guardian, 27/9/2004). Indeed, as the only country which is a permanent member of the UN Security Council, the G8, the Commonwealth, the EU and a major power in the IMF and World Bank, Britain may well hold a unique role in reducing world debt (Dixon et al., 2001: 158).

However, in order to play this ethical role, Britain must address and resolve the well-documented negative consequences which a commitment to market freedom has for poor populations (Abrahamsen et al., 2001: 261). Whilst anti-debt groups such as Jubilee2000 have welcomed increases in the UK aid budget, there has been widespread criticism of Labour's continued reliance on neo-liberal practices. Abrahamsen and Williams have highlighted that such policies tend to, 'worsen the living standards of the already poor by depressing employment and real incomes, and by cutting public expenditure on health, education and other services' (2001: 255-256).

The government does seem to have acknowledged a conflict between strict neo-liberal practices and an 'ethical dimension' to its foreign policy. Blair commented in 1999 that 'new ways of organising international [financial]

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institutions' were necessary for them to be positive instruments in the fight against poverty. However, so far, Labour's attempts at reforming the IMF, WTO and World Bank have been deemed largely unsuccessful and unsatisfactory by academics and journalists alike (Abrahamsen et al., 2001: 257; Pilger, 2000). This has led Dixon and Williams to argue that the 'conference halls and voting chambers of the international financial institutions' will provide the true test of Labour's 'ethical dimension' (2001: 169).

The ethics of the government's foreign development initiatives have also been criticised. Labour has claimed it seeks to balance capitalism and social democracy by following a 'Third Way'. However, huge investment in countries such as Turkey, China and Saudi Arabia has left its foreign development policies vulnerable to the charge of being unethical (Vickers, 2000: 43). Pilger uses the example of the Ilisu dam in Turkey to illustrate the conflict which can arise between development and the 'ethical dimension'. He argues that Steven Byers' approval of £200 million to finance the project has assisted 'in ethnically cleansing thousands of Kurds from their cultural heartland' (Pilger, 2000). It's a common trait that such neo-liberal development policies focus on national infrastructure at the expense of the environment and indigenous populations (Dixon and Williams, 2001: 165). Whilst labour should be applauded for committing money to improving the infrastructure of less economically developed countries, the manner in which it is doing so, (i.e. by backing large neo-liberal projects rather than small-scale community-based schemes) often has a negative impact on human rights and living standards of the people living in poverty.

Labour's 'ethical dimension' to foreign policy sits uneasily with neo-liberal aid and development projects, which often cause increased hardship in states which already possess fragile economies and populations mired in poverty.

Conclusion

The 'ethical dimension' to Labour's foreign policy has been mired in criticism and controversy since first announced in 1997. I have argued that there is a fundamental tension between domestic interests and the 'ethical dimension' to foreign policy as far as the arms-export industry is concerned. Labour has failed to reconcile these competing interests, as has been highlighted by the selling of arms to countries committing gross human rights abuses. The humanitarian interventions carried out under Labour have achieved varying results. Although ethical principles have been judged to be behind them all, this has not necessarily led to ethical outcomes. Labour's economic policies have perhaps seen the most evidence of an 'ethical dimension', with increases in Britain's aid budget and new initiatives to reduce foreign debt. However, the 'ethical dimension' of such policies has been damaged by the government's blind commitment to free-market principles for both aid and development projects.

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Although Labour has undoubtedly highlighted the role of ethics in foreign policy, over the two terms which Blair's government has served, it is difficult to conclude that they have established Britain's post Cold War role as a 'force for good in the world' (Cook, 1997a). The 'ethical dimension' has been hugely undermined by fundamental tensions between domestic and foreign interests, an inconsistent relationship between ethical principles and ethical outcomes, and a reliance on the status-quo of neo-liberal economic practices.

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