

Intervention: Choice or Necessity?

The last chapter made it clear that British defence policy is now based around military intervention overseas. The question which then arises is whether the UK has gone into the intervention business with such enthusiasm because it is required for the defence and security of the UK, or whether some other motives lie behind the decision. In short, is intervention a matter of choice, or necessity? If it is the former, then we can dispense with it without cost to our security.

The 2003 Defence White Paper identified three 'visions' for Britain's armed forces. These were:

- Defending the United Kingdom and its interests.
- Strengthening international peace and security.
- [Being] A force for good in the world.¹

The second of these is superfluous. Either 'strengthening international peace and security' is one of the interests of the United Kingdom, in which case it belongs in the first category; or it is not, in which case we are concerned with it solely out of a desire to 'do good' - in which case it belongs in the third category.

In effect, therefore, defence policy as envisioned by the Blair government has two purposes - defence of the UK and transforming the world for the better. The first is unsurprising - it is what defence policy always has been, and should be, about. The

[1] Ministry of Defence, *Delivering Security in a Changing World*, p. 20.

second is a startling new concept. It redefines the entire purpose of the British armed forces.

Being a 'force for good' is a proposition which has no place in a defence planning document. In the first place, it is entirely unnecessary. After all, what is the alternative – being a 'force for bad'? Whose 'good' are we talking about? How is 'good' defined? In practice, the concept's purpose is to give moral gloss to the policy of armed intervention overseas. What being a 'force for good' actually means is all too often armed aggression, such as that undertaken against Iraq. The language also suggests a severe misunderstanding of the role of armed forces. Soldiers are not social workers. They fight, and kill. That is what they are trained to do. Doing 'good' is not an appropriate definition of their tasks.

It is, though, the definition that Britain's Labour government has pushed to the fore in recent years. 'Defence' as such has fallen into second place. A quick glance at the Ministry of Defence's website confirms this. Incredibly, the very first words one confronts on the 'Army Jobs: Army Life' recruiting page are 'The British Army is a force for good'. The site then goes on to stress the army's activities 'around the world'. Defending the UK barely gets a mention.² Similarly, the Labour Party's defence website, under the heading 'Our Approach', states immediately that 'Labour believes that Britain should act as a force for good in the world'.³ (One wonders whether they think that Conservatives believe that Britain should act as a force for evil.)

The 'goodness' concept seems to have evolved over the past seven years from being something of an afterthought to being the central plank of the UK's defence policy. In the 1998 SDR, the phrase 'force for good' did appear, but at the very end of the document, without any great emphasis.⁴ Kosovo, however, seems to have convinced Mr Blair that military force was an appropriate means for reshaping the world for the better. The 1999 Defence

[2] 'Army Jobs; Army Life', available online at:
www.army.mod.uk/careers/army_life/what_is_the_army.html

[3] 'Defence', available online at:
php.labour.org.uk/pda/policy_article.phtml?id=29

[4] Ministry of Defence, *The Strategic Defence Review*, para. 201, p. 53.

White Paper elevated the concept to its first chapter under the heading 'Our Security Priorities'. Even then, being a 'force for good' was the last of the defence priorities listed.⁵ By 2003, the idea had been promoted again, now becoming one of the defence 'visions'.

Whether 'doing good' is desirable will be discussed in Part 2. First comes the question whether this is a policy of choice or necessity. Clearly, it is the former. One can argue that we have moral responsibilities to help others, that it benefits us to do so, and even that force is an appropriate tool in this regard, but it is hard to present a case that one *has* to intervene in this way. Had the UK failed to attack Yugoslavia in 1999, it is not obvious how the security of the UK would have suffered. Indeed, one of the justifications used in the conflict was precisely that NATO's action was not based on self-interest. Similarly, we could have left Sierra Leone alone, and suffered no harm from that. These things are not things that we *have* to do.

This, therefore, leaves as a hard requirement only the other plank of defence policy – the defence of the UK and its interests. The question here, then, is whether military intervention overseas on the scale now envisioned by defence planners is strictly necessary for our security. Could we have dispensed, for instance, with attacking Iraq and still remained secure? Or were vital security interests at stake which made intervention essential?

The logic behind interventionism is roughly as follows: post-Cold War the world has become more unstable, and is a more dangerous place; crises produced by failing states may spill over borders and damage our interests; the UK, furthermore, has numerous enemies overseas, who if left alone will seek to attack us; we must, therefore, take the fight to them, and intervene in their countries to restore order, reduce instability, and pre-empt attacks upon us.

There are numerous faults in this reasoning. In the first place, the idea that the world is more unstable now than in the past,

[5] Ministry of Defence, *Defence White Paper 1999*, chapter 1, para 2. Available online at: www.mod.uk/publications/whitepaper1999/chapter1.htm

although popular, is mistaken. It seems that people have incredibly short memories. The perception appears to be that Cold War rivalries kept a lid on conflicts, as the superpowers acted to ensure that the world never became too unstable. In fact, throughout the Cold War the complaint was the opposite – that superpower rivalries incited conflict and instability, through mechanisms such as proxy wars. During the past sixty years, there have been no shortage of wars, insurgencies, and the like – including the numerous conflicts in South-East Asia, Africa, and South America. Most of these have now come to an end. It is true that a number of bitter ethnic conflicts erupted in the death throes of the Cold War (in Yugoslavia and Nagorno-Karabakh, for instance), but ethnic conflict is nothing new. Furthermore, despite the visibility of these examples, the incidence of ethnic conflict worldwide actually fell in the 1990s.⁶ This is also true of war more generally. Several surveys of international conflict using a variety of methodologies have shown that the incidence of war has declined in the past fifteen years (as indeed has the incidence of terrorism). The world is getting more peaceful. (For more on the surveys in question, see Appendix 2.)

Two events have, though, proved to be godsend for the doom-mongers. The first was the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. This gave credence to the rhetoric of ‘rogue states’ and ‘weapons of mass destruction’ as terrible new threats to Western security. The next event was the horrific attack on America which took place on 11 September 2001. This highlighted a new threat from Islamist terrorism. Put all three of the above together to produce a ‘nexus of rogue states, terrorists, and weapons of mass destruction’ and you seem to have a devastating threat which requires urgent preventive military intervention.

The problem with this ‘threat’ is that it is grossly exaggerated. In the first place, the intent of ‘rogue states’ to attack the UK has never been demonstrated. For the past decade the USA, which invented the ‘rogue state’ concept, has given seven countries that appellation: Cuba, Pakistan, Libya, Iraq, Iran, North Korea,

[6] Y. Sadowski, ‘Ethnic Conflict’, *Foreign Policy*, no. 111, Summer 1998, pp. 12-23.

and Syria. Of these, the first, Cuba, is on the list purely for domestic political reasons and poses no threat to anybody; the second, Pakistan, is now America's ally; the third, Libya, has come in from the cold (indeed, Mr Blair has described its leader, Colonel Gaddafi, as 'courageous'); and the fourth, Iraq, is now under our control. So, the entire 'rogue state' threat comes down to three rather weak nations, none of whom could have any possible reason for launching an unprovoked, and surely suicidal, attack on the United Kingdom, and none of whom has the slightest capability of doing so even if, for some inexplicable reason, they did wish to. In short, the 'rogue state threat' is hardly a threat at all (and compared with the old Soviet threat, it is so miniscule and unimportant that it is a wonder that anybody takes it seriously).

Second, the hype about 'weapons of mass destruction' (WMD), and indeed the very phrase 'WMD', mask the fact that most 'WMD' are nothing of the sort. Nuclear weapons are certainly capable of mass destruction, but it is a terrible error of categorisation to place chemical and biological weapons (CW and BW) beside them. CW and BW are comparatively poor weapons, which it is extremely difficult to disseminate in a way which would cause mass destruction (this is especially true of BW). The main role of such weapons is to disrupt rather than kill – to close down areas for long periods while they are decontaminated. Certainly, if a terrorist acquired viable CW or BW, he or she could cause a huge amount of chaos and expense. But the loss of life would probably be small. One can kill large numbers far more effectively by packing fertiliser in a truck and blowing it up, as shown in Northern Ireland and Oklahoma (for more detail on WMD, see Appendix 3).

Third, the idea has become prevalent that terrorism now poses an 'existential threat' to the West. Mr Blair, for instance, has said that we are 'in mortal danger' and that 'the nature of the global threat we face in Britain and round the world is real and existential'.⁷ This is bizarre. However much power terrorists have, they

[7] 'Blair Terror Speech in Full', BBC News, 5 March 2004. Available online at: news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/3536131.stm

certainly cannot destroy Western civilisation or our way of life (unless we do it for them by over-reacting and destroying it ourselves). The threat from terrorism is one to individual lives, but not to our collective existence. Since 11 September 2001 a much-reduced risk tolerance has prevailed. One can observe this in Mr Blair's justification of the invasion of Iraq: 'do we want to take the risk? ... This is not a time to err on the side of caution.'⁸ But Iraq precisely illustrates the fallacy of Blair's philosophy. One can make an argument that invading Iraq brought some benefits (especially to Iraqis), but the idea that we *had* to invade Iraq is nonsense. The threat from Iraq to the UK was zero. It had no WMD, no links with al-Qaeda, no meaningful offensive military capability, and no intent to attack the UK. If we had erred more 'on the side of caution', no harm would have come to Britain as a result. Instead, nigh on 100 British citizens (including 90 soldiers) have lost their lives, over two thousand have been wounded, our international reputation has been damaged, and we have boosted the cause of Islamist terrorism.

The philosophy of military intervention to tackle imaginary threats from overseas is not merely unnecessary, but actually harmful to our interests. Dispensing with this policy will not bring terrible consequences to our national security. Why, then has it taken hold of the military establishment so thoroughly? Three reasons stand out.

The first reason for military intervention is the existence of a capability to intervene, and the lack of constraints against it. We intervene because we can, and because nobody can stop us. The temptation to deploy military forces in support of diplomacy is too great, and having started down the military road, we find ourselves unable to stop ourselves going the whole way. As Major General Ian Durie, until 1996 Director of the Royal Artillery, noted in early 2003: 'There is a rush to war and, as those of us who are military men know, such large-scale troop deployments carry with them an almost inevitable need to use them'.⁹ The speed with which the UK and USA adopted the new inter-

[8] Ibid.

[9] Obituary, Maj-Gen the Rev Ian Durie, *The Independent*, 18 May 2005.

ventionism once the restraining hand of the USSR had vanished suggests that this is a prime factor. Confederate General Robert E. Lee once remarked that 'It is well war is so terrible, else we shall grow too fond of it'.¹⁰ Western military superiority has made war too easy, with exactly the consequence of which Lee warned.

The second reason is bureaucratic. The end of the Cold War deprived the military establishment of its *raison-d'être*. Interventionism is in favour for the simple reason that it is the only way that existing institutions can survive and continue to justify their budgets. One can see this logic clearly at work in NATO, which is now obsessed with the policy of 'transformation', which means restructuring NATO's armed forces to operate 'out of area' – i.e. other than in defence of NATO territory. Former NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson championed this policy, sloganeering: 'Out of area, or out of business'!¹¹ The logic of bureaucratic self-interest could not be clearer – the noble lord did not, after all, say 'out of area, because our security demands it', but in effect 'out of area, or our cosy institution will collapse'. We shall see more logic of this sort at work in the European Security and Defence Policy in Part 3.

The third reason is blame avoidance by politicians. Especially after the events of 11 September 2001, democratic politicians have become very fearful of being held accountable should some terrible 9/11-style disaster happen again. They have therefore chosen to transfer the risk onto others. The calculation appears to be that if, for instance, Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and gave them to terrorists who used them against the UK, they as politicians would be held to blame for doing nothing to stop this. If, however, they invaded Iraq to prevent this and then discovered that there were in fact no weapons, people (indeed many people) would be killed, but at least these would not be Britons, and so the blame for the mistake would be compara-

[10] Douglas Southall Freeman, *Lee*, abridged by Richard Harwell (New York: Collier, 1961), p. 278.

[11] See for instance, a quotation from Robertson in 'The US and NATO: a Partnership in Action', US Department of State, available online at: usinfo.state.gov/is/Archive/2004/Jun/11-227891.html

tively light. From the politicians' point of view, the latter course seemed the safer. In essence, our leaders have engaged in aggressive war in order to cover their backs and preserve their reputations (with mixed success, as Mr Blair has discovered!).

This analysis makes it clear that interventionism has many roots, but none of them relate successfully to the actual security requirements of the UK. Institutional self-protection, intervening simply because one can, and the desire to be a 'force for good', are not necessary for our security. Nobody has adequately shown that if we eliminated our interventionist capability, our security would suffer as a result. To return to our original question, interventionism is a matter of choice, not of necessity.