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Blair's Foreign Policy and its Possible Successor(s)

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Summary

Foreign policy has been a defining feature of the Labour government under Tony Blair. Major initiatives, including the establishment of the International Criminal Court and the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol, happened under Blair's watch, and military campaigns were undertaken in Kosovo, Sierra Leone and Afghanistan. However, it is Blair's

response to the post-9/11 'global war on terror' and the invasion of Iraq that marks a watershed in British foreign policy.

As Tony Blair approaches the tenth anniversary of his election victory, and his final year in power, this paper assesses the impact of these, and other, events and concludes that a more nuanced relationship with the United States will be a requirement for Blair's successor.

- Although Tony Blair did not express much interest in foreign policy before becoming prime minister, in Labour's first term it must be judged a qualified success. A key feature was Blair's ability to demonstrate Britain's European credentials while forging a close working relationship with President Clinton.
- The post-9/11 decision to invade Iraq was a terrible mistake and the current débâcle will have policy repercussions for many years to come. The root failure of Tony Blair's foreign policy has been its inability to influence the Bush administration in any significant way despite the sacrifice – military, political and financial – that the United Kingdom has made.
- Tony Blair's successor(s) will not be able to offer unconditional support for US initiatives in foreign policy and a rebalancing of the UK's foreign policy between the US and Europe will have to take place.

2 Blair's foreign policy and its possible successor(s)

Introduction

Foreign policy has been a defining feature of the Labour government under Tony Blair. Almost all British prime ministers find themselves devoting more time to foreign policy the longer they stay in office, so after nearly ten years it is not surprising that Blair is the dominant figure in formulating the foreign policy of his government. In Blair's case, of course, the focus on foreign policy may have been accentuated by the difficulty of playing a leading role in the management of the UK economy, where the Chancellor of the Exchequer has held sway for so long. While other ministers concerned with foreign affairs have come and gone, the prime minister has remained – supported by a high-powered team at 10 Downing Street that has often acted independently of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office. That is why it is not unreasonable to refer to British foreign policy in the last decade as Blair's foreign policy.

It did not start out that way. Tony Blair did not express much interest in foreign policy before becoming prime minister. Furthermore, his initial choice of ministers suggested that foreign policy would not be the major focus of his attention. Robin Cook, as Blair's first foreign secretary, hit the ground running while the decision to give responsibility for the aid budget to a new ministry (the Department for International Development) provided its first minister, Clare Short, with a large degree of autonomy. Defence was given to George Robertson, another heavyweight in the Labour team. Only on Europe, where the minister did not at first have cabinet rank, did the prime minister become heavily involved from the beginning.

Qualified success

Foreign policy in the first term of the Labour government (1997–2001) must be judged a qualified success. Indeed, it began remarkably well – albeit for reasons that had nothing to do with the election victory. The handover of Hong Kong to China took place as anticipated, marking the decolonization of the last significant British territory and paving the way for upgrading relations with the remaining overseas territories. The Commonwealth provided an increasingly useful forum in which Britain could establish development priorities and forge diplomatic alliances. The United Kingdom was an enthusiastic supporter of the Millennium Development Goals, agreed at the special summit of the United Nations in September 2000.

The Amsterdam Treaty, signed in June 1997, provided an opportunity for Tony Blair to demonstrate that Britain would once again play a constructive role in the European Union, while at the same time holding out the prospect of eventual British membership of the Eurozone. The decision in 1998 to sign into UK law the European Charter of Human Rights was seen in the rest of Europe

as a very positive step. The claim that Britain would be at the heart of Europe no longer rang hollow. Furthermore, Blair followed up these promising first steps with a crucial summit with President Chirac at St Malo in 1998 in which the foundations of European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) were laid on the basis of Anglo-French military cooperation.

There were some stumbles, of course, as is bound to happen with a new government. Robin Cook's claim that British foreign policy would have 'an ethical dimension' was inevitably interpreted by the media and the Conservative opposition as meaning that Britain would have an ethical foreign policy. This elision then proved hard to square with arms sales to repressive states and the supply of weapons to the ousted Sierra Leone president in 1998 despite a UN arms embargo. The signing of the Kyoto Protocol at the end of 1997 looked promising, but an earlier vote in the US Senate (95–0) refusing to accept any international agreement on climate change that did not include mandatory targets for developing countries was not given the attention that it required. The worst stumble, however, was the decision not to extradite General Pinochet to Spain to face torture charges, but to return him to Chile on medical grounds. When a sprightly Pinochet then showed in media interviews that his mental faculties were not impaired at all, it made a mockery of Britain's commitment to international human rights – especially as it occurred not long after the UK had argued vigorously and successfully for the establishment of the International Criminal Court.

First test

Blair's first big test came with the Kosovo campaign in 1999. The eruption of ethnic violence in the Balkans threatened once again to demonstrate the inability of the European Union to deal with a crisis on its doorstep and exposed the divisions among the outside powers. The refusal by the Russian Federation to countenance the use of force ruled out recourse to the United Nations Security Council, while President Clinton was not prepared to commit ground troops that would inevitably be drawn heavily from US forces. The compromise, pursued vigorously by Tony Blair, was an aerial bombardment carried out by NATO without a UN Security Council resolution. This was a momentous decision for two reasons, both of which appealed to Blair. First, it committed NATO for the first time in 50 years to offensive action; and, secondly, it demonstrated how force could be used against a sovereign country with a degree of legitimacy without the support of the United Nations.

The rationale of the Kosovo campaign was subsequently set out by the prime minister in his Chicago speech in April 1999, while the war itself was still raging. In essence, this established the conditions under which Britain would support humanitarian intervention against

a sovereign power with or without United Nations support. It was a potentially open-ended commitment that could never be fulfilled consistently given the imbalance between the limited resources available (political as well as military) and the large number of countries where human rights are systematically abused. While calling for a long-term commitment to post-conflict state-building, it showed no appreciation of the difficulties likely to be encountered. It was, in retrospect, a naïve speech with little or no reference to history that was unduly influenced by European failures in the Balkans before Blair came to power. However, the speech set the tone for the next few years and provided the intellectual case for the military intervention in Sierra Leone in 2000.

By the time of his second election victory in June 2001, Tony Blair could look back on his foreign policy with some satisfaction. On the all important question of where to strike a balance between proximity to the United States and being at the heart of the European Union, he had been much more successful than his immediate predecessors. John Major, crippled by party factionalism, had pushed the United Kingdom to the margins of the European project. Margaret Thatcher had put too much emphasis on her close personal relationship with President Reagan. Blair had demonstrated Britain's European credentials in many ways, while forging a close working relationship with President Clinton. Even the election of George Bush did not faze Tony Blair, despite the former's early rejection of the Kyoto Protocol, as he established a *modus vivendi* with the new president.

Relations with the United States

The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 dramatically altered this balancing act. Perhaps it would have changed anyway. The European half of the equation was already beginning to turn sour, as the United Kingdom shied away from joining the Eurozone and 'Brussels' was increasingly portrayed as part of the problem rather than as part of the solution. However, Blair was one of the first – if not *the* first – to see how the United States would change as it unleashed its 'global war on terror'. His desire to show empathy with the United States in its moment of grief was entirely understandable. However, his failure to try to coordinate a European response was regrettable. Instead, Washington DC was witness to a series of visits by European leaders all anxious to demonstrate first and foremost their *national* support for the United States and whatever steps it might take in response to the attacks.

The dangers in this approach were not apparent at first. The decision by the Bush administration to brush aside NATO's offer of help in the invasion of Afghanistan was allowed to pass. The establishment of a camp at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba to hold 'illegal combatants', in apparent breach of the Geneva Conventions, barely

raised an eyebrow in British government circles. Even the decision by President Bush to classify Iraq, Iran and North Korea as an 'axis of evil' in his State of the Union address in January 2002 went unchallenged by Blair, despite the fact that the United Kingdom had diplomatic relations with the last two and there was no link between Saddam Hussein's Iraq and the atrocities of 9/11. At that time, it is true, even a coordinated European response would have made little difference, such was the determination of the neo-conservatives in the Bush administration. However, it gave the distinct impression that Europe was incapable of forming a geo-strategic view, that bilateral relations were the only ones that counted and that the Bush administration could count on British support no matter what policy it adopted.

Up to this point, the divisions within the European Union over policy towards the United States were not so severe that they threatened to disrupt the march of the European project. However, by mid-2002 Tony Blair had concluded that President Bush was determined to invade Iraq and that Britain needed to be a partner in this exercise. The British role was therefore to provide diplomatic cover and to enrol allies in Europe and elsewhere as far as possible. This was without a shadow of doubt the defining moment of Blair's foreign policy – indeed, the defining moment of his whole premiership. It will shape his legacy – for better or for worse – for many years to come.

Decision to invade

The problem Blair faced was not how to maintain European unity in the face of a threatened US pre-emptive war. He calculated that, as in Kosovo in 1999, success on the battlefield would quickly heal any intra-European wounds that might emerge. Instead, the problem was how to obtain United Nations approval for a war of choice when NATO intervention was ruled out by French and German opposition. A case for humanitarian intervention could have been made, but that was unlikely to command support in the UN Security Council and could have provoked a Russian or even Chinese veto. Instead, in close cooperation with US Secretary of State Colin Powell, the decision was made to emphasize the need to eliminate Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction.

In hindsight, we can see that this was a terrible mistake. Was it a mistake at the time? The jury is still out on the extent to which Blair knew that the claims about WMD were overblown or even fabricated. What is clear is that the decision to commit British troops to the invasion of Iraq in the absence of a UN Security Council Resolution authorizing the use of force drove a horse and cart through the 'doctrine of international community' he had proclaimed in his Chicago speech. Britain was not sure of its case (witness the Attorney-General's altered advice on the legality of war); the diplomatic options had not been

4 Blair's foreign policy and its possible successor(s)

exhausted (Hans Blix was calling for more time for the UN weapons inspectors); and the national interest was not truly engaged (even if Saddam Hussein had WMD, they were not directed at the United Kingdom). Under these circumstances, the only thing that could have rescued Tony Blair was a swift and successful establishment of a democratic government in Iraq, and that did not happen.

One defence of Blair's position, as so often with British prime ministers, was that unwavering support for the United States in public would bring private influence leading to a change in US policy more favourable to British interests. The announcement by President Bush that the United States would accept a two-state solution in the Middle East and would work towards the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel was therefore seized upon by those close to Blair to demonstrate the effectiveness of the British position. However, there is no evidence that British pressure was responsible for this pronouncement, which simply reiterated the policy established by President Clinton at the end of his administration, although it is true that British officials played a part in drafting the 'road map' that was supposed to lead to peace in the region.

Iraq may have been the defining moment of Tony Blair's premiership, but his foreign policy has of course had many other dimensions. The British presidency of the G-8 in 2005, and the preceding preparations, provided an opportunity to shift the agenda away from the Middle East towards other issues that played to British strengths – in particular Africa and climate change. The first was a relatively low-risk strategy, given the momentum that had developed in support of the continent since the launch of NEPAD (the New Partnership for Africa's Development) in 2001 both in the G-8 and – just as importantly – in Western civil society. The second was a high-risk strategy, given the visceral opposition of the Bush administration to any approach to climate change mitigation that relied on mandatory targets. Yet the judgment of history on these two initiatives of the Blair premiership may be very different. The emphasis on aid and debt relief for Africa in return for an improvement in governance may come to look strangely old-fashioned, while the determination to include the United States, China, India and other big emitters of greenhouse gases in practical solutions to climate change is clearly a harbinger of things to come.

Relations with Europe

The European dimension of Blair's foreign policy has been particularly difficult to manage since the Iraq invasion. This is not only – indeed, not even primarily – because of the divisions caused by the invasion itself. It has much more to do with the crumbling of the European project following the rejection of the draft constitutional treaty by voters in both France and the Netherlands.

Enlargement of the European Union, traditionally one of the few dimensions of European integration supported by a broad swathe of the British political spectrum, is no longer popular and UK membership of the Eurozone has been put on permanent hold. Blair has been unable to persuade most of his European colleagues to take ESDP seriously and defence spending – as a share of GDP – is more likely to fall than rise in most member states. Faced with these obstacles, European policy has essentially become one of damage limitation – as demonstrated by the British presidency of the EU in the second half of 2005. Blair can take credit for the fact that Britain is no longer the outlier when it comes to Europe, but British influence is strictly limited and the British public is still uncomfortable in its European skin.

Success and failure

Outright successes in foreign policy have been relatively few (perhaps that is in the very nature of foreign policy). Blair can certainly take some of the credit for the decision by Colonel Gaddafi to abandon Libya's nuclear weapons programme, although the colonel continues to run an authoritarian state that contributes very little to the stability of the African continent. The dogged pursuit of a political solution to the Northern Ireland conundrum is also very much to Blair's credit, although a definitive solution still eludes him. The recent agreement with Spain over Gibraltar may pave the way for a significant deepening of the Anglo-Spanish relationship to the advantage not only of both countries, but of the European Union as a whole. Last, but not least, Tony Blair has put Britain on the right side of the line on many issues dividing the nations of the world, from Turkish membership of the European Union to a tougher relationship with Putin's Russia to the mitigation of climate change.

However, there have been many disappointments and failures along the road – not just the outcome in Iraq. Blair saw the consequences of Taliban resurgence in Afghanistan on the back of drug-trafficking far too late; this was unforgivable given the link between heroin consumption on British streets and the strengthening of warlordism in Afghanistan. Blair has also been unable to prevent Britain's standing in the Middle East from declining sharply despite his willingness to invest personal political capital in tackling the most sensitive issues; new ideas on making progress towards peace in the region are now much more likely to come from the neighbouring states or Britain's European partners. Blair has not fully reaped the dividend that might have been expected to come from India's close historical ties with Britain and its membership of the Commonwealth, while being dragged into a classic European fudge in seeking to lift the arms embargo on China. And international negotiations on the Doha Development Round, the reform of the United Nations and nuclear non-

proliferation – to mention just a few – have been deeply disappointing from Britain's point of view.

The root failure, however, has been the inability to influence the Bush administration in any significant way despite the sacrifice – military, political and financial – that the United Kingdom has made. There are two possible explanations: either the accumulated political capital was not spent wisely or the capital was never as great as was supposed. The latter now looks the most probable explanation, although anecdotal evidence also suggests that the prime minister did not make full use of the opportunities that were presented to him. Given the Byzantine complexity of Washington politics, it was always unrealistic to think that outside powers – however loyal – could expect to have much influence on the US decision-making process. The bilateral relationship with the United States may be 'special' to Britain, but the US has never described it as more than 'close'. The best that could be hoped for is that Britain would ally itself with one of the Washington factions that ultimately prevailed in the internecine struggle for presidential support. Tony Blair has learnt the hard way that loyalty in international politics counts for very little.

Forseeable future

His successor(s) will not make the same mistake. For the foreseeable future, whoever is prime minister, there will no longer be unconditional support for US initiatives in foreign policy. Nor will it make much difference who is in power in the United States. The logic of transatlantic relations today is that costs can be borne by single states, but benefits will accrue to all members of the European Union. There is very little, outside of intelligence-sharing, that a US government can do to reward the UK without rewarding other states. And even when it is possible, as in the case of the export of sensitive military technology, a protectionist Congress ensures that Britain is treated in much the same way as other states.

Tony Blair will argue that he never gave unconditional support to his counterpart in the White House, and he can cite the Kyoto Protocol and the establishment of the International Criminal Court as well as Britain's voting record in the United Nations in his defence. Yet there is no doubt where his instincts lie and this message has been conveyed to his officials throughout the world. A distancing of the United Kingdom from the United States does not amount to a rupture and all likely candidates to succeed Blair as prime minister in the next few years will work to retain good relations. Furthermore, a new US president, from either party, will certainly make things easier in view of the extraordinary public hostility that George Bush has generated in Britain and elsewhere. However, like Suez 50 years ago, the Iraq débâcle marks a watershed in British foreign policy that will alter the relationship with the United States for many years to come.

A different relationship with the United States has many consequences, the most important of which is Britain's role in the European Union. No British government – indeed, no European government – can afford to distance itself from both the United States and the European Union at the same time (although John Major's administration came close). This may be uncomfortable for both candidates with the best chance of being prime minister in the next five years. Gordon Brown's instincts are strongly Atlanticist and he has been a strident critic of lagging performance in the Eurozone, while David Cameron has indicated his preference to ally the Conservative Party with European parties that represent the most Eurosceptic tendencies within the European Parliament.

A closer relationship with Europe is not only a requirement of British foreign policy, it is also likely to be urged on Britain by future US presidents. A government such as Law and Justice in Poland does the United States no favours by combining a strong Atlanticist streak with Europhobia. What US governments want is a European Union that can make a real contribution to the international political and security agenda, and any European government with the diplomatic skills to deliver EU support will be hugely appreciated. Britain has an opportunity to play that role provided it is taken seriously by its European partners and contributes fully to the European project. In due course, that will require the United Kingdom to revisit its opposition to joining both the Schengen agreement and the Eurozone.

Building support within the European Union requires allies – particularly among the six biggest countries. France seems certain to reinforce its partnership with Germany, whoever wins its presidential election in 2007, while both Italy and Poland are going through a prolonged period of introspection that will limit their ability to play a major role in the European Union for several years. That leaves Spain, and the prospects for deepening the bilateral relationship with Britain, once Blair has left office, are very good. The modernization of Spain in the last 20 years has been breathtaking in its speed and success; Spain's international interests complement those of Britain and it is a natural link to the 'Hispanics' who are likely to play such a crucial role in the 2008 US presidential election.

The rebalancing of the UK's foreign policy between the United States and Europe will also affect the security debate. While the decision to replace Trident has effectively already been taken, it is unlikely to be reversed by Blair's probable successor(s). It becomes harder to make the case for unilateral nuclear disarmament, if Britain ceases to be so close to the United States. The same is true of Britain's membership of NATO. Blair's preference, maintaining Britain's central security role in the nuclear club as well as modernizing its armed forces to play a leading role in NATO, will not be seriously challenged. Even a hung parliament, with the Liberal Democrats holding the balance of power, is unlikely to make much difference.

6 Blair's foreign policy and its possible successor(s)

Positive parts

Some other parts of Tony Blair's legacy also look secure. The African policy will evolve, partly to cope with the growing influence of China on the continent and partly as empirical evidence emerges on which component of the 'trade, aid, debt relief' trinity works best. However, the focus on Africa as the prime candidate for Britain's growing programme of official development assistance seems certain to stay. The public is comfortable with it and there is cross-party support. And it is an area where Britain, together with France, can play a strong leadership role globally – not just within the EU – without antagonizing the United States.

The most positive part of Blair's legacy in foreign affairs will be climate change policy. While it is easy to criticize the gap between his rhetoric and government actions at home in mitigating climate change, there is no doubt that Blair's powers of persuasion have been very effective in pushing this issue up the international agenda. And Blair has stuck to it consistently, raising climate change as an international policy concern throughout his premiership. While it will never be possible for him to escape from Iraq as the defining feature of his term, he can take some comfort from the knowledge that the debate on climate change – both domestically and internationally – has moved on significantly since he first came to power and that he can legitimately take some of the credit for this.

Professor Victor Bulmer-Thomas OBE has been Director at Chatham House since April 2001 and steps down on 31 December 2006.

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