



The Wrong Game

Why British Foreign Policy Must Change

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Introduction

9/11 was 'the day the world changed' - but not just in terms of terrorism. Ever since that day the whole world scene has been changing dramatically and fundamentally; and, in the words of Bob Dylan, "the wheel's still in spin". Across the world attitudes have altered to meet these changes - except in Britain and the US!

So completely absorbed have George Bush and Tony Blair been in the 'war' on terror that they have been totally blinded to those wider changes. As a result, neither British nor American foreign policy has altered to reflect them.

The dangerous truth is that Tony Blair and George Bush are stuck in a 9/11 time warp. They are playing the wrong game at the wrong time by the wrong rules in the wrong place. In doing so, they are not only endangering British Service lives but are now actively making bad international situations worse.

They are trapped in a mediaeval mindset of never-ending conflict between good and evil. Demonstrated in their rhetoric of "the axis of evil" and "the arc of extremism", theirs is a simple world in which they are the 'goodies' and their enemies the 'baddies'. I must confess my own Party, including myself, has not in the past been totally innocent of this charge; but the justification for our previous position has now been overtaken by world change and we, I hope, have changed with it. The art of foreign policy is to adjust to shifting circumstances and David Cameron's recent speech was welcome.

The age of polarised foreign policy

In the days before the world changed, in the Cold War days of President Reagan's 'Evil Empire', there was some justification for a morally polarised approach. The philosophy of the USSR was openly one of oppressive world domination. It was right that we confronted it and eventually saw it off. It was also right that we confronted the evil that was Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait and his chemical attack on his own people. It was right too that we responded to the crimes against humanity in the Balkans. It was and remains a matter of shame how selective we were in choosing where else to intervene. Ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, yes. Ethnic cleansing in Zimbabwe, no. And while there has been plenty rhetoric about the horrific genocide in Darfur, there has as yet been little meaningful action.

9/11, however, crystallised a new evil, that of fundamentalist Islamist terrorism. All terrorism is irredeemably evil both because it is murderous and because it is based on the blackmail of fear. It must be confronted and eradicated. 9/11 was different both in terms of scale and nature. It introduced a disciplined multiple suicide element into international terrorism, replicated on a smaller but no less vicious scale in London on 7/7, designed to wreak mass murder of innocent civilians. It was right therefore that we went into Afghanistan in pursuit of Al Qaeda and Bin Laden. Such vile and religiously distorted terrorism required a hard and determined response to show that these fundamentalist terrorists had not won. The overthrow of the Taleban and the flight of bin Laden into the mountains of Pakistan was a necessary response to the terrorist blackmail of fear.

Our own experience, however, both from Northern Ireland and from our previous colonial days should have taught us that while terrorism can and should be contained by military action it cannot be defeated by it. It must be accompanied and eventually replaced by a gradual engagement with those who support and give shelter to such terrorism, gently to persuade them that there is a better way to seek to achieve their aspirations.

Dancing with wolves

Put bluntly, that means talking to terrorists and the communities which support them, 'dancing with wolves', as I did in Northern Ireland in the early 1990s.

I know that for a lot of people that is a bridge too far. They ignore our history. Many of our previous terrorist enemies became politicians with whom we have had subsequently to deal. Indeed as we consider today's Middle East we sometimes forget that Israel's was partially built on the terrorism of those who went on to found the Likud Party.

On numerous occasions having pursued the military option we have eventually had to talk with those who had previously been our sworn enemies. From Jomo Kenyatta to Archbishop Makarios to Gerry Adams, however initially unpalatable when it was clearly right to talk we have done so. Arguably, we are rather good at it. And we should not shy away from it now.

On this measure, there is now a strong case for the international community to open dialogue not only with Iran and Syria in relation to Israel/Palestine but with Hamas and Hezbollah as well. If Israel understandably cannot currently engage in all or any of these dialogues, then in the long term interests of international stability within the region and for the long term security of Israel others should do so for her.

In the aftermath of the recent 'war' between Israel and Hezbollah in South Lebanon - a war of mutual attrition which neither won, and whose moral justification on Israel's side was drowned in the blood of innocent victims - there needs to be a major rethink of policy. George Bush and Tony Blair, who as we now know deliberately stood back and refused to press for a ceasefire on the grounds that Israeli good must be allowed to triumph over Hezbollah evil, must now see that far from weakening their target, they have given it new life.

They must see too, as Israel eventually must as well, that there can be no 'two state solution', no secure Israel living alongside a viable Palestinian state, without the eventual inclusion of Hamas which for better or for worse is a very real element of the Palestinian political entity and without a secure and dependable cessation by Hezbollah of hostilities and the threat of hostilities against Israel.

In the end dialogue which includes the political elements of these organizations will be indispensable and the sooner that the ground for such dialogue begins to be prepared the better for everyone. That means for a start replacing military aggression with a process of winning hearts and minds and creating the groundwork within which engagement in peace pays dividends on all sides. We demonstrated in Northern Ireland that this process is not mutually exclusive of continuing a proper military containment of terrorist activity.

The changing world

The near Middle East is a good example of the changed times. The implication of those changes can be applied more widely as well. While past direct military actions against specific evils were justified, the changing world since 2001 has rendered the continuation of many of those actions and attitudes irrelevant and in some cases dangerously counterproductive. After Iraq and Afghanistan, military preemption has somewhat lost its gloss. That is why a change of mindset and of policy both in general and in the specific are urgently required.

We no longer live – if we ever did – in a simple world where the delivery of ‘democracy’ is a panacea. For a start ‘democracy’ means different things to different people, and in too many parts of the world it is regarded as an American colonialist imposition, part of that secularist and materialistic ‘westoxification’ which is so bitterly resented in much of the Muslim world.

Moreover the decade of relative US military invincibility is over. Her ability effectively to wield irresistible hard power on a world wide basis and at will has been irredeemably tarnished by the ‘bogging down’ in Iraq and Afghanistan. And Blair’s umbilical attachment to the US has left us tarred with the same brush and weakened by the same failures.

We live today in a world of shifting centres of power and influence, where new economic powers and military forces are emerging, where evolving alliances and accommodations are the new order, where sometimes ‘one man’s meat is another’s poison’ and ‘my enemy’s enemy is my friend’. That is not a world of constant lights and shades, it is a moving kaleidoscope where over-simplistic philosophies backed by heavy handed military intervention and the application of maximum force is never going to build or rebuild; it is always going to blow away - and in so doing will inevitably leave vacuums in its wake.

In this changing world, creating vacuums is a recipe for instability, or unintended consequences, or both. We should be working to create mutually beneficial accommodations rather than creating new vacuums. But as long as George Bush and Tony Blair look at the world in simple terms of good and evil, they and we will lose the plot. So long as the ‘war’ (a regrettable description which gives terrorists an unhelpful ...

...military cachet) on terrorism is their top international priority, the plot will continue to be lost, and in the ensuing confusion unintended and dangerous consequences will increasingly occur.

Iraq, Iran and ‘democracy’

In that context it is deeply ironic that they portray the operation in Iraq as part of that ‘war’ on terrorism, when terrorism and insurgency has only taken root there because their crass post-Iraq-war planning failure created a vacuum into which Al Qaeda gratefully surged. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the allied invasion, the bottom line upon which frequent assurances were given was that there was a comprehensive post-war reconstruction plan completed and available. In the end there was none - or if there was it was never deployed. We are now not only reaping the lethal harvest of the seeds which that failure sowed, but are also increasingly becoming the target of that insurgency.

We have achieved a lot on the ground in terms of physical reconstruction for the people of Iraq, but we have not given them stability or security. The chance for doing so has now passed, and there is little if anything more that we can positively achieve. The longer we stay, the more entrenched the problem will become. It is more than time for us with dignity and honour to come home.

Whether, however, we do come home or not, the end-game of the Bush/Blair strategy in Iraq is deeply confusing. If the country, as seems likely, descends into civil war or even breaks up it will have a more destabilising effect on the stability of the whole region including Turkey than was ever posed by Saddam Hussein. And moreover it will be a civil war in which we can and must have no part. Conversely, if the Bush and Blair do against the odds achieve their objective of stable democracy in Iraq, it will be a Shia democracy, increasingly in league with Shia Iran, perfectly able together if so inclined seriously to destabilise the energy interests of what under Bush and Blair is perceived in the Muslim world as an anti-Islam West. By crass misjudgement the scene will have been set and the political framework provided from within which to do so.

Yet this is the same Iran against which neither Bush nor Blair will rule out future military action in response to its ambition to achieve nuclear armaments, despite the fact that any such military intervention would almost certainly fail to meet its objective, would swiftly become bogged down, would create seismic geo-political after-shocks and would be internationally divisive. This is the same Iran which Bush excoriated as part of the ‘axis of evil’, and which he and Blair now condemn as sponsors of terrorism.

This is the antithesis of joined up strategy or thinking. At one moment they vilify and threaten Iran, at the next they prepare to hand it Iraq on a plate. It is typical of the illogicalities and inconsistencies which inevitably arise from a blind application of the doctrine of good and evil, leaving us to ask if this tangled, confused and threatening outcome is really what our troops are fighting and dying for in Iraq?

We are still told that such inconsistencies are best cured by the 'export of democracy'. This argument might be more convincing if those who readily press this case equally readily accepted the results of it, whether or not it produces the desired outcome. Democracy can never be a la carte. If the Palestinians elect Hamas and the southern Lebanese choose Hezbollah, that democratic wish - while it may not be welcome - must be respected and they must be included in dialogue. International scepticism about neo-con objectives in general and Bush/Blair motives in particular is hardly surprising when those democratically elected parties are instead ostracised.

The age of soft power

All this does is to create more vacuums and to play even further into the hands of the extremist, and already there is growing evidence that the West's military response to these vacuums is recruiting more new terrorists than it is destroying. We need urgently to find another way. Rather than compounding the problem by increasing the volume of aggressive military involvement, we should be looking to win hearts and minds. We should now be seeking soft power rather than hard power engagement; not least because it is becoming increasingly clear that, while hard power may contain extremism, it will take soft power to beat it.

That is why it is wrong to keep raising the spectre of using force against Iran to persuade her to comply with the nuclear non-proliferation requirements. It only serves to harden support for the militants, as we saw so vividly in Lebanon under Israel's disproportionate and sometimes indiscriminate onslaught on the people in the South and in Beirut. Nor is it easy successfully to demonise Iran – however vile President Ahmadinejad's language and obscene his threats - when China still deals with him commercially and Russia militarily, and he is formally supported by many of the group of Unaligned Nations. To try to do so is increasingly to spit into the wind.

If ever there has been a moment to work together to establish dialogue, free of the overhanging and counterproductive threat of force inspired by rhetoric, it must be on this issue of Iran. I suspect the eventual outcome of the issue of Iran's development of nuclear capability, whether civil or military, will be neither clear cut nor tidy. Our task should be directed at examining the potential outcomes and working with the rest of the international community to find ways of managing them. And that inevitably means dialogue, vicarious if need be but preferably direct.

It is not just Iran. In the five years since 9/11 the world as a whole has moved to one which is less about good and evil and the military solutions to it and more about shades of culpability and threat and the dialogue and creation of relationships to deal with them. The primary purpose of dialogue should therefore not be, at least to start with, one of final stage negotiation. It should be a process by which to reconcile misunderstandings and manage differences. It should be, by a process of painstaking confidence building, about filling vacuums. By definition it must not be about bombing and other forms of attrition.

It must be about winning hearts and minds, not by coercion but by trust – and this is never easy or quick.

The exception that is Afghanistan

The exception to this is Afghanistan. We did not create that vacuum. In a sense it has always been a vacuum of lawlessness and fundamentalism. The USSR briefly and ruthlessly tried to fill it. When they left it became a vacuum again, until it was filled by the Taliban and Al Qaeda. It was only after 9/11 that we took steps to confront that threat and to try to replace it with something more benign. We have not exactly been successful, partly because Bush and Blair have placed the emphasis more on hard power military initiatives than on soft power hearts and minds efforts. I would love it if our forces were able to come home from Afghanistan now – as I have argued in relation to Iraq. We cannot however afford to let Afghanistan become a vacuum again for Islamic fundamentalism to fill, an almost inevitable outcome, and one which would directly threaten us again as it did successfully on 9/11. And whose echoes affected us again on the 7th July last year in London.

In preventing Afghanistan again becoming a vacuum, I welcome NATO's substantially involvement as the first steps in internationalising the effort. At present, however, it is too Western orientated, smacking too much in the minds of Afghans of the colonial initiatives of the past. It does not have to be, and arguably should not be, solely a Nato/Western exercise. There are other great regional powers whose interests are equally affected by what happens there. Russia and China have an urgent interest, as Islamic fundamentalism could gnaw away at the stability of their border regions. India, with its enormous Muslim population and the unresolved mess in Kashmir, is constantly under threat from such fundamentalism and has an immediate interest too. Pakistan's persistent internal tensions can only be worsened by a Taliban Afghanistan. Recognising the deep sensitivities of any direct Russian involvement and the paramount need to avoid it, there is surely a case for a more international response, probably based on a mixture of direct technical military and economic support to the Government of Afghanistan and intensive heart-and-minds activity with the local communities on the ground.

What is certain is that we cannot go on seeking a hard power solution against a reborn Taliban with insufficient manpower and equipment and a less than wholly enthusiastic Nato – as we are trying to do right now. And even if we were substantially to increase resources and support, we must recognize that while military action can prevent from day to day the vacuum reoccurring it will never alone defeat the Taleban – who are a...

... fundamental part of Afghanistan - nor will it permanently deal with the financial narco-dependency of so many Afghans. That change of emphasis from 'overwhelming force' to gradually changing the mindset of those who currently give support, tacit or direct, to the terrorists could provide the key to achieving a lasting filling-in of this historic vacuum.

Shifting balances of power and economic pressures

Such a change of emphasis in Afghanistan would also recognise the way the world has changed. It would recognize the shifting balances of power and influence. It would recognize that while still immensely powerful in both economic and military terms, the fact is that America's unipolar moment has come and gone. Her formidable military reputation has been tarnished by the lack of definitive success in Iraq and Afghanistan. Meanwhile Russia, with her fossil fuel resources, is already beginning to re-exert a substantial influence beyond her borders, through the 'near abroad' and ever more widely. China grows apace both economically and militarily. Her need for raw materials and energy will have enormous geopolitical consequences. India too is flexing her considerable economic muscles and is developing into a major regional power. Japan can never be underestimated. And in terms of geopolitical influence I believe that South America is a slumbering giant. All these are joining or preparing to join the existing powers at the world's top table - and there are many others too.

These developments obviously could pose economic or even physical risks for us. Yet they also provide us with opportunities and create scenarios in which we still have a significant role to play. To be in a position to do so, however, we must first move from the Bush/Blair rhetoric to the global reality. If we are seriously looking for evils which can destabilise the world, yes of course there is always terrorism which must be dealt with; but there are also poverty and disease. The impacts of these are not only humanitarian within their own locations but can rapidly lead to waves of mass migration both economic and social which will in due course affect us all. To this must be added the growing problem of energy and natural resource deprivation. Water shortages in many densely populated parts of the world spring readily to mind. Each of these problems has the capacity to lead to major upheavals, some social, some political and some even military.

In a sense the world is returning to its traditional if not natural state of being driven by economic implosions and demographic explosions; implosions which create the vacuums which are filled by extremism of one sort or another and explosions which create mass outward movements of peoples across continents. It is to the management and control of these implosions and explosions that our foreign policy should be directed. As Conservatives traditionally steeped in this style of diplomacy we should even in opposition be taking a lead.

Britain's opportunity

We are as a country uniquely well placed to do so. As a full but independent minded member of the EU, as an influential member of the Commonwealth and as hopefully a genuine but not subservient partner in the Special Relationship with the US, we can act as a bridge between the emerging spheres of interest and work within the intersections where their concentric circles meet. After a decade of meekly toeing the US line while paying court to the more chauvinist tendencies of our European partners, we could at last play an independent and proactive role in bringing about a more stable and secure world.

In this more fluid world we need a more agile foreign policy. We need to think beyond the individual circles of influence and be able to move between them. It will involve some controversial changes of direction. If the new international order is to be about dialogue, resolving misunderstandings and managing differences, then it must be less about building fortresses and more about building bridges.

This will have immediate consequences. It will mean that while Nato can and should remain a mutual defence organization, its out-of-area role must become less the hard power sword-arm of the West and more a discrete part of a global policing initiative - something I first mooted two years ago. Its mutual defence role should not be underestimated. Take Georgia, keen to join Nato, and also vulnerable to Russian pressure and to Russian sponsored internal separatist movements. Becoming a member of Nato would give Georgia a security assurance she has never had; it would also give the West a means of securing vital energy supply routes without direct physical intervention.

Such a change of direction would also have ramifications for the EU. The integratory building of Fortress Europe would have to cease. The concept of a country called Europe would have to be stood down. Further enlargement would need urgently to be revisited. Particularly on the fringes of Europe the proper role for aspiring members would need to be re-explored.

The potentially vital regional and religious bridge building role of Turkey in a changing world could be severely undermined by being a full member of the EU. Whereas three years ago the accession of Turkey seemed desirable in terms of broadening and loosening the scope of the

EU, a more fluid world now suggests that it would be better as a bridge between a number of international and inter-religious spheres of influence including Europe. Ironically at the other end of Europe so might we.

Britain's challenge

We should not miscalculate the impact on us of what is occurring in today's world. We are operating in a genuinely fluid world, which in turn faces us with substantial migratory movements - some open, and some disguised as asylum-seeking and natural economic immigration. The social and economic pressures posed by this could well be enormous and potentially highly disruptive. It raises generally the ramifications of divisive multiculturalism on the one hand or enforced integration on the other. Abroad it exacerbates a resentful sense of neo-colonialism. At home it inevitably raises the age-old spectre of the fifth column, the enemy within and gives rise to a targeted and discriminatory desire for major controls on population movements. All of this could spin swiftly out of control, another urgent reason for dialogue and accommodation rather than confrontation and hard power.

In any event the stark truth is that, unless we substantially increase the funding of our armed forces and more closely match resources to commitments, we will have no place in the hard power game. Either we should cut back on our military commitments or we should increase the resources we are prepared to make available to them. If we do neither, I fear that those arenas where we are still seeking to exercise hard power may well turn out to be our Vietnams.

In a sensible world the days of hard power should be behind us. This should be the age of soft power. As our hard power capabilities are whittled away by political neglect, such a sea change should be to our advantage - if only we are bold enough to seize the opportunity and agile enough to take up the challenge.



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