

Successfully Implementing Ethical Foreign Policy

Written by Emily Clews

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EMILY CLEWS, OCT 31 2013

Introduction

Historically, the obligations and moral responsibilities of nation State's were confined to their citizens and this was reflected in the process of foreign policy making.[1] Strategies were chosen by the State to safeguard its national interests through achievement of its goals in international relations. Whilst what is meant by 'ethical foreign policy' is the subject of disagreement between academics, it can generally be understood as requiring governments to take a more enlightened view of their own self-interests, demonstrated through a foreign policy commitment to alleviate human suffering and to promote mutual understanding, cooperation and peace in the international system.[2]

This view derives from a cosmopolitan moral theory, advocating that morality itself is universal and territorial boundaries are 'morally irrelevant' in limiting our identification, solidarity and obligations to others.[3] Essentially, political communities are no longer restricted by the boundaries of a sovereign State, exemplified in policies of foreign aid, human rights promotion, global health initiatives, and humanitarian intervention.[4]

Explanations for the proliferation of ethical values into foreign policy-making have been attributed to the political space and ability to intervene after the demise of the Soviet Union, as well as being 'demand driven' from the increasing quantity of 'failed States' in the international system.[5] However, the internalization of such ethical values is more convincingly explained by the impact of globalization[6]. Facilitated by the development of activist non-governmental organizations, Governments were convinced that it was in their political and strategic interests to respond to the needs of others.[7]

Questions of ethics and morality are inextricably linked to the practice of foreign policy making. Ethical foreign policy is not an independent construct, since every foreign policy has an ethical dimension because we are "ethically constrained in everything we do".[8] Dan Bully highlights this duality when he states that the subject of ethics is foreign policy: "it examines how we *ought* to relate to otherness", and that if foreign policy is a practice of constructing otherness and relating to it, "*the* question of foreign policy must be how we *ought* to do this: a question of *ethics*".[9]

This interdependence shifts the necessary parameters of the question as an ethical position in foreign policy is already predetermined and cannot be implemented in isolation as though in a vacuum. The issue then becomes just how far a State considers its moral duty to extend beyond its territorial boundaries, a question considered here with reference to the New Labour government in Britain under Tony Blair.[10] Using the development of the policy and considering interventions in Kosovo (1999) and Iraq (2003), this case study will explore the overlapping and contradictory nature of British foreign policies, while concluding that the Government continued to adhere to a highly moralist and normative foreign policy, even in the aftermath of 9/11. First, an attempt will be made to establish the concept of ethical foreign policy in the relevant theory of international relations.

Theoretical Explanation

From a realist and largely traditional perspective, the idea and implementation of an ethical foreign policy, based on the interest of the other rather than the interest of the self, grossly underestimates the realities of international politics.

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Such an ethical stance inherently weakens the State and actively undermines the national interest, defined by power, security and wealth.[11] Thus while a community can exist in a domestic sense, any international community based on ethical principles can only be a self-deception – a chimera – part of an ideological manoeuvre to further enhance national interest.[12] In support of this claim realists emphasize the ‘reality’ of intervention, such as the failure to intervene in the Rwandan genocide (1994), as evidence of the unwillingness of governments to risk the lives of their citizens for the protection of others. The endorsement of a fully-fledged ethical foreign policy would mean that the State was obliged to intervene anywhere, a policy that could not be carried out successfully, and which undermines the national interest by impairing man power, resources and security.[13]

Given the mutually constituted nature of ethics and foreign policy, it is more persuasively considered through a critical lens where it is unsustainable for States to be motivated by national interest alone. Research by critical theorists reveals a strong domestic dynamic, and a continuous quest for political legitimacy, underpinning the acceptance and adoption of ethical foreign policy.[14] Initially developed by Jürgen Habermas in his early theory of western Governments, he concluded that western democracies faced a serious ‘legitimation crisis’ because of the moral difficulties in ensuring effective governance, as well as justifying both their action and inaction – especially in domestic politics.[15] More recently articulated by David Chandler, it is the new sense of purpose and identity that underlies the moralizing foreign policy in western States.[16] The international sphere, unlike domestic policy arenas, offers a rare opportunity to establish an ideological program in which a sense of dynamism and momentum can be achieved. This in turn elicits political legitimacy through popular domestic support and espousing a distinct ‘idea’ of the State.[17]

Hence, political elites can take the initiative in renewing the moral authority of the state – both domestically and internationally – by self-consciously including normative ideals in internationalist foreign policy agendas.[18] The case study of the New Labour government, especially its justifications for intervention in Kosovo and Iraq, will be used to judge how far this was the case for Britain.

New Labour and the British ‘Dimension’ to Ethical Foreign Policy

Development: 1997-1999

The 1997 British General Election heralded a 179 seat-majority for Tony Blair, and the return of the Labour Party to power for the first time in eighteen years.[19] ‘New Labour’, represented a post ideological Government looking to carve out a ‘third way’, built on newfound confidence and a desire to fashion a new understanding of its place in the world. This entailed the re-envisioning of what is meant to be British to how Britain should deal with other nations and international organizations on the world stage.[20]

The foundations of Britain’s ethical foreign policy were established in the Mission Statement by Foreign Secretary Robin Cook two weeks after coming to power, in which he articulated four goals to “provide the Labour Government’s contract with the British people on foreign policy”. [21] Alongside commitments to multilateralism, prosperity and environmentalism, Cook asserted that British foreign policy must have an “ethical dimension”, to “support the demands of other peoples for the democratic rights on which we insist for ourselves”, to be achieved by placing “human rights at the heart of our foreign policy”. [22]

This explicit embodiment of an ethical foreign policy was influenced by two overlapping concepts. Firstly, New Labour recognized the importance of globalization and the opportunities in the shift in world order it could bring.[23] Secondly, domestic renewal and feeling good about being British had to be the cornerstone of foreign policy to achieve greater prominence on the world stage and in line with Cook’s vision, a number of progressive reforms were introduced into policy-making. [24]

From 1997-1999, the British attempt to instil proactive ethical foreign policy was reasonably well received, both at home and abroad.[25] However, core features underlying this early ethical foreign policy can be considered to set the stage for post 9/11 interventions considered less ‘ethical’, and lacking in domestic and international support.

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Core Features

In pursuing a critical perspective, three core features can be considered as making Britain's 'ethical dimension' possible, whilst at the same time making it inherently unstable. Discussed in turn, these features serve to illuminate both the differences – and similarities – of the 'ethical' humanitarian intervention in Kosovo with the 'unethical' invasion of Iraq; the high and low points of British ethical foreign policy.

1) Uncertainty about British Identity and National Interest

As one of his foreign policy advisors admits, "Blair's foreign policy record developed as time passed. I don't think he came in with a clear set of ideas that he then delivered".[26] Academic analysis of the official foreign policy literature and ministerial speeches across New Labour's leadership finds no "sustained endeavour to consider what 'Britain' is and who the 'British' were at the turn of the 21st century". [27]

This had two major implications; primarily that such lack of reflection makes it impossible to know how far Britain's ethical foreign policy was representative of the desires of the population. This is critical because, as Tara McCormack argues, it is not the external environment that imposes a coherent foreign policy, but a specific domestic order that leads to the identification of certain threats and appropriate foreign policy tools to mitigate them.[28] Secondly, and more seriously, following the arguments of Habermas and Chandler, it indicates an absence of a clear political program, and New Labour's attempts to generate this through decisive and dynamic action in the international sphere. From this view, the Government's ethical ideology is considered to evoke sacred symbols of lost greatness in an attempt to re-establish a sense of unity within the political community.[29]

Therefore, ethical foreign policy played a central role in the New Labour project because it gave a moral clarity and forward dynamic to the party itself: "foreign policy is important because of its potential impact on domestic politics and the New Labour project, rather than in itself".[30] By centralizing ideas and values at the heart of British policy, and linking them to its significant diplomatic and military power, the risks of costly engagements can be considered self-evident.[31] Future armed interventions were not about strengthening the national self against the foreign other, but rather about proving oneself by liberating, rescuing or supporting others, for the reason of providing the New Labour government with political legitimacy.[32]

2) Construction of the International Community

In the build-up to the Kosovo intervention, New Labour proclaimed the existence of a global community and constructed it through its ethical foreign policy discourse. This constructed the subject of international politics as a member of the international community, with rights – but more importantly – responsibilities.[33] If a State failed to fulfil its responsibilities (to democracy, human rights and neo-liberal economics) then it ceased to be a subject of international society, and became its object: only being capable of acted upon, and hence another subject's responsibility.[34] The core responsibility of a State is to be successful, if it is not – through choice or incapability – it loses the territorial and sovereignty rights of a nation State.[35]

Blair epitomized this moral component of British foreign policy in the delivery of the Chicago Speech (1999), where he emphasized a 'doctrine of international community', to produce a global debate on when States can legitimately intervene, and to remind the US political elite of their responsibility to protect.[36] Underlying this speech was the belief that globalization and interconnectedness had reached such a stage that it was no longer possible to draw a distinction between domestic and foreign policy problems, especially when it came to security.[37] Blair argued that: "We cannot turn our backs on conflicts and the violation of human rights within other countries if we still want to be secure", and he established five criteria to ascertain a shared consensus about the determination of legitimate conduct.[38] However, nowhere in these criteria is adherence to the 'right authority', where advocates of military interventionism would require authorization from the appropriate international organization or wider international community.[39]

From 1999 a key enactment of Britain's ethical foreign policy was considered to be the responsibility to protect: a

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policy area where British policy exceeded other members of the international community and in which British leadership was considered vital.[40] At its zenith, the ideal of international community and Britain as its leader became so absolute that Blair answered as and for the international community rather than for Britain.[41] Through the articulation of an international community, with Britain at its centre, gave Blair the opportunity to play out simple conflicts between good and evil without the compromise and problems of domestic politics.[42]

3) Impact of the Individual

The final core feature of Britain's ethical foreign policy was the leadership and worldview of Tony Blair himself. In this sense it is ironic that while pursuing an overtly ethical foreign policy, Blair reasserted the traditional elitist elements of political tradition, namely stressing strong decisive leadership at the expense of public deliberation.[43] Foreign policy decisions were made outside of Cabinet discussion, Blair preferring to get the advice of policy advisors.[44] Furthermore, it is widely known that Blair – or Cook for that matter – had little interest in foreign policy before assuming power, a point that leads Vickers to argue that such an ethical approach was an “outlet for Blair's energy and proactive, forward leaning and personalized approach to policy making”.[45]

Beyond this, Stephen Dyson and others argue, is the individual impact of Tony Blair on the identity of the State his decisions helped mould. This is based on the assertion that State identities come from a unique integration of inputs that occur ultimately in the heads of Statesmen, States thus being able to shift their identities because leaders perform this integrative task differently.[46] Blair's view of the world is largely perceived as a threatening place and based on Manichean divisions of good and evil. This, and his unwillingness to consider compromise or partial settlement, gives credence to Kampfner's assertion that Blair's five wars in six years to be “without precedent in modern political British history and without parallel internationally”.[47] Finally, Blair had a strong belief of himself and ability to control events, leading the Economist to amend Dean Acheson's famous quip and reformulate it along the lines that Britain had indeed lost an empire but had found Tony Blair.[48]

Case Study: Continuity and Change in the Kosovo and Iraq Interventions

The development and critical evaluation of the underlying features of British ethical foreign policy shows that, while pioneering and moral in ambition, such policy was actually predicated on uncertainty and lack of engagement with the British public, and decided mainly on the worldview of Tony Blair. This final section analyses both the high (Kosovo) and low (Iraq) points of New Labour's foreign policy, arguing that despite common criticism, similar ethical values can be discerned in each.

NATO's Operation Armed Force commenced in response to the ethnic cleansing and forced expulsions of ethnic Albanians from Serbia, is considered the pinnacle of New Labour's ethical foreign policy. This is because Britain's contribution to aerial and ground forces went far beyond protecting or advancing strategic or national security interests, and was motivated by the belief that it was Britain's responsibility as an international actor to react where human rights abuses occurred; the suffering of the people of Kosovo was literally the reason given for British action.[49] Despite the lack of a clear UN mandate, action was accepted within Government and domestically, as the plight of the Kosovars constituted a humanitarian emergency on such a scale that Britain was warranted in bypassing the Security Council.[50] Thus, far from weakening the UN, British and NATO allies were in fact upholding humanitarian values embodied in its charter.

The substantial personal leadership role of Tony Blair also cannot be overlooked. As one of the most aggressive European leaders advocating intervention and increased numbers of ground troops, he further used the situation to argue for a more formal establishment of guidelines surrounding humanitarian intervention, suggesting barriers of sovereignty and non-intervention in countries which cannot uphold human rights standards were no longer relevant. (Chicago Speech).[51] The link between this, and other New Labour interventions in Sierra Leone and Afghanistan, was that Britain was a leading member of the international community, a prominent subject of international politics and believed it had the responsibility to protect the people of these nations.[52]

In the post 9/11 shift from humanitarian intervention to domestic security, Iraq is considered to be an anomaly to New

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Labour's ethical agenda. Many key distinctions remain, namely the legal justification for the war and the huge domestic, international and Security Council opposition faced by the British government. This more substantial and controversial military commitment came to overshadow Blair's reputation for upholding ethical values, with Dunne and Wheeler asking 'can Britain ever have an ethical foreign policy after Iraq?'[53]

Although any notions of ethical foreign policy appear to be sacrificed under the guise of national security, Britain's 'ethical dimension' could, and would not, disappear. Foremost was the shifting justification for intervention, from hard security concerns, almost immediately to a secondary 'ethical' justification to answer the plight of the Iraqi people, instil democracy and implement the rule of law.[54] Furthermore, as the Iraq invasion suffered from a severe lack of operational planning, it is unlikely to be the assertion of neo-imperialism or pursuit of strategic power interests critics claim of it.[55] Rather, for Blair, the ideological challenge of Islamist terrorism required a determined response, with the use of military force being of symbolic ethical importance in defending key values. Indeed, some have argued that Blair became more moralizing in his foreign policy after 9/11.[56]

The framing of the Iraq intervention came to be increasingly seen as drawing many parallels with the 'genuine' ethical intervention of Kosovo. In particular Blair stressed the escalating nature of the threat and presence of despotic regimes, using similar adjectives to describe the Milosevic and Hussein regimes as representing "the very antithesis of all the values we stand for".[57] Blair's foreign affairs advisor David Manning explained that Blair took Britain to war because he "believed Iraq under Saddam posed a serious threat that now had to be confronted. It was as simple as that".[58] Equally, Blair has more recently admitted that he took Britain to war for moral reasons, and that he would use different arguments to justify this.[59] Indeed, there was no prospect of building an international coalition at the UN based on humanitarian grounds, Hans Blix accusing Blair of using WMD as a 'convenient justification' for war.[60]

Finally, New Labour continued to implement a wide range of policies that reflected Britain's identity ethics more than its relative power concerns, for example the annual increase of its overseas aid budget, by offering to reduce its nuclear stockpile as well as be a leading advocate for debt reduction in developing countries.[61] One can argue that Britain's responsibility to protect changed into a foreign policy based on the 'responsibility to save' with its post 2004 focus on Africa.[62]

Conclusion

In conclusion, far from arguing that an ethical foreign policy is possible to implement successfully, this assignment has sought to problematize the notion of ethical foreign policy as a consistent and self-standing construct: ethical foreign policy cannot be implemented successfully, but is rather dependent on the underlying domestic and political context of the State in question.

This argument was strengthened by the deconstruction of New Labour's 'ethical dimension' to foreign policy making under Tony Blair. Through analysis of the policies 'core features' and examination of the justification to intervene in both Kosovo and Iraq, this showed – contrary to popular perception – significant continuities between the ethically accepted and rejected interventions in the former and latter.

Iraq was not a conscious continuation of Britain's responsibility to protect, and this to an extent is the point. Rather, the invasion of Iraq highlighted an internal moral contradiction in the nature of foreign policy; that there can be credible moral arguments for both intervention and non-intervention, and therefore that both policies can be considered at one time to be morally wrong.[63]

Therefore, further to the realization that ethics cannot be removed from foreign policy, is the understanding that its very nature and ideal is unstable within itself. Consequently, an ethical foreign policy can *never be* executed successfully, demonstrated by the intervention in Iraq, which despite being based on the same ethical principles drew severe domestic and international criticism.

There can be no doubt that Blair's Labour Government adopted an enlightened stance regarding its obligation and

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responsibility to protect citizens beyond its borders. However, Blair's ethical foreign policy can also be considered an 'anti' foreign policy: his moralization and tunnel vision side-lined policy-making mechanisms within his own government, and ultimately led to the introduction of a 'freedom' and 'democracy' in Iraq its citizens did not ultimately ask for or understand.[64]

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