

Was Britain a 'Good International Citizen' under the Blair Government?

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LEWIS STOTT, OCT 11 2015

The concept of 'good international citizenship' was first introduced by the former Australian minister for foreign affairs, Gareth Evans. Early speeches in his role identified three key components to the national interest of a state when considering foreign policy (hereafter FP) options; "geo-political" interests; "economic" interests and finally "being, and being seen to be, a good international citizen" (Evans, 1988). In understanding to what degree Britain was a 'good international citizen' (hereafter GIC) under Blair, I will first examine exactly what Evans meant by the term, before analysing key FP decisions taken during the Blair era, (primarily the interventions in Kosovo and Iraq and arms sales to Indonesia), set against a consensus of requirements that GICs are required to adhere to. I will argue that whilst it may be a stretch to call Britain a GIC under Blair, he certainly presided over a distinct change in the use of ethics and morality in FP decisions, and that there are potential challenges in the concept of the GIC, which I hope to highlight throughout, that may prevent any nation reaching such a prestigious status.

Good International Citizenship

With the idea of the GIC, Evans sought to find a balance between the two extreme schools of thought on FP making, that of realism and idealism. A realist perspective to FP is often misunderstood as being 'immoral', in fact as Brown (2002) rightly points out, the realist stance is amoral. It advocates the pursuit of national interest as being the key factor in FP decisions, not necessarily at the expense of others. However, for realists there is an "inescapable tension between national security and human rights in foreign policy making" (Smith, 2001, p.169), and including human rights in decision making may risk national security. It is not against the inclusion of morality in FP formation, as long as this does not result in consequences that are adverse to the national interest (Brown, 2002, p.176-179). At the other end of the spectrum lies the idealist perspective, in its extreme prescribing a cosmopolitan ethic to FP in which "we have no reason to treat our own interests as more compelling than those of any other human being" (p.180), and so involves a strict adherence to human rights and morality in decision making.

Evans sought to pursue a realistic, practical and useful balance between these two positions. He described his GIC concept as "enlightened self-interest" or "idealistic pragmatism" (Evans, 1999). The concept differs from realism because of its rejection of realism's widespread assumption that the pursuit of national interest "pulls in the opposite direction to the promotion of human rights" (Wheeler and Dunne, 1998, p.848), and from idealism because of its acceptance that "terrible moral choices have sometimes to be made" (Bull, 1983, p.13). Evans (1989) states that "good international citizenship is not the foreign policy equivalent of boy scout good deeds", but reflects the new, interdependent world in which "global problems...require global solutions". We require the co-operation of others to tackle the global problems that affect our own security and prosperity, and so must be seen to contribute to helping them. Being a GIC permits the pursuit of national interest, but holds a "special emphasis" towards the promotion of human rights, and the advancement of democracy, because "in the longer term, the evolution of just and tolerant societies brings its own international returns...stability and peace". For Linklater (1992), GICs are permitted to pursue national interest, but are "required to put the welfare of international society" (p.8-9) first.

"The good international citizen seeks to achieve the following goals: strengthening international support for universal human rights standards; obeying the rules of international society; acting multilaterally and with UN authorisation

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where possible; and recognising that a sustainable ethical foreign policy requires the deepening of civil rights and constitutional reform 'at home'" (Smith, 2001, p.182).

An Ethical Dimension

Just 12 days after Blair walked in to Downing Street, his new Foreign Secretary Robin Cook announced to the public his new "mission statement" for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). He announced four objectives that would guide British Foreign Policy under the new government, which closely resembled those that Gareth Evans prescribed less than a decade ago. The objectives were security, prosperity, improving quality of life for British citizens and notably, the insertion of an "ethical dimension" into FP. Echoing Evans' GIC concept, Cook claimed "national interest cannot be defined only by narrow realpolitik" and stated that the Blair government would put "human rights at the heart of foreign policy" (1997). It seemed as though Blair was to attempt to introduce a 'Third Way' to the international as well as domestic policy arena.

However, the scale of change introduced was contested by many, not least of which former Conservative Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd, who stated "what is slightly irritating...is to pretend that a shift of two or three degrees is a shift of 180 degrees" and that Cook's predecessors were "immoral rogues" (1997). How much then, did the Blair government act in accordance with being a GIC? When issues such as human rights were in tension with the national interest, which did the government prioritise? To analyse this, I will now look at key FP decisions during Blair's rule to see where the Blair governments decisions fell on the spectrum between realism and idealism, and to what degree Britain could be classed as a GIC under Blair.

Arms Sales

Arms sales were one of the first aspects of Blair's FP to become criticised alongside his professed 'ethical dimension'. Britain was a world leader in the development and ratification of the 1997 Ottawa Treaty, being amongst the first group of nations to agree to a complete ban on the production and development of land-mines, and the destruction of any existing stockpiles. The government was also committed to increasing transparency, and began producing annual human rights reports detailing the nation's efforts to further their case. However, these efforts, which George Robertson, the Defence Secretary, claimed meant Britain was "leading by example" (1998) in the promotion of human rights, were vastly overshadowed by dubious arms sales decisions, not least of which the dealings with Indonesia during Blair's first term.

Between 1994 and 1996, the UK supplied \$725m of Indonesia's \$1,260m arms imports (Gilby, N. 2001). At the same time, the Soeharto government were committing "serious human rights abuses" (US Department of State, 1998), and were widely accepted to be implicit in supplying weaponry to anti-independence militias in East Timor. Cook and Blair had inherited a golden opportunity to showcase Britain's new 'ethical dimension', and lead by example by preventing the sale of arms to a government with one of the worst human rights records in the world. In particular, they had the opportunity to cancel the Conservative party approved sale of 12 Hawk aircraft to the Indonesian government, which Cook had stated in opposition, in 1994, had "been observed on bombing runs in East Timor in most years since 1984" (Independent, 1999).

Instead, Cook adopted the controversial position of claiming dialogue and "diplomatic pressure" (1998) would be the key to initiating reform rather than decisive action, and continued with vast arms sales to Indonesia. Under pressure, the government cited questionable legal reasons for why the controversial Hawk sale could not have been blocked, before then acknowledging in a later annual report that the sale could have been prevented (Pilger, 1999). Baroness Symons, the defence procurement minister, stated Indonesia had a right under the UN Charter to purchase weapons for self-defence. However, this was "problematic given the overwhelming evidence that 'defence' forces" were violently policing "a territory [East Timor] that has never been recognised as a *de jure* part of its sovereignty" (Smith, 2001, p.175). Cook then stated that it was "not realistic or practical to revoke licenses which were valid in force at the time of our election" (Cook, 1999a, p.145). Clearly the government was struggling to marry its decision to permit arms sales to Indonesia with its own ethical dimension discourse, especially as it became clear that it was "almost inconceivable that British-made hardware" had "not been used for the systematic 'internal repression' of the East

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Timorese" (Smith, 2001, p.175).

The government did eventually change their stance towards Indonesia, and in 1999 Cook elected to "take national action to suspend further arms exports" (Cook, 1999b). The problem is that this action came too late to reconcile the previous two years of policy towards Indonesia with the 'ethical dimension'. For Britain to have acted as a GIC, it should have prevented these arms sales, as they were fully aware they were supplying a repressive regime committing gross human rights violations. It should not have mattered that the Labour government was assured by the Indonesians that the arms would not be used in East Timor, or against Indonesian civilians. By refusing arms sales to a state with a poor human rights record, Labour had an opportunity to link external security to good governance, and create an incentive for Indonesian reform and the promotion of human rights. Instead, they pursued narrow commercial interests for national prosperity, reaping the economic benefits of fuelling a conflict.

Clearly then, if we accept that being a GIC requires that narrow economic goals be sacrificed in the face of human rights violations, the government failed to act as a GIC in this situation. The argument that if Britain had not sold the arms, someone else would have filled the void, is not a valid one. As Wheeler and Dunne (1998) point out, "we do not defend the export of drugs or pornography on the same grounds" (p.868). At this period in time, the arms industry employed 415,000 people in the UK, across many labour seats. Given that this was where the government was ultimately accountable, it seems Labour was unwilling to prioritise human rights over national prosperity when the domestic consequences were potentially so detrimental (Toynbee and Walker, 2011, p.280). This highlights a potential difficulty within the GIC concept.

With such a strong emphasis on human rights, it becomes increasingly unlikely that any country is able to reach GIC status. We cannot possibly expect human rights to always trump national interest. For example, Cook and Blair held minimal discussions with China over their human rights record, and held a 'weak hand' due to their desire to secure "new business contracts in the lucrative Chinese market" and the "need for Chinese participation in multilateral security institutions" (Smith, 2001, p.173). It is hard to define the point at which failing to prioritise human rights over national interests defines a state as a 'bad' citizen, and may therefore be unfair to say a nation did not act as a GIC in a 'weak hand' situation.

Intervention in Kosovo

"The most pressing foreign policy problem we face is to identify the circumstances in which we should actively get involved in other people's conflicts" (Blair, 1999)

Soon after entering Downing Street, Blair was faced with an immense FP challenge in the form of Kosovo. On Europe's doorstep, Serbian nationalist and Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic was engaged in a bloody campaign involving the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo Albanians, in order to suppress demands for independence. A GIC is required to uphold the norms of international society (Smith, 2001, p.182), and Kosovo presented Blair with a challenge, as two of these norms were in tension – the norm of human rights and the principle of legal intervention authorised by the UN Security Council (UNSC). Blair was instrumental in organising a NATO coalition that carried out the air campaign that forced the Yugoslav army to withdraw. He described one factor behind the intervention as a use of "enlightened national self-interest" due to the conflicts proximity and potential fallout (2010, p.228) – a remarkable similarity to the foresight Evans had said was required in acting with "enlightened self-interest" as a GIC (Evans, 1999). The use of force in Kosovo was never authorised by the UNSC, and was therefore illegal according to international law.

This highlights the divide between legality and legitimacy within international intervention. The intervention was unquestionably illegal, but enjoyed the support of the overwhelming majority of the international community. Russia and China were opposed to intervention based on their loyalty to the norm of state sovereignty, and that internal affairs should not be interfered with. They made clear their belief that intervention without UNSC authorisation set a dangerous precedent. The principle of state sovereignty then becomes an obstacle to the UN's ability to enforce international law, as the UNSC is paralysed into inaction over issues such as the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. Blair was fully aware of this predicament, and Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) describe New Labour as "norm

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entrepreneurs" (p.893) in gaining support for an intervention that defied existing international law.

Blair in 1999, presented his 'doctrine of the international community', proposing five "major considerations" for FP makers in deciding whether or not to intervene.

1. "Are we sure of our case?"
2. "Have we exhausted all diplomatic options?"
3. "Are there military options we can sensibly and prudently undertake?"
4. "Are we prepared for the long-term?"
5. "Do we have national interests involved?"

It is hard to argue that these considerations were not adhered to in Kosovo, and Blair highlighted the need to reform international institutions in order to avoid "the deadlock that undermined the effectiveness of the Security Council during the Cold War". Despite the illegality of the Kosovo intervention, it had the support of Kofi Annan, the then Secretary-General of the UN, who stated after Kosovo that a new norm "must take precedence over concerns of state sovereignty" (Annan, 2000, p.64).

The Blair government did seem to act as a GIC on Kosovo. They were prepared to defy international law, and deny Russia and China the ability to use their UNSC veto to prevent the defence of human rights. Blair even proposed potential reform for international institutions to make the defence of human rights easier. Through Kosovo, Blair furthered the case of human rights internationally. Again though, this situation highlights difficulties within the GIC concept. If a GIC is required to uphold the norms of "international society" (Smith, 2001, p.182) and put the "welfare of international society" first (Linklater, 1992. p.8-9), then who or what is 'international society'? If it is the UN, then the institution is consistently divided and the inevitable inaction prescribed by adhering to the law of UNSC authorised intervention would have resulted in Britain being "complicit in evil" (Cook, 1999c). Which norms should a GIC prioritise?

Intervention in Iraq

Tony Blair wrote that many regard Iraq, undoubtedly the most controversial decision of his premiership, as the "stain" on an "otherwise impressive record" (2010, p.374). The given justification for intervention was the security threat that Saddam Hussein presented if in possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). Whilst Hussein's violations of human rights were well known, this was not the premise for intervention. Again, the government intervened without the explicit authority of the UNSC, although this time lacked the legitimacy that came with the support of the majority of the international community regarding Kosovo. Britain did not act to uphold the norm of human rights, and did not adhere to UNSC authorisation.

Cook resigned on this basis, stating in his resignation speech that Britain did not have the support of NATO, the EU or the UNSC, and that the war was unethical (2003). Blair's argument that intervention helped to uphold the power of UN resolutions was fundamentally undermined by the fact that the vast majority of states were against intervention, compared to the minority in Kosovo that lent the intervention legitimacy. Whilst Blair may have felt he had met the conditions of his own 'doctrine of the international community', this has been well contested (Murray, 2006). Iraq may potentially be better off without Saddam Hussein, but Britain cannot be said to have acted as a GIC in this situation, as the decision undermined many of the concept's basic premises. Again this highlights the difficulty in reaching an international consensus on what behaviours a GIC should display.

Conclusion

New Labour presided over a shift of more than a few degrees in Britain's FP. There were numerous successes of the 'ethical dimension': The Ottawa Treaty (1997) that prevented the manufacture and distribution of land-mines; the FCO's annual reports that increased transparency within the arms trade; the role Britain played in the establishment of the International Criminal Court; but above all, Britain's part in the Kosovo war.

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However, there were undoubtedly failures to adhere to the 'ethical dimension'. Arms should not have been sold to Indonesia when they had such a poor human rights record. Britain failed to take the opportunity to link external security to good internal governance, and influence reform. On Iraq, Britain failed to uphold the norms of the international community, and lacked the legitimacy gained from the support of a majority of other states.

Because of this, it is impossible to call Britain a GIC under Blair. However, the GIC concept has such a strong emphasis on human rights, and disputable definition of international society that it makes such a grand title realistically unattainable. Whilst some perceive the 'ethical dimension' to have been primarily rhetoric for domestic benefit (Chandler, 2003, p.295), Blair's government had the courage to introduce it. Britain may have failed to act as a GIC all the time, but the key change the 'ethical dimension' introduced was the unprecedented way it provided the public with something to hold the government's FP accountable to, and a framework with which to debate foreign affairs. Because of this, it provided FP actors with the incentive to act ethically, and to make Britain a 'better' citizen than in the past.

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