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Introduction

The events of 11 September 2001 (hereafter 9/11) intensified debates about the UK's role in global politics. To what extent had UK foreign policy helped shape a world order that could produce such acts of terrorism? How closely should the UK align itself with the US in their aftermath? What roles should the UK play on the world stage and what values should guide it? What and who was UK foreign policy for? This study aims to contribute to these debates by offering a critical analysis of the foreign policies pursued by Tony Blair's Labour government during its first two terms in office between May 1997 and May 2005.

During this period, Blair's government set out a wide variety of ambitious roles for UK foreign policy. Before its 1997 election victory, the Labour party had suggested that some new directions in foreign policy were likely.¹ After nearly two decades in opposition, the party caucus was weary of Britain's traditional pragmatism in foreign policy and saw the development of a more principled approach as one area where it could clearly differentiate itself from the Conservatives and gain an electoral advantage into the bargain. For Tony Blair, it seemed clear that although the UK could no longer aspire to superpower status in a military sense, it was in a position to play a pivotal role on the world stage and to make Britain's presence felt on a variety of important issues. First and foremost, Blair's government sought to act as a bridge between the US and Europe.² In Whitehall, key figures in the new government also adjusted the course of their ministries. The new Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, keen to enhance his radical credentials within the party, began reforming what he considered the conservative, 'stuffy' and opaque culture within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO).³ In a similar fashion, Defence Secretary George Robertson declared that the UK's armed forces would act as a 'force for good', while Clare Short's new Department for International Development (DFID) set out to alleviate world poverty and ensure that Britain did not forget its obligations to the planet's poorest citizens.

During its first two terms, Blair's government touted itself as being many things, not least a force for good, a friend of democracy and at the heart of Europe. It also suggested it would reject the crude *realpolitik* pursued by the previous Conservative government; it would put the promotion of human rights at the heart of its diplomacy; and it would find

a third way between capitalism and socialism. In addition, it claimed it would place stricter limits upon arms exports; eliminate world poverty (or, rather halve the number living in absolute poverty by 2015); make globalisation work for the poor; be a pivotal power and a bridge-builder between the US and Europe; champion a new doctrine of international community; fight wars for values not territory; cancel the debts owed to it by the world's poorest countries; be strong in the world; actively engage with and reorder the world around it as a way of winning a 'war' against terrorism; take steps to improve Africa's shameful predicament and, most recently, fight the forces of evil and barbarism and prevent hypothetical problems becoming imminent threats.

Of course, beneath the hype and from the vantage point of May 2005, this list remained primarily one of aspiration rather than achievement. It had also quickly attracted criticism on four main grounds. First, most of these commitments were not as novel as Blair's government portrayed them. Winston Churchill had spoken of Britain being at the intersection between the three 'majestic circles' of the Commonwealth, the English-speaking world and a united Europe; Harold Macmillan had suggested the UK could become the world's 'chief source of inspiration', and James Callaghan had claimed for Britain the role of international bridge-builder.⁴ Moreover, especially after the end of the Cold War, most liberal democracies, including Britain, adopted similar positions on the major international issues of the day relating to the promotion of democracy, good governance, free markets, sustainable development and human rights.⁵

A second strand of criticism argued that Labour's statements of intent were far too grandiose. Not only did this set the government up for a fall when it failed to achieve its objectives but for some commentators it reflected a certain naivety about the 'hard reality' of international affairs and the structural constraints upon foreign policy.⁶ Arguably this tendency reached its zenith in Blair's speech to Labour's annual conference in October 2001, which according to one journalist in *The Times*, 'left Kipling looking wimpish'.⁷ In one sense, Labour's ambitious objectives simply reflected a widespread and deep-seated desire for the UK to – in Douglas Hurd's famous phrase – 'punch above its weight' in world politics. According to one former British ambassador, Brian Barder, Labour's objectives revealed the extent to which the government, its opposition and the domestic media remained 'addicted' to pursuing an unrealistic 'leadership role' in international affairs regardless of whether the UK retained either the requisite capabilities or, just as importantly, followers.⁸ This mindset was not unique to Blair's government: delusions of

grandeur were a common theme in UK foreign policy throughout the twentieth century and doubtless before that as well.⁹ Barder's proposed solution was to 'scale down' the UK's world role to a level more in tune with its vital interests and capabilities. Instead, especially after 9/11, Labour 'scaled up' its international commitments.

A third set of criticisms noted that for all its long lists of objectives, Labour failed to engage in serious reflection about the conceptual rationale underpinning its foreign policies and how it would choose between competing priorities and interests.¹⁰ Indeed, despite some early attempts, there was little serious engagement between British academia and Blair's government on this issue.¹¹ Arguably, at least part of the explanation for this state of affairs lies in the fact that the UK did not fit neatly into the conventional categories of international theory. As Steve Smith observed in the late 1980s,

There is simply no convenient classification within which Britain fits: it is not a superpower, nor a middle power; it has aspects of a great power, but is caught up in a very complex set of interdependencies; it has to be involved in bargaining with defence and economic alliances and organisations, yet it is not a small power. No other country has quite this profile. Yet exactly because Britain slips between conceptual categories, it offers a very real challenge to international relations theory.¹²

This challenge remains today. But precisely because the UK is difficult to classify, perhaps more than most states, its role in world politics remains open for debate.

A fourth set of critics dismissed Labour's stated objectives as little more than propaganda designed to obscure the real impact of its foreign policies. These commentators challenged the assumption that the UK played a generally benign, even benevolent role in world politics. Instead, they saw the UK as an 'outlaw state'.¹³ As the main proponent of this approach, Mark Curtis, put it, Blair's Britain.

is a systematic violator of international law and ethical standards in its foreign policy – in effect, an outlaw state. ... Britain's role remains an essentially imperial one: to act as junior partner to US global power; to help organise the global economy to benefit Western corporations; and to maximise Britain's (that is British elites') independent political standing in the world and thus remain a 'great power'. ... the Blair government is seriously out of control – an

outlaw state, undertaking its foreign policy in open contempt for international ethical standards, including riding roughshod over the United Nations. ... If we were honest, we would see Britain's role in the world to a large extent as a story of crimes against humanity.¹⁴

In sum, although the UK had lost its empire it retained its imperial mindset, helped manage an unjust world order, protected the fundamentals of that world order through coercion and sometimes military force and privileged the narrow interests of its elites over international legal considerations and the development and welfare of a significant proportion of the planet's population. For Curtis, Blair's government simply represented the most recent phase of this long and scandalous British tradition. Indeed, he thought Labour was worse than its Conservative predecessors because it explicitly claimed to put human rights at the heart of its foreign policy but failed to do so in practice, especially in places such as Iraq, Kosovo, Diego Garcia, Chechnya, Indonesia, Afghanistan and the Middle East.

A critical analysis of UK foreign policies

This book aims to provide a critical analysis of UK foreign policies under Labour. It is therefore necessary to define both 'foreign policy' and 'critical analysis', neither of which have obvious or neutral definitions. In a recent overview of the secondary literature, Walter Carlsnaes defined foreign policy as

those actions which, expressed in the form of explicitly stated goals, commitments and/or directives, and pursued by governmental representatives acting on behalf of their sovereign communities, are directed toward objectives, conditions and actors – both governmental and non-governmental – which they want to affect and which lie beyond their territorial legitimacy.¹⁵

This provides a useful starting point. However, Carlsnaes ignores the fact that it is not only states and governments that conduct foreign policies. Consequently, Christopher Hill's definition of foreign policy as 'the sum of official external relations conducted by an independent actor (usually a state) in international relations' is more useful.¹⁶ This recognises that a wide variety of actors including states, transnational corporations (TNCs), churches, dispossessed peoples, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), insurgencies and international organisations such as the

European Union (EU) can all conduct foreign policies. The focus here is thus the sum of the UK's official external relations between May 1997 and May 2005, especially those actions undertaken to affect certain stated objectives, conditions and actors that lie beyond its territorial legitimacy.

In defining 'critical analysis', Colin Hay's work provides a useful starting point. According to Hay, critical political analysis entails five commitments.¹⁷ First, it should be empirical without being empiricist, that is, it should use empirical description as a starting point from which to build interpretations and explanations but should recognise that empirical evidence alone cannot adjudicate between competing interpretations and explanations of political processes and events. As a result, the normative assumptions and commitments of the analyst invariably find their way into the final product. In places throughout the book I make ethical judgements about Labour's foreign policies based primarily upon whether Blair's government lived up to its statements of intent. As well as being difficult if not impossible to avoid, making ethics a central part of the debate about UK foreign policy is something that the Labour government encouraged both its supporters and its critics to do, especially during Robin Cook's period as Foreign Secretary (1997–2001).

A second component of critical analysis is that it should include a balanced conception of the relationship between structures and agents, an issue traditionally central to the study of foreign policy. Within the academic literature on foreign policy analysis two conventional traditions are commonly identified: *realpolitik* and *innenpolitik*.¹⁸ The *realpolitik* tradition suggests that the course of a state's foreign policy is largely dictated by its material capabilities and relative position within international society. From this perspective it is the structures of international politics that dictate foreign policy and it is of little consequence which political party or prime minister is at the helm of the good ship Britannia. In contrast, the *innenpolitik* tradition allocates political actors a significant role in deciding the sort of foreign policy their state will pursue. Different sorts of regimes and governments will thus conduct different types of foreign policies. Both these traditions, however, rely upon problematic distinctions between structures and actors as well as a clear boundary between the domestic and the international that is untenable in practice. Real diplomatic games always involve both purposive action and structural constraints. Similarly, political analysis has long since moved beyond dichotomous thinking about the relationship between actors and structures. Following Hay, I find the 'strategic-relational' approach useful.¹⁹ Put simply, this involves analysing the

dialectical relationship between the choices made by conscious, reflexive and strategic actors within the 'strategically selective contexts' – contexts that favour certain strategies over others as a means to realise an actor's intentions or preferences – in which they find themselves. Ultimately, therefore, although UK representatives may often feel constrained to a greater or lesser degree by their environment, choices will always exist.²⁰ The focus here is how the British state (as a conscious, reflexive, strategic and collective actor) conducted itself within the strategic contexts of the global economy and what English School theorists call 'international' and 'world' society.²¹

One problem with analysing the role of a single state within such diverse and constantly developing contexts is that it is often exceedingly difficult to disentangle UK foreign policy from the morass of processes and events in world politics. At issue here is the extent to which (in a world characterised by (uneven) political interdependence) events and processes can realistically be labelled 'the outcome' of UK foreign policy. In short, unravelling how and when UK foreign policy is 'responsible for X' or 'to blame for Y' or, indeed, 'successful in achieving Z' is difficult, if it is possible at all. Generalisations and the attribution of blame, responsibility and success must be made cautiously and remain sensitive to the contingencies of the specific issue under examination.

Third, critical analysis rejects a narrow and exclusive definition of politics as the interplay of governmental variables and instead takes into account the activities of NGOs, individuals and the influence exerted by transnational norms, ideas and values. Defined in this manner, critical analysis is synonymous with analysing 'the distribution, exercise and consequences of power'.²² In this case, it involves analysing the consequences of UK foreign policy and determining the individuals and groups that benefited from it and those that lost out.

Fourth, a critical analysis should remain sensitive to the potential causal and constitutive role of ideas in UK foreign policy. What UK representatives think about the contexts in which they find themselves has important effects upon their behaviour. This raises difficult epistemological and methodological issues about the extent to which it is possible to know precisely what motivations and ideas are guiding UK foreign policy-makers. This study analyses and evaluates Labour's foreign policy behaviour, in part at least, in light of its own justifications.²³ This exercise resembles what the Critical Theory tradition calls 'immanent critique', that is, examining discrepancies between words and deeds and evaluating the outcomes of Labour's foreign policies in light of the justifications given for undertaking them.²⁴ Analysed in these terms, a more

progressive foreign policy would entail closing the gap between Labour's statements of intent and the actual policy outcomes that emerge. However, critical analysis also entails highlighting tensions between incompatible objectives and contradictions that may exist between the stated means and ends of Labour's foreign policy. Locating tensions and contradictions can help explain the gaps between words and deeds. It also provides the necessary first step for resolving them.

Finally, critical analysis recognises the contingency and inherent unpredictability of political processes, including UK foreign policy. There is nothing natural or inevitable about Labour's foreign policy commitments. Where one commitment took precedence over others this resulted from deliberate choices and decisions being made. In UK foreign policy, as in politics more generally, things could always have been different.

Overview of the book

Between 1997 and 2005, Blair's administration exhibited elements of both continuity with, and change from, Labour's traditional approach to international affairs. Four main foreign policy commitments can be identified within the various threads that made up the Blair government's brand of liberal internationalism. The first was to multilateralism, that is, the commitment to finding shared solutions to common international problems and avoiding unilateral action wherever possible. The second commitment was the government's desire to be considered America's closest ally; what I refer to as Atlanticism. The third was strong although not unconditional support for neoliberal principles of political economy. The fourth was an explicit rejection of *realpolitik* and a concomitant commitment to pursue foreign policies based on more cosmopolitan (but unfortunately usually vague and unarticulated) ethical foundations. I refer to this as moralism. These foreign policy commitments did not exist in a rigid or static hierarchy. Rather at different times and with regard to different issues some took precedence over the others. Similarly, while these commitments were not necessarily contradictory, tensions between all four arose at various times between 1997 and 2005, particularly when US foreign policy moved in a more unilateral direction.

One volume cannot possibly provide an exhaustive survey of Labour's foreign policies. Consequently, choices had to be made about which issues, relationships, processes and events could illuminate the fundamental characteristics of UK foreign policy under Labour. This

book focuses on three aspects: its underlying commitments, its key relationships and its central issue areas.

Part 1 (Chapter 1) provides an overview of Labour's key statements of intent during its first two terms in office and an assessment of what was 'new' about it compared with previous Labour governments. It then outlines what I consider to have been the Blair government's four underlying foreign policy commitments, namely, Atlanticism, multilateralism, neoliberalism and moralism.

Part 2 (Chapters 2–4) explores three of the UK's key foreign relationships, namely, those with the US, the EU and Africa. Chapter 2 examines the basis of Labour's Atlanticism and its decision to remain the closest ally of the world's sole superpower. In particular, it discusses the foundations of the US–UK 'special relationship' and the impact the 9/11 terrorist attacks had upon Labour's foreign policy. The first military consequence of 9/11 was Britain's participation in the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, which is analysed in the latter part of the chapter. Before, but especially after 9/11, Blair's government achieved its objective of remaining America's closest ally. Signing up to a 'war on terrorism', however, generated several problems, as did the lacklustre international attempts to build a stable and democratic Afghanistan.

Chapter 3 explores Labour's relationship with the EU through an analysis of its stance on the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). It does so by investigating how Blair's government approached this issue both before and after the watershed event of NATO's intervention in Kosovo in 1999. I suggest that Labour consistently and successfully promoted an Atlanticist version of ESDP that sought to ensure the EU's military capacity would complement rather than replace the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

In Chapter 4 I analyse the UK's relationship with sub-Saharan Africa. After decades of neglect at the hands of successive UK governments, between 1997 and 2005 Blair's government consistently devoted greater attention to African affairs than its predecessors. In many respects, the UK's record on Africa became an important barometer of the depth of Labour's moralism and its commitment to liberal internationalist values. In Africa, the government's stated objectives were to promote peace, prosperity and democracy. Consequently, the chapter provides a critical analysis of its policies in these three areas before examining the UK's support for the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). As Blair suggested in his speech to Labour's annual conference in the aftermath of 9/11, 'The state of Africa is a scar on the conscience of the world. But if the world as a community focused on it, we could heal it.'

And if we don't, it will become deeper and angrier.²⁵ Such sentiments encouraged Blair to set up a Commission for Africa that issued its report on 11 March 2005. Despite some successes, most obviously in Sierra Leone, Labour failed to resolve some of the tensions within its liberal internationalism and did not alter the fundamentals of UK–Africa relations such as over terms of trade.

Part 3 (Chapters 5–9) analyses five consistently important issues between 1997 and 2005, namely, political economy, defence, international development and global justice, intervention and Iraq. Chapter 5 examines the economic dimensions of Labour's foreign policy focusing particularly on its attempts to find a third way between capitalism and socialism in an interdependent and globalising world. In practice, the Blair government's political economy both at home and abroad was heavily influenced by its understanding of neoliberalism and globalisation. Nevertheless, its commitment to neoliberalism was not unconditional and a heavy dose of mercantilism was always evident in its relationship with UK corporations and with regard to so-called commercial diplomacy. The chapter explores how Blair's government thought about these issues and analyses its stance on the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI), international trade, the reform of the international financial architecture and commercial diplomacy towards China.

Chapter 6 explores the elements of continuity and change in UK defence policy during Labour's first two terms. It begins by analysing the 1998 Strategic Defence Review and suggesting that Labour's defence policies emphasised four issues in particular: the importance of flexibility, power projection, operations other than war and achieving political effect with its armed forces. Changes of direction were also evident in the UK's approach to NATO where emphasis was placed on the need to transform the Alliance to meet the challenges of a globalising and post-9/11 world. In other areas, however, Labour's approach deviated little from the policies of the previous Conservative government. Arguably the two most important examples were Labour's policies on nuclear weapons and arms exports. Both generated considerable controversy and are analysed in the final two sections of the chapter.

Chapter 7 analyses Labour's policies on international development and global justice. After highlighting the highly iniquitous and fundamentally unjust nature of the current world order, I explore how DFID sought to address these issues through the strategies outlined in its 1997 and 2000 White Papers. Here Labour's approach involved four central objectives: to raise the profile of international development issues, to develop an agenda focused on reducing poverty, to implement

that agenda by pursuing a joined-up approach across the relevant departments in Whitehall and to build partnerships for development with foreign governments, multilateral agencies, UK firms and NGOs. The chapter then provides a critical analysis of Labour's policies in relation to the economic, criminal and environmental dimensions of global justice with reference to the issues of debt relief, the Pinochet case and the establishment of the International Criminal Court (ICC), and climate change.

Chapter 8 analyses Labour's engagement with what Blair referred to as 'other people's conflicts', including the issue of military intervention. It does so by asking what factors drove Blair's government to become so actively engaged in other people's wars and what forms that engagement took? The UK, like most powerful liberal democracies, was inclined to argue that the norm of non-intervention should be conditional upon governments not systematically abusing their populations. This inclination was augmented by the powerful lead given by Blair's executive on issues of humanitarian intervention. However, while Labour proposed some sophisticated criteria on when to use force to protect human rights and participated in some important enforcement operations, it was more common for the UK to engage with other people's wars through diplomatic means. The rest of the chapter therefore analyses how Blair's government responded politically to the wars in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Chechnya, as well as its initiatives designed to regulate the trade in 'conflict goods' and the activities of private military companies.

Chapter 9 analyses arguably the defining issue of UK foreign policy: Iraq. It is organised around my contention that the 9/11 terrorist attacks represented a turning point in the way Blair's government thought about Iraq. Consequently, the first section investigates the UK's Iraq policy before 9/11, focusing on its most controversial aspects, namely, the effects of economic sanctions and the use of military force in numerous operations such as Desert Fox in December 1998. During this period, I characterise the UK's strategy towards Iraq as one of 'contain and punish'. After 9/11, however, the government's strategy towards Saddam Hussein's regime shifted to one of 'punish and remove'. As a result, three questions became central: why did the UK invade Iraq in March 2003, was the invasion legal and was it effective? The final section analyses the invasion's impact on three important aspects of Labour's foreign policy: the war on terrorism, the Middle East peace process and transatlantic relations.

The Conclusion reflects upon the ways in which Labour's underlying commitments affected its foreign policies before highlighting some of the main contradictions within them. Under Blair's leadership the UK played a variety of roles in global politics. Although at times some of these roles were contradictory, none of them were inevitable. Rather, they resulted from conscious choices taken by Blair's government. Like all choices, they could have been made differently.

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