

One year into Iraq: what must Britain re-evaluate?

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Introduction

Exactly a year ago, the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, commanded UK armed forces to join a US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, after obtaining majority support in a formal vote in the House of Commons. The consequences of this decision have been momentous: for international relations and the effectiveness of the United Nations; for domestic politics within the USA and the UK; for the well-being and morale of those troops called upon to serve; but above all, for the Iraqi people, whose aspirations for peaceful and secure lives appear as elusive as they ever have been these last 15 or more years. For many, subsequent events have indicated that the invasion of Iraq was the wrong act, at the wrong time, and taken for the wrong reasons. Calls for new thinking are being made with increasing urgency.

It is the responsibility of all civil organisations concerned with peace and security to ensure that the forums and resources for productive dialogues are created and sustained. These dialogues must involve concerned citizens as well as policy makers and experts.

Oxford Research Group (ORG) is concerned to facilitate, and contribute to, the widest possible discussion and analysis of medium to long-term policy options in the area of defence and security, with the focus on the UK as it relates to its allies on both sides of the Atlantic. There is a (perhaps understandable) reactive short-termism in much of the defence and security thinking currently coming from Whitehall and Washington. Policymakers need to focus on broader goals, and the options available to achieve them. ORG will continue to identify key topics where decisions about UK security policy are being made. Such issues require public discussion, as well as the contributions of specialist experts in intensive dialogue with policy makers.

As the international community helps the Iraqi people to pick up the pieces (a task which is not addressed in this paper) there remains the broader task of relating the specific lessons learned in Iraq

to the long-term questions on whose answers much more than the future of Iraq may depend. This may require more fundamental re-appraisal than has so far been undertaken by policymakers in the mainstream of post cold-war society.

This paper outlines three fundamental issues for Britain and its future role in the world. These are (a) the future role of British armed forces, (b) how UK participation in future “wars of intervention” might be justified and legitimised, and (c) the UK’s role in effective action needed to eliminate terrorism, and its root causes.

(a) The role of the British armed forces: Are war-fighting roles and peacekeeping roles incompatible?

The continuing Iraq conflict has placed enormous strains on serving military personnel at all levels in the hierarchy. Soldiers in the field have lost their lives, some due to inadequacies in supplies or equipment. They have frequently found themselves treated as oppressors rather than liberators by the people they are attempting to serve. And they have had to cope with disillusionment and anger back home, in some cases vociferously expressed by their own families, who feel their loved ones’ lives have been put at risk for reasons they cannot support. Senior military personnel have struggled to meet all the demands placed on them by politicians, facing not only the usual resourcing dilemmas (how to deploy limited personnel and equipment to the best advantage) but also having to face dilemmas of conscience and trust, knowing as they did that there was considerable public doubt about the national interest behind the tasks for which they were being required, by their government, to risk service people’s lives.

Iraq is not the only recent case where initial military campaigns have caused opposing forces to capitulate or withdraw relatively quickly, but where it has proved far more difficult afterwards to fully secure the peace. In December 1999, six months after Slobodan Milosevic’s forces had been forced out of Kosovo, an editorial in the Guardian noted that:

“The Nato allies cannot agree whether Kosovo should continue indefinitely under UN administration, move to independence, or return to Serbian control. These unresolved issues, all foreseeable, are diplomatic landmines. Kosovo has become an intervention without end”.

Speaking in Parliament on 1st December 1999, Paddy Ashdown, then leader of the Liberal Democrats, said the following:

“If history is generous... it could well say that the Balkans wars came before Europe was ready – it had not yet prepared the institutions for dealing with them. We have no such excuse for stabilizing the peace... I remain unconvinced that the unco-ordinated policies that we follow will deliver a stable peace”.

Five years on the political and security situation in Kosovo is still unstable and uncertain. Afghanistan tells a similar story.

Planning for war without planning for peace is a recipe for failure. Such failure has been particularly tragic for the UK, and its

international reputation. British armed forces have a growing reputation around the world in the tasks of post-conflict reconstruction and conflict prevention. By being increasingly locked into an aggressive pre-emptive war-fighting strategy dictated from Washington, and confirmed in the UK Defence White Paper of December 2003, Britain places this reputation under great strain. Troops on the ground cannot build relationships of trust with local civilian populations when the actions of their political masters undermine that very same trust. Even where trust can be maintained, the capacity of the UK armed forces to deliver sustained post-conflict support is threatened by the huge cost implications of developing “interoperability” with US war-fighting forces. Further spending pressures come about through the UK Government’s determination to continue to support the rapidly escalating costs of projects such as the Eurofighter, whose cold-war genesis, in the opinion of many defence analysts, now renders them operationally irrelevant.

In the meantime, British troops remain thinly stretched, in too few numbers, in the various places around the world where they are being expected to secure the peace.

The UK is ready for a fundamental reappraisal of all aspects of its military capacity, structure, and direction. This is too important a matter to be left to defence experts or conducted behind closed doors. Government accountability demands that defence decisions are made with the understanding and confidence of those whose taxes pay for the military, and whose lives are directly affected by any decision to go to war.

UK political parties have already begun work on preparing their manifestos for a possible general election in 2005. Each manifesto will include a defence policy. This could be a particularly crucial moment for the facilitation of serious discussion within civil society which has the capacity to inform policy development.

Wide dissemination of research and analysis will be required to enable the most constructive engagement with such questions as: How many personnel should we have in our Army, Navy, and Air-force, and what are their major roles to be? Is it appropriate or necessary for the UK to have substantial war-fighting capacity? What developments in equipment and technology are needed to support the roles we think most important? Should Britain’s nuclear force, Trident, be replaced? Has the Government lived up to its promise to put significant resources into conflict prevention? In addressing these questions it may be necessary to call into question historic assumptions about Britain’s role in the world.

(b) The ‘new humanitarianism’: On what grounds can proactive military interventions be justified?

To take a nation to war without the full and explicit authority of the United Nations Security Council is possibly among the most serious and momentous decisions that any head of government can take. Iraq is not the first war that the Britain has embarked upon without United Nations authorisation. The 1999 NATO bombing of Kosovo and Serbia was also undertaken without the authority of the United Nations Security Council.

In assessing the bombing of Kosovo and Serbia, the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee decided that the action was “of dubious legality in the current state of international law” but “justified on moral grounds”. This conclusion was based on an appeal to humanitarian outcomes – in particular the claims that the bombing halted ethnic cleansing and prevented genocide.

In the light of the failure to discover a serious external threat posed by Iraq's supposed weapons of mass destruction, similar humanitarian arguments have now been brought forward to justify the Iraq War. Apologists for the invasion of Iraq argue that the humanitarian benefits of removing Saddam Hussein from power will ultimately outweigh the costs of the conflict. This argument remains controversial, to say the least.

An explicit rationale for wars of humanitarian intervention was articulated by Tony Blair in a speech he made at the Chicago Economic Club on April 22nd 1999. In this speech he outlined what has come to be known as the "Blair Doctrine", or the "Doctrine of the International Community". The key sentences from his speech follow:

"... how do we decide when and whether to intervene. I think we need to bear in mind five major considerations..."

First, are we sure of our case? War is an imperfect instrument for righting humanitarian distress; but armed force is sometimes the only means of dealing with dictators. Second, have we exhausted all diplomatic options? We should always give peace every chance. Third, on the basis of a practical assessment of the situation, are there military operations we can sensibly and prudently undertake? Fourth, are we prepared for the long term? In the past we talked too much of exit strategies. But having made a commitment we cannot simply walk away once the fight is over; better to stay with moderate numbers of troops than return for repeat performances with large numbers. And finally, do we have national interests involved?"

Five years on it may now be the time for a broad public evaluation of the "Blair Doctrine". Do the criteria put forward in 1999 stand the test of time, and if they do, have recent events been clear and justified applications of these criteria?

(c) Tackling structural violence: Eradicating the root causes of war and conflict.

Since the fateful events of September 11th 2001, the control and eradication of global terrorism has become the primary explicit foreign policy goal of the USA and its allies. Terrorism has often been presented as the greatest threat facing humanity, and the 'war on terror' has been depicted as a finite winnable campaign, in which a clearly defined

group of international outlaws can be hunted down and neutralised.

The reality is, of course, far more complex. There are many threats facing humanity, of which terrorism is only one; and it is no more likely that there will be any decisive short-term victories in the 'war on terror' than there have been in the 'war on drugs' or the 'war on crime'. It must also be accepted that the greatest feared future threat from terrorists comes from the possibility that they will acquire and use weapons and materials of mass destruction (whether chemical, biological, or nuclear). Whilst non-proliferation is clearly a core goal for the international community, the elimination of existing stocks (held predominantly by the permanent member states of the UN Security Council) would be a major contribution to thwarting terrorist ambitions. Reframing disarmament debates in the light of these urgent issues is a crucial task in which the UK could and should be playing a major role.

If we take loss of innocent life as the measure of how large a specific threat is, then the recent actions of terrorists are a rather small part of the worldwide threat to human security. In the period September 2001 to October 2003, paramilitary forces hostile to the USA have killed around 3,500 civilians in 20 attacks worldwide (including the attacks within the USA on 9/11). In the same period the USA and its allies are reported to have been responsible for over 3,000 civilian deaths in Afghanistan, and upwards of 10,000 in Iraq.

But these figures pale into insignificance when placed alongside deaths caused daily by poverty. In his report "*A Secure Europe in a Better World*" Xavier Solana, EU High Representative for Common Foreign Policy, wrote as follows:

"Almost 3 billion people, half this world's population, live on less than 2 Euros a day [... roughly £1.30 or \$2.50]. 45 million continue to die every year out of hunger and malnutrition. Sub-Sahara Africa is poorer now than it was 10 years ago. In many cases, the failure of economic growth has been linked to political problems and violent conflict. In some parts of the world, notably Sub-Sahara Africa, a cycle of insecurity has come into being. Since 1990, almost 4 million people have died in wars, 90% of them civilians. Over 18 million people have left their homes or their countries as a result of conflict"

Observations like this have moved many leading commentators to assert that poverty, not terrorism, is the major problem facing humanity. Other commentators have highlighted the momentous threats posed to human survival by the effects of climate change, and other environmental consequences of human action.

Poverty and environmental change are interlinked, in that they are the consequences of the way that developed nations behave, both within their borders, and in their relations to developing nations. The UK Government has shown, both by words and actions, that it takes these global problems very seriously, more seriously than some of its key allies. More needs to be done to develop effective strategies to ensure that these abiding and deeply-felt concerns remain at the heart of UK foreign policy, rather than being diverted (some might say subverted) by agendas of narrow sectional interests that do not represent the voices or the aspirations of the majority world.

Stimulating and supporting constructive dialogue

A recently published briefing paper by Dr Scilla Elworthy - entitled "*Cutting the Costs of War*" (March 2004) - is the first in a new sequence of ORG initiatives which are addressing these broad issues.

Dr. Elworthy suggests new ways in which the funds allocated to the UK Conflict Prevention Pools could be deployed, and she outlines thirteen costed and evaluated non-military methods for preventing and resolving conflict. Her paper is one contribution to a wider discussion about how those charged with making our country a safer place from external threat should prioritise resources between military expenditure and a whole range of non-military security-related expenditure (on such things as the intelligence services, police forces, civilian peacekeepers, overseas aid programmes, and civil defence programmes, to name but a few government-funded areas of activity whose co-ordination is required to achieve the best and most stable resolution to conflict).

ORG is committed to facilitating dialogues and analyses through which the widest range of different creative solutions to conflict may be constructively explored. Our future projects will be guided by our longstanding concerns to develop robust and defensible non-violent alternatives to the prevention and resolution of conflict, in constructive dialogue with all who have an interest in promoting peace and security in the world. We invite the active support and engagement of all those who share our goals.

March 17th 2004

For information on *Cutting the Costs of War* by Dr. Scilla Elworthy, see: www.oxfordresearchgroup/publications/briefings/one_year_into_iraq.htm

About Oxford Research Group

Oxford Research Group seeks to develop effective methods whereby people can bring about positive change on issues of national and international security by non-violent means. Our research focuses on three broad areas: nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation; UK defence and foreign policy; and global security in the changing international environment. We bring senior policy-makers together with independent analysts, scientists and technologists, military experts, writers and psychologists, to develop ways past the obstacles to achieving peace with security.

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