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On the Road to Damascus: British Foreign Policy and the Crises in Libya and Syria

Summary

The purpose of this article is to capture one of the key features of the political thought that developed in the United States of America. Assuming that the USA's political culture is indeed exceptional, the author attempts to find the common denominator that would reflect the singularity of the American political mind. The author states that such a feature is the radical anti-historicity of the American mode of thinking about politics. It is a phenomenon that is deeply-rooted in the political and spiritual past of the United States and seems to be crucial because it never developed to such an extent in other traditions. Furthermore, even today to a large extent it defines both the American left and right. It is also very much present in academic discussion as well as in ordinary political activities. By anti-historicity the author means the rejection of the thesis that politics within a given society depends on that society's past experience. The phenomenon defies simple normative assessments. On the one hand, it protects American politics from the perils of radical historicism; on the other hand, it hinders the USA's contacts with other political bodies. However, the author concludes that

understanding American anti-historicity is crucial when entering into any relations with the USA.

KEYWORDS

British Foreign Policy, Military Intervention, Arab Spring, Libya, Syria

**W DRODZE DO DAMASZKU. BRYTYJSKA POLITYKA
ZAGRANICZNA WOBEC KRYZYSU W LIBII I SYRII**

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest porównanie i przeciwstawienie brytyjskiej polityki wobec kryzysu w Libii i w Syrii odpowiednio w 2011 i w 2013 roku. Szuka się w nim odpowiedzi na pytanie, dlaczego parlament brytyjski, który w 2011 roku tak zdecydowanie poparł użycie siły przeciwko Libii, wstrzymał swoje poparcie dla akcji militarnej w Syrii w sierpniu 2013 roku. Autor wskazuje, że perspektywa masakry w libańskim mieście Benghazi przekonała brytyjskiego premiera, że akcja międzynarodowa była pilną koniecznością. Rezolucja Rady Bezpieczeństwa ONZ pozwalająca na akcję militarną w celu ochrony libijskiej ludności cywilnej oraz fakt, iż interwencję poparło kilka rządów na Bliskim Wschodzie, również przyczyniły się do uznania jej przez rząd brytyjski za w pełni uprawnioną. Jednakże dwa lata później brytyjski parlament skutecznie zawetował udział Wielkiej Brytanii w atakach powietrznych przeciwko Syrii. Było to skutkiem, jak argumentuje autor, braku rezolucji ONZ w tej kwestii i wsparcia rządów w regionie dla Syrii oraz wątpliwości co do skuteczności akcji militarnej. W artykule podejmowane jest również pytanie, czy brak brytyjskiej interwencji w Syrii oznacza początek zwrotu w brytyjskiej polityce zagranicznej.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

brytyjska polityka zagraniczna, interwencja militarna, Wiosna Arabska, Libia, Syria

INTRODUCTION

The revolutions in North Africa and the Middle East in 2010 and 2011 (which became popularly known as the “Arab Spring¹”) resulted in the toppling of two authoritarian governments in Tunisia and Egypt. Libya and Syria, in contrast, found themselves descending into civil war. The crises in these two countries posed a major challenge to the international community. David Cameron – Britain’s prime minister from 2010 – had previously adopted a sceptical stance in relation to overseas military interventions. Yet, when confronted with the scale of the atrocities that the forces of the Libyan leader, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, were perpetrating against their own people, he argued that a robust response to the crisis was needed. Along with the French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, Cameron played a leading role in mobilizing the international community in order to prepare the way for a military intervention, the purpose of which was to protect Libyan civilians. When making the case for the intervention to Britain’s Parliament, Cameron stressed the circumstances that were unfolding in Libya were “exceptional.” He emphasized, in particular, that the intervention was legal, and that a swift response was necessary in order to prevent a bloodbath from ensuing in Benghazi. In response, Parliament voted overwhelmingly in favour of a resolution that supported Britain’s participation in the international intervention. Over two years later, Cameron again argued that it was necessary for British forces to participate in airstrikes against Syria after it was revealed that forces under the command of Bashar al-Assad – the Syrian leader – had used chemical weapons against civilians. The prime minister stressed that Syria had broken an international convention that prohibited the use of chemical weapons on the battlefield, and that the regime should accordingly be punished. On this occasion, however, the same Parliament that had backed the Libyan intervention in 2011, voted against a government

¹ Although it has been pointed out that this term is problematic. The unrest in the Middle East continued for many months, hence it is wrong to conflate it with a particular season. A more accurate alternative might be the “Arab Awakening.” This article uses “Arab Spring” since it is the most widely used and understood term for describing the uprisings and their aftermath.

resolution that supported airstrikes in principle. Consequently, Britain withdrew from any plans to participate in the proposed airstrikes against Syria.

In recent years there has been a wealth of literature analyzing the “Arab Spring,” and the Western response to the events that unfolded in North Africa during this period. NATO’s intervention against Libya, in particular, has generated much comment. In the immediate aftermath of Gaddafi’s fall, the NATO operation was cited as an example of a successful Western intervention, particularly when placed in the relatively recent context of the rather more troubled experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan [Daalder, Stavridis 2012]. Other writers concentrated on the significance of the intervention in terms of humanitarian intervention, and more particularly on what it revealed about the emerging international norm of “responsibility to protect” (often abbreviated to R2P). At the time, the NATO intervention in Libya was seen as evidence of the strengthening of the emerging international norm of R2P [see Bellamy 2011, p. 263]. Since then, largely as a consequence of the international community’s failure to take robust action to bring the brutal civil war in Syria to an end, it has been argued that the international consensus on R2P has been significantly weakened [see Morris 2013; Thakur 2013]. Rather than contribute to the ongoing debate about R2P, this article instead focuses on what Britain’s participation in NATO’s intervention against Libya, and then the British Parliament’s decision to veto proposed airstrikes against Syria, reveals about the state of Britain’s foreign policy today, both towards the Middle East and North Africa, and also more generally. There were obvious similarities between the crises in Libya and Syria: these are two states in North Africa and the Middle East which were rent asunder by civil war. Yet, whereas in the case of Libya, NATO mobilized relatively quickly and initiated a bombing campaign whose purpose was to protect civilian lives, and which eventually resulted in the overthrow of Gaddafi’s regime, in the case of Syria the international community was conspicuously reluctant to intervene. This was reflected in British foreign policy. The article will consider the reasons as to why the British government was able to mobilize Parliamentary support for the 2011 intervention against Libya, and also why it failed to persuade the same Parliament to support limited airstrikes against Syria in 2013. The article will

also consider whether the Syrian “non-intervention” is a reflection of the increased strength of isolationist sentiment in British politics today.

BRITAIN AND MILITARY INTERVENTION

Britain has always viewed itself as being more than “just” a European Power. This is chiefly a legacy of the fact that Britain once possessed a global empire. Indeed, the outlines of the frontiers of the states within North Africa and the Middle East were largely shaped by European colonial powers, especially Britain. Within the region of the Middle East and North Africa, Britain possessed a number of colonies, including Egypt, Palestine and Iraq. Britain also had close ties with the ruling royal families in Saudi Arabia and Jordan. In 1956, however, Britain’s prestige within the region was dealt a critical blow after Britain and France (together collaborating secretly with the Israel) staged a military intervention against Egypt, ostensibly to protect the Suez Canal. This intervention, from Britain’s perspective, ended in disaster when it became clear that the UK’s chief ally, the United States, publicly opposed the intervention, and the British pound came under acute pressure. The combination of Britain’s diplomatic isolation, its deteriorating financial situation, and the fact that the US suspended oil shipments to Britain meant that the government was compelled to bring the operation to a halt. The failed Suez intervention did lasting damage to Britain’s reputation in the Middle East [Adamthwaite 1988]. Nevertheless, even after Suez the British remained heavily engaged within the region. Fain [2002, p. 95] has described Britain’s position in the Persian Gulf region in the following terms:

Its client states ringed the Arabian Peninsula, and the Crown Colony of Aden anchored its position in the region. Britain depended on Gulf petroleum to fuel its economy, on the region’s sea and air facilities to keep open the routes to its dependencies in Africa, the Indian Ocean, and Australia, and on its stature as a regional power to cement Britain’s status as a great nation with global interests and responsibilities.

Britain, moreover, was the one western power that was willing to formally undertake the burden of maintaining the Middle East’s security

through its membership of the Baghdad Pact.² It was not until the late 1960s that Britain liquidated the last vestiges of its empire – mainly for financial reasons – within the region, when it departed from a set of bases in the Persian Gulf as part of its “East of Suez” withdrawal [Smith 2007; Parr 2006].

As the above brief summary indicates, historically Britain has been intensely engaged in the region of the Middle East and North Africa. Britain, moreover, has on several occasions militarily intervened within the region. Aside from the unhappy experience of the Suez Crisis, Britain deployed troops in Kuwait and Iraq in 1958; more recently, British forces participated in the first Persian Gulf War in 1991, and the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. The fact that Britain once had an empire, however, “has left the UK with a negative reputation for using military force in the service of imperialistic aims, from Asia to the Middle East to Africa” [Gaskarth 2013, p. 122]. It is, nonetheless, largely a consequence of the fact that it once had a worldwide empire that Britain today is a state that has global interests. Britain’s standing as a former world power is still reflected in the fact that it has privileged membership of some of the world’s most prestigious international clubs. Notably, Britain is a P5 member³ of the United Nations Security Council, and belongs to the G8; it is also (for the time being at least) a member of the European Union, and a major European power within NATO. Partly as a result of these worldwide interests, and also partly because its national identity demands that it plays a prominent role on the international stage, Britain historically has pursued an activist foreign policy. This has been reflected in Britain’s repeated willingness since 1945 to send its military forces overseas. More recently, Britain has found itself intervening in what have been termed “new wars” Cottey [2007, p. 37] has described these as being “internal conflicts within states but with significant regional and international dimensions.” In the last two decades, Britain has

2 The Baghdad Pact (also known as the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) or the “Northern Tier”) was an alliance of five states: Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and Turkey founded in 1955. Both Britain and the US wanted a multilateral alliance to be established in the region, although the US, for political reasons, declined to become a direct member [see Ruane 2005].

3 That is, Britain is one of the five permanent (and veto-wielding) members of the United Nations Security Council.

been drawn into this type of conflict, sometimes for humanitarian reasons, such as in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s and Sierra Leone in 2000, or in an effort to eliminate particular groups or organisations that are considered to be a threat to international security, such as in Afghanistan from 2001 [Gaskarth 2013, p. 126].

Tony Blair – prime minister of Britain from 1997 to 2007 – seemed to have a penchant for military intervention, going to war five times in six years [Kampfner 2004]. Notably, in 1999, Blair played a leading role when it came to advocating using military force against Serbia in response to the atrocities that were being committed against ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. In the midst of the war, in a significant speech he gave in Chicago, Blair [1999] outlined what he described as his “Doctrine of International Community.” Citing the specific examples of Saddam Hussein and Slobodan Milosevic – then leaders of Iraq and Serbia respectively – the then prime minister argued that it should be right for the international community to intervene against those governments that were committing atrocities against their own people. In his memoirs, Blair [2011, p. 248] argues that the speech “was an explicit rejection of the narrow view of national interest and set a policy of intervention in the context of the impact of globalization.” Yet the interventions staged in the wake of the 9/11 attacks as part of the “Global War on Terror” revealed all too clearly the potential pitfalls of deploying military forces in distant parts of the world. The mounting casualties that Britain experienced as a result of the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq⁴ meant these wars became increasingly unpopular [Hood 2008, pp. 190-191]. In the light of these experiences there were many in the British body-politic, on both the left and right, who questioned seriously whether it was really in Britain’s best interests to be involved in such distant, overseas expeditions.

David Cameron – leader of the Conservative Party from 2005 and prime minister after the 2010 general election – appeared to

⁴ As of October 2013, 447 British military personnel had been killed in Afghanistan (Rogers 2013, <<http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2009/sep/17/afghanistan-casualties-dead-wounded-british-data>> (accessed 21.02.2014). In the case of Iraq, 179 British military personnel by the time the war came to an end in 2009. See *British Military Deaths in Iraq*, BBC News [undated], <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-10637526>> (accessed 21.02.2014).

reflect this increased scepticism. As the party's new leader, Cameron attempted to "modernize" the Conservative Party in a manner that was similar to Tony Blair's reforms of the Labour Party in the mid-1990s. In effect, he seemingly pushed the Party towards the centre-ground of British politics by arguing that the Conservatives should adopt a more compassionate approach to social policy, and emphasizing the importance of some traditionally non-Conservative themes such as the environment. As Bale [2009] has noted, Cameron, in stark contrast to his immediate predecessors, was at least partially successful in rehabilitating his party, in that opinion polls revealed that for the first time in over a decade support for the Conservatives had significantly increased. Dodds & Elden [2008] and Beech [2011] have argued that, as part of his modernizing project, Cameron, in partnership with his foreign affairs spokesman, William Hague (who would become foreign secretary after the 2010 election), also began to formulate a foreign policy agenda that combined conservative and liberal principles. Of the traditional conservative aspects of foreign policy, the new leadership were firm believers in the importance of the Anglo-American "special relationship." Another "traditional" conservative trait they exhibited was an overt scepticism towards European integration. In other foreign policy areas, however, Cameron began to adopt a significantly more cosmopolitan approach. As part of this new liberal foreign policy agenda, Cameron committed his government to spending 0.7% of national income on development aid – much to the disgruntlement of many of his MPs [Evans 2013]. In opposition, Cameron also opposed the Labour government's efforts to introduce detention without trial of terrorist suspects for a 90-day period [Beech 2011, p. 351].

On the issue of military intervention, it seems that the Conservative leader was by no means an instinctive neoconservative. In 2003, Cameron [2003] – then a backbench MP – confessed in a revealing newspaper column to belonging to a group of Conservative parliamentarians who were "confused and uncertain" about how they would vote when it came to the issue of going to war against Iraq. While he did eventually vote in favour, he nonetheless revealed a cautious attitude when it came to overseas military interventions. As leader of the opposition after 2005, Cameron also made it clear that he had significant reservations regarding Tony Blair's philosophy of

“liberal interventionism” and aspects of the “neoconservative project.” Cameron, in particular, rejected the view that democracy could simply be imposed upon particular countries. Moreover, while he did not explicitly reject the notion of humanitarian intervention, he argued that the international community should only act in cases of genocide. As Watt [2011] has observed, this set the bar particularly high when it came to defining cases in which humanitarian intervention could be considered to be legitimate. William Hague also made it clear that, in certain circumstances, a Conservative government would consider armed intervention for humanitarian reasons. Rhetorically asking the question as to whether the government would intervene “if we thought another Rwanda was happening?” he answered: “Yes, we would.” He continued: “Would we intervene if we saw another Balkan war unfolding? Yes, we would” [quoted in Coll 2010]. Given the way in which events unfolded in North Africa and the Middle East the following year, Hague’s comment would appear to be particularly significant. But when David Cameron became party leader, there was little appetite in wider British political circles – or beyond – for military interventions in distant parts of the world that were motivated primarily by humanitarian concerns [*Into the Unknown*: 2011]. It was on this platform that Cameron faced as prime minister his first major foreign policy challenge in the spring of 2011.

LIBYA: LIBERAL INTERVENTIONISM REVIVED?

In December 2010 a popular revolt broke out against the authoritarian government in Tunisia. In the weeks and months that followed, unrest spread to other parts of the Middle East and North Africa. In the cases of Tunisia and Egypt, the authoritarian governments were overthrown. In Libya and Syria, the governments attempted to use their military forces to crush the revolution [Anderson, 2011]. This sudden blooming of what was soon dubbed the “Arab Spring” caught the British Foreign Office by surprise [*British Foreign Policy...* 2012, pp. 18-20; Wintour, Watt 2011]. It also seems to have had a significant impact on David Cameron’s thinking. The revolution in Libya, in particular, and the ensuing civil war appear to have forced the prime minister to reconsider his views on the desirability of direct

intervention for humanitarian purposes [Stephens 2011]. While the initial British response to the uprising against Gaddafi was relatively cautious, when evidence began to mount that the Libyan regime was brutalizing its population, sentiment began to harden. Along with the French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, David Cameron began to press for the establishment of a no-fly zone as a means of protecting the Libyan people. The impending humanitarian disaster in Libya, as Gaddafi's forces prepared their assault on the ancient city of Benghazi, which was a rebel stronghold, eventually compelled the international community to adopt a more robust stance.

On 17 March, British and French diplomats – with the support of the US government, which was discretely adopting a stronger stance towards Libya – managed to secure passage of Resolution 1973 through the United Nations Security Council. This not only authorized the establishment of a no-fly zone, but, in an unprecedented step, also stated that “all necessary measure” could be used in order to protect Libyan civilians. It was the first time “Responsibility to Protect”⁵ was invoked as the legal basis for the use of force [Cronogue 2012, pp. 140-143]. It was notable that both Russia and China (both P5 members of the UNSC) chose not to veto the resolution, an indication that even these governments had finally lost patience with Gaddafi's regime. It should also be noted, however, that only ten of the fifteen Council members actually voted in favour of the resolution, with the remainder electing to abstain. Notably, these five included all the BRIC⁶ countries, as well as Germany. This was an indication that the governments of the world's largest emerging economies continued to harbour significant misgivings when it came to the notion of Western governments intervening militarily against other sovereign states, even if the principal objective of the mission was to save civilian lives [Dunn, Gifkins 2011, pp. 523-524]. There was also some doubt as to exactly what sort of military action

5 The International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty first proposed the concept of “Responsibility to Protect” in a report published in 2001. It was unanimously adopted at the 2005 World Summit.

6 Brazil, Russia, India and China – the world's four largest emerging economies. Shortly after the vote, South Africa (which supported UNSCR 1973) was also invited to join this group of states. The BRIC therefore became the BRICS.

United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1973 authorized. The resolution explicitly prohibited the introduction of a foreign occupying force on Libyan territory. What was less clear was the extent to which the coalition could target the Gaddafi regime itself or those military forces that belonged to it which were not committing atrocities. When the Resolution was passed, a number of countries – including Russia, Brazil and South Africa – made it clear that they were implacably opposed to the notion of UNSCR 1973 being used as a “smokescreen” to obscure a policy of “regime change” [Bellamy, Williams 2011, pp. 847-848]. Yet logically, it could be argued that the only way of guaranteeing the safety of Libyan civilians was to remove Gaddafi from power. A policy of “regime change,” however, seemed to go well beyond what the spirit of UNSCR 1973 intended.

The next day Cameron presented a statement to the House of Commons (the lower chamber of the British Parliament) in which he detailed the atrocities that the Libyan regime was in the process of committing against its own people. The prime minister went on to announce that Britain would, alongside France and the United States, participate in an international operation that would enforce UNSCR 1973. In making his case, the prime minister stressed that intervening “in another country’s affairs should not be undertaken save in quite exceptional circumstances” [*Hansard, House of Commons* (hereafter *HC*), 18 March 2011, col. 611]. Cameron argued that any intervention had to meet three specific criteria: the first was what he termed “demonstrable need”; the second was that the intervention needed to have regional support; and the third was that there needed to be a clear legal basis for the intervention. The prime minister argued that the proposed imposition of a no-fly zone fulfilled the principle of “demonstrable need” because Gaddafi’s forces were at that moment preparing their assault on Benghazi. Given that it was estimated that up to one thousand Libyan citizens had already been killed in the civil war, and that Gaddafi’s forces had already committed horrific atrocities in Misrata – another town that was a centre of opposition to the regime – time was clearly of the essence. Cameron argued that without air-support provided by Western powers, the rebel forces would be annihilated and a bloodbath within Benghazi would ensue. On the second principle, Cameron emphasized that several Arab governments – including Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the

United Arab Emirates – supported a Western intervention against Gaddafi’s regime. Moreover, the secretary-general of the League of Arab States, Amr Moussa, had also called upon the United Nations to intervene. Finally, Cameron emphasized the legal basis of the intervention, in that the UN Security Council had passed a resolution that explicitly authorized the use of force in order to protect civilians. It also, the prime minister noted, placed clear limits on the scope of the intervention, explicitly stating that no international occupying force would be deployed in Libya [*Hansard HC*, 18 March 2011, cols. 613-614].

Cameron’s statement suggested that it was the potential blood-bath in Libya that was the biggest factor in his decision to support and participate in a UN sanctioned operation that aimed to protect Libya’s civilians. Indeed, at one point in the debate, Cameron stressed that the “clock was ticking” [*Hansard HC*, 18 March 2011, col. 623]. It has also been suggested that the West’s failure to prevent the mass murder of over eight thousand Bosnian Muslim men at the hands of the Bosnian Serb Army at Srebrenica, which was supposedly a UN “safe haven,” in 1995 weighed heavily in the prime minister’s thinking [Davidson 2013, p. 321; Wintour, Watt 2011]. Davidson has also argued that the government perceived that the crisis in Libya significantly threatened British interests in the region. There were fears that if the war in Libya continued there would be a large-scale influx of Libyan refugees to Europe, many of whom might well find their way to Britain. The government also emphasized Libya’s geographical proximity to the European Union, and the fact that European countries had significant economic interests in the region. Nick Clegg – Britain’s deputy prime minister – when making the case for a robust British response to the Libyan crisis, emphasized these interests when he stated on 2 March:

This is a region vital to UK and EU interests. If people in the UK ask why, I would point at the efforts in recent weeks to rescue British nationals caught up in the turbulent events, at the level of human migration from North Africa to Europe, at the level of trade and investment between Europe and North Africa, and its importance to us in terms of energy, the environment and counter-terrorism. North Africa is just 14 miles from Europe at its closest point, what happens to our near neighbours affects us deeply [quoted in Davidson 2013, p. 323].

Furthermore, the British government pointed to the dangers of allowing Gaddafi to remain in power as leader of a “pariah state,” with the spectre of him continuing to mount reprisals against his own people, and being a potential source of terrorism in the future [Davidson 2013, pp. 322-323].

It is also clear from the debate that Britain’s participation in the 2003 war against Iraq cast a long shadow over the decision to intervene in Libya in 2011. There were many references to the war and the subsequent occupation of Iraq during the debate. The prime minister was also keen to emphasize that the situation in Libya was rather different to that of Iraq in 2003. Indeed, he placed particular emphasis on the passing of UNSCR 1973, and stressed that the overarching goal of the intervention was not to introduce forcibly a democratic political system in Libya; it was, Cameron emphasized, for the Libyan people to decide their own country’s future [*Hansard HC*, 21 March 2011, col. 706]. Indeed, the prime minister stressed that UNSCR 1973 prohibited any form of international occupation of Libyan territory. In this way, the government’s policy towards Libya could well be viewed as Cameron’s liberal-conservative foreign policy in action: a willingness to intervene in order to protect human lives, but eschewing the more ambitious elements of Blair’s “Doctrine of International Community.” As one British minister subsequently noted, the international coalition had “moral and political authority from the Arab League and wide-ranging legal authority from the UN” [quoted in Wintour, Watt 2011]. The case that the prime minister and other senior government figures made proved persuasive. In the parliamentary debate on 21 March, many MPs on both the government and opposition benches spoke in support of the international coalition’s intervention in Libya. Parliament then voted overwhelmingly in favour of the motion that endorsed Britain’s participation in the international operation, with 557 MPs voting in favour and only 13 against. For the most part, those who voted against were MPs on the left wing of the Labour Party, as well as the single Green MP, Caroline Lucas [*Hansard HC*, 21 March 2011, col. 802].

Britain, alongside France, played a particularly prominent role during the war. Indeed, in a curious inversion of the thesis of Robert Kagan [2004], the Europeans appeared more eager to use force against Gaddafi’s regime than the United States. From the beginning, the

Obama administration was more than content to allow their two European allies to spearhead diplomatic efforts to produce an international coalition against the Libyan government. Moreover, European military forces (mainly British and French) undertook most of the bombing sorties. It should also be noted, however, that the Europeans continued to be heavily dependent upon US military capabilities. Daalder and Stavridis [2012] note that “Washington provided 75 percent of the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance data employed to protect Libyan civilians and enforce the arms embargo.” The US also “contributed 75 percent of the refueling planes used throughout the mission – without which strike aircraft could not have lingered near potential targets in order to respond quickly to hostile forces threatening to attack civilians.” In short, without American support the operation would have been impossible for the Europeans to mount. Indeed, as the operation progressed, it became clear that the resources of European NATO members – most of whom had cut their defence spending to less than two percent of GDP – were being stretched to the limit. France’s sole nuclear powered aircraft carrier had to be recalled in August for essential maintenance; Italy also withdrew its aircraft carrier in order to save money [Erlanger 2011]. The intervention, nonetheless, proved to be successful. At the end of August, rebel forces finally seized Tripoli; as a result, the National Transition Council (the rebels’ political leadership) assumed power in Libya. On 20 October Colonel Gaddafi himself was finally captured and killed in his birthplace, the city of Sirte, effectively bringing the war to a conclusion. For Cameron, the intervention had proved to be a “good war”: Libya was widely regarded, after the debacle of Iraq and the quagmire of Afghanistan, as a good example of how to conduct a humanitarian intervention [Daalder, Stavridis 2012]. Given that Libya was a significant foreign policy success story, one newspaper presciently observed that Cameron was likely to have gained a taste for overseas military expeditions [*Mr Cameron’s War* 2011].

THE SYRIAN NON-INTERVENTION

The intervention against Libya appeared to establish a precedent whereby the international community could intervene militarily if a government was perpetrating major human rights violations against

its own people. Yet there was an obvious discrepancy in the way the international community mobilized in order to prevent humanitarian atrocities from being committed in Libya, but failed to take decisive action in relation to Syria, despite widespread violence, during the same period. As Cronogue [2012, p. 126] has noted, “responsibility to protect” is likely to be invoked when not only legal but also “strategic and pragmatic” factors “all point strongly toward intervention.” The circumstances in Syria were not dissimilar to those of Libya around the same time, in that the country found itself in the grip of a vicious civil war, and the regime of Bashar al-Assad was brutalizing its own people. Yet, despite the increasing bloodshed within the country, there appeared to be little appetite among the international community to become directly involved in Syria’s affairs. This was particularly evident on the part of the Obama administration, whose officials made it clear that they were loath to become embroiled in what they viewed as a messy and protracted conflict [*Global Cop Like it or Not* 2013].

While the international community seemed intent on keeping its distance from the civil war in Syria, Barack Obama – the US president – publicly stated on 21 March 2013 that his government would not allow the Assad regime to use chemical weapons against its own people; this would constitute, in the president’s words, a “red line” that Syria’s government would not be permitted to cross. A few weeks later, however, in April, evidence surfaced that the regime had indeed employed chemical weapons. US intelligence ascertained that Sarin gas had been used in Syria on a small scale. The Obama administration, however, swiftly distanced itself from its previous threat of direct intervention, claiming that the intelligence was not wholly conclusive, and passed responsibility for dealing with this issue to the United Nations. It appeared that despite the supposed “red line” in relation to the use of chemical weapons, the Obama administration was still extremely anxious to avoid becoming directly involved in the Syrian civil war [MacAskill 2013]. Three months later, another, much larger attack took place in Damascus. This was thought to have killed at least 1300 people, with thousands more descending on Syrian hospitals reporting symptoms that were thought to have been produced by toxic chemical agents. This time, in the face of an international outcry, it seemed

that President Obama was determined to act. The US began to draw-up plans for a bombing raid against Syria in order to destroy some of the Assad regime's stockpiles of chemical weapons. Moreover, President Obama asked the British to participate in the planned operation [*Global Cop Like it or Not* 2013].

David Cameron had for some time adopted a relatively hawkish posture on the issue of the Syrian crisis, arguing that the international community should be doing more to bring the civil war to an end [*David Cameron in America* 2012]. Hence, it was scarcely surprising that when he received a call from President Obama requesting British participation in airstrikes against Syria, the prime minister readily agreed. Having given this verbal assurance, the government then began to organize support in Parliament for a motion that would authorize Britain's participation in an air-campaign that would target Syria's chemical weapons. It seems that Cameron and other senior figures in his government assumed – as had been the case with Libya two years earlier – that parliamentary support would be relatively forthcoming. Initially, the leader of the opposition, Edward Miliband, indicated that he would be willing to support a government motion that approved military force “in principle,” as long as Parliament was given a second opportunity to vote on a resolution after the UN Security Council had considered the issue. At the eleventh hour, however, Miliband decided to introduce an alternative resolution. In substance, there was little difference between the government and opposition resolutions: both accepted the principle that Britain would participate in a military campaign if UN weapons inspectors provided clear evidence that chemical weapons had been used. The only significant difference between the two motions was that the government's directly implicated the Assad regime in the attack and supported military intervention in principle, whereas the opposition's emphasized that the regime's culpability had yet to be determined. After a long parliamentary debate, in which MPs from all sides of the House expressed reservations regarding the planned airstrikes, both the government and opposition resolutions were voted down. In the light of this, Cameron, when asked by Miliband, made it clear that he would respect Parliament's opinion, and Britain accordingly would not participate in any military intervention against Syria [*Hansard HC*, 29 August 2013, cols. 1555-1556].

At the time, Parliament's decision to reject the government's resolution was widely regarded as a major humiliation for David Cameron. It was almost unprecedented for a prime minister to lose a vote in the Commons on an issue concerning the possible use of military force [Rawnsley 2013]. The parliamentary vote, however, led to the unexpected outcome of President Obama asking Congress to vote on whether the US should launch airstrikes against Syria. In the meantime, on 9 September, before Congress had had the opportunity to vote, the American secretary of state, John Kerry, at a press conference in London, remarked that the only way the Syrian government could avert military strikes was to place their chemical weapons under international control. Seizing upon this statement, the Russian government launched a diplomatic initiative in which it persuaded the Syrian regime to promise to transfer their chemical weapons into the hands of United Nations inspectors; in return, the US government would suspend the planned military strikes against Syria. As a result of these initiatives, by the end of September 2013, it appeared unlikely – at least for the time being – that the Americans would use military force against the Assad regime [Going Another Round 2013]. It could, therefore, be argued that the British Parliament's vote against airstrikes had a very direct impact on the decisions that the Obama administration took in relation to Syria.

At first sight, it seemed surprising that Britain's Parliament, which had voted overwhelmingly in favour of military intervention against Libya in 2011, was unwilling to sanction airstrikes against Syria little more than two years later. Yet a closer examination of the situation in Syria in 2013 reveals that it possessed few of the "exceptional circumstances" that Cameron had delineated in 2011. The most obvious (and problematic) difference was the fact that in August 2013 the United Nations Security Council had not passed a resolution that authorized military strikes against Syria. Both Russia – who viewed the Assad regime as an ally in the region – and China had made it clear that they would veto any resolution that authorized the use of force. Above all else, the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, was not willing to countenance a repeat of the Libyan intervention. The Russians believed that NATO had abused the UN authorization it had received to protect Libyan civilians and had instead pursued a policy of regime change, which included the targeting of the Libyan leader

and his family. Given the “betrayal” Russia had experienced at the hands of the West over the case of Libya, it was scarcely surprising that Putin was unwilling to sanction another UN operation directed against the Assad regime [Allison, 2013, pp. 797-799]. Cameron, however, stressed that Syria was in breach of a 1925 international convention that banned the use of chemical weapons on the battlefield. The prime minister argued that military action was necessary in order to maintain the “taboo” against the use of these kinds of weapons. Yet the fact remained that any military intervention against Syria would not be supported by a UNSC resolution. Given the importance that Cameron attached to UN authorization in 2011, the absence of a Resolution in relation to Syria was always going to make the prime minister’s arguments rather more difficult to sustain.

A second factor that Cameron emphasized in 2011 was the imminent humanitarian catastrophe that would result if the international community did not swiftly use military force against the Gaddafi regime. In the case of Syria, the bloodletting had been well under way for the best part of two years, resulting in the deaths of tens of thousands of Syrian civilians. Hence, the British government was hardly in a position to argue that a quick decision was necessary in order to prevent a bloodbath; by that stage, Damascus was already awash with blood. Another difficulty was that it was not entirely clear how selected airstrikes against the Syrian regime would prevent the further use of chemical weapons. In the parliamentary debate, several MPs expressed concern that the bombing would result in what is euphemistically referred to as “collateral damage” – that is, non-combatant casualties – but could not guarantee that the Assad regime would be prevented from using chemical weapons in the future [e.g. *Hansard HC*, 29 August 2013, cols. 1454-1455, 1461-1464]. There were, therefore, significant doubts as to whether the “unbelievably small” attack – in the words of John Kerry [quoted in Wintour 2013] – would actually be effective when it came to preventing the future use of chemical weapons.

Regional support was the third factor that Cameron cited when he making the case for intervention against Libya in 2011. The prime minister stressed that the general secretary of the Arab League had requested the NATO intervention against the Gaddafi regime, and several Middle Eastern states were contributing military resources to

the operation. In the case of Syria in 2013, there was a clear absence of regional unity. While some governments in North Africa and the Middle East were actively supporting the rebels, others – such as Iran and to some extent Iraq – were assisting Assad’s regime [Hokayem 2012]. Indeed, as Bellamy and Williams [2011, pp. 848-849] have noted, Syria’s higher standing within the region of the Middle East and North Africa, when compared to Libya, ensured that it received a greater degree of protection from international organisations like the League of Arab States. Therefore, any NATO intervention would take place in a region that was already badly divided, and there was a real risk that members of the Alliance would find themselves involved in a conflict that might “spill over” to include other states in the region. There was also the fact that, whereas in 2011 Gaddafi was bereft of allies, the Assad regime in 2013 could still rely on the support of important international players, such as Russia and China [Allison 2013, pp. 797-759].

There were at least two other reasons as to why opinion was generally more sceptical of the proposed intervention in 2013. The first was that Syria’s rebel forces were fragmented, and included a number of disparate elements who, while they shared a desire to overthrow President Assad, had little else in common, and certainly did not have a united view when it came to Libya’s future. While there were pro-Western moderate elements among the rebel forces, there were also radical Islamic groups, some of whom were affiliated to al-Qaeda. Moreover, as the Syrian civil war has drawn on, the influence of *Jihadist* groups appears to have significantly increased. As Joyner [2013] has observed, “while virtually all in the West view Assad as the clear bad guy, there’s not much sense of who the good guys are.” Whereas in 2011, leading states in the Atlantic Alliance had few qualms when it came to supporting anti-Gaddafi rebel forces, in 2013 there were considerable doubts as to whether a government that came to power after President Assad had been removed would necessarily be in the best interests of the West. Connected to this assessment was the fact that Libya, after Gaddafi’s removal, has entered into a period of instability, with radical Islamic groups becoming more prominent in Libyan affairs [Going Another Round 2013]. This has placed a question mark as to whether the 2011 Libyan intervention was quite as successful as it first appeared; and this can only have served to reinforce

the scepticism that many in British official circles felt regarding the possibility that a military intervention in support of Assad's removal would eventually result in a stable, democratic Syrian state.

The failure of the British Parliament to support the military intervention against Syria resulted in much debate about the future of British foreign policy. Some commentators, for example, suggested that isolationist sentiment is becoming more evident in British political circles, especially within the Conservative Party. It is certainly true that there is a new generation of Conservative MPs who are instinctively hostile to various international organisations – especially the European Union – and believe that Britain should have a less activist foreign policy. David Cameron lost his vote in the Commons because 30 of his own MPs voted against it, another 31 chose to abstain, while many more were in sympathy with the revolt [Rawnsley 2013]. In this sense, there is a strand of Conservative thinking that wants the Conservative Party to recommit itself to a policy of “splendid isolation.”⁷ An additional factor that makes an activist foreign policy more problematic is the fact that Britain today is a multicultural society. It has been reported [Wintour 2014b] that Britain's Ministry of Defence has concluded that public support in Britain for overseas military interventions has significantly fallen, and this trend is likely to continue in the future. One reason for this is a general sense of war-weariness after the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. But the Ministry also senses that there is resistance in an increasingly diverse nation to seeing British troops deployed in countries from which UK citizens, or their families, once came. The fact that the coalition government has significantly cut Britain's defence budget as part of its efforts to manage the economic recession will also make it more difficult for future governments to contemplate significant overseas military interventions. This prompted the former American secretary of defence, Robert Gates, to warn that these cuts would almost certainly have a damaging effect upon Britain's partnership with the United States [Wintour 2014a].

While there may be some truth to these observations, it should also be noted that this was same Parliament that had voted overwhelmingly

⁷ This was a foreign policy associated with the Lord Salisbury, Conservative prime minister at the end of the nineteenth century.

in support of the military campaign against Libya a mere two years earlier. Despite the 2013 vote, there still appears to be something of a consensus within British official circles that the Anglo-American partnership needs to be maintained. Indeed, British governments have long recognized that part of the price for maintaining this close diplomatic partnership is that they must be willing to shed blood alongside their American cousins [Danchev 2006, pp. 582-583]. It should be noted, moreover, that Obama and Cameron – despite their very different backgrounds – seem to have forged a relatively close working relationship. It is true, as Dumbrell [2012] has noted, that there are some significant political differences between the two men – particularly regarding how they have responded to the economic downturn in their respective countries – and that American strategic interests have shifted away from Europe towards Asia. It is also true that after Parliament vetoed Britain’s participation in airstrikes against Syria, concerns were expressed that it could have a damaging impact on the Anglo-American alliance [Niblett 2013]. Yet it seems likely that both London and Washington will be anxious to maintain a close partnership. Evidence for this can be found in Cameron’s official visit to the United States in March 2012, which was accompanied by much pomp and ceremony [Watt 2012]. Hence, it seems likely the specific circumstances within Syria may well have led to Parliament vetoing Britain’s participation in military strikes. But it would be wrong to view that as blanket opposition in principle to the use of armed force for humanitarian reasons, especially if it is in conjunction with the United States.

Furthermore, a close reading of the government and opposition resolutions reveals that the positions of the two parties were not that far apart. The Labour leadership was not wholly opposed to the possibility of military action against Syria, but simply argued that the airstrikes should be delayed for a few days in order to give the United Nations inspectors the opportunity to report their findings. It could be argued that the vote against the resolution was evidence of the government’s incompetence when it came to managing Parliament. Had senior Conservative figures demonstrated a little more flexibility when it came to dealing with opposition parties, they could probably have persuaded Parliament to pass a resolution which would have given them most of what they wanted. As it was, when

Parliament voted against the government resolution, David Cameron unilaterally chose to interpret the vote as a veto against any kind of military action [Rawnsley 2013]. One should, therefore, be cautious about overstating the isolationist impulses in British foreign policy. It is true that the experience of Iraq has served, in Cameron's words, to poison the "well of public opinion" [*Hansard HC*, 29 August 2013, col. 1428] when it comes to supporting humanitarian interventions. No doubt isolationist sentiment within the Conservative Party, the fact that Britain is an increasingly multicultural society, and deep cuts to Britain's defence budget will prove to be complicating factors when it comes to future overseas interventions. Nonetheless, an important element in Britain's national identity continues to be the notion that the country is still a major player on the world stage. It is significant that David Cameron, who in opposition had adopted a relatively cautious position on the issue of overseas military interventions, played a conspicuous role in facilitating international action when confronted with the Libyan crisis in 2011. Despite Britain's self-exclusion from the planned military strikes against Syria, it seems probable that Britain for the foreseeable future will continue to be heavily engaged in world affairs.

CONCLUSION

A comparison of the British responses to the crises in Libya and Syria in 2011 and 2013 respectively elucidates the way in which attitudes towards military intervention have evolved since the war against Iraq in 2003. In recent years, one can discern a growing sense of war-weariness in British official circles as a result of the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. Significantly, in opposition, the Conservative Party was critical of Tony Blair's propensity for sending British military forces overseas. As part of their "conservative-liberal" foreign policy, however, the Party's leadership did acknowledge that, in the face of a huge humanitarian catastrophe, it would be legitimate to intervene militarily. The crisis in Libya in 2011 offered the first major test of this philosophy. At a relatively early stage, David Cameron – along with the French president, Nicolas Sarkozy – decided that the international community needed to act in order to prevent the

Libyan government from committing horrific atrocities against its own people. When making his case to Parliament, Cameron argued that the circumstances of the Libyan crisis were “exceptional” and therefore warranted international intervention. He stressed, firstly, that the intervention was legal, in that it had been sanctioned by the UN Security Council; secondly, that it had regional support; and thirdly, that the international community needed to act swiftly to prevent a bloodbath being perpetrated in the city of Benghazi. The intervention against Libya proved to be successful, in that thousands of civilian lives were saved, and that it eventually led to the removal of Gaddafi’s regime. In the case of Syria two years later, when it was revealed that the regime of Bashar al-Assad had used chemical weapons against its own people, Cameron again supported limited airstrikes. On this occasion, however, Parliament voted against a resolution that endorsed Britain’s participation in airstrikes against Syria. It can be argued that few of the “exceptional circumstances” that pertained to Libya in 2011 were present in 2013. Notably, the UN Security Council had not passed a resolution that authorized the use of military force; and there were obvious divisions within the Middle East, with some states supporting the Syrian government and others backing the rebels. Concerns were also expressed in Parliament about possible civilian casualties as a result of airstrikes, and whether they would actually prevent the future use of chemical weapons.

Britain’s participation in the NATO operation against Libya, and David Cameron’s willingness to participate in international action against Libya indicates that “liberal interventionism” is far from dead in British foreign policy. Yet the failure to win parliamentary support for the intervention against Syria also suggests that there are definite limits with regard to what official and public opinion are prepared to accept. As a result of the experiences of the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, there has been something of a backlash when it comes to deploying British military forces in distant lands. It has also been suggested that isolationist sentiment is beginning to harden among certain elements within British official circles, particularly inside the Conservative Party. The tension between, at one extreme, liberal interventionism, and isolationism on the other, reflects the fact that Britain does have a range of strategic choices regarding the kind of foreign policy it wishes to pursue. Gaskarth has noted, for instance,

that “Britain’s military capability is an important facet of its own self-identity” [Gaskarth 2013, p. 125]. Elsewhere he has argued that there are a range of potential strategies that Britain could implement in the future, before going on to outline six potential role orientations that Britain could conceivably adopt: these include what he labels as (1) “isolate,” a role orientation that is “inward looking and involves expending as little energy and resources externally as necessary to allow states to focus on domestic concerns” [Gaskarth 2014, p. 566]; (2) “regional partner” in which Britain would play a leadership role within the EU; (3) “influential (rule of law state),” in which Britain would use its influence to uphold international law; (4) “thought leader,” in which Britain would provide creative thinking and act as a convenor of debate, discussion and dialogue; (5) “opportunistic-interventionist,” in which Britain “would exploit current disruptions in the international system to advance liberal ideas about human rights, democracy and good governance, even at the expense of existing frameworks on international law” [Gaskarth 2014, p. 577]; and finally (6) a “Great Power” role orientation, in which Britain maintains a strong military capacity, which would give it a “comparative advantage in the event of war” [Gaskarth 2014, p. 579]. To be sure, Britain is more likely to perform some role orientations than others. Gaskarth, for instance, argues that it is extremely unlikely that Britain will in the future adopt a rigidly isolationist position, noting the potential fallout Britain would experience in terms of the reactions of its EU partners, the US, and, to some extent, the Commonwealth. Britain, moreover, in the twenty-first century, is no longer equipped to perform the role of “Great Power.” The role of “opportunistic-interventionist” resembles closely the foreign policy that Tony Blair pursued, but the costs of that (as discussed above) have also become evident. Similarly, Bakawi and Brighton [2013] have argued in favour of Britain radically reorienting its foreign policy strategy. They suggest that Britain should take advantage of the legacy of the British Empire, and engage more intensely with those nations beyond North America and Europe with whom the UK has historic links. Such a strategy might, for instance, involve a move away from direct intervention towards offering military advice and support for foreign armies; and the Foreign Office putting more emphasis on “public diplomacy, diaspora economies and generally connecting

with people rather than governments, especially in post-colonial societies facing crises of governance, such as Nigeria and Kenya" [Similarly, Bakawi, Brighton, pp. 1122-1123]. It is beyond the scope of this article to "pin down" the type of strategy that Britain will or should pursue in the future. For now, it is enough to say that, in the light of the experience of Britain's participation in the NATO intervention against Libya, and the British Parliament's decision to veto the possibility of airstrikes against Syria, that British foreign policy has reached a critical juncture. It will be the task of British politicians and other public officials, in consultation with the British public, to devise a foreign policy strategy in the years ahead. This will also, to a significant degree, be linked to the kind of state that Britain aspires to be in the twenty-first century.

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