

November 2007

opinion

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to the War on Terror?

Sir Michael Aaronson

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“*hd*” Opinion

A Holistic Approach to the War on Terror?

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¹ The author writes in a personal capacity and wishes to make clear that his views do not necessarily represent those of any of his present or previous employers. This is a version of a paper delivered at the Pluscarden Programme seminar at Saint Anthony’s College, Oxford, on 10 May 2007. The original is posted on the college website.

² “Where does Development fit in foreign Policy?”: Speech by Secretary of State 16 April 2007 <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/news/files/Speeches/foreign-policy-april07.asp>

Introduction

In a recent speech made in New York Hilary Benn, the UK’s International Development Secretary, officially closed down the War on Terror: “In the UK, we do not use the phrase “War on Terror” because we can’t win by military means alone, and because this isn’t us against one organised enemy with a clear identity and a coherent set of objectives.”² This news was welcomed by those who had long argued that the “War on Terror” was not a helpful concept, and were glad to see the UK government at last acknowledging this.

However, the “W” word is still alive and well and living in Washington, albeit in a slightly different guise. For example, the US Department of Defense “Quadrennial Defense Review 2006” opens with the words: “The United States is a nation engaged in what will be a long war”. This is compared to the Cold War, but fought against a very different kind of enemy, and calling for “major shifts

³ <http://www.defenselink.mil/qdr/report/Report20060203.pdf>

in strategic concepts for national security and the role of military power” and “new concepts and methods of interagency and international co-operation”³.

Similar concepts very much in use across the Atlantic are those of the “Three Block War” (i.e. combining in the same theatre war-fighting, political negotiation, and reconstruction and development activity) and the “3D” approach (defence, diplomacy, and development aligned in pursuit of security objectives). What they all share is the belief that only by harnessing these different kinds of activity can the current war in which the US and her allies are engaged be won: what might be called a holistic approach to winning the war against terrorism. It is a notion that most people in the humanitarian and development communities find profoundly disturbing: are they right to be so concerned?

In this paper I will argue that they are indeed right to be concerned. But it is not the prospect of a more joined-up approach that should worry us, rather the continuing naivety of many of the assumptions underpinning our foreign and security policy, and our limited capability to implement it wisely. In other words, it is the “War on Terror” that is misguided, rather than the “holistic approach”. I would like to make it clear that I firmly believe we must take the terrorist threat seriously, and that we have no choice but to increase our investment in counter-terrorism measures. However, if we wish to make an effective response to modern-day terrorism we must not just enhance our counter-terrorism capability, we must also be prepared to face up to the mistakes we have made in the way we view the outside world and have intervened in it to protect our interests.

I will start by explaining my own personal perspective on these issues, and then try to set them in the recent historical context. I shall illustrate my argument with reference to the current situation in Afghanistan, and finally suggest how our current approach needs to change if we are to respond more effectively in future.

A Personal Perspective

My own background is shared between the worlds of diplomacy and of international relief and development. I was for 16 years a member of HM Diplomatic Service and for 17 years international director and subsequently chief executive of Save the Children, the UK’s leading international children’s charity. Thus I spent the first half of my career in the Cold War era, when East-West issues

dominated, and the second at a time when North-South issues came to assume a higher profile.

As a diplomat, I served the interests of my country; as an aid worker I upheld a set of universal humanitarian values, and specifically the rights of children, first formulated by Eglantyne Jebb, the founder of Save the Children. Initially this did not seem too difficult a transition; in general terms the UK had a stated commitment to the same values I was trying to uphold at Save the Children, although from time to time it needed to be prodded to be more imaginative and proactive. But increasingly during the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War, the increasingly muscular interventionism practised particularly by the US and the UK posed a new set of problems.

Previously, wherever I visited as a representative of a UK-based charity, I had found it not only natural but relatively easy to present myself as an impartial humanitarian, concerned only with the relief of suffering and the improvement of children's lives. But as the UK became more embroiled in other people's wars around the world – and particularly as the UK military was called upon to play a role in these wars – the cloak of impartiality became harder to wear.

At Save the Children we engaged constructively with the military in an attempt to find ways of co-existing peacefully – if not exactly collaborating. The UK military was rightly proud of its doctrine of peace-keeping, and as long as that was what it did, we rubbed along together pretty well. The problem arose when it was asked to go beyond peace-keeping to war-fighting; however justified the cause it could no longer claim to be impartial and to the extent that we NGOs were identified with the actions of our country that created a problem for us, too.

As a consequence of this, both at Save the Children and since leaving in 2005, I have worked with the UK military and with NATO HQ, to interpret the humanitarian and development perspectives for the military, and to try to ensure that this is factored into the development of the emerging doctrine of the “Comprehensive Approach”. In the language of the communiqué following the NATO Riga Summit in November 2006: “today's challenges require a comprehensive approach involving a wide spectrum of civil and military instruments (and) practical cooperation at all levels with partners, the UN and other relevant international organisations, non-governmental organisations and local actors in the planning and conduct of ongoing and future operations.”⁴

⁴ <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2006/p06-150e.htm>

Based on my experience I am convinced that the difficulties encountered in civil/military co-operation on the ground have

less to do with the different actors than with the overall political framework within which they are asked to operate: in particular the lack of clarity about aims and objectives and what is an appropriate role for outside intervention. The theatre of operations where this is most evident at the moment is Afghanistan. I wanted to see this for myself and therefore asked the MoD if they would sponsor me to make a visit, which they kindly did; I went in January this year. I will come back to the subject of Afghanistan later in this paper, but before that I want to make a rapid historical survey in order to help us to understand why we are where we are today.

The Recent History of Intervention

In the late 1980s, when I joined Save the Children, we were providing assistance in a number of fairly low-intensity but long-running internal conflicts, which were causing severe consequences for the civilian population, and which were receiving precious little attention from the international community: for example Ethiopia/Tigray/Eritrea, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Angola. At the time the cry from organisations like Save the Children was for more intervention: we said that humanitarian action could never substitute for political action and that Western politicians needed to expend more political capital on trying to achieve political solutions.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 gave rise to new optimism that the west, free from the constraints of the Cold War, could come up with a “peace dividend” in Africa and elsewhere. Meanwhile in 1991 the first Gulf War showed that the US and her allies could put together an effective coalition, under a UN mandate, to defend a country against international aggression. Operation Provide Comfort, mounted in response to the ensuing flight of the Kurds into the mountains of Northern Iraq, raised some concerns among the humanitarian community because it was under military control, but to political leaders it appeared to show that the humanitarian aspect of conflict could be managed in an integrated way alongside the political and military ones.

Responding to this mood, in June 1992 UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali published his “Agenda for Peace”, an ambitious interventionist doctrine which Save the Children questioned at the time because it suggested that humanitarian assistance could be used as a tool for political ends⁵. When the Somalia crisis reached a critical level later in 1992 the US responded with an armed invasion that had disastrous consequences because it had not been properly thought through and in particular had not anticipated the

⁵ Position Paper: The United Nations and Humanitarian Assistance, Save the Children UK March 1994, p2.

capacity of warring Somalis to unite against a perceived invader. Two years later, and arguably as a direct consequence of this failure, the world stood by as 800,000 people were butchered in the Rwandan genocide.

At this stage it was clear that what was needed was more consistent, courageous, and intelligent intervention when human rights were threatened on a massive scale as they had been in Somalia and Rwanda. The Danida-led independent evaluation of the response to Rwanda, published in 1996, also underlined, among other things, the need for the political dimension of complex emergencies to be properly factored in to any humanitarian response.⁶

⁶ <http://www.um.dk/Publikationer/Danida/English/Evaluations/RwandaExperience/index.asp>

However, the story of the second half of the 1990s was of another dismal failure, this time in Bosnia, where a UN peace-keeping intervention was undertaken with a hopelessly weak mandate, which meant that although force was provided, it had no utility.⁷ The situation was only rescued when US and European leaders were at last persuaded to get tough and send in a force with a stronger mandate.

⁷ See General Sir Rupert Smith: "The Utility of Force" Allen Lane 2005

In many ways the modern story starts anew with Kosovo in 1999. Many of us were deeply concerned by aspects of the campaign – not least by the claim that this was a "humanitarian war" because it responded to, first, Milosevic's human rights violations and, subsequently, the huge exodus of refugees into Macedonia and Albania. But its successful outcome meant that it could be claimed as a success, and I believe it shaped much of what came later.

During the Kosovo campaign, on 24 April 1999, UK Prime Minister Tony Blair made a speech at the Economic Club in Chicago on the "Doctrine of the International Community". Best remembered for its attempt to define a contemporary set of "Just War" criteria, it was nevertheless much more than that. It set out in a visionary and principled way why and how peoples and nations needed to work together in future and was an early statement of the reality of global interdependence and the benefits of globalisation. It concluded with a plea to the American people "never to fall again for the doctrine of isolationism. Stay a country outward-looking, with the vision and imagination that is in your nature. And realise that in Britain you have a friend and an ally that will stand with you, work with you, fashion with you the design of a future built on peace and prosperity for all, which is the only dream that makes humanity worth preserving."⁸ This statement surely goes some way to explaining why Tony Blair subsequently went along with George W Bush into the disaster of Iraq.

⁸ <http://www.pm.gov.uk/output/Page1297.asp>

⁹ <http://www.iciss.ca/report-en.asp>

Another important initiative flowing from Kosovo was the 2002 report of the Canadian-led International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, whose advocacy of a “Responsibility to Protect”⁹ was eventually formally adopted at the UN Global Summit in 2005. This was an important step in moderating the principle of state sovereignty, enshrined in the UN Charter, to incorporate the international community’s increasing unwillingness to tolerate major violations of human rights. In parallel, moves were continuing to establish the International Criminal Court to try war crimes and crimes against humanity, following the adoption of the Rome Statute in 1998 (the ICC was eventually established in 2002).

So, it could be claimed that as the new Millennium dawned some significant steps had been made in operationalising the vision Tony Blair had spelt out in his Chicago speech. However, for the humanitarian world, there were some big question marks over, for example, the blurring of roles between military and civilian humanitarian agencies and the perceived shrinking of “humanitarian space” that flowed from this (in other words, humanitarian agencies becoming less free to operate freely on the basis of their perceived impartiality). These were not allayed by the publication in October 2000 of the Brahimi report, mapping out a new “coherent” approach to UN peace operations.¹⁰ It was also of great concern that global official development assistance (ODA) had been declining during the 1990s, unlike so-called “humanitarian aid”, which had been increasing.¹¹ This meant that many of the underlying causes of crisis were not being addressed and that increasingly it was only the high-profile, televised, emergencies that were responded to. And finally, there was the continuing failure to come to terms with long-running conflicts and violations of human rights, most significantly – in global political terms – the injustices suffered by the Palestinian people.

¹⁰ For an analysis of NGO concerns see “NGOs and the Military in Complex Emergencies: The New Realities – The NGO Perspective” – paper presented by the author at Wilton Park, 23 April 2001

¹¹ For further details see Roger Riddell: “Does Foreign Aid Really Work?” OUP 2007

Then, quite literally and horrifyingly out of the blue, came the tragedy of 9/11, which led to the rhetoric of the War on Terror. Suddenly the world had changed and rational discourse on complex issues had become much harder. The initial response, with the UN for once united in support of the US, was positive. However much one might dislike war of any kind – aptly described by Pope John Paul II as a “failure of humanity” – it was hard to oppose the legitimate pursuit of Al Qaeda into Afghanistan given the scale of their atrocities and the lack of co-operation from the Taliban government in that country. Again, Tony Blair made a welcome commitment to the Afghan people, saying “We will not walk away from (ordinary Afghans) once the conflict ends, as has happened in the past”.¹² Less reassuring to many of us at the time was his belief that it was possible to form a grand coalition of all actors, political, military, and humanitarian, to deal with all aspects of the crisis: our

¹² Prime Minister’s statement in the House of Commons 8 October 2001: <http://www.pm.gov.uk/output/Page1621.asp>

¹³ Letter to Prime Minister from Director General, Save the Children, 11 October 2001

concern was that this would lead to further blurring of roles and in the long term make it harder or even impossible for us to do our job.¹³

Unfortunately the intervention in Afghanistan was soon overtaken by the gathering crisis over Iraq. I do not want to go into any detail about Iraq other than to make two points. First, for some years Save the Children and others had been extremely critical of the sanctions regime, which harmed poor Iraqis far more than they did Saddam and his followers. Second, the same lack of analysis and understanding of the local context that had characterised the sanctions regime was clearly evident in the flawed approach to winning the peace in Iraq, once Saddam had been defeated militarily. The mistakes that were made are well documented, and regardless of whether or not the invasion was justified, its disastrous implementation has almost certainly ensured that the operation will end in tragic failure.

Exponents of the “War on Terror” have claimed that because we face new kinds of threats – most obviously WMD in the hands of terrorists – we must find a new kind of response. Of course this is true, and we have to take these threats very seriously and defend ourselves vigorously. But I want to argue also that we have lost our compass in terms of how we relate to the rest of the world and in particular in terms of how we intervene in other people’s countries. Setting aside issues of “Just War”, my main point is that we do not have the contextual understanding to plan and execute such interventions properly, and as a result we make massive mistakes. We believe we can use “humanitarian” or “development” assistance to help us achieve our objectives, but in reality we are back to where we were at the end of the 1980s, where we relied on humanitarian action as a substitute for effective political action. So we stagger in Iraq, look decidedly shaky in Afghanistan, are impotent in Darfur, and apparently do very little in Palestine. Something is fundamentally wrong with our model.

The Case of Afghanistan

I now want to look in more detail at what is happening in Afghanistan. I start by saying that I make no claim to be an expert in the country, but I believe I have been suitably modest in my observations and conclusions.¹⁴ Afghanistan is where the “holistic approach” so favoured by current policy-makers is facing its sternest test. My contention is that it isn’t working and that we had better understand why. What evidence do I have for this statement; what do I believe are the reasons for this failure; and what do I think needs to be done about it?

¹⁴ A full report following my visit in January is available on the St Antony’s website: http://www.sant.ox.ac.uk/areastudies/Afghanistan_Report_2007.pdf

My claim that the holistic approach is not working is based on the following observations:

- a. The resurgence of the Taliban and the heavy-duty counter-insurgency campaign undertaken both by ISAF and the Americans has raised the stakes quite significantly in terms of security for ordinary Afghans, as well as outsiders. There has been a significant increase over the last year in the number of Afghan civilian casualties, as well as among the military and the aid community.¹⁵
- b. A massive international apparatus is in place but is clearly not working effectively. There are many chiefs, but no overall leadership.
- c. There is a mutual lack of understanding and a very high level of frustration between civilians and military personnel.
- d. There must surely be increasing doubt in the minds of ordinary Afghans whether the government of President Karzai and his international backers can deliver, which may well cause them to hedge their bets.

¹⁵ See the detailed monthly reports on the BAAG website, the latest example being: <http://www.baag.org.uk/downloads/Monthly%20Review%2007/83%20-%20Apr%2007.pdf>

What are the reasons for this?

- a. The overall international response since 2001 has been poorly conceived and hugely under-resourced. There are 147,000 Coalition troops in Iraq compared with 46,000 in Afghanistan, which is 30% bigger as a country. There is 1/25th the number of troops, and 1/50th the amount of aid per head of population, compared to what was made available in Kosovo.¹⁶
- b. The Government of Afghanistan is weak, the UN is weak, ISAF fills the vacuum (often very well) but is hamstrung by internal NATO incoherence, which is partly on the military side but stems mainly from a lack of agreement as to NATO's political role.
- c. ISAF/the PRTs do not have a clearly-defined role vis-à-vis other actors in stabilisation, reconstruction, and development.
- d. There is no agreed philosophy of how development resources should be applied, e.g. in the crucial area of security sector reform (SSR). The failure to grow an effective police force and a properly-functioning judicial system are major sources of insecurity because they cause people to lose faith in the authorities and resort to other sources of protection.
- e. Policy-makers understand that military action alone is not enough to win hearts and minds among the Afghan people, but their expectations of "development" are naïve. Development can only take place where the rule of law prevails and people have confidence in the authorities; neither obtains here and elections

¹⁶ According to Paddy Ashdown, "Troops home by Christmas is not an option" *The Independent* 25 January 2007 <http://comment.independent.co.uk/commentators/article2183805.ece>

and physical infrastructure projects cannot on their own be a substitute.

- f. In these conditions, ISAF has unrealistic expectations of what civilian agencies can deliver, not least because of two fundamentally different conceptions of, and approaches to, security. It is hard for the respective parties physically to meet, let alone decide to collaborate.
- g. More fundamentally, there does not seem to be a clearly-defined strategic aim shaping the military and other objectives: “defeat of the Taliban” is an improbable outcome given the history and political economy of Afghanistan – but what is Plan B?

A senior British military officer commented on my report: “It highlights very clearly the lacunae in policy and structure which cast shadows over the energy being expended at the working/tactical level. This must be a critical area for Government of Afghanistan/ UN engagement with NATO support. Massive challenge but not insuperable if the scale of the problem is fully recognised in the right places.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Personal communication to the author, March 2007.

We shall not solve the problems in Afghanistan by treating it as an isolated case; if foreign fighters join the Taliban it is not just because of what happens locally. My report argues for better dialogue between people on the ground, but the real problem lies higher up and relates to how we view our intervention in such situations.

Some Conclusions

So, what is to be done, not just in Afghanistan but more generally in response to “rogue” or “failing” states that pose a threat to international peace and security, which no-one disputes was true of Afghanistan under the Taliban even if with the benefit of hindsight it was not true – at least not to the extent imagined – of Iraq under Saddam?

First, we need to think much more broadly than the prevailing interventionist mindset allows about the instruments available to the international community. We need to support developing nations through better aid, fairer trade, and proper debt relief, while at the same time holding them to account for how they treat their citizens, for example by being willing to use the International Criminal Court and the new Human Rights Council set up at the 2005 World Summit. In this way we can make a reality of Responsibility to Protect, which has so far been honoured more in the breach than in the observance.

¹⁸ This refers to a famous “Economist” front cover from the 1990s.

We need to be more modest in our estimation of what we as outsiders can achieve; we need to understand that external intervention cannot substitute for what has to grow internally; that “regime change” is about a lot more than getting rid of a corrupt leadership. We must abandon the euphoric, post-Cold War, notion that the UN – or anyone else for that matter – can somehow be “World Cop”¹⁸, although we should continue to strengthen multilateral institutions as the best way of achieving legitimacy and sustainability of our actions.

We need a more proactive, courageous, and consistent approach to foreign policy. We need to be prepared to risk political capital even where there isn’t an obvious immediate domestic political advantage – e.g. by patiently tackling some of the intractable civil conflicts that blight the lives of millions of civilians. This week has seen a return to power-sharing and self-government in Northern Ireland. The political capital that has been expended here over the last 15 years is immense, and we must understand that it will take a similar effort to solve the problems of the Congo or of Sri Lanka, for example. We cannot claim the moral high ground in Iraq if we ignore Darfur. Above all, we must take some risks and tackle the Israel/Palestine problem.

We must put much more value on local knowledge, understanding, analysis, and ability to speak other people’s language both literally and metaphorically. We must make sure our foreign policy is informed by how people see us, not just how we see them. The fate of countries like Afghanistan cannot be in the hands of people – however skilled – who are on a nine-month rotation in theatre. We need the modern-day equivalent of the old “Oriental Secretary” in every foreign mission and relevant department at home: more people with the deep political and cultural knowledge and understanding. This used to be a key part of our formidable diplomatic machine: where has it gone?

Linked to this, we in the UK at any rate need a more joined-up external relations policy. Do we really still need two foreign ministries: one (called DfID) for the developing world and one (called the FCO) for the rest? Does our current diplomacy support our humanitarian and development ambitions as well as it should? The argument that development assistance is somehow non-political, and must therefore be cocooned in protective clothing away from dangerously self-interested foreign policy, is surely misguided. We stand to gain much more from understanding that it is in our national interest to promote a fairer and therefore safer world for all people – and that this should be the overarching goal of our foreign policy. I would like to see a single external

relations programme with development at its heart, based firmly on humanitarian and human rights principles.

In this vein, I would like to return to the New York speech given by Hilary Benn with which I introduced this paper. His remarks about the “War on Terror” got the headlines, but the speech was entitled: “Where does development fit in foreign policy?”, and he made some very important points. He said:

- a. We have to listen to others – really listen – and move in their direction;
- b. We have to be prepared to give and take;
- c. We have to do something about injustice (especially in the Middle East);
- d. We have to get the politics to work “Because if you can’t get the politics to work – debate, compromise, discussion that is the essence of making decisions that affect the lives of people, then nothing is possible.”¹⁹

¹⁹ <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/news/files/Speeches/foreign-policy-april07.asp>

All this is relevant to Afghanistan, especially the point about politics. And it applies not just to local governance, but to how we conduct ourselves, the international community. General Sir Michael Rose recently made this point about Iraq: “The sooner we start talking politics and not military solutions the sooner (our soldiers) will come home and their lives will be preserved.”²⁰

²⁰ “UK and US must admit defeat and leave Iraq, says British General”: The Guardian 4 May 2007
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/Iraq/Story/0,,2072171,00.html>

²¹ www.hdcentre.org

Linked to this, we must understand that the old maxim “Jaw-Jaw is better than “War-War” is still a fundamental truth. The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue,²¹ which I have the privilege to chair, takes the view that we should be ready to talk to absolutely anyone if it advances the cause of peace. “We don’t talk to terrorists” has over the years surely been shown to be (a) untrue, and (b) a bad strategy.

If we really do have to intervene in someone else’s country by force, let us understand what the “long haul” really means. Paddy Ashdown estimates we might need to be in Afghanistan for 30 years²²: I agree. In which case we have to be ready to build a political constituency at home for this kind of commitment: we have to get the electorate to understand that there are no quick fixes. We also need to understand, as Sir Richard Dannatt, the head of the British Army, has said, that if we kick the door down when we enter someone’s house, we shouldn’t expect to be treated in the same way as if we had been invited in.²³

²² <http://comment.independent.co.uk/commentators/article2183805.ece>

²³ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6046888.stm>

We must understand better that “humanitarian” assistance is by definition impartial and cannot be used to secure a political

objective; also that “development” can be facilitated, but not engineered. Both are important in helping to achieve a fairer, safer, world, but they need their own space if they are to be effective.

Above all, we must stop viewing the world in Manichean terms of “us” and “them”. The Taliban were in many ways despicable, but Save the Children and others managed to achieve things in Afghanistan even under their regime. The simplistic notion of the “War on Terror” was never going to be a useful concept for coming to terms with and responding to the complex challenges we face in our rapidly globalising world of the 21st century.

So much for the “War on Terror”; what about the “holistic approach”?

As I said at the beginning of this paper, I do not think that “joined-upness” is the real problem, rather the current misguided politics of intervention. As it happens, I do not much care for “holistic” as a concept, as it implies a degree of integration between different functions that (a) many people think is undesirable (b) in practice is not achievable and (c) in any case would not add a great deal of value even if it were. It smacks of drab managerialism when what we really need is statesmanlike leadership. That can only come from someone articulating a clear vision that itself constitutes a magnetic force that gets people pointing in the same direction. It is worth recalling that Tony Blair tried to give us that vision in his 1999 Chicago speech: somehow we need to find a way back to it.

And finally, we have to ask ourselves – academics and professionals in the fields of defence, diplomacy, and development, concerned and intelligent people – where have we been all this time? Speaking personally, I do not feel that the points I have made in this paper are particularly original or profound – in fact it is somewhat depressing to realise that I have been making them consistently for the last 15 years. Why have we not made our voice heard?

Along with my colleagues in the other major UK development agencies I enjoyed a close working relationship with government ministers from 1997 on international development matters. And yet, despite repeated attempts to engage, I feel I had absolutely no impact on foreign policy relating to the “War on Terror”. So we walked arm in arm with government to “Make Poverty History” while remaining profoundly out of step in the “War on Terror”. How do we ensure in future that there is a consistent approach across all three domains of defence, diplomacy, and development? Because if there isn’t, we surely have a very big problem indeed. That, I think, describes the real challenge we all face.