

Western Military Intervention and the Dangers of “Short-term” Foreign Policy Thinking

Those who called for caution or were against the wars in Iraq, Libya and Syria are often derided. But, as recent history shows, there have been grave consequences for Britain and the rest of the world

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From Iraq (circa 2002-3), to Libya in 2011 and Syria today, influential liberal commentators including David Aaronovitch, Nick Cohen, Paul Mason, Jonathan Freedland and many politicians have repeatedly pushed for Western military intervention.

“Something must be done,” they shout from their newspaper columns. “We must act now before it is too late,” they warn in the House of Commons.

One of the things that characterises these emotive and often simplistic calls for action is their narrow, laser-like focus on human rights abuses Western governments are publicly concerned about.

Those who advise caution, critical thinking and a wider lens of analysis are often labelled naive, or worse, apologists for the authoritarian leader in the West’s sights.

However, recent history shows this unwillingness to consider possible wider, long-term impacts of Western wars of choice has had grave consequences for Britain and the rest of the world.

Take Nato’s intervention in Kosovo in 1999, sold by Tony Blair’s government to the British public as a humanitarian intervention urgently needed to stop ethnic cleansing carried out by Serbian government forces.

“The liberal press — notably the Guardian and the Independent — backed the war to the hilt (while questioning the tactics used to wage it) and lent critical weight to the government’s arguments,” British historian Mark Curtis notes in his 2003 book *Web of Deceit: Britain’s Real Role In The World*.

In addition “the anti-war movement failed to mobilise beyond the political margins,” explained international relations specialist Dr Aidan Hehir in a 2009 Irish Times op-ed.

Aaronovitch, then at the Independent, proclaimed he would fight if asked by the government, while Andrew Marr writing in the Observer put forward “the Macbeth option: which is that we’re so steeped in blood we should go further” and “put in ground troops.”

With Blair basking in the liberal media's adoration after playing a leading role in the military campaign that pushed Serb forces out of Kosovo in June 1999, it is worth considering some of the longer-term ramifications of Nato's intervention.

It is clear the war's perceived success (rejected by Curtis and US dissident Noam Chomsky) emboldened Blair, likely increasing his messianic tendencies, which many believed played a crucial role in the invasion of Iraq four years later.

"It may well be he was actually drunk on his self-importance having had successes in Kosovo and Sierra Leone," Colonel Tim Collins, a senior figure in the army in 2003, commented when the Chilcot Inquiry published its findings. "He genuinely believed he could do no wrong."

Iain Duncan Smith came to a similar conclusion when he recounted a September 2002 meeting he had with Blair to Andrew Rawnsley for his 2010 book *The End Of The Party*.

"He'd decided this was a successful formula. He'd done Kosovo. He'd done Afghanistan. It was what he believed in," said the Tory Party leader at the time of the Iraq invasion.

Writing in the *Financial Times* in 2007, Quentin Peel makes the obvious connection:

"Kosovo was... a crucial moment in the development of the international vision... that eventually led to [Blair's] backing for the US-led invasion of Iraq" — an invasion, let's not forget, that was not authorised by the United Nations, just as the Kosovo intervention was also not backed by the UN.

As the title of Dr Hehir's *Irish Times* piece argued: *Nato's "Good War" In Kosovo Degraded International Law*.

There are other important links to the race to war in 2003.

"It was during the [Kosovo] war... that Blair and Campbell honed their PR machine and Blair's image as a humanitarian leader," asserted former International Development Secretary Clare Short in her 2004 book *An Honourable Deception?*

Noting how the Foreign Office had been sidelined in 1999, writing in *International Affairs* journal, Dr Oliver Daddow argued Kosovo was the point when Blair confirmed "that he did not need to rely on Whitehall's decision-making machinery for ideas or strategy."

The 2011 Nato war in Libya has also had a number of influential effects on subsequent conflicts.

Backed by around 97 per cent of British MPs and much of the liberal commentariat, the British intervention was given legal cover by the passing of UN Security Council resolution 1973, which authorised "all necessary measures" to protect civilians in Libya.

Though the resolution did not refer to regime change — illegal under international law — the

House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee's examination of the intervention in 2016 concluded the "limited intervention to protect civilians drifted into a policy of regime change by military means."

Soon after Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi was forced out of Tripoli, David Cameron and French President Nicolas Sarkozy made a triumphalist, political capital-boosting visit to the country in September 2011 (or so they thought). Russia, on the other hand, took an entirely different lesson from the war.



Quoting a senior Barack Obama administration official as saying Russian President Vladimir Putin is "obsessed" by the Nato-enabled overthrow and death of Gaddafi, Julia Ioffe recently argued in The Atlantic magazine that "regime change in Libya and Ukraine led to Russia propping up Bashar al-Assad in Syria."

Ioffe goes on to quote former US secretary of state John Kerry's chief of staff as characterising Putin's approach to Syria as "not one more."

A 2011 BBC article entitled Why China and Russia Rebuffed the West in Syria confirms this thesis. "Libya is perhaps the prime reason" behind Russia's vetoes at the UN on Syria, Jonathan Marcus notes.

"Both the Chinese and Russian governments seem to think that the West took advantage of [UN] resolution [1973] to intervene militarily in a Libyan civil war" and carry out regime change, he notes. "They are determined not to allow any similar resolution to go forward [on Syria]."

Nato's intervention in Libya also had an important influence on the Syrian rebels fighting to overthrow the Assad government. Writing about the UN's mediation efforts in the Syrian crisis, the academics Raymond Hinnebusch and William Zartman refer to "the opposition's unrealistic expectations" of the peace process in 2012: "During a visit to a Free Syrian Army unit, one UN official found that the Libyan precedent and anti-Assad Western rhetoric had convinced opposition fighters that Nato was going to intervene on their behalf."

According to the UN official, this was "not conducive to... serious engagement."

In his 2017 book *The Battle For Syria: International Rivalry In The New Middle East*, Chatham House's Dr Christopher Phillips highlights a similar dynamic with the opposition's regional supporters in 2012:

“Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey were convinced both that Assad was close to falling and that eventually the US would intervene as it had in Libya, and so saw no need to compromise.”

The Libyan intervention, then, was one of the reasons behind Russia’s large, obstructive role in Syria, and the decision by some opposition groups to shun negotiations aiming to end the war — two of the many reasons why the horrific conflict continues today.

So it goes. The ongoing North Korean crisis is inexorably linked with these events in the Middle East.

“North Korea learned from Iraq that Saddam Hussein’s mistake was he did not possess the weapons of mass destruction he was falsely accused of having. Libya taught a similar lesson,” Professor John Delury, a North Korean expert at Yonsei University Graduate School of International Studies, told the BBC in 2016.

According to a 2017 Guardian report, North Korean “state media frequently refers to their [Gadafi’s and Saddam Hussein’s] demise as proof that the US wolves are now at North Korea’s door.”

What these three examples show is that beyond the immediate crisis, Western military interventions have — often predictable — serious and widespread knock-on impacts that have been disastrous for the British public and the wider world.

Not to say anything about how the interventions often undermine the British government’s own interests and policy goals — Russia’s response to the Libyan intervention worked against British policy goals in Syria, for example.

We desperately need more critical and long-term thinking when the government tries, as it inevitably will, to gain public support for its next foreign war. Rebuilding and maintaining a popular and powerful anti-war movement is an essential first step to achieving this.

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