

Ethics and interventions, 1992–2001

9

Introduction

Arthur Balfour – Foreign Secretary from 1916–19 and author of the notorious 1917 Declaration (Chapter 3) – once declared that he would rather consult his valet than take advice from the Conservative Party conference. Balfour found it impossible to sustain this haughty attitude in practice; and since his time Foreign Secretaries have had no choice but to recognise the importance of a broadly supportive framework of domestic opinion, within their own parties and the electorate more generally. To take the most obvious examples, the retreat from Empire and the negotiation of membership of the EEC were operations which were conducted in a manner which took account of likely reactions from MPs and voters.

Timeline of domestic political developments

September 1992 Britain forced to withdraw from Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) of European Monetary System

July 1994 Tony Blair becomes Labour Party leader

June 1995 John Major resigns as Conservative Party leader to force his critics to 'put up or shut up'; stands for re-election and wins unconvincingly

May 1997 General election: landslide Labour victory; overall majority of 179

April 1999 Blair's Chicago speech on principles of 'liberal intervention'

In its dealings with the world beyond Europe, the second Major government was similar to its post-war predecessors. Its record was criticised in Parliament

and in the press, and in respect of international crises, like the conflict in the Balkans, its policy was shaped to a considerable degree by its perception of public opinion. However, British diplomats continued to feel that public opinion was one among numerous policy influences, in which their own responses to the situation in various countries mattered a great deal. Policy towards 'Europe' was a very different matter. Here, between 1992 and 1997 the government itself was seriously divided; and the Prime Minister was unable to pursue his preferred policy line because of obstruction from a relatively small Parliamentary faction, whose position was supported by powerful voices in the media.

Major's Maastricht misery

As we have seen, the Conservative victory in the general election of 1992 was decisive in terms of the votes it received (more than 14 million), but the party suffered a net loss of 40 seats compared to the previous contest of 1987, and its overall Parliamentary majority was cut to 21. In other words, if just 11 Conservative MPs felt strongly enough to oppose Major's policy towards the EU, the government could be outvoted in the House of Commons.

Even before the 1992 general election Major had delayed Parliamentary ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in case it exposed the divisions within his own party. After the election, events elsewhere ensured that Major's precarious Parliamentary position would be subjected to the maximum strain. In June 1992, by a margin of less than 50,000, Danish voters rejected the Maastricht Treaty in a referendum. A similar poll was scheduled to take place in France in September; global markets were unsettled by rumours that this might also have a negative outcome. The general uncertainty encouraged speculators to focus on the values of various currencies which had joined the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM). The Italian lira came under pressure and was duly devalued despite government support. The British pound sterling was the next in the firing line.

The lesson of the lira might have suggested that it would be worse than futile for the UK government to resist the message of the markets. A devaluation of the currency might even generate some economic benefits, making British manufactured goods more competitive and allowing a reduction of interest rates. However, Major himself had advocated membership of the ERM during his brief spell as Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1990, so the maintenance of the value of the pound at the agreed level was a matter of personal prestige. In addition, Britain had just taken its turn to adopt the Presidency of the EU (which rotated among member states every six months); to say the least, this would be an inopportune moment for the markets to pass a tacit vote of no confidence in the country's economic management. Finally, successive devaluations of the pound sterling had been greeted in the British media as national humiliations,

which tended to be followed quite swiftly by election defeats for the party which happened to be in office at the time. The howls of British anguish ultimately arose not from an 'objective' assessment of the nation's economic needs at any given time, but rather from perceived affronts to the post-war narrative of Britain's continuing great-power status. Before the ERM crisis of 1992 John Major had proved unwilling to accept that story as the guiding principle for government decision-making. However, in September 1992 he suddenly seemed far more susceptible to its persuasive power – not least because the country which was best-placed to alleviate pressure on the pound sterling happened to be Germany, which had established high interest rates in response to its own domestic economic situation, in the wake of reunification. Despite Major's attempts to build a constructive relationship with Helmut Kohl, the German Bundesbank was under a constitutional obligation to conduct monetary policy in accordance with national priorities, and duly refused to cut its interest rates in order to help the British.

Unable to sustain the value of the pound despite considerable expenditure and several panic-induced interest-rate rises, the government admitted defeat on the morning of 16 September 1992. In economic terms, 'Black Wednesday' (as it soon became known) was actually beneficial to Britain. It was, however, a disastrous blow to John Major's authority. Having posed as a refreshing alternative to Mrs Thatcher's autocratic style, he was now easily portrayed as an inadequate Prime Minister who allowed other European leaders to use him as a doormat. In these circumstances it was only natural for a Conservative Party leader with an interest in self-preservation to revert to the seemingly successful formula of his predecessor. Whatever else it might have done, Black Wednesday turned John Major from a Euro-friendly political leader into someone whose default response to any dilemma within the EU was to assert 'British interests' (as his increasingly Europhobic party perceived them) in the hope that this pugnacious stance would generate sufficient positive publicity to efface the memory of September 1992.

Among its other consequences, Black Wednesday was a serious setback to Major's hopes of securing Parliamentary approval for the Maastricht Treaty. Parliamentary proceedings, which had been suspended in the wake of the Danish referendum, resumed in November 1992 after a government motion to that effect had passed by just three votes. Backbench Conservatives tabled numerous amendments, delaying the passage of the bill until July 1993. But Major's ordeal was not over, since the legislation included a clause which ensured a Parliamentary debate on the treaty's Social Chapter, from which Britain had been allowed to opt out. After the debate, on 22 July, a government motion was defeated by eight votes. Major prevailed in a vote of confidence the following day, but the man who had allegedly won game, set and match at Maastricht was now firing every shot into the net or over the baseline. Black Wednesday had permanently tarnished his reputation for economic competence, and the Maastricht debates made him look incapable of managing his party. On 23 July, after winning

the vote of confidence, he told a reporter that he only refrained from sacking disloyal members of his Cabinet because he did not want three more 'bastards' causing trouble on the backbenches.

Mad cows

Major's new stance towards Britain's European partners was, on the face of it, not entirely devoid of promise; he could claim that he was merely reverting to the uncooperative stance of all his predecessors since Edward Heath. However, in the years since Mrs Thatcher had offended the sensibilities of European leaders by demanding her country's money back European diplomacy had become much more demanding for a Conservative Prime Minister. On the one hand, the EEC which had finally agreed to a compromise with Mrs Thatcher was now a far more confident EU, talking of a multi-speed 'Europe' in which recalcitrant countries like Britain could be left behind, at considerable cost in terms of future influence. On the other, thanks at least in part to Lady Thatcher's unbridled verbal interventions since 1990, an increasing proportion of Conservative MPs and grass-roots supporters was now promoting policy positions based on a mixture of free-market economics and national assertiveness – a combination which was difficult to sustain under rational scrutiny but which amounted to an intoxicating brew when turned into simplistic soundbites by tabloid newspapers. In short, having decided to abandon his emollient attitude towards 'Europe', Major found himself trying to land a simultaneous blow on targets which were rapidly moving apart – 'Eurocrats', who were too complacent to be intimidated by British bluster, and Conservative Eurosceptics, who could no longer be appeased by anything short of a direct threat to leave the EU.

Given his domestic weakness Major was ill equipped for any serious confrontation; to the European allies he had alienated, he was like Margaret Thatcher without the handbag. All too obviously, that deadly accessory was still in the hands of its original owner, who was wielding it against her successor with increasing savagery. In 1994 Major was forced to abandon an attempt to revise the EU's voting procedures to make it easier for Britain to block proposed legislation, and he vetoed one candidate for President of the EU Commission only to hand the job to another (Luxembourg's Jacques Santer) who was at least as equally determined to promote a federalist agenda. After eight Conservative MPs defied the government in a vote on the EU budget Major tried to impose some discipline by depriving them of the party whip. This merely elevated them to the status of martyrs, and a ninth MP resigned the whip in sympathy.

In June 1995 Major resorted to the ultimate gamble, resigning as party leader (though not as Prime Minister) in the hope of persuading critics of his European policy to 'put up or shut up'. Unexpectedly, a challenger did emerge from the

Cabinet ranks – John Redwood, a cerebral Eurosceptic with limited charisma. Major won the ensuing leadership election by 218 to 89 votes, and his allies tried to present this as a remarkable endorsement. Those with a true appreciation of the contest could only regard it as a further blow to his authority.

However, Major had yet to reach the dregs of his European cup. Rightly alarmed that the cattle disease Bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) could spread to humans through infected meat, in 1996 (ten years after the disease had first appeared in the UK) the EU banned the export of British beef. While BSE was not confined to Britain, the outbreak was far more serious there than in other European countries, at least in part because of inadequate oversight of animal husbandry. Far from acknowledging that the EU was taking (somewhat belated) action in response to a potentially catastrophic threat to human health, Major tried to blackmail his supposed partners by obstructing the EU policy-making process until the ban was lifted. This was not just a case of shooting the messenger; rather, Major was standing at the scene of a serious accident and training machine guns on the arriving ambulance crew. Predictably, his gambit misfired and Britain was forced to resume its strategy of reluctant cooperation with EU institutions.

With each successive episode of unavailing protest against EU decisions, Major provided unwitting authorisation to the Eurosceptic position, which already enjoyed ample support from the tabloid press and from Lady Thatcher. Unfortunately, his most senior (and most reliable) Cabinet colleagues were throwbacks to the time when the Conservatives had been happy to accept the (somewhat misleading) title of ‘the party of Europe’. Indeed, up until the 1997 general election defeat, which put Major out of his protracted misery, the Chancellor of the Exchequer Kenneth Clarke and the Deputy Prime Minister Michael Heseltine were arguing that Britain should join the projected European single currency. Long before this, however, Britain’s European partners had begun to crave a change of government. In the 1997 general election campaign Major ended up pleading with the warring factions within his party to give him some respite in order to focus his energies on the fight against the Labour Opposition; true to form, his appeal fell on deaf ears.

‘Punching above our weight’

Away from ‘Europe’ Major’s foreign policy record was more respectable; but there was still some trace of a pattern in which the Prime Minister faltered after a decent start. Relations with the US, for example, were soon placed on a more sustainable, businesslike footing after the unwholesome intensity of Reagan–Thatcher. In George H Bush, Major found a pragmatic operator of a similar stripe. By the time of the 1992 British general election it was widely felt that the UK had shored up its position as the key European ally of the US.

However, in November 1992 Bush was defeated by the Democrat Bill Clinton – another politician who was unencumbered with heavy ideological baggage but who was very different from Bush in terms of background and personal characteristics. It emerged that British Conservatives – now perceiving themselves as part of a transatlantic tribe of anti-progressives – had assisted the Bush campaign, and that this help had extended to a civil-service trawl through UK records in the hope of finding evidence that Clinton had misbehaved during his spell as a Rhodes scholar at Oxford during the 1960s. It was impossible to imagine similar services being offered by the Conservative Party of Harold Macmillan to help the Republican Richard Nixon beat the Democrat John F Kennedy in 1960. But if such a thing had occurred, there would have been good reasons for Kennedy to swallow his resentment since warm relations with Britain were so clearly beneficial to American policy. By 1992 it was not difficult for Americans to regard Britain as an expendable ally, whose diplomatic slights would be resented and punished.

Although Clinton chose not to make too much of this ghastly blunder, a White House foreign policy adviser claimed that ‘Clinton hates Major’ (Baylis, 1997). After this unpromising opening the relationship between the leaders could never go beyond conventional cordiality. However, cooperation with other US officials proceeded without noticeable interruption, at least partly thanks to the diplomatic skills of Major’s Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd. The product of public school and Oxford, Hurd had worked in the Foreign Office before standing for Parliament. He was a skilled linguist and a former aide to Edward Heath – attributes which had a roughly equal propensity to stir Margaret Thatcher’s suspicions. As a result, Hurd’s promotion to his natural berth as Foreign Secretary had to wait until Thatcher had drained the pool of rival candidates (plumping for John Major as successor to Sir Geoffrey Howe in 1989 as her last hope of thwarting Hurd).

Despite their sharply contrasting backgrounds – and the fact that they had been rival candidates to succeed Thatcher in 1990 – Major and Hurd quickly established a relationship of mutual trust. In January 1992, while the government was basking in Major’s early successes in the Gulf and at Maastricht, Hurd wrote an article for the *Daily Telegraph* in which he claimed that:

In recent years Britain has punched above her weight in the world. We intend to keep it that way. Britain plays a central role in world affairs. We owe this in part to our history, but we continue to earn it through active diplomacy and a willingness to shoulder our share of international responsibilities.

(quoted in Wallace, 1994, 292–3)

The ‘punching above our weight’ remark has become something of a cliché in discussions of Britain’s role in international affairs. In its true context it could be

seen as an attempt by a skilled wordsmith to encapsulate Britain's position in a morale-boosting way which also conveyed a coded warning to the Treasury against cuts in the FCO's budget. However, in the boxing world contestants who punch above their weight tend to end up on the canvas, regardless of nimble footwork or well-aimed jabs. It was certainly open to sceptical readers of Hurd's article to suggest that it was time for Britain to give up an ultimately pointless attempt to defy its physical limitations. In his article Hurd explicitly accepted that Britain's 'central role in world affairs' was a product of the past. Why try to maintain this role, which entailed considerable expenditure on the upkeep of grand embassies and their associated staff?

From the perspective presented in this book, Hurd's article is noteworthy as an attempt to reconcile the main post-war narratives relating to British foreign policy. On the one hand, 'punching above our weight' is an explicit acceptance of the country's decline since 1945; it would never have occurred to Ernest Bevin, for example, to concede that other states were weightier. One might have expected Hurd to put a positive spin on Britain's new role as a European power, especially since he was a 'Heathite' who had been repulsed by Thatcher's Euroscepticism. However, even Hurd could not withstand the potency of the Churchillian great-power argument. Britain, it transpired, had a *duty* to persevere with its global role; and it deserved to do so because power should not be measured in crude material terms. Morality matters too; and this factor ensured Britain's continuing place at diplomacy's 'top table'.

Bosnia

Hurd announced his resignation from the government in July 1995, on the day after John Major triggered a Conservative leadership contest (see above). By that time, Major's government had been poleaxed by dissident MPs, who, thanks to the small Parliamentary majority secured in 1992, genuinely *did* punch far beyond their weight.

Hurd's departure also coincided almost exactly with the worst war crime committed in Europe since 1945, when an estimated 8,000 Muslim men and boys were butchered in the Bosnian town of Srebrenica, which was supposed to be under UN protection. This was one of many atrocities in the ongoing conflict within the former Yugoslavia, which had begun to splinter in 1991. The subsequent international outcry – seconded energetically by Lady Thatcher – precipitated NATO air strikes against Bosnian Serb forces, which had pursued a policy of 'ethnic cleansing' in pursuit of their goal of incorporating Bosnia within an enlarged Serbia. The strikes soon brought an end to the conflict, and a ceasefire was agreed in October 1995, followed by a treaty signed in Paris in December.

Britain's initial response to the crisis in the former Yugoslavia was widely criticised as inadequate, in keeping with its hesitant performance during the preceding crisis in Croatia, where Germany took the leading role. Major and Hurd accepted the case for humanitarian assistance to the predominantly Muslim Bosnian government but based their approach on the need to *contain* the conflict, rather than supporting initiatives aimed at bringing it to an end. Indeed, they strongly opposed the lifting of an arms embargo, even though the Bosnian Serbs were much better equipped than Muslim forces. In particular, the British government resisted the American proposal ('lift and strike') to supply the Bosnian army with weapons and attack the Serbs from the air. The British felt that the war could not be ended without the commitment of ground troops, which none of its NATO allies was prepared to countenance; meanwhile, its own forces conducting humanitarian missions in Bosnia would be in serious jeopardy.

In his memoirs Major continued to argue that British policy had been vindicated. The air strikes had only brought peace, he felt, because by September 1995 other factors had fallen into place (including the availability of a viable plan for a post-war settlement). 'It is bizarre', he wrote, 'that in the popular imagination British policy was seen as a callous washing of hands in the face of the nightly suffering of the innocent on the nation's television screens' (Major, 1999, 545, 547). His reference to television coverage, however, only explained why his cautious policy had attracted so much criticism.

Rather than being hard-hearted or unduly calculating, Major and Hurd are more appropriately indicted for standing out against some key assumptions arising from the idea of a new world order, reinforced by images from the 1991 Gulf War which showcased the terrific power (and apparent precision) of air strikes to a global television audience. From this perspective, it was easy to assume that aggressors in any part of the world could be repulsed by the use of 'smart' weapons, deployed by service personnel who were too distant from the conflict zone to fear retaliation. In other words, it now seemed possible to wage 'war without tears' (at least on the interventionist side). In addition to such complacent assumptions, Major and Hurd had to confront the implications of 'the CNN effect', which meant that heinous war crimes could be reported almost instantly and through vivid electronic imagery. In combination, these developments increased the likelihood that British decision-makers would come under pressure to intervene in international conflicts – and that the public mood would change overnight if the 'wrong people' – civilians or UN peacekeepers – became victims of 'surgical strikes'.

Superficially, at least, it could be argued that Major and Hurd had tried to implement a Realist strategy in response to the Bosnian crisis and had come to grief because (like academic analysts who adopt a Realist outlook) they had been insensitive to public opinion at home and abroad (Chapter 1). As usual, the true picture is more complicated (Controversy 9.1). In fact, both Hurd and

Controversy 9.1 Realism and British policy towards Bosnia

In his memoirs John Major wrote that:

Our policy had to be dictated by two concerns: to save as many lives as we could while the slaughter continued, and to do all in our power to limit the conflict. . . . At the time, many politicians and commentators argued that this decision was mistaken, that Britain had no strategic interest in Bosnia. I disagreed. I had no doubt that there were sound policy reasons to justify sending in our troops.

(Major, 1999, 535)

For scholars of international relations, this is a fascinating passage. From a broadly Realist perspective, it is noteworthy that Major asserts the importance of Bosnia to Britain's strategic interests. However, as Chapter 1 shows, Realists regard ethical considerations as secondary (at best) in the making of foreign policy. Yet Major seems to have had a different order of priorities; even if humanitarian concerns were not his *primary* motivation, they were on a par with other 'sound policy reasons' which justified intervention. One might wonder whether Major's calculations would have been the same without the CNN effect – a suspicion which is deepened by British policy during the Rwandan genocide (see p 250), which did not command much media attention until the worst of the slaughter was over. Nevertheless, on his own testimony Major seems to have accepted that the situation in Bosnia affected Britain's national interest at least in part because of the moral concerns it raised, and this attitude is very difficult to square with academic understandings of Realism.

In his memoirs Douglas Hurd quotes an undated memorandum to the Prime Minister (presumably written some time in 1994) in which he argued that 'more than any country, at some cost to our reputation, we have been the realists in this. We should continue to insist on realistic objectives and timetables' (Hurd, 2003, 467). This is another thought-provoking passage for theorists of international relations. Although Hurd's approach to the Balkan crisis is often interpreted (and criticised) as a manifestation of Realism, it seems odd that a Realist of this kind would persist in a policy line 'at some cost to our reputation', since the maintenance of an unclouded reputation is an obvious Realist objective unless the issue has a direct effect on national survival (which was clearly not the case in respect of British policy towards Bosnia).

On reflection, it appears that in this memorandum Hurd was using the words 'realists' and 'realistic' in their more common, non-academic sense,

i.e. he was trying to reassure Major that British policy had been guided by a careful calculation of the various goals that could be achieved (including humanitarian ones), rather than by wishful thinking. As such, Hurd's memorandum to Major can be translated as a way of saying that 'in this crisis, Britain is actuated by a mixture of motives, which include the possibility that national security might be affected as well as humanitarian concerns. More than any other country, we have been consistent in proposing and opposing measures which seem most likely to promote these objectives'. This coincides with Hurd's own evaluation of British policy towards Bosnia as an attempt to 'balance' the promptings of 'Realism' and 'idealism' (Hurd, 1997, 127). This, though, was written before the intervention in Kosovo (see pp 263–7), which reinforced the impression that diplomacy backed with a concrete threat of military action would have saved thousands of Bosnian lives.

After quoting from his 1994 memorandum, in his memoirs Hurd notes that 'part of realism was maintaining the Atlantic Alliance, and that meant keeping our disagreement with the Americans within bounds' (Hurd, 2003, 467). In this passage Hurd seems to be using the word 'realism' in its academic sense, i.e. that Britain's national interest, narrowly conceived, is best served by 'maintaining the Atlantic Alliance', even if in specific instances US policy happens to be wrong-headed. But if Hurd really accepted the highly questionable view that keeping in step with the Americans should be an overriding priority for British Foreign Secretaries, he was taking a considerable risk in opposing the preferred US option of 'lift and strike', especially when other European powers could be expected to take advantage of any cooling in the 'special relationship'. Fortunately for Hurd, although he accepts in his memoirs that Bosnia created 'strains' in the alliance, 'the leaders on both sides of Atlantic kept them under control' (Hurd, 2003, 467).

Major were taking a close interest in public opinion and were well aware that they were out of step. As early as July 1992 Hurd reflected in his diary on 'a deeply gloomy day. The clamour and emotional pressure for intervention growing fast here and especially in the US. Our prudent stance looks feeble and inhumane' (Hurd, 2003, 454–5). Presumably, Hurd was unaware that he had echoed almost exactly a passage in another diary – this time the fictional one of James Hacker, the central character in the satirical television programme *Yes, Prime Minister*, who had mused that 'It doesn't do the government any good to look heartless and feeble simultaneously' (Lynn and Jay, 1986, 212). As Hacker and Hurd both knew, domestic perceptions mattered, whether accurate or not. It also mattered that on this occasion the US and the British government had

disagreed, and that the crisis had ended in a way which suggested that the senior partner should pay less heed to Britain's advice in future.

Hurd also faced bitter criticism for his stance towards Rwanda, where around 800,000 members of the minority Tutsi population were slaughtered by the Hutu majority between April and July 1994. On this occasion Britain's failure to act was less easily defended, which probably explains why the country's name does not feature in the index of John Major's memoirs. Blanket television coverage rammed home the geographical reality that Bosnia was situated on Europe's doorstep; but if reporters were not physically present, Western policy towards Rwanda could be (and was) justified on the lines used by Neville Chamberlain in relation to Czechoslovakia, that the Tutsi were a faraway people of whom little was known. However, members of the British Intelligence community were aware of dangerous tensions prior to the Rwandan massacre; and if it was really true that Britain 'punched above its weight' as a member of the UN Security Council, it could have done something to prevent this from becoming one of the most discreditable episodes in UN history (including attempts to deny that butchery on this scale could be defined as 'genocide', an exercise in verbal pedantry which was obviously prompted by a shared concern among members of the international community for the avoidance of intervention). It would be wrong to single out Britain in this dismal story, although it is entirely proper to note that its role was characterised by a singular lack of heroism.

Dams and lies

In his memoirs Hurd admits to feeling 'deeply dismayed' in April 1994, when the Rwandan massacres began (Hurd, 2003, 495). However, he was not referring to Rwanda but to the news that the government's decision to confirm funding for the construction of a dam in Malaysia might be open to legal challenge. Work on the dam, at Pergau in Kelantan state, had begun in 1991, with the British multinational company Balfour Beatty taking a leading role. The UK government's contribution to the costs was £239 million, initially allocated from the Overseas Development budget. However, when the deal was negotiated between Margaret Thatcher and the Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir the latter agreed to purchase British-made defence equipment.

Confronted by concerns about the cost of the deal in 1991, Hurd (with Major's approval) decided that Britain could not withdraw the funding without significant loss of face. Hurd was unaware of the apparent link with defence sales, but he would have been rather naïve – not a trait readily associated with seasoned diplomats – if he had felt that Thatcher's government would have made such a generous contribution without some quid pro quo. The concerns expressed in April 1994 turned out to be wholly justified: a subsequent judicial

review held that Hurd's decision to proceed with the funding had been illegal, since it was not intended to assist the Malaysian people on either humanitarian or economic grounds.

Hurd's memoirs betray his lasting discomfort concerning Pergau; he contrives to discuss the affair without reminding the reader of the enormous sum involved. It was not very consoling that, ultimately, this was an instance of 'blowback' from the Thatcher years, during which the British armament industry was the recipient of numerous contracts secured on dubious terms. In 1996 another judicial review, headed by the respected Lord Justice Scott, published its findings. This brought a close to an ignominious saga which (like Pergau) originated in 1988.

The subject of Scott's review was the export of sophisticated machine tools to Iraq by a Coventry-based firm, Matrix Churchill, which had itself been purchased by the Iraqi government. Equipment which might be used by Iraq for the production of weapons had been subject to export restrictions – until the fateful year of 1988, when the government relaxed its guidelines without taking the trouble to inform Parliament. In the wake of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait certain government departments were less inclined to take a *laissez-faire* approach to the export trade with Iraq; and the directors of Matrix Churchill were duly prosecuted by Customs and Excise. The trial collapsed when government collusion was exposed, leading to the establishment of the Scott inquiry.

Compared to the petty corruption of the Pergau Dam affair, 'arms to Iraq' amounted to a deadly indictment of the Thatcher government's habitual tendency to prioritise short-term economic goals, whatever the cost in terms of British foreign policy or indeed the safety of British citizens who might be exposed to danger in future conflicts. As Scott pointed out, the issues went to the heart of the conduct of British government – particularly in relation to the crucial principle that the government should be held to account for its decisions. In this instance Parliament had not been informed of revised policy guidelines – indeed, when the issue was raised MPs had been *misinformed*. Regrettably, though, if the scandal had been exposed back in 1988, it would probably have passed without media comment, since Iraq was not regarded as a significant threat to British interests at the time and (despite his penchant for slaughtering his own citizens) Saddam Hussein had yet to be demonised. By 1996, although some ministers who had been involved in the deception were still in office, the person who had presided over the original misdemeanours was out of office and devoting her energies to a lucrative series of speaking engagements. Nevertheless, a brilliant speech by Labour's Shadow Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, ensured that the Scott Report took a prominent place in a more general indictment of the Major government, which long before 1996 had cemented an indelible reputation for political ineptitude and public misconduct. The government won the Parliamentary vote after the debate on 'arms to Iraq'; but when the public was

polled at the end of February 1996 only 8 per cent believed that the government had handled the Scott Inquiry well, against 69 per cent who thought it had performed badly (Riddell, 1996).

In 1994 the eminent academic William (later Lord) Wallace had presented a preliminary verdict on the Major government. In his view, it ‘had no foreign policy; no sense of Britain’s place in the world or how best to use diplomacy to achieve national objectives’ (Wallace, 1994, 299). Britons who were hoping for clarity in these crucial respects could only share the feelings of many people working within the EU, who longed for a change of government at the next British general election in the expectation that ‘things can only get better’.

Labour, 1983–92

The general election of 1983 represented the nadir of the post-war Labour Party. Under the leadership of Michael Foot and armed with a radical manifesto, the party polled only 27 per cent of the national vote, placing it just ahead of the alliance between the Liberal Party and the newly formed Social Democratic Party. Unusually for a general election campaign, foreign policy issues had featured prominently in pre-election debates, focusing on Labour’s most eye-catching proposals – the elimination of Britain’s nuclear arsenal and withdrawal from the EEC.

Labour’s defeat in 1983 was so crushing that the party was still nursing the wounds 11 years later, when Tony Blair became leader. The policy of withdrawal from the EEC had been jettisoned almost immediately after the election by Labour’s new leader, Neil Kinnock. However, the commitment to nuclear disarmament was retained. While electorally it appeared to alienate some voters within the Labour movement, it remained a key and popular pledge. Kinnock was especially keen to demonstrate that the policy would not harm the ‘special relationship’. To bolster his image and the credibility of his policy Kinnock travelled to Washington in early 1987 to meet President Reagan to explain Labour’s position. A disastrous visit ensued, during which Reagan broke with diplomatic protocol to criticise Labour’s defence policy in order to assist his friend Margaret.

During the election campaign of 1987 Kinnock was questioned on how Britain would defend itself without nuclear weapons. His response was portrayed by political opponents and a hostile print media as a recommendation of ‘guerrilla warfare’ against an occupying power. A second overwhelming election defeat meant that even the most ardent proponents of nuclear disarmament were forced to recognise that the policy was a liability. The commitment was eventually dropped in 1989 – ironically, just at the point that the Soviet Union ceased to be a military threat.

In the next general election campaign (1992) Labour argued for the maintenance of Britain's nuclear arsenal and supported its continued membership of the EEC (shortly to become the EU). These new policies promised to neutralise what had previously been electoral weaknesses for Labour, but the potential benefits were minimal since the party merely seemed to be playing catch-up with the Conservatives. In any case, foreign policy was only a significant electoral consideration when there was a sharp contrast between the platforms of the rival parties (as in 1983 and 1987).

The Blair era

Neil Kinnock resigned immediately after the 1992 general election; his successor, John Smith, was a more reassuring character who (unlike Kinnock) had served as a minister (from 1975 to 1979, with full Cabinet rank for the last few months of the Callaghan administration). Polling evidence suggests that Smith would have won the general election of 1997 comfortably; but he was a proponent of gradual change within the Labour Party, whereas his successor was an unflinching radical. When he was elected Labour leader in 1994, after Smith's premature death, Blair was 41 years old. He had been elected for the first time in the notorious 1983 general election but was unencumbered by the legacy of Labour's perceived failure. When it came to international relations and foreign policy Blair benefited from trends that favoured the Labour Party: the fallout from the ERM crisis allowed Labour to win a hearing for a more constructive approach towards 'Europe', and the *froideur* between Major and President Clinton allowed Blair's Labour Party to pose as the true guardians of the 'special relationship'.

Blair emerged as a significant political figure at a time when Britain's relationships with 'Europe' and the US seemed ready for reconfiguration in the context of a changing world order. The ending of the Cold War had freed the Labour Party from one of its persistent electoral handicaps – the sense that it was not sufficiently forceful in confronting the Soviet Union. The collapse of the familiar foe tempered some of the criticisms aimed at the Labour Party, while also reducing the electoral salience of defence issues. It seemed that Britain would engage in wars of choice in the future, rather than wars of survival. The British military could be reformed in an appropriate fashion. When the Major government commissioned a defence review in 1990 the resulting report, *Options for Change*, argued that a reduction in defence spending was possible. Debate on defence was now framed around the size and uses of an anticipated 'peace dividend'. Despite conflicts which demanded a significant military commitment – notably the Gulf War in 1991 – the defence budget began its gradual projected decline from 4 per cent of GDP in 1990 to less than 3 per cent by 2000. Given the unexpected liberation from the threat of nuclear annihilation, the Labour Party

suddenly enjoyed the option of a return to its policy of nuclear disarmament. However, this was eschewed by the party, which, perhaps understandably, was obsessed with the need to avoid another repetition of previous defeats rather than thinking creatively about the future.

Bill Clinton's victory over George Bush in the 1992 US Presidential election was a significant fillip for Labour, suggesting that 'progressive' forces could thrive in the post-Soviet new world order. The final advantage for the Labour Party arose from Britain's uncertain engagement with 'Europe'. Since 1983 there had been a thawing of relations between Labour and the EEC, in sharp contrast to the growing antagonism on the Conservative side. The switch from a policy of withdrawal to one of more than grudging acceptance was assisted by the appointment of the French Socialist Jacques Delors as President of the European Commission, and Delors' speech to the 1988 TUC conference threatened to turn a token kiss on the cheek into a full-on embrace. In the space of a decade the two main political parties in Britain had switched sides on the European debate; Labour appeared genuinely united behind a positive view of the EEC, while the Conservatives were giving the appearance of a bickering rabble.

The ethical dimension

The election of 1997 transformed the political landscape in Britain, almost, on this rare occasion, justifying the constitutional cliché that a government had secured a 'mandate' for its policy programme from the British people. Blair's New Labour secured an overall Parliamentary majority of 179 seats – the biggest majority held by any government since Baldwin's 1935 coalition.

While critics predicted that, in terms of domestic policy, Blair would merely be a more telegenic version of John Major, Robin Cook, the new Foreign Secretary, lost no time in putting his mark on his new workplace. Within two weeks of the election Cook had launched a new mission statement, establishing the parameters of New Labour's approach to foreign policy. Viewing the interdependent global order, Cook pronounced the priorities of 'security, prosperity and quality of life'. In sharp contrast to the Realist outlook of Douglas Hurd, Cook argued that the political values that shaped domestic policy should be replicated in the making of foreign policy: as he put it, 'political values cannot be left behind when we check in our passports to travel on diplomatic business'. Any foreign policy that Cook endorsed would promote British values:

Our foreign policy must have an ethical dimension and must support the demands of other peoples for the democratic rights on which we insist for ourselves.

(Cook, 1997)

The statement provoked widespread comment which was not invariably favourable. Cook was certainly not the first Foreign Secretary to enter office with high ambitions, but, as the *Economist* noted, the professionals were sceptical of 'the intrusion of morality into the hard business of foreign policy' (*Economist*, 1997). From their perspective, it seemed inevitable that the idealism of human rights promotion and arms embargos would soon be overtaken by 'events'. But in the early days of the new government it appeared that a number of circles could be squared. Crucially, far from having to contemplate a self-imposed choice between 'Europe' and the US, there was every chance that the new government could maintain good relations with both.

Robin Cook's mission statement reasserted a British commitment to the North Atlantic Alliance and made positive noises about the role that Britain could play in 'Europe'. By the end of May, changing the natural order of things, US President Clinton visited the new British Prime Minister, apparently on the assumption that this would help his profile back home.

While Blair's honeymoon with the British electorate lasted much longer than usual, Cook's attempt to give a new priority to ethical considerations quickly foundered. The first mishap came with the sale of military aircraft to Indonesia, a country ruled by a military dictatorship with a history of human rights abuses. The £160m order for sixteen Hawk fighter aircraft from British Aerospace had been agreed by the previous government. In July 1997, after consultation, the FCO stated that legal obstacles had prevented them from revoking the export licence. The new Foreign Secretary did not block the deal, but the government reaffirmed its opposition to the sale of equipment which could be used for repressive purposes. The reversal for Cook on Indonesia highlighted that the ethical dimension of foreign policy could easily conflict with other government priorities, notably the anxiety to protect the British arms industry, which was responsible for over 350,000 jobs and 3.3 per cent of Britain's total exports of finished manufactured goods. It was an effective economic sector with well-established Whitehall contacts. Indeed, in the case of Indonesia alone, between the election of the Labour government in 1997 and the imposition of an EU arms embargo in 1999, a further 111 arms-export licences were granted by the UK government (*Economist*, 1999). Cook and his supporters could argue that he had spoken of an ethical *dimension* to foreign policy, which was not the same as a promise to eschew *all* other considerations. However, the government's hyperactive spin doctors had given the impression that moral concerns would now be uppermost, implying that this government would be far more virtuous than its tawdry predecessors. Whatever it did for Britain's international image, the episode undoubtedly diminished Cook's public standing and reduced his authority within a government riven by personal rivalries.

The first weeks of the new government were marked by a more momentous development which illustrated the difficulty of including a significant ethical

dimension in foreign policy. On 1 July 1997, after a rather bathetic ceremony, the British ceded to China control of their prosperous Hong Kong colony. This was not a decision which could be attributed to the Labour Party, in either its 'old' or 'New' manifestations; the key development was a deal negotiated in 1982 by Mrs Thatcher and the Chinese government and enshrined in a Joint Declaration between the two governments in December 1984. Mrs Thatcher had entered the talks with reluctance, not least because of the apparent contrast between her approach to Hong Kong and her refusal to negotiate with Argentina during the Falklands Crisis. There was, in fact, a significant difference in the legal situation, since the Hong Kong colony (consisting of Hong Kong Island and Kowloon) was only viable thanks to the inclusion of the 'New Territories', which Britain acquired in 1898 on a 99-year lease. Even so, if China had been comparable to Argentina in its military capacity, the future of Hong Kong might have been a more problematic political issue. As it was, China held all the cards in the 1982 talks, and it was testimony to the skills of British diplomats (as well as the flexibility of their interlocutors) that, rather than proposing to absorb Hong Kong as if it had never been detached from their country, the Chinese recognised its distinctive developmental path in line with Deng Xiaoping's slogan 'one country, two systems'.

However, although it was wise to negotiate the basis for a handover well in advance, the agreement of the Joint Declaration left more than a decade before the Chinese took over in Hong Kong – allowing ample opportunity for discomfiting developments. The death throes of Soviet Communism were not necessarily a serious setback for the Chinese regime, whose relations with its supposed ideological ally had been equivocal at best. However, Mikhail Gorbachev's attempt to 'modernise' the Soviet system had foundered because of the difficulty of negotiating a course which would permit an element of economic liberalism without endangering the rule of a single party. China had embarked on a similar path, and many of its citizens accepted the argument (familiar among Western liberals) that economic and political freedom were inseparable. In April 1989 – weeks in advance of a scheduled visit by Gorbachev himself – up to 100,000 students marched on Beijing's Tiananmen Square to demand political reforms. The government response was initially ambiguous, but martial law was declared on 20 May 1989, and on 3 June soldiers began to fire on the protestors. The final death toll is disputed, but most reliable estimates indicate that thousands, rather than the officially admitted hundreds, were killed.

For the West – and for the British in particular, given the impending Hong Kong handover – the Tiananmen Square massacre ushered numerous chickens home to roost. Had the repression been authorised by a favoured anti-communist regime during the Cold War – for example, had it been instigated by Mrs Thatcher's close personal friend General Pinochet of Chile – the British government would have treated it as something like a tragic traffic accident. Public

expressions of concern would have been issued alongside more ‘understanding’ private messages. Since this was China rather than Chile, Lady Thatcher expressed her ‘revulsion and outrage’, but the government confirmed that the Hong Kong timetable would not be affected.

The awkward truth for the British was that, in the eyes of the Tiananmen Square demonstrators, the prevailing political system in Hong Kong was scarcely preferable to that of one-party China. The practice of ruling the colony without consulting its citizens was reflected in Mrs Thatcher’s negotiations of 1982, in which the people of Hong Kong were not represented. Belatedly, the British came to the view that it would have been advisable to let democratic institutions take root in Hong Kong well in advance of the handover; when they had enjoyed the opportunity, however, they had let it slip precisely because, like the Chinese, they had preferred to keep decisions within a (very) confined circle. In the years between Tiananmen Square and 1997 the last Governor of Hong Kong, the ex-Conservative minister Chris Patten, tried to make up the lost ground, only to be subjected to personal abuse by the Chinese, who were well aware that (like the British in general) he was acting in accordance with an ethical narrative of Britain’s imperial role, which bore an uneasy relationship to the practical record.

Tony Blair was present for what Prince Charles scornfully dubbed as the ‘Great Chinese Takeaway’. To the relief of officials, even in private discussions with Chinese leaders he emphasised that the handover provided an opportunity for a ‘new start’ in the relationship between Britain and China and made only ‘a very brief mention of human rights’ (Campbell, 2011, 77).

Blair in office: the domestic and European balancing act

The ability of British premiers to influence international agendas in the post-war period relies on a combination of factors, not least of which is their relative domestic strength. Margaret Thatcher, throughout her premiership, commanded comfortable majorities in the House of Commons, providing her with a solid base from which to engage with international relations. In turn, Thatcher used the international arena to burnish her domestic image. The electoral landslide of 1997 provided Tony Blair with a similar platform to build his international image but, as with Thatcher, domestic politics was an ever present consideration.

Blair had taken full advantage of Conservative divisions over ‘Europe’, arguing that the Major government had thrown away the chance to take a positive role. Under more vigorous leadership Britain would engage and help reform the EU. For example, Labour committed itself to signing up to the Social Chapter of the Maastricht Treaty. This was an endorsement of the ‘social Europe’ that

Jacques Delors had used to bridge the divide between Brussels and the British Labour movement in the late 1980s. However, Major's difficulties over 'Europe' were not entirely the product of his own ineptitude or even of a Conservative propensity for deadly infighting. The British public appeared resistant to the benefits of the EU, particularly its plans for a single currency; and this mood was cultivated by sections of the press which had various self-interested motives for promoting Europhobia. Having courted media proprietors (notably the Australian-born US citizen Rupert Murdoch) so assiduously since 1994, Blair was reluctant to risk losing their goodwill over an issue which was likely to tax even his legendary powers of persuasion. Therefore New Labour attempted to navigate a 'Third Way' between the scepticism of the Conservative Party and the general positivity offered by Britain's other significant political force, the Liberal Democrats.

Thus, in its 1997 manifesto, New Labour promised that in adopting the Social Chapter it would 'promote employability and flexibility, not high social costs'. This caveat indicated that Blair sought a leading role within the EU while stopping short of a full-hearted endorsement of the European project. The election campaign took place less than two years before the scheduled introduction of a single European currency. From the wording of the manifesto, and comments during the election campaign, it was clear that Britain would not be joining the first wave of nations signing up to the single currency, due to be introduced on 1 January 1999. Not ruling out future adoption of the euro, and indeed pledging that a New Labour government would play a full role in planning for the new currency, the manifesto also followed the Conservatives in promising that no decision would be taken without a referendum. This carefully crafted position could not disguise the real meaning of New Labour policy: the initial phase of the most significant project in the history of European cooperation would go ahead without the British.

Blair was instinctively pro-European. Even when the official policy of the Labour Party had advocated withdrawal from the EEC, Blair had spoken in favour of Britain maintaining its membership (Seldon, 2004, 81). He entered office with the backing of a large Parliamentary majority that supported closer ties with European institutions. But the decision to join a European single currency was not straightforward. Apart from widespread opposition within the public and the press, there were also practical questions to address. The manifesto commitment that a referendum would ultimately decide if Britain joined entailed a delicate tactical calculation. Any referendum would have to take place after a subsequent general election to avoid it becoming a plebiscite on the government of the day, rather than the issue at hand. There was also a technical calculation, which limited the scope for immediate action, since expert opinion judged that the British economy was not 'in convergence' with the European states joining the euro in the first wave. Then there were the practical considerations

of what would be required for Britain to change its currency. This final fact alone made adoption of the euro in 1999 highly unlikely. Taking all these factors into account, the earliest realistic date for a referendum on the euro would be after a general election held either in 2001 or 2002.

The prospect of Britain joining the European currency during New Labour's first term was ended in October 1997, following a chaotic period of contradictory 'official' briefings by rival teams of spin doctors. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, had been broadly in favour of euro membership, but the experience of office induced second thoughts. The adoption of the euro would ultimately mean a transfer of economic powers away from London, something that any Chancellor was unlikely to relish. Brown, whose influence over domestic policy extended far beyond the Treasury's usual remit, was in no hurry to divest himself of his dominant position. While Brown was growing more sceptical about the euro Blair had remained positive, and Robin Cook had also begun to appreciate the advantage of closer ties with 'Europe'. A compromise was necessary, ruling out euro membership in the short term while allowing Blair to reassure his EU colleagues that Britain would not revert to its former role of an 'awkward partner'. Presenting the agreed policy to Parliament, Brown described the decision on the euro as 'the single most important question the country is likely to face in our generation'. He established five economic tests that would have to be satisfied before Britain could contemplate holding a referendum on the single European currency. While effectively ruling out membership for the current Parliament, Brown's tests had been designed to keep the issue under the Treasury's control, making the Chancellor, rather than the Prime Minister (let alone the Foreign Secretary), the ultimate arbiter of this key policy decision. Brown was like a university lecturer who reserves the right to reinterpret the wording of his own exam questions in order to ensure that his students either passed or failed. It was not fanciful to depict Tony Blair as the unfortunate student whose career prospects could be helped or blighted according to Brown's fluctuating mood. As a senior official subsequently reflected: 'I don't think any of us realised at the time, that October would be such a profound turning-point in the whole Euro story' (Seldon, 2004, 327).

With hindsight, if New Labour was to tackle the euro issue it would have been better to start work without delay. In the first months of the new government, Blair commanded unprecedented levels of support. In September 1997 his approval rating was recorded at 93 per cent, making him the 'most popular democratic politician in history' (Castle and Routledge, 1997). It could not last, but this would have been the time to push the case for 'Europe'. As it was, with membership of the currency ruled out, Blair sought other routes to European influence, particularly in the area of defence and foreign policy. At Saint-Malo in December 1998 the French and British governments signed a Joint Declaration on European Defence, committing the EU to develop a military capability which

would operate in circumstances where NATO intervention was inappropriate. The Saint-Malo agreement held out the prospect of closer European cooperation in a sphere where the UK could play a very prominent role. However, the security developments in the years immediately following 1998 offered little opportunity for the new capability to be utilised.

Overall, with regard to 'Europe' the record of New Labour's first term resembled that of the Major government between 1990 and 1992. In both instances the Prime Minister made positive noises about integration, but these stated intentions were thwarted by circumstances. The obvious difference was that John Major led a deeply divided party, whereas there were few dissenters in Labour ranks, and even if they had been more numerous, they could not have endangered Tony Blair's gargantuan Parliamentary majority. With this context in mind, Blair can actually be seen as a more recalcitrant partner than Major. The latter secured an opt-out on the single currency at Maastricht, and, despite his obvious advantages during his first term, Blair acted on it by retaining the pound sterling. New Labour did accept the Social Chapter, which Major had rejected, but that decision was unproblematic because it enjoyed considerable support from Labour voters (and the trade unions), whereas Major's backbench tormentors would have opposed it on ideological grounds even if it had not emanated from Brussels. As if to compensate for their acceptance of 'social Europe', Blair and Brown lost no opportunity to deliver unwelcome sermons on the superiority of thinly regulated Anglo-American capitalism – a line of argument that was at least as irritating to European audiences as John Major's 'us against them' rhetoric. Against this background, Saint-Malo looks like a radical attempt by Blair to exploit his popularity at home in order to promote integration; equally, though, it can be interpreted as a (belated) move to shore up European security after the end of the Cold War, amid well-founded expectations that the US would now shift its attention to other global theatres. Certainly, Saint-Malo suggested that Blair's Britain was sidling towards the acceptance of a European 'destiny'. But the impression that the UK was finally finding a role remained vulnerable to 'events' – and in Blair's second term these came thick and fast.

Bridging the Atlantic

While Blair's ambitions in 'Europe' were obstructed by various factors, prospects for an improved relationship with the US were promising. The terminology of the 'special relationship' that seemed so inappropriate in the Major years was resuscitated by the shared ideological vision and apparent personal chemistry of Clinton and Blair. When Blair visited Washington in 1996 the New Labour leader rapidly established a rapport with Clinton in discussions which focused on political strategy more than traditional foreign policy (Riddell, 2003, 68). Apart

from the natural inclination of British political elites to take much greater interest in American politics than those of neighbouring European states, Blair found in Clinton someone who was equally keen to establish a reputation for ‘progressive’ thinking. It was an unsettling shift, from the right-wing crusaders Reagan and Thatcher to the new firm of Blair and Clinton, purveyors of high-sounding rhetoric from an imprecise position on the centre-left. But whatever their Third Way really amounted to, the fact that they both supported the slogan provided a promising basis for cooperation.

For Blair, the Third Way had an obvious application to foreign policy; it meant that instead of having to choose between the US and the EU, Britain could be best friends with both. In London in 1997 Clinton felt emboldened to articulate the position of most (if not all) of his post-war predecessors: ‘It is good for the US to have a Britain that is strong in Europe and strong in its relations with the US’. Blair often returned to this theme, declaiming in January 2003 that:

there is no greater error in international politics than to believe that strong in Europe means weaker with the US. The roles reinforce each other. . . . [Britain] can indeed help to be a bridge between the US and Europe and such understanding is always needed. Europe should partner the US not be its rival.

(Blair, 2003)

It all sounded very sensible, but as in other areas it proved more difficult to match rhetoric with reality.

The first test of Blair’s balancing act came soon after his 1997 election victory. Since August 1990 Iraq had created its own subset of foreign policy issues for the UN and the permanent members of its Security Council. The ambiguous denouement of the Gulf War in 1991 had left Saddam Hussein in power in Iraq, badly damaged but potentially even more dangerous as a result. Anticipating this eventuality, the ceasefire agreements, codified in UN Security Council Resolution 687, had called on Iraq to:

accept the destruction, removal, or rendering harmless, under international supervision of . . . [a]ll chemical and biological weapons and all stocks of agents . . . [and] all ballistic missiles with a range greater than 150 kilometres.

In addition, Iraq would ‘agree not to acquire or develop nuclear weapons or nuclear-weapons-usable-material’ (www.un.org/Depts/unmovic/documents/687.pdf). Once Iraq had met these requirements, the UN sanctions regime, established after the invasion of Kuwait, would be lifted. What appeared straightforward in

the aftermath of the defeat of Iraqi forces in 1991 became an ongoing struggle which outlasted the decade. As Saddam Hussein reasserted his rule, he embarked on an elaborate game of cat and mouse. The Iraqi authorities would announce compliance with UNSCR 687 and demand the lifting of sanctions, only to be countered by new evidence highlighting that the Iraqi weapons programme was more advanced than previously believed and/or that Iraq was falling far below the standards of transparency specified by the wording of the UN resolution. Iraq gained support from states around the world by highlighting the humanitarian consequences of the UN sanctions regime. By the time that Blair entered Downing Street both Russia and France were lobbying for the easing of sanctions, whereas the US had indicated that they would not be lifted while Saddam Hussein remained in power.

The situation came to a head in November 1997, when UN weapons inspectors were expelled from Iraq. Blair was strong in his condemnation, attacking Saddam Hussein in a form of words that would become familiar over the next five years: ‘He has deceived people, used chemical weapons on his own people, and invaded other countries without any possible justification’. Blair went on to say that Hussein had to ‘be made to back down . . . because, if he does not, we will simply face this problem, perhaps in a different and far worse form, in a few years’ time’ (*Hansard, House of Commons Debates*, 19 November 1997, Vol. 301, col. 323). While Blair continued to urge a diplomatic solution, future schisms between the permanent members of the UN Security Council were already emerging, challenging Blair’s aspiration of acting as a bridge between ‘Europe’ and the US.

Despite a deal, brokered by the Russian Federation in late November 1997, that allowed weapons inspectors to return to Iraq, the crisis was postponed rather than resolved. The following year was marked by further disputes between the Iraqi government and UN weapons inspectors over access to sites and information. Early in 1998 the US indicated that progress on weapons inspection might require the use of force to convince Saddam Hussein that the international community was serious about compliance. If military action took place, it would do so with support from the British government even if ‘a further UN resolution was “unachievable”’ (Seldon, 2004, 388). When Blair addressed the House of Commons in February 1998 he reaffirmed his loathing for Saddam Hussein – ‘an evil, brutal dictator’ – and warned that ‘[y]ou can achieve much by diplomacy, but you can achieve a lot more when diplomacy is backed by firmness and force’ (*Hansard, House of Commons Debates*, 24 February 1998, Vol. 307, col. 175).

Relations between the UN and Baghdad finally broke down at the beginning of November 1998, when Iraq halted cooperation with the weapons inspectors. At this point the US committed itself to military action, citing UNSCR 678, the resolution that had authorised the use of force in the Gulf War of 1991, as the

legal basis. Blair supported this move. On 14 November he authorised ‘substantial military action’ by UK forces for the first time in his premiership. At the last minute an intervention by UN General Secretary Kofi Annan halted a joint US–UK strike against targets in Iraq. But this time, unlike the previous year, the postponement was of brief duration. UN weapons inspectors withdrew from Iraq, and on 16 December Operation Desert Fox began. A four-day intensive bombing campaign targeted Iraqi sites linked to its WMD programme.

Through Operation Desert Fox, Blair had confirmed his willingness to use military force in pursuit of foreign policy goals. While the US administration welcomed this return to business as usual, the European reaction was more nuanced. The German Chancellor, Gerhard Schröder (another member of the Fellowship of the Third Way), blamed the need for military action on the intransigence of Saddam Hussein; but the French offered a more guarded commentary, deploring ‘the spiral which led to the American military strikes against Iraq and the serious humanitarian consequences they could have for the Iraqi population’ (Youngs and Oakes, 1999, 34). The notion that Britain could serve as a bridge between ‘Europe’ and the US had not been discredited, but it was soon subjected to another test, which raised questions about the US commitment to Europe.

Kosovo

If Operation Desert Fox had emerged from the inconclusive Gulf War, Blair’s next foreign policy challenge arose from unfinished business in the Balkans. The disintegration of Yugoslavia had overshadowed European politics in the 1990s, and at the close of the decade its final conflict played out where it had begun a decade before, in Kosovo. As the events unfolded through the early 1990s European governments, the US and UN had all struggled to cope with the complexity of the conflict, most especially the Bosnian civil war, which contained multiple frontlines and a shifting array of military alliances. But some events brought clarity out of complexity, most notably the massacre of civilians in Srebrenica in 1995. While Blair had maintained his focus on domestic politics, he voiced private concerns about Britain’s inactivity over Bosnia (Seldon, 2004, 392).

When Blair became Prime Minister the situation in the Balkans had been simplified to an extent, with the Bosnian conflict now approaching a resolution. Furthermore, although ethnic nationalism had been defeated in Bosnia, the conflict had shown its propensity to inspire a level of barbarity which Europe had not witnessed since the Nazis. The conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia had brought the term ‘ethnic cleansing’ into common usage, and the tragedy of Srebrenica was a forceful argument for politicians to take prompt and resolute action to avert a repetition. In addition, for the US and ‘Europe’, the example of the Bosnian

war had shown that a bombastic leader – the Serbian Slobodan Milosevic – could be forced to retreat and negotiate through a judicious blend of diplomacy and military force.

By 1998 Milosevic was a diminished figure. The Dayton Agreement which followed the Bosnian conflict had disabused those who dreamed of a greater Serbia. Rather than representing expansionary objectives, Kosovo was a region *within* the Serbian republic. While it had played a significant part in the history of Serbian nationalism, in its modern incarnation it was home to a majority ethnic Albanian population. The Yugoslavian authorities had recognised this when they granted Kosovo a considerable degree of autonomy in 1974. But while this policy may have seemed enlightened, it failed to meet the demands of the majority population who wanted a republic on a par with those enjoyed by the Croats and Bosnians. It also stoked the resentment of the Serbs in Kosovo, who believed they were becoming second-class citizens within their own Serbian republic (Youngs and Dodd, 1998, 10). Milosevic had capitalised on these grievances to build support for Serbian nationalism. Having gained the presidency of Serbia, he soon moved to extinguish Kosovan autonomy and reassert control over the region.

As the rest of Yugoslavia fractured, Kosovo also began dividing on ethnic lines. In 1996 the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) emerged as the self-styled defenders of the ethnic Albanian community, targeting Serbian security forces. Kosovo moved closer to full-scale conflict through 1998 as the KLA increased its activity, fighting for and holding territory. The Serbian government responded with heavy-handed security measures, and soon civilian casualties were being reported. The international community, discerning a pattern of events that was all too reminiscent of Bosnia, started to mobilise. The UN agreed a trade and arms embargo while the Clinton administration engaged in direct diplomatic talks with Milosevic. Hopes of a peaceful resolution were checked by a new Serbian security offensive against the KLA in late May 1998, provoking an exploration of various interventionist options. George Robertson, Britain's Defence Minister, warned that 'President Milosevic should be under no illusions' about NATO's resolve (Youngs and Dodd, 1998, 26). The diplomatic road was still open, depending, crucially, on Russian mediation. This appeared to be working when talks between Russia's President Boris Yeltsin and Milosevic in mid June made progress, once again suggesting that conflict could be avoided by concerted diplomacy backed by a credible threat of force.

Through this period the British government had applied diplomatic pressure on Serbia and planned for military action through NATO. The diplomatic promise of 1998 began to fade by the end of the year, when fighting between the KLA and Serbian forces resumed. The conflict now repeated some of the familiar images of the previous tragic events in Yugoslavia, with media exposure of ethnic killings and refugees fleeing the war zone. The member states of the EU which

had already absorbed refugees from the Bosnian conflict viewed the potential for a new exodus with concern. Once again the diplomats were engaged, but this time with the explicit understanding that NATO air strikes would be launched against Serbia if the violence could not be brought under control. In Rambouillet Britain and France chaired discussions between the Serbs and the Kosovars. The proposed settlement would disarm the KLA. In return the Serbian security forces would have to withdraw from the region and its autonomy would be restored. This agreement would be secured by NATO peacekeeping forces.

The British and French were helped in this process by the US, which persuaded the KLA to sign up to the deal in order to heap the pressure on Milosevic. However, this tactic failed. The proposed deal threatened to destroy the President's standing within Serbia, after his impassioned pledges to protect the Serbian population of Kosovo. In the absence of an agreement at Rambouillet NATO air strikes began on 24 March 1999.

Speaking on the eve of the conflict, Blair framed this upcoming military action as a humanitarian mission. Resorting to military force did not signal an abandonment of the ethical stance that New Labour had proclaimed on arriving in office. Quite the contrary: the primary reason for British involvement was 'to avert what would otherwise be a humanitarian disaster'. Blair emphasised that the British government promised to protect the people of Kosovo from further Serbian repression: 'To walk away now would not merely destroy NATO's credibility; more importantly, it would be a breach of faith with thousands of innocent civilians whose only desire is to live in peace, and who took us at our word' (*Hansard, House of Commons Debates*, 23 March 1999, Vol. 328, col. 162). While Blair warned the British public of the risks and potential casualties for British forces, the early stages of the Kosovo war followed the template of Operation Desert Fox and the 1995 air strikes against the Bosnian Serbs. However, in Kosovo NATO planes could not use their laser-guided munitions because of heavy cloud cover; Serbian forces proved more difficult to locate than war planners had hoped; and, most damning, for a war being fought for humanitarian values, the air strikes actually increased the pace of ethnic cleansing within Kosovo. Far from backing down, Milosevic had been emboldened by the air war, ensuring that every stray missile and civilian casualty was built into a media narrative to counter the efforts of NATO spin doctors.

As the prospect of a limited conflict faded, Blair became increasingly concerned that there was a real prospect the air strikes would fail. Apart from threatening the credibility of NATO, this could also undermine his leadership at home. Blair began to explore the possibility of deploying ground troops to support the air campaign, and military planners set to work on the logistics. In mid-April 1999 Blair travelled to Brussels to meet General Wesley Clark, the NATO Supreme Commander. Blair pushed Clark on whether the war was winnable without ground troops, and Clark could offer no guarantee. Clark saw that Blair regarded the conflict in Kosovo as 'more significant to the Europeans than to Washington'

and that Blair was ‘representing Europe’ (Riddell, 2003, 104–5). Blair had already started to lobby Clinton on the need for ground troops, but Washington appeared unconvinced, and cracks began to appear in the close relationship between the two political allies.

Blair visited Washington in late April 1999 for a formal NATO meeting to mark the organisation’s 50th birthday. Prior to the gathering he gave a speech to the Economic Club of Chicago. The speech, entitled ‘The Doctrine of the International Community’, was soon dubbed the ‘Blair doctrine’. In Kosovo Blair was faced with the dilemma of deciding the circumstances which could justify military intervention within another state. Reflecting on events in Kosovo, Blair presented a set of five considerations for the international community:

First, are we sure of our case? . . . Second, have we exhausted all diplomatic options? . . . Third, on the basis of a practical assessment of the situation, are there military operations we can sensibly and prudently undertake? Fourth, are we prepared for the long term? In the past we talked too much of exit strategies. But having made a commitment we cannot simply walk away once the fight is over; better to stay with moderate numbers of troops than return for repeat performances with large numbers. And finally, do we have national interests involved?

(Blair, 1999)

The speech did not in itself break new ground, but it clarified Blair’s assessment of the contemporary world in which isolationism was not an option.

We are all internationalists now, whether we like it or not. We cannot refuse to participate in global markets if we want to prosper. We cannot ignore new political ideas in other countries if we want to innovate. We cannot turn our backs on conflicts and the violation of human rights within other countries if we want still to be secure.

(Blair, 1999)

It was a world that would intermittently throw up crises and humanitarian disasters. The international community had a responsibility to act, through military force if other methods of persuasion proved ineffective. This commitment could not be made without some consideration of the national interest, but if undertaken, the interventions would have to be long-term engagements rather than short-term fixes. Blair argued that Kosovo did constitute a national interest for Britain, as failure there would destabilise southern Europe. While arguing that intervention in Kosovo was justified on his Chicago principles, he recognised that the air strikes had not received UN endorsement. Therefore he suggested that a priority for the international community after Kosovo would be reform of

the UN Security Council structures, to avoid it being bypassed in the future. Legal advisers in the FCO, who had not seen the speech before its delivery, were concerned about the implications of the 'Blair doctrine' in relation to international law and the UN (Seldon, 2004, 399). It was also notable that the UK Prime Minister, rather than the US President, was making a public attempt to delineate a framework for action by the 'international community' – and in a speech delivered in Clinton's own country.

The divisive issue of ground troops had been left off the agenda of the NATO meeting in April 1999, but it did not go away, and the British government kept pressing the US. By mid May, this had developed into a row between the two allies. Clinton was angered by criticism of his leadership in the British press – taking at face value Blair's claim to have mastered the media – and he was critical of what he believed was British 'grandstanding' (Seldon, 2004, 403). The US were resentful of the British attempt to bounce them into a commitment to ground forces that would fall disproportionately on them, despite British offers of a significant troop deployment. The bombing campaign was still underway, and the US explored diplomatic channels through the Russian government. By early June there was a diplomatic breakthrough with Milosevic after the Russian government had made it clear that it would not block a NATO intervention in Kosovo and that if Serbia did not withdraw its forces from Kosovo military action would continue. Having withstood ten weeks of bombing and now facing a serious escalation and the prospect of an operation on land, Milosevic's options were narrowing. A deal was reached for the withdrawal of Serbian forces from Kosovo, and the NATO bombing campaign ended on 9 June. UN Security Council Resolution 1244 authorised the deployment of NATO forces to Kosovo to oversee the return of refugees. NATO had prevailed in its conflict with Milosevic and both the UK and the US could claim vindication. For Blair, raising the possibility of ground troops had convinced Milosevic that NATO would not be backing down and that a deal would have to be made. For Clinton, the issue of ground troops had been a distraction, and the crucial factor was the adroit use of Russian mediation.

Kosovo was a defining moment for foreign policy during Blair's first term. While Operation Desert Fox had provided him with an international stage, he had obviously played a subservient role to the US. Kosovo raised his profile further, and his Chicago speech reflected a desire to take a global lead in the development of a principled justification for the use of force. If the 'Blair doctrine' had been inspired by reflections on Kosovo, it seemed to be verified by a subsequent intervention, this time in the West African state of Sierra Leone, a colony which had become independent in 1961 but had retained strong economic links with Britain. Sierra Leone had been affected by civil unrest since the early 1990s, and in 2000 it seemed possible that the democratically elected government would be overthrown for a second time, despite the presence of UN peacekeepers.

British forces were despatched and transformed the situation, in an operation which was a classic of its kind – successful and swift and involving heroic actions without significant casualties on either side. The congruence between Britain's role and the five Chicago principles was striking, including the commitment of 'moderate numbers of troops' – mainly for training purposes – to prevent the need to 'return for repeat performances'.

From being a novice Prime Minister with very limited foreign policy experience, Blair had now eclipsed his Foreign Secretary and exceeded even Mrs Thatcher's tendency to dominate foreign policy from Downing Street. But Blair's leadership ambitions left him exposed in Europe, where there had been no consensus on the deployment of ground troops in Kosovo, and they had damaged his relations with Washington. The question that this raised – and that remained throughout Blair's time in office – was how much influence did this high-profile role actually bring, in view of the yawning disparity in hard power inherent in the 'special relationship'?

The relationship between Tony Blair and Bill Clinton, which had promised a lasting renewal of the 'special relationship', came to an official close in January 2001. Clinton had served the two terms of office allowed by the US constitution; Blair was facing a second election in which victory was virtually assured, and there seemed to be little to stop him going for a hat-trick. Whatever the personal differences between the two over Kosovo, they were still united by the Third Way mantra. A year after he left office Clinton addressed the Labour Party conference to confirm that he remained committed to New Labour. His reassurance to the Labour delegates was, however, twofold. He told the gathering that they should reconsider their traditional misgivings about the continued close relationship between their two countries, and that they could trust Blair to be a moderating influence on the new man in the White House – the Republican George W Bush.