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Missing the Point on Hard and Soft Power?

MARY KALDOR

Abstract
This article is a critique of two reports of parliamentary inquiries, into intervention and soft power, respectively. Neither report includes any discussion of Britain's involvement in and culpability for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Despite a more radical approach taken by the report on soft power, the article argues that the failure to address recent wars is symptomatic of a deeper and more dangerous inability to face up to profound and dangerous changes taking place in the world.

Keywords: Intervention, soft power, network, globalisation, war, communications, 'comprehensive approach', military

Britain has just failed to 'win' two wars. That is to say, British forces have withdrawn from both Iraq and Afghanistan without ensuring long-term stability. In the case of Iraq, the current situation is catastrophic—after a war in which hundreds of thousands died and 4 million were displaced from their homes, extremist Islamists (who did not exist in Iraq before the invasion) now control large parts of the country. The situation for ordinary people in Afghanistan is precarious, unstable and violent, with an ever-present threat of the return of the Taliban.

It is in this context that two parliamentary inquiries have been undertaken, presumably intended to help rethink Britain's foreign and defence policy. The House of Commons Defence Committee explored traditional uses of 'hard power' in its report *Intervention: Why, When and How?*, published in April 2014.[1] Meanwhile an *ad hoc* committee of the House of Lords was set up in May 2013 specifically 'to examine the use of soft power in furthering the United Kingdom's global influence and interests'. The resulting Committee on Soft Power and the UK's Influence was chaired by former Foreign Office minister (and a Cabinet minister in the Heath and Thatcher governments) Lord Howell of Guildford. Its report, *Persuasion and Power in the Modern World*, was published in March 2014.[2]

Strikingly, given the obvious context, there is nothing in either report about what went wrong with respect to Iraq and Afghanistan: how we took such disastrous decisions, what was wrong with our doctrines and capabilities and what needs to change. Both reports refer to Afghanistan and suggest that there may be some (positive) lessons to be learned about cooperation among different UK departments and ministries. Iraq is barely mentioned in either report, though the Lords committee does quote one witness suggesting (in one paragraph out of a total of 310) that the War on Terror and Iraq might have been bad for the UK's soft power because of their effect on the UK's reputation. This same report does attempt to outline profound changes in the world, calling for a radical change of mindset and putting forward some important proposals. Yet despite this, there is something curiously complacent and conservative (with a small c) about both reports. The silence about Iraq suggests somehow that we have returned to an earlier era, to a more innocent time.

Hard power

The report on intervention is supposed to be about why, when and how the UK should intervene militarily in other countries in the future. The most useful suggestion is the need to redefine intervention. The Ministry of Defence (MOD) uses what the report considers a very narrow definition of intervention 'as the projection of military force (augmented by other agencies as required) outside the UK sovereign territory to achieve an effect in securing, protecting or promoting UK national interest through the use or threat of

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force'.[3] The report suggests that a redefinition is required to take into account humanitarian intervention. It does not discuss under what rubric the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan might be defined.

According to the report, the MOD recognises that there might be what it calls 'non-discretionary' interventions under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter (the right to self-defence) or NATO obligations. The MOD also considers that 'the UK would still be permitted under international law to take exceptional measures to alleviate a humanitarian catastrophe'.[4] The report proposes that the government should develop a new strategic rationale for intervention, although it does not spell out what this might be. It stresses, potentially usefully, the need for strategic communications and for consultation with local populations. And it expresses concern about the reduction in resources devoted to defence, arguing that the government's assertion that this will be achieved with 'no reduction in influence' is 'wholly unrealistic'. Again, nothing in the report explains what is involved in gaining 'influence', nor how defence resources contribute to influence—perhaps a UK that had not spent very large amounts of resources on the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq might have more 'influence', depending on what is meant.

The report pays the usual lip service to the 'comprehensive approach' (bringing together the military and civilians) and to the existence of the National Security Council that oversees security policy across government departments. It commends 'adaptable postures', meaning presumably that the defence sector has to be ready for all possible contingencies. And in a perhaps telling aside, it suggests that the period 1990–2012 might turn out to be an aberration; it quotes (approvingly, it seems) General Sir Robert Fry on the possibility of a return to more 'classical strategic mores' and proposes that due weight should be given to state-to state conflict: in other words, a return to a more comfortable world of conventional military power.

Soft power, 'smart power' and definitional problems

The report on soft power is much more substantial and far-reaching. It describes the rise of the East and the South and the dramatic changes wrought by what it describes as 'hyper-connectivity'. 'International Affairs', says the report, 'now feature countless feedback loops of human devices and systems, meaning the world that international relations operates within has become markedly different'.[5] The report argues that the MOD, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Department for International Development (DFID) no longer have a monopoly on relations with the rest of the world, that classical diplomacy is becoming marginalised and that individuals and citizens are increasingly empowered, including across borders. It stresses the salience of intangibles such as intellectual capital and professional services. It puts forward proposals for strengthening Britain's 'global institutions', such as the British Council, the BBC, education (including universities), sport and the creative industries, as well as commending the role of Diaspora communities in Britain. Of great significance is the report's critique of the current visa regime as well as the growing anti-immigrant rhetoric, and the ways in which these undermine the instruments of soft power.

Yet despite all this, there is something unsatisfactory about the overall perspective of the report. Power is defined as 'getting what one wants': soft power is said to be about the power of attraction rather than compulsion, and this is largely achieved through cultural and communicative tools. Military and economic power are said to be about compulsion rather than attraction, and are therefore considered to be hard power. 'Smart power' is the combination of soft and hard power in an 'effective strategy'.[6]

It is worth recalling that there was always an ambiguity about Joseph Nye's definition of soft power.[7] On the one hand, soft power refers to the tools of power—communicative and cultural tools as opposed to money or weapons. On the other hand, it also refers to the power based on consent or attraction or legitimacy in contrast to hard power, which is based on coercion and violence. These two

aspects are not the same. Military force is also a form of communication and can shape legitimacy. The strategist Carl von Clausewitz asked, 'Is not war merely another kind of writing and language for political thoughts?'[8] Was not UK involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan a form of communication? Should we not be asking what those wars have communicated? By the same token, communication can impose a dominant way of thinking that constitutes a form of coercion. As the French philosopher Michel Foucault explained: '[O]ne's point of reference should not be to the great model of language (langue) and signs but to that of war and battle. The history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of a language: relations of power not relations of meaning . . .'[9] The discourse of the War on Terror, for example, has had a polarising effect on opinion, narrowing the space for humanitarian options; nowadays we are either for or against intervention, and this hinders any reasoned discussion about the current situation in places such as Iraq or Syria.

But beyond the definitional problems is a further set of questions. Who is 'one' and what is it that 'one wants'? And what is an 'effective strategy'? The nearest that the report comes to an answer is in its 'catalogue of benefits' from soft power, which include:

- Securing greater protection for the UK's citizens by reducing the likelihood of attack, building alliances, and increasing international goodwill.
- Reducing hostility towards the UK
- Winning friends and supporters for the UK's values
- Dealing with threats that can only be tackled internationally
- Opening the way for greatly expanded trade in British goods and services and challenging trade barriers, visible and covert
- Promoting large-scale investment flows, both inwards and outwards and increasing the attractiveness of the UK as a place in which to invest; and supporting the UK's internal cohesion and social stability.[10]

These aims sound strangely old-fashioned, out of keeping with the radical framework of hyper-connectivity. They seem to reflect a retreat to a much more narrow national perspective. And what is the UK, after all? The report seems to assume that it is a traditional state, perhaps a Great Power. It argues that the UK must act independently of the US and Europe when necessary, and agrees 'heartily' with former Prime Minister John Major, who told the committee: 'We are not some tiny little country pushed to one side. We are still a big country in the eyes of the world and a powerful and influential country.'[11]

A different starting point?

Surely a world of hyper-connectivity is also a world in which something called the United Kingdom, a state apparatus based in the territory of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, can no longer insulate the people who live there (if it ever could) from the global economy and finance, from insecurity in different parts of the world or from the consequences of environmental degradation and resource shortage? In a world of multinational corporations and global financial markets, can any one state hope to achieve the goals enumerated in the report? Are those goals even compatible with each other? Can we expand trade and investment without endangering the environment? Can we ensure internal cohesion and social stability in a world where multinational corporations do not pay tax, where global financial markets require public expenditure cuts or where our involvement in foreign wars involves the killing and displacement of people with whom many UK citizens identify because of religion, ethnicity or family ties?

The failure to come to terms with what happened in Iraq and Afghanistan and to discuss our culpability, I would suggest, is symptomatic of a deeper failure to grasp the profundity of the changes that we are living through. Both reports were published before the European elections. Nevertheless, even before the sweeping successes of populist parties seen across Europe, including the UK, it was possible to identify a widespread distrust of the political class in many countries and a sense of frustration and disillusionment with the ways in which our institutions work. At the time of writing, a deep malaise seems to be affecting our world. We have a war on European soil in Ukraine—not a clas-

sical state-to-state war but a messy combination of ethnic and religious violence, characterised by widespread human rights violations and forced displacement that is both local and transnational and involves complex global phenomena such as oil, finance and a kind of postmodern geopolitics. The Middle East is engulfed in a similar sort of war or wars on an even greater and more alarming scale, with political and economic reverberations across Europe and the world. And this is not even to begin to describe other tempestuous problems such as climate change, the continuing Euro crisis, inequality and poverty and the possible breaking up of Britain, Spain and/or Belgium.

When thinking about 'our interests', who or what is meant by 'we'? If what is meant is the citizens of the UK, our lives are so intertwined with the lives of colleagues, relatives and friends in other parts of the world that it is increasingly difficult to define a distinct 'we' that has separate and definable interests. Would it not be perhaps better to redefine 'we' as everyone, humanity? Or if 'we' means the UK state, does that need redefining too? The report on soft power talks about the UK's role as a networked society. Perhaps the UK state apparatus could be redefined as a networked institution of global governance with special responsibilities, both for responding to and translating local demands at other levels and for upholding global standards? Perhaps the UK could be reconceptualised as one layer of political authority within a global system, with a set of useful capabilities that could be used for local purposes within a wider framework and to contribute to the shaping of that wider framework? What would this mean for 'soft power' or for 'intervention'?

The issue is not soft versus hard power—whether we mean different types of tools or attraction versus compulsion. To be sure, in the twenty-first century there has been a profoundly significant shift from the use of military force to the use of communicative tools as instruments of power, as Foucault might put it—a shift from geopolitics to biopolitics at a global level. This can be explained by a variety of developments: the declining legitimacy of military force as a consequence of the post-1945 strengthening of norms against war and aggression; the ineffectiveness and risks of using force because increased lethality and accuracy of weapons has made symmetric war too dangerous and asymmetric war too unpredictable; and finally, the technological revolution in travel and communication which allows us to see the consequences of violence in different parts of the world and to empathise with distant others. Returning to Nye's distinction, the point is rather that what matters is the substance of power, not the tools of power. What ideas and practices constitute power? The tools are relevant but they depend on what power is conveying—the content of communication. There may well continue to be a role for the use of force along with other instruments, but conceived in terms of the overall message being conveyed.

If the UK state were to be reimagined in a way that is more in keeping with the contemporary global context, it would surely be anachronistic to suggest that military power should be projected in the UK national interest. In today's world, it would be rather like suggesting that Wiltshire can project military power into other parts of the UK in Wiltshire's national interest. At the same time, should the UK have a role in what is happening in eastern Ukraine, or the Middle East? Should there not be an international policing role aimed at dampening down violence, to which the state contributes? Such policing might well, for example, involve a 'comprehensive approach', but what does this mean? The term 'comprehensive approach' relates to tools, not doctrine and strategy, and it is doctrine and strategy that desperately need to be rethought. The aim of such an international policing intervention would be to uphold global standards, to achieve peace and human rights or to implement international law. This is very different from what happened in Iraq or Afghanistan, which involved Western intervention and counter-insurgency. But it would also be very different from doing nothing, which seems to be the current prescription. I am not offering a blueprint for how this might be achieved; rather, I am suggesting that we need to address issues of soft power and intervention through a very different lens.

As a matter of fact, in the 1990s, in the aftermath of the Cold War, there were the beginnings of a different approach. That was the period of debate about globalisation,

cosmopolitanism or world risk. It was the period of Robin Cook's foreign policy with an ethical dimension, and of new thinking about humanitarian intervention and international action. These emerging ideas were blown off course and channelled in a much more sinister direction through the War on Terror and all its unfolding tragedies—Iraq and Afghanistan, Guantanamo, the continuing drone campaign and the alarming spread of extremist Islamism. All this is ignored in the two reports. Yet both the more constructive approach of the 1990s and that of the War on Terror were ways of adapting to the changed global context. Only if we face up to the recent past and come to terms with the role that something called the UK has played in the terrible events that are now unfolding will it be possible to at least begin to think through some of the potential solutions and how something called the UK might contribute to those solutions. Christopher Clark's book *The Sleepwalkers* describes how Europe went to war one hundred years ago. What are we sleepwalking into now?

Notes

1 House of Commons Defence Committee, *Intervention: Why, When and How? Fourteenth Report of Session 2013–4*, 28 April 2014.
2 House of Lords Select Committee, *Soft Power and the UK's Influence, Persuasion and Power in the Modern World, Report of Session 2013–4*, 28 March 2014.
3 House of Commons Defence Committee, *Intervention*, p. 13, para 6.
4 Ibid., p. 25, para 37.
5 House of Lords Select Committee, *Soft Power*, p. 28, para 14.
6 First used in J. Nye, 'US power and strategy after Iraq', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 82, no. 4, 2003, http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/58997/joseph-s-nye-jr/us-power-and-strategy-after-iraq
7 First used in J. Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, New York, Public Affairs, 1990.
8 C. von Clausewitz, *On War*, Ware, Wordsworth, 1997, p. 358.
9 M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, New York, Pantheon, 1980, pp. 114–15.
10 House of Lords Select Committee, *Soft Power*, p. 59, para 86.
11 Ibid., p. 62, para 95.

