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New Labour's grand strategy in the UK (1997-2007): constructivism or realism?

Abstract

This article examines British grand strategy under Tony Blair's New Labour, focusing on Britain's identity as an "pivotal power" and its role as a bridge between the United States and Europe. Within the ideological framework of constructivism and liberal interventionism, Blair merged values and interests in a highly attractive intellectual mix. It was with this ethical approach, where post-modern security pointed to human rights protection as the ultimate goal, that the interventions in Kosovo and Sierra Leone began. However, in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, British support for the 2003 invasion of Iraq reflected a shift towards realpolitik. This episode, which has been widely criticised, has parallels with the current era, where historic decisions, such as Brexit and its subsequent development, do not seem to be based on truly strategic considerations.

Keywords

Grand strategy, New Labour, Constructivism, Liberal interventionism, Brexit.

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“I grew up as part of a post-war generation. I voted for Britain to remain in the EEC in 1975. I fought to persuade my Party to become a party of Europe, believing that to be in my country’s interest. I support the European ideal of cooperation between nation-states for the mutual benefit of all. I have no doubt that the future of my country lies in being at the heart of Europe” (Blair, 1995: 2)¹.

I Introduction

International relations theories provide conceptual frameworks for understanding and analysing how State-actors behave on the world stage. According to Alexander Wendt (1995), considered one of the key figures of this discipline and author of the book *Social Theory of International Politics* (1999), constructivism is aimed at studying social change through ideas. This approach is in opposition to a materialist view, which holds that material forces *per se* determine international life.

In the case of Tony Blair, former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, the question of whether he was a constructivist or a realist raises an intriguing debate. Labour brought a new language to the domain of British politics in the late 1990s. However, the facts denote features of *realpolitik*. There are signs that Blair was committed to restoring the UK to glory (Powell, 2011: 262-263). In order to capture the key features of New Labour during the period 1997-2007, this article analyses four parameters.

The first is the hallmarks of the British grand strategy. It especially delves into Britain’s status as a “pivotal power”. It also explores the strategic dimension of the UK’s special relationship with the United States, an issue that has shaped British strategy since the Second World War and which prevailed over other substantive considerations in the decision to become involved in the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Secondly, this article dissects the new British Government’s European policies. The arrival of the Labour Party in Downing Street, after eighteen years of the two consecutive Governments of Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990) and John Major (1990-1997), heralded a major shift in British policy towards the European Union (EU) under the banner of New Labour. Moreover, a key issue in this analysis, which may be associated with classic principles of British grand strategy, is the vision of Britain as a bridge between the United States and Europe (Hill, 2010).

Thirdly, this article analyses the ideological framework. Tony Blair faced major challenges that had remained unresolved in the second half of the 20th century when he took office as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom in 1997. To address them, Blair developed a grand strategy with the ethical dimension at the forefront of external

¹ Tony Blair’s speech to the Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung in Bonn on 30 May 1995 is available in full at the following link: <https://dorie.ec.europa.eu/en/web/dorie/details/-/card/235579>

action. This approach has been associated with the doctrine of the international community, presented in 1999. Some have compared it to the policies of William Ewart Gladstone, a Liberal Party member and British statesman who was Prime Minister of the United Kingdom four times in the second half of the 19th century. Gladstone played a pivotal role in British politics in the Victorian era (Bogdanor, 2007: 103). However, unlike earlier times, Tony Blair's speech was distinguished by its moral orientation (Dyson, 2009). Blair used the term "devil" in his public speeches to refer to threats such as international terrorism (Seldon, 2001), or to people such as Milošević or Saddam Hussein (Dyson, 2009). This moral vision was projected into external action based on a personal understanding of the UK's rightful place as a great country (Daddow and Gaskarth, 2011). Other issues were its actual materialisation and the deviation of the application of ideas to the real world (Wallace, 2005).

Fourthly, the next parameter under analysis, which is directly linked to this intellectual approach, is the so-called "wars of choice". Tony Blair's tenure as leader of the United Kingdom was witness to crucial international events. This was the case of the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001 ("9/11" hereafter). For Europeans, 9/11 was an awakening from the Kantian and postmodern vision that accompanied the golden decade of the 1990s. Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" interpretation that the fall of the Berlin Wall would bring an end to international confrontation seemed outdated (Garton Ash, 2003b). More specifically, the decision to support the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 drove a wedge between the UK and other European countries such as France and Germany. It also led to a marked deterioration in Tony Blair's international image (Hill, 2005: 384-409).

In conclusion, it may be argued that New Labour's grand strategy pursued an approach that may be termed selective constructivism, where external interventionism in defence of ethical values intersects with the protection of national interests. While Blair's efforts initially appeared to be successful, the Iraq crisis called into question the fundamental thrust of Britain's grand strategy, which was the UK's ability to act as a strategic bridge between the United States and old Europe (Dunne, 2004). The prevalence of "shoulder-to-shoulder policies" with the United States, over and above other substantive issues, led to one of the biggest strategic blunders in recent UK history.

2 Identifying features of New Labour's grand strategy

2.1 Britain as a pivotal power

Britain's imperial past has historically influenced its identity. They have always refused to accept themselves as a second-tier power. British exceptionalism means that Britain does not see itself as just another country (Sanders and Houghton, 2017: 274).

Following the Second World War, Britain's loss of international influence vis-à-vis the United States meant that it lost its status as a major player. Dean Acheson's famous 1962 West Point speech, in which the then US Secretary of State noted that Britain had lost an empire and had not yet found its role in the world, had a resonant effect in the corridors of Whitehall (McCourt, 2014).

This aspiration never completely disappeared, continuing to be an important factor in the articulation of British grand strategy (Morris, 2011). Forty years after this speech, on the 10th of January 2002, *The Economist* published an article entitled "The dashing Mr Blair: Britain has lost an empire but has at last found Tony Blair", which appeared to imply that, thanks to the Prime Minister, the country was once again playing a prominent role in international affairs. However, this ironic epigraph actually concealed a critical underlying message: the Prime Minister's rhetoric overestimated Britain's role in world affairs (*The Economist*, 2002).

New Labour extended the term "pivotal power" to modulate the message of Britain as a global great power (McCourt, 2011). Its significance may be associated with its position as a transatlantic bridge, capitalising on its special relationship with the United States while maintaining close ties with Europe. For Blair (2010), being a pivotal power also meant exercising moral leadership in the face of global challenges, such as the protection of human rights and the rule-based international order. The UK also exercised active multilateralism, presenting itself as a force for good.

Today, the expression "pivotal power" from the 1990s may be reinterpreted as the "Global Britain" vision, following the UK's exit from the EU (Brexit). The two terms emerged in different contexts. While Blair used EU membership as a vector of international influence, the "Global Britain" concept implies a redefinition of Britain's grand strategy outside the EU in key areas such as international trade.

However, the underlying objective is both the UK's ambition to be a world-class country, despite its real limitations. Lord Hurd's famous quote from 1993, noting that Britain has always fought beyond its means, illustrates this perfectly (Edgerton, 1998; Porter, 2016).

2.2 Special "relationship" with the United States

The UK-US relationship retained its strategic dimension under New Labour, based on shared democratic values and a liberal tradition. These issues were seen as genuine national interests (Danchev, 2007: 191). However, the UK has always displayed a certain intellectual arrogance towards the United States. From the British perspective, contacts between these two countries have been likened to the relationship between classical Greece and the late Roman Empire, where a sophisticated Greek civilisation (a role played by London) refines the intentions of the barbarians, in Washington (Dumbrell, 2009: 273).

From the US perspective, the 1990s alliance with Britain was not as important as it was before the fall of the Berlin Wall, when airbases on British soil were a vital part of the forward defence against the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the Kosovo War generated some tensions. In addition, Tony Blair's patronage of the Saint-Malo Declaration and his support for the development of the European integration agenda cooled relations between the two countries (Dumbrell, 2009: 274).

But 9/11 changed this dynamic. The relationship took on renewed momentum with the UK's active participation alongside the US in its grand strategy against terror: "no other state has the day-to-day engagement in planning and preparation for operations that the UK has with the United States" (McCausland, 2006: 191).

The Bush Administration did not put much pressure on Blair to join the Iraqi coalition in 2003. The President offered Blair the possibility of withdrawing Britain's participation, after realising the difficulty of gaining social support in Britain for the war (Naughtie, 2004: 144). Added to this offer are statements by the Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who indicated that British participation was not essential to US military planning, when it appeared that Blair would not be able to obtain authorisation from the British Parliament to commit British troops (Naughtie, 2004: 145).

Despite Bush's offer that Britain should stay out of the invasion (Bromund, 2009: 267; Kennedy-Pipe and Vickers, 2007), the prevailing approach in the Prime Minister's decision was to stand by the US at all costs (Coates and Krieger, 2004; Sanders and Houghton, 2017: 187). The UK's commitment to the US materialised with the dispatch of a sizeable ground contingent at the very start of the invasion of Iraq. This initiative may be interpreted as a move to influence US grand strategy and encourage progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process (Dunne, 2004). However, the passage of time has demonstrated how this view was distorted (William D., 2024a: 148). Thus, the third way can be said to have evolved from a Europeanist position towards a sclerotic view of continental Europe vis-à-vis the United States as the land of promise (Wallace, 2005: 61). Britain was too absorbed in its role as clever Greece advising and influencing powerful Rome to realise that it was in fact being used by the United States to impose its strategy unilaterally (Porter, 2010).

3 Renewed Europeanism

Blair tried to dissociate Eurosceptic dynamics as a hallmark of "Britishness" (Riddell, 2006; Seldon and Snowdon, 2007: 572). New Labour's grand strategy pursued a European agenda of renewal, where the UK was called upon to lead a transformative process of organisation for a post-modern world.

Tony Blair addressed the public in a cosmopolitan and global way, as if in his view, there were no borders. This form of looking at the world may be compared to Ernest Bevin's original vision, when he pointed out that the goal of his foreign policy was for anyone to be able to board a train from London's Victoria Station and travel to any

place without being asked to show their papers. Blair thus sought to reposition British opinion towards major issues that would shape Europe's future: enlargement of the Union, its economic management and institutional reform. The reality was, however, quite different (Young, 1998: 514).

Initially, New Labour was clearly pro-European. Its ideas were boosted by rhetoric presenting Britain as a pivotal power and a bridging nation between the US and the EU (Sanders and Houghton, 2017: 154-157). Tony Blair was considered pro-European, at least at the beginning of his term as Prime Minister. In his 1995 speech at Chatham House, entitled "The Future of Europe", Blair pointed out that to doubt Europe was to deny Britain's historic role as a major global player².

His election in 1997 pointed to a different relationship with Europe than that of his predecessors, Margaret Thatcher and John Major (Sanders and Houghton, 2017: 154). For continental European nations, accustomed to British delegations that did not guarantee progress on agreements reached, the arrival of New Labour meant dealing with a British Government that aspired to lead the Union in a style that verged on condescension. Specifically, in his initial visits to European countries in the early days of his term in office, Blair's message promoted the liberal economic model of the third way as opposed to the social policies of Jacques Delors. This wide-angle vision, commonly referred to in Blair's language as *le grand tableau*, was founded on an economy based on knowledge, skills and creativity (Pollack, 2000).

The United Kingdom was one of the most proactive countries in the Lisbon Agenda, the name given to the programme adopted by EU Member States at the European Council of 23-24 March 2000. Its aim was to make the Union "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion" by 2010 (European Council, 2010)³.

With regard to economic policies, Blair appeared to herald a decidedly pro-European decade for the first time in British history. While the rhetoric was openly inclusive, the new Labour Government was ambivalent about a project as sensitive as the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) (Applebaum, 1997: 57). Launched in 1988 by Jacques Delors, then President of the European Commission, 1999 witnessed one of its milestones, the entry into force of the single currency (Wall, 2008b), a historic initiative that Britain did not join: "As to Britain and the Euro, we will make our decision not on political grounds but on the basis of our national economic interests" (Blair, 1999a).

² Available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/2016-06-08-EU1995.pdf>

³ The Conclusions of the Lisbon European Council of March 2010 are available at the following link: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21032/consejo-europeo-de-lisboa-conclusiones-de-la-presidencia.pdf>

The decision to reject the euro had already been taken internally by Blair's Labour Government at the end of 1997⁴. Tony Blair's argument was to wait and watch whether the Common Market would move forward. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, applied five economic tests (Grant *et al.*, 1997)⁵, the results of which were the subject of his statement dated 27th of October 1997 in the House of Commons, in which Gordon Brown (1997: 585-586) concluded that more time was needed to introduce the single currency in Britain:

“The Treasury's assessment is that, in vital areas, the economy is not yet ready for entry and that much remains to be done. The previous policy of keeping options open without making active preparations has left parts of the economy unprepared. Our overall assessment is that Britain needs both a period of preparation and a settled period of sustainable convergence, both of which require stability.”

Britain was also a promoter of progress in EU foreign and security policy in practical terms (Wall, 2008c), illustrating a desire to demonstrate closer ties with the EU (Sanders and Houghton, 2017: 155). The traditional British position in this field was entrusted to NATO. This was the preference of successive governments, understood as the established position over many years (Moravcsik, 1998: 5-6), regardless of which political party was in power (Dover, 2005: 508).

Within this area, the shift in British strategy towards greater European integration opened up new avenues of understanding in security and defence matters, which would be reflected in the Saint Malo agreements in 1998 (Kramer, 2003: 81). There are three reasons behind this initiative for enhanced cooperation between the UK and France, signed by the two countries on 6 December 1998 in the French city.

The first was to improve Europe's military capabilities to intervene in humanitarian crises and reduce its marked dependence on the United States (Dover, 2005: 513), in view of the Union's inability to act in serious situations in Europe such as Kosovo in 1998 (Brookshire and Hennessy, 2003; Hennessy, 1998; Seldon, 2001).

The second was to favour a proactive and constructive attitude towards the Union's military role, without the traditional view of NATO as a competing actor in European security, a shift that may be interpreted as a tactical move that did

4 Fiscal independence was a major factor in this decision. The UK joined the European Exchange Rate Mechanism in 1990, with an exchange rate against the Deutsche Mark of 2.95%. On 16 September 2022, its value reached the minimum permitted level of 2.82%. On that day, known as Black Wednesday, the British Government was forced to raise interest rates to 15% and inject £16 billion from reserves to keep the British currency in the markets, resulting in an economic depression and an unsustainable deficit. As a consequence, the UK was expelled from the European exchange rate mechanism, with consequent loss of credibility.

5 The five economic tests meant to assess the feasibility of adopting the euro were:

«(1.) Are business cycles and economic structures compatible so that we and others can live comfortably with euro interest rates on a permanent basis?; (2.) if problems emerge, is there sufficient flexibility to deal with them?; (3.-) would joining the EMU create better conditions for firms making long-term decisions to invest in Britain?; (4.) what impact would entry into the EMU have on the competitive position of the UK's financial services industry, especially in the City's wholesale markets?; and (5.) will joining the EMU promote higher growth, stability and a lasting increase in jobs?»

not alter the traditional British strategy of favouring the transatlantic relation (Dover, 2005,: 508).

Thus, the third, more instrumental, motive was that of leading EU security and defence policy as a means of gaining influence among its Member States and in the US. This would thus mitigate the negative effects of maintaining a distance in other areas, such as economic policies (James and Oppermann, 2009: 287-288).

The UK also used its role as a pivotal power to favour EU expansion (Seldon, 2007). This was of a strategic nature, as the entry of several Eastern European countries provided greater security against a Russian Federation that was already revealing itself as a country with geopolitical aspirations and assertive messages to reclaim its past (Wall, 2008a,: 29-30). In May 2004, ten new countries acquired the status of EU Member States⁶. This increase came just two months after NATO's eastward expansion. Both processes, viewed together, represented a decisive change in the configuration of the political map and security, with the aim of stabilising Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall (Solana, 2023: 58).

3.1 Strategic bridge

The concept of pivotal power is very closely related to the key issue of British grand strategy, which is to act as a strategic bridge between the United States and Europe.

New Labour adopted this constructivist approach from the onset. Thus, Foreign Secretary Robin Cook called for a reversal of the classic British grand strategy followed by previous Conservative governments. It was a matter of abandoning the “splendid isolation” –an expression traditionally attributed to Lord Salisbury in association with the strategic advantage conferred on Britain by its insular nature (Howard, 1962)– to exercise a renewed leadership role in Europe (Gale, 2021).

The expression of strategic bridging was not new. For Winston Churchill, Britain was at the intersection of the three circles representing the Commonwealth, the Anglosphere and Europe. Harold Macmillan also used this expression to express Britain's position as intermediary between the United States and Europe (Ashton, 2005). And in the 1970s, James Callaghan, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1976 to 1979, and leader of the Labour Party from 1976 to 1980, stated that Britain was a bridge-building country (*The Economist*, 2002). More recently, Blair revived this idea in May 1997, on the occasion of Bill Clinton's first official visit to Britain: “And a Britain that is leading in Europe is a Britain capable of ever closer relations also with the United States of America” (Blair, 1997). In subsequent speeches by Blair, such as his remarks on 15 December 1998 at the 150th anniversary of the Associated Press news

6 Czech Republic, Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

agency, devoted to British foreign policy, this idea of strategic bridging emerges on a repeated basis:

“Britain does not have to choose between being strong with the US, or strong with Europe; it means having the confidence to see that Britain can be both. Indeed, that Britain must be both; that we are stronger with the US because of our strength in Europe; that we are stronger in Europe because of our strength with the US” (Blair, 1998).

Another example of the connection between the US and Europe, and the UK's key role as a connecting actor between the two, may be found in the 1999 Chicago speech, which is also known as the Doctrine of the International Community:

“For Britain, the biggest decision we face in the next couple of decades is our relationship with Europe. For far too long British ambivalence to Europe has made us irrelevant in Europe, and consequently of less importance to the United States. We have finally done away with the false proposition that we must choose between two diverging paths - the Transatlantic relationship or Europe. For the first time in the last three decades we have a government that is both pro-Europe and pro-American. I firmly believe that it is in Britain's interest, but it is also in the interests of the US and of Europe” (Blair, 1999a).

Following the terrible terrorist attack in 2001 that changed the world, the relationship between Europe and the United States was very different. It seemed that Europeans and Americans no longer lived on separate continents, but on separate planets: Europeans on Venus and Americans on Mars (Kagan, 2002).

From the perspective that 9/11 had reshaped international relations, this new paradigm presented Blair with an opportunity to demonstrate Britain's capacity for international influence. Within this context, Blair's remarks demonstrate how the Prime Minister made numerous calls for European countries to show solidarity with the United States, and how he consolidated his privileged position as a strategic bridging actor between the United States and Europe (Sanders and Houghton, 2017): “we have buried the myth that Britain has to choose between being strong in Europe or strong with the United States” (Blair, 2001a).

These same underlying messages were repeated in a speech to the European Research Institute on 23 November 2001, where Tony Blair, using strong pro-European rhetoric, uttered phrases such as “we must be whole-hearted, not half-hearted, partners in Europe” (Blair, 2001b). During this public intervention, Tony Blair also used rhetorical references that acknowledged the vital role of the United States and the importance of the UK as a bridging actor with Europe: “Indeed the UK has a powerful role to play as a bridge between USA and Europe” (Blair, 2001b).

However, in January 2003, the Prime Minister's tone changed. In his speech to British ambassadors, Blair conveyed this goal as an aspiration in the context of a souring of international relations between European countries and the United States: “We 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).

Tony Blair’s speech on 18 March 2003, on the occasion of the House of Commons debate prior to the parliamentary vote on participation in the invasion of Iraq, is prescient, but in a wholly contradictory sense to what the Prime Minister sought to convey:

“Because the outcome of this issue will now determine more than the fate of the Iraqi regime and more than the future of the Iraqi people, for so long brutalised by Saddam It will determine the way Britain and the world confront the central security threat of the 21st century; the development of the UN; the relationship between Europe and the US; the relations within the EU and the way the US engages with the rest of the world. It is of utmost importance. It will determine the pattern of international politics for the next generation” (UK Parliament, 2003).

While Blair’s ambition was to set himself as a leader on the international stage, the reality was very different, and what he actually achieved was to widen the gap between the two sides of the Atlantic. The 2003 Iraq War was arguably a profound contradiction to the ethical foreign policy that governed the interventions in Kosovo and Sierra Leone (Bulley, 2010). In particular, blind loyalty to the United States at all costs led to the breakdown of one of the axioms of British grand strategy: to act as a strategic bridge between the new and the old continent (Garton Ash, 2003a).

Recently, Tony Blair himself has openly criticised the breach created by Brexit. However, with the privilege of hindsight, it is possible to draw three connections between New Labour and the rise of Euroscepticism in Britain which eventually led to Brexit. Firstly, ambiguity in European policies in the 1990s –especially, issues such as abandoning the referendum on the European Constitution and refusal to adopt the euro– did not help European ideals to gain ground in British society (Farrell and Goldsmith, 2017). Secondly, the promotion of EU expansion into Eastern European countries intensified fears over immigration. This is a key element of Eurosceptic discourse (Hawkins, 2021). Finally, New Labour’s economic globalisation policies deepened regional inequalities that fuelled a sense of abandonment in areas that subsequently voted overwhelmingly for Brexit (Dorey, 2021: 195).

4 The doctrine of the international community

In 1997, New Labour put forward a grand strategy built on ideas guided by a moral framework for action as its hallmark. British foreign policy would be built on a strong ethical approach, which, in the words of the British foreign secretary, “[...] will put human rights at the heart of our foreign policy” (Cook, 1997). This opening strategy made use of soft power, such as the global influence of the English language with institutions such as the *BBC* and the British Council (Cook, 1997), or using the

Foreign Office website (www.fco.co.uk) to disseminate the ideas of the new British strategy (Wheeler and Dunne, 1998: 853).

Two years later, Tony Blair would deliver a speech in Chicago, which is commonly referred to as “the doctrine of the international community”. Broadly speaking, this vision influenced the diplomatic, economic and military policies of Britain's Labour Governments for over a decade. As a matter of fact, it can be seen how Blair referenced international institutions in this speech, directly mentioning the G7, the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations Security Council, NATO, and the Kyoto protocol, and the need to adapt this architecture to the reality of the international panorama: “We need to focus in a serious and sustained way on the principles of the doctrine of international community and on the institutions that deliver them” (Blair, 1999a). For these reasons, the doctrine of the international community may be viewed as a grand strategy with transformative ambitions, intended to renew Britain's national purpose, abandoning the idea of splendid isolation and reorienting its position in the world as an international actor (Kramer, 2003: 72 and 75).

Liberal interventionism was one of the most characteristic features of New Labour's strategy. Blair's speech in Chicago on the 24th of April 1999 may also be examined in connection to his appeal regarding the grave situation in Kosovo. The atrocity of the events was reflected in the Foreign Minister's speech dated 14th of April 1999: “The mass graves that have been uncovered by our photographs by aerial reconnaissance are the graves not of the casualties of fighting or of war, they are the graves of the victims of war crimes” (Cook, 1999).

A crucial moment was Blair's speech in the British Parliament on the 23rd of March 1999⁷, where he discussed in detail the ethical reasons behind the intervention. In this speech, the Prime Minister argued that inaction in the face of human rights violations in Kosovo would be tantamount to giving *carte blanche* and would defy the fundamental values of the international community:

“If Kosovo was left to the mercy of Serbian repression, there is not merely a risk, but the probability of re-igniting unrest in Albania, of a destabilised Macedonia, of almost certain knock-on effects in Bosnia, and of further tension between Greece and Turkey. Strategic interests for the whole of Europe are at stake. We cannot contemplate, on the doorstep of the EU, a disintegration into chaos and disorder” (Blair, 1999b).

Eventually, *Allied Force*, a NATO operation which ran from the 23rd of March to the 10th of June without a UN Security Council resolution to back it up, was a military success (Bartlett, 2000). The air operations, which lasted seventy-eight days, succeeded in getting Milošević's troops to withdraw from Kosovo. This air campaign was not the only reason behind this success. In addition to the possibility of a ground operation, which had not been entirely ruled out in operational planning, the Russian leader,

7 Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199899/cmhansrd/v0990323/debtext/90323-06.htm>

Boris Yeltsin, also ceased to support Milošević. This withdrawal of support may have been as decisive, if not more so, than the military action (Sanders and Houghton, 2017: 157-158).

Once again, Blair used soft power to mobilise the international community in the face of human rights violations. The ethical dimension was a fundamental pillar of New Labour's strategy and its position on Kosovo (Sanders and Houghton, 2017: 306). Tony Blair's moral rhetoric promoted international military action in the face of the atrocities committed by the Milošević regime. Blair delivered a series of speeches outlining the ethical principles that guided the decision to intervene. The strong connection between moral values and Britain's national interests formed the basis of the central message within the doctrine of the international community (Gilmore, 2014).

The words uttered by the British Prime Minister in his Chicago speech conveyed his personal conviction (Seldon, 2005: 394) and the ethical justification for intervention in defence of humanitarian principles, linking military action to the moral responsibility to protect civilians in Kosovo:

“This is a just war, based not on any territorial ambitions but on values. We cannot let the evil of ethnic cleansing stand. We must not rest until it is reversed. We have learned twice before in this century that appeasement does not work. If we let an evil dictator range unchallenged, we will have to spill infinitely more blood and treasure to stop him later” (Blair, 1999a).

Those in favour of these ideas, as well as those critical of this values-based interventionist policy, agreed on one central point. It was widely agreed that the Chicago speech was revolutionary, as it broke with the Westphalian stream of international relations, where the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other nations was considered sacrosanct (James, 2024b).

This intellectual framework may be placed behind other operations abroad, such as in Sierra Leone in 2000. As in Kosovo, the use of force in Sierra Leone was underpinned by a British strategic culture based on liberal interventionism (Daddow and Schnapper, 2013). Here, intervention was motivated by an ideological belief in Britain's responsibility as an international actor to intervene in human rights violations wherever possible (Bogdanor, 2005: 448).

This operation is considered a precursor to the “responsibility to protect” principle. This principle, adopted by the United Nations, is based on the idea that States have an obligation to ensure the security of their citizens in the face of atrocities, and that the international community has an obligation to intervene if the State is unable to ensure said safety (Gallagher, 2013)⁸. Moreover, the operation in Sierra Leone fostered a positive attitude towards interventionism in distant lands on humanitarian grounds within the British Government (Williams, 2001; Dorman, 2018).

⁸ The United Nations General Assembly Resolution of 16 October 2005 is available at the following URL: https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_60_1.pdf

5 The wars of choice

The so-called “wars of choice”, referring to the military operations engaged in response to the 9/11 attacks in Afghanistan (2001) and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, were along the same interventionist lines, both of them part of the grand strategy against global terrorism.

On 12 September 2001, barely twenty-four hours after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, for the first time in history, NATO activated Article V of the Atlantic Alliance Treaty, which states that an attack against any member of the Alliance will be considered an attack against the Alliance as a whole. The announcement by NATO Secretary General, the British Lord George Robinson, emphasised solidarity with the United States and thus the determination to act against the global threat of international terrorism (Johnstone, 2003).

Within the United Nations, on 28 September 2001, the Security Council adopted Resolution 1373 (2001), which was the main benchmark for international cooperation in the fight against terrorism⁹.

Furthermore, on 7 October 2001, the US Ambassador to the UN John Negroponte announced the invocation of Article 51 of the UN Charter. Consequently, in application of the right of self-defence, military action would begin immediately against Al Qaeda and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan (Katselli and Shah, 2003).

Given the speed of US action in the aftermath of 9/11, most notably the early identification of Osama bin Laden as the spiritual leader of Al Qaeda and the organiser of the attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, Britain could not sit idly by (Taylor, 2011).

5.1 War in Afghanistan (2001)

The first step of this new phase was Britain's involvement in the 2001 Afghan war. For Britain, Afghanistan was not a new area of operations. The term “Great Game” had been used in 19th century imperialism to describe the struggle between two great powers, Britain and Russia, for control of Central Asia (Rubin and Rashid, 2008: 30). By 2001, however, Britain was no longer a great power, but a satellite country of the United States, adopting the ideas of US national security strategies as its own (Porter, 2010).

The British Government published credible evidence that Al Qaeda was responsible for the 9/11 attacks and that the Taliban had provided safe haven for Bin Laden. Air

⁹ The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1373 (2001) is available at the following URL: https://www.unodc.org/pdf/crime/terrorism/res_1373_spanish.pdf

strike operations against Al Qaeda over Kabul and Kandahar as part of Operation *Enduring Freedom*, which began on the same day, were supported by the Royal Navy (with Tomahawk missiles launched from nuclear submarines) and the Royal Air Force. Additionally a battle group of 1,700 British commandos joined the *Enduring Freedom* forces.

In 2001, the traditional annual speech at London's Guildhall, known as the Lord Mayor's Banquet, was held on the 12th of November, with the operation already underway. At this event, Blair referred to the complicated humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, an issue that made the country a hub for illegal trafficking, as well as a sanctuary for criminal and terrorist organisations. Blair's narrative used the need for stability to justify the operation in Afghanistan (Cawkwell, 2016: 2). Thus, the war on terrorism was explained in the form of a political action aimed at eliminating the conditions under which "such acts of evil can flourish and be tolerated" (Blair, 2001a).

Subsequently, Tony Blair's personal action at the Bonn conference on 5 December 2001 was key to securing international agreement to form an international force that would operate in Afghanistan. A fortnight later, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1386 (2001)¹⁰ which led to the creation of the ISAF (*International Security Assistance Force*) to assist the interim authority in Afghanistan. Britain led the first ISAF contingent in Kabul, which relieved the US provincial reconstruction team for the transition from combat to stabilisation operations (Suhrke, 2011).

Twenty years on, the balance sheet is not positive. In 2021, the US withdrew from Afghanistan, a unilateral decision that was "driven not by grand strategy but by politics" (Blair, 2021). It is striking that the national security strategy "Global Britain in a Competitive Age", published in March 2021, explicitly alluded on two occasions to supporting the Afghan Government to stabilise the country. However, barely a month later, on the 13th of April 2021, Joe Biden announced the withdrawal of all US troops from Afghanistan by the 11th of September 2021. This decision was taken without consulting its main ally, the UK, the second largest international contributor to the mission, with 20 years of uninterrupted presence, more than 100,000 troops deployed during that time and 457 killed in action. This argument brings into question the so-called "UK-US special relationship" as a major component of a British global grand strategy worthy of such status (Clarke, 2023).

5.2 *Invasion of Iraq (2003)*

Tony Blair believed that toppling Saddam Hussein was the right path for Britain to follow as a logical outcome of the international community doctrine outlined in his 1999 Chicago speech. Thus, the invasion of Iraq was conceived of as a liberal war, justified on humanitarian grounds and for the protection of human rights (Freedman,

¹⁰ Available at: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/454998>

2005: 88). Moreover, the British Prime Minister believed that regime change would cause a benign domino effect that would facilitate democratisation dynamics in Middle Eastern countries (Porter, 2018: 57).

Tony Blair's main justification for British intervention in the invasion of Iraq was threefold: the imminent threat posed by the possession of weapons of mass destruction, or a clear intention to manufacture them; connections with international terrorist groups, primarily Al Qaeda; and the continuing human rights violations under Saddam Hussein's dictatorial regime (Freedman, 2005; Kennedy-Pipe and Vickers, 2007: 211)¹¹.

Eventually, following two rounds of voting in the British Parliament, the decision to join the war was officially adopted (William D., 2024a: 172)¹². For Coates and Krieger (2004), this decision, attributable to Parliament as a whole, challenges the British *establishment* itself, despite Blair's very direct involvement and personal leadership style. Robin Cook himself, who resigned as Foreign Secretary on the 17th of March 2003, on the eve of the vote in the House of Commons, argued that he could not support this military intervention (Kennedy-Pipe and Vickers, 2007: 206).

The official enquiry into Britain's involvement in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, led by Sir John Chilcot, revealed that there had been no real need for pre-emptive action that would justify the invasion of Iraq. The declassification of the official report on 6 July 2016 caused public shock because of the forcefulness of the condemnation, despite widespread public belief that the war had been a grave mistake (McTague, 2016). The "Chilcot Report", as it is commonly known, concluded unequivocally that the UK Government had exaggerated the threat posed by Saddam Hussein and his access to weapons of mass destruction as a reason to support the United States and justify the invasion¹³.

Based on the information published in this official report, William D. James (2024) identifies two key moments in the British decision to become involved in the invasion of Iraq. Both are at the level of a grand strategy.

The first is the meeting held on the 23rd of July 2002, at the request of Defence Minister Geff Hoon. This meeting may well be likened to a modern-day National Security Council, an element that did not exist at the time. The meeting was

¹¹ The original transcript of the full speech may be found at the following URL: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/2870581.stm

¹² Voting was held on the 26th of February and the 18th of March. In the latter round, the vote in favour of invading Iraq prevailed over the dissenting votes of Liberal Democrats and left-liberal MPs. Specifically, the British Parliament approved the use of all necessary means to overthrow Saddam Hussein with 412 votes in favour and 149 against in the House of Commons.

¹³ The Chilcot Report was commissioned in 2009 by Gordon Brown as Prime Minister. It covers the period from 2001 to 2009. Its conclusions were reached by reliable and impartial analysis of the evidence offered by detailed scrutiny of secret, but subsequently declassified official documentation in the UK's national archives. The twelve volumes resulting from this investigation may be consulted at the following URL: <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20171123122743/http://www.iraquinquiry.org.uk/the-report/>

attended by the key decision-makers on the intervention in Iraq. In addition to Prime Minister Tony Blair, it was attended by the Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, Defence Secretary Geff Hoon, the Chief of Defence Staff, intelligence officials, and key staff from 10 Downing Street (James, 2024a: 161). Among them the only dissenting voice was that of Jack Straw. He questioned the utility of invading Iraq due to its links to weapons of mass destruction, when other scenarios, such as Iran, Libya, or North Korea, presented a higher level of threat (Chilcot *et al.*, 2016). However, for the Prime Minister, not participating in the Iraq operation would have been tantamount to breaking the special relationship between the UK and the US. Alastair Campbell, his communications director, recorded this moment in his personal memoirs: “when Jack [Straw] commented on the possibility of not supporting the United States, TB [Tony Blair’s acronym] said it would mean the biggest change in foreign policy in the last fifty years” (Campbell and Hagerty, 2013: 279).

The second key moment was on the 28th of July 2002, when Blair wrote to George W. Bush: “I will be with you, come what may” (Chilcot *et al.*, 2016), signalling unconditional British support for the US invasion of Iraq.

By September 2002, Tony Blair was resigned to the inevitability of war in Iraq. Unilateralism prevailed over multilateralism. Eventually, under the guise of the threat to international security posed by the combination of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, and Saddam Hussein’s dictatorial regime, Tony Blair was trapped by the logic of his earlier decisions. The British Government was behaving like a puppet operated by the United States (Wheatcroft, 2007: 7).

The “shoulder-to-shoulder policies” that had been in place since Bill Clinton’s time; Blair’s adherence to the ‘axis of evil’ rhetoric employed by George W. Bush in April 2002; the photograph at the Bush-owned Texas ranch; and his participation in coordinating the “no-fly-zone” on Iraq drove the country into a corner from which it could not emerge without the Prime Minister losing face with its main partner, the United States (Coates and Krieger, 2009). For Blair, the risk of being sidelined by the United States was worse than the risk of public disapproval in Britain (Hlatky, 2013), an argument also used by Robin Cook himself (Hoge, 2003).

Thus, in contrast to the possible argument that the US pressured Britain to join the military intervention, the facts demonstrate that the Iraq invasion was a war of choice.

Wars of choice required considerable defence spending in order to fund military missions abroad. In 2001, the UK volunteered to lead NATO’s ISAF. In January 2022 there were 1,800 British troops on the streets of Kabul (Farrell, 2017: 94). However, in 2008, the UK’s military budget was the lowest it had been since 1930, at only 2.3% of the GDP, in a situation where it would have been almost impossible to undertake a military operation similar in scale to the 1982 Falklands War (Gardiner, 2008). Approximately one third of the total contingent in Iraq was British, responsible for security in several southern Iraqi provinces. It was a grand strategy decision whose effects are still palpable today (James, 2024a: 146). But morale, recruitment levels and operational capabilities of the Armed Forces further exacerbated the effects of this

underfunding. In other words, the means were not sufficient to achieve the ends of their strategy (Bromund, 2009: 271). Moreover, according to the “Chilcot Report”, the troops sent to Iraq had not been properly trained and equipped (Sanders and Houghton, 2017: 184-187).

This personal style of governing the nation, which according to Michael Clarke (2007: 174-175) bordered on democratic autocracy, has been described as “sofa politics”. The dysfunctional nature of the cabinet largely contributed to decisions that have been highly criticised, such as the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Lord Butler’s statement that the decision-making process was flawed is at least thought-provoking. Thus, the former Secretary to the Prime Minister’s Office for ten years (under Margaret Thatcher, John Major and Tony Blair) publicly declared that Margaret Thatcher had a capacity to listen and made proper institutional use of the cabinet. John Major faced internal divisions, indiscipline and leaks, which led him to rely less and less on his cabinet for advice regarding key decisions. And under Tony Blair, the cabinet was virtually non-existent. There are documents on crucial issues, such as the Iraq intelligence reports, which were not distributed to cabinet ministers. No meetings of the Defence Policy and Foreign Affairs Committee were held. Alternatively, the working method was via verbal reports (Norton-Taylor, 2007).

6 Conclusion

Determining whether Tony Blair was primarily a constructivist or a realist in international relations is not a black and white question; after analysing the many aspects of his tenure, a scale consisting of numerous intermediate greys may be found. Its pragmatic approach may have combined elements of both theories, adjusting them to changing geopolitical circumstances. Ultimately, the complexity of political decisions and the interplay between multiple factors make it challenging to place Blair within a specific category, but detailed analysis reveals a rich interplay between ideas and interests in his grand strategy.

The evolving study of the four parameters analysed in this article provides us with an evolutionary framework that may be classified as a kind of selective constructivism. It begins with the prevalence of the ethical dimension —with slogans such as the idea of “a force for good” which justified the theory of liberal interventionism (Daddow, 2009: 183)— towards later positions that fit better within *realpolitik*. In other words, British grand strategy was guided by the primacy of national interests, but without discounting the importance of international ideas and standards.

Despite an exciting start, with a clearly pro-European discourse and achievements in areas such as economic management and the Northern Ireland peace accords, Blair’s legacy is ultimately portrayed as mixed and unfinished. Blair’s attempts to leave a lasting mark on British politics were overshadowed by the Iraq war and other controversies (Riddell, 2006).

9/11 was a clear turning point in British grand strategy, with the 2003 invasion of Iraq as the clearest example. The idealism that underpinned the liberal interventionist approach (from a moral-ethical perspective, Tony Blair considered it an obligation to eliminate Saddam Hussein) ran up against a lack of strategy (the difficulty of shifting from inspiration from the muses to representation on the boards), without a clear vision of what to do, and leaving open the question of how the Iraq invasion would effectively contribute to the grand strategy of the war on global terrorism (Smith, 2007: 392).

Thus, in view of the lack of coherence between theory and praxis, and a political-strategic planning that was overtaken by events, it is appropriate to say that British grand strategy during the New Labour years was contradictory. The clearest example of this is the decision to participate in the Iraq war in 2003. There is general consensus, confirmed by the official enquiry led by Sir John Chilcot, that this decision may be described as a strategic blunder. For Hew Strachan (2013: 218), the “wars of choice”, as the interventions in Iraq (2001) and Afghanistan (2003) are called, were conducted without a clear long-term strategy, partly because the political objectives were unclear, modified, or so broadly defined as to be impossible to achieve. Christopher Elliot (2015) argued that the British Government did not take a comprehensive approach to the problem, both at the highest level of politico-strategic decision-making and at the top military command, where there was strong rivalry between the three armies over budgetary issues in a context of cutting military spending.

Britain’s stance of unwavering support for the United States (shoulder-to-shoulder), which guided Britain’s grand strategy in the global war on terror (Dyson, 2009), has been widely criticised for its lack of coherence (Gaskarth, 2015) and inherent confusion in strategic thinking, issues that have led to the failure to marry political objectives with military action (Edmunds, 2014).

As a final conclusion, within the framework of multidisciplinary and open-minded thinking, as demonstrated by Tony Blair’s words in the first stage of his mandate, the ultimate goal of the process according to post-modern security was the freedom of the individual, where values and interests merged in a very attractive intellectual mix. In this world of ideas, the question was not just about British interests, but about self-perception and identity. In short, it was about reconciling the Britain that it was and the Britain it sought to be (Cooper, 2003). However, the future did not seem to be determined by grand plans, treaties or strategies, but by the decisions of the moment.

This seems to be reproduced today, where issues such as Brexit are openly criticised by a growing section of the population. Likewise, the asymmetry of the special relationship between the US and the UK may still be detected in events such as the US administration’s unilateral decision to withdraw from Afghanistan.

To this must be added the unpopularity of making commitments beyond those required to protect national interests, positions perceived by society as policy failures (Walt, 2006; Beeson, 2007). Blair himself publicly acknowledged that the Iraq intervention had been a disaster (Branigan, 2006; Roberts, 2006; Webster, 2006). Eventually, the disillusionment of British society contributed to Tony Blair’s

resignation in 2007, due to the strong divergence of policies based on the protection of international values and human rights and his inability to rebuild the political base on which he had twice been democratically elected (Bromund, 2009: 260).

The Blair Witch Project is the title of a well-known found-footage film depicting the search for a young girl who has disappeared in a forest, and when it seems that they are about to find her, she mysteriously disappears. The same was true of New Labour's grand strategy. After an exciting start, with a very clear message about revitalising the UK's role in the world as a bridge connecting the two shores of the Atlantic Ocean, his grand strategy eventually faded out.

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