

NOT SO SPECIAL?

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The British debate over Syria has plugged into an increasingly hostile mood against military intervention. Even the minimal threat of sea and air-launched cruise missiles, with their extreme accuracy and low risk, has caused an outpouring of anti-war feeling. In many ways the debate in the UK is less about Syria in 2013 than it is about Iraq in 2003. The "dodgy dossier" and the need to abide by a US offensive timetable, the searing post-war experience and the civilian and military deaths have given the British public a sense of wariness and hostility to any military endeavour. Although the intervention in Libya was successful – in that it deposed Gaddafi – the end result is still instability, armed militias and the export of committed Islamic fundamentalist fighters all over the Maghreb.

It may have taken a while, but this mood has filtered into the minds of politicians. Keen to reflect the views

of their constituents, many MPs on the government side either rebelled or abstained. The Labour party, keen to put Blair and Iraq behind them, set very stringent hurdles that the government was not willing to jump in order to get their support. The resulting government defeat was, in that sense, inevitable.

But the impact is considerable. For the first time a Prime Minister has dispensed with the Crown Prerogative, now wielded by Number 10, to commit the country to military action. Instead, given the past history of interventions and the weakness of the Coalition government, the Prime Minister chose to place his foreign policy in commission to Parliament. But what he was not expecting was the humiliation of defeat on what was simply a principle of military intervention with the promise of a future vote if action was needed. What is even more odd is the opposition's mood the following morning. According to many

Gassed: alleged victims of a government-authorised chemical weapons attack are buried



observers, the Labour MPs seemed to wander about in a haze, having not expected a government defeat; the more foreign relations-aware ones are still reeling from the implications.

And there are many implications, not just for the UK – such an explicit, public and final rejection of military action has had global consequences. For the UK there is the constitutional position. It looks as though, in future, parliament will continue to be consulted with regard to military action. On top of that, it seems likely that if the vote goes against the government they will not undertake military action in future. Previous debates on military operations often happened after they had begun, and were certainly not seen by the government as binding on the decision-making process. It is true that no government could afford to ignore the wishes of Parliament, but no government would also have risked placing before the House a motion that would result in such a humiliation as defeat. We are now in a wholly new constitutional position, where the needs of diplomacy are subordinated to the immediate desires of Parliament.

And that is where the second issue sits. Unless there is a treaty that the House has already passed, the demand will be for a binding vote on any future military endeavour. This severely limits the freedom of action of the British government. Successful interventions, such as Sierra Leone, were often done by stealth; the initial mission profile was simply the evacuation of British civilians not saving the country and supporting an ineffectual UN deployment. This would be far harder to achieve, particularly if Parliament hedges any motion in support of military action with clear parameters to the overall mission.

And then there is the United States. The UK has traditionally been “the brilliant second” to US military action. The presence of the Union flag allows the President to claim the United States is not operating unilaterally but with allies in pursuit of goals shared by Western democracies. Clearly that was what Washington, and everyone else, expected this time.

HMS *Tireless*' cruise missiles would not have been a military necessity given the weight of US firepower in the region, but diplomatically they would have been invaluable. But now the British military is out of the running, and the Prime Minister cannot give any undertakings that a British flag will be there when the shooting starts. In fact, given the precedent that this vote has set, no future British Prime Minister will be able to give that undertaking, and no US President will be able to take it for granted.

Of course the repercussions for the relationship between the UK and the US are potentially huge. It does not mean that the entire security/technology/diplomacy relationship dating back to WW2 is suddenly junked. Both sides have things that the other wants. For example, RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus is still an exceptionally useful source of intelligence intercepts from a wholly reliable source. But the UK and the US have traditionally been in lockstep when it comes to military support, despite some famous faux pas, such as Grenada. But the British would do well to remember that action to retake the Falklands in 1982 would have been almost impossible without US co-operation, and recent interventions in Sierra Leone and Libya were backed to the hilt by Washington. This is not a one-way relationship.

Out of the public eye, Britain also gains considerable benefit through security co-operation and access to advanced military technologies. This is not just a few spare parts and the odd secret titbit. The security apparatus alone is massive and dates back to WW2, via the UKUSA agreement that predates Nato, all the way through to the present day's security co-operation relating to Islamic fundamentalist terror cells. The relationship is deep and heavily intertwined.

But one aspect of this relationship the UK could traditionally promise was military support if the US needed the diplomatic benefit of an ally in any operation. As Britain's military horizons have shrunk the ability to provide that support has consequently diminished, but the option is still there if it is possible. British Prime Ministers have been able to use Crown Prerogative to provide such military support, even if it is simply logistical, overfly rights or Special Forces support.

Additional questions must now be asked. Where does this new policy draw the line? In 1986 the Thatcher government allowed the US to use RAF Lakenheath for a non-Nato bombing of Libya, an act which arguably increased the ire of Colonel Gadaffi towards the UK. Would such an act now need a Parliamentary vote? What about the surreptitious use of Special Forces, whose deployment would have to be secret? How would this be addressed by Parliament, and if it was not and one was captured what then? The genie is now out of the bottle and floating around the room, but no one has yet managed to pin it down.

There have, though, been shouts of acclamation too. Britain, and Blair in particular, was accused of acting as America's poodle ten years ago. In this act of non-co-operation many see the desire to overcome that particular

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accusation. What is unusual is that many of these same voices on the Conservative party benches are the same ones which also resent the influence of the European Union. This resurgent strand of little Englanders sound very much like the inter-war Imperial-focussed Tories, unwilling to be drawn into European entanglements and suspicious of the US. Updated, that implies an isolationism from both magnetic poles that have traditionally acted upon UK foreign policy since the 1950s. If this group sees this as some form of lion's roar, it is a cry leading the UK into some form of diplomatic wilderness.

This vote has brought the UK into line with its European partners, with one exception: France. Although the French public are equally suspicious of military action, and do not seem to trust their President to carry it out, Francois Hollande is still holding to the line that France will support the US over military action in Syria. They may also deploy military assets to the region: the carrier Charles de Gaulle is berthed at Toulon and not that far from the scene of the action. If the French wanted to she could easily be off the Syrian coast in a couple of days and undertake stand-off air strikes against Syrian targets.

It is now that seasoned Nato historians will need to take a deep breath. For France to be the main active military support to the US, in military action against a former French colony, against French public opinion and without a UN endorsement? Even five years ago it would have seemed absurd. Now it looks like it is going to become a reality. Hear that whining sound? That is De Gaulle spinning in his grave...

And such a scenario just piles additional humiliation on David Cameron. The rest of Europe, as in the past, is strong on diplomatic condemnation of Syria but is reluctant to endorse, let alone participate in, US-led military action. This is not only true in pacifistic Berlin, where Angela Merkel is in the middle of a difficult election, but among smaller countries like Denmark and Norway – countries that could be traditionally relied upon to back Washington. There too, the public are deeply sceptical that any form of military action would be wise or appropriate.

Of course Russia and China are thrilled. Well, their governments are. Reports from Russia indicate that the majority of the population do not really care about Syria, but rather about a "strong Russia", which is what tends to lead foreign policy in the Kremlin these days. Unlike Serbia, and the military action there, Russians do not feel any strong cultural ties to Syria, and so this is much more a problem of power politics. Relations between Washington and Moscow are now icier than any time since Gorbachev. Syria has simply added to the concern that Moscow is becoming increasingly authoritarian and will countenance any lie or any human rights violation by its ally, because the loss of that ally will mean a loss of face.

So, Moscow could take considerable solace from the UK decision. It makes Washington look isolated when even its most reliable ally will not step up to the plate despite having military assets in the region. Putin's response, after expressing surprise at the vote,



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Protestors gather outside Parliament ahead of the government vote on military action in Syria

was to say: "This shows that in Great Britain, even if it is the USA's main geopolitical ally in the world... there are people who are guided by national interests and common sense, and value their sovereignty". Plugging directly into the "America's Poodle" argument. China was, of course, more restrained. Nevertheless they too called for a diplomatic solution, and both are almost guaranteed to vote against the UK's UN resolution urging intervention.

If lessons are to be learned from this, they mostly need to be learned in Washington. The Obama administration has been poor in its diplomacy in Europe, and particularly with the UK. Although the Rolls Royce minds in the Foreign Office may fully understand the implications, the general public most certainly does not. But what it has seen is unrest in Egypt coming on top of a succession of Middle Eastern adventures and wants none of it. On the back of this, the US has made no effort to cultivate UK public opinion. Admittedly Obama is not the hate figure that Bush became, but neither is he Clinton. Clinton's ability to charm and communicate won over huge swathes of European opinion and his popularity remains high. The US needs to reflect that British support is now no longer guaranteed, and no British Prime Minister can deliver it unless he is able to carry Parliament. By extension that means being able to sell the policy to the public, to make the case, and here the British government and the United States have singularly failed, despite this being an atrocity of such magnitude.

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