

Linking idealism and *realpolitik*

By Kristin M. Haugevik

Values at stake. While the British press and his political contenders are busy debating whether his time in 10 Downing Street is up, Tony Blair himself has attempted to put renewed focus on his once celebrated doctrine of value-based intervention. In the pamphlet "A Global Alliance for Global Values", recently published by the Foreign Policy Centre in London, the Prime Minister reconfirms his conviction that what he calls "the battle of values" needs to be won.



Kristin M. Haugevik is a researcher at NUPI, the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs.

It was in April 1999, at the Economic Club in Chicago, that Blair first introduced his argument about value-based intervention, in what will almost certainly be remembered as one of the most influential speeches of his premiership. At the time, he was at the height of his political career. He had earned himself the reputation of a great communicator with the ability of making complex political messages comprehensible for the general public. This evening was no exception. After having expressed how "absolutely delighted" he was to be in Chicago, Blair moved on to the actual topic of the evening. "While we meet here," he began, "unspeakable things are happening in Europe".

He was, of course, referring to the ongoing situation in Kosovo. One month earlier, NATO had launched "Operation Allied Force" in order to, in the words of then Secretary General Javier Solana, "halt the violence and stop further humanitarian catastrophe". It was NATO's first broad-scale military operation, and it involved a broadening of the organisation's traditional approach to security. While the refugee situation in Kosovo certainly could have represented a potential danger to European security, it was the threat to European values that was most frequently emphasised. This evening Blair argued that the case of Kosovo ought to be seen in a wider context. Then he outlined what has later been referred to as "the Blair doctrine" – the idea that international intervention should take place not on the basis of interests, but on values. "We are all internationalists now", he insisted.

Blair's attempt to establish a link between "idealism and *realpolitik*" was well achieved. Thus, it was not unexpected that just war, humanitarian intervention, and global values became recurring issues in his speeches on foreign policy. In October 2001, around the same time as military action against Afghanistan began, he delivered a passionate speech on the international community's moral obligation to intervene in situations of humanitarian suffering. Referring to Kosovo, Rwanda, and Sierra Leone, he argued that Afghanistan too was a case where vital global values were at stake.

Two years later he attempted to make the same connection on the more controversial case of Iraq. "Kosovo, with ethnic cleansing of ethnic Albanians, was not a hard decision for most people; nor was Afghanistan after the shock of September 11; nor was Sierra Leone", he recalled in a 2004 speech. He admitted that the decision to intervene in Iraq had been "immensely difficult" to make, but concluded that sometimes intervention is necessary even if one's own security is not directly threatened. "The best defence of our security", he said, "lies in the spread of our values". In the new pamphlet he reconfirms this position: "It is our values that link our military action in Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan and Iraq, with our diplomatic action on climate change, world trade, Africa and Palestine."

Unfortunately for Blair, his arguments about value-based intervention are met with less acclamation and more scepticism today than seven years ago. Whereas Kosovo, Sierra Leone, and Afghanistan without too much difficulty could be seen in such a context, Blair and George W. Bush have been accused of focusing on democracy, freedom, and human rights only to divert attention from the embarrassing lack of WMDs in Iraq. Blair's dedication to a value-based foreign policy may very well be founded on true idealism. Sadly for the Prime Minister, the case of Iraq appears to have weakened his credibility on this issue.