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Speeches

Tony Blair speech to Chicago Council on Global Affairs

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It is almost ten years to the day that I stood in this city and gave an address at the height of the Kosovo crisis. In that speech, I set out what I described as a doctrine of international community that sought to justify intervention, including if necessary military intervention, not only when a nation's interests are directly engaged; but also where there exists a humanitarian crisis or gross oppression of a civilian population.

It was a speech that argued strongly for an active and engaged foreign policy, not a reactive or isolationist one: better to intervene than to leave well alone. Be bold, adventurous even in what we can achieve.

Many, at the time, described the speech as hopelessly idealistic; dangerous even. And, probably, in the light of events since then, some would feel vindicated. As for me, I am older, better educated by the events that shaped my premiership, but I still believe that those who oppress and brutalise their citizens are better put out of power than kept in it.

However, it is undeniable that in the years that have passed, circumstances have changed radically. When I was here in 1999, Kosovo was the issue of the day, the ethnic cleansing of a civilian population, Muslims as it happened, by the Milosevic regime in Serbia. Subsequently, I authorised military action, by British forces in Sierra Leone, where a group of gangsters - portrayed in the film 'Blood Diamond' - were trying to overthrow a democratically elected Government. The gangsters were stopped, the Government saved and in late 2007, the people of Sierra Leone changed ruling party by the ballot box, and without bloodshed.

But then came Afghanistan and afterwards Iraq. Up to 11th September 2001, the military interventions, undertaken with such a humanitarian purpose, had been relatively self-contained, short in duration and plainly successful. Even after then, the removal of the Taliban Government occurred in three months. And though, of course, the reasons for that intervention were obviously justifiable by reference to a traditional view of national interest, since the Afghan regime had allowed Al Qaida to operate training camps; the nature of the regime - its cruelty, its suppression of women, its use of the drug trade - hugely contributed to the public support for its removal.

When Saddam was ousted in 2003, even those who disagreed with the conflict could see and abhor the way he and his henchmen behaved in their barbaric treatment of their people.

However, as time has passed, so has the familiar certainty that our power would always triumph,

that if the will was there, the means of intervention would be efficacious. Iraq, though measurably improved from two years ago, remains fragile; Afghanistan is proving to be a battle needing to be re-waged. Sustaining public support through so many years has proved difficult in respect of Iraq and even in respect of Afghanistan.

So: should we now revert to a more traditional foreign policy, less bold, more cautious; less idealistic, more pragmatic, more willing to tolerate the intolerable because of fear of the unpredictable consequences that intervention can bring?

My argument is that the case for the doctrine I advocated ten years ago, remains as strong now as it was then; and that what has really changed is the context in which the doctrine has to be applied. The struggle in which we are joined today is profound in its danger; requires engagement of a different and more comprehensive kind; and can only be won by the long haul. The context therefore is much tougher. But the principle is the same.

The struggle faced by the world, including the majority of Muslims, is posed by an extreme and misguided form of Islam. Our job is simple: it is to support and partner those Muslims who believe deeply in Islam but also who believe in peaceful co-existence, in taking on and defeating the extremists who don't. But it can't be done without our active and wholehearted participation.

It is one struggle with many dimensions and varied arenas. There is a link between the murders in Mumbai, the terror attacks in Iraq and Afghanistan, the attempts to destabilise countries like Yemen, and the training camps of insurgents in Somalia.

It is not one movement. There is no defined command and control. But there is a shared ideology. There are many links criss-crossing the map of Jihadist extremism. And there are elements in the leadership of a major country, namely Iran, that can support and succour its practitioners.

Engaging with Iran is entirely sensible. I fully agree with the Obama Administration in doing so. The Iranian Government should not be able to claim that we have refused the opportunity for constructive dialogue; and the stature and importance of such an ancient and extraordinary civilisation means that as a nation, Iran should command respect and be accorded its proper place in the world's affairs. I hope this engagement succeeds.

The purpose of such engagement should, however, be clear. It is to prevent Iran acquiring nuclear weapons capability; but it is more than that, it is to put a stop to the Iranian regime's policy of de-stabilisation and support of terrorism. The purpose of the engagement, as the President and Secretary of State have rightly emphasised, is not to mix the messages; but to make them indisputably clear.

Unfortunately, though, it would be rash to believe that resolving our differences with Iran's current regime, would resolve this struggle. It would, of course, be a major advance, some might argue a definitive one. But, in truth, the roots of this extremism go deep and far broader than those initiated by the Tehran revolution of 1979.

Examine, for a moment, where things stand. The future of Pakistan is critical, but uncertain. Were

it to go badly wrong, the consequences would be drastic. In Lebanon, there is calm but no one doubts now the political and military might of Hezbollah. In Palestine, whatever criticism can be made of Israel, the fact remains that terrorist attacks are still aimed directly at innocent civilians who live in what is undeniably the state of Israel; and such attacks hugely impair the chance of peace on the basis of two states. And there is continuing terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan.

These examples are well known. But how many know that in the Mindanao insurgency in the Philippines, over 150,000 have died; in Algeria, tens of thousands have perished ; and as we speak, across a wide part of the northern half of Africa, previously good relations between Muslims and Christians have been sundered, and communities set against each other.

Of course, each arena of conflict has its own particular characteristics, its own origins in political or territorial disputes, its own claims and counter-claims of injustice. Of course the solution in each case will be in many respects different. But it is time to wrench ourselves out of a state of denial. There is one major factor in common. In each conflict there are those deeply engaged in it, who argue that they are fighting in the true name of Islam.

And here is the crucial point. This didn't start on 11th September 2001, or shortly before it. The roots aren't near the surface. It was in the 1970s that Pakistan's leadership decided to re-define itself through religious conviction. The storming of the Holy Mosque in Mecca took place years ago. Al Qaida began in earnest in the 1980s. In many Arab and Muslim nations, there was more tolerance and less religiosity in the 1960s, than today. The doctrinal roots of this growing movement can be traced even further back to the period in the late 19th and early 20th century where modernising and moderate clerics and thinkers were slowly but surely pushed aside by the hard-line dogma of those, whose cultural and theological credentials were often dubious, but whose appeal lay in the simplicity of the message : Islam, they say, lost its way; the reason was its departure from the true faith as stated immutably in the 7th century ; and the answer is to return to it and in doing so, vanquish Islam's foes, in the West and most especially within the ruling parties of the Islamic world itself.

The tragedy of this is that the authentic basis of Islam, as laid down in the Qur'an, is progressive, humanitarian, sees knowledge and scientific advance as a duty, which is why for centuries Islam was the fount of so much invention and innovation. Fundamental Islam is actually the opposite of what the extremists preach.

But, in recent times, as the West and nations such as China developed and opened up under the impulse of a steady, post Second World War globalisation, so these extreme elements have presented themselves in reaction to it, railing against the modern world, its evils, its decadence, its hedonistic secularism.

In terrorism, they have found a powerful, hideous and, in one sense, very modern weapon. It kills the innocent; but it does much more than that. It creates chaos in a world which increasingly works through confidence and stability.

And they have succeeded in one other sphere. They have successfully inculcated a sense of

victimhood in the Islamic world, that stretches far beyond the extremes. So powerful has this become that it has severely warped the debate even in many parts of the non-Islamic world, where frequently commentators, while naturally condemning the terrorism, nevertheless imply that, to an extent, the West's foreign policy has helped 'cause' it.

President Obama's reaching out to the Muslim world at the start of a new American administration, is welcome, smart, and can play a big part in defeating the threat we face. It disarms those who want to say we made these enemies, that if we had been less confrontational they would have been different. It pulls potential moderates away from extremism.

But it will expose, too, the delusion of believing that there is any alternative to waging this struggle to its conclusion. The ideology we are fighting is not based on justice. That is a cause we can understand. And world-wide these groups are adept, certainly, at using causes that indeed are about justice, like Palestine. Their cause, at its core, however, is not about the pursuit of values that we can relate to; but in pursuit of values that directly contradict our way of life. They don't believe in democracy, equality or freedom. They will espouse, tactically, any of these values if necessary. But at heart what they want is a society and state run on their view of Islam. They are not pluralists. They are the antithesis of pluralism. And they don't think that only their own community or state should be like that. They think the world should be governed like that.

In other words, there may well be groups, or even Governments, that can be treated with, and with whom we can reach an accommodation. Negotiation and persuasion can work and should be our first resort. If they do, that's great, which is why if Hamas were to accept the principle of a peaceful two state solution, they could be part of the process agreeing it. But the ideology, as a movement within Islam, has to be defeated. It is incompatible not with 'the West' but with any society of open and tolerant people and that in particular means the many open and tolerant Muslims.

The difference, now, in the nature of any intervention, however is this. Back in April 1999, I thought that removal of a despotic regime was almost sufficient in itself to create the conditions for progress. But this battle cannot so easily be won. Because it is based on an ideology and because its roots are deep, so our strategy for victory has to be broader, more comprehensive but also more sharply defined. It is important to recognise that it is not going to be won except over a prolonged period. In this sense, it is more akin to fighting revolutionary Communism than a discrete campaign such as the one which changed the Balkans a decade ago.

So I understand completely the fatigue with an interventionist foreign policy - especially when it involves military action that takes its toll on the nation's psyche, when we see those who grieve for the fallen in battle. The struggle seems so vast, so complex, so full of layers and intersections that daunt us, that they make us unsure where we start, how we proceed and where and how on earth we end.

'Look there are people in this world who are crazy,' a friend said to me the other day, 'leave them to be crazy.' Except the problem is that they won't leave us in the comfort of our lives. That's not the way the world works today. The Holy Land, that from Tel Aviv to the River Jordan, could fit

within a small US state, is many, many thousands of miles from here. But, whether there is peace there or not, will affect our peace.

So: How to win? In summary, I would identify six elements to a successful strategy.

First, we have to understand we have not caused this phenomenon but what we do now can help beat it. You can debate, in respect of Iraq or Afghanistan, whether by removing the dictatorships, we provided the terrain for terrorist organisations to work in ; or the alternative view, which is that by fighting them there, we damage their capacity world-wide by focusing the battle.

Whichever view is taken, there is no conceivable justification for the ghastly and wicked use of terror to kill and maim innocent people, the bulk of whom are of course Muslims. And there are ample alternatives to violence in Iraq, in Afghanistan, in the democratic process; in Palestine, Lebanon and elsewhere, in diplomacy and peaceful political change. Terror is the enemy of progress. The responsibility for terrorism lies with the terrorist and no-one else.

This has to be proclaimed vigorously by us; but also upheld and shouted from the rooftops from within Islam itself.

Secondly, there is some good news. Ultimately, this battle can only be won within Islam itself and the fact is, across Islam today, we have allies. The most powerful are the ordinary people themselves. Yes, the voice of extremists may be louder. They are better organised. But they don't represent true Islam or true Muslims. We need to support these allies. We need to work with them to allow their voice to be heard and their authenticity to be established. In this regard, we should acknowledge that the world of Islam is not just the Middle East and its surrounds, but includes large parts of Asia, including Indonesia the largest predominantly Muslim country in the world.

Third, in supporting them, we have to escape the false choice between the use of hard or soft power. Only a combination of the two will work. One of the most damaging aspects of the politics of the past ten years has been the posing of the policy challenge as between a so-called 'neo-conservative' right who were held to promulgate a purely military solution; and a so-called 'liberal' left that preferred diplomacy. Most sensible people know that here - as, in fact, in many areas of twenty first century politics - such labels are unhelpful, counter-productive and distort the challenge. We have to fight where we are being fought against. We have to persuade where the battle is for hearts and minds.

Fourth, in the use of hard power, we have to understand one very simple thing: where we are called upon to fight, we have to do it. If we are defeated anywhere, we are at risk of being defeated everywhere. Fortunately, you can be incredibly proud of your Armed Forces here in the US, as we, the British, can be of ours. They have been in the frontline of this battle for eight long years now. They are still on it. They are brave and committed people, fighting the good fight in a cause that is right and they deserve and need our wholehearted commitment in return.

Fifth, in the deployment of soft power, we need to be likewise resolute and encompass all dimensions of the struggle. We have to be partners and helpers to the process of change and

modernisation within Islam. We cannot do it. But we can support the doing of it by others. There is a perfectly intelligent view that 'imposing' democracy on Iraq and, to an extent, Afghanistan, was a mistake. It's not a view I share, obviously; but I fully respect it. However, I do not accept at all the view that democracy is unattainable or unaccepted in the Islamic world. On the contrary, eventually it is only by the embrace of greater democracy - albeit by evolution - that this battle will be won. It will be hard to accomplish. But it is the most dangerous thing imaginable, to force people to choose between an undemocratic elite with the right idea and a popular movement with the wrong one. Many of those drawn to the simplistic notion that 'Islam is the answer' are attracted because of the failure of countries to change, where change is urgently needed ; and in doing so, end up agitating for the wrong change, because we are not helping sensible change to occur.

So a soft power strategy should go broad and also go deep. This extremism has many political characteristics. But it is also cloaked in religion. You can't ignore that fact. So part of defeating it lies also in religion, lies in a consistent and clear critique of its religious error by religious leaders within Islam; and in the burgeoning initiative for dialogue, understanding and action between the different faiths of the world, of which my foundation, the Tony Blair Faith Foundation, is a part. The more we reach out across the world of faith, the more common space the Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic faiths can inhabit, then the extremists and reactionaries within all faiths can be challenged.

And it needs to be organised. It needs to be at the centre of policy, properly resourced, properly serviced. It needs to go down into the education systems, ours as well as theirs, into collaboration between institutions of learning, into arts and culture. Foreign policy needs to be completely re-shaped around such a strategy.

And, of course, though I know I sound like the proverbial broken record on this, the Israel-Palestine question must be resolved. No-one should suggest this dispute has caused the extremism; but its resolution would immeasurably help its defeat. It isn't a side issue; it isn't a diversion. And it is resolvable. If we understand how much it matters, we will find the will and the way to do it. But it must be done.

Finally, we are required to do something that it seems rather odd to have to say. We have to re-discover some confidence and conviction in who we are, how far we've come and what we believe in. By the way, I think this even about the economic crisis. It is severe. It's going to be really, really hard. But we will get through it and not by abandoning the market or open economic system but by learning our lessons and adjusting the system in a way that makes it better. But on any basis, this system has delivered amazing leaps forward in prosperity for our citizens and we shouldn't, amongst the gloom, forget it.

The same is true for the security threat we face. We are standing up for what is right. The body of ideas that has given us this liberty, to speak and think as we wish, that allows us to vote in and vote out our rulers, that provides a rule of law on which we can rely, and a political space infinitely more transparent than anything that went before ; that body isn't decaying. It is in the prime of life. It is the future. And though the extremists that confront us have new adherents, we

have ours too, nations democratic for the first time, people tasting freedom and liking it.

And that is why we should not revert to the foreign policy of years gone by, of the world weary, the supposedly sensible practitioners of caution and expediency, who think they see the world for what it is, without the illusions of the idealist who sees what it could be.

We should remember what such expediency led us to, what such caution produced. Here is where I remain adamantly in the same spot, metaphorically as well as actually, of ten years ago, that evening in this city. The statesmanship that went before regarded politics as a Bismarck or Machiavelli regarded it. It's all a power play; a matter, not of right or wrong, but of who's on our side, and our side defined by our interests, not our values. The notion of humanitarian intervention was the meddling of the unwise, untutored and inexperienced.

But was it practical to let Pakistan develop as it did in the last thirty years, without asking what effect the madrassas would have on a generation educated in them? Or wise to employ the Taliban to drive the Russians out of Afghanistan? Or to ask Saddam to halt Iran? Was it really experienced statesmanship that let thousands upon thousands die in Bosnia before we intervened or turned our face from the genocide of Rwanda?

Or to form alliances with any regime, however bad, because they solve 'today' without asking whether they will imperil 'tomorrow'? This isn't statesmanship. It is just politics practiced for the most comfort and the least disturbance in the present moment.

I never thought such politics very sensible or practical. I think it even less so now. We live in the era of interdependence; the idea that if we let a problem fester, it will be contained within its boundaries no longer applies. That is why leaving Africa to the ravages of famine, conflict and disease is not just immoral but immature in its political understanding. Their problems will become ours.

And this struggle we face now cannot be defeated by staying out; but by sticking in, abiding by our values not retreating from them.

It is a cause that must be defeated by a better cause. That cause is one of open, tolerant, outward-looking societies in which people respect diversity and difference in which peaceful co-existence can flourish. It is a cause that has to be fought for; with hearts and minds as well as arms, of course. But fought for, nonetheless with the courage to see it through and the confidence that the cause is just, right and the only way the future of our world can work.

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