When doing something is not an option: Politics, strategy and the British approach to the Syrian conflict

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(Not least because it isn’t very good).

Abstract

This paper analyzes Britain’s apparent struggle to define a role for itself with regard to the civil war in Syria. It highlights how three related factors together undermined its ability to develop a coherent strategy. The first factor might best be termed the Iraq factor. Britain is much more skeptical about the utility of military action after years of war in Afghanistan and Iraq. Both the public and the political elite agree doubt that getting involved in other people’s wars is a rational use of British blood and treasure. The second factor is pure domestic politics. In times of relatively weak governments, parliament’s new war powers effectively force political party leaders to agree on major overseas military initiatives. In practice that means compromise or inaction, regardless of what the public (or MPs) want. The third factor is a set of rational strategic calculations. Britain can probably free-ride on US power in Syria, and it lacks the immediate material capacity to make much of a difference on its own. There will be no political solution until the US and Russia reach an agreement, for example. Britain has grounds to doubt the legality of intervention, and incentives to shirk its traditional great power role. The Cameron government knows its citizens do not support the admission of large numbers of Syrian refugees, and that its lack of land borders with the rest of Europe allows it to sit out the continent’s efforts to manage mass flows of people fleeing conflicts. Britain lacks a clear strategy for Syria, in other words, for both good and bad reasons. It is both suffering from and adjusting to a more realistic 21st-century international status. Yet even accepting that adjustment, it still has room for useful policy contributions. This paper seeks to set some viable options out.

Introduction

Britain has struggled since 2011 to define its role in the international response to the ongoing Syrian civil war. This paper argues that the roots of this struggle lie in the rise of domestic divisions over the country’s proper role in the Middle East as a region, and in turn in the wider world. It accordingly contributes to the “interminable and rather neurotic” debate over the sort of state Britain should be (Cornish and Dorman 2015, 353), while attempting – as far as is possible (McCourt 2011a, 146) – to escape its politics and present an outside view. The British response to the Syrian conflict breaks down into four distinct phases. In the first phase, roughly from March 2011 to August 2013, policymakers studiously avoided getting involved, or even suggesting that Britain had an active part to play. Over time they gradually tired of diplomacy and began to intervene directly on the side of opposition groups challenging the Assad regime. But it was not until the chemical weapons attacks in Damascus of 21 August 2013 that anyone proposed significant action. The second phase, from August 2013 to September 2014, followed the decision by the
House of Commons to veto British involvement in airstrikes against Assad. It saw an escalating humanitarian effort on the British part, but little of substance in terms of conflict resolution. This period also witnessed the rise of Daesh, the so-called ‘Islamic State’ that seized vast swathes of Syrian and Iraqi territory in the summer of 2014, prompting the US to use force to prevent the fall of Baghdad. After months of public deliberation, the coalition government led by Prime Minister David Cameron felt ready to risk a parliamentary vote on Britain following suit. From September 2014 to November 2015 British policy entered a third phase. The Daesh advance halted. But it continued to hold considerable ground. Following a political compromise between the government and Leader of the Opposition Ed Miliband, Britain concentrated its efforts on the Iraqi side of the border, leaving Syria to the US and a handful of Arab League (mainly Gulf) states. As the conflict rumbled on, large numbers of refugees made for Europe, place the European Union under unprecedented strain and prompting a major effort from Germany to meet the humanitarian crisis. Britain, already locked in political battles over its EU membership and historically high immigration, did its best to stay aloof. A string of terror attacks, inspired and to some extend directed by Daesh, shook Tunisia, France, Lebanon and Belgium in mid and late 2015. Under pressure from its French and US allies, the Cameron government (re-elected in May with a small single-party majority) asked MPs to approve extending British military efforts into Syria in December of that year. They agreed, though not without a contentious and divisive debate. The humanitarian and diplomatic efforts rumbled on.

Underpinning all of this was a sense of “strategic drift” (Gaskarth 2014, 559), incoherence and delay. Britain’s military contribution to the fight against Daesh prompted particular concern. Alex Danchev once remarked that Britain’s capacity to influence international affairs had so declined relative to its desire for power that “Britain is Belgium, though the British do not know it yet” (Danchev 1998, 164). Britain, like Belgium, sent eight front-line combat aircraft to the anti-Daesh campaign, a contribution the House of Commons Defence Committee decried as “strikingly modest” (Defence Committee 2015, 4-5). Parliament’s dramatic reversal of government policy in August 2013 may have had some “positive outcomes” as Jamie Gaskarth (2016a, 718) has pointed out, but it was nevertheless a shocking reversal that embarrassed the Cameron government. Restricting action against Daesh to Iraq and ruling out action in Syria made limited strategic sense, and caused a degree of “diplomatic embarrassment” in the region and with coalition allies (Foreign Affairs Committee 2015, 10). Eventually the position was reversed, but not without difficulty.

Of course it made sense for Britain to approach the “complexity” and “greater [potential] consequences” (Foreign Affairs Committee 2012, 73) of entanglement in Syria
cautiously (Stansfield 2014, 1332). But there was more to it than that. Britain has struggled to adopt a clear and consistent stance because its domestic elites have been locked in disagreement over the country’s broader role in the world. Most have learned from Iraq to be skeptical about the merits of interventionist foreign policies, especially in the Middle East (Dumbrell 2006, 466, Daddow 2013, 213). Parliament’s involvement in decisions about the use of force abroad has linked this wider skepticism to more specific and concrete developments (Strong 2015a, 2015b, Kaarbo and Kenealy 2016, Gaskarth 2016a). Role contestation is now institutionalized amongst MPs. They disagree over the ethics, strategy and implications of interventionism per se, and the military sort especially. They are not implacably opposed to getting involved in what they consider other people’s problems. But they are at least wary. And that wariness has made decisive, consistent or coherent action increasingly difficult, at least in the military sphere.

The remainder of this paper breaks down three dimensions of the domestic clash over Britain’s role in the world. Focusing on the traditions and dilemmas underpinning debates in parliament, in line with the interpretive methodological approach (Bevir, Daddow and Hall 2013, 163), it first outlines a role-theoretic approach to understanding British foreign policy, before presenting a short overview of successive policy developments towards Syria since 2011. It then outlines three related factors limiting the levels of domestic consensus and preventing the adoption of a coherent stance. Iraq comes first. Iraq undermined public and elite trust in the institutions of British government, and in the practice of intervention. Overcoming its legacy still represents the greatest challenge ministers face in involving the country in events abroad. Politics is second. Complex parliamentary bargaining dynamics and political fragmentation together make coherent policymaking harder for David Cameron than for previous Prime Ministers, at least since the Second World War. Strategic questions come last. Strategy in this context encompasses difficult trade-offs between morality, capacity and allies’ expectations, trade-offs many British elites calculate in different ways. In concluding, the paper points towards some areas of present consensus, and suggests other viable options for useful things Britain can still reliably do.

**Studying Britain’s role in Syria**

The notion is well established in the literature that influential individuals within a state might disagree over its proper role in international politics, with meaningful substantive consequences (Holsti 1970, 253, Biddle 1986, 67, Breuning 1995, 237, Cantir and Kaarbo 2012, 8). This “role contestation” involves conflict between and within different understandings of the role a state should play, as well as interactions among different
groups of elites (Brummer and Thies 2015, 273, Cantir and Kaarbo 2016). Most studies looking at the subject agree that Britain’s role in the world depends in part on dialogue between different domestic actors (Gaskarth 2013, 61, 88). There is some disagreement, broadly tracking the division between a role theory tradition derived from social psychology and one from sociology (Thies and Breuning 2012, 2) between those who regard internal role conceptions as the most important driver of actual policy (Brummer and Thies 2015, 276-277), and those who emphasize the influence of “the expectations...that emanate from the international sphere” (McCourt 2014, 13). Trying to resolve the question of whether domestic conceptions or international expectations matter more to Britain, and by extension to states more generally, would mean moving beyond the core purpose of this paper, but acknowledging that the trade-off exists does help define its scope. Looking at the empirical record, meanwhile, underlines the merits of a domestic-driven approach. In short, Britain’s policy towards Syria largely did not change in line with international expectations, at least not entirely, between March 2011 and June 2016. Prime Minister Cameron proposed direct intervention in August 2013 to support the US in Britain’s traditional ‘first ally’ role. But domestic factors prevented him from acting. It took Britain several weeks to match the US commitment to fighting Daesh in Iraq in the Summer of 2014, and over a year to join it in Syria. Both the delay and the strategic eccentricity of the artificial Iraq/Syria division derived from domestic forces that cut against international pressures. Even the ultimate shift in focus into Syria reflected the parliamentary balance of power more than the entreaties of a wounded France. A domestic-first approach seems justified.

Within the literature focused on Britain specifically, two critical dilemmas arise. The first dilemma concerns Britain’s status as a great power in international politics, as a state capable of exerting a significant independent influence on global affairs. Though clearly not matching the superpower status of the United States, most observers conclude that Britain actually meets the criteria for inclusion among the great powers (Morris 2011, 326, Gaskarth 2013, 94), even if its status is “residual” (McCourt 2014, 2), “diminished” (Daddow and Schnapper 2013, 337) or otherwise in doubt (Broad and Daddow 2010, 210). The second dilemma build upon the first, raising questions about what Britain’s broader status means in practice. Here two traditions matter. The first is more isolationist and pragmatic (Hadfield-Amkhan 2010, 6, Gaskarth 2014, 566), and is traditionally associated with David Cameron’s Conservative Party. But Cameron’s approach has been quite different to that of his predecessors, at least rhetorically (Beech 2011, 359-360, Honeyman 2015). Drawing on elements introduced by his predecessor, Tony Blair, Cameron has articulated what he once described as a “liberal conservative” understanding of Britain’s proper international stance (Cameron 2006). Combining two distinct traditions in a fashion...
that suited Cameron’s first government, a Liberal Democrat-Conservative coalition, this approach linked a broad faith in the power of liberal intervention (Daddow and Gaskarth 2011, Bevir, Daddow and Hall 2013, 164, Beech and Oliver 2014, 112-113) with a narrower skepticism about its practical effects (Daddow and Schnapper 2013, 330). Britain could sometimes intervene in the affairs of other states, in other words. That did not necessarily mean it should (Daddow 2013, 210).

Liberal conservatism (or conservative liberalism, to be perhaps more precise) defined Britain’s initial response to the Syrian conflict. Foreign Secretary William Hague made a series of statements in the House of Commons, beginning in February 2012, in which he condemned human rights abuses in the country while both downplaying the prospect of substantial British intervention (Hague 2012a, cc23-25, 2012b, c39). By September, Britain had begun providing non-lethal hardware to unarmed opposition groups in Syria (there were still unarmed opposition groups at the time). Hague also trumpeted Britain’s status as the second-largest donor, behind the US, to displaced Syrian people (Hague 2012c, cc53-55). Through early 2013 Hague began to make stronger claims about Britain’s “moral obligation to help save lives in Syria and a national interest in ensuring that the country provides no haven for terrorist activity”. But the proposed methods did not promise to deliver much of substance on the ground, and he repeatedly underlined the “dangers and drawbacks of military intervention” (Hague 2013a, cc483-490). Hague was not immune to the fact his gradualist approach appeared to offer few concrete benefits. In March he complained, frustrated, that “diplomacy is taking far too long”. But he recognized that the US was not interested in a full-scale intervention, and that without US support Britain lacked the capacity to go it alone (Hague 2013b, cc961-970). Even an initial suggestion that Britain might arm rebel groups looked set to go nowhere, prompting considerable opposition from MPs (Hague 2013c, cc903-911).

The second phase of Britain’s Syria policy saw a marked step-change in both the government’s liberal rhetoric and its practical implications. Defeated by MPs in August over a proposal to use force to punish the Assad regime for using chemical weapons against civilians, the government effectively ruled out military intervention, a step Hague earlier refused to take. Instead he redoubled his efforts to highlight Britain’s humanitarian input, noting the financial contribution represented “the largest total sum that the UK has ever committed to a single crisis” (Hague 2013e, c144). British policy nevertheless looked constrained, its commitment to an interventionist role in the world in doubt. By early 2014 Hague’s statements hinted at a shift in tack. He talked more openly of trying to encourage other states to support the international humanitarian effort in Syria and the surrounding region. He also began to highlight particular niche issues, like the need to protect women from sexual violence in conflict (Hague 2014a, cc583-588). This pointed towards a re-
engagement with the notion of “good international citizenship” (Wheeler and Dunne 1998, 848), subsumed to some extent by the understandable focus on military action and national interest after 2001 (Gilmore 2015, 107). At the same time, however, Hague also mentioned Daesh for the first time.

Britain’s policy went through a major overhaul during the following months, and especially after Mosul fell to Daesh, which proclaimed its ‘caliphate’ in June 2014. No longer was the Assad regime the primary British concern. David Cameron asked MPs to authorize military action in Iraq on 26 September, telling the House of Commons that Daesh “have already declared war on us” and that it was imperative to respond (Cameron 2014, c1263). Though humanitarian concerns still formed part of the case for intervention, especially in light of the massacre of several thousand Yazidis sheltering in the Sinjar Mountains by Daesh forces during August, and indeed in Syria where the government had agreed with Labour Leader Miliband not to act, Cameron based his case primarily on British national security. Over the following months British Tornados began conducting strike operations in Iraq, while a variety of support aircraft contributed to the wider coalition effort, including through surveillance, logistics and air-to-air refueling. In some respects this contribution fulfilled the expectations of Britain’s allies, though perhaps on a smaller scale than in previous operations. Britain sent sixteen Tornados and ten Typhoons to enforce the no-fly zone over Libya in 2011, for example, compared to the eight Tornados (later increased to eight) and six Typhoons deployed against Daesh. Together these assets have accounted for approximately 8% of coalition airstrikes in Iraq and 60% of surveillance missions, making Britain the second largest contributor to the coalition’s strike operations (Mills, Smith and Brooke-Holland 2016, 6-7). Playing second fiddle to the United States while taking on primary responsibility for certain niche activities fits perfectly with Britain’s historic role as ‘first ally’ (Gaskarth 2014, 566).

Four events shifted the government towards extending British action into Syria. First, the Conservative Party won an outright House of Commons majority in the 2015 General Election. No longer reliant on Liberal Democrat coalition partners or, necessarily, on Labour opposition support, Prime Minister Cameron was better placed politically to seek a further parliamentary vote. Second, on 26 June 2015, an individual with links to Daesh killed thirty-eight foreign tourists on a beach in Sousse, Tunisia. Thirty were British citizens. Cameron called for a “full spectrum response” (Cameron 2015a), but did not immediately ask MPs to authorize wider strikes. Third, on 21 August, Cameron ordered an RAF Reaper UAV strike that killed Reyaad Khan and Junaid Hussein, two British Daesh operatives, as they travelled in a car through Syria. He told MPs the strike was a necessary act of self-defense, as Khan was actively involved in organizing attacks on UK citizens at the time of his death. Public opinion approved (Sayers 2015), as did parliament’s Joint
Committee on Human Rights (2016). He furthermore maintained his right as Prime Minister to order such attacks and then seek parliamentary approval afterwards, while maintaining that he would continue to seek consensus for extending British operations into Syria (Cameron 2015a, cc25-26, 31). Finally, large-scale terrorist attacks in Paris on 13 November and the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 2249 – which called on member states to use “all necessary measures” against Daesh (UN Security Council 2015) – on 20 November changed the international picture. Following specific requests from the French and US governments, Cameron asked MPs to approve extending British strike operations.

The present phase of Britain’s Syria policy therefore focuses narrowly on the direct security threat posed by Daesh. Indeed, in introducing the debate on 2 December 2015, Cameron argued the extended military campaign was “about discharging our responsibilities, chiefly to our own citizens” rather than to the region or the international community (Cameron 2015b, c1504). Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond spent more time reflecting on the implications of inaction for Britain’s role in the world, repeatedly asking “what kind of country would we be?” and concluding “we cannot contract out the responsibility for our national security” (Hammond 2015, c488). Interestingly, though Hammond previously argued the coalition possessed sufficient strike power in Syria without direct British participation (Hammond 2014, cc468-471), during the 2 December debate Cameron made much of the distinction between “strike” and “precision-strike” operations (Cameron 2015c, c329). The suggestion was that Britain could add additional specialist capabilities beyond its existing contribution on the surveillance side. Doing so, Cameron argued, would meet allies’ expectations and fulfil Britain’s role as a responsible great power.

In sum, then, Britain’s policy towards the Syrian conflict has developed gradually through four distinct phases since early 2011. Each phase has involved a shift towards greater militarization and securitization of the conflict and the threat it poses to British national interests. At no stage has Britain actually done ‘nothing’. But it is only in the most recent phase that Britain fully met the expectations of critical allied states, principally France and the US, about the role it should properly play (McCourt 2014). The following sections discuss why this was the case, highlighting three drivers of the sort of domestic role contestation highlighted at the outset of this section; memories of Iraq, parliamentary politics and disagreements over the balance to be struck between moral leadership and good strategy.
Iraq

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the legacy of the 2003 invasion of Iraq loomed largest over the three parliamentary debates about military intervention during this period, on 29 August 2013, 26 September 2014 and 2 December 2015. Many British political elites remember the Blair government’s decision to go to war against Saddam Hussein with considerable hostility. Many are less willing to trust governments proposing military action than they otherwise might be (Coates and Krieger 2004, 5, Kennedy-Pipe and Vickers 2007, 206). The problem is twofold. First, the invasion proved more costly and less effective than anticipated, undermining or at least problematizing the claim that interventionist foreign policies work (Dodds and Elden 2008, 360, Bulley 2010, 451). Secondly, the decision to go to war ultimately lacked legitimacy, a particular problem in the era of post-modern conflicts that lack clear objectives, front lines and end points (Michalski and Gow 2007, 198). What makes a military action legitimate depends on a combination of circumstances and collective social judgments, principally involving questions of legality, morality and constitutionality. Thanks in part to disagreements over the proper authority of the UN Security Council relative to the governments of its member states, the Iraq War provoked a crisis of constitutionality that was never effectively resolved (Clark 2005, 5, 210, 225-226). When the invading allies failed to stabilize the country after deposing Saddam Hussein, this crisis extended from the *ad bellum* to the *post bellum* stage, and raised further questions about the *in bello* phase too (Orend 2002). Their failure mattered. Legitimacy and success are linked, in practice if not in theory (Finnemore 2003, 16, 18, Reus-Smit 2007, 165). Had the US-led coalition been successful, doubts about the basis for its resort to arms would have faded over time (Mueller 2005, 109). It was not, so those doubts linger (Freedman 2004, 8). The Iraq experience effectively disproves David Chandler’s complaint that ‘ethical’ interventions can always be presented as the lesser of two evils (Chandler 2003, 309). Few British public actors argue that leaving Saddam Hussein in power would have been an unmitigated good. But most now treat the decision to go to war in Iraq as an error in itself, as well as a driver of the present conflict.

Iraq played a particular role in influencing how MPs debated the prospect of military action against the Assad regime in August 2013, in part because of similarities between how the Blair and Cameron governments presented their arguments (Strong 2015b, 1132). Though Cameron insisted “this situation is not like Iraq” (Cameron 2013, c1427), MPs raised four main points of comparison, around the fact the government ultimately asked them to trust its judgment, the absence of explicit UN Security Council approval, doubts about exit strategies and the need for public support. Blair’s Foreign Secretary Jack Straw led a number of MPs who pointed to the issue of trust. Labour’s
Roger Godsiff and the Conservative Guy Opperman described Iraq as a source of “poison” in British politics, breaking down the bonds of trust between government, parliament and public. Edward Leigh, another Conservative, put the point quite bluntly. “We were lied to”, he told colleagues (Hansard 2013, cc1451, 1487, 1521). Ed Miliband himself highlighted several “lessons from Iraq”, chief among them the need for “respect for the United Nations” (Miliband 2013, c1443). Green Party MP Caroline Lucas and a handful of (primarily Labour) members agreed (Hansard 2013, cc1479, 1484, 1490). Though the government and opposition proposed quite similar policies, involving the gradual escalation of diplomatic pressure on Damascus before a further vote on military action if necessary, only the Labour amendment explicitly promised to seek a UN Security Council vote. In practice the distinction was meaningless, since Miliband confirmed he would not see a Russian veto as a barrier to action, and the government had decided against committing to a vote knowing Russia would veto, but the Iraq link made the issue more significant in the debate. Elfyn Llwyd of Plaid Cymru, Alasdair McDonnell of the SDLP, Labour’s David Lammy and the Conservatives’ Richard Harrington all asked separately about the lack of a concrete exit strategy, underlining the degree of cross-party concern about the issue, and pointing to the risk of entanglement and ‘mission creep’ in light of the Iraq experience (Hansard 2013, cc1456, 1476, 1497, 1506). McDonnell and the Conservative Edward Garnier highlighted the lack of public support, another ominous echo (Hansard 2013, cc1476, 1538). Though some MPs disagreed, many of those who spoke in the 2013 debate saw Iraq as a cautionary experience, one warning against further military interventions in the Middle East. Conservative MP Bernard Jenkin, shadow defence secretary in 2003, complained about the “post-Iraq panic”. Ben Gummer warned about the risk of a “double calamity” should MPs misapply the lessons of Iraq. Pat McFadden put the point succinctly, arguing “the past should inform us rather than imprison us”. Nevertheless, as former International Development Secretary Andrew Mitchell observed, the “spectre of the debate on Iraq” continued to haunt the House of Commons (Hansard 2013, cc1470, 1517, 1522, 1473).

Iraq played a more nuanced role in the 2014 debate. Some MPs, including Labour’s Peter Hain and Diane Abbott, continued to frame the 2003 experience as a reason to vote against any military intervention. “We went to war on a lie”, warned Hain, “and the aftermath was disastrous” (Hansard 2014, c1277). To know the consequences of striking Daesh, argued Abbott, “we do not have to look in a crystal ball; we can read the book” (Hansard 2014, 1342). Most participants in the debate, however, took a more nuanced view, epitomized by Miliband’s argument that Britain faced a “heightened responsibility” to act in 2014 “precisely because we did intervene in Iraq” in 2003 (Miliband 2014, c1271). Labour’s Shabana Mahmood emphasized her own identity as a Sunni Muslim in both arguing for action against Daesh and complaining that “our history in Iraq, with the war of
2003, has eroded trust, created suspicion about our motives for getting involved and perhaps caused some of the factors that has led us to where we are today” (Hansard 2014, 1329). Doubts remained, in other words, but the memory of Iraq played both a less prominent and a less negative role in the 2014 debate on further military action in Iraq than it did in 2013 on intervention in Syria.

Iraq was not the only precedent informing parliamentary debates on Syria. The Foreign Affairs Committee acknowledged in 2012 that Russian and Chinese complaints about the conduct of the Libyan intervention made reaching an international consensus about Syria more difficult. It concluded, nevertheless, that the 2011 action remained the right thing to do (Foreign Affairs Committee 2012, 11). During the 2014 Daesh debate Liberal Democrat MPs Nick Harvey and Menzies Campbell talked about earlier precedents in Bosnia, Rwanda and Kosovo in arguing for action (Hansard 2014, c1312, 1285). Labour’s Meg Munn meanwhile used the 2013 vote to argue against inaction (Hansard 2014, c1325). The Foreign Affairs Committee agreed with Munn, complaining that the legacy of that vote “loomed large” over both the 2014 and 2015 Daesh discussions (Foreign Affairs Committee 2015, 5). Iraq remained the most powerful and most frequently-deployed historical comparison, however. Its role was clear. Despite the government’s best and repeated efforts, the memory of Iraq provided many MPs with a powerful analogical argument against military intervention of any sort, and in particular in the Middle East. It discredited both the institutions of government involved in policy decision-making, including the Attorney-General and the Joint Intelligence Committee, and the use of force itself. In the process, Iraq helped fuel domestic divisions over whether Britain could properly and successfully play an interventionist role in the world.

**Politics**

Party politics shapes foreign policy (Risse-Kappen 1991, Riefler, Scotto and Clarke 2011). In particular, party politics shaped several states’ involvement in the invasion of Iraq, including Britain’s to an extent (Schuster and Maier 2006, Dyson 2007, Mello 2012). Britain has a strong tradition of bipartisanship in foreign and security policy (Honeyman 2012, 121, Gaskarth 2006, 331). That tradition affected the country’s approach to Syria to some extent, though it broke down over the 2013 vote (Oliver 2015, 115). Nevertheless, MPs have since 2010 grown both more powerful and more rebellious, especially over questions involving interventionist foreign policies. Parliament’s involvement in military deployment decisions has also created considerable opportunities and incentives for politicization, as again the 2013 vote underlines (Strong 2015b).
Parliament has historically mostly followed the lead of the government in policymaking, especially in matters of foreign and security policy. So subservient were earlier generations of MPs that one observer concluded Britain’s system of government amounted to little more than “elected dictatorship” (Hailsham 1976). As Richard Heffernan put it, the British parliament amounted to little more than “a legislature that chooses never to bite, a tiger muzzled by partisan politics” (Heffernan 2005, 68). Powerful in theory, it was impotent in practice, neutered by party loyalty. More recent academic research has suggested a growing role for parliamentary contestation in the construction of (British) domestic role conceptions (Kesgin and Kaarbo 2010, Strong 2015b, Kaarbo and Kenealy 2016). This is significant. MPs’ introduction into combat deployment decisions has given them a very direct route through which to influence how Britain engages with international affairs. But it has also encouraged them to push for greater influence still. David Cameron’s governments have largely supported these efforts, while reserving the right to use force without approval in a humanitarian emergency or in the event of a direct threat to “a critical British national interest” (Cameron 2014, c1265). Pre-empting a back-bench debate the following day, in July 2013 Hague promised the House of Commons a formal vote on any decision to supply weapons to Syrian rebels (Hague 2013d, c379), expanding the parliamentary prerogative. Under pressure after the 29 August vote, Hague offered MPs a further concession, promising to seek their approval should Britain offer even non-lethal support to the Free Syrian Army (Hague 2013f, cc642-645).

All this has led Parliament to become an important “veto point” in the foreign policy process (Edmunds 2010, 393). Debates over national interest and, more generally, over the role Britain should play in international politics increasingly center on the attitudes of MPs (Edmunds, Gaskarth and Porter 2014, 506). Gaskarth, for example, recently underlined the significant structural pressure parliamentary involvement places on governments trying to act overseas. While the Cameron government handled the 2013 vote badly, for example, it was in a sense a prisoner of its own institutional circumstances (Gaskarth 2016a, 728) and of the “parliamentary prerogative” it helped develop after 2003 (Strong 2015a). MPs themselves frame parliament’s role as that of “a strategic inquisitor on military deployments” (Defence Committee 2014, 5). But the reality is they are much more than that. They hold effective veto authority, despite the fact the House of Commons remains primarily a political rather than a deliberative body.

Explaining the decision to focus the first Daesh debate on action in Iraq, excluding Syria, Cameron told MPs he “did not want to bring a motion to the House today on which there was not consensus” (Cameron 2014, c1259). The price of that consensus was, however, strategic eccentricity and delay. The Foreign Affairs Committee concluded that the 2013 veto did not damage Britain’s relationship with the United States, arguing instead that it
underlined the closeness of the ties between the two states (Foreign Affairs Committee 2014, 30). It is apparently true that on the former occasion President Obama decided independently that military action was not in the US national interest (Goldberg 2016). At the same time, the 2013 veto fits into a new emerging narrative of a Britain unable to act decisively to support the US thanks to the need to secure parliamentary approval. US forces first intervened against Daesh in Iraq on 15 June 2014, with Britain not joining until more than three months later on 26 September. Fearing a repeat of 2013, Cameron refused to recall MPs during their summer recess, and used the Conservative Party conference to shore up support on his own back-benches before cutting a deal with Miliband. That took time. The US extended its operations into Syria on 23 September 2014, with Britain not following until 3 December 2015, nearly fifteen months afterwards.

MPs themselves complained about the politicization of Britain’s response to Daesh during the 2014 debate. Conservative MP Richard Ottaway argued that parliament’s involvement in military deployment decisions represented a strategic asset, underlining the greater legitimacy of UK actions compared to ISIL. At the same time, he also complained about the government’s decision to restrict British operations to Iraq (Hansard 2014, c1275). Kenneth Clarke agreed, describing the division as “artificial” (Hansard 2014, c1279) while Liam Fox, another former Conservative Cabinet Minister (indeed, Fox was Cameron’s first Defence Secretary), called the focus on Iraq a “mistake” and argued “sooner or later we are going to have to” act in Syria as well (Hansard 2014, c1288). Their party colleague Jesse Norman complained that the involvement of parliament in military deployment decisions was itself a “serious mistake” (Hansard 2014, c1349). Labour MPs however criticized the way ministers sought to make their case. Gisela Stuart, for example, argued that they should be more “cautious” in future (Hansard 2014, c1308). The fact remained, however, that Cameron and Miliband cut a deal to restrict British operations that both could live with politically but that most MPs (and most of the British public) thought unnecessary (Strong 2015b).

After the 2015 election the House of Commons looked somewhat different. With the Liberal Democrats annihilated, Labour weakened and supplanted in its Scottish redoubt by the Scottish National Party and the Conservatives able to form a single-party government with a small majority, the politics of military action had shifted decisively. The problem for Cameron, however, was that the shift was not necessarily in his favor. Reacting to defeat after five years of Conservative-led austerity and anemic political recovery, the Labour Party elected veteran hardline left-wing MP Jeremy Corbyn as its leader. Corbyn was Chairman of the Stop the War Coalition. He was among thirteen MPs who voted against military action in Libya following the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1973. Though not a pacifist per se – he defended Russia’s incursion into Ukraine as a reasonable
response to “NATO belligerence”, for example (Corbyn 2014) – he nevertheless represented one of the most implacable opponents of Western military intervention in parliament. There would be no deals between Cameron and Corbyn as there had been with Miliband. Nor was there room for a deal with the SNP, with its strong tradition of populist Tory-bashing and opposition to UK policymakers embroiling Scotland, a small country, in great power politics. Defence Secretary Michael Fallon made clear soon after the 2015 election that the government wanted to revisit the question of military action against Daesh in Syria. It took until December for Cameron to seek a vote because he knew he would need some opposition support, and he could not get it through the traditional mechanism of dealing with the leader.

In the event, the 2015 debate served primarily to showcase the degree of division within the Labour Party itself. Corbyn spoke straight after Cameron, warning about the “spectre of Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya” and calling for his MPs to vote against further military action (Corbyn 2015, c347). His Shadow Foreign Secretary Hilary Benn closed the debate for Labour. A far superior public speaker, Benn overshadowed Corbyn and drew a standing ovation in the House. Labelling Daesh “fascists”, he argued “They hold us in contempt. They hold our values in contempt. The y hold our belief in tolerance and decency in contempt. They hold our democracy—in contempt. What we know about fascists is that they need to be defeated”. He concluded “it is now time for us to do our bit” (Benn 2015, c486). With Labour fairly evenly split for and against further action, a comfortable majority of MPs supported Cameron. The degree of division was unprecedented, however, underlining as Conservative MP Andrew Murrison pointed out how far “the shadow of Iraq” still hung over the Labour Party (Hansard 2015, c396).

Political divisions therefore helped the government get support for its Syria policy at the end of 2015. Cameron was able to exploit divisions amongst Labour MPs to win support for military action against Daesh, reversing to an extent the 2013 vote and demonstrating that he at least had learned the lessons of that defeat. He was, however, lucky. He had no right to expect so many Labour MPs to vote against their new leader, though participated in the surge of grassroots feeling that won him the position in the first place. Benn’s contribution, heard in awed silence where Corbyn was roundly heckled, helped enormously. Cameron even benefited from newspaper coverage alleging he accused Corbyn of being a ‘terrorist sympathizer’ in a speech to Conservative MPs. Labour MPs united to condemn the apparent slur while continuing to disagree on the substance of the proposed policy. Most of the questions directed at Cameron during his opening statement referred to the remark and ignored what he was actually saying. By giving his opponents
something political and peripheral to complain about, he largely escaped direct policy scrutiny.

The broader picture looks more complicated for British governments interested in playing an active role in international affairs. MPs continue to press for wider authority over foreign and security policy, and ministers under pressure seem willing to echo the earlier gradual establishment of the parliamentary prerogative (Strong 2015a) by giving it to them. It takes time to build a political consensus around interventionist foreign policies, even those that do not involve the use of force. In the case of Britain’s approach to Syria, the need to win over a reasonable proportion of MPs and the risks of relying on the government’s own majority meant delay and strategic eccentricity. Doing something substantive has often seemed too complicated, leaving Britain reduced to a lowest common denominator policy. That may well continue to be the case in future, damaging the country’s ability to contribute to international peace and security and to meet its allies’ expectations.

Ethics and strategy

The Defence Committee has argued that “a strategic and well-articulated vision of the UK’s position in the world would lead to more rational decisions on whether or not to intervene as well as a better public understanding of the rationale for any future decision” (Defence Committee 2014, 3). Agreeing on such a vision looks challenging. British political elites disagreed repeatedly over two distinct dimensions of Britain’s role in the world as it related to the Syrian conflict. They argued about the ethics of different forms of intervention and non-intervention, and over the extent to which Britain should meet the expectations of its allies as opposed to free-riding on their greater freedom to act decisively. Taken together these disagreements highlight the particular challenge Britain faced in defining a position for itself in the international response to the Syrian crisis.

Wheeler and Dunne’s concept of “good international citizenship” fits neatly with the ‘liberal conservative’ approach to foreign policy espoused by the two Cameron governments since 2010. Their combination of national interest, respect for human rights and a pragmatic willingness to make difficult choices aligned with Cameron’s own efforts to reconcile his liberal and conservative instincts (Wheeler and Dunne 1998, 848). Gilmore is not entirely correct to argue that the Conservative focus on national interest has prevented the model becoming fully embedded in British policy thought, in other words. He is right, however, to highlight significant differences between government approaches to Syria in terms of theory and practice (Gilmore 2015, 107). This is unfortunate. There is, in principle, much to be said for a foreign policy approach that balances ethics with interest, seeking
pragmatic solutions to difficult international issues (Brown 2010, 226, Daddow 2013, 210). The problem in the case of the Cameron governments has been a failure to admit the degree of trade-off and compromise involved (Gilmore 2014, 542, Ralph 2014, 18). When faced with difficult decisions during the Arab Spring, ministers repeatedly found themselves exposed; attacked from an ethical perspective for thinking and acting strategically, and from a strategic perspective when emphasizing ethics.

Given FPA’s relative lack of attention to the issue of ethics, especially when compared to how much attention policymakers give ethical considerations, it seems evident that observers need to give these issues greater prominence (Bulley 2014, 165). Britain’s response to the Syrian crisis in particular underlines the range of difficult trade-offs governments face. Doubts about the execution of the Libyan intervention are used to criticize the concept of Responsibility to Protect, despite the fact it played only a limited part in justifying that campaign (Morris 2013, 1277, 2015, Hehir 2015). Disagreements over the conduct and the outcome of both the Libya and Iraq operations fuel arguments over the proper procedures for approving intervention at an international level (Ralph 2013, 335, 2014, 3). Across the board, the failure to confront and resolve very real questions about the ‘right’ thing to do caused Britain difficulties. Most political elites agree that doing the ‘right’ thing in ethical terms is important. Few can effectively articulate what, in practice, that means. Jeremy Corbyn’s position on UN Security Council approval for military action represents an important case in point. Corbyn voted against the Iraq War and the 2013 and 2014 interventions in Syria and against Daesh because they lacked UN Security Council approval. He also voted against the Libyan intervention, backed by UNSCR 1973, and the 2015 action against Daesh, encouraged if not explicitly authorized by UNSCR 2249. Corbyn is not alone among opponents of British involvement in the Syrian crisis in raising the bar for his support every time the government looks set to meet it.

In terms of allies’ expectations, meanwhile, the picture looks more positive from a ministerial perspective; and indeed the questions of what is right in a given situation, and what Britain’s allies think, are difficult to separate (Ralph 2011, 305-306). What the US and France, in particular, think about Britain matters enormously (McCourt 2011b, 1600, 2014, 2). Unable to meet the material cost of matching the US commitment to international peace and security, even on a smaller scale, Britain has since 1945 sought to demonstrate its usefulness as an ally by using its remaining power judiciously (Coker 1986, 139, Bradford 2011, 14). Such an approach has some strategic merit (Bell 2013) and has shown some success. Britain’s participation in NATO, in particular, both facilitates and justifies its role as ‘first ally’ of the United States (Kreps 2010, 191). Syria raised difficult questions about the longer-term prospects for this role, especially after the 2013 vote and the 2014 restriction on anti-Daesh operations (Gannon 2014, 224, Gaskarth 2016a, 728, Holman
As the Defence Committee put it, the government’s failure to define a role for itself contributed to making finding a role harder by raising “significant questions about the UK’s ambitions” (Defence Committee 2015, 6).

President Obama’s decision not to act against the Assad regime in 2013 alleviated to some extent the embarrassment the government endured by losing the 29 August vote (Strong 2015b). The fact Britain contributed significantly to international humanitarian efforts in the region (despite opting out of EU efforts to resettle refugees) also reduced the pressure ministers felt from allies’ expectations. But once Daesh exploded onto the scene the question of how far Britain was willing to meet its allies’ expectations became central to the debate over its wider Syria stance. Government arguments that Britain “should not stand back and let others carry the burden and the risks of protecting our country” (HM Government 2015, 8) proved highly effective in both the 2014 and 2015 debates, as did wider concerns that Britain might be perceived as a “free-rider” by the United States should it fail to contribute (Foreign Affairs Committee 2016, 9). During the first Daesh debate, Cameron reiterated the argument that “protecting the streets of Britain should not be a task that we are prepared to subcontract” while noting “America wants Britain to join the air action in Iraq” (Cameron 2014, cc1261-1262). Ed Miliband agreed, though he focused more on the challenge Britain would face trying “to persuade other Arab countries to play their part” if it stayed out (Miliband 2014, c1274). A number of back-bench MPs agreed, including the Conservatives Kenneth Clarke and Gerald Howarth, the DUP’s Nigel Dodds and Labour’s Hugh Bayley. The latter highlighted the influence of international role expectations on his own thinking by asserting that he “could not hold up my head in the NATO Parliamentary Assembly if our country were to duck out and to leave it to the United States, France and our Arab partners to deal with this difficult problem” (Hansard 2014, 1352). Edward Leigh, another Conservative, disagreed with Cameron, but largely because he felt the government had not funded the armed forces sufficiently to meet the sort of commitment proposed (Hansard 2014, c1323).

After the Paris attacks, Cameron reiterated the argument that the British “should not be content with outsourcing our security to our allies” (Cameron 2015b, c1490). During the second Daesh debate he mentioned the King of Jordan and the role of Turkey, Saudi Arabia and several Gulf states in the coalition as well as France and the US (Cameron 2015c, cc326, 337). His stance found widespread support. The Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Conservative MP Crispin Blunt, told colleagues that in countries in the region Committee members “were told that the UK’s position was compromised by the fact that we were only half in and half out of the coalition” (Hansard 2015, c362). Reflecting the divisions within their own party, Labour’s former Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett and serving Shadow Foreign Secretary Benn echoed these claims. Beckett invited colleagues “to
consider how we would feel, and what we would say, if what took place in Paris had happened in London and if we explicitly asked France for support and France refused” (Hansard 2015, 364). Benn refused “to leave to others the responsibility for defending our national security” and asked “if we do not act, what message will that send about our solidarity with those countries that have suffered so much, including Iraq and our ally, France?” (Benn 2015, c484). In light of the small size of the proposed British contribution, which involved extending existing operations geographically but not in terms of firepower, several MPs complained as David Davis did about its “symbolic” nature (Hansard 2015, c388). Julian Lewis (Con) warned that “a gesture of solidarity, however sincerely meant, cannot be a substitute for hard-headed strategy” (Hansard 2015, c369). Yasmin Qureshi (Lab) called the proposal a “symbolic gesture” (Hansard 2015, c384). Most apparently accepted that symbolism can matter, and a majority voted to approve the further use of force.

Conclusion

This brief discussion of the dilemmas underpinning Britain’s response to the Syrian crisis sheds some light on the forces preventing decisive, active government decision-making. Parliament’s involvement in military deployment decisions, and its doubts about the virtues of military entanglement in Syria, have together shaped Britain’s broader policy stance. Debates in the House of Commons both facilitate the collective use of practical judgment in seeking to resolve difficult ethical trade-offs (Brown 2010, 231-232) and institutionalize domestic role contestation (Cantir and Kaarbo 2012, 14). The result has been to limit Britain’s ability to engage coherently and effectively (Gaskarth 2016b, 120-121).

Scope still remains, however, for Britain to play a positive role in the Syrian conflict, and in future similar circumstances. To begin with, by 2020 Britain will have two large new aircraft carriers in service, with a base able to host them at Mina Salman in Bahrain. The return ‘East of Suez’ is significant in itself, given what the withdrawal in the late 1960s said about Britain’s adjustment to its post-imperial decline (McCourt 2009, 454). The material limits on Britain’s military contribution to the coalition against Daesh imposed by the lack of an aircraft carrier following the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review will be reversed, and Britain will re-orient its international security posture towards the Gulf even as the US continues its pivot towards Asia (Roberts 2014, 663). This re-orientation opens up the possibility that Britain will act independently of the US more often in future, while in the process actually better fulfilling its role as ‘first ally’ and UN Security Council member.
More interestingly, perhaps, the challenges the Cameron governments have faced in launching direct military intervention in Syria forced them to seek out alternative parts to play; Britain’s large humanitarian contribution being only the most visible example. One possibility that emerges from both the political and scholarly debate is a renewed focus on diplomacy. Several different observers agree that Britain is perceived in the Middle East not as an idealistic power pursuing humanitarian objectives against its national interests, but rather as a cold practitioner of realpolitik (Foreign Affairs Committee 2012, 3, Leech and Gaskarth 2015, 139, Holman 2016, 12). There might be scope for embracing this identity to some extent, by taking on the role of interlocutor with morally objectionable regimes. Indeed, Cameron and Hammond emphasized Britain’s efforts to negotiate with Saudi Arabia and Iran, the two major regional protagonists in the Syrian conflict, during the first Daesh debate (Hansard 2014, c1262). It is far from clear there could be any domestic agreement around such a role, not least in light of the difficulties Tony Blair faced adopting a similar approach after the 11 September attacks, not least when he visited Damascus. But MPs do broadly prefer diplomacy to violence, while Jeremy Corbyn has called repeatedly for the government to talk to Russia, to President Assad and to Iran. Perhaps the real problem with Britain’s efforts in Syria has been an insistence on trying to do the morally unobjectionable thing all the time, leading to endless debates over the ethically ‘right’ thing to do. Perhaps what is needed instead is greater pragmatism, reflecting Britain’s reputation in the region, its claims to a central role in a networked world and its broader diplomatic traditions. Doing something unpleasant, like talking to a bloodstained dictator, may ultimately prove more productive than doing nothing at all.
References


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