

The Good International Citizenship framework can be used to build an ethically-minded UK foreign policy

By Democratic Audit

*The New Labour government committed to including an ethical dimension in UK foreign policy, but was criticised for failing to meet the standards it set out to achieve. In many ways the Coalition government has sought to maintain New Labour's commitment but has faced similar tensions. **Jonathan Gilmore** argues that foreign policy should reflect a balance between the government's responsibilities to the national interest, the promotion of a stable inter-state order, and the wellbeing of vulnerable non-citizens.*



How should the UK balance its national interest with ethical commitments? Credit: [Number 10](#), CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

With a UK general election due in the next twelve months, it seems likely that news reports, TV debates and social media will soon be saturated with the main parties' claims about the state of the economy, the cost of living crisis and Britain's future membership of the EU. Less likely is that similar levels of attention will be dedicated to discussions about the future direction of UK foreign policy. Despite several controversial overseas military interventions over the past 15 years, the Britain's influence as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and its still sizeable hard and soft power capabilities, foreign policy has rarely been a key area of debate in general elections and appears an arena of only peripheral concern to the public at large.

At the same time, protracted economic instability across Europe, an apparent decline in the relative power of the UK, the legacy of New Labour's liberal hubris and the challenge to European stability posed by recent Russian military adventurism, all have significant implications for future formulations of British foreign policy. Moreover, technological development arguably continues to erode the boundaries between what may once have been considered issues of foreign policy, and the day-to-day concerns of domestic publics.

My recent research has suggested that a narrative of Good International Citizenship could be a useful means of reflecting upon where our ethical responsibilities lie in an increasingly interconnected world, yet one still divided into territorially bounded states. It also provides a discursive framework through which greater democratic engagement with future formulations of UK foreign policy might be promoted, helping citizens to better

understand and influence the ways in which their society presents itself to the outside world.

Perhaps one of the principal reasons why foreign policy is not generally a central point of contention during election campaigns is the strong emphasis on continuity in British foreign policy. To a certain extent, New Labour's open embrace of an 'ethical dimension' in its early foreign policy was a notable break from such continuity. Although pre-Labour British foreign policy was certainly not bereft of ethical concerns, the innovation was in making ethical responsibilities to non-citizens clear commitments to which the government could be held accountable. International development, human rights promotion and better regulation of Britain's arms industry were key elements of Labour's ethical vision. Despite perceived overstretch in Afghanistan and Iraq seemingly defining Labour's foreign policy during the last decade, the incumbent Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition have provided few visible differences in their formulation.

Despite claims of a move towards a more 'realistic' or 'pragmatic' approach re-orientated to better serve core national interests, Coalition foreign policy remains wedded to the promotion of 'values', in that same way that Labour were to the 'ethical dimension'. Whilst the language and precise emphasis have changed, the practices and policies are very similar. Commitments to international development, human rights promotion and humanitarian intervention all feature as continuities between Labour and the Coalition. Although widely derided at the time, it seems that New Labour's 1997 'ethical dimension' may now have become a permanent fixture in British foreign policy.

This overt ethical dimension in British foreign policy is not necessarily unwelcome and reflects continued attempts to address the question of how to engage with non-citizens in an increasingly inter-dependent world. Where both Labour and the Coalition have run into trouble is in the failing to acknowledge the tension that might sometimes exist between national interest and overseas ethical responsibilities. In 1997, New Labour's ethical dimension revealed a conflict between British economic interests, in the form of arms sales to Suharto's Indonesia, and the promotion of human rights overseas. Although the Coalition have maintained and perhaps enhanced the regulation of UK arms sales, this tension still remains. Despite William Hague's assurances that "at no stage in the conduct policy do we reduce emphasis on human rights for any commercial reason", a 2013 Parliamentary report was highly critical of continued arms exports to authoritarian states. The report noted that in 3,074 Standard Individual Export Licences (SIEL), for military goods worth £12.3 billion, had been approved for the 27 countries identified by the FCO as 'of human rights concern'.

Beyond Britain's commercial interests, foreign intervention and programmes of state building in Iraq and Afghanistan have similarly revealed tensions between the UK's national interests, international stability and the wellbeing of vulnerable non-citizens overseas.

A way forward from these tensions lies not in abandoning overseas ethical commitments, nor in seeking refuge in a more traditional and apparently grounded sense of national interest. Drawing from the [English School of international relations](#), the concept of Good International Citizenship highlights three divergent spheres of responsibility that foreign policy-makers must negotiate – responsibilities to the national interest, to the promotion of a stable inter-state order, and for the wellbeing of vulnerable non-citizens.

The practice of Good International Citizenship involves mediation and compromise between these different spheres of ethical obligation, identifying the ways in which they complement but also conflict with one another. The framework doesn't provide an objective determination of when the correct balance has been struck between these spheres of responsibility. Indeed it is questionable whether a perfect balance could ever exist. Instead, it has the potential to open out discussion on future formulations of British foreign policy and exploring the deeply political terrain that exists between these three spheres of responsibility.

Affirming Good International Citizenship as a framework around which to build an ethically-minded foreign policy could be used to stimulate a public dialogue through which the more specific policies and practices might be examined, holding policy-makers to account for the ethical claims they make. The process should involve asking difficult questions of apparently common sense assumptions about national interest and challenging the apparent moral clarity previously linked to claims about overseas intervention for the benefit of distant strangers. One of the ultimate aims of this process would be to acknowledge that all components of foreign policy are invariably both ethical and political, and that subjecting the process of policy formulation to consistent and ongoing public scrutiny

is an essential task in a democratic society.

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*A fuller version of this argument can be found in Jonathan's article "Still a force for good? Good International Citizenship in British foreign and security policy" published in the *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, forthcoming in print, [available online now](#).*

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