Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

The Power of Western Foreign and Security Policy

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I am extremely honoured to have been invited here today - I hope not just as a Minister of the Foreign Office, but as a long time friend of the Konrad Adernauer Stiftung.

The last thirty years has seen world politics change beyond recognition. Indeed, it encompassed the most profound period of change since “Der Alte” himself was Chancellor. The Berlin Wall fell, communism collapsed and it was assumed that a new stable Western order would endure. Indeed, Francis Fukayama proclaimed ‘the end of history’. Yet history, as it tends to do, kept on going. The West has been physically challenged by the new threats posed by terrorism; economically challenged by financial crises; and its influence in the world has been challenged by the emergence of other powers. Today, we are discussing how to maintain the competitiveness of the West in a globalised world. To me, this topic of discussion itself implies that the decline of Western power is self-evident.

It is not a new challenge, and it is often rightly rebuffed. Today I argue that our response to the Arab Spring is a further rebuttal and demonstrates the enduring power of Western foreign and security policy but in a very different world.

Power has physical connotations and is often confused with military strength. This is, as one US ambassador said to me recently, a hangover of the Cold War where power could be deployed to control events. But it is now more useful to think about power in terms of the ability to shape or influence one’s environment. So the question is two-fold: ‘What does the West want its environment to look like; and is it able to achieve this?’ Now I can’t speak for all Western countries, but of course the UK wants to live in a stable, secure and prosperous environment; an environment in which our values are shared by our fellow members of the international community.

In Iraq, the West chose to intervene militarily for the sake of security. However, underpinning the interventions was the idea that we could depose antagonistic regimes and install democracies that would act as bastions of stability in troubled regions. This neoconservative ambition was founded on laudable values, but its methods were deeply misguided.

Stability in democracy is derived from the fact that the people have a non-violent means of changing the way that they are governed. Voices are heard, everyone has their say. But imposing democracy, by its very definition, does not give people a say.

Democracies in the West share common features, but have very different local models. Look at the differences between the German and British political systems: different constitutions, different heads of state, different electoral systems, different relationships between centre and periphery. Each Western democracy evolved into what it is today through the unique experiences, choices and cultures.

We learnt in Iraq the central importance of people. Imposing new political orders on other people will breed instability for the very reasons that repressive regimes breed instability - it disempowers.

Even in Afghanistan, where our intervention was widely agreed to be legitimate, we failed at first to recognise the importance of empowerment. By taking control of the security and administration of the Afghan people, we took away their responsibility. For a rightly proud people, this bred distrust, resentment and opposition - a gift to our ideological and extremist opponents.

We maintain an unwavering commitment to democracy and human rights. But our approach to promoting them is now tightly focussed on strengthening institutions rather than imposing new ones and empowering people to shape their own futures.

Just under a decade ago an initiative was launched entitled ‘G8 B MENA’ designed to bring together G8 countries, governments and civil society across the broader Middle East to discuss concepts leading to better governance. The first few years of this forum were, I understand, not particularly successful. But the UK believed in it and championed its cause, which received a boost when Secretary of State Clinton took hold of it after her appointment. In Doha in December 2010 the forum took place against the backdrop of scenes of unrest in Tunisia. Suddenly the whole purpose of G8 B MENA became rather clearer. Indeed, Mrs Clinton spelt out quite forcefully the risks of ignoring what looked like a distinct change in the weather. The events of this year have underlined how strong those winds have turned out to be.

Thus, even before the Arab Spring, the UK was committed to promoting change from within. To this end, in October last year we launched the Arab Partnership initiative. This focused on how we could work with states to strengthen the institutions that are so central to liberal democracy: representative parliaments, vibrant political parties, strong civil society, free press, and independent judiciary, to name but a few.

This approach has shaped our response to the Arab Spring. Throughout the events of the past year we have maintained our steadfast support for the values that we hold dear. We have been strident in our condemnation of repression and in our insistence that regimes respond to their people’s demands. We have offered our assistance to those countries wishing to undertake political reforms. We have supported institutions as opposed to

personalities. We have rejected the idea that there is one common blueprint for all. We have empowered people who share a common hunger for political rights, economic opportunity and justice to craft their own political order based on accountability, transparency and human rights. Such an order will be stable and prosperous, benefitting our own security and economic opportunities.

In Afghanistan, we have begun the process of Transition whereby responsibility for security is progressively handed over to the Afghan National Security Forces, which we have helped to build up to the task. We are supporting the Afghan government in making political reforms driven by Afghan experience and culture - decision making by shuras, jirgas and other traditional but essentially democratic forms. We are encouraging members of civil society to mobilise and push for the reforms that they want to see. Last week I met Selay Ghaffar, a women tirelessly campaigning for the rights of women and children in Afghanistan. By empowering the security forces, politicians and reformers, we are able to help them take control of their own destiny. This means that we are able to withdraw our brave men and women from combat, while ensuring that our national security is protected. It is not without risk, it is not without challenge.

We have also recognised that collective influence is far greater than our individual influence. We have harnessed the strength of international institutions. Whether it be through coordinating economic sanctions and political pressure through the EU and UN, providing financial support through the Deauville Partnership or the European Neighbourhood Policy Review, or acquiring an international mandate from the UN for intervention in Libya, the West has realised that united it is stronger.

In this vein, the West has also been more collaborative in working with countries and organisations in the region in support of its values. This has only been possible because regional actors have found a common voice - and I think this will be one of the themes of 2011. Their bold activism has given us a genuine and legitimate voice to latch onto. t allows us to work with the grain of cultures, relationships and realities on the ground - which has only recently been possible. It is far more powerful for the Arab League to condemn the repression in Syria, one of its own members, than for the West to do so. It is far more effective for the Gulf Cooperation Council to provide an initiative for a settlement in Yemen than for the West to do so. It is far more legitimate to intervene in Libya at the request of the Arab League than for the West to do so unilaterally. By encouraging such organisations to take a leading role, and by supporting their efforts, we empower the region to take control of its own reform agenda. And our interests are aligned: a peaceful, secure and stable region makes our streets safer and produces economic opportunities from which we can all benefit.

I am confident that our approach has helped to sustain momentum for change in the region. It has created an environment in which change can thrive. Make no mistake; we played a pivotal role in helping the Libyan people throw off the shackles of the Qadaffi rule, and did so

in such a way that empowered them to take control of their own destiny. Lessons have been learnt. y maintaining the support of the states in the region, and by offering our assistance at this seminal time, we strengthen our economic links and mutual prosperity. And by addressing the day-to-day political and economic grievances of people on the street, there will be less inclination towards political dissent and terrorism - indeed it is true, Al Qaeda and other militant organisations were completely sidelined in the recent revolutions.

So the Arab Spring provides a huge opportunity for positive change in a region of vital importance to the West. Our response has capitalised on this opportunity and strengthened its momentum. But huge challenges still remain.

Firstly, while in the long run more open political systems will be more stable than autocratic ones, transitions can be and are turbulent. Look at Libya, Syria and Egypt. Our challenge is to protect the brave civilians standing up to their oppressors and to support their aims. We will continue to do so multilaterally, with the support of the region.

Many commentators in the West have expressed concern that democratic processes may yield undesirable results. For example, they say, the election of Islamist parties. I believe that it is dangerous to underestimate the endurance of extremist ideologies - even though they have not played a prominent role in the Arab Spring. However, it is not for us to decide who governs any other country. We will engage with any group that upholds the democratic process and the values that we champion. This includes the rights of ethnic and religious minorities and of women.

Indeed, democracy is not just about elections. For people’s demands to be fulfilled, their human rights need to be constitutionally and legally guaranteed. In societies where political power has been associated with forcefully silencing opposition - as in Syria - extra efforts will need to be made to ensure that rights and freedoms are respected. This will involve scrutiny being provided by local civil society, and external observers like the regional institutions and the UN. Human rights concerns do not go away with the conclusion of conflicts.

Finally, liberated people may expect immediate economic benefits from their revolutions. New governments in these countries will need to take difficult measures to open and grow their economies. And these are tough times for the world economy. But the long term economic benefits to those in the region and to our own economies are so great that we will do our utmost to provide economic support - even in such difficult times. We are pushing the EU to make a bold and ambitious offer to the region, in particular to offer broad and deep economic integration. We want this to lead to a free-trade area and eventually a customs union to consolidate reform and create economic opportunity. But it won’t happen tomorrow, and dashed expectations can spoil momentum for change.

So, if power is about being able to control one’s environment, then our forays into Iraq and Afghanistan may well have given cause for people to question the power of Western foreign and security policy. But our response to the Arab Spring and our change of approach in Afghanistan have surely shown that we successfully learnt the lessons from recent past. By adopting a values-based approach, by harnessing international organisations and by working with and through states and organisations in the region, we have helped to support and sustain the cries of people across the Arab world for their rights and their dignity.

The eruption of democracy movements across North Africa and the Middle East presents the potential for the greatest advance for human rights and freedom since the end of the Cold War. This can lead to stability, security and prosperity in the region from which we all benefit. If Western foreign policy can help to make this happen, then is indeed powerful, but it is also sustainable.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-power-of-western-foreign-and-security-policy