

Rhetoric without responsibility: the attraction of ‘ethical’ foreign policy

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Abstract

This article analyses the shift, from the openly declared pursuit of national interests in foreign policy, to the growing emphasis on ethical or moral duties to protect the rights and interests of others, often in areas where western states have little economic or geo-strategic interest. It suggests that while international changes may have provided the opportunity to present foreign policy in ethical terms, an important impetus behind ethical foreign policy interventions may lie in the domestic sphere and the search for new mechanisms of enhancing political legitimacy. Ethical foreign policy is ideally suited to buttressing the moral authority of governments, often under question in the domestic context, because policy-makers are less accountable for matching ambitious policy aims with final policy outcomes in the international sphere. The gap between rhetoric and responsibility lies in the fact that policy can be declared a success with little regard for policy outcomes, as there is no formal accountability to non-citizens abroad, while problems can be blamed on the actions of other people or their governments. The freedom of manoeuvre provided by the ethical agenda of foreign policy activism allows governments to cohere a sense of purpose and mission through the projection of their power abroad when they find it increasingly difficult to act decisively at home.

Introduction

The definition of an ‘ethical’ foreign policy, and the means of its realisation, remain the subject of disagreement among academic analysts of inter-

national relations. However, there is a general consensus that western government policy-makers have, in the last decade, explicitly taken on board normative and ethical concerns, shifting away from a 'realist' approach in which a more narrowly conceived national interest was the basis of policy-making.¹ This policy shift has meant that the declarations of 'ethical foreign policy' emanating from the governments of leading world powers are often uncritically taken at face value and assumed to be 'simply the right thing to do' (*The Guardian*, 27 March 1999).

The drive to act in the interests of others, rather than in purely national interests, can be seen in the justifications for a host of new policy initiatives including major international involvement in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, former Yugoslavia, East Timor and Sierra Leone in recent years.² For many commentators, the new, ethical nature of international foreign policy was given clearest expression in the international community's support for military intervention in the 1999 Kosovo war.³ The historic transformation marked by this conflict was emphasised by Czech president Vaclav Havel, speaking in April of that year:

But there is one thing no reasonable person can deny: this is probably the first war that has not been waged in the name of 'national interests', but rather in the name of principles and values. If one can say of any war that it is ethical, or that it is being waged for ethical reasons, then it is true of this war. Kosovo has no oil fields to be coveted; no member nation in the alliance has any territorial demands on Kosovo; Milosevic does not threaten the territorial integrity of any member of the alliance. And yet the alliance is at war. It is fighting out of a concern for the fate of others. It is fighting because no decent person can stand by and watch the systematic, state-directed murder of other people. It cannot tolerate such a thing. It cannot fail to provide assistance if it is within its power to do so (Falk 1999, 848).

The US-led military intervention against Afghanistan in October 2001 was also couched in the ethical language of caring for others rather than merely the narrow pursuit of the interests of state. In addition to stressing US national interests in responding to an attack on its major symbols of economic and military dominance, the US establishment and the coalition of supporting states stressed the humanitarian nature of the military response, which included the dropping of food and medical provisions. President George W. Bush described the bombing of Afghanistan as an action of 'generosity of America and our allies' in the aid of the 'oppressed people

of Afghanistan' (Bush 2001). The US defence secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, argued that the military action was in line with previous US-led interventions in Kuwait, Northern Iraq, Somalia, Bosnia and Kosovo 'for the purpose of denying hostile regimes the opportunity to oppress their own people and other people', adding that: 'We stand with those Afghans who are being repressed by a regime that abuses the very people it purports to lead' (Rumsfeld 2001).

This article questions some of the assumptions about the increasing emphasis on principles and values in international affairs and looks at why the ethical formulation of foreign policy has become ever more pronounced by the British government and those of other leading western states. The first section briefly considers which factors lay behind the shift towards reframing foreign policy in the language of ethics and values and draws attention to the lack of focus on the importance of domestic concerns. The second section forwards an analysis of why 'ethical' foreign adventures can be attractive to western governments, keen to strengthen their political legitimacy through finding a new sense of purpose and mission.

Why now?

Among the many explanations forwarded to explain the importance of interventionist 'ethical' foreign policy in the 1990s, two broad approaches often stand out. The first approach is a gradualist one, which argues that the shift to prioritising the interests of those in other countries is part of a slow evolution of universal human rights concerns since 1945.⁴ The second approach argues that there has been a radical break in recent years and explains this through a focus on qualitative changes in international society.

In the first approach, post-1945 history is often described as an 'evolutionary process for international human rights law' (Robertson 1999, xiv).⁵ Often this 'evolution' is described as a number of stages. Thomas Buergenthal (1997) analyses three: the normative foundation of human rights in the UN Charter and the International Covenants of 1966; followed by the stage of institution building with the establishment of the UN Human Rights Committee and the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in the 1970s; and the third stage, that of implementation in the post-cold war era with the 1993 UN Vienna Declaration on Human Rights, which stated that the 'promotion and protection of all human rights is a legitimate concern of the international community'.

The idea of gradual progress towards institutionalising an ethical international agenda assumes a dynamic inherent in the UN system of human rights provisions which can tend to overlook the impact of dramatic changes in the international framework with the end of the cold war (Boerefijn 1995; King 1999; Montgomery 1999). For many commentators, these recent changes are in fact a challenge to the cold war UN framework and reflect a fundamentally different conception of the relative importance of non-national concerns such as the rights and interests of non-citizens, in relation to UN norms and international law.⁶ Claims that ethical policy-making puts a duty to protect the rights of the individual above the rights of state sovereignty indicate the break with the earlier framework established by the UN.⁷ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 was a non-binding UN General Assembly resolution, which promoted human rights in abstract terms and was not intended to be read as a statement of law or legal obligation (Robertson 1999, 30, 75; Mills 1997, 276; Corell 1997, 519; Ignatieff 1999). Similarly, the drafters of the 1948 Genocide Convention chose to explicitly reject universal jurisdiction for the crime, Article 6 giving national governments the final responsibility for prosecution of the crime on their territory (UN 1948).

The second approach emphasises changes in the international sphere which have led to a radical shift in both the language and institutional mechanisms of foreign policy. There is little agreement on which of many factors has been key to this transformation. For some writers, the challenge to the UN Charter framework of state sovereignty and non-intervention and the rise of the focus of individual rights and new rights of intervention reflects new practical realities. These commentators focus on the changing nature of conflict, problems of 'failed states' and 'complex emergencies' and the increase in the vulnerability of non-combatants since the end of the cold war.⁸ For other analysts, the focus is on the new demands of global or international 'civil society', reflecting higher levels of concern about rights abuses around the world due to the communications power of the Internet, or CNN, forcing governments to act to assuage the concerns of voters and civic groups (Robertson 1999, 373; Annan 1998, 57).

One factor that has received little attention in studies which seek to catalogue the grounds for a shifting definition of national interests and a growing assertion of normative policy frameworks is that of the pressure from post-cold war changes in domestic politics. This article suggests that this may well be an important factor, rarely considered by analysts of the new 'ethical' world order. The following sections address why there are

domestic political advantages which governments seek to gain through their promotion of interventionist ethical foreign policies.

The domestic impetus

One aspect that defines governments across the major industrialised states is a preference for an ethical reframing of policy initiatives in a broad range of areas, from health and education to transport, the environment and policing, through stressing the importance of non-materialist aspirations such as inclusion, citizenship and community. With the end of the ideological framework of the cold war it has become increasingly difficult to justify and legitimise policies on the 'partisan' basis of the conflicting interests of traditional party politics. This was initially reflected in the shift by governments in America, Britain and Germany to attempting to occupy the centre ground and redefine their aims in the language of the 'Third Way'. The nature of the recent defeats at the polls for Third Way-style governments in the US and across much of Europe, and the increasingly unpredictable nature of domestic politics demonstrate that there is little likelihood of a return to political programmes based on the traditional constituencies of the left and the right. Today, political elites in the US and in Europe find it difficult to come up with a policy programme which can provide them with a sense of mission and political purpose in the absence of clear domestic political constituencies.

There is increasing cynicism and doubt over government and politics at a domestic level, demonstrated by falling turnouts at the polls, declining party memberships and lower viewing figures for the nightly news. It is in this context, where domestic policy-making initiatives easily lead to party divisions and often public discrediting, that an interventionist ethical foreign policy can be a powerful mechanism for generating a sense of political purpose and mission. Ethical concerns, such as the human rights of others, seem to provide a moral framework which can project a sphere of agreement and consensus and point beyond the relativism and pessimism of our times. As Francesca Klug notes: 'the post-cold war search for new ideals and common bonds in an era of failed ideologies appears to have contributed to a growing appreciation of human rights as a set of values' (Klug 2000, 147).

It should be emphasised that this demand for new ethical ideals and the 'growing appreciation' of the need to support the rights of others has been

generated by governing elites rather than in response to popular movements from below. Opinion studies have consistently demonstrated that the idea that there is public pressure for a policy shift towards more 'ethical' concerns has been exaggerated. For example, in the mid-1990s, polls showed that only a minority of the American public backed human rights promotion as an important foreign policy goal, well behind stopping the flow of illegal drugs, protecting the jobs of American workers and preventing the spread of nuclear weapons.⁹ This finding was illustrated by the fact that President Clinton had to explain where Kosovo was on the map before attempting to promote military action in 1999, because there was so little public interest in the issue.

Perhaps the most important example of the British and US governments attempting to create an 'ethical' interventionist agenda is the case of Iraq. For the last 10 years US and British political leaders have used Iraq as an international cause which they can use to raise their status at home and emphasise their commitment to a moral mission abroad. The British and US publics have never been as enthusiastic as their governments in pursuing conflict with Saddam Hussein and the emphasis on Iraq in foreign policy initiatives has little to do with shifts in public opinion. For example, in July 2002 when George W. Bush and Tony Blair prepared the public for a possible military conquest of Iraq, polls showed that only a small, and declining, majority of American people were in favour (Tyson 2002). Opinion polls consistently demonstrate that the western public tends to share a more traditional view of foreign policy priorities, based on national interests, rather than the liberal 'crusading' perspective often pushed by their government leaders (Schwarz 2000). This gap is explained by the fact that the drive to pursue ethical adventures abroad is not directly related to winning votes, but to an even more basic political instinct of the political establishment—the need for governing administrations to have a sense of self-identity, purpose and self-belief. Governments without a sense of 'mission' and collective purpose would lose their internal cohesion and soon dissolve into faction fighting and petty squabbles.

When there are few domestic issues upon which policy can be defined, the international sphere provides an arena in which policy can be expressed in clear, direct and authoritative terms. The Labour government's Strategic Defence Review in 1998 made clear that the resources being put into foreign policy initiatives bore little relationship to any strategic threat faced by the UK (UKSCD 1998, para. 87). This new flexibility, in terms of freedom from cold war threats, has allowed foreign policy to be driven

more directly by a search for policy initiatives seen to symbolise a clear projection of values. This process was apparent in the government's decision to take a high-profile stand over Kosovo, despite the lack of any 'direct and immediate threat to Britain's own national security from the situation' (UKSCD 1998, para. 95). Intervention in Kosovo was not determined by British geo-strategic concerns of international instability, nor by the alleged depth of public support for Kosovo Albanians, who received little sympathy once they tried to take refuge in Britain as asylum seekers (Hume 1999). An important motivation for British high-profile involvement in Kosovo lay in the unsullied cause of the victims of Milosevic's Serb regime. As Tony Blair declared, the Kosovo Albanian refugees had 'become symbols of hope, humanity and peace'. To intervene on their behalf would therefore be to fight 'a battle for humanity' because their cause 'is a just cause, it is a rightful cause' (Blair 1999).

The attention to the articulation of a political mission, beyond the petty partisanship of left and right, through foreign policy activism abroad has been an important resource of authority and credibility for western political leaders. The ability to project or symbolise unifying 'values' has become a core leadership attribute. George W. Bush's shaky start to the US presidency was transformed by his speech to Congress in the wake of the World Trade Centre and Pentagon attacks, in which he staked out his claim to represent and protect America's ethical values against the terrorist 'heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century' (Bush 2001). Similarly, Tony Blair was at his most presidential in the wake of the attacks, arguing that values were what distinguished the two sides of the coming conflict: 'We are democratic. They are not. We have respect for human life. They do not. We hold essentially liberal values. They do not' (*The Guardian*, 27 March 1999). Peter Hain, minister of state at the UK Foreign Office, also focused on the 'values that the terrorists attacked' in his call for political unity around 'tough action' (*The Guardian*, 24 September 2001).

By association with the cause of the victims of international conflicts, western governments can easily gain a moral authority that cannot be secured through the domestic political process. Even general election victories, the defining point of the domestic political process, no longer bring authority or legitimacy. This was clear in the contested victory of George W. Bush in the 2000 elections, which turned on the problem of the 'hanging' chad in Florida. However, the problem of deriving legitimacy from elections is a much broader one, with declining voter turnouts. In the

British elections in 2001 Tony Blair achieved a landslide second term mandate, but there was little sense of euphoria—this was a hollow victory on a 50 per cent turnout which meant only one in four of the electorate voted for New Labour.

The demise of the framework of traditional party politics, the source of western governments' domestic malaise, is directly associated with the search for an external source of legitimacy. This process is illustrated in Michael Ignatieff's quote from the writings of British war reporter Don McCullin:

But what are my politics? I certainly take the side of the underprivileged. I could never say I was politically neutral. But whether I'm of the right or the left—I can't say ... I feel, in my guts, at one with the victims. And I find there's integrity in that stance (Ignatieff 1998, 22–23).

Ignatieff suggests that the external projection of legitimacy or moral mission stems from the collapse of the left/right political framework, stating that 'there are no good causes left—only victims of bad causes' (ibid., 23). Governments, like many gap-year students, seek to define and find themselves through their engagement with the problems experienced by those in far-off countries. This search for a moral grounding through solidarity with the 'victims of bad causes' has led to an increasingly moralised 'black and white' or 'good versus evil' view of crisis situations in the non-western world.¹⁰ The jet-setting UK prime minister, Tony Blair, has been much criticised for appearing to deprioritise the domestic agenda in the wake of September 11, yet even his critics admit that his 'moral mission' in the international sphere has been crucial to enhancing his domestic standing.

The search for ethical or moral approaches emphasising the government's moral authority has inexorably led to a domestic shift in priorities making international policy-making increasingly high profile in relation to other policy areas. The emphasis on ethical foreign policy commitments enables western governments to declare an unequivocal moral stance, which helps to mitigate awkward questions of government mission and political coherence in the domestic sphere. The contrast between the moral certainty possible in selected areas of foreign policy and the uncertainties of domestic policy-making was unintentionally highlighted when President George Bush congratulated Tony Blair on his willingness to take a stand over Afghanistan and Iraq: 'The thing I admire about this prime minister

is that he doesn't need a poll or a focus group to convince him of the difference between right and wrong' (UKGovernment 2002). Tony Blair, like Bush himself, of course relies heavily on polls and focus groups for every domestic initiative. It is only in the sphere of foreign policy that it appears there are opportunities for western leaders to project a self-image of purpose, mission and political clarity. This is because it is easier to promote a position which can be claimed to be based on clear ethical values, rather than the vagaries of compromise and political pragmatism, in foreign policy than it is in domestic policy.

There are three big advantages: first, the object of policy activism, and criticism, is a foreign government; second, the British or American government is not so accountable for matching rhetoric to international actions; and third, credit can be claimed for any positive outcome of international policy, while any negative outcome can be blamed on the actions or inaction of the government or population of the country concerned. The following sections highlight that the lack of connection between rhetorical demands and accountability for policy-making or policy outcomes has made selected high-profile examples of ethical foreign policy-making a strong card for western governments, under pressure to consolidate their standing and authority at home.

Foreign policy of criticism

The framework for externalising the search for political mission through ethical foreign policy feeds off the human rights discourse initially established by influential non-governmental organisations (NGOs) during the cold war.¹¹ Western human rights groups, often funded by governments, focused on the abusive practices of what they saw as repressive foreign countries and cultures, while the agenda of civil liberty groups was concentrated on domestic issues (Mutua 1996, 609). NGO human rights work tended to focus on the cataloguing of abuses committed by foreign governments, as Henry Steiner notes:

Given the ideological commitments of these NGOs, their investigative work naturally concentrates on matters such as governmental abuses of rights to personal security, discrimination, and basic political rights. By habit or established practice, NGOs' reports stress the nature and number of violations, rather than explore the socioeconomic and other factors that underlie them (Mutua 1996, 622).

Virtually all reports by NGOs were catalogues of cruelties and abuses by governments, and their central campaigning method was to publish reports that generated press coverage and placed international attention on stigmatised governments (Burgerman 1998, 910; Posner 1997, 628). The NGOs campaigning against non-western governments saw their work as non-political, they just described abuses and asked the international community to act. In this way, they presented human rights as independent of the social, economic or political situation. Many NGOs were concerned that explaining why abuses occurred might justify them or give credence to the claims of repressive regimes. If mitigating factors were to be brought into the account this would undermine the mission of seeking immediate compliance with human rights standards. This pressure was brought about by utilising key events or symbols such as a highly publicised massacre, like Srebrenica, or a 'poster child' to simplify complex issues for mass audiences (Burgerman 1998, 910).

This association of ethical human rights policies with the denunciation of the crimes or abuses of governments has led to a particularly one-sided perspective focusing on condemnation and punishment. It was assumed that the more 'ethical' the government or NGO group was the more forceful would be their calls for sanctions or other forms of international action. However, there is little evidence that condemnation and coercion was a more effective policy option than co-operation. Critics, for example Jeffrey Garten (1996), have questioned whether human rights activists would deny that US trade links and commercial investment in states like China, India, Indonesia and Brazil have contributed to improved economic opportunities, communication freedoms and better education, health and working conditions and conclude that 'the criteria for promoting human rights ought to be not what salves our consciences, but rather what works'. Nevertheless, most high-profile ethical or value-orientated policy actions have involved selective condemnations, sanctions and military intervention; the policies of economic integration and aid have in fact suffered and are often seen as inimical to human rights promotion.

It appears that the NGO approach of seeking 'worst cases' to highlight their good work through mounting a populist campaign of condemnation has been willingly followed by western governments. For example, in his ethical mission statement of July 1997, the British foreign secretary, Robin Cook identified the key aspects of ethical foreign policy. These all prioritised coercion over co-operation, ranging from public condemnation to international sanctions to threats to try political leaders at new *ad hoc*

international courts (UKSCFF 1998; Cook 1997). The ethical policy of condemnation has, in fact, been central to the success of ethical foreign policy activism. The politics of condemnation takes for granted that the problems of weak and fragile states are internal matters of poor governance or questions of the mind-set of ruling elites.

In this way, western governments justified their military action to remove the Afghan regime, after September 11, through the condemnation of the human rights record of the Taliban government, Tony Blair arguing:

Look for a moment at the Taliban regime. It is undemocratic. That goes without saying. There is no sport allowed, or television or photography. No art or culture is permitted ... Women are treated in a way almost too revolting to be credible. First driven out of university; girls not allowed to go to school; no legal rights; unable to go out of doors without a man. Those that disobey are stoned (Blair 2001a).

This approach ignores the international context, for example the impact of sanctions and international isolation. It also pays scant attention to the domestic social and political context, never asking how women can have equal rights, or how high art and culture can flourish in a society ravaged by war and intervention and now largely based on feudal backwardness and a subsistence economy. The foreign policy of criticism exploits the narrow focus of the human rights framework to portray even destructive actions such as carpet bombing as a viable solution to problems which might more rationally be seen to lie in earlier international policies that had encouraged economic and social disintegration. This simplistic focus sets up an interventionist discourse where western governments are seen to have the solution to problems of non-western states and where any western government action, regardless of its outcome, can generally be portrayed as better than acquiescence and passivity.

Rhetoric without responsibility

Ethical goals, like human rights protection, are held to be moral duties and therefore the responsibility of everyone. Mary Robinson (*The Guardian*,

23 October 1999), UN Commissioner for Human Rights, argues that ‘all of us are called upon to play a part in championing and defending human rights ... Individuals have a duty to put pressure on governments ... and to try to ensure the media spotlight is not turned off ... We are all answerable’. Kofi Annan, UN Secretary-General, makes the same point:

When we recall tragic events such as those of Bosnia or Rwanda and ask, ‘Why did no one intervene?’ the question should not be addressed only to the United Nations, or even to its member states ... Each of us as an individual has to take his or her share of responsibility. No one can claim ignorance of what happened. All of us should recall how we responded, and ask: ‘What did I do? Could I have done more? Did I let my prejudice, my indifference, or my fear overwhelm my reasoning? Above all, how would I react next time?’ (Whitney 1999).

However, as Alex de Waal notes: ‘The “responsibility” of the UN agencies, NGOs and foreign governments is a vague and easily evaded moral responsibility—nothing more than an aspiration—rather than a practical obligation for which the “responsible” institution can be called to account’ (de Waal 1997, 70). Internationalising responsibility for international ethical norms, such as the promotion of human rights, means that although we may all share responsibility, there is no political institution that is actually accountable.¹²

The question of accountability is central to understanding the domestic drive behind ethical foreign policy. In a modern democracy the government has a duty to reflect the desires and priorities of its citizens in its policy-making. Ethical foreign policy is defined by an opposite set of justifications because it is based on the moral recognition that a government’s duty goes beyond the demands of the electorate: ‘[O]nce we recognise that our duty extends towards those unknown, i.e. that we have a duty of more extended caring, then the unknown can be anywhere and anyone, irrespective of place, race, creed, sex or whatever’ (Dower 1997, 103).

Ethical foreign policy is often seen as subject to a higher accountability than that of the domestic electorate; the universal moral accountability of supporting the rights of victims. As Mary Robinson puts it: ‘Everything begins and ends with a determination to secure a life of dignity—a truly human quality of life—for all the people in whose names we act’ (Robinson 1997, 25). However, the problem with universal moral accountability

is that it can never be a replacement for political accountability. In fact, the claims for universal moral accountability undermine the notion of democratic accountability itself, by replacing democratic accountability to citizens of the nation state with moral accountability to non-citizens who cannot vote or hold the government accountable.

International intervention on the ethical basis of supporting the needs or human rights of victims in other countries tends to empower the forces that are acting on their behalf rather than the victims themselves. As Hannah Arendt noted, this relationship of external assistance for victims is the opposite of a right, it is a charitable act; there is no law or right that could force intervention of this sort (Arendt 1979, 296). As with all cases of claims not based on rights: 'Privileges in some cases, injustices in most, blessings and doom are meted out to them according to accident and without any relation whatsoever to what they do, did, or may do' (ibid.).

Tony Blair's party conference speech following the September 11 attacks demonstrated the ease with which the ethical framework could legitimate the projection of power abroad on the basis of acting on the behalf of others. Blair declared that he was not just concerned with British interests but that: 'The starving, the wretched, the dispossessed, the ignorant, those living in want and squalor from the deserts of northern Africa to the slums of Gaza, to the mountains of Afghanistan: they too are our cause' (Blair 2001a). Today the governments of the United States and Britain declare they have a duty to protect the rights of the Afghan people; tomorrow they may claim the duty to protect the rights of the citizens of Somalia, Sudan, Iraq or another sovereign state. The problem is that there is no mechanism to make the actions of the world's most powerful states accountable to the citizens of the states in which they choose to intervene. For example, Tony Blair could claim that the carpet bombing of Afghanistan was an action undertaken on behalf of Afghan citizens: 'This is not a conventional conflict. It is not a battle for territory per se or for the subjugation of Afghanistan. It is a battle to allow the Afghans themselves to retake control of their country' (Blair 2001b). However, the Afghan people were not given any choice over the manner of their 'liberation' by US Air Force B52s.¹³

Previous international intervention in Serbia and Kosovo had earlier demonstrated that this process could reinforce the inequalities of power between the international actors and those most affected by their actions. It is the intervening powers that define the victim and prescribe the rights which they are choosing to uphold. The use of ethical policy aims to justify

the overtly political ends of western foreign policy in this region was demonstrated in discussions on the selective use of humanitarian aid in Serbia in 1999 and 2000. The European Union proposed to provide only certain types of humanitarian aid to Serbian municipalities run by opposition parties. The first selective aid programme was 'Energy for Democracy', where humanitarian shipments of heating fuel were directed to cities such as Nis, Kraljevo and Kragujevac. This was followed by similar aid programmes such as 'Schools for Democracy', 'Roads for Democracy' and 'Milk for Democracy' (ESEM 2000; Rozen 2000). This selective approach of aiding some 'victims' while the rest of Serbia suffered international sanctions attempted to manipulate the internal politics of the region by encouraging opposition to the Milosevic government, a political project favoured by western governments.

Perhaps the clearest example of the manipulation of victims' rights in the region was in response to the Kosovo crisis. The victim status of the ethnic Albanians, that allowed them to gain the support of Nato states, was not enough to allow them a say in the post-war government of the province. Once the Serb state had been forced to relinquish sovereign powers over the territory, Nato was concerned that the victims would 'fill the vacuum' with their own institutions (Zizek 2000, 59). After waging war for ethnic Albanian rights to autonomy and self-government, the Nato and UN officials felt that the ethnic Albanians could not be trusted to rule in their own name, let alone take over the administration of schools, hospitals and the media (Chandler 2000).

The lack of accountability to people who have to live with the consequences of ethical foreign policy activism means that the judgement of whether an intervention has been successful is one made by those powers who have intervened. The decision on whether and when to pull troops or international administrators out of East Timor, Sierra Leone, Kosovo, Bosnia or Macedonia is one made by the internationals rather than the local community and often depends more on international concerns and policy priorities rather than the situation on the ground. For example, the pressure on Lord Ashdown, the British-nominated international High Representative in Bosnia, to push through reforms and relinquish some of his powers, comes not from the people of Bosnia, but the European Union, which cannot establish a Stabilisation and Association agreement to formalise relationships with the former Yugoslav state unless there is a greater level of democratic authority for elected representatives.¹⁴

Policy success guaranteed

When intervening for ethical ends there is little pressure to account for final policy outcomes. Whatever happens in the targeted states, under international sanctions or military action, it can be alleged to be better than non-intervention. As both Tony Blair and *The Guardian* argued in response to the 'collateral' deaths of ethnic Albanian refugees from the high altitude Nato bombing campaign in Kosovo: 'Milosevic is determined to wipe a people from the face of this country. Nato is determined to stop him' (*The Guardian*, 15 May 1999). The House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, although dismissing the idea that there was a Serb policy of genocide, still concluded that 'The issue in Kosovo was ... whether in the absence of Nato intervention, the Serb campaign would have continued over many years, eventually resulting in more deaths and instability in the region than if Nato had not intervened. We believe that it would' (UKFAC 2000, para.123). The belief that it would have been even worse without international action provides a hypothetical *post facto* justification that is difficult to disprove. The discourse of ethical foreign policy establishes a framework of western intervention which inevitably encourages a positive view of intervention in the face of exaggerated fears of non-intervention.

The methods used in international interventions and the final outcome are less likely to attract critical attention once an ethical human rights framework is established. Joy Gordon usefully draws on comparisons with the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials after the Second World War, which asserted an essential distinction between 'evil human beings and righteous ones' (Gordon 1998, 783). In denouncing the moral crimes of the states which lost in the war, the acts of western powers were seen as excusable:

What Nuremberg tells us is that, measured against the moral and political imperative of denouncing atrocities, all competing moral or legal imperatives are completely without weight ... We inherit from Nuremberg the idea that when there are atrocities to denounce, we need not look at the acts of the denouncers themselves (Gordon 1998, 786).

The ethical foreign policy framework establishes a moral 'divide' in the context of which it is difficult for critical views of 'ethical' interventions to gain a hearing. Today's human rights advocates tend to portray every

'ethical' intervention against selected pariah states as on a par with the Allied war effort against Nazi Germany, the template for a moralised view of conflict.

The 'collateral' deaths of many Afghan civilians, as 'stray' missiles hit hospitals, mosques, civilian convoys, anti-Taliban villages, civilian economic installations and Red Cross supply stores, were justified by the 'ethical' ends of the war, western governments emphasising that stopping the bombing would be even worse. Polly Toynbee (*The Guardian*, 31 October 2001), for example, argued that, if left in power, the Taliban would 'slaughter their own people in numbers greater than the likely casualties of this war'. There was therefore little questioning when Tony Blair claimed that military action was justified, regardless of its level of success: 'Whatever the dangers of the action we take, the dangers of inaction are far, far greater' (Blair 2001a), a policy U-turn which conveniently forgot that the policy of inaction, in the face of civil war and repression, had received little criticism from government ministers over the previous decade.

Conclusion

It was only in the 1990s that the agenda of ethical foreign policy activism became possible with the end of superpower rivalry and the old international political framework. This article has suggested that one important factor behind major western powers acting on this possibility and making foreign policy concerns central to defining their administrations, is the difficulty of generating moral authority through domestic policy initiatives. Over the last decade, ethical foreign policy initiatives have become an important mechanism for cohering western governments and international institutions, often appearing to be bereft of any clear consensus-building political agenda of their own. This drive to resolve questions of legitimacy and coherence through ethical policy has led national governments and international bodies to institutionalise selectively the once marginal concerns of human rights advocacy groups and international lawyers.

As David Rieff (2000) astutely argues, the attraction of ethical foreign policy does not necessarily lie with policy outcomes either in terms of human rights promotion or some other covert *realpolitik* agenda:

The fact that it is so easy for us to poke holes in the doctrine should give us pause, not lead us to pat ourselves on the back. It should, at

the very least, make us wonder where humanitarian intervention fits in and why it has become (along with human rights) a central rhetorical plank of so-called Third Way politics in the West ... [H]umanitarian intervention is important because it is central to the post-cold war west's moral conception of itself ... And in this context what is important about humanitarian intervention is an idea, rather than a practice ... [T]hose who oppose the doctrine should not console themselves with the thought that by refuting its practical applications they have accomplished much of anything.

While it is easy to draw out the inevitable limits and contradictions of 'ethical' foreign policy when it comes to questions of economic and geo-strategic self-interest, it is more difficult to understand the commitment of western troops and resources in situations where there appears to be little geo-political or strategic interest involved. Commentators who overlook the domestic gains from the promotion of ambitious ethical foreign policies find it difficult to explain why western government leaders have often been at the forefront of raising the concerns of people on the other side of the planet. This article suggests that by including the problems of the domestic sphere in our policy analysis it will be possible to have a better grasp of the limits and possibilities inherent in the new ethical agenda.

Notes

1. See for example, Smith and Light (2001) and Booth, Dunne and Cox (2000). The term 'ethical foreign policy' is used in this article as shorthand for an assertion of an ethical or moral interest to intervene abroad in order to advance the interests of others. I do not attempt to argue that this assertion of ethical interests shapes foreign policy as a whole or that it is anything other than highly selective. The limits of ethical foreign policy are dealt with in more detail in a number of works, including Chandler (2002, 82–88); Brown (2001) and Economides (2001). My concern is not a study of foreign policy (or foreign trade relations) per se, but rather the specific dynamic behind high-profile military and diplomatic interventions abroad which have been a particular feature of the past decade.
2. See further, Ramsbotham and Woodhouse (1996) and Wheeler (2000).
3. Declared by many commentators to be the first ethical humanitarian war, see for example, Klug (2000) and Lord Robertson (2000, 22). Of course, the term 'international community' is a politically loaded one which attempts to minimise the importance of the opposition to the war from Russia, China, India and many other members of the 'international community'.

4. Human rights concerns are often considered to be the 'litmus test' of ethical foreign policy as they involve the prioritisation of the universal interests of people on the basis of their membership of the human race rather than upon the accidental basis of their citizenship within a particular political entity.
5. For a US approach see for example, Wagenseil (1999).
6. For example, T. Dunne and N. J. Wheeler (2001, 183) assert that in acting as a good international citizen in intervening in Kosovo, the British government was effectively 'advancing a new legal claim that challenged existing UN norms'.
7. See for example, ICISS (2001).
8. See for example, Zartman (1995); Jackson (1990); Kaldor (1999); Thurer (1999); Weiss (1999); Gutman and Rieff (1999).
9. David P. Forsythe notes that: 'Analysts concluded that there was considerable American popular support for pragmatic internationalism, but not a great deal of support for moral internationalism' (2000, 143). See further, Holsti (2000).
10. There is a large literature on this subject. One result of the moralised view of humanitarian crisis is the conception of the 'undeserving victim' and growing conditionality attached to humanitarian aid. See, for example, Stockton (1998); Macrae and Leader (2000); Fox (2001).
11. For an excellent history of the cold war links between human rights NGOs and western governments see Sellars (2002).
12. The question of accountability has been a key problem in attempts to establish a 'right' of humanitarian intervention without the support of the UN Security Council. With no alternative body with international credibility, there is effectively an 'accountability gap', leaving the states and 'coalitions of the willing' which favour a humanitarian intervention which breaches sovereignty to judge for themselves whether this intervention would be legitimate. See further the discussions of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, for example, Roberts (2001).
13. For a critique of ethical foreign policy which does not engage directly in dialogue with those most affected by it see for example, Fierke (2001) and Cochran (2001).
14. Private discussion with Lord Ashdown, Vienna, 5 July 2002. See also ICG (2001).

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David Chandler

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