In this lecture I want to explore how it was that the UK became committed so quickly to military intervention in Libya following the outbreak of protests against the Gaddafi regime - and specifically to the removal of Gaddafi himself - given that as a nation we are still embroiled in Afghanistan and licking our wounds over Iraq. I will attempt some possible explanations, and suggest areas for further research at the interface between UK foreign and domestic policy. I make clear at the outset that I am no expert on Libya; I speak rather as someone who has witnessed a great deal of international intervention in a variety of forms over many years, and who believes that we need a much greater focus on ourselves as interveners if we are to understand intervention properly and do it better in future.

In January 2010 David Cameron’s Conservative party published a National Security Green Paper, which included a commitment to “reducing the need for military intervention by building a capacity for preventative action, including diplomacy led by the FCO and for contributions from a wider range of government departments”. That was welcomed by those of us who have long regretted the run-down of our diplomatic capability and detailed area understanding. Yet 14 months later, as Prime Minister, Mr Cameron played a leading role in mobilising the international community in support of military intervention in Libya.

During the tumultuous events in January and February, first in Tunisia then in Egypt, Libya was relatively quiet. Then, on 16 February, riots broke out in Benghazi in the eastern part of the country, which has long had a mutually antagonistic relationship with Gaddafi. On 17 February, the Foreign Secretary, William Hague, was making a statement in the House of Commons about the situation in Bahrain. Asked about Libya, he said “we call on the government of Libya to recognise the right to peaceful protest and to avoid the excessive use of force”. However the violence continued and on 18 February it was reported that dozens of protesters were said to have been killed by the security forces. Interestingly for the purposes of this analysis, the UK Parliament then took a week’s break. The Prime Minister left for the Middle East heading a trade delegation that - controversially - included a number of arms manufacturers. Meanwhile the protests in Libya spread to other parts of the country, including the capital, Tripoli. There were also reports of Gaddafi using his air force to bomb civilian targets to contain the uprising against him. Fears began to rise for the fate of foreign nationals caught up in the fighting, including a good number of UK citizens, and political pressure on the UK government to rescue them began to grow. While the PM was away, on 21 February, William Hague in Brussels for an EU foreign ministers meeting - said he had been told Gaddafi might have fled to Venezuela. On the same day the Deputy Head of the Libyan Mission to the UN in New York requested the UN Security Council to take action to prevent further violence in Libya, and in particular to impose a no-fly zone to prevent Gaddafi’s forces from attacking civilians.
On 22 February, William Hague said the Libyan state was collapsing, but on the same day Gaddafi made his first TV appearance in Tripoli since the outbreak of the crisis, vowing to fight “to the last drop of blood”. Meanwhile reports of violence and atrocities continued. On 23 February the UN Security Council held an emergency meeting to discuss Libya and issued a press statement (SC/10180) calling on the government of Libya to “meet its responsibility to protect its population ... to act with restraint, to respect human rights and international humanitarian law, and to allow immediate access for international human rights monitors and humanitarian agencies”.

On 24 February the Daily Mail carried a headline "British rescue turns to farce", as the plane meant to evacuate British nationals from Libya was grounded at Gatwick airport by a technical fault. However, while the government faced criticism for its handling of this aspect of the crisis, its diplomats were active behind the scenes at the UN (as the Prime Minister confirmed in his statement to the House of Commons the following week). On 25 February the UN Human Rights Council discussed a proposal to expel Libya (the expulsion was confirmed by the UN General Assembly on 1 March). Then on Saturday 26 February the UN Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 1970, which referred the Gaddafi regime to the International Criminal Court (ICC) for possible "crimes against humanity", and imposed an arms embargo, travel ban, and asset freeze. In other words, a very tough set of measures, passed remarkably quickly by Security Council standards, and without any abstentions - quite an achievement for the sponsors of the Resolution. On the same day both President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton were quoted as saying Gaddafi "must leave now".

Returning to UK domestic politics, with Parliament due to reconvene on Monday 28th February, on 27 February the Labour MP and former International Development Secretary, Douglas Alexander, called on the Prime Minister to come to the House of Commons "not just to explain why the Foreign Office got its evacuation plans so badly wrong at the start, but how Britain can be a leader and not a follower in the efforts to increase the pressure on Gaddafi to stand down". Thus the scene was set for David Cameron’s statement to the House on 28 February.

Much of the statement was about the evacuation of UK nationals, where as we have seen the government was feeling the political heat. But the most striking aspect of the Prime Minister’s statement was his uncompromising stance towards Gaddafi: "I turn to the pressure that we are now putting on Gaddafi’s regime. We should be clear that for the future of Libya and its people, Col Gaddafi’s regime must end and he must leave." The PM referred to the UK’s efforts at the UN to bring about a Security Council Resolution, describing Gaddafi’s “murderous regime” and pointing to the ICC referral, which would mean that Libya’s leaders could "face the justice they deserve". On military intervention he said "we do not in any way rule out the use of military assets" and said he would ask the Chief of Defence Staff and the MoD to work with allies on a plan for a no-fly zone over Libya. He said "it is clear that this is an illegitimate regime that has lost the consent of its people, and
our message to Col Gaddafi is simple: go now." He added that “There is a real
danger now of a humanitarian crisis inside Libya”.

This was a strong statement, supported by the Leader of the Opposition, who
on the subject of Gaddafi said: "I think that the whole House will endorse the
Prime Minister's view that the only acceptable future is one without Col
Gaddafi and his regime." Thus there was a remarkable degree of cross-party
agreement about the need to remove the Libyan leader, only 12 days after the
initial outbreak of violence.

Although there was subsequently quite a lot of to-ing and fro-ing about
whether a no-fly zone really was an effective means of resolving the crisis,
with the US Secretary of Defence, Robert Gates, in particular questioning the
level of military intervention this would require, it would seem that for David
Cameron at least the die was already cast. There was further embarrassment
for the British government the following week with the Daily Mail reporting on
7 March "SAS troops rounded up and booted out as Libyan MI5 mission turns
to farce", but on the international front things were moving Mr Cameron's way.
There were statements on Libya by the Organisation of the Islamic
Conference on 8 March, by the Peace and Security Committee of the African
Union on 10 March, crucially by the Arab League - calling for a no-fly zone
over Libya - on 12 March, by the UN Secretary-General - calling for an
immediate ceasefire - on 16 March, culminating on 17 March with the

This Resolution authorised military action against Libya, although this time
five Security Council members abstained (Brazil, China, Germany, India, and
Russia). The explanations of vote of the abstaining members make interesting
reading. All deplored the violence in Libya and were critical of the Gaddafi
regime. But Germany "saw great risks" in undertaking military action and said
"the likelihood of large-scale loss of life should not be underestimated". India
regretted that the Resolution had been passed without waiting for the report of
the Secretary-General's Envoy to Libya and argued that the resolution "was
based on very little clear information ... there must be certainty that negative
outcomes were not likely before such wide-ranging measures were adopted.
Political efforts must be the priority in resolving the situation." Brazil was
concerned that the measures approved might have the unintended effect of
exacerbating the current tensions on the ground and "causing more harm than
good to the very same civilians we are committed to protecting". Both China
and Russia prioritised peaceful means of resolving the conflict and said that
many questions had not been answered in regard to the provisions of the
Resolution, including how and by whom the measures would be enforced and
what the limits of the engagement would be. As subsequent events have
shown, all these comments were very pertinent.

It should be emphasised that, even as the Resolution was being passed,
Gaddafi's forces were reversing some of their earlier territorial losses, had
retaken the key town of Adjabiya, and were threatening the main opposition
stronghold of Benghazi. Although Gaddafi initially reacted by declaring a
ceasefire, this was quickly revealed to be a sham and on the basis of past
statements by him and his sons there appeared to be an imminent threat of a massacre. In justifying the NATO-led Operation Odyssey Dawn shortly after it began on Saturday 19 March David Cameron said “we have all seen the appalling brutality that Col Gaddafi has meted out against his own people. And far from introducing the ceasefire he spoke about he has actually stepped up the atrocities and the brutality that we all see.”

The most fervent advocates of the intervention have sought to justify it in terms of a “humanitarian crisis”, or an impending "humanitarian catastrophe". The "H" word is probably one of those most abused by politicians - and, dare I say it in this distinguished audience, even by scholars. Let us remember that the word "humanitarian" describes an altruistic intention translated into action consistent with that intention; i.e. an intervention resting on a belief that our common humanity alone creates an obligation to relieve suffering and distress. In its more technical application, under international humanitarian law, it means treating the victims of conflict equally, regardless of which side of the conflict they are on.

Therefore, if Libya was facing a "humanitarian crisis" it meant that people on both sides of the fighting needed assistance and protection, and that the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) should be given unrestricted access to them. This would include access to both sets of combatants and to civilians fleeing the fighting and congregating, for example, on the Tunisian and Egyptian borders. This, one might think, ought to have been the first priority of the international community when the fighting erupted in February. And yet, although all three Security Council documents refer to the importance of humanitarian access and respect for international humanitarian law, this was decidedly not the main focus of official statements in the UK.

In the years following the end of the Cold War the term "humanitarian intervention" came to be used, by both politicians and academics, to describe coercive military intervention for ostensibly humanitarian reasons. I say "ostensibly" because almost inevitably, when a decision to use force is taken, considerations other than purely humanitarian ones come into play. So, under the Just War tradition formulated by Christian theologians from St Augustine onwards, one of the principles is "reasonable prospects of success" i.e. you do not fight a Just War unless you are reasonably confident you can win - otherwise it ceases to be just. Equally, when Tony Blair gave his famous Chicago speech in 1999 one of his five "considerations" before undertaking military intervention to right wrongs was "do we have national interests involved?" Therefore, so-called “humanitarian intervention” can immediately be seen to be much less straightforward than is claimed. It usually involves – as in the case of Libya – coercive action against a tyrant abusing the human rights of his own people; this is often controversial and always complicated.

By the end of the 1990s the concept of “humanitarian intervention” had become discredited because of the manifest failure of the international community to act in a concerted, consistent, and effective way to deal with mass atrocities committed in Bosnia, Rwanda, Kosovo and elsewhere. Instead the UN adopted the new concept of “The Responsibility to Protect".
This affirmed member states’ primary responsibility to protect their own citizens, but said that where they were unable or unwilling to do so, there was a place for collective action by members of the UN, including by coercive means if necessary.

Since it was adopted by the General Assembly in 2005 and endorsed by the Security Council in April 2006 “R2P”, as it is known, has been honoured more in the breach than the observance (for example in the case of Darfur). It was therefore highly significant that first the Security Council Statement SC/10180 on 23 February, then both the Resolutions, 1970 and 1973, used the language of R2P, by calling on Libya to meet its responsibility to protect its people. This will no doubt give support to those who argue that, in addition to its undisputed force as an ethical imperative, R2P is beginning to acquire the status of customary international law. However one can be sure that this will continue to be debated by international law and international relations academics for many years to come!

In fact, over the years, where the Security Council has been of a common mind it has managed to justify international intervention to address violations of human rights on the grounds of a “threat to international peace and security” (which, other than self defence, is the only basis for military action under the UN Charter). In the case of the Libyan crisis it might be argued that the immediate threat to international peace and security was actually quite limited, with the main issues relating to what was happening within Libya’s borders. Nevertheless, the preamble to UN SCR 1970 states that the Security Council is “mindful of its responsibilities for international peace and security” and UN SCR 1973 refers to the Security Council’s “determining that the situation in Libya continues to constitute a threat to international peace and security”. And, in fairness, some would argue that the prospect of large numbers fleeing the country in response to the violence would indeed constitute such a threat.

So, the Security Council has no difficulty justifying international intervention when it is minded to do so. The issues are always around the politics of the situation and in this case it was a political triumph for the UK and her allies to secure a unanimous vote for UN SCR 1970 and to avoid a veto of UN SCR 1973. However, problems started almost immediately in terms of whether the protection of civilians could be achieved without aggressive military action over and above the enforcement of a no-fly zone (as Robert Gates had feared) and, ultimately, without regime change; although both the UK and the US had already declared this was their political objective, they also had to acknowledge it was not mandated by UNSCR 1973. That is the game we are still playing now, over five weeks later. In that sense, and not for the first time, the US and the UK settled for a Resolution that pushed at the limits of what was politically acceptable, although it did not give them what they really wanted – a licence to remove Gaddafi.

There is no doubt that the Security Council would not have acted as it did without some highly effective diplomacy from the UK and her allies. The question to which I now return is: why did the UK decide so early in the day...
that its political objective was the removal of Gaddafi? As already stated, from a purely humanitarian point of view there is a strong argument that the priority should have been to intervene to broker a ceasefire and to create the space for a political settlement between Gaddafi and his opponents. Given the willingness of the OIC, the Arab League, the AU, and Turkey to engage with this conflict this might have been a more obvious focus for diplomacy in the early stages of the crisis. But by pushing for such a strongly worded Security Council Statement on 23 February, and by characterising Gaddafi in the way the Prime Minister did in the Commons on 28 February, the room for manoeuvre was seriously restricted. As with the coalition intervention in Afghanistan in 2001/2 the language of victory and punishment crowded out the language of peace and reconciliation.

This was in sharp contrast to the more measured international response to the violence elsewhere in the Middle East, both before the Libyan crisis erupted and subsequently. There is no denying the extreme nature of Gaddafi's response to the protests against him, nor the bloodcurdling nature of the threats made by him and other members of his family. And, as subsequent events in Misrata and elsewhere have shown, these threats were not empty. But by moving so quickly to suggest that Gaddafi may have been guilty of crimes against humanity (as per SCR 1970) the UK and its allies left themselves little room to manoeuvre to mediate a halt to the fighting in the hope that a political settlement could be found.

Then, when the warnings contained in SCR 1970 did not work, the West had little option but to move to more coercive measures. In that sense it was a victim of its own earlier rhetoric; the parallels with the situation in which NATO found itself in late 1998 when Milosevic paid no attention to its threats concerning Kosovo are instructive. However, taking the military route is a high risk strategy. If the campaign is over quickly it is hailed as a success; if it drags on it can become extremely unpopular. The willingness to contemplate a military intervention in Libya was perhaps surprising given the difficulties encountered - and, one would hope, lessons learned - in Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. In all these cases a lack of understanding of the local political economy led to an unrealistic sense of what an intervention from outside could hope to achieve, and to subsequent failure on a grand scale. Somalia is still in deep trouble, Iraq is fragile, and in Afghanistan we are still trying to find a way out of the mess we helped to create. Less than a year after coming into office with a promise of a new foreign and security policy David Cameron was prepared to take the risk of military intervention - why?

An obvious explanation is that the Government believed that Gaddafi would not last very long, and that calling for his removal was therefore a relatively safe option. William Hague's unfortunate remark about Venezuela on 22 February would seem to suggest this, as would suggestions from other members of the foreign policy establishment in the UK that it would not take long for Gaddafi's generals to "sort him out". If this wishful thinking determined the direction of UK foreign policy it was a grievous error. And, as the subsequent mission to Benghazi that went embarrassingly wrong suggested, not enough was known about the opposition to justify backing them from the
start to defeat a much more heavily armed and better organised Gaddafi. It was apparent at the time that we knew very little about Libya as a tribal society dominated by an authoritarian leader or about the long-standing antipathy between the eastern and western halves of the country. So it is possible that the very definite nature of the UK position reflected either a failure of intelligence, or of local knowledge, or a misjudgement based on the lack of either. In other words, the UK government may simply have made a miscalculation about the "reasonable prospect of success" of an intervention to bring about regime change in Libya.

In addition, it must be remembered that in the first week of the crisis the government was very much on the back foot and needed to re-establish its credibility with its own domestic constituency. The Prime Minister had been out of the country and there was much criticism in the media both about the arms sales element of his mission to the Middle East and about the delays in evacuating UK nationals from Libya. Hence Douglas Alexander was able to challenge the Prime Minister directly, not only to explain the embarrassment of the evacuation, but also to show he was a man, not a mouse, in dealing with Gaddafi.

This raises the interesting question how much public opinion contributes to decisions to go to war, and whether the UK public has a natural tendency to be supportive of foreign military interventions or not. It is argued that Margaret Thatcher rescued her first term as Prime Minister as a result of a successful war with Argentina over the Falklands. Tony Blair will be remembered for taking us to war five times -- although neither he nor we much liked the term, whence "humanitarian intervention". Do we, as a society have some kind of pathological need for a villain, someone we can demonise, wage war on, and defeat -- Galtieri, Milosevic, Saddam, Gaddafi? Real-time TV and "embedded" journalists allow us to engage in an action packed game of virtual war, safe at home in our armchairs. Preventive diplomacy, third-party mediation, impartial humanitarian assistance, all take second place in the popular imagination to cruise missiles and Tornado strikes. Is this something that should worry us?

Interestingly, and somewhat at variance with this characterisation, public opinion polls show that in the early days of the Libyan crisis the UK public was ambivalent at best about the wisdom of military intervention, with opposition growing as the prospect of a drawn-out campaign has come to seem more likely. Perhaps public attitudes are shifting as we leave our imperial past further behind and experience the harsh economic reality of life in the 21st century. Some commentators argue that our institutions -- the military, the intelligence services, the foreign policy establishment, - have yet to catch up.

Unlike a US President, a British Prime Minister does not have to seek the approval of the elected representatives of the people in order to declare war. But this has not made the UK more likely than the US to describe military intervention as "war", even where this might be the most honest description, as in the case of Libya. Here, although the coalition is clearly supporting the opposition in its war against Gaddafi this is unlikely ever to be spoken of in these terms, given the language of UNSCR 1973, which is based on the
protection of civilians. This, I suggest, is not a healthy situation in a democracy. Let us hope it does not lead to the situation faced by our troops in Afghanistan, where for a long time we were at peace in Whitehall but very much at war on the ground. Significantly, as of mid-April, the ICRC’s position is that there are now two armed conflicts in Libya: an internal one between Gaddafi and his opponents, and an international one between the coalition and the Libyan regime. This has consequences in terms of creating obligations under international humanitarian law, and is surely a more honest description of what is actually happening.

In his statement to the House of Commons on 18 March following the adoption of UNSCR 1973 David Cameron sought to justify the bombing of Libya in very simple terms: demonstrable need, regional support, and a clear legal basis. President Obama and other senior members of the Administration have spoken with equal clarity and it is hard to argue with them. It is fair to ask, though, whether a Security Council Resolution alone is sufficient to bestow legitimacy in the absence of a popular mandate at national level. In the case of the UK it could be said this was provided by the absence of major opposition in the House of Commons on 28 February, but in contrast to this is the lack of strong public support as revealed by the opinion polls. How much public support does a Prime Minister need in order to go to war? However, ultimately the main issue is not whether the intervention is legitimate, rather whether it is wise; one can always make a case, but is it the right thing to do? This, perhaps only history can judge.

In this lecture I have asked some questions about the interaction between foreign and domestic politics in the UK’s intervention in Libya that I believe would benefit from further research. Does the UK have a natural predilection for military intervention, while being reluctant to call this ”war”? If so, does this come from the foreign policy establishment or the people? Have we lost sight of the need to promote peace among warring parties, as opposed to supporting one side to victory over the other? Do we still value neutral, independent, humanitarian action as the primary means of carrying out our ”responsibility to protect” civilians caught up in armed conflict?

I suggest that the challenge for academics and policymakers alike is to attempt a serious answer to these questions and to arrive at a point where we take a much broader view of international intervention, using the wider range of instruments available to us rather than by default settling for the military option. International intervention can take many forms: some supportive, some coercive; some short-term and tactical, some long-term and strategic. For better or for worse, the UK has a long tradition of engaging with the wider world - and knows more than most about what works and what doesn’t. But in recent times we have neglected our capability to acquire and retain detailed local knowledge and understanding. If we still want to play a role on the world stage we need to build this up again, as the Green Paper of 2010 seemed to promise. We do have a choice; it is up to us to use it wisely.
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