

Britain's foreign secretary urges no retreat on imperialist militarism

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Foreign Secretary David Miliband outlined his foreign policy goals before an audience at Oxford University earlier this week. Billed as his first significant speech in his new post under Prime Minister Gordon Brown, his remarks were described as an effort to “recast” British foreign policy in the face of popular hostility to the wars and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Those looking for any substantive divergence from Labour's previous foreign policy would have been disappointed. Miliband's remarks were in all essentials a repetition of the government's support for the US policy of pre-emptive war and liberal imperialist interventionism set out by former Prime Minister Tony Blair in Chicago some 10 years before.

While Blair had termed this neo-imperialist policy as the “doctrine of the international community,” Miliband rebranded it the “diplomatic imperative.” Otherwise, the references to globalisation creating an interdependent world, the danger from terrorism and “failed states,” the posturing as a moral arbiter concerned with human rights abuses and the underlying insistence that all national governments must abide by the dictates of the world market was the same. As was the threat of military action should any country be judged to have diverted from this path.

In contrast to Blair's Chicago speech, however, Miliband's assertion of Britain's imperialist interests was undoubtedly hamstrung by the terrible legacy of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Miliband made an oblique reference to the “conflict” over the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, without specifying its substance. There was no mention of US and British lies over Iraq's “weapons of mass destruction,” the dodgy “intelligence” dossiers, the perverted abuses exposed at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere, or Guantanamo Bay. Nor was there any mention of the tens of thousands killed and millions displaced by the US and British invasions and the wretched poverty and hardship endured by Afghan and Iraqi civilians under occupations without end.

Miliband paid passing reference to the “deep concerns at the mistakes made” in Iraq and Afghanistan, but he chose not to deal with the fact that the US has now determined there will be no further drawdown of its troop presence in Iraq for the foreseeable future, or its current efforts to strong-arm European Union states into intervening in Afghanistan so that they can

take their share “of the fighting and the dying.”

Instead, Miliband complained that conflict over the Iraq war had “clouded the debate about promoting democracy around the world,” and made a “plea...not to let divisions over those conflicts obscure our national interest, never mind our moral impulse, in supporting movements for democracy.”

“Democracy” had received a huge fillip, Miliband claimed, “with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the crumbling of Soviet Empire.” At that time, “it was tempting to believe in the ‘end of history’—the inevitable progress of liberal democracy and capitalist economics.” But “...in the 1990s, something strange happened. The neoconservative movement seemed to be most sure about spreading democracy around the world. The left seemed conflicted between the desirability of the goal and its qualms about the use of military means,” he continued, adding that, “in fact, the goal of spreading democracy should be a great progressive project.”

“We must resist the argument of the left and the right to retreat into a world of realpolitik,” he warned.

Miliband's effort to distance his government from right-wing militarism is threadbare nonsense. In Britain, Labour has been the most consistent representative of the “neoconservative movement,” combining its support for imperialist intervention abroad with swingeing cuts in workers' living standards and social gains so as to benefit the super-rich at home.

The wars against Afghanistan, Iraq and, before that, Yugoslavia had nothing to do with “spreading democracy,” but with asserting the geopolitical interests of US and British imperialism against their major economic rivals.

Miliband specified as the “indispensable conditions of a democracy”...“that the people choose the government, that they are free from arbitrary control and that the government respects the right of the people to dispense with it.” This is patently not the situation in Afghanistan and Iraq, whose puppet regimes were established by the occupying powers and rule only with their continued support.

Coming to the heart of his real concerns, Miliband argued, “Democracy is the best custodian of trade. Free trade and investment rely on confidence that governments will protect *property rights*, operate in a transparent way, and avoid hidden subsidies and distortions” (emphasis added).

By democracy, he continued, “I mean not just more elections, but the rule of law and *economic freedoms* which are the basis of liberal democracy” (emphasis added).

This is the real content of the “democracy” championed by Miliband and the Labour government—the right of the western powers, particularly Britain and the US, to forcibly establish their economic interests and property rights in the resource-rich Middle East.

Miliband stressed that the international community, and specifically the European Union, must make clear that these are its objectives too and must be prepared to act forcibly to this end, recognising that “there will be situations where the hard power of targeted sanctions, international criminal proceedings, security guarantees and military intervention will be necessary.”

Interventions in other countries should be better planned, and have the support of multilateral institutions preferably, Miliband implied, combining “both soft and hard power.”

The “soft power” option is anything but. It involves targeted pressure—including sanctions—aimed at crippling a country’s economy and terrorising its people until it is brought to heel.

All this was dressed up with support for so-called “civilian surge[s].” Miliband’s lecture was in honour of Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been held in prison or under house arrest for more than 12 of the past 18 years. Miliband went out of his way to praise the “civilian surge” in Burma in September of last year, which saw mass anti-junta protests. This had ensured that “Burma has not and will not be forgotten,” he went on, noting that “the regime has this week called for a referendum for May on a new constitution and elections for 2010.”

Miliband’s professed concern for the plight of Suu Kyi has nothing to do with the democratic rights of the Burmese people. Rather, it is directed against China, whose relations with the Burmese junta threaten to cut across those of US and British imperialism in a country rich with natural resources—including gas and oil.

He also cited Pakistan as a supposed example of how targeted international aid had enabled women to “have been supported to stand as candidates in local elections.” Yet, less than a month after the assassination of Pakistan People’s party leader Benazir Bhutto, and mass protests over the killing and the arbitrary purging of more than 60 supreme and high court judges, President Pervez Musharraf was welcomed by the Brown government in London. No “civilian surge” in Pakistan was going to stand in the way of the Labour government giving its backing to the military dictatorship, which has acted as a key ally of the US and Britain in the region.

Even the United Arab Emirates received a free pass from Miliband, who claimed that as it “has become more integrated into the world economy, it has tackled corruption, increased transparency, and improved institutional and legal mechanisms.”

Just who is to be the subject of “soft and hard power” aimed at “reforming established democracies, or supporting transitions to democracy”?

The “economic success of China,” Miliband said, meant that Britain could “no longer take the forward march of democracy for granted.” While “arguably more people in China are freer today than they have been at any previous time in Chinese history,” people “inside China and outside are rightly concerned about the next stages in political development.”

More specifically, Miliband targeted Russia. Alongside the World Trade Organisation and NATO, the European Union should use the carrot of membership to “engage more actively in promoting democracy beyond its immediate neighbourhood.” In addition to forging “a more attractive Near Neighbourhood Policy,” “we need to keep the door open to our Eastern neighbours and continue to deepen our ties with them, supporting those who filled the streets during the Rose revolution in Georgia in 2003 or the Orange revolution in Ukraine in 2004.”

In Georgia and the Ukraine—which are central to Washington’s plans to dominate the strategic Caucasus region—the US bankrolled the so-called “democratic” opposition with the aim of replacing the perceived pro-Russian regimes in these countries with ones more compliant to its interests.

Subsequently, both countries have become ever more deeply mired in allegations of fraud, corruption and the trampling of democratic rights. Miliband made no mention of the fact that only in November Georgia’s Mikhail Saakashvili imposed a state of emergency after police violently attacked demonstrators and raided the pro-opposition Imedi TV, or of the allegations of widespread fraud that had seen Saakashvili returned to power just last month. Instead, he expressed his “regret” that “Russia has acted to prevent OSCE experts and parliamentarians from observing its Presidential elections in March.”

Serving notice that Britain intends to step up such provocative interference in the territory of the former Soviet Union, as well as the Middle East, Miliband hailed the development of a new BBC Arabic and Farsi service and stressed it would attempt to manipulate similar “civilian surges” through the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and trade unions, under the auspices of the International Labour Organisation.

“Britain has global reach in its media and through the networks of its NGOs. That is why the Foreign Office and DfID continue to invest in national and global NGOs that can open up debate and stimulate pressure from civil society,” he said.



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