The Role Of Prime Minister In Implementing The UK Foreign Policy

This essay aims to establish the role the Prime Minister plays in setting, shaping and implementing foreign policy in the UK by exploring decision-making patterns by former Prime Ministers in the related field, as well as current government's choices and aspirations on the international arena, and the contribution of Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and other bodies. As Paul Williams (2004: 911) noted that 'foreign policy is not made in a political vacuum' it is paramount to take into consideration Britain`s national interest in international relations and the country's position in the existing paradigm of world politics.

First, it will define what 'foreign policy' is and why it takes a special place in policy making. Foreign policy will be analysed against following factors: globalisation, public opinion and national interest. Also, it will summarize the key models of the Foreign Policy Analysis (Allison 1971) and question their effectiveness and drawbacks.

Second, the essay will refer to case studies on the subject to bring empirical data into analysis. The case studies include the Europeanization of the foreign policy in the UK, the US-UK intervention in Iraq in terms of the ethical foreign policy. They will help to access the role played by foreign policy makers. Given the length of this essay it will not comment in detail on the influence of NGO's, ambassadors abroad and the economy; however, they are undeniable parts of foreign policy-making process.

Finally, the essay will discuss a possible course of action for the UK to take in order to achieve a successful foreign policy and bring back the power to decision-makers. What could be done to overcome common thinking of foreign policy being about 'getting our way in an unhelpful world' (Cradock 1997: 99-100).

What is a foreign policy?

In the modern world it is impossible to imagine a country without a well-defined set of rules of behaviour towards its geopolitical neighbours and economic partners. The question remains, however, as to what extent foreign policy represents interests of leaders, political parties and general public of a particular country. 'Collective coping with the international environment is, indeed, a useful shorthand definition of foreign policy' according to Christopher Hill (2003: 9) but this definition leaves infinite variants of interpretation of what 'collective' is and who plays the leading role in doing so – the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, a collaboration of both, official agents interpreting and implementing policies or influence of powerful countries that Britain has close relationship with?

In order to understand who conducts foreign policy it is essential to outline the policy goals first. William Hague, the current Foreign Secretary, in his speech on the 1st of July, 2010 promises to

'deliver a distinctive foreign policy that extends our global reach and influence, that is agile and energetic in a networked world, that uses diplomacy to secure our prosperity, that builds up

significantly strengthened bilateral relations for Britain, that harnesses the appeal of our culture and heritage to promote our values, and that sets out to make the most of the abundant opportunities of the 21st century systematically and for the long-term. So for the first time in years in my view Britain will have a foreign policy that is clear, focused and effective.'

His statement highlights the fact that UK foreign policy is not pursuing one goal; on the contrary, it seeks to accomplish multiple aims: to extend Britain' global influence, to secure prosperity, to promote values through culture, etc. Successfully achieving them means achieving each part separately which involves resources and actors in different areas. As a result some policies might overlap and even contradict one another (Williams 2004: 913) and it is worthwhile looking at specific parts of the policy rather than a whole.

Foreign policy has been characterised by being overly secretive and elitist which makes it more complicated to trace the decision-making process. Foreign policy takes a special place in the whole policy-making field as it is closely linked with politics. It should not come as a surprise since it deals with sensitive issues like intelligence services and diplomacy, which seldom become available to general public, for obvious reasons: the information might fall into the wrong hands and undermine the objectives set by the policy. Nevertheless, it is possible to comprehend in which direction foreign policy is headed based on the past decisions made by politicians and the impact they made at the time. This direction a state chooses to follow depends greatly on the personality of a leader, current administration and economic situation a state finds itself in. Foreign policy is conducted in complex internal and international environments; it results from coalitions of active actors and groups situated both inside and outside state boundaries; it involves bargaining and compromise affecting the interests of both domestic and international groups (Neak cited in Carlsnaes 2008).

Foreign Policy Analysis

To analyse foreign policy scientifically Graham Allison (1971) in his work Essence of Decision comes up with three models of decision-making related to foreign affairs (known as Foreign Policy Analysis) trying to explain the reasons and causes behind states' decisions in a crisis. The first model, Rational Actor Model (RAM), assumes that a single actor (state) makes decisions upon a calculation of possible outcomes, thus decisions are rational reactions to a particular situation. It can be said that state chooses a course of action in line with its national interest trying to avoid losses and maximize benefits. The second model, Organizational Process Behaviour (OPB), is characterised by decision made by multiple organisations that look back at previous precedent and act accordingly. Thus it tries to bring down the importance of central control in decisions. The final model, Bureaucratic Politics, is summarized by Allison's own words – 'where you sit determines where you stand', meaning that governmental organizations normally have a preferred way of dealing with an international crisis.

These models were used by the scholar to apply different 'lenses' to explain the origins of the Cuban Missile Crisis and establish how and why the USA and the USSR came to the choices they made during the conflict. Allison admits that these three models are not capable of encompassing all possible variants, his study became a milestone in FPA as it attempted to present social science capable of achieving clear and objective explanations of social and political actions.

Stein (2008) develops the idea of rational-decision making further: in order for a policy maker to make a rational choice, he/she needs to value how reliable the information is, and whether it comes from a trustworthy source. Moreover, any new information that might turn up has to be evaluated against diagnostic evidence that takes into consideration the consequences the policy maker is considering.

Who is in charge?

On paper it is the Foreign Secretary who conducts foreign policy in the UK although it hasn't always been the case. The Prime Minister retains the power to declare war and deploy military troops, making the fragile equilibrium of power shift. Tony Blair has shown that depending on who is leading the country, the style of policy-making changes dramatically. During New Labour the most important decisions on foreign policy were not taken at the FCO but in the Cabinet. His leadership earned the name 'interventiolalist' as Britain took part in several military operations: Barras in Sierra Leone, Desert Fox in Iraq amongst others. It is the Prime Minister's decision whether to send troops into combat or not and Blair chose to consult not the cabinet as a whole but rather small ad hoc committees of advisers. Anthony Sheldon (2004: 692) named these groups 'denocracy' as their meetings took place in Blair's office, 'the den'. Such exclusiveness promotes confusion as a small circle of trusted ministers and advisors gives an impression that the policy as a whole is reactive rather than proactive.

It is worthwhile mentioning that the UK is a parliamentary monarchy and the Queen is the official ruler in the UK. Although her power is mostly of a ceremonial nature, nevertheless, she plays an important role in representing the country at various levels: the UK, the Commonwealth and internationally. In her speech to the Parliament on the 9th of May 2012 the Queen set the following agenda: to strengthen oversight of the security and intelligence agencies, to seek approval of Parliament on the anticipated accession of Croatia to the EU, to support a secure and stable Afghanistan, to reduce the threat of nuclear proliferation in Iran and to build strategic partnerships with the emerging powers. These goals show that the Queen is far from being above politics, on the contrary, she is greatly concerned with Britain's position in the fast developing world and foreign policy is one of her concerns.

Factors influencing foreign policy: American influence

The UK boasts to have a special relationship with the USA in terms of foreign policy. foreign policy has privileged the idea of working closely with the United States, particularly in the area of international security, where the UK has provided the largest and most effective non-US contingent to three American-led conflicts in recent years – twice in Iraq and once in Afghanistan (Wallace and Phillips, 2009: 267). The two countries have been allies for a long period of time and acted accordingly. Britain considers its international relations with the USA to be as important as its ties with Europe, if not more. However, in the light of Britain losing its imperial power long ago and the hegemonic rise of the US, arguably, Britain plays along with the American directives. This was the case in all interventions where the USA took part in the last 60 years except the conflict in the Falklands.

It appears that Britain is torn among its own interests, the EU integration and Anglo-American ties (Atlanticism). Blair decided to strengthen the country's position by addressing these three issues at once. The USA will benefit from a special relationship with the UK when making

decisions in Europe and vice versa. This special relationship (Wallace and Philips 2009: 267-274) includes defence cooperation, military nuclear cooperation, provision of bases to the United States and intelligence relationship. But does Britain get out as much as the USA in this relationship? The answer to this question remains unclear:

‘On issues as varied as the Kyoto Treaty, the Ottawa Treaty banning landmines, the war in Kosovo, the attack on Afghanistan, the Middle East peace process, the Iraq war and subsequent occupation, or the holding of captives at Guantánamo Bay, there has been little evidence of the UK’s ability to shape US policy. Indeed, governments, in clinging to the idea of the ‘special relationship’, have generally overlooked the fact that the US has several privileged relationships, notably with Mexico, Israel, Australia, Italy and Poland.’ (Wallace 2009: 65)

While Brits assume that Americans hold certain sentiment towards shared past and noble goals, the USA might be pursuing its own national interest instead. Riddell (2003) argues that America ‘is not disposed to sacrifice national interest on the altar of nostalgia or sentiment – and shows scant regard for those who do’. It shows that no matter who the USA considers to be its allies, it is going to pursue its own national interest and foreign policy.

Tony Blair was not the first Prime Minister who chose to play a bigger role in foreign-policy making. Margaret Thatcher in her role as the Prime Minister had her own very specific view on how to conduct foreign policy. Her initiative to take part in the military conflict in the Falklands wasn’t supported by the USA at first which didn’t stop her. She had very distinctive views about Anglo-European relationship as well and the FCO was often excluded from the decision-making process. She blamed the FCO for being pro-European and considered creating a separate body to counteract the FCO’s dominance in foreign policy-making.

Public opinion and media shaping foreign policy

Public opinion is another important ‘lens’ of foreign-policy making. As we live in a world where communication has become instantaneous powered by digital media both politicians and policy-makers try to use it to their advantage. According to Robinson (2008) there exist two models capable of analyzing the impact of public opinion and media on a policy. The pluralist model suggests that ‘the media and publics are independent of political influence and, as such, can act as a powerful constraint upon governments.’ The elite model, on the contrary, assumes that media act ‘merely as mouthpieces for government officials, operating to mobilize publics in support of respective policies.’ The case of the polls on the Iraq War in the UK showed that although the majority disagreed with Tony Blair’s decision to engage in the conflict, they did not stop the Prime Minister from changing his course of action. The consequences of this decision resulted in Blair not being re-elected, as the media coverage revealed more details about the rising number of casualties in the war. Bias of the media should also be put under scrutiny – the newspapers in the UK (as well as the rest of the world) often cater to different political parties promoting a certain agenda and delivering a policy chosen by that party to the public. Thus, it is extremely difficult to account for the influence of the media due to the fact that public opinion might not be partial having been shaped by the media. ‘Foreign policy is always the product of a society, a polity, interpreting its situation and choosing – who chooses is another matter – to act or react in a particular, unpredetermined way.’

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is not a definite answer to who conducts foreign policy. Different Prime Ministers showed a ranging level of involvement into foreign policy-making process. Factors such as Europeanization, the US-UK alliance, public opinion and economic crisis make it more difficult to understand to what extent one person or several people (the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary along with advisors) can follow through with the propositions set at the beginning of a government's term. The process of foreign-policy making involves civil servants, ministers and officials of all spectrums as well as independent advisors, experts from the UK and worldwide. While most significant decisions are made by the Prime Minister, he makes his choice based on the data and evidence he has been given. Finally, it is not enough to simply formulate foreign policy, the major stages of the policy-making process fall onto the shoulders of civil servants who interpret, implement and present the policy. Moreover, there are multiple foreign policies in the UK which demand different approaches. If the UK wants to remain its international power that has been in decline after the fall of the Empire and maintain the foreign policy that is coherent at all stages of the policy-making process, it needs to find balance between pursuing its national interest, skillfully presenting and implementing the policy at the domestic and the international levels and managing the members involved in the process. Britain faces not a menu of alternative routes to far-reaching international influence, but a choice between imperfect options (Cradock 1997). UK needs to go through the three-step process identified by Christopher Layne (cited in Menon, 2010) – determining the country's vital interests, identifying threats to these and deciding how best to deploy national resources in order to protect them.