The End of Intervention? Implications of the Syria Vote for UK Foreign Policy

Chatham House Working Group
Challenges and Choices for the UK after 2015

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Meeting Summary

This is a summary of the first meeting of the Chatham House Working Group on Challenges and Choices for the UK after 2015, held at the institute on 6 May 2014. The participants discussed the longer-term implications of the UK parliamentary vote over military action in Syria, which took place in the House of Commons on 29 August 2013. This document summarizes the key points of the discussion, which was held under the Chatham House Rule.

The Working Group, comprising parliamentarians, policy makers, analysts and senior journalists, will meet eight times in the lead up to the May 2015 general election to consider the international issues that will face the next government.

To what extent did the parliamentary vote reflect the distinctive circumstances of the Syria case, or a more general shift in popular and political attitudes toward intervention?

After 13 years of war, conflict fatigue has set in amongst the public, in much of the media and in parliament. Many participants said the vote represented the deep disillusionment felt by many in the United Kingdom after the prolonged conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. It was stressed that although the Iraq War differed in many ways from the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, not least in that the latter had the backing of the United Nations, the experiences of both conflicts has played a significant role in shaping the response of parliamentarians to developments in Syria.

The objectives behind the proposed intervention in Syria were too vague. It was suggested that, when making the political case for intervention, clarity about the purpose of the action is essential. In the lead-up to the Syria vote, the government failed to show effectively how the need for military action was linked to British security interests. As a result of previous conflicts and perceived intelligence failures, there is now greater scrutiny of proposed intervention and a more rigorous focus on the benefits to the nation.

It was noted that the notions of intervention as punishment or as means of deterring future actions seem to have fallen out of favour. One participant suggested that, in the Syria case, the concern of many MPs was not just about the initial intervention but also about the risk of ‘entanglement’.

The vote was symbolic of the loss of trust in intelligence. It was pointed out that the judgments of the intelligence services no longer carry the same weight as they did prior to the Iraq War. The importance of restoring trust in the work of the intelligence services was emphasized, with one participant warning that it is dangerous to be in a situation in which the government presents parliament with judgments based on intelligence and parliament refuses to believe it.

The parliamentary process was mishandled by the government. Several participants argued that the vote was rushed in order to fit in with an American timeline. Another said a serious mistake was made in calling a vote without being certain that enough MPs – who had to be recalled for the vote – would support the motion.

One participant noted that the distinctive make-up of the parliament elected in 2010 was relevant to the outcome. The 2010 general election saw one of the largest intakes of new MPs in recent years, many of whom had only a limited background in politics prior to being elected. They bring a different perspective
to those who have served longer in the House and tend to be more independent-minded. This had made the current parliament the most unstable and rebellious in recent history. It was also pointed out however that the prime minister had taken the wrong message from the vote. The message was not ‘No under any circumstances’, but rather that parliament was not ready to endorse action at this stage.

Public opinion and polling had a big influence on the vote. One participant said that it was worrying that public opinion had played such a significant role. Another added that the poll in the run-up to the vote showed that the public was against intervention of the kind proposed by the government by a margin of 2:1, and that few polls have ever been picked up as quickly by the media.

One participant argued that conflict fatigue is not permanent and that, under the right set of circumstances, the public would be supportive of future interventions. However, another argued that intervention will be very difficult in future for three reasons:

• There is growing public scepticism toward Britain playing a proactive role in the world.

• The human costs of war are now much more prominent in the public mind.

• There is growing distrust of politicians and the public is now less willing to be led by them.

However, it was also noted that the Syria vote was not an issue on which parliamentarians had felt particular pressure from their constituencies. Another issue at the time, badger culling, had caused many more constituents to write to their MPs than Syria had, by a ratio of ten to one.

In any debate about intervention, the costs of non-intervention must also be given serious consideration. It was suggested that too little attention had been paid by parliamentarians to the implications of failing to uphold international law. The vote had followed the use of weapons of mass destruction on civilians, which contravened the Chemical Weapons Convention. If the West would not act under those circumstances, asked one of the participants, then when would it be willing to?

Another participant noted however that, at the time of the vote, the UN had not yet made its judgement on the use of chemical weapons. In response, other participants argued that there are cases in which it is necessary to take action without the backing of the UN. Another questioned what the lack of action against Syria has done to the Responsibility to Protect norm.

Is intervention in the Middle East more difficult than elsewhere? The ongoing post-intervention violence in Iraq and, more recently, Libya, has raised questions about whether interventions in Arab countries are inherently more fraught. It was pointed out that the United Kingdom has been involved in a number of generally successful military interventions in non-Arab states, for example in Kosovo and Sierra Leone. While there were costs to these actions, they were judged to be acceptable costs, unlike in the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Another participant said it is doubtful that intervention is easier in other parts of the world. The success or failure of a given intervention, it was argued, is contingent not on location or culture but on the clarity of the strategic objective and whether a political settlement is ultimately reached. When there is an attempt to change a nation’s culture or society, or if there is an absence of a political settlement, the intervention is unlikely to be a success.

Why does the United Kingdom feel a responsibility to act when others do not? It was noted that there was no clamour among emerging democracies such as India and Brazil to intervene in Syria,
and that many of these countries do not appear to share the United Kingdom’s approach to international order.

Some argued that the government considered military action in Syria in part because of a notion that the United Kingdom ought to take such actions, commensurate with its international role as a major power and permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.

Has the vote affected the way allies – particularly the United States and France – view the United Kingdom’s international role? To what extent has it changed perceptions of Britain more broadly, including in Russia and the Middle East?

The vote represented a shift in UK strategic culture that has been recognized in other parts of the world, notably in Washington. One participant argued that the vote gave the impression to the US national security establishment that the United Kingdom is no longer able to punch above its weight and therefore may no longer be the first ally in US power projection. It was argued that there is now a ‘coolness’ in transatlantic relations that has not been seen for 25 years. For some in the United States, the fact that the prime minister could be defeated on a vote of such magnitude and not stand down is extraordinary.

However, the vote was viewed differently in the US Congress, where many elected representatives felt that it merely reflected the anti-interventionist feeling held by the British public. Had a similar vote taken place in the United States, as had been planned, Congress would in all likelihood have reflected a similar sentiment.

Several participants said that the vote may have affected Russian strategic thinking, though there was disagreement about the extent to which a connection can be drawn between the West’s failure to act on Syria and Russia’s actions in Ukraine.

UK relations with France have not suffered significantly from the vote against military intervention. It was suggested that the United Kingdom’s assistance to France in its operations in Mali and the Central African Republic has helped to limit the impact that the Syria vote may have had on Franco-British relations. One participant said that, in the days following the vote, French officials had in fact expressed gratitude to the United Kingdom for voting against military action.

By contrast, this participant added, representatives he had spoken to from a number of Central European countries had expressed anxiety about the implications of the vote for their own security alongside a re-assertive Russia.

The vote may have damaged the United Kingdom’s standing with some countries in the Middle East. It was noted that the United Kingdom’s relationships with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states may weaken as a result of the vote. One participant pointed out the irony that, prior to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, many of the countries in the Middle East were advising against intervention. By contrast, in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and other countries in the region, there is now a prominent view that the West has demonstrated weakness by not intervening in Syria.

Another participant cautioned that, when the West draws red lines but does nothing when they are crossed, others will draw conclusions about the West’s willingness to match its rhetoric with action. Another raised the concern that, if the United Kingdom’s foreign policy is to ‘do nothing’, there are
implications for deterrence more generally. It was suggested that there may be consequences for how robustly NATO’s Article 5 security guarantee is viewed.

**The United Kingdom and others lost sense of what Syrians themselves wanted.** One participant observed that the question of what the Syrian people wanted was not given sufficient consideration. The Syrian National Council was very much in favour of a military response, but opinion on the ground in Syria was split.

It was argued that the character of intervention affects perceptions of it on the ground. Drone strikes, which do not expose soldiers to risk, have generated particular antipathy in the Middle East. There may in fact have been greater support within Syria for a commitment by the West to put troops on the ground, rather than the prospect of missile strikes.

**Under what circumstances could a British government now legitimately use military force without parliament’s consent? Has the vote created a constitutional convention requiring parliamentary approval before military action can be taken?**

**A precedent has been set that will be difficult to subvert, except in exceptional cases.** There was a widely held view that wars of choice – as opposed to those of necessity – will now require prior approval from parliament. It was argued that parliamentary consent will be required in nearly all circumstances, except those in which action is urgent and/or directly threatens the United Kingdom’s core security interests.

One participant drew a distinction between three types of intervention: those intended to punish, those that seek to change a regime’s behaviour and those carried out in defence of national security. In future it may be only the latter for which parliamentary approval is not required. It was argued that the vote has created an urgent need for a regularization of when, how and under what circumstances the government consults parliament on these matters.

**It must be remembered that intervention covers a broad range of options.** It was stressed that the term ‘intervention’ covers a wide spectrum. Ethical interventionism is a comparatively new concept. It originated in the early 1990s and represented the particular circumstances of that time, including the end of the Cold War and the beginning of a period of unrivalled dominance of the United States and the West in international affairs.

One participant pointed out that UN peacekeeping operations are a form of intervention, voicing regret that this is an area in which the Europeans are no longer as active as they could be. It was recommended that the United Kingdom ought to return to playing more of a role in peacekeeping.

It was noted that some ‘interventions’ happen without parliamentary debate or consent. For example, the United Kingdom has since 2012 been active in helping to secure peace and stability in Somalia, something that was not presented to parliament for prior approval.

**The role of parliament has been fundamentally changed by the vote in ways that are not yet fully clear.** It was suggested that the vote was evidence of the empowerment of parliament, which now has a louder voice and greater sway over government. One participant said, however, that the episode may in fact demonstrate that parliament is weakening, and that it is too in hock to public opinion and the media to make bold and important decisions.
A view was expressed that the role of parliament should be to advise the government and, when necessary, to bring it down through a vote of no confidence. Although the United Kingdom does not have a written constitution, the vote on Syria has turned on its head the principle that the government governs and parliament advises. Many argued that the episode presents a profound philosophical challenge: is government supposed to lead public opinion, or to follow it?