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The Feeling of Ontological Insecurity: The United Kingdom's Conflict-Seeking Foreign Policy (1998–2003)

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Abstract

By the advent of the New Labour government in 1997, under Prime Minister Tony Blair, the UK became actively involved in various international conflicts, including the war in Kosovo (1998), Afghanistan (2001), and Iraq (2003). This article seeks to explore why the New Labour government under Blair engaged in multiple wars and conflicts, often experiencing limited material gains for its efforts. By focusing on social factors such as the desire for recognition and a sense of ontological security, the article hypothesizes that New Labour's conflictual stance stemmed not solely from material considerations, but significantly from the UK government's feeling of ontological insecurity within the international society. This article argues that once a state's sense of ontological security is disrupted, whether temporally or spatially, it often pushes states to prioritize reclaiming its lost national identity over safeguarding material gains and interests, aiming to restore its ontological security. Highlighting the determination of elite policymakers to stand closely aligned with the United States, the study will use a content analysis approach to analyze three key conflicts involving the New Labour government. Ultimately, the findings suggest that a profound sense of ontological insecurity played a crucial role in driving the UK government toward conflict-oriented behaviors.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Iraq, Kosovo, Ontological (in)Security, Recognition, Status

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1. Introduction

The realist perspective on states' conflict-driven behavior lacks sufficient authenticity and falls short of explaining the UK's foreign policy under the New Labour government. From a theoretical standpoint, both offensive and defensive realists assert that the primary motivator behind a state's conflictual tendencies is the need for survival. They treat states as isolated units or "black boxes" operating independently. Within an anarchic international system, states are inherently alienated, and their distribution of capabilities pushes them to pursue internal or external balancing with powerful actors. Furthermore, major powers often employ offshore balancing to hinder rival states within their regions by containing emerging powers along their peripheries (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979; Walt, 2002). There is a clear paradox within this argument. Based on the realist perspective, it seems unlikely that the United Kingdom, as one of the world's leading military powers, would need to align itself with the United States to ensure its survival against weaker states like Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq. With its nuclear capabilities, powerful allies, military coalition through NATO, and geographically secure position as an island nation within the European Union, the UK has historically been regarded as one of the safest nations globally.

Nevertheless, this article seeks to present a theoretical shift by arguing that, beyond material necessities, the UK's military interventions and international operations have been significantly influenced by its status anxiety as a declining power. While acknowledging the realist argument concerning survival and the pursuit of relative gains, this analysis will explore how the UK government, as a state grappling with a sense of decline, has at times risked its material interests to attain ontological security. The

discussion will primarily focus on two key points. First, it examines the way in which the UK has employed military force as a means of achieving recognition and securing its ontological stability. Second, it explores how the use of force helps maintain the British historical and biographical continuity as a former empire. Consequently, this article argues that many traditional explanations surrounding the UK's conflict-driven behavior fail to adequately capture the motivations of the New Labour government. Instead, it highlights how British decision-makers relied on strong military action and a close partnership with the United States to address their broader societal anxieties as a fading imperial power.

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This article aims to address the earlier posed questions by conducting a qualitative study of three cases, specifically examining the foreign policy decisions made by British elites between 1997 and 2016. The case study is organized around three key events: the UK's involvement in conflicts in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq (1997–2009). These events serve to highlight the role of ontological insecurity in shaping the British foreign policy. The study employs a theoretical framework informed by contributions from Steele (2008), Mitzen (2006a), Murray (2019), and Ward (2017). 'Ontological security is a sense of stability that emerges in response to "the need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time —as being rather than constantly changing — in order to realize a sense of agency"' (Mitzen, 2006, p. 342). Broadly stated, Ontological security is understood as an individual's need to uphold a consistent self-identity or stable social presence via recognition by established societal structures (Innes &

Steele, 2014). When states fail to secure this sense of stability, they often experience ontological insecurity. To explore these concepts thoroughly, the article employs a process-tracing methodology to analyze the events and outcomes of the selected cases. Utilizing a content analysis method, it integrates both the research objectives and methodological considerations.

This article adopts content analysis to examine communication and speech acts. It analyzes any material containing messages within this framework. The approach is guided by three main principles: focusing on what relevant actors say, rather than how or why, narrowing the scope to themes or keywords linked to research questions, and interpreting texts with a focus on social factors as key drivers of decision-making. Utilizing the NVIVO software as a tool, the study explores the way in which the UK prioritized social factors—such as British people, British identity, and values—over material considerations. NVIVO is the premier software for qualitative data analysis. Qualitative researchers describe, evaluate and interpret social phenomena. The following graphs highlight the use of a qualitative case study approach, focusing on speech acts, interviews, private discussions, and archival records to analyze the UK government’s provocative actions within the international sphere between 1997 and 2007. The research concludes with an analysis of approximately fifty New Labour speeches conducted using NVIVO software. It identifies recurring themes and terms, including Britishness, British identity, norms, and values (Figure 2), as well as the idea of status as a great power, which were used to socially justify military interventions in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

3. Ontological Insecurity: The UK's Intervention in Kosovo (1998–1999)

Mitzen (2006a, 2006b) and Steele (2008), by introducing the concept of ontological security into the study of politics, have encouraged scholars to explain interstate relations beyond the physical security-seeking assumption in IR through the concept of ontological (in) security. Specifically, Mitzen (2006a) explains interstate conflict through actors' aspiration for ontological security by introducing self-narratives and memories to IR (Lupovici, 2012; Mitzen & Schweller, 2011; Mitzen, 2006b). In this view, countries seek ontological security as much as physical security (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2016, p. 2). Mitzen (2006a, p. 342) postulates convincingly that historical narratives can play a crucial role in providing states with a secure social identity (Zarakol, 2021). To retain the feeling of ontological security, states routinize their relationships with great powers. As Mitzen (2006a) illustrates, these actors look for ways to escape conflict and cooperatively try to reconcile interaction with security-seeking purposes in the international system. However, sometimes states follow various social actions to serve their self-identity needs and often compromise their physical existence to respond to their social demands (Steele, 2008, p. 2). For instance, the experience of shame, self-doubt, and anxiety usually dominate, as stable social relations are disrupted between states (Steele, 2005, 2008; Exodus, 2020, p. 26). This condition can easily enable actors to seek conflict and violence regardless of their power and size (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2016, p. 2; Gustafsson, 2014, p. 613).

As noted earlier, the aforementioned arguments largely challenge the realist explanation of the international system. As realists suggest, countries seek security and survival, and anarchy

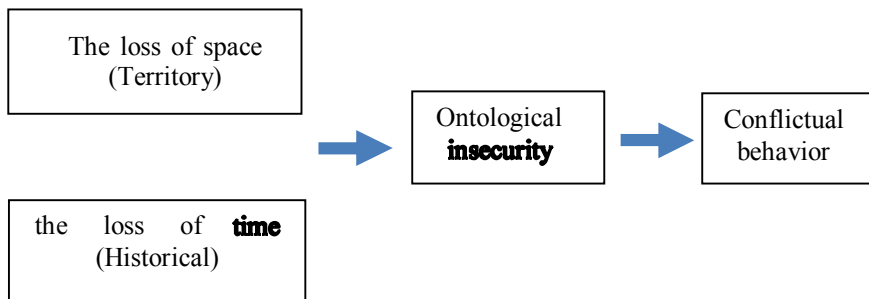
leads the weaker states to avoid conflicts (Blainey, 1973). In this perspective, small states only seek to balance and bandwagon through the established forces in the anarchic system (Rosenau, 1974, p. 273). Conversely, through a recognition lens, the demand for ontological security can even push small states to seek conflict and violence in search of status and recognition. Despite states' need for physical survival, states often seek status and recognition to secure their stable identity in the international society. Status mostly pertains to the question of 'structure' rather than 'agency,' while recognition is an act or a series of activities to achieve status and ontological security through established powers or significant 'Others' (Ringmar, 1996; Wohlforth et al., 2018, p. 5).

However, what seems to be missing from the realists' argument is that often the grassroots of conflicts behaviors require to be examined on a social basis in the international society (Chavoshi & Saeidabadi, 2021; Mitzen & Schweller, 2011). Based on this argument, middle powers would often seek conflict as soon as they experience 'social immobility' and 'misrecognition' in the international society. Conflicts are often exacerbated when states realize that when an emerging state is recognized by established forces, the recognized actors achieve a secure and legitimate social status. As Ward (2017) notes, desiring a higher status usually has two significant effects on the international society. Initially, it grants specific material advantages to states compared to other countries; Further, it offers self-esteem and domestic political legitimacy for a waning power to precede globally as who they truly aspire to become as a self-assured social being (Ward, 2017, p. 37).

Similarly, Ejodus (2020, p. 26) through a nuanced exploration in a Weberian tradition, explains Serbia and Kosovo conflicts in light

of Serbia's anxiety over the secession of Kosovo. The author attempts to shine a light on how states intensely desire to sustain their 'territories' (space) and narratives (time) as national monuments and how much the concept of 'space' has resonated with social significance to the public and the decision-maker in Serbia. In this view, physical insecurities of states or the dire experience of territorial loss for a nation can provoke feelings of ontological insecurity among other states. Ultimately, this signifies the ways in which states often risk their physical security and material gain in search of ontological security to protect their national identity and territories. As indicated in Figure 1, we should be able to understand that once states lose their territory (Ontic space) and national narratives (Biographical continuity) they often feel insecure about who they are (Mohammadpour & Saeidabadi, 2023).

Figure 1. Ontological Insecurity and the Rise of Conflicts



Source: Author

Since 1997, the British government has engaged in numerous military operations. Dixon (2007) highlights how the New Labour

government crafted a policy for armed intervention, framing actions like Kosovo as a justified Anglo-American interventionism. On the other hand, Blair (1999) believed that such actions prevented a humanitarian disaster and introduced humanitarian intervention into public discourse to legitimize the UK's active global role. These interventions influenced Britain's strategy for building international alliances, aligning closely with the United States, while promoting global good. Upon taking office, Blair aimed to reaffirm Britain's role as a middle power, branding it as both a 'pivotal power' and a 'transatlantic bridge.' Jack Straw reinforced this vision in 2002, describing Britain as a 'force for good' (Straw, 2002).

More than six months have elapsed since September 11. A great deal has been achieved... Military deployment has succeeded in Sierra Leone, Macedonia, and Afghanistan. Our development assistance has greatly impacted the reduction of poverty, especially in countries where governments are committed to improving their people's lot (Blair, 2002).

Following the eruption of the conflict, the United Kingdom formally did not declare its neutral position. Fundamentally, the UK government has defined a moral position and grounded its strategy on moral dimensions to stop ethnic cleansing in Kosovo (Edmunds et al., 2014, p. 5). By the time NATO carried out an aerial bombing campaign against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia during the Kosovo War, the UK government had played a decisive role in mobilizing a European campaign to bring down the Milošević government. The United States and the people of Yugoslavia later called this operation the 'Operation Noble Anvil' and 'Merciful Angel' operation respectively (Bonnén, 2003). Within the context of the Britain-Kosovo conflict, Blair,

while defending his position against Cook, declared that 'we want Britain to be a force for good in the international community' (Vickers, 2004, p. 11). Robin Crook, not known as a pacifist British Foreign Secretary (1979-2001), also supported a liberal internationalist tradition on the left (Vickers, 2004, p. 198).

In April 1999, British Prime Minister Tony Blair delivered a provocative speech at the Chicago Economic Club at the height of the crisis in Kosovo. This speech is known as the 'Doctrine of International Community' speech. Interestingly, Blair's blueprint rested on six defining principles of the international community and its institutions: Reforming the system of international financial regulation, providing a new push on free trade in the WTO, reforming the workings of the UN, taking a critical approach to examine NATO, having close cooperation on meeting the targets of Kyoto, and adopting a robust strategy to scrutinize into the issue of third world debt. Blair also reflected on globalization, economics, politics, and security. He gave particular attention to the criteria and the time of military intervention; he also declared that 'we are all internationalists now, whether we like it or not. He continued by demonstrating that globalization and the drastic impact of interdependence in the global world are inevitable since 'we live in a world where isolationism has ceased to have a reason to exist' (Blair, 1999).

During this time, the points mentioned above lie at the heart of the UK government. As conventional wisdom argued, the British incorporation of moral and ethical dimensions was reflected as an indispensable part of the British foreign policy. Instead of adopting a compromising approach, Britain took a pragmatic policy by centralizing an internationalized foreign policy and intending to associate the 'ethical dimensions' as the pillar. For Blair, the

moralization of British FP manifested a new emerging British aggressive foreign policy. Blair also continued by detailing that 'the whole country unite' behind any troops sent into action to support Kosovo in a nationwide broadcast. For Blair, the notion of unification behind the United Kingdom was symbolized as an act of pride and dignity (Nelsson, 2019):

To those who say NATO is striking at a sovereign nation without justification, I say it is Milosevic who scrapped Kosovo's autonomy ... Ninety per cent of its people are not Serbs. Now they have no rights, no justice, no protection; 250,000 of them, are homeless; 2,000 killed since last spring.

Ultimately, NATO forces entered Kosovo to confront Yugoslav forces on June 12, 1999 (HRW, 1998), without obtaining authorization from the UN Security Council. This intervention led to at least 488 civilian casualties among the Yugoslav population, including a significant number of Kosovar refugees (Human Rights Watch, 2000). Reports from the UK government on the conflict in Kosovo include Blair's (1999) statement asserting that:

We do so primarily to avert what would otherwise be a humanitarian disaster in Kosovo ... I say this to the British people: there is a heavy responsibility on a Government, when putting their armed forces into battle, to justify such action ... But in my judgment, the consequences of not acting are more serious still for human life and peace in the long term.

According to the analysis conducted on thirteen speeches by the British Prime Minister from 2000 to 2007, the prime minister justifies UK's intervention based on four reasons. First, as claimed, the UK was acting against Milosevic to prevent the shocking crimes that would result in ethnic cleansing, systemic rape, and mass murder. In his view, the prime minister took on a moral

obligation to bring Kosovo out of 'isolation'. This time, however, the tools of intervention were significantly different, and as Blair frequently put it: the UK was in a leading role in withdrawing the Serb military forces and paramilitary figures from Kosovo and providing humanitarian aid. The 'morale of the Yugoslav army is beginning to crack'. Based on the notion of Global Interdependence, the UK government should be acting actively, and 'success is the only exit strategy I am prepared to consider' or 'there is no alternative to continuing until we succeed', Blair (1999) declared.

Second, the UK has been using its military power to protect British values overseas and promote humanitarian activities in support of weaker states. In his speech at Brighton in 2000, Tony Blair described the UK's intervention in Sierra Leone and Kosovo as follow: 'these are the choices (that) 'we make' for Kosovo'. In his speech, Blair in addressing Milosevic confirms: 'You lost. Go. Your country and the world have suffered enough' (Blair, 2000). Third, the UK's commitment to stop the ethnic cleansing of Muslims. According to this argument, the UK government as a Christian state finds a moral commitment to defending the Muslim community. Blair (2001a) in Brighton explained that by the UK partnership attack on Milosevic, the world would witness 'the policies of ethnic cleansing where one of the greatest dictators of the last century will see justice in this century' (Blair, 2001a).

Fourth, the United Kingdom advocates an enlightened self-interest to fight for its values. According to this view, the UK's interventionism is an endeavor to engage the United Kingdom in the world rather than isolating the UK in the 21st Century. As Blair announced at the George Bush Senior Presidential Library, Crawford in 2002, a brutal dictator such as Slobodan Milosevic

kills innocent people as Nazis. In this view, the unprecedented rise of refugees will sooner or later enter the EU, and ‘we’ as he detailed, should ‘try to stop him’, otherwise, ‘the region will explode; we will strengthen his hand, he will win’ (Blair 2002a). Fifth, the UK intervened in the Kosovo conflict as a savior. Without the direct support of the UK government, several states such as Kosovo, and Afghanistan would encounter significant humanitarian issues (Blair, 2003). In a different speech, Blair brought this concept into more detail and argued that the UK intervention is part of the UK’s commitment to the international community and declared that “we do intervene, even though we are not directly threatened” ... “our self-interest was allied to the interests of other”. Then he concluded by noting that the United Kingdom had to ‘act to help them (Kosovo) and we did (Blair, 2004).

Conversely, the possibility of losing its influential position as a major global actor gradually fosters a profound sense of unease in Britain. An analysis of 13 speeches delivered by the UK Prime Minister between 2000 and 2007 reveals that the country's foreign policy narratives heavily emphasize a moral responsibility to confront oppressive regimes. While there was a notable shift towards using force to address broader concerns rather than immediate threats to the UK, it is clear that the Blair administration faced minimal direct danger from Milosevic's forces. Nonetheless, the central theme of these discussions remained rooted in the UK's perceived duty, as a leading power, to dismantle brutal regimes. Moving forward, in the Leader's speech at Brighton in 2005, Blair (2005) declared:

When we campaign for justice in Africa, that is a progressive cause. When we push for peace in Palestine, it is a progressive

cause ... when we fight behind the standard of democracy in Afghanistan or Iraq or Kosovo or Sierra Leone, for me that too is a progressive cause.

According to the analysis conducted in figure 2, although the political elites have mainly focused on the notion of protecting the UK's physical security against Milosevic, the prime minister utilized various keywords such as Muslims, ethics, refugees, democracy, progress value, justice, and force from 2000 to 2007 as well. Based on this argument, the primary purpose of the UK government is basically beyond protecting the UK's physical security. In this regard, the notion of protecting and saving the threatened communities in Kosovo under the dictatorial government is defined as the UK's moral obligation to act as a savior rather than the protector of the UK's physical security.

Figure 2. Randomized Analysis of the Frequency of the Speech Acts Utilized by the UK Elites in Kosovo (2000-2007)



Source: Author

The analysis leads to three primary and interconnected conclusions regarding the evolution of the British foreign policy. Firstly, during the tenure of the New Labour government, there was a significant and transformative shift in the United Kingdom's approach to international relations. This period marked a departure from a traditionally passive, domestically focused stance toward a more dynamic and interventionist framework that embraced a distinctly internationalist perspective. The government's actions and rhetoric suggested a greater willingness to engage proactively in global affairs, moving beyond simple reactive responses to events on the world stage. Secondly, this transformation was accompanied by an ambitious effort to redefine Britain's identity and role within the global arena. The United Kingdom positioned itself as a key player advancing a foreign policy underpinned by moral imperatives. This approach emphasized ethical responsibilities, which included advocating the defense of weaker states and actively promoting core democratic values such as human rights, social justice, and governance reform.

Through these measures, the UK sought to project itself as a principled nation committed to fostering stability and fairness, while reinforcing its relevance in a rapidly changing world. Lastly, it is apparent that both sociopolitical and material factors have concurrently influenced the British foreign policy during this era, although their impact has not been uniform. While social drivers such as public opinion, ethical considerations, and institutional ideologies played an essential role in shaping Britain's foreign policy behavior, material realities also carried considerable weight. Despite this interplay, the UK's unique geostrategic position—characterized by its geographical separation as an island nation and its possession of nuclear capabilities—ensured that it rarely faced

immediate physical threats to its national security. Instead, its interventionist strategies appear to represent a broader ambition: to reshape its historical image and reaffirm its position as a benign yet proactive force within the global order, maintaining its relevance and influence as a moral leader on the international stage.

4. After 9/11: Fourth Anglo-Afghan War in Afghanistan (2001–2014)

Although Blair played a central role in defining and implementing the UK government's foreign policy priorities, the UK ministers largely supported the responsibilities of the decision taken by the New Labour Party. As outlined in the 2003 Ministerial Code, it is explicitly stated that the Cabinet is supported by Ministerial Committees, which uphold the principle of collective responsibility. This framework ensures that decisions taken by the Cabinet are thoroughly deliberated and sufficiently authoritative, enabling the Government as a whole to assume accountability for them (Iraq Inquiry, 2016, p. 179). Therefore, according to the executive summary of the Report of the Iraq Inquiry published in 2016, Lord Wilson of Dinton as Cabinet Secretary, attended and noted 21 Ministerial discussions on Iraq from January 1998 to January 1999, in the aftermath of Operation Desert Fox in 1998 (Iraq Inquiry, 2016, p. 55).

The Cabinet Secretary, Lord Wilson, also demonstrated that the Government's response to international terrorism and the military action against the Taliban in Afghanistan had continued with more than 45 Ministerial meetings between 11 September 2001 and January 2002 (Cabinet Office, 2005). Since then, British foreign

policy-makers have publicly supported the US coalition against terrorists in the Middle East. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the UK's prime minister announced that the UK should stand 'shoulder to shoulder' with the Bush administration to defeat and bring down international terrorism (Blair, 2001b). For Blair, war and a swift operation lie somewhere above the law and international legal principles. As Blair (2001a) said to Bush:

If this is a war — and in practice, not legal terms, it is — we need war methods. Some of this will require action that some will balk at. But we are better to act now and explain and justify our actions than letting the day be put off until some further, perhaps even worse catastrophe occurs. And I believe this is a real possibility.

Blair, however, noted that “in Britain, right now, I couldn't be sure of support from the Parliament, Party, public or even some of the Cabinet” (Iraq Inquiry, 2016, p. 114). Soon later, The Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) on 18 September announced that the attacks on the US had ‘set a new benchmark for terrorist atrocity’. In this report, JIC blatantly declared that the terrorists are searching for great impacts against the West and might be able to use chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear devices (HM Government, 2018). On July 28, 2002 — Blair re-emphasized his complete support of the war on terror. In Blair's view, the war with terrorists in Afghanistan was the war of all wars and should not be compared with any other operation. He also emphasized the potential risk of terrorists acquiring and using nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons, and the dangers of inaction. Through a close analysis of 20 speeches delivered from 2001 to 2009, the UK government utilized four main arguments to discuss why the United Kingdom joined the US against the Taliban.

First, the New Labour government's commitment to tackling the so-called 'tyranny of global terrorism'. Brown in the Chancellor's speech at Brighton in 2001 declared that the terrorist aspired to bring the global financial system to its knees. For Brown, the threat of terrorists to the global financial system pursued the UK to maintain the conditions for stability and growth in a way that the UK would not succumb or surrender to terrorist threats (Brown, 2001). The same argument was also promoted by Prime Minister Blair at Sedgefield in 2004. He believed that 'Al Qaida sought the capability to use WMD in their attacks'. Although he did not bring any significant evidence, he noted that Al Qaida sought to achieve WMD as it was in their 'religious fanaticism' and 'duty' to invade the Western powers such as the UK.

According to this argument, the UK had to seize the opportunity to fight against the 'the global threat to our security...so, Blair emphasized that the UK must act to eliminate it (Taliban). For the prime minister, the UK was well-prepared to protect and defend the security of the people of his country against terrorists (Blair, 2005). Second, the New Labor government found the possibility of invading Afghanistan as an opportunity to 'shine through what we (British) do in Afghanistan' Blair declared. Third, the UK indoctrinated the concept of an attack on the United States as an attack on the dignity of the Western power rather than on Western powers' material possessions; the possibility of such an invasion by the Western powers seemed to be shameful and described as social stigmatization. In Blair's view in his notes at the George Bush Senior Presidential Library, Blair (2002b) took the issue beyond sole material factors and argued that "what erupted on the streets of New York on September 11 was not an attack on America alone. It was an attack on us all".

For Blair, although the 9/11 catastrophe was an attack on people and buildings, this tragedy was an attempt to 'provoke, through terror, such chaos that it engulfed our way of life, the very values we hold dear'. Further, the prime minister underlined that the attack was not an ignorable tragedy. He described the depth of tragedy in detail and demonstrated that the invasion was conducted by groups of terrorists with poor capacities against a "nation of 27 million, thousands of miles from America ... in the heart of the world's most powerful nation" (Blair, 2002b). Fourth, the UK-US coalition against Afghanistan was also attempting to normalize a new discursive practice by demonstrating that the US-UK coalition against the Taliban could bring sustainable education to children and women. In his lecture at Labour's local government, Blair demonstrated that after the UK invasion of Afghanistan, more than three million children including boys and girls could go back to school again (Blair, 2003). In another speech, he underscored that as a result of the US-UK invasion, around 6 million people could vote freely to decide for their future (Blair, 2003). In addition, a few years later, while referring to the UK intervention in Afghanistan in more than four interviews and speeches, Blair and Brown frequently utilized different discourses to describe the situation in Afghanistan.

In 2001, debates surrounding the UK's invasion of Afghanistan underscored its broader social implications, with proponents arguing that the military action was designed to counter terrorism and restore peace. Discussions often invoked themes such as security, political reconciliation, economic reconstruction, peace, and stability to articulate the mission's goals. There was also a strong emphasis on preventing terrorism from affecting the British society. During this period, UK's elites portrayed their policies as a delicate balance between addressing ontological insecurity and

ensuring physical security. While traditional International Relations (IR) theory primarily focuses on states pursuing physical security, the New Labour government expanded its foreign policy to address issues beyond material concerns. Rather than solely countering external threats, the intervention in Afghanistan was positioned as a means to alleviate domestic social unease. From an ideational perspective, this approach reflected an aspiration to reaffirm the UK's identity and significance as an independent social entity.

5. The War in Iraq: Desire for Ontological Security, Recognition, and Status

The United Kingdom entered a full-scale occupation of a sovereign state – Iraq for the first time since the end of the world wars in 2003. In Blair's view, the decision to stand tightly close to the US was of strategic significance and a sign of solidarity with the UK's major ally as well as being in the United Kingdom's long-term national interests and security. On September 12, 2002, Blair congratulated Bush on a speech making the case for an invasion of Iraq and stated that "It was a brilliant speech". Blair (2002c) sent an emotional response and stated "it puts us on exactly the right strategy to get the job done ... the reception has been very positive with everyone now challenged to come up to the mark. Well done".

The Iraq Inquiry, published in 2016, revealed that many crucial decisions concerning the prelude to the Iraq conflict were made either in one-on-one discussions between Tony Blair and the relevant Secretary of State, or during meetings involving Blair, Jack Straw, and Geoffrey Hoon. These gatherings also included officials from No. 10 Downing Street, John Scarlett (then Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee), Sir Richard

Dearlove, and Admiral Boyce in the UK. The report highlights that while some of these meetings were documented in formal minutes, others were not recorded at all (Iraq Inquiry, 2016, p. 56). Beyond the heated discussions about Britain's role in the Iraq war, the British government's eagerness for invasion and its moral positioning became evident. This was exemplified by their deliberate sidestepping of international legal frameworks, while actively seeking alternative means to justify the invasion through new United Nations resolutions. Despite the absence of any formal decision on an invasion by the US administration at that time, Tony Blair unequivocally assured President Bush that the UK would play a significant military role if war became inevitable (Iraq Inquiry, 2016, p. 17). Furthermore, Secretary Colin Powell testified during the inquiry that Blair had been working diligently to push for a collaborative approach with the US. He aimed to establish a broad coalition and lay out a framework to steer US actions against Iraq in a specific direction (Iraq Inquiry, 2016, p. 3).

On January 23, 2003, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw and Secretary Colin L. Powell had a joint interview in Washington on Iraq. Following a question posed by a reporter on 'what if (Iraq) did not disarm, if they did not meet the terms of 1441', Straw stated that "if they did not disarm, if they did not meet the terms of 1441, then they were subject to serious consequences". In reference to resolution 1441 (U.S. Department of State, 2003), Straw declared that "if Iraq fails to comply, serious consequences will follow ... And everybody knew, too, that serious consequences mean only one thing: force", Straw said. As it turned out, the British government faithfully committed to the use of aggression. In this regard, Straw confidently declared that "President Chirac is on record, himself, as accepting that force may have to be used to

enforce the will of the United Nations” (U.S. Department of State, 2003). Straw, in response to the question ‘What do you both believe are the risks of going to war against Iraq without the full approval of the UN?’ replied: “We've currently got the full approval of the United Nations”. He noted that “we've made it clear to the United Kingdom Government that we would much prefer a second resolution”. And then, he discussed the various critical issues that justified the UK's preparation for war.

Aldrich (2005, pp. 82-83) in his paper titled, *Whitehall and the Iraq War: The UK's Four Intelligence Enquiries* referred to the Hutton inquiry and its disclosure of British political comments on the invasion. As indicated, several emails unearthed that many figures around Blair realized that the evidence of Iraqi WMD was rather unreliable and thin. In this period, Hutton, Member of Parliament (MP) for Barrow and Furness, secured an email written by Jonathan Powell, Blair's chief of staff, to the chair of the JIC, John Scarlett underscoring the fact that Iraq needs to be more and more investigated before any invasions. On the eve of the publication of the September 2002 dossier, Powell indicated that the document supporting the invasion of Iraq and the imminence of any threat from Saddam demonstrated ‘nothing’. He continued by arguing that “if I was Saddam I would take a party of Western journalists to the Ibn Sina factory or one of the others pictured in the document to demonstrate there is nothing there. How do we close off that avenue to him in advance?” In this regard, as noted in *Iraq Inquiry* (2016, pp. 39-40), Sir Richard Dearlove asserted: “I don't think the Prime Minister ever accepted the link between Iraq and terrorism. I think it would be fair to say that the Prime Minister was very worried about the possible conjunction of terrorism and WMD”.

Accordingly, the possibility of WMD in Iraq and the direct threat by the Iraqi regime to the UK was practically not feasible and widely refuted. In this context, the Prime Minister acted as one of the primary forces to push the UK government to full-scale war. Lord Turnbull, Cabinet Secretary from 2002 to 2005, described Tony Blair's characteristic way of working with his Cabinet colleagues as "I like to move fast. I don't want to spend a lot of time on conflict resolution" (BBC News, 2011). What seems to be significant is that between early 2002 and the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, Tony Blair received several warnings about the need for an analysis of whether the benefits of military action outweighed the risk of a protracted and costly nation-building exercise. According to the Iraq inquiry (2016), in the letter from Mr. Hoon's Private Office to Sir David Manning on 28 February 2003, it was stated that it was 'absolutely clear' that the US expected the UK to take leadership of the South East sector in Iraq. However, what seemed to be clear was that the UK government was "currently at risk of taking on a very substantial commitment that we will have great difficulty in sustaining beyond the immediate conclusion of conflict" (Iraq inquiry, 2016).

Meanwhile, Blair's Foreign Policy Adviser, declared to President Bush that it would be impossible for the UK government to take part in any action against Iraq without the UN support (Iraq Inquiry, 2016, p. 16). However, it was on 17 March that the Parliament confirmed the decision, and the next day the United Kingdom embraced the US-led invasion of Iraq and authorized the use of force when the UK and US armies invaded Iraq in 2003. At this time, the nuclear Iraq myth was utilized as a particularly potent ideological force for military mobilization during the wars in Afghanistan and stigmatized Iraq as an existential threat to

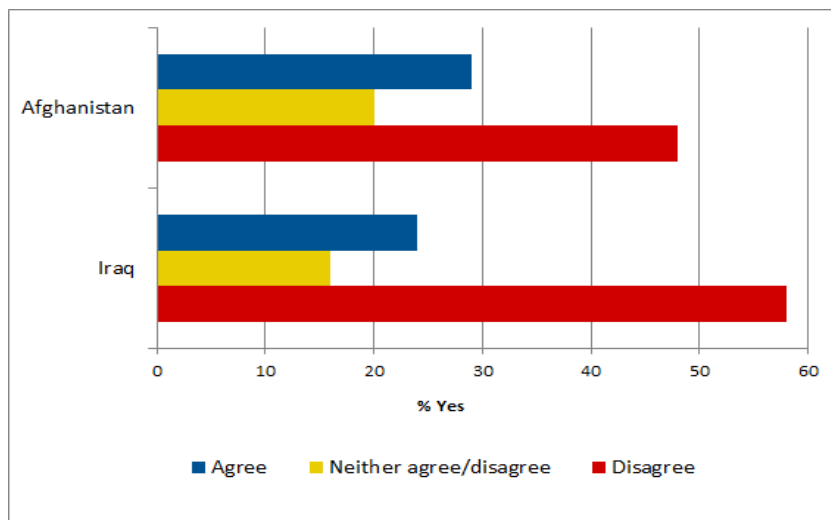
international peace and security. Nevertheless, in a few years, two major results were attained. First, the coalition could easily remove a brutal regime that defied the United Nations peace and security resolution and posed serious threats to international peace and security. Second, in less than five years, thousands of people died, many families were left bereaved and many individuals were wounded physically and psychologically. Since then, the inquiries concerning the use of force and military interventions against sovereign states provoked profound controversies over states' rights and responsibilities in the international society.

Following the UK-US coalition's intervention against the Iraqi regime, the situation grew increasingly complex for both powers within the international community, resulting in three key outcomes. First, it became apparent that the accusations regarding Saddam Hussein's chemical, biological, and WMD capabilities were unfounded. Leaders had placed unwarranted trust in flawed intelligence reports, revealing their naivety and the anxiety of political elites' eager to present themselves as part of a civilized state prior to the Afghanistan conflict. Second, the US-UK coalition failed to mobilize widespread international support against Iraq. A full-scale war was launched in March 2003 without obtaining a legitimizing resolution from the UN Security Council. The UK government's attempts to secure a second resolution were met with staunch opposition from France, Germany, and Russia, who argued that the inspection process was sufficient and insisted that both the US and UK adhere to the expectations of the global community. Lastly, public support for military actions targeting so-called 'rogue states' fell short in establishing the political legitimacy of these missions, improving their effectiveness, or aiding policymakers in justifying extensive defense expenditures (LES, 2015). Peter Ricketts, the Foreign Office's Political Director,

while advising Jack Straw to brief Tony Blair, noted concerns about convincing public opinion of an imminent threat from Iraq, suggesting that the matter required an open discussion between the Prime Minister and the US President (Prados & Ames, 2010).

The survey conducted by the British Social Attitudes (BSA) with over 3,000 participants in 2011 asserted that the UK's decision to participate in wars in the Middle East was irrational. In this survey, participants were randomly requested to answer series of questions on both Iraq and Afghanistan missions. As the survey indicates about 58% disagreed with UK's involvement in the Iraq mission, and 48% disagreed with the UK's invasion of Afghanistan (LSE, 2015). Accordingly, although the survey was conducted after the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, a significant number of applicants held opposing views on the UK's invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. Approximately 2% of the respondents had chosen the 'neither agree/ disagree' item and remain neutral in total.

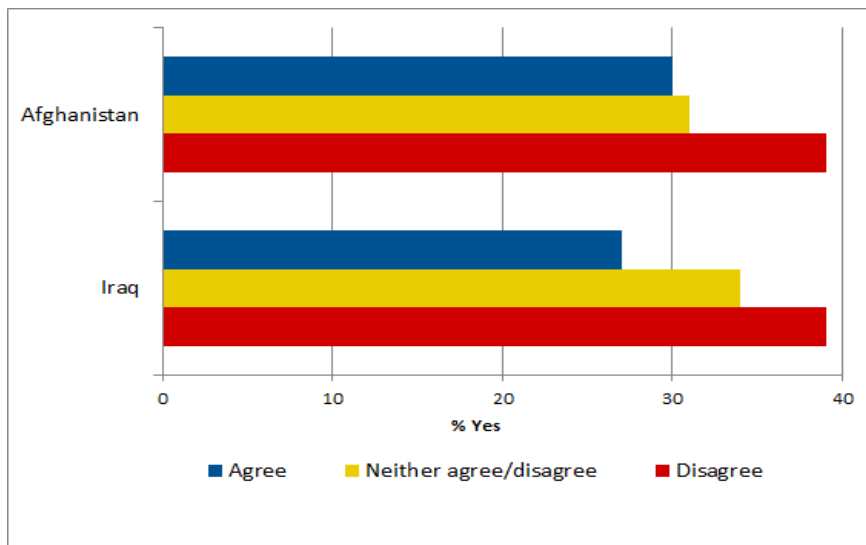
Figure 3. Public Approval of the Iraq and Afghanistan Missions (LSE, 2015)



Source: Strong, 2015

As demonstrated in Figure 3, the British public displays a complex and multifaceted perspective regarding the military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Survey data reveals that approximately 40% of respondents regarded the United Kingdom's involvement in Afghanistan as successful, while approval for the U.S. invasion of Iraq remained below 30%. Interestingly, a considerable segment of the population, accounting for 35%, maintained a neutral position by selecting 'neither agree nor disagree'. Additionally, although more than one-third of respondents adopted a neutral stance, nearly 30% of the population continued to perceive the military interventions in both Afghanistan and Iraq as successful endeavors.

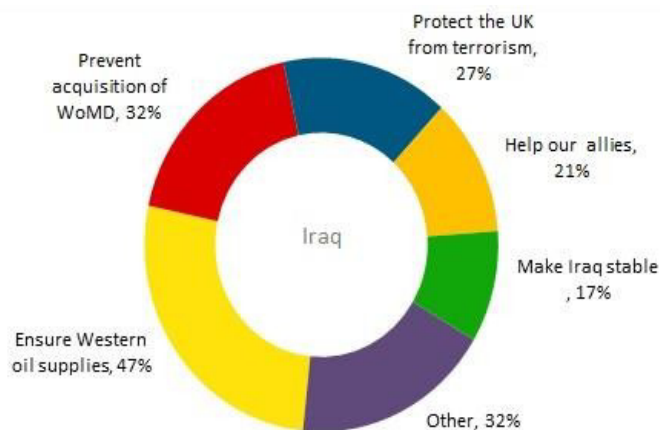
Figure 4. Public Perceptions of the Success of the Missions (LSE, 2015)



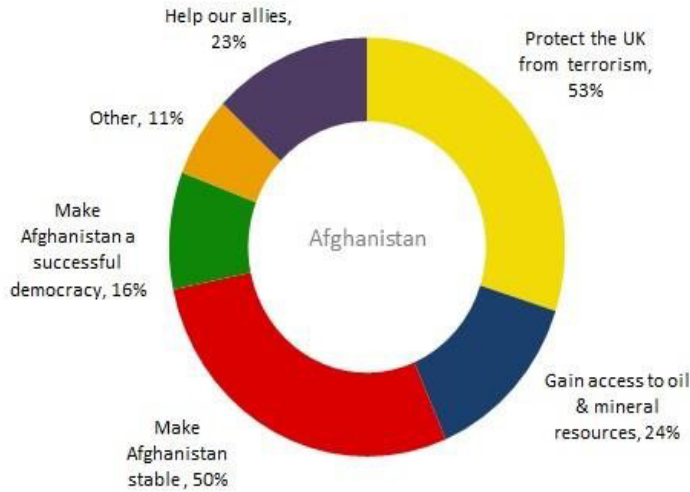
Source: Strong, 2015

A close look at Figure 4 reveals that the public holds a cynical standing, particularly about the Iraq mission. The participant's view is largely in contrast with official figures' claims on preventing the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction, democratization, and preventing terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan. In this survey, only 27% of the respondents believed that the mission to the Middle East helped protect the UK from terrorism, while just 17% continued to believe the same about the war in Iraq. The UK government's broader strategy of adopting a moralizing foreign policy, which aimed at promoting democracy, proved largely unsuccessful. Additionally, approximately 400,000 people protested in 2002 against the American-led invasion of Iraq. Shortly after, more than one million discontented citizens demonstrated against the war in Iraq. This was followed by a large march in front of the New Labour conference in Manchester, opposing the United Kingdom's occupation of Iraq (Faucher-King & Le Galès, 2010, p. 123).

Figure 5. Public Perceptions of the Purposes of the Iraq and Afghanistan Missions (LSE, 2015)



The Feeling of Ontological Insecurity:
The United Kingdom's Conflict-Seeking Foreign Policy (1998-2003)



Source: Strong, 2015

Economically, the consequences are both disheartening and thought-provoking as indicated in figure 6. During the war in Afghanistan, UK's leaders underscored the importance of national security against the alleged rogue states like Iraq and Afghanistan. However, many failed to provide a clear and comprehensive view of the UK's role in Iraq. The initial operations in Afghanistan during 2001 and 2002 cost between £300-400 million. Similarly, from 2005/06 to 2009/10, military expenditures saw an average annual increase of 132%. Specifically, Operation Toral, the UK's effort as part of NATO's Resolute Support Mission, incurred an average yearly cost of £90 million (Commons Library, 2021). A UK defense expenditure report published by the House of Commons Library in April 2022 revealed that in the past 15 years, military operations cost the United Kingdom approximately £5 billion (2021/22 prices). According to the report, military spending grew significantly after 2001, reaching a historic peak since 9/11.

The data reveals that expenditure was at its highest during operations in Afghanistan in 2009/10, with overall defense spending peaking at £46.5 billion in real terms during that same period.

Figure 6 .Annual Audited Cost of Military Operations in the UK Death Rate



Source: Commons Library, 2021

British soldiers were 12% more likely to have been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan than American soldiers during the ‘war on terror’ (Sabbagh, 2020). According to the research briefing on Afghanistan statistics concerning UK’s deaths, casualties, mission costs, and refugees (2021), 457 deaths of UK armed forces

personnel were reported. However, the number of fatalities peaked between 2009 and 2010; a total of 457 personnel died whilst on deployment to Afghanistan, and 405 died because of hostile action in Afghanistan. Additionally, there were a total of 7,807 field hospital admissions, although most admissions were related to disease or a non-battle injury and there were 7,477 medical air evacuations during the 12-year operation. As a consequence, in the initial months of the war in 2001, approximately 8,918 applicants submitted asylum applications to the UK. In the following year, 63,000 applications were also submitted for asylum in the UK from Afghanistan and 30,600 asylum applications from Afghans were successful in the initial decision (Kirk-Wade et al., 2024).

6. The New Labour: War of Prestige or War of Survival?

The arguments presented thus far can be summarized as follows: Firstly, the UK and US military actions against the alleged 'rogue states' and 'dictators'—including operations in Kosovo (1999), Sierra Leone (2000-2002), Afghanistan (2001), and Iraq (2003)—were executed without legal authorization from the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). This lack of legal and international legitimacy has raised significant doubts about the UK's commitment to fostering peace and security within the global community. Secondly, the British civil society has exhibited diminishing enthusiasm for involvement in international conflicts. Consequently, the UK government has misled its citizens about the need to address threats posed by 'rogue states' and autocratic leaders under the pretext of ensuring peace and security for Britain, while lacking solid domestic support. Lastly, the UK's engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan resulted in disproportionately high military

and economic costs. The broader strategy of the New Labour government to enhance both international peace and the UK's national security now faces serious scrutiny. By compromising material interests, Britain risks losing trust and credibility as a dependable partner and leader on both international and domestic fronts, significantly undermining its social capital.

As mentioned, the New Labor's foreign policy was exemplified by a series of interventions in Kosovo (1999), Afghanistan (2001), and Iraq in 2003. The UK government found the revival of its social identity based on confrontation with other powers. The existence of an inferior being shaped the master and slave relationship. In this vein, Tony Blair mostly took a high moral tone and strived to convince the observers to act aggressively through a moral position as a major power. In his Chicago speech of 1999, bolstered by the prominent role, he formulated his so-called 'doctrine of the international community'. For instance, Blair, in defining his role as a leader, attempted to construct a dichotomy of self and other. In this dichotomy, he usually put the inferior actor on the wrong side of history and attempted to represent the UK and the US as the liberating parties. For instance, in light of the war in Kosovo and NATO's intervention, Robin Cook, the Labour government's Foreign Secretary told the *New Statesman* interview on 3 May 1999: 'I am robust that we are right to be fighting this evil'. For Blair, the military confrontation with Slobodan Milošević was largely grounded on a moral basis.

One of the major discussions on why the UK government was involved in several conflicts and wars resides in how the UK government defined itself. During this time, the UK government tried to define a moral position for itself as a liberating actor among the inferior actors. For Britain, the sense of rightfulness and

commitment to bringing global peace and security has one significance, which is being a world power. In the case of UK's intervention in Kosovo, as the war proceeded, the international community increased its pressure on Milosevic to terminate the violence against Kosovo and Albanians, and allow an international intervention to end the war. Knowing that the Kosovo crisis was an internal issue, Milosevic as the political leader, instead managed a referendum in April 1998 in which 94.3% of Serbian voters voted against 'foreign meddling' at that time (Ejdus, 2020. p. 84). Theoretically speaking, the dichotomy of the self (master) and the other (slave) was signified as the source of ontological security for the UK government. This dichotomy and the desire for recognition and status did not simply evaporate. However, during the following weeks of the Kosovo intervention, both Clinton and Blair, after intense conversations agreed to put intensive military pressure on Milosevic.

Interestingly, what seemed to be quite significant is that even Daddow (2009) put more weight on the non-material forces such as security and survival, and used religion and Orthodox interpretations as his motivation to explain the UK foreign policy. Since 2000, Blair took a similar role and never backed away from his moral position as a so-called strong leader. On April 10, 2002 – House of Commons, Blair (2002a) said; "Saddam Hussein's regime is despicable, he is developing weapons of mass destruction, and we cannot leave him doing so unchecked". In a few months, on October 2, 2002b, in a speech at the Labour Party Conference, he claimed: "Sometimes, and in particular dealing with a dictator, the only chance of peace is a readiness for war". Interestingly, Blair in 2016, after the end of the Iraq war emphasized that "In the Iraq war; we set the Iraqi people free and secured them from the 'evil'

of Saddam Hussein, but instead they had become victims of sectarian violence” (Blair, 2016).

Achieving a great power status was indispensable for the UK. The UK desperately attempted to find a new voice and became a well-recognized state. For this to happen, the decision-makers took on various measures to not only increase their sphere of influence, but to act militarily to mitigate their status anxiety as a middle power state. This argument is surely in contrast with both defensive and offensive realists who put more weight on the material aspect of the international system and completely forget states’ need for recognition and ontological security. What seems to be significant is that the British thirst for recognition and ontological security worked as a driving force to act as a liberating and moral voice in the international society to achieve thick recognition. Blair hardly calculated the UK’s physical security in its interventions and openly exemplified his incentive for conflict to achieve something more than simply physical security. On September 5, 2003 – during his Interview with the *New York Times* Blair (2003, in *Smithsonian Magazine*, 2007) declared: “They ask why we don't get rid of Mugabe, why not the Burmese lot? Yes, let's get rid of them all. I don't because I can't, but when you can you should”.

However, on September 28, 2004 – during his speech at the Labour Party, when he was asked about his decision to declare war on Saddam Hussein and his wrong allegation about his nuclear and chemical weapons programs he stated:

Do I know I'm right? Judgments aren't the same as facts. Instinct is not science. I'm like any other human being, as fallible and as capable of being wrong. I only know what I believe. The evidence about Saddam having actual biological and chemical weapons, as opposed to the capability to develop them, has turned out to be wrong (Blair, 2004).

In explaining the UK's role in the invasion of Iraq, he also backed away from his moral position and put more weight on the protection of the UK's physical security. For instance, Blair said, "I did it because I thought it was right, the possibility of WMDs falling into the hands of terrorist groups". Then he moved on by noting an important issue: "a real and present danger to Britain and its national security, should be that the issue of Iraq/WMD has to be addressed" (Blair, 2016). However, as explained earlier, this argument is not applicable for four main reasons. From a realist perspective, the UK is a nuclear power with significant military capacity. Second, the United Kingdom is located in a far-reach area and it takes millions of miles to arrange a full-scale war against the UK. Third, as the surveys indicated the British civil society had a low interest to participate in a war in Iraq. Fourth, the international society had shown the least interest in supporting a new war in the Middle East. In this vein, Blair (2004) argued that the "repressive states are developing weapons could destroy on a massive scale". His Speech to British forces at RAF in 2004 led to more contradictions, as Blair claimed that it was the UK's moral commitment to act against satanic regimes and to act as an internationalist 'good for force' in Iraq. In his memoir in 2010, Blair wrote:

I knew, in the final analysis, I would be with the US because it was right morally and strategically. But we should make a last-ditch attempt at a peaceful solution. First to make the moral case for removing Saddam... Second, to try one more time to reunite the international community behind a clear base for action in the event of a continuing breach (Iraq Inquiry, 2016).

According to this view, the UK government had two major commitments as an internationally recognized state. First, to act as

a ‘force for good’ to not only transform the image of the UK Prime Minister, but to change public perceptions of the role of Britain alongside the US on the world scene (Pew Research Center, 2004). As prime minister, Blair had instigated a range of policies such as increasing military expenditure, promoting defense reforms, and finalizing lucrative arms deals with the US. Second, to act as a moralizing actor with the ‘responsibility to protect’: The question of why Britain jeopardized its material interests in the international society can be discussed by addressing two main points: First, the UK government acted provocatively to regain a sense of self as an independent social identity, prioritizing ontological security over its democratic commitments and international responsibilities. Second, it sought recognition from the US as its significant other, consistent with the Hegelian idea that states seek acknowledgment primarily from specific actors. This pursuit of ontological security often leads states to risk their material interests.

7. Conclusion

With the advent of the New Labour government in 1997, the United Kingdom, positioned as a middle power within Europe, assumed an active role in shaping responses to geopolitical conflicts in both the Middle East and Southeastern Europe. In this regard, this article delved into the United Kingdom's provocative strategies and examined them through two main perspectives. The first key point centers on historical evidence that demonstrates the UK's consistent alignment with the United States as a means of preserving and enhancing its global status. The second focuses on the country's direct involvement in high-profile conflicts such as those in Kosovo (1999), Afghanistan (2001), and Iraq (2003), which, it argued, were aimed at solidifying its international

standing. Broadly speaking, this article contended that Britain developed an acute awareness of its status on the international stage, leading to a profound sense of status anxiety throughout this period. This form of insecurity manifested most prominently during its participation in military interventions between 1997 and 2007. The article posited that when nation-states perceive threats to their core identity and sense of stability, they are frequently willing to compromise immediate material interests in order to restore or reaffirm their national and international image. While developing a theoretical framework on the concept of ontological insecurity and states' conflict-seeking behavior, this paper has developed a social explanation to illustrate states' behavior in securing their own sense of ontological security in both space and time. It argued that the UK's interventions under New Labour's leadership in Kosovo (1999), Afghanistan (2001), and Iraq (2003) were ultimately driven by deeply ingrained feelings of ontological insecurity. These military actions can be understood not only through practical policy goals, such as counter-terrorism or democratization, but also as attempts by Britain to reclaim and reinforce its image as a significant and influential global power in the international society, while participating or triggering international conflicts under the New Labour government.

Declaration of the Use of AI and AI Assisted Technologies

This article was not authored by artificial intelligence.

Conflict of Interests and Funding

The author certifies that he has NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureaus; membership, employment,

consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs affecting author's objectivity) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Ethical Considerations Statement

The author avoided data fabrication, falsification, plagiarism, double publication/submission and any form of misconduct against publication ethics. The Author has properly cited all sources of ideas, words, and materials including pictures, charts, tables and statistics used in their paper.

Data Availability Statement

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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