A Critical Thinking Framework for Tackling Inequality through Foreign Policies

Henry Rimmer

INTRODUCTION

This article attempts to constructively challenge those tasked with designing and implementing foreign policies, specifically policies combatting inequality, including freeing people from oppression.

My motivation is to support these professionals by proposing the adoption of a framework to help test the rigor of their plans. My motivation stems from my thesis that since 2003, the West has, on several occasions, implemented inequality-tackling policies that have inadvertently altered political and social structures in ways that have contributed to an increase in human suffering and greater inequality, not decreased it.

These are my opinions only, and do not represent the views of any organizations I have links to. Although based on first-hand experience assisting the delivery of U.K. foreign policy internationally, I recognize that my argument would benefit from further research and testing, and

Henry Rimmer *is an intelligence and analytical tradecraft expert. Specializing in measuring the effect of policy interventions and intelligence analysis and assessment techniques, he delivers consultancy, training and mentoring worldwide. He has rich and current experience of working in national security and counterterrorism environments in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Henry draws on his practical experience and critical thinking expertise to help organizations untangle complex programmatic situations and identify sensible and benefit-realizing ways forward. Henry is a co-founder of Effectology (www.effectology.co.uk) and the founder of Atlas Analytics (www.atlas-analytics.co.uk).*

may contain untested assumptions. I present it as-is in order to support Part Two of this article.

In Part One, I include what I assess to be examples of where inequality has been used as a foreign policy driver, and has inadvertently caused greater suffering: in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria since 2003. I define policy drivers as the broad aims, targets or statements used by government or non-government organisations to shape actions in order to achieve strategic outcomes.

In Part Two, I offer a framework presented as six statements that a policymaker or implementer can self-test against, with suggested activities to be undertaken to support that testing. My intent with the framework is to introduce further rigor and critical thinking specific to foreign policy planning, and to recommend that the framework is adopted by governments in order to establish a consistent approach to the topic using a common methodology. The framework is designed to reduce the risk of future situations similar to those I use as examples in Part One from occurring again.

I have tested the framework with three experts: a retired U.S. Army officer, a U.K.-based academic, and a former British diplomat. Their comments on the validity of the framework are included and supplemented with their own personal experience.

Throughout the article, the term "intervention" is used in the behavioral change context, where it might be defined as an action designed to alter the behavior of one or more physical or psychological systems.[1]

The overall objectives of this article are to encourage debate that contributes to ensuring that before the West's inequality-tackling policies leave the planning tables, they are the best they can be. If there is interest in my proposal among the readership of this publication, then I would take a lead role in enabling interested parties to further discuss the topic and testing the framework (or agreeing to another) in 2021.

PART ONE: INEQUALITY AS A FOREIGN POLICY DRIVER

At both societal and individual levels, I have no doubt that inequality is a root cause of misery and frustration, and fuel for protest and dissent. For governments working on strategic decision-making issues, combating inequality and oppression are common drivers for designing foreign policy interventions, albeit in conjunction with national security drivers like counterterrorism or countering hostile states.

However, I judge a country may be less vocal about inequality within the borders of an economic partner, for example, as seen in the U.K.-Saudi

Arabia relationship, from which the United Kingdom benefits from the sale of its weapons to Saudi Arabia. There appears to be a condition placed upon inequality mitigation efforts—they are less desirable when actions by the policy owner would threaten its sovereign, regional or global interests. This is worthy of further investigation, but falls outside the scope of this article.

Once drivers have been used to shape an inequality-tackling policy, and the policy is ready to be applied, official messaging from leaders is an essential component in communicating the rationale behind the policy and the need for its success. For example, freeing Iraqis from oppression was a recurrent theme used by U.S. President George W. Bush to shape the international political environment before the start of the 2003 Iraq War, to motivate U.S. Forces on the day the conflict began in earnest, and thereafter.[2] Similarly, in his 2011 speech on American diplomacy in the Middle East and North Africa, President Barack Obama wove freedom and equality throughout. He included in statements such as, "Societies held together by fear and repression may offer the illusion of stability for a time, but they are built upon fault lines that will eventually tear asunder," and, "The United States supports a set of universal rights. And these rights include free speech, the freedom of peaceful assembly, the freedom of religion, equality for men and women under the rule of law, and the right to choose your own leaders– whether you live in Baghdad or Damascus, Sanaa or Tehran."[3] Official messaging is also used to reaffirm the drivers of inequality-tackling policies once they are completed. In 2012, at the end of NATO's operation to oust Libyan leader Muammar al-Qadhafi, the U.K.'s Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, praised the U.K. servicemen and women as "guardians of freedom" and said that because of their actions, "the Libyan people have hope for their future."[4]

These messages and many others from Western leaders indicate that action against oppression, and the achievement of freedom for the oppressed, can only be a 'good thing' and the 'right thing' to do. I agree, but only as long as our motivations are genuine and our plans are robust and realistic.

I assess that in the years since these examples took place, where a dictator or proscribed group– defined as one that is banned under national or international law– has been removed from power, the West has altered political and social structures in those countries in ways that have inadvertently contributed to an increase in human suffering and greater inequality. The West's hand in removing leaders– albeit dictators– in Iraq and Libya contributed to power vacuums that were quickly filled by a patchwork of hostile entities vying for dominance. The most successful of these is Islamic

State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which has been prolific in both countries and also remains a persistent threat in Libya in 2020, according to the Strategic Studies Institute at the United States Army War College.[5] Old inequalities under the leadership of Hussein and Qadhafi may have ended, but they were swiftly replaced with new ones which are just as arbitrary, unjust, and detrimental to the wider population—as seen in ISIL's brutal version of *Shari'a* law.

Furthermore, the United Kingdom's well-intentioned planned actions, and following inaction, against the Bashar al Assad regime in Syria have contributed to greater Russian military and Iranian political footprints in the Mediterranean region, making it harder for the West to achieve its foreign policy goals.[6] (Another key contributing factor in this development is that President Obama did not secure support for military action against Assad following the use of chemical weapons).[7] The consensus would surely be that such an outcome of inequality-tackling policies—such as ousting despotic leadership—was a failure if it has led to a decay in the quality of life of those people it was designed to help.

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To be clear, I am not seeking to find fault in foreign policy decisions to date or to degrade or diminish the hard work that has been done and sacrifices that have been made by so many, but I do want to attempt to reduce the risk of future interventions that inadvertently increase human suffering for the majority. I enjoy the privileged position of hindsight, which allows me to make judgments retrospectively, and places me at a considerable advantage over those who were required to make "hot decisions" at the time, in the face of a multitude of complex and contradictory forces (although regime change is not usually a "hot decision" and therefore the framework in Part Two could and should be applied in those instances). In all cases, I assume good faith on those actors who made decisions and executed them.

I am not presenting detailed evidence to support the arguments above, but instead assume that there is a reasonable consensus to be reached concerning the inherent difficulty and complexity of delivering successful inequality-tackling policies, as suggested by some recent examples which have dominated modern geopolitical affairs. To address this complexity in

a positive way, I offer the following framework, derived from the application of disciplined critical thinking, as an aid to policy makers:

PART TWO: CRITICAL THINKING FRAMEWORK FOR POLICY MAKERS

I want to help us all to look ahead and support our policymakers and implementers into channeling our assets, resources and reputations into doing the "best thing." The "best thing" is the one that delivers the policy intent most effectively, while minimizing the impact of any unintended consequences.

To help do this, I have prepared a short framework presented as six statements that a policymaker or implementer can self-test against, including suggested activities to be undertaken to support that testing. I have engaged three experts to share their own points of view, all with first-hand experience of working with inequality-tackling policies. Again, their inclusion here is not confirmation that they agree with my opinions in Part One of the article and their inputs should be regarded as being limited to the statements that they are included under.

This framework has been built on a combination of my own first-hand experience of intervention design and delivery, and also the critical thinking, intelligence analysis and assessment processes I have learned through working for the U.K. and U.S. governments. I am confident that in any absence of a similar policy checklist, these six statements can assist any government by encouraging it to scrutinize its intended policy plans, endeavor to provide unbiased evidence for each stage, and contribute to producing a rational audit trail to support its decision of whether to proceed or not with the proposed intervention. These six statements are:

1. "We understand the operating environment and we are not projecting our own expectations of equality."

2. "We are offering support that has been genuinely requested and can lead to realistic and sustainable change."

3. "The policy proposal is transparent and testable."

4. "Our plan is logical and coherent."

5. "We can measure the effect of our interventions."

6. "We have considered the 'do nothing' option."

In order to test the framework, I presented my thesis and defense for it (as seen in Part One) to the three experts surveyed, and offered the six-statement framework as a potential solution to reducing the risk of

similar scenarios occurring in the future. The respondents provided written feedback on each of the six statements, which I have edited to better suit the style of this publication without losing their meaning. The Iraq conflict (2003-2011) is a frequent theme in their replies; that is their choice. The experts are:

Lt. Colonel Nate Sassaman, USA (Ret.): a 1985 West Point graduate, LTC (R) Sassaman led over 1,000 soldiers as a Combined Arms Infantry Battalion Commander in the heart of the Sunni Triangle in Iraq from 2003-2004.

Camille Corti-Georgiou: a U.K.-based academic with a degree in Politics. Camille has worked alongside the U.K. Data Service and European Work and Employment Research Centre, and has contributed to publications such as Manchester's Human Development Report.

Mark Morgan, MBE: a former British diplomat who served in Iraq during the Iraq War (2003-2011) and in Afghanistan during the Afghanistan War (2005-), in addition to other postings overseas, including Kuwait immediately after the First Gulf War.

FRAMEWORK INSTRUCTIONS

I propose that the policymaker and their team should be aiming to answer "True" to each of the following stages, which are presented as true statements. These users should be able to present an audit trail of evidence to demonstrate how they have been able to answer each statement in the affirmative, which could include listing reliable intelligence, the people and processes used, the number of group sessions held, or individual tasks conducted and the respective outcomes and findings.

The presence of a "False" to one or more of the six statements should indicate that the inequality-tackling policy being designed is not sufficiently tested and that more information is required; if information cannot be provided, then the plan in its current format should not continue. The framework should therefore be used alongside existing research techniques and intelligence collection and analysis efforts by the organization in order to address any gaps in knowledge with the acquisition of relevant and reliable new information, or to agree that the gap cannot be filled.

Statement 1: "We understand the operating environment and we are not projecting our own expectations of equality."

Author Comment: As an example, the dismantling of Iraq's Ba'th Party—"De-Ba'thification"– and of multiple government ministries by the

U.S.-led coalition in Iraq in 2003 was initially seen as a blow to oppression, but in fact, it made the country more dangerous.[8] The "Coalition of the Willing" did not understand the unintended damage that the removal of the political structure would cause, or if it did, chose to accept the risk and did it anyway.[9] In the future, we must demonstrate our understanding of the political and security structures and systems in foreign countries, and the plausible effects our interventions may have. As shown in Iraq and elsewhere, the intervention against a specific target may succeed or fail, but the repercussions on the wider system must also be understood to avoid unexpected and unwelcome secondary effects.

I cite "mirror imaging" as a common error in my experience, which is a phenomenon in which intelligence analysts fill the gaps in their knowledge about an individual, culture, or nation with their own projected values or beliefs. Chapter 6 of the CIA's Psychology of Intelligence Analysis includes the following warning: "Failure to understand that others perceive their national interests differently from the way we perceive those interests is a constant source of problems in intelligence analysis."[10] Put simply: is what we see in a foreign nation really inequality, or just a way of life that is different from ours? Does the current form of governance provide more stability for its civil society, compared to what we can guarantee following our interventions?

Expert comments: *LTC Nate Sassaman* agrees with Statement 1, and believes that the West failed to understand the operating environment in Iraq in 2003, and was guilty of projecting its own expectations of equality. He describes "extreme arrogance" by the United States to have assumed that it could choose a pre-positioned leader like Ahmed Chalabi, or even Ayad Allawi, to lead Iraq, when in fact both men were summarily rejected by their own country. Sassaman adds that a "supreme lack of cultural understanding" led to the De-Baathification, a policy that was "ignorant and lacking incredible understanding of the country and culture that the US had committed forces into." For Sassaman, the actions were "a complete misread and made the country far more dangerous for everyone there."

Camille Corti-Georgiou also agrees with Statement 1, but argues that Western expectations of equality are so deep-seated that to not project them would, to some degree, be an insurmountable task. She cites the United Nations Millennium Development Goals as an example of the West imparting developmental principles on less-developed nations. She comments that, "We have a tendency to idealise our own Western archetype of development, and I would imagine the same applies to standards of equality. On the other hand, employing a pre-existing framework that has

worked for Western countries, is not always wrong, so long as each case is considered on an individual basis. To assume that nations follow the same trajectory of development can have problematic normative implications, but to completely dismiss the path to development of a Western country may, by the same token, lead to the dismissal of effective policy implementation."

Author Comment: For Statement 1, I also secured comment from *Matthew Lewin,* an NGO worker specialising in providing skills to security forces in Southern Africa to combat the illegal wildlife trade. Lewin also served with the British Army in Afghanistan in 2013. He agrees with Statement 1 and provides a different perspective through his counterpoaching work in Africa. He explained that it is only by understanding in detail how inequality is a driver for the poachers and their families that the NGOs can work with and establish realistic and sustainable policies, and that therefore, "these policies must include providing poachers with alternative livelihoods and greater security for their families." Lewin's comments both support Statement 1 and Statement 2 below.

Statement 2: "We are offering support that has been genuinely requested and can lead to realistic and sustainable change."

Author Comment: Our actions will be conducted with the support of the oppressed, and not "done to them." We are offering our support to countries or segments of their societies that genuinely want to achieve greater equality, and they have communicated this clearly. Further, they can realistically sustain the targeted outcome of greater equality for the long term, once change has occurred. Assessing the legitimacy of any request by those segments of society is crucial, as is whether any potential change we intend to enable is firstly, realistic, and secondly, sustainable. We would expect to see a transparent and auditable justification for this assessment. The legitimacy of a genuine request, or other grounds for intervention, would need to be clearly defined and open to scrutiny.

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Expert comments: *Nate Sassaman* agrees with Statement 2, and highlights the importance of understanding the agendas of all stakeholders that could be affected directly or indirectly by the intervention. He warns that it is extremely dangerous when we "don't take the time to understand nor consider all the potential consequences of our support to one govern-

ment or group, just because we have been asked or ordered to intervene."
This also further supports Statement 1 and the need to understand the
operating environment.

Although *Mark Morgan, MBE*, agrees with Statement 2, he argues
that there is an inherent problem in "identifying legitimate opposition
groups in countries with despotic regimes which oppress the free will of
their people." He describes from personal experience how the situation
in these countries is usually opaque, and Western governments often lack
clear diplomatic and intelligence reporting on the real status of opposi-
tion groups. Morgan believes that the majority of the intelligence effort are
focused on the activities of the regime, and rather than targeting "winners,"
Western governments are faced with exiled leaders who are "casting around
for benefactors of political and financial support." There is usually a scar-
city of options to consider and this leads governments into developing rela-
tionships with opposition groups and their so-called leaders who are often
living in exile. Morgan describes how these leaders can have flawed person-
alities and highlights the importance of asking questions, including: What
is the real reason they are living in exile? Have they become too Westernized
and lost touch with their in-country constituency? Are their motives for
opposing the regime altruistic? Morgan further explains that once these
personalities' relationships with foreign governments—often with the
intelligence services—become public knowledge, it diminishes their cred-
ibility in many eyes, including at home, in neighbouring countries, with
the UN, and even other members of coalitions. He adds that, "When we
look at the leaders of the two main Iraqi opposition groups throughout the
1990s and prior to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, neither Ahmed Chalabi nor
Ayad Allawi (despite being from respected Shi'a families) really represented
the majority Shi'a population. They both had a track record of organizing
failed coups in Iraq, which should have told us something about the level
of real support they had amongst Iraqis. It also should have told us whether
the decision to double down and continue to back them at that point was
in response to a genuine Iraq-based opposition request for support– or was
it pandering to the opinionated in the absence of any viable alternatives?"

Statement 3: *"The policy proposal is transparent and testable."*

Author Comment: Inequality and the reduction of oppression
should not be used as wrappers in which to conceal other ambitions related
to energy, the economy, or the military. Integrity is essential for the reputa-
tion of our nations, our own individual consciences, and primarily, for the

respect of those people our interventions will affect. Transparency must include an assessment of the benefits that might accrue to the intervening nation, aside from any consideration of addressing inequality, and a clear audit trail of the analysis that led to the assessment.

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Expert comments: *Camille Corti-Georgiou* agrees with this statement and that the analyses behind it should be fully reproducible, and believes that the "do-nothing" approach (Statement 6, which I will outline below) should be investigated to the same extent. Corti-Georgiou describes how the research and analyses to support Statement 3 are likely to be complex, but if these efforts help arrive at an answer of "True," and support for this answer along a chronological trail of analyses is evidenced, then the means to corroborate a decision have been transparent.

Mark Morgan, MBE, agrees with the statement, but describes the danger associated with policies evolving, and therefore the difficulties of maintaining transparency. As he explained, "One only has to look at the British Government's changing rationale for its forces to be in Afghanistan to see how governments have a hard time balancing public opinion with doing the right thing. British forces were originally deployed in Afghanistan to rid the country of al-Qaeda terrorists and then, once quickly achieved, the mission became one to help Afghans to build a new democratic society. Advancing the rights and opportunities for women became a theme for the new mission. Running in the background was a Counter Narcotics mission. As the military death toll increased, it was hard for the government to persuade the public that inequality was a cause worth losing lives for."

Statement 4: "Our plan is logical and coherent."

Author Comment: A logical and coherent plan is one that has been thoroughly tested through peer-group review—it has been "war-gamed." Government-recognized "Structured Analytical Techniques" (SATs), like those pioneered by Randolph H. Pherson, must be used.[11] These SATs must include—at a minimum—scenario generation techniques, in order to identify plausible future scenarios and help us consider what the future could look like during and after our interventions. The "Key Assumption

Check," used to identify and communicate our assumptions and reduce the risk of them going untested, should be a constant feature. Ideally, all analytical techniques should be applied with people from outside the policy group who have different experiences, expertise, and opinions, to reduce the risk of groupthink, or a lack of knowledge, shaping decisions. In the United Kingdom, lessons from the 2016 Iraq Inquiry report have been crystalised into an operational policy handbook called "The Good Operation," which is focused on planning military operations. Freely available online, this serves as an induction tool, training resource, and aide memoire for operational policy professionals in defence and across government and includes the 10-step "Chilcot Checklist" ranging from vision to evaluation.[12]

Expert comments: All respondents agreed with this statement, and there were no comments.

Statement 5: "We can measure the effect of our interventions."

Author Comment: Measurement is crucial. We must be able to measure our potential success or failure, and have the assets and resources set aside to do so. Further, we must be prepared to keep measuring, long after our intervention activities have ceased, as the effects may not be visible for months or years later. We must first baseline the situation, and have the findings peer-group reviewed by external experts to ensure that we are not shaping the facts to our advantage before any interventions start. It takes courage to measure our own actions, and we must be open to and prepared to accept failure or the fact that we have created negative unintended outcomes. We must have a plan for catastrophic failure and also for catastrophic success.

> *It takes courage to measure our own actions, and we must be open to and prepared to accept failure or the fact that we have created negative unintended outcomes.*

Expert comments: *Nate Sassaman* agrees with this statement, but warns that it may not be possible to measure the effect of our interventions for a generation. He says that this problem was the case in Iraq, and that "our intervention in Iraq in 2003-04 sowed the seeds of ISIL success that started in 2014-2015," and that even with this knowledge, it is still too early to see the full effect of the Iraqi intervention. He explains that there is no quick fix available, and that early measurement of the effects of an

intervention like that in Iraq is not possible because they are "generational-shaping moments for that country."

Camille Corti-Georgiou agrees with Statement 5, but warns that empirical quantification to prove it will be difficult. She raises the challenge of how successes or failures will be measured, and if a consistent framework for measurement should be applied to all nations– like the United Nations Development Programme Human Development Index, for example– or if a unique approach should be tailored to each country.

For *Mark Morgan, MBE*, foreign interventions to ameliorate inequality or oppression, especially change which has been achieved through military action, requires inputs on the ground from many different agencies and branches of government, such as military, intelligence, diplomacy, and development organizations to be successful. He says that coordinating these agencies' effects is a challenge, and when there are other nations involved in a coalition, these challenges are multiplied. Morgan explains that, "In the case of Iraq, there was the Head of the Coalition Provisional Authority at the top of the pyramid of strategic decision making, and he was supported by various coalition nations' military and civilian senior representatives. In Afghanistan, there was the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) command supported by nations' Special Representatives and latterly ambassadors. In the regions, there were the joint military and civilian Provisional Reconstruction Teams whose function was to deliver security, extend the writ of the Afghan government, and facilitate reconstruction. On the civilian side, this was a multi-agency approach. In both Iraq and Afghanistan, there were coordinating groups at both the strategic and tactical levels where the effect was being measured." For Morgan, the biggest problem arose with the different approach adopted by civilians and military in measuring success. As he explained, "While it is easy to count the number of water wells dug and commissioned, the number of police trained, and the number of equality workshops delivered, all of these generally require the military to provide a secure environment. But these statistics are not how military commanders internally measure their own performance or to some extent have their performance measured. With ambitious commanders rotating out of theatre every six months as in the case of 'Regional Command–South East,' it was more important for commanders to have better military metrics than the preceding commander or the set the bar high for their successors. This meant constantly increasing the battle rhythm in terms of operations and how many insurgents [were/ were to be] captured or killed. This can become self-serving."

Statement 6: "We have considered the 'do nothing' option."

Author Comment: If we cannot demonstrate that we have a robust and tested plan, and that we are able to both deliver it and commit the resources to fix any errors should it fail, then we must be prepared not to act. The criticism we may face in not acting in the short term may be insignificant to the adversity that may occur in the long term if our plans are not robust.

Expert comments: All respondents agreed with Statement 6. *Nate Sassaman* comments that he is a proponent of the "do-nothing" option and that, "once the button is pushed, forces beyond our control are put into action. It's so easy to commit, and so very hard to pull it back." He adds that the "do-nothing" option must be considered as a viable course of action, and that in Iraq, the United States missed recognizing so many long-term consequences for both the Iraqi people, its government, and its forces.

For *Camille Corti-Georgiou*, Statement 6 is "incredibly important" and ultimately underpins all other considerations. She further suggests that it does not need to be a stand-alone statement, and should in fact be considered in parallel with the previous five statements.

Finally, *Mark Morgan, MBE,* urges us to be aware that Foreign Policy Priorities may suggest that a policy of non-intervention is the better thing, even though oppression is present within [the/a] society of a key partner. In these cases, a working relationship around counterterrorism, geopolitical or economic priorities may outweigh the case for doing something; this may then raise moral questions.

CONCLUSION

All respondents agreed that the framework is valid and does not warrant further statements added or any removed, but also agreed that further testing of it is needed to more robustly evaluate its potential value in a practical situation. My hope is that by using the approach listed in the framework, in cases where inequality is a reason for or a major driver of foreign policy plans, we can demonstrate that we have thoroughly considered whether our intended actions are necessary, proportionate and legal, that the outcome we seek is realistic, and that we have a reasonable chance of reducing inequality, not inadvertently creating more of it. I re-iterate my offer of taking a lead role in enabling interested parties to further discuss the topic and testing this framework (or agreeing to another) in 2021. *f*

ENDNOTES

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