

[dstl]

Discretion


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Overview

- Dstl were tasked by DCDC to investigate the concept of discretion, in order to gain a better understanding of the factors that influence the choices made by HM Government when deciding whether or not to take military action.
- For this study, discretion was defined as:

“Decision-makers’ perceived freedom of choice over whether and how to intervene militarily”

Approach

- Literature review:
 - Prevents ‘reinventing the wheel’ syndrome
 - Provides theoretical tools to help develop our understanding
- Historical Research
 - Previous quantitative research by Dstl correlated conflict onset with various factors, but had no predictive or explanatory capability
 - Therefore, opted for in-depth qualitative research
 - In-house:
 - Suez Crisis, Cuban Missile Crisis, Vietnam War, intervention in Sierra Leone
 - Experience gained enables set-up of focused EMR contracts
 - EMR by  :
 - Bosnian War, Intervention in East Timor, Gulf War
- Analysis and synthesis
- Briefings and exploitation

Literature Review

- Little existing literature explicitly focussing on discretion
- That literature which does exist tends to make a simplistic distinction between 'wars of necessity' and 'wars of choice'
- In reality, the distinction is rarely so stark: decision-making is affected by a complex range of factors which make assessment of 'necessity' a complex and subjective process
- Organisational, political and psychological factors all have significant impacts on perceived freedom-of-choice
- Simple, quantitative approaches to explaining discretion are insufficient to explain real-world decision-making

Insignificance of Vital National Interests



- US deployment in Vietnam
 - Communist gains in Southeast Asia considered serious, but not critical to US interests

- British deployments
 - British humanitarian deployments in the Balkans, East Timor and Sierra Leone primarily motivated by factors not related to vital national interests
- Cuban Missile Crisis
 - Vital interests more clearly at stake, but use of military force was still discretionary



Players and Spectators (1)



- Expectations of allies are linked to costs of non-involvement in conflicts
 - Reputation, rhetoric, alliances, professed grand strategy and statements of ambition create an image of a nation being a player or a spectator
 - Allies will expect a self-professed player to play, raising the costs of merely being a spectator.
- Discretion diminishes once player image established
 - E.g. Britain regarding East Timor and Sierra Leone, US in Cuba
- Involvement in a conflict signals intent, and can lead to mission creep
 - E.g. Defence engagement and upstream activities in Vietnam and Sierra Leone



Players and Spectators (2)

- The US expects allies to lead on crises in their own 'backyard'
 - E.g. UK and France in Libya and Balkans, and Australia in East Timor



- Formal alliances generate expectations, regardless of military capability
 - E.g. US pressurised New Zealand into Vietnam combat deployment
- However, creating a spectator image can minimise costs of non-involvement
 - E.g. British non-deployment in Vietnam War

Organisational Factors

- Subordinate actors can significantly affect the discretion available to senior decision-makers
- Decisions taken by those at a senior level do not necessarily get enacted as intended



– Cuban Missile Crisis

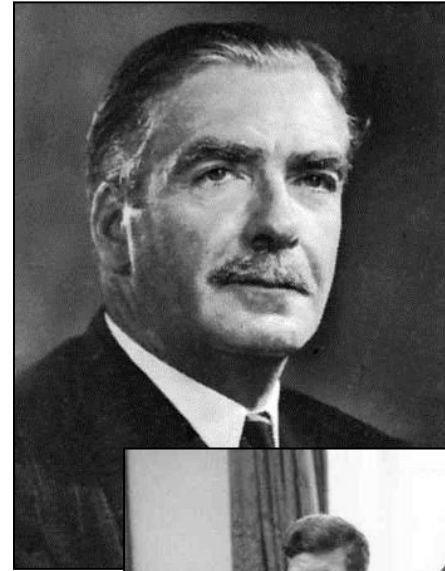
- Actions by junior military personnel could have significantly escalated the crisis
- The State Department failed to act on a direct presidential order to prepare the diplomatic ground for removal of missiles from Turkey

– Sierra Leone

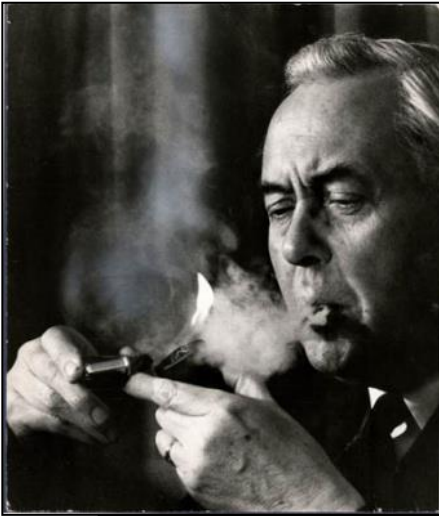
- Decision-makers forced to react to the consequences of subordinates acting on their own initiative and exceeding their mandate

Personal attributes of decision-makers

- Fundamental, and often ignored, determining factors in decision-making are the decision-makers themselves
- Personal factors that can affect decision-makers include:
 - Their personalities
 - Genuine moral and ethical considerations
 - Their personal interpretation of historical analogies when considering options
 - Their previous experience in initiating combat deployments



Domestic Politics



- Level of support in Parliament/Congress can significantly impact decision makers' discretion.
 - During the Vietnam War, a British combat deployment would likely have collapsed the Labour government
- The US election cycle has an impact on US discretion:
 - Imminent elections delayed US retaliatory action in Vietnam
 - Upcoming elections impacted on Clinton's ability to avoid a deployment in the Balkans, for fear of appearing weak

Military Capabilities and Doctrine

- Military capabilities can either enhance or constrain perceived discretion:
 - Presence of Gurkhas in Brunei enabled rapid response to the East Timor crisis
 - Lack of a realistic ‘surgical strike’ option in the Cuban Missile Crisis forced Kennedy to seek alternatives
- Flawed doctrine and planning assumptions can reduce discretion:
 - Planning assumptions left Britain unable to respond rapidly to the Suez crisis
 - The USAF’s adherence to doctrine during the Cuban Missile Crisis exasperated Kennedy and precluded the use of airstrikes
- However, effective doctrine can enhance discretion:
 - Sierra Leone provided an opportunity to validate the concept of rapid reaction forces

Military Advice is Often Ignored

- Often, perceived lack of military capability has little or no bearing on decision-makers' discretion



- Major ignored military advice that the MoD was not well structured for peacekeeping in the Balkans, and that 400,000 NATO troops would be required for a ground operation
- Eden pressed ahead with plans to re-take the Suez canal despite advice that the armed forces were not configured to do so
- Military advice against deployment to Northern Ireland ignored

Summary and Implications

- It is misleading to assume increasing levels of discretion in the future
 - Decision-makers choose to engage in ‘discretionary’ conflicts for a range of factors outside of the military’s control
 - Vital interests often not at stake, defence policy frequently ignored, planning assumptions often false
- UK discretion will continue to be closely linked to its foreign policy objectives
 - It should not be assumed that conflict prevention activities and closer links with allies will reduce the requirement to commit military force
- It is prudent to ensure that the MoD is best-placed to respond flexibly and effectively to a wide range of contingencies
 - Military can play a positive role in shaping the thinking of leaders



Questions?

