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## 'David Miliband's piccolo diplomacy' says Guardian, UK

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Blair at least walked the walk. But this foreign secretary can offer only feelgood gestures of episcopal concern by Simon Jenkins

I hope President Rajapaksa of Sri Lanka takes time out today to comment on the resignation of Mr Speaker. What the Sri Lankan government has "wanted to see", he might say in the jargon of the new interventionism, is clean and transparent democracy in Britain. Speaking for all Sri Lankans, he would regard the affair of MPs' expenses as "unacceptable" and "not living up to their commitments". A group of Sri Lankan MPs would be visiting Britain to monitor developments.

Ridiculous? Yet those are exactly the words and tone of voice used by Britain's foreign secretary, David Miliband, in his dealings with what seems like half the globe. The Foreign Office wakes each morning and scans the world's conflicts to ponder where it might score a quick headline with a call for peace, reform, a ceasefire or "United Nations action". I cannot see the point of Britain telling the world that "what we want to see is Russia on a different course". It merely infuriates every Russian. Why does Miliband say of Syria's dictator that "I've been talking for over 18 months to him about his responsibilities in the region", as if he were Lugard addressing a recalcitrant Nigerian chief? Why boast that he is "working on maintaining a ceasefire between Israel and Gaza" when he is doing nothing of the sort? A delegation of Singapore's MPs might feel equally justified in visiting London to express the "unacceptability" of Britain's financial regulation. The Colombian prime minister, recently criticised by Miliband for the "impunity" of his militia, might wonder at the impunity of Britain's corrupt arms dealers. Pakistan, lectured weekly by London about its army's performance, might demand an inquiry into discipline at Deep Cut barracks. Beijing might discover a Miliband-style "moral obligation" to defend minority rights in Northern Ireland, given the resurgence of separatist violence. The Swedes might denounce Britain's care of the elderly on the grounds that they "cannot stand idly by" while welfare state values are traduced by British callousness. Were any of these things to happen, British politicians and the British media would be outraged. How dare other nations pass judgment on our affairs? What business is it of theirs? Yet this is what Britain does to them. Foreign policy is in 19th-century mode, with a moral gunboat over every horizon. Iran, Colombia, Kenya, Russia, Sri Lanka have all been damned by Miliband with the same fatwa as "unacceptable". Regular ceasefire calls are bread and butter to the Foreign Office's underemployed policymakers. These feel-good gestures of episcopal concern are intended to generate a warm sense of wellbeing in speaker and audience, a jerkily liberal response to "something must be done". The effect is zero. This is not megaphone diplomacy but piccolo. Ceasefires usually benefit one side or the other in a running conflict. They are seldom impartial to those embroiled in the theatre of war, any more than are other weapons of soft intervention such as condemnation, boycott and commercial and financial sanction. In Sri Lanka a rudimentary study of the past three months of fighting would have told Miliband that a ceasefire would be pro-Tamil, not just "pro-humanitarian". He compounded his demand by damning the "indiscriminate" shelling of Tamil civilians. How he could do this while supporting the bombing of Pashtun civilians along the Afghan border is a mystery. Yet the consequence of appearing to support the Tamils was to infuriate those same insurgents when Miliband refused to lift a finger to give force to his ceasefire call. It was just words, hypocritical window-dressing. It appeared to support a partitionist movement, but refused to do so in practice. The outcome has been entirely negative. Miliband is regarded in Colombo as an incompetent neo-imperial -meddler whose embassy was attacked on -Monday and whose effigy was burned and tossed into the compound. Meanwhile the Tamils, double-crossed by London's posturing, reacted with one of the most furious demonstrations seen in Parliament Square. The conflict was not ended by this rhetorical intervention. No lives were saved, no British interest served. Each side has merely been convinced that London was favouring its sworn enemy. Policy towards Sri Lanka merits a doctoral thesis in diplomatic ineptitude. Britain had no dog in this fight, and no capacity to influence events either way. Its platitudes, bromides and -hectoring were merely patronising, like an NHS advert telling the world to wash its hands and blow its nose. As of today, Britons travelling to Sri Lanka must be less safe than any other foreign nationals, whichever side of the divide they happen to encounter. Such intervention soon falls victim to relativism. The one country that is treated by Miliband with kid gloves is the People's Republic of China. He recently told the Fabians that "it is important that we don't treat China as an errant child" - implying just such treatment for every other moral -miscreant. Why? Because China is rich. Such intervention has been as pointless in Sri Lanka as its predecessors in Israel/Palestine, Russia, Georgia, Iran, Burma, Sudan and Zimbabwe. Tony Blair's 1999 exegesis on so-called liberal interventionism, whatever its justification in the Balkans, has degenerated into a global woe-crying under Gordon Brown and Miliband. Where the fine talk led to military action, at least it walked the walk. Labour's early decision to move from the Tories' policy of humanitarian relief in Yugoslavia to threatened, then actual, aggression against the Serbs represented a coherent policy. By rewarding each separatist movement in turn it achieved Nato's covert objective of Balkan fragmentation. The same outcome will probably follow intervention in Iraq, Afghanistan and even Pakistan. Such policies may be disagreeable but at least they are understandable. Miliband's piccolo diplomacy is a mystery. He seems to crave a role above his station, howling at the moon as if saying so made it so. He has summoned the ghost of Palmerston from a Whitehall attic, but confined him to the press office, to write endless speeches full of words such as unacceptable and disappointed. At this very moment someone in the Foreign Office must be drafting a memorandum for his boss, welcoming the agreement of both sides in Sri Lanka to Miliband's demand that they cease -hostilities and behave like sensible chaps. How good of them to do so. Cucumber sandwiches, anyone?

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