For our most powerful and hypocritical leaders, crimes are those that others commit

Their hearts bleed for the victims of Putin but not for those of el-Sisi

Like Kerry, Hague voted in favour of the Anglo-American assault on Iraq and, as recently as three years ago, was still defending it. “We are leaving [Iraq] a better place and it was worth doing what we have done,” he told the BBC in May 2011.

“For the powerful,” as Noam Chomsky once remarked, “crimes are those that others commit.” For instance: it is “illegal and illegitimate” for Russia to try to detach Crimea from Ukraine by means of a dodgy referendum, Hague says. Indeed, it is. But was it any less illegal or illegitimate for the west to detach Kosovo from Serbia in 1999 with a 78-day Nato bombing campaign? Territorial integrity matters – until it doesn’t.

How about the west’s double standards in the Middle East? Fresh from berating Putin over his Ukrainian land-grab, David Cameron arrived in Israel, where he refused to allow the words “occupied” or “occupation” to cross his lips in a speech to the Knesset and described a halt to the construction of Israel’s illegal settlements as a “concession”. Can you imagine our PM calling a Russian withdrawal from Crimea a “concession”? Or threatening Israeli leaders with sanctions and visa bans? For the record, Israel has been occupying both the West Bank and Syria’s Golan Heights, in defiance of UN Security Council resolutions, for 47 years.

Most of these examples will be dismissed by the more fanatical apologists of western foreign policy as “whataboutery”. This is the term said to have been coined by the Northern Irish politician John Hume to denounce the practice of deflecting attention from a particular crime or abuse by bringing up a similar crime perpetrated by others.

Yet the point here isn’t to deflect or divert attention. Few on the anti-war left pretend Putin is anything other than a thug who yearns for the dark days of the Soviet Union, or that Yanukovych wasn’t a corrupt autocrat. Rather, the point of so-called whataboutery is to expose the hollowness of our leaders’ claims to hold any kind of moral high ground in the international arena – or to be ethically motivated by the loss of lives in faraway lands.

Yes, their hearts bleed for the victims of Putin, but not for the victims of el-Sisi. They are outraged at attempts by Yanukovych to call on Russian troops to help suppress unrest in Ukraine – but not by the pro-western king of Bahrain’s reliance on Saudi troops to stifle protests in his island nation.

The truth is that “whataboutery” is a term deployed to cover up the egregious hypocrisy and uncanny sanctimony at the heart of western foreign policy; to shut down any discussion of our glaring and shameful inconsistencies when it comes to matters of war and peace. Ironically, it is the accusation of whataboutery, not the whataboutery itself, that is the ultimate moral evasion. Because double standards matter.

Mehdi Hasan is the political director of the Huffington Post UK and a contributing writer for the New Statesman