THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT AT 10: THE CHALLENGE OF PROTECTING THE WORLD’S MOST VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

The Sources and Effects of Humanitarian Interventions: Realism, Liberalism and the State-to-Nation Balance
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This short paper presents an explanation for the rise of humanitarian interventions in the 1990s, and also for their effects on regional stability. I argue that the sources of the rise of the idea and the practice of humanitarian interventions have derived from the combined effect of realist factors and liberal values following the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The effects of such interventions on regional stability, however, depend on the state-to-nation balance in the country and the region in which the intervention takes place.

Post-Cold War sources of humanitarian interventions: Realist factors and Liberal values

Two key changes in the aftermath of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union have led to the rise of the idea and practice of humanitarian interventions. From a realist perspective the key change was in the balance of power, more precisely, the transition from bipolarity to unipolarity. This new power structure meant that the US remained the

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sole superpower without a countervailing coalition arrayed against it. This change – producing US hegemony and Western power superiority in the international system – has made possible humanitarian interventions because of the declining external constraints on US-led/Western interventions. The 1991 Gulf War has already shown the formidable US power-projection capacity to far-flung areas of the world. In short, realist factors provided the opportunity for humanitarian interventions.

The transformation of the balance of power in favor of the West was closely related to the emerging dominance of Western liberal ideas such as democracy and free markets. A key value of liberalism is the relative centrality of universal human rights versus state rights (these latter rights are mostly associated with the Westphalia international order based on the norm of non-intervention in the domestic affairs of other states). Thus, Liberalism provided the motivation for humanitarian interventions related to the idea that the international community should be committed to protecting human rights everywhere in the world, even if that might mean – at least in extreme cases of violations of human rights – an external intervention in the domestic affairs of sovereign states.

More specifically, Realism provides the explanation and the conditions for the capacity to intervene worldwide:

- Balance of Power I: The presence of a hegemon under unipolarity reduces drastically the chances for the formation of a balancing coalition, which could constrain the hegemon’s capacity to intervene.
- Balance of Power II: Yet, when a balancing coalition emerges, the likelihood of interventions declines drastically. This might explain the variation between an intervention in Libya in 2011, and the lack of an intervention in Syria despite major human rights abuses there, including well over 200,000 people being killed. Such a non-intervention can be explained at least partly because of the balancing/strong opposition by Russia and Iran to any Western intervention in Syria.
- Balance of Threat: The absence of a major strategic threat following the collapse of the Soviet Union has made huge military forces potentially available for
Western, especially American, non-strategic interventions, notably humanitarian ones.

**What are the implications of Realism for the likelihood, scope, and level of humanitarian interventions?**

The Realist logic would lead us to expect that a cost-benefit balance would provide some of the key conditions for when humanitarian interventions will take place and at what level. These conditions would include expected limited material benefits (otherwise it would be considered a “national interest” type of intervention, namely strategically- or economically-based intervention) and also expected low costs in terms of “blood and treasure” – that is, casualties to the intervening forces and the financial costs of the intervention.

If strategic interests are engaged, then it is not a humanitarian intervention. When such interests are at stake, there will always be a suspicion that the humanitarian rhetoric is hiding behind realpolitik interests. A truly humanitarian intervention usually takes place in areas without great strategic and/or economic importance. If there are expected high costs, however, no humanitarian intervention is likely to take place. Thus no humanitarian intervention took place in Darfur, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and post-2011 Syria despite the large-scale human rights violations in all these places. In sum, humanitarian interventions are likely in areas with low material interests and expected low costs, such as the US intervention in Somalia in 1992.

Indeed, there is proportionality between national interests and the willingness to sacrifice. States – and societies – are much more willing to sacrifice, both blood and treasure, when key national security interests seem to be at stake (even if sometimes mistakenly so, due to political manipulation or misperceptions) than for universal goals such as protection of human rights in foreign countries.

Thus, both Realist logic and the domestic politics of tolerance for costs would lead us to expect that states which engage in a humanitarian intervention will do their utmost to avoid even minimal casualties – even if that might jeopardize the success and the effectiveness of the mission itself.
Thus, the conduct of humanitarian interventions is often reflected in the following features:

- The use mainly of air power rather than ground troops – for example, the interventions in the Balkans in the 1990s (Bosnia in 1995, and Kosovo in 1999) were by air power even if “boots on the ground” could have been very useful for the success of the mission.
- The use of air power is from 15,000 feet and above.
- Avoidance of the use of helicopters even if they are most useful for the type of mission typical of humanitarian interventions.
- Since the willingness to tolerate casualties is very low, the forces are going to be withdrawn if the casualties are even minimally higher than expected. A notable example is Somalia, where shortly after 18 US servicemen were killed in Mogadishu in October 1993, the US forces disengaged from the humanitarian intervention there.
- Deployment on the ground takes place only following the establishment of peace. Thus, only following the achievement of the 1995 US-brokered Dayton Peace Accords settling the Bosnia conflict were the US and NATO willing to contribute ground troops to a peace-keeping force.

**A key example: Libya vs. Syria – Why intervention vs. non-intervention**

Based on the balance of power logic of sources of weakness vs. strength, we can highlight the following factors as explaining the variation between the two cases:

1) To begin with, the Libyan military was much weaker than the Syrian army.
2) Moreover, Libya’s proximity to Europe meant that it was easier to use NATO air power and to overcome air defenses, which were much weaker than the Syrian ones.
3) The Khadafy regime in Libya was also much more isolated in its region, in contrast to the Assad regime which is heavily assisted by its regional allies, Iran and Hezbollah.
4) Internationally, the Khadafy regime was without any strong supporters (thus Russia and China abstained in the UN Security Council rather than opposed the resolution authorizing the Libyan intervention) in comparison to the Assad regime, which is strongly supported diplomatically and by arms supply. This has culminated in a military intervention to protect the regime, by a permanent member of the UNSC, Russia.

**Implications of Liberalism**

The dominance of Liberal ideas brings about a preference for multilateral interventions: the best scenario is sanction by the UNSC; if this is not forthcoming, at least by NATO. Thus, the UNSC resolution facilitated a NATO-led intervention in Libya in 2011, but the Russian (and Chinese) opposition prevented a UNSC resolution with regard to a potential intervention in Syria. In the case of the 1999 Kosovo intervention, the UNSC didn’t authorize the NATO humanitarian intervention there, but at least in most of the West, the support of NATO in the intervention provided a sufficient multilateral legitimacy rather than being seen as a unilateral US intervention.

The prevalence of a multilateral coalition means that there are institutional constraints on the freedom of military action of the hegemon, which has to gain the support of the other members for its military plans. Another implication of Liberalism is the tendency to protect people irrespective of race, gender, nationality, religion, ethnicity or civilization but rather based on universal human values. Finally, in the post-conflict stage, under Liberalism there are likely to be attempts to build democracy and a free market in the aftermath of the intervention.

Both the Realist and Liberal logics challenge the logic of Westphalia, which imposes constraints on intervention in the domestic affairs of sovereign states. This supposedly serves as the legitimacy for Russian and Chinese opposition to UNSC resolutions on Syria. Yet, their opposition seems to derive more from realpolitik opposition to US hegemony and also to Liberal values, due to their fear that the West is engaged in democracy promotion and regime change, which might eventually also endanger their own regimes.
Explaining the effects of humanitarian interventions on regional stability

I argue that the effects of interventions depend on what I call “the state-to-nation balance,” or what is especially relevant here, the state-to-nation imbalance (and its size) following the intervention, which reflects the imbalance both preceding the intervention and as a result of it.

My model predicts under which conditions such interventions can be stabilizing and when they are likely instead to be destabilizing. Namely, if the intervention results in a higher state-to-nation (s/n) balance, then it will be stabilizing; however, when there is a high s/n imbalance and the hegemon is unable to make it substantially more balanced, then the intervention is likely to be destabilizing. But first, we should address the following question: what is the meaning of the state-to-nation balance?

The state-to-nation balance has two distinctive dimensions. While in practice there may be some interrelationships between the two dimensions, for analytical purposes it is useful to make a distinction between them. The first dimension refers to state strength or capacity. This is the “hard” element of state-building. The second refers to the extent of congruence or compatibility between political boundaries and national identifications in a certain state. This is the “soft” component of nation-building, which also incorporates issues of national self-determination.

The degree of state strength (stateness or the success of state-building)

This variable refers to the institutions and resources available to states for governing the polity (on state-building, see Tilly 1975; Migdal 1988; Ayoob 1995; and Paris 2004). Weak states lack effective institutions and resources to implement their policies and to fulfill key functions. Most notably, they lack effective control over the means of violence in their sovereign territory and an effective law enforcement system. Thus they face great difficulties in maintaining law and order and providing security in their territory. This, in turn, severely handicaps economic activity in the state.

State strength or capacity can be measured by the ability of the state to mobilize manpower for military service and to extract financial resources from their societies. Other potential indicators of state strength include: the extent of government
effectiveness in service provision and the extent of its control over the state sovereign territory; GDP per capita, GDP growth, and trade indicators, since states with higher economic development enjoy larger pools of resources from which to extract taxes, and, indeed, in economically developed states taxes constitute a major portion of the annual income (Thies 2004:64–65); and expenditure ratio, that is, the ratio of military expenditure to GDP, which is also relevant since it indicates to what extent a given state is capable of mobilizing manpower for military service.

*The degree of congruence (or extent of success of nation-building)*

This variable refers to the extent of congruence between the territorial states and the national aspirations and identities of the people in these states – namely, the extent to which the current political boundaries in a certain state reflect the national affiliations of the main groups in that state and their aspirations for national self-determination, i.e. to establish states and/or to revise existing boundaries. High congruence means that there is compatibility between the state (as an entity administering certain territory) and the national sentiments of its citizens (that is, their aspiration to live as a national community in their own state). In other words, there is a strong acceptance and identification of the people in the state with the existing state and its territorial boundaries. Congruent states are either ethnically homogenous or have strong civic nationalism based on citizenship as the key criterion for membership in the nation (for example, Western European states or the immigrant societies in the New World).\(^1\) There are two primary senses in which a state’s geopolitical and national boundaries may be *incongruent* in relation to the ethno-national criterion of one state per one nation:

1) A single geopolitical entity may contain numerous ethno-national groups, while at least some of them aspire for national self-determination. This is the internal dimension of incongruence, which has major implications for the possibility of civil wars, especially in weak states.

\(^1\) Some might argue that recent waves of mass migration to Western European states might have made them less congruent.
2) A single ethno-national group may reside in more than one geopolitical entity. This is the external dimension of incongruence, which has major implications for revisionist or irredentist policies, especially if the majority ethnic group in the state lives in substantial numbers also in neighboring and other regional states, either as a majority or a minority.

The problem is that most of the places that are candidates for humanitarian interventions are in a high condition of state-to-nation imbalance. Thus it is an uphill battle to pursue any one of the following strategies in order to fix the state-to-nation imbalance:

A. State building, that is, building well-functioning state institutions led by professionals that can maintain domestic and external security and law and order, and provide useful services to the whole population.

With regard to the enhancement of the national congruence, there are three alternative strategies of nation-building:

B. Partition of the state according to the ethno-national divisions (“two – or more – states for two – or more – peoples”).

C. Power-sharing with a bi-national state, in which power is shared by the key ethno-national groups.

D. Civic nationalism – “a state of all its citizens” – in which ethnicity is a cultural, but not a key political, criterion for the distribution of political power and the allocation of scarce resources.

When there is high state-to-nation imbalance, the implementation of options C. and D. is extremely difficult, but also option B. is difficult to accomplish if there is no clear geographic separation among the ethno-nation/sectarian groups like in Iraq – where the Shiite and Sunni are mixed in some areas, though the Kurds are much more separated and thus a partition with them (by establishing a Kurdish homeland) is potentially easier to achieve.

When a greater state-to-nation balance is present or the scope and/or magnitude of the imbalance is relatively limited, the likelihood of relative success in the nation-building
enterprise is greater. Bosnia and Kosovo are good examples of the second dynamic, with some sort of partition. As a result, a better national congruence was accomplished following the US-led interventions in 1995 and 1999 – though not without numerous problems, limitations and difficulties – through a partition either de facto (Bosnia) or de jure (Kosovo).

When there is a high degree of a state-to-nation imbalance, and the state itself (which had a weak institutional base already before the intervention) becomes even weaker following the external intervention, the state is likely to become a full-blown failed state as the cases of Iraq, Somalia, and, most recently, Libya demonstrate.

**The intervention in Libya and its aftermath**

The 2011 Libyan intervention is especially useful for showing the destabilizing effects of a humanitarian intervention in the absence of carefully addressing the extremely demanding and costly challenges of state-building and nation-building.

The Libya intervention was a NATO-led multilateral humanitarian intervention, based on R2P and sanctioned by the UNSC (Russia, China and also Germany abstained, thus making possible the endorsement of the resolution). During the intervention itself, many argued that it was transformed from being a purely humanitarian, R2P-type intervention into one aiming at regime change by helping the rebels to topple Muammar Khadafy. Indeed, that is the way Russia and China now define this intervention, which seems to be one of the reasons they cite for opposing additional humanitarian interventions that they are afraid would be transformed into regime change according to Western preferences.

Yet, the outcome of the intervention is a failed state – composed of a multiplicity of competing armed militias, including militant Islamists, some affiliated with the most radical group, ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham) – which is committing major crimes against humanity such as beheading innocent people who do not belong to what they define as the “right” religion.

Post-2011 Libya is characterized by a total loss of control by the central government and the lack of monopoly over the means of violence in the country. More precisely, there is
not even one overall government to speak of, but rather two competing governments and parliaments in addition to a wide array of armed militias. These two warring governments are fighting each other, each controlling only a fraction of the country’s territory, while competing militias control other pieces of territory with differing degrees of effectiveness.

Thus, in contrast to Liberal expectations, Libya has not only failed to evolve into a well-functioning democracy, it has become a failed state. Such a transformation has not only great adverse internal repercussions, but also major destabilizing regional implications. While Libya now serves as a safe haven for militias affiliated with both al-Qaeda and ISIS, these organizations have major regional ambitions and thus can use the Libyan base for terrorist actions in neighboring states in North Africa and the Sahel. Moreover, the collapse of Khadafy’s regime makes possible major arms smuggling of its military hardware to neighboring states and to the Middle East, further inflaming the turmoil, for example, in the Sinai Peninsula and in Syria. In addition, Libya now serves as a major departing port for illegal immigrants – many of whom come from other failed states – to Europe, especially via proximate Italy, which views this wave of immigration with a lot of anxiety.

A major explanation for the destabilizing effects of the Libyan intervention is the high state-to-nation imbalance of the country, which only got worse following the intervention. National congruence was very low already, due to tribal and regional polarization. For instance, there are major differences in identity and affiliation between the eastern and western parts of the country, which were unified only under Italian colonialism in the 20th century and were never really unified into one cohesive nation under successive regimes following independence. This was especially true during the oppressive Khadafy regime, which also did not construct effective and well-functioning state institutions, though it maintained some sorts of law and order even if in completely distorted and arbitrary ways. Yet even this low level of institutionalization was completely destroyed by the collapse of the Khadafy regime due to the combined effect of the NATO intervention and the Arab Spring.
Conclusion

This short paper addresses the sources and effects of post-Cold War humanitarian interventions. Following the end of the Cold War, the combination of changes in power distribution toward unipolarity and the dominance of Liberal ideas about the importance of universal human rights made possible the rise of humanitarian intervention as an important norm and mechanism in international politics. At the same time, the implementation of this norm was constrained by a variety of Realist and domestic political considerations.

Still, some important post-Cold War interventions can be defined as humanitarian, in the sense that they were aimed at protecting human beings irrespective of any parochial affiliation of these people. This pattern goes against, for example, the Huntingtonian argument about the Clash of Civilizations, as some of the Western-led interventions protected Muslims, in contrast to Huntington’s expectation of a major clash between the West and Islam.

Some of the key examples of humanitarian interventions include those in the Balkans in the 1990s and in Libya in 2011. The former interventions succeeded in stabilizing the Balkans and stopping the mass killing there, even if not resolving many of its problems. In contrast, the Libyan intervention together with the destabilizing consequences of the Arab Spring made Libya a failed state, with major negative implications for the wellbeing of the country and its population, as well as the whole region. This unfortunate outcome has seemed to inflict a major blow on the noble idea of humanitarian intervention in the current period. But it is difficult to predict to what extent its implementation will decrease, since the idea of such interventions still carries a lot of ideational weight and emotional sympathy in the international community which is confronting numerous cases of major abuse of human rights throughout the world.