

Humanitarian Hazard

Revisiting Doctrines of Intervention

No foreign policy seems more inherently benign than humanitarian military intervention. It is rooted in the altruistic desire to protect innocents from violent death. It appears feasible, given the military superiority of Western forces over those in developing countries where most violent conflict occurs. And the only obvious costs are a modest financial commitment and the occasional casualty.

For these reasons, in the wake of the world's failure to prevent violence in the Balkans and Rwanda, US President Bill Clinton declared in June 1999 the doctrine that bears his name: "If the world community has the power to stop it, we ought to stop genocide and ethnic cleansing." In December 2001, a distinguished international panel went a step further and declared the existence of a "Responsibility to Protect"—suggesting that the failure to intervene by those capable of doing so might even breach international law.

But a more sophisticated analysis calls into question the value of humanitarian military intervention, even when judged by its own explicit standard of saving lives. For two reasons the benefits of such intervention are much smaller, and the costs much greater, than commonly recognized. First, most violence is perpetrated faster than interveners can realistically arrive to stop it. Second, as economists could have predicted, but few humanitarians have acknowledged, the intervention regime actually exacerbates some conflicts through what I have labeled "the moral hazard of humanitarian intervention." In light of these two dynamics, an increase in intervention does not save as many lives as commonly claimed. Unless the West adopts a number of reforms outlined at the end of this article, more intervention might actually lead to a net increase in killing.

Killers are Quicker than Interveners

In the high-profile conflicts of the 1990s, most violence was perpetrated far more quickly than commonly realized. In Bosnia, although the conflict dragged on for more than three years, the majority of ethnic cleansing was perpetrated in the spring of 1992. By the time Western media arrived on the scene later that summer, Serb forces already occupied two-thirds of the republic and had displaced more than one million residents. In Rwanda, at least half of the eventual half-million Tutsi victims were killed in the first three weeks of genocide. When Croatia's army broke a three-year cease-fire in August 1995, it ethnically cleansed virtually all of the more than 100,000 Serbs from the Krajina region in less than a week. In Kosovo, when Serbian forces switched from a policy of counter-insurgency to ethnic cleansing in March 1999, in response to NATO's decision to bomb, most of their cleansing occurred in the first two weeks, and they managed to cleanse 850,000 Albanians, half the province's total. In East Timor, following a 1999 vote for independence, Indonesian-backed militias damaged the majority of the province's infrastructure and displaced most of the population in little more than a week.

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Even less well recognized is the fact that logistical obstacles impose significant delays on military intervention, humanitarian or otherwise, even where a strong political will exists. For example, after Iraqi President Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in August 1990, and US President George Bush ordered an immediate deployment to defend Saudi Arabia (Operation Desert Shield), it took nine days for the first unit of 2,300 US troops to reach the area of conflict. Another week was required before the unit was sufficiently prepared to venture beyond its makeshift base. Thus, even with the vital national security interest of oil at stake, it took the United States more than two weeks to deploy and begin operations of a relatively tiny force. The reasons are numerous, but stem mainly from three factors: modern militaries cannot operate without their equipment, their equipment is extremely heavy, and there are limits to the rate at which such equipment can be airlifted to remote countries.

Indeed, the airlift to Saudi Arabia was much easier than a typical humanitarian intervention because the Arabian peninsula is closer to the United States and has better airfields than most conflict zones. Even short-distance interventions can be bedeviled by the combination of poor airfields and weighty forces. For example, when the United States deployed just 24 Apache helicopters from Germany to nearby Albania (Task Force Hawk) for the 1999 Kosovo intervention, it required 17 days. Two factors explain this: poor Albanian airfields and a US Army doctrine that mandated a force of 5,350 personnel and their equipment to operate, maintain, and protect the helicopters. In total, this task force weighed 22,000 tons, necessitating 500 flights of large, modern C-17 cargo aircraft.

Intervening in Africa, where most of today's violent conflicts take place, is even harder due to bad airfields and the farther distance from western military bases. Had the United States tried to stop the Rwandan genocide, it would have required about six weeks to deploy a task force of 15,000 personnel and their equipment. This time estimate is conservative, because analogous past interventions to Haiti, Panama, and the Dominican Republic actually required somewhat larger forces. Unfortunately, this means that by the time Western governments learned of the Rwandan genocide and deployed an intervention force, the vast majority of the ultimate

Tutsi victims would already have been killed.

The fact that much civil violence is carried out more quickly than intervention forces can arrive is by itself no excuse for failing to intervene; some lives can be saved even by belated intervention. However, it does mean that the benefits of humanitarian intervention are far smaller than commonly realized. This is important to remember as we turn to the unexpected costs of humanitarian intervention.

Intervention Exacerbates Violence

The most counterintuitive aspect of humanitarian military intervention is that it sometimes may cause the very tragedies it is intended to prevent. The explanation for this starts from the little known but empirically robust fact that genocidal violence is usually a state retaliation against sub-state groups for launching armed secession or revolution. Most groups are deterred from such armed challenges by the fear of state retaliation. In the 1990s, however, the regime of humanitarian military intervention changed this calculus, convincing some groups that the international community would intervene to protect them from retaliation, thereby encouraging armed rebellions. As events played out, these armed challenges did provoke genocidal retaliation, but intervention arrived too late to save many of the targets of retaliation. Thus, the intervention regime—intended to



Opposite: A French paratrooper patrols a street in Bangui in the Central African Republic in May 1996, before the French withdrawal. **Above:** Children in Mostar, a besieged Moslem enclave in Bosnia, wave at a UN relief convoy in August 1993.

insure against risks of genocide and ethnic cleansing—inadvertently encouraged risk-taking behavior that exacerbated these atrocities. This is the classic dynamic of moral hazard, which is an inherent drawback of insurance systems.

For example, in the early 1990s, Bosnia's Muslims wanted their republic to secede from Yugoslavia so that they could establish their own state. However, they knew Serbs in Bosnia and the rest of Yugoslavia, who possessed considerably greater military power, opposed secession, so

a direct consequence of the promise of humanitarian intervention. Research in both Bosnia and Kosovo, based on interviews with senior Muslim and Albanian officials who launched the suicidal armed challenges, indicates they would not have done so except for the prospect of such foreign aid. The unavoidable conclusion is that the regime of humanitarian intervention helped to cause the tragic outcomes it intended to prevent, at least in these two cases.

In the wake of the terror attacks of September 11,

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they initially eschewed secession as suicidal. By 1992, however, the international community had pledged to recognize Bosnia's independence if it seceded. This led the Muslims to believe that they had a guarantee of humanitarian military intervention if they armed themselves and seceded from Yugoslavia—which they did (with the support of Croats, who mainly hoped to join Croatia). The Serbs retaliated as expected in April 1992, but the international community did not intervene with significant force for more than three years—by which time an estimated 100,000 Bosnian Muslims had been killed and more than 1,000,000 displaced.

A similar scenario played out a few years later in the Serbian province of Kosovo. There the local ethnic Albanian majority sought independence but prudently had hewed to peaceful resistance throughout the early 1990s. Even after an influx of light weapons from neighboring Albania in 1997, most of Kosovo's ethnic Albanians, including the rebel Kosovo Liberation Army, believed they were no match by themselves for heavily armored Serb forces. However, the rebels expected that if they could provoke the Serbs into retaliating against Albanian civilians, the international community would intervene on their behalf, thereby facilitating independence. The plan played out almost perfectly. The rebels began shooting large numbers of Serb police and civilians in 1997, the Serbs retaliated with a brutal counter-insurgency in 1998, and NATO bombed the Serbs and occupied the province in 1999, establishing Kosovo's *de facto* independence. As noted above, however, the intervention also compelled the Serbs to initiate last-ditch ethnic cleansing—displacing about half the province's Albanians and killing more than 5,000. After Serbia's defeat, the Albanians took revenge by ethnically cleansing 100,000 Serbs, about half those in the province, while killing hundreds more.

All of this death and displacement on both sides was

2001, the international community—and especially the United States—has switched its military focus from altruistic humanitarian intervention to a self-interested war against terrorism and proliferation. One unintended side benefit is that rebels no longer expect that they can attract humanitarian intervention by launching provocative armed challenges against states. In today's security environment, the United States is more likely to view such rebels as international terrorists and to support state retaliation against them. As a result, nascent rebellions by Albanian rebels in Macedonia and southern Serbia have fizzled out, rather than replicating the dynamics of Bosnia and Kosovo. However, when and if the terrorist threat wanes, the international community is likely to pick up the gauntlet of humanitarian intervention once again, and recreate the problem of moral hazard.

A Lesson Learned

The shortcomings of humanitarian military intervention do not mean it should be abandoned as a policy tool. The goal should be to enhance its beneficial potential, while reducing its unintended costs. The conflicts of the 1990s present three major lessons: the speed of violence, the moral hazard of intervention, and the limits of coercive diplomacy. Formulating reforms to address these lessons, however, requires a sober consideration of both the costs and the trade-offs.

The first lesson, based on the lightning pace of the recent violence, is that we need intervention forces that can deploy more quickly. Lighter forces, with fewer heavy weapons and less armor, require fewer cargo flights and thus can save more lives by deploying quicker. However, shedding protective armor and weaponry also would increase casualties among the interveners. Such a trade-off cannot be made lightly.

An alternative is to pre-position troops and their heavy equipment at forward bases closer to where they are most

likely to be needed for humanitarian intervention: in Africa. Interventions could be launched from these bases using small military cargo aircraft, which are more plentiful and better able to land at rudimentary African air fields than wide-body inter-continental models. The cargo aircraft could also make several round-trips per day to an intervention from forward bases, rather than one trip every few days from distant US or European bases—radically reducing deployment time from weeks to days. One obstacle, however, is that many Africans oppose foreign military bases as a form of neo-colonialism. An even bigger obstacle is that western states so far have been unwilling to invest in military forces dedicated to missions other than defending their own interests.

In recognition of the West's lack of will to deploy ground troops to Africa, the United States launched a project in the mid-1990s to train indigenous African forces for humanitarian intervention. This initiative had a reasonable premise—that African states would be more willing to risk the lives of their troops to stop conflict on the continent—but it has several shortcomings. First, there has been little provision of weaponry or combat training, so the African forces are suitable only for the permissive environment of peacekeeping after a conflict ends—and even then only so long as violence does not re-ignite, a common risk. Second, the initiative so far has failed to pre-position heavy weapons, armored personnel carriers, or helicopters at African bases, so that in the event of a crisis such equipment would have to be transported and joined up with intervention forces on an *ad hoc*, protracted basis. Third, most training has been conducted within national units, so that the few trained forces are unprepared for multi-national coalition operations that would be necessary in any large-scale intervention. In light of these shortcomings, if major civil violence were to break out again in Africa in the future, an all-African force would have little hope of quickly or effectively stopping the killing.

Another option is a UN rapid response capability, as proposed several years ago by an international commission headed by Algerian diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi in 2000. This panel called for expanding UN standby arrangements “to include several coherent, multinational, brigade-size forces and the necessary enabling forces, created by Member States working in partnership, in order to better meet the need for the robust peacekeeping forces.” One problem is that the report makes no provision for the coordination of airlift operations. Only the US military has a large, long-haul cargo air fleet; rapid reaction to most parts of the world is impossible unless the United States participates. A further problem is that even if UN member states were willing to commit troops in advance for humanitarian intervention, it is uncertain they would actually deploy them when called upon. Relying on a UN force that might not materialize when needed could

prove even worse than today's *ad hoc* system—in which states at least know that the buck stops with them.

Reduce Moral Hazard

As noted, some sub-state groups have been emboldened by the prospect of humanitarian intervention to launch armed challenges against states, provoking genocidal retaliation. One superficially attractive solution would be for the international community to launch timely humanitarian military intervention in every case of genocidal violence. However, this is unfeasible for two reasons. First, even if the political will for such extensive intervention existed (which it does not), the number of actual cases of such violence would soon exhaust our resources. The 1990s alone witnessed major civil violence in at least 16 areas (some on several occasions): Albania, Algeria, Angola, Azerbaijan (mainly in Nagorno-Karabakh), Bosnia, Cambodia, Congo Republic, Croatia, Ethiopia, Liberia, Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Tajikistan, and Zaire (and its successor, the Democratic Republic of Congo). Moreover, by the logic of moral hazard, each instance of humanitarian interven-

TO MOVE A GIANT

Ground forces, while required for effective humanitarian intervention, are the slowest to deploy. The US Army is dependent upon support from US Air Force or Navy units for mobility. Such deployments are subject to availability of transportation, quality of ports or landing zones, and the need for heavy machinery.

While various technological improvements can be made on current transportation methods, a more effective means of facilitating mobilization is efficient prepositioning. Efficient pre-positioning would allow for the rapid transfer of soldiers and equipment as well as expedite the establishment of a base of operations.

Current positioning of US forces is inefficient and could be substantially improved. US forces in Central Europe, for instance, could be transferred to Italy, close enough to assure NATO of US priorities in the area, but also closer to the Mediterranean for quick deployment. Additional forces in the Pacific should be moved onto Theater Support Vessels and placed off the West Coast of Australia and near Japan to support the brigade already in Korea. Coverage of South and Central America could be improved by placing better naval transport options in the Gulf of Mexico.

An examination of the main conflicts involving US troops in 2002 reveals that most occurred as sudden urban conflicts. Since 75 percent of major urban areas are within 150 miles of coastline, a naval pre-positioning such as the one mentioned here could theoretically move a medium brigade anywhere in the world in four days, an entire division in five days, and five divisions in 30 days.

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Lt. Col. Kenneth E. Hickins (US Army)

tion raises expectations of further intervention and thus encourages additional armed challenges that may provoke still more genocidal retaliation—further overwhelming the international capacity for intervention.

Two means exist to mitigate moral hazard. First, the international community should reward non-violent protest movements, rather than armed rebellions. In Kosovo, it did the opposite, ignoring a non-violent ethnic Albanian resistance for eight years and then rewarding its violent counterpart with military assistance. So long as disgruntled ethnic groups believe they can attract Western intervention with violence rather than with passive resistance, Western states encourage rebellions that provoke genocidal retaliation.

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The second solution is drawn from the economics literature on moral hazard, which suggests we should not pay claims that arise solely because of the provision of insurance coverage. In other words, the international community should not intervene on behalf of groups that provoke retaliation in the hope of garnering humanitarian intervention. If the West adopted this policy, and stuck to it, such cynical rebellions would likely peter out fairly quickly. Such a policy still would permit humanitarian intervention on behalf of groups that suffer genocidal violence through no fault of their own—for example, at the hands of leaders like Adolf Hitler or Pol Pot—as the concept originally envisioned.

A policy of not intervening in cases of intentionally provoked genocide is open to criticism as being hard-hearted. This is especially true in cases where the victims of retaliation did not endorse the armed challenge or did not know it would provoke a backlash. However, if the theory of moral hazard is correct, a policy of not intervening in response to deliberate provocations eventually would reduce the number of such cases—and thereby the overall incidence of genocidal violence. If so, such a policy would not be hard-hearted, but actually compassionate, at least from a long-term perspective.

Avoid Pyromaniac Diplomacy

A third lesson is that the international community needs to better coordinate its diplomacy with military intervention. Since the end of the Cold War, the West has tried to coerce authoritarian governments (or rebels) to hand over power

to opponents by applying economic or military sanctions. However, in several cases, including Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, and East Timor, the targets of coercion have responded instead by ethnically cleansing their opponents. To prevent this eventuality, the West needs to preventively deploy robust intervention forces, prior to exercising coercive diplomacy. Unfortunately, most preventive deployments so far have been feeble. When violence breaks out, as in Rwanda and Srebrenica, they provide little protection and then are withdrawn. Such half-hearted deployments lend a false sense of security that encourages vulnerable groups to let down their guard so that they ultimately die in greater numbers, making this type of intervention worse than nothing.

If the West is unwilling to deploy robust forces preventively, it must temper its use of coercive diplomacy aimed at compelling rulers or rebels to surrender power, because of the risk of inadvertently triggering massive violence. So long as the West lacks the will for adequate preventive deployments, its diplomats should focus instead on carrots, rather than sticks—offering incentives to oppressive governments and rebels, including economic assistance, in exchange for gradual power-sharing. The West also should be prepared to offer “golden parachutes”—monetary rewards, asylum, and immunity from subsequent prosecution—to entrenched leaders willing to peacefully yield power. While human rights groups abjure the prospect of cutting deals with leaders who have blood on their hands, in some cases forgiving past crimes may be the price of preventing future ones.

It may be a noble endeavor to use military force to protect victims of genocidal violence. But it is infinitely preferable to prevent the outbreak of such violence in the first place. To do so requires adoption of more enlightened policies of humanitarian intervention, tempering altruistic instincts with the stubborn realities of human nature and military logistics. ■

For this article, the author wishes to refer to two of his previous works: The Limits of Humanitarian Intervention: Genocide in Rwanda (2001) and “Transnational Causes of Genocide: Or How the West Inadvertently Exacerbates Ethnic Conflict” (2003)