
Political and Military Criteria for Selective Humanitarian Interventions¹

MICHAEL O'HANLON

Research Associate, The Brookings Institution

A poor understanding of military realities has characterized many debates about whether and how to intervene in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Somalia.² Future decisions about whether and how to use U.S. forces to assist countries beset by civil violence can and should do better.

Indeed, they must. However imperfectly past operations of this type have unfolded, and however skeptics may now characterize them, recent history as well as the nature of today's international environment suggest that there will be more in the future. To begin, moral considerations and the U.S. national political ethos will continue to argue in favor of intervention. As a well-known Marine general and veteran of recent military operations in Somalia and Iraq put it, "On the Hill, I was challenged a few times about why we ever get involved in this. Well, we get involved with this because we get asked to do it.... I'll tell you what—I've walked the ground and seen a lot of dead children. I've seen a lot of people who have starved to death or have been brutally massacred alongside a road. And something inside me says, 'Maybe I shouldn't be doing this, but dammit, I *want* to do it.'"³

Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich made a broader point, linking the moral issues involved in humanitarian interventions to the credibility of American foreign policy and the character of the international community. Discussing policy toward the former Yugoslavia, he argued, "When directly challenged, we must be victorious. The notion of a small band of barbarians directly taking on the civilized democracies and winning is a threat to the entire survival and stabil-

ity of this planet. And we should respond to it with whatever level of coercion is ultimately required to communicate the fact that we are serious people.”⁴

General polling data suggests that the American public thinks very pragmatically about the issue of humanitarian intervention; mitigate suffering and conflict where that can be done with high confidence, modest cost, and limited duration, but avoid open-ended commitments and high casualties in countries of little direct importance to the United States. Contrary to much of the post-Mogadishu conventional wisdom on the topic, Americans are not opposed to what are largely humanitarian interventions, even if there exists some risk of casualties to U.S. soldiers. Nor do they believe that military operations to promote peace and security should be limited to situations in which a peace accord is already in place and simply requires monitoring.⁵

Yet a discriminating approach to intervention is absolutely essential. Americans may not fully agree with all the views expressed by those realists who argue that peace operations only make sense in defense of major American interests, or with the so-called Weinberger doctrine as it applies to civil conflicts.⁶ But they probably do agree with the other criteria that those most wary of intervention demand: concrete objectives, a plausible idea of how the mission will be concluded, a rough estimate of how long it will take, reasonable confidence that its fiscal and human costs will be limited, and an estimate of its prospects for bringing lasting peace to a country.⁷ A discriminating approach to intervening also seems essential as a practical matter; there are at least thirty ongoing wars around the world at present, and indeed, some have been raging for decades.⁸ Thus, some way of prioritizing responses to those conflicts is needed.

In addition, handling these types of problems is inherently difficult politically, requiring a great deal of time and detailed study from top-level decision-makers who must understand the peculiarities of a given country if they are to succeed in helping it build a lasting peace.⁹ For example, they must make critical decisions about whether to attack extremist factions, try to arrest war criminals, propose partition of the country at issue, or ban certain types of ethnically based political parties. To attempt too many missions is to increase the chances of failure and risk discrediting the very notion of humanitarian intervention among publics whose support is needed.¹⁰

Washington's decisions about where to participate in selective humanitarian interventions will also be based on factors like a country's proximity to the United States and the degree of linkage between its ethnic groups and key American voting blocs. But these provide an insufficient set of decision-making criteria for a country with the values of the United States. Where suffering is extreme and acute, decisions about intervention should also be based on the prospects for relieving that suffering in a relatively low-cost and durable way.

Outside powers often have military options short of intervention to address serious violence within a given country. Notably, they can make recourse to the use of arms transfers, air strikes, blockades, and the like. But those limited

tools of military involvement are not always adequate. Too many people may be at imminent risk of death, or general military parity among various factions may appear likely to doom a country to protracted conflict.

If trying to help one side win from the sidelines of battle is not a viable policy option, what might the international community do instead? Traditionally, it has focused on peacekeeping missions in which outside forces only deploy after parties to a conflict agree to a ceasefire. Those parties, however, often only accept mediation and some form of ceasefire after reaching a protracted military stalemate. This approach carries the risk that much of an entire country can be destroyed in the meantime. In civil wars, the problem may be worse yet because it is not even clear who should be involved in negotiations and what relative influence they should be granted in those negotiations. Also, peace accords often fall apart, sometimes leading to even worse violence than before.¹¹

Thus, outside powers will often not have a choice between diplomacy and the use of force. If the international community wishes to contain or end a certain conflict rapidly, or at least mitigate its worst effects on society, it will sometimes need to use major military instruments. And it should expect that at least one party to a conflict is likely to contest its intervention violently.¹²

It is possible that the international community could obtain leverage over local parties, or relief for a given persecuted group, by creating a safe haven within or adjacent to the country at issue.¹³ But such partial solutions are most promising for conflicts such as wars of secession, in which a clear victim people can be identified not only by race or religion but by geographic location. For a general breakdown of order, or when dealing with a murderous regime, many civilians throughout a country are likely to be at acute risk. In that case, it may be necessary to make much of the country a safe haven. In other words, it may be necessary to invade, establish control, and temporarily play the role of sovereign over much or all of a country's territory.

A military operation intended to restore order in this way might be termed a peace enforcement operation or peace imposition.¹⁴ However, it is probably better to leave the adjective "peace" entirely out of the terminology and describe it as intervention to restore order. Outside powers should emphasize from the start, however, that the goal of their operation is to respect the principle of sovereignty by quickly restoring rule to a representative—or at least a fair—indigenous government.¹⁵

In considering any humanitarian operation, there is a natural trade-off between intervening early and intervening late. Conventional wisdom holds that the use of force should be a last resort, employed only after diplomacy and other measures have been attempted and found wanting. In addition, in many civil wars, it is difficult to know the true strength and motivations of a given rebel movement early in the conflict. In some cases, it may be best to let rebels try to fight and lose; in others, it may be desirable that they have a chance to win without the hindrance of outside peacemakers. For example, an external intervention

in Zaire's refugee crisis of late 1996 that sought simply to impose a ceasefire and allow refugees to be fed might have done more harm than good. Had it prevented the "banyamulenge" from driving Hutu extremists out of the camps, it would have perpetuated a problem that was in fact largely solved by the unfettered actions of regional participants in the conflict.

On the other hand, it is highly desirable to intervene as soon as possible in a conflict that seems destined to be severe. The humanitarian benefits of doing so are often obvious. In addition, though it is sometimes said that civil wars must

Intervening early is usually difficult, but policymakers should not shrink from difficult decisions.

burn themselves out before peace is possible, they can accelerate as easily as they can reach some natural exhaustion point. The bitterness war engenders, and its tendency to enhance the power and influence of destructive leaders and groups while weakening or eliminating constructive forces in society, can add to the momentum of war for a substantial period of time

before it begins to recede.¹⁶ Even in places where wars do finally seem to burn themselves out, it is often only after many years.

Intervening early is usually difficult. But policymakers should not shrink from difficult decisions on the pretext that they must give all non-military instruments of policy their full due. In Amin's Uganda or the Interahamwe's Rwanda, for example, early intervention would have been fully justified by the situation—and highly desirable.

One can be fairly specific about how to conduct a forcible humanitarian intervention to seize temporary control of a country. It is possible to be confident about successfully completing the mission's basic military steps—provided that a top-notch Western force, preferably that of the United States, provides significant assets, including strategic and tactical airlift and combat forces.

Exit strategies are critical in these types of missions. Any humanitarian intervention of the type considered here is much more than a military deployment. Unless outside forces simply choose to help one side win a war, or provide general security to relieve acute suffering and then depart without improving the basic security landscape of a country, they will wind up conducting elements of "nation-building." Which groups they choose to involve in such processes and which they choose to exclude or even treat as adversaries will have much to say about the country's future prospects (as will decisions about whether or not to countenance partition of a country). Given the sensitivities that most Americans have about nation-building activities in the post-Vietnam, post-Lebanon, post-Somalia era, it is hardly necessary to elaborate on the associated dangers. Yet, it is equally important not to dismiss such efforts. After all, the international community has

been undertaking numerous nation-building—perhaps better described as “state-building”—activities of late, like holding elections, improving police and security forces, and assisting economic reconstruction in the wake of civil wars. The question is not whether to try in the abstract, but what to do in a specific case.

What of the likely budgetary and human costs associated with intervention? The former are fairly predictable on a day-to-day and month-to-month basis, and already rather familiar to those who have followed recent operations in places such as Panama, Somalia, and Bosnia: generally one to several billion dollars a year in marginal expenditures. That range covers most operations of interest, generally requiring roughly 20,000 to 60,000 uniformed personnel. Forces of that size are appropriate for interventions in most small to moderate-size countries, assuming potentially hostile forces numbering in the thousands or low tens of thousands.

Five other conclusions follow from my political-military analysis. Each can be summarized briefly here. First, intervention to seize control of a relatively small country characterized by semi-organized yet severe violence is eminently feasible. However, transport and logistics capabilities are at a premium, and rapid maneuver is very important. For these reasons, U.S. military participation is generally a prerequisite to success, though the French and British may be able to handle the lead role in smaller operations.

Second, deaths and other casualties to intervening forces are very likely to occur. They might total a very small number (as in the case of the U.S. invasion of Haiti in 1994), but would more commonly reach into the dozens or low hundreds (as they did in Panama and Somalia). They could number in the high hundreds if the country in which they were intervening had reasonably well-equipped armies, difficult terrain, or dedicated fighters; should all of those circumstances coincide, casualties to intervening forces could exceed 1,000. Simply put, infantry combat is difficult and dangerous. Although Western advantages in technologies such as night-vision devices and helicopters, as well as rigorous training, give advanced forces a substantial edge, they do not permit the same type of asymmetrical and stand-off fighting techniques that characterized Desert Storm. If I might be forgiven for lapsing briefly into Vietnam-like body counting, intervening forces would do well to inflict 5 to 10 casualties for every one they suffered.

Third, there is virtually nothing of a military nature that outside forces can do to prevent the possibility of protracted guerrilla resistance against their intervention. Even if the initial phases of seizing key infrastructure and establishing general order are accomplished promptly and at modest cost—as is likely in most countries of interest—sustained resistance is entirely possible thereafter. It could lead to several times as many deaths among intervening soldiers as would be incurred during the initial phases of the operation.

But fourth, the odds of such resistance hinge partly on the politics of the country at issue—and an informed judgment about those politics should there-

fore be part of any decision to intervene. In some cases, interveners will by their simple presence and capabilities intimidate virtually all possible opposition and be able to establish order and help rekindle reconstruction. In others, they will be tested by factions or leaders with little interest in a democratic process and a willingness to suffer casualties in order to drive interveners out of their country.

Fifth, and finally, the likelihood of dedicated resistance is often also a sensitive function of how an intervention is conducted and what its goals are. For example, policymakers may elect to have their armed forces attack and weaken an extremist indigenous group in a given country. Or they may choose to "live and let live," focusing their energies instead on building up the country's domestic security institutions in the hope that those institutions will someday be able to contain extremists on their own. The decisions outsiders make could easily and significantly affect their own casualty rate and the overall prospects for the country's long-term recovery from war.

Sometimes, risking more casualties to intervening forces may improve the long-term prospects for peace. But in other cases it may not; for example, allowing an extremist faction or ethnic group to secede from a country may limit risks to intervening forces and also improve the chances for lasting peace in the region. A number of these points can be well illustrated by reference to multinational interventions in Somalia in 1992–1993, and in Bosnia through the early- to mid-1990s. Consider first the mission in Somalia. Many mistakes were made in that intervention, but most of them were political rather than military. National military leaders deserve part of the responsibility for the mission's shortcomings since they knew at least as much about the overall political-military situation in Somalia as anyone else, and were involved in crucial decisions like whether to pursue General Aideed. But leaders and troops on the ground performed well. It is difficult to imagine better tactics or other improvements that would have assured a more favorable outcome.¹⁷

The militaries of the United States and its allies established control over key facilities, maintained proper patrols, set up good human intelligence networks, and prevailed decisively in most firefights—with the notable exception of the slaying of 24 Pakistani peacekeepers in June 1993. They seriously weakened General Aideed's forces in the fateful fight of October 1993, in which eighteen U.S. servicemen lost their lives. They probably could have significantly diminished his faction's strength vis-à-vis the others in Somalia had they been willing to engage Aideed's forces again and sustain comparable numbers of casualties over the next few weeks. Doing so might have given other factions an opportunity to form a coalition government and unified security forces.

Pursuing Aideed would have been a perfectly sound policy, had the risks been recognized and President Clinton been prepared to rally public and Congressional support for the operation despite those risks. Intervening simply to ease the humanitarian catastrophe and then withdraw would also have been an

acceptable and self-consistent policy. What was unacceptable was trying to do the former while giving the public and its representatives on Capitol Hill the impression that risks were no greater than those associated with the latter.

The case of Bosnia illustrates the importance of choosing a mission mandate that is consistent with the political-military realities of a given country. Early calls for intervention there to defeat Serb forces and reimpose a unified Bosnian state under the Muslim-led government might well have incited dedicated guerilla resistance by the Serbs. On the other hand, operations to drive Serb forces from specific tracts of land clearly were possible at limited cost, as combined Croat-Muslim forces demonstrated in late 1995. Also, the earlier use of air strikes to destroy artillery being used in ethnic cleansing operations or to break the siege of Sarajevo could probably have helped protect populations and facilitate peace talks—just as it ultimately did in the months before Dayton.

In the aftermath of the Dayton accords, keeping the peace has proven relatively safe for the IFOR and SFOR forces. But in all likelihood, using troops from NATO states and other countries to pursue war criminals on a large scale and forcibly resettle refugees would be considerably riskier. For that reason, it has been wise not to use them for

such purposes. Directly opposing ethnic cleansing and genocide in Bosnia when they were occurring would have been a defensible policy; using limited force to help along a peace process and then using outside forces to keep the peace has been a self-consistent and con-

The case of Bosnia illustrates the importance of choosing a mission mandate that is consistent with political-military realities.

structive policy as well. But easing into an aggressive military mission through the back door of a peace agreement is neither honest with the American people nor likely to maintain public support should U.S. casualties result. In fact, that policy—still being advocated by many individuals as of this writing—would risk repeating the very mistakes that afflicted U.S. and UN policy in Somalia.

Given the inadvisability of those operations, the lack of meaningful progress toward reintegration of the three Bosnian entities into a single state, the continued existence of three largely hostile armed forces within the country's territory, and the international community's mounting desire to leave Bosnia soon, another conclusion also seems inescapable. It is time to call a spade a spade, and allow Bosnia to be divided into three separate entities. Doing so soon, while outside forces are still in the country, will allow tempers to cool and access agreements over disputed regions like the Brcko corridor to be worked out before the Bosnians are again on their own. Umbrella organizations governing not only transit routes and shared infrastructure but economic cooperation, protection of minor-

ity rights, and other matters of shared concern are needed within Bosnia, to be sure. But they should not be confused with a single national government.

These examples underscore both the potential and the limitations of forcible intervention. They should help brace policymakers for the types of risks and costs that could be involved in future operations—and convince them of the need to make explicit decisions about tradeoffs as well as to lobby their publics to support whatever mission mandate and exit strategy are adopted.

There do not appear to be any straightforward modifications to military technology, strategy, or tactics that could make such operations substantially less risky. At the same time, if the emergence of a snowballing guerrilla resistance movement is unlikely, and if outside parties are willing to pay a modest blood price in any intervention—two very big “if’s”—they will generally be able to prevail in such situations, and help give local populations an opportunity to form new governments and reconstruct their countries. 

Endnotes

¹ This article draws significantly from the forthcoming Brookings Institution manuscript, “*Saving Lives with Force*”.

² These missions were not complete failures; the operation in Bosnia is providing a reasonable prospect for the peace accord to take hold, and the operation in Somalia kept alive many tens of thousands of people who would probably not have otherwise survived. Still, these missions should have been more effective, and were not seen as successes by those publics whose support for peace operations and related interventions is crucial to their political viability. For a discussion of what constitutes success in such missions, see William J. Durch, *The Evolution of UN Peacekeeping* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993) 12; John L. Hirsch and Robert B. Oakley, *Somalia and Operation Restore Hope* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, 1995) 150.

³ Lieutenant General Anthony Zinni, U.S. Marine Corps, “It's Not Nice and Neat,” *Proceedings*, (August 1995) 29.

⁴ See Norman Kempster, “Gingrich Proposes U.S.-Led Bosnia Force,” *Los Angeles Times* (10 July 1995:3)

⁵ See Steven Kull, “What the Public Knows that Washington Doesn't,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 101 (Winter 1995-96):102–115. More plausibly, perhaps, but still encouragingly, a recent University of Texas study found that 459 randomly selected participants in a three-day study group, who had initially considered current foreign aid spending too high by a factor of more than 2:1, were evenly split on the matter at the end of their conference.

Americans would seem sympathetic to the logic of Rwanda's current ambassador to the United Nations, Manzi Bakuramutsa, who argued in 1994 that “...United Nations peacekeepers go somewhere when there is not much danger....In Rwanda we have films of people begging to be protected in the genocide. And the peacekeepers left.” See Barbara Crossette, “When This Rwandan Speaks, the Big Guys Listen,” *New York Times*, 27 December 1995: A4.

⁶ As Secretary of Defense Weinberger argued in 1984, “We should only engage *our* troops if we must do so as a matter of our *own* vital national interest. We cannot assume for other sovereign nations the responsibility to defend *their* territory—without their strong invitation—when our own freedom is not threatened.” See Caspar W. Weinberger, “The Uses of Military Power,” Speech

to National Press Club (Washington, DC, 28 November 1984).

⁷ For a similar set of criteria, see Colin L. Powell, "U.S. Forces: Challenges Ahead," *Foreign Affairs*, 71, no. 5 (Winter 1992/93):38; for others, see Senator John McCain, "The Proper U.S. Role in Peacemaking," in Dennis J. Quinn, ed., *Peace Support Operations and the U.S. Military* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1994) 89–90; and President Clinton's May 1994 directive on peace operations, PDD-25.

⁸ Roughly half of those wars are causing casualties at the rate of at least 1,000 deaths per year. International Negotiation Network, *State of World Conflict Report 1994-1995* (Atlanta, Ga.: Carter Center, 1995) 4, 60; Boutros Boutros-Ghali, *An Agenda for Peace* (New York: United Nations, 1992) 7.

⁹ Ambassador James F. Dobbins, "Haiti: A Case Study in Post-Cold War Peacekeeping," Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, II, no. I, (October 1995):5.

¹⁰ For a similar viewpoint, see Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Sarah Sewall, "Peace Enforcement and the United Nations," in Dennis J. Quinn, *Peace Support Operations and the U.S. Military* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1994) 104.

¹¹ I. William Zartman, "Dynamics and Constraints in Negotiations in Internal Conflicts," in I. William Zartman, ed., *Elusive Peace: Negotiating an End to Civil Wars* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1995) 18; William J. Durch, "Getting Involved: The Political-Military Context," in William J. Durch, ed., *The Evolution of UN Peacekeeping: Case Studies and Comparative Analysis* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993) 8, 21–22; Fred Charles Ikle, *Every War Must End* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971) 106.

¹² For similar views, see Durch, 25; Richard K. Betts, "The Delusion of Impartial Intervention," *Foreign Affairs* 73, no. 6 (November/December 1994):20–33; and Stephen John Stedman, "Alchemy for a New World Order," *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 3 (May/June 1995):17–18.

¹³ For a concurring opinion, see Richard N. Haass, *Intervention: The Use of American Military Force in the Post-Cold War World* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment, 1994) 87–100.

¹⁴ For a good description of many of the different types of peace-related operations now being used or contemplated, see Headquarters, Department of the Army, *FM 100-23: Peace Operations* (December 1994):2–15; see also Boutros Boutros-Ghali, *An Agenda for Peace* (New York: United Nations, 1992); and Executive Office of the President, "The Clinton Administration's Policy on Reforming Multilateral Peace Operations," (May 1994) 12.

¹⁵ See for example, Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1977) 101–108; Francis M. Deng, Sadikiel Kimaro, Terrence Lyons, Donald Rothchild, and I. William Zartman, *Sovereignty as Responsibility* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1996).

¹⁶ Terrence Lyons and Ahmed I. Samatar, *Somalia: State Collapse, Multilateral Intervention, and Strategies for Political Reconstruction* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1995) 31; Michael S. Lund, *Preventing Violent Conflicts* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, 1996) 14–15.

¹⁷ Though helicopters might have been operated differently in any subsequent missions, given their unexpected vulnerability to Somali rocket-propelled grenades as evidenced on October 3, 1993, they would not have been effective if kept at too great a distance—and other vulnerabilities of the force would have remained as well.