

INTERVENTION

- The Politics of Force

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Abstract

Among the most difficult decisions faced by Western leaders and policy-makers are whether – and, if so, how – to mount an intervention into a failed or failing state to deal with humanitarian catastrophe or a threat to international order. Such ventures are invariably controversial and the success rate has been mixed – while there have been few outright failures, the commitment of forces by the intervening power(s) has often been greater and for longer than initially expected. Policy makers base their decisions on information from various sources. By placing intervention at the intersection of a number of related (sometimes precursor, sometimes consequent) phenomena – civil war, insurgency and occupation – this essay seeks to elicit some insights from recent and current academic research into those phenomena. It does not seek to draw “lessons” as such – many commentators have offered these (and some are simply blinding glimpses of the obvious). Rather, the insights identified offer ways of framing the issues that may help policy makers reach decisions that are less intuitive and more informed – and thus less likely to be plagued by unforeseen consequences.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is about military interventions by states or coalitions of states in the affairs of other states. Typically, such interventions respond to:

- civil conflict;
- humanitarian catastrophe, including genocide and “ethnic cleansing”;
- “failed states” which have given rise to these phenomena or contain other threats to international order (such as terrorists exploiting “ungoverned spaces”).

Interventions are almost invariably controversial. This is not only because of the normal presumption in international law against states interfering in the domestic affairs of other states, but also because of the political issues that they raise within the intervening states themselves – what “national interest” is at stake?; are the costs/opportunity costs of the intervention justified?; and so on.

For the policy makers of an intervening state, interventions can entail becoming deeply drawn into the political and social dynamics of countries and societies of which they have little direct knowledge. They struggle to find appropriate analogies against which to calibrate proposed courses of action – and to explain them to their, sometimes skeptical, publics. Decisions made in haste may entail lengthy repentance; failing to act promptly to a challenge risks losing control of events. In terms of meeting objectives, the success record of recent interventions has been mixed. Many have succeeded in “stopping the killing” – but only after significant missteps along the way and/or the continuing commitment of seemingly disproportionately large resources. Not untypical is a comment by a leading commentator in the field that, with respect to humanitarian interventions, “...too often what happened...was too little too late, misconceived, poorly resourced, poorly executed, or all of the above.”¹ With the exception of the “too little too late,” many observers would apply the same epithets to the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq.

¹ Gareth Evans, “When is it Right to Fight?,” *Survival*, Vol. 46, No 3 (Autumn 2004), p. 62

Interventions find themselves at the intersection of a number of phenomena. They can involve “peacekeeping” after civil conflict; “peacemaking” during civil conflict; asymmetric warfare and counter-insurgency operations; occupation; and “nation-building”. An intervention may help end a civil war – only for the intervening force to find itself (a) facing an insurgency by a disenfranchised party and/or (b) having to adopt a posture that could reasonably be characterized as a *de facto* occupation. In the process, the intervening force may also encounter culturally alien tactics like suicide attacks. All of this taxes the judgment of policy makers, whether on the spot or in capitals. Their decisions – often in highly dynamic circumstances – spell success or failure. My starting point – which I think is sufficiently self-evident that it needs no extended explication – is that structural factors alone do not predetermine the outcome; human agency is critical.

This essay considers how the findings of recent academic research might inform policy makers’ decisions on interventions, addressing less the question of “whether” to intervene as “how.” Part 1 “sets the scene,” examining definitional issues and how our understanding of the role and scope of interventions has developed over time. Part 2 reviews some recent academic work. Part 3 seeks to put the issue into the wider context of states. And Part 4 draws some conclusions.

PART 1 - BACKGROUND

Definition

This essay uses a definition of “intervention” derived from two older, but still authoritative, works by R. J. Vincent² and Michael Walzer.³ It:

- is an effort by a state, coalition of states or international organization to affect the internal correlation of forces within the target state;

² R J Vincent, *Nonintervention and International Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p.13

³ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (Basic Books, 1977), p.86

- involves the use of armed forces in a coercive or deterrent role (through the use, or threat of use, of force);
- is limited, in the sense that no permanent conquest or annexation of the target state is foreseen;
- is recognized as being contrary to the normal presumption against intervention in international law, but is seen as a justified by exceptional circumstances.

This definition is not perfect, but it covers most of the episodes that have been popularly described as “interventions” in recent years. It is a moot point whether the invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq in 2003 is covered by the definition. On the one hand, the United States sought only to remove the Ba’athist regime and then withdraw – no permanent conquest or changes to external boundaries was foreseen. On the other, the conventionally understood “exceptional circumstances” did not apply – at that time, there was no civil war, humanitarian catastrophe or terrorist bases inside the heartland of Iraq. Given post-2003 developments, however, to discuss intervention without mentioning Iraq would be strangely artificial.

The Debate about Intervention

There has been much debate in academic and policy making circles about the merits or otherwise of interventions and about how (or how not) to conduct them. Outside the academy, it is still widely believed that the end of the cold war somehow unleashed various pent up forces which have challenged the conscience and will to act of an international community no longer paralyzed by fear of nuclear escalation. In fact, the number of new civil wars started in the 1990s was close to the average over the previous four decades – and more civil wars ended as the superpowers stopped funding their

proxies.⁴ And interventions are nothing new. But previously they were generally unilateral and, at least in theory, covert attempts to support one warring faction. In the post cold war period, they have more often been multilateral, overt efforts to separate warring factions. The key change has therefore been more from the perspective of the intervening powers than that of the target states themselves: the end of the cold war provided more opportunity to intervene; an authorizing mechanism (an “un-blocked” Security Council); and more capability (forces no longer tied to the Central Front in Europe).

A further shift in perspective arose from the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. Previously much of the debate was about whether intervention was the right response to the “something must be done” impulse of concerned Western publics at the sight of civil conflict and attendant atrocities. There was the option of saying “no”, if an intervention seemed likely to be expensive or to have a low likelihood of success. 9/11 showed that the “basket cases” of the international state system were not just affronts to human decency, but could harbor threats to the homelands of the major powers. So intervention became part of strategies to fight “terrorists” at a distance. These strategies were adopted explicitly by the United States in the National Security Strategy 2002,⁵ by the United Kingdom in the Strategic Defence Review New Chapter 2002,⁶ and even in the European Union’s European Security Strategy published in 2003.⁷

Finally, the period has seen a developing consensus in support of the proposition that the international community has a responsibility to intervene to protect people from genocide and other man-made catastrophes when their own states manifestly fail to do so. The concept of the *Responsibility to Protect* was endorsed by the UN World Summit in 2005. But there are, as yet, no Security Council-agreed guidelines for when the more extreme

⁴ Monica Duffy Toft, *Peace through Security: Making Negotiated Settlements Stick*, unpublished manuscript: Harvard University, 2006, p.6.

⁵ National Security Strategy of the United States, September 2002, p.6

⁶ Strategic Defence Review New Chapter, Cm5566, July 2002, Section 2, para 9.

⁷ European Security Strategy, December 2003, Section 2, p.7.

measures – such as the use of force – should or should not be mobilized.⁸ To this writer at least, it is not apparent that the *Responsibility to Protect* has yet had any real impact on the way in which the international community responds to crises or that it has provided a bridge between those states that highlight the responsibilities of the international community and those that highlight the sovereignty of states.

As already noted, it is a common perception among policy makers and opinion formers that recent interventions have a mixed record of success. This perception tends to be corroborated by academic research. Even where an intervention succeeds in “stopping the killing,” it may be seen as subsequently stymieing the political and economic development of the county concerned, to the disadvantage of its inhabitants and the considerable continuing material – and sometimes human – cost to the intervening powers. Although they publicly laud the success of individual interventions (or specific operations within them), policy makers sometimes worry that the intervening agents have become “part of the problem.” The presence of an international pro-consul saves local politicians from having to take tough decisions, while the needs of international forces and bureaucracies provide easy pickings for local businesses. A “dependency culture” can emerge and self-perpetuate. Frustrations on these points among policy makers/ opinion formers were apparent in relation to the Balkans in the early 2000s and are again in relation to Iraq now. While such frustrations are understandable, it is important that they do not drive bad decisions.

So something is not right. But does it matter? The operations in Afghanistan and Iraq appear to have induced some “intervention fatigue,” at least among the Western powers. Despite some public pressure from citizens groups – and notwithstanding various official statements of concern – the United States and the United Kingdom have not forced the issue on Darfur. One can also see the emergence of a potentially influential academic critique of intervention as recently practiced combined with a postulated alternative approach – I return to this later.

⁸ See Gareth Evans, *Conflict Prevention: Ten Lessons We Have Learned* (Closing Keynote Address given at the University of Toronto, 4 February 2007), available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org>

But, in the meantime, it is not difficult to identify potential future trouble-spots – and some may be too big to ignore. There are a number of “weak” states in strategically sensitive regions. Such states are typified by large and rapidly growing populations; internal ethnic and sectarian pressures; environmental degradation; and state institutions which can barely cope. Many, if not all, are likely to experience changes in weather patterns consequent on global warming within the near term. These changes could exacerbate the factors mentioned above and accelerate the occurrence of state “failure.”

So even if the next few years see no new large-scale humanitarian interventions, it would be a pity – when the time comes – if the international community’s decisions are not informed by knowledge distilled from study of the experiences of the last decade or so.

PART 2 - RESEARCH

Approach

This essay does not purport to be a piece of original scholarship or a synthesis of all relevant academic work. The intellectual excavation required is beyond the resources available to me. Instead, and continuing the archeological analogy, it is more the presentation of finds from some trial trenches dug at random across the site. It seeks to capture some of the principal insights from recent research and derive some pointers of relevance to policy makers. I have reviewed in particular research undertaken by (mainly American) political scientists who employ quantitative approaches – building large (large-*n*) data sets, testing hypotheses against the data using techniques such as regression analysis, and illustrating the more plausible via multiple case studies. These approaches may seem rather exotic to some policy makers. They may be suspicious of the quality of data used and thus the conclusions derived, seeing the process as one of “garbage in, garbage out”. I do not claim to understand every aspect of the statistical methodologies used. But, I submit, it is not necessary to do so before one can consider the work’s potential policy implications (any more than policy-analysts need to understand the

precise scientific techniques used to measure temperatures over time before they can consider the policy implications of research on climate change). The key is that any such work should be subject to rigorous peer review before wider release – which, from my observation, it certainly is. *Conversely*, while political scientists are often conscious of their work’s potential policy relevance, the latter is not their primary concern: it is not a criticism to say that concluding “Policy Implications” sections sometimes seem to have the air of after-thoughts.

Is this worth doing? Surely policy makers learn from the experiences of their own, or related, institutions in past interventions and apply the lessons appropriately to current and prospective ones? To some degree at least, they do. The question is whether they always do so soundly. The record might suggest otherwise. With the exception of Iraq, we have few insiders’ accounts of the decision making processes before and during recent interventions. But what we know suggests that assessments and decisions relating to interventions have often been vulnerable to the cognitive “short-cuts” known to psychologists as “heuristics”. These have, in turn, been informed by details drawn from familiar analogies. Such cognitive “short-cuts” are common in everyday life – and any resulting misjudgments have relatively limited consequences. It is not so in the case of interventions. Expectations can be unrealistic; mindsets can become fixed. Having authorized an intervention, policy makers may be slow to recognize changes in context which could require adapting the approach. Take, for example, Iraq: political scrutiny of the invasion plans appears to have been heavily influenced by the relatively easy recent success in Afghanistan; political decision makers were slow to recognize in the early summer of 2003 the onset of an insurgency; and then slow to accept in 2006 that this had spawned a civil war.

Research cannot be used to derive a set of laws. But it can at least offer a wider evidence base on which to make decisions. As one scholar⁹ has observed, this has become common practice in monetary policy making and it does not appear to be especially burdensome. So why not in policy making on matters of life and death?

⁹ Patrick Regan, *Civil Wars and Foreign Powers* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), p. 148

Scope and Character

The academic *corpus* takes many forms. There are a number of analyses of interventions, mainly of an historical character. There is considerable research by political scientists on civil wars, dating mainly from the mid-1990s and continuing to grow: I have focused on that research most pertinent to the efficacy of interventions (rather than work on other aspects such as the treatment of non-combatants). There is a smaller but also growing body of research on insurgencies. And there is some work on occupations. Dialogue between the three areas appears to have been relatively limited – mainstream academe seems more comfortable with civil wars, leaving the other two areas to professionals (such as ex-military officers), pundits and some brave academic pioneers. In tandem, there is a growing body of research on the motivations of terrorists (and, particularly, recruits for suicide attacks) which provides an indication of the attitudes of people who – to the chagrin and apparent incomprehension of some Western politicians – resist obviously well-intentioned intervention forces. There is also the work of a number of scholars, mainly academic lawyers, into the challenges of rebuilding the “rule of law” in failed states. A useful recent conspectus is *Can Might Make Rights?*¹⁰ by Jane Stromseth, David Wippman and Rosa Brooks. Again, the dialogue between such work by legal scholars and research by political scientists into the nature of civil conflicts appears to be relatively limited.

Specific mention should be made of two projects to bring together the insights of scholars and practitioners. The RAND Corporation’s history of Nation-Building has studied 16 post-World War 2 case-studies; its latest volume¹¹ seeks to summarize best practice. Finally, the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy, at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, has organized through its *Project on the Means of*

¹⁰ Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006

¹¹ James Dutton et al, *Beginner’s Guide to Nation-Building* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2007)

*Intervention*¹² a number of multi-disciplinary workshops on various aspects of intervention. Not unreasonably, it has a particular focus on the protection of human rights. Both the RAND and Carr Center projects draw heavily on historical analysis and rather less on social science.

The Limits of “Lessons”

The RAND “guide book” (sic) describes itself as “a doctrine for conducting effective nation-building operations”.¹³ It makes a number of sensible recommendations, including the following:

- take advantage of the time normally available to undertake detailed planning, covering both the civilian and military components of the mission;
- ensure a match between *means* (i.e. personnel and money) and *ends* (in terms of the degree of imposed social transformation envisaged);
- find ways to engage neighboring states constructively;
- give first priority to establishing public security and humanitarian relief, with disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) of former combatants as the next priority;
- efforts to reform the police and rebuild the judiciary and corrections systems need to proceed together;
- reconstruct quickly the target state’s capability to allocate donor funding and to collect its own revenue;

¹² Available at www.ksg.harvard.edu/cchrp

¹³ Dutton et al, op cit, p. ix

- ideally, national elections should be preceded by DDR of former combatants, the growth of civil society, independent media and political parties, and the holding of local elections;
- focus on emergency repair of infrastructure, not new investment.
- take maximum advantage of the “golden hour” immediately following the end of major combat operations.¹⁴

The problem with such lessons is that they do not answer the really hard questions. Of course policy makers should match ends and means, but where should one set the level of ambition in terms of transforming a war-torn society? Should the policy drive the resources or the resources the policy? They also do not provide a firm basis for resisting siren voices arguing expediently that, notwithstanding “lessons” from previous experience, the case in hand is somehow “different”. Although in theory “the lead-up to most nation-building missions affords ample time for detailed planning”¹⁵ and thus opportunities to iron-out some of these tricky issues, in practice much of that time risks being absorbed by debates – between and within governments – over *whether* to intervene at all.

Findings from the Field

Civil Wars

There are generally accepted academic definitions of civil wars. Criteria include:

- the focus of the war is control of the political unit;

¹⁴ Ibid, pp. xix-xxxvi

¹⁵ Ibid, p. xix

- there are at least two organized groups of combatants;
- the state is one of these groups;
- there are at least 1000 battle deaths per year on average;
- the ratio of deaths is at least 95 percent to five per cent (that is , the stronger side suffers at least five percent of the losses);
- the war starts within the boundaries of an internationally recognized state.¹⁶

Depending on precisely which criteria are used, there have been well over a hundred civil wars – or intra-state conflicts – since the end of World War II. Patrick Regan has identified 138 intra-state conflicts between 1945 and 1995 – of which 89 attracted third-party intervention. Since many conflicts have attracted multiple interveners, he calculates that there were 194 individual interventions during the period.¹⁷ Monica Toft’s criteria produce the slightly smaller number of 134 civil wars in the post-war period up to 2000.

The findings from such analyses include:

- conflicts which attract intervention tend to last longer than those that do not – and the greater the number of interveners, the longer the conflict.¹⁸
- conflicts which attract intervention tend to be bloodier than those that do not.¹⁹
- if success is defined as bringing about a six month (or longer) respite from fighting, about 30 percent of interventions into civil wars have been successful.²⁰

¹⁶ I have taken these criteria from Monica Duffy Toft, *op cit*, p. 8. They are a pragmatic conflation of criteria originally developed by other scholars (and widely used).

¹⁷ Regan, *op cit*, p. 27

¹⁸ Regan, *op cit*, p. 31

¹⁹ Regan, *op cit*, p. 33

- interventions in support of the government side are more likely to succeed than those supporting the opposition.²¹
- interventions are generally more likely to succeed when a conflict is intense (10,000+ casualties) – although not when a conflict is very intense (*circa* 1 million casualties).²²
- interventions into intense ideological conflicts have had a lower chance of success than those into religious or ethnic conflicts.²³
- interventions supporting the opposition have a greater chance of success if a mixed strategy is employed, namely one using both military and economic means (such as sanctions).²⁴
- over the 1945-2000 period, 60 percent of civil wars were ended by military victories of one side over the other, 18 percent by negotiated settlements, and nine per cent by ceasefires/ stalemates.²⁵
- but the pattern changed over the period: whereas military victories ended about 75 percent of civil wars up to and including the 1980s, they ended only about 40 percent in the 1990s – probably reflecting a greater propensity of the international community to intervene.²⁶
- civil wars ended by military victories are least likely to recur: over the 1945-2000 period, only 12 percent of such wars recurred compared with about 33 percent of

²⁰ Regan, op cit, p. 29

²¹ Regan op cit, p. 29

²² Regan, op cit, p. 93

²³ Regan, op cit, p. 95

²⁴ Regan, op cit, p. 98

²⁵ Toft, op cit, p. 10

²⁶ Toft, op cit, p. 11

civil wars ending in ceasefires/stalemates and about 30 percent of wars ending in negotiated settlements.²⁷

Asymmetric Conflicts

Simply put, an asymmetric conflict is one in which one side is possessed of overwhelming power with respect to its adversary. More scientifically, and borrowing the coding used by one of the most recent studies, a conflict is asymmetric if the *halved* product of one actor's military strength (armed forces and population) exceeds the *simple* product of its adversary's military strength by 5:1 or more.²⁸

- Over time, strong actors are losing more and more asymmetric conflicts – strong actors won almost 90 percent of such conflicts in the first half of the nineteenth century, compared with just under 50 percent in the second half of the twentieth century.²⁹
- Typically, weak actors employ unconventional or indirect strategic approaches (such as guerilla warfare). In conflicts during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, strong actors were more likely to defeat weak ones if they adopted the same broad strategic approach as their adversaries (that is, unconventional or indirect) than if they used a different one (that is, conventional or direct).³⁰
- Yet, over the same period (and somewhat counter-intuitively), an increasing proportion of asymmetric conflicts were characterized by the two sides using different strategic approaches. And, in almost 80 percent of conflicts, the losing actor stuck to the same strategic approach.³¹

²⁷ Toft, op cit, p. 13

²⁸ Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.43

²⁹ Arreguin-Toft, *ibid*, p. 4

³⁰ Arreguin-Toft, *ibid*, p. 44

³¹ Arreguin-Toft, *ibid*, p. 37

Occupations

An occupation can be defined as the temporary control of a territory by another state that claims no right to permanent control over that territory.³²

- Of 24 completed occupations since 1815, 29 percent were successes, 17 percent had mixed outcomes, and 54 percent were predominately failures.³³
- Occupations which aim to rebuild the occupied country's political and economic structures ("comprehensive" occupations) are far more likely to be successful than occupations aiming only to prevent the occupied country becoming a threat ("security" occupations).³⁴

Clearly, these findings beg a host of methodological questions. What are the rules for case selection and are they applied consistently? Do the start and end points skew the results? (One obvious point is that civil wars have been frequent enough that scholars can draw reasonably robust conclusions from data sets covering the last half-a-century; for asymmetric wars and occupations, they have to go back 200 years.) How precisely are "winning", "losing", "success", "failure" defined? But, even in the most benign circumstances, policy-makers have to work with incomplete and possibly contradictory data. That is a not a good reason for falling back on intuition or hunch. With data sets as large as those used in these studies, it seems unlikely that some re-coding at the margins would have a huge impact on the results.

Conversely, policy-makers must, however, be careful not to draw simplistic "lessons". It would be wrong to jump gleefully to the conclusion that these results support the view expressed by various pundits over the years that the international community should never intervene in civil wars because that simply protracts them and the attendant suffering. While one can see the dynamic by which successive third-party interventions

³² David M Edelstein, "Occupational Hazards: Why Military Occupations Succeed or Fail," *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Summer 2004), p. 52

³³ David M Edelstein, *ibid*, p. 57

³⁴ Edelstein, *op cit*, p. 80

might protract a civil war, it may be precisely the longer (and more intense) civil wars that attract intervention. Similarly, ideological conflicts may have been more resistant to intervention not because they are intrinsically more intractable than ethnic or religious ones, but because – in the cold war context of much of the post-World War II period – an intervention on one side has tended to provoke a balancing intervention on the other.

Similarly, Arreguin-Toft’s findings on strategic interaction might seem a blinding glimpse of the obvious – there are examples from antiquity onwards of regular armies employing regular campaign strategies (and tactics) suffering catastrophic defeats at the hands of “barbarians” and the like. Yet commanders (who, on the whole, are not stupid) continue to employ conventional strategies against unconventional ones – presumably believing that, against the odds, “this time” it will be different.

Putting such quibbles aside, the findings remind us that that actions produce reactions – and that a range of outcomes is always possible. They also provide a foundation for observations that have some relevance to decisions on interventions and the attitude of mind with which policy-makers approach those decisions: the chances of success are rather less than even; a minimalist approach may not necessarily be the best one; the politically correct approach to civil wars of being neutral and bringing the parties to the negotiating table (rather than changing the correlation of forces so that one side wins outright) may be counter-productive in the longer-term; and being adaptive is not just important but an essential ingredient of success.

PART 3 - CONTEXT

Decision-making

Decisions to intervene in a civil war or other crisis in another state are taken in the first instance by the national governments of the intervening states regardless of the ultimate form of the intervention. Governments need to decide whether to commit their own

forces and/or to support a UN resolution endorsing an intervention by a single power or multilateral coalition. Whatever high-sounding moral rhetoric may be deployed in specific cases, I assume that policy-makers generally seek to take such decisions against a rational utilitarian framework, balancing costs against benefits.³⁵ On this basis, policy makers need to identify:

- the costs of intervention. These will be *material* (costs of transporting forces; repairing damaged or worn equipment, and replacing expended ordnance or equipment destroyed in combat operations) and *human* (loss of life and limb). They will also be *political* – whatever decision is made, there is likely to be criticism from some constituency of opinion or another (the intervention will be seen as “too little, too late” or “too big, too soon”, and so on).
- the benefits of intervention. These will be less tangible. Helping to stop a civil war or humanitarian crisis in another state may bring domestic and international acclaim – hence political benefit. It may also prevent refugee flows which could, in time, attract costs. And it could reduce the risk posed by the civil war to regional stability – which could avoid possible future costs.

Fundamental will be the assessment of likely success. An intervention that is seen to have “failed” carries a very high political cost – even if the associated material and human costs to the intervener are relatively low (and the short-term benefits to the target state are high).³⁶ Perhaps the most striking illustration of this is the United States’ intervention in Somalia in 1992-93. All these factors – the relatively low statistical probability of success; the high political cost of failure; and the risk of high material and human costs whatever the outcome – would tend to suggest that policy makers should be mightily concerned to ensure that their decisions on interventions are soundly based.

³⁵ See, for example, Tony Blair’s comment “I think that the world in which we live today means that our self-interest...cannot be pursued unless we understand that what happens today in one part of the world affects us ultimately in our part of the world...,” interview, BBC Radio 4, 22 February 2007.

³⁶ Stephen Van Evera, “Assessing US Strategy in the War on Terror,” *Annals of the American Academy*, September 2006, p. 16 quotes research estimating that 44,000 Somali lives were saved by US action.

States

Most recent interventions have been into so-called “failed states,” “quasi-states,” or “shadow states.” Sovereign states³⁷ are normally characterized by a monopoly (or, at least, a clear priority) in the use of force within their territorial boundaries. “Failed states” have typically lost this monopoly and other attributes of a state, such as the collection of revenue through taxation and the provision of basic services. “Quasi-states” have been a feature of the post-cold war landscape: political entities which were semi-autonomous parts of larger political units (such as the Soviet Union or the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) and which lacked many of the institutions of a fully-fledged state (typically, a properly functioning judiciary). Finally, “shadow states” are, as the term suggests, in-between entities: many of the institutions exist, but they are controlled by private interests for their own private benefit.

There is a clear causal link between state failure and internal conflict. It is not necessarily linear – one does not necessarily cause the other, in either direction. Rather, it tends to be circular – each feeds off each other, leading to insecurity, forcing individuals to turn to factions, militias, or even criminal gangs, etc for their protection. As state services deteriorate or collapse altogether, many militias reinforce their hold by providing basic services – in effect, establishing parallel state structures. In such societies, civil conflict can become endemic and self-sustaining – few citizens will have the incentives or the skills to end it. Unless the international community is content to “let it burn”, some form of external intervention is unavoidable.

Scholars have identified a number of structural indicators for state failure which can provide early warning. These include very low and declining GDP levels, deteriorating infrastructure, collapsing educational and medical services, flawed institutions (such as corrupt bureaucracies and partial judiciaries), and so on. But, as one leading scholar has

³⁷ The following overview draws on Mohammed Ayoob, “State Making, State Breaking and State Failure,” in Chester Crocker, Fen Hampson and Pamela Aall (eds.) *Turbulent Peace: The Challenge of Managing International Conflict* (Washington DC: US Institute of Peace Press, 2001).

put it, “State failure is largely man made, not accidental”.³⁸ While structural factors contribute to failure, they do not necessarily lead to it. The downward spiral to failure has generally been catalyzed and accelerated by calamitous (and often self-serving) decisions of individual leaders, whether Mobutu in Zaire, Stevens in Sierra Leone, or Siad Barre in Somalia. It is always easier to destroy than to rebuild. It takes only one madman (or careless visitor) a moment to smash an artifact in a museum, but a team of skilled experts months to re-assemble it. However, the first step is for the police to remove (forcibly if necessary) the madman from the premises. This parallel can be applied to rebuilding failed states, as discussed later.

Non-state Actors

Reference has already been made to militias. One of the other common features of failing and failed states is non-state actors who fill the vacuum when government effectively collapses. Typical are “warlords” – individuals who, through charisma or patronage ties, have personal followings (often militias) and deploy them to advance their own interests.³⁹ For most Western policy makers, warlords are figures from the Middle Ages. Such figures may well emerge as “spoilers” of efforts to end civil wars, namely “leaders and parties who believe that peace emerging from negotiations threatens their power, world view, and interests, and use violence to undermine attempts to achieve it.”⁴⁰ Another, less value loaded, way to think of these figures is as “veto players.”

What motivates such actors? Can they be “managed”? Scholars have devoted much attention to such questions. In his seminal 1997 article, Stedman argued that the international community must correctly diagnose the nature of the spoiler and select a strategy accordingly. Spoilers fell into three types: “limited,” “greedy,” and “total.”

³⁸ Robert I. Rotberg, “The Failure and Collapse of Nation States”, in Robert I. Rotberg (ed.) *When States Fail: Causes and Consequences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 25

³⁹ This definition is adapted from that developed by Kimberly Martin, “Warlordism in Comparative Perspective,” *International Security*, Vol. 31, No 3 (Winter 2006/07), p. 48

⁴⁰ Stephen John Stedman, “Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes,” *International Security*, Vol. 22, No 2 (Fall 1997), p. 5

Limited spoilers have limited goals which can normally be accommodated by adjusting the peace process. Greedy spoilers are more opportunistic: their demands expand or contract according to their calculations of cost and risk. Total spoilers seek total power and have unchanging goals. More recent research⁴¹ casts doubt on whether actors' behavior is as static as the Stedman typology implies. It also highlights a certain circularity: all parties to a negotiation make demands, but only those who actually torpedo the process are "spoilers." This work argues that "spoilers" adjust their demands according to the correlation of forces on the ground. So Savimbi in Angola, a "greedy" spoiler, changed his demands over time according to the relative strength of UNITA. Similarly, in Mozambique, the attempts of a "limited" spoiler (Dhlakama) to derail the peace process foundered because the international community – which enjoyed superior resources – called his bluff.

This suggests is that the international community should beware personality-dependent deals and instead ensure that it has adequate means (carrots and sticks) either to co-opt or coerce potential veto players. Exactly how these are deployed requires care. There is some evidence⁴² to suggest that offering "public goods" (that is, benefits to the entire country) to induce warring parties to the negotiating table can encourage some of them, in a multi-party environment, to hold out for longer before signing a peace deal – in an attempt to secure a larger share of a bigger pie. Conversely, the promise of differentiated "private goods" (that is, benefits specific to a group's region) to the various warring parties conditional on signature are less subject to this risk – especially, if the offer of carrots is complemented by a threat of equally well-targeted sticks.

Types of Intervention

Scholars and scholar-practitioners have categorized intervention in many forms: deterrence; prevention; coercion; punishment (to reinforce norms); peacekeeping;

⁴¹ Kelly M Greenhill and Solomon Major, "The Perils of Profiling," *International Security*, Vol. 31, No 3 (Winter 2006/7)

⁴² David Cunningham, *International Responses to Multi-Party Civil Wars*, unpublished manuscript: Harvard University, 2006

peacemaking; war-fighting; “nation-building”; interdiction; humanitarian relief; rescue; and – an indirect form of intervention – military assistance to an internal actor.⁴³

Deterrent or preventive interventions are relatively rare – one example is UNPREDEP in Macedonia from 1995-99. Generally, in recent years, interventions have served four purposes: humanitarian relief (providing protection and basic necessities); peacekeeping (helping to uphold a prior peace agreement between previously warring parties); and peacemaking (tilting the balance in an internal dispute, so bringing the parties to the negotiating table); and “nation-building” (recasting the institutions in a state to prevent a recurrence of conflict).

Obviously, these purposes may overlap in practice. But the distinctions between them are important, especially in relation to decision making. Take, for example, the distinction between peacekeeping and peacemaking (as defined above). There is a fundamental difference between a situation in which a peace agreement has been reached and one where it has not. The former situation requires impartiality towards the parties – as long as they are observing the terms of the agreement. The latter situation does not – indeed, attempting to show impartiality in such circumstances could make matters worse. The same applies where a previously negotiated agreement has effectively collapsed. The problem, of course, is that peacekeeping forces deployed pursuant to a Resolution under Chapter VI of the United Nations Charter have often been lightly-armed: as the prior agreement begins to fray, “impartiality” becomes a euphemism for impotence. Perhaps the “lesson” here is to adopt a very robust interpretation of self-defense.

The Goal of Intervention

The fact that we can characterize interventions by purpose does not resolve the question of whether those purposes are appropriate or even realistic. There has, for instance, been a seesawing debate in the United States about whether interventions should involve “nation-building.” For the moment, there is a consensus that they should (but watch this

⁴³ Richard Haass, “Using Force: Lessons and Choices for US Foreign Policy,” in Crocker, Hampson and Aall (eds.), *op. cit.*

space). Indeed, a recent piece in the U.S. Army War College quarterly *Parameters* suggested that the military should adopt the term “Intervention, Stabilization and Transformation (IST) operations.”⁴⁴

But how far *should we go*? This is the fundamental question, the answer to which drives the matching of ends and means. It touches both normative and pragmatic considerations. The fact that interventions normally occur in “failed” or “failing” states provides a clue, both for the military operation and its synchronization with civilian activity. Intervening powers posit various objectives for their action, broadly congruent with the categories outlined above. These range from, at one end, “restoring order,” through “reconstruction,” to “democratization.” Logically, none of these objectives stands up as a justification for intervention. “Restoring order”? Many countries suffer internal unrest, but generally they can be safely left to deal with it themselves (albeit sometimes they do so in ways that dismay the international community and rightly so). “Reconstruction”? Many states have chronically weak infrastructure, but we do not seek to pump-prime their reconstruction efforts with uninvited military force. As for “democratization,” scholars have had to remind us that democracy involves much more than holding elections. A functioning democracy requires not only such features as the rule of law and free media. These features also need to develop in the right order: unless the “institutional groundwork” is in place first, transitions to mass electoral politics can lead to instability and conflict.⁴⁵ Holding elections in “failed states” soon after the intervention may mean that they are little more than ethno-sectarian plebiscites.

Building on the argument about the rights and responsibilities of state sovereignty in the *Responsibility to Protect*, I suggest that the fundamental objective of an intervention can only be to address the condition that made it necessary in the first place: namely, to restore the state – “state-building.” Taken literally, “nation-building” is extraordinarily ambitious and – except in exceptional circumstances, such as Germany and Japan after World War II – inappropriate. Without delving too deeply into the literature on nations

⁴⁴ Steven Metz and Raymond Millen, “Intervention, Stabilization, and Transformation Operations: the Role of Landpower in the New Strategic Environment,” *Parameters*, Vol. XXXV, No 1, Spring 2005, p43

⁴⁵ For a useful overview of this argument, see Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), pp. 3-9

and nationalism, a “nation” has an identity based upon some sort of shared experience or fate (and sometimes, but not necessarily, shared language, ethnicity and culture) which develops over time – perhaps decades, even centuries. Conversely, the institutions of a state can be forged in a *relatively* short period.

This is not just a semantic argument. The danger of the over-aspirational connotations of “nation-building” is that, in the rough-and-tumble of political debate, policy makers can throw the baby out with the bath water – as the George W Bush Administration did in the initial years of its first term and hold back from even modest state-building. It is also integral to more tactical decision making – using the right terminology helps ensure that we focus on the right things. The commanders and administrators of intervening forces are invariably faced with 101 priorities, all competing for time (including the personal attention and energy of senior personnel) and resources. Some will conflict with others. If an activity does not contribute to rebuilding the state – or, worse, seems more designed to appeal to domestic constituencies back home – it should not be given priority.

Why do Interventions Fail or Succeed?

One can address this question in two ways. What are the proximate causes of interventions failing to meet their objectives? And, more revealingly, what are the deeper factors that condition success? Briefly, on the former, the literature suggests:

- **Military Defeat.** Few interventions in recent years have encountered defeat on the battlefield. The only clear example is Somalia: the “Black Hawk Down” incident was rapidly followed by a humiliating withdrawal of UN/US forces. The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan could also be regarded as an example of defeat: Soviet forces encountered harder than expected resistance and eventually the Soviet leadership lost the will to continue.

- **Premature withdrawal or reduction of military forces.** This has been more common. Recent examples include the interventions in Haiti (1994), Sierra Leone in the 1990s, Liberia, and East Timor.
- **Failure to deal adequately with “spoilers”.** Again, both Sierra Leone and Liberia are examples. The Sierra Leone government (encouraged by their international partners) reached a premature agreement with the RUF while ECOMOG let Charles Taylor off the hook in 1991.
- **Failure to reform the security sector.** Again, both Haiti and East Timor are examples. In Haiti, little progress had been made to reform the Police. In East Timor, the UN Mission withdrew before building local capacity in the security sector.

So what conditions success? For the sake of simplicity, one might catalogue the academic schools of thought as follows: “power matters,” “institutions matter,” “rights matter,” and “culture matters:”⁴⁶

- “power matters”: political scientists of the realist persuasion highlight the importance of “hard” military power. The intervening force acts as a “balancer,” changing the correlation of internal forces so that either the “good guys” win (Afghanistan 2001) or the warring parties have to come to the negotiating table (Bosnia 1995). This approach sees little merit in the intervener remaining to undertake state-building (or “nation-building”): this is a snare and a delusion. It has been argued that the initial US disinclination to pursue “nation-building” in Afghanistan after evicting the Taliban was right: the US should have warned the new Afghan Government to keep the Taliban at bay or it would intervene again. The problem with this argument is that the intervener could find itself paying repeat visits to a particular country. Given the turn-over in large military

⁴⁶ The following summary draws heavily on Fen Osler Hampson’s chapter, “Parent, Midwife or Accidental Executioner: Role of Third Parties in Ending Violent Conflict,” in Crocker, Hampson and Aall (eds.), *op cit*.

organizations, the forces sent will probably be significantly changed from the previous occasion whereas the insurgents will enjoy greater continuity – and insurgent groups tend to learn and adapt. So each return match is likely to be more difficult for the intervener.

- “institutions matter”: this approach also focuses on the correlation of forces within the country, but sees a role for non-coercive “soft power” intervention to develop power-sharing solutions. This may mean waiting until the situation is “ripe” for resolution. But selecting the right inducements and managing potential “spoilers” are fraught with difficulty: interveners have sometimes excluded spoilers (so as to reach agreement) only for them later to undermine the new arrangements. In practice, a good deal of hard power may be required to uphold the new institutions – and this can itself frustrate the development of societal norms (such as respect for the rule of law) which are necessary to sustain these institutions. The emergence of a “dependency culture” in which local inhabitants benefit from the spending power of international community representatives (military and civilian) and leave them to take any tough decisions has been particularly evident in Bosnia.
- “rights matter”: this approach recognizes the inherent fragility of arrangements under which any significant part of the population continues to fear for its safety, causing it to take defensive measures – inducing a cycle of escalation which can bring the institutional house of cards crashing down. The answer is to create participatory governance structures and promulgate new norms. But this can involve trying to plant Western concepts in unpropitious foreign soil and lead to a pressure for early elections (to embed the new arrangements). Again, the timing of elections is tricky: too early and they can be highly destabilizing.
- “culture matters”: this approach highlights the psychological origins of conflict. To avoid recurrence, the intervention needs to change the attitudes and even the social structures of the disputing parties. “Ripeness” must be cultivated and

nurtured. But there are a host of practical problems. Where to start? Presumably with the leaders, but there is a real risk of leaders casting off their prejudices in the studiously non-confrontational “workshop” environment only to revert to type when faced with the prospect of selling the deal to their supporters.

Political scientists following the academic principle of parsimony – if one theory can explain a phenomenon, we needn’t bother with more – tend to highlight one or other of these and disparage the others. But policy makers can be more generous. Providing that the practical measures emerging from the theories are not mutually contradictory, they can afford to back more than one horse.

And experience suggests that all of these factors are relevant and that any intervention relying disproportionately on one or the other is doomed to fail – either in the sense of becoming bogged down and “part of the problem” (for example, Iraq) or in achieving merely a temporary respite (for example, Haiti 1994). However, the synchronization and calibration of the tools available requires care. Proselytizing rights may not be the best approach when the biggest threat to stability is an insurgency – defeating which may require “robust” military action.

There has been a parallel debate among scholars about why states win or lose counter-insurgency campaigns. Again, paraphrasing broadly:

- “interest matters”: major powers lose asymmetric conflicts because there is an asymmetry of interest⁴⁷ in the outcome between them and their opponents – winning is not an existential issue for them, so they do not devote all their resources and energies to the fight. Insurgents are able to protract the struggle and impose costs on the major powers which – although not great in relation to their overall economic strength – are disproportionate to their interests in the outcome and thus they are vulnerable to domestic pressure to end the struggle

⁴⁷ Andrew Mack, “Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: the Politics of Asymmetric Conflict,” *World Politics*, 27 (January 1975), pp. 181-2

prematurely. This theory does not explain the increasing tendency for strong actors to lose. It also sits uncomfortably with the United States' experience in Vietnam or the Soviet Union's in Afghanistan – both persuaded themselves that the struggles were part of a wider global struggle in which their fundamental interests were engaged. However, this theory contains an important insight to which I will return later.

- “political systems matter”: in recent years, many states engaged in counter-insurgencies have been liberal democracies. They have less capacity than authoritarian regimes to coerce their troops into fighting long and unpleasant counterinsurgency campaigns and have not been culturally prepared to take the robust measures necessary to put down an insurgency.⁴⁸ But there is little evidence to suggest that the use of barbaric methods is a recipe for success in a counterinsurgency campaign – any military gains are short-lived.
- “strategy matters”: states are more likely to win counter-insurgency campaigns if they mimic the strategies of the insurgents.⁴⁹ If insurgents use unconventional strategies (as generally they do), so should the state. It does not need to be the same unconventional strategy, but a conventional approach will not defeat an unconventional one.
- “external factors matter”: although intangible factors such as will and strategy are important, there is a strong correlation between external assistance to insurgents and their success against the state.⁵⁰ In a raft of cases – the American Colonial insurgency against the British (1775-83), the Chinese Civil War (1945-49), and the Vietnam War (1965-73) – the weaker side eventually won because it received significant support from outside. Conversely, in other cases where such assistance was not available – the Confederate insurgency in the United States

⁴⁸ Gil Merom, *How Democracies Lose Small Wars: State, Society, and the Failures of France in Algeria, Israel in Lebanon, and the United States in Vietnam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003)

⁴⁹ Ivan Arreguin-Toft, *op cit*, p.18

⁵⁰ Jeffrey Record, “External Assistance: Enabler of Insurgent Success,” *Parameters*, Vol. XXXVI No. 3 (Autumn 2006), pp. 36-49

(1861-64), the Boer War (1899-1902) and, significantly given its almost totemic status among counterinsurgency pundits, the Malayan Emergency (1948-60) – the insurgents lost.

There is, perhaps, a deeper link between these theories. One issue which these accounts do not expressly address is why states do not seem to learn from their own and others' experience. Why has the United States had to re-learn in Iraq some of the lessons of Vietnam? It has been argued⁵¹ that the cultures of large militaries, particularly the US military, are antithetical to the kind of approaches and skills required in peace enforcement and counterinsurgency operations. In the wake of failure in such operations, their reaction is to try to confine the use of force to conventional force-on-force engagements and to avoid messier commitments. This approach, exemplified in the United States by the so-called Powell Doctrine, regularly collides with the real world where politicians wish to use limited force to end civil wars – or, indeed, where straightforward military campaigns are followed by (apparently unforeseen) insurgencies.

But the military culture argument is simplistic. Most of the large states concerned uphold the principle of civilian primacy and past interventions have involved strong interaction between civilian policy makers and the military. Why do the former fall into the same trap? And, despite the caricatures, most militaries have shown that they can be innovative and adaptive.

What does not emerge clearly from the academic literature is what one might call an *asymmetry of attention*. Unlike a war, an overseas intervention tends to be just one of a number of challenges which governments (and their Foreign and Defense Ministries) are facing. Normal politics continues. As a result, the planning and subsequent execution of the intervention does not receive that sustained scrutiny and deliberation which would expose unrealistic assumptions or partial analyses. This weakness can be accentuated by the fact that interventions are often planned in secret by small circles of advisers who can reinforce each others' blind-spots. Finally, the continuation of normal politics increases

⁵¹ For example by Jeffrey Record, *The American Way of War: Cultural Barriers to Successful Counterinsurgency* (Air War College Policy Analysis Series Paper No.577, September 2006), pp. 3-5

the risk that known “difficult” issues – such as dealing with important but not very cooperative neighboring countries – will be put to one side under pressure to “do something”. Conversely, for parties within the target state, planning and executing operations to thwart the intervening force is their top, if not sole, priority. So the great power tries to address the situation through a series of short-term “campaigns” or “initiatives” which are not pursued for long enough to deliver the expected results. Its opponent merely has to “hunker down” and wait for the successive storms to pass.

PART 4 - FINDINGS

General Observations

In the light of this review, what general considerations should inform decisions on interventions?

Fortune’s Wheel

All three data sets – civil wars/interventions, asymmetric conflicts, and occupations – suggest that the probability of an intervention succeeding is relatively low: about 30 per cent. On the other hand, it is not **so** low as to suggest that interventions are never worth considering if there are strong concerns about developments in the target state (humanitarian catastrophe, terrorist plotting, and so on). But overturning such odds requires active risk mitigation – and learning from those organizations for which this is second nature (such as those undertaking complex engineering projects at the edge of our technical understanding). It is not simply a matter of “detailed planning, which should involve both civilian and military components of the mission.”⁵² Unfortunately, “involve” is a slippery word and can entail little more than defining interfaces. Rather, it means seeing the intervention as a single, integrated enterprise from the outset and planning it accordingly on an “end-to-end” or through-life basis.

⁵² Dobbins et al, op cit, p.xix

Complexity

Academic studies underline the complexity of the arenas into which interventions are made. There are multiple political actors – governments, rebel groups, quasi-autonomous militias, etc – and “actors within actors” – individual politicians, generals, and so on with their own agendas. And there are usually multi-layered social dynamics – sectarian divisions intersecting with tribal and clan structures (sometimes with competing secular ideologies thrown into the mix). Much of this is exotic to policy-makers in Western industrial states (although it might be less so if they were more familiar with their own countries’ histories). There is therefore a tendency for them to over-simplify the issues, using somewhat black-and-white language. Group x will be labeled as “terrorists” or “criminals” (or both) – not recognizing that it (a) may represent just one end of a much broader spectrum of opinion in that society and (b) may itself contain differing views. This approach makes it more difficult to cut deals either with the group as a whole or with elements within it. Managing complexity is not unique to these situations – indeed the governments of the major powers all have experts in managing highly complex acquisition or infrastructure projects, but it is not apparent that their insights are generally exploited outside those fields.

It is better if someone wins

Quantitative analysis indicates that violence is less likely to recur if one side in a civil conflict wins. This suggests that a “knee-jerk” effort by the international community to stop the fighting and bring the warring parties to the negotiating table could be counter-productive. (Admittedly, there has been little recent evidence of any such disposition – but this seems to be more the result of wider international factors than a more sophisticated understanding of the dynamics of civil conflict.) It also suggests that the international community (or whatever country or coalition is intervening on its behalf) should be prepared to take sides. In terms of ensuring success, the literature suggests that it would be wiser to back the side which constitutes the government. This is not always

possible – in Afghanistan in late 2001, it would have meant supporting the Taliban. But the main problem is that the parties to a civil conflict are likely to contain individual leaders with attitudes and records distasteful to international opinion. Working with such people is not simply morally difficult; their continued grip on power can make it difficult to address festering human security issues (see “rights matter” above). As ever, a balance must be struck. Recent experience has underlined that the military superiority of the intervening force does not guarantee success in such situations; this reinforces the argument for picking a local partner.

Every intervention must end

By definition, interventions are limited. The literature suggests that the intervening force is likely to enjoy greater acceptance among the inhabitants – and a greater prospect of success – if it is clear that its presence is not open-ended. This raises a dilemma. Too obvious a focus upfront on the “exit strategy” may simply encourage recalcitrant elements to believe that they can “sit out” the intervention and then return to their previous mischief-making; this risk would be compounded by published exit dates. However tempting to assuage public opinion in either the target state or back home, these should be avoided. The trick is to signal clearly that the intervention is limited in time without impaling oneself on artificial deadlines. This could be done by defining and publicizing a political “end state” in which the intervening force does not figure, and by vigorous (and well-publicized) capacity building in indigenous organizations (such as police, judiciary, tax-collection agency, and so on).

Security *vis-à-vis* legitimacy

It is now a commonplace in both academic and practitioner discourse that the establishment of security is essential: without security, institution-building, economic development, the nurturing of norms of civilized behavior, and so on cannot proceed. But security cannot be achieved solely through coercion. Coercive measures – raids, arrests, and such like – can foment dissent if they are seen by the inhabitants as arbitrary

or involving disproportionate force. Conversely, soldiers and police on every street corner do not necessarily prevent intimidation and threats behind closed doors or conveyed via cell phones or the internet. The aim therefore must be not just to establish security but to (re-)establish the Rule of Law. And this, it is argued, means that establishing security must go hand-in-hand with legitimacy – the intervention itself needs to be seen as legitimate and the intervening force needs to develop indigenous institutions which are seen as legitimate.

But what exactly is legitimacy and how important is it? The cynical observer might suspect that the current focus on legitimacy reflects a touch of *Schadenfreude* in the academic establishment at the difficulties encountered following the “illegitimate” invasion of Iraq. And the evidence adduced in support of the argument is hardly overwhelming. The fact that polling data suggest that public opinion is much more supportive of the intervening forces in Afghanistan than in Iraq – and that the former is relatively more settled and the intervention there was properly legitimated *ex ante* by the United Nations – does not prove any causal link between legitimacy and consent; there are other plausible reasons why the Afghan people are more supportive. Does it really matter that much to the inhabitants of a war-torn state whether the foreign force in their midst enjoys the imprimatur of a committee in far-away New York?

More telling may be recent work by social psychologists on behavior in large organizations. Tom Tyler’s research suggests that employees are incentivized to accept norms less by sanctions than by whether they see the organization’s procedures as fair – procedural fairness induces a sense of legitimacy which in turn induces deference to the rules.⁵³ It does not seem totally far-fetched to apply this insight to the target states of interventions. It suggests that the conduct of the intervening forces – including, for example, the fairness of the procedures that they use to screen suspects – can confer legitimacy. Such legitimization (rather than decisions by invisible overseas bodies) will leave local people more willing to accept the decisions of the intervening force, even if they are occasionally involve the use of roughly coercive methods.

⁵³ Presentation to the Conference on Law and Mind Sciences at Harvard Law School, 10 March 2007.

Unity of effort – or purpose, or understanding?

Again, it is a commonplace of current academic and practitioner discourse that a successful intervention – whether to end a civil war or put down a rebellion – requires “unity of effort” between military and civilian authorities. Military action alone does not suffice: victory does not create security and establishing security is a necessary but not sufficient condition for rebuilding the state. But “unity of effort” is easy to advocate (it seems to make self-evident sense), but it appears to mean different things to different people and is clearly difficult to achieve in practice.

The origin of the concept of “unity of effort” is widely attributed to the British counterinsurgency campaign in Malaya. But recent scholarship suggests that it had less of a military component than its emulators have assumed and that it relied heavily on mixed civil-military committees⁵⁴ – unity of effort did not mean unity of command. Others argue that unity of effort means little without unity of purpose⁵⁵ – otherwise individual agents of the intervening power, operating unavoidably with a degree of discretion in fluid circumstances, can inadvertently cut across each other. But perhaps even more crucial is unity of *understanding*. There has to be a common understanding between the intervening force and its political authorities – multinational in the case of a coalition and inter-agency/departmental in all cases – as to the nature of the situation in the target country and the purpose of the intervention. NATO’s somewhat uncertain progress in Afghanistan, and the accompanying public debate over “national caveats”, is perhaps rooted in the absence of complete unity of understanding between NATO allies on these points.

At the practical level, military doctrine (or, at least, British military doctrine) highlights the importance of a “comprehensive approach” to interventions, but then seems to

⁵⁴ Stuart Gordon, “That ‘nauseating phrase’ ‘hearts and minds’: The Real Meaning of ‘hearts and minds,’” *Project on the Means of Intervention Workshop Papers Volume Four: 2005-06*, available at www.ksg.harvard.edu/cchrp

⁵⁵ Sarah Sewall, “Modernizing US Counterinsurgency Practice: Rethinking Risk and Developing a National Strategy,” *Military Review*, September-October 2006, p. 107

emphasize the distinct roles of the military and other agencies – humanitarian relief, for example, is the responsibility of civilian agencies and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs).⁵⁶ Many maintain that this is correct, but their argument seems to have more to do with wider ideological preferences and bureaucratic ambitions than the situation on the ground in target states. In societies where conventional Western categories (governmental/non-governmental, civilian/military, and so on) rarely apply, can such an approach be appropriate? It seems to me to present two dangers. First, it can encourage what has been called in another context a “throwing problems over the wall” mentality: negotiating “hand-offs” can become a major distraction. Secondly, if a (perhaps the) key enabler of success is winning and keeping the support of the local population, then food aid delivered by “neutral” NGOs may not be sensible: the people should feel a sense of dependency on the intervening force and, even more importantly, the government or other party which it is supporting. Moreover, as was found in Somalia, the NGOs may be feeding the rebels.

More is more – but how much? Stability *vis-à-vis* Democracy

There is a paradox here. On the one hand, for the consumption of international and their own domestic opinion, leaders of intervening states often emphasize that they are bringing “democratization” – an inevitably resource-intensive investment. On the other hand, it is natural for states to wish to minimize their commitments. The human resources required to mount to mount and sustain an intervention – military, police, and so on – are expensive and usually in short supply. Moreover, states are subject to what might be called a “commitment dilemma:” commitment of resources to one area may mean that the state is unable to respond to a more urgent or threatening development which emerges elsewhere. Whatever the rhetoric, therefore, states generally tend to be inclined to hedge their bets and to be cautious about the degree of “social engineering” that they undertake as part of an intervention.

⁵⁶ JWP 0-01 British Defence Doctrine: “Should the deployed force undertake such humanitarian tasks, responsibility should be handed-over/returned to the appropriate civilian agency *at the earliest opportunity* [my emphasis].”, JWP 0-01.1. Available at www.mod.uk

Research suggests that, although intuitive, this approach may be counter-productive. Edelstein's study of occupations suggests that more ambitious occupations have tended to succeed more often than ones that simply sought to neutralize the country concerned as a threat. This finding is consistent with other research. An internal security effort that relies primarily on coercion not only does not work but is exhausting for the intervener/occupier. Security requires a fully-functioning security sector – efforts to turn the police into an impartial and effective agency will have little lasting impact if the judiciary is unable to process cases in a timely manner and the jails are full of people awaiting trial. Such a system will not attract respect and deference from the population. When planning an intervention, states should assume that – as a minimum – they will have to undertake a thorough makeover of the security sector of the target country and allow the appropriate resources and time for this.

But further? Yes, but proceed with extreme caution. In principle, as argued previously, respect for individual rights can help reinforce the security system as a whole. And “democracy” – in the sense of representative institutions and systems for rotating or sharing power – can help secure such rights. The intervening authorities will, however, need to make an unvarnished assessment of the vestigial political institutions of the target state and the load that they can bear: in the absence of strong institutions, national elections could do more harm than good. On balance, the presumption should be against trying to “transform” a failed state into a fully-fledged liberal democracy: this is a task beyond both the proper limits of an intervention and the boundaries of prudence.

External Factors

Most countries have borders. Most interventions have been in countries with borders. One of the favorite examples of a successful intervention and counterinsurgency campaign is Malaya (1948-60). But Malaya was unusual in being located on a peninsular and having only one relatively short land-border (with a country friendly towards it). Studies constantly highlight the significance of porous borders. Insurgents can escape to sanctuaries in other countries; arms can be supplied to the parties in a civil war; spoilers

can slip away if in danger of capture. Conversely, intervening powers usually wish to contain their area of operations for both practical and wider diplomatic reasons – interventions are normally controversial and the acquiescence of neighboring countries is desirable. But attempts to deal with the target country as if it were a self-contained unit fly in the face of the historical evidence. Border issues might appear to belong to the “too difficult” category. However, unless they are addressed, the intervention’s risk of failure is much higher.

The “Utility of Force”

As suggested earlier, a “successful” intervention can be defined simply as one that ended a civil conflict or defeated an insurgency without early recurrence. On that basis, studies suggest that success requires the sustained deployment of third party forces. Examples include Bosnia and Sierra Leone – although the United Kingdom has withdrawn most of its forces from the latter country, it maintains an “over-the-horizon” commitment. In contrast, Haiti and East Timor saw relatively quick withdrawals of forces – requiring a second intervention in Haiti ten years later and a return deployment of forces to East Timor, at the request of its new government, in 2006. This is not surprising. State-building takes time. There are two further, perhaps more challenging, conclusions.

First, much is made in contemporary discourse of the importance of winning the “hearts and minds” of the local population through “quick-impact” welfare projects (such as rebuilding schools and constructing roads). This argument is buttressed with examples from current campaigns of how such “hearts and minds” projects have been followed by useful intelligence tip-offs from local people. It is also claimed that such projects employ local males who might otherwise be tempted to become insurgents. But research gives grounds for doubting this conventional wisdom. First, a number of studies indicate that economic factors do not generally motivate people to become terrorists.⁵⁷ Secondly, the recent comparative studies of counterinsurgency campaigns referenced earlier give

⁵⁷ Alan B. Krueger and Jitka Maleckova, “Education, Poverty and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Fall 2003), pp.119-144

“hearts and minds” (as currently understood) little positive support: on the contrary, this approach is conspicuous chiefly by its absence from the analysis. Making the right strategic choices and denying insurgents external support seem to have been more significant as winning factors. In the show-case for “hearts and minds”, the Malayan Emergency, welfare efforts were limited and conducted on shoe-string budgets.⁵⁸ More telling was the adoption of the unconventional strategy of population control: while including some “hearts and minds”, this also entailed considerable repression. The same approach with even more limited resources (and even less focus on “hearts and minds”) broke the Mau Mau in Kenya.⁵⁹ In short, correlation should not be confused with causation: winning “hearts and minds” is at best a tactic that may help an unconventional strategy defeat an unconventional opponent.

Secondly, if state failure is not the inevitable consequence of structural factors and human agency plays a critical role – and the “spoilers” who emerge from the wreckage are primarily opportunists whose demands will wax and wane according to local circumstances – then action against them is an essential complement to measures to rebuild institutions and so on. To return to the earlier analogy: before the museum’s conservationists can start to reconstruct the smashed Ming vase, the police have to remove the miscreant. “Power matters”: there is no substitute for having robust forces – and being prepared to use them. The decisive action by UK forces in Sierra Leone in 2000 is widely seen as exemplary.

Finally, alongside persistence and decisiveness in the use of force, policy-makers need to remember the importance of competence in execution. Approaches that worked well in one scenario will not work in another if incompetently applied. As an example, the strategic hamlets program in Vietnam – modeled on the population control strategy in

⁵⁸ Caroline Elkins, “Colonial Counterinsurgencies: Britain’s Past and America’s Present,” *Centerpiece: Newsletter of the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs*, Vol. 20, No 3 (Fall 2006)

⁵⁹ See Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain’s Gulag in Kenya* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005). The questions raised by some reviewers about aspects of Elkins’ methodology do not alter this overall conclusion.

Malaya – flopped because corrupt officials failed to deliver the weapons and embezzled the supplies intended to make them secure and functioning communities.⁶⁰

Not intervening, but “balancing”?

Given the difficulties that the United States has encountered in Iraq, some US scholars have begun to advocate a different approach which would bear little resemblance to intervention as recently practiced. James Fearon argues⁶¹ that the United States would have more leverage over the various parties in Iraq if it were to reduce its commitment to the Maliki government and withdraw its troops from the streets – where it is effectively backing one party, the Shi’ites. Instead, it should adopt a “balancing” posture, either “offshore” or “onshore”, thereby encouraging the parties to cut deals with each other while itself retaining the option to attack seriously miscreant elements if necessary. The attraction of such an approach is obvious – and it would appear to be applicable more widely. But it is less clear why it should be particularly effective in any given state – why should the parties to a civil war be positively influenced by threats from the “balancer” when experience has shown the limits both of US airpower as a coercive instrument and of the intelligence on which it typically relies? It may encourage them to intensify their conflict – so that whoever wins can present the balancer with a *fait accompli*. Or it may encourage the weaker party to go to ground until the balancer is distracted elsewhere – and then come roaring back. The conclusion from comparative studies of recent interventions is that a substantial commitment of “boots on the ground” is unavoidable, if only to understand fully the internal dynamics of the society. It was the minimization of that commitment, and then its misemployment, that has exacerbated the difficulties faced in certain contemporary theaters of operations.

So what?

So what does all this mean for policy-makers? “Lessons” are useful, but they will not make the key judgment calls in a given intervention. Moreover, in the hands of the

⁶⁰ Arreguin-Toft, *op cit*, p. 156

⁶¹ James Fearon, “Iraq’s Civil War,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 86, No 2, Mar/Apr 2007

unwary, they can encourage a “check-list” approach which is insensitive to local nuances. “Lessons” need to be complemented by policy-makers having a broad understanding of the nature of such enterprises as well as the political and social dynamics to which they respond – and, indeed, contribute. At the very least, this will give them a better sense of the inherent challenge of the enterprise, the “base rate” probability of success, and what factors might move those probabilities in one direction or the other. It will also encourage them to ask appropriately searching questions: “What mitigation measures have been taken to ensure that this intervention succeeds when the odds are at best 50:50?” “Why not back x to win rather than try to stop the war now?” “How can we – uniquely – succeed without sealing the borders?” and so on. Finally, such understanding provides some broader reminders and warnings.

First, the threshold for intervention is set high not only for legal (and ethical) reasons, but also for prudential ones. Intervention is difficult, it can sometimes make matters worse (or, at least, no better), and it should not be undertaken lightly. But it is not “mission impossible”. Although the overall “base rate” of success since the end of World War II is relatively low, James Dobbins argues that the recent record of “nation-building” is “encouraging”: a raft of countries is at relative peace today because third parties intervened and rebuilt basic state functions.⁶² Iraq aside, there may have been some “learning effect”. Policy-makers should not let themselves be seduced into thinking that there is some sort of semi-detached, pain-free alternative.

Secondly, success or failure is usually relative. Although some pundits have criticized the interventions in former Yugoslavia because of their initial problems and the fact that they have involved a huge (and continuing) investment of international resources for the quasi-stabilization of tiny statelets, those interventions stopped the killing. So the management of expectations – both internally (within governments and coalitions) and externally – is key.

⁶² Dobbins et al, op cit, p. vi

Thirdly, interventions go badly if policy makers make mistaken decisions, either in planning or execution. It is natural to try to blame all difficulties on actions by “extremists” and to question whether foreign troops can save people “from themselves”. But it is not persuasive: neutralizing extremists and calming ethnic tensions are the *raison d’ être* of interventions.

Fourthly, the key decision – after whether to intervene at all – is *how far* to reform the internal institutions of the target state. Some security sector reform is axiomatic – otherwise, the intervention would not have been necessary in the first place. But beyond that? Further academic research to develop a “political maturity model” with indicators and benchmarks might help guide decision-making here.

Fifthly, interventions take place into complex situations. As noted earlier, decision makers are vulnerable – through the use of heuristics or familiar analogies – to jumping to comforting but deceptive conclusions. This risk can be greater in a crisis – when a small circle of policy makers can find itself under pressure to “do something”, often in the context of tight deadlines (such as Parliamentary occasions or press conferences, when Ministers will be expected to “say something”). In such circumstances, policy makers may not welcome complicating voices of doubt or even dissent. But these are *precisely* the circumstances when they need to ensure that they are not about to become victims of a “conspiracy of optimism” in which an intervention is posited on a series of best-case assumptions. They need to have an understanding and frame of reference which enables them to question whether things are all that they seem to be and whether the options on the table are the only ones.

So a key requirement is to ensure that there are processes which help overcome the primary asymmetric threat to good decision making, namely the *asymmetry of attention*. The objective would be to require policy-makers to apply the following “tests” and to gather the information necessary to do so.

Ensure that the policy is based on facts not presumptions

- This is a simplification of the advice in Richard Neustadt and Ernest May's classic book *Thinking in Time* published in the twilight of the cold war in 1986. But it is even more relevant to the murky situations which attract interventions. Without relentless clarity about what we "know" (rather than have "presumed"), policy makers risk basing their approaches on urban myths rather than realities. Policy makers presumed that the social fabric of Iraq in 2003 was much like that in 1990: they were wrong and their hopeful expectations about the capability and willingness of Iraqis to rebuild their country were dashed.

Be clear about the purpose of the intervention

- In my view, such clarity can emerge from reflecting on why the intervention is seen as legitimate in the first place. It entails being clear that the purpose is to rebuild the target state so that, in future, the normal presumption of non-intervention will apply once more. This has two implications: (a) it means that the interveners recognize at the outset that they have an obligation to reform its security sector (and do it properly); and (b) it makes it easier for the interveners to manage competing priorities and avoid "mission creep".

Ensure that the social dynamics of the target state have been studied and understood

- Interventions tend to occur in countries where there are strong group identities which are not contiguous with the borders of the state. Ethnic, religious, and tribal/clan dynamics are fundamental – and unavoidable. They are the lens through which the inhabitants assess the actions of the intervener.

Be clear about the nature of the intra-state conflict into which it is proposed to intervene – or which may be faced post-intervention

- Different situations require different remedies. Stopping a civil war – continuing or subject to more-or-less robust ceasefire – between evenly matched parties of equal merit requires a different approach from supporting a counter-insurgency campaign by an established government against rebels or separatists.

Ensure that sensitive diplomatic issues like disputed borders and/or ambivalent stances by contiguous states are addressed

- Almost invariably, civil conflicts are sustained via porous borders. This has two implications: (a) the solution may mean addressing wider regional dynamics (for example, continuing Indo-Pakistan tensions in the case of Afghanistan); (b) if the intervening state or coalition is not prepared – for wider diplomatic or strategic reasons – to challenge neighboring states to close borders to hostile traffic, then policy-makers should think carefully about whether the cause is important enough to justify launching the intervention (since the odds would be stacked even more against success).

Ensure that the intervention is being planned as a single enterprise

- Recognizing the truism that military means alone cannot solve the issues that gave rise to the intervention means little unless it results in a holistic plan incorporating all relevant elements. And there should be some sort of accountability for delivery. It does not need to be a single individual. It could be a committee – providing that it is clearly identified. (Various ministers have said that Afghanistan is a “key test” for NATO, but the casual observer would be hard-pressed to isolate any individual or defined group of individuals, either at Alliance level or within individual nations, who are clearly identified as being responsible and accountable for delivering success.)

Be realistic and candid about timescales

- Weaker forces (such as insurgents) win by protracting conflicts beyond the point that the intervening states had expected or planned for. In domestic political debate, the policy-makers of such states will always be tempted to minimize the likely scale and length of the proposed intervention (to avoid hard questions about costs, the size of the armed forces, and so on). But doing so risks preordaining failure.

Avoid confusing activity with action

- A basic task of the planning process will be to identify objectives and targets to provide some way of calibrating whether the intervention is “on track” to completing its mission. But these need to be meaningful and to denote real effect within the target state. Bureaucracies – military and civil – love generating statistics and metrics which give the illusion of achievement. “Body counts” after military engagements are not indicators of success – most areas of current instability have a surplus of military-age males. And the numbers of troops and police completing training programs tell us little about the re-establishment of security – putting people through a training cycle does not ensure that they understand the conduct required of police officers or soldiers in a civilized society.

No process can substitute for good judgment – but it can increase the likelihood of informed judgment.

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