

Intervention

The most pressing foreign policy problem we face is to identify the circumstances in which we should get actively involved in other people's conflicts.

PRIME MINISTER TONY BLAIR, Chicago, April 1999¹

Until Western countries started to intervene in developing civil wars in 1991 there was every reason to suppose this was something they would be desperate to avoid, especially now that there were no Cold War imperatives to support beleaguered clients. Both realism and international law warned governments away from another's domestic quarrels. The principle of non-interference, embodied in the UN Charter, meant that other states could continue with annoying and provoking behaviour, causing economic costs and affronting cherished values, provided that they stayed within their own borders. Here the most vicious tyrannies enjoyed the same rights as the most harmonious democracies. If this was uncomfortable, so too could be engaging with distant and intractable disputes. These promised pain and frustration in return for very little reward. Peace between states took priority over peace within states.

The strength of the international norm meant those who did intervene were chastised. In 1971 Indian action helped turn East Pakistan, which was fighting a vicious civil war with West Pakistan, into Bangladesh. Eight years later Pol Pot's 'killing fields' in Cambodia were ended by a Vietnamese occupation. Also in 1979 Tanzania toppled Uganda's

tyrannical leader Idi Amin. In all cases there was a net gain for human welfare (or more accurately a reduced net loss), though the interventions were explained largely on security grounds. Still they were all condemned internationally for breaching the non-intervention norm.² Although Michael Walzer had made the case for intervention as early as 1977 in cases of the most shocking crimes against humanity, arguing that individuals could be the victims of aggression and not just states, this gained little traction until after the end of the Cold War.³ Even after 1990, Russia and China remained wary of self-determination, conscious of how it might be applied to their own minorities.

Why then did Western attitudes shift so sharply? There were self-interested reasons: to deal with risk to expatriate communities; to push back against pernicious and repressive ideologies; and to prevent war-torn states serving as sanctuaries for terrorists as well as bases for organised crime and various forms of trafficking, including drugs, arms, and people. Should the intensity of the fighting drive people out of their homes, as was normal, refugees could put an enormous burden on neighbouring states. There were, however, also ways of addressing these problems without direct intervention, including policing borders, transferring arms and funds to the government, and sometimes to the rebels, and working to absorb refugees, or help these people stay safe in their own countries. Civil wars certainly became more visible, and TV channels were now able to reach distant places and send back images of suffering to feed continuing news channels, such as CNN. Reports of atrocities and misery took the edge off the optimism of 1990 and the hopes of a coming epoch of peace and good governance. It was also a matter of capacity. The West now enjoyed a remarkable military preponderance, with the US alone spending as much on its armed forces as the rest of the world combined. It was in a position to act if it chose to do so.

The main reason for the sudden shift in gears, however, was a case in which it was hard not to intervene. It began with the firm opposition to Iraq's occupation of Kuwait in August 1990. The decision to use armed force to push Iraq out of Kuwait was remarkable in itself, but it was also wholly consistent with established international norms, confirmed by a series of UN resolutions. By March 1991 Kuwait had been liberated but

Iraq was left as a unitary state within its recognised borders and with the regime that had caused all the trouble still in place. Frustrated, Shia and Kurdish areas exploded in rebellion, and this for a while rocked the regime. Western forces did not intervene. Saddam Hussein had kept enough in reserve, and the revolt was ruthlessly suppressed. This created a massive refugee crisis as Kurds tried to flee from northern Iraq into Turkey and Iran. The initial reaction from the United States and its allies was that this was not their business, and they had no obligation to get involved. For a moment the non-interference norm held. But then it broke. The media in the area which had been following the war were still around to record the plight of these displaced people and note words that might have encouraged them to expect Western support.⁴ Eventually the US, UK, and France accepted responsibility and successfully created a protected safe haven in northern Iraq which allowed the Kurds to return to their homes.

This set a precedent. An intervention took place and was successful. Then almost immediately tensions became evident in Yugoslavia. Again the Western instinct was to stay clear or to confine the response to offers of mediation. But this was a significant part of Europe, from which conflicts had spread in the past. The fighting was taking place in and around popular holiday destinations. In addition, TV broadcasting meant that images of suffering populations could be transmitted directly into living rooms. British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd observed that ‘mass rape, the shooting of civilians, in war crimes, in ethnic cleansing, in the burning of towns and villages’, were not novel. What was new was that ‘a selection of these tragedies is now visible within hours to people around the world. People reject and resent what is going on because they know it more visibly than before’.⁵ Faced with heartbreaking depictions of tragedy there were demands that something must be done.

These demands grew as casualties mounted and the Serb-dominated Yugoslav government appeared indifferent to UN resolutions demanding restraint. Furthermore, following German unification and with the Soviet Union about to split into its component parts, there was less certainty that existing territorial boundaries must be upheld at all costs. The principle of self-determination made a return as an alternative basis for state-making

to simple adherence to established borders, no matter how arbitrary. Diplomatic pronouncements combined talk of the ‘territorial integrity of States’ with the ‘equal rights of peoples and their right to self-determination’. European governments together deplored acts of ‘discrimination, hostility and violence against persons or groups on national, ethnic or religious grounds’. When awful things were going on in the neighbourhood, these were ‘matters of direct and legitimate concern to all participating States and do not belong exclusively to the internal affairs of the State concerned.’⁶

After trying mediation, backed by economic sanctions and sporting bans, gradually Western countries became more forceful. From tentative beginnings, first in Croatia and then in Bosnia-Herzegovina, external involvement moved from unarmed monitors to lightly armed peacekeepers to more robust land forces backed by air power. The British and French, leading the intervention, were torn between their reluctance to get too involved and their growing awareness that the humanitarian mission was constantly being undermined by their inability to stop the fighting. After the massacre of Muslims in Srebrenica, with Dutch peacekeepers stuck in a passive role, air strikes began against Serb positions, which also came under pressure because of Croat and Muslim ground offensives. This was followed by an agreement which divided Bosnia up and curtailed local Serb ambitions. Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević’s focus then shifted to Kosovo, a province of importance to Serbian national identity yet populated largely by Muslims. His intention appeared to be to push them into neighbouring territories. This time the response was much firmer. Starting in March 1999 NATO engaged in an extended air campaign against Serbia, leading eventually to Milošević climbing down.⁷

THE GUIDANCE THAT FLOWED FROM A NORM OF NON-INTERFERENCE was absolutely clear—it meant doing nothing everywhere. Guidance for a norm of possible-interference was much harder—it meant doing something somewhere. A whole range of possibilities was being opened up without agreed rules or helpful precedents. When, where and how to intervene would have to be worked out on a case-by-case basis. In April 1999 during the Kosovo campaign British Prime Minister Tony Blair set

down some pragmatic criteria that could provide guidance: confidence in the case, exhaustion of diplomacy, plausible military options, readiness for a long haul, and relevance to the national interest.⁸ Some cases might be clear-cut, with credible military operations available. At other times the case might be more ambiguous and the military options poor.

There was only limited, and generally unimpressive, experience on which to draw. There were essentially two models available, neither of which breached the non-intervention norm. The first was 'aid to the civil power'. This required the use of regular armed forces to help a government impose law and order because the police authorities were no longer up to the task. This was the basis for the attempts to defeat independence movements during the colonial period, and was the rationale for both the US in Vietnam and the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. The problem in these cases came with a civil power with little legitimacy or independent strength. Success on this model therefore meant building up the local government so that it could cope on its own, relying on its own armed forces and police. The British intervention in Malaysia during the early 1960s, conducted in extremely favourable circumstances, was an example of how such an effort might be successful.

The second model was peacekeeping. This had been developed by the UN and was largely about using contingents of foreign troops to ensure that a ceasefire line held. The UN exercise to try to bring peace to the Congo in the early 1960s had been so chaotic, including the death of Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld, that similar endeavours had been viewed warily thereafter. In this model impartiality was the key: the troops were present with the consent of the parties to the conflict. Unlike those aiding a civil power, when the upper limit on force was determined by the strength of the insurgency, and conflict could resemble a conventional war, the model for peacekeeping required forces that were non-provocative and therefore only lightly armed, with just enough for their own self-defence. By and large these forces were successful when marking a clear ceasefire line, although these lines tended to become fixed, which meant that the forces also became fixtures. The United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) for example was introduced in 1964 and never left, waiting for a definitive settlement between the Greek and Turkish

communities. The peacekeeping model was adopted for both interstate and civil wars, and not only by the UN but also by multinational groups, as with the Sinai (after the Egypt-Israel peace agreement) and Beirut in the early 1980s.⁹

It was the peacekeeping model that was first employed in the Yugoslav conflicts, requiring impartiality and consent, and non-provocative forces. This was inadequate. There was no peace to keep, and lightly armed forces could not impose a peace. In addition, their mandate began to expand during the course of the conflict. The model was about keeping warring parties apart. The mission in Bosnia increasingly came to be about protecting civilians, including providing the sort of safe havens that had been found for the Kurds in northern Iraq in 1991. The difficulty was that this involved taking sides. There were few purely humanitarian acts in the midst of a war. An urgent need to send in a convoy of food and medical supplies to relieve people caught in a besieged town undermined the strategy of those laying siege who wanted those people to get desperate. When it came to brokering a ceasefire or better still a peace settlement the starting point was normally impartiality. But recalcitrance by one side could result in more coercive measures. The next step was to conclude that the only way to a satisfactory peace was for one side to win. By this time the intervention had moved a long way from the starting mission. As, for all these reasons, the old peacekeeping model came under increasing strain the talk was of 'second-generation peace-keeping' or 'wider peace-keeping' and then 'peace support' until eventually it was not clear that peace as such was present or obtainable, so the aim came to be 'stabilisation operations'.¹⁰

By the late 1990s intervention for humanitarian purposes had become not only acceptable but also almost mandatory.¹¹ In 1999 the UN Secretary-General reported for the first time on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict.¹² The interventionist norm was captured by the assertion of a 'responsibility to protect'.¹³ Soon this was being invoked with such regularity that it even had its own shorthand (R2P). The focus on individual responsibility for war crimes was reflected in a new International Criminal Court (ICC), which began its work in 2002.

In 2003 the African Union, formerly the Organization for African

Unity, was constituted with a new act. This encouraged ‘respect for democratic practices; good governance, rule of law, protection of human rights, and fundamental freedoms; and respect for the sanctity of life.’ It established ‘the right of the Union to intervene in a Member State pursuant to a decision of the Assembly in respect of grave circumstances, namely: war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity.’ The next year a UN ‘High-Level Panel’ endorsed the ‘emerging norm’ that there was a right of ‘military intervention [as a] last resort’.¹⁴ In a document agreed by the General Assembly in 2005, the international community was to take ‘responsibility to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity’.¹⁵

As the need to protect civilians took centre stage it was evident that the protectors would need to be able to act robustly. This meant putting peacekeeping forces into dangerous and difficult situations, with all the inherent problems of funding, command structures, and multinationalism. In a mission to Sierra Leone in October 1999, UN peacekeepers were mandated ‘to afford protection to civilians under imminent threat of physical violence’.¹⁶ When describing in October 2014 yet another mission to deal with violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, its head told the Security Council: ‘the protection of civilians is more than a mandated task, it is our *raison d’être* in the DRC and a moral imperative of the UN’.¹⁷

The more African countries were contributing peacekeeping forces in their own region, the more their own interests in influencing outcomes became apparent. The idea that peacekeepers should come from the region was encouraged for Africa, by both the local nations and the Security Council. The advantages in terms of cost and ease of deployment, and a readiness to get involved, were evident. But this could be a mixed blessing.

While some may argue that this is all the better for promoting “African solutions to African problems”, this can have negative consequences for African citizens, including exposing them to poorly paid and resourced troops with low levels of training and little respect for civilians; further entrenching despotic regimes; or regionalising existing conflicts.¹⁸

As with armies away from home through the centuries, sexual activity added to the misery of the communities that were supposedly being helped. This was especially true at a time when HIV-AIDS was spreading. Peacekeeping forces were one means by which it spread, including back to the contributing country.¹⁹

At times also they offered a promise of safety that they could not deliver. Thus in the DRC after 2006 the UN force appeared as an ally of the government, but this meant an association with an army that was still ill-disciplined and predatory.²⁰ As a threatened population moved in large numbers towards the UN camps for protection, they made themselves more rather than less vulnerable. It was not only in the DRC but also the Central African Republic and South Sudan, that when UN troops were ‘thinly spread out, logistically hamstrung and devoid of reserves and critical force multipliers’, the locations where the desperate people gathered ‘provided attractive targets for attack.’ In this respect there was a risk of the international effort aggravating rather than easing the conflict trap.

DESPITE THE EVIDENT FAILURES THERE WERE INTERVENTIONS that worked. In 2000 Britain helped stabilise Sierra Leone as a result of a somewhat opportunist but still successful intervention.²¹ Despite the presence of a UN force, a rebel group was advancing on the capital Freetown. The British government sent a team to prepare to evacuate foreign citizens, which meant securing the airport. This by itself appeared to have a stabilising effect and soon the British army was working with Sierra Leone forces to push the rebels back. As this operation led to the rebels being disarmed and disbanded it was widely taken as a vindication of humanitarian interventions and a demonstration of the potential of a small number of highly professional regular soldiers when taking on less-well-organised militias.

In Liberia the bloody regime of Charles Taylor, which had supported the rebels in Sierra Leone, in part by illegal smuggling of diamonds and timber, eventually buckled as rebel groups put his forces under severe pressure. He fled to Nigeria, opening the way for a democratic government, a UN peacekeeping force to provide security, and his

indictment for war crimes at the ICC. In 2011 French and UN forces worked together to ensure that the successful winner of the Ivory Coast's election was able to take power against the resistance of the defeated incumbent, although their rationale also involved protecting civilians against atrocities committed by both sides. The next year Islamist movements began to make their appearance as a serious destabilising factor in Africa. One succeeded in gaining control of northern Mali. At the start of 2013 a French intervention helped the Mali government defeat the Islamists.

Peacekeeping operations could reduce the risk of a relapse into war, but it depended on the type. Unsurprisingly, a peace was more likely to last if it had consent rather than if it was imposed. Operations with consent were more effective if they were forceful in their methods. Weak operations with limited consent were, again unsurprisingly, likely to fail.²² Much depended on the grasp of the local situation, the ability to work with other missions on such tasks as promoting the rule of law and economic development, the degree of support given by neighbouring states, and the success in demobilising militias.²³

The negative stories risked obscuring positive achievements. In a critique of the critics, Roland Paris argued that there was a strong case still to be made for 'liberal peace-building', included the promotion of representative governments. He warned of the consequences of conflating those efforts that had followed the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan with those that had followed negotiated settlements, and warning of oversimplifying endeavours that were morally complex and exaggerating the imperial overtones.²⁴ The need was to learn from experience and adapt practices rather than abandon the enterprise altogether.

FOR EIGHT YEARS THE FRENCH DIPLOMAT JEAN-MARIE GUÉHENNO served as the head of peacekeeping for the United Nations, with a later spell working on a UN mission to Syria. In his memoir he described his first day in the office on 1 October 2000 with senior figures from the UN and those who had been involved in its most prominent operations in recent years. As they reviewed their record it was mixed. The end of the Cold War had meant that it was easier to get Security Council approval for new missions,

and it had also provided an opportunity to settle some of the lingering conflicts of the past, including in Cambodia, Namibia, Mozambique, and El Salvador, in which the UN ‘blue helmets’ had been able to help consolidate the peace.

But then things had gone wrong within Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and Somalia where the peacekeepers had ended up as bystanders to tragedies, ineffectual when the moment came. By 1999 this had cast such a cloud over the organisation that it was assumed that the UN might have had its day. Yet UN members suddenly agreed to three new missions, which had provided a new impetus. These were in two areas that had fought to break away from central rule—Kosovo in Serbia and East Timor in Indonesia. The third was in the DRC. All had revealed problems—with lines of command from the HQ in New York that inhibited those with field responsibility and budgets that could not be stretched to include all the development work that needed to go hand in hand with keeping the peace.

Guéhenno quoted another Frenchman, Bernard Kouchner, who had been in charge of the UN effort in Kosovo, explaining how ‘humanitarian interventions are political interventions’. The most humanitarian act was to fix the politics, but that could not mean forgetting the need to fix injustice.²⁵ Here was the core problem of peacemaking at any level. Peace required a political settlement, but was that to be based on a calculation of the balance of power at the time, or a sense of the rights and wrongs of the conflict, which might address the underlying, and probably still simmering, grievances that had led to the conflict? There was also the issue of whether the UN was now to become the effective government of these war-torn countries or was to work on restoring sovereignty as soon as possible, and get in place an effective government.

The urgency of 2000 had dissipated by the middle of the decade. The Security Council was more divided than it had been since the end of the Cold War, making life difficult for those who had to get the organisation working to support those in the field. Moreover, a controversial UN mission to Iraq after the US-led invasion came to a sad close when one of the UN’s most experienced figures, Sergio Vieira de Mello, was killed along with twenty-two colleagues by an act of terrorism. The mission in the DRC had lost credibility and suffered its own scandal when

peacekeepers were accused of widespread sexual abuse, yet new missions had been agreed in Haiti and Côte d'Ivoire overstressing the organisation. Duties had been added without the extra resources to enable them to be met.

Back in 2000 the senior UN official Lakhdar Brahimi had urged caution. The Security Council should contain its ambition, avoiding sending peacekeeping missions unless there was a peace to keep, and setting tasks with mandates marked by clarity, credibility, and achievability.²⁶ Yet soon, and against the backdrop of the 'Responsibility to Protect', twenty-one new operations were established.²⁷ Brahimi's guidance was largely ignored. It was too tempting to use these missions to signal resolve, appearing to take action while doing little to ensure success.²⁸ There was no cost in expressing ambition, only in trying to realise it. Western interventions had fared little better. Neither Iraq nor Afghanistan achieved a stable peace. Although a degree of order had been brought to both countries by 2011 in neither case was the political order stable enough to cope as Western forces withdrew. Another intervention that year in Libya, with UN backing, faltered.

In 2015, like de Madriaga over eighty years earlier, Guéhenno looked back ruefully to an international community that could never have the cohesion of a national community, and could authorise noble ends but not always the means to achieve them.

Grand plans were elaborated and immense hopes were generated among the people we had suddenly decided to help. But hope was often dashed, and we then faced resentment if not outright hostility, while on the home front, ambition has been replaced by a pressing desire to pack up and leave.²⁹

The problem was not a lack of need or value, but too many disappointing experiences.