

Humanitarian Intervention: evolution of a dangerous doctrine

Saturday 28 January 2006, by [BELLO Walden](#) (Date first published: January 2006).

Revised version of a speech delivered at the Conference on Globalization, War, and Intervention sponsored by the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, German Chapter, Frankfurt, Germany, January 14-15, 2006.

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As war clouds gather over Iran, the topic we are focused on in this conference is very timely: great power military intervention in the affairs of sovereign states for “humanitarian reasons.”

“Humanitarian intervention,” defined simply, is military action taken to prevent or terminate violations of human rights, that is directed at and carried out without the consent of a sovereign government. While the main rationale for the invasion of Iraq by the United States was its alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction, an important supporting rationale was regime change for humanitarian reasons. When it became clear that there were in fact no WMD, the Bush administration retroactively justified its intervention on humanitarian grounds: getting rid of a repressive dictatorship and imposing democratic rule.

IRAQ: DEAD END OF HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION

Iraq shows the dangers of the humanitarian rationale. It can so easily be used to justify any violation of national sovereignty to promote the interests of an external force. Yes, under Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi people were subjected to systematic repression, with many people executed and jailed. Yet, most of us, at least most of us in the global South, recoil at Washington’s use of the humanitarian logic to invade Iraq. Most of us would say that, even as we condemn any regime’s violations of human rights, systematic violation of those rights does not constitute grounds for the violation of national sovereignty through invasion or

destabilization. Getting rid of a repressive regime or a dictator is the responsibility of the citizens of a country. In this regard, let me point out that not even during the darkest days of the Marcos dictatorship did the anti-fascist movement in the Philippines think of asking the United States to do the job for us.

Now, for some people in the North, who belong to states that dominate the rest of the world, national sovereignty may seem quaint. For those of us in the South, however, the defense of this principle is a matter of life and death, a necessary condition for the realization of our collective destiny as a nation-state in a world where being a member of an independent nation-state is the primordial condition for stable access to human rights, political rights, and economic rights. Without a sovereign state as a framework, our access to and enjoyment of those rights will be fragile.

So long as nation-states remain the prime political collectivities of human beings, so long as we live in a Westphalian world-and let me say emphasize that we are not in a post-Westphalian world-our defense of national sovereignty must be aggressive. And absolute, for imperialism is such that if you yield in one case, it uses that as a precedent for other, future cases.

Are we not exaggerating our case? No. The Iraq tragedy is a result only of the American Right's drive to place US power far beyond the reach of any potential rival or coalition of rivals. The way to Iraq was paved by the actions of liberal democrats, the very same Clintonites that currently criticize the Bush administration for its having plunged the US into a war without end. In other words, the road to Iraq would have been more difficult without the humanitarian intervention in Yugoslavia in the 1990s. As one conservative writer so aptly put it, George W. Bush, in invading Iraq, simply took the "doctrine of 'democratic engagement' of the first Bush administration, and that of 'democratic enlargement' of the Clinton administration, one step further. It might be called 'democratic transformation.'" (1)

KOSOVO, REALPOLITIK, AND INTERVENTION

Kosovo has been called, along with the US troop landing to put Jean Bertrand Aristide in power in Haiti in 1994, a classic humanitarian intervention. But rather than being emulated, the Kosovo military intervention is something we cannot afford to repeat. Let us look at the reasons why.

First of all, it contributed mightily to the erosion of the credibility of the United Nations, when the US, knowing it would not get approval for intervention from the Security Council, used the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as the legal cover for the war. NATO, in turn, was a fig-leaf for a war 95 per cent of which was carried out by US forces.

Second, the humanitarian rationale was undoubtedly the purpose of some of its advocates, but the operation eventually mainly advanced Washington's geo-political designs. The lasting result of the

Kosovo air war was not a stable and secure network of Balkan states but NATO expansion. That is not surprising, since eventually that was what the air war was mainly about. Milosevic's moves in both the earlier Bosnian crisis and in Kosovo, according to Andrew Bacevich, "called into question the relevance of NATO and, by extension, US claims to leadership in Europe." (2) If it did not successfully manage Slobodan Milosevic, the US could not have supported its drive for NATO expansion. For the Clinton administration, such expansion would fill the security vacuum in Eastern Europe and institutionalize US leadership in post-Soviet Europe.

In Washington's view, according to one analyst,

"NATO enlargement would provide an institutional framework to lock in domestic transitions under way in Eastern and Central Europe. The prospect of alliance membership would itself be an "incentive" for these countries to pursue domestic reforms. Subsequent integration into the alliance was predicted to lock in those institutional reforms. Membership would entail a wide array of organizational adaptations, such as standardization of military procedures, steps toward interoperability with NATO forces, and joint planning and training. By enmeshing new members in the wider alliance institutions and participation in its operations, NATO would reduce their ability to revert to the old ways and reinforce the liberalization of transitional governments. As one NATO official remarked: "We're enmeshing them in the NATO culture, both politically and militarily, so they begin to think like us — and over time — act like us." (3)

A major aspect of the politics of NATO expansion was securing the Western European states continuing military dependence on the United States, so that the European governments' failure to follow through on an independent European initiative in the Balkans was quickly taken advantage of by Washington via the NATO air war against Serbia to prove the geopolitical point that European security was not possible without the American guarantee.

Third, the air war soon triggered what it was ostensibly meant to end: an increase in human rights violations and violations of international treaties. The bombing provoked the Serbs in Kosovo to accelerate their murder and displacement of Albanian Kosovars, while doing "considerable indirect damage" to the people of Serbia through the targeting of electrical grids, bridges, and water facilities—acts that violated Article 14 of the 1977 Protocol to the 1949 Geneva Convention, which prohibits attacks on "objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population." (4)

Finally, Kosovo, as noted earlier, provided a strong precedent for future violations of the principle of national sovereignty. The cavalier way in which the Clinton administration justified setting aside national sovereignty by reference to allegedly "overriding" humanitarian concerns became part of the moral and legal armament that would be deployed by people of a different party, the Republicans, in Afghanistan and Iraq. As the right-wing thinker Philip Bobbitt saw it, the Clinton administration's actions in Kosovo and Haiti served as "precedents" that "strengthen the emerging rule that regimes that repudiate the popular basis of sovereignty, by overturning democratic institutions, by denying even the most basic human rights and practicing mass terror against their own people, by preparing and launching unprovoked assaults against their neighbors — jeopardize the rights of sovereignty, including the inherent right to seek whatever weapons a regime may choose." (5)

FROM KOSOVO TO AFGHANISTAN

When the invasion of Afghanistan took place in 2001, there was relatively little opposition in the North to the US move to oust the Taliban government. Washington took advantage of sympathy for the US generated by the September 11 events and the image of the Taliban government sheltering Al Qaeda to eliminate negotiations with the Taliban as an option and throw international law out of the window by invading Afghanistan, with little protest from European countries. But to strengthen its position, the Bush administration not only used the rationale of bringing the perpetrators of September 11 to justice. It also painted its move into Afghanistan as a necessary act of humanitarian intervention to depose the repressive Taliban government—one that was justified by the precedents of Haiti and Kosovo. Invoking the humanitarian rationale, states belonging to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization like Canada, Germany, and the Netherlands also eventually sent armed contingents. And in this connection, it must be pointed out that many NGOs-including many liberal organizations-supported the US intervention for the same reason

Like the Kosovo air campaign, Afghanistan soon showed the pitfalls of humanitarian intervention.

First, great power logic soon took over. Hunting for Bin Laden yielded to the imperative of establishing and consolidating a US military presence in Southwest Asia that would allow strategic control of both the oil-rich

Middle East and energy-rich Central Asia. Moreover, Afghanistan was seized on by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld as what one analyst described as "a laboratory to prove his theory about the ability of small numbers of

ground troops, coupled with air power, to win decisive battles." (6) The Afghanistan invasion's main function, it turned out, was to demonstrate that the Powell Doctrine's dictum about the need for a massive commitment of

troops to an intervention was obsolete—a view that skeptics had to be persuaded to accept before they could be convinced to take on what emerged as the Bush administration's strategic objective: the invasion of Iraq.

Second, the campaign soon ended up doing what its promoters said they would eliminate: the terrorizing of the civilian population. US bombing could not, in many cases, distinguish military from civilian targets—not surpr

ising since the Taliban enjoyed significant popular support in many parts of the country. The result was a high level of civilian casualties; one estimate, by Marc Herrold, placed the figure of civilian deaths at between

3,125 and 3,620, from October 7, 2001 to July 31, 2002. (7)

Third, the campaign ended up creating a political and humanitarian situation that was, in many respects, worse than that under the Taliban.

One of the fundamental functions of a government is to provide a minimum of order and security. The Taliban, for all their retrograde practices in other areas, were able to give Afghanistan its first secure political regime in over 30 years. In contrast, the regime of foreign occupation that succeeded them failed this test miserably.

According to a report of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, "security has actually deteriorated since the beginning of the reconstruction in December 2001, particularly over the summer and fall of 2003." (8) So bad is basic physical security for ordinary people that one third of the country has been declared off limits to United Nations staff and most NGOs have pulled their people from most parts of the country. The Washington-installed government of Hamid Karzai does not exercise much authority outside Kabul and one or two other cities, prompting UN Secretary

General Kofi Annan to state that “without functional state institutions to serve the basic needs of the population throughout the country, the authority and legitimacy of the new government will be short-lived.” (9)

Worse, Afghanistan has become a narco-state. The Taliban were able to significantly reduce poppy production. Since they were ousted in 2001, poppy production has shot up, producing a record crop in 2004 and earning Afghanistan the dubious honor of supplying close to 80 per cent of the world’s heroin supply. Some 170,000 Afghans now use opium and heroin, 30,000 of them being women. (10)

Government officials are involved in 70 per cent of the narcotics traffic, with about a quarter of the 249 recently elected members of Parliament linked to the drug trade. One estimate in a study conducted for the independent Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit concludes that at least 17 newly elected MPs are drug traffickers themselves, 24 others are connected to criminal gangs, 40 are commanders of armed groups, and 19 face serious allegations of war crimes and human rights abuses. (11) For these people, who dominate Afghanistan’s political life, “insecurity,” according to Kofi Annan, is a “business” and extortion is a “way of life.” (12)

Can one really honestly claim that this life is an improvement over Taliban rule? Many Afghans would say no, saying that at least the Taliban were able to provide one thing: basic physical security. Now, this argument may not cut any ice with upper and middle class people in the North that live in safe suburbs or gated communities. But talk to poor people anywhere, and they put great value on ridding their shantytown communities of criminals and drug dealers.

Oh yes, what about the impact of NGO humanitarianism? Well, on the heels of the US troops came a veritable army of NGOs of different kinds, all seeking to help the Afghan people with hundreds of well-funded projects. Indeed, like the Southeast Asian tsunami disaster and that wrought by Hurricane Katrina in the US, raising money for “helping the Afghans” soon became a profitable operation that made humanitarian-related NGO jobs among the most desirable in local economy. How positive these projects have been is another story, since like the military campaign, there were many badly thought out and badly executed projects whose main effect was to stoke resentment in the local population.

THE CASE AGAINST HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION

Popular among certain elite circles in the US and Europe in the 1990s, humanitarian intervention has earned a bad name, especially in the South. Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq underline the bitter lessons of humanitarian intervention. To repeat:

1. Humanitarian intervention seldom remains the dominant rationale for long, with geopolitics quickly becoming the driving force of a military operation.
2. Humanitarian intervention ends up doing what its proponents say they are out to prevent: instigating increased human rights violations and violations of human rights and related international accords.
3. Humanitarian intervention sets a very dangerous precedent for future violations of the principle of national sovereignty. Kosovo opened up the road to Afghanistan, and both led to the tragedy of Iraq.

All this does not mean that states and international civil society should not make use of all the moral and diplomatic means at their disposal to isolate repressive regimes such

as the Taliban. Indeed, when one can be certain that their impact will be felt mainly by the regime and not the people, economic sanctions are valid and useful in certain circumstances. Sanctions had a positive role in apartheid South Africa but they had a very negative on ordinary people in Iraq, but that is a topic for another discussion.

But we must always draw the line when it comes to the use of force by one state on another. Forcible regime change is not only wrong. It has far-reaching destabilizing consequences for the whole international state system. Once it has managed to get the green light from significant others in one case, you can be sure that the hegemon will resort to it again and again, driven by the imperative of increasing its power and accumulated advantages within the international system. You begin with a Haiti or a Kosovo, and you end up with an Iraq.

In international relations, there is a distinction made between “status quo powers” and “revisionist powers.” Status quo powers seek to maintain the structure and distribution of relative power within the system. Revisionist powers seek to change the structure and distribution of power. Ironically, the US is today a revisionist power — that is, it seeks to achieve a balance of power in its favor that is even greater than that it enjoys today. By going along with its earlier “humanitarian interventions” in Kosovo and Afghanistan, many states and civil society organizations must bear some responsibility for creating this unrestrained hegemon.

We must forcefully delegitimize this dangerous doctrine of humanitarian intervention to prevent its being employed again in the future against candidates for great power intervention like Iran and Venezuela. Like its counterpart concept of “liberal imperialism,” there is only one thing to do with the concept of humanitarian intervention: dump it.

NOTES

1. Philip Bobbitt, “Better than Empire”, <http://www.gavinsblog.com/mt/archives/00895.html>
2. Andrew Bacevich, *American Empire: the Reality and Consequences of US Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 163.
3. G. John Ikenberry, “Multilateralism and US Grand Strategy,” in Stewart Patrick and Shepard Foreman, eds, *Multilateralism and US Foreign Policy* (Boulder: Lynne Reiner, 2002), pp. 134-135.
4. Michael Mandelbaum, “A Perfect Failure,” *Foreign Affairs*, Sept-Oct 1999, p. 6.
5. Bobbitt, *ibid*.
6. Richard Clarke, quoted in Seymour Hersh, “The Other War,” *New Yorker*, May 12, 2004 http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/?040412fa_fact.
7. Herrold, cited in Michael Mann, *Incoherent Empire* (London: Verso, 2003), p. 130.
8. Amy Frumin, Morgan Courtenay, and Rebecca Linder, *The Road Ahead: Issues for Consideration at the Berlin Donor Conference for Afghanistan*, March 31-April 1, 2004) Washington: CSIS, 2004), p. 22.
9. Secretary General, United Nations, *The Situation in Afghanistan and its Implications for International Peace and Security*, A58/742/S2004/230, p. 4.

10. "Ron Moreau and Sami Yousafzai,"A Harvest of Treachery," Newsweek, p. 30.
11. Ibid.
12. Quoted in Secretary General, United Nations, The Situation in Afghanistan..., p. 16.

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* Published by FOCUS ON TRADE, number 115, January 2006.

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