

Intervention: Some Social and Economic Considerations

Intervention in Afghanistan and in Iraq is front news. I want, however, to take a broader look at the phenomenon of a country, or countries, resorting to force to influence another country's affairs.

Armed intervention is as old, or even older, than human history. So is the standard intervention pattern. Politically or economically influential groups within a relatively strong "A country", or a coalition of countries, find it advantageous to interfere in the affairs of a relatively weak "B country". To gain broader support, the "A interest groups" justifies aggression in moral terms. The "A interest groups" might spread the word that "B" is a threat to "A". An alternate claim is that "B" violates principles sacred to "A".

Here are two well-known examples of justification. The first deals with mythological events: A state is accused of aiding and abetting the kidnapping of a foreign citizen outside of its own boundaries. A coalition is formed, and after an unexpectedly long war the "rogue country" is duly punished. The second example refers to events that took place late in the 18th Century. A "failed country" is accused of being a hotbed of radical ideas that threaten the stability of its neighbors. A group of worthy and highly respected citizens of the said failed state, including its king, appeal for foreign intervention to

preserve the ancient liberties of the gentry. The neighboring states oblige. Their armies overcome the extremists' opposition, and restore order. The country's parliament votes almost unanimously to surrender national sovereignty. Except for some minor eruptions, peace is assured for the next century and a half. As you probably recognize, the first example refers to the Trojan War; the second – to the Third Partition of Poland. We do not know, for sure, whether there was a Trojan war, and if there was one, what were its causes. But we may surmise that Troy was a commercial rival of Greek cities. We know, however, that Poland (or what was left of it after the first two partitions) was a nice, easy to acquire piece of real estate. .

History provides myriad of other, well-documented cases of intervention undertaken for economic reasons and justified in moral terms. The King of France wanted to seize the wealth accumulated by the Knights Templar, but to accomplish this deed, he decided it expedient to accuse them of heresy. Venice financed the Fourth Crusade in order to eliminate a dangerous trade rival. The knights who participated in the crusade sacked Constantinople to enrich themselves. Yet the financiers and the crusaders pretended to be motivated by the desire to put an end to the Great Schism. Even the crassest of all wars – the opium war – was “justified” in terms of defense of free trade.

The “standard pattern of intervention” – aggression promoted by interest groups which camouflage their motives justified in moral terms - persisted throughout the Twentieth Century. Hitler, who rarely hid his motives, found it expedient to claim at Munich that he had a moral duty to help the Sudeten Germans who suffered terribly in

the hands of the Czechs. The Soviets occupied Eastern Poland and the Baltic States to put right historical wrongs. During the Cold War both sides justified interference in minor countries' affairs by invoking high principles. For instance, the Soviets claim that they did not invade Czechoslovakia, Hungary or Afghanistan: they reluctantly responded to urgent appeals for intervention coming from within each country. The first Gulf War was fought ostensibly to defend the independence of Kuwait. The need to preserve the access to the Middle East's oil was a powerful argument for the war. Yet many "liberals" (in the American sense of the word) who rejected the economic and strategic arguments for the war, were ready to subscribe to the moral argument – as if they were unaware of the fact that Kuwait, like Iraq was artificially created in the 1920s under the Allies' divide and conquer policy. The victors gave Kuwait back to the ruling dynasty, and no one even bothered to find out what the Kuwaiti men (and women!) thought of the arrangement. The recent intervention in Iraq was justified on the grounds that (a) Saddam Hussein's armies were a danger to the world, and (b) that he was a ruthless tyrant who persecuted his own people. No one questions that Saddam was a cruel tyrant, but many have doubts about the purity of motives of the sponsors of the intervention.

Why does intervention require moral justification? Since Adam Smith we have reluctantly come to accept the idea that individual greed is the motor of economic progress. But our social ethos emphasizes the virtue of altruism and of cooperation. . Even in the United States we honor Carnegie not because he made a pile of money, but because he gave it away.

The moral principles we espouse carry over to the political sphere. Ever since Hobbes political scientists have modeled the relations between the State and the Polity in terms of a “game” played by opportunistic agents¹. Yet theory and ample empirical evidence notwithstanding, we expect those who govern us to behave as selfless Platonic Guardians, guided solely by considerations of a Common Good. In particular, we are loath to admit that politicians are beholden to interest groups, which give them their backing. To use an obvious example: sugar beet cultivation is costly to the industrial countries in which the beet is grown, and it is to the disadvantage of the LDCs, which grow sugar cane. Yet no US, or European, politician will admit that he favors protection of the sugar beet industry because the growers or refiners finance his campaign. Instead, protection is justified in murky terms of “national interest”. By the same token, a politician cannot admit that he favors intervention in the affairs of a foreign country because such intervention means higher profits for an industry group, which backs him up.

Stripping away the ideological verbiage, we can see that countries differed among themselves in the style of intervention, and the same country adopted a different approach depending on the circumstances. Some forms of intervention had a limited purpose and scope. For instance, the sole purpose of “capitulations” was to collect debt owed to West European powers by the declining Ottoman Empire. U.S. intervention in Latin American affairs had the sole purpose of fostering U.S. business interests. Regimes which favored business, be they democratic or dictatorial, enjoyed US backing; regimes suspected of anti-business bias were opposed. No attempt was made to spread “good government” and

¹ The classic formulation is due, of course, to Hobbes (1651, 1968) A modern classic is Downs (1957)

a blind eye was turned on regimes which fostered, or did not oppose, large-scale persecution of their own population. The colonial powers established their rule over the overseas possessions to secure the supply of resources to the metropolis and/or to provide areas for settlement. Depending on the local circumstances, the colonial powers induced the local authorities to conform to their wishes, or they established their own administrations. The variety of approaches notwithstanding, all instances of “traditional” intervention follow the same pattern. The government of country “A” decides on whether and how to intervene. In choosing among different methods of intervention internal as well as external factors are taken into account. In cost-benefit terms, the choice falls on the method which is expected to be the most cost-effective.

Ideology cannot, however, be dismissed as a mere cover-up for “crass economic motives”. Throughout history we find examples of human solidarity cutting across national and ethnic lines. For instance, though the Spanish conquest of South America was motivated by the desire to acquire gold, the purpose of the Jesuit rule of Paraguay was to create an ideal community for the Indians, and to save their souls. In other (though not in all!) overseas possessions, the native populations derived benefits from the institutions created by the colonial powers.

The Twentieth Century, along with many horrors, ushered in an era of “new ideology”, the symbols of which are national self-determination, decolonization, and the concept of “crimes against humanity”. Pan- human solidarity has, doubtless, been reinforced by the spread of radio, and even more, of television. Thanks to television, we

can see, without moving from our living rooms, the misery suffered by people in other lands.. The desire to come to their aid is, in itself, a powerful motive for intervention. Indeed, in the case of the intervention in Kosovo, as well as in the case of interventions in Bosnia-Herzegovina, in Sierra Leone, Liberia, or East Timor the interventionists bear the cost of their action without deriving any material advantage.

The “new interventionism” – intervention on moral grounds – opens up issues that did not arise in interest-driven interventionism. Who, for one, is to decide whether the welfare of the people of a country calls for foreign intervention? In theory - the decision should rest with the institutions established by the international community such as the UN. But the standards of what is, and what is not, an acceptable government are ill-defined. And even where there is genocide (which, by quasi-universal agreement, should not be tolerated) a condemnation by an international body, such as the UN, is likely to have little if any effect, unless an individual major country agrees to play a lead role. Thus, the intervention in former Yugoslavia was ineffectual until the time the US decided to engage its air force. Australia took the lead role in East Timor. In the case of Rwanda the major powers expressed their disinterest, and unchecked mass slaughter of people went on, for years. On the other hand, if the government of a major country takes the lead, there is always suspicion that it does so in self-interest, rather than on moral grounds, the Second Gulf War being an obvious case in point.

Intervention undertaken on moral grounds in the affairs of a dysfunctional state calls for the establishment of a “good government”. But what kind of government is it

supposed to be, and whom is it supposed to serve? A naïve American view is that the government should be chosen by popular vote, that there should be separation of powers, and an independent judiciary. It is also understood that there should be separation of church and state. But the westernization and the secularization of several Islamic countries is fostered by authoritarian regimes. If people had their say, they would be likely to opt for theocracy, and, perhaps, even for a jihad against the United States. Would then, the popular verdict be acceptable to the occupying powers?

It is far from clear, moreover, whether the model of a democratic nation-state is universally applicable. The nation-state is a nineteenth century European invention. Even in Europe in severe conflicts have erupted in several of the multi-ethnic countries². The ethnic situation is especially complex in sub-Saharan African clusters of diverse, and sometimes even hostile, ethnic groups live within the same countries, while members of the same ethnic group are divided by border.. Prior to colonization, much of sub-Saharan Africa was organized into empires, such as Mali or Benin, with far reaching local autonomy. The colonial powers deposed the paramount rulers, curtailed the powers of local chieftains, and carved up the territories they conquered or acquired, with total disregard of natural land features, of ethnic boundaries.. Decolonization left the artificial boundaries virtually intact. The boundaries separating the various Arab nations were likewise drawn by Western powers. It is hardly surprising that some of the countries

² Inter- was Poland was torn by severe ethnic conflicts. These were solved through the forced expulsion of Poles from the Eastern part of the country, and of Germans from the Western part, and through the redrawing of the borders. Yugoslavia collapsed as soon as dictatorship was replaced by democracy. Czechoslovakia separated peacefully into two independent states. But other multi- ethnic states survive and even manage to thrive (see Gagnon and Tully, 2001)

“fail”: one may question whether, in conditions of the resulting *anomie* Western-style democratic governments are an appropriate solution.

One is tempted, indeed, to suggest that democratically-elected governments are likely to succeed only in countries, such as the United States, Sweden, or Australia, where there is a solid, educated, middle – class. To support this thesis one may cite the case of (relatively backward) interwar Central and Eastern Europe . The democratic regimes installed at the close of World War I collapsed within ten years with the sole exception of Czechoslovakia, the wealthiest and most industrialized country of the region³. One may surmise that such countries were not “ready for democracy”, and that it is too early for democracy in to-day’s “failed states”. But this is too simple a thesis. In the interwar period Italy, Portugal and Spain also became fascist, and Germany, the leading continental power, embraced Nazism. But after World War II democracy took hold in all of Europe outside the Soviet zone. In Germany, Italy and Japan democratic regimes installed by Allied occupants took strong root. Some notable lapses notwithstanding, solidification of democracy also occurred in Latin America. As soon as they were freed from Soviet domination, the countries of Eastern Europe took steps to adopt the democratic system. Most significant of all: India, a multilingual, multiethnic, multi-religious and ill educated country is the world’s largest democracy. Western-style democracy is not the one model that fits all. But one is equally mistaken in thinking that some countries such be condemned to arbitrary, authoritarian rule because they are “unripe for democracy”.

³ See, for instance, Mazower (1998) pp. 104-137

To sum up: throughout the ages, and down to the present, strong countries have intervened in the affairs of weaker ones. Specific interest groups, such as mercantile or industrial interests, pressured their governments to intervene. Moral considerations were invoked to legitimize actions, and to mobilize broader public support.

Moral considerations do play, however, an independent role. There is, I believe, a growing conviction that countries have the right, and even the duty, to interfere in the affairs of states that violate the basic human rights of their inhabitants. The problem arises, however, as to who is to decide whether such a violation has taken place, and what remedial action to take. The existing international institutions are too weak to assume that role. The decision falls, by default, falls to the Great Powers, but these have their own agendas.

The goal of intervention in the affairs of a “rogue” or a “failed” country is, ostensibly, to install a “good government”. There is no assurance, however, that a government favored by the majority will necessarily conform to the idea of those who carry out the intervention. For instance, it is not out of the question that the population of a Arab country might opt for an Islamic government, hostile to the West. A broader issue concerns the adaptability of Western-style democratic regimes to the conditions of the LDCs. On this, the jury is still out.

References

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