Third Party Intervention in Ethnic Conflict

https://www.e-ir.info/2011/09/16/third-party-intervention-in-ethnic-conflict/

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Is third-party intervention in an ethnic conflict ever disinterested? What impact does this have on the settlement of an ethnic conflict?

This essay is concerned with the motivations that drive states to intervene, and argues that their actions are never wholly disinterested. The notion that states intervene for entirely altruistic reasons does not stand up to scrutiny. Even in cases where a conflict has no immediate impact on a third-party, wider interests such as the upholding of values, national security, and the protection of its own forces become apparent. As this essay will show, this often results in a third-party intervening on one side of a conflict, rather than as a neutral mediator. The impact this can have on the settlement of a conflict is worth noting, as it may lead to feelings of victimisation and resentment, retributive attacks, and increased support for an oppressive regime. This can be a major stumbling block in the future when trying to settle ethnic conflicts. The scope of this essay will be limited to interventions which third-parties have justified on humanitarian grounds, rather than interventions in secessions or civil wars. It looks, in particular, at the case of the NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999.

Questions of altruism and disinterest have been discussed at length with reference to the individual. Variants of altruism, first coined by Comte, which generally hold that individuals have the moral obligation to serve others at their own expense, have had a clear impact on the rationale behind humanitarian intervention. The responsibility to protect the weak—even if it is not in their interest—translates in the international arena into a 'kind of self-sacrificial love in which strong nations protect vulnerable strangers', with those who intervene 'acting disinterestedly and assuming great risks in order to rescue others in need'.[1] The utility of such attitudes have been contested, as has its existence. Nietzsche rejected altruism as stifling the potential for individual human greatness, by tying people to a value—rather than a genuine practice—which does not exist and leaves everyone worse off. Furthermore, and most importantly for this discussion, he branded as hypocrites those in political and moral power who espoused altruistic values: 'Where has the last feeling of decency and self-respect gone when even our statesmen, an otherwise quite unembarrassed type of man, anti-Christians through and through in their deeds, still call themselves Christians today and attend communion?'[2] Ultimately, where one sits on the issue of disinterested third-party intervention will depend on whether or not one believes there is truly such thing as a selfless act.

However, there is a problem in applying the works of Comte and Nietzsche to discussions of humanitarian intervention which is integral to the argument of this essay. Their works were not concerned with the state, but instead with the individual. Though a state is a made of a collection of individuals, it is not the same as the individual writ large. They are not designed to act selflessly, but exist to protect the interests of their own citizens. Its actions will always be the product of a population's representatives' perceived interests. Herein lays the problem of the idea that states intervene without concern for their own interests.

Though it is a contentious example of a humanitarian mission, examination of the case of NATO intervention in Kosovo goes some way to illustrating some of the fallacies of disinterest in intervention which can in turn be applied to all other cases. It was presented by Czech President Vaclav Havel, amongst others, as 'the first war that has not been waged in the name of "national interests," but rather in the name of principles and values'.[3] At the same time, Thomas Friedman described the conflict as being about 'how we should react when bad things happen in unimportant places'.[4] When examined, however, it becomes clear that Kosovo is not the unimportant place it was

painted to be, and that the mission was not conducted solely with humanitarian interests at its heart.

Much of the literature concerning state motivation is based on a normative understanding of intervention. Though there is nothing wrong in questioning the reasons behind a state's intervention—indeed, it is necessary, with history rife with examples of underhand or ulterior motives being masked behind a humanitarian justification—it would seem that often the nature of statecraft is misunderstood. It may be that at times national interests are not deviously Machiavellian, but simply happen to coincide with the pervading moral climate of the day. As Walzer says, 'circumstances sometimes make saints of us all'.[5] Furthermore, it is also the case that states tend to act in a way that is seen to be morally correct. They will always seek to justify their actions to the wider world when engaging in conflict, arguing that their cause is a just one, rather than letting it be taken as naked aggression. In the case of intervention, acting morally is itself the end, rather than simply a part of a wider legal justification. At the end of the twentieth century, with pressure from the media, the public and civil society, states were forced into action. These actors had an interest in being seen to do the right thing, regardless of whether or not they believed it to be a just or necessary cause.

Capacity to act is another issue which factored in NATO's decision to intervene in Kosovo. Criticisms of humanitarian intervention often reflect to the apparent hypocrisy of intervening in one conflict, whilst choosing to ignore another. Chomsky devotes large passages to deriding NATO and UN interventions in Kosovo and East Timor respectively, whilst pointing to Turkey's oppression of its Kurdish population going unpunished.[6] NATO intervention on behalf of Kurds, or even Chechens or Tibetans, would not be in its interest; it does not want to upset its members, nor interfere in the affairs of powerful states where it would be unlikely to achieve results without huge cost. States have a duty to their citizens and armed forces to only engage in conflicts which they have the capacity to fight in, and in which they have a reasonable chance of success. To enter a conflict in which victory seems unlikely—particularly one in which a state's existence is not immediately under threat—is irresponsible. NATO's failure to act on behalf of the Turkish Kurds should not have somehow disqualified it from acting in Kosovo, as some commentators liked to think it did. Again, Walzer sums up the situation when he writes, 'we can't meet all our occasions; we rightly calculate the risks in each one. We need to ask what the costs of intervention will be for the people being rescued, and also for the rescuers, and for everyone else'.[7]

In spite of having the capacity to act in Kosovo, NATO's use of strategic and tactical force was still governed by its constituent members' interests and not solely by humanitarian motivations. The decision to use air power exclusively to attack Serbia was based on NATO's calculations of political costs. It was deemed that the accuracy of modern airborne weapons would provide a 'speedy, risk-free victory' which avoided civilian casualties and risks to pilots.[8] However, in Kosovo concerns relating to civilian and pilot losses appeared to be in direct contradiction. High altitude bombing reduced the risk to pilots to such an extent that none were lost to enemy fire during the campaign. From this it can be discerned that the preservation of the fighting force was of greater concern to NATO than the protection of foreign civilians, something which Ignatieff identifies as being the 'moral calculus of war through the ages'.[9] In an age of constant television coverage this came under scrutiny, with neither alliance members, nor the world public, were prepared to tolerate the loss of innocent civilian lives in return for little military progress.[10] However, in the end concerns regarding the loss of forces were considered to be of greater importance than those of Serbian civilians. Low altitude attacks were deemed to be at too high a risk from ground fire and were therefore never approved.

This essay will now turn its attention to the question of the impact any interests held by a third party may have on the settlement of an ethnic conflict. As with the previous question, it will look at the more general effects this can have, before again examining the case of NATO intervention in Kosovo in greater detail.

Whilst peacekeeping missions involve a military intervention to enforce a ceasefire and separate two or more parties from one another, humanitarian intervention often takes the form of a state (or group of states) taking one side in a conflict, in order to protect those unable to look after themselves from an oppressive group. Where peacekeeping missions come about as the result of an invitation from all parties in the conflict, other interventions, such as NATO's in Kosovo, involve an external power picking a side and fighting on their behalf. Ethnic conflicts are often protracted and bloody as a consequence of both sides seeing themselves as fighting for grand aims such as the survival of their ethnicity. External intervention can put an end to the stalemate that these drawn out conflicts often result in. By taking

sides and tipping the local balance of power, an external actor is able to assert its authority over the region of conflict, dictating its demands to the defeated ethnic group.

Having taken the side of ethnic Kosovars and the KLA, the initial reaction of the public to the bombing in Serbia was one of resistance to the alliance's demands, though this would eventually subside. Horrowitz and Reiter argue that 'punishment attacks, particularly in an authoritarian state, may sometimes increase support for the target regime' and evidence seems to suggest that this was the case with Kosovo. [11] Initial reactions to the bombing in Serbia were of angry, popular defiance of NATO. The result of this was a surge of nationalism which was further buoyed by the Milosevic regime's propaganda war and crackdown on freedoms.[12] As Hosmer states, to have backed down in such a situation may 'have cost Milosevic [his] newly found political support and possibly his rule'.[13] After a month of bombing the reality of the situation appeared to sufficiently impact upon the lives of many in Serbia, with public attitudes changing as war weariness began to set in. Physical hardships of the bombing strategy began to take their toll on the population as it continued. Anti-war protests began to appear around the country, perhaps most notably in southern Serbia where Milosevic traditionally had drawn his support from. In entering the conflict on one side, rather than neutrally or impartially, the calls for a political settlement from civilians seemed to have played a part in persuading Milosevic that there would be no serious domestic consequences of settling with NATO.

NATO attacks on Serbian infrastructure placed further pressure on an already damaged economy, forcing them to settle to the Alliance's demands. Serbia's economy was already in a poor state before the bombing began, largely as a consequence of UN-backed sanctions dating back to 1992. The country had experienced harsher economic times earlier in the decade as Biddle points out: 'in 1993, Serbia's industrial output and retail sales fell by 40 and 70 percent, respectively … inflation reached a staggering 116 trillion percent … 80 percent of the population had fallen below the poverty level'. [14] In 1993, the Serbian GDP had dropped to about half its 1991 value, so what made the infrastructure and economic woes of 1999 less tolerable? The answer, according to Hosmer, is that the NATO attacks left billions of US dollars worth of damage to repair on top of pre-existing economic woes, with no prospect of international assistance to ameliorate the situation. He goes on to argue that the political instability caused by such a situation led Milosevic's closest associates to pressure him into compromising.[15]

According to Milosevic and senior Serbian officials the key reason for seeking peace with NATO was the fear that threats would be pursued and that the bombing would become unconstrained. The settlement document presented by NATO at the start of June warned Serbia that it had Russian approval, that there was to be no negotiation on its terms, that no future improvements would be offered, and that attacks would continue if it was rejected. The belief amongst the Serbian leadership was that future attacks against Serbia would be unconstrained if the settlement was rejected. Milosevic is reported to have told the heads of various Serbian political parties on the night of 2 June that 'the rejection of the document means the destruction of our state and nation'.[16] This is backed up by senior Serb military officials who, despite claiming that they could have stayed on and fought in Kosovo, doing so would have involved 'allowing the rest of Serbia to be destroyed'.[17]

The evidence available illustrates that in attacking Serbia in order to prevent ethnic cleansing of ethnic Kosovars, NATO's actions eventually took their toll on Serbia and were integral to their decision to seek a settlement. The sustained bombing of civilian infrastructure and imposition of sanctions eroded their ability and will to fight on, and also created an environment in which Milosevic could back down without significantly harming his domestic reputation. The NATO threats of unconstrained bombing – or even a ground invasion – were also instrumental in Milosevic's decision-making process, as the total destruction of Serbia's remaining infrastructure would have been ruinous for the regime.

The main error in providing a satisfactory settlement to the situation in Kosovo appears to have been the decision to conduct a humanitarian intervention as a war. The result of this was an ill-prepared strategy which did not satisfy advocates of humanitarian intervention, nor did it definitively settle the issue of Kosovo. Though NATO may have succeeded in making Serbia accept its demands, the ways in which they went about forcing this acceptance do not fit the bill as the humanitarian intervention it was claimed to be. As Kaldor writes, humanitarian intervention is 'different from air strikes and different from classic "old war" ground operations … [it is] defensive and non escalatory by definition … its focus is on the individual human being and not another state'.[18] NATO may have declared war on

the government of Serbia rather than the people and gone to the effort of targeting sites which would minimise civilian casualties, however there is little difference in the eyes of the dead or their family and friends between those killed in war deliberately and those killed in war by mistake. Furthermore, during the course of the war, NATO attacks provided a screen under which further ethnic cleansing could take place, and the number of refugees who were either internally displaced or fled to surrounding countries seems to suggest that the attacks created new humanitarian crises. Estimates of casualties vary, but most sources give a figure of approximately 150 Serb troops and 500 civilians, including ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, killed during the 78 day campaign. Though this may be an inevitable side effect of war, NATO claimed to be involved in a humanitarian intervention. This action, on behalf of the people of the Kosovar majority in Kosovo, should not have had anywhere near as many casualties if it was to live up to its name. Furthermore, attention should have been paid to the situation for Serbs in Kosovo. The lack of preparedness for the post-conflict challenge in Kosovo on the part of NATO is evident in their failure to prevent KLA troops imposing a regime of intimidation and murder on Serb citizens who remained after the Serbian armed forces' retreat. The result of this was an almost complete exodus of Serbs from Kosovo.

As this essay has demonstrated, it is not possible for third-party intervention in a conflict to be disinterested. The idea of a truly selfless act does not exist at the state level, and nor should it. A state exists to serve its citizens and their interests which may, on occasion, result in the rescue of an ethnic group within another state who are unable to protect themselves from oppression at the hands of their government or another ethnic group. The case of NATO action with regards to Kosovo illustrates how a powerful military alliance can have interests at stake in a remote and apparently unimportant state. Rather than let ethnic cleansing take place, NATO decided that it was in its interest to uphold moral values and act on the behalf of an oppressed group. As we have seen, the means by which it pursued its aims and the extent to which it went to attain them were again governed by interest.

Supporting one group over another can have a large impact on the settlement of an ethnic conflict. Again, as the case of Kosovo demonstrates, the population of Serbia felt it was they who were being victimised by NATO rather than their government. The result of this was a surge of nationalism and support for Milosevic's government. Furthermore, it created a cover under which further ethnic cleansing by the Serbs could take place, whilst also giving the KLA freedom to pursue its own policies of ethnic cleansing. NATO, having interests at stake and coming in to support one side at the expense of the other, may have actually created more problems for the overall settlement of the conflict.

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[1] Roberts (1996), P. 4

[2] Nietzsche (2000), p. 75

[3] Havel in Miller (2000), p. 6

[4] Friedman in Chomsky (1999), p. 5

[5] Walzer (2006), p. 105

[6] See Chomsky (1999) and (2000)

[7] Walzer (2002), p. 35

[8] Ignatieff (2000), p. 61-2

[9] *Ibid*., p. 62

[10] Freedman (2000), p. 341

[11] Horowitz and Reiter (2001), p. 162

[12] Collin (2004), p. 150

[13] Hosmer (2001), p. 52

[14] Biddle (2002), p. 140

[15] Hosmer (2001), p. 65

[16] *Ibid*., p. 93

[17] *Ibid*., p. 95

[18] Kaldor (2006), p. 142

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