

Determining a Successful Humanitarian Intervention

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Deciding whether or not to engage in a humanitarian intervention is a weighty decision on any national leader, with many contextual factors at play that can sway the process. The influence of national interests, of course, are often the top priorities for policymakers regarding any foreign policy decisions. However, in the event of a humanitarian crisis where intervening would not directly further any national interests, and humanitarian concerns are the only rationale, is success still possible? This paper will attempt to determine whether or not humanitarian interventions should only be undertaken when the aims of such an operation coincide with the national interest. If an intervention is only feasible/successful when national interests are at stake, it would obviously be wholly counterproductive to conduct such an operation without the necessary condition being present. However, if national interests are not a necessary condition for a successful humanitarian intervention, then following humanitarian impulses could potentially prove a productive instinct to follow. Determining whether or not humanitarian intervention is only feasible and/or successful when national interests are at stake demands assumptions regarding multiple concepts. First and foremost, “humanitarian intervention” is a politically loaded term utilized at the behest of great powers for their aims. Similarly, the “national interest” is itself an equally varying concept that can be altered depending on contextual factors. Finally, the aims of any particular operation are naturally different, and humanitarian interventions do not all have the same goals. Along the same lines, feasibility depends on a variety of factors.

Defining humanitarian intervention

First and foremost, the phrase “humanitarian intervention” refers to a vague concept that is too often weighted with political implications. Humanitarianism as a term, utilized in the context of modern human rights, is relatively new, yet the mentality associated with humanitarianism has existed for far longer.^[1] The modern age of humanitarian intervention began with the end of the Cold War, as geostrategic interests rooted in *realpolitik* became less pressing compared to humanitarian concerns.^[2] The precise scope of what comprises a humanitarian intervention remains hotly debated as well; some scholars would include the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan in that category,^[3] while others would exclude them from such a characterization.^[4] Since the national interest was the justification for these two examples, gaining an objective understanding of what humanitarian interventions actually are is vital before one can analyze them with any precision.

Seybolt describes four main forms of humanitarian intervention: assisting in the delivery of aid, providing protection to aid operations, protecting the injured party, and militarily defeating the aggressor. None are mutually exclusive from any others, and these types should be perceived as a continuum in the order listed where the difficulty in enforcement increases.^[5] Naturally, the level of political will necessary also increases along the same lines. Although the tactics may differ, the motives for intervention remain constant: the desire to address a humanitarian crisis underway. For the purposes of this analysis, primary focus will be on humanitarian interventions intended to address the final two goals.

Interventions, as a military strategy, are intended to compel state actors to cease certain types of actions that would otherwise result in intolerable human rights violations. While it need not actually involve the use of force, the credible threat of force is necessary for coercion. Additionally, only parties external to the events can carry out an intervention, often characterized today as taking place under the auspices of the “international community.”^[6] This is usually formalized via a mandate from an international body, such as the United Nations.

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The international community, however, is an agglomeration of various states with their own national interests, and therefore the political agendas of each must be taken into account. The actions of the international community is driven by the national interests of each country involved, and it is misleading to talk of “international will”.^[7] From this perspective, humanitarian interventions can be best understood through the realist theory of international relations, as the interests of individual nation-states are pertinent in terms of determining the overall effects of such interventions.

Defining national interest

Good defines the national interest as “a rough guide to, and a negative restraint on, decision and action.” One of the key characteristics of the national interest is that it represents a varying perception depending on the actor; within the United States, the national interest as described by the Pentagon will almost certainly vary compared to the State Department.^[8] Therefore, an objective, relatively static “national interest” does not necessarily exist, at least beyond the most basic interests of self-preservation and growth. While we could reduce our definition of national interests to those obvious aspects which, if left untended, potentially threaten the very integrity of the state, this would limit our realm of analysis. National interests encompass far more, and the term “humanitarian intervention” would not be employed if the national interest at stake was the intervening party’s continued existence. Instead, we should consider that national interests are essentially what policymakers perceive them to be. Joseph Nye makes the insightful claim, “in a democracy, the national interest is simply what citizens, after proper deliberation, say it is.”^[9] In a similar vein, Jakobsen stated that, “state interests are what states ‘think them to be’”.^[10] The malleability of the concept permits its use in a wide variety of situations, depending on the political aims of the state. More importantly, however, the perception of the national interest is limited by the fact that actors have finite information available to them at any particular point in time, and so the national interest can shift rapidly as additional information becomes available.

Because of the impermanent definition of the national interest, making judgments as to whether or not national interests increases the chance of success for a humanitarian intervention must be theorized. The realist perspective in international relations would regard purely altruistic humanitarian intervention as a fantasy; nation-states involve themselves in interventions when it suits their interests rather than out of a regard for humanitarian concerns.^[11] However, the interests of nation-states span far beyond material concerns, and the public image of a state, for example, can be as valuable an asset as any military force. National interests span multiple levels, however, and while purely humanitarian concerns may be a national interest as defined by the public, such concerns occupy the last rung in the hierarchy.^[12] Therefore, while humanitarian interests could theoretically fall under the umbrella of “national interests”, they will be excluded from our definition.

Determining success

If one wants to be as succinct as possible, the general consensus among scholars is that success in any case of humanitarian intervention is defined by having saved lives that would have been lost in the absence of the intervention.^[13] Humanitarian interventions take several forms described above, each with its own metrics of success, but theoretically this is always the desired goal. While the moral value of this determinant is self-evident, this is also an abstract metric to use, since it demands knowledge of how many people would have perished in the absence of intervention. While attempting to determine how many people would have died in a hypothetical scenario that never actually took place is in itself a complicated undertaking, even the more tangible statistics, such as population figures, can be elusive in conflict zones due to the chaos that reigns. To determine the figure, Seybolt describes a four step process to determine the number of lives saved due to an intervention,^[14] which has the capability of being able to objectively measure success for humanitarian interventions. Using this measurement, there are five main humanitarian interventions that can be declared successes: Haiti in 1994, Bosnia in 1995, Kosovo in 1999, East Timor in 1999, and Sierra Leone in 2000, though only a few (primarily Haiti and East Timor^[15]) can be considered completely successful. Each was undertaken primarily by a state actor, rather than any international institutions.^[16]

The success of a particular humanitarian intervention operation additionally depends recognition of the source of the

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problem, and engaging in the proper intervention type to neutralize it. The failure to treat the source of a humanitarian crisis, only addressing the symptoms, is obviously bound to result in failure. A better definition of success would, therefore, also include having eliminated the original cause of the humanitarian crisis. For the purposes of this analysis, however, Seybolt's methodology will be utilized for determining successful humanitarian interventions based on quantitative figures.

Determining feasibility

The feasibility of any humanitarian intervention depends on the efficacy of the political authority in charge. The most cohesive decision-making entities in the international realm are, of course, nation-states; multilateral organizations such as the UN, while bearing a larger amount of legitimacy, cannot muster the same qualitative military edge. Considering the requisite features of a military force being used in cases of humanitarian interventions, which often are required in the most remote regions of the globe, the nation-state carrying out such an operation must have a fully modernized, currently available and highly mobile military.[17] Only a select few, primarily Western states fulfill these requirements. From this perspective, feasibility is wholly dependent on whether or not one state out of this very select subset is willing to commit itself to such a task. In the context of a single state, feasibility can be further broken down into two main constituent parts: military and political feasibility.[18]

In regards to political feasibility, rallying public support for wars has become increasingly difficult in a post-Cold War era, as the number of credible threats to the integrity of Western states has dwindled drastically. Governments are unlikely to engage in an intervention without sufficient public support. Due to this fact, humanitarian discourse has become the primary legitimizing force for foreign interventions, particularly by the United States.[19] Utilizing this form of rhetoric to gain public support for military action is, therefore, absolutely necessary to ensure political feasibility, regardless of the actual intentions.

On the international front, political feasibility also rests on the consensus within the UN Security Council. Despite the framework of realism which posits that nation-states behave in the manner that will benefit themselves, which would appear to favor unilateral military action, the normative perception in the international system is that interventions require the legitimation of the highest international bodies. Without a solid pretext for intervention, it is improbable to achieve unanimity amongst the members of the council, as it will likely impact the interests of one of the permanent members.[20] The invocation of the national interests of all parties, therefore, substantially increases the chances of their acquiescence to the intervention. Feasibility, however, will not be extensively analyzed in this study due to the fact that, considering this definition of the term, it is impossible to measure both feasibility and success of a particular humanitarian intervention since an infeasible operation will not be conducted. To carry out comprehensive case studies determining the feasibility of humanitarian interventions, examples of interventions that never took place would need to be taken into account. In order to focus upon the question of whether national interest affects the potential for success, only operations which have been conducted, and are therefore "feasible", can be judged as to whether or not they were conducted successfully.

Case studies

By closely examining the associated factors for each intervention and determining the level of national interest by the intervening parties involved, we can determine whether or not there is a relationship between national interest and success in humanitarian interventions through a theory-testing sample case study.[21] The hypothesis to be tested is that humanitarian interventions are successful (dependent variable) when national interests are at stake (independent variable). While an exhaustive analysis of all humanitarian interventions to date is beyond the scope of this paper, we will analyze five prominent cases from the 1990s. East Timor, Bosnia and Kosovo were cited above as examples of success in conducting a humanitarian intervention, while Somalia and Rwanda are considered examples of failure.

East Timor

Utilizing Seybolt's methodology, the estimate given is that the intervention by INTERFET in East Timor saved

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approximately between five to ten thousand lives and reduced casualties in the crisis to a little over one thousand in total.[22] This clearly meets the definition of success that we defined earlier. Beyond this numerical metric, however, the aim of the TNI was to make East Timor so chaotic as to be virtually ungovernable, and the intervention certainly thwarted this goal. The most important player in INTERFET, the most effective arm of the intervention, was the Australians. The Australians had a number of interests in East Timor that fall under the scope of “national interests”, particularly in the realm of security and economics. Any breakdown of effective governance on the island would have had significant ramifications for Australia, such as increasing refugee flows and disruptions in joint Australian/Indonesian administered petroleum reserves.[23] These factors make it abundantly clear that national interests were at stake in the East Timor intervention.

Bosnia

The initial UNPROFOR operations were lackluster at best in containing the emerging crisis in Bosnia. While tens of thousands of lives were lost, UNPROFOR was unable or unwilling to confront the actual source of the humanitarian crisis, and saved a comparatively smaller “thousands” of lives. Once NATO became intimately involved in the conflict through Operation Deliberate Force, the number of lives lost dropped dramatically.[24] The strategic advantage that NATO forces granted to Bosniak-Croat forces brought a swift end to the conflict. These facts make it clear that while the UN effort can be considered a failure, the NATO operation was fully successful. James Baker explicitly stated in regards to the US role in the Bosnian crisis, “We’ve got no dog in this fight.” US national interests, from a realist perspective, were virtually absent. The counterargument that the reputation of the US was at stake was not taken seriously by the government.[25] As our definition of national interest is based on what policymakers perceive them to be, no national interests were present in this case.

Kosovo

The fact that the humanitarian intervention in Kosovo spanned four separate NATO operations, each of which could be considered separately as a success or failure, means it is not simple to characterize the entirety of the Kosovo intervention as a pure success or failure. While the bombing campaign by Operation Allied Force did not directly save any lives, two of the other three branches can be credited with saving thousands while only hundreds of lives were lost. The final branch, that of KFOR, likely saved more lives than the 700 Serb and Roma citizens that were killed, but it is impossible to know even approximately how many. While not a complete success, the number of lives saved can place the Kosovo intervention in that category. While the United States, the primary player in Kosovo intervention, lacked any direct economic or political interests in Kosovo, the integrity of NATO as a cohesive alliance was at stake.[26] European NATO members had much more pressing interests at stake due to their geographic proximity to the crisis. Considering the importance of the alliance to the United States, and the potential confrontation within the organization that would have ensued had the United States not taken part, the Kosovo crisis became a more pressing national interest, according to our definition of the term, than it would have otherwise been.

Somalia

The multiple UNOSOM operations, combined with UNITAF and Operation Provide Relief in Somalia between 1991 and 1995 saved approximately 22,000 lives in total. Over the course of the crisis, however, a combined approximate figure of 125,000 lives were lost.[27] This wide gap between the number of lives saved and lives lost, and particularly the fact that the number of lives lost outpaced the number saved during the period of intensive intervention, classifies this case as a failure. The US strategic loss in the Battle of Mogadishu cemented perception of the whole US operation as a failure in the public imagination as well. US interests were considered minimal in the case of Somalia, particularly compared to the simultaneous crises that were taking place across the continent. The end of apartheid in South Africa, and the Angolan and Mozambican civil wars had far more effect on US interests.[28] Somalia was economically disconnected from the US, it is geographically distant, and the former US military base at Berbera was dismantled earlier due to obsolescence.[29]

Rwanda

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Rwanda is generally considered the prime example of a failure to intervene properly, and the numbers clearly reflect this perception. Despite the relatively large numbers saved by the four intervention missions in Rwanda, the 500,000 to 800,000 who died over the course of the crisis grossly outstrips that figure.[30] Based on these figures, Rwanda is objectively a failure. US apathy to the situation was visible from the outset, and the only concern was that US nationals were evacuated from Rwanda.[31] The case of Somalia loomed large over the decision process, where US soldiers had quite visibly failed to accomplish their goals. Terming the crisis as a genocide was avoided, as it would mandate action by the US government.[32] Therefore, the United States took extraordinary measures to avoid involvement.

Conclusion

While the data collected implies that national interest is not necessarily a requisite feature of a successful humanitarian intervention, it is clear that when national interests are at stake, success is likely to occur. However, the absence of national interests, defined in realist terms, should not dissuade a state from conducting humanitarian interventions. Our data shows that success can certainly result without major national interests. While this is a small-*n* case study, the trend appears to be that the rate of success is higher when national interests are at stake. This may be due to the fact that states spend more effort resolving problems that directly affect their national interests, since such situations have more immediate ramifications than other humanitarian crises. Therefore, when conducting an intervention in which national interests are not directly at stake, the intervening state should still be willing to commit all necessary resources to properly handle the situation. The lack of national interests should not be used as a rationale for limiting the extent of an intervention; the state should be willing to endure a significant amount of pain in the process. Without a willingness to sacrifice military assets and personnel in pursuit of the goals of an intervention, the potential for success is drastically reduced. Looking back on historical cases of humanitarian intervention, this appears to be the most effective paradigm available. Committing insufficient resources to complete the task at hand is likely to result in failure, so based on this fact, abstaining from intervention entirely would be preferable. Refraining from intervention would save the meager resources that would have been devoted to a doomed operation.

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Notes

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