

Precautionary intervention?

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JOHN WILLIAMS, APR 15 2011

Precautionary intervention? The troubled engagement between humanitarian action and the precautionary principle

There is an understandable desire in international relations, as in so many other areas of life, to be able to see into the future, to know what it is that is coming down the track towards us and whether the light at the end of the tunnel is indeed the sunlight of a better future or just an indication that the tunnel is on fire. In recent weeks, in Ivory Coast and Libya, the tunnel has been well and truly alight.

How can we predict such eventualities? How can we take effective action to avoid the worst of the behaviour that politics throws up again and again? Who can decide, on the balance of future probabilities, which course of preventive action is the correct one? These are enduring questions for policy-makers and for analysts of international relations. They are also unanswerable, at least in the absence of the kind of insight into political behaviour that appears to be irredeemably beyond us, no matter how much some might try to build predictive theory. It is only, it seems, when calamity is, almost, upon us that there is enough certainty to take action in an attempt, sometimes too late, to stave off the worst. This has been a pattern discernible in practices of 'humanitarian intervention' (or whatever other label you prefer for coercive action aimed at addressing grave humanitarian crises) since the notion leapt to prominence in the aftermath of the first Persian Gulf War in 1991. It is only when the Iraqi Kurds are freezing to death in the mountains; only when the Bosnian Muslims are being rounded up in 'concentration camps'; only after the Tutsis have been hacked to death in the hundreds of thousands; only when Colonel Gaddafi's forces are at the gates of Benghazi and so on that coercive and especially militarily coercive action is initiated on a large scale. The 'responsibility to prevent' is a responsibility that it seems almost impossible to fulfil. Perhaps only UNPREDEP, in Macedonia at the end of the 1990s, stands as a clear example of a preventive deployment that, more or less, worked. The circumstances of its deployment are unique and there seems little reason to expect a widespread repetition of this practice.

Preventive action has, of course, hardly been an unknown position in international relations in the last decade. The Bush Doctrine of preventive war and the notion of a '1% doctrine' ascribed to former Vice-President Dick Cheney (that if there is a 1% chance of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons the US must treat it as a certainty) both stand as examples of justification of action in advance of certainty in the name of dealing with potentially serious, even catastrophic, threats and challenges before they are fully developed. Such practice had been massively controversial and, in the eyes of many, deeply damaging to the interests, reputation and influence of the United States and those states, like the UK, who supported such preventive strategies. In a telling instance of the effort to distance itself from its predecessor, all links to the National Security Strategies that had justified preventive action were removed from the White House website within a few hours of President Obama's inauguration.

Yet the siren voice of prevention persists. We should have known that Colonel Gaddafi, perhaps, unlike his counterparts in Tunisia and Egypt, would put up a fight in the face of a popular uprising and that he would have the resolve and the mastery of the coercive instruments of state power to put down his own people with whatever degree of brutality was required. If we should have known this then it should have been possible to take preventive action, to act in a precautionary way, to avoid the worst of what we are seeing. The idea of precaution, and of the precautionary

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principle, is one that has been applied in a number of areas of public policy, sometimes for decades, such as public health and environmental issues. It is enshrined in EU law, for example, and there have been efforts to try to apply the precautionary principle to international relations and the foreign policy of states. Some see the Bush doctrine as an example of 'better safe than sorry' thinking that chimes with the idea of precaution. Something similar could, or should, be done in relation to situations that bring with them the risk of humanitarian disaster.

This, though, is to misunderstand the nature of the precautionary principle as it has developed in these other policy areas. It is not about being 'better safe than sorry' in the face of uncertainty, it is about knowing the limits of knowledge and taking into account the risk factors that are involved when we act at the limits of that knowledge. Humanitarian crises are good examples: their complexity and unpredictability is undeniable. We have even developed a specific term, 'complex humanitarian emergencies', to emphasise this point. We must acknowledge the limits of our knowledge and the risk that is associated with acting in advance of certainty or in the presence of the chronic persistence of uncertainty. For example, for some, intervention in Libya is misguided because we do not know who we are dealing with in terms of the rebels based in Benghazi (on the other hand, we know more or less exactly who we are dealing with in the form of Colonel Gaddafi). We might be backing dangerous Islamic radicals, or supporting the establishment of a corrupt and kleptocratic collection of the unelected little better than the devil we already know, or we might be supporting a popular uprising that will lead to a genuine democratic transition that will bring accountable, responsible and effective government to a people denied such for the entirety of their post-colonial history. The fear of spreading conflagration, dangerous precedent, mission-creep and so on also persist and there is no way of providing definitive answers to any of these problems in advance. That is the nature of politics: to govern, in the words of the old saying, is to choose; and to choose is usually to act in the face of uncertainty about the consequences of different choices.

The precautionary principle is a useful tool for directing thinking towards areas of uncertainty and unpredictability based on the limits of knowledge and asking how we should act as a result. That we often must act regardless does not absolve us of the responsibility to act in a measured way, cognisant of the risks that we incur and aware of the false hope of certainty. Risks must be taken in situations such as that in Libya or the Ivory Coast and those risks come in many forms: immediate risks of 'collateral damage' arising from the use of military force; medium term risks to the stability of neighbouring states; long-term risks to established patterns of political practice to name just a few. Intervention in Libya brings all of those risks and more, and it is incumbent on responsible political actors, including commentators, to acknowledge that we are treading on a path with no fixed direction and are taking risks that we cannot fully control. To act in a precautionary way is not to refuse to act in the face of uncertainty or to insist that only actions that are 'tried and trusted' or conform to established precedents or rules are admissible. It is not, as some assert, an inherently conservative proposition. Instead, precaution is about honesty in the face of uncertainty and the limits of knowledge. We cannot know what will happen in Libya as a result of current military action, but we can insist upon acknowledgement of that absence and interrogate where and why and how our knowledge of the future runs out and look to improve that knowledge. Responsible planning must recognise uncertainty and the necessity of alternatives, and it must also recognise that to choose is to take risks and that sometimes taking large risks, acting in awareness of widespread uncertainty, is still the right thing to do because of the consequences of inaction.

It is still impossible to know whether that light at the end of the Libyan tunnel is sunshine or fire: whether the outcome of military action will be better or worse than what has gone before. But we do know that it will be different from what came before, that choices have been made that cannot be unmade and will alter the politics of north Africa for years to come. Our knowledge of what some possible outcomes will entail is good – the reassertion of rule by Colonel Gaddafi, for instance – knowledge of other outcomes is poor. A precautionary approach does not necessarily prefer the former to the latter, and there are many compelling reasons why uncertainty is preferable in this case. We should embrace and promote the uncertainty of a post-Gaddafi politics in Libya but we must be precautionary in our approach: accept the limits of knowledge, the impossibility of fully accurate prediction and the necessity of responsible planning for diverse outcomes.

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