

**Should states intervene in foreign conflicts for purely humanitarian reasons or only when they believe that their national interests are at stake? How effective are interventions carried out solely or primarily on humanitarian grounds?**

### **Despite Good Intentions:**

#### **The Failure of International Humanitarian Interventions**

Scholarly debates over the need for international humanitarian interventions have gained importance in face of the ethnic cleansing carried out in Yugoslavia in the early nineties, and of the genocides that took place in Rwanda in 1994 and that is currently taking place in Sudan. These interventions entail armed or unarmed participation of one or more states, oftentimes with the assistance of international organizations, in another state so as to ensure the well-being of its domestic groups that can no longer be protected by their government. In a purely humanitarian intervention, the decision to intervene is made independently of the interveners' self-interest (Author A, 1999). Even though such interventions may seem justifiable on higher moral grounds, they are ineffective. The finite resources of states and the restrictions imposed by their domestic constituencies will only allow for the full deployment of needed resources when the state's self-interest is also at stake. Accordingly, it is not surprising or coincidental that most interventions are made on the bases of self-interest and not exclusively or primarily on humanitarian grounds.

Scholars disagree on whether moral reasons alone warrant international intervention. On the one hand, human rights advocates argue that the international community has a duty to intervene in conflicts where citizens are helpless (Author B, 2000). On the other hand, political realists claim that if the self-interest of nations is not

at stake in such interventions, countries will lack incentives to invest the amount of resources necessary for a successful intervention and therefore the intervention is likely to fail (Author C, 2001). While the arguments of human rights advocates are based on normative claims on when to intervene, realists focus on the strategic aspects of intervention and its feasibility in an anarchic world that lacks an overarching authority.

Agreeing with the realists, I argue that interventions decided solely upon humanitarian grounds are likely to fail for two main reasons. First, resources are finite and, for this reason, there are always more needs than means available to satisfy them. Governments thus must decide whether to allocate resources domestically or abroad, and, in the latter case, in which particular states. Domestic conflicts where the interests of interveners are at stake will receive more funding.

Second, the survival of governments, even in authoritarian regimes, depends on the support of their citizens. If interventions fail, rulers will be held to blame by their constituents. Rulers will therefore prefer to intervene in the easiest cases, that is to say, those where they are most likely to succeed. Yet these are usually not the cases where there is most need for humanitarian intervention.

The existing empirical evidence supports the realist view. It shows that interventions decided solely upon “good intentions” usually end up badly. A critical case supporting this claim is the US intervention in Somalia in 1993. On that occasion, the US government was heavily pressured by its citizens to provide humanitarian aid to Somalis suffering from starvation and political oppression. However, the US had no strategic or economic interests in Somalia. For this reason, it intervened only with minimal capabilities. American soldiers were outnumbered and killed in the streets of Mogadishu, and the efforts to capture Somali war lords failed (Author D, 2002; Author E, 2003). Conversely, US intervention in Kosovo succeeded precisely because the region had considerable strategic importance, and the American government was therefore

willing to invest all the resources necessary to end the conflict between Serbs and Albanians and to ensure sustainable peace (Author F, 2003).

In sum, international interventions carried out for solely humanitarian purposes are likely to fail. Given finite resources and the constraints imposed by domestic politics, leaders lack the political will to ensure the success of such interventions. Interventions are costly and, unless they are driven by self-interest, they tend to be carried out half-heartedly, wasting valuable resources and in some cases even becoming counter-productive. The interventions in Somalia and Kosovo corroborate this conclusion.

The realist argument developed in this essay is not meant to suggest that states should also avoid using sanctions or attempting to mediate domestic conflicts in other states, since these policies are less costly than direct interventions. But, as realists have long warned, morality plays a limited role in world politics, and any efforts that negate or ignore the primacy of self-help in the international system are not bound to succeed.

## **References**

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