Section: Analysis

‘Never again’, or ‘Yet again’?

When do US presidents deploy the military for humanitarian reasons?¹

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As the war in Syria enters its fifth year, with no end in sight, knowing under what circumstances the United States deploys its military for humanitarian reasons is valuable, in particular, because the conditions have little to do with the international environment. Despite the fact that the end of the Cold War resulted in fewer constraints in the international environment on humanitarian intervention, US leaders continue to shy away from protecting innocents outside of the United States from harm. Leaders eschew interventions even though as presidential candidates they regularly campaign on reestablishing America’s moral lead in the world and that America has responsibilities to prevent mass human rights violations.

This article discusses why, once in office, a president’s initial response is to avoid the controversy of a risky involvement. When this strategy fails, the president shifts to a strategy of legitimating a policy of intervention and/or to a strategy that insulates the foreign policy from domestic political pressures. When deciding to intervene militarily for humanitarian reasons the domestic environment is essential in understanding the president’s thinking, especially regarding the political opposition and the public’s attitude toward the crisis.

First, avoid

The impulsive and apparently indecisive way in which the Barack Obama administration dealt with the August 2013 gas attacks in Syria raises questions about America’s overall strategy towards intervening militarily for moral or humanitarian reasons. Was Obama’s vacillating policy in the Syrian crisis unique, or have previous US administrations also behaved indecisively when called upon to militarily intervene for humanitarian rationales? Does the United States have a clear strategy on intervening militarily on humanitarian grounds and, if so, what is it?

Although the post-Cold War produced expectations that America would use its military forces for good, leaders consistently avoided protecting foreign innocents from harm. For instance, in the 1992-95 war in Bosnia, where ethnic cleansing resulted in the deaths of 100,000 people with another two million displaced, the United States steadfastly refused to intervene over a three year period. Presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton both evaded intensifying political pressure for American military intervention. Their administrations presented unclear and conflicting signals internally and externally about America’s role and commitment to humanitarian missions. In the Post-Cold War world “never again” sentiments all too often resulted in “yet again” events. How can this be explained?
For much of the post-WWII era explanations focused on the external environment, based upon the argument that foreign policy was a response to demands and circumstances located abroad. Thus, for much of the history of the US, the internal affairs of other states were seen as exactly that — internal — regardless of the levels of inhumanity on display. As long as US citizens were not directly involved, implicated or harmed, there was little ostensible reason to protest or act against a third party.

But over time, really starting in the 1990s, the standards of acceptable state behavior regarding humanitarian abuses shifted. Explanations for foreign policy also evolved to include domestic elements — an inclusion that not only holds promise in answering the question posed above but also addresses the problem that traditional geopolitical explanations contradict America’s professed values and morals. Americans understand that neglecting morals and values undermines the United States’ image in the world. But more importantly, Americans want international commitments to come with a moral component.

**US presidents play a dual game**

When domestic elements are taken into account, leaders become watchful of the perceptions regarding their political strength. Meaning, presidents will prioritize maintaining leverage over their domestic opposition. This also implies that any use of military force for humanitarian intervention is based on a dual game of, on the one hand, political survival over the president’s opposition and, on the other hand, the task of constructing a consensus for a risky policy. Prevailing in this duel game can be enormously challenging, especially when framed against the backdrop of a pressing or imminent humanitarian crisis.

The need to win this dual game suggests that a presidents’ preference will be to sidestep risky humanitarian operations, especially if they imply open-ended outcomes. Rather than expend political capital on risky humanitarian operations, it is better to dodge them altogether. Therefore, in the case of the decision to use military force for humanitarian reasons, domestic political factors — in particular the perspective of the president’s opposition — are more influential than the characteristics of the international environment. Moreover, the need to accommodate domestic opposition will also necessarily reduce a president’s ability to respond to international pressure. Domestic politics can further explain why presidents sometimes choose military force to save non-Americans from harm. In those cases that US presidents do intervene, risk perceptions shift and leaders assess that their inaction is more hazardous to their political survival.

Although coping with the conjoined effects of domestic and international pressures is not limited to the US or, for that matter to established democracies, the numerous access points within America’s complex political system generates more opportunities for domestic elements to influence foreign policy than in other many other democracies. In his analysis on the impact of public opinion on the foreign policy-making processes in four liberal democracies with distinct domestic structures, Thomas Risse-Kappen argued that the US has “the most decentralized foreign and security policy-making structure of the four countries.”

Risse-Kappen additionally argued that US foreign policy networks come closest to being the “society-dominated type,” in which “constant building and rebuilding of coalitions among societal actors and political elites is fairly common even in foreign and security policy.”
society-dominated type structure presents the opposition with more opportunities to confront the government’s leadership and policies, suggesting that leaders working in such a structure are more sensitive to their opposition. Moreover, presidents must contend with what has been categorized a “significant” opposition, meaning it has “sufficient political resources” that indicate it may succeed in capturing power in “the not-too-distant future.” If any such opposition continuously poses a direct challenge to leadership and government control, the president ignores it at his/her peril.

While Risse-Kappen points out that coalition building is constant in the US, coalitions themselves are not easily formed, in part, because the opposition also often asserts its power through an independent Congress. Naturally, coalition building is even more daunting when the president’s party does not enjoy a majority in one or other, or both, houses of Congress. But even if foreign policy leaders are not able to build coalitions to support a controversial policy, they still must ensure political survival. This means that US policy makers are sensitive to the long-term domestic consequences of their short-term foreign policy decisions. Policy makers will want to prevent foreign policy issues being linked to the overall credibility of their leadership — they will not want to appear weak in the eyes of the electorate, or their opposition, because credibility is a prerequisite for survival. If a president is losing in the dual game he or she may be unable to address an issue, even when facing intense international pressure. If domestic political pressures actually threaten to dislodge a leader from power, foreign policy will be adjusted in order to impose fewer domestic costs.

This exploration of the underlying forces of the dual game means leaders will choose either a policy of avoidance of domestically controversial actions, or the legitimation of the government line. If a leader embarks on a strategy of legitimation, he/she will attempt to control foreign policy issues in order to mobilize new support for the administration’s policy. Legitimation may require assertively selling the policy to audiences while at the same time discrediting opponents. If neither the avoidance nor legitimation strategy works, leaders shift to insulating their foreign policy from domestic political pressure. By insulating, leaders commit to a policy but then try to diminish or ward off criticisms thrown up by their opposition, or any disapproval that may emerge from the domestic environment.

**The importance of a risky issue**

Some issues clearly involve more risk than others. The issue of concern here, humanitarian intervention, is among the most precarious any leader must contemplate. In the US context humanitarian intervention is even more hazardous than other uses of force because it involves endangering the lives of American personnel in order to protect individuals who have no direct stake in domestic politics and where national security is not directly threatened. Rand researchers Eric Larson and Bogdan Savich underscore these two points by concluding that none of the four humanitarian operations during the Clinton administration (Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia and Kosovo) “were judged particularly important by most members of the public.”

The fact that humanitarian interventions are not clearly linked to national security interests may also exacerbate partisanship in Congress due to the lower costs associated with challenging an incumbent president and administration. In this vein, Larson and Savich
argue that there is no empirical evidence that Clinton could have overcome his congressional opposition to the operations in Somalia, Haiti or Bosnia by building coalitions around an activated public base. On the contrary, congressional pressure proved decisive in forcing Clinton to remove forces from Somalia. Thus, when the predominant perception is that the US national security interests are marginal, presidents will not want to risk their political capital when the benefits appear to be few, especially if an election is near. Even when humanitarian missions are deemed to be a critical success, political leaders may derive no obvious benefit. For instance, in spite of the fact Clinton’s mission in Bosnia was widely viewed as successful, Larson and Savych found that the public did not view it “as a particularly important accomplishment.”

Military actions, by their very nature, also tend to garner widespread attention, suggesting that any overt failure or shortcoming will tend to reflect directly upon the president, since as Commander-in-Chief, it is the president who has the legal authority to deploy military force overseas for up to 90 days. Likewise, gross human rights violations that trigger a humanitarian response will increase public attention. Those who are paying attention may not like the means by which lives are saved. The use of force may involve the taking of lives as well as the saving of lives, including innocents who may be killed as the result of collateral damage.

The longer any operation lasts the more perilous and more detrimental the situation becomes for the president, since criticism by the political opposition and/or the media will unfavorably affect a president’s popularity. If American soldiers are injured in the operation, the lack of support may quickly undermine the president’s position, as happened in 1993 in Somalia. The American public’s willingness to tolerate casualties is also greatly influenced by whether a consensus exists among its political leaders. If elite consensus is missing, which is likely to be the case in humanitarian missions, even low costs can quickly undermine public support for an intervention.

A US tendency toward isolationism can also constrain the appetite for humanitarian intervention. Opposition parties often attempt to reactivate this tendency as a political ploy against the president. For example, during the Clinton administration politicians on the far right successfully turned America’s participation in UN peacekeeping missions into “political poison.”

There is a clear conundrum at work here. While it is true that Americans are wary of foreign intervention, they also clearly desire to export democratic and humanitarian values, and generally wish to see ethical considerations reflected in US international commitments. Barry Blechman argues that these conflicting tendencies on the part of the American public lead to an “intervention dilemma” for policy makers. Dealing with this dilemma further complicates the president’s need to build policy coalitions while at the same time retain the reins of power.

**Case study: the US humanitarian intervention in Libya**

The 2011 Libyan intervention is the only significant deployment of US military force for humanitarian reasons in the past fifteen years, making it an appropriate case study to assess whether the opposition and public opinion are essential components in the president’s
decision making. The Libyan intervention was also the first time that the United Nations Security Council had expressly approved military intervention citing the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) as a new global norm.

Accompanying the emergence of norms like R2P was a growing and an increasingly attentive NGO community that publicized humanitarian abuses. This NGO community, along with civil society groups, exerted pressure on those states capable of intervention. Post 9/11 American public opinion polls also created domestic leeway for humanitarian intervention, with 67 percent in 2004, 71 percent in 2006 and 69 percent in 2008 indicating that they supported US troops intervening in cases of genocide.

With a domestic and an international environment creating greater prospects and the development of relevant norms, and thus opportunities to address instances of mass atrocities, Obama’s strategy should have been one that favors moral advocacy with regard to humanitarian issues. Moreover, Obama personally indicated that he believed there are some global jobs that America alone has the mix of military, economic and diplomatic muscle to undertake. On the campaign trail Obama made it clear that his understanding of American security was a broad one.

But when a crisis erupted, did Obama’s deeds match his rhetoric? In the early part of Obama’s presidency, the global financial crisis meant domestic concerns outweighed the undertaking of major foreign policy initiatives. While the decade may have started with America confidently employing military force in Afghanistan and Iraq, it ended with America suffering a degrading economic crisis, complete with a growing financial indebtedness to the emerging powers. George W. Bush’s military interventions had clearly ignored costs. The under-estimation or disregard for the costs of military intervention was a practice that Bush’s successor was unable to follow.

First, avoid

As a consequence, Obama’s foreign policy initially focused on winding-down the operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. On the eve of the Libyan intervention a Pew Research survey underscored that the American public was not in the mood for a proactive foreign policy with more than six in 10 Americans disagreeing that the US had a responsibility to stop the conflict in Libya. The survey also found that 77 percent opposed bombing Libyan air defenses, 69 percent opposed sending arms and supplies to anti-government groups in Libya and 82 percent opposed sending troops into Libya. Public opinion, coupled with the continuing financial crisis, created fertile ground for Obama’s political opposition to stimulate America’s isolationist impulse, which was clearly evident in the run-up to the 2012 elections.

The prevailing domestic environment created few chances for Obama to win the dual game and practice an active humanitarian intervention policy that corresponded to his campaign rhetoric. He adopted the less risky strategy of avoiding the controversy through declarations of moral condemnation against Qaddafi. However, pressure began to mount from both inside and outside his administration. Those pushing Obama to intervene included Defense Secretary Robert Gates, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice and National Security Council staffer Samantha Power. External pressure came from
important allies France and Great Britain. When Obama himself began to worry that inaction would leave him morally responsible for failing to prevent an imminent massacre — which would undercut his credentials and depict him as a weak foreign policy leader — he shifted policy.

When avoidance fails: insulate

At the same time, Obama remained conscious of his opposition, meaning that he insulated his policy to intervene from domestic political pressures. For instance, before any statements on Libya emerged from the White House, Obama moved to separate the operation from his administration by externalizing policy-making to the UN. As Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice recounts, Obama instructed her early on to inform the other members of the Security Council that stopping the violence in Libya was not a core national security interest for the United States and thus any US involvement required Security Council authorization. Rice told her colleagues, “It’s up to you to decide,” leading James Traub to argue that Obama’s tactics were “better understood as leading without wishing to be seen as taking the lead.”

In a further insulating move, Obama stipulated that his support for the no-fly zone rested “on the establishment of an international coalition with an Arab face.” Administration officials accentuated the role that Middle Eastern countries would play in the operation, pointing out that at least three Arab countries had promised to contribute militarily. In remarks before a bipartisan group of members of Congress, Obama said US military action would be short and it would be led by British, French and Arab allies. To accentuate the fact that America was not leading, French President Nicolas Sarkozy was delegated the job to announce the start of military operations. In an additional insulating move after significant involvement in the initial wave of air strikes against Qaddafi’s forces, Obama quickly pulled back US forces, indicating that Washington was handing over to NATO the operational lead — a policy that an un-named White House adviser indicated was part of Obama’s plan to lead from behind. Obama further stressed that the operational costs would not be anything like Iraq because it was a NATO-based coalition doing the fighting.

To additionally isolate his intervention policy from his domestic opposition, Obama placed caveats on the roles that American military personnel would engage in, while at the same time limiting the capabilities that the US military would contribute in support of the NATO mission. Obama even argued that US involvement was so minimal that it did not fall under the provisions of the War Powers Resolution, which required that he confer with Congress if hostilities lasted longer than 90 days. In order to make this point, Obama disregarded the lawyers in the Justice and Defense Departments, who disagreed with his notion that the War Powers did not apply. Instead Obama relied on lawyers in the State Department and the White House, as their arguments supported his goal of shielding the mission from domestic opponents.

James Mann argues that Obama’s contravening of the War Powers Resolution went beyond any claims made by George W. Bush in expanding his presidential power in war making. But Mann misses the main reason why Obama avoided congressional oversight. It was not to expand presidential power but rather to insulate his decision to intervene in Libya from domestic politics. It was not a US intervention — it was a NATO intervention under a UN
mandate. This referral to NATO as a separate entity from the US is new for American policymakers. As Kurt Volker, a former United States Ambassador to NATO, observed, “the tendency to think of NATO as ‘them’ has long been the pattern in Europe, where NATO is often synonymous with ‘the Americans.’” That this “othering” may have implications for the future of the NATO alliance is not as important to a president who was contemplating a precarious military operation in a third Muslim country during his first term. For an administration that wants to ensure its political survival and make it to the second term, it is enticing to argue that a separate institution was responsible for the military campaign.

**The dual game vs. soft power and leadership**

From a foreign policy perspective, downplaying America’s role in stopping violations of human rights diminishes soft power and may also call into question whether America is still a global leader. Whether the United States retains its standing is important to America’s allies around the world, especially those in the Middle East. But Obama did not pursue a policy of restraint, mixed with insulating his decision to intervene in Libya because of factors that arise from the international level. Obama chose his restricted strategy towards the Libyan humanitarian crisis because of the twofold imperative of retaining political power while at the same time building support for a risky foreign policy.

It would seem that even in the age of R2P as a justifying principle for humanitarian intervention, US presidents will not employ a strategy of outright moral advocacy that accepts the responsibility for the welfare of people suffering human rights violations abroad — unless the president can build a coalition with his opposition to support intervention, or he is willing to jeopardize his political survival.

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