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NO SOONER had NATO launched its first air strike in Libya than the mission was thrown into controversy—and with it, the more general notion of humanitarian intervention. Days after the UN Security Council authorized international forces to protect civilians and establish a no-fly zone, NATO seemed to go beyond its mandate as several of its members explicitly demanded that Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi step down. It soon became clear that the fighting would last longer than expected. Foreign policy realists and other critics likened the Libyan operation to the disastrous engagements of the early 1990s in Somalia, Rwanda, and Bosnia, arguing that humanitarian intervention is the wrong way to respond to intrastate violence and civil war, especially following the debacles in Afghanistan and Iraq.

To some extent, widespread skepticism is understandable: past failures have been more newsworthy than successes, and foreign interventions inevitably face steep challenges. Yet such skepticism is unwarranted. Despite the early setbacks in Libya, NATO's success in protecting civilians and helping rebel forces remove a corrupt leader

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there has become more the rule of humanitarian intervention than the exception. As Libya and the international community prepare for the post-Qaddafi transition, it is important to examine the big picture of humanitarian intervention—and the big picture is decidedly positive. Over the last 20 years, the international community has grown increasingly adept at using military force to stop or prevent mass atrocities.

Humanitarian intervention has also benefited from the evolution of international norms about violence, especially the emergence of “the responsibility to protect,” which holds that the international community has a special set of responsibilities to protect civilians—by force, if necessary—from war crimes, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and genocide when national governments fail to do so. The doctrine has become integrated into a growing tool kit of conflict management strategies that includes today’s more robust peacekeeping operations and increasingly effective international criminal justice mechanisms. Collectively, these strategies have helped foster an era of declining armed conflict, with wars occurring less frequently and producing far fewer civilian casualties than in previous periods.

A TURBULENT DECADE

MODERN HUMANITARIAN intervention was first conceived in the years following the end of the Cold War. The triumph of liberal democracy over communism made Western leaders optimistic that they could solve the world’s problems as never before. Military force that had long been held in check by superpower rivalry could now be unleashed to protect poor countries from aggression, repression, and hunger. At the same time, the shifting global landscape created new problems that cried out for action. Nationalist and ethnic conflicts in former communist countries surged, and recurrent famines and instability hit much of Africa. A new and unsettled world order took shape, one seemingly distinguished by the frequency and brutality of wars and the deliberate targeting of civilians. The emotional impact of these crises was heightened by new communications technologies that transmitted graphic images of human suffering across the world.



For the first time in decades, terms such as “genocide” and “ethnic cleansing” appeared regularly in public discussions.

Western political elites struggled to respond to these new realities. When U.S. marines arrived in Somalia in December 1992 to secure famine assistance that had been jeopardized by civil war, there were few norms or rules of engagement to govern such an intervention and no serious plans for the kinds of forces and tactics that would be needed to establish long-term stability. Indeed, the marines’ very arrival highlighted the gap between military theory and practice: the heavily armed troops stormed ashore on a beach occupied by only dozens of camera-wielding journalists.

Although the Somalia mission did succeed in saving civilians, the intervention was less successful in coping with the political and strategic realities of Somali society and addressing the underlying sources of conflict. U.S. forces were drawn into a shooting war with one militia group, and in the October 1993 “Black Hawk down” incident, 18 U.S. soldiers were killed, and one of their bodies was dragged through the streets of Mogadishu while television cameras rolled. Facing domestic pressures and lacking a strategic objective, President Bill Clinton quickly withdrew U.S. troops. The UN soon followed, and Somalia was left to suffer in a civil war that continues to this day.

Meanwhile, two days after the “Black Hawk down” fiasco, the UN Security Council authorized a peacekeeping mission for Rwanda, where a peace agreement held the promise of ending a civil war. The international force was notable for its small size and paltry resources. Hutu extremists there drew lessons from the faint-hearted international response in Somalia, and when the conflict reignited in April 1994, they killed ten Belgian peacekeepers to induce the Belgian-led UN force to pull out. Sure enough, most of the peacekeepers withdrew, and as more than half a million civilians were killed in a matter of months, the international community failed to act.

Around the same time, a vicious war erupted throughout the former Yugoslavia, drawing a confused and ineffective response from the West. At first, in 1992, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker declared that the United States did not “have a dog in that fight.” Even after the world learned of tens of thousands of civilian deaths, in May 1993, Clinton’s secretary of state, Warren Christopher, described the so-called



ancient hatreds of ethnic groups there as a presumably unsolvable “problem from hell.” Unwilling to risk their soldiers’ lives or to use the word “genocide,” with all of its political, legal, and moral ramifications, the United States and European powers opted against a full-scale intervention and instead supported a UN peacekeeping force that found little peace to keep. At times, the UN force actually made things worse, promising protection that it could not provide or giving fuel and money to aggressors in exchange for the right to send humanitarian supplies to besieged victims.

The UN and Western powers were humiliated in Somalia, Rwanda, and the former Yugoslavia. War criminals elsewhere appeared to conclude that the international community could be intimidated by a few casualties. And in the United States, a number of prominent critics came to feel that humanitarian intervention was an ill-conceived enterprise.

The political scientist Samuel Huntington claimed that it was “morally unjustifiable and politically indefensible” to put U.S. soldiers at risk in intrastate conflicts, and he argued at another point that it was “human to hate.” Henry Kissinger saw danger in the United States becoming bogged down in what he later called “the bottomless pit of Balkan passions,” and he warned against intervening when there were not vital strategic interests at stake. Other critics concluded that applying military force to protect people often prolonged civil wars and intensified the violence, killing more civilians than otherwise might have been the case. And still others argued that intervention fundamentally altered intrastate political contests, creating long-term instability or protracted dependence on the international community.

Nonetheless, international actors did not abandon intervention or their efforts to protect civilians. Rather, amid the violence, major intervening powers and the UN undertook systematic reviews of their earlier failures, updated their intervention strategies, and helped foster a new set of norms for civilian protection.

A key turning point came in 1995, when Bosnian Serb forces executed more than 7,000 prisoners in the UN-designated safe area of Srebrenica.

Two decades of media exposure to genocide have altered global attitudes about intervention.





REUTERS

UN peacekeepers in Potocari, Bosnia, July 1995

The Clinton administration quickly abandoned its hesitancy and led a forceful diplomatic and military effort to end the war. The persistent diplomacy of Anthony Lake, the U.S. national security adviser, persuaded the reluctant Europeans and UN peacekeeping commanders to support Operation Deliberate Force, NATO's aggressive air campaign targeting the Bosnian Serb army. That effort brought Serbia to the negotiating table, where U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke crafted the Dayton agreement, which ended the war. In place of the hapless UN force, NATO sent 60,000 heavily armed troops into the "zone of separation" between the warring parties, staving off renewed fighting.

The "problem from hell" stopped immediately, and the ensuing decade of U.S.-led peacekeeping saw not a single U.S. combat-related casualty in Bosnia. Unlike previous interventions, the post-Dayton international peacekeeping presence was unified, vigorous, and sustained, and it has kept a lid on ethnic violence for more than 15 years. A related innovation was the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), a court that has indicted 161 war criminals, including all the principal Serbian wartime leaders. Despite extensive



criticism for ostensibly putting justice ahead of peace, the tribunal has produced dramatic results. Every suspected war criminal, once indicted, quickly lost political influence in postwar Bosnia, and not one of the 161 indictees remains at large today.

Buoyed by these successes, NATO responded to an imminent Serbian attack on Kosovo in 1999 by launching a major air war. Despite initial setbacks (the operation failed to stop a Serbian ground attack that created more than a million Kosovar Albanian refugees), the international community signaled that it would not back down. Under U.S. leadership, NATO escalated the air campaign, and the ICTY indicted Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic for crimes against humanity. Within three months, the combined military and diplomatic pressure compelled Serbia to withdraw its forces from Kosovo. And even though many observers, including several senior Clinton administration officials, feared that the ICTY's indictment of Milosevic in the middle of the military campaign would make it even less likely that he would capitulate in Kosovo or ever relinquish power, he was removed from office 18 months later by nonviolent civil protest and turned over to The Hague.

Outside the Balkans, the international community continued to adapt its approach to conflicts with similar success. In 1999, after a referendum on East Timor's secession from Indonesia led to Indonesian atrocities against Timorese civilians, the UN quickly authorized an 11,000-strong Australian-led military force to end the violence. The intervention eventually produced an independent East Timor at peace with Indonesia. Later missions in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Côte d'Ivoire used a similar model of deploying a regional military force in coordination with the UN and, on occasion, European powers.

CORRECTING THE RECORD

DESPITE THE international community's impressive record of recent humanitarian missions, many of the criticisms formulated in response to the botched campaigns of 1992–95 still guide the conversation about intervention today. The charges are outdated. Contrary to the claims that interventions prolong civil wars and lead to greater humanitarian suffering and civilian casualties, the most violent and protracted cases



in recent history—Somalia, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Bosnia before Srebrenica, and Darfur—have been cases in which the international community was unwilling either to intervene or to sustain a commitment with credible force. Conversely, a comprehensive study conducted by the political scientist Taylor Seybolt has found that aggressive operations legitimized by firm UN Security Council resolutions, as in Bosnia in 1995 and East Timor in 1999, were the most successful at ending conflicts.

Even when civil wars do not stop right away, external interventions often mitigate violence against civilians. This is because, as the political scientist Matthew Krain and others have found, interventions aimed at preventing mass atrocities often force would-be killers to divert resources away from slaughtering civilians and toward defending themselves. This phenomenon, witnessed in the recent Libya campaign, means that even when interventions fail to end civil wars or resolve factional differences immediately, they can still protect civilians.

Another critique of humanitarian interventions is that they create perverse incentives for rebel groups to deliberately provoke states to commit violence against civilians in order to generate an international response. By this logic, the prospect of military intervention would generate more rebel provocations and thus more mass atrocities. Yet the statistical record shows exactly the opposite. Since the modern era of humanitarian intervention began, both the frequency and the intensity of attacks on civilians have declined. During the Arab Spring protests this year, there was no evidence that opposition figures in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, or Yemen sought to trigger outside intervention. In fact, the protesters clearly stated that they would oppose such action. Even the Libyan rebels, who faced long odds against Qaddafi's forces, refused what would have been the most effective outside help: foreign boots on the ground.

Recent efforts to perfect humanitarian intervention have been fueled by deep changes in public norms about violence against civilians and advances in conflict management. Two decades of media exposure to mass atrocities, ethnic cleansing, and genocide have altered global—not simply Western—attitudes about intervention. The previously sacrosanct concept of state sovereignty has been made conditional on a state's responsible behavior, and in 2005, the UN General Assembly



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unanimously endorsed the doctrine of the responsibility to protect at the UN's World Summit. NATO's intervention in Libya reflects how the world has become more committed to the protection of civilians. Both UN Security Council resolutions on Libya this year passed with unprecedented speed and without a single dissenting vote.

In the wake of conflicts as well, the international community has shown that it can and will play a role in maintaining order and restoring justice. Peacekeeping missions now enjoy widespread legitimacy and have been remarkably successful in preventing the recurrence of violence once deployed. And because of successful postconflict tribunals and the International Criminal Court, individuals, including national leaders, can now be held liable for egregious crimes against civilians.

Collectively, these new conflict management and civilian protection tools have contributed to a marked decline in violence resulting from civil war. According to the most recent *Human Security Report*, between 1992 and 2003 the number of conflicts worldwide declined by more than 40 percent, and between 1988 and 2008 the number of conflicts that produced 1,000 or more battle deaths per year fell by 78 percent. Most notably, the incidence of lethal attacks against civilians was found to be lower in 2008 than at any point since the collection of such data began in 1989.

Still, although international norms now enshrine civilian protection and levels of violence are down, humanitarian interventions remain constrained by political and military realities. The international community's inaction in the face of attacks on Syrian protesters, as of this writing, demonstrates that neither the UN nor any major power is willing or prepared to intervene when abusive leaders firmly control the state's territory and the state's security forces and are backed by influential allies. Furthermore, the concept of civilian protection still competes with deeply held norms of sovereignty, especially in former colonies. Although humanitarian intervention can succeed in many cases, given these constraints, it is not always feasible.

GETTING BETTER ALL THE TIME

IT IS against this backdrop that the international community should evaluate the two most recent interventions, in Côte d'Ivoire and Libya.



In Côte d'Ivoire, a civil war that began in 2002 led to the partition of the country, with a large UN force interposed between the two sides. After years of peacekeeping, the UN oversaw long-delayed elections in 2010 and declared the opposition leader victorious. The incumbent, President Laurent Gbagbo, refused to leave, causing a months-long standoff during which Gbagbo's forces killed nearly 3,000 people. As another civil war loomed, France sent in a powerful military force that, in tandem with the UN peacekeepers, deposed Gbagbo and put the legitimate winner in the presidential palace.

Two decades ago, a similar situation in Angola led to disaster. After the UN sent a mere 500 military observers to monitor elections

More important than
an exit strategy is a
comprehensive
transition strategy.

in 1992, the losing candidate resorted to war and the international community walked away. The crisis in Côte d'Ivoire ended much differently, partly because the mission was broadly seen as legitimate. Supporters of the action included not just the UN Security Council and Western governments but also the African Union, neighboring West African countries, and leading human rights groups. Moreover, the intervention in Côte d'Ivoire applied escalating military force over the course of several months that culminated in overwhelming firepower. The operation's planners allowed for, but did not count on, diplomacy and negotiation to dislodge Gbagbo. When those paths proved fruitless, the international community hardened its resolve.

Although the final chapter of the Libya mission has yet to be written and serious challenges remain, it has enjoyed several of the same advantages. The international response began in February when, as Qaddafi's security forces intensified their efforts to crush the protests, the UN Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 1970, which condemned the violence, imposed sanctions on the regime, and referred the case to the International Criminal Court. Three weeks later, Qaddafi's forces moved toward the rebel capital of Benghazi, a city of more than 700,000, and all signs pointed to an imminent slaughter. The Arab League demanded quick UN action to halt the impending bloodshed, as did major human rights organizations, such as the International Crisis Group and Human Rights Watch. In response,



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the Security Council passed Resolution 1973, which demanded a suspension of hostilities and authorized NATO to enforce a no-fly zone to protect civilians. Although five members of the Security Council—Brazil, China, Germany, India, and Russia—expressed reservations, none of them ultimately opposed the resolution. The subsequent intervention has been a genuinely multinational operation in which the United States at first played a central combat role and then stepped back, providing mostly support and logistics.

The intervention has accomplished the primary objective of Resolution 1973. It saved civilian lives by halting an imminent slaughter in Benghazi, breaking the siege of Misratah, and forcing Qaddafi's tank and artillery units to take cover rather than commit atrocities. And despite the initial military setbacks and some frustration over the length and cost of the operation, the intervention contributed to the end of the civil war between Qaddafi and the rebels, which otherwise might have been much longer and more violent.

LESSONS LEARNED

EVER SINCE U.S. marines stormed the Somali coast in 1992, the international community has grappled with the recurring challenges of modern humanitarian intervention: establishing legitimacy, sharing burdens across nations, acting with proportionality and discrimination, avoiding “mission creep,” and developing exit strategies. These challenges have not changed, but the ways the international community responds to them have. Today's successful interventions share a number of elements absent in earlier, failed missions.

First, the interventions that respond the most quickly to unfolding events protect the most lives. Ethnic cleansing and mass atrocities often occur in the early phases of conflicts, as in Rwanda and Bosnia. This highlights the necessity of early warning indicators and a capacity for immediate action. The UN still lacks standby capabilities to dispatch peacekeepers instantly to a conflict area, but national or multinational military forces have responded promptly under UN authority, and then after a number of months, they have handed off control to a UN peacekeeping force that may include soldiers from the original mission. This model worked in East Timor, Chad, and the Central African



Republic, and it guided the international community's response to the impending massacre in Benghazi.

Second, the international community has learned from Somalia, Rwanda, and Bosnia that it needs access to enough military power and diplomatic muscle to back up a credible commitment to protecting civilians and to prevail even if things go wrong along the way. Lighter deployments may also succeed if members of the international community have additional forces close at hand that can be accessed if needed. When UN peacekeepers ran into trouble in Sierra Leone in 2000, for example, the United Kingdom rushed in with 4,500 troops to save the government and the peacekeeping mission from collapse.

Third, intervening governments must be sensitive to inevitable opposition from domestic constituencies and must design interventions that can withstand pressure for early exits. As Libya has demonstrated, protecting civilians from intransigent regimes often requires persistent and sustained action. In all likelihood, seemingly straightforward operations will turn out to be much less so. In past, failed missions, the international community was unwilling to accept coalition casualties and responded by withdrawing. Successful interventions, by contrast, have been designed to limit the threat to the intervening forces, thus allowing them to add resources and broaden the dimensions of the military operations in the face of difficulties.

Fourth, legitimate humanitarian interventions must be supported by a broad coalition of international, regional, and local actors. Multilateral interventions convey consensus about the appropriateness of the operations, distribute costs, and establish stronger commitments for the post-intervention transitions. But multilateralism cannot come at the expense of synchronized leadership. War criminals usually look to exploit divisions between outside powers opposing them. Interventions need to avoid having multiple states and organizations dispatch their own representatives to the conflict, sending mixed signals to the target states.

Finally, perhaps the most daunting challenge of a humanitarian intervention is the exit. Because violence against civilians is often rooted in deeper crises of political order, critics note that once in, intervenors confront the dilemma of either staying indefinitely and assuming the



burdens of governance, as in Bosnia, or withdrawing and allowing the country to fall back into chaos, as in Somalia.

Some observers, then, have demanded that any intervention be carried out with a clearly defined exit strategy. Yet more important than an exit strategy is a comprehensive transition strategy, whereby foreign combat forces can exit as peacekeepers take over, and peacekeepers can exit when local governing institutions are in place and an indigenous security force stands ready to respond quickly if violence resumes. The earliest phases of an intervention must include planning for a transition strategy with clearly delineated political and economic benchmarks, so that international and local authorities can focus on the broader, long-term challenges of reconstruction, political reconciliation, and economic development.

Successful transition strategies include several crucial elements. For starters, negotiations that end humanitarian interventions must avoid laying the groundwork for protracted international presences. The Dayton peace accords, for example, created a dual-entity structure in Bosnia that has privileged nationalist and ethnic voices, and Kosovo's final status was left unresolved. Both of these outcomes unwittingly created long-term international commitments.

Intervening powers must also proceed with the understanding that they cannot bring about liberal democratic states overnight. Objectives need to be tempered to match both local and international political constraints. Recent scholarship on postconflict state building suggests that the best approach may be a hybrid one in which outsiders and domestic leaders rely on local customs, politics, and practices to establish new institutions that can move over time toward international norms of accountable, legitimate, and democratic governance.

Humanitarian interventions involve an inherent contradiction: they use violence in order to control violence. Setbacks are almost inevitable, and so it is no surprise that the operations often attract criticism. Yet when carried out thoughtfully, legitimately, and as part of a broader set of mechanisms designed to protect civilians, the use of military force for humanitarian purposes saves lives. Mass atrocities, ethnic cleansing, and genocide are truly problems from hell, but their solutions—honed over the course of two decades of experience from Mogadishu to Tripoli—are very much of this world. 🌐

