

Aspirations Don't Make Foreign Policy

Globe and Mail

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3 November 2008

John Bolton was George Bush's appointee as the United States ambassador to the U.N., and is infamous for his abrasive style of diplomacy and contrarian nature at the U.N. He is a contentious figure in U.S. foreign policy, with some praising his efforts at reform and others infuriated by his lack of respect and agenda as a U.N. representative, before his resignation in 2007. Bolton stated that his proudest moment in his career was when he persuaded President Bush to resign the Rome Statute. He will also be participating in the Munk Debate on Humanitarian Intervention.

The central problem with the case for humanitarian intervention is that the arguments advanced in its favour are largely incoherent. All will agree that there are situations of human suffering that deserve attention, but most are far removed from even the most expansive definition of national interests. What's more, proponents of interventionism rarely explain to the citizens of countries like Canada why their sons and daughters are to be put in harm's way, albeit for noble purposes.

So, what precisely are these advocates proposing to do, and what is the utility in grouping such disparate examples together under the label of humanitarian intervention? Proponents are never sure who they are going to save, but consider the situations in Sudan, Somalia and Burma.

In Sudan, we see a genocidal civil war. What began as a conflict between the government and the indigenous population in Darfur now risks spreading to the neighbouring countries of Chad and the Central African Republic. Hundreds of thousands of people have died. In Somalia, there has been a near-complete breakdown in central government authority. In the south, this has resulted in fractious warlordism. In the north, in Puntland and Somaliland, we see a state of near secession. For almost 20 years, the country has verged on anarchy. In Burma, a long-standing dictatorship has recently blocked international humanitarian assistance following a major natural disaster. There is no doubt that thousands died unnecessarily due to the inaction of the military junta. Each of these cases represents a humanitarian crisis, but the circumstances vary dramatically. What precisely do advocates of intervention wish to be done in each of these vastly different situations? More importantly to the debate about humanitarian intervention, what clarity is there in lumping them together under one set of norms and actions? (...)

On Sudan, UN authorization of an African Union peacekeeping force has faced constant obstruction in the Security Council. China and Russia have threatened vetoes at every step - why would anyone think they will change their ways? As for Somalia, in the early 1990s, the United States intervened unilaterally to try and open the channels of humanitarian assistance, but within two years of turning the mission over to the UN, the country had again descended into chaos. Why would the UN do better in Somalia this time than it did last time? Where Burma is concerned, the Bush administration fought hard just to get its discussion on the Security

Council's agenda. We ultimately prevailed, but it was certainly not easy, and the resulting council action was marginal. Are these three cases emblematic of the much vaunted international community?

Third, I have found that many who advocate the doctrine of **responsibility to protect**, and particularly military intervention, are very casual with other people's blood. It is much easier to advocate for the use of force when you are not the one doing the heavy lifting.

The reality of international military capabilities is that when observers on the sidelines express high ideals for what the international community should be doing, they are generally referring to the United States. And as tragic as the situation is in Darfur, in a democracy we have to be able to explain to American citizens why they should put their sons and daughters at risk where there are no vital U.S interests, even in an area of undoubted humanitarian tragedy.

There has been much talk about creating a standing volunteer rapid response force that can act in the name of the **responsibility to protect**, but this force will be faced with the very same logistical restraints as any national army. If under the UN, it will be subject to all of the UN's limitations. Once deployed, it is entirely unclear how the rapid response force would ever be able to extract itself from what are often intractable, long-term conflicts.

I am afraid that in the end, the principle of the **responsibility to protect** remains fundamentally aspirational. And aspirations do not make a foreign policy.

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