

## The Perils of Intervention

by STANLEY KOBER

Especially after the end of the Cold War, the “responsibility to protect” concept began enjoying special attention. Stanley Kober seriously doubts if appropriately. The author does not only provide historical evidence when the “responsibility to protect” concept has been used as an excuse for military intervention, but also raises the adequate question about the disastrous consequences of failed interventions.

Crisis management is a frequently used euphemism for external intervention. After all, the situation in a country does not attract the attention of outsiders if it is successfully handled as a domestic matter. Only when the crisis spills over borders or when the situation inside a country provokes moral outrage do outsiders feel a need to intervene—to manage the crisis. In recent years, “responsibility to protect” has become a spur to intervention. It has mainly emerged from two historical junctures. The first of these is the Holocaust that would “never again” be allowed to happen. Pursuant to the goal to prevent further genocides, states were put under an obligation to prevent genocide. The second juncture was the end of the Cold War. Whatever was said about preventing genocide in the aftermath of the Second World War, nobody wanted to risk another global war. In addition, interventions were often viewed as politically motivated efforts in order to gain an advantage vis-à-vis the other side. Neither side could take the sincerity of the other seriously.

As the Cold War had ended, the first serious challenge came with Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait. Russia and China did not object when the United States assembled an international force to protect Saudi Arabia and then freed Kuwait from Iraqi occupation. President George H.W. Bush famously spoke of a new international order in which the United Nations

would act to prevent aggression, in contrast to the divisions that paralysed it during the Cold War. Yet, the subsequent disintegration of Yugoslavia brought old divisions back to the forefront: the Kosovo Crisis in particular raised serious questions about intervention.

Who decides about intervention? According to the UN Charter, intervention should be authorised by the Security Council. However, given its internal division, agreement was impossible. The NATO military campaign was acknowledged to be illegal even by its defenders. Yet, these defenders nevertheless argued that it was legitimate because of the severity of the human rights violations and the responsibility to protect the people from the atrocities committed. The

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problem with that argument is that anyone can invoke it to justify intervention. Indeed, in the 1930s Adolf Hitler used the treatment of the Sudeten Germans as an excuse to pry territory from Czechoslovakia. Substantively providing the discursive grounds for the ethnic cleansing rationale for intervention in Kosovo, Hitler complained that people were being expelled from their villages. In effect, he was arguing that Germany had a “responsibility” to protect them. Britain and France regarded his arguments as sufficiently legitimate and hence abandoned the legal commitments they had made in Locarno in 1925.

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The intervention in Kosovo possibly marks the beginning of the end of the post-Cold War world. As the Cold War had not led to a world war, and as Russia was weakened subsequently, the dangers of a new global division were largely ignored, just as they were before the First World War. When Austria delivered its ultimatum to Serbia, it did not expect Russia would come to Serbia's defence. Russia was still recovering from its defeat in the war against Japan, and it had not intervened in the on-going bloody Balkan wars. But Russia decided that, in spite of its weakness, its honour mandated it to protect the Serbs. So one action led to another and the world was plunged into a terrible war; the Balkan wars that preceded it, terrible as they were, live in its shadow.

The veto in the UN Security Council was meant to prevent that situation from occurring again. No matter how bad a situation might be, if the major powers line up on opposite sides, there is the potential for a much worse catastrophe. If one side misjudges the intentions of its opponent, intervention to prevent a local atrocity could lead once again to a major conflagration. And although that concern has been widely dismissed since the end of the Cold War, that very complacency is an eerie re-play of the confidence that existed a century ago—that the absence of major war in Europe for such a long time, combined with the ties of commerce and investment that increasingly knit the countries of Europe together, meant that another major war could not occur.

Wall Street, according to a popular saying, climbs a wall of worry. When people stop worrying, when they become too confident, disaster strikes. During the Cold War we worried about escalation, and we avoided major war. If history teaches anything, it should remind us of underestimating the risks of war. Moreover, even during the Cold War, interventions that occurred in the absence of great power agreement in the Security Council tended to fail miserably.

Americans tend to think foremost of Vietnam. When Congress overwhelmingly approved the Tonkin Gulf Resolution nobody imagined the war would end so badly. The Vietnam War raises questions about the

“responsibility to protect” concept since many of the people who supported intervention in the Balkans opposed the American effort in Vietnam. But what was the difference? If Slobodan Milosevic’s national-

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ism was so evil, wasn’t then Ho Chi Minh’s nationalism similarly evil? Why was the tragedy of ethnic cleansing worse than the plight of the boat people? If the people of Kosovo were entitled to protection, why not the people of South Vietnam? And the American experience in Vietnam provides one final, cautionary note for those who would favour intervention. Can you be so sure your intervention will succeed? What if it doesn’t? Could you make a bad situation worse? The American defeat in Vietnam was unexpected—certainly by us. And the consequences for the Vietnamese were tragic. But the consequences for the Cambodians were, if anything, even worse.

We wanted to protect; we tried very hard. But we failed. Did we make the situation worse as a result? If we had not intervened, would the Cambodians have been spared genocide? There is no way to know. But the question should haunt those who favour intervention. How can you be sure your intervention will succeed? And will you make the situation worse if your intervention fails?