

RETHINKING INTERVENTIONISM

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In the past decades, several non-Western countries conducted military interventions: India; Vietnam (Cambodia); Libya; Russia in Georgia and indirectly in Crimea; Rwanda (in DRC); and Israel in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Gaza. But since the fall of the USSR in 1989-1991, it is mainly the West, deprived of any enemy matching its own size, who "interfered" a lot and intervened abroad using humanitarian or international law rationales to disregard the principles of national sovereignty. The West surely did not intervene militarily in the Lebanese or Algerian civil wars, nor in Yugoslavia between 1991 and 1995, nor in most civil or regional conflicts in Africa (Angola, Mozambique, Great Lakes, Somalia, Eritrea, Liberia, Kivu, Sudan, etc.), nor in Syria or in Crimea recently, nor even in Chechenia, in Sinkiang, in Tibet or in the Near East. Yet it did so in over a dozen instances, on the initiative of one or several countries, unilaterally or legitimized by the Security Council under Chapter VII : in Rwanda, against Uganda and the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in 1990-1993 (France, Belgium); in Kuwait against Iraq in 1991 (the United States with a wide Arab and Western coalition); in Somalia (USA, Restore Hope); in Rwanda in June 1994 (France, for humanitarian reasons); in Kosovo in 1999 (the West against Milosevic); in Sierra Leone in 2000/2002 (the United Kingdom, in order to put an end to the civil war); in Afghanistan in 2001 (the US against the Taliban at the beginning, then NATO and a coalition to secure and rebuild the country); in Iraq in 2003 (the US and the UK to prevent a massacre in Benghazi); in Libya in 2011 (France and Great Britain, to prevent a massacre in Benghazi); in Mali in 2013 (France, to stop the Jihadists); in the Central African Republic in 2014 (France, to prevent a civil war). One could also add the Atalanta anti-piracy operation in the Indian Ocean, decided by the European Council in 2008, as well as some one-time European interventions in Africa under the UN umbrella, particularly in DRC. It so happens that most of these interventions take place in Muslim countries, in Africa or in the Middle East, or sometimes in the Balkans, and that their instigators are the United States, the United Kingdom and/or France, even though other Western countries occasionally joined these operations. France has been one of the most interventionist countries, maybe because of the long-lived popularity of the concept of interference, and because of its elites' belief in a "universal mission". Some of them were decided and conducted in a unilateral manner, without the approval of the Security Council being asked or obtained: the US intervention in Iraq in 2003 and, long before, France in Chad in 1985/86 (against Gaddafi) and in Rwanda/Uganda in May 1990 (to prevent a civil war). However, most of them were decided or ratified by the UNSC, as the international intervention in Kuwait against Iraq in 1991, the French or Franco-British interventions in Libya, Mali, the CAR (2011 to 2014), Opération Turquoise in DRC/Rwanda in 1999 and the operation in Afghanistan in 2001. The Western intervention in Kosovo in 1999 was hybrid: eighteen months of unfruitful negotiations, a last-chance conference, two Chapter VII resolutions that condemned Milosevic's actions (and Albanese provocations) and yet did not authorize "all means" - sacramental formula for a coercive operation - to be used. When addressing their public, Western leaders always presented these interventions as the act of the "international community", which can only be true when all five members of the permanent members agreed. To echo the demands of the most militant part of society (NGOs, the media, popular intellectuals) and convince the usually skeptical public, they do not use vital interest's rhetoric but rather martial or ethical justifications: not accepting the unacceptable, nor justifying the unjustifiable, punish, sanction, arresting a "new Hitler" or refusing a "new Munich", sticking to our values, etc. Of course, neither the Russians (Georgia 2008, Crimea 2014) nor the Israelis (Operation Cast Lead, 2008/2009, 2012), nor Chad in its neighborhood, nor Rwanda or Uganda (in Kivu after 1994) have used this type of justifications. In hindsight, could we consider that these interventions have met their (variable) objectives? In 1991, the coalition succeeded in expelling Iraq from Kuwait, reestablished the country's sovereignty and put the emir back on his throne. The 1999 Kosovo intervention put an end to the Serbian exactions but also triggered, beyond the "substantial autonomy", a controversial yet irreversible independence process in Kosovo, largely because of Milosevic's obstinacy. The United Kingdom fortunately ended Sierra Leone's civil war. The French preventive operation in Rwanda in 1990 seemed to have reached its goal, imposing a compromise through the Arusha Accords in 1993. Yet, president Habyarimana's assassination on April 7, 1994 ruined the efforts made during the previous four years, even though Opération Turquoise, launched in June 1994 to deal with the shortfalls of the "international community", did save many lives. The American intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 reached its primary objective: throwing down the Taliban regime that hosted Al Qaeda. But building the Afghan nation, which was the theoretical purpose of the unfolding international intervention, was most probably out of reach. In 2003, the United States easily crushed Saddam Hussein, but could not prevent the ensuing chaos that led to a Shia Iraq in 2014, which holds close ties to Iran and Alawi Syria! The intervention in Libya in 2011 actually prevented the expected massacre in Benghazi, yet Gaddafi's hardliner attitude and dynamics on the field led beyond the negotiated terms of the UNSC resolution to a regime change, and to even more destabilization in Sahel. In Mali, the French military intervention had radical effects on the Jihadi threat and on restoring territorial integrity, yet the Tuareg political issue still needs to be solved. In CAR, the intervention of the French army was a brave move, but the situation is highly perilous and one will need to come up with a positive escape route. Maybe an international tutelage? In the Indian Ocean, Operation Atalanta against piracy is efficient and is not criticized. The French marine is also usefully acting in the Gulf of Guinea. In sum, besides the 1991 operation in Kuwait, Operation Atalanta and the first phase of the Libyan and Afghan interventions - though, could we really take them separately from the following events? - almost all other operations, whether or not they have triggered a regime change, have had contrasting, fragile, or even counter-productive effects. Did these operations get popular support? Less and less so. We can assess two wear-and-tear phenomena. On the one hand, one sees the emerging countries (China, India, Brazil, South Africa...) growingly question Western legitimacy to initiate and carry on such operations - even though China also feels embarrassed about Crimea having recourse to the principle of self-determination. One could be critical of this archaic "third-worldist" attitude, yet it cannot be ignored. On the other hand, the capacity of neo-conservatives, "liberal-hawks" or partisans of interference to heat up the debate and mobilize the media, is decreasing, and so is their ability to push decision-makers to carry military interventions. Even though Germany maintains that she wants to live up to its international responsibilities, she would probably not act today as she did in Kosovo under G. Schroder and J. Fischer. Iraq and Afghanistan remain in everyone's mind. Hence, in a world where the West will not retain a monopoly over power anymore, even though it will claim it over ethics and indignation, it will be more and more difficult for them to intervene. Fatigue, disenchantment, troubled economy, new and old isolationism and pacifism are burdening the United States and Europe. It will be more and more difficult to obtain all five permanent members' agreement, even more so when the Security Council is - one day - enlarged (see the major emerging countries' White Papers). But even in that case, where international legality would hypothetically be respected, internal public opinions, either preoccupied by other issues or disillusioned by experience, will be growingly hard to convince (take, for instance, the aborted airstrikes on Syria, which none of the three intervening countries' public opinions were supporting). Europeans still have trouble finding a common ground on external interventions other than, at most, sanctions - serving as diplomatic "drones" to hit a target from the distance. This reluctance will be even greater regarding unilateral interventions, which may be morally legitimate given the horror to which one would like to put an end, but remain devoid of international legality, as it would have been the case in Syria. Public support will only be gained for direct, precise, proven, imminent threats on national territory or vital interests. Maritime navigation freedom (of concern for the Atalanta and the Gulf of Guinea operations) may be included. When one sees how senselessly France is subject to accusations about Rwanda, twenty years later, whereas it was the only country in the world that tried not only to stop the civil war early on, but also to find a political compromise (Arusha) between the protagonists and to save lives, it becomes tempting to start recommending as few interventions as possible for the future... The tougher stance recently taken by Obama on Ukraine should not be deceptive; Putin is offering him an opportunity to stand firm on his principles and to show leadership to everyone who might have doubted it, and especially Congress, which he needs to find a deal with Iran (currently his main concern). However, unless a real escalation occurs at the Russo-Ukrainian border, this discourse does not announce any new cycle of Western interventionism. Westerners, Europeans, including us French, will thus have to get ready for crucifying moments of helplessness (Syria) or humiliation. However, the West will have trouble thinking of itself separately from its proselytism and its universal ambitions ("katholikos") and focusing on its vital security or economic interests. Thus, if we want to secure our capacity to intervene tomorrow, when it will be absolutely necessary, we, together with the most frequent interveners (USA, UK), will have to draw the lessons from past interventions and non-interventions. We will have to agree in a convincing and consensual manner on who will be allowed to intervene legitimately in the future (which country, alliance, organization?), in which situation, what for and how (decision, implementation, control). Otherwise, Western public opinions, in an isolationist fatigue, will put an end to interventionism. For better or for worse.



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