Improving the Agents and Mechanisms of Humanitarian Intervention

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Abstract

I agree with the broad thrust of Abramowitz and Pickering's article. They rightly highlight the failings of the current agents and mechanisms of humanitarian intervention. The problem, however, is twofold. First, all the currently-existing interveners possess notable, and well-known, flaws. The U.N. and regional organizations suffer from serious shortfalls in funding and equipment. States frequently lack the commitment and willingness to act. And, although NATO's operations in Bosnia and Kosovo raised hopes that it would be a willing and powerful humanitarian intervener, the reluctance of many of its members to commit troops in Afghanistan (where member states have clear interests) has cast serious doubts over whether it can be relied on as an effective agent of humanitarian intervention in the future (where the interests of its members may be less clear). Second, there are problems with the authorization of intervention: there are many occasions when humanitarian intervention should be rapidly undertaken, but is not because it has been stymied in the U.N. Security Council. There needs, then, to be notable improvements if the international community is to possess the capacity to intervene effectively for humanitarian purposes when necessary.

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I agree with the broad thrust of Abramowitz and Pickering's article. They rightly highlight the failings of the current agents and mechanisms of humanitarian intervention. The problem, however, is twofold. First, all the currently-existing interveners possess notable, and well-known, flaws. The U.N. and regional organizations suffer from serious shortfalls in funding and equipment. States frequently lack the commitment and willingness to act. And, although NATO's operations in Bosnia and Kosovo raised hopes that it would be a willing and powerful humanitarian intervener, the reluctance of many of its members to commit troops in Afghanistan (where member states have clear interests) has cast serious doubts over whether it can be relied on as an effective agent of humanitarian intervention in the future (where the interests of its members may be less clear). Second, there are problems with the authorization of intervention: there are many occasions when humanitarian intervention should be rapidly undertaken, but is not because it has been stymied in the U.N. Security Council. There needs, then, to be notable improvements if the international community is to possess the capacity to intervene effectively for humanitarian purposes when necessary.

However, I am less convinced that the solutions offered by Abramowitz and Pickering would do much to improve the international community's capabilities in this regard. To start with, take their suggestions that concern the authorization of force and, in particular, the proposal to curb the use of the veto. This has been mooted for a number of years (for instance, it was suggested by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty in 2001 (ICISS)), but there has been little, if any, indication of a willingness by the permanent members (P-5) to restrain themselves in this way. I fear that this is a political dead end. What we need instead are alternative, additional sources of international legitimacy. Indeed, this is one reason why the notion of a "league of democracies" has been floated. Other options for improving the authorization of intervention include the strengthening of regional organizations (more on that later), a reinvigoration of the Uniting for Peace procedure of the General Assembly and, more ambitiously, the development of cosmopolitan democratic institutions, such as the world parliament endorsed by Andrew Strauss and Richard Falk. My point is that finding alternatives to the U.N. Security Council is the best way of making it work. These alternatives would pressurize the Council into making the right decisions more often, for fear of losing power and influence.

Abramowitz and Pickering also present two proposals for improving the mechanisms to *undertake* humanitarian intervention: (i) a contribution of 5,000 troops from each of the P-5 (a 25,000-strong force in total); and (ii) a 5,000-strong autonomous U.N. rapid reaction force. There is reason to be cautious about the first proposal. Having the P-5 authorize, and then undertake, their own interventions could risk putting too much power in their hands. The second solution, however, has more merit. Indeed, I have written elsewhere that such an option is the most desirable long-term solution to the problems faced by the current agents and mechanisms of humanitarian intervention.

That said, the particular proposal made by Abramowitz and Pickering of 5,000 troops would run into a number of problems. If the force fulfilled its role in one region in the world, it would not

be able to intervene elsewhere. The need for rotation of troops would also mean that it would be a "one-shot option." That is, after undertaking one mission, it would not be able to intervene for a number of months afterwards while its troops regenerate. Furthermore, there may be no backup troops forthcoming to replace the force, which would leave it with the dilemma of either leaving, thereby letting the crisis go unresolved, or staying, and thereby depriving others access to its protection. Moreover, having funded the force, states would expect it to remove some of their peacekeeping and intervention burden (or humanitarian relief burden), and therefore may be less willing to provide troops and equipment themselves. As such, this proposal, if established, would add little to the currently-existing options.

To be fair, Abramowitz and Pickering seem to see this force as a stepping-stone to something more significant. But the same problems would apply to a larger, more developed force (including their other suggestion of 25,000 troops from the P-5). To be more valuable, a standing U.N. force would need to be *much* larger. But this leads to problems of its own, including feasibility and the potential for abuse.

Accordingly, I still believe that regional organizations offer the best solution for improving the capacity to intervene. The potential of the African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU) in particular is substantial. To be sure, both institutions are currently a long way from being able to conduct major humanitarian interventions by themselves. But given their general support for humanitarian intervention (e.g., in the African Union's Constitutive Act) and the interests that they possess in halting humanitarian crises, we should pursue the development of their capacities. A stronger AU and EU will add much to the ability of the international community to undertake humanitarian intervention.

Much of what I have said may give the impression that I think that we should abandon the U.N. as the locus of peace operations. This is mistaken. The frequently-highlighted inefficiencies of the U.N. are, in practice, overshadowed by the understated, but notable, successes that it has with its peace operations. Likewise, the problems that UNAMID has had getting up to strength in Darfur should be put into the context of what is a boom time for U.N. peace operations. According to the U.N. Department of Peacekeeping Operations, there are, as of August 2008, 107,503 troops, police, observers, and other officials serving in 16 U.N. peacekeeping operations. This is the largest number of peacekeepers to date and, what is more, it looks like this number will continue to grow. Of course, this should not be a reason for complacency. We should continue to improve the agents and mechanisms of humanitarian intervention to build on the U.N.'s abilities and to offer more options when faced with the mass violation of basic human rights. Augmenting regional organizations' capacities would be one way to do so.

Dr. James Pattison is a Senior Lecturer in International Relations at the University of the West of England, U.K. He recently completed his PhD on humanitarian intervention, for which he was awarded the "Sir Ernest Barker Prize for Best Dissertation in Political Theory." He has written various articles on the ethics of war and intervention and is currently working on a book on the Responsibility to Protect for Oxford University Press. Please visit his website: http://www.uwe.ac.uk/hlss/politics/staff_jPattison.shtml.