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James Pattison
University of Manchester

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On Genocide and the National Interest

Abstract

In the second presidential debate, Barack Obama said, in response to a question about the crisis in Darfur, that “when genocide is happening, when ethnic cleansing is happening somewhere around the world and we stand idly by, that diminishes us. And so I do believe that we have to consider it as part of our interests, our national interests, in intervening where possible.” In a similar vein, Michael Abramowitz and Lawrence Woocher highlight how genocide is increasingly being seen as a security threat by the White House.

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Human rights, United States national security, United States foreign policy, Genocide, Conflict prevention

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On Genocide and the National Interest

by James Pattison

In the [second presidential debate](#), Barack Obama said, in response to a question about the crisis in Darfur, that “when genocide is happening, when ethnic cleansing is happening somewhere around the world and we stand idly by, that diminishes us. And so I do believe that we have to consider it as part of our interests, our national interests, in intervening where possible.” In a similar vein, Michael Abramowitz and Lawrence Woocher highlight how genocide is increasingly being seen as a security threat by the White House.

I largely agree with their analysis. The prevention of genocide *is* in the national interests of the major Western powers. This is the case, first, when these interests are narrowly conceived. In short, genocide is costly. Consider, for instance, the large financial costs of rebuilding post-genocide societies and the international prosecution of the *genocidaires*. More generally, as Abramowitz and Woocher point out, genocide can have severe repercussions for regional and international stability. An example is the massive destabilization of the eastern parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo after the influx of the fleeing *interhamwe* from Rwanda. Second, as Obama highlights, the prevention of genocide can be in our national interests, *broadly* conceived. The positive effects of a state being perceived to be a good international citizen—by, for instance, helping to prevent genocide—have often been highlighted. These effects include an improved standing in international organizations and a greater ability to influence others. Yet, perhaps more important are the negative effects of being seen as an international reprobate, through negligence, indifference, or the reckless pursuit of material self-interest. The Clinton administration’s failure to support strong action in response to the Rwandan genocide has clearly harmed how history remembers that government. Likewise, France received a major blow to its international reputation by its refusal to act in a timely and effective manner in response to the genocide, and by its [alleged support](#) for the Hutu government troops.

So, there are potentially strong links between the national interest and acting effectively in response to genocide. This view is not a new one. In his “[Two Concepts of Sovereignty](#)” speech, former UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, famously called for a broader notion of the national interest, arguing that the “collective interest *is* the national interest.” Although such arguments, I think, are largely empirically correct, it is important to acknowledge that they are also *political*. Those who highlight the close links between the national interest and responding effectively to genocide often do so because they want to persuade political elites to take action. In short, such arguments are often about mobilizing political will.

There are, however, dangers with this strategy. (I should note that these dangers also apply to my own work—in my recent book, [Humanitarian Intervention and the Responsibility to Protect: Who Should Intervene?](#), I argue that humanitarian intervention in response to the mass violation of basic human rights is in states’ national interests.) First, there is a danger that preventing genocide will be seen solely in self-interested terms. Self-interest may subsequently come to guide a state’s response to genocide. If preventing genocide is not obviously in the national interest—because, for instance, of the high financial costs of acting—then there may be no response. This danger is most serious if self-interest is conceived narrowly, that is, if the reputational arguments highlighted above are simply overlooked. What happens when genocide

is unlikely to cause refugee flows that would affect us, is not expected to lead to a terrorist threat, is a long way from our region, and would be costly for us to tackle?

Second, and related, there is a danger that making the case for the response to genocide hang on our national interests misses something important. Responding to genocide is not simply in our interests; it is, first and foremost, a *moral* obligation. It is also a *legal* obligation under the Genocide Convention. The international community has a duty to prevent, to halt, and to tackle genocide. Indeed, of all the duties that states have, this is one of the least controversial. Here then is the worry: linking this duty to the national interest may help to reinforce the Realist view that states should be concerned solely with the promotion of their national interests. Although this view may sometimes come to dominate states' foreign policies, it is nevertheless important to challenge it. States have moral duties to those beyond their borders, even when these do not coincide with the national interest. Therefore, although preventing genocide *can* be in a state's self-interest, we need to avoid letting the case for tackling genocide hang solely on the national interest. It is far more important than this.

Dr James Pattison is a Lecturer in Politics at the University of Manchester. His research interests concern the moral issues raised when using military force abroad, including humanitarian intervention, the responsibility to protect, and the increased use of private military companies. His PhD on humanitarian intervention was awarded the Sir Ernest Barker Prize for Best Dissertation in Political Theory by the Political Studies Association in 2008. He has recently completed the book, [Humanitarian Intervention and the Responsibility to Protect: Who Should Intervene?](#), which has just been published by Oxford University Press (Spring 2010). He has also published various articles on the ethics of force, including for [Ethics and International Affairs](#), [International Theory](#), [the Journal of Military Ethics](#), [the Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy](#), [the Journal of International Political Theory](#), [the International Journal of Human Rights](#), and [the Journal of Social Philosophy](#). Before joining Manchester, he was a Senior Lecturer in International Relations at the University of the West of England, Bristol (from Sept 07-09). He has also spent time as a Research Affiliate at New York University and he was a temporary lecturer in the School of Geography, Politics, and Sociology at Newcastle University.