Double Standards Demystified

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Abstract

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As the initial excitement of "humanitarians" about the rapid action taken by the coalition and NATO forces in Libya slowly waned, analysts, including Corinne Dufka, increasingly lamented the selectiveness of the international community's response to man-made humanitarian crises. If the international community is so concerned about civilian protection, then what about the people of Bahrain, Yemen, Syria, Darfur, or Côte D'Ivoire? Why prevent massacres in Benghazi, but not in Duékoué ? Few moved beyond their consternation about this cherry-picking.

Those factors that affect the likeliness of a robust "Libya-style" international response given a certain level of risk of atrocities are rarely acknowledged. The authorization of military force in response to imminent or ongoing mass atrocities is the product of a difficult diplomatic process, subject to numerous factors unrelated to the gravity of the humanitarian crisis.

The Power of the Target Country. The target country's ability to resist external intervention through its political, military, or economic power is a key determinant of the international community's eagerness to protect civilians. The threat of UN vetoes, retaliation, or economic embargoes of powerful repressive states may suffice to keep UN troops at a safe distance. The weak regimes of Libya and Côte D'Ivoire carried insufficient weight to deter the international community.

The Strategic Value of the Region. The level of political, economic, or national security interest in the region of decisive players within the international community is another key determining factor. Together with the power of the target country, traditional realpolitik best explains the international community's selectiveness. Whereas the atrocities committed in Libya triggered a Kosovo-like heavy-handed response from NATO, strategically insignificant countries are simply less likely to grasp the world's attention.

Consent. The decision to act collectively against atrocities is also contingent upon the consent of a significant part of the local population, regional hegemons, and regional organizations. Interventions are more likely welcomed when the central government is unable to halt atrocities committed by rogue elements within its own security forces, the opposition, or non-state armed groups. If the regime is directly or indirectly involved in the crimes, a consensual humanitarian intervention will be unlikely. In Libya, the requests for assistance from the Libyan opposition and the initial support for the operation from the Arab League allowed for a nonconsensual intervention to rapidly materialize.

Geopolitical Dynamics. Special ties or strategic relations between a repressive regime and powerful players may also reduce the likeliness of a multilateral intervention. Security Council members driven by geopolitical incentives, cultural affinities, or benign historical ties with the regime may play soft on the humanitarian record of their protectorates. This dynamic explains the lack of an international response to the recent atrocities committed in Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar, or the Palestinian Territories.

Other factors that influence the international community's decision to engage in an intrusive form of intervention include the level of *international media coverage*, as well as the *international financial climate* and *military resource availability.*

In an ideal world, these considerations would be subordinate to the urgency and gravity of a humanitarian crisis. But a world in which the risk of atrocities automatically triggers a strong response seems far off. Double standards are an unpleasant reality that sprout from the nature of international politics, and will remain part and parcel of the international response to man-made humanitarian crises in the foreseeable future. Multilateral military action on predominantly humanitarian grounds has been a rare occurrence with a mixed track record. But the absence or tardiness of firm action in some countries should not discredit the courageous decision the international community took to protect the people of Benghazi. As Nicholas Kristof noted in his New York Times column, "Isn't it better to inconsistently save some lives than to consistently save none?"

Jonas Claes is program specialist at the U.S. Institute of Peace's Center for Conflict Management, where he conducts research on conflict prevention, the Responsibility to Protect, and security issues in Central Asia. Claes is also co-author of a book chapter entitled 'Leadership and R2P: From Principle to Practice' in the forthcoming Routledge Handbook on 'The Responsibility to Protect', and a chapter on "Responsibility to Protect and Peacemaking" in a Praeger Volume on "Peacemaking: From Practice to Theory". He holds an M.A. in Security Studies from Georgetown University, an M.A. in International Relations from the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Belgium).