

# Understanding Humanitarian Interventions in the South – A New Prescription following the Cold War

Saif Ur Rahman

Bangladesh University of Professionals,  
Bangladesh

*saif3221@gmail.com*

## Backdrop of Humanitarian Intervention

The concept of humanitarian intervention is defined as a state's use of armed force to protect lives from foreign tyranny and this idea is linked to a centuries-long philosophical struggle, between individual rights and sovereign authority (Gray, 2019). Weiss (2001) characterizes it as a 'moral minefield' that has debates both for and against. The inherent dichotomy extends its roots in 17<sup>th</sup> century figure Hugo Grotius, who stated, any government-sanctioned 'outrage upon humanity', as delegitimizing state control. This played immediate role in examples of intervention, as European powers appealed to 'natural rights' of Christians, following their ill-treatment by Ottoman authority (Gray, 2019). These have been replicated in modern times with different name and modality. The developing countries, in global south have often claimed that these are replica of the historical inequalities that should be overcome. These interventions are troubled, but a necessary concept (Gray, 2019). The exploratory study shall try to see how these activities existed during Cold War era.

Many critiques say that intervention had played a key role in promoting a more robust system of international norms (AMF, 2021), but whether these could uphold the required values that benefit the people and their state or not, that question can be revisited. It is probably true that despite many challenges, the intervention notably, by no means perfectly achieved the goal of protecting civil life. The key responsibility of carrying out humanitarian interventions are, expectantly, that there will be minimum sufferings, no unnecessary death, and there shall be visible efforts to establish human rights in a conflict area, even when the home sovereign authority is reluctant (AMF, 2021). In fact, such interventions were less in number during the Cold War era and got accelerated thereafter due to various factors and reasons. The study shall subsequently discuss the contextual issues that were in vogue during the Cold War era.

## Cold War Era and Its End

In order to discuss the reasons of very few instances of humanitarian interventions during the Cold War era, it is necessary to write something about the backdrop of Cold War and also what happened after it ended. This linking will point at a time when the World War II was ending, that the Cold War commenced. It was a long-enduring and continuing confrontation between the erstwhile Soviet Union (the Communist) and the United States and its allies (the Capitalist), lasting between 1945 and 1989 (or 1991). It was cold because none of the two powers officially declared war on each other. But both sides tried to prevent the other from spreading its economic and political systems in their spheres of influence (Ohio History Central website, 2021). Many American leaders believed that the Soviet Union aimed to spread Communism all over the world. It could make the working class overthrow the middle and upper classes (in

East and Central Europe and Asia). This contest continued till the 1980s. The Soviet Union attempted to expand its own military power to face those of the United States. The Soviet economy crumbled while contesting against the American system and destroyed their own ability (of Soviets) to meet the needs of its own populace and ended the Cold War.

### **Liberal and Humanitarian Intervention (Blair Doctrine)**

In early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Great Britain was a balancer and watchdog in global politics. It was reduced to a middle power by America and Germany, so the British Premiers tried many approaches during post-1945 and post-Cold War era. Following the Cold War tensions during that time, British appeared as “Ethical Force for the good in the World” and Blair stressed on ‘Just War’ theory and liberal-humanitarian interventionism in 1999. He termed this as the doctrine for the international community countering Article 2(4) and 51 of the United Nations (UN) Charter and also the 1648 Westphalian peace documents; the latter being the global principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of a nation. It somewhat challenged the ‘sources of social power’ by Michael Mann, which includes Despotic and Infrastructural power. Despotic power refers to the repressive capacities of a state, and infrastructural power refer to its ability to penetrate society and implement its decisions. Challenging the typical types of interventions during Cold War, Blair intelligently suggested a recipe for humanitarian interventions which somewhat challenged the concept of sovereignty, but it enabled positive actions to protect humanity by use of force transnationally.

### **Understanding Humanitarian Interventions and Prior**

Humanitarian interventions may be viewed as a means of preventing or reducing the ongoing gross violations of human rights in a state, in this circumstance such state may be unwitting or incapable of providing requisite protection to its own population, or may be actively involved in the persecution (Jayakumar, 2012). According to Farrell (2002), it may be directed towards two purposes: 1) providing emergency assistance, and 2) protecting fundamental human rights. It therefore, can take both forms: military, or non-military. The latter may include the emergency air, e.g. money, food, medicine, and expertise, it can also mean human rights promotion through diplomacy and ‘sanctions’. But often when expressed in policy making, it means “forcible military intervention in humanitarian crises” (Farrell, 2002). It is believed that such a step is necessary in failed states, when the severity of ongoing conflict prevent air operations, and against “so-called murderous states” to stop human rights abuses therein. To address concerns, the intervening forces are likely to undertake a variety of steps under ‘Peace Operations’ in order to improve security situation and to suppress or neutralize a conflict.

Interestingly, it is widely known that this humanitarian intervention is a post-Cold War activity. During the Cold War, the practice of intervention was mostly unilateral, statist and coupled with a motivation to pursue power and also egoistic interests amid the bipolar world order that can be described as anarchical. Sovereignty was pronounced as the most important pillar of statecraft and sometimes multilateral organizations played a minor role in practicing intervention. But mostly it was overshadowed by the essence of non-interference or non-intervention and state sovereignty. The human rights considerations were still prominent according to existing international law, but this had little effect on the politics of intervention, as it was weakly constrained by normative considerations. During the Cold War, the international system was divided into two profoundly hostile camps but the sheer strength and military power discouraged the risk of total war or direct military confrontation between them



(major powers). This reticence was further influenced by the presence of nuclear weapons that had the potential to cause mutual destruction. In this backdrop intervention as a ‘lesser evil’ step was frequently used by both superpowers to sustain their spheres of influence (e.g. Hungary, the Dominican Republic, Czechoslovakia and Grenada) and upper hand (The Adelphi Papers, 2009).

Most critiques agree that mostly the humanitarian interventions surfaced after the demise of Cold War tensions. If one may ask why, it was rare during the Cold War era? The answers can be outlined by shortlisting several important reasons:

- a. Firstly, Cold War dominated the international politics to a large extent and the great powers devoted their focus on military efforts and enhancing military capabilities by building up massive deterrent forces to outclass the other. Though the superpowers did not actively engage against one another, they did intervene in Third World conflicts, for the purpose of supporting their own and undermining the opponents’ ‘Client States’. These types of military interventions were termed “Proxy Wars” and these actions did add fuel to the wars instead of extinguishing them (Farrell, 2002). The great powers also funded and armed their so-called client states who were engaged in severe human rights violations and atrocities.
- b. Secondly, there was little or no public pressure for the great powers to do anything to ameliorate or retard the Third World conflicts. Eastern and Western publics were indoctrinated to view these conflicts and client states as elements of a ‘bigger Cold War battle scenario’. In which human rights could be compromised at the altar of national security.
- c. Thirdly, the role of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) was greatly undermined by the superpowers by flexing their muscles of military might inappropriately. Cold War politics prevented international collaboration in suppressing Third World conflicts or punishing the “evil states” by paralyzing the UNSC. To be legal, forcible military intervention in a humanitarian crisis must be authorized by a Resolution of the UNSC. Unfortunately, UNSC Resolutions can be vetoed by any one of the permanent five members (P5). With the P5 split along the Cold War divide – Britain, France, the United States of America versus the Soviet Union and communist China, each side exercised their veto power 279 times during the Cold War (Farrell, 2002). Though most countries ratified and endorsed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by the 70s, the Cold War slowly had a tendency to secure the political, economic, social and human rights issues as international instead of purely domestic or state-centric. This shift of stance triggered an evolution of challenging the absoluteness of the principles of non-intervention (Adelphi papers, 2009).
- d. Thus, the Cold War period had numerous instances of intervention by both: the erstwhile USSR and the USA in the domestic affairs of other states. To name a few, USSR’s intervention in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Afghanistan, and the USA’s intervention in Grenada, Vietnam, Panama and the Dominican Republic. There were also indirect interventions by the influence of allied states like Cuba or France-Belgium.

Since the superpowers had to exercise restraints of not escalating tension to a war, the conflicts were transferred to the periphery where those risks would be minimal but their influence would



still be visible. Due to this, the USA and its allies did very little to oppose the Soviet interventions in Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968). The USSR also was silent during American intervention in the Dominican Republic (1965) and Grenada (1983).

Overall, these interventions were driven by political and self-interest considerations, rather than humanitarian. The aim was to exercise power in local conflicts and internal issues of states and to prevent such gain on the target states by the opponents. Sometimes these were coupled with the intent of indoctrination by ideological components. But seldom it would truly obtain the consent from the international society. The author opines that the ideological considerations did not overtake the bloc's political and strategic interests; e.g., USSR did not want Anwar Sadaat or Nasser of Hafeez-Al-Asad to become socialists. Warsaw pact countries supported Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia. The British and the French, in support of the USA also militarized their own political and economic objectives. In the banner of containing Communism, France has its own intervention in Africa and Britain had its active role in the Middle East. It is though, very incorrect to generalize the role of European superpowers with the reference of bipolarity as their equations related to former colonies remain very different and controversial till today (for example, British reluctance in supporting Julius Nyerere in 1964 and French actions in support of Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda etc.).

### **Role of International Media**

Though the role of international media was not as vivid as today, still the effect of media news acted as a catalyst to influence public opinion, and somewhat diffused intensity of conflicts. More relevant examples are the intervention by India in erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in 1971 in support of the liberation struggle by the Bengalese against the tyranny of West Pakistan military junta. Through multi-pronged approaches, India and some other countries sensitized the world community through news, diplomatic attempts, cultural avenues and audio-visual proofs of mass killings, atrocities and genocide thus making a strong case against the violations perpetrated by the West Pakistani junta. It is also believed that numerous 'body bags' returning to USA from Vietnam and associated media campaigns on this account may have shortened the war in Vietnam.

In addition to superpowers, some regional powers practiced the doctrine of intervention inside their areas of influence (India assisting the liberation war in East Pakistan in 1971, Vietnam in Cambodia in 1978 and Tanzania in Uganda in 1979). These interventions had a humanitarian dimension. India's intervention ended genocide in Bangladesh. Vietnam's intervention against Khmer Rouge limited Cambodia's genocide. The aftermath however, is difficult to justify and Vietnam also could not convince the big four at the UNSC to justify military intervention in order to prevent violations.

### **International Bodies and Essence of Justice**

The United Nations and multilateral organizations also exercised interventions; e.g. in Democratic Republic of the Congo by some European powers (Operation Artemis, formally European Union Force (EUFOR) were deployed in Democratic Republic of the Congo, as a short-term European Union-led UN-authorized military force before UN peacekeepers were formally deployed). But this intervention did not address the relations between state and its people but to re-establish the state itself, thus could not prevent heavy casualties.



According to Ayoob (2002), the inherent clash encircling the state sovereignty and humanitarian intervention had existed and still persists between northern and southern perspectives on “Order and Justice” in the international system. In simple words, the north is simply interested in justice within states and order among them, and the south is basically committed to order within states and justice among them. This divergence of perceptions of order and justice and some other considerations would dictate their alignments and the technological, military and economic capabilities at their disposal (Ayoob, 2002). Weaker states and if they are new, would give more stress on their sovereignty. The well-established stronger states are more accepted by the population so may become interventionist and overrule others’ fresh claims of sovereignty. Before the existing ‘capability-divide’ is bridged sufficiently, no state can ignore the reality that the difference of perception between north and south shall continue to create differential approaches to humanitarian calls even after the demise of the Cold War era.

### **Concluding Words**

Humanitarian intervention has surfaced more prominently following the end of Cold War era which proved to be a lesser evil against any ongoing tyranny or wrongdoing that is triggered by governments’ sanction, i.e., a rouge power state. Any such intervention that is undertaken without the sanction of the relevant government can be justified only to prevent an imminence of genocide or comparable bloodbath. Though it is explained as surgical, the collateral damage is often beyond description or explanation. The capacity of the use of military force should be finite and thoroughly justified, especially when an intervention goes without the UNSC approval. Cold War era interventions were mainly proxy moves and flexing of mighty muscles using subsidiary methods through the weaker allies. Blair’s aim in redefining the issue of non-interference and human rights overtaking the sanctity and humanity can be a lesser evil that can address the needs of the weak and restore human values we all so desperately need.

### **References**

- AMF. (2021). Humanitarian Intervention and Relief – the post-Cold War era. American Foreign Relations (AMF). Retrieved from website.
- Ayoob, M. (2002). Humanitarian Intervention and State Sovereignty. *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 6(1), 81-102.
- Davis, J. E. (2011). From Ideology to Pragmatism: China’s position in Humanitarian Intervention in the post-Cold War era.
- Dillon, I. (2019). International guideline on human rights and drug policy. *Drugnet Ireland*, 6-7.
- Duncan. (2021). The Pros and Cons of humanitarian Intervention; The humanitarian careers.
- Duncan. (2021a). United Nations vs NATO: The differences; The humanitarian careers.
- Farrell, T. (2002). Humanitarian Intervention and Peace Operations. Baylis et al., 286-308.
- Gray, N. (2019). Walking a fine line: the pros and cons of humanitarian intervention.
- Hennessy, P. (1998). The Blair style of government: An historical perspective and an interim audit. *Government and Opposition*, 33(1), 3-20.
- Jayakumar, K. (2012). Humanitarian Intervention: a legal analysis. *E-International Relations*.
- MacFarlane, N. (2013). *Intervention in Contemporary world politics*. Routledge.
- Ohio History Central. (2021). Cold War. Retrieved on August 06, 2021 from ohiohistorycentral.org.
- Roth, K. (2004). War in Iraq: not a humanitarian intervention. *Human Rights in the War on Terror*, 143-157.



- The Adelphi Papers. (2009). Intervention during the Cold War. Chapter 3. Taylor & Francis.
- UKEssays. (2018). The Blair Doctrine – Historical Perspective. Retrieved on August 06, 2021.
- Weiss, T. G. (2001). Researching humanitarian intervention: some lessons. *Journal of Peace Research*, 38(4), 419-428.