

Humanitarian Intervention: a map of the evolving post Cold War international system

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Which aspect of the international system after the end of Cold War is worth to study and how? In social sciences, the answer to such a question cannot escape moral underpinnings, even if it proclaims to do so. Having this in mind, this paper does not aspire to expose any kind of causal relationship between the changing character of humanitarian intervention and the realities of the international system, but rather it offers insights of the system by reflecting on the consequences and the character of the evolving nature of humanitarian intervention.

Humanitarian intervention is practically the vehicle through which the normative and actual relationship between use of force and state sovereignty is changing, in order to accommodate the rules to the new distribution of capabilities in the international system. This transformation is reinforced partially by ideological and technological factors. In some occasions, it is the triumph of liberalism and globalization that fuels this process by creating domestic pressure within Western states in favor of “humanitarian” military action.

This paper attempts to map the evolution of the contemporary international system. It argues that the forces and rules governing it, can be understood through a careful examination of the way that the norm and state practice regarding humanitarian intervention have evolved. It starts from the assumption that the deep structure of the international system is formed both by the shared understandings governing organized violence and the distribution of capabilities in the anarchic international environment, to paraphrase Alexander Wendt¹.

The paper reaches to conclusions. Firstly, humanitarian intervention is likely to result in the rise of a second block of powers with competing interests to that of the West. Secondly, the centre and the periphery of the system is further divided among legal and cultural lines. Thirdly, state practice after the end of Cold war de facto alters the rules regarding use of force, a fact that will reinforce security dilemmas in a global level.

¹ Wendt, Alexander. (2003). *Social Theory of International Politics*.UK: Cambridge University Press. p . 77

Questions in IR after the end of Cold War

It seems that the “moment of clarity” has been lost when the stable, familiar, bipolar world, which was the centre of IR study unexpectedly collapsed within a span of time, and we simply cannot agree on what has taken its place or if we can ever “know” it, for that matter. After the scientific turn of the discipline in the Cold War period², we appear to be ready to face and examine more critically uncomfortable truths about the international system and state behavior, in an effort to understand whether the former has changed after the end of its bipolar phase and the triumph of liberalism.

The initial shift in the distribution of capabilities initiated a process of revision of the rules and “rights” embodied in the system³. The questions that have arisen since 1989, have to do with the breadth of the actual change in international system and its realities. Many forces are at work: globalization, as well as liberalism⁴ and more recently the dynamics of global terrorism. These questions have yet to be settled.

Two great predicaments?

But why has it been difficult to reach an agreement regarding the way that international system has evolved?

There are two impediments: the nature of the object under examination and human perception itself. Unlike natural kinds, social ones are distinctively more space-time specific⁵. As the international system is a dynamic one, we can either describe its mechanisms of change or capture a snapshot of its temporary state in a given specific period. Capturing such a snapshot of an ever-changing scene requires both intuition and reflexes.

As far as intuition is concerned, one should be careful when formulating causal laws to describe patterns not reproduced in a mechanistic way. When it comes to

² During this period the highest moral responsibility of researchers was their commitment to rationality and logic which was believed to facilitate the avoidance of a nuclear war among the two superpowers. This need shaped the focus of IR mainstream towards the formulation of rational conflict management and deterrence strategies. After the end of bipolarity the frontiers of the research conducted seem to be expanding.

³ This claim is antithetical to the constructivist view that a change to the behavior and repeated practice of the states produces fundamental changes in the international system itself. See Koslowski, Rey and Kratochwil, Friedrich V. (1994). “ Understanding change in international politics: the Soviet empire’s Demise and the international system”. *International Organization*. Vol. 48 No. 2. pp.215-247.

State practice is not possible to alter only as a result of a change in its identity. The aspirations of a states regarding its role in the international system, reflect its actual and perceived relative power.

⁴ Cox, Michael. Booth, Ken and Dunne, Tim. (1999). “An introduction: The Interregnum: Controversies in World Politics: 1989-99. *Review of International Studies*. Vol. 25. pp.3-20.

⁵ Wendt (2003). p. 69.

sensitive reflexes, we need to take into account the impact of cultural, theoretical and historical biases inbuilt in our cognitive process.

Firstly, the international system is too complicated to fully comply with any simplistic model we may construct. A model is a simplified image which always relies on a theory which functions as the lenses through which we make sense of the data available to us⁶. Therefore, we necessarily need a theory to determine which aspects of the system under examination are important and should be a part of its description. Thus, in fields where no experiments can be conducted, we rely - arbitrarily to a degree - on a set of prepositions which we believe deliver results with the best explanatory or predictive power.

Secondly, our conception of how world is ordered cannot escape the influence of our previous historical experience. The latter shapes our perception of the international system and our expectations regarding its future behavior. Our mind adapts to the external environment by discovering familiar patterns, drawing comparisons to the past. This may reinforce in our mind the impression that the phenomena under inspection evolve in a circular manner. Consequently, when an event produces radical effects on what we know, we tend to believe that after that moment has passed, things will return to their normal, prior condition.

Objections to the epistemological foundations of this paper

These said regarding the impediments to an agreement within IR community on the current status of the international system, I will firstly address possible objections to the importance I place on the evolution of humanitarian intervention as a tool for the description of the evolving international system. Then, I shall turn to the international system itself.

One initial objection to the underlying logic of this paper is that the structure of the international system is not dependent upon ideas and does not vary according to beliefs. I will address this objection by reflecting on the development of scientific knowledge.

The 20th century was certainly amazing in many ways, but what has always fascinated me, is the unprecedented rate and the manner in which our knowledge in

⁶ In the words of Robert Cox: the primary task of a theory is... to enable the mind to come to grips with the reality it confronts. Cox, Robert. *Approaches to International Order*. p.87. Also quoted in Palan, Ronen. (2007). "Transnational theories of order and change: heterodoxy in International Relations scholarship. *Review of International Studies*. Vol 33. pp.47-69

natural sciences grew. In astrophysics for instance, the formulation of the theory of the “dark matter” has led theorists to the conclusion that the universe that we are able to understand through our senses and scientific instruments, is in reality only a tiny detail of the universe that actually surrounds us and which we ignore. Again, in physics, as Professor Feynman admits, there is an “expanding frontier of ignorance” as “everything that we know is only some kind of approximation”⁷. It is particularly intriguing that in fields which have existed for centuries this accumulation of knowledge has led to the belief that we have currently explored only a tiny shore of the vast “ocean” called universe –whose primary constituents remain unknown.

Returning to the field of international relations, this puts under question –to my view- the simplicity and the certainty which underline our views of the international system and its structure. Is this structure consisted of material or ideational elements? I am prepared to argue that we shouldn’t think of this problem in mutually exclusive terms, as a *dichotomy*.

Undoubtedly, there are material realities which determine each actor’s space of action. Given the anarchical environment of the international system, its structure depends on the distribution of capabilities among the units. It determines the options each actor has when it comes to resorting to force.

So, what space does this leave for ideas? It is ideas that shape our understanding of the world and help us locate our interests. Every specific international order promotes certain values and interests. The Holy Alliance aimed to uphold a status quo favorable to the interests of monarchy and church in Europe, or even today, USA uses its superb military and financial capabilities to guarantee –among other goals- open markets and to limit the spread of WMD. These interests are perceived as vital by the ruling elites in each of these states because these elites hold specific views of reality, of the available courses of action and their possible results.

Certainly, there are views within IR community, hostile to the idea that values, ideology or ideas contribute to the structure of the international system⁸. I believe that this issue is settled by asking ourselves how would the contemporary international

⁷ Feynman, Richard F. and Leighton, Robert B. and Sands, Mathew. (1977). *The Feynman Lectures on Physics. Mainly Mechanics, Radiation and Heat*. Massachusetts: Addison- Wesley Publishing Company. p. 1-1.

⁸ See Smith, Steve. (2000). *The Discipline of international relations: still an American social science?* Paper presented at the annual conference of the Australian Political Science Association. Canberra. 5 October.

system look like if the Soviet Union had won the Cold War. I do not think that we would be talking today about humanitarian intervention.

A second objection to this paper would be that humanitarian intervention is nothing new but another form of war, or even another form of intrusion on behalf of great powers to the affairs of other states. Even if we are prepared to accept that humanitarian intervention is not actually a new phenomenon, it is equally true that today there is a change in what we regard as humanitarian intervention. It is important to trace these changes in the discourse and our views regarding legitimate use of force. As the end of super-power rivalry was produced through non-violent means, the change of such rules and relationships between the actors within the system should be expected to be gradual. And it is this progress that can be described through an understanding of humanitarian intervention both as a discourse and as a state practice.

Trends in the post Cold War international system

There are five trends in this process. Firstly the expansion of the international system which is a trend carried on from previous centuries. Secondly, the continuation and intensification of the uneven relationship between the developed North and the underdeveloped South. Thirdly, the continuation of American primacy within the western hegemony in political and economic terms. Lastly, a change in the rules concerning use of force. I will proceed by analyzing these trends.

One of the most important shifts in the international system is that, in the present period, it's more expanded than ever before. It meaningfully includes more members which are also significantly more interconnected. The practice of humanitarian intervention indicates that the international community faces to some extent common threats and that it has a common interest in setting a common policy to address them.

The claim that there is a right or even a responsibility to intervene where gross violations of human rights occur, is –in moral terms- an admittance that every region of this planet should be part of the international system, regardless of its economical, political or strategical significance because there is a duty to remember our common humanity. In other words, theoretically speaking, there should be no such region of no or lesser concern to international community.

Secondly, today state interests are expanded and more diverse. In this new era of internationalism based on values and rights, state interest is articulated with additional terms. This is evident from the same demand for humanitarian intervention, which

rests on the assumption that contemporary international community has an interest in acting as a whole for reasons not necessarily having to do with upholding status quo or security. Humanitarian intervention is the response of international community to grave abuses of human rights, to serious wrongs whose impression no one can escape, to wrongs that the international community has decided that she cannot afford to ignore. Thus, the international system is undoubtedly in its liberal moment.

The individualistic character of liberalism poses a subtle and yet fundamental challenge to the system. It moves towards more anthropocentric directions and humanitarian intervention as policy and discourse is a clear indication. Under this spirit “The Millenium Declaration”, issued in September 2000, identified freedom, equality, solidarity and shared responsibility as fundamental values, essential to international relations in the 21st century. As George Sorensen had put it: “today world order is about realizing the good of mankind as a whole”⁹. To sum up, to some extent, at least rhetorically, our foreign policy agendas in the West have moved away from strict state-centrism.

This shift was apparent during the optimism of the first post Cold- War years. US leadership, puzzled by the new purpose and role of the US formidable military and economic capacity, concluded that it should be used in order to uphold globally freedom and human dignity. This aspiration had been articulated clearly by President Clinton, when referring to the US operation in Kosovo, he stated:

*“But never forget, if we can do this here, and if we can then say to the people of the world, whether you live in Africa, or Central Europe, or any other place, if somebody comes after innocent civilians and tries to kill them en masse because of their race, their ethnic background or their religion, and it’s within our power to stop it, we will stop it.”*¹⁰

Initially the United Nations assumed a proactive role in this effort to support the respect of fundamental human rights globally. Its mission proliferated while its financial resources remained relatively stagnant. The bitter experience of the realities on the ground during the first few years after the end of the Cold War, demonstrated the available expertise, resources and knowledge of the local realities were inferior to the growing demands of peacekeeping and latter peace-enforcing operations, not to

⁹ Sorensen, George. (2006). *What Kind of World Order? The International System in the New Millennium. Cooperation and Conflict*. Vol. 41, No. 4. pp.343-363.

¹⁰ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary. *Remarks by the President to the KFOR troops*. June 22, 1999.

mention nation building. In addition, the time consuming, bureaucratic process necessary for the authorization of such operations, constituted UN –and in extension multilateral solutions- target of severe criticism. The inadequacy of multilateral institutions to act decisively in order to prevent or limit acute humanitarian crises was further demonstrated by the selectivity of the deployment of humanitarian operations.

These realities undermined UN credibility as a competent global actor able to enforce order even in a regional level. Nevertheless it was the developments after 9/11 attacks which delivered the critical blow to multilateralism. This is not because, as the Bush administration has been heavily criticized, it has brought about a preference to unilateralism, a fact clearly depicted in the National Security Strategy of the US. The seeds of this policy were apparent even during the Clinton administration which had denied the UN command of US troops and had used NATO airpower against Serbia without prior UN authorization. It is because it has permitted US leadership to link explicitly humanitarian intervention, fundamental human rights and security with democracy and its global spread, and has placed sovereign equality under attack.

Thus, legal and cultural lines of division were drawn in addition to the political and economic drift between the North and the South. This has turned

the world in two different directions, creating two different zones in the process: one they call a 'postmodern security community' composed of 'powerful advanced capitalist industrial democracies' no longer operating by the realist rules of the game, and the other comprised of a mixture of modern and premodern states where international relations continue to operate by the Westphalian norms of power politics that prevailed all over the world up to 1945.¹¹

Moreover, while in the Cold War period the South enjoyed a degree of independence by using the norm of sovereignty as a barrier against foreign interference, today the sovereignty of some states is conditional. This shift has taken place gradually. It reached its culmination in 2002 when the United States announced that it should have the exceptional privilege to respond unconstrained and even unilaterally to any threats to international security, in any part of the world, according to its priorities.

¹¹ Cox, Michael. Booth, Ken and Dunne, Tim. (1999).p.10

Turning to the politics within the international system, it seems that while the North-South drift widens, there is certainly a realignment of relationships between the actors. This is evident when focusing on the relationships between the West and the countries of the South. During the Cold War US could not afford not to support authoritarian regimes which operated as barriers against communism. The end of bipolarity released US from this need and permitted the realignment of US support after 9/11 according to the priorities of the War on Terror. The war in Afghanistan, fought on security and humanitarian premises, is a clear example of this point. US fought this war against its Cold War regional allies. Needless to say, Iraq has also been an ally of the West during the Cold War.

Within the Western camp, the questions do not arise regarding the policy aims but rather for the means achieving it. United States and its major European allies have participated in actions which de facto question the codified rules regarding use of force. Again, the bombing of Serbia in 1999 illustrates best that the Western camp stands united when it comes to questioning what has been termed as “unfettered” sovereignty. However, the question is not whether or not the principle of sovereign equality should be sacrificed. This is the reality in contemporary international system regardless of the answer we would advance. The question we should rather ask is why there is such a shift and what does it tell us for the future of the international system.

Incentives, humanitarian intervention and change

Turning to the reasons behind this shift, one would initially suppose that the sacrifice of the sovereignty principle is a natural product of an agreement between UN members to build an international order which supports human rights. I agree with Noam Chomsky that today human rights are “endangered species”. It is questionable though whether the course of action taken, namely the use of force against war-torn or poor societies can effectively secure the observance of human rights in those countries, especially when such action is not accompanied by measures to address poverty in those states.

This conclusion is supported by the state discourse regarding humanitarian intervention and the selectivity of such practice which clearly reveal that it is not undertaken because of a genuine concern for the horrible human rights violations in some states. While until 9/11 humanitarian intervention was considered as the tool that would uphold a liberal international order and liberal values globally, under

George Bush it came closer to the republican tradition. Bush connected intervention to democracy, liberty and justice, blurring the lines between humanitarianism and traditional security interest. According to this view, instability within states situated at sensitive regions, has dire consequences even for the prosperous, Western states.

Destabilized regions are considered to be grave security threats with a global impact as they are potential harbors of terrorist organizations. Instability, despotic regimes and oppression especially in countries located in volatile peripheral systems are seen by the West as the impediment to a stable world order. As the international stability is threatened by weak and failed states, it is not only a moral prerogative but also an inescapable security need for the North which dictates a policy of questioning Cold War unconditional sovereignty. To sum up, the rules regarding use of force are revised because the United States, which use immense capabilities to uphold the current international order, have an interest in their revision.

Humanitarian intervention: the red line dividing the international community.

What is the reaction of the rest of the world to western policy of revision? Even if the West remains –even implicitly- united behind the need to revise –at least from time to time- the constraints regarding the use of force, this is not the case for the rest of the world. As Kofi Annan has warned, there are

*“deep divisions among the Member States on the nature of the threats that we faced and the appropriateness of the use of force to address those threats”.*¹²

This is also clearly stated in the 2005 UN World Summit Resolution, which reaffirms:

*.. that the relevant provisions of the Charter are sufficient to address the full range of threats to international peace and security. We further reaffirm the authority of the Security Council to mandate coercive action to maintain and restore international peace and security. We stress the importance of acting in accordance with the purposes and principles of the Charter.*¹³

The report of the UN High Panel on the Threats, Challenges and Change, in December 2004 also pointed towards this direction, by stating that *Article 51 needs*

¹² Report of the High Level Panel on the Threats, Challenges and Change. 2 December 2004. (A/59/565). Available at: <http://www.globalpolicy.org/reform/initiatives/panels/high/1202report.pdf>

¹³ UN General Assembly. 20 September 2005. (A/60/1) Available at: <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N05/487/60/PDF/N0548760.pdf?OpenElement>

*neither extension nor restriction of its long-understood scope*¹⁴. In the same report the “right to intervene” is clearly rejected while it is stated that only the Security Council has the capacity to authorize military intervention as a last resort to address humanitarian crisis. Thus, the majority of UN Members including ones with considerable capabilities such as Russia or China, are not willing to grant either to a state or to a coalition of states the right to use force for humanitarian purposes or in order to prevent any type of security threat.

Future

Given this profound disagreement among the members of the international community regarding humanitarian intervention and the current state practice, what can we expect for the future?

Selectivity of humanitarian intervention and deviation from the conventional interpretation of the international law, reinforce the impression on the weaker states that *the strong do as they can and the weak as they must*. Of course, this is an observation made by Tacitus, but its relevancy today suggests that not so many things have changed after all.

Undoubtedly, the most prosperous in the international system is the Western camp in which the US retains its primacy. The heavy economic and security dependence of Europe, Japan and Israel to the regimes created and supported by the US are the reasons why this “empire by invitation”¹⁵ still holds together after the end of Cold War.

The West possesses superior military capabilities. The post- Cold War record shows that it is neither unwilling nor constrained to use it. In this environment, smaller states have an incentive to acquire WMD in order to enhance their security and create the space for more independent foreign policy options. The Iranian nuclear program speaks louder than any argument. On the other hand, actors with considerable capabilities have an incentive to intensify their armament efforts, which in the long run, will result in a new arms race.

Still, given the overwhelming capabilities of those states wishing to revise the international order, external balancing is the necessary policy for those actors wishing

¹⁴ Report of the High Level Panel on the Threats, Challenges and Change. 2 December 2004. (A/59/565). Available at: <http://www.globalpolicy.org/reform/initiatives/panels/high/1202report.pdf>

¹⁵ Lundestad, Geir. (1986) "Empire by Invitation? The United States and Western Europe, 1945-1952." *Journal of Peace Research*. Vol. 23, No. 3. p.p 263-77.

to emerge as global or regional powers. There are today signs of this policy. The enhanced cooperation between Russia and China is a result of the worries caused by the increased US presence in Asia, especially after the war in Afghanistan¹⁶. Similar considerations regarding the balance of power in the Middle East, drive Russian diplomatic support of Iran.

Consequently, it we are driven towards the rise of a second block of powers that will eventually balance the West. Such prospect is highly probable, as humanitarian intervention, especially when associated with the spread of democracy, drains Western financial and military resources and undermines US moral stance. Consequently, the process of revision described in this paper through a reflection on the way that humanitarian intervention has evolved, far from revolutionizing the system, shall result in no more than the birth of a new distribution of relative powers among major actors.

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¹⁶ See: Indian Daily. *Russia and China announce strategic partnership in a bid to counter expanding Western military and fiscal influence*. 3 February 2005. Available at: <http://www.indiadaily.com/editorial/02-03b-05.asp>

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