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## Is There any Consistency Regarding Western Intervention in Conflicts? A View from Realism

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### **Abstract**

*The trajectory of western intervention in large-scale conflicts around the world has become one of the most debated topics in International Politics. However, one of the major criticisms leveled against it is the inconsistency that arises from the selective choice of some targets for intervention while overlooking other large-scale human rights violations of 'equal or greater magnitude' in other places. This article does not deny that these inconsistencies in western interventions are palpable but argues, from a realist perspective, that because these actions, of states, are often dictated by the features of the state system, the policies that give rise to these 'inconsistencies' are only a product of what appears to be the consistency of state behavior in international politics, driven, not by humanitarianism, but by national interests and a political culture that unites the west. It argues that because the object of analysis of humanitarian intervention sits between realist and cosmopolitan arguments in the study of international politics we can expect to see certain consistent patterns in favor of the realist logic.*

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**Key Words:** Humanitarianism, Humanitarian Intervention, Western Intervention, Realism, Cosmopolitan,

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### **1.0 Introduction**

The challenge of how to engage with the protection of human rights and human security is one of the most persistent problems that the international community is confronted with. Violence within states when connected with violations of human rights has come to be perceived as a legitimate concern of the international community (Ayoob, 2001:225). While this is not particularly a new problem, the growth and expansion of human rights claims, which constitutes a qualitative change in the norms and ethics of global politics has contributed significantly to this pressure (Finnemore, 1996). The response of the international community to the challenge of preventing or ending violations of human rights has been mainly through humanitarian interventions carried out unilaterally or through a coalition by western liberal States or organizations' like the United Nations (UN) and military alliances such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and other regional organizations. Humanitarian intervention, a heavily contested concept, has been dealt with by scholars across a wide range of disciplines ranging from ethics, philosophy, politics, international relations/politics/law, strategic studies, war/peace studies to policy practitioners and media commentators (Trim and Simms, 2011). These varied perspectives while making a huge contribution to understanding the concept have also been the source of 'conceptual confusion' (Trim and Simms, 2011:2). Humanitarian Intervention, according to Lee (2010:22) refers to "the use of military force by one state (or group of states) against another state to promote respect for human rights among the citizens of that state." Lee (2010:23)

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further states that humanitarian intervention is usually a response to a humanitarian crisis often caused not by natural disasters but by severe social conflicts within the target state. Roberts (1993:429) also suggests that humanitarian intervention refers to military intervention in a state, without the approval of its authorities, and with the purpose of preventing widespread suffering or death among the inhabitants. Bagnoli (2006:117) rightly observes that humanitarian intervention is taken to be the exception rather than the rule of the nonintervention principle that expects states to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other states and not get involved in issues of internal jurisdiction.

The history of intervention goes back a long time but it has become common place to describe the 1990's as the era of humanitarian activism as it coincided with a period when the subject of human security was the focus of scholarly debates (Weiss, 2004:136). A detailed analysis of individual cases of humanitarian intervention is not the intention of this article; however, we make references only to a few that are relevant to the argument made here.

In April 1991, after the Gulf war, the United States (US), Britain, French and Dutch military forces intervened in Iraq to help the Kurdish people. In December 1992 the US military intervened in Somalia to stem a humanitarian crisis. Two years later the world stood by and watched as Rwandans' were massacred, by their own government, in 1994, and the West found no motivation to intervene, promptly, to prevent or stop it despite the wide media attention given to it. The intervention by NATO to end Serb atrocities in Kosovo in March 1999 and the Australian-led intervention to end mass atrocities in East Timor during the same period marked this era. In March 2011, a multi-state coalition started a military intervention in Libya to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which was passed as a result of the urgent need to stop Gaddafi's forces from committing atrocities in Benghazi (Brockmeier et al, 2016:113). However, reports of massive atrocities in Syria, where thousands lost their lives in armed conflict, and chemical weapons attacks in August 2013 which killed hundreds of civilians, including women and children (Blanchard and Sharp, 2013) were not enough motivation for any form of western intervention. This brief overview immediately suggests inconsistency as a result of the choices made to intervene in some cases and not in others. While the inconsistency may be obvious there is a pattern of consistency that can be identified because humanitarian interventions, as Finnemore (2008) argues, always occur within an intricate structure of conflicting norms and values that determine whether and how it happens.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

Extant literature suggests that there are several theories of humanitarian intervention. Scholars like Adelman (1992:75) point out that humanitarian intervention is justified on the basis of threats to international peace and security not necessarily violations of human rights. Others like Lucas (2004:73) argue that the use of force in humanitarian cases is morally different from war because it is closer to domestic law enforcement and peacekeeping, or domestic crime-fighting than it is to real war; and as such it does not fall within the scope of just war tradition nor its analysis. Some others like Hoffmann (1996:14-16) argue that factors such as the increasing economic interdependence, interventionist actions of super powers and increasing emphasis on human rights have violated and eroded the sovereignty of states and have led to the blurring of lines between domestic and international politics. Hehir (1998:32) in support of interventions argues that force can and should be an instrument of justice. Another set of arguments relate to the idea that Walzer (1977:101) puts forward when he argues that humanitarian intervention is justified when the levels of rights violations within a state "shock the moral conscience of mankind." In line with this Bagnoli (2006:118) opines

that serious violations of human rights like ethnic cleansing, genocide, massacre and other such horrific crimes are too serious to be ignored or regarded as simply “matters of domestic jurisdiction.” The cosmopolitan approach, according to Teson (2003:94), argues that permissible humanitarian intervention is “the proportionate international use or threat of military force, undertaken in principle by a liberal government or alliance, aimed at ending tyranny or anarchy welcomed by the victims and consistent with the doctrine of double effect.” For this category of scholars, “state sovereignty and the non-intervention principle are of instrumental utility rather than intrinsic value” (Lee, 2010:33). Humanitarian intervention should not merely be “right of intervention but should be seen as a responsibility to protect the rights of people particularly those suffering violations regardless of national boundaries (International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty {ICISS}, 2001). Researchers hold different opinions as to what the best definition of or justification for humanitarian intervention should be but there are two major classes of definitions, one in the form of aid programs to assist victims of war or other humanitarian crisis and the second one in the form of military intervention for the protection and/or promotion of human rights (Shaw, 2010:273). The latter is more suited to this article because it refers to the threat or actual use of force by a state or states against another state with the explicit aim of preventing or ending grave violations of human rights (Holzgrefe and Keohane, 2003). This definition however, has been described as being too narrow and unrealistic in that it does not take into account other motives for intervention and overlooks the realist behaviour of states in an anarchic international system (Davidson, 2012:150). One could argue, however, in defense, that whereas human rights abuses may not be a moral concern to realists as they are to cosmopolitan theorists, it could be a strategic concern because of its destabilizing effects in regional conflicts (Choi, 2013:124). So, for the purpose of this article humanitarian intervention refers to “any action by governments or organizations to prevent or stop governments, organizations or factions in a foreign state from violently oppressing, persecuting or abusing the human rights of people within that state” (Trim and Simms, 2011:1).

The trajectory of western intervention in large-scale conflicts around the world has become one of the most debated topics in international politics. However, one of the major criticisms leveled against it is the inconsistency that arises from the selective choice of targets for intervention while overlooking large scale human rights violations of ‘equal or greater magnitude’ (Ayoob, 2001:1) in other places. This article does not deny that these inconsistencies in western interventions are palpable but argues, from a realist perspective, that because the actions of states are often dictated by the “inescapable features of the state system” (Black, 1974:280). The policies that give rise to these ‘inconsistencies’ are only a product of what appears to be the consistency of state behaviour in international politics that is driven, not by humanitarianism, but by national interests and a political culture that unites the west. It argues that because the object of analysis of humanitarian intervention sits at the intersection of realist and cosmopolitan arguments in the study of international politics (Fixdal and Smith, 1998:225) we can expect to see certain consistent patterns mainly in favour of the realist logic. Although this realist logic is criticized for ultimately neglecting the human cost of mass atrocities while placing emphasis only on regional or state stability (Snidal, 1985:5), it is the only logic that explains the ‘pattern of consistency’ we find in western interventions.

### **3.0 Methodology**

This article makes the argument that there is some consistency in the ‘inconsistency’ of

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humanitarian interventions as they play out in international politics. The article depends largely on existing literature to provide historical evidence of the pattern of these consistencies. It adopts a descriptive format and presents arguments in sections. It uses the realist theoretical framework as a basis for analysis.

#### **4.0 Theoretical Framework for Analysis**

The realist paradigm, argues that states are the key political units and the principal actors in world politics and no higher authority sits above them to dictate to them what they should or should not do (Mearsheimer, 2002:25). States are sovereign political entities and the absence of any hierarchy in the state system, referred to as anarchy, does not presuppose chaos but a kind of order that is maintained by states looking out themselves first and ensuring their security by any means possible and available (Mearsheimer, 2002:25). Realists argue that States cooperate with each other but at the root of this cooperation lies, not a harmony of interests but conflicting interests. So states will compete with each other and calculations about power (Morgenthau, 1969), however it may be defined, dominate state thinking. In other words, the basic structure of the international system shapes the behaviour of states. It must be pointed out that there are significant differences among realists but these common tenets are accepted by all of them.

The orthodoxy of realism has been challenged by many theories including the cosmopolitan approach. Cosmopolitanism argues that there is a need to see the world as a political and cultural entity that will include all human beings on a global scale beyond one's own state. It presupposes that the world is made up of individuals and people rather than states (Kreig, 2013:50). It believes in a positive attitude towards difference and a desire to construct broad allegiances and equal and peaceful global communities of citizens who should be able to communicate across cultural and social boundaries forming a Universalist solidarity especially in moments of crisis sharing a common morality (Fixdal and Smith, 1998:294). The primary universal norms are believed to derive from humanitarian law, which give individuals universal human rights that must be protected and enforced (Kreig, 2013:50). Furthermore, the notion of purely domestic state affairs is nonexistent and everyone, every state, has the moral duty to help suffering individuals hence the motivation for intervention has to be purely "altruistic, that is, a philanthropic concern for a fellow human being" (Croates, 2003:75).

However, as long as the basic structure of the international system remains anarchic and has not changed, states will continue to be the key actors and their behaviour will consistently be shaped by the state system. Moreso, the idea that a separate behaviour is demanded that can be categorized as 'humanitarian' attests to the dominance of these realist assumptions about international behaviour (Farer, 2004:227). This has implications not only for humanitarian intervention but for other issues such as international justice, aid, trade and all forms of international cooperation. It is for this reason that certain consistent patterns can be observed in the trend of western interventions in conflict.

#### **5.0 Western Humanitarian Intervention: Consistency in Inconsistency**

This section presents the three major arguments of this article about why and how humanitarian intervention is consistent with realist behavior of states, namely: humanitarianism, national interest and western political culture.

## 5.1 Humanitarian Intervention and Humanitarianism

The claim of a moral duty of humanitarian intervention arises from the argument that all human beings all over the world are entitled to at least a minimum degree of being protected from harm by reason of their common humanity (Wheeler and Bellamy, 2008). As a result, there is a moral duty to intervene to protect civilians from genocide and mass killings because when a state fails in its duty to offer this protection it loses its right to sovereignty (Teson, 2003:93). From the perspective of realists, states will not intervene for purely moral or humanitarian reasons (Wheeler, 2000:30). As Kreig (2013:50) aptly posits, “The idea that humanitarian intervention has to follow altruistic humanitarian motives and the desire to help others selflessly derives from the cosmopolitan idea of moral universalism”. Humanitarian interventions are real military operations that involve men, material and real costs to the intervening states and as such States are rarely willing to sacrifice their own soldiers in overseas interventions purely for humanitarian reasons (Morgenthau, 1967). If humanitarian concerns, measured by deaths and genocidal campaigns, were the justification for intervention, then as Stedman (1992:4) argues, Bosnia would rank below Sudan, Liberia and East Timor. The genocide in Rwanda in 1994 did not provoke intervention on humanitarian grounds but arguably to prevent further insecurity, from refugee problems resulting from people fleeing the genocide that threatened regional escalation. The humanitarian crises in Libya and Syria during the Arab-Spring had similar patterns of grave atrocities against a civilian population but while in the case of Libya the UN Security Council Resolution 1973 authorized the use of “all necessary measures” to protect civilians from mass killings, Syria was denied similar intervention (Kuwali, 2013:2).

Interventions are rarely purely humanitarian and in a realist world where relative gains, a major hindrance to cooperation, (Snidal, 1991) is important to states which have to sacrifice men and materials to save strangers, it is unlikely that humanitarianism would be a consistent motivation even if in some cases it appears to be. Scholars like Wesley (2005:58) rightly argue that interventions motivated by general moral justifications will either fail to occur or will succumb to half-hearted commitments. This position is valid because when one looks at cases of Bosnia, Haiti and Kosovo where the United States appeared to intervene for humanitarian reasons, there were other strategic motives (Bellamy, 2009:3). Bosnia and Kosovo, Bellamy (2009) rightly observes, were initially worth intervention because of the threat they posed of a larger conflict in Europe where the US had clear strategic interests. In the final analysis, some of these interventions in the Balkans ended up creating unintended humanitarian crisis and so failed from a humanitarian point of view (Yoshida, 2013). Haiti on the other hand was defended due to a fear that if the crisis continued, a refugee crisis could pose problems for America due to its geographical proximity. In the realist world the question of universal moral good exists only to the extent that it serves a state’s interests and human rights are not universal because there is no higher moral authority than the political state (Devetak, 2007). Even if humanitarian intervention is “a moral duty” (Gomes 2011:1), scholars like Baer (2011:301) rightly argue that humanitarian intervention is not an enforceable moral duty where it is compulsory for interveners to make that ultimate sacrifice of coming to the aid of strangers beyond their borders. There are limits on the costs that one state must bear to protect the rights and lives of citizens in other states (Buchanan, 1999:86). In the absence of an overarching authority, international conditions, as Forde (1992:62-63) posits, “Compel states to defend their interests by frequently immoral means and this compulsion of self-defense dissolves moral duties”. It is important to note at this point that while the primary motivation behind western intervention lies not just in saving and helping strangers, there have been a number of interventions that have curtailed and prevented large-

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scale human rights abuses through the use of force (Brown, 2007:57).

## 5.2 Humanitarian Intervention and National Interest

One of the consistent features of western intervention is that, it is quite often, driven by national interests. Realism, as observed by Mearsheimer (2002), assigns considerable importance to national/self interest in the decision making process surrounding the question of circumstances that demand intervention. National interest, the combination of economic, strategic, material and personal interests of the political decision makers (Kreig, 2013:40) which reflects the sum of material and security interests of a state (Acharya, 2003:2) remain very relevant to the decisions of a state to intervene or refrain from doing so in different circumstances. Although many scholars argue that because the concept of humanitarian intervention emerges from an ethical perspective that encourages helping others, the idea of national interest should have no place in motivating an intervention (Maitland, 2002:4), it is empirically clear that states will only commit resources for the protection of the freedom, rights and interests of strangers only when it serves a self-interested agenda.

In the case of Kosovo, countries like Portugal, Belgium and Spain supported and contributed to the intervention not on humanitarian grounds but because they had concerns that the conflict could escalate, spread and result in a refugee crisis that would undermine the security and stability of the region (Yoshida, 2013). From another perspective, Stegner (2008:97) rightly observes that the interest of the United States was not in the Balkans perse but for the integrity of NATO. Stegner (2008:97) suggests that the intervention was done to boost the image of NATO in Europe at the time. Regardless of the introduction of the doctrine of the 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P), states still tend to act not based on moral duty but on their national interests. The R2P has even been criticized for being statist in the sense that it tends to favour political solutions (Pattison, 2013:575). As Moses (2006:18) rightly argues, the powerful states in the international system will continue to determine when and in what form interventions should take place. The case of Libya in comparison with Syria also lends credence to this important point. Although many NATO members shared the same convictions about the threat in Libya, they did not see the need to intervene in Syria just yet even when there was evidence of chemical weapons being used and the 'red line' was crossed. Some have argued that interest in Libya's oil reserves, fear of creating terrorist havens in Libya and the fear of Libya using chemical weapons against European states were among the motivations for the humanitarian intervention in 2011 (Yoshida, 2013). As Lenarz (2012:4) rightly observes, there is no purely altruistic interventionism given that national interests are always at the core of the balance of power, "blurring the lines between humanitarian motives and realpolitik."

Critics of the realist position may argue that states have international obligations to act in a humanitarian crises but as Dobos (2009:5) argues, international law does not impose a duty on states to intervene for humanitarian purposes and so the state is not bound by any other contract other than its responsibility which is first to its own people and its own interest. A 'just' intervention in a realist world has to be based on a motivation according to the states interest (Wheeler, 2004:6). While some may dismiss national interest as selfish, others like Shawcross (2001:123) have noted that this is an essential factor and one that is necessary for successful intervention. This is because in most cases there is need for political will and the involvement of governments and leaders of other states would not be possible unless their interests were implicated somehow (Shawcross, 2001:123). This is not to say that states may not sometimes change their position to accommodate humanitarian concerns, but this would

be an exception rather than the rule. The reality is that western states rarely intervene when there are no vital interests at stake and the result is a pattern of intervention that is highly selective (Wheeler and Morris, 2007:448).

### **5.3 Humanitarian Intervention and Western Political Culture**

The very idea of western intervention suggests that it is controlled largely by the ‘west’. What or who is the ‘west’? Hurrell (2006:1) describes it as the ‘great power club’. Puchala (2005:577) defines it in economic, political, ideological and hegemonic terms as “a group of capitalist countries that are committed to open markets, a club of democracies, the source and center of liberal internationalism, and a transnational coalition of elites sharing and being united by interests, aims and aspirations arising from similar institutions and a common ideology”.

In the post-cold war era, the west celebrates liberalism and is yet unchallenged (Puchala, 2005:580). The idea that lasting peace is possible only through the transformation of non-liberal societies into models of western liberal states has contributed to the practice of humanitarian intervention. Interventions are consistently carried out by western liberal states for the purpose of spreading and preserving liberal norms and values through Kant’s three variables of liberal institutionalism namely: international institutions, international trade and democracy (Kant, 1970). While this article does not agree that humanitarian interventions are a new tool of imperialism and colonialism as some argue (Davidson, 2012) given that the benefits of some of these interventions are obvious, it does argue that the underlying inspiration for intervention is laced with the desire to spread and preserve liberal values which is believed to hold the key to global peace and security as inspired by the Kantian notion of perpetual peace (Kant, 1970). As Reid (2006:1) opines, a definitive feature of liberalism is its “belief in the ability to establish societies through the removal of life from the conditions of war and the provision of political means to allow human beings to flourish peacefully”. There has been expansion in the range and scope of humanitarian missions (Davidson, 2012:142) and also an increasing awareness that in order to protect human rights in any meaningful way, the situation on the ground must be changed. Interventions conducted in the Middle East were not motivated by humanitarian interests but by the security concerns of the Western liberal world in an attempt to increase their security through the management of populations they consider risky to global peace and security (Dillion and Read, 2011). From this perspective, US-led interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan are not a departure from, but an acceleration and continuation of processes of spreading and establishing liberalism that have been on Western liberal agenda since the end of the Cold War (Davidson, 2012:142). Tony Blair (1999) pointed this out clearly when he stated that “the spread of our values make us safer”. Again the point is not that the western liberal agenda inevitably prevents a humanitarian outcome (Bellamy, 2004:225) but that this agenda is consistently a feature of these western interventions. The vital interests of the intervening states are grounded in liberal notions of human security (Davidson, 2012:154) and so in liberalism’s quest to expand its control and influence across the world, the scope of intervention has been broadened to include democracy spreading, nation building and regime change as has been demonstrated in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya (Morozov, 2010).

Although the same liberal values-based rhetoric and human rights justifications were used, the case of Syria in 2013 received a different response from that of Libya in 2011. NATO’s decision against intervention in Syria was due to several factors. Ranging from the domestic politics of Syria, the loyalty and commitment of the Syrian army to Assad, loyalty and

commitment of international and regional allies, fear of offending the Islamic elements and provoking another Middle East conflict to the highly trained Syrian Army, NATO had a lot to deter it from intervening in Syria (Miller, 2015).

### Conclusion

This article has argued from the realist perspective, that national interest and the international order will always trump the moral impulse to assist those who are suffering grave violations of human rights at the hands of their governments (Fiott, 2013). As Lenarz (2012:4) rightly observes, “the idea of an apolitical humanitarianism may be a noble endeavor but it is incompatible with the reality of international politics.” State behaviour is not anchored on morality only but on the self-interests of these intervening states as demonstrated in their choices to intervene in some cases and refrain from intervention in others. As morality does not yet have a bearing on military engagements, humanitarian intervention will continue to be a foreign policy tool that is used to promote national security interests or economic interests involving national resources such as oil, iron, diamonds or copper (Choi, 2013:125).

International institutions are themselves a product of the western hegemonic world order (Cox, 1983:62) and so whether it is the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank (WB), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the UN, The European Union (EU) or NATO, these institutions are a reflection of the rules which facilitate the expansion and legitimacy of western norms.

In the real world states are still the key actors in world politics and as long as the basic structure of the state system has not changed we cannot expect states to behave in a manner that is different from the way the system conditions them to behave. Where they deviate it is an exception rather than the rule and what is consistent in western interventions is that they are not governed by humanitarianism and altruistic motives but by national interests of states with shared ideas, norms and liberal ideals which unite them.

The powerful states in the international system tend to engage in humanitarian intervention selectively resulting in an inconsistency in policy because their behaviour is shaped by what they judge to be in their own interest they are therefore selective about when and where they choose to intervene. This problem of selectivity emerges when an agreed moral principle is at stake in more than one situation, but national interest dictates different actions and responses (Wheeler and Bellamy, 2008). For all the talk and reality of globalization, “sovereign states will still constitute the principal elements of order in the international system and it is only occasionally that states will act as cohesive political communities” (Farer, 2004:212).

The responsibility to protect doctrine is a positive step in the right direction but being statist (Pattison, 2013), the challenge remains whether it will be able to generate the political will necessary to make it effective on a consistent basis and how it makes states more willing to incur costs and risks just to save people who have no direct influence or contribution to their interests. Finally, while states might agree on criteria for making judgments, the application of these criteria to real cases will always be open to private interpretation.

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