Is military intervention on humanitarian grounds a good thing?

Today we live in a world where many atrocities and horrors exist within states that have failed in protecting its own people from harm. Whether it be civil war, genocide, starvation or a “massive violation of human rights”¹, all these wrongdoings to the population of a state have, at one point in recent history, required a response from states and supranational bodies who are in a position to intervene, and in some cases see it as their duty to do so. Such humanitarian crises stimulate a plethora of available responses, but perhaps too often instead of diplomacy, military intervention is used in its place. Both the UN and powerful States, most notably The United States, have seen it as their responsibility to act as the “fire brigade in humanitarian crisis”² and so on some occasions have responded to such a situation with brute force through the armed forces. However whether this military invention does more harm than good or whether its conquests are entirely harmless and help the people they set out to protect depends on the level of intervention they have undertaken and the situation at hand. Throughout this essay I will explain where the beginnings of the concept of intervention is supposedly found, where State sovereignty fits into the picture, the type of humanitarian crisis than should or should not warrant military involvement, the derogatory effects of armed forces and how their involvement can affect an already delicate situation and I will finally discuss whether the reason of ‘humanitarian grounds’ could be acting as a scapegoat for imperialist-like intervention whilst referring to both Realist and Liberal views.

In an era where many states and institutions thoroughly believe in the responsibility to protect and the right to intervene, it would perhaps be beneficial to understand history and evolution of the principle. The term ‘Responsibility to Protect’ commonly shorted to ‘R2P’ is generally thought

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² Collins, C & Weiss, T (1996) ibid, Pg. 12.
to be a modern concept than has arisen in the last few decades however, its roots can be traced back to the Geneva Conventions of 1949. During the four 1949 Geneva Conventions, core principles that were constructed can be directly linked to ‘R2P’ ‘s doctrine, it was these conventions that helped solidify and “form the core of international humanitarian law”3 and thus helped legitimize a practical concept such as ‘R2P’. Although it did not mention the neologism itself, ‘R2P’ principles can be found throughout, such as in the common Article 1 of the convention which reads that intervening forces have the duty “to respect and to ensure respect for the present convention in all circumstances”4, thus highlighting how the objective of intervention should be based around “restoring existing order, not changing it”5. It was not until 2001 that the term ‘Responsibility to Protect’ was coined and conceptualized “by a number of eminent individuals”6 who belonged to a commission called the ICISS (International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty). This catalyzed progress for the concept; it was especially popular with civilians in the west who had watched humanitarian crises unfold without response through their television screens over the years, and it was even more popular with Humanitarians both within politics and outside it. Finally in 2005 the United Nations “embraced Responsibility to protect”7 as it’s very own doctrine and specifically mentioned the term in the “paragraphs of the World Summit Outcome Document”8 and thus ‘R2P’ was reborn as a legitimate practice and response tool of the United Nations.

3 Cooper, R.H & Kohler, J.V (2009) Responsibility to Protect, Palgrave Macmillan, Pg. 3
4 Gowlland-Debbas, V (2010) International Law and the Quest for its’ Implementation, Brill, Pg. 323
6 Cooper, R.H & Kohler, J.V (2009) Responsibility to Protect, Palgrave Macmillan Responsibility to Protect, Palgrave Macmillan, Pg. 3
7 Cooper, R.H & Kohler, J.V (2009) ibid. Pg. 2
8 Brauner, O (2010) Chinas Changing Approach to International Intervention, GRIN Verlag, Pg. 85
The Sovereignty of a Nation is a staple for a functioning International order, but when crisis strikes, how legitimate is it for another State to cross boundaries and interfere with other States internal affairs? In usual circumstances “no other actor has the right to interfere” \(^9\) with the internal affairs of another State, if this wasn’t an exercised norm, world anarchy would ensue, and havoc would be unleashed. Imperialism would still be a norm and world order would not exist, however in the 21st century we have come to the conclusion that in some dire circumstances it is legitimate to cross these boundaries and interfere, even when we are sometimes not welcome as was the case in Somalia and Kosovo. With this new exception, the value of Sovereignty is diminished, where is the line drawn? What kind of humanitarian crisis warrants breaking an age-old covenant kept as an “international law that exists between States” \(^10\)? Surely bringing the armed forces to a country where there may be crisis but not warfare would be detrimental to the State and perhaps from their point of view, comparable to an act of war or invasion. In this sense there have been “important changes in the meaning of sovereignty” \(^11\) due to the acceptability of military intervention on humanitarian grounds, the decline of the long-hold principle of State sovereignty could be suggested to be only detrimental to the world.

Oliver Cromwell once said whilst General of Manchester’s northern army that “to justify an army it is necessary to postulate a credible enemy” \(^12\), this statement is valid for the current times, and resonates today when discussing military intervention on humanitarian grounds. Essentially Cromwell is suggesting that in order to justify any kind of military force, any opposition it may meet must harbor a sufficient amount of threat and power. However, not all humanitarian crises

\(^{10}\) Collins, C & Weiss, T (1996) ibid. Pg. 10
\(^{11}\) Barnett, M & Weiss, T (2011) Humanitarianism contested: Where Angels fear to tread, Routledge, Pg. 80
\(^{12}\) Janowitz, M & Van Doorn, J (1971) On Military Intervention, Rotterdam University Press, Pg. 48
involve warfare and violence, starvation for example, whilst still a failing of the state in regard to looking after its populations prosperity, may not warrant military intervention. Starvation as a crisis may not be deliberate or done tenaciously by the State to its own people, it may be in fact a simple failing of governance or unfortunate natural circumstance. Therefore, perhaps it would be right to suggest that military intervention is not needed here, if intervention were to transpire, it could be detrimental to the State and its sovereignty, it would take away the States opportunity and right to learn and rebound from the situation. Instead ‘R2P’ and the mobilization of troops has traditionally be reserved for severe situations where the State is actively acting unlawfully towards its citizens and where the military is the “only feasible vehicle”\textsuperscript{13} to solve the crisis. Genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity are listed as acceptable terms for intervention, whilst it is unanimously agreeable that all of the former are real world atrocities, ‘crimes against humanity’ seems somewhat broad in comparison to the rest. The broadness of this determinant is slightly concerning, perhaps this humanitarian factor could be manipulated and used to pursue goals that would seem otherwise unacceptable by the international community. This Realist point of view, that states act selfishly for their own gains and will often twist the facts, will be discussed later in more detail. Nevertheless, which humanitarian crises that are responded to is highly relevant in assessing military interventions overall good as responding to a certain situation with the wrong response is highly detrimental. In some cases the “political vacuum”\textsuperscript{14} created by humanitarian catastrophes needs a response other than the armed forces.

On the occasions that the military do intervene some pundits and academics have suggested that they in fact do more harm than good and can worsen an already volatile situation; often putting

\textsuperscript{13} Barnett, M & Weiss T (2011) Humanitarianism contested: Where Angels fear to tred, Routledge, Pg. 68.
\textsuperscript{14} Weiss, T (1999) Military-Civilian Interactions, Rowman and Littlefield publishers inc Pg. 206
more civilians at risk. Putting individuals armed with weapons among natives of a country who are already extremely volatile and prone to violence is essentially a catalyst for hostility and because “mankind too easily resorts to the most destructive patterns”\(^\text{15}\) a full-blown war can easily break out, which clearly can put innocent civilians in danger. The very fact that a military body is now present in the middle of a severe humanitarian crisis may be treated as a threat or an invitation to fight by those that are causing any injustices and thus may militarily mobilize a group of people that may before have been dormant from warzone-like violence. In this sense military intervention has only worsened the situation, it has done no good at all, yet another conflict has come to be, therefore showing that the “danger of escalation clearly ranks among the most important political consequences of intervention”\(^\text{16}\). The intervening military can also cause unnecessary death to civilians, as was the case in 1999 when NATO proceeded to bomb the former Yugoslavia. On a UN mission during the Kosovo war, NATO forces unlawfully killed 500 innocent civilians\(^\text{17}\) and whilst they fully recognized it was “illegal to purely target civilian infrastructure”\(^\text{18}\) mistakes were made and lives were taken. It could also be suggested that the military are in fact completely unfit for some kinds of humanitarian response as “humanitarian intervention often requires long term commitment” due to the nature of a crises destruction. It takes time to rebuild trust, society and infrastructure within a broken state, time that external governments and the armed forces do not have in surplus. There is substantial pressure on governments in the present age to withdraw their States troops as soon as possible and as soon as the threat has been eradicated, a long term rebuilding plan with military involvement may once have been feasible but today with civilian pressures from the home state and the anti-war sentiment that they

\(^\text{15}\) Cooper, R & Kohler, J.V (2009) Responsibility to Protect, Palgrave Macmillan, Pg. 1
\(^\text{16}\) Stern, E.P (1977) Limits of Military Intervention, Sage Publications, Pg. 30
\(^\text{17}\) Fassin, D & Pondolfi, M (2010) Contemporary States of Emergency, Zone Books, Pg 342
\(^\text{18}\) Fassin, D & Pondolfi, M (2010) ibid. Pg 342.
encompass the military have turned into a short term response. Thus showing how their lack of ability to properly finish the objective can act as an argument against the helpfulness of military intervention on humanitarian grounds.

One Realist criticism of military interventionism on humanitarian grounds is that the motivations behind the intervention may in fact be related to the self-interest of a State. Some have even suggested that humanitarian grounds act as a “cover for unwarranted western meddling”19, whether it be resources or information they are attempting to meddle with. Western imperialism, in particular the “continuation of American hegemony” are motives that Realists in particular believe are the real incentives behind such intervention. Perhaps certain States want to show their military power and flex their muscles, perhaps they wish to create a “legal utopianism”20, where all world States follow a liberal morality and have a democratic process, factors that are reminiscent of American political culture. Noam Chomsky suggests that America will “maintain its hegemony through the threat or use of military force”21 and whilst it cannot start a war for these reasons, it perhaps finds itself keener to participate in intervention than other States whose hegemony may not be at risk. The legitimization States seek to intervene in this way can be gained through creating a media simulacrum22 that their own populations will believe and use as justification for their states actions, when in reality their States real incentives could be hidden from them. One cannot underestimate the use of suggestion and images as they can very easily

19 Cooper, R & Kohler, J.V (2009) Responsibility to Protect, Palgrave Macmillan, Pg. xiii
20 Fassin, D & Pondolfi, M (2010) Contemporary States of Emergency, Zone Books, Pg. 119
22 Baudrillard, J (1994) Simulacra and Simulation, University of Michigan Press, Pg. 6
“motivate or deter the political will required to enable military action”\(^{23}\). If a stark image of what is seemingly a threat to an individual’s State and their wellbeing it is likely they will back any action needed to keep themselves safe, thus in this way "security rhetoric is utilized to justify military assistance"\(^{24}\). The political will and backing of a nation is incredibly important when the military is involved as without it any further action becomes incredibly difficult to justify and an angry electorate will not re-elect a government they see as warmongers.

Although true Liberals such as Immanuel Kant would not support intervention of any kind due to the dismissal of State sovereignty of which he prides highly, most recognize the occasional need to intervene when “human beings are denied basic human rights”\(^{25}\). Unlike Realism, the Liberal perspective suggests that the motivations of intervening States are seemingly transparent and there is genuine concern for those that have received unjust actions from their State. Such Liberalists believe that some “moral obligations of governments exist in an international state of nature”\(^{26}\) and when humanitarian crisis strikes it is their duty to respond in any way they can, sometimes militarily although this kind of intervention is not taken lightly within Liberal thought.

For some Liberals it is appropriate to intervene when an individuals rights are being dismissed, due to the nature of individual rights they are held “by virtue of their personhood”\(^{27}\), time, national boarders and culture are irrelevant and so to intervene on humanitarian grounds is perfectly legitimate in order to protect the individual, irrelevant of their environment.

\(^{23}\) Barnett, M & Weiss T (2011) Humanitarianism contested: Where Angels fear to tred, Routledge, Pg. 73
\(^{24}\) Stern, E.P (1977) Limits of Military Intervention, Sage Publications, Pg. 230
\(^{26}\) Monten, J & Wilson, J L (2011) The Review of Politics, Volume 73, Issue 04, Pg. 634
\(^{27}\) Teson, F (2001) The Liberal Case For Humanitarian Intervention, Public Law and Legal Theory, Working Paper No 39, Florida State University College of Law, Pg. 3
To conclude military intervention on humanitarian grounds should not be a decision taken rashly. Although on the surface it may look to do much overall good, the repercussions it can cause internally, the way State Sovereignty is abused and the perhaps hidden incentives behind such actions make the concept lose appeal and justification somewhat. However, it must be remembered that no two situations are the same and that certain types of humanitarian crisis require certain responses, a military intervention is not the answer to all humanitarian crises.

When a situation is dire and an individual’s rights are clearly at risk then perhaps military intervention is a good thing and is warranted, but armed force should not be used flippantly and when it is used it should be used in the proper manner. Perhaps, as many critics have suggested, intervention by the west and America is an act in defense of their hegemony and intervention for this sole reason should never be sanctioned, however it would be naïve to think that this notion does not play at least a small role in a governments reasoning to intervene as there is, after all, no such thing as a selfless state, they must gain something from any interventional action they take. Essentially, at the core when used for perfectly legitimate reason in the right situations military intervention can be beneficial and a good solution however, States must be extremely careful to not be trigger-happy. Military intervention should always be the last resort; diplomacy and reasoning should be exercised first. The failings of military intervention show that at times it can go wrong and so perhaps it could be suggested that moving away from this model could be beneficial in some instances. It would be propitious to the world if States were to always put diplomacy and conversation first, instead of an AK47.

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