

Humanitarian Intervention Again

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Once again, as in the bombing of Serbia twelve years ago, our air force is bombing a country presenting no threat to the safety or security of Canada. In fact, we are at war. There has been no declaration of war. There has been no serious attempt to intervene peacefully to help resolve the conflict. There has been no debate in our Parliament. There was no suggestion of sending a mission to Libya to assess the situation on the ground.

More seriously, there has been no rational explanation of what the bombing is designed to do and little idea of who it is we are fighting for.

The United Nations Security Council has authorized a no-fly zone to be enforced over Libyan skies but it is not clear what exactly this means. In the meantime some Western nations - including Canada - have interpreted it to mean they are authorized to attack and destroy Qaddafi's forces fighting against an armed rebellion to overthrow the dictator. Other countries do not agree. Among them are: Germany, Russia, China, India, Brazil and, more importantly, the Arab League.

Some have argued the aim is to prevent the Libyan despot, Muammar Quaddafi, from slaughtering thousands of his people, but there has been no evidence that this was his intention before the bombing took place.

President Sarkozy of France has made it clear the intervention is to change the regime and replace Quaddafi. France has already recognized the rebels in Benghazi as the legitimate representatives of the Libyan people. This extraordinary step seems to rule out any possibility of negotiating with Qaddafi for a peaceful solution to the armed struggle. It also implies what amounts to a demand for his unconditional surrender - a demand that almost always leaves your opponent no choice but to fight to the bitter end.

As for the United States we are not sure what President Obama has in mind. Initially, he was hesitant to lead his country into yet another war against a Muslim nation. However, a hyped-up media and a number of his close advisors urged him to intervene militarily. Having done so, he was anxious to at least pretend that the lead in the continuing conflict would be taken by others, and the "others" now seem to have been designated as some of the NATO countries - minus Germany and Turkey.

The waves of unrest and upheavals in the Arab world have created great hope but at the same time potential danger. Who or what might replace the deposed despots is not known, One thing seems clear, none of the Muslim countries involved is ready for, or even desires to have, western style democracy.

For the most part their values are not western values and lurking in the background is the menacing threat of religious extremism. This may be especially true in Libya, which has produced a high proportion of suicide bombers and mujahideen fighters in Afghanistan and Iraq.

As a general rule it is wise not to take sides in a civil war unless our own vital interests are at stake. What is taking place in Libya today is a civil war and we find ourselves playing the role of air force for the rebels. Unfortunately, we really have no idea of who they are or what they represent. Moreover, we do not know where the conflict will lead, how long it might last or the broader implications for the region after the fighting ends.

All of this fiasco has turned out to be a colossal mess and is unlikely to end well. This is not unusual when the excuse for intervention is based primarily on so-called humanitarian reasons.

Military intervention for humanitarian reasons is not a new phenomenon. We recall that Hitler justified his invasion of Czechoslovakia on the grounds that the ethnic Germans in the Sudetenland were being mistreated and abused by their fellow Czechoslovaks.

The concept has, however, found renewed popularity following the failure to prevent the Rwanda genocide. It gained momentum during the civil war in Bosnia and later in Kosovo, when charges of ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity were levelled against the Serbs. The NATO intervention in Bosnia and Kosovo - despite strong evidence to the contrary - continues to be hailed as highly successful operations.

The Balkan experience led directly to the new doctrine of the "responsibility to protect" or R2P - the right to intervene in a sovereign state to protect populations there who are at risk. R2P has become the new term for humanitarian intervention and has laid out the conditions to be met for such intervention.

The key provision is that if a state is failing to protect its citizens from mass atrocities and peaceful measure are not working, the international community has the responsibility to intervene at first diplomatically, and then more coercively, and at last resort, with military force.

The United Nations Charter does not permit the use of military force for humanitarian intervention. However, in 2005 the General Assembly did adopt the principle of R2P, provided that the parties to the dispute "first of all seek, a solution through negotiation, enquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement, resort to regional agencies or arrangements, or other peaceful means of their own choice."

If such peaceful means have been tried but have failed then and only then can the United Nations Security Council authorize the use of force. Clearly none of these peaceful methods were tried before the decision was taken to bomb Quaddafi's forces.

R2P has many loyal advocates both in Canada and the United States. In Canada, our former foreign minister, Lloyd Axworthy, and retired General Romeo Dallaire are leading proponents of the doctrine. In the United States, one of the foremost advocates is Samantha Powers, author, foreign policy analyst, and now member of the US National Security Council.

Samantha Powers was appointed to the Council by President Obama and is said to have strongly influenced the President to intervene in Libya. In 2002, before her appointment to the National Security Council, she pushed hard during the second Intafada for US military intervention against Israel with the aim of establishing and protecting a Palestinian state.

She exemplifies the potential dangers of having a doctrine that invites the violation of national sovereignty on the basis of alleged human rights abuse. For human rights proponents like her there are few conflict situations that do not deserve military intervention. The concept of “do no harm” becomes irrelevant.

It is fortunate that R2P is not a mandatory obligation for the international community. It provides a framework for intervention and guidelines to be followed but it remains the responsibility of the United Nations Security Council to authorize military intervention in a sovereign state. The veto power remains a last resort to prevent the violation of sovereignty for whatever reason.

There is great danger in assuming that the western democratic nations can exercise wise judgment about when they should intervene in a conflict taking place in developing countries. There is even more danger in assuming that the intervention is motivated by real humanitarian concerns and not for selfish political or foreign policy objectives as was clearly the case in Bosnia and Kosovo.

The R2P concept is too easily high jacked by leaders who see an opportunity to gain political mileage at home by playing the role of protecting the rights of suffering victims in far away places. If the country to be punished is headed by a dictator and is not too powerful to take on, then the risk is worth taking.

If the intervention can be in concert with other allied nations so much the better. For Canada, acting as part of NATO becomes particularly important as it was in the bombing of Serbia, and is now in the case of Libya. Quite apart from the substance of the issues involved Canada feels it must go along with our NATO partners whether the military action is justified or not. Our political leaders do not need to consult Parliament because NATO has decided the matter for us.

This is not a satisfactory situation for a democratic country. Other NATO member countries do not always feel obliged to follow the NATO lead if they do not agree with a military solution to the problem. Greece refused to take part in the bombing of Serbia in 1999 and Germany has refused to join its NATO partners in the Libya intervention.

Going to war is a serious business and it should be only done with the full agreement of the Parliament of Canada after a vote in the House of Commons. It is well to remember that at the outbreak of the Second World War it was only after debate in the House of Commons and a vote that Canada declared war on Germany.

Decisions about war and peace that affect the safety and security of our armed services and citizenry are the paramount expression of a nation’s sovereignty. Canada should not abdicate that responsibility in any circumstances.

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