The New Facade for Regime Change: A Brief History of Humanitarian Interventionism

By Prof. Vijay Prashad
Global Research, June 04, 2016
CounterPunch 2 June 2016

Sitting in his presidential palace in 1991, Iraq's President Saddam Hussein and his Culture Minister Hamad Hammadi drafted a letter to Mikhail Gorbachev, President of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.). Hussein and Hammadi hoped that the U.S.S.R. would help save Iraq from the West's barrage. Hammadi, who understood the shifts in world affairs, told Hussein that the war was not intended "only to destroy Iraq, but to eliminate the role of the Soviet Union so the United States can control the fate of all humanity". Indeed, after the 1991 Gulf War, the U.S.S.R. fell apart and the United States emerged as the singular superpower. The age of U.S. unipolarity had dawned.

A jubilant U.S. President George H.W. Bush inaugurated a "New World Order", namely "a world where the rule of law supplants the rule of the jungle". It is the U.S., he intimated, that lives by the "rule of law" and it is the enemies of the U.S. — "actual and potential despots around the world" — that live by the "rule of the jungle". In this new world, "there is no substitute for American leadership", said Mr. Bush, and so "in the face of tyranny, let no one doubt American credibility and reliability". Enemies of the U.S. — tyrants and despots — would face the full-spectrum domination of the U.S. military. Mr. Bush's predecessor, Ronald Reagan, had already wanted to go after "misfits, looney tunes and squalid criminals" who opposed U.S. policy, but he was held back by the U.S.S.R. and by popular liberation struggles in Africa and Latin America. The collapse of the U.S.S.R. and the weakened Third World bloc provided the U.S. with a tremendous opportunity.

The humanitarian facade

George H.W. Bush's successor Bill Clinton gave the idea of intervention its liberal patina. His National Security Adviser, Anthony Lake, crafted the notion of "rogue states" — those countries that remain outside "the family of democratic nations". Mr. Lake's examples included Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Libya and North Korea.

Orlok | Shutterstock.com

The U.N.-backed sanctions regime sought to weaken Iraq to the point of collapse. No pretext allowed the West to tackle the other countries. It was Yugoslavia, instead, that faced the barrage of "humanitarian intervention", the new term of art for Western bombardment in the service of protecting civilians. The killing of 45 Kosovar Albanians in Racak in January 1999 provided the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) with the reason to intervene. China and Russia refused to provide U.N. authorisation. It did not stay NATO's hand, which

bombed Yugoslavia into pieces. Older theories to preserve state sovereignty — such as the 1648 Peace of Westphalia and the 1934 Montevideo Convention — went by the wayside. If the West decided that a conflict demanded intervention, then the full force of Western power would be brought to bear on those whom the West determined to be the "bad guys". This was the gist of humanitarian interventionism.

What counted as a disaster worthy of intervention? In 1996, Madeleine Albright, then U.S. Ambassador to the UN, acknowledged that the U.S.-driven sanctions on Iraq had led to the death of half-a-million children. "I think this is a very hard choice," she said, "but the price, we think the price is worth it." In other words, it was acceptable to allow half-a-million Iraqi children to die in order to maintain the strangulation of Iraq. This death toll — near the low estimate of the Rwandan genocide of 1994 — could be tolerated if Western interests had been served. Later, when Western clients such as Israel and the countries of the African Great Lakes massacred tens of thousands, there was no outcry about genocide and for intervention. It had become clear by the 1990s that the idea of humanitarian intervention had been reduced to a fig leaf for Western interests.

New language for intervention

U.S. President George W. Bush used the language of civilian protection in 2003 to conduct a war of aggression against Iraq. The U.S. war broke Iraq's infrastructure and state institutions as well as dented the pretensions of humanitarian intervention. The chaos that followed was authored by the regime change war of 2003. Humanitarian intervention now seemed illegitimate — it burned in the fires of Baghdad. Western liberals hastened to refashion the doctrine. They turned to the United Nations, which had been battered by its subordination to Western interests in the 1990s.

Under Kofi Annan's watch, the U.N. endorsed the new idea of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) in 2005. This new doctrine asked that sovereign states respect the human rights of their citizens. When these rights are violated, then sovereignty dissolves. An outside actor endorsed by the U.N. can then come in to protect the citizens.

Once more, no precise definition existed for who gets to define the nature of a conflict and who gets to intervene. Reverend Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann, president of the U.N. General Assembly, released a Concept Note that raised questions about the new R2P doctrine. D'Escoto called R2P "redecorated colonialism" and said that "a more accurate name for R2P would be the right to intervene". The atmosphere for a critique of the West, despite the catastrophe in Iraq, did not exist. Ninety-two U.N. member states — including Brazil, India and South Africa — spoke in favour of R2P. Mexico, India and Egypt did raise the fear of unilateral coercion, although they settled into their seats when reminded that R2P required UN Security Council authorisation. Failure to act in the case of Israel's punctual bombardment of Gaza drew several comments from member states during the debate around R2P. Singapore's delegation suggested that "the judgment of whether a government has failed in its responsibility to protect must be taken by the international community without 'fear or favour'", a standard that would be difficult to meet given the West's stranglehold on the U.N. institutions. Rev. Brockmann's warning was unheeded. Humanitarian interventionism remained in the arsenal of the West.

The test for R2P came not during Israel's bombing of Gaza in Operation Cast Lead (2008-09), after which a U.N. report found prima facie evidence of war crimes. It came a few

years later in Libya. An uprising against the Libyan government in February 2011 provided the opportunity to test R2P. During the Yugoslavian war, the Kosovo Liberation Army had made it clear that they used their fighters in strategic ways so as to provoke a response from the Yugoslavian army; massacres of civilians, they felt, would be the best way to bring in Western air power on their side and turn any conflict to their advantage. The rebels in Libya (and later in Syria) had much the same strategic assessment. If they could elicit state violence, then they might be able to assert their right to international protection. This could only work — as the Palestinians find — if the adversary of the rebels was an enemy of the West. Egged on by the French and the Gulf Arabs, the U.S. pushed the U.N. Security Council to anoint their intervention with an R2P resolution. This is indeed what occurred. NATO went hastily from protection of civilians to regime change. Washington celebrated the success of the intervention — not for Libya's sake, but for the sake of humanitarian intervention. Finally, the idea had been salvaged.

Preventing mass atrocities

In August 2011, the U.S. government established an Atrocities Prevention Board (APB) to collect intelligence on potential mass atrocities. The APB sought to drive the narrative of what would count as an atrocity and when the West should intervene with the U.N.'s blessings. But the APB has not been able to do its work effectively. What appeared as a successful intervention in Libya was seen in Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa — the BRICS states — as a dangerous precedent. India's then-Ambassador to the U.N., Hardeep Singh Puri, told me in early 2012 that the Libyan example would prevent any U.N. Security Council resolution on Syria. The BRICS countries now saw that protection of civilians actually meant regime change whose aftermath was horrendous. In other words, it was the Libyan example that proved Rev. Brockmann right and saw the halting emergence of the new age of multipolarity.

Critics of humanitarian intervention are not callous about the horrors of war and genocide. Sovereignty cannot be a shield for massacre of civilians. Yet, at the same time, proponents of intervention watch disasters unfold and then wait till the last minute when a military operation becomes necessary. They do not want to acknowledge the long-term reforms needed to prevent the escalation of conflict into genocidal territory.

The critics worry that humanitarian intervention of the Western variety ignores causes and produces terrible outcomes. Mr. Puri warns, in a forthcoming book, of perilous interventions, namely military actions that lead to chaos and increased suffering. Could there be other interventions that are not perilous? Rev. Brockmann suggested that an antidote to mass atrocities might come from global financial reform, the redistribution of wealth and U.N. Security Council reform. Violence, he argued, is an outcome of grotesque inequality. R2P did not address the protection of civilians from the multiple horsemen of the 21st century apocalypse — illiteracy, illness, poverty, joblessness and social toxicity. These are the authors of crisis. Bombs cannot defeat them.

Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: **Prof. Vijay Prashad**