

U of T MODEL UN - February 4, 2016

Bader Theatre

Pleasure to be here with you at U of T's model UN.

I want to talk to you about the world of international relations. Politics, economics, law, power, history, media, culture - all are a part of it. Huge challenges.

I hope some of you will be involved in this field someday- as diplomats, lawyers, journalists, business executives or in other capacities. No matter what you do, your lives will all be deeply touched by international forces and you will have the chance to shape those forces.

I speak to you this evening as a foreign policy practitioner. I spent a lot of time working on the UN, NATO, G7. Now I teach Foreign Affairs here at Victoria College, in the Lester B. Pearson stream of Vic One.

When we look back at events through the clear lens of history, all seems so clear, so inevitable. I can promise you that in the middle of these events, nothing is crystal clear and nothing is inevitable. Leaders deal with uncertainty, imperfect information, and fast moving situations on the ground. There is no guarantee on outcomes.

The UN was founded after WW II. Its purpose was primarily international peace and security.

- Five countries with vetoes in the UNSC.
- Charter - No interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states.

UN wouldn't have been formed without these two elements. But they do limit its effectiveness.

When the UN seems weak and helpless, the fault is not with the institution but with its member states. "Blaming the UN for a crisis is like blaming Madison Square Garden when the Knicks lose" (Holbrooke).

Situation has changed a lot since the UN Charter was signed.

Current conflicts are often within countries and involve non state actors. UN Charter doesn't give us easy answers to these challenges.

We now have a considerable body of experience with military intervention in international crises since the end of the Cold War. Some humanitarian, some for other reasons. Let's examine this experience to see if we can draw some broad conclusions and some lessons learned.

When does a humanitarian or other international crisis require external military intervention? Is there a threshold for action? Will intervention actually improve the situation on the ground? Who should decide? "Do Western democracies need UNSC approval to act against a dictator killing his own people?"

National sovereignty is not as absolute as the UN Charter suggests. Certain international norms have emerged in the past 70 years: notably human rights and the non-use of weapons of mass destruction. Also, the world is smaller and more inter-connected. We know immediately of atrocities taking place in hitherto distant and ignored places.

Let's look at six cases:

1. Rwanda (1994): Civil war. UN force had a very weak mandate - stay neutral, monitor, help deliver aid; limited resources. Big powers obstructed real action, the 1993 Somalia "Blackhawk Down" disaster was crucial for the US attitude. Romeo Dallaire warned of coming genocide, stonewalled by UN HQ and the UNSC P5. World didn't care. Failure to stop genocide, 800,000 dead, tragedy; political costs of doing nothing were low at the time, later Clinton's greatest regret.

2. Balkans (1992-1999) Civil war along ethnic lines, break-up of former Yugoslavia. In Bosnia a UN force with a weak mandate could not stop Milosevic's ethnic cleansing, 100,000 dead. UN peacekeepers with no peace to keep. Srebrenica tragedy in 1995, 8000 men and boys killed. US finally engaged, NATO air strikes brought about Dayton Peace Agreement, effective NATO led force on the ground post-Dayton, robust rules of engagement, had to take sides to stop the killing. In Kosovo Milosevic continued ethnic cleansing. NATO led from the outset; no explicit UNSC mandate, Russia would have vetoed. 78 day campaign, criticism from the press until it ended; but refugees were able to return, protected by a robust NATO led peacekeeping force, Milosevic indicted by Justice Arbour and dumped by his own people, sent to international court in The Hague, died in prison, basically a pretty big success.

Out of this experience came the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine. Attempt to codify what had been an ad hoc approach; the West liked it, other parts of the world less enthusiastic, afraid it might be used for selfish purposes. Conditions for intervention: just cause, last resort, reasonable prospects for success, right authority.

Then came Sept. 11, 2001. Focus shifted dramatically to terrorism. Interventions would henceforth be based on security threats. Humanitarian crises and R2P were eclipsed.

3. Afghanistan (2001-2016): Started as action to counter or degrade the terrorist threat, pretty straightforward and widely supported. Taliban replaced, Al Qaeda moved elsewhere - Pakistan and beyond. West took over a broken Afghanistan. Humanitarian goals were not central initially but eventually grew in importance (girls in school), mission became nation building. Western allies and Afghans both eventually grew weary. Public opinion turned against the mission. Taliban came back.
4. Iraq (2003 - 2016): US acted with limited support, alienated much of the world. Canada, France, Germany opposed; initial military success was followed by messy, ill-planned and costly occupation; WMD fiasco, distortion of intelligence. This became a turning point. All interventions fell out of favour. Then came ISIS and the West is now back.
5. Libya (2011): Flowed from the Arab spring, Gadhafi isolated, had no allies. Arab League called for, and UNSC authorized, intervention. (Putin regrets non-use of veto). Reluctant Obama didn't want another Srebrenica in Libya; Leadership France and UK, US "leading from behind". Militarily, regime change was achievable. Initial success, but lack of follow up has left a terrible mess. Cannot be judged a success. Situation is arguably worse than it was.
6. Finally, Syria (2012-2016): Dictator killing his own people, 300000+ dead, millions of international refugees. A completely broken country. With the refugees, chaos in the region and in Europe. Russian and Chinese vetoes at UNSC. Ambivalent US and West are engaged but not fully. Sunni Shia sectarian conflict. Russia, Iran, ISIS, a real mess. Where are the troops from the Arab world?

A few conclusions and lessons learned:

1. Good intentions are no guarantee of good outcomes.
2. Choices for governments are often between a bad alternative and even worse ones.
3. When we intervene in crises the engagement is usually much longer than we expect (Bosnia, Iraq, Afghanistan). Conditions, expectations and even basic goals will change dramatically as the engagement continues.
4. We are not good at forecasting the outcome of interventions. War is inherently unpredictable. By intervening militarily we enter the realm of the unknown.
5. Be wary of fickle media: short term - "do something"; then "why are we there?"

6. Military intervention can be good at regime change. But then what? Very mixed record on nation building.
7. The pendulum of public opinion swings dramatically and has an impact on the willingness to incur risk and cost. The peak for action was between 1995 (Srebrenica) and 2002 (pre-Iraq). The pendulum swung completely against intervention by 2013. Now ISIS has brought it back somewhat (as they had hoped).
8. Finally, international legitimacy is essential; however the UNSC can be paralyzed. Interventions need broad enough multilateral support to share the burden of responsibility, costs and failures. A formal mandate from the UNSC is often completely unrelated to the eventual success or failure of the mission.

One commentator noted: "In Iraq the U.S. intervened and occupied and the result was a costly disaster. In Libya the U.S. intervened and did not occupy and the result was a costly disaster. In Syria the U.S. neither intervened nor occupied and the result was a costly disaster." The bottom line is that it is very difficult to manage hot conflicts, regardless of good intentions and deep resources.

So, where does this leave us? Essentially case by case, best political judgment. Leadership is key. Sometimes there is no alternative to the use of force. But there is also no guarantee that it will work.

Hence, diplomacy is essential. Diplomacy is often scorned as weakness and appeasement (see Republican primaries). But, sometimes it works: Myanmar (democracy), Iran (nuclear). Diplomacy means engaging with both friends and adversaries. And finding solutions and common ground to complex problems. It must be robust and tireless and endlessly patient. It should keep tyrants off balance, with sanctions and an international court system that works. And it is so much better than the alternative. Syria - UN peace process. Slow but crucial.

Institutions like the UN can help us in this effort. You should be inspired by the ideals it represents. I can assure you that the problems of the world will not all be solved before you are in a position to deal with them and move us forward. So, best of luck. Future will be in your hands. Hope to see some of you here next fall.

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