



# IRREDEMIABLY SHAKEN?

## INTERVENTION IN THE POST-AFGHANISTAN ERA

*Jean-Marie Guéhenno*

**T**HE lamentable end of Western engagement in Afghanistan is a watershed event that may well mark the end of an era. At the moment, there is a lazy consensus that “intervention” in the lives of others can only fail. The same question keeps being asked: why engage in costly open-ended engagements when we don’t know what we’re doing? Such a mindset fits very well with the spirit of our times, a shrinking and often xenophobic vision of a world of which we are fearful because we do not understand it and are incapable of managing it: we would rather hunker down behind tightly-controlled borders than venture into dangerous foreign lands.

This is the exact opposite of the zeitgeist that prevailed in the immediate aftermath of the end of the Cold War when the triumphalist mood of the time

generated a sort of hubris in the West. We thought that we could reshape the world in our own image, according to a sequence in which military intervention was followed by stabilization and came to a conclusion with the conduct of free and fair elections that would legitimize an inclusive government. We believed, in short, in social engineering.

**A**s the head of UN peacekeeping during its biggest expansion (2000-2008), I played my part in that project, deploying multidimensional missions in a number of countries in various parts of the developing world. And if some unsavory ruler challenged that post-Cold War ambition, so the thinking went, he would need to be crushed and, if possible, tried in an international court. The emerging doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect and the creation of the International

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*British, Turkish, and American soldiers assist an Afghan child at the Kabul airport, 20 August 2021*

Photo: Guiliver Image/Getty Images

Criminal Court were two illustrations of that vision: the establishment of a genuine “international community” that would coalesce around shared principles and would be strong enough to show solidarity when populations were under threat.

Of course, the reality never fully conformed to that ideal model. But there was a sense that the world was shrinking and that interdependence made abstention impossible. For some, international engagement was a moral imperative whilst for others it was a strategic necessity. Either way, shoring up “fragile states”—as they were

patronizingly described in advanced democracies—was not only the moral thing to do; it was also prudent because these “fragile states” might otherwise become safe-havens for transnational terrorist organizations, as had been the case when the Taliban hosted Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. And that might require a military intervention.

That sort of interventionism had old roots that preceded the East-West confrontation structuring the world after World War II, and of which the Soviet Union was an alternate incarnation rather than its opposite. It reflected the European tradition of universalism:

a belief in universal values that finds its secular expression in political systems. It was almost a moral obligation to spread the values that underpin them. Strategy and morality had since the early days of colonialism been blended in a morality tale, the “white man’s burden” celebrated by Rudyard Kipling: the Afghan woman that appeared on the cover of Time magazine at the end of 2002 was only the last incarnation of that story, when she became the standard bearer of Western interventionism.

The abrupt departure from Kabul, with desperate Afghans clinging to departing airplanes and falling to their death when the planes took off, provides a brutal and gruesome ending to that morality tale. In the end, we care more about our own fellow citizens than we care about people we have never met, living in countries we can barely identify on a map. Because we oversold the vision of an international community, we are slightly embarrassed by our betrayal, and try to find excuses to it. U.S. President Joe Biden thus explained that it was difficult for America to fight for Afghanistan when Afghan soldiers were not willing to fight for their own country. He did not mention that Afghan security forces had suffered more than 70,000 casualties over the past 20 years whereas American ones had been less

than 2,500. But the United States and the West felt better convincing themselves that the people they were abandoning no longer deserved their sympathy.

The truth is that the comfortable view that ethics and strategic interests converge has been blown to pieces. The horizon of reason is not the horizon of our emotions, nor is it the horizon of our interests. What we celebrate as universalism is sometimes nothing more than the ambition of power, and many crimes have been committed in the name of universalism:

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historians rightfully point to the atrocities of slavery, colonialism, imperialism. At the same time, as we just did in Kabul, we dispense with universalism when it no longer suits us.

This is not a pleasant moment for a West that believed its own propaganda and thought that the collapse of the Soviet Union ushered in the triumph of Western universalism. It did not matter much if many countries, which had been the victims of European colonialism, never bought into that narrative and were always wary that humanitarian interventions were an updated version of old imperialism. The political crisis of the West and the rapid emergence of China as an example of economic success divorced from

the universalist values of the West have shattered that Western self-confidence and the belief that a Western model is the future of the world. One could say that we are now irremediably shaken.

**WITHER INTERVENTION?**

What does all this mean for the future of intervention? One paradox of our time is that at the very moment when skepticism is growing on the wisdom of intervening forcefully in the lives of others, the rules that govern the use of force have been loosened. Unilateral interventions or interventions not sanctioned by the UN Security Council have become more frequent, and the provisions of the UN Charter on the use of force have been repeatedly violated or loosely interpreted.

When the 2011 Security Council resolution authorizing the use of force to protect civilians in Libya became a basis for regime change, it badly damaged the emerging norm of the Responsibility to Protect and it weakened non-proliferation efforts, as all would-be proliferators were made aware of the danger for them of renouncing nuclear weapons, as Muammar Qaddafi had a few years after the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the United States.

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The response of the international community to 9/11 had even more far-reaching consequences. The Security Council radically changed the balance that the UN Charter had set when it agreed that the Al-Qaeda attacks—notwithstanding the fact that they had not been ordered or directed

by the Afghan state—provided sufficient ground to launch a war against that same Afghan state on the basis of a self-defense argument: the vision of the drafters of the Charter was that authorization by the Security Council to use force would be

the norm and unilateral use of force by states claiming self-defense would be the exception.

Since 2001, the unilateral use of force has become the norm, and an impotent Security Council has watched helplessly as states play an increasingly assertive role invoking the right of self-defense. There is not much confidence in the capability of a hypothetical “international community” to shape our collective future, but there is an increasing tolerance for the use of unilateral brutal force. That leaves the world in a dangerous situation: no collective will to build stability, but a higher risk of fierce unilateral responses when instability becomes a threat to national security.

Is there an alternative? This essay argues that rather than altogether abandoning the possibility of intervention, we need to do three things: *first*, define more clearly what makes an intervention legitimate; *second*, recalibrate interventions; and *third*, rethink how we intervene.

**WHY LEGITIMACY MATTERS**

There are indeed considerable differences between a war such as the Iraq intervention (unilaterally launched by the United States), the Afghanistan intervention (sanctioned by the UN but largely conducted by a small group of countries), the long-term

deployment of troops in the Democratic Republic of Congo (sanctioned by the UN but much lighter than international deployments in Iraq or Afghanistan, yet more significant compared to even lighter deployments in other UN peacekeeping operations), and the various strictly political UN missions (characterized by a lack of international troop deployments). But they share one characteristic: even if the Afghan and Iraq wars were presented as self-defense interventions, they were wars of choice; and in that respect, they raise the same hard questions as the other two types of intervention.

Interveners need to demonstrate more rigor and honesty as they weigh the

pros and cons of future interventions. What justifies intervening in the lives of others when your national security is not directly at stake? Which moral and strategic interests are at stake? What level of commitment, in both intensity and in duration, do they warrant? How assured are interveners that they will be willing and able to sustain the effort?

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Answering such and similar questions is the only way of addressing the question of the legitimacy of an intervention—not only in the formal sense of respect for international law, but also in its substantive dimension.

Legitimacy matters in both its formal and substantive dimensions. It matters from the standpoint of the interveners—especially if they are democracies—as they will have grave difficulties in sustaining their engagement if the intervention does not have a solid foundation accepted by a large majority.

That legitimacy should be both formal and strategic, and Afghanistan shows what happens when the strategic legitimacy of an intervention is questioned: the current Taliban regime is certainly abhorrent to many Afghans who have tasted of another way of life, but is it a threat to the rest of the world? Many

experts argue that the Taliban has an essentially domestic agenda, and that, if it achieves effective control of Afghanistan, it will have little tolerance for transnational terrorist groups that could again result in devastating retaliation against the country it now controls.

Of course, it is far from clear whether the Taliban will succeed in its enterprise. It may well be that a year from now, Afghanistan will have again slipped into civil war, whether because of divisions within the Taliban (between those like Haqqani network supported by Pakistan and the more independent-minded Kandahari Taliban), or because of a

new challenge by enemies of the Taliban affiliated with the Northern Alliance. In either scenario, the capacity of the Taliban regime to police Afghanistan would be severely curtailed and terrorist groups based in Afghanistan could once again become a threat to other countries. But such speculative thinking had not been enough to prevent the departure of the United States in the summer of 2021.

Legitimacy also matters—perhaps even more so—in the eyes of the people of the country in which the in-

tervention takes place. For them, formal legitimacy is essential. The divisions in the Security Council have resulted in efforts by Western countries to get around the Council’s growing paralysis and write their own rules, inspired by the Christian concept of “just war.”

Such past efforts may have made intervention more legitimate in the eyes of the interveners, but in the end, they are rarely enough to convince the people of the country in which the intervention is taking place: inevitably divisions within the ranks of the interveners and their political opponents feed the suspicion that the former have ulterior motives, which as a consequence undermines the trust that is required to make real progress. In the country where the intervention takes place, a lack of a broad international consensus that would have been necessary for a formal decision of the Security Council to authorize the intervention in question means that the interveners will have the gravest difficulties in building compromise—much less consensus—in the country in which they intervene. The interveners are unlikely to be seen as impartial and the intervention may

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deepen divisions rather than overcome them. The disagreements over the legitimacy of launching an intervention will continue to fester after the intervention, which will in turn feed into local disputes, as we see, for instance, in Libya today.

This suggests that interventions are more likely to succeed if they are conducted in a genuinely multilateral framework, with the blessing of the United Nations, if not necessarily under its direct authority. In the present dysfunctional state of international affairs, that is likely to make intervention much rarer than in the past three decades, but there may be situations where agreement among the permanent members of the Security Council will still be possible, making intervention an option.

As divided as are presently the members sitting on the Council, they still agree that states are the indispensable custodians of an international order, and they are wary of a world in which spaces under the control of non-state actors expand. Thus, it stands to reason that compromise will be found somewhere between the European tradition

of universalism and the Chinese vision of controlled harmony.

#### CALIBRATING INTERVENTIONS

A combination of international divisions and national retrenchment will undoubtedly reinforce the “intervention fatigue” that prevails in the world today. But intervention should not altogether disappear from the international toolbox. But in order to remain a credible option, it will need to be better calibrated.

There are indeed vast differences between the deployment of a force of tens of thousands of troops supporting a multidimensional mission,

the deployment of a political envoy supported by a handful of senior aides, and all the situations in between. We should abandon the illusion that the stabilization of a country broken by civil strife can be achieved quickly. More often than not, stabilization is a generational effort that requires persistence on the part of international partners. The quick entry/quick exit template, which is then followed by rapidly-held elections, simply does not work; there may be situations in which an open-ended commitment is the best option, rather than a time-bound engagement that

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gives the upper hand to spoilers willing to wait out an impatient or tired international community.

But the open-ended option requires calibrating the international commitment in a way that can be sustained indefinitely—an approach that is very different from what has been done since the end of the Cold War. Deciding what is the right formula will require not only having a sound evaluation of the situation, but also a willingness of international stakeholders to engage in a sustained effort.

There may also be situations in which the best option is an intense political engagement with the lightest of footprints. The war with the FARC in Colombia ended with minimal international engagement because of the traditional Latin American aversion for UN interventions, but the political support of a UN envoy and of a couple of countries that supported the process was instrumental in facilitating the conclusion of a peace agreement. The outcome of the Afghan war might have been different if, say, instead of the enormous footprint—both civilian and military—that the international community eventually came to have in the country, the role of the international community had been limited to the provision of good offices to broker an agreement between the beneficiaries of the quick war of 2001 and the Taliban.

In all situations to come, the preferred option should be the lightest possible engagement—not only for reasons of international sustainability, but also for reasons of local acceptability. There may be exceptional situations in which a strong and massive international engagement may be required for a short period of time. But such a foreign presence should not overstay its welcome. A UN flag may be better tolerated than a national flag, but in the end, any foreign presence will be perceived as an occupation, and the design of future interventions should reflect that awareness.

#### RETHINKING INTERVENTIONS

Three decades of interventions in very different contexts provide some lessons—especially on what not to do. Three lessons stand out, with each being examined in turn.

The *first* lesson has to do with in-country security. Its provision is an absolute priority in any stabilization strategy, and there is a false dichotomy between *i*) security and *ii*) service delivery/development as the foundation of legitimacy for a state trying to reassert itself in a post-conflict environment. Indeed, security is not enough; but without security, there will be no development, and there will be no effective state presence, as the populations of northern Mali have found out in villages where no civil servant wants to serve because of a credible fear of bodily harm.

The problem lies with the many flaws of the international approach to security and security sector reform. International actors see this largely as a technical undertaking in which better trained and better equipped police and military will have the upper hand. They usually underestimate the political and societal dimensions of the effort. For security forces to be effective, they need to believe in their mission and they need to enjoy the trust of the population. Both of these things depend on the political context: do soldiers and police officers respect the new authority? Do they have an “esprit de corps” that makes them proud of what they do? Are they willing to sacrifice their lives for the country they are meant to serve? Does the population see them as impartial protectors or as representatives of a particular group? Are they a threat or a reassurance?

Too often, these basic political conditions are ignored and the problem is aggravated by the modalities of international engagement: the international security force—whether it is an enforcement force under national command or UN peacekeepers—becomes a substitute to, rather than a support for, national efforts. It relieves national authorities of their responsibility in pro-

viding security to their people and finds itself in the uncomfortable situation of being at once rejected by the population and irreplaceable because no effective alternative force has been built, as we found out in Afghanistan.

Put differently, an international presence finds itself in a trap when it has lost the capacity to transform a situation but cannot leave without risking the collapse of the country it has come to help. Lastly, as if that was not enough, support for national efforts, when it is provided, is not always adapted to the capacities and needs

of a force that will have limited resources once the international presence is withdrawn. Logistics are often provided by costly private contractors that a developing country will simply not be able to afford, while expensive and hard-to-sustain close air support becomes an indispensable tactical feature of operations.

In the future, a political understanding of the conditions for effective security should drive the international intervention effort; and the preferred course of action, in most situations, should be support to national efforts rather than substitution through the deployment of large foreign forces of peacekeepers or

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peace enforcers. And “support” should not become a synonym for the kind of superficial training programs that rarely help build credible forces, but rather should involve foreign officers embedded in fighting units and willing to share the same risks that the people that they are meant to support. This may limit the willingness among countries providing peacekeepers or trainers to take part in such operations; but that in itself will be a test of the seriousness of their commitment.

The *second* lesson is about state-building efforts. Everyone agrees that rebuilding a country that has been ravaged by civil strife must be a comprehensive effort, but the interventions of the last decades—whether the lavishly funded ones like Afghanistan or Iraq, or the more frugal ones like most UN multidimensional operations—have exposed the huge gap between theory and practice. Most of the time, state-building is supply-driven rather than demand-driven. National agencies, UN funds and programs, and international aid agencies and private philanthropies push their own pet projects, creating an unwieldy situation in which it is both hard to identify priorities and in which national authorities—those that international actors supposedly want to support in helping to rebuild a legitimate state—are often the spectators rather than the actors of the effort.

Moreover, the consultants and experts who design the projects often lack the anthropological knowledge that would be needed for the projects to be sustained by local chains of accountability, creating bottom-up ownership. In the absence of such ownership, there is a high risk that the offer will not correspond to the actual needs of the country in which an intervention has taken place and that the execution of the project will feed corruption rather than build a credible state. The more money, the more corruption.

Such deep flaws of state-building are hard to correct: there is just not enough knowledge to ensure that projects will be attuned to the specific characteristics of a particular country, and there is not enough discipline among the many foreign actors involved in interventions to ensure that the provision of support will follow the priorities of the country rather than those of the donors. That should not lead to abandoning any state-building efforts, however; but it should translate into us having a much more modest understanding of what can be achieved: we should consider the real rather than the assumed capacities of the international community. We should also limit our ambitions by focusing on a few priorities rather than pretending that all dimensions of state-building can be covered. If the international community is incapable of acting like a symphony orchestra. It should

test whether it can in some limited cases be a chamber orchestra.

The evolution from the “symphony orchestra” image to the “chamber orchestra” paradigm reflects the *third* and most important lesson of the past decades: the primacy of politics, and the need to subordinate all efforts to the consolidation of a fragile peace. This has implications for state-building—for instance, strengthening cabinet functions for a proper allocation of resources across the country—while building local government and accountability in parallel.

Each situation will require a different set of priorities. But in the end, the

foundation for both development and security is a political agreement that can be sustained. Without it, everything will unravel. When the international community makes the momentous decision to intervene, it should focus like a laser

on the political settlement that it supports.

The next decade is likely to see less interventions than the first two decades of this century, but that newfound humility may actually lead to more successes.

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The world moves in cycles. In the wake of the excessive confidence of the early decades of the post-Cold War period, we have now become more cautious. This should not need lead to xenophobic retrenchment but rather to calibrated engagement. ●

