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The Power To Protect: Should It Be Exercised?

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With nearly 13 million people living as refugees and another 22 million internally displaced, armed conflicts continue to uproot more people worldwide than any other cause.

Recent dramatic events in Liberia further emphasize the importance of political and military preparedness to prevent or shorten such conflicts. Can new military technologies and tactics be used to increase the effectiveness and reduce the costs and risks of forcible humanitarian interventions? If such operations can be more effective and less costly, will the political barriers to undertake them be lowered, making it easier for individual countries and the UN to fulfill their responsibility to protect?

On July 31, 2003 the United States Institute of Peace and Refugees International (RI) co-sponsored a [Current Issues Briefing](#) to discuss a recently released report by Refugees International—"Power to Protect: Using New Military Capabilities to Stop Mass Killings." The panel featured Clifford Bernath of RI and co-author of the report; David Gompert of RAND and co-author; Jane Holl Lute, UN assistant secretary general for peacekeeping operations (Lute spoke in her personal capacity; she assumed her UN duties a day after the discussion on August 1); and William Nash of the Council on Foreign Relations. The discussion was moderated by Kenneth Bacon of RI.

The views summarized below reflect the discussion at the meeting; they do not represent formal positions taken by the Institute, which does not advocate specific policies.

How can the Military Aid in Humanitarian Missions?

"When you see the faces of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) and the conditions in which they are existing, you realize that it's not enough to just care for them. You have to end the conditions that cause these displacements—armed conflicts," said Clifford Bernath of RI, the report's co-author, explaining how the idea for the report originated. To this end, since 2000, Refugees International has been examining how peace operations can be made more effective at either shortening or preventing wars.

The new RI report acknowledges the responsibility and right to protect, and goes one step further: it examines how military materiel and capabilities can be transformed for use in the non-military environment of humanitarian interventions. According to Bernath, the paramount question is: "If, through military transformation and technological enhancements, the political, economic, and military risks (of humanitarian interventions) can be reduced and the chances of success can be enhanced, would leaders then be more prone to make decisions to intervene to save lives?" To address this question, the report examines recent combat operations, particularly in Afghanistan, and the employment of technologically advanced military capabilities. In doing so, the authors sought to determine the extent to which such military hardware and operations can be put to use in humanitarian interventions.

A unique characteristic of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, known as Operation Enduring Freedom, was the use of small, highly mobile combat units that use information technology to operate in concert with intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, and with air power and other ground forces, said David Gompert of RAND, who co-authored the RI report. In turn, such units operate with improved

awareness, greater precision, and increased cohesiveness. "Information is gathered, processed, and disseminated easier; strike effectiveness is greater at lower collateral damage; and forces can be operated cohesively even while keeping them dispersed," he said.

"So we looked at Operation Enduring Freedom and the operational challenges that were faced by forces there, and looked at humanitarian crises that have occurred with interventions, that could occur or occurred without intervention and looked at operational challenges faced in those sorts of circumstances. Then we compared how the units as we saw them operate in Afghanistan would be able to meet operational challenges in forcible humanitarian interventions," Gompert explained.

Challenges of Humanitarian Intervention

What they found, he said, is that there can be operational challenges in forcible humanitarian interventions even more daunting than Afghanistan. "In Afghanistan the United States chose the time of attack, and that is not always the case with forcible humanitarian interventions. The absence of local allied forces in most humanitarian interventions is another challenge." But there were some challenges in Afghanistan that made Operation Enduring Freedom more demanding than most, if not all, of the forcible humanitarian interventions the authors considered.

"One is that the United States did not know about the 9-11 attacks," said Gompert. In humanitarian interventions, you have an idea that the large-scale killings are going to happen, although you may not know the exact moment. Second is the capability of the forces you are fighting, the so-called distinction between killers and fighters." In Afghanistan, Gompert pointed out, the U.S. primarily faced fighters who were strongly motivated and capable. That is generally not the case in forcible humanitarian interventions, where you face mainly killers who are not very skilled soldiers. Finally, according to Gompert, there are some serious challenges one faces during forcible humanitarian interventions similar to those faced in Afghanistan, most importantly that the adversary is highly dispersed on terrain that is difficult to navigate.

Using Information Technology

To address such challenges, many of which are common to both full combat operations and forcible humanitarian interventions, the authors suggest the use of small but mobile and agile units that can easily bring to bear intelligence and surveillance capabilities and call in air power and other ground reinforcements.

Jane Holl Lute cautioned that military capabilities do not exist in a vacuum, free of political considerations. "What are the characteristics of these conflicts we see around the world? One is that governments are part of the problem, and internal conflicts are a testimony of this fact. Second, there is no consolidated leadership usually on either side. Leaders do not fully or competently command their forces and there are spoilers on both sides. Third, usually there is no urgency to these conflicts, they can go on and on, as they have been going on not for years only, but for generations."

Moral Dilemmas

Another challenge, according to Lute, is the question of authority to use force. "Today, the political challenge is that there are only three conditions under which the use of force is legal: Force is perceived as legitimate if you are attacked, if you are asked, or if you are otherwise allowed under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. And irrespective of what any individual government may think of these standards, this is the collective wisdom of the international community today regarding the legitimate use of force." Moreover, she said, interventions create a moral dilemma for Westerners, in that "the national security interests to intervene in these places are very low. So I wonder if the equation of bringing down the costs of intervening to correspond to the interests involved, as the authors argue, can ever be equated." Finally, Lute asked, if you make it easier to intervene, are you then weakening your sensibility that it ought to be hard to go to war?

Lute said the challenges that arise with humanitarian interventions can be addressed through the United Nations. "The UN gives us a way of understanding whether a problem is tractable. The UN gives us a way to elevate the political salience of dealing with a problem. And the UN provides a mechanism to engage." However, the consensus of 1945 that gave rise to the UN has broken down, in particular its two core principles: sovereign equality of states and the rules for the use of force.

"In the run up to war in Iraq, you had countries such as Germany that rejected the use of force as a legitimate tool of international politics almost under any set of circumstances," Lute said. "Second, if the state system was originally designed to reflect the protection of the sovereign and people were protected by their sovereign from the invading outsiders, nowadays most of the people need protection from their sovereigns through the outsiders. And the UN exists as a mechanism to do that. But it cannot work effectively even if the costs are reduced for interventions, unless we have the re-establishment of the core principles. That is the main challenge not only for the UN but for the United States in particular because no other state can lead more effectively."

Interventions: Political then Military

William Nash of the Council on Foreign Relations also counseled caution. He pointed out that the issue of forcible humanitarian interventions is political at first and military only in implementation. Even with the political decision, it is often very hard to know what military tactics would accomplish the political objective. Nash also pointed out a need to rethink the idea that smart weapons can always defeat machete-wielding thugs.

Among other challenges, Nash listed the limitations of U.S. human intelligence capabilities, the manpower-intensive nature of humanitarian interventions, and the importance of stability operations that need to follow them. "The interventions of which we speak are far more manpower intensive, and stability is much more important than war-fighting. Take Afghanistan and Iraq: we performed brilliantly in the war-fighting part, but less than brilliant in the stability part," Nash said.

Therefore, according to him, apart from the military capacities that the RI report highlights, additional capabilities for post-conflict scenarios are needed. "And the reason is that you quickly transform from the focus on the thugs to the protection of the civilians. That is generally more associated with police work than it is with military work, and that is why this change of focus from fighting to stability is a difficult transition to make. Lastly, the stability force needs to be directly linked with all the other things that you have to do when you intervene, from humanitarian relief, to the provision of basic services, to nation-building challenges you have accepted upon intervening."

Conclusions

While it would be a mistake to advocate going to war more easily and more frequently, there was a near consensus among the participants that the advancements in military capabilities do indeed change the political, economic, and military costs of humanitarian interventions; ease the political debate surrounding them; and increase the options available to the international community. With new technologies and operational strategies, the chances of successful humanitarian interventions increase, the political threshold for interventions is lowered, and some of the excuses for not intervening are stripped away.

However, the participants recognized that other critical issues remain to be addressed. Even if intervention capabilities have improved, prevention is still preferable, although it gets little attention. There can be a mismatch between decisions to intervene, which are generally based on the interests of the intervenors, and the reasons for intervention, which arise from the humanitarian situation on the ground. Moreover, the responsibility, the right, and the ability to intervene do not necessarily translate into authority to intervene. In any event, a forcible humanitarian intervention is only part of the broader effort to address a humanitarian disaster and therefore its ultimate success is largely contingent upon the existence and effective execution of post-conflict peace operations, including humanitarian aid distribution, stability

operations, and nation-building efforts. The international community's abilities and willingness in these additional efforts are still in need of improvement.

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This USIPeace Briefing was written by director of peace operations [Daniel Serwer](#) and research assistant Ylber Bajraktari. The views expressed here are not necessarily those of the Institute, which does not advocate specific policies.

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