

Cato Institute Policy Analysis No. 209: The Futility of U.S. Intervention in Regional Conflicts

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Executive Summary

Regional conflicts have greatly increased since the end of the Cold War, a trend that promises to continue. As Washington gropes for a policy toward regional wars, military intervention frequently emerges as an option. Except in the rare cases in which regional conflicts threaten American national security, however, military intervention in regional conflicts is ill-advised.

As tragic as many of the regional wars are, most cannot be resolved by American military intervention. In fact, military involvement often aggravates the situation. Furthermore, intervention can create a number of problems for the United States, including a rise in anti-American sentiment, diminished American credibility if the mission fails, domestic skepticism about future military operations even when legitimate U.S. interests might be involved, and threats to vital interests where none previously existed.

Proponents of intervention cite a number of interests, both security related and humanitarian, as justifications for U.S. military involvement in regional wars. The most common, and fallacious, argument for intervention is that global instability is a threat to U.S. security. That argument relies heavily on the discredited domino theory and the notion of deterrence by example. Global instability does not, per se, threaten vital American interests and is the normal state of affairs. A policy that views disorder or instability as a security threat would force the United States to expend vast resources in pursuit of an unattainable objective.

Rather than attempt to stifle regional conflicts through military intervention, the United States should encourage regional initiatives. Washington must, however, recognize that many regional conflicts are so deeply rooted that no outside party, from within or outside the region, will succeed in ending the fighting.

Introduction

The threat of tensions' escalating into superpower confrontations helped stifle regional conflicts for many years, but age-old disputes across the globe have exploded since the end of the Cold War, and regional conflicts are on the rise. The "World Military and Social Expenditures" report counted an unprecedented 29 "major" wars in 1992. ("Major" meant a war that involved one or more governments and killed at least 1,000 people in the year.)[1] Time has also identified an ominous proliferation trend. An informal study a number of years ago revealed that approximately 20 wars were likely to be under way at any given time, but a 1993 Time study identified 48 wars in progress (defined as two organized sides fighting and causing casualties).[2] Although such precise numbers are not often cited, there is widespread agreement that regional conflicts, driven by religion, nationalism, and political and economic disputes, are rising dramatically and will continue to do so.

"Regional conflict" is difficult to define precisely, and experts use the term in a variety of ways. For the purpose of this analysis, the term will mean an armed upheaval, either cross-border or internecine, that affects a limited area but has little direct impact on the security of the rest of the world. The definition is necessarily broad, applicable to wars between established sovereign states, such as the Iran-Iraq conflict in the 1980s; internal strife in the absence of a functioning government, as in Somalia; a dispute between a sovereign government and an armed group within its borders, as in Sudan; or a conflict that involves both sovereign states and external nonstate parties, as in the former Yugoslavia.

In the age of mass communication, the entire world often witnesses the human tragedy associated with regional wars. Americans who are accustomed to basic human rights, relative stability, and freedom are often moved by distressing media images of remote war-torn regions. Those tragedies inspire in many Americans a sincere desire--even a sense that it is the duty of the United States--to alleviate the suffering. There is also widespread conviction that we have the means to do so. Since the American triumph in the Cold War and the successful expulsion of the world's fourth largest army from Kuwait with so few allied casualties, Americans and foreigners alike have tended to assume that the U.S. military is capable of managing regional conflagrations whenever it chooses to do so.

In reality, U.S. military intervention is generally not a viable solution to regional conflicts and should not be undertaken except in the rare instances in which American national security is at stake. In most cases regional conflicts cannot be helped--and may well be exacerbated--by the intervention of outside parties. U.S. intervention can be especially counterproductive, since it often intensifies smaller, less powerful countries' (the very nations most likely to be involved in regional conflicts) fears of America's hegemonic intentions. Militarily, too, the United States is ill-suited to suppress regional conflicts, in which warring forces frequently rely on guerrilla warfare, street fighting, and other tactics that are not easily met by America's high-tech war machine.[3] Retired British diplomat Jonathan Clarke has pointed out that

America's adversaries know full well that they are uncompetitive on a "First World" battlefield. Their response, like that of the Massachusetts Minuteman confronting that British Redcoat, is to lower the threshold of war to prevent the full range of American advanced weaponry and electronic wizardry from operating. The result is that Americans enter today's messy Third World battles not as odds-on favorites but on level terms.[4]

Indeed, it was precisely that type of warfare that prevented the United States from achieving its objectives in both Vietnam and Somalia--proving that the most powerful military in the world is far from invincible.

Not only does inappropriate military intervention fail to reconcile regional conflicts, it also has negative consequences for the United States. There can be significant political costs, ranging from diminished American credibility, as the result of an unsuccessful mission, to resentment on the part of foreign governments and populations of Washington's meddling in their affairs. More serious, injudicious military intervention can create threats to national security where none previously existed, stoking the fires of anti-Americanism, jeopardizing the lives of U.S. troops, and ultimately undermining our ability to protect vital national interests in the event of a direct threat.

Regional Conflicts: A Security Threat?

There is widespread acknowledgement that most regional conflicts do not represent an intrinsic threat to America's national security. Even the interventionist-minded Clinton administration does not claim that regional wars are a direct threat to American vital interests, and officials have been quick to point out that foreign policy failures in Somalia, Haiti, and Bosnia should not be viewed as jeopardizing the nation's security. As Secretary of State Warren Christopher has cautioned, regional conflicts should not "detract from our ability to concentrate on the strategic priorities." [5]

Indeed, that thinking prevailed even during the Cold War, when Soviet expansionism was a factor and one faction in a conflict might be an ally or surrogate of the Soviet Union. Referring to Vietnam, America's most ambitious intervention since World War II, one of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's top aides conceded that "it takes some sophistication to see how Vietnam automatically involves [our vital interests]." [6] Since the end of the Cold War, with no viable and aggressive major expansionist power, even more "sophistication" is required to connect remote regional conflicts with American security.

Global Stability: The New Holy Grail

The primary post-Cold War national security rationale that has emerged to justify U.S. intervention in regional conflicts is that global stability is essential to American prosperity and security. George Bush articulated that policy in 1991: "The enemy is unpredictability. The friend is stability." [7] Regional conflicts, because they supposedly weaken global stability, put the security of all states at risk, according to that school of thought. Robert G. Neumann of the Center for Strategic and International Studies has put it in more precise terms.

At the end of the twentieth century, even weak and underdeveloped states are arming themselves with weapons of mass destruction. Their conflicts will be very destabilizing and will touch directly the interests and the security of the United States. . . . A serious attempt must be made at creating order, or at least growing "zones of order." [8]

The world economy and America's place in it are one of the main reasons that global stability is said to be a national security concern. Because a healthy American economy depends on a functioning international marketplace-- which relies on a degree of stability--some people have argued that we must intervene to ensure stability. Sen. Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), for example, contends, "Full participation in the international market place requires a degree of stability and security in the international environment that only American power and leadership can provide." [9] Former secretary of defense Dick Cheney has made a similar point: "The worldwide market that we're part of cannot thrive where regional violence, instability, and aggression put it at peril. Our economic well-being and security depend on a stable world." (10)

Both the strategic and the economic arguments that maintain that global stability is essential to American security are seriously flawed. Neumann's suggestion that order or "zones of order" be created, for instance, highlights one of the flaws--the fact that global stability is an extremely nebulous concept. Some regions are more important to U.S. security than others. Western Europe, East Asia, and neighboring North American states are more relevant both economically and strategically than are, say, Central Asia or sub-Saharan Africa. Moreover, stability itself is relative. Even those who contend that global stability is important to U.S. security cannot literally mean that all conflicts everywhere must be suppressed. That objective is manifestly beyond the ability of any nation or group of nations.

The Myth of Global Stability

There is no compelling evidence that global instability per se is or ever has been a threat to American national security. (11) "Peace is not the normal state of affairs. Equilibrium in the international system is not a natural or automatically realized phenomenon," concedes former assistant secretary of state Elliott Abrams. (12) Indeed, an international system of sovereign states is by its very nature unstable. That has always been true--even during the relatively quiescent, bipolar Cold War era.

The Cold War was more stable than the periods that immediately preceded and followed it. However, regional conflicts could and did occur. In Jonathan Clarke's words, "The history books burgeon with the records of major conflagrations" that occurred during the Cold War. (13) The conflicts in Ethiopia, Angola, Chad, India-Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nicaragua, and El Salvador were only a few of the regional wars that raged. Global instability is not unique to the post-Cold War era, although it has become more pronounced.

Clearly, the most fundamental objective of foreign policy must be to protect U.S. vital interests and national security. But a policy that erroneously views global stability as essential to American security would force the United States to expend enormous resources in pursuit of an unattainable objective. Unless Washington chooses to intervene, thereby incurring risks, there is no regional upheaval that would seriously imperil American interests in the foreseeable future. The United States has always survived the disorder and instability that are endemic to the state system without serious economic or strategic repercussions. The militarized pursuit of global stability would exact costs that greatly outweighed any benefits it might confer. (14)

The Resurgent Domino Theory

The tenuous link between global instability and U.S. security relies heavily on the domino theory--which appeared to have been discredited after the Vietnam War but is once again in vogue. Those who contend that the war in Bosnia

represents a threat to American national security invariably invoke the domino theory to support their calls for intervention. Rep. Lee Hamilton (D-Ind.), for instance, outlines a whole series of falling dominoes near Bosnia.

Serbian-backed forces are committing aggression against Bosnia, an independent state and a recognized member of the international community. The conflict threatens to spread within the former Yugoslavia and spill outside its borders. The severe repression in Kosovo, a former autonomous region of Serbia, risks war, and would immediately bring Albania into the conflict. "Ethnic cleansing" in Voivodina, another former autonomous region of Serbia, may force Hungary to respond. Destabilization in the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia could embroil Bulgaria and Greece.(15)

There are variations of the Bosnian domino theory. The scenarios frequently include Turkish entrance into the expanded war, and the more alarmist interventionists hint ominously that a nationalist Russia might also join the fray.(16)

The domino theory, however, is fallacious. Absent rigid alliances or collective security arrangements--or a tripwire, such as the 500 U.S. troops currently in Macedonia--to force other states into the morass, regional conflicts are not wildfires that automatically expand until forcibly extinguished. As Christopher Layne and Benjamin Schwarz have argued:

The domino theory . . . has never reflected the real dynamics of international politics. Unlike the chain reactions posited by physics, in the world of statecraft crises are usually discrete happenings--not tightly linked events. The outcome of events in potential hotspots . . . will be decided by local conditions, not by what the United States does or does not do.(17)

Even if the domino theory did accurately forecast the spread of regional wars, states in close proximity to the conflict would have far more at stake than would the United States. The West European powers have always had the military capability to intervene in Bosnia. Had they genuinely felt their security threatened, they undoubtedly would have used that capability, since states are not normally suicidal. Interestingly, the Europeans have been reluctant all along to authorize air strikes against Serbia, despite the Clinton administration's enthusiasm for that option.

The Illusion of Deterrence by Example

Related to the domino theory is the idea of deterrence by example. While the domino theory posits that an isolated regional conflict will eventually threaten American security by engulfing other states in the area and spreading uncontrollably, deterrence by example suggests that a strong American response to aggression or unrest in one situation will discourage aggression elsewhere in the world. Conversely, a weak American response will encourage it. Like the domino theory, deterrence by example is largely irrelevant in the context of actual events. The aborted U.S. intervention in Haiti, for example, is not going to lead to a rash of military dictatorships any more than strong American responses to Manuel Noriega and Saddam Hussein deterred Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic from pursuing his aims in Bosnia.(18) To formulate policy on such a premise would be a mistake.

A History of "Crying Wolf"

History provides numerous examples of failed policies that operated on the assumption that American security is inherently dependent on events in faraway regions. Both the domino theory and the notion of deterrence by example have driven Washington to intervene in remote conflicts out of concern that an outcome inimical to American interests would jeopardize national security. Officials warned that intervention was necessary to ensure that the conflict was resolved in our favor. Yet when intervention failed to yield advantageous results, there appeared to be little or no effect on American vital interests.

Vietnam is the preeminent example. The Washington foreign policy community viewed that remote regional conflict as a microcosm of the U.S.-Soviet rivalry. "The war was seen in Washington as a test . . . and meeting the test was believed to be necessary to maintain all frontiers," explained John Spanier of the University of Florida.(19) In reality, the fall of Vietnam had negligible, if any, impact on U.S. security. American intervention had devastating consequences for the people of Vietnam, but the fall of South Vietnam did not lead to the collapse of noncommunist

countries throughout East Asia and the western Pacific as U.S. policymakers had predicted. Instead, the effects remained confined to Indochina.

Angola was also at one time portrayed as vital to American security because of the possibility of Soviet dominance in southern Africa. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger reportedly warned that "if Moscow gets away with this one, it will try again in some other area, spreading its influence while making the U.S. look weak to its friends and allies abroad." (20) John Stockwell, who headed the Central Intelligence Agency's Angola Task Force until his resignation, denied that Angola was an area of vital importance.

Superficially, [Kissinger's] opposition to the Soviet presence was . . . rationalized in terms of Angola's strategic location on the South Atlantic, near the shipping lanes of the giant tankers which bring oil from the Middle East around the horn of Africa to the United States. This argument was not profound. Soviet bases in Somalia had much better control of our shipping lanes, and any military move by the Soviets against our oil supplies would trigger a reaction so vigorous that a Soviet base in Angola would be a trivial factor. In fact, Angola had little plausible importance to American national security and little economic importance beyond the robusta coffee it sold to American markets and the relatively small amounts of petroleum Gulf Oil pumped from the Cabindan fields. (21)

Stockwell's assessment of Angola's strategic insignificance proved to be correct. Congress rejected Kissinger's pleas for military intervention, the CIA operation in Angola failed to stop the Soviet-backed Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola from taking power, and Angola continues to be plagued by unrest. Despite Kissinger's menacing predictions, the situation there has never had any measurable impact on American security.

Beyond National Security

In the absence of a clear and defensible strategic rationale for intervention in regional conflicts, a smattering of idealistic justifications has emerged. In the past, idealism sometimes served as a fig leaf for more mundane motives. During the Gulf War, for instance, President Bush invoked such notions as the preservation of the new world order, protection of sovereignty, and a stance against "naked aggression" to obscure the harsher truth that he was deploying U.S. troops primarily to protect economic interests--American access to gulf oil. (22) The idealistic arguments were essential to gain the support of those who are uncomfortable with the notion of war for self-interest yet accept war as a tragic but necessary sacrifice for the sake of altruistic objectives. For some people, humanitarian reasons or the advancement of various moral principles are in themselves adequate justification for U.S. military involvement in regional wars.

Democracy, human rights, national self-determination, and humanitarian assistance are among the most common rationales for military intervention where no threat to national security exists. All are admirable ideals. Yet military interventions based on such ideals are even more problematic than those that are at least rhetorically rooted in national security, and intervention is usually an ineffective way to advance ideals. If anything, coercion tends to make a mockery of the very principle it was intended to defend. As Paul W. Schroeder of the United States Institute of Peace argued in the Washington Quarterly, "The more the lesson desired is inflicted by external armed force, the less the experience of defeat and failure is likely to be internalized in a useful way and lead to the kind of durable change desired." (23)

Military intervention for reasons unrelated to American security also forces the United States to embrace inherently hypocritical policies. Because it is impossible for the United States to intervene in every instance in which American principles are offended, the necessary selection process inevitably gives priority to some conflicts while marginalizing others. As Robert Oakley, President Clinton's special envoy to Somalia, said, "The international community is not disposed to deploying 20, 40, 60,000 military forces each time there is an internal crisis in a failed state." (24) To take action in some cases and not others does not make for consistent policy.

If the United States were to declare genocide in Bosnia sufficient grounds for American military intervention, for example, it would be blatantly hypocritical to ignore the (clearer and considerably more severe) genocide in Sudan. Similarly capricious was Washington's determination that the breakdown of the Somali government merited American intervention, while officials ignored the crisis in Rwanda after the apparent assassination of President Habyarimana on April 6, 1994 (100,000 were said to have been killed in the first two weeks of fighting alone) except to evacuate

Americans from the area. Likewise, demands that U.S. troops protect democracy in Haiti are incongruous in light of Washington's quiet indifference toward the suspension of democracy in Algeria when Muslim extremists were poised to win elections in 1992. The inconsistency and hypocrisy of those policies are evidence of the weakness of intervention on the basis of nebulous principles.

Military Interventionism: A History of Failure

The United States should also avoid military intervention in regional conflicts because, in the vast majority of cases, it does not work. In fact, it usually aggravates the situation.(25) Even if a consensus were to develop that global stability or any other objective should be pursued by all viable means, military intervention would remain an unwise course in most cases. It rarely achieves its purpose and often has the perverse effect of obstructing, rather than advancing, what it seeks to achieve. (American peacekeepers in Lebanon in 1983, for example, were an aggravating rather than a stabilizing force.) Intervention usually harms American interests as well. The most compelling arguments against American intervention are its ineffectiveness and the harm it causes all parties involved.

The ability of military action to achieve political objectives in the modern era is very limited. "Beware of the facile assumption that wars are fightable and winnable again. Beware of the illusion that there is a military solution to every geopolitical problem," warns journalist Theo Sommer.(26) Many deeply rooted political and economic problems are impervious to military solutions.

Lack of Endurance

Intervening powers are at a disadvantage because their stake in the outcome is usually far smaller than that of the primary combatants. In the former Yugoslavia, for example, Bosnian Muslims, Croats, and Serbs are fighting out of nationalism, which they perceive as closely related to their very existence as states (or as distinct cultures). Nationalism in that case is an ideal for which many people are prepared to kill and die. Outside parties that become involved for essentially altruistic reasons are not prepared to fight with the same intensity or endurance. Altruism and nationalism simply do not inspire equal determination.(27)

Moreover, the American public is renowned for its unwillingness to sustain heavy casualties in remote regional wars. American support for military action abroad tends to decline dramatically at the prospect of an extended occupation that will entail significant U.S. casualties. The erosion of public support usually leads to the erosion of congressional support, resulting in serious divisions within the government that is supposed to be directing the intervention. With leadership divided, there is little chance for success. The military, already operating under handicaps inherent to intervention, is virtually assured of failure. As political scientist Richard Falk has commented, "It is not that intervention can never work but that it will almost never succeed unless a costly, prolonged occupation is an ingredient of the commitment."(28)

The failure of interventionism is not merely a post- Cold War phenomenon. During the Cold War it may have been easier to "sell" an intervention because Soviet influence in a regional conflict was always a potential, if indirect, threat to American security. Nevertheless, in the instances in which Washington deemed the threat sufficient to warrant intervention, the track record was poor. The pinnacle of failed Cold War intervention--at immense cost to the United States--may have been Vietnam, but it certainly was not the only failure. In Korea there were 137,000 American casualties in a war that ended in stalemate; there were a number of other, smaller but equally ineffectual interventions in conflicts in Africa and Central America during the Cold War as well.(29) In all instances Americans bore significant human and economic costs, yet their sacrifices brought no lasting substantive gain and made little sense, even when rivalry with the Soviet Union was a factor. Similar sacrifices would make even less sense today in the absence of a superpower challenger.

The Vietnam disaster greatly diminished Washington's enthusiasm for military involvement overseas. Ronald Reagan tentatively resumed foreign adventurism, most notably by sending U.S. Marines to Beirut, Lebanon, as "impartial" peacekeepers in the Lebanese civil war. American interests in the outcome of the Lebanese war were remote at best, and Reagan's foray into the conflict was unproductive. The costs, however, were great--especially to the 241 Marines killed in their barracks by a suicide bomber, who clearly did not consider American involvement impartial.

The Impossibility of Impartiality

Indeed, U.S. involvement was not impartial. The presence of U.S. troops strengthened the position of the Christian-dominated regime of President Amin Geymayel at the expense of the other factions. The Lebanon debacle underscores a larger problem. **It is exceedingly difficult for any outside party, acting alone or in concert with others, to remain impartial during an armed conflict, no matter how sincere the intention.** That point was painfully proven once again in Mogadishu 10 years after Beirut.

When President Bush sent U.S. troops to Somalia in 1992, he cited a humanitarian reason: to feed the starving Somali population. Civil order had broken down, and warring factions were using starvation as a weapon against innocent people. Despite the simple and narrow focus of the mission, the United States eventually found itself party to the civil war. Under the auspices of the United Nations, American troops were engaged for several months in a manhunt for "warlord" Mohammad Farah Aideed, culminating in a ferocious firefight on October 3, 1993, that cost the lives of 18 Army Rangers. The search for Aideed was futile and, in the end, abandoned. In an ironic twist of events, a U.S. military plane carried "political leader" Aideed to a peace conference in Ethiopia only weeks after U.S. troops gave up their search.

Nothing substantial was accomplished. While it is true that Somalis were no longer starving, the worst of the famine was over before American troops arrived. According to many sources, some regions of Somalia were actually producing an agricultural surplus at the time the United States intervened.(30) **"Mission creep"** transformed the objective from easing starvation to "nation building," and no substantive progress was made toward that goal. Street fighting diminished for a time, but even before the American withdrawal in March 1994 it began to resume. Again, the costs have been tremendous: American, UN, and Somali lives; scarce economic resources (\$1.3 billion for the United States alone); and American credibility were all squandered in the unsuccessful mission.

Bosnia: A Classic Intractable Conflict

Intervention in Bosnia would be similarly futile and even more costly. Contrary to the popular view that Bosnian Muslims are hapless victims of clear Serbian aggression, the war in Bosnia is a highly complicated, three-sided conflict based on ancient ethnic and religious grievances. The civil war in the artificial state of Bosnia-Herzegovina--which has never existed as a free, independent, multiethnic country but has merely been a battleground since it declared its independence from Yugoslavia--is a struggle between Bosnian Muslims, Bosnian Croats, and Bosnian Serbs with substantial involvement of Serbia and Croatia. All sides have been guilty of ethnic cleansing and war crimes.

All sides are also fervently committed to their respective objectives and have shown little inclination to make difficult compromises for the sake of a NATO or UN peace plan. Bosnian Muslims are fighting to regain the territory they have lost. "They have tremendous motivation, and no reason to stop fighting for a peace plan they know is unjust," commented one unidentified UN official in the New York Times.(31) Bosnian Serbs, on the other hand, have achieved major battlefield victories and are unwilling to acquiesce to an imposed settlement. "Having fought for our own state, why would we go into a federation with Muslims and Croats now? In negotiations someone can say they will make concessions, give up territory. But here on the ground we say, 'No way,'" declared Milan Bogicevic, council president of the Serb-held city of Zvornik.(32) Even if outside pressure succeeds in interrupting the fighting, it will not end the antagonism that has fueled the war. As one Serb soldier mused:

My uncle fought against Croats and Muslims in World War II. Now 50 years later I travel the same road, fighting the same people. And if the world forces us to join Croats and Muslims in a federation, our children will also travel this road, fighting another war.(33)

Stopping the fighting would require extremely high levels of manpower and entail high risks of casualties. Herculean efforts might succeed in smothering the worst violence, but only a permanent occupation could maintain the fragile cold peace. There would be no lasting solution, a point on which Stephen Hadley of the Department of Defense concurs.

While we could certainly suppress the level of fighting among the combatants, our own forces would then become the

objects of attack and of a guerrilla war that could have no end. . . . If our forces then withdrew, the underlying dispute--and its attendant violence--would most likely flare again.(34)

Tragic though the situation may be, American intervention would not bring a lasting peace to the beleaguered region but would instead embroil the United States in one of the bitterest conflicts of the 20th century.

Anti-American Sentiment: Yankee Go Home

Another cost of military intervention is a rise in anti-American sentiment, which was evident throughout the Cold War in Africa and Latin America and more recently in Somalia. When U.S. Marines made their dramatic landing in Mogadishu in December 1992, the Somalis greeted them with cheers. Less than a year later, on October 3, 1993, 18 Americans died in a single day at the hands of Somalis. Hatred of the United States was unmistakable, particularly in the gruesome and widely published photograph of smiling Somalis dragging the corpse of an American soldier through the streets. Despite the apparent goodwill at the beginning of the mission, American involvement was violently resented once the United States became part of the war.

Similar ill will greeted U.S. soldiers when they attempted to land in Haiti as part of a UN force assisting the implementation of the Governors Island accord. Given the long history of U.S. interference in Haitian domestic affairs, the resistance should not have been surprising. The United States has meddled so much there--American troops occupied Haiti for nearly 20 years beginning in 1915, and Washington has frequently granted or withheld financial assistance in crude attempts to influence Haiti's domestic affairs--that UN secretary-general Boutros Boutros-Ghali initially rejected American participation in the peacekeeping force. Only after President Clinton threatened to withdraw American support for the agreement did the United Nations reluctantly accept a U.S. contingent. Faced with violent opposition to the American presence, which occurred soon after the massacre of U.S. troops in Mogadishu, the Clinton administration ordered the ships not to land. (The most powerful country in the world's lack of will to confront opposition described as a few hundred "thugs" also did significant damage to American credibility.)

Anti-Americanism in Haiti and Somalia should not be dismissed lightly. The Pentagon has identified north-south conflict--the "haves" vs. the "have-nots"--as a serious future problem for the United States. In a study entitled "Terrorism Futures," religious, ethnic, and regional conflicts were cited as probable sources of terrorism in the next decade. At the beginning of the study in late 1991, researchers anticipated that religious extremism would be the gravest threat. The unexpected conclusion, though, was that an "us vs. them" mentality would be a more alarming threat, pitting "fanatics from impoverished countries" against wealthier nations.(35)

In view of the likelihood that the Third World, or the south, will be the site of many future conflicts, American intervention could provide the impetus for an era of divisive north-south confrontation.(36) An interventionist policy could also make the United States a high-priority target for terrorists and other disgruntled factions. The flaring of hostility toward American military personnel in Somalia may be an omen of that danger.

Creating New Problems

Interventionism also jeopardizes U.S. vital interests in other ways. The most obvious threat is to the lives of American soldiers sent into the conflict. Once troops have been deployed, it becomes a vital interest to ensure their security. If they are in danger or if troops have been taken hostage, the United States has a responsibility to protect them. It was for that reason that President Clinton announced March 31, 1994, as the date for withdrawal from Somalia and, at the same time, took what appeared to be the contradictory action of sending several thousand additional troops to Mogadishu. To guarantee the security of the troops already there, additional forces had to be deployed. The intervention had created a threat to U.S. interests where there had previously been none.

Other, more abstract, threats arise from interventionism as well. The argument has been made that American credibility, like American soldiers, constitutes a vital interest that must be protected at all costs. Owen Harries, editor of the National Interest, made this argument with reference to American interests in Bosnia:

At the beginning of the Bosnian crisis there was, in my opinion, no significant American interest at stake. . . . But that was then. In the meantime, the Clinton administration has managed to create a serious national interest in Bosnia

where none before existed: an interest, that is, in the preservation of this country's prestige and credibility.(37)

Harries goes on to say that American credibility is not merely a matter of national self-respect or patriotism. It is a vital interest with implications for national security. "For the greater one's prestige, the less necessary it is to resort to force and other forms of coercion in order for one's will to be effective--and vice versa," he says.(38)

Intervention in regional wars is a distraction and a drain on resources. Diverting time, money, and manpower from areas that have a significant impact on national security to peripheral nonsecurity interests is never desirable. But in the event of a crisis that affects U.S. vital interests, it is downright dangerous. It is difficult for the United States to be well prepared to protect national security when its military resources are diffused all over the globe and are configured to participate in nebulous peacekeeping or peace enforcement operations.

Unnecessary interventions also waste another very important and readily depleted resource: public support for U.S. military operations. Failed military missions engender tremendous public skepticism about future operations. Although that caution may serve a useful purpose in keeping troops out of other regional conflicts, it may be dangerous in the event of a genuine threat to national security. The American people's support is essential to the success of military operations. Lack of public support when vital interests are at stake could weaken American resolve--and therefore jeopardize our ability--to protect those interests.(39)

Regional Solutions as an Alternative to U.S. Intervention

If American military intervention is not a viable response to regional conflicts, what policy should Washington pursue? The circumstances surrounding each conflict are different, and each conflict must be considered on a case-by-case basis. Diplomacy--as long as it is not an intrusive attempt to impose an American settlement on warring parties--should not be abandoned. Occasionally, there may be trade-related options as well, although economic sanctions rarely constitute a constructive policy. In the final analysis, American policymakers and the American public must realize that external forces simply cannot solve most regional conflicts.

When outside forces do have the ability to influence events, it will generally be best to encourage regional solutions. One reason is self-interest--if the United States is concerned about the conflict, other states in the region have even more cause for concern. Arthur Schlesinger argued that point before the Persian Gulf War: "Since the threat [Saddam Hussein] poses to the U.S. is far less than the threat to the Gulf states, why are we Americans the fall guys, expected to do 90 percent of the fighting and take 90 percent of the casualties?"(40) It makes far more sense for major international actors to take greater responsibility for the security of their own regions than to involve the United States, the United Nations, or other powers from outside the region.

Regional initiatives--diplomatic, economic, or military--are also more likely to succeed. States in the region will probably have stronger economic and political ties (in other words, more leverage) with the warring parties. Also important, neighboring states will most likely have a better understanding of the conflict and know the most effective way to foster negotiations. In the case of Somalia, for example, leaders of other African countries understood the nature of clan warfare and realized the problems inherent in trying to demonize a popular leader like Aideed. They also understood the futility of trying to exclude him from the political process. The United States and the United Nations simply did not have sufficient understanding of the culture and indigenous politics to formulate a viable policy.

Regional initiatives would also be more effective than American intervention because they minimize the likelihood of imposed solutions. Few entities outside the United States have the political, economic, or military capability to dictate a settlement; a regional solution is therefore more likely to represent genuine agreement among the parties. A good-faith accord will not require iron-fisted enforcement or long-term occupation to maintain peace. Furthermore, the absence of American involvement will relieve regional leaders of the stigma associated with American "puppets" and assuage the fears of foreign populations concerned about American hegemonic designs. U.S. intervention or "pax Americana," on the other hand, would erase all of those advantages.

The United States should avoid regional intervention except in cases in which there is a direct and substantial threat to national security or American vital interests. No matter how superficially appealing the rationale, military intervention in regional conflicts generally does not work and often creates threats to U.S. security where none previously existed.

In this era of proliferating regional wars, the United States must resist the impulse to intervene. To do otherwise is to invite further tragedy, increasing the suffering not only of the combatants but of the American people as well.

Notes

[1] Quoted in "29 Wars Killed 6 Million in 1992," Baltimore Sun, November 10, 1993, p. 4.

[2] Quoted in Llewellyn D. Howell, "Ethnic Conflict Threat ens international Stability," USA Today Magazine, July 1993, p. 31.

[3] Gilles Van Nederveen, review of Ethnic Conflict and International Security, by Michael E. Brown, Current News, November 5, 1993, "The Friday Review," p. 2.

[4] Jonathan Clarke, "Put Teeth into Preparedness to Wage War," Los Angeles Times, February 9, 1994.

[5] Warren Strobel, "Christopher Looks beyond the Recent Struggles at State," Washington Times, November 12, 1993, p. 1.

[6] John McNaughton, quoted in Christopher Layne and Benjamin Schwarz, "American Hegemony--Without an Enemy," Foreign Policy, no. 92 (Fa