

Stay Out: Why Intervention Should Not Be America's Policy

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan dominate security discourse. With thousands of lives lost and billions of dollars spent, few issues merit more attention. Yet it is worthwhile to remember that these wars, like all wars, will end. And when they do, policy makers will come to terms with a harsh, albeit forgotten, reality: The ruling of distant peoples, as George Kennan so aptly put it, is not “our dish.” The United States should steer clear of “an acceptance of any sort of paternalistic responsibility to anyone, be it in the form of military occupation, if we can possibly avoid it, or for any period longer than is absolutely necessary.”¹ Simply put, intervention might have been our fate, but it should not be our policy.

From a practical perspective, the US experience with intervention has not been a happy one. Guatemala, Iran, Cuba, and Vietnam add up to a bad scorecard, and recent events have continued this negative trend. What is exceptional about America's recent interventions, however, is how well they have camouflaged a fundamental truth about international politics: The greatest dangers in the world stem from the greatest powers, the smallest from the smallest ones. And make no mistake; intervention operations to rid the world of terror are a short-run concern. In the long run, the balance of power among states in the world poses the greatest challenge to US security and, in this regard, the United States is in a precarious position. Large-scale economic changes, together with ongoing wars, have placed the United States in a relatively weaker position with respect to its rivals than it was eight years ago. In economic terms, the costs have been staggering, with estimates as high as \$3 trillion. In military terms, even if the United States were to achieve its war aims, American forces are less capable than they were in 2000.² Continual deployments, along with the accompanying wear and tear on personnel and equipment, have left the American military in desperate need of replenishment. As the new administration has made clear, coming to terms with these structural challenges will be demanding.³ Harder still is trying to find another case that rivals or even approximates the United States' relative decline, the pitch and speed of which appear unusual.

While the decline is real, it is important to stress that the United States remains the most powerful nation in the world, and the choices it makes today will affect it in the future. As recent history illustrates, global change can come quickly and only somewhat predictably. The dramatic end of the Cold War and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union serve as stark reminders of the timing and tempo of international life. The strategic insight of those events should not be lost on policy makers: Great powers rise slowly but can fall quickly. As the United States positions itself for the coming years, it is worth noting that there are potential challengers on the horizon. With the world's largest population and a promising economy, China is the dominant power in Asia. In Europe, it is Germany. Both dwarf regional rivals and have the capacity to dominate them should they ever decide to do so. With respect to its neighbors, India is equally strong, while Russia's power, especially if measured in terms of mega-tonnage, is matched only by the United States. In the world of tomorrow, America might rue the day when it chose to make intervention its most pressing security concern. How the United States responds to pressures to intervene could determine the fate of the nation.

The debate about intervention will continue to be fueled by those who believe liberty and wealth can cure the world's ills. Concerns will also be heard from those who shy away from the use of force unless it is used to right a wrong. It is important to stress that while liberty is preferable to all other options and poverty remains a scourge on the human race, neither fostering liberty nor ending poverty can secure world peace. The facts are these: Democracies have fought many wars, and the wealthier ones tend to fight more than most, which is another way of saying that the history of world politics is primarily a history of inequality. Policy makers would do well to recognize this, lest the United States finds itself intervening to right wrongs in interesting places throughout the world to no avail.

Curbing the Demand for Intervention

Curbing the demand for intervention hinges on several factors, not the least of which is the choices statesmen make regarding international order. In establishing and sustaining international order, great powers have two options. They can dominate rivals, or they can accommodate them. Should a state choose to dominate rivals, making its security contingent on its ability to surpass all others, it will enter into what has historically proven to be a poor game, in which the costs of domination are severe. Should a state choose

to accommodate rivals, making its security is contingent on its ability to balance against others, it will enter into what has proven to be a somewhat less poor game, in which the costs of balancing are less. Statesmen know this in advance, which is why shrewd states seek accommodation.

International Order and Failed States

Few issues threaten international order more so than failed states. That is the central claim of Thomas Barnett's popular book, *The Pentagon's New Map*. Barnett argues that the United States cannot be made safe at the expense of others. In this increasingly interconnected world, "our vulnerability is not defined by the depth of our connectedness with the outside world but by the sheer existence of regions that remain off-grid, beyond the pale, and unconnected to our shared fate."⁴ These regions are the same ones where we find failed states. Barnett's answer to the failed-state problem is daring and audacious: serve as bodyguard to the rest of the world. The task is not perpetual war, as some might have it. Rather, the United States is to "serve as globalization's bodyguard wherever and whenever needed throughout the Gap." Due to the enormity of the task and the associated risks if things go poorly, one had better pause and ask why.

That failed states are a reality comes as no surprise. The number of states has been steadily increasing for the past 50 years. In 1958, the United Nations recognized 81 states in the world; by 2008 that number had grown to 192.⁵ In economic terms, more firms means more failures—in a competitive world, one should expect nothing less. That states are failing, however, is not the problem. The problem is, failed states are a non-problem getting too much attention. The recent stand-up of the US Africa Command, or AFRICOM, is an indicator that US leaders take Barnett's call to intervention seriously. Established in February of 2008, AFRICOM is designed to solve regional issues before they become more acute, recognizing that "peace and stability on the continent affects not only Africans, but the interests of the United States and the international community as well." It will do this by building partnership capacity and serving as the lead coordinating agency with considerable involvement from the Department of State and other agencies concerned with the future of Africa. As lofty as it sounds, AFRICOM is an unnecessary extension of US power and resources into an area of the world that is, from a security perspective, not terribly important.

What Barnett and the founders of AFRICOM overlook is that some states pose severe security concerns while others do not. Failed states are located far away from the United States. They tend to be poor with scant natural resources and few, if any, powerful friends. Somalia, Sierra Leone, and Sudan are good examples. Since international security is determined by the global distribution of material capabilities, expressed in terms of economic and military power, it stands to reason that those interested in international order ought to concern themselves with states that have the capacity to upset the distribution of material capabilities. And failed states have little chance of doing that. The *2008 Failed States Index* lists 20 states that are critically unstable.⁶ Of those, only two, Pakistan and North Korea, pose serious security concerns. The typical failed state has a GDP of \$39 billion, which equates to about 1 percent of Germany's GDP, 10 percent of Norway's, and approximately 50 percent of Myanmar's. If we were to add up all 20 GDPs of the states on the index, the combined GDP would be slightly higher than that of the Netherlands.⁷

Nonetheless, the idea that failed states pose a threat to international order remains durable. In large part, this is due to the popular wisdom that correlates failed states with terrorism. Failed states, the logic goes, are related to terrorism in that they serve as safe havens for terror groups. There is, however, little evidence to support this. In fact, the ideal conditions in which terror groups flourish are found in those states with severe political and religious repression, growing economies, and uneven economic development.⁸ Furthermore, those states with a declining economy (poor and getting poorer) are the least conducive for harboring terror organizations. In other words, low-income states with growing gross national incomes are nearly four times more likely to support terror organizations than those with declining economies. This is especially so when uneven income distribution accompanies growth. Under such circumstances, the tension between the life people live and the one that they might expect appears stark. Over time, this relative deprivation leads to an increase in frustration, making conditions ripe for terrorist exploitation. This point is worth stressing: poor states with growing national incomes bear watching; those with falling ones do not.⁹

In the case of failed states that have been exploited by terror groups, there are a number of extenuating circumstances to consider. Afghanistan illustrates this point when one considers that the contemporary history of Afghanistan is not a trite history of a failed state that chose to harbor terrorists. It is a complex history involving two great powers that, through

intervention, neglect, or the combination of both, assisted in the ruining of a country and their relations with it. As a result, the Taliban government came to power and got cozy with some bad people for reasons that one may never understand. Other states might be tempted to do the same. But will they? If successful states tend to imitate others, that does not appear likely. Afghanistan is one of the poorest states in the world. With a per capita GDP of \$800, a life expectancy of 42 years, and a mortality rate of 250 per 1,000 live births, it is the brand name for failure. Why would any state want to imitate that?

Moreover, it is hard to imagine how AFRICOM or any international organization could have prevented such failure. States, like firms, succeed and fail; one should not be surprised. That is not to suggest that all failures are the same. While it is true that should some states fail they would pose grave challenges to international order, few, aside from Egypt, are in Africa. A failed Russia, because of its size and resources, immediately comes to mind. Pakistan and North Korea would also pose immense challenges. What these states share in common, however, is not a special propensity for failure but nuclear weapons, which are more than capable of upsetting the distribution of material capabilities throughout the world. In these instances the United States, as leader of a coalition, might have to intervene to secure nuclear materials and weapons should the governments collapse, which is another way of saying that the international community must get serious about counterproliferation. The point is small, the implications enormous. Some states pose substantive challenges to international order, others do not.

International Order and Terrorism

Terrorism is the second issue thought to threaten international order. Terrorists think strategically, as evidenced by the fact that they play their deadly game to win in the long term. They offer a glimmer of hope to the forlorn and destitute, while attempting to force states to come to terms with their demands. They also live in secrecy, which is another reason why they are so problematic. No one can trust them, not even those who hide and comfort them. In short, terrorists pose strategic problems for states, but terrorism has never significantly upset international order. From this perspective, terrorism is a domestic security issue, not an international one, as the term *homeland security* suggests.

When thinking about the terror problem, however, it has become common to exaggerate its importance by downplaying what has been the traditional problem for states, namely, war. During the past 200 years, war has decimated empires, laid waste to countries, and claimed millions of lives, while terrorism, its horrendous nature aside, has claimed far fewer lives. In way of comparison, 625 people died as a result of international terror in 2003; 35 were Americans. This figure is less than the 725 killed during 2002. As these numbers make clear, terrorism is a weapon of the weak; and while terrorists have incredible will, they do not wield incredible power.

This is not meant to downplay the importance of deterring acts of terror or stopping terrorists from acquiring weapons of mass destruction (WMD). However, should the day come when terrorists gain access to WMD, they will, in all likelihood, acquire them from men or women who live in states. States remain the most important actors in international life because they monopolize the most destructive power in the world. How statesmen choose to use that power when dealing with terror is yet another important challenge that they face.

It has become common to suggest that terrorism cannot be deterred, but a growing consensus is emerging around the notion that, in fact, it can. But what of intervention—does the evidence suggest it can solve the terror problem? On the contrary, a positive relationship appears to exist among terror and intervention. That is, as intervention increases, so do terror incidents. As far back as 1997, the Defense Science Board noted a correlation among what it called an “activist American foreign policy” and terrorist attacks against the United States. Ten years later, this became more apparent as suicide terror rose in places it was never seen before. Prior to America’s intervention, there were no reports of suicide terrorism in Iraq. In 2003 there were an estimated 25 attacks. By 2004 that number had grown to 140 and in 2005 had ballooned to an estimated 478, claiming an untold number of lives. By the end of 2005, there were an estimated 200 attacks and by the following year, that number had increased another 50 percent to almost 300.

That intervention yields terror comes as a surprise, and it is too soon to conclude that there is a causal argument to be made. Nonetheless, while more research in this area is required, one analyst has shown how terror can be thought of as a reaction to the presence of occupation forces. More specifically, it has been used successfully to compel democracies to withdraw their forces from territories that terrorists claim as their homeland.

In this regard, suicide terror appears to be an effective punishment strategy, and intervention, with its accompanying boots on the ground, merely creates more targets for the terrorists. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that even in those cases where terror has been effective, it has altered the order of local politics, not international ones.

International Order and Genocide

Since 1945 the international community has vowed to end genocide, but as Cambodia, Rwanda, and Darfur attest, the international community is painfully slow to act against states that commit it. This is as true today as it was when Hitler's Germany launched an all-out attack on Europe's Jews. In this regard, the Holocaust remains a hard test for all arguments regarding genocide, particularly the idea that intervention can stop it.¹⁰

In a peculiar way, Raul Hilberg recognized this and wrote about it in his massive account of the destruction of the European Jews. As he noted, "The task of destroying the Jews put the German bureaucracy to a supreme test," and the technocrats solved this problem by passing the test.¹¹ Meticulous in detail and majestic in scope, Hilberg's interpretation forces readers to come to terms with the perpetrators. What makes them so disturbing is not found in their extraordinary nature but in their ordinary one. "We are not dealing with individuals who had their own moral standards," he argued. The bureaucrats' moral makeup was "no different than the rest of the population." How to explain the large-scale killing operation that put to death more than six million? "The Germans overcame the administrative and moral obstacles to a killing operation."¹² It was in their bones, and intervention was no match for its ferocity.

Before it was all done, the Germans had constructed a massive bureaucracy, along with a language that had meaning across all levels of authority that dehumanized the victims and rationalized killing. To suggest that an intervention could have stopped them from doing so seems dubious. How could force be used to destroy a bureaucratic structure that existed not only in the minds of the participants but in their bones as well? It would seem that intervention, in this case, could do little to end the killing. It might have halted things momentarily, but because genocide was in the perpetrators' viscera, ending the genocide in Europe took a war that was as brutal as anything we have to compare it with.

To recognize genocide, condemn it, and hold perpetrators accountable through the enforcement of international law is vital for the civilized world, and in this regard, to suggest that intervention can stop it trivializes its nature. Any attempt to end the lives of a group of people because they are different is a crime and should be dealt with accordingly. The crime is one of aggression, because in the face of aggression, neither peace nor rights can exist. The wrong that the perpetrator commits is to force men, women, and children to flee or fight for their lives, which legally puts genocide into the domain of war. Genocide might be civilization's fatal flaw in that it does not upset the material basis of international order, but its presence makes a mockery of international community. Policy makers would do well to understand that to rid the world of genocide, states must be willing to go to war; nothing short of war can stop it once it has begun.

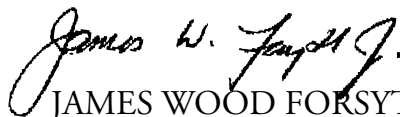
A World without Intervention

Suppose, as the result of a cataclysm, all of our scientific knowledge about international politics were lost, save for one sentence to be passed on to the next generation. What would it say? It would read as follows: *States, regardless of their internal composition, goals, or desires, pursue interests they judge best.* In pursuing interests, shrewd statesmen understand the important differences between international and domestic factors, especially when it comes to establishing and maintaining international order. In international politics, material factors and historical forces shape and constrain the behavior of states, not domestic ones. This has been missed by interventionists who have sought to reshape international politics by meddling in the domestic politics of countries as diverse as Guatemala, Iran, Cuba, and Vietnam. Why? Interventionists fail to see the great, albeit tragic, continuities of international life, which is a life of inequality, conflict, and occasionally, war. Instead they downplay reality, attempt to transform it, or both by choosing to ignore these harsh, yet real, concerns. The intervention in Iraq, which was billed as something that would not only reshape the politics of that country but the politics of the Middle East and hence the world, has failed to do so. For these reasons, policy makers would do well to embrace reality and eschew intervention. What might this mean for policy?

Moving away from an interventionist foreign policy would allow policy makers to focus on security issues that have been neglected for the past several years. Failed states, terrorism, and genocide are serious problems worthy of attention, but they have never upset international order and

pose no serious threat to do so in the immediate future.¹³ Nuclear weapons, however, do pose such challenges, and the recent move by the United States to address its nuclear arsenal and posture reflect a growing consensus that there are more important things to deal with than intervention.

Similarly, policy makers would do well to pay attention to the changing nature of the international political economy to gauge how the US economy might stack up in the new world of winners and losers. An affordable force structure that is balanced and capable of deterring and compelling will prove to be more useful in the long run than one primed for counter-insurgency. Lastly, by recognizing the limits of intervention, a renewed sense of humility might be brought back into security discourse. Perfect security can never be achieved, but states can squander their power in its pursuit if they are not prudent. Kennan had a deep understanding of this: The ruling of distant peoples is not “our dish.” Let us remove it from the menu in the years ahead.

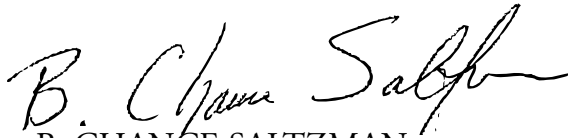


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Notes

1. George Kennan, *American Diplomacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 19.
2. The United States can afford to spend more than most and assume more risks than others because of its relative power. However, the more often a state uses its force, the weaker it becomes.
3. Defense secretary Robert Gates' new budget priorities clearly reflect this idea.
4. Thomas P. M. Barnett, *The Pentagon's New Map: War and Peace in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2004), 298.
5. United Nations, “List of Member States,” <http://www.un.org/members/growth.shtml>.

6. Fund for Peace—A Nonprofit Research and Educational Organization, *2008 Failed States Index*, <http://www.fundforpeace.org/web/>.
7. World Bank, *2007 World Development Report—Gross Domestic Product*, <http://econ.worldbank.org>.
8. In a detailed analysis of the political, religious, and economic factors most prevalent in states affiliated with terrorist organizations, it was found that the convergence of repressive politics, a homogenous religious population, and a growing, albeit uneven, economy produced conditions most supportive of terrorist organizations.
9. B. C. Saltzman, "Liberty and Justice for All: The Democracy Project and the Global War on Terrorism," masters thesis, School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, Air University, 2005.
10. Some of the most creative thinking regarding the use of force and genocide stems from the work of Dr. Douglas C. Peifer. See his *Stopping Mass Killings in Africa* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 2008) for an interesting argument regarding airpower and genocide. While I am sympathetic with the spirit and intent of his research, I remain skeptical as to its practicality.
11. Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1961).
12. Ibid., 205.
13. The obvious exceptions being a war to end genocide or a terrorist with WMD, as previously stated.