Part II

The U.S. Economy and Foreign Policy
The first anniversary of U.S. troop deployments in Kosovo highlights a crucial and controversial question which the eventual presidential debates should, but probably won’t, address: Whether and when should the United States intervene to forestall, mitigate, or counter ethnic conflicts and other violations of human rights abroad?

Such interventions span a wide range of operations: peacekeeping (Bosnia over the past five years); peacemaking (Kosovo in the past year); “operations other than war” (Somalia, Haiti, and Rwanda in prior years); and the provision of humanitarian assistance in militarily insecure circumstances (all of the above). In the lexicon of military planners, these operations are collectively referred to as “small scale contingencies” (SSCs), in contrast to operations designed to deter or to meet “major theater wars” (MTWs).

At the end of 1999, the U.S. had 253,000 military forces deployed in foreign countries, of which 46,000 were afloat but ported or regularly refueled abroad, while the remainder was shore-based. Most of these forces are deployed in 11 NATO countries, plus Japan and Korea, reflecting America’s alliances and treaty obligations. Nevertheless, it is the smaller deployments growing out of the SSCs—Bosnia and Herzegovina (5,800), Serbia including Kosovo (6,400), Macedonia (1,100), and 13,000 in the Middle East, a legacy of the Gulf War in 1991—that account for a disproportionate share of the stress and fatigue under which the military establishment currently labors.

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There are numerous reasons for this disproportion. Families are not allowed in the SSC-type deployments, a restriction that coincides with a peak in the percentage of married men and women serving in the armed forces. Repeated and protracted separations have disruptive effects on families and on service morale, which add to the services’ difficulties in meeting their retention and recruitment goals in face of the competing pull of strong civil labor markets.

For many years, the U.S. military establishment has been principally sized and configured to deal with MTWs, not SSCs. The main determinant of U.S. force planning has been the goal of meeting two simultaneously-occurring MTWs, in Northeast Asia and the Middle East. It is thus implicitly assumed that, if two MTWs can be effectively dealt with (i.e., a “worst-case” scenario), a sufficient though unspecified number of SSCs can also be managed, because the SSCs constitute “lesser-included” demands for military capabilities.

This is a drastically abbreviated and simplified version of the long-standing and enduring logic of U.S. military planning, a logic that, while occasionally modified at the edges, is imperfectly congruent with America’s actual military interventions and deployments in the post–cold war era.

Serious questions arise concerning the actual effectiveness of SSC-type actions and ensuing deployments. Such interventions typically occur in complex political and ethnic circumstances that are neither well-understood nor effectively managed by foreign policymakers, military forces, and cumbersome bureaucracies, however laudable their intentions. The ability of U.S. and other intervention forces to correctly assess these situations, to maneuver effectively in them, and to ameliorate let alone resolve them is both severely limited and beset by uncertainties and perverse consequences. The sobering ambiguities were strikingly portrayed by a cover picture in the London Economist last year showing a bereaved and weeping Kosovo woman below a caption that posed the question: “Victim of Kosovo—or NATO?”

Debate over the pros and cons of such interventions reflects two opposed stances. On one side, opponents of interventionism—the so-called “realist” school—argue that U.S. intervention should occur only when “vital national interests” are at stake, quite apart from
humanitarian considerations, and whether or not the contemplated actions are multilateral or unilateral. The realist argument contends further that most recent interventions—Somalia, Haiti, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Kosovo—didn’t pass this stringent test, although intervention in the Gulf to repel Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait ostensibly did.

On the other side, supporters of intervention—the “liberal” or “idealist” school—reply that humanitarian considerations, including the furtherance of ethnic and religious tolerance, protection of human rights, and the advancement of democracy, represent core American values. Hence, tangible support for these values is itself a vital national interest. It can be hoped, if not expected, that exchanges between the presidential candidates before November will address this issue. Were they to do so, one element missing from the standard debate might be usefully added to it.

The Hippocratic oath instructs those pursuing the medical profession: “above all, do no harm.” This is too exacting to be fully complied with where military intervention is contemplated, because these situations are ambiguous and complex, and defy precision and certainty. Nevertheless, when U.S. policymakers contemplate intervention they should do so with abundant humility, if not timidity, because of the profoundly uncertain connections between the blunt instruments they can use, and the complex ends they seek.

Perhaps there are ways to hone these instruments so they can be used with greater dexterity and less risk of inflicting inadvertent harm. One way—an adaptation of what once was referred to as the “Nixon Doctrine”—is to equip and train the afflicted side of a local conflict (for example, the Bosnians brutalized by the Serbs), instead of committing intervention forces from outside. A second approach is to earmark a part of U.S. military forces specifically for SSC-type interventions, training and equipping them to maximize their effectiveness in these “lesser” contingencies. Neither of these measures is riskless, but they may still be better than the alternatives.

Even if the Hippocratic oath would remain too exacting to be applied literally, there is a corollary that should be obligatory: Recognize that harm will be an inevitable consequence of intervention, and therefore try to demonstrate convincingly, before intervention occurs, that
such harm will be substantially less than the desired, although uncertain, improvement that is sought.

From the standpoint of U.S. declaratory policy, a cautionary admonition by Abraham Lincoln is also relevant: “We should not promise what we ought not, lest we be called upon to perform what we cannot.”

Postaudit

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 and Operation Enduring Freedom place U.S. intervention in an entirely different context. Still, the cautionary concerns expressed here remain valid.