

Global Security in 2014: Assessing Strategies of Intervention

An analysis of a discussion on global security co-sponsored by the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre and the National Capital Branch of the Canadian International Council and held in Ottawa, on Friday, May 29, 2009. The seminar rapporteur was David Petrasek.

A select group of current and former policymakers and others representing the academic and NGO communities convened on May 29, 2009 to consider the question of global security, looking ahead to 2014. The particular issue under review was Canada's potential future contribution to international peace and security through the application of intervention mechanisms and tools. The ensuing discussion revolved around two broad themes: on the one hand, trends of armed conflict and shifting balances of power, driven by a wide array of social, military, cultural, political, and economic factors; and, on the other, Canada's ability and willingness to intervene in new and complex security contexts.

The discussion began with a briefing on the cross-cutting issues affecting global peace and security, which include factors like the youth bulge, global pandemics, and the 2008-09 international economic meltdown. Given the volatility of the present, it is impossible to predict the future, even only a few years ahead. In addition to the unpredictability of the future intervention environment, the numbers of stakeholders, resources, and political agendas are strong influences on interventions, such as those in Afghanistan, Haiti, and Iraq, and contribute to their successes and failures.

Faced with the complexity of future interventions, one participant suggested that maybe all that can reasonably be achieved, looking forward, is "to be the least unprepared." Canada, on its own, does not set political agendas, and must recognize its limited ability to influence events, albeit that Canada has often functioned as a voice of reason in past interventions, thereby contributing to their success.

Discussion proceeded in three segments: changing perspectives on power and security; intervention as it is currently understood, including its components and characteristics; and the future of Canada's involvement in intervention looking ahead to 2014.

Understanding evolving global security paradigms

How is *global power* being transformed? What implications do the rise of new powers and the demise of others have for *global security*? What opportunities and constraints does Canada confront as a result of changing security paradigms?

To intervene is to shape events elsewhere; it implies some element of coercion, or, in other words, the exercise of power. But this is not just about military power. Participants were drawn to Joseph Nye's metaphor of a three-layered chessboard, on which different sources of power are in play at each level: on the top, the US hegemon; in the middle, global economic powers; and on the bottom, the myriad sources of power that impact on international relations ranging from criminal

networks and terrorists to mass social movements, non-state actors, and You Tube, with much in-between. The bottom level is where the issue of global peace and security is now playing itself out – not on the top or middle boards, as recent history has demonstrated. Power shifts frequently and in unknown ways on the bottom board, and it is impossible to map how and where these power structures influence geopolitics.

What trends are discernible at each level of the chessboard?

In relation to the top board, participants quickly agreed on the obvious: new powers and security arrangements are emerging. The “unipolar” world is a thing of the past. US military power may remain ascendant well into the future (certainly beyond 2014), but the conflicts and crises that do and will command the world’s attention will require multilateral responses. This is evident already in the United Nations (UN), where the *perception*, if not the reality, of waning US influence is widespread, and the need for multilateral approaches, often involving China and India, is apparent. Indeed, there is consensus that the UN Security Council membership rules need to change; the current reform debate focuses on the specifics regarding implementation of membership changes, rather than if they are required at all. The growing importance of regional alliances, where countries look first to security relationships and guarantees from neighbouring states, may be a further sign of the diffusion of power.

At other board levels, things appear murkier. The global economic crisis may speed up the relative decline of traditional (US) and rising (China) economic powers, with unclear consequences for security in different parts of the world. Most of the participants agreed that the strictly state-centric view of power is out-dated. As one commented, “Who ensures security, or generates insecurity? It is not just states.”

The power of ideas was also discussed, including their ability via mass media and the Internet to penetrate borders as never before. While US (and western) military and economic power might weaken, according to some discussants, the power of the ideals of liberal democracy are not likely to. On the contrary, others thought these ideals are being challenged and the obvious failures of the free market model that is attached to liberal democracy will further weaken its appeal.

There is the power too of technology, especially information technology that speeds the dissemination of ideas and creates expectations at many levels. It offers the world’s poor, and the disaffected youth of poor countries, a vision of the good life creating “unrealizable expectations,” with unpredictable but likely dangerous, consequences. The wired world, coupled with the 24-hour news cycle, creates another type of expectation: that leaders will respond effectively and rapidly to crises as they emerge on screen or online. Perhaps equally “unrealizable,” there is the expectation that repeated promises to make the world a better and safer place might actually be acted upon.

Finally, there is the power of the local; the influences of home, vernacular places, family, community, tribe, cultural motifs and religion that are enduring and, some would say, strengthening in reaction to globalization.

There was, unsurprisingly, little agreement on the relative importance of each of these “softer” sources of power, or the ways in which they would shape both the future of conflict and interventions into conflicts. All were certain, however, that moves on the bottom-level chessboard were of increasing consequence at other levels. There was deemed to be inter-connectivity between the chessboards.

What about Canada?

If power at all levels is shifting, and if there are few certainties beyond an increasingly complex environment for both conflict and the interventions that might be made to secure peace, where does this leave Canada? Canada’s military and civilian contributions to the UN and its NATO role in Afghanistan undoubtedly have raised the country’s international profile as an intervention stakeholder. At the same time, does the fact that the Afghanistan role will end in 2011, even though the mission will not be complete, mean there is insufficient domestic political support for similar missions in the future?

There were divergent views on this point; it was stressed that the military component of the Canadian contribution to the mission began in 2001 and it is unreasonable to expect any country to make open-ended commitments. According to this view, Canada is not leaving the race, just passing the baton. Even so, there is no doubt that the situation in Afghanistan in 2012-2014 will have a significant impact on the Canadian public’s appetite for future interventions.

However characterized, Canada’s departure from Afghanistan is viewed by some as a welcome opportunity. Battle-hardened Canadian troops, trained in counter-insurgency and tested in managing the complexities of multi-mandate missions, will be available for deployment elsewhere. Will not Canada now be better able to support UN deployments with robust peacekeeping missions?

If we are looking ahead, however, why focus solely on UN missions? Though much is unclear, there are some certainties. Canada will not act alone; it will look for UN support (and seek to support the UN), and it will be keen to act with its allies. There was a strong argument made that it is for Canada to define a future role and be sure it is equipped to play it. Canadian leaders need not, and should not, sit back to be buffeted by events.

The many actors and factors at play mean that interventions are bound to be complex undertakings. Flexibility in response is perhaps the over-riding imperative, coupled with the ability to work in coalitions that extend beyond states.

Intervention as a mechanism of security relations

What do we mean by *intervention*? Is it useful and sensible to merge military and other forms of intervention or should we keep them distinct? What future do we see for the practice of intervention, given power shifts and global trends?

If intervention is defined as “an effort, originating from outside, to change the political balance in a country,” that begs the question of whether it makes sense to include under one rubric all the various means that might be employed. Military

intervention stands at one end of a spectrum of action, with increasingly less coercive, but not necessarily less effective, means as one moves along the spectrum. Trade and development policy, and engagement at non-state levels (back to the bottom of the chessboard), all carry the potential to bring about change in other countries. The civilian and police components of peacekeeping missions are often as important as, perhaps even more important than, the military components when it comes to bringing about and/or supporting the societal transformations that are often essential if contemporary armed conflicts are to be suspended and the likelihood of a return to conflict dramatically reduced.

There was a general feeling that more attention needed to be given to these less coercive options, and at earlier stages, even if it might stretch our understanding to call all such options “interventions.” In this context, a suggestion was made to enhance the support for and professionalization of conflict mediation, whereby third parties (the UN, other states, private foundations) work with actual or potential belligerents to find negotiated solutions. Canada is far less active in this area than other states such as Norway and Switzerland.

Other non-coercive options discussed included development aid and policy, and making inter-governmental organization (IGO) membership dependent on standardized good behaviour. The Stability Pact for Eastern Europe, eventually run by the European Union (EU), was viewed as an excellent model. The *Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe* (OSCE)’s low-key ‘good offices’, provided by its High Commissioner for National Minorities, were also described as effective.

Regarding the need to act early, there was an inconclusive discussion on “early warning”, the ingredients of which are good intelligence on countries at risk, and mechanisms to understand and act on such intelligence. Some felt there really was a lack of information; others doubted it, suggesting we are awash in data on fragile states. There are, it was pointed out, “places we thought were stable, but aren’t (Kenya); places we thought were unstable, but are proving quite secure (Indonesia); and places we think are unstable and indeed are, but we don’t do anything (Myanmar, Somalia).” “Understanding is more important than knowledge,” was one comment. Indeed, the truth is that the international community has a mixed record, at best, in responding to information on impending disasters.

Regarding rules for intervention, or perhaps less formal “lessons learned,” a number of points emerged in the discussion. The dictum of ‘do no harm,’ or ‘don’t make things worse’, sounds sensible; in practice, it might mean that no one does anything in the worst situations (Somalia, again). Legitimacy is key, meaning the proper authority for intervention, usually the United Nations Security Council, and a purpose around which all key stakeholders, especially the people in the affected country, can rally. Local support is essential, as is a realistic strategy, from the beginning, for international actors to pass the baton to local authority. Afghanistan shows how hard this can be. Canada has had a lesson in the four “c’s” for judging in-country partners: “true counterparts, credible, committed and non-corrupt.”

Lurking underneath purpose and legitimacy is the persistent concern that the goals Canada seeks – democracy, rule of law, human rights, open and pluralistic societies – are unachievable. In many of the countries experiencing chronic conflict,

these goals might, at best, be realized in very incomplete ways. Wouldn't a more realistic goal simply be to contain the conflict? Halt the fighting and create space in which societies can manage their own transitions without being forced to play by someone else's rules? Further, some seminar participants, though not all, feared that the emergence of China and the decline of the West might make it harder to push for such goals. In short, what future is there for a "liberal peace" in an era in which liberal ideas may no longer dominate?

The session discussion ended on a pessimistic note. Participants were acutely aware that there is no "magic bullet," that intervening, whether it is to prevent genocide or mass atrocities, to contain conflict, or to act in support of democratically-elected governments challenged from within, carries much risk and successes are certain to take time and effort. Canada is learning this in Afghanistan. Given that Canada will be called on again, the question now is how should it prepare to respond in ways that meet challenges effectively?

Considerations for future interventions

What is the future of intervention? How will intervention be affected by the emergence of newly powerful states with global ambitions? How should Canada prepare, and what issues or areas should it focus on?

Discussion on the future of intervention proceeded along the same skeptical lines that marked consideration of its present. Even understood 'softly,' intervention implies some form of solution imposed from outside, regardless of whether such a solution is to the liking of a majority of the population. The view was put forward, though not all agreed, that the solutions Canada seeks require societal transformation at a pace that far exceeds what historical experience suggests is possible. Why, given the long history of Christianity and state formation in Europe, should we expect Islamic societies to change almost overnight?

As it is now, the question of legitimacy will be key to the future of intervention. The UN is far from perfect, but the Security Council does provide a sense of legitimacy to military action and intervention. Participants debated the importance of the Obama Administration's support for the UN and multilateralism. While it is certainly welcome, much damage has been done by the policies of previous US administrations and the rise of new powers is posing further challenges to the UN's effectiveness and ability to respond to crises. Canada must work to enhance the UN's credibility. There is a trend towards the UN "delegating" (not always happily) its peacekeeping mandates to regional groupings like the African Union. There are pros and cons to this "regionalization," but we must be wary of stripping tasks away from the UN if the result is to weaken multilateralism and to strengthen regional powers, which might have hegemonic tendencies.

What of the rise of China, India and other powers that are perhaps more wedded to the importance of non-interference? China's influence is already being felt in trade, investment and aid regimes. In some cases, it is working within existing international frameworks (trade); in others, it appears to be pursuing a distinct approach (aid). Will China seek to export its model of authoritarian capitalism? If so, does this increase or decrease the risk of conflict? There are many imponderables.

Some argued that in the future, given China's rise, it may be harder for Canada to connect calls for intervention to human rights concerns. Others disagreed, pointing out that, while key differences remain, China supports much of the international legal framework directed at protecting civilians and ending war crimes. Clearly, strengthened engagement with China on these issues is fundamental.

Regarding Canada's future focus in this area, there was support for a greater role in peacemaking and preventive diplomacy, engaging to prevent and end conflict through negotiation. Until diplomats are motivated to engage early, they will always be responding to the latest crisis rather than acting to prevent crisis. Moreover, one lesson is stamped indelibly on the minds of those who have struggled with conflicts in the post-Cold War era. Prevention can save an awful lot of blood and treasure. A constructive approach to intervention would, therefore, be to mobilize governments in support of taking early action to stabilize a difficult situation before it becomes so serious as to place monumental demands on the international community.

A plea was made that Canada should focus where it can make a difference, playing to its strengths, and taking into account that it will rarely, if ever, be able to act alone. There was some discussion about those "strengths". Is Canada's model of diversity and co-operative federalism useful in other contexts? Is our rather deep secularism appealing in situations where religious belief is still the main prism through which the world is viewed? There was dispute about whether the presence in Canada of diasporas originating in countries with so many armed conflicts (and representing all parties to conflicts) would be a help or a hindrance.

Some ideas emerged from the discussion. The Government of Canada might, for example, look to the problem of the "resource curse" – the well-known phenomenon whereby poorer countries with abundant natural resources are likely to be poorly governed and prone to conflict. The scramble for resources, likely to resume, will make this problem worse. As a resource-rich country, with global companies active in this area, perhaps Canada has a particular role to play? In terms of research, participants encouraged further study on a number of issues, including the problem of water scarcity as a driver of future armed conflict; renewed attention to the complex issues of identity-based conflict; and more analysis of the role of trans-national criminal networks in fuelling conflict.

As a final point, participants discussed what "illiberal" peace might look like. What is "good enough" in terms of restoring countries after conflict? What are the minimum conditions that must be satisfied to be able to claim that interventions have been successful? We must not shy away from taking action but *we need to be more honest about the limits of intervention.*

Conclusion

With a deeper understanding of the complexity attached to intervention comes a measure of modesty and caution. This was evident in the restrained and pragmatic approach taken by the participants and their evident realization that aspiration has to be closely related to capability. Nevertheless, the seminar opened some fascinating avenues for further exploration: state-building strategies that are unencumbered by ideology; strategies of prevention that obviate the massive outlays sometimes required

by intervention; the meaning of cultural security, which interveners neglect at their peril; the unexpected consequences of intervention that are sometimes far more than intervening governments bargained for; the future role of a surging China and how we factor it into our calculations; and finally, the impact of the economic and financial crisis on the capability to intervene in 2014.

The seminar discussions also revealed a paradox. The battering taken by interventions in the post-Cold War era has made us very much aware that when we act we must be equipped with a clear narrative on what we are doing and why. As one participant said, our interventions must be purposeful and focused. At the same time, neither map nor taxonomy exists to help us make sense of the emerging order. That must be a major factor accounting for the caution of those who work in the area of international security and/or spend their time thinking about it. The seminar did not yield a set of precise guidelines for action but it did make the enormous challenges confronting the policymaker appear with greater definition and clarity.