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Why Does UN Humanitarian Intervention Remain Selective?

Martin Binder

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Over the past two decades, the United Nations Security Council has responded more strongly to some humanitarian crises than to others. This variation in Security Council action raises the important question of what factors motivate United Nations intervention.

The United Nations (UN) selective response to humanitarian crises—as evidenced most recently by the organisation's uneven reaction to the conflicts in Libya and Syria—is arguably among the most contentious issues in international politics. Some scholars and observers heavily criticize this practice, arguing that the selectiveness of humanitarian interventions undermines their legitimacy and ultimately their success; that the uneven response to humanitarian emergencies suggests that these intervention are motivated not by humanitarian concerns but by the military and economic interests of powerful states; and that the selective enforcement of human rights norms undermines the emerging rule of law in international politics (for examples see Archibugi 2004, Chomsky 1999)

Others disagree and claim that selectivity is not only unavoidable for the UN but also desirable. The selectivity of humanitarian intervention, so the argument goes, reduces the risk of over commitment; it helps to maintain cooperation among the great powers; and it prevents the UN from becoming involved in ill-conceived operations (see Roberts and Zaum 2008)

But what explains why UN humanitarian interventions remain selective in the first place? Why is it that the UN has taken strong action to respond to some

crises, like those in Northern Iraq, Somalia, Bosnia, Sierra Leone or—more recently Libya—but not to other like those in Colombia, Myanmar, Sudan, or—currently—Syria?

The scholarship on humanitarian intervention often argues that each humanitarian crisis (and the responses to them) is historically unique and therefore requires a case-by-case explanation. While I agree that attention should be paid to the specificities of each crisis, my research shows that the UN's response to them is not random but follows remarkably consistent patterns (see Binder 2015, 2017). More specifically, I argue that *a combination of four factors* explains whether the United Nations does or does not take strong action (sanctions, 'robust' peacekeeping operations, military action) in response to a humanitarian crisis. This explanation has been developed and tested through a systematic comparative analysis of the UN's response to more than 30 humanitarian crises after the end of the Cold War combined with several in-depth case studies of intervention decisions in the UN Security Council.

- The first explanatory factor is the extent of *human suffering* in a crisis. In a humanitarian crisis people suffer and die while human rights norms are massively violated. This generates a morally motivated pressure to come to the rescue of threatened populations and to defend international norms.

- Secondly, whether the UN intervenes depends on the extent to which a crisis *spills over to neighbouring countries and regions*. Humanitarian crises often affect neighbouring countries or regions in negative ways. Spill over effects include regional conflict diffusion, refugee flows, terrorism or economic downturn. Spill over effects create a material interest to intervene.

- The third explanatory factor for UN intervention is the *ability of a target state to resist outside intervention*. Militarily strong target states, or target states that have powerful allies, can raise the costs and risks of UN intervention and affect its chances of success.

- Fourth and finally, UN intervention is explained by the level of *material and reputational resources* the UN has committed to the resolution of a crisis in the past (sunk costs). To the extent that the UN have invested time, money, and diplomatic prestige in the resolution of the crisis, this creates the wish to protect these investments through continued or escalated involvement.

None of these explanatory factors is sufficient *in itself* to explain selective intervention. In combination, however, they provide a powerful explanation for the UN's uneven response to humanitarian crises.

When does the UN take strong action?

The UN can be expected to take strong action—coercive measures including economic sanctions, 'robust' peacekeeping operation or (the authorization of) military action—if the extent of a humanitarian crisis (in terms of victims and internally displaced persons) is large, and if the organisation has committed substantial resources to its resolution. This, however, leads to intervention only when the crisis also generates substantial negative spill over effects (e.g., refugee flows) or when the target state of an intervention is weak and therefore unable to resist to outside intervention.

Explaining limited UN action (or inaction)

A limited response of the UN to a humanitarian crisis, such as UN observer missions, humanitarian assistance, or even complete inaction of the UN, is best

explained by the ability of a potential target state to resist outside intervention (e.g., through military capabilities). However, other factors must be present as well. Military capabilities must be either complemented by a low level of previous UN involvement; or by a relatively low level of human suffering and spill over effect to neighbouring countries.

A few brief examples may help to illustrate how these four factors interact to lead to strong or limited UN action.

Bosnia

UN intervention in Bosnian crisis was clearly driven by a combination of motivational factors. For one, UN members were strongly concerned by the large-scale plight of the Bosnian civilian population and the grave human rights violations committed by the parties to the conflict (ethnic cleansing, the installation of concentration camps, the siege of Sarajevo, and the massacres at Srebrenica). Second, the intervention was motivated by the wish to prevent the crisis from spilling over to Western European countries, most notably in form of refugee flows, and to stop a more generalized destabilization of the Balkan region. A third important driver of UN intervention in Bosnia was the wish of UN member states to protect the tremendous investments both material (through humanitarian assistance and peacekeeping) and reputational (diplomatic efforts) the UN had made over the course of the conflict. However, when the Bosnian Serbs took hundreds of UNPROFOR blue helmets hostage, this brought the UN to the brink of failure and put the UN's efforts in the Bosnian crisis in jeopardy. In this situation, rather than withdraw, the organisation escalated its response. Finally, outside intervention was facilitated by the inability of the Bosnian Serbs and the Serbian government to generate sufficient resistance against outside intervention by the UN (and later by NATO).

Cote d'Ivoire

Very similar motivational patterns can be observed with respect to the UN's decision to authorize military intervention in the context of post-election violence in Côte d'Ivoire in 2010. The dramatic levels of internal displacement and the fears of genocide, given the xenophobic politics of 'Ivoirité' that characterized the conflict, raised strong humanitarian concern in the UN. At the same time, UN members wished to prevent the conflict from spilling over to other Western African countries, most notably to Liberia which was slowly recovering from a long and brutal civil war. Moreover, the substantial and longstanding involvement of the UN in the country generated an additional institutional dynamic pushing towards intervention. The UN had invested heavily in the resolution of the crisis in Côte d'Ivoire—most notably through peacekeeping and peacebuilding. UN members wished to protect these investments they saw at stake, should country relapse into civil war. Finally, former President Laurent Gbagbo and his supporters were too weak to effectively resist outside intervention in in the country. By the time the UN decided to authorize military action, large parts of the country were controlled by forces loyal to Gbagbo's opponent Alassane Ouattara.

Libya

As in the crises in Bosnia and in Côte d'Ivoire, humanitarian intervention in Libya was driven by more than one factor. Muammar al Gaddafi's public announcement to commit a massacre in the town of Benghazi generated particular pressure on the part of UN members to act. Concerns to prevent spill over effects also played an important role. In addition to destabilizing effects for neighbouring Egypt and Tunisia—both of which are undergoing important political change in the wake of the 'Arab Spring'—Western UN members feared

that hundreds of thousands of Libyan refugees would cross the Mediterranean towards Europe. At the same time, the Gaddafi regime was not in a strong position to resist outside intervention. Not only was there a capable opposition movement in the country, but also Tripoli had managed to alienate nearly all of its former Arab and African allies. Libya also lacked partners in the Security Council who might have opposed or blocked UN intervention. However, the Libyan case fails to provide strong support for the previous institutional involvement explanation in that the UN did not invest substantial material and immaterial resources to the resolution of the crisis prior to the intervention.

Syria

The ongoing crisis in Syria illustrates how a combination of factors *prevents* strong UN action. The available evidence suggests that massive human rights violations, the spiralling violence in the country as well as the severe spill over effect of the Syrian conflict for neighbouring countries, most notably Lebanon, raised strong concerns on the part of UN members. A majority of UN members have pushed for sanctions against the Assad regime in the UN Security Council. That the UN has nevertheless not taken strong action in Syria can be explained by two factors. First, unlike the cases discussed before, Syria is more able to resist outside intervention—most notably because the Assad regime enjoys the continued support of its Russian and Chinese allies, who block any coercive measures against Syria in the UN. Second, the UN has not been substantially involved in Syria in the past and has not committed substantial resources to the resolution of the crisis. As such, a complementary dynamic of escalating commitment could not unfold in the UN to push towards coercive measures.

Summary

Whether the UN intervenes or does not intervene in a humanitarian crisis cannot be explained by a single factor. Rather, a combination of conditions – the extent of human suffering, the level of spill over effects, the military strength of a target state and the extent to which the UN has been involved in a crisis before – accounts for this variation in UN action to a large extent. While the explanation I suggest here does not account for all UN responses to humanitarian crises, it covers more than 80% of the UN humanitarian interventions after the Cold War.

Image credit: Bernd Untiedt/Wikimedia.

Martin Binder is Associate Professor in International Relations at the University of Reading. His research focuses on humanitarian intervention, the authority and legitimacy of international institutions, and rising powers. His work has been published in the Journal of Peace Research, International Studies Quarterly and International Theory, among others. His recent book *The United Nations and the Politics of Selective Humanitarian Intervention*has been published in 2017 with Palgrave Macmillan.

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