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What makes Humanitarian Intervention fail?

1. Introduction

This paper will discuss why humanitarian interventions fail. It will use the NATO interventions in Kosovo (1999) and Libya (2011) to illustrate the analysis. To explain why the two interventions can be considered as failures, I will provide a brief summary of the interventions before the analysis. Rather than a general discussion about whether humanitarian intervention is good or bad, legal or illegal, or motivated by realist or liberalist ideas, this paper will focus on several factors that contributed to the failure of the interventions in Kosovo and Libya.

The analysis will be built upon strategic theory. Thomas G. Mahnken describes strategy as the essential link between the ends of policy and the means of military force. "(…) strategy deals with using military means to fulfil the ends of policy." (Mahnken, 2016: p.54). This paper will argue that the failure of the humanitarian interventions in Kosovo and Libya have been due to bad strategies. These strategies have been bad because of several problems NATO have encountered and created. The problems, or factors leading to the failure of the interventions, are the reliance on air power, the unwarranted official optimism about what can be achieved, media coverage, friction, lack of unity of effort, and lack of a clear objective. These concepts will be explained later in the paper. Some factors can be found in both interventions, whereas others are specific to one case. I have chosen to divide them into three main problems with humanitarian intervention: The politics of humanitarian intervention; friction or "The fog of war"; and diversion from the principles of war.

Before we get to the analysis however, I will identify and define key terminology.

2. Terminology

The question "what makes humanitarian intervention fail?" requires some definitions before it can be answered. First, it is important to understand what is meant by *humanitarian intervention.* The term can be understood in two ways, one broader and one narrower. The broader definition identifies two main purposes of humanitarian intervention: To protect human rights, and to provide emergency assistance (Greitens, 2016, p.265). This definition opens for humanitarian intervention to take both military forms (such as the interventions in Kosovo and Libya), and non-military forms (such as emergency aid, for example provided by NGOs like Doctors Without Borders). The narrower definition is provided amongst others by Alex J. Bellamy. He writes: "«Humanitarian intervention» refers to the use of military force by external actors for humanitarian purposes, usually against the will of the host government."

(Bellamy, 2016, 328) Two elements of this definitions are important: That humanitarian intervention requires the use of military force, and that they (usually) are conducted against the will of the host government. Thus, it excludes for example emergency operations from NGOs as well as UN Peace Keeping Operations. The rest of this paper will be built upon this narrower definition of humanitarian intervention because it suits the two cases with which I will illustrate my analysis, the interventions in Kosovo and Libya.

The second term that needs a definition, is what we refer to by *failure*. There should be no doubts that humanitarian intervention rarely results in military failures for the intervening parties. After 1990, there is arguably only one example of humanitarian intervention resulting in military failure for the intervening actor – the US intervention in Somalia 1992/3. Failure of humanitarian intervention should therefore rather mean failure to achieve its humanitarian purposes. The UN doctrine of the *Responsibility to Protect* (R2P) has given humanitarian intervention a clear legal status. The paragraphs on R2P from the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document uses terminology such as protecting the population from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. (http://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/about-responsibility-to-protect.html) Therefore I believe the preventing of such atrocities mentioned in the Outcome Document could be good indicators to determine the success of humanitarian interventions.

3. Brief summary of the interventions in Kosovo and Libya

3.1. Operation Allied Force: The NATO intervention in Kosovo 1999

NATO's decision to intervene in Kosovo for humanitarian purposes, was taken on the 24th of march 1999. By that time, there had been low-intensity-fighting between Serbian troops and the Kosovar Liberation Army (KLA) for about a year. In the summer of 1998, Serbia had sent several ten-thousands military troops, police forces and paramilitary groups to fight the KLA and their supporters. The Serbian offensive led to a large number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), Adam Roberts suggests as many as 260 000. (1999, p.113). There were reports of killings on civilians as well. The International Community was anxious that scenes from the war in Bosnia in 1995 might repeat, such as genocide and ethnic cleansing. NATO was at first heavily engaged in diplomacy to end the deployment of Serb forces in Kosovo. In October 1998, NATO threatened Belgrade with air strikes if forces were not withdrawn (Roberts, 1999, p.112). As Serbian atrocities continued in the winter if 1999, NATO chose to intervene on humanitarian grounds, and the bombing campaign started on the 24th of March.

The bombing campaign lasted for 11 weeks straight, until Serbia accepted peace negotiations on the 3rd of June. As a result, Serb forces withdrew from Kosovo, and the administration of Kosovo was handed over to the UN. The NATO campaign was not, however, able to stop violence targeting civilians and ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. Many critics will even say the campaign accelerated ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. Adam Roberts supports this claim by pointing to the fact that the number of IDPs and killings were a lot larger after March 24th, than before (Roberts, 1999, p.113).

3.2. Operation Unified Protector: The NATO intervention in Libya 2011

The case of Libya is different from Kosovo in many ways. It is also unique, because it was the first time the UN authorized use of military force against a Governments will by referring to R2P. In the early parts of 2011, people gathered in big, pro-democracy demonstrations in all the big cities of Libya, as part of the "Arab spring"-movement. The demonstrations were not only peaceful however, and armed rebels used violent means to attack Qaddafi's regime (Kuperman, 2015, p. 69). In rather chaotic circumstances – and with lots of media coverage – Qaddafi used military force to fight the rebels, and some claimed his forces deliberately targeted civilians and peaceful protesters. By mid-March, Qaddafi's forces had recaptured all rebel strongholds except for Benghazi. As government troops headed for Benghazi, Libyan expatriates in Switzerland affiliated with the rebels warned of an upcoming "blood-bath" in Benghazi (Kuperman, 2015, p.71). In these circumstances, NATO (authorized by the UN Security Council) established a no-fly-zone over Libya, and started a bombing campaign against targets associated with Qaddafi's army. The rebellion grew in strength, and in October, Qhadafi was tortured and killed by rebels. NATO declared victory, and in July 2012, Libya's first free election was held. Alan J. Kuperman describes how the country devolved rapidly to failed state after this however: "Libya has not only failed to evolve into a democracy; it has devolved into a failed state. Violent deaths and other human rights abuses have increased severalfold" (2015, p.67).

4.Discussion: What makes humanitarian intervention fail?

As we can deduct from the paragraphs above, the NATO campaigns in Kosovo and Libya can both be judged as failed humanitarian intervention, given that none of the campaigns were able to stop mass atrocities such as ethnic cleansing, war crimes and crimes against humanity. Arguably they accelerated, rather than stop such crimes. Therefore, I believe one could detect factors that make humanitarian intervention fail by investigating the errors from these two interventions. Some of the factors can be found in both cases, while some are specific for each

case. This analysing part of the paper will be structured after the three main strategic problems suggested in the introduction.

4.1. The politics of humanitarian intervention - Sensitivity to popular support

It is common to view humanitarian interventions as sensitive to popular support. Sheena Chestnut Greitens claims that this is because humanitarian interventions are "wars of choice" rather than "wars of necessity" (2016, p. 273). Such claims can be supported by a Clausewitzian view on strategy. According to Clausewitz' concept of the rational calculus of war, states should be prepared to commit more to defend vital national interests, than to defend peripheral ones (Mahnken, 2016, p.60). Deaths of peace keepers or soldiers from the intervening alliance are considered especially damaging to the popular support for humanitarian interventions. This problem of humanitarian intervention was evident both in the campaign over Kosovo in 1999 and in Libya in 2011.

4.1.1. Over-reliance on air power and casualty aversion

Greitens claims that humanitarian interventions' sensitivity to popular support produces what she calls "operational pathologies", that pull them away from the principles of war. One of these pathologies is an over-reliance on air power and unrealistic expectations of what it can accomplish (Baylis, pp. 276-277). This is because they want to avert casualties. In both Libya and Kosovo, NATO chose to conduct the war through air power alone.

For Kosovo, Adam Roberts suggests that the decision to rely on air power alone was a result of both unwillingness to risk casualties and disagreements between the governments of the alliance, as well as questionable readings of the previous wars in Yugoslavia. He argues that the reliance on air power alone made it difficult to stop the ethnic cleansing in two ways: The Serbian forces in Kosovo did not need to defend themselves against land troops, so they could instead focus on killing civilians; and the government in Belgrade could hope to "sit out the bombing", without worrying that invasion forces were approaching (Roberts, 1999, pp.111-112).

The air campaign over Libya was more successful in achieving its goals, according to Florence Gaub. The NATO air strikes were able to knock out Libya's air defence system, in practice establishing a no-fly-zone, before going on to target the government's command-and-control system (Gaub, 2013, p. 7). She emphasizes, however that the Libya campaign did possess a land force – the rebel forces – though not under NATO command. Because these rebels were not under command and probably influenced by Qatari and UAE military

personal, Gaub argues that: "(…) in practice the difference between regime change and civilian protection, and between advice and military planning, became more unclear the longer the operation lasted." (2013, p.11)

4.1.2. "Unwarranted official optimism" about the intervention in Kosovo

Another problem connected to the sensitivity for public opinion that was evident in the case of Kosovo, is what Adam Roberts describes as "unwarranted official optimism" about what could be achieved with the campaign. He describes how many decision-makers in NATO governments believed that Serbia would give in to the NATO demands after only a few days of bombing (Roberts, 1999, p.111). This official optimism can be related to humanitarian interventions' sensitivity to the public opinion, because it is unlikely that the public will endorse an operation they do not believe in succeeding.

The consequences of this unwarranted optimism were an underestimation of the Serbs, leading to some key misunderstandings that made it difficult to protect the Kosovars from ethnic cleansing. Two of these misunderstandings were (1) questionable readings of the NATO air campaign over Bosnia in 1995 and (2) a lack of understanding of Serbian strategic culture (Roberts, 1999, pp.110-111). In Bosnia, NATO air strikes had indeed contributed to pressuring Serbia to the negotiations table, but in contrast to the case of Kosovo, the air campaign had followed a period of severe Serbian territorial losses on the ground. Without a land component however, the Kosovo campaign was never likely to produce the same kind of results in relatively short time. NATO also underestimated the Serbian strategic culture. Many Serbs held beliefs that Serbia had for centuries faced off imperial threats: First the Ottomans, then the Austrians, then Nazi-Germany and later Stalin's Soviet Union. A country that views itself as alone in a hostile world, suffering courageously, Roberts argues, "was never likely to make a simple cost-benefit analysis of the bombing, or to crumple quickly in face of a bombing campaign alone." (Roberts, 1999, p.111).

The results of these misunderstandings were that the Serbian response to NATO's bombing campaign was to carry out harder punishments to the Albanian population in Kosovo rather than to accept NATO's demands. Roberts quote a Kosovar citizen: "The Serbs can't fight NATO, so now they are after us" (cited in Roberts, 1999, p. 113).

4.1.3. Misleading media coverage in Libya

Media coverage is also believed to have an impact on humanitarian interventions. Conflicts or impending humanitarian crises that attracts media coverage, have been suggested to create popular support for interventions (Greitens, 2016 pp. 273). This was the case of Libya, where both Western and Arab media reported Qaddafi's use of force against civilians. The problem however, according to Alan J. Kuperman, was that many of these reports were false. He points to at least three separate cases of reports on Qaddafi's regime that turned out to be untrue. First, early in the uprisings, Saudi newspaper Al Aribya had reported that 10 000 Libyans had died in the fighting. Human Rights Watch had documented only 233 deaths in the same period however (Kuperman, 2015, p. 69). Second, an Al Jazeera article from before the intervention, reprinted by Western media, stated that Qaddafi's air force had bombed civilians in Benghazi and Tripoli. The story was proven untrue by Hugh Roberts of Tufts University. "Indeed, striving to minimize civilian casualties, Qaddafi's forces had refrained from indiscriminate violence." (Kuperman, 2015, p. 70) The third issue was the very threat of genocide in Benghazi. In mid-March 2011, an exile group affiliated with the Libyan rebels, stated that a "blood-bath" was about to happen in Benghazi, which was then printed inn Western newspapers. Kuperman describes this story as untrue and characterizes it as propaganda, designed to attract a NATO intervention at a time when the rebels were at the time about to lose the war. "There is no evidence or reason to believe that Qaddafi had planned or intended to perpetrate a killing campaign." (Kuperman, 2015, p. 71).

4.2. Friction – The Chaos of war

The Clausewitzian concept of friction, or "the fog of war", can be applied to explain why humanitarian interventions fail to achieve its humanitarian goals. Thomas Mahnken describes this as a theory of why seemingly easy planned operations, can turn out to be difficult to execute because of interaction with the enemy (2016, p. 61). Adam Roberts explains how this concept can pose a difficult problem for humanitarian interventions:

All major cases of genocide and ethnic cleansing in the twentieth century have occurred during or immediately after major wars: the chaos and hatred unleashed in war, and the secrecy that wartime conditions engender, can provide the necessary conditions for such mass cruelty. (Roberts, 1999, p. 114)

The empirics of the interventions in Kosovo and Libya support this argument. In both cases did the death toll and attacks on civilians increase drastically after the interventions were initiated. In Kosovo, the number of IDPs more than quadrupled during the campaign (Roberts, 1999, p. 113). This indicates that the NATO campaign accelerated the Serbian atrocities in Kosovo. In Libya, Alan J. Kuperman suggests that the interventions led to violence targeted at

civilians. He describes how Libya devolved into a failed state following the toppling of Qaddafi's regime, leading to Islamist terrorism, sectarian violence, racism and reprisal killings on such a scale that it could be considered as crimes against humanity (Kuperman, 2015, pp. 67-68).

It is evident that the chaos that wartime conditions provide, can lead to an acceleration of mass atrocities and human rights violations against the civilian population. And in this way, the fog of war can be an explanation to why humanitarian intervention may fail in the short term. Roberts remind us however, that it does not necessarily leads to the failure of interventions in the long term. Referring to Kosovo he says: "It may have been better to bring the crisis to a head than to let it fester on, albeit in a less intense form, for year after year (..)" (1999, p. 114).

4.3. Diversion from the principles of war

When fighting a war, military forces usually act according to the fundamental principles of war. These principles are unity of effort, clear identification of the objective, massing of forces, and surprise (Greitens, 2016, p. 274). Greitens explains that these principles can be hard to follow in peace operations and humanitarian interventions. In the cases of Kosovo and Libya, at least two of these principles appears to not have been followed – unity of effort and clear identification of the objective.

4.4.1. Unity of effort

Unity of effort is achieved by placing all forces under a single commander (Greitens, 2016, p. 275). In neither of the interventions in Kosovo and Libya was this achieved, as the land forces were not under NATO operational control. It is a widely held view that air power is most effective when combined with a land component. In Kosovo however, the Kosovo Liberation army was not able to be an effective ground force for NATO (Greitens, 2016, pp. 277-78). The results were that the Serbian troops were able to carry out ethnic cleansing toward the Albanian population. By contrast, in Libya the rebel troops were powerful enough to make advances on Qaddafi's army, when supported by NATO air strikes. The lack of unity of effort proved to be a problem here as well, however. Florence Gaub acknowledges that the rebels were not under NATO command, and that direct contact between NATO and the rebels was impossible (2013, p. 11). As a result, NATO was unable to control the militias after the regime change, and many of these militias proved to have malign intensions. Alan J. Kuperman claims that militant Islamists emerged under NATO air cover to become a capable

part of the rebellion, and that the Islamist militias refused to disarm after Qaddafi was killed (2015, p. 72)

4.4.2. Lack of clear identifiable objective – Mission expanded in Libya

According to Greitens, clearly defined objectives can be hard to provide in peace operations. She blames UNSC politics, as UNSC resolutions are often deliberately vague to get the support of the great powers (2016, p.275). This was certainly the case for the intervention in Libya. Florence Gaub writes that the aim of the UNSC resolution did not suit to military planning. "the protection of civilians does not indicate an end state to be achieved, nor does it identify an enemy" (2013, p.20). Despite efforts to make the objective more concrete, it caused confusion, especially as governments of several NATO states started to advocate for regime change and several other objectives. "In practice, this meant that the political problem was passed on to the military level, where it did not belong" (Gaub, 2013, p. 22).

5. Conclusion

This paper has analysed why humanitarian intervention fails to achieve its humanitarian purposes. I suggest that there is not one, but many factors, and the combination of these that lead to the failure of the interventions in Kosovo and Libya. These factors can be sorted into three main strategic problems that NATO will need to overcome should they engage in humanitarian interventions in the future. The first problem – the sensitivity to the public opinion – deals with the politics of humanitarian interventions. The other two – friction and diversion from the principles of war – deal with the military conduct of humanitarian interventions. This paper has not attempted to answer whether these problems are inevitable when conducting humanitarian campaigns, or whether they are possible to overcome. Different scholars will probably have different opinions to this question. Should the answer prove to be that the problems are inevitable, however, it is my opinion that the international community should be very cautious engage in such campaigns.

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