

Humanitarian intervention effectively amounts to rehabilitation of imperialism

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■ ■ It is often said that “with great power comes great responsibility.” Reading your book, my impression was that you argued for a more sensible definition of “responsibility,” perhaps a decolonized version of it, with “a bit more modesty and less arrogance” in your words. Is that an accurate enough reading of your work?

I certainly think that the West could use more modesty in its relation with the rest of the world. But that is not my main point and I do not believe that power will lead to great responsibility, unless it is forced to behave that way. The whole point of international law, embodied in the UN Charter, is to prevent great powers to behave irresponsibly by interfering in the internal affairs of other states.

■ ■ Your book was originally published in 2005. In the years since then, have you come to reconsider any of your arguments against “humanitarian intervention” in general? A case in point is ISIL, aka Daesh, and an internationally agreed-upon, though mostly informal, consensus to fight and eliminate it at all costs.



Well, first of all, I only criticize interventions that violate international law, namely those where one state intervenes in another one without the consent of the latter. When Syria asks for the help of Iran or Russia to combat Daesh, it does not violate international law. The same thing is true when Mali asks France for help in order to combat jihadists. Besides, I am not sure which internationally agreed-upon consensus you are talking about. The U.S. and other Western countries have actually helped Daesh in Syria (although they called them “moderate rebels”) before fighting them. They did the same thing in Afghanistan with the predecessors of the Taliban and of course, their invasion of Iraq is largely responsible for the rise of terrorism in the region.

■ ■ What is your impression of recent developments in regards to the outcomes of U.S. military interventions, most notably the withdrawal of the U.S. forces from Afghanistan and subsequent takeover of the country by Taliban? Have the Americans learned a lesson and, in the words of your Italian friend in your book, no longer think that “democracy can be exported”?

Well, there is a sense in which democracy, or at least what the West calls democracy, can be exported: for example, in Germany and Japan after WW2. But that was not the goal of the war (then, the U.S. had been attacked by those countries) and the specific form of democracy (tying these countries by all sorts of links to the American



empire) that was “exported” was to a large extent motivated by the U.S. desire to fight the Soviet Union. In the case of Afghanistan, I don’t think exporting democracy was ever a goal of the U.S. there. The initial goal was to fight terrorism, something that Taliban agreed with, provided that the U.S. gives a proof of Bin Laden responsibility in the events of 9/11, which of course the U.S. refused to do.

After the overthrow of the Taliban and, later, the killing of Bin Laden, the goals of the war became uncertain: continue to fill up the coffers of the military-industrial complex, control a strategic region or what? But there was no more a desire to install a democracy in Afghanistan than there was such a desire when Mossadeq was overthrown in Iran. The U.S. wants subservient regimes everywhere. If they can be formally democratic (as in Germany and Japan) democracy is fine; if they cannot be so, as in Iran, Guatemala, Chile and many other places, autocracy is fine too.

■ ■ Would you agree that the hypocrisy with which the U.S. chose its targets of “humanitarian intervention” might constitute a “strong argument,” a moral one for that matter, against such interventions? After all, some observers believe that the U.S. tolerated, supported, or even allied itself with perpetrators of humanitarian catastrophes when they happened to serve some national interests of the U.S.



Of course, my book is full of denunciations of such hypocrisies. But if one sets up rules whose goal is to limit the abuses of power, as was done with the UN after WW2 (the abuses considered then were those of Germany and Japan) but there is no real mechanism to enforce those rules, what can one expect? During the cold war, a balance of forces limited to some extent the imperial ambitions of the U.S. But after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was no longer such a counter-force and the U.S. did not feel constrained by any rule and certainly not by those of international law.

However, things are changing. The imperial arrogance of the U.S. has led them to create many enemies. Russia for example, was quite friendly to the U.S. after the fall of communism, but after being looted by the West in the 1990’s, it elected Putin who changed radically the economic and geopolitical orientation of his country. Syria was supposed to be the last Arab nationalist regime to be overthrown in the Middle East, but thanks to Iran, Hezbollah and Russia, it resisted.



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In Latin America, far from being able to destroy the Maduro government, the U.S. has now to face similar governments in Bolivia, Peru, Nicaragua and Honduras. Finally, and that is the most important factor, the rise of China, not only economically, but also technologically and diplomatically (through the Belt and Road initiative) does constitute a new bulwark against U.S. hegemony, and a much stronger one than the old Soviet Union. The China-Russia alliance of course makes the situation only more difficult if not impossible for the U.S., although they don’t seem to realize that.

■ ■ The very institution of the UN was initiated to prevent another world war, and was subsequently authorized to deal with human catastrophes. Do you agree with the assessment that it has lost at least a significant part of its influence and credibility over the last two decades? And, if yes, do you think it’s a lost cause which is perhaps going to take a seat next to its predecessor, League of Nations, in history books?

I am not sure what you mean when you say that the UN was subsequently authorized to deal with human catastrophes. If you refer to the “responsibility to protect” (R2P), it does not change anything fundamental to international law, since the use of force still depends on the authorization of the Security Council. It was used in Libya, but that did not allow the U.S. to transform the R2P mission into a regime change one. Once they did that, Russia and China realized that their vote at the UN in favor of R2P had been abused and it is unlikely that this mechanism to permit military interventions will be allowed again.

The problem of the League of Nations was that it didn’t have any means to impose the respect of its decisions. The UN was supposed to solve this problem because the Security Council could authorize the use of force. Because of the veto power of the five permanent members of that Council, the use of this authorization was in fact rather limited. But the real problem is: what to do when one of those permanent members violates the rules? While Russia and China self-impose the respect of international law, the U.S. violates it constantly, not only through military interventions, but also through sanctions, embargoes, blockades, and subversions of electoral processes. And, as I said above, the only way to resist such violations does not reside in the UN itself, but in a coalition of countries, including strong ones like Russia and China, that gives itself the mission of defending the UN Charter. Of course, they have to do it indirectly, by helping the resistance of the countries targeted by the U.S., in order to avoid a direct and suicidal confrontation with the U.S.

I may add that my book was mostly a criticism of the Western Left for having abandoned during the war against Yugoslavia in 1999 any pacifist or anti-imperialist position. Although there was some opposition to the Iraq war, there was essentially none to the Libyan war, to the support for the rebellion in Syria, to the coup in Ukraine in 2014 or in Bolivia in 2019, to sanctions against several countries, including Iran, and there is almost no criticism of the contemporary military build-up against Russia and China. That is because the vast majority of the Western Left has accepted a certain view of “human rights” that legitimizes the “right” of humanitarian intervention, which amounts in practice to a rehabilitation of imperialism and neo-colonialism.