Theoretical Approach to Understanding NATO Intervention in Libya

Explaining NATO's Intervention in Libya Through Neorealism, Liberalism and Marxism

In 2001, the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty stated that a state's freedom from external interference is conditional upon its fulfilment of its sovereign obligation to protect its citizens. This concept, termed the Responsibility to Protect (R2P)[1], was not without its detractors. Governments in Asia and Latin America claimed the concept sought to legitimize the use of force by strong states against weak ones (Seybolt 2008, 2). Indeed, the role of politics in decisions to intervene has been the subject of ongoing academic debate (19). Some go as far as to argue an international custom allowing for humanitarian intervention will trigger unjustified interventions based on spurious motives (Tesón 2003, 113). After the fall of Muammar Gaddafi, many questions endure regarding the reasons for NATO's decision to intervene.[2] Through a case study of the humanitarian intervention[3] in Libya, this essay will demonstrate that political objectives superseded humanitarian considerations in NATO's enforcement of a responsibility to protect through the use of force.

Explaining Interstate Conflict

Classical realists and neorealists alike view international politics as a jungle whereby each state is subject to the "omnipresent threat of war" (Waltz 1989, 45). International relations between states are unlike domestic politics because a central authority with a monopoly on the legitimate use of force does not exist internationally to regulate the actions of aggressive or power-seeking states. This system is anarchic; war is a symptom of anarchy. The constant possibility of war in an anarchic system requires states to follow realpolitik: "to be self-interested, prepare for war and calculate relative balances of power" (Doyle 1997, 18). Rational unitary state actors must pursue security and survival above all as anarchy relegates states to a permanent state of self-help. Realists assume that in anarchy, power determines the behaviour of states. The relative gain of one state is inherently threatening to another, resulting in a security dilemma.[4] Neorealists argue that "in a world where power counts, no nation pursuing a rational policy has a choice between renouncing and wanting power" (Waltz 1989, 41). Waltz essentially describes a system whereby rational actors have little choice but to engage in realpolitik. The failure to do so threatens the survival of the state. In an international system characterized by anarchy, self-help and the constant threat of relative gains, conflict is a natural occurrence. In this system, states with too much power may prompt other states to pursue countermeasures, while excessive weakness may leave a state open to attack (40). Realists perceive military force as especially useful for preserving security and advancing national interests. International law is incapable of regulating the aggressive realpolitik of powerful states.

Liberals reject the realist proposition that international politics is similar to a jungle; instead, liberals prefer to compare world politics to a "cultivable 'garden,' which combines a state of war with the possibility of a state of peace" (Doyle 1997, 19). Through reason, liberals contend, man has the ability to re-shape domestic and international institutions, create international law and dampen the threats associated with anarchy. Conflict, in this sense, is not inevitable. A central tenet unifying various forms of liberalism is the primacy of individual freedom. Not surprisingly then, liberals are strong proponents of democracy and free trade. Doyle notes that "liberals regard representative states as reflections of individual consent; autocratic states, conversely, they regard as instances of the repression of individual

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rights" (Doyle 1997, 19). Liberal or democratic states do not fight each other[5] (Levy 1989, 88). Depending on one's definition of democracy, the number of wars fought between democracies during the last two centuries range from zero to less than a handful (Levy 1989, 87). A zone of peace currently exists among more than 40 liberal states – mostly in Europe and North America – whereby, among other factors, respect for individual rights and shared commercial interests maintain peace among these states. Conversely, these institutional and normative frameworks that promote peace among like-minded democratic states create the conditions for antagonistic relations with non-democratic states. As Doyle notes, "liberals benefit from a presumption of amity; non-liberals suffer from a presumption of enmity" (1986, 1161). As such, liberal states are more prone to use force against non-liberal states to advance liberal ideals: freedom, human rights, democracy, etc. (1160).

Marxists disagree with liberals on the purpose of liberal democratic wars. Marxist theories of imperialism argue that liberal capitalist democracies use "their military and financial capacities to seize as much territory and resources as they could to increase the opportunities for successful accumulation by their own capitalists" (Gamble 1999, 136). In this sense, democratic war has more to do with economic gains than the promotion of individual freedoms. For Marx, economic activity and political activity are fundamentally intertwined. Marx's materialist view argues that the core activity in any society concerns the way in which human beings produce their means of existence (Jackson and Sorenson 2010, 189). For Marx, the bourgeoise control the capitalist economy because this class dominates the means of production.[6] Marx argued that because of this, the bourgeoise will also dominate the political sphere because economics is the basis of politics (189). As such, state activity, including foreign policy, is driven by upper-class interests. Consequently, for Marxists, conflict between states, such as war, is fundamentally a means toward further capitalist accumulation for the bourgeoise. As Levy notes, "the basic argument is that the inequitable distribution of wealth in capitalist societies generates overproduction[7], inadequate domestic investment opportunities and generally stagnant economies. These effects lead to expansionist and imperialist policies abroad" (1989, 88). Free-market expanse is not an agent-less process; rather, it is the ruling-class that advances such foreign policy options to open new capital markets. Marxists also predicted that powerful capitalist economies would divert conflict from the core of the system to the periphery, where their interests are less likely to conflict (Levy 1989, 89).

Why Intervene in Libya?

Humanitarian intervention is founded on liberal understandings of a moral obligation to protect human rights. Fernando Tesón, an academic proponent of liberal interventionism, argues that "if a situation is morally abhorrent, then neither the sanctity of national borders nor a general prohibition against war should by themselves preclude humanitarian intervention" (2003, 95). What's more, Tesón states that liberal states have a moral "obligation to rescue victims of tyranny or anarchy" (Tesón 2003, 94). From this perspective, the international community authorized the use of force in Libya to defend those protesting the Gaddafi regime. This narrative argues that after more than 40 years of oppression, Libyans rose up to call for freedom and democracy. Liberal states, in turn, had a moral imperative to intervene against an unjust, undemocratic regime. In this scenario, international law through the UNSC maintained international peace and security. Through this liberal prism, politics had an irrelevant or secondary role; human rights violations were sufficient to prompt a humanitarian intervention.

Although this narrative was propagated throughout the Libyan conflict, this interpretation ignores NATO's pursuit of a political objective, which, at times, undermined its mandate to protect civilians. NATO used more than 200 cruise missiles and 20,000 bombs in its operation in Libya, including on non-military targets, to support the opposition (Pugliese 2012). Human Rights Watch stated that NATO's actions directly resulted in more than 70 confirmed civilian deaths, including women and children ("NATO" 2012). The New York Times found "significant damage to civilian infrastructure from certain attacks for which a rationale was not evident or risks to civilians were clear" (Chivers 2011). Furthermore, as the operation wore on, NATO began to strike the homes of Gaddafi loyalists, killing women and children. In one instance, NATO bombed the house of Brigadier General Musbah Diyab, killing not only him but also seven women and children. Evidently, NATO pursued an aggressive, offensive strategy, overstepping its UN mandate ("Leaders" 2011). The military strategy was in line with a political objective of regime change. In fact, after the death of Gaddafi, some within the NATO establishment have ceased denying such a policy existed. In a New York Times Op-Ed, Ivo Daalder, US Ambassador to NATO, stated the operation demonstrated "the use of limited force – precisely applied – can affect real, positive political change" (2011). What's more, human rights

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abuses were documented on both sides. As the rebels gained momentum in the conflict, their actions grew increasingly violent with reports of arbitrary detentions, disappearances, torture and summary executions ("Amnesty" 2011). In one incident, the bodies of 53 Gaddafi loyalists were found executed with their hands tied (HRW 2011). NATO's aggressive offensive actions, which ignored the opposition's war crimes, are at odds with the liberal interpretation. NATO's actions were demonstrably in pursuit of much more than protecting civilians. As such, a purely moralistic reading of the intervention should be tempered with this reality on the ground.

To explain the war in Libya from a neorealist perspective, one has to consider the development of the Rogue Doctrine in US[8] security policy. Rogue states[9] are revisionist by nature, threatening US national security and seeking to upset the status quo. Gaddafi, for instance, had a notoriously combative relationship with the West. Indeed, one of the first official uses of the *rogue* label was by President Clinton citing the "'danger' posed by "rogue states such as Iran and Libya" (O'Reilly 2013, 61). Containment and detente are ineffective; the US instead needed to employ the use of force, including pre-emption (58). Security policy has two courses of action through this realist doctrine. First, because the US is stronger, confrontation and conflict is favourable. Second, US capabilities, including military force can produce relative gains for the US. Thus, even though conflict is costly – especially military conflict – the US is able to achieve a net gain through the use of force against rogue states[10]. As such, the US intervention in Libya was more so about advancing national security interests in an anarchic system by eliminating a rogue regime through the use of force. Through the neorealist interpretation, it is human rights that are irrelevant or ancillary to this prime objective. As detailed, NATO's aggressive pursuit of regime change supports this claim. In addition, neorealists reject the liberal argument that international law can temper anarchy and regulate state behaviour, claiming instead that international law is simply a tool to be used and misused by powerful states. Once again, empirical evidence would appear to support this premise. Foremost, NATO overstepped its authorized mandate. UNSC Resolution 1973 did not authorize offensive action or regime change. South African President Jacob Zuma said he was "not happy" that a no-fly zone "became the bombing cover for the [rebels]" ("Leaders" 2011). Furthermore, NATO violated the arms embargo by actively supplying weapons to the rebels, even though many had links to extremism. NATO also violated the framework of the UN resolution through the use of British, American and Canadian soldiers on the ground (Wang 2011; Fitzpatrick 2011). Thus, for neorealists, political calculations were central for NATO's decision to intervene.

Marxists would agree with neorealists that NATO's decision to intervene had more to do with politics than human rights. However, for Marxists, economic interests take precedent. State preferences are not crafted by rational unitary state actors; instead, they are heavily influenced by the upper socioeconomic strata. Gamble states that "what states did abroad very clearly reflected the interests of the dominant sections of their national capital and not just something as vague as national interest" (1999, 128). According to this interpretation, economics and politics and fundamentally intertwined so much so that the state is malleable to ruling-class interests and seeks to create favourable conditions for capital accumulation (135). Colonel Gaddafi had a well-documented tense relationship with Western commerce. Once Gaddafi was ousted, Western financial interests would be in a prime position to benefit from a liberalized economic system. Indeed, the National Transitional Council said that it intends to reward countries that supported its fight. British Defence Secretary Philip Hammond urged companies to "pack their suitcases" and head to Libya, prompting some to posit that the "starting pistol" for Libya's resources has been fired (Adetunji 2011; Krauss 2011). What's more, Hammond stated that while much of Libya lay in ruins, "great care had been taken" to avoid destroying critical infrastructure necessary for commercial operations (Adetunji 2011). These financial interests were not merely reacting to new business opportunities; rather, Libya's "coming bonanza" was an ongoing topic amongst transnational economic networks well before the regime collapsed (Walt 2011). Economist Joseph Stiglitz implicitly concurs with a Marxist interpretation of the use of force to open previously closed markets. He states that the US has adopted "an increasingly hard-powered economic agenda," noting "America's international political economy was driven by a whole variety of special interests which saw the opportunity to force other countries to open their markets to its goods on its terms" (Steger 2008, 233). As such, through this theoretical framework, the Libyan conflict was a result of capitalist interests seeking to upend the Libyan political system to benefit particular upper-class interests.

Liberals would counter that even though political objectives were evident in Libya, they do not trump humanitarian objectives nor do they negate the need to act to avert a humanitarian crisis. In fact, Taylor Seybolt argues that

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humanitarian intervention is inherently political, so much so that its success requires a clear, attainable political objective (2008, 19). Some liberals would also argue offensive action is justifiable. Tesón states that causing harm, including the death of innocents, is justifiable as long as the intervention saves more lives (2003, 117). Yet, in Libya, even this nuanced argument would not justify the conduct of the intervention. Seumas Milne states "it is now absolutely clear that, if the purpose of intervention in Libya's civil war was to save lives, it has been a catastrophic failure" (2011). The UN estimates 1,000-2,000 people died before the intervention; during the eight month conflict, estimates of the death toll range from 10,000-50,000 (Milne 2011). For a liberal interpretation of the conflict in Libya that moves away from a rigid moral interpretation, one has to turn to democratic peace theory. This theory posits "differences in religion, language, and other characteristics contribute to war" (Levy 1989, 83). NATO intervened in Libya because of the absence of institutional similarities or likeminded social, political and economic beliefs. NATO as a collective security arrangement guarantees peace among its members but requires assertive actions against outsiders. From this vantage point, the Libyan intervention was not just about curbing human rights violations; it was also about the promotion of democratic values through regime change. While this argument may have more empirical support, it nonetheless undermines the notion that protecting civilians was the prime motivator for NATO's intervention. This would explain why NATO looked the other way when the opposition committed human rights violations. Ultimately, NATO needed rebel boots on the ground to institute a political change.

Humanitarian Intervention after Libya

Nearly two years after the fall of the Gaddafi regime, questions endure regarding the reasons for NATO's decision to intervene. Empirical evidence suggests a political objective superseded humanitarian considerations. A liberal interpretation arguing for the primacy of human rights cannot account for NATO's conduct during the conflict. Neorealist and Marxist interpretations on the other hand provide intriguing theoretical explanations arguing for the primacy of political motivations. Nevertheless, normatively, humanitarian intervention was not intended to be a shortcut to regime change. Seybolt makes an important point here: "humanitarian intervention might be less likely in future situations where civilians truly need help if the claim of humanitarian motives is doubted because of past misuse" (2008, 5). Indeed, Russia and China have repeatedly correlated their decisions to block UNSC resolutions on Syria with reference to NATO's actions in Libya.

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[1] The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) argues that a state's freedom from external interference is conditional upon its fulfillment of its sovereign obligation to protect its citizens.

[2] During the vote for UN Resolution 1973 India and Russia among other countries expressed concern regarding who would enforce the resolution and for what reasons (UN, 2011).

[3] Holzgrefe defines humanitarian intervention as "the threat or use of force across state borders by a state (or group of states) aimed at preventing or ending widespread and grave violations of the fundamental human rights of individuals other than its own citizens, without the permission of the state within whose territory force is applied," (2003, 18).

[4] The Security Dilemma is a condition whereby one's states efforts to improve national security threatens another state, which provokes countermeasures.

[5] Kant argued non-democratic regimes are more war-prone whereas democracies are inherently peaceful (Levy 1989, 84). This is because in a democracy those who would suffer in wartime are part of the decision-making process (Doyle 1986, 79). In 1976, a study of democracy and war in the period 1816-1965 by Small and Singer found this to be untrue, both in the frequency and severity of war. Subsequent studies have corroborated the findings of the Small-Singer study (Levy 1989, 87).

[6] Classical Marxism argues that capitalist economies pit two social classes against one another: the bourgeoise, who own the means of production, and the proletariat or workers, who own labour power, which must be sold to the bourgeoise (Jackson and Sorenson 2010, 189). Because the bourgeoise control the means of production and are driven by the need to accumulate wealth, the relationship is naturally exploitive as labour has to put in more work relative to its compensation in order for the bourgeoise to appropriate surplus value (189).

[7] Overproduction implies that because the bourgeoise continue to appropriate surplus value from the proletariat, it effectively undermines the capacity of the workers to purchase the products of the bourgeoise. This requires the state to open new markets for capitalist exploitation.

[8] As the most powerful body in NATO, understanding US motivations is central to explaining NATO's decision-making process.

[9] Rogue states are characterized by their aggressive tendencies, threatening posture toward regional neighbors, as well as the international community in general, sponsorship of international terrorism, and most notably, the pursuit of weapons of mass destruction (O'Reilly 2013, 58).

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Tesón explicitly disregards the misuse of humanitarian intervention for political purposes primarily because of the cost associated with intervention (2003, 113). Yet, the Rogue Doctrine explicitly calls for the use of force despite costs. Indeed, Tesón's argument would appear naive for realists: if a powerful state is willing to incur costs solely to defend human rights, why wouldn't that same state incur costs to achieve a political gain? In 2003, the Bush Administration attempted to do just that when it sought to frame its invasion of Iraq as a humanitarian intervention.

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Written by: Terence Fernandes
Written at: Freie Universitat
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