Breaking and Entering: Subverting Sovereignty Despite the International System

Intervention and sovereignty are two very important, yet seemingly contradictory, components of the international system. One qualifying interpretation of the concepts was made by Lawson and Tardelli (2013): sovereignty does not apply to interventions in the way it is directly applicable to war. Rather, intervention 'qualifies or suspends' the notion of sovereignty (2013: 1235). This apt distinction offers a space to broaden the concept of interventions as a practice and recognises that sovereignty is in itself a malleable definition of nationhood.

In considering international interventions as broad and ever present, but distinctly not war, MacMillan (2013) offers a working definition that realises 'discrete acts of coercive interference in the domestic affairs' of other nation states (Macmillan, 2013: 1041). As such, a wide definition of interventions encompasses military interventions and sanctions, special trade relations or deals, development aid, diplomatic initiatives, covert military operations, weapons trades, comprador elites, and many other influences on a given state (Phillips, 2016). It falls just short of practices in international relations as a whole. In addition to this conceptualisation, Reus-Smit (2013) posits that interventions involve the reconfiguring of institutions, identities, and socio-political practices, and do not necessarily involve an international order constituted by sovereignty; rather, interventions simply arise as interactions 'between transnational social forces and bounded political identities' (Reus-Smit, 2013: 1076). Similarly, sovereignty has had multiple interpretations over time and space; it has been taken as self-determination, legal and international recognition, and as a form of responsibility (Krasner, 1999; Chandler, 2008; Lawson and Tardelli, 2013). Most simply, it attempts to delineate what is local, external, and international authority (Ayoob, 2002).

This essay looks to answer the question that arises from these irreconcilable facets: what it is about international intervention practices that make them so prevalent, despite the preaching of the principle of sovereignty in the international system. It is important to note, however, that this paper will focus its analysis on state-level interventional practices. Those conducted by NGOs or those argued to be for humanitarian or altruistic purposes are outside the scope as they push the intervention-sovereignty dilemma to something unanswerable without employing subjective opinion and philosophical disputes. Instead, this essay considers state actions and those elites who make and influence decisions that intervene in other states' governances and their violations, or non-violations, of international sovereignty and non-intervention principles. To answer this question, this essay will engage with the question of power, the role of the UN Security Council, hidden practices of intervention, and the blurring of the local-international line when it comes to elites. This discussion finds that there are two broad but understandable reasons as to why interventions are and have been so common; first, those with the agency and power to intervene can do so with little to no repercussion, and second, states can alternatively apply tools and techniques of intervention that do not disrupt superficial values of sovereignty.

Within discussions on international interventions, there comes an inherent need to contend with the power dynamics and imbalances between states. It is this power imbalance that gives one state the potential for agency over another and puts a nations' capacity to hold its autonomy in question. John MacMillan (2013) outlines three forms of asymmetrical power that pre-empt interventions: Great Power status (such as that held by the USA or Britain); market control; and the social construction of forms of symbolic difference. With these comes a sense of superiority that is bolstered by growth and advancement, and one that enforces the self-perception of absolute agency, thus

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allowing for the ignoring of *de facto* sovereignty of other states. The right to sovereignty is afforded by Great Powers to other Great Powers and signifies a level of status that is inaccessible to less physically powerful states (Lawson and Tardelli, 2013). Such status and self-legitimisation, justified by force, provides these states with the capability to perform elite bargains at local and international scales (Charbonneau, 2012). Charbonneau's article regarding the regime change peace interventions in Cote d'Ivoire concludes that agency is 'performed, authorized, institutionalised, […] claimed, resisted, challenged, negotiated, and/ or transformed' (Charbonneau, 2012: 520), but ontologically, this agency, however dynamic, is signified through violence. French military and UN troops deployed to Cote d'Ivoire were a show of agency, and thus an accepted capacity to intervene in the regime change and take part in the conflict (Charbonneau, 2012). Similarly, the US's invasion and alteration of governance policies in Iraq in 2003 – whether under the guise of democratisation or conducted in response to the claims of weapons of mass destruction, regime change against Hussein, or the desire for regional resource control – were a display of great authority and power in the country and on the international stage (Docena, 2003).

The US did not have permission to interfere under international law, nor were interventions authorised by the UN Security Council; additionally, while in occupation, alternative governance policies implemented by the US did not have support or consent from Iraqis (Docena, 2003). Despite this, the invasion carried on. Fulfilling MacMillan's sources of power imbalance, the US indeed had Great Power status, it seized market control through the engagement of US based private corporations for both the invasion and the attempted rebuilding of Iraq, and it constructed and preached democracy, security, and anti-terrorism as symbols to justify its actions (Docena, 2003; Klein, 2007). Iraq's sovereignty and right to self were barely considered by the intervening party.

The UN Security Council's role in international interventions is, in theory, that of an equaliser. However, this role is confounded by the permanent five members (China, France, Russia, the USA, and the UK) and their veto powers. While interventions need approval by the Security Council, any of these members can veto such a resolution if it is not in their best interests (Phillips, 2016). Conversely, as seen by the case of Iraq, this mandate is not universally enforced either. Indeed, it is the UN itself where the notions of sovereignty were codified both by the West as organizing global powers for the protection of themselves and their territorial legitimisation, and as a legal concept alongside the civilising mission (Bonilla, 2014). The UN Security Council's inherently unequal power and states' ability to make unilateral decisions is another source of politico-legal agency that allows for international interventions – ones that are typically self-serving. This illustrates that while states may be *de jure* sovereign,' they are far from *'de facto* equal' (Lawson and Tardelli, 2013: 1242). On the international stage, little regard is given to lesser nations, those with less agency or less physical, economic, or political capacity to resist. Despite the reality of real world situations being ineffably complex, Millar (2017) pertinently draws account of the 'technocratic, problem-solving, or tool-kit' solutions of contemporary intervening practices – ones that do not take 'consideration for local political, economic, cultural, or social' diversity (2017: 294). It can be clearly seen that those most powerful intervene as and when they chose, and while doing so, have the ability to disregard local realities just as they can the notion of local sovereignty.

In applying the aforementioned wider definition of interventions, many more practises in international relations as a whole can be comprehended. As such, lying at the peripheries of what is considered an intervention, exists everyday interventionism (Williams, 2013). These forms of intervention are less overt than traditional, physical force-based, boots-on-the-ground forms of intervention and so are less likely to trigger questions of the violation of sovereignty – despite being just as coercive.

Firstly, the utilisation and manipulation of political economy in intervention practices have been common since the instigation of international relations. Through this, interventions in states are increasingly no longer exclusive to other powerful states, but rather both private and public entities are gaining power to intervene in politics at a global scale – interacting with equal power and agency to one another – so as to 'coercively reshape state-society relations without resorting to military force' (Lawson and Tardelli, 2013: 1242). This is exemplified by the United States and International Financial Institutions' (IFI) involvement in Iraq during and after the 2003 invasion (Docena, 2003; Klein, 2007). Not only was massive military force involved in the intervention, but USAID also employed several contractors in a number of sectors to reshape governance and economic structures to the tune of Western neoliberalism and free-market capitalism in their pursuit of economic growth. These contractors (e.g., Bearing Point, Bechtel, DynCorp,

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Halliburton, etc.) called on for apparent 'technical assistance' (Docena, 2003: 7) were US-based corporations with ties to US executives running the intervention operations. The reformation of state policies in Iraq worked to benefit international investors and ultimately remove wealth from the country and its people (Docena, 2003; Klein, 2007).

One such example of Bremer's orders enacted through the Coalition Provisional Authority was Order 39; it removed the regulations on 'investments and operations of multinational corporations' (Docena, 2003: 3) and allowed the repatriation of organisational profits, thus worsening reinvestment prospects in Iraq. Another was Order 81, which allowed for the monopolisation of agricultural companies by multinationals, thus removing food and property security from locals (Docena, 2003). Moreover, to enforce and solidify economic restructuring, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank were involved. As has been the case elsewhere, here too did the IMF and the World Bank's loans come with conditionalities that severely inhibited the future prospects of the country, while still benefitting the interveners' agendas and respecting their agency far more than that of the intervened (Docena, 2003; Klein, 2007; Woodward, 2013; Loewenstein, 2015). While these specific intervention tools – political and economic power – were not physically violent in their display, they did still interfere gravely with Iraq's own self-determination and security.

The use of political economy and interventions through the IMF and World Bank come in parallel with the concept of development and aid interventions. Just as with brute force military interventions, foreign development can be seen as a 'tool of global ordering' (Williams, 2013: 1216). Notwithstanding the fundamental moral and ethical flaws of the aid industry (paternalism, short-sightedness, technocracy, and unsustainability), it can be seen that humanitarian interventions are used by states as a device to interfere in the functioning and independence of other states. This is epitomised by Klein's (2007) concept of 'Disaster Capitalism,' for instance, in international developmental interventions in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake. Here, certain states, the World Bank, and other large-scale actors envisioned the recovery process as an opportunity for macro-economic development for the country, all the while locals simply wanted to restore their livelihoods and well-being (Katz, 2013; Loewenstein, 2015). Their inability to forego essential aid amidst disaster, however, resulted in the privatisation of their communications sector and much of the public services. This removed their right to autonomy and control over their own state's reconstruction (Klein, 2007). Great Power states such as the US exercise their hegemonic interests in developing states through responding to humanitarian crises just as in conflict or in 'strengthening fragile states' (Williams, 2013: 1229) through the use of USAID, other development agencies, and international development projects. These devices are dubbed transformative development and transnationalisation and serve to support strategic goals of interveners through their influence on local policy – all the while placing the actual livelihoods, services, and local institutional stability as wholly secondary (Williams, 2013).

Furthermore, it can be seen that the global centre of political economy is moving east-ward, and the once Great Powers are losing their stronghold on other global geopolitics and resources (Forough, 2019). This is particularly true for those with garnering resources like the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). The BRICS countries provide a new source of funding and increasingly shift the global order, threatening the dominance of the OECD[1] (Cunliffe, 2019). An interesting illustration of this movement is the case of China. Forough (2019) notes the emphasis that the state places on its core principle of non-interference. Despite this proclamation, however, China often has and continues to intervene in the affairs of other sovereign states, like in its support of UN missions in Afghanistan or its interventions in Vietnam. Contemporarily, this is done through the provision of selective development projects, and as such China's accompanying influence, especially in the 'economically ignored' (Forough, 2019: 279) sub-Saharan Africa, through their Belt and Road Initiative (Lawson and Tardelli, 2013; Forough, 2019). China's seemingly contradictory non-interventionist policy and increasing active interventionism serve to both ensure China's securitisation in an increasingly interconnected world and to revise the international system into something more conducive to its rising power. Similarly, other BRICS countries are exercising their growing dominance and pushing an increasingly multipolar world (Cunliffe, 2019). BRICS countries' newer interventionism is subtle, far less violent, and so can be seen to bypass traditional notions of sovereignty; they are done with little to no external attention or published justification (Mac Ginty, 2019).

Contrary to Western liberal interventionism, this interventionism is distinct; it offers 'ways in which non-Western actors have already developed particular complexes of interference, of which [traditional] intervention comprises but

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one element' (MacMillan, 2019: 319). In the context of aid, intervention is often invited (or indeed bargained) by local elites (Lawson and Tardelli, 2013; Williams, 2013). This illustrates precisely how the local-international line, and as such the delineation of sovereignty, is increasingly blurred. Charbonneau (2012) rightly points out that the assignment of agency to that which is international in contrast to that which is local ignores the mobile influence of elite actors involved in intervention practices. This local/ international dichotomy is one that falsely simplifies complex situations and the elite bargains that take place. In discussing the case of Cote d'Ivoire, for example, Gbagbo was as much a local element of the conflict as he was an 'international actor in peace negotiations' (Charbonneau, 2012: 521). An alternative example is that of Sri Lanka. After the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, much of its coastal towns were destroyed and so its people desperately needed reconstruction and aid (Klein, 2007). However, political, and economic elites within the country engaged with foreign aid donors and organisations to capitalise on the disaster; they invited privatisation and corporate-led expansion of the tourism industry along the coastline – in place of domestic reconstruction efforts (Klein, 2007). Here, the Sri Lankan government breached its social contract with locals and invited flouting of its own agency (Klein, 2007). Whether political, economic, or physical, elites dictate intervention outcomes, so too do they dictate their right to a state's self-determination. Local or international, the limits of sovereignty are manipulated by actors, for their own benefits, in either realm.

Sovereignty, although an idealised overarching international principle, is malleable. It is highly subjective, dynamic, and ever evolving in its applications (or lack thereof). Similarly, intervening is in and of itself an extremely fungible policy tool – it can serve several purposes and comes in many different shapes and forms, and of these but a handful clearly violate ideals of sovereignty. There are two broad reasons as to why intervention practices are so common throughout the international system. Primarily, if a state or an elite has physical, economic, or political power, it can intervene in another's affairs with little repercussion. The application of this power is practically always done for the state's own gain and at the expense of the intervened. Here, sovereignty becomes little more than a formality that can be brushed away through influence. Secondly, if intervention practices are not type-cast, boots-on-the-ground style occurrences, they do not need external justification. Through the manipulation of political economy, development aid, and the engagement of local elites, these intervention practices circumvent questions of sovereignty. It can be concluded, therefore, that if one does not have the agency, strength, or independence to resist external intervention – in any of its forms – what one has is at best a diminished degree of sovereignty.

End Notes

[1] The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, an intergovernmental economic institution that contains 37 developed countries that are committed to democracy and a market economy.

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