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Stefano Recchia. "Soldiers, Civilians, and Multilateral Humanitarian Intervention."
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Four years after the United States' invasion of Iraq, former Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott wrote that one word summed up the U.S. failure in Iraq: "unilateralism."¹ Scholars have largely agreed with this reading of international cooperation—or lack thereof—in the run-up to the war. As Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth note, such unanimity is rare among scholars.²

For all the unanimity regarding this antipathy toward unilateralism, there has been plenty of disagreement on the topic, namely about why the United States acts as though multilateralism is a necessary ingredient for intervention. One camp suggests that on the whole, multilateralism is instrumentally useful insofar as it helps

¹ Strobe Talbott, "Unilateralism: Anatomy of a Foreign Policy Disaster," *International Herald Tribune*, 21 February 2007.

² Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, "International Relations Theory and the Case against Unilateralism," *Perspectives on Politics*. 3:3 (2005): 509-524.

the lead state share the burden, while also diffusing any pushback that might result from antagonizing other states.³ Another camp views multilateralism as more of a normative end in which states go to great lengths to assemble multinational coalitions out of a sense of legitimacy and appropriateness.⁴

Both sets of accounts have largely ignored domestic politics. Stefano Recchia argues in “Soldiers, Civilians, and Multilateral Humanitarian Intervention”⁵ that this is an unfortunate oversight, and that only by turning to the attitudes of America’s military leaders themselves can we locate the motivation behind seeking multilateral approaches for U.S.-led humanitarian intervention.

Recchia’s account suggests that American generals prefer multilateralism for interventions where there is no clear security threat because it allows the military to avoid onerous burdens for humanitarian missions that the military tends not to favor. Marshaling evidence from dozens of interviews with senior defense officials, Recchia illustrates the plausibility of the argument with case studies of Kosovo and Haiti.

While the argument extends the existing literature on why the U.S. prefers multilateralism, it also raises a number of questions both theoretical and empirical. First, while the argument’s scope conditions seem to be limited to humanitarian intervention, we see multilateral outcomes in non-humanitarian interventions as well—Afghanistan has been quite multilateral—so how would Recchia explain these outcomes? Moreover, humanitarian interventions are easy cases for norms. Indeed, Martha Finnemore’s account of multilateral norms is situated in the context of humanitarian intervention, so why should we expect that military leaders would not also embrace these norms, and how do we differentiate in a qualitative sense whether these leaders have subscribed to the norms or are more interested in the burden-sharing elements that Recchia ascribes to them?⁶ If it is burden-sharing, why should we not expect senior military officers to prefer multilateralism in other contexts?

Second, the emphasis on civil-military relations in the context of cooperation behavior in military interventions is novel, although it raises questions in terms of causal weight. Why should we expect the military to be the dominant voice when it comes to cooperation strategies rather than other actors in the bureaucracy that would likely be more trusted when it comes to such matters, in particular, the State Department? After all, it was Secretary of State James Baker in the Gulf War who logged hundreds of thousands of miles shuttling between country capitals to generate multilateral support, and Secretary of Defence Colin Powell leading up to both Iraq and Afghanistan, doing the heavy lifting in terms of generating multilateral buy-in for those wars. Why should we expect the Defense Department to have more influence than the State Department? For Recchia’s argument, the two sets of preferences converge on multilateralism,

³ Sarah Kreps, *Coalitions of Convenience* (Oxford University Press, 2011); Alexander Thompson, *Channels of Power: The UN Security Council and US Statecraft in Iraq* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

⁴ Martha Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

⁵ Stefano Recchia, “Soldiers, Civilians, and Multilateral Humanitarian Intervention” *Security Studies*, 24:2 (April-June 2015): 251-283.

⁶ Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention*.

which means an overdetermined outcome, making it more difficult to determine the relative influence of Defense versus State.

By the same token, scholars have written at length that the public turns to the United Nations Security Council as a 'second opinion' on the use of force, viewing it as an impartial judge of the merits of using force.⁷ How do public attitudes, which have been convincingly cited as creating political incentives for leaders to act in ways consistent with those preferences,⁸ stack up against the influence of military officers when it comes to multilateralism? Part of the problem for Recchia is that these are not necessarily alternative arguments or actors, but actors whose preferences are generally in line with those of the military officers, at least when it comes to attitudes about multilateralism, which add to the difficulty in differentiating the causal influence of one versus another. What we end up with is an over-determined outcome, making it interesting but not as analytically useful to know that the military was also pushing for that same outcome.

Third, Recchia illustrates the logic with two cases of humanitarian intervention in the Clinton Administration. I recognize that these are plausibility probes, but the generalizability of the findings is somewhat limited. As Michael Mandelbaum observed at the time, the type of interventions of the 1990s were somewhat peculiar cases of "social work"⁹ that look different from more recent cases of so-called humanitarian intervention such as the 2011 Libya case, where multilateralism was unavoidable rather than the deliberate choice. In other words, given that France and the UK took the lead in enforcing the initial no-fly zone and pushing the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution that would ultimately authorize the use of force,¹⁰ is it meaningful to speak in terms of American preferences for multilateralism since it was joining a coalition rather than corraling members of a coalition as was the case in the 1990s? In addition, the Clinton Administration's relationship with the military was notoriously fraught, which may paradoxically have forced the administration to be more deferential to the military. The military was influential on everything from restricting Bosnia military operations to airstrikes in August 1995 to limiting the availability of forces for Kosovo in 1999. According to Michael Desch, however, "the Bush administration embraced a fundamentally different approach to civilian control. Administration officials worried that without aggressive and relentless civilian questioning of military policies and decisions at every level, they would not be able to accomplish their objective," and instead implemented an "unequal dialogue" in which civilians dominated decisions about the use of force.¹¹ Taken together, one wonders whether the type of intervention carried out in the 1990s plus the particular strength of the military during that time limits the generalizability of the argument.

⁷ Joseph Grieco, Christopher Gelpi, Jason Reifler, and Peter Feaver, "Let's Get a Second Opinion: International Institutions and American Public Support for War," *International Studies Quarterly*, 55:2 (2011): 563-583; Terrence Chapman, *Securing Approval: Domestic Politics and Multilateral Authorization for War* (University of Chicago Press, 2012).

⁸ Ole Holsti, *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004); Michael Tomz and Jessica Weeks, "Public Opinion and the Democratic Peace," *American Political Science Review*, 107:4 (2013): 849-865.

⁹ Michael Mandelbaum, "Foreign Policy as Social Work," *Foreign Affairs*, Jan/February 1996. 16-32.

¹⁰ Steven Erlanger, "France and Britain Lead Military Push on Libya," *The New York Times*, 18 March 2011.

¹¹ Michael Desch, "Bush and the Generals," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2007. 97-108

The article's contribution would still be notable, but the author should consider whether claims beyond the Clinton administration in the 1990s are justified.

Overall, the question of how the United States uses force, and in particular when and why it operates multilaterally or unilaterally, is of enduring significance given the United States' ongoing involvement in places such as Afghanistan and the Middle East. Recchia's piece has given us one more lens through which to think about these decisions on the use of force.

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