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Is There an Obama Doctrine?

Did the president articulate a new blueprint for American involvement in foreign wars?

The Risks of the Moral Imperative

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Notwithstanding the magnanimity of the so-called Obama Doctrine — loosely defined as America’s moral imperative to intervene militarily wherever foreign leaders commit atrocities against their own people — it fails to address two inherent limitations of Washington’s attempt to shape foreign conflicts to its liking.

First, as demonstrated in Vietnam, Kosovo, Somalia, Iraq and elsewhere, altruism alone is not enough to yield the outcomes America wants. The best plans cannot overcome the practical limitations and unintended consequences that arise in the course of armed intervention.

Second, because the United States has a history of brandishing the “violation of human rights” threat in order to justify initiating and continuing wars, to billions of others around the world our good intentions often cloak ulterior motives that serve American interests.

Given these two limitations, America’s effort in Libya might hurt as much as it helps.

In terms of reaching the ends Washington seeks, troubles abound. It is still unclear who Libya’s “eastern rebels” are, what will follow Qaddafi politically, and whether the West can lay the groundwork for the promotion of liberal democratic institutions. Regarding the audience beyond Libya, the appearance that the West is attacking yet another Muslim country may not only confirm the narrative that the United States seeks to weaken and dominate the Islamic world, but also increase the amount of anti-American radicalism that fuels Islamist terrorism.

American assistance to the people of Libya remains, in principle, justifiable and even morally supportable; however, the question comes down to whether an American campaign to battle evil in foreign lands has the potential to generate an assortment of other more unpleasant evils.

Topics: Barack Obama, Libya, Military

As we've learned over and over, altruistic motives in armed intervention often do not head off greater evils.