

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

America's Quandary: To Intervene or Not to Intervene?

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I'm grateful to my Cato colleague Brad Stapleton for organizing a forum with Michael W. Doyle, discussing his new book *The Question of Intervention: John Stuart Mill & the Responsibility to Protect*. I'm doubly grateful to Brad for asking me to comment, not because I'm short on things to do, but because I might not have read the book otherwise. I've spent the last few days pondering why Mill's essay, "A Few Words on Non-Intervention," published in 1859, is still relevant today.

Not all of it, mind you. Mill's defense of imperialism was consistent with nineteenth century attitudes, but would offend modern readers (with a few notable exceptions). But Doyle, the Director of the Columbia Global Policy Initiative and the Harold Brown Professor of International Affairs, Law, and Political Science at Columbia University, reminds us why Mill's presumption of nonintervention among *civilized* nations was, and is, correct.

As hard as it may be for many Americans to appreciate, since our military seems to be always at war, most other countries generally avoid intervening in other countries' affairs.

"Nonintervention is the norm of modern international law, international ethics, and the just war tradition," Doyle writes, at the beginning of the book, "it can be overridden or disregarded only with good reasons."

Doyle has thought long and hard about those "good reasons." His other books include *Striking First: Preemption and Prevention in International Conflict*, which I reviewed for the *Cato Journal* (here). He is well versed in the ethics of war.

But this latest book doesn't get bogged down in purely moral or legal principles. A key emphasis, instead, is on the practicality of intervention. Doyle (and Mill) stress "the consequentialist character of the ethics of both nonintervention and intervention." Most foreign interventions fail, and even the successes are costly in lives and treasure. The track record of interventions to spread democracy is particularly abysmal. (Data compiled by Doyle and Camille Strauss-Kahn, and published in the book, tracks with Alexander Downes and Jonathan Monten's earlier findings.) The better recourse is to influence the international system through non-coercive means.

Mill's reasons for favoring nonintervention pertain to the *direct* threat posed to the intervener—interventions “can be dangerous to national security”—and the *indirect* reasons, including widely accepted norms against the use of force, and the presumption of self-determination. “Peace should not be broken without good cause,” explains Doyle. “These laws might have been unenforceable, but for Mill, they were not morally discretionary.” Thus, in most instances, countries should refrain from intervention.

In most instances. And our contemporary sensibilities would reject at least some of the types of interventions that Mill deemed appropriate. Doyle explains:

“[P]ersuasive as the moral logic of Mill's views on intervention sometimes is, the fact of the particular cases he cited and the examples we now experience tend to favor a stronger bias toward nonintervention to be overridden or disregarded only in grave cases and with multilateral deliberation.”

The truly tough part, then and now, is in identifying the exceptions when foreign intervention is appropriate and just. Though I am sometimes scorned for my supposed excess of caution with respect to intervention, few self-described noninterventionists disavow *all* foreign intervention. Most, myself included, support the use of force in self-defense—and not merely in retaliation, but also preemptive measures, for example, in the face of imminent threat. Some noninterventionists could even justify anticipatory self-defense, when dealing with particularly serious security threats, for example. But preventive war is quite different from preemption, and runs afoul of a host of problems, not the least of which is our collective inability to predict the future. There's a reason why Bismarck is purported to have said that waging preventive war was akin to committing suicide for fear of death.

I'll write more next week about the modern-day Responsibility to Protect, and how it relates to Mill's thoughts on intervention from over 150 years ago. In the meantime, I recommend Doyle's treatment of this vital question—“To intervene or not to intervene?”—and encourage you to check it out here and here.

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