

Recipe for Chaos

Should the United States ever use its power alone, or should it act only on behalf of the international community? Recent events have made it clear that, on this important question, the Clinton administration leans in the latter direction.

President Clinton introduced the subject in his Inaugural Address, stating that America would use force when the "conscience of the international community is defied." Defining how and in what manner the conscience of the international community is being defied is, of course, inherently a multilateral problem.

Recently, it has been widely reported that a presidential directive will soon be issued placing some American military forces under U.N. command to be employed when a country undergoes a "sudden and unexpected interruption of established democracy or gross violation of human rights." The directive would commit America's armed forces to support peacemaking efforts designed to bring about settlements, not simply to police them. U.S. forces would serve under U.N. commanders, but U.S. officers would be expected to ignore those U.N. orders they judge to be "imprudent or outside the agreed U.N. mandate."

This is a recipe for chaos. If these statements imply that international consensus is the prerequisite for the employment of American power, the result may be ineffective dithering, as has happened over Bosnia. If they mean that international machinery can commit U.S. forces, the risk is American military involvement in issues of no fundamental national interest, as is happening in Somalia.

Just as the president's Inaugural Address avoided the key question of what forum was to determine what offends the conscience of humanity, so the new directive does not explain who is to decide where democracy has been "established," what constitutes a gross violation of human rights and what happens if the interruption of democracy is not "unexpected." And how is an American officer on the ground to decide whether a U.N. order is "imprudent" or "outside the U.N. mandate?"

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Boutros-Ghali, claimed that he had the right to make the final determination. Can anyone really believe that when it comes to risking casualties, American forces can be committed on the basis of an advance presidential decision?

Defining appropriate criteria for the use of American force is a key to international stability. For if potential aggressors come to believe that the use of U.S. force will turn on the ambiguous formulas contained in administration pronouncements, deterrence could be weakened. The difficulty of explaining such ambiguities to the American public may accelerate isolationism and America's abdication from its crucial stabilizing role in the world.

In practice, U.N. multilateralism can work only if all nations share a common perception of a danger, are willing to run the same risks and agree on a common strategy. Unless each of these three conditions is met, multilateral machinery becomes paralyzed, and indeed is likely to favor the side capable of creating *faits accomplis*, as happened from the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1935 to Serbian depredations in Bosnia and Croatia.

To be sure, peace-keeping forces in Cyprus, the Middle East and Cambodia have made major contributions to international stability. But forces like these can be assembled on an ad hoc basis and require no significant combat activity.

In the so-called peacemaking efforts with a permanent force, if multilateral organizations determine the American military commitment, there is the danger of overextension. If they are

given a veto, the risk is abdication. Somalia illustrates the first danger, Bosnia the second.

Multilateral action in Somalia was first raised by Boutros-Ghali, who called attention to starvation there as a more serious problem than what was happening in Bosnia. His concern generated international action because the effort seemed largely humanitarian and because America was willing to bear the initial military burden. The American landing was welcomed by many as an appropriately "selfless" use of American power. But the implication that the absence of any definable national interest is a valid criterion for risking American lives could erode the willingness of the American people to support any use of military power for any purpose.

Madeleine Albright, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, has described the American role in Somalia as nation-building. Defense Secretary Les Aspin has defined the U.S. objective more modestly as security in Mogadishu and the creation of a national police force. None of these worthy objectives, which have no built-in terminal date, justifies risking American lives in a country where there exists no other American national interest.

Moreover, what starts out as a "humanitarian intervention" almost inevitably becomes political. We entered Somalia to distribute food to the starving. The attendant need to establish a security framework drew us into fighting one of the warlords, escalating the American role into a contest over the distribution of political power. Distasteful as it may be to say it, Albright's and Aspin's stated criteria are more reminiscent of the 19th century wars to establish "protector-

ates" than of the humanitarian purposes that first involved America in Somalia.

If, in Somalia, multilateralism triggered a military mission in search of a political purpose, Bosnia has been a human debacle to which U.N. multilateralism has proved at best irrelevant and at worst an obstacle. Every international forum—whether the European Community, NATO or the United Nations—has failed to agree on the political objective, the principle of military action or the appropriate measures to be taken.

Part of the difficulty has been in defining what multilateral force is supposed to accomplish. If Bosnia is treated as a nation, the purpose of military action would have had to be to restore a unified country. But Bosnia has never been a nation, nor is there any ethnic basis for nationhood. A Bosnian state can be created only by forcing Serbs and Croats, who have already fought one war to avoid living together in Yugoslavia, to live together in a much smaller Bosnia with the Muslims, whom they hate even more than they hate each other. Military support of the Vance-Owen plan would have amounted to an open-ended American (or U.N.) intervention in a civil war and, if some semblance of peace were restored, an open-ended commitment to keeping that peace. The Clinton administration wisely recoiled before this prospect, as did every other nation that considered it.

In the months since, the administration has been dithering, unable to devise a plan of action that would somehow combine a demonstration of its abhorrence of Serbian atrocities with its desire to avoid becoming involved in a prolonged Balkan war. Without clear-cut American leadership, multilateralism in Bosnia amounts to an alibi for inaction.

Even when some consensus did form around possible military action, it was mired in a bog of multilateral confusion. A few weeks ago, NATO agreed to use air strikes, but immediately deadlocked on defining the purpose. Was it to protect Sarajevo? To ensure humanitarian relief? And, if so, against whom? Croats or Serbs? Or only Serbs? Each of these purposes was mentioned at

one time or another, but no clear decision ever emerged.

The command arrangements for the proposed air strikes were a study in confusion. The purpose was variously described as "showing resolve" and "moving up the escalatory ladder." Yet the devastatingly conclusive contrary experience of the postwar period teaches that such symbolic acts are dangerous; the only plausible way to show resolve is by inflicting penalties the adversary is not prepared to accept. In any event, NATO planning was said to be subject to final approval by the U.N. secretary general, an international civil servant with no military experience. Multilateralism of this sort is not policy but a flight from it.

In these circumstances, it seems unwise to commit 20,000 troops to peace-keeping in Bosnia, as has been reported. The agreement is being reluctantly entered into by parties that are unlikely to keep it, putting U.S. forces in the middle under rules of engagement they cannot control.

This leads to the following conclusions:

- There is no substitute for a clear-cut American policy. Whether it is executed multilaterally or unilaterally then depends on how vital a subject is to American interests.
- Force should be used only if definable American interests are at stake. These can—and often should—include moral concerns. But they must be strongly supported by public opinion, and they should be clear.
- Sufficient force must be applied to reach these objectives quickly and at a minimum cost.
- Multilateral support for the use of American force is, of course, highly desirable. But at the end of the day, America can neither give a veto over the defense of its interests to international institutions nor permit multilateralism to invoke American forces where no significant national interests are involved.

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