

Why Does UN Humanitarian Intervention (e.g., Peacekeeping) Remain Selective?

Martin Binder
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Over the past two decades, the United Nations has responded more strongly to some humanitarian crises than to others. This variation in UN action raises the important question of what factors motivate United Nations intervention.

The scholarship on humanitarian intervention often argues that each humanitarian crisis (and the responses to them) is historically unique and therefore requires a case-by-case explanation.

While it is important that attention should be paid to the specificities of each crisis, research shows that the UN's response to them is not random but follows remarkably consistent patterns.

More specifically, a combination of four factors explains whether the United Nations does or does not take strong action (sanctions, 'robust' peacekeeping operations, military action) in response to a humanitarian crisis.

This explanation has been developed and tested through a comparative analysis of the UN's response to more than 30 humanitarian crises after the end of the Cold War (i.e., since 1990).

- The first explanatory factor is the extent of human suffering in a crisis. In a humanitarian crisis people suffer and die while human rights norms are massively violated. This generates a morally motivated pressure to come to the rescue of threatened populations and to defend international norms.
- Secondly, whether the UN intervenes depends on the extent to which a crisis spills over to neighbouring countries and regions. Humanitarian crises often affect neighbouring countries or regions in negative ways. Spill over effects include widening conflict to regional conflict, refugee flows, terrorism or economic downturn. Spill over effects create a material interest to intervene.
- The third explanatory factor for UN intervention is the ability of a target state to resist outside intervention. Militarily strong target states, or target states that have powerful allies, can raise the costs and risks of UN intervention and affect its chances of success.
- Fourth and finally, UN intervention is explained by the level of material and reputational resources the UN has committed to the resolution of a crisis in the past (sunk costs). To the extent that the UN have invested time, money, and diplomatic efforts in the resolution of the crisis, this creates the wish to protect these investments through continued or escalated involvement.

None of these explanatory factors is sufficient in itself to explain selective intervention. In combination, however, they provide a powerful explanation for the UN's uneven response to humanitarian crises.

When does the UN take strong action?

A few brief examples may help to illustrate how these four factors interact to lead to strong or limited UN action.

Bosnia

UN intervention in Bosnian crisis was clearly driven by a combination of motivational factors. For one, UN members were strongly concerned by the large-scale plight of the Bosnian civilian population and the grave human rights violations committed by the parties to the conflict (ethnic cleansing, the installation of concentration camps, the siege of Sarajevo, and the massacres at Srebrenica). Second, the intervention was motivated by the wish to prevent the crisis from spilling over to Western European countries, most notably in the form of refugee flows, and to stop a more generalized destabilization of the Balkan region. A third important driver of UN intervention in Bosnia was the wish of UN member states to protect the tremendous investments both material (through humanitarian assistance and peacekeeping) and reputational (diplomatic efforts) the UN had made over the course of the conflict. However, when the Bosnian Serbs took hundreds of UNPROFOR blue helmets hostage, this brought the UN to the brink of failure and put the UN's efforts in the Bosnian crisis in jeopardy. In this situation, rather than withdraw, the organisation escalated its response. Finally, outside intervention was facilitated by the inability of the Bosnian Serbs and the Serbian government to generate sufficient resistance against outside intervention by the UN (and later by NATO).

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