



Where are the foreign policy realists?

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J. Michael Barrett

President Obama proclaimed recently that, "preventing mass atrocities and genocide is a core national security interest and a core moral responsibility of the United States of America." Amazingly, prominent conservative voices not only echoed these sentiments, but actually clamored for more direct interventions in foreign conflicts.

They do so without due regard for practical, legal or economic limits on such action. To define humanitarian intervention as a "core national security interest" is nothing short of imperial overreach. It constitutes a radical realignment of centuries of strategic and military thought about the proper use of force.

Nations have long recognized the need to fight to defend certain interests. Security fears, economic interests, and threats to identity and honor were recognized as universal drivers of human conflict at least as far back as the Peloponnesian War of the fifth century B.C. But to violate another state's sovereignty and send our troops to impose our values, even with the "permission" of the United Nations and the global community, is a far cry from anything we've seen before as standing U.S. doctrine.

Consider these four facts, which inevitably intersect:

- * Our federal government is borrowing 40 cents of every dollar it spends;
- * 15,000 man-portable surface-to-air missile systems in Libya are unaccounted for;

* 50,000 civilians, military forces and police officers have died in the drug cartel insurrection afflicting our southern neighbor, Mexico; and
* every 10 seconds a child is reported physically or sexually abused right here in the United States.

One need not be an isolationist to recognize we Americans spend much, much more on our government than we take in as revenue, face significant, unpredictable threats to our security abroad, have failed to address our role in ongoing Mexican drug wars, and allow unspeakable criminal acts to continue here in our own nation -- where we have clear legal, moral and constitutional obligations to protect our citizens and provide for the common good. How, then, can we justify going abroad in search of wrongs to set right when we there is so much not being done here at home?

Most of us, as individuals, would commit ourselves to righting a wrong if we saw it happening and had the power to help. But in such cases, we put only ourselves at risk. Can we apply those values to the higher levels of statecraft, requiring intervention by our military and government to stop aggression and oppression wherever it occurs? In such cases, we would be putting many more lives at risk.

We have heard plenty of bellicose rhetoric from the outspoken interventionists of the neoconservative Right. But where are the foreign policy realists -- the ones who know that although we must not isolate ourselves we also must not overreach our legitimate bounds to serve as the judge, jury and executioner in localized conflicts? If conservatives feel the government is so inept at dealing with domestic problems, how much can they trust its heavy hand abroad?

Realism is not isolationism. It just means picking battles based on clear national security priorities. We are not the world's policeman, and there are problems aplenty here at home. This is not a good time to stretch the mission of those in uniform -- who have sworn to defend us from our enemies -- into a new role as the world's nanny. That's not conservative -- it's just reckless.

J. Michael Barrett, the CEO of Diligent Innovations, is a former Navy Officer and director of strategy for the White House Homeland Security Council.