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Reshaping the Idea of Humanitarian Intervention: Norms, Causal Stories, and the Use of Force

Carrie Booth Walling, *All Necessary Measures: The United Nations and Humanitarian Intervention* (University of Pennsylvania Press 2013).

With an ongoing human tragedy unfolding in Syria and the international community unable and unwilling to respond, Carrie Booth Walling's *All Necessary Measures* reminds us that in international politics, power is "no longer simply about whose military can win but also about whose story can win."¹ That is, the narratives that shape our understanding of the causes and possible solutions of mass violence inherently shape our willing-

1. CARRIE BOOTH WALLING, *ALL NECESSARY MEASURES: THE UNITED NATIONS AND HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION* 5 (2013).

ness to act. In this carefully researched and well-reasoned book, Walling argues that scholars and practitioners must take norms seriously, even in the arena of power politics.

All Necessary Measures considers how the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) began to entertain questions about human rights and then, how principled arguments for human rights led to humanitarian intervention. It contrasts examples of successful humanitarian intervention with those instances of mass atrocity in which the UNSC either refused or failed to act. By comparing these cases, the author convincingly demonstrates that principled ideas and arguments intersect with and change states' interests. It also makes a secondary but no less important argument about the intersection of norms, arguing that human rights exist alongside other norms, particularly state sovereignty, and that these norms are constantly co-evolving. *All Necessary Measures* ultimately points to an emerging synthesis of sovereignty and human rights.

The book adds to the expansive literature on humanitarian intervention by showing that in order to understand when and why states engage in humanitarian intervention, we need to pay particular attention to the narratives states are telling about the use of force and how these narratives and the principled arguments that undergird them can alter states' material interests. Much of the literature on humanitarian intervention focuses on the legitimacy of the idea of humanitarian intervention and the domestic and international hurdles in overcoming collective action problems related to intervention. Many, if not most, of these analyses regard states' material interests

as fixed. Walling reminds us that these interests are not fixed and are instead at least partially socially constructed.

All Necessary Measures puts forth a theory of causal stories. This theory emphasizes the discourse of human rights and humanitarianism used at the UNSC and suggests that the types of stories member states tell influences the decision to authorize force. Through content analysis of UNSC texts, the author identifies three types of causal stories. The first, the intentional causal story, characterizes conflicts as one-sided and premeditated, describing human rights abuses as "systematic, targeted, deliberate."² In intentional causal stories, there is a clear victim and a clear perpetrator, thus resulting in an impulse to punish the perpetrators and protect the victims. The main principles at play are justice and international law.

The second type of causal story, the inadvertent causal story, paints conflict as being two-sided. Civilian casualties are to be expected, but this type of story depicts these casualties as unintended and indiscriminate. Walling calls this a narrative of moral equivalency, meaning that there are multiple parties involved and the conflict often earns the label of civil war or ethnic conflict. The main principles at play are neutrality, sovereign equality, and domestic noninterference, while the main outcomes are framed in terms of providing assistance and protection or conducting observations.

Finally, the third type of causal story is the complex causal story, in which a combination of macro-level factors results in a complicated and tragic scenario that is, almost by definition, unsolvable. The main principles in these narratives are state sovereignty, stability, and the

2. *Id.* at 24.

status quo, and the resulting policy outcomes involve reporting, documentation, condemnations, and appeals, but no other action.

This tripartite scale provides a unique lens through which to look at how UNSC members promote humanitarian intervention and understand the narratives they rely on to justify their action or inaction. Perhaps the two most compelling components of these narratives are the degree to which there is a clear perpetrator and the degree to which humanitarian intervention can actually solve the crisis at hand. The two are, not surprisingly, related. That is, in situations that are described as complex, with large, structural contributing factors, there is no one to clearly blame and the prognosis for humanitarian intervention is grim. Further, failing to identify a perpetrator relieves the UNSC from the onus of action and underscoring the difficulty of effecting change relieves them of this burden even further. In fact, even the Responsibility to Protect doctrine takes to heart the principle of “do no harm.” If a conflict is depicted as multifaceted and complex, with no clear perpetrator or victim and no clear solution, intervention would be at best unhelpful and at worst actively harmful. In contrast, in scenarios where the conflict is portrayed as one-sided and the violence intentional, the assumption is that the UNSC could and *should* do something. That is, in these scenarios the UNSC has both a legal and moral obligation to respond.

One of the main concerns about humanitarian intervention, and particularly the Responsibility to Protect doctrine, has been that interventions eat away at state sovereignty and are thinly veiled attempts at neo-colonialism. *All Necessary Measures* confronts this allegation head on. The author acknowledges the persistence of this critique by saying that intervention

is more likely when state sovereignty is depicted as weak or lacking; that is, when a conflict is framed as the result of state failure, the UNSC is more likely to rely on a narrative that promotes intervention. Conversely, when the narrative highlights a strong state, intervention becomes less likely. An analysis of the discourse around humanitarian intervention suggests that the UNSC is very attentive to sovereignty concerns and is unwilling to sanction intervention in the face of what they see as a strong sovereign state.

Of course, there are often competing narratives about any given conflict. We need look no further than the ongoing debate about Syria among the five permanent members of the Security Council. While the United States has continued to promote a narrative in which the Assad regime is a clear perpetrator of human rights abuse—even while acknowledging that the rebel groups have also had a hand in the violence—Russia has put forth a narrative that portrays Assad as being on the defensive, fighting against an insurgent uprising that threatens the sovereign integrity of the Syrian state. As Walling predicts, when two narratives collide and neither dominates, the result is inaction.

Tracing the effect of discourse is clearly challenging, both because discourse reflects, and perhaps veils, states’ strategic and material concerns, and because classifying narrative patterns is methodologically difficult. Walling uncovers patterns in UNSC member narratives in a novel way. Through content analysis of UNSC texts, she uses the typology of causal stories to identify and analyze the ways in which members talk about conflict, war, and human rights. She uses an approach called predication analysis, which maps out the relationship between the conflicts the UNSC addresses and the verbs, adverbs, and adjectives that

members use to describe these situations. Walling executes her methodology well, providing careful and consistent analysis of the emergence and development of the three causal stories she wants to explore.

The empirical chapters of the book track the development of the norm of humanitarian intervention and the attendant discourse around sovereignty from the first Gulf War up to intervention in Libya. The case studies point to the shifting nexus between intervention and sovereignty norms. For example, in the case of the humanitarian action in the Gulf in the early 1990s, intervention reaffirmed and upheld the sovereignty of Iraq's neighbors. The narratives around intervention in the first Gulf War painted a picture of a clear aggressor and a threat to international peace and security and included human rights abuses as part of this threat.

This is not to suggest that narratives in favor of humanitarian intervention developed in a smooth or linear pattern after the operations in the Gulf in the early 1990s. Instead, as the author suggests, the development of the norm of humanitarian intervention was marked by starts and stops as humanitarian concerns intersected with states' material or strategic interests. Thus, in the case of Somalia, where the government was absent, humanitarian intervention was less controversial and the narrative painted intervention as something novel that the UNSC could accomplish. Meanwhile, in the case of Bosnia, the strategic interests of the P5 and other members yielded less compelling narratives, and as Walling notes, asked member states to address multiple and competing norms at once: "sovereignty, nonintervention, the protection

of nationals."³ It was only until quite late in the conflict and after much loss of civilian life that intervention, and limited intervention at that, took place. In Rwanda, where the violence was perpetrated by a state, it was only after much of the atrocity had occurred that the narrative about the legitimate sovereign authority in Rwanda began to shift.

So where does this leave us? While the Responsibility to Protect doctrine has been formally and widely endorsed by UN member states, controversy and disagreement over the implementation of the doctrine persists. Chapter 7 discusses the conflict in Darfur, which is illustrative of the current state of the relationship between human rights, sovereignty, and intervention norms. The UNSC's resolutions on Sudan highlighted the acceptability of derogations in sovereignty in order to protect human rights. While, on the one hand, the UNSC's discourse reflected the elevated status of human rights and humanitarian law, intervention never took place. Not only did a complex causal story emerge, but so did a causal story identifying Omar al-Bashir's administration as the legitimate sovereign authority in Sudan. Moreover, even the most compelling narratives identifying the suffering of civilians could not overcome some clear logistical and strategic concerns—namely, the prospect of a long, protracted, and possibly unwinnable conflict in Sudan and the fact that the US and its NATO allies were already engaged in Iraq and Afghanistan.

If, as Walling argues, humanitarian intervention is shaped by the causal stories that actors tell about the violence, about the perpetrators, and about the likelihood of intervention stopping harm to civilians, then we should expect the

3. *Id.* at 111.

result to be a veritable mish-mash of policies: intervention here, condemnation there, peacekeepers placed throughout. In the last two empirical chapters—on Darfur and Libya, respectively—*All Necessary Measures* introduces another outcome to this web of causal stories: international criminal prosecution. While humanitarian intervention never took place in Darfur, the UNSC did break new ground by referring the situation in Darfur to the International Criminal Court in 2005, and the International Criminal Court was quick to indict Muammar Gaddafi and his associates during the Libyan Civil War in 2011. Prosecuting suspected perpetrators for war crimes introduces yet another challenge to state sovereignty and shapes the way that the UNSC and the international community talk about responsibility, accountability and sovereignty. As with intervention, principled arguments and causal stories about international criminal accountability are quickly evolving alongside and in conjunction with norms about human rights, intervention, and sovereignty.

Overall, *All Necessary Measures* is an evocative project, in no small part because it challenges the primacy of place that scholars and policymakers give to material and strategic concerns. While other analyses point to the narratives that emerge around humanitarian intervention as the result of states' strategic and material concerns, Walling ultimately argues that material concerns and these narratives are mutually constituted; that is, material concerns do not exist independently of narratives, and similarly, narratives do exist independently of states' strategic and material interests. Walling takes an unabashedly social constructiv-

ist approach to understanding the role of human rights in the context of power politics, and I would encourage even the most rationalist of scholars to read this book for the cogency of its argument and the nuance of its empirical work. This is an important piece of scholarship for all readers interested in conflict and human rights, as it clearly and cogently demonstrates that narratives matter, even in the realm of power politics.

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