

Post-Interventionist *Zeitgeist*: The Ambiguity of Security Policy

Florian P. Kühn

1 Liberal Interventionism, Security and Social Transformation

Over the last two decades, international security has turned into a playing field for experiments in social engineering of all sorts. Under the guise of globalized risks, the states of the Western security community (Deutsch et al. 1957; Etzioni 1965; Adler/Barnett 1998) have attempted to shape social rules and institutionalized mechanisms of state domination elsewhere, more precisely the control and monopolization of violence. To this end, military units were deployed under sometimes contradictory mandates to support political transitions or create the conditions necessary for such transitions to occur (Richmond 2005; Chandler 2009; Kühn 2010; Hameiri 2011; Dodge 2012).

The practice of intervention, however, has produced mixed results at best. While resilient social figurations have resisted, subverted, or transformed the political projects, the agents of the intervening countries have themselves undergone significant changes in organization, outlook, or political salience (Heathershaw 2009; Bonacker et al. 2010; Richmond 2011; Bliesemann de Guevara 2012b). This contribution explores the mutual effects of political adaptation and the social repercussions these political transformations have in the countries sending and receiving intervention forces. Analyzing intervention as policy tightly connected to a liberal understanding of the world and of societies, it scrutinizes interventionist policy as a technique to reshape social relations in Western countries and non-Western countries alike. It will do so putting at its center the concept of ambiguity, which helps to understand current policy making. In this light, what may look like entering a post-interventionist age might in itself be ambiguous in that interventionist practices continue unabated, but are framed differently.

2 Externalizing Costs: The Political Economy of Interventionism

From a political economy point of view, external interventions triggered by security considerations have been legitimized with the horrendous costs in terms of human suffering, refugee migration and also associated security risks to Western societies like weapons and drugs trade, organized crime,

terrorism and the spread of disease. To counter or deter security risks, Western states have over centuries developed costly and specialized apparatuses, consisting of coercive organizations like militaries, epistemic support services such as strategic think tanks, and material supply of the means of violence, such as arms industries. At the same time, the costs of social adjustment, prescribed by a liberal idea of the state as the exclusive source of legitimate violence, has been burdened onto those societies deemed not fit to control populations. The question whose security gains interventions are directed at, thus, remains unanswered: Is it the populations in so-called weak, failing, or failed states whose everyday lives need protection, or is it the populations of the rich West who need to be protected from threats to their way of life emanating from those 'risky' areas outside the security community? (Pugh/Cooper/Turner 2008; Clapton 2009; Hameiri/Kühn 2011; Kühn 2011, 2012a)

That these areas are seen as risky is a development which followed the East-West ideological confrontation, when threats with their clearly determined origin and known and anticipated tactics and intentions disappeared. The void was filled by perceptions of risk, which is significant for its diffuseness, its unknown intentions and potential (Daase 2002: 14–16; Daase/Kessler 2007). While everyday notions of risk bear a more or less balanced relation between opportunity and danger, in this new security paradigm of risk, the latter has increasingly been overemphasized at the expense of the former.¹ For example, the Arab spring was immediately seen as risky in the way that fundamentalist governments might take over states earlier dominated by autocratic and gerontocratic regimes with outrageous human rights records – and not by many as an opportunity for democratic and, eventually, economic development.² This is because the whole idea of liberal peace and security is based on notions of order (Richmond 2002: 31–35) – a conservative approach contradicting liberal economic reasoning with its explorative spirit of entrepreneurship. “Maintaining order”, as Richmond (2002) calls his book, in this sense comes down to preserving or re-installing state institutions, which are viewed to be containers of social relations of all sorts (Bliesemann de Guevara/Kühn 2010: 20–36). Within a risk paradigm, essentially, non-state social relations themselves are treated as being risky, and ever more intrusive

-
- 1 See Hameiri/Kühn (2011: 275–277) for a discussion of the ontological and epistemological differences of the very notion of risk as emblematic in the works of Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens on ‘reflexive modernization’ vice versa Mary Anderson’s view that risks are socially constructed or, third, technologies of government, as Michel Foucault would have it.
 - 2 There may be other reasons to be skeptical about Middle Eastern chances for sustainable transitions, such as continuous rent dependencies (see Beck 2009).

interventions seen as laudable as long as they are expected to solve the problems of instability and disorder (Clapton 2009).

What has been clear is that the social costs of security related interventions were burdened on non-Western societies, with ambitious reform projects aiming at security sectors, but generally also at modes of economic reproduction and, not least, cultural re-adjustments along liberal guiding norms (Sovacool/Halfon 2007; Bhatia/Sedra 2008: 36, 181–183; Dodge 2012; Kühn 2012b). Part of the individualization of security is that people in Western societies empathize with victims of violence, be it in countries like Syria/Libya or victims of terrorist attacks in Western capitals (Rasmussen 2003: 171). The result is a change in political pressure to address these problems in ways exceeding older paradigms of security. While those were based on deterrence and international (state) order, states have become instrumental rather than constitutive for risk deflection and management techniques (Kühn 2011).

One of the results of this development is that interventions have become depoliticized, apparently neutral exercises, creating a huge conceptual misunderstanding between recipient societies and political constituencies in deploying countries: Whereas Western societies see themselves as providing assistance towards a better, i.e. liberal, future, local communities view themselves as being subjected to transformations they did not call for and never meant to exercise (Pugh 2012). Local communities, in effect, seem to have a much better grasp of the violence and forced transformations than intervening parties who are tightly trapped in self-referential discourses and political necessities (such as budgetary restrictions, alliance politics, or tensions between ethics of conviction and ethics of responsibility) (Richmond 2011: 205–211).

Contrasting this logic is the assumption that states which are ruled democratically are a necessary condition for the peaceful conduct of international relations. Economically, democratic states are associated with markets and capitalism – however, it is surprising that democratic peace theory has assumed such salience in the academic discipline of International Relations. Thinking along the lines of democratic peace theory has in itself contradictions and ambiguities, which Müller (2002) calls “antinomies”. He points, among other problems, to the fact that democratic peace theory’s basic assumption that states are exclusive political actors on the international stage is no longer (if it ever was) valid: Over the last decades, globalization and other denationalizing effects have taken away most areas of social regulation from the state or transformed it into modes of transnational governance (Müller

2002: 47).³ From a security perspective, to be sure, it looks different for France to elect François Hollande or the United Kingdom David Cameron compared to Egypt or Iran being ruled by Islamist parties and actors. This points to the mechanisms of perceiving risks in the first place: The states that have formed the so-called Western Security Community communicate comparably more intensely with each other than with those on the outside. This may be understood also as a Security Epistemic Community, bearing distinct ways of framing security as well as being subject to certain dynamics of the *Zeitgeist* (on the ambiguity of peace as a policy and a practice see Kühn 2012b). The obsession with terrorism which streamlined international security policy of the last decade may serve as an illustration.

3 Can Costs be Externalized at all?

Political responsibility is, for the time being, tightly bound to state mechanisms to formulate and put into practice political decisions. This has led to the narrowing down of interventionist policy to the national level, where parliamentary oversight has rolled back leverage for governments in making decisions about interventions.⁴ However, once decisions to take action have been taken, international bodies are quickly mandated to do the implementing. Thus, international policy has become denationalized, located in international bodies such as NATO or EU, in effect working to deflect responsibility for fiscal and policy decisions (Bliesemann de Guevara/Kühn 2010: 192–195). However, in political discourse, this may work as long as things go according to plan; after all, legitimacy of interventions is seen to be higher when many international actors are involved.⁵ Once soldiers or humanitarian

3 This extends to generating meaning for militaries which, despite significant cooperative structures in the Western context (but also including other states' militaries), rely on nationality and national states to generate meaning for what they do – their existence is contingent upon the legitimating narratives of states. Where missions are undertaken in the name of a Western, or European alliance, this legitimacy is being undermined. In other words: Are soldiers prepared to die for the European Union or the continuous existence of NATO rather than their countries?

4 Notwithstanding differences in the political systems of Western states, where French presidents have different political repertoires of action at hand as, for example, a German Chancellor or a British Prime Minister. It is here where the study of domestic politics interlinks with the study of international relations.

5 Interestingly, for the time after 2014 in Afghanistan, the political discourse circles around which kind and depth a mandate by the UN would require while the Afghan side is disregarded wholly.

workers die, once radicalism spreads, indicating ample discontent in the countries of intervention, once mission creep sets in, putting into question efforts in terms of time and money, then parliamentarians and policy makers at all levels of administrations need to address the resulting political pressures.

However, leverage to correct wrongs in policy is limited due to internationalized decision-making procedures and due to international loyalty to alliances which is sometimes regarded higher than concrete policy. This leads to a tendency to act according to the idea of ‘more of the same’, as could be observed in Afghanistan (Suhrke 2011: 219–228).⁶ Following the optimist decade of the 1990s, when liberal ardor directed policy, and the half *angst*-driven, half radical policy of the so-called ‘War on Terror’ during the 2000s, there is growing sentiment now that not all which may be desirable can also be achieved, and that which can be achieved needs to be paid for. The temporal sequence of events means that Iraq and Afghanistan informed subsequent cases of security concerns such as the intervention in Libya or Syria (Pelham 2012).

The striking discrepancy between plans and outcomes, especially in the politics of statebuilding but not limited to it, is part of another ambiguity: Plans are directed at communities and collectives, which may have group identities and practice delineation, assuming that people of all kinds conform to individualist notions of liberalism. In this thinking the individual is the only source of political authority, the indivisible component of a sovereign and a political (and economically) rational actor. The irresolvable ambiguity of the individual and how it is being viewed when acting in accord with collectives makes directing interventionist policies so difficult (Kühn 2010: 102–111). However, because local actors are seldom taken as being on par with Western agents, interventions still unfold according to prefabricated Western concepts, simply because political resistance is limited at first: Either, ‘partners’ are being installed by the intervening powers, or paid for their ‘cooperation’, or politically organized voice against interventionist policy lacks the means of efficiently organizing such political programs. As may be observed in Afghanistan, Iraq, but also in Libya, political resistance against

6 The case of withdrawing troops, as could be observed in Afghanistan where Canada and the Netherlands withdrew combat forces before an official end of the mission even was in sight is illustrative of how exaggerated political concerns about what would happen once solidarity between members of the alliance ended; at the same time, one might argue that it demonstrates the lack of cohesive power of NATO that states can stand by a common mission without consequence.

an implemented order develops in synchronicity with military resistance (Pelham 2012).

For the armed forces, mandated and tasked to keep the order, this means that a more target-oriented structure is required – one that needs to address the discrepancy of collective action, which is often viewed as risky for the intervention and its aims, and individuals, often seen as passive recipients of developments both political and economic. At the same time, the so-called ‘War on Terror’ led to a misguided orientation of security policy, overestimating the unlikely at the cost of strategic orientation. To level strategic planning and military practice, which is essentially social, organizational adaptation is required at both tactical and planning levels, bearing significant consequences for both national apparatuses and security organizations such as NATO. As Theo Sommer has explained, the existing security structures need to adapt to newly recognized realities: That NATO is strongest where it works as a potential rather than where its troops are deployed, where it fosters policy making between member and associated states rather than being in charge of policy implementation (Sommer 2012).

Within the Western security community, the ambiguity of security worked well to legitimize interventions (Bliesemann de Guevara/Kühn 2011). While it remained unclear whose security was pursued, either the local populations’ one or the Western societies’ one, it was easier to claim that constructing states elsewhere was in the security interest of Western tax payers who essentially finance such policies: “The ethics of the Other have enabled the past problems to be rewritten as ones of non-Western state-governing capacity at the same time as denying accountability for present policy strictures. Paradoxically, the attempt to deny power and accountability has driven the extension of external mechanisms of regulation.” (Chandler 2006: 95) Between Chandler’s assertion and today, many more such mechanisms have been innovatively drafted, including advances in drone technology to manage – rather than address – violence.

Notwithstanding that cost factors are more closely scrutinized in times of fiscal and financial crises, two conditions are necessary for legitimizing interventions in this ambiguous way to work. First, the security of Western states and societies needs to be perceived as less problematic than without an intervention and, second, some sort of – even cosmetic – progress needs to be visible in the countries under intervention. Where human rights violations continue under international trusteeship, for example, interventions cannot claim to have solved the problem. What might be called post-interventionist policies could be a complete withdrawal of political involvement – leaving local populations (if there ever was a clearly distinguishable ‘local’ in a spa-

tial or social sense) to their own devices but under control of surveillance and occasional remote action.

4 Social and Societal Effects of Interventionism

Abounding social effects of interventionism are widely ignored in the political debate. On the one hand, numbers of soldiers and civilian workers encountering serious mental health problems are rising, while on the other, social transformations produce pathologies in societies where interventions take place. Among these phenomena is a transformation of political elites, which turn into coalitions of distribution rather than focusing and processing political demands of a tax-paying electorate (Suhre 2011). Instead, in many cases, the latter turn to state institutions for employment, patronage, and opportunities of co-optation (Kühn 2010: 241–254). Despite the best efforts of the intervening parties, and contingent upon general levels of economic development, dependency structures are likely to develop during interventions and to persist well after the main phase of an intervention ends, and indeed, the main funding streams run dry. The political economy of interventions has very transformative, and in this way conflictive, effects. They are, however, seldom analyzed as many of the effects of interventionist political economy on the surface serve other means (capacity building, budget support, development of institutional structures etc.); this allows Western observers to view political-economic pathologies as secondary effects, unintended in their creation but nevertheless unavoidable ‘bads’ in the quest to achieve (greater) goods.

5 Interventionism Rebound: The Legacy of the Liberal World Project

In the liberal mind-set, interventions seek to create or stabilize an international order, comprised by states, which are seen as prerequisites for security and development. This understanding puts the state at the center of all social relations and tries to establish this ‘state of the state’ where it does not yet exist. While post-interventionism may be brought about by the politics of the purse, that is a lack of funds to conduct costly endeavors such as interventions in Afghanistan or Iraq, the basic understanding of the world as one to be shaped by human reason in pursuit of generalized norms is not likely to change. In this light, it merits discussion what ‘post-interventionism’ actually means; is it a change of practices or a significant transformation of the underlying ontological basics – e.g., a pluralism towards multiple forms of economic repro-

duction, social norms and forms of life? Although awareness of the political costs of interventions – for example full-scale military involvement in ending atrocities in Syria – may differ over time, leading to a low willingness to take the risks of intervention, interventionist policy as a concept is by no means discredited. The quest to right the pitfalls of interventionist practice still seems to be ongoing.

For several reasons, mainly because the interlacing discourses of development and security are defining how we understand international relations, it seems unlikely that interventionism has already reached its ‘post’- age. Rather, in the spirit of liberal invention, new forms of intervention and social re-adjustment are likely to be found. The constant reminder of the importance of resilience of local populations, but also of personnel of intervening agencies, is an indication that liberal ideas are likely to prevail. By shaping international policy in such terms, Western agencies provide a mind-set which serves as preconditions to understand reality.

It is in this spirit that strategies of resilience are being applied to Western societies alike. Elsewhere, I have argued that there is a class struggle underway from above which aims to transform traditional functions of social exchange by fostering a sense of threat within Western communities (Kühn 2012b). Mark Duffield (2011) explains how strengthening societies against threats impossible to define and to locate in space and time leads to an all-encompassing security problem being put in the center of security. He argues that a total mobilization of resources and people’s complicity is necessary to enhance preparedness against threats that can no longer be predicted. Resilience as a concept and anti-climax in strategic planning calls for individual preparations and adaptation to changing circumstances (Duffield 2011: 13). Putting the burden of security on individuals, however, fails to foster a retreat of social technology. Instead, making Western societies resilient cascades into continued interventionist practices in non-Western society to become resilient against social but also increasingly environmental, economic, demographic and other risks of modernity.

6 Conclusions: Re-Conceptualizing International Relations and Security

To precisely analyze international relations and security, it might be important to re-conceptualize Western understandings of the world. Much of the canonized knowledge taught in universities and colleges still dates back to the overarching mould of the Cold War; while globalization and problems such as climate change or non-state violent actors have triggered debates on changing structures, the ontological base layers of international relations have

remained remarkably stable. To evaluate the changes in the security environment, four points seem to merit closer scrutiny:

- (1) It would be high time to unfold a conceptual approach which takes into account the dynamics of social figurations beyond the state as well as power structures which cannot be denied despite the formal equality of states in the international legal system. Yet, while dominant Western states are struggling to preserve their defining features in the face of seriously structure-damaging economic challenges, analyzing international relations in terms of imperial approaches seems not to be sufficient either: Rather, looking at structures of domination, tightly connected to capital relations while transcending national borders and modes of political regulation, ought to be at the center of analytical approaches of interventions.
- (2) What is portrayed in the political parlance of international institutions, the commonality of world politics, is lacking the distinct fora of political deliberation: The UN is as state-centric as world society and lacks the means for information exchange on a meaningful scale. What we can observe is a plethora of distinct, often mutually exclusive discourses about legitimacy, policy, and norms. Uproar in the Muslim world against denigration of the Prophet as well as outcries for freedom of expression: Both address home audiences or peer groups rather than being exchanges in a discourse. The same occurs on the practical level of ongoing interventions, where the merits and political calculations are debated systematically excluding the intentions of those concerned. The gap between audiences in Afghanistan, to name but one example, and Western states involved in intervention there may be impossible to bridge.
- (3) For Western actors, the increasing internationalization of missions bears the political advantage of broad-based mandates and increases the intervening regime's weight; over time, however, this might turn into a disadvantage because it becomes an impenetrable network in which responsibilities for what is actually happening on the ground are unclear. Political constituencies as well as policy makers are increasingly becoming uneasy with supporting political practices that they have no say in shaping. The direct link between those paying for the results of decisions and decision making seems to be broken.
- (4) Finally, a professionalization of aid workers as well as of military units engaged with what could be broadly defined as community work has taken place within the last two decades. Their practical experience gives them an epistemological advantage in shaping understanding of what is being done and how it is (or is not) working. In other words: Those involved in interventions have a prerogative in defining problems – how an

intervention is seen in the first place – and solutions – including the instruments to rectify faulty developments. With definitions of problems and the provision of the means to solve them in one hand, it becomes difficult to politically engage in discussions about their value. After all, it is impossible to distinguish which argument or practice is motivated by problems on the ground and which stem from the intrinsic interests of those propagating it. The call for more money and more time on aid agencies' side, but also the call for better equipment, more 'boots on the ground' are, in this regard, the same side of the coin.

In this sense, the age of interventions may just have begun, even though military interventions to establish political orders may be in decline. Economic commodification of land and resources (and subsequent legal regulation), people (as productive forces) and public assets may become a capitalism-driven international mode of social interaction. Short of direct coercion, interventionist practices seem to be headed for a restructuring of the epistemology of security and towards education of individuals to be self-serving and resilient. Whether this includes violent practices or leaves the transformation to the non-Western, not-yet-liberalized Other, remains to be seen. A post-interventionist paradigm, if it exists, may turn out to be a mere change of sequence, as political institutionalization may in the future follow the consolidation of economic structures rather than vice versa.

References

- Adler, Emanuel/Barnett, Michael (1998): *Security Communities*. Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press.
- Beck, Martin (2009): Rente und Rentierstaat im Nahen Osten. In: Beck et al. 2009: 25–49.
- Beck, Martin/Harders, Cilja/Jünemann, Annette/Stetter, Stephan (Eds.) (2009): *Der Nahe Osten im Umbruch. Zwischen Transformation und Autoritarismus*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
- Bhatia, Michael/Sedra, Mark (2008): *Afghanistan, Arms and Conflict. Armed Groups, Disarmament and Security in a Post-War Society*. Abingdon – New York: Routledge.
- Bliesemann de Guevara, Berit (2012a): Introduction: Statebuilding and State-Formation. In: Bliesemann de Guevara 2012b: 1–19.
- Bliesemann de Guevara, Berit (Ed.) (2012b): *Statebuilding and State-Formation*. London: Routledge.
- Bliesemann de Guevara, Berit/Kühn, Florian P. (2010): *Illusion Statebuilding. Warum der westliche Staat so schwer zu exportieren ist*. Hamburg: Edition Körberstiftung.

The Armed Forces: Towards a Post-Interventionist Era?

Kümmel, G.; Giegerich, B. (Eds.)

2013, X, 316 p. 8 illus., Softcover

ISBN: 978-3-658-01285-4