

Review

Martin Binder: The United Nations and the Politics of Selective Humanitarian Intervention

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In the 1980s, the International community seriously began to discuss how to respond effectively to gross and systematic violations of the human rights of citizens. The debate intensified after the tragedies in Rwanda and the Balkans. Actions by outside military forces in several territories have provoked questions about whether there is a right to humanitarian intervention. And certainly, the debate on the subject has been spurred by the strong sense that there were crises (*e.g.* the genocide in Rwanda in 1994) in which the international community should have intervened promptly but failed to do so. The question at the heart of the matter is whether States have unconditional sovereignty over their affairs or whether the International community has the right to intervene in a country for humanitarian purposes. Some International agreements adopted after 1945 (such as the Genocide Convention) have limited the sovereignty of individual states (albeit only with their agreement) and raised the questions of the conditions under which the International community should intervene in internal affairs in order to ensure the implementation of these agreements. There is a contradiction between, on the one hand the right of the state to govern inside the country – and the implementation of human rights on the other. As is known, humanitarian intervention, a long-standing issue in international legal writing and in state practice, has become a major focus of international legal thinking and military action. Since the early 1990s, there have been new and unexpected elements in the practice of intervention, in its authorization, and in debates about it.¹

In his book entitled, *The United Nations and the Politics of Selective Humanitarian Intervention*,² Martin Binder suggests an explanation for the Security Council's selective politics of humanitarian intervention. He takes an approach that variation in the Council's response to humanitarian crises cannot be explained by a single factor but is driven by the interplay of humanitarian considerations, material interests, and institutional effects.

Martin Binder is a researcher fellow in the research unit Transnational Conflicts and International Institutions at the Social Science Research Center Berlin and his research interests include international institutions, military intervention, and human rights.³ Since 2015 he is also Associate Professor at University of Reading and guest researcher at the WZB unit Global Governance. Martin Binder was a WZB Researcher at the Mindos de Gunzburg Center for European Studies at Harvard University. He

¹ A. Roberts, *The So-Called 'Right' of Humanitarian Intervention*, pp. 3, available at: https://weblearn.ox.ac.uk/access/content/user/1044/YBIHL_vol_3_2000_publ_2002_-_So-called_right_of_humanitarian_intervention.pdf (26 March 2018).

² Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

³ M. Binder, Center for European Studies Harvard, 2012-2013, available at: <https://ces.fas.harvard.edu/people/001382-martin-binder> (13 March 2018).

has also worked extensively with human rights and also analyzed Humanitarian Crises and the International Politics of Selectivity, also legal, political and philosophical perspectives on international institutions. Thanks to his background in research, history and the practical side, Martin Binder is an expert on the issue and his work is very promising.

First, Martin points out that a combination of four factors determines whether and how strongly the Council acts when faced with a humanitarian crisis: „the extent of human suffering in a crisis; the extent to which a crisis spills over to neighbouring countries and regions; the ability of a target state to resist outside intervention (countervailing power); the extent of material and reputational resources the UN’s has committed to the resolution of a crisis in the past (sunk costs).“⁴ In his book he explains that none of these factors is sufficient in itself to account for the observed variation in UN humanitarian intervention. Jointly, however, they offer a powerful explanation that covers more than 80 percent of the Council’s response to humanitarian emergencies after the Cold War. The book focuses on UN Security Council intervention decisions for several reasons, but especially because the Council is the key international security institution and the only one with a truly global reach.

In the second chapter, Martin Binder draws the reader's attention to the explain why the Security Council responds selectively to humanitarian crises and gross violations of human rights. This chapter consider how decisions are taken in the Security Council in order to argue that, given the institutional bargaining dynamics and voting rules in the Council, collective intervention decisions by the Council are different from unilateral ones, and thus require different, separate analyses and explanations.

The third section explains that a large extent of human suffering and substantial previous involvement in a crisis by inter-national institutions are the key determinants for strong Security Council action, but only when combined with either limited countervailing power of the target state or with negative spillover effects to neighbouring states or regions.

The fourth chapter offers an in-depth analysis of the motivations that drove the Security Council to authorize the use of military force in Bosnia. Martin Binder argues that a combination of four motives were decisive for the Security Council’s response: „(1) humanitarian concerns for the plight of the Bosnian civilian population, and the moral pressure generated by transnational operating human rights protagonists and the media; (2) Council members were concerned about the conflict spilling over to Western European countries, most notably in form of refugee flows, and about the destabilization of the Balkan region and beyond; (3) over the course of the conflict, the Council committed tremendous material and reputational resources to its resolution. When the Bosnian Serbs took hundreds of UNPROFOR blue helmets hostage, bringing the UN to the brink of failure, concerns that prior investments could be lost contributed to the Council’s decision to authorize the use of military force to put an end to the war; (4) this decision was facilitated by the inability of the Bosnian Serbs and the Serbian government to generate sufficient countervailing power against outside intervention by the UN and NATO.“⁵

In the last chapters Martin Binder examines the crisis in Darfur and the Council’s response to this crisis. Responses to three of the most recent humanitarian crises in Côte d’Ivoire, Libya, and Syria are also analysed in detail. Binder highlights that the Council’s reaction to these crises can only be explained by several motivational factors taken together. The concluding chapter of this book summarizes the central findings of Martin research and discusses their various theoretical and normative implications. Binder

⁴ M. Binder, *The United Nations and the Politics of Selective Humanitarian Intervention*, University of Reading, UK, 2017, pp. 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

concludes firstly that the conflicts had important negative effects for neighbouring countries and for members of the Security Council — destabilizing effects linked to refugee flows and to thousands of returnees that lost their jobs due to the conflicts, as well as to economic downturn and the reduced flow of capital. Analyzing the case of Côte d'Ivoire Martin Binder notes how this case clearly shows that the Council's decision to authorize military intervention was also driven by the wish to protect material and immaterial investments that the UN and regional organizations had made in the past to resolve the crisis. The author notes that The Security Council can not act without the agreement of a majority of its members, including the permanent members and It has shown under what conditions we can expect that such an agreement to address situations of massive human suffering will form and when it will not. This has important consequences for decision makers in national and international institutions, for humanitarian organizations that operate in crisis areas, and, of course, for the populations affected by humanitarian emergencies around the world.

Finally, the book offers an explanation for the Security Council's politics of selective intervention. Martin Binder develops his argument in two steps. He first sets out by suggesting that a broad concept of humanitarian intervention – one that takes into account the entire range of possible Security Council action – is required to adequately grasp the patterns of the Security Council's selective response to humanitarian crises over the past two decades. Martin Binder presents a configurational – or multicausal – explanation of Security Council intervention that centers on the interplay of humanitarian concerns, material interests, and institutional effects. The findings of this book have important theoretical and practical implications. They contribute to a better understanding of the way that international organizations work and how they take decisions. However, Martin's work requires a certain level of knowledge in order for the reader to be able to understand the contrast and his references throughout the book, but it is nonetheless a very interesting read. This book helps to better understand certain situations in Darfur, Côte d'Ivoire or military interventions in Somalia, Bosnia, or Libya. Martin Binder analyzed in detail what factors account for the UN's selective response to humanitarian crises and what are the mechanism that drive – or block – UN intervention decisions and thereby contributed an important piece of work to research related to the field of international peace and security and the legal conundrum of humanitarian intervention.