What's Worth Fighting For: A Progressive View of the Use of Force

Jordan Tama, Truman Associate and Benjamin Rhodes, Research Director

July 6, 2007

Sixty percent of Americans believe it was wrong to invade Iraq, according to a recent poll. Meanwhile, 64 percent of Americans favor action to stop the genocide in Darfur - though they are unsure how to do it. What is clear is that Americans lack consensus on when we should use military force abroad.

Now is the time for progressives to offer a new vision on the use of force, so that the next time we consider military action, we make a sound decision based on clear principles supported by the American people. This paper is the first in a series intended to spark discussion about when to wage war - the most serious choice faced by our national leaders.

What Is Worth Fighting For

The starting point must be agreement on what is worth fighting for. Nearly all Americans believe that the use of force is justified to protect the security of our homeland, our people, and our treaty allies. It is also worth fighting when it is possible to prevent the most egregious forms of human rights abuse, such as genocide. By standing with allies and standing against mass killing, we defend our own security and uphold our values.

Generations of American leaders have agreed that when our homeland is attacked or imminently threatened, the use of force in self-defense is justified. After Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, we had to fight to defend our territory. Sixty years later, most Americans correctly perceived that military action against Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan needed to be part of our response to 9/11.

We must also be prepared to act when an ally we have promised by treaty to protect is attacked or imminently threatened. Security guarantees, such as those we provide to NATO allies, and those enshrined in the UN Charter, are essential to global stability. In addition, the United States has unique relationships with vulnerable targets that are not treaty-protected allies - notably Taiwan and Israel. American support for them can pre-

vent war by signaling to other powers that these friends of the United States will not stand alone if they are attacked without provocation.

Harder decisions involve security threats that are not imminent, and cases of large-scale atrocities. Should we use force to prevent a hostile government from developing nuclear weapons, to weaken an anti-American group forming terrorist cells in another country, or to protect a vulnerable population from ethnic cleansing? Many Americans would answer "sometimes," and ultimately these decisions must be made on a case-by-case basis. But our decision-making in these harder cases would benefit from the articulation of principles outlining the circumstances that call for intervention.

Use of Force Principles

In the absence of an attack or imminent threat, five core principles should guide our decision-making. These prudent principles recognize the dangers and unintended consequences inherent in any use of force, as well as the occasional necessity of military action to protect our security and the lives of others.

The Duty to Prevent: The duty to prevent is a principle needed in a world where terrorists can wreak the kind of destruction once reserved to states. It affirms that national governments have a responsibility to prevent grave dangers from emerging from inside their territory; if they fail to do so, other countries have a right to intervene to forestall the threat. For instance, the Taliban's blatant shirking of its duty to prevent Al Qaeda from launching attacks from Afghanistan prior to 9/11, or to bring them to justice afterward, provided America with the right to use force in self-defense to remove an intolerable danger. Looking ahead, military intervention would be justified if a government with nuclear capacity intended to transfer a nuclear bomb to terrorists, or was unable to stop such a transfer. In such cases, however, given that we would be using force first, we must be certain of our intelligence and the evidence behind it.

The Responsibility to Protect: The responsibility to protect asserts that all governments have the responsibility to protect their people from genocide, crimes against humanity, and massive human rights abuses, and that when a government fails to fulfill that responsibility, the international community has the right to intervene to safeguard the population. The UN adopted a version of this principle in 2005, but it has been adhered to inconsistently. In Rwanda, we failed to take action to stop a genocide that claimed 800,000 lives. In Kosovo, we succeeded in saving thousands of ethnic Albanians from Slobodan Milosevic's killing fields. Today, we are failing again as we stand by while genocide takes place in Darfur. We cannot intervene militarily in every country where there is major suffering; intervention requires a viable strategy for success and exit before we put troops in harm's way. But standing by in the face of systematic massacre, rape, and displacement makes a mockery of our principles and spreads a culture of impunity that is both wrong and dangerous.

Deploy Non-Military Options: Military power is just one tool at America's disposal. The duty to prevent and the responsibility to protect should only trigger military action when nonmilitary options are exhausted or cannot succeed. These options include negotiations, diplomatic pressure, intelligence and law enforcement operations, economic incentives and sanctions, security assurances, and - in cases of proliferation - arms inspections. In Iraq, the UN inspection regime was containing Iraq's nuclear ambitions in 2003, and could have been strengthened further. By contrast, intervention in Afghanistan was justified because noncoercive measures could not induce the Taliban to dismantle Al Qaeda and turn over its leaders. Today, we have yet to exhaust our options in pressing North Korea and Iran to abandon their nuclear programs.

Do More Good Than Harm: We should only use force if we are confident that the benefits of military action will outweigh the costs to ourselves, global security, and victims we wish to assist. Security threats are often so frightening - and human rights abuses so terrible - that we feel we must "do something." Yet North Korea could respond to a military strike by firing enough artillery at Seoul to kill tens of thousands of people instantaneously. An attack on Iran would almost certainly rally the Iranian people against us, prompt reprisal terrorist acts, escalate the war in Iraq, and dramatically isolate the United States in the world. The use of force against North Korea and Iran would therefore only be sensible if it was the sole way to stop them from perpetrating a far greater harm - such as transferring a nuclear bomb to terrorists. In all cases, we must act militarily only when a thoughtful tally of costs and benefits suggests intervention is likely to improve our security or the security of those we are intervening to help.

Maximize International Support: In the 21st century,

backing from other countries is critical to ensuring our military success. Because war is conducted in the realm of public relations as well as on the battlefield, other countries' opinions affect the assistance we receive, and our ability to win hearts and minds and quell guerrilla resistance. When we have acted with broad backing - in World War II, Korea, the Balkans, and the Gulf War - we have been more successful than when we have acted with scarcer support, as in Vietnam and Iraq. International support lowers the cost to the United States and reaffirms the notion that America leads the world on behalf of collective security principles. Going it alone maximizes those costs and risks isolating our nation.

No American president should refrain from using force - unilaterally, if necessary - to protect the American people from an immediate danger. But because a war of choice undertaken by any nation naturally invites skepticism, the UN Charter requires UN authorization for military action in situations other than self-defense. When the UN Security Council gridlocks for purely political reasons, we should look to our treaty allies in NATO for backing, as we did in Kosovo, rather than only gaining support from a less legitimate "coalition of the willing."

The Role of Congress

Congress has a constitutional responsibility to be at the forefront of these debates. America's founders, reacting against fruitless wars initiated by kings, created a strong set of checks and balances to make going to war a process that requires negotiation between the branches. While pursuing a responsible conclusion to the Iraq war, members of Congress should advance proposals for clear principles to govern future decisions to deploy our military, and should insist on congressional authorization for interventions. Informed and considered congressional backing of military action will in turn lead to stronger and more sustainable public support for intervention when it is truly necessary - public support that is critical to our success.

* *This paper benefited from the insights of Anne-Marie Slaughter, Dean of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University.*