

International Conflict:
A Critical Thinking Essay

Lindsey LeSchack

Dr. Petersheim

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The Nonintervention Delusion: What War Is Good For is an article written by Richard Fontaine that dissects the non-interventionist perspective on United States' military operations and discusses guidelines that could be adopted by American political leaders to move the U.S. military approach towards subtlety. Fontaine begins his article with an explanation of the end to the endless war ideal, which is a call from citizens and political leaders from several different groups for the United States to practice military restraint and decrease foreign intervention. Over time, the number of individuals in agreement on this matter has risen. So why would political leaders not yet have acted? A central idea in this article is that like many things, the United States' approach to military intervention may not be as black and white as intervening or not.

Many cases have been made against intervention by United States' military forces. Fontaine highlights the most prevalent of these arguments against intervention in his article. These arguments stem from a range of beliefs – some problems are not U.S. business, the U.S. has a poor track record with intervention, starting a military campaign can lead to more conflict, other countries can intervene instead, and the costs are very high. Fontaine offers counterpoints to these beliefs and offers two main guidelines for a subtler approach to military intervention that act as a sort of compromise between the opposing ideals. These two guidelines can be boiled down to two main ideas for political leaders: do not overlearn from previous interventions and choose interventions that can be clearly evaluated and have clear conditions (Fontaine 2019, 3-4). Finally, Fontaine offers his concluding thoughts by drawing back to an idea that has been discussed throughout this article: is the current U.S. military approach a result of the Cold War, or is it a part of its foreign policy? Political leaders in the United States will ultimately oversee that decision as the future of military intervention unfolds.

Political leaders and citizens of the United States alike all have varying opinions on whether military intervention is a policy that should be continued. These opinions even differ within the same individual over time. Richard Fontaine exemplifies this in his article by naming previous Presidents such as Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump, all of whom pledged to decrease intervention while campaigning and then continued or even increased intervention while in office (Fontaine 2019, p. 9). It has become clear in recent years that public opinion on U.S. military operations is reaching a consensus – Americans want a less militant foreign policy. If these individuals' campaigns were in alignment with public opinion, why was there no change once they were elected? Why is the United States continuing to engage in international conflict? There are many answers to these questions. The decision to intervene is very nuanced and the United States has several reasons for doing so.

There are three levels of analysis that can be used to determine causes of conflict in international relations discussed in chapter five of *International Relations*. These levels of analysis can also be used to understand why the United States would continue to intervene despite the diminishing American appetite for intervention (Fontaine 2019, p. 1). The first level of analysis, the individual level, assesses the causes of conflict from the perspective of rationality (Goldstein and Pevehouse 2020, 5.1 p. 5). Some theories that stem from this level would tell you that U.S. involvement reflects a rational decision on behalf of its leaders. This does not always hold up, as some U.S. interventions are collectively viewed as mistakes. The second level of analysis is the domestic level, in which theories are based on the idea that some characteristics of states make them either more or less prone to violent conflict (5.1 p. 8). From this level of analysis, the argument could be made that the United States intervenes due to factors such as its type of government, economic state, or values. As said by Richard Fontaine, military action has

been a principal part of U.S. foreign policy for decades (p. 10). The domestic level of analysis may say that the U.S. is more prone to conflict as intervention has become engrained in its ideals over time. However, as most theories from this level are based on generalizations, they should be applied cautiously. The third level of analysis discussed in this textbook is the systemic level of analysis, in which conflict is explained through “power relations among major actors” (5.1 p. 12). On this level of analysis, theories might explain that the U.S. intervenes not because of internal factors, but rather because of their role as a great power. A final and very principal reason that the United States has continued their policy of military intervention is nationalism. In *International Relations*, written by Jon C.W. Pevehouse and Joshua S. Goldstein, chapter five discusses the idea of nationalism, “the devotion to the interests of one’s own nation over the interests of other states” (Goldstein and Pevehouse 2020, 5.2.1). As said by Richard Fontaine, the U.S. is a great power with “strongly held interests and values” (para. 40). As a great power, defending those interests can be incredibly important, even if it means military action.

Richard Fontaine makes a point in his article that the U.S. must engage in great-power competition. One nation that is currently considered a great power is Russia, a nation that is currently engaged in warfare with Ukraine after invading in early 2022. The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has been one of the deadliest European conflicts in decades. Many Western nations, including the United States, have condemned the actions of Russia, but have not pushed for direct military intervention. American troops have multiplied across the continent of Europe but have not been sent to Ukraine to engage in direct combat. According to Richard Fontaine’s article, we should be engaging with other great powers. On the other hand, Americans are less supportive of military intervention now than ever. It is possible that U.S. political leaders are following similar guidelines to those presented by Richard Fontaine and are both reviewing

previous interventions and performing a rigorous cost-benefit analysis on military intervention in this scenario. In other words, they may be taking a much more nuanced approach to intervening in this conflict than we have seen in the past.

In the beginning of the war, Russia faced resistance from Ukrainian forces and several setbacks. However, they have now gained territory in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions (Bowen 2022, para. 4). According to the same article by Andrew Bowen published in 2022, “the deputy commander of the [Russian] Central Military District...said in an interview that Russia wanted to take full control of eastern and southern Ukraine” (para. 40). Reflecting on the conflicts of interest explained in chapter five of *International Relations* in combination with the aforementioned statement, this could be a territory-motivated conflict. However, there are also aspects of this conflict that demonstrate motivations of an ethnic clash, and these two are not mutually exclusive. The Russians and Ukrainians are the two largest ethnic groups within the East Slavs. Russian President Vladimir Putin has expressed that one goal of Russia in this conflict is to protect the DNR and LNR separatist nations from Ukrainian invasion, two regions with heavy presence of Russian ethnicity and language. The war between Ukraine and Russia has been harsh, and there are two very clear sides to the fight. The United States has offered support in many ways to Ukraine but has not offered the physical military intervention that they have to others in the past. Both Fontaine’s article and the textbook seem to make a very clear point – the United States acts to protect their interests and values. This war seems to go against U.S. ideologies, this is an opportunity for great power competition, and, according to the levels of analysis discussed before, it seems that military intervention is simply a central part of U.S. foreign policy. So why have they not yet intervened? It seems that the course of the United States’ future military action policies depends on the choices made in this war.

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