

# **The A-B-Cs of Military Intervention**

## **A Checklist of Key Considerations**

Senior U.S. officials need some structured way to determine whether military intervention is appropriate, given threats that loom large in Iran, North Korea, the Horn of Africa, and elsewhere around the world. Insights in seven categories familiar to strategists (national interests, threats, politico-military objectives, policy guidance, planning options, resources, and public opinion) could help underpin decisions to intrude or abstain. Each case is unique, so the following checklist simply lists sample questions.

### **National Interests**

Military intervention is most appropriate when highly-valued national security interests such as survival, homeland defense, international stability, peace, and prosperity are at stake. Humanitarian and intangible interests such as national credibility may muster immediate support, but are much harder to justify if goings get tough. Relevant questions should include:

- ✓ Which U.S. and allied interests are pertinent? Are they compatible?
- ✓ Which of them are worth the expenditure of precious lives and treasure?
- ✓ Which of them should take top priority?

### **Threats to National Interests**

Threats to national interests vary with regard to imminence and intensity. Decision-makers who hope to avoid wrong wars at wrong times with wrong enemies cannot rationally conclude that military initiatives would be best until they consider alternatives, appraise probable risks, and prioritize each perceived threat. Those processes demand first class intelligence estimates that evaluate enemy intentions, capabilities, limitations, and potential responses to U.S. initiatives, followed by net assessments that dispassionately compare friendly and enemy postures, with particular attention to geographical constraints. Relevant questions should include:

- ✓ Which perceived threats menace U.S. interests most severely?
- ✓ Which of those threats are susceptible to mainly military solutions?
- ✓ How do enemy cultures, capabilities, and geography affect U.S./allied probabilities of early military victory?

- ✓ What might be the long-term consequences of protracted war or failure to achieve essential objectives?

## **Political Aims and Military Missions**

Political aims and military missions, which prescribe what must be done to safeguard national interests despite perceived threats, should be prioritized to conserve resources for the most important purposes. Success in acceptable time at acceptable costs must culminate in a better situation than prevailed before intervention began. Politico-military collaboration is imperative. Serious problems arose in Vietnam, for example, because senior military commanders and their civilian supervisors often pursued incompatible purposes. Disputes with allies can be equally disruptive, as demonstrated in Bosnia, where some U.S., U.N, and NATO participants preferred peacekeeping as the primary goal while others touted peace enforcement. "Mission creep" can amplify aims well beyond original intent unless carefully controlled, as U.S. leaders discovered in Somalia, where the switch from humanitarian operations to peacemaking opened a gulf between goals and deployed capabilities. Relevant questions should include:

- ✓ Are political aims clearly expressed and achievable?
- ✓ Are U.S. and allied aims harmonious?
- ✓ Would attainment of U.S. objectives solve the most serious problems?
- ✓ What politico-military costs might accompany failure?

## **Policy Guidance**

Policy guidance, including military rules of engagement, can simplify or complicate the accomplishment of objectives and the preparation of wartime and post-war plans. Typical considerations include escalation control, the role of nuclear weapons, time limitations, restrictions on collateral damage and casualties, the permissibility of privileged sanctuaries, and the treatment of non-military enemy prisoners. Flip-flops frequently occur when new brooms sweep clean. U.S. policy-makers in the 1990s, for example, considered armed force only as a last resort after Operation Desert Storm subsided, although early decisive action occasionally might quell incipient crises before they become intractable. President George W. Bush in sharp contrast promotes preemption policies. Relevant questions should include:

- ✓ Are policies compatible with political aims and military missions?
- ✓ Could some policy restrictions be safely relaxed?
- ✓ Should policy-makers put a time limit on military operations?

- ✓ What costs are acceptable in terms of resources and casualties?

## **Planning Options**

U.S. national security planners balance interests and capabilities against risks and costs taking policy guidance into account as they search for feasible, suitable, flexible, and politically acceptable solutions to intervention problems. They advise decision-makers about the relative roles that military power and diplomacy should play, which missions U.S. armed forces might most appropriately perform, and which might better be left to allies. Judicious planners ask themselves, "What if this or that happens?" then devise Options B, C, and D ready for implementation if Option A fails to produce required results. Other relevant questions should include:

- ✓ How might enemies react to any given U.S./allied option?
- ✓ How could U.S. and allied armed forces best divide workloads?
- ✓ Which alternative appears most attractive if preferred alternatives fail?
- ✓ What political, economic, and other prices would inaction incur?

## **Resources**

The best laid plans are useful only if ends (specified as outcomes) and means (forces and funds) match reasonably well, with enough in reserve to cope if other injurious threats loom large. Competition for scarce resources unfortunately is forever fierce. Decision-makers, taking future as well as present requirements into account, must reduce ambitions, increase assets, or both when shortfalls unreasonably increase risks. Relevant questions should include:

- ✓ Are allocated resources ample for current operations?
- ✓ Are remaining resources ample to handle other impending crises?
- ✓ Is the present mix of active and reserve component forces most appropriate?
- ✓ How could allies best contribute? Would they?

## **Public Support**

The American people and elected legislators in Congress ideally should approve U.S. military intervention before it occurs, but that may not always be possible. Statesmen in such cases must rally and maintain public support.

Compelling interests, sensible objectives, ample resources, and reasonable prospects of early success simplify that task. The news media, which exert powerful influences on public opinion, play crucially important roles. Relevant questions should include:

- ✓ Has the President lucidly explained the purpose of intervention?
- ✓ Are U.S. interests and objectives sufficiently compelling to attract and retain popular support?
- ✓ To what extent would unfavorable world opinion influence decisions?
- ✓ Are enemies better able to sustain public support than the United States and its allies?

### **Wrap-Up**

Military intervention, no matter how innocuously it begins, may escalate unexpectedly, perhaps in unanticipated ways. Original rationales may be overtaken by unforeseen events. The President and his politico-military assistants (especially Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, the JCS Chairman, and combatant commanders) therefore would be well advised to scrutinize pertinent factors repeatedly before and after armed combat begins to guarantee that U.S. servicemen and women lay their lives on the line for legitimate reasons.