

Workshop Report

20 Years after Kosovo: The Prospects and Limits of International Intervention

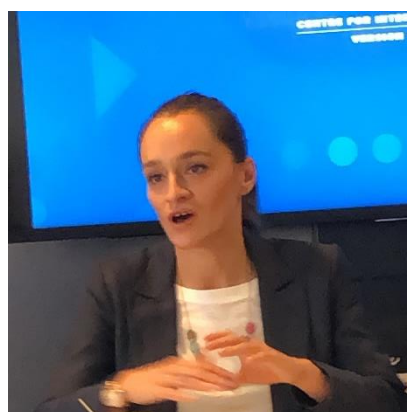
18-19 September 2019

General aims

The aims of the conference were threefold. First, given that the conference coincided with the twentieth anniversary of NATO's war in Kosovo, the purpose of the event was to provide a space in which academics, policy practitioners, and those directly affected by the intervention could reflect upon the events of 1999 and ask how interventionism has developed ever since.

The second aim of the conference was to bring together scholars with an interest in intervention and interventionism, broadly defined. The conference organisers are particularly proud that many early career researchers took the opportunity to present their work on different aspects of the academic debate on intervention. Overall, the conference's aim was to offer a comprehensive and specialist discussion of nearly all aspects of intervention.

The third aim was to facilitate dialogue between academics and policy practitioners. To this end, a policy roundtable on Kosovo and its aftermath, chaired by Professor Amelia Hadfield (Politics, Surrey), was organised. The organisers were honoured that Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman, whose academic work on intervention had an important impact on the Blair administration's position on 'liberal interventionism', agreed to deliver a keynote lecture at the conference.



Event themes

As indicated above, the conference offered a comprehensive forum in which nearly all facets of the debate on intervention were explored: historical, contemporary, practical, philosophical, empirical, and theoretical. Given that the Kosovo War served as a hook for the conference, it was not surprising that it was a major intellectual theme at the conference. There were two major takeaway points from the Kosovo-theme. The first was that the success of NATO's Kosovo intervention is debatable in the short- and long-term. In the short-term, military action did save lives, though NATO's bombing of dual infrastructure in Serbia during the intervention remains a critical issue. In the long-term, NATO's attempts to stabilise Kosovo presented a double edge sword. On the one hand, Kosovo is politically stable. On the other, issues surrounding corruption and political nepotism have not been resolved. Kosovo, as one participant observed, is stable but largely politically comatose, a 'stabiocracy', rather than a democracy.

The second major theme of the conference was the Responsibility to Protect. The conference was co-organised by the British International Studies Association's special working group on the Responsibility to Protect (IR2P WG). Many of the papers presented, therefore, focused on the Responsibility to Protect, which is itself a complex phenomenon. One question that loomed large over the conference proceedings was whether the Responsibility to Protect had ultimately failed. While it had been successfully invoked in Libya in 2011, the ongoing slaughter of civilians in the Syrian Civil War (2011-), as well as the large-scale ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar 2017/8, raises questions as to whether R2P is still a viable response to mass atrocities. The assessment of various academics was not particularly optimistic in this regard, though not entirely negative.

Beyond this general question arising from the changing fortunes of R2P, papers presented at the conference discussed some more specific issues relating to R2P. Among these were

- the extent to which right-wing populism and the election of Donald Trump to the office of US president pose a threat to the idea of R2P and whether that threat can realistically be countered;
- the way in which non-western states relate to R2P, especially using the example of Mexico, a state traditionally sceptical of interventionism due to its proximity to the United States of America; and
- the use of the veto by the Permanent Five in the UN Security Council and the extent to which the existing veto structures could either be reformed or circumvented.

Finally, one important theme at the conference was the ethics of intervention. The BISA's IR2P working group has always had a strong interest in ethical issues and the UK has a strong research culture in international political theory. Two sets of issues emerged from the ethics segment of the conference. The first was to what extent cyber methods and the alignment between certain political groups may permissibly be used to counter the isolationism of the Trump administration and other right-wing populist governments. The second issue related to the more idealised and abstract question of whether the reconstruction of post-intervention societies as representative democracies is ethically permissible or whether pro-democratic reconstructive measures violate a community's collective right to political self-determination. Neither of the two issues have been tackled at satisfactory depth in the ethics literature on intervention.

Next steps/outcomes

The conference has breathed new life into the Centre for International Intervention (cii), which hosted the event. The event enabled cii to re-launch and broaden its network, and especially to deepen its relationship with BISA. Dr Alex Leveringhaus, one of cii's co-directors, has now joined the organising committee of the IR2P special working group. Based on the new network, cii will offer a number of affiliate relationships and fellowships to academics and policy-practitioners – details of this will be discussed at cii's quarterly meeting in January 2020. A follow-up event is planned for April 2020 on the role of social media and other technologies in mass atrocities.

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