

The UN at a Crossroads: The plague of Foreign Intervention
Keynote Speech: UJ/South Africa Association of Political Science (SAAPS)
Colloquium

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2011
31 August 2015

Conference theme:
Progress or Stagnation: Quo Vadis Southern African Politics?

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Relations

***"We should be wary of foreigners bearing the gift of institutions."* Francis**
Fukuyama

Ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted to be here tonight and I thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak. I can only hope that my speech is informative, intellectually stimulating and entertaining enough to pair nicely with your food and wine. I will not delve into Southern African politics specifically, as there is a roomful of expertise in that regard. I thought it might be more useful to address the issue of foreign intervention in the context of this colloquium.

Of the many ills that befell African politics over the last four centuries, foreign intervention and outside meddling in her internal affairs stand out as one of the most enduring and stubbornly long-lasting features. Our continent's encounter with the western world particularly, and to some extent the Arab world, has been met by defeat mired with appalling acts of carnage by various occupying forces. A long history of submission, reckless exploitation and plundering of resources was made possible by a subservient local elite fiercely attached to its' meager privileges while mimicking the "masters" approach to indigenous populations. The ensuing result was slavery, colonialism and a modern day neo-colonialism, which is the bedrock of underperformance and underdevelopment. It is fair to say that this western pathological inclination is deeply rooted in the centuries old ideology of supremacy.

Indeed there is a bank of historical evidence to substantiate the absurd and obsessive desire of Western powers to determine the political leadership in Africa and elsewhere. Since independence, logistical and financial support to fringe rebel groups with undefined political aims has been the underrated aspect of the foreign policy and strategy of former colonial powers. The result has been a metastasis in the growth of myriad non-state actors¹ successfully threatening or destroying fragile and weak polities.

This infallible technique has not changed much over the centuries: demonize a potential adversarial government (thereby transforming trivial concerns into serious threats, and serious threats into existential ones), while artfully designing “options” to yield precooked conclusions. Peace and freedom have become code words for expansionism, employed to camouflage cynical imperialism and commercial ambitions.

In the post 9/11 era, the neocons’ pervasive “*hard power über alles*” mentality demonstrated the inestimable value of fixing the facts to fit a particular policy, such as sowing panic as a means to secure support for the execution of the war on Iraq and Afghanistan.

A note a caution -- “gung-ho” and hot air politics, as well as warmongering for the sake of war and interventions, is not the exclusive province of right wing nutty policies. According to Andrew J. Bacevich, confronting Colin Powell in 1993 Madeleine Albright famously demanded to know “What’s the point of having this superb military that you are always talking about, if we can’t use it?” This epitome of wholesale interventionism marked the birth of an odd alliance -- a toxic-mix of left-leaning do-gooders with jingoistic politicians, giving birth to “humanitarian intervention”.

¹ “*The Islamic State. The Free Syrian Army. The Syria Revolutionaries Front. The Hazm Movement. The Yarmouk Brigade. The Ajnad al-Sham Islamic Union. The Mujahedeen Army. The Asalaw-wa-al-Tanmiya Front. The Nouredin al-Zengi Battalions. The Ahl al-Athar Brigade. The Shields of the Revolution Council. The Ahrar al-Sham Islamic Movement. The Tawhid Brigade. The Army of Islam. Jahat al-Nusra. The Jaysh al-Sham. The Sham al-Islam Movement. The Jund al-Sham. The Muhajerin wa-Ansar Alliance. Not to forget the forces of President Bashar al-Assad controlled by warlords rather than the government* Jeffrey Simpson, “Our Mideast Mission Implausible”, The Globe and Mail, Oct. 03 2014

In this *era of rebellions* and the west's torrid love affair with fringe groups and endemic destabilization, we must remember a fact of ostensibly earthshaking importance: yesterday's colonial powers and today's great powers do not engage in foreign interventions to defend themselves, but to assert control over foreign populations. Today's wars are no exception. Now we call it the responsibility to protect, enduring freedom, or sangaris, but that does not alter the reality. To illustrate the above, Marine Corps Major General Smedley Butler, a veteran of US invasions in the Caribbean colonies and Central America famously described himself as a "gangster for capitalism", thus acknowledging the imperial character of these invasions.

The bane of foreign military interventions violates article 2 of the UN Charter, which is no material for footnotes. It proclaims that the UN is based on the principle of the sovereign equality of all its members. Alinea Four in particular is crystal clear: "All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations." To be clear, there is no credible alternative to the UN Charter for collective peace and security architecture devised in 1945, which has served us well albeit imperfectly. It neither includes unconditional support to rebel movements nor authorizes the illegal dissemination of deadly weapons to fringe groups.

In my conclusive remarks, let me state what is our job in regards to interventionism. **Article I (1) of the UN Charter** clearly states that the primary purpose of the United Nations is: "***to maintain international peace and security, and to the end: to take, and bring about by peaceful means, and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations which might lead to the breach of the peace.***" Our job is to intervene: to prevent conflict where we can, to put a stop to it when it has broken out, or -when neither of those things is possible - at least to contain it and prevent it from spreading.

The addiction of the West to regime change in the developing world, as well as military action for action's sake, is showing its true face in Libya and Syria today, and in the wave of immigrants flooding European shores. Violent changes of political leadership and coup d'états have seldom resulted in tangible security wins, let alone democracy, and they come at a high cost. They represent a deficit of imagination and an abdication to the notion that the only mechanism for the devolution of power is through violent means. The restoration and strengthening of the current UN framework is the paramount ethical imperative of our time, and the surest way to move towards a more peaceful world, where cooperation trumps constant conflict.