

# Review

## ***The Question of Intervention: John Stuart Mill & the Responsibility to Protect***

Michael W. Doyle. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015. 288pp.

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John Stuart Mill's "A Few Words on Non-Intervention" (1859) considers both the "sacred duties" owed to the independence and nationality of states and the possible exceptions to the general rule of non-intervention. In *The Question of Intervention*, Michael Doyle proposes to "comment on Mill's arguments, defend some, condemn some, and refine others" (10). What emerges is a clear and well-structured overview of the ethics and legitimacy of intervention

Doyle begins in chapter 1 by outlining the case for non-intervention as the general rule of international relations. Drawing upon Mill's "Few Words," Doyle posits four "indirect" arguments in favour of non-intervention: states should abide by international law which prohibits intervention; the expectation of intervention would be systematically harmful by creating a moral hazard; interventions that start well can become corrupted; and outsiders will struggle to understand the internal affairs of a state. Doyle then outlines Mill's "two most powerful arguments against intervention [which] are based *directly* on considerations of self-determination and individual harm" (26).

Later in the chapter, there is a concise and informative account of the entrenchment of non-intervention in international law. Finally, drawing on data compiled with Camille Strauss-Kahn, Doyle provides an empirical assessment of the effects of interventions. Surveying 334 "major, overt" interventions undertaken since 1815, Doyle finds that "only 26 produced a government no worse in democratic and civil liberties

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measures than the preceding government. That is, only 12 percent were potentially successful in advancing the cause of liberty and democracy” (46). Given the striking level of failure, Doyle argues that “even well-intentioned interventions designed to promote liberty should be approached sceptically” (47).

Although non-intervention is presented as the default position, it is open to exceptions. Chapter 2 examines the instances which may demand that the principle of non-intervention be over-ridden. Taking his lead generally from Mill’s text, Doyle considers the cases of rescuing nationals abroad, intervention in an internationalised civil war, reducing harm in an ongoing civil war, and classical humanitarian intervention.

Doyle proceeds, in chapter 3, to analyse possible exceptions to the non-intervention principle that disregard, rather than override, the values underpinning the non-intervention principle. He considers the morality and legitimacy of intervening to support a secessionist movement, of counter-intervening to restore the internal balance of forces, and of occupation.

Over the course of chapters 2 and 3, Doyle rarely engages in any depth with the theoretical foundations of Mill’s arguments. Instead, a range of historical case studies are skilfully employed to test the effectiveness of intervention in the types of cases endorsed by Mill. For example, Britain’s intervention in Portugal in 1846 is used as a test case to examine the effectiveness of, and reveal practical lessons for, intervening in a protracted civil war (66–69). In a positive sense, this approach makes the study readable for a wide audience. On the down side, the essence of Mill’s thought is somewhat diluted as conclusions are drawn on the basis of what is deemed to have worked (or not worked) in practice.

The penultimate chapter provides an overview of the development and operation of the Responsibility to Protect (RtoP) Doctrine. Much of the chapter is somewhat pedestrian as Doyle reviews the doctrine’s evolution. Moreover, it is not made clear how RtoP relates to the work of Mill. Although we are told in the preface to the book that Mill’s argument warrants “a guarded defense of the new doctrine of RtoP” (xii), Doyle fails to substantiate this statement in the chapter dedicated to RtoP or in the book generally.

The final chapter of the book stresses the importance of post-bellum peacebuilding. Doyle’s analysis leads him to conclude that existing occupation law is

inadequate as it fails to permit transformative peacebuilding. He goes on to outline the necessity of consent and international capacity for successful peacebuilding.

Overall, the book highlights the difficulty of executing intervention. Whereas Mill largely assumed that intervention would be effective in the cases that he discussed, Doyle is keen to demonstrate the complexity of intervening successfully: “the more extensive list of examples Mill invokes reveals more complexity than he recounts, and in each case that complexity leans against the interventionist conclusions he reaches” (191). So, even in those instances in which “something” must be done for the sake of self-determination, humanity, or national security, it is not always the case that intervention is an appropriate solution. What to do when standing by is unpalatable and intervention impractical is the conundrum that the international community faces today in Syria.