HUMANITARIAN OPS: OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES AND PITFALLS

By Mary Elizabeth Walters and Jacqueline Whitt February 14, 2020
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Jacqueline Whitt: Hello, and welcome to A Better Peace the War Room podcast. I'm **Jacqueline Whitt** Professor of Strategy at the U.S. Army War College and the Editor for A Better Peace. Thanks for joining us today. Today's podcast explores a particular conundrum for strategists and military planners especially those who are in advanced democracies where values and interests are often intertwined in rhetoric and in practice. What do you do when humanitarian crises are wrapped around the world? What are the opportunities and challenges for military intervention or for peacekeeping operations? When should military intervention be on the table at all? What are the relevant strategic, operational and tactical considerations? To explore some of these questions and challenges, I've asked **Dr. Mary Elizabeth Walters** to join me here on A Better Peace. Mary Elizabeth is a fellow Tar Heel for her PhD training and she's received her PhD in military history. She's now an Assistant Professor of History at Kansas State University and her dissertation looked at why and how the U.S. military became the leader of international refugee assistance in Albania. Her research interests include peacekeeping and humanitarian operations more broadly. Mary Elizabeth, thanks and welcome to the War Room.

Dr. Mary Elizabeth Walters: Thank you for having me.

JW: We'll start with a question about defining the problem. What is the strategic calculation or the strategic logic or the problem that military leaders face when there is a humanitarian crisis going on somewhere in the world?

MEW: Let's start by constraining it to a humanitarian crisis linked to conflict.

JW: Okay.

MEW: Because the calculus is very different if you're dealing with something like the 2004 Tsunami.

JW: So, natural disasters, famines, things like that.

MEW: Natural disasters, famines, to some degree these are a different set of calculus. Often the operation is far more constrained, and you're not dealing with an endemic conflict that if you get involved in, you might own.

JW: And might not be able to get out of.

MEW: So, for that purpose…

JW: And maybe not dealing with contested environments. Okay.

MEW: Exactly.

JW: Alright, so we will deal with the hard problem.

MEW: We will deal with the worst problem, yes. Let's go to 1998 in Kosovo. We start to get reports in the international media about an uptick in ethnic violence between the ethnic Serbs and ethnic Albanians, and at this point Kosovo is part of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, a successor state of communist Yugoslavia. So, the international community starts to take an interest. At that point they're not really keen to send in the military, so you get a year of diplomatic efforts. Those start to break down. At that point NATO starts to get more invested and you end up with operation Allied Force. NATO then owns the problem. There is still a NATO peacekeeping force in Kosovo 20 years later. One of the big calculus is how bad of a humanitarian crisis is it? Is it in an area where your military could potentially do something? Have you tried diplomatic efforts? Are you willing to own the problem long-term?

JW: And to stay.

MEW: To stay.

JW: If those are the calculations, and in this case it's a NATO operation so that's not just calculus for one country, that's an alliance, a coalition calculus that has to get everybody on board to agree to these political questions. Does the calculus change depending on which country we're thinking about? And what are some of the ways that we see that vary?

MEW: Definitely. So, Libya is a good example. When Gaddafi was removed, there was an uptick in humanitarian crises. There was a lot of talk about using Kosovo as the model and intervening in that way. There's a key difference in size, so size can play a really big role. It is

one thing to intervene in a place or a country—what is now recognized by at least some countries in the world as a country—that is the size of Connecticut with a smaller population than Connecticut than to intervene in country the size of Libya or Syria.

JW: So geographic size, population size…

MEW: Geographic size, population, what type of military forces might your intervening military be facing. Are you dealing with the Syrian military which has fairly sophisticated anti-aircraft defense systems? Are you dealing with militias that have AK-47s but not much else? These all go into it because it's going to change how much of a commitment are you going to have to make, are your political leadership, particularly in a democracy, is your broader public willing to sustained casualties to stop somebody else dying? You get the knee-jerk reaction of we ought to do something. Can that be sustained or not? And something to keep in mind is that if you intervene and then leave, you'll often make the problem even worse. Somalia is a great example of this. There have been multiple failed peacekeeping missions to Somalia and each one drives instability because local actors try to use the peacekeeping mission to further their own aims, and then the moment that mission leaves, it sends any stability that might have been found back into chaos.

JW: It's like a sort of injection into a complex system which can then throw things off and change the entire nature of the system.

MEW: Definitely.

JW: One of the other concepts that we hear sort of tossed around in this space when we think about the strategic level is the Responsibility to Protect or R2P. Can you explain what that is and where that idea comes from and maybe how widely accepted is it and how is it used in these in these conversations.

MEW: Definitely. Towards the end of the Cold War in the 1980s, there's a growing conversation about, and it's really tied to the Helsinki Agreement, that human rights are an international issue, they're not just something that is the state's responsibility inside of the state, that this can be part of higher international geopolitical thinking. By the end of the Cold War, you start to get statements of that human rights and atrocities, that is the role of the international community. In the '90s you start to hear kind of talking about the right to intervene and beginning discussions or more widespread discussions of just war theory but applying it to humanitarian crises and ethnic cleansing and genocide, and then the Responsibility to Protect is really galvanized by actually the Kosovo War in 1999 that I work on and is an immediate outgrowth of that.

JW: Not only is there a right to intervene but actually…

MEW: Actually, you have to…

JW: The international community has a responsibility, an obligation to intervene.

MEW: Yes, exactly. The Responsibility to Protect argues that the state is responsible for protecting their population and if they fail to do so that, at that point, they've kind of given up to some degree their right to sovereignty, and it becomes the duty and the responsibility of the international community to step in and protect the citizens because their government will not.

JW: Or has failed to.

MEW: Exactly. There is a brief moment in time around 2000 and the first six months of 2001 when the idea of the Responsibility to Protect is really being talked about a lot. There's a lot of discussion about it at the UN, a lot in favor, a lot of countries kind of semi-informally, semi-formally sign on to it, and then 9/11 happens and the strategic calculus changes.

JW: That feels like so long ago when that moment was sort of at the forefront of international discussions.

MEW: Yeah, it's part of this broader moment really that goes up until 9/11. There's a massive uptick in peacekeeping. In the '90s, if I'm getting my numbers right, there's more peacekeeping missions that are created in that one decade then in the whole Cold War. So, it's this moment of optimism about the Cold War is over and we can do more.

JW: A new geopolitical sort of, literally a new world order that we think is going to last and then 9/11 happens.

MEW: And then the discussion really shifts into more scholarly circles and a few diplomats are still talking about it, but you don't really see states doing anything.

JW: Okay. Have crises in places like Libya and Syria and Yemen in particular increased the conversation around humanitarian interventions in the recent last few years?

MEW: Some, more in the negative rather than in the positive. Those are all cases.

JW: And the warning against intervention?

MEW: Yes. All of those cases are ones where you'd have to have either a country or group of countries willing to incur, probably pretty heavy risk of casualties, really complicated in terms of

trying to negotiate a settlement. Really the trick with intervening is the intervenor either has to be willing to impose a settlement and occupy, or if you're doing a more UN-style peacekeeping mission, you have to have some degree of buy-in on the parties of they want a resolution.

JW: And they have to accept the peacekeeping force they've got. They can't be seen as occupiers, as invaders and so on and so forth. The cultural considerations, the linguistic considerations seem enormous.

MEW: All of that plays into it. There’s also some really interesting work coming out more in political science right now looking at the qualitative differences between UN and non-UN peacekeeping missions. It's starting to point to there is a difference and there's a couple of problems with UN peacekeeping missions. The command structure tends to be heavy on Europeans, democratic militaries with a strong sense of how do you interact with civilians and professionalization. The bulk of peacekeepers, however, are coming from the developing world. It’s often used as a reward because as long as they're on a UN peacekeeping mission, they're paid, their salary is provided through the UN peacekeeping budget, and it's at basically American and Western European standards of salary.

JW: Right.

MEW: And so, it’s a reward tour. You've just done kind of a hazard duty or you're about to retire. But sometimes they're coming from countries that don't have their own good track record of human rights and problematic relations between their military and their civilian population.

JW: And different normative behaviors, different ideas about what is acceptable.

MEW: Exactly.

JW: And what the purpose of the peacekeeping mission is.

MEW: And as they’re currently structured, the UN cannot prosecute their own peacekeepers. If a UN peacekeeper breaks the rules, does something bad, there’s a range or spectrum, they break the rules of engagement, they kill civilians, there's a problem with rape, the most the UN can do is report it to that soldier’s home nation, and they can send them home, they can ban them from the mission, but that is the extent of what the UN can do. That creates a lot of problems.

JW: This is one of the ongoing pieces of a really intense discussion at the United Nations about the impunity of peacekeepers and the protection of peacekeepers but also how you hold them accountable in military operations. Those are lots of challenges. When might in the current

environment, when could you imagine a military intervention or peacekeeping mission really making sense in terms of potentially working to resolve a crisis?

MEW: I think you'd have to have a couple of… if you have a check box or something. One, it would need to happen in an area that is of strategic significance for your country. As callous as it sounds, not every humanitarian disaster, not every campaign that ends up with ethnic cleansing is going to be in a place where your political leadership has a strategic interest.

JW: So, interest still matters.

MEW: Interest matters because otherwise you are not going to have the long-term commitment and you're going to end up with a failed mission. You might stop it for a couple months, but it's going to restart the moment you pull out and it might in fact be worse. So, interest. The next is what are the military capabilities on the ground? What are you going to be going up against? Again, do you have the political will to face that? Peacekeeping or intervention works best when you're not facing a country with a fully modern military with lots of resources and high-tech equipment.

JW: Especially one that's intent on stopping the intervention or the delivery of aid or whatever it is you're trying to do.

MEW: The next is ideally both parties, even if they're fighting, would like a way out and your intervention can help provide them cover for a way out.

JW: So, space for negotiation.

MEW: Exactly.

JW: Off ramps.

MEW: Some sort of political camouflage so that nobody's losing face if they back down. Alternatively, it can work under the right circumstances if at least one of the actors is fully supportive. Kosovo would be an example of that. The ethnic Serbs, Serbia did not want the NATO intervention, obviously they were being bombed.

JW: It’s unsurprising.

MEW: But Kosovo is majority ethnic Albanian, and they were very very supportive of it. Some situations like that can work. The next is, again ties back to this issue of interest, are you willing to stay? To really have a successful mission you have to be willing to stay. If you look at not just

Kosovo, Bosnia still has peacekeepers and their military presence. The British when they intervened in Sierra Leone in 2000, they stayed for a very long time, and that's really what you have to be willing to do. If you don't have those conditions, then you're better off kind of taking the approach of a doctor, your first rule is to do no harm. If you're not willing to do it all the way, stay out of it. It's awful and it can sound very callous because we want to help, but sometimes we're going to end up making it worse.

JW: When we think about ways that military intervention can exacerbate or make a situation worse, what are some of the complexities that military intervention can introduce into these humanitarian crises?

MEW: A great example is actually the AIDS crisis in Africa. There is a lot of evidence that actually peacekeepers spread AIDS to West Africa in the '90s during some of the peacekeeping missions both through the UN and then regional African peacekeeping missions, where they in theory had to be screened, but faked the screening. Dealing with militaries that, again, had gotten into the mission and either through black market economies that pop up around bases or other means, spread AIDS. Similarly, in Haiti you see public health consequences because of the peacekeeping deployment. That can be one.

JW: You introduce new biology and new vectors for transmission of germs, right?

MEW: You can create bubble economies. You're intervening or you're coming into a place that's post-conflict or in the middle of a conflict and suddenly there's a base, there's peacekeepers with lots of money that pops up around it. The peacekeeping mission closes or dramatically downsizes and suddenly this fragile economy crashes, which can spur a new cycle of violence.

JW: Sure.

MEW: You can also run into problems with confusion among combatants about military vs. civilian. If militaries provide aid, then that can cause problems for civilian international aid organizations because it creates this confusion over impartiality. Are you part of this outside force coming in and might be fighting them? Or are you a civilian providing neutral aid to all parties? That can be a consequence that you don't have as much, and this is why I wanted to separate out natural disaster. When the U.S. Navy comes in and they have the carrier and they can use helicopters and get to places that the roads washed out, you don't have to deal with this trickiness of partiality, impartiality.

JW: Questions about who they are there to assist and help.

MEW: Exactly. But when you are in a conflict situation, that's something to think about.

JW: Absolutely. That seems like a lot of reasons not to try this, to not use military force to intervene in the middle of humanitarian crisis even when the human cost, the economic cost is extraordinarily high. Like you said, it is heartbreaking, it is gut-wrenching to watch some of this happen. Can we think about places where the military might be useful? Where military force might be the right answer to intervene and to stop crisis sort of in the middle of when it's happening?

MEW: The best time to do it is before it's completely collapsed. If you're getting intelligence that says we're seeing an uptick and it's starting to get bad, that's the best time to stop it because if you can get in in that kind of sweet moment, then you're not going to be having as much of a risks factor as if you're trying to come in three years into a conflict. You can nip it in the bud. That's a really good time to get in. It's a really hard time to convince political leadership that that's the right thing to do.

JW: Because it doesn't have the sort of emotional affective pull early on.

MEW: Exactly.

JW: You can imagine that oh, they're being hyperbolic, it's being blown out of proportion, things aren't that bad, maybe it'll get better.

MEW: Rwanda is a great example where you're getting the reports, it's getting worse and then it goes too fast. Even if there had been the political will, it all happens really really quickly. It can be really hard to do but if you can get in early, if you're dealing with a small area, it's one thing to try and stop the Syrian Civil War versus, again, somewhere in the Balkans, a much smaller geographic space. Related to that, you're going to have a higher chance of success if it's somewhere where you have cultural similarity because you won't accidentally feed into the conflict as much. So, if you have some sort of connection with the country that's having this problem.

JW: This is how we see French involvement with francophone Africa—still remains higher than other Western countries.

MEW: And they have more linkages. They have a better chance of success than someone coming in with absolutely no ties. This isn't that there aren't examples or exceptions.

JW: Or that it's a perfect match all the time either.

MEW: Definitely not perfect. Sometimes with peacekeeping it's more of if you can get the buy-in to deploy the peacekeeping mission sometimes the simple presence of having peacekeepers can help tamp it down. But again, you're looking at a long-term. Most peacekeeping missions aren't as dramatic as the Kosovo one where it's 78 days of bombing and then it's over and you've managed to stop a campaign of ethnic cleansing and within two months of the last bomb, most of the refugees are back, not in their homes because they're burned, but back in the country. But you can definitely have peacekeeping missions that buy time for a diplomatic settlement which is what most of them do. That can be very very successful as long as you have some degree of buy-in among the warring parties that allows you to be there. You can also use the military in other ways. If you have a refugee crisis and it's not a conflict that you can directly intervene in, if it's too big, the military's factions involved are too sophisticated that your kind of risk factor is beyond what you find acceptable, you can still use militaries to help stabilize surrounding neighboring countries because if you have a sudden influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees, a lot of the time the neighboring countries are already not the most stable.

JW: Fragile as well.

MEW: They tend to be kind of fragile areas where these events happen. So, the presence of, particularly Western military peacekeepers, can help provide that stability for the neighboring country.

JW: And military capabilities in terms of logistics, organization, control, communication, shoring up externally.

MEW: Shoring up the state, shoring up the infrastructure, making sure that the presence of the refugees isn't posing an unbearable cost on the neighboring country that could fracture any existing problems.

JW: And then they can be almost neutral.

MEW: Depending on the scale of the refugee crisis, again, militaries can provide kind of a stopgap measure in the time it takes aid organizations to mobilize. If you need rapid logistics, there's really no one better to call than the U.S. military. And so, you can use military assets to get a huge amount of aid, be that food, bedding, tents, all these short-term, stop it from being a complete disaster…

JW: Again, we are talking about creating space and buying time…

MEW: Exactly.

JW: For aid organizations, for international organizations, for states…

MEW: It’s not that the military is suddenly taking over refugee assistance, it's that you're buying time for the aid organizations to get in.

JW: It almost turns it from conflict intervention into these humanitarian, disaster relief type-missions where we have I think it maybe a clear understanding of what the military can do and what it's what it's good at and what it's not really set up to do.

MEW: Absolutely.

JW: Mary Elizabeth, thanks so much for joining me in War Room today. We've had I think a great conversation, lots to think about for strategists, for military planners, for military professionals, but also for citizens and for the public to think about what it means when we see humanitarian crises unfolding in front of us in the international community and what is our obligation as humans? What is our obligation as a state? And then for military professionals, what can they do and what are they maybe not well suited to do? So, thanks so much for your time, it's been a pleasure.

MEW: Thanks for having me, this has been great.