

Do English School ‘solidarists’ provide a convincing justification for humanitarian intervention?

Alan Lis

16.06.2020



Main points:

- Humanitarian intervention is a very contentious and divisive matter, causing arguments with regards to its legitimacy, scope, and potential consequences.
- This article will argue that English School solidarists do provide a convincing justification for humanitarian intervention, however, only to a certain degree.
- One needs to remember that the reasoning that humanitarian intervention brings some risks and poses certain dangers, as argued by the English School pluralists and realists, is a valid one, and therefore it can be argued that such argumentation undermines, to an extent, the justification offered by solidarists.

Abstract

This article touches upon the issue of humanitarian intervention and will consider whether English School solidarists provide a convincing justification for it. This paper will cover some theoretical background needed to cover this specific topic and subsequently will present and explain the arguments that English School solidarists use to justify humanitarian intervention, and then contrast them with the reasoning of unfavourable to the practice of humanitarian intervention English School pluralists and realists. Doing so, it will argue that even though some of the arguments that solidarists offer to justify humanitarian intervention are indeed persuasive, the strength of their reasoning is to an extent undermined by claims made by the English School pluralists and realists, and therefore it will argue that the solidarist justification for humanitarian intervention is only partly convincing.

Introduction

Humanitarian intervention is a very contentious issue, and much ink has been spilled on this topic not only by scholars but also by diplomats and journalists. It has been also a divisive matter, causing arguments with regards to its legitimacy, scope, and potential consequences. This article will consider convincingness of justification for humanitarian intervention offered by the English School solidarists and contrast it with the arguments of those that make a case against such interventions.

In essence, this article will argue that English School solidarists do provide a convincing justification for humanitarian intervention, however, only to a certain degree. Despite the fact

that some of their arguments are indeed very strong and persuasive, one needs to remember that, as noble as the concept of humanitarian intervention is, it is also a very complex issue, and therefore arguments from the opposite side need to be taken into consideration as well. The reasoning that humanitarian intervention brings some risks and poses certain dangers, as argued by the English School pluralists and realists, is a valid one, and therefore it can be argued that such argumentation undermines, to an extent, the justification offered by solidarists.

As for the structure of this article, its main body will begin with a section including some theoretical background and definitions of key terms- it will explain the English School and its core assumption in a few words and then introduce the English School debate between pluralists and solidarists. Having done so, the following section will present and analyse the solidarist justification for humanitarian intervention, firstly explaining their theoretical position and then three of their strongest arguments justifying such type of intervention. The subsequent part will analyse claims made by the English School pluralists and realists. It will be explained how the former argue that humanitarian intervention threatens the stability of international society and what it may lead to, and how the latter reason that the practice of humanitarian intervention may be manipulated and misused. After that, conclusion will summarize the main points presented.

Theoretical background and definitions of key terms

The English School is one of the approaches to international politics. It originated in the second half of the twentieth century and has been represented by a number of well-respected and noticeable scholars, such as Hedley Bull, John Vincent, or Adam Watson, who constituted a group of its ‘most influential early members’ (Linklater, 2013; 88). More recently, however, Nicolas Wheeler, Tim Dunne, and Robert Jackson have been its most prominent advocates.

The main claim of the English School approach, which ‘has been said to distinguish it from other theories of IR’ (Dunne, 2013; 138) is that states form an international society. Scholars of English School, which have tended to divide themselves into two camps- pluralists and solidarists, introduced by Hedley Bull in ‘The Grotian Conception of International Society’ in 1966- view international society somewhat differently. Those dissimilarities, which will be elaborated in the following sections, have resulted in a ‘debate’ between pluralists and solidarists that includes their discussion regarding the practice of humanitarian intervention.

Scholars of both camps have spilled much ink on this particular topic- indeed, it is a vital component of the English School thinking about ‘the rights and duties that states hold by virtue of their membership of international society’ (Dunne, 2015; 60), and as a concept, it is said to pose ‘the conflict between order and justice in its starkest form’ (Wheeler, 1992; 463), which are crucial themes for English School thinking- the concept of order for the pluralist theory of international society, and justice for that of solidarism.

Before turning to the solidarists’ justification, a few words on humanitarian intervention are needed. It has always been a divisive issue (Dunne, 2015; 60), and a highly controversial one (Kardas, 2013). Humanitarian intervention, defined by Saban as ‘forcible action by a state, a group of states or international organizations to prevent or end gross violations of human rights on behalf of the nationals of the target state, through the use or threat of armed force without the consent of the target government’ (Kardas, 2003; 21) takes place under certain circumstances. In a very simple way, one may argue that such intervention occurs when a state targets its own citizens, greatly violating their human rights, or in the case of a state collapsing in lawlessness (Wheeler, 2000; 27).

Solidarism and its justification for humanitarian intervention

Bull, who, as mentioned above, came up with the notions of solidarism and pluralism, defined the former in terms of ‘solidarity, or potential solidarity, of the states comprising international society, with respect to the enforcement of the law’ (*cited* in Wheeler, 2000; 11). Solidarists are in favour of humanitarian intervention. As for their concept of international society, solidarism implies that states serve interests and purposes of people (Dunne, 2015), and not the other way around. It, therefore, can be argued that the solidarist approach places people- their rights and security- at the core of its conception of international society, and above the sovereignty of states. Thus, in a case where peoples’ rights are being violated on a large scale, and the sovereign state whose population is at danger either is responsible for such violations, or is not able to stop them, then, according to the solidarist approach, other members of international society are obliged to carry out an intervention aimed at protecting those people (Dunne, 2013). In addition, solidarists treat the defence of human rights with great importance (Wheeler, 2000) and claim that ‘individual rights and duties are the ultimate moral referent’

(Wheeler and Dunne, 1996; 100) for them. Through such, solidarists believe that humanitarian interventions are justified because morality has supremacy over the principle of sovereignty.

The theoretical background behind the reasoning of solidarists gives strong foundations for their arguments, with which they justify humanitarian intervention. The maximum allowed length of this article does not allow for analysis in greater scope, and thus only three of the strongest and most convincing solidarists' arguments justifying humanitarian intervention will be explained.

Moral responsibility of states to protect human rights both domestically and internationally

The first argument analysed here is the one provided by Nicolas Wheeler (2000), who based his claim on Bull's 'The Grotian Conception'. The argument in question implies that in the solidarist society of states it is established that states have a moral responsibility to protect not only their own populace, but they are also expected to defend the implementation and compliance of human rights everywhere. By promoting this argument solidarists underline the universal duty of states to maintain the well-being of people and highlight that the responsibility of states to protect people from being unlawfully harmed and their rights from being violated does not apply only within their sovereign borders, but that in case of a massive-scale wrongdoings they are obliged to intervene outside of their legal jurisdiction too. Indeed, borders should not stop foreign governments from helping those, who otherwise would not get any help and would tremendously suffer.

Benefits of the principles of non-intervention and sovereignty should not be automatically granted

The second point assessed here was made by R.J. Vincent, whose early writings, what is interesting, included him in the pluralist wing of the English School (Suganami, 2010), and Peter Wilson. In 1993 they rightly reflected upon the issue whether 'states ought to satisfy certain basic requirements of decency before they qualify for the protection which the principle of non-intervention provides' (Vincent and Wilson, 1993; 125). They correctly suggested that if a given state does not meet those basic requirements, it should not be protected by the principles of non-intervention and sovereignty, implying that such a powerful security shield shall be open only to those states, whose standpoint on the case of complying with human

rights, their promotion and implementation, is impeccable. Otherwise, if a state commits crimes on a massive scale, the society of states should not abide by the non-intervention rule and do get involved in order to help people. This particular argument links well with what Kofi Annan, the former Secretary-General of the UN, said in 1999: ‘no government has the right to hide behind national sovereignty in order to violate the human rights or fundamental freedoms of its peoples’ (Annan, 1999).

States may intervene pre-emptively if there is evidence of a massacre to happen

Michael Walzer’s argument is another one that justifies humanitarian intervention, however in arguing that ‘humanitarian intervention is justified when it is a response [...] to acts ‘that shock the moral conscience of mankind’’ (2006; 102) Walzer may have missed one point. By arguing for a humanitarian intervention to be justified specifically as a response, there is a risk that help may come too late to save some of the endangered people. After all, even in 2019, it must take some time before army units of a foreign state (or states) achieve readiness for an intervention, and it takes only seconds to kill somebody. Therefore, if states hold credible and convincing evidence of what would happen if they hesitate with their intervention, they ought to be allowed to intervene pre-emptively. This argument that states should not wait for the massacre to start to intervene if people are threatened with such was raised by Bazylar (1987) and repeated by Wheeler (2000). Indeed, solidarists rightly argue that not only interventions responding to a massacre should be justified, but also those pre-emptive ones as well.

The arguments analysed above are among the strongest ones that solidarist offer to justify the idea of humanitarian intervention. However, one needs to remember that ‘while the use of force can promote good consequences, it always produces harmful ones as well’ (Wheeler, 2000; 35). Indeed, the issue of humanitarian intervention, as noble as it is, is also a complex one and it has some drawbacks which need to be taken into consideration. Negatives associated with such interventions will be presented in the following section.

Objections to humanitarian intervention- arguments of pluralists and realists

English School pluralists stand on the opposite side of the debate regarding humanitarian intervention. However, criticisms towards such may be found coming also from the realist angle. Arguments of pluralists and realists that undermine the strength of the solidarists’

justification will be analysed below. Firstly, however, the theoretical concept of pluralist international society will be explained in order to better illustrate their position.

Pluralism- its theoretical assumptions and argumentation against humanitarian intervention

In the pluralist international society, the main focus is put on the concept of order. Pluralism holds that states, not individuals, are the basic members of international society and ‘as sovereign equals, they can have no legitimate interest in matters that fall within each other’s domestic jurisdiction, and no right of intervention to protect individuals’ (Linklater, 2013; 98). Indeed, pluralists attach primary significance to the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention, which contribute to cooperative coexistence between states forming the international society. In other words, security of states has a priority over security of people in pluralist order.

Pluralists see humanitarian intervention as ‘a violation of the cardinal rules of sovereignty, non-intervention, and non-use of force’ (Wheeler, 2000; 11), so all the elements they hold dear. In general, they argue that humanitarian intervention causes a threat of undermining international order, what may have particularly bad consequences, as severely weakened inter-state order may cause further disruption to peace and security and eventually result in war. In case of that happening, there is a possibility that even more people may suffer and get to be deprived of their rights. As Jackson claimed, ‘humanitarian values are never under greater threat than when states get involved in wars’ (2000; 291). Jackson’s views illustrate well also another point of pluralists- that of the supremacy of states over people in international society. Indeed, he stated that ‘stability of international order is [...] far more important than minority rights and humanitarian protection’ (Jackson, 2000; 291). Pluralists, in other words, believe that humanitarian intervention threatens the stability of the international system, which is a crucial aspect for them, and thus is very likely to cause more troubles than actually solve.

The realist criticism

There are some similarities to be found in the solidarist and realist approaches (Wheeler, 2000), however, it is much easier to find criticisms that realists raise against the justification of solidarists. Wheeler (2000) does a great job explaining them in a greater capacity, however, the limited space here will allow to focus on just one of them. Thomas Franck and Nigel Rodley

(1973) argued that legalizing the practice of unilateral humanitarian intervention would make it susceptible to manipulation. Indeed, it has always been a possibility that states would use humanitarian intervention in order to pursue their national interests- maximizing national self-interest is one of the core assumptions of realism- using it simply as a cover-up to hide their real intentions. Moreover, as the concept of humanitarian intervention can be manipulated by states, there is always an option that humanitarian intervention may become ‘a weapon that the strong will use against the weak’ (Wheeler, 2000; 29-30). Indeed, Third World leaders may oppose the idea of humanitarian intervention, especially coming from the Western countries, simply for the reason of seeing it as a threat to their domestic power (Wheeler and Dunne, 1996) and their homeland being exploited. Thus, realists are right to argue that the practice of humanitarian intervention may very well be manipulated and misused.

Conclusion

This article argued that the English School solidarists do provide a convincing justification for humanitarian intervention, however, their account, despite some very strong arguments that were mentioned, cannot be said to be fully convincing. Arguments raised by the English School pluralists and realists undermine, to an extent, the strength of the solidarists’ explanation, showing that the practice of humanitarian intervention is an ambiguous matter. For solidarists, humanitarian intervention is a method that states are entitled to in order to help people, whose rights and security are at the center of their thinking of international society, and whom they value more than the principle of states sovereignty and norm of non-intervention. As an idea, humanitarian intervention is definitely a noble one, however, one needs to remember that it also has its drawbacks. Pluralists and realists rightly recognized that humanitarian intervention may be a threat to the stability of international society, and as such, it may cause more problems than cure. In addition, realists acknowledged that humanitarian intervention may be misused and manipulated- used as a cover for pursuing national interests, or as a weapon of more powerful states against those poorer ones. These are the reasons for which the solidarists’ justification, despite offering very strong arguments, is convincing only to a certain degree.

Bibliography

Annan, K. (1999). Secretary-General Calls For Renewed Commitment in New Century to Protect Rights of Man, Woman, Child -- Regardless of Ethnic, National Belonging. [online] Available at: <https://www.un.org/press/en/1999/19990407.sgsm6949.html>.

Bazyler, M. (1987). Reexamining the Doctrine of Humanitarian Intervention in the Light of the Atrocities in Kampuchea and Ethiopia. *Stanford Journal of International Law*, 23.

Dunne, T. (2013). The English School. In: T. Dunne, M. Kurki and S. Smith, ed., *International Relations Theories. Discipline and Diversity*, 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dunne, T. (2015). The English School and Humanitarian Intervention. In: R. Murray, ed., *System, Society and the World. Exploring the English School of International Relations*, 2nd ed. [online] E-International Relations Publishing. Available at: <https://www.e-ir.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/System-Society-and-the-World-E-IR.pdf>.

Franck, T. and Rodley, N. (1973). After Bangladesh: The Law of Humanitarian Intervention by Military Force. *The American Journal of International Law*, 67(2), pp.275-305.

Jackson, R. (2000). *The Global Covenant: Human Conduct in a World of States*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.291.

Kardas, S. (2003). Humanitarian Intervention: A Conceptual Analysis. *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations*, 2(3&4), pp.21-49.

Kardas, S. (2013). Humanitarian Intervention as a 'Responsibility to Protect': An International Society Approach. *All Azimuth : A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace*, 2(1), pp.21-38.

Linklater, A. (2013). The English School. In: S. Burchill and A. Linklater, ed., *Theories of International Relations*, 5th ed. Palgrave Macmillan.

Suganami, H. (2010). The English School in a Nutshell. *Ritsumeikan Annual Review of International Studies*, 9, pp.15-28.

Vincent, R. and Wilson, P. (1993). Beyond Non-Intervention. In: I. Forbes and M. Hoffman, ed., *Political Theory, International Relations, and the Ethics of Intervention*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Walzer, M. (2006). *Just And Unjust Wars : A Moral Argument With Historical Illustrations*. 4th ed. New York: Basic Books, p.102.

Wheeler, N. (1992). Pluralist or Solidarist Conceptions of International Society: Bull and Vincent on Humanitarian Intervention. *Millenium: Journal of International Studies*, 21(3), pp.463-487.

Wheeler, N. (2000). *Saving Strangers. Humanitarian Intervention in International Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wheeler, N. and Dunne, T. (1996). Hedley Bull's pluralism of the intellect and solidarism of the will. *International Affairs*, 72(1), pp.91-107.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Alan Lis. Graduate of two British universities: University of York (BA in Politics with International Relations) and University of Warwick (MA in International Security). Erasmus student at the University of Bergen, Norway. His previous professional experience includes, amongst others, working for the Department of Strategic Studies of the Chancellery of the Prime Minister of Poland and Euractiv.pl. His main research interests are international security, terrorism, and hybrid threats.

IF YOU VALUE *THE INSTITUTE OF NEW EUROPE'S* WORK, BECOME ONE OF ITS DONORS!

Funds received will allow us to finance further publications.

You can contribute by making donations to INE's bank account:

95 2530 0008 2090 1053 7214 0001

with the following payment title: „darowizna na cele statutowe”