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Why Is the U.S. So Hypocritical in Foreign Policy?

By Ivan Eland

March 18, 2014

In the current crisis over the Russian "invasion" of Crimea (is it an invasion when the population seems to want to be invaded and no violence occurs?), US protests seem rather hypocritical to the world. After all, recently, the United States has attacked or invaded six countries – Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya using ground troops or manned aircraft and Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia using unpiloted drone aircraft dropping bombs. In all of these instances, even if the local government directly or tacitly approved of the US military action, many of the country's people did not.

A free and fair referendum among the people of Crimea would probably welcome a return of Crimea to Russia. Sixty percent of the Crimean people are Russian-speakers. In contrast, the more violent US invasions or attacks on countries usually have been less well received by much the population of the target nations. But didn't Russia violate international law by sending troops into a foreign land without doing so in self-defense? Russia makes the lame excuse that it was rescuing Russian-speakers in Crimea from the anti-Russian revolution in Ukraine. And since international law requires that countries take military action only in self defense or when the United Nations Security Council approves such use of force, the answer is that Russia has violated international law.

Yet in only one of the aforementioned cases of US military intervention was international law satisfied – attacking Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks. Even then, the self defense justification has been stretched to the maximum by conducting a long-term nation-building war and striking groups in Pakistan that have nothing to do with the Afghan War (the Pakistani Taliban). In another, the U.S.-led air attacks against Libya, a U.N. resolution permitted the use of Western air power to create a no-fly zone to prevent the Libyan Air Force from executing Muammar Gaddafi's blustering threat to harm Libyans in opposition to his rule. However, as Russia, correctly complained at the time, the U.S.-led Western powers abused the resolution and kept bombing until Libya until Gaddafi was removed from power. In Iraq, Yemen, and Somalia, the United States struck people who had nothing to do with the September 11 attacks – blatantly violating the self-defense requirement in international law and, in the case of Yemen and Somalia, the US Constitution and the post-9/11 congressional resolution authorizing the use of US military force against the perpetrators of those attacks.

Citizens of the United States often believe that the US military is fighting overseas to advance their freedom and that of other peoples everywhere. In reality, the United States behaves like other nations, for instance like Russia, usually taking military action to advance its military, political, economic, or diplomatic interests. According to the realists – an academically well-respected school of foreign policy thought with illustrious practitioners, such as Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, George H. W. Bush, and Barack Obama – all countries behave this same way, regardless of their sometimes high flying rhetoric. The policy record indicates that the realist school of foreign policy is usually right about how world leaders and their countries, including the United States, behave, but the realists have a problem when selling such Machiavellian policies to the idealistic American people.

Americans are particularly prone to such idealistic and "patriotic" appeals, because advertising is more deeply ingrained in the culture here than in other countries. If America didn't invent advertising, it surely perfected it. Madison Avenue has inculcated into the American people, including members of the armed forces, the belief that the US military is overseas fighting for "our freedom," when a more accurate analysis would be to say that armed forces are fighting for what the national leaders perceive to be in US national interests. (Real US national security interests could be scoped back to a much narrower list.) Thus, the oft severe divergence between the soaring rhetoric and real motives, which is more readily apparent to foreign, rather than American, observers leads many foreign leaders and citizens to describe US policy with one word: hypocrisy.

Research shows that democracies are no more pacific and benevolent on the world stage than are dictatorships – as can be illustrated by the aggressive formal British and French Empires and the informal American Empire. But it also shows that such hypocrisy is not unique to the United States, even if US double standards are the most flagrantly obvious. For example, Spain, Britain, and Canada are all protesting Russia's detachment of Crimea from Ukraine while resisting their own separatist movements and helping their NATO ally, the United States, detach Kosovo from Serbia using armed force in 1999.

But lest we let Russia off the hook too much, the Russians are hypocritical in detaching the Russian-speaking Crimea from Ukraine but denying self-determination to regions of Russia that might want to separate from it – for example, Chechnya and Dagestan.

So when analyzing countries' behavior internationally, and especially that of the United States, we must descend past the usually high-flying rhetoric associated with military action and face the reality that other, deeper reasons for attacking other countries might exist. (In the Crimean case, Russia wants to safeguard its strategic naval base in Sevastopol. We must then evaluate whether these deeper reasons are actually necessary for the attacking nation's security and whether that country is acting hypocritically in criticizing other nations' similar actions. Unfortunately, during the post-World War II era, in terms of numbers of military actions, the United States has empirically been the most aggressive country in the world – the vast majority of these interventions having nothing to do with spreading freedom and some of them even extinguishing it.