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Structuring Intervention Decisions to Prevent Genocide and Mass Atrocities

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“Simply put, the US government does not have an established, coherent policy for preventing and responding to genocide and mass atrocities” (Albright & Cohen, 2008; p.3)

Abstract

Drawing on techniques from decision analysis, psychology, and negotiation analysis, we highlight a general approach to assessing genocide prevention decisions that we believe could provide decision makers with additional insight, consistency, efficiency, and defensibility. We argue that the use of a consistent decision-making framework would facilitate the comparison and review of choices, with significant clarity gained through the simple act of developing a common language for the key decision elements and placing considerations into an agreed-upon context and order. The consequences of alternative actions can then be evaluated in terms of their ability to achieve the identified values, collectively determining the overall benefits, costs, and risks of proposed actions. Properly used, a decision-aiding framework has the potential to improve the quality of intervention deliberations, laying the groundwork for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the threats posed to American values and interests using a common language for analysis that facilitates input and involvement from all key parties.

1.0. Introduction

The Executive Summary of the Genocide Prevention Task Force, co-chaired by Madeleine Albright and William Cohen, begins by emphasizing “. . . the fundamental reality that genocide and mass atrocities threaten American values and interests” (Albright & Cohen, 2008). Yet decisions about whether the US should intervene and attempt to stop genocide taking place in another country are complicated, on many levels (Power, 2002). Such choices place a cognitive demand on decision makers because they involve multiple dimensions of value and a wide range of possible alternative actions. The decision context typically is characterized by numerous constraints including insufficient time, limited information, and scarce financial

¹ Our colleagues Michael Harstone and David Frank have contributed significantly to our thinking on these topics.

resources. Intervention decisions also involve difficult emotions because people’s lives—foreign as well as US citizens—are at issue and because decision makers feel a moral responsibility for the outcomes of their choices.

Drawing on techniques from decision analysis, psychology, and negotiation analysis, we highlight a general approach to assessing genocide prevention decisions that we believe could provide decision makers with additional insight, consistency, efficiency, and defensibility. Our research—as academics and advisors to governments—has focused on understanding how people both do and should make decisions characterized by multiple dimensions of value, uncertain consequences, and difficult tradeoffs. This characterization applies to most decisions concerning genocide prevention but it also applies to a host of other tough public policy choices facing governments such as responses to climate change, storage of high-level nuclear wastes, or prevention of terrorism. Each of these national-level policy choices is said to have an influence on “national security” and the long-term “national interest”—two terms that often surface as part of discussions of genocide prevention. And although in each of these diverse policy arenas the consequences of decisions typically are subject to uncertainty (and thus good outcomes are not guaranteed), appropriate decision-making approaches have the capability to improve the quality of outcomes by identifying choices that better align with and achieve the considered interests of decision makers. As President Obama stated when discussing US policies in the Middle East, “We have to be able to distinguish between these problems analytically, so that we’re not using a pliers where we need a hammer, and we’re not using a battalion when what we should be doing is partnering with the local government . . .” (Remnick, 2011).

2.0. A decision-aiding approach

Prescriptive decision making is concerned with how people can improve their choice processes. As succinctly characterized in the book *Smart Choices* (Hammond, Keeney & Raiffa 1999), a recommended decision-making sequence forms the acronym ProACT: understand the Problem context, clarify Objectives and associated measures, define Alternatives, identify their likely Consequences and important uncertainties, and highlight key Trade-offs. When used in an iterative fashion, cycling back to re-examine assumptions with shifts in the importance of different objectives or as new information becomes available, the approach is both rigorous and links with the logic of common sense.

To the extent that similar decisions are made over time, the use of a consistent decision-making framework encourages learning because it facilitates the comparison and review of choices, examining criteria and reasons that (in hindsight) will turn out to have a stronger or weaker rationale. The use of a simplifying structure to address intervention choices also has the benefit of forcing decision makers to confront a paradoxical truth: it is because the issues involved in framing such choices can appear overwhelmingly difficult that a simplifying structure is useful. Without an organizing structure, the breadth of concerns involved in thinking about interventions to prevent genocide can effectively serve to paralyze rational decision making. As a result, what often happens is that the difficult becomes (falsely) easy by relying on habit (what did we do last time?) or intuition (what is my gut feeling?)? Discussions and debate may bias decisions in favor of achieving prominent objectives that are easy to defend, such as national security, without carefully weighing these against less prominent or more uncertain objectives, such as human rights or civilian lives (Slovic & Västfjäll, 2013).

A structured, decision-aiding process also can help to balance the role of two main judgmental mechanisms, involving the automatic and more thoughtful responses that have been termed System 1 and System 2—fast and slow—thinking by Kahneman (2011) and others. System 1 is a fast, automatic system based on experience and involving intuition and feelings. System 2 brings in slower, more reasoned responses that involve cognition and analysis. Together these two ways of comprehending reality form the basis for how we identify and make difficult tradeoffs; different individuals, and likely different countries, will rely on different mixtures of System 1 and System 2 inputs when addressing intervention decisions.

A particular concern with respect to genocide prevention choices is that the fast, automatic thinking of System 1 can override the slower, more deliberate thinking of System 2 and lead to a reliance on emotional responses and judgmental shortcuts. Although these “judgmental heuristics” help decision makers to cope with the complex cognitive demands placed on them, they can also open the door to a variety of decision-making biases that lead individuals to anchor on oversimplified analogies, to give insufficient attention to their own perspective and values (thus resulting in the phenomenon known as “groupthink”), to focus on one or two prominent dimensions of a choice to the neglect of other important considerations, and to encourage psychophysical numbing by diminishing sensitivity to meaningful changes in a concern. Awareness of these judgmental biases—which research has shown to influence the

choices and reasoning processes of experts as well as laypersons—can help significantly to improve the quality of decisions and aid in balancing the contributions of our System 1 and 2 inputs to choices.

3.0 Structuring Intervention Decisions

Our starting point for thinking about genocide prevention decisions is the same as that of Albright and Cohen: identifying the interests and values of Americans and their decision makers within a specified problem context. Although each situation is different, all decisions about whether to intervene in a foreign country to prevent or reduce genocide and mass atrocities are likely to reflect both an over-riding political philosophy (e.g., to what extent do the President and Congress seek to shape the course of global events)² and specific considerations such as the country's geographic location, its history and economic capabilities, and both current and future political realities such as the stability of its current leadership. These considerations give shape to the problem; understanding the context for decisions is always the first step in developing effective decision aids.

Once key elements of the intervention decision context are identified, decision makers will be faced with a set of values or concerns that will be affected, to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the choices that are made. These values then need to be evaluated with respect to how significantly they are likely to be impacted by a broad set of alternative policies, which typically include at least the following categories of responses: diplomatic, economic, legal, and military (either covert or overt)—all of which could be applied in various combinations, at different levels of intensity, and with more or less coordination with allies.

Identifying values and characterizing policy alternatives is neither easy nor straightforward. As people whose job is to examine and help aid public policy choices, we have addressed few issues not characterized by their respective decision makers and technical experts as “the most difficult ever encountered.” Nevertheless, substantial insights often can be gained simply through organizing the various sources of decision complexity, as shown in the following illustrative listing of key contextual concerns, values, and alternatives.

² A recent interview with Samantha Power (Osnos, 2014) refers to this as a desire to “bend the curve.”

- *Context*: geographic location, history, economic capabilities, leadership stability
- *Values*: national security, civilian lives and injuries (US, foreign), military lives and injuries (US, foreign), economic costs (intervention, aid), reputation of US (moral, legal, leadership), regional stability (social, political, economic).
- *Alternatives*: diplomatic, economic, legal, military (covert or overt—air strikes, ground troops, etc.)

Significant clarity can be gained through the simple act of developing a common language for the key decision elements and placing considerations into their proper place or order—an organizing or binning process referred to as “decision sketching” (Gregory et al., 2012). Each of the alternatives will have different effects in terms of their ability to achieve the identified values, and these consequences will collectively determine the overall benefits and costs of any selected policy. In addition, some of the consequences will matter more to some people than to others, which can help to shed light on both the sources of agreement among participants and their reasons for disagreements. The balancing of these different outcomes forms the basis for discussions of trade-offs: how much of a potential gain in one objective is needed to balance off potential losses in another?

A decision-aiding approach uses several specific tools to help structure these discussions, with the goal of highlighting key considerations and—by making relationships among these decision elements more transparent—encouraging participants to pay attention to areas of agreement and disagreement. Three tools are particularly helpful.

Objectives hierarchies provide a vehicle for identifying and ordering concerns relevant to a decision (Keeney, 1992). For example, key values for intervention decisions to prevent mass atrocities and genocide will typically include effects on national security (including both domestic and international political or economic threats), civilian and military fatalities and injuries (both US and foreign), economic costs of intervention and aid, effects on the reputation of the US (related to meeting moral & legal obligations), and the anticipated impacts on regional stability. Each of these fundamental concerns often will include several sub-objectives: “protecting human lives,” for example, includes both deaths and injuries that might affect either civilians or members of the military. Delineating objectives (a) provides a clear basis and record for identifying what matters to the decision, (b) it provides an explicit and consistent framework

for comparing the consequences of alternative actions or for generating new, creative alternatives, and (c) it allows different participants to express the importance they place on each concern, which often provides the rationale for disagreements regarding choices.

Performance measures establish one or more specific metrics (aka attributes) that track changes in the objectives related to an action. Developing good measures for changes to each interest is essential for the consistent evaluation of alternatives and also permits clear communication about what matters among the decision participants. They should be understandable, complete (otherwise important concerns are omitted), concise (to facilitate the ready comparison of alternatives), direct and unambiguous (to ensure clear communication), and measurable (so that data can be found to track differences among alternatives). Coming up with good measures for some objectives is relatively easy, for example using dollars to measure cost or numbers of fatalities for lives lost. Other important objectives, such as “national security” or “national reputation,” are more difficult to define—yet deliberations about intervention options will be improved to the extent that different intervention alternatives can be compared on these dimensions and all stakeholders are using the same working definitions (Keeney & Gregory, 2005).

Consequence tables are another key structuring tool (Clemen, 2004), used to emphasize the link between the consequences of actions and the concerns that matter the most. Columns show the different intervention alternatives that are under consideration; rows show the different values that may be impacted. Each box of the table thus shows what is likely to happen if that alternative is selected. Consequence tables can be kept simple or can be constructed to incorporate additional considerations such as the existence of sequential decisions, information changes over time, thresholds signaling the need for possible shifts in actions, or important geographic differences among potentially affected regions. As noted by Samantha Power: “You have to take into account the other collateral issues that you’re dealing with on the international stage” (Osnos, 2014).

4.0. Moving forward

The doctrine of responsibility to protect (R2P), articulated in 2005, permits the international community to intervene in the affairs of a sovereign state if it fails to protect its population from mass atrocity crimes. President Obama supported and strengthened this agreement by

proclaiming, as part of Presidential Directive 10, the establishment of the Atrocities Prevention Board (APB) and by stating that “Preventing mass atrocities and genocide is a core national security interest and a core moral responsibility of the United States.” (White House, 2011).

Our belief is that depicting genocide prevention decisions in terms of fundamental values, clearly articulated measures of performance, and the consequences of different alternatives can help to organize what is known about the predicted consequences of interventions while highlighting key information gaps. A structured decision-aiding approach also has the capability to examine carefully a vague doctrine, such as “protect the national interest” or “promote humanitarian interventions,” and transform it into an organized framework that promotes both understanding and discussion. Of course, a decision-aiding framework cannot “make” the tough choices required of the US government with respect to interventions intended to reduce genocide and mass atrocities. What it can do is to improve the quality and extent of intervention deliberations, laying the groundwork for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the threats posed to American values and interests using a common language for analysis that facilitates input and involvement from all key parties.

5.0. References

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