

## **The Axis of Intervention**

**By John Feffer | July 27, 2006**

There is a new force in foreign policy: the “axis of intervention.” Two allies are official members: the United States and Israel. With its recent invasion of Somalia, Ethiopia has joined the grouping. A fourth nation, Japan, is petitioning for membership.

The Bush administration has not attacked any countries recently. But in President George W. Bush’s first five years in office, the United States has established a dangerous precedent in international affairs. The attack on Afghanistan launched a war against not only a state (the Taliban-led government) but also a paramilitary organization (al-Qaida). The intervention into Iraq was the first example of a “preventive” war—a campaign not just to preempt an imminent attack but also to prevent *any* potential conflict in the future. And finally, the United States has introduced the concept of a “war without end.” The United States is fighting an unknown number of terrorists. If one organization surrenders or is destroyed, another will inevitably take its place.

Israel has matched these U.S. policies. The current interventions in Lebanon and Gaza target paramilitary organizations (Hezbollah, Hamas) and sovereign entities (the Lebanese government, the Palestinian National Authority). The attacks were a direct response to the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers, but formed part of a broader effort to prevent any future offensives from their hostile neighbors. Both conflicts are but the latest in a half-century war. And just as the U.S. invasion of Iraq has produced more terrorists than it has suppressed, Israel’s bombing of its enemies only generates more ill will toward the country. If Israel doesn’t begin to take negotiations seriously, its very own war without end will spiral further out of control.

Ethiopia sent its troops into Somalia on July 20 to prop up a weak government. Ethiopia is desperate to prevent the growing power of the Islamic Courts, a militant Islamic movement that has its own militias. But the intervention is also part of the longstanding conflict with Eritrea, which Ethiopia accuses of supporting the Islamic Courts. The intervention, however, only further radicalizes

the Islamic Courts and boosts Somali public opinion in their favor.

Japan signaled its interest in joining this axis of intervention by putting the military option onto the table in its dealings with North Korea. After Pyongyang’s launch of seven missiles on July 4, leading Japanese government spokesman Shinzo Abe said, “If we accept that there is no other option to prevent a missile attack, there is an argument that attacking the missile bases would be within the legal right of self-defense.”

Unlike the United States, Israel, or Ethiopia, Japan was until recently the furthest thing from an aggressive power. It enjoyed five decades of a “peace constitution.” Its military was restricted to defense. It had very little capacity to attack another country.

Now Japan wants to have a “normal” military. In today’s world, “normal” unfortunately translates into a capacity to launch ill-advised military interventions. Japan is acquiring an in-air refueling capacity that will allow long-range bombing missions. It is changing its constitution to permit a wide range of military operations. Some Japanese officials have even broken the taboo and discussed Japan’s potential need for nuclear weapons. And Japan has been one of the closest supporters of recent U.S. military campaigns, including the endless war on terrorism.

It’s bad enough that the world’s most prominent proponent of state pacifism has renounced its tradition. What will happen to global security when the world’s second richest country joins the arms race and begins to contemplate long-range bombing campaigns? China and South Korea have raised the alarm about Japan’s new militarism. But the Bush administration has a very short historical memory.



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The new axis of intervention targets not only sovereign states like North Korea and non-state actors like Hezbollah and the Islamic Courts. With the news of Israeli attacks against Red Cross vehicles and a clearly marked UN observation post in Lebanon, the real target of the axis of intervention becomes clear: the institutions of international law. By resorting to military force and scorning diplomacy, both Israel and the United States have undermined the United Nations and key global agreements such as the Geneva Conventions. It remains to be seen whether Japan and Ethiopia will sign on to this larger agenda.

The possibilities of global cooperation opened up by the end of the Cold War have come to a dead-end. The axis of intervention promises a future that resembles the distant past, what the English theorist Thomas Hobbes called the “war of all against all.” It is a world, ironically, where both aggressive countries like the United States and Israel and aggressive non-state actors like al-Qaida and the Islamic Courts will feel right at home.

While the events of recent weeks have been indeed disturbing, the world hasn’t slid entirely down the slippery slope. Interventions have taken place, but internationalism is not dead. As the stunning front page of *The Independent* graphically represented, the world community has united in favor of an immediate ceasefire in Lebanon—the only dissent comes from the United States, Britain, and Israel.

Japan’s threat to launch a preemptive attack on North Korea has generated nothing but criticism in the region and has not found much favor with the Bush administration either. Indeed, all the key countries continue to scramble to find a multilateral solution to North Korea’s nuclear problem. And if the current transitional government in Somalia can persuade Ethiopia to leave—with some pressure exerted from the outside by a superpower or two—Islamic militias will be much more disposed to participate in UN-brokered talks.

The United States government, with John Bolton still in place as its envoy to the United Nations, is no fan of multilateralism. The Bush administration remains strongly on the side of intervention. But with an international reputation that sags ever more precipitously and a military capability stretched well beyond sustainability, the United States might have no other choice than to accept multilateral solutions on an ad hoc basis.

Such ad hoc multilateralism is not ideal. But it’s better than an ever growing axis of intervention.

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