

Introduction

James Pattison

Some of the most controversial foreign policy issues in the first years of the Trump administration have involved alternatives to war. These include the relaunching of the sanctions regime on Iran, the diplomatic turmoil over North Korea's nuclear weapons capabilities, Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the rise of digital disinformation and "fake news," and inadequate responses to mass atrocities in Syria and Myanmar. Moreover, the significance of the alternatives to war in international relations is likely to increase. As Western leaders are seemingly reluctant to engage in military action on the scale of Iraq or Afghanistan, they will surely continue to look for other measures to achieve their foreign policy goals.

Yet, by and large, international ethicists have largely overlooked the alternatives to war, despite their integral role in global politics. While there are copious articles on the ethics of war (and increasingly on the use of force short of war), nonmilitary measures have been relatively ignored. The ethics of economic sanctions have attracted at least some scholarly attention, but many of the other measures have been almost completely unexplored from a normative standpoint.¹

In addition to understanding the case for the alternatives to war in their own right, considering the ethics of the alternatives is central to two broader issues at the heart of international ethics. The first concerns the justifiability of war. The point is simple: we cannot know whether war is just without understanding the case for the alternatives. Just war theory, in terms of both *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*, includes a notable comparative element, often framed as "last resort" or "necessity" (and sometimes "proportionality"). How we understand this comparative element is contested, but it is clear that for just war theorists military action needs to be preferable to all other options.² Without a detailed understanding of the ethical case for the alternatives, one cannot make this comparative judgment:

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war might be better or worse. Moreover, this judgment is not simply a narrow instrumental one about whether the alternatives will be more effective at addressing the situation than war. As is clear from the contributions to this roundtable, each alternative has various noninstrumental factors that weigh heavily in the consideration of their use.

The second issue concerns the responsibility to protect (RtoP) doctrine. Although RtoP and humanitarian interventions are often conflated, RtoP involves a good deal more. This is most obvious under pillar three of the doctrine, whereby “timely and decisive response” involves not simply military measures but a whole range of nonmilitary measures as well. Such measures are also relevant for pillar two when states request international assistance to address mass atrocities, including threats posed by nonstate actors. Without an understanding of the normative case for these nonmilitary measures, it is unclear what the precise remedial responsibilities of the various actors in the international community are, and thus unclear how they should fulfill their remedial responsibility to protect. We need, then, a stronger account of the alternatives in order to specify the role of RtoP.

My recent book, *The Alternatives to War: From Sanctions to Nonviolence*, provides a moral map of many of the main alternatives, including economic sanctions, diplomacy, nonviolence, arming rebels, humanitarian assistance, accepting refugees, and prosecutions by the International Criminal Court, focusing on international responses to ongoing or impending aggression and mass atrocities.³ This roundtable, which brings together leading experts on just war theory, diplomacy, the responsibility to protect, and the ethics of civil resistance, covers further measures. These are electoral subversion (Cécile Fabre), covert positive incentives (James Pattison), responses to digital propaganda (Corneliu Bjola), the use of “backfire” as part of nonviolent resistance (Michael Gross), and doing nothing and allowing the state to win (Alex Bellamy).

As this roundtable makes clear, although there may often be compelling reasons to privilege these measures over war, they also raise complex ethical issues. How can it ever be justifiable to subvert the elections of other democratic states? Is offering covert positive incentives undemocratic and so worse than offering overt positive incentives? How should states react to disinformation without losing their moral authority? What should organizers of nonviolent movements do when the participants involved are likely to face injury or death? Given the difficulties of

tackling atrocity crimes, is it sometimes better to let states win rather than prolonging conflict?

There is much work to do in improving our understanding of the ethics of the alternatives to war. It is our hope that this roundtable will prove to be a notable step forward in this regard.

NOTES

- ¹ Some of the main articles on sanctions have appeared in this journal, including debates between Joy Gordon and George Lopez. On sanctions in general, see Joy Gordon, "A Peaceful, Silent, Deadly Remedy: The Ethics of Economic Sanctions," *Ethics & International Affairs* 13, no. 1 (1999), pp. 123–42; George Lopez, "More Ethical than Not: Sanctions as Surgical Tools," *Ethics & International Affairs* 13, no. 1 (1999), pp. 143–48; and Joy Gordon, "Reply to George A. Lopez's 'More Ethical than Not,'" *Ethics & International Affairs* 13, no. 1 (1999), pp. 149–50. On smart sanctions in particular, see Joy Gordon, "Smart Sanctions Revisited," *Ethics & International Affairs* 25, no. 3 (2011), pp. 315–35; and George Lopez, "In Defense of Smart Sanctions: A Response to Joy Gordon," *Ethics & International Affairs* 26, no. 1 (2012), pp. 135–46.
- ² See Eamon Aloyo, "Just War Theory and the Last of Last Resort," *Ethics & International Affairs* 29, no. 2 (2015), pp. 187–201.
- ³ James Pattison, *The Alternatives to War: From Sanctions to Nonviolence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). There are other accounts fast appearing. The two most notable are Michael Gross and Tamar Meisels's *Soft War: The Ethics of Unarmed Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) and Cécile Fabre's *Economic Statecraft: Human Rights, Sanctions, and Conditionality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018).