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The Evolving Paradigms of Military Interventions and China: Lessons from Global Centre-Periphery Relations

SUMMARY

Military interventionism, a unilateral and coercive practice in international politics, is widely discussed in scholarly literature. However, key aspects, such as a consolidated definition of military intervention and the complex geographical features involved, remain insufficiently conceptualised. Evidence, including the economic rise of non-Western powers, the politico-military ascendance of Russia and China, and the growing prevalence of asymmetric threats, signals a shift from a unipolar to a multipolar global system. This article examines the extent to which great powers are inclined to intervene in neighbouring regions compared to peripheral areas within different structural contexts of the international system and offers potentially relevant factors to be considered while analysing similar cases that might occur, notwithstanding who is the intervening actor. This research briefly introduces justifications for three past interventions—in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and Iraq—to identify the role of geographic positioning in justifying interventionism. This study explores centre-periphery dynamics and factors influencing military interventions. It offers insights into China's foreign policy behaviour as it manoeuvres its role as a "hesitant hegemon" in the current international system.

Keywords: military interventionism, international system, geopolitics, multipolarity, balancing risks theory, China, great powers, regional security, centre-periphery.

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Kina i evolucija paradigmi vojnih intervencija: lekcije iz odnosa centra i periferije

SAŽETAK

Vojni intervencionizam, kao jednostrana i prisilna praksa u međunarodnoj politici, široko je zastupljen u akademskoj literaturi. Međutim, ključni aspekti, kao što su objedinjena definicija vojne intervencije i složene geografske karakteristike, ostaju nedovoljno konceptualizovani. Pojave koje uključuju ekonomski uspon nezapadnih sila, političko-vojni uspon Rusije i Kine, kao i sve veća prisutnost asimetričnih pretnji, ukazuju na prelazak sa unipolarnog na multipolarni globalni sistem. Ovaj članak ispituje u kojoj mjeri su velike sile sklone da interveniše u susjednim regionima u poređenju sa perifernim oblastima u različitim strukturnim kontekstima međunarodnog sistema i nudi potencijalno relevantne faktore koje treba uzeti u obzir pri analizi sličnih slučajeva koji bi mogli da se pojave, bez obzira na to ko je akter intervencije. U istraživanju se ukratko predstavljaju opravdanja za prošle intervencije – u Jugoslaviji, Avganistanu, Iraku – kako bi se identifikovala uloga geografskog pozicioniranja u opravdavanju intervencionizma. Ispitivanjem dinamike centra i periferije u ovim slučajevima, studija osvetljava ponašanje Kine u spoljnoj politici dok ona navigira svojom pozicijom kao „hegemon koji okleva“ u današnjem međunarodnom sistemu.

Ključne reči: vojni intervencionizam, međunarodni sistem, geopolitika, multipolarnost, teorija balansiranja rizika, Kina, velike sile, regionalna bezbednost, centar-periferija.

Introduction

Military interventionism as a unilateral coerced practice in international politics is profoundly discussed in the literature. Despite the numerous analyses, some aspects, such as the consolidated definition of military interventions or the complexity of their geographical features, are not clearly conceptualised yet. Much evidence, such as the economic empowerment of non-Western centres, the politico-military rise of Russia and the PR China, and the increase of asymmetric threats, testify that the international system has experienced a gradual shift from unipolar to multipolar, which makes most of the attempts futile in longitudinal analyses of geography as a variable. To determine the specifics of contemporary and potential cases of military interventionism, this research discusses the importance of justifying the variables of interventions in the past – in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and Iraq – as the ones corresponding to the unipolar era. The author explores the theoretical extent to which the centre-periphery position of the targeted states figures in justifications for the onset of military interventions in a unipolar

and multipolar era, as well as in current and potential cases of interventionism. The knowledge produced by the findings from these military interventions will serve to explain the foreign policy choices that are at the disposal of the People's Republic of China at a particularly delicate moment in which this country, aspiring to be the new hegemon of the system, can potentially encounter more assertive military actions.

Research interest in military interventions is supported by the practice of a vast number of interventions done by the countries of the global West, dominantly by the US. Only in the last three decades has the United States significantly increased its military interventionism, marking a notable shift in the foreign policy strategy. According to data from the Congressional Research Service, the US launched at least 251 military interventions and small-scale interventions between 1991 and 2022, a substantial increase from previous periods.² This trend is further corroborated by the Military Intervention Project at Tufts University, which documented over 500 international military interventions since 1776, with nearly 60% occurring between 1950 and 2017.³

This paper begins by examining the types of military interventions that are key variables within the geopolitical sphere. The author addresses the lack of a universally agreed definition of military interventions and proposes four explanatory frameworks, including definitional elements, to understand why states may choose this course of action. To illustrate these dynamics, the discussion presents the cases of military interventions in Yugoslavia (1999), Afghanistan (2001), and Iraq (2003), highlighting common factors and patterns that have historically driven such actions.

The analysis then turns to China, positioning it as a distinct actor in the international system with a unique approach to global engagement. Unlike many Western-led interventions, China's strategy prioritises non-interference, economic partnerships, and cultural diplomacy, respecting the sovereignty and development paths of other nations. By applying the identified factors of military intervention to China's case, the study provides insights into how China's policy of restraint, coupled with its commitment to peaceful development, offers an alternative model of influence and security in the 21st century, potentially reshaping expectations for military engagement worldwide.

² Ben Norton, *U.S. launched 251 military interventions since 1991, and 469 since 1798*, Multipolarista, 2022, <https://mronline.org/2022/09/16/u-s-launched-251-military-interventions-since-1991-and-469-since-1798>, 20/10/2024.

³ MIP Research, *Military Intervention Project (MIP)*, Fletcher Center for Strategic Studies, Tufts, 2024, <https://sites.tufts.edu/css/mip-research>, 21/10/2024.

Capturing military interventionism as a geopolitical variable

There are a lot of conceptualisations of what forms of military interventions are and what military interventionism policy is. Usually, interventionist policies are characterised by several attributes. Firstly, the geography of the politics of interventionism plays a crucial role in examining how the spatial distribution of power and resources influences interventions.⁴ The first of the possible explanations bases the argumentation on the use of military force against states located on the (global) periphery during recent human history. Such patterns continued in the unipolar era with the implementation of military interventions against Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as against the FRY, which (although not by geographical criteria) was part of the political periphery of Europe at that time. The thesis about geography as a variable for the phenomenological analysis of military interventions appeared in papers published by several notable authors.⁵ The main findings of their studies point to a decrease in the probability of military interventions with moving away from the geographical space of the permanent members of the UN Security Council or the apostrophization of geographical factors (relief, terrain, access to the sea) in the explanation of military interventions.⁶ The argument about military intervention on the periphery by the great powers was thematised in more detail by Jeffrey Taliaferro, who cites historical examples of the involvement of the United Kingdom in conflicts in Afghanistan in the middle of the 19th century and the South African War in the early 20th century, or France's wars in Indochina and Algeria during the fifties of the last century.⁷ In his book, Taliaferro examines in detail the cases of Germany provoking the Moroccan crisis in 1905, then Japan's decision to join the Second World War, as well as the US intervention during the Korean War in 1950.⁸ This author has put two questions at the centre of the analysis of the great powers' foreign and security policies. First, it refers to determining the factors that contribute to the great powers initiating the use of military force in general, as well as other forms of political inclusion in (for them) distant states, and second, why do

⁴ Kevin Grove, Maroš Krivý, Lauren Rickards, Gabriele Schliwa, Stephen J. Collier, Savannah Cox & Matthew Gandy, "Interventions on design and political geography", *Political Geography*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2019, 102-117.

⁵ See more in: Peter Woolley, "Geography and the limits of US military intervention", *Journal of Conflict Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 4, 1991, 35-50.; Juan Duque, Michael Jetter & Santiago Sosa, "UN interventions: The role of geography", *The Review of International Organizations*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2015, 67-95.; Kevin Grove et al., "Interventions on design and political geography", 102-117.

⁶ Kevin Grove et al., "Interventions on design and political geography".

⁷ Jeffrey Taliaferro, "Power Politics and the Balance of Risk: Hypotheses on Great Power Intervention in the Periphery", *Political Psychology*, Vol. 25, No. 2, 2004, 177-211, 178.

⁸ Ibid.

the great powers persist in conflicts against the states of the global periphery despite the weak prospects of achieving military victories with simultaneously high political and economic costs?⁹ To provide answers to these questions, Taliaferro proposed an innovation of the theoretical paradigm, his theory of risk balance.¹⁰ This theoretical proposal, as its creator claims, continues the idea of offensive realism by introducing into the analysis the foreign policy of small and weak states, as well as the foreign policy of major powers towards “neglected” states.¹¹

Additionally, Taliaferro’s argument includes the categorical apparatus of offensive and defensive realism such as relative power, national interests, maximisation of national security, and others.¹² The central assumption on which his theoretical postulate is based refers to the willingness of leaders of great powers to consciously accept the risk that would involve the use of force against peripheral states despite the obvious prospects of defeat.¹³ Great powers will intervene again and again, without the desire to evaluate and change the interventionist agenda, which Tagliaferro substantiates with the examples of the administrations of American presidents Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon, which during the sixties and seventies of the last century authorised the use of military force against Vietnam, extending it to neighbouring Laos and Cambodia.¹⁴ The theory of the balance of risks assumes that the cause of military interventions is the security concerns of the great powers and not their inherent aggressiveness.¹⁵ Losses in relative power or status in the international system will lead to the adoption of strategies based on the acceptance of risky military interventions that are even assumed to be unsuccessful.¹⁶ The theory, however, requires further refinement to account for contemporary interventions by great powers in their immediate regions, such as Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Another possible explanation for the unilateral use of force is based on the liberal assumption that superpowers seek to maintain themselves as dominant in the international order through the use of force. The theory of hegemonic stability, originally developed in the domain of economic sciences by Charles P. Kindleberger, offers the most complete understanding of this phenomenon, which was soon modified and more widely accepted in the

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 179.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 204.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 203.

¹⁶ Ibid.

analytical framework of security studies.¹⁷ At the systemic level, the theory assumes the existence of a hegemon (always one) characterised by an ever-growing and strong economy, exceptional technological development, and supremacy in the field of technology, as well as a commitment to the system.¹⁸ The author of the theory requires the cumulative fulfilment of all three conditions so that the projection of power and commitment in relation to the system or its larger part is, therefore, a *conditio sine qua non* for assigning the attribute of "hegemon" to the leading state of the system. In the theoretical domain of security studies, hegemonic stability was first implemented in 1989 by Stephen Krasner and Michael Webb. They link the relative economic gains achieved by the leading states of the system with the diversification of security interests and thus the well-being of other states in the system of international relations.¹⁹ These authors note that in the period between the Second World War and the 1970s, the role of the US as hegemon was undeniably clear. Until the fall of the Berlin Wall, it was obscured by the competitiveness of the second bloc led by the then USSR.²⁰ With the emergence of the unipolar model of the organisation of the international system, the US, as the only remaining superpower, became the hegemon of the system. According to the assumption of this theory, the system needs a hegemon who can legitimately use force in the event of a significant disruption of the system's functioning, which is why the era of unipolarity was seen as an empirical realisation of hegemonic stability.²¹ Therefore, in practice, it is almost impossible to separate

¹⁷ Robert Owen Keohane, *The theory of hegemonic stability and changes in international economic regimes, 1967-1977*, University of California, Los Angeles, 1980.; Duncan Snidal, "The limits of hegemonic stability theory", *International organization*, Vol. 39, No. 4, 1985, 579-614.; James Alt, Randall L. Calvert & Brian D. Humes, "Reputation and hegemonic stability: A game-theoretic analysis", *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 82, No. 8, 1988, 445-466.; Michael Webb & Stephen D. Krasner, "Hegemonic stability theory: an empirical assessment", *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 1989, 183-198.; Joanne Gowa, "Rational hegemons, excludable goods, and small groups: an epitaph for hegemonic stability theory?", *World Politics: A Quarterly Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 41, No. 3, 1989, 307-324.; Isabelle Grunberg, "Exploring the "myth" of hegemonic stability", *International Organization*, Vol. 44, No. 4, 1990, 431-477.; Yücel Bozdağlıoğlu, "Hegemonic (in) Stability Theory and Us Foreign Policy: The Legacy of the Neocons in the Middle East", *Anadolu University Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2013, 1-12.

¹⁸ Charles Kindleberger, *The Formation of Financial centers. A study in Comparative Economic History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1974, 197-198.

¹⁹ Michael Webb & Stephen D. Krasner, "Hegemonic stability theory: an empirical assessment", 184.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 183.

²¹ Stefano Guzzini, *From (Alleged) Unipolarity to the Decline of Multilateralism? A power theoretical critique*, DIIS Working Paper, Copenhagen, 2005.; John G. Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno & William C. Wohlforth, "Unipolarity, state behavior, and systemic consequences", *World Politics*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2009, 1-27.; Robert Jervis, "Unipolarity: a structural perspective", *World Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 1, 2009, 188-213.; Christopher Fettweis, "Unipolarity, Hegemony, and the New Peace", *Security Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 2017, 423-451.

hegemony from any other form of organisation of the international system except unipolarity, because a key segment of determining unipolarity is power projection.²² Hence the conclusions of certain authors according to which the US has not become a “global empire”; instead, as a hegemon, they established a set of rules that they sought to defend and enforce within the system they lead.²³ As a result of efforts to maintain “order” based on its own understanding of its organisation, the US in the era of unipolarity, together with its allies, often resorted to the unilateral use of force for the sake of disciplining “renegade” states.

A third rationale for the trend in interventionist policies involves the pursuit of economic and financial advantages, along with securing energy resources that major powers consider essential for sustaining the provision of public goods domestically. Throughout the early 20th century, leading powers, notably the United Kingdom, demonstrated these interests by declaring zones of influence, such as the Persian Gulf, and challenging the ambitions of rivals like Germany. Winston Churchill underscored the strategic significance of oil as a critical energy resource for global power, a theme that reemerged at the end of the 20th century.²⁴ Daniel Yergin attributes the renewed competition for oil and associated military force to three main drivers. First, the global expansion of capitalism has created a demand for oil as a profit-generating resource. Second, the rise of the so-called “hydrocarbon man,” whose daily life depends on oil and its derivatives, has heightened state responsibilities to secure a stable energy supply. Finally, states have increasingly incorporated energy resource competition into their security strategies, resulting in a “security dilemma” over energy access.²⁵ In 1980, US President Jimmy Carter addressed the strategic and security challenges posed by energy supply concerns in the Persian Gulf. During his State of the Nation Address, he emphasised the critical importance of the region, declaring that any attempt by an external power to control it by force would be considered an attack on vital US interests, warranting a decisive military response.²⁶ Carter specifically

²² Christopher Fettweis, “Unipolarity, Hegemony, and the New Peace”, 433.

²³ Immanuel Wallerstein, *The decline of American power: The US in a chaotic world*, The New Press, New York, 2003.; Toby Dodge, “Iraq: the contradictions of exogenous state-building in historical perspective”, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 1, 2006, 187-200.; David A. Lake, “Two cheers for bargaining theory: Assessing rationalist explanations of the Iraq War”, *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 3, 2010, 7-52.; Christopher Fettweis, “Unipolarity, Hegemony, and the New Peace”.

²⁴ Daniel Yergin, *The prize: The epic quest for oil, money & power*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1990.

²⁵ Ibid., 12-13.

²⁶ Jimmy Carter, *State of the Union Speech 1980*, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum, 1980, <https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/assets/documents/speeches/su80jec.phtml>, 15/10/2024.

highlighted the Persian Gulf's essential role as a "vital oil-producing area".²⁷ The significance of this policy perspective became particularly pronounced during and after the 2003 military intervention in Iraq.²⁸ Some analyses have framed such interventions as "petro-imperialism"²⁹, where for the first time, the strategic landscape shifted from geopolitics to geoeconomics.³⁰ Richard Haass, a senior State Department official, described the Persian Gulf's significance as fundamentally linked to its energy resources, suggesting that without them, global interest in the region would diminish substantially.³¹ In his analysis, John Duffield notes that in 2002, just prior to the Iraq intervention, a quarter of US energy imports came from the Middle East, with oil accounting for nearly 40% of global energy consumption.³² Additionally, in the months leading up to the invasion, US energy imports reached 55% of total consumption.³³

The then use of military force against Iraq was justified by "legitimate interests" that treated the Persian Gulf as a "relatively cheap source of energy for the global economy that was built for half of the 20th century on the basis of the use of oil and its derivatives".³⁴ Any collapse of such a foundation would lead to the collapse of the world economy.³⁵ One of the possible explanations for the invasion of Iraq in 2003 is the challenge of the status quo by this state within the Persian Gulf and the desire for regional dominance.³⁶ Contributing to the additional confusion was the disagreement in the statements of the leaders of the coalition countries regarding the reasons for the intervention. Just one month before the invasion of Iraq, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, in one of his many interviews, stated that the argument about oil as the cause of military intervention was actually "one of the most absurd conspiracy theories".³⁷

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Kenneth Pollack, "Securing the Gulf", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 82, No. 4, 2003, 2-16.; Michael T. Klare, "For oil and empire? Rethinking war with Iraq", *Current History*, Vol. 102, No. 662, 2003, 129-135.

²⁹ Nayna J. Jhaveri, "Petroimperialism: US oil interests and the Iraq War", *Antipode*, Vol. 36, No. 1, 2004, 2-11.

³⁰ Ibid., 4.

³¹ Richard Haass, "The age of nonpolarity: what will follow US dominance", *Foreign affairs*, Vol. 87, No. 3, 2008, 44-56.

³² John Duffield, "Oil and the Decision to Invade Iraq" in: Jane K. Cramer and A. Trevor Thrall (eds), *Why Did the United States Invade Iraq?*, Routledge, London, 2012, 145-166.

³³ Michael T. Klare, "For oil and empire? Rethinking war with Iraq", 132.

³⁴ Kenneth Pollack, "Securing the Gulf", 3.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 15.

³⁷ Tony Blair, *Blair: Iraq oil claim is 'conspiracy theory'*, The Guardian, 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2003/jan/15/foreignpolicy.uk>, 25/10/2024.

The fourth possible explanation for the unilateral use of force is partly related to the theoretical categories of realism, which, among other things, favour the state, hard power, that is, the state's position in the system of international relations, and the desire to project military power. According to this explanation, the intervening actors are only superpowers or great powers because only they have the resources and interests to implement military interventions as instruments of foreign policy. The function of military interventions, in this case, is "stabilising" by powerful states in relation to the polarity of the international system.³⁸ In the forty-five-year period between World War II and the fall of the Berlin Wall, Tillema indexed 591 cases of military interventionism manifested within 269 armed conflicts.³⁹ This author identified as many as 97 states that intervened militarily at least once in the mentioned period, dividing them into four categories according to their hard military-economic power and status in international relations: superpowers, second-order great powers, "new" states (created after the Second World War war), and others.⁴⁰ Although the prevailing view in the literature about superpowers and great powers as the dominant intervening actors is counterintuitively, the largest number of military interventions were carried out by newly created states after the Second World War, as many as 243 (41%)⁴¹, and not by superpowers or great powers. Tillema's research was the first to thoroughly challenge the view that interventionist policies in foreign affairs are exclusive to superpowers. His findings reveal that only 4% of military interventions from 1945 to 1989 were conducted by superpowers, while 21% were undertaken by great powers. Surprisingly, the remaining three-quarters of interventions were carried out by newly independent states, with the most active being Israel, India (since 1947), Syria (since 1946), Pakistan (since 1947), and Morocco (since 1956).⁴² In the bipolar world order of the period, the United States, with 16 interventions, ranked only 6th in frequency, while the Soviet Union ranked even lower as 22nd.⁴³ Although Tillema's study covers all military interventions within this bipolar international system, he acknowledges that not all forms of intervention can be easily quantified. Variations in duration, intensity, and context mean that these figures should be interpreted with caution, although they do provide a valuable basis for reconsidering the belief that interventionist policies are primarily the domain of superpowers and major powers. The patterns of

³⁸ Kenneth N. Waltz, "The anarchic structure of world politics", In: *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues*, Robert J. Art & Robert Jervis (eds.), Pearson, New York, 2016, 48–70.

³⁹ Herbert K. Tillema, "Foreign overt military intervention in the nuclear age", *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 1989, 183.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, 184.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

unilateral use of force by the US are changing to a significant extent with the transition to a unipolar model of the organisation of the international system. More than ever in its history, the US military has been deployed outside its territory from 1990 to the present (see Chart 2). Dobbins et al. state that in cases of military interventions aimed at regime change and state building, the responsibility for implementing such interventions belongs exclusively to “the only remaining superpower in the system, characterised by disproportionate military and political power”.⁴⁴

China’s expanding military capabilities, global interests, and increased assertiveness in regions like the South China Sea have sparked discussion about its potential for military intervention. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), designed to boost connectivity and economic cooperation across Asia, Africa, and Europe, has also led to a greater Chinese presence in the strategic areas. This presence raises questions about the possible use of military force to safeguard China’s investments and secure key supply chains. Additionally, China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea have contributed to regional tensions, making the possibility of military action to assert these claims a subject of attention. China’s military modernisation, particularly in advanced naval and power projection capabilities, enhances its intervention capacity. However, motivations for any intervention would likely be rooted in defending its economic interests, protecting its citizens abroad, or, potentially, seeking regional influence. China’s strategies for military engagement may vary according to specific objectives and circumstances. Direct interventions involve deploying military forces to confront adversaries, while indirect interventions might include supporting local allies or covert actions. Hybrid strategies blending military, diplomatic, and economic tools are also increasingly relevant. Assessing China’s choices in potential military interventions is essential for understanding its growing global role and evaluating associated risks.

Interventions in the unipolar era: Geographically diverse, ideologically unified

In the post-Cold War era, the United States emerged as the sole superpower, wielding significant influence over global affairs. This unipolar environment allowed for a greater scope of military interventions, as the absence of a rival power curtailed potential challenges. The case of Yugoslavia represents an early example of military intervention in the unipolar era. The dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s led to a series of devastating conflicts, prompting international intervention to prevent further

⁴⁴ James Dobbins, John G. McGinn, Keith Crane, Seth G. Jones, Rollie Lal, Andrew Rathmell, Rachel M. Swanger & Anga R. Timilsina, *America’s role in nation-building: from Germany to Iraq*, Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, 2003, 14.

humanitarian crises. The subsequent NATO-led intervention against Yugoslavia (FRY) in 1999 exemplified the willingness of the United States and its allies to employ military force to protect human rights and maintain stability in the region. Afghanistan, on the other hand, became a focal point of military interventionism following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States. In response to the presence of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban regime's sheltering of terrorists, the US led a coalition invasion of Afghanistan to dismantle these threats and establish stability in the region. This intervention showcased the willingness of the unipolar power to engage in prolonged military operations in pursuit of strategic objectives. Lastly, the case of Iraq offers a controversial example of military interventionism in the unipolar era. The 2003 US-led invasion aimed to eliminate alleged weapons of mass destruction and overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime. However, the intervention resulted in prolonged conflict, sectarian violence, and political instability, raising questions about the efficacy and justifications of unipolar military interventions. Despite looking different at first sight, the factors that shape interventionist policy by the intervening actor are more or less the same, which will be discussed in the following section.

The intervention in the FRY took place at a delicate moment, after a multi-year and extremely complex civil war that left numerous consequences for the social and political life in the republics of the former SFRY, as well as for the everyday lives of citizens, starting with damaged infrastructure, low economic standards, and the economic and political sanctions under which some of them found themselves. Between 1992 and 1995, the FRY was subject to comprehensive UN sanctions, which significantly weakened its capacities and orientated the country towards domestic economic production. In addition, in the (Western) world, there was a very negative sentiment in relation to the then FRY, which arose as a result of negative media manipulation and a campaign that was conducted years ago due to the civil war in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Events in the Balkans, more specifically in the territory of the former SFRY, were at the top of the US administration's foreign policy agenda. Bill Clinton's first presidential directive in 1993, after taking office, was related to the determination of US foreign policy towards the situation in the former Yugoslavia, where, at that time, there was a civil war. In the directive, the activities of the political leaders of the Serbs in the Balkans are treated very negatively. Thus, the key tasks are stated as "thwarting Serbian aggression", "standing in the way of Serbian conquests", and "military punishment of Serbia for the activities carried out".⁴⁵ According to all criteria of international law, the intervention in FRY was a typical example of armed aggression. Academic polemics about the international legal nature of the NATO intervention in the FRY in the

⁴⁵ "PRD 1: Presidential Review Directive/NSC 1", The White House, Washington, 22 January, 1993.

Western literature are mostly focused on justifying the “humanitarian” aspects of the use of military force for the sake of “protecting human and minority rights in Kosovo and Metohija.”⁴⁶ However, the debate on the international legality of the intervention indisputably confirms that it was not legally founded, i.e., it represented an illegal attack on a sovereign state. Acknowledging that the military intervention against the FRY was not in accordance with the UN Charter, Charney states that this case represents a “precedent in the preservation of human rights” that will influence future similar activities of NATO.⁴⁷ Due to the growing problems and opposition to the policy of globalism throughout the decade, this intervention could have been anticipated, bearing in mind that the authorities were disrupting the globalist plans of the West.⁴⁸ Seen from the perspective of the intervening actor (the US and its Western allies), the issue of military intervention in the FRY is related to the inter-ethnic problems in the area of Kosovo and Metohija, which culminated in the 1990s in the southern Serbian province. The alleged violation of human rights and freedoms on the territory of Kosovo and Metohija was significantly internationalised during 1998 (this will be discussed later in this subchapter), which served as a basis for justifying the intervention a year later. In this sense, according to the subject and objectives of the dissertation, the first part of this subchapter will be focused on the analysis of the events of 1998, which preceded the military intervention, as well as the course of the military intervention against the FRY (1999).

Another intervention led by the Western bloc occurred in 2001 against Afghanistan. The use of military force as an instrument of US foreign policy in the case of military intervention in Afghanistan was legitimised by the direct threat to its national security caused by the terrorist attacks on Washington and New York in September 2001. Some authors state that the War on Terror could have been delayed or even completely stopped if the Bush administration had managed to convince the Taliban to hand over the terrorists in the period before the terrorist attacks in September 2001, which did not bear fruit.⁴⁹ Just two days before the terrorist attacks on the US, Northern Alliance commander Ahmad Shah Massoud was killed by al-Qaeda⁵⁰, partially thwarting a possible anti-Taliban Northern Alliance

⁴⁶ Jonathan Charney, “Anticipatory humanitarian intervention in Kosovo”, *American journal of international law*, Vol. 93, No. 4, 1999, 834-841.; Louis Henkin, “Kosovo and the law of “humanitarian intervention”, *American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 93, No. 4, 1999, 824-828.

⁴⁷ Jonathan Charney, “Anticipatory humanitarian intervention in Kosovo”, 836.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 838.

⁴⁹ Misra, 2004, 108 according to: Leoni Connah, “US intervention in Afghanistan: Justifying the Unjustifiable?”, *South Asia Research*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 2021, 70-86.

⁵⁰ CFR, *The U.S. War in Afghanistan*, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-war-afghanistan>, 27/10/2024.

response to the planned 9/11 attacks. Immediately before the intervention, in response to the White House's question about the legal permissibility of the use of force in Afghanistan, the legal adviser of the US president, in the form of a detailed (non-binding) memorandum, claimed that the president "beyond any doubt has the constitutional power to take military actions that he deems necessary and appropriate in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001".⁵¹ In explaining the legality (at that time) of possible military action, the Office of the Legal Counsel stated that military force could be used in "retaliation for terrorist attacks, and to prevent and deter possible future attacks on the US".⁵² Not only, according to American jurists, the president had the right to decide on the use of armed force outside the US territory, but he enjoyed full discretion to decide on the amount, type, manner, and nature of the military response to recognised threats.⁵³ The day after the terrorist attacks of September 11, the UN Security Council met and adopted Resolution 1368 under an emergency procedure, which condemned the attacks on the US in the strongest terms, treating them as a threat to international peace and security.⁵⁴ With this Resolution, the UN Security Council expressed "readiness to take all necessary steps to provide an adequate response to attacks in accordance with the UN Charter".⁵⁵ The terrorist attacks carried out against the US were the basis for the activation of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty of 1949, according to which an armed attack on one or more members of this Alliance is treated as an attack on the entire Alliance.⁵⁶ This was the first case of activation of this article in the history of NATO, and the US invoked Article 51 of the UN Charter, which guarantees the UN member states "the inherent right to individual or collective self-defense".⁵⁷ The internal legality of the use of force against Afghanistan in addition to the War Powers Resolution is the consent of the US Congress, which provided the so-called "statutory authorisation" for the use of force to the US President.⁵⁸ A week after the terrorist attacks, both houses of the US Congress passed a joint resolution authorising the US president to use military force. The president is given the right to use "all available and proportionate military means against states, organisations, or individuals that he determines have planned, carried out, or assisted in

⁵¹ John Yoo, *Memorandum opinion for the deputy counsel to the President*, US Justice Department, Washington, 2001.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ "Resolution 1368", United Nations Security Council, 12 September 2001, art.1.

⁵⁵ Ibid., art. 5.

⁵⁶ "The North Atlantic Treaty", North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 4 April, 1949, art. 5.

⁵⁷ "Charter of the United Nations", United Nations, 1945, art. 51.

⁵⁸ 107th Congress, *Authorization for Use of Military Force against Afghanistan*, House of Representatives, Washington, 2001.

carrying out terrorist attacks since September 11".⁵⁹ It is interesting that the document did not specify that military intervention could be carried out against Afghanistan. Addressing the nation on the day of the initiation of military intervention in Afghanistan, on October 7, 2001, President Bush declared that "the United States is at war and military attacks will be focused on Al Qaeda training camps and Taliban military installations in Afghanistan".⁶⁰ On the same occasion, Bush pointed out that these were "carefully chosen military targets", which were the result of "failure to fulfil the conditions given to the Taliban".⁶¹ The terms given to the Taliban included the closure of terrorist camps, the extradition of al-Qaeda leaders, and the release of foreign nationals (including Americans) who had been "unjustly" convicted.⁶² This was the first military intervention that arose as a response of the US to the violation of its national security, which is why it is not surprising that in his address to the nation on the day of the initiation of the intervention, Bush denied the possibility of a neutral position in relation to the conflict because, according to him, any government or entity that supports and harbours terrorists "designates itself terrorists and murderers".⁶³ Supporting these views, the US Secretary of State at the time, Donald Rumsfeld, pointed out on the same day that this attack was "a natural continuation of US-led military interventions, such as those in Somalia, Bosnia, and the FRY".⁶⁴ The ethical issues surrounding the unilateral use of force have been the subject of extensive scholarly discussion following the military intervention against Afghanistan. The terrorist acts of 9/11 were perceived as an attack on US values and security and were condemned as such.

The third military intervention in the unipolar era occurred in Iraq. As an intervening actor, the US declared three immediate reasons for intervening: the possession and development of WMD, the overthrow of the existing regime of Saddam Hussein, and the promotion of human rights and democracy in Iraq.⁶⁵ Besides these three reasons for the immediate legitimisation of the intervention, additional ones can be identified, such as punishment for sponsoring terrorism by the Saddam regime,⁶⁶ removing

⁵⁹ Ibid., art. 2.

⁶⁰ George Bush, *Address to the Nation on the Threat of Iraq*, Cincinnati, Ohio, 2002, <https://americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbushwariniraqcincinnati.htm>, 20/10/2024.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ George Bush, *Presidential Address to the Nation*, White House, 2003, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/10/20011007-8.html>, 18/10/2024.

⁶⁴ Donald Rumsfeld, *Text of the Defense Secretary's Briefing on the Military Strikes, the Pentagon*, 7 October 2001, Associated Press, 2001.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Outi Korhonen, "'Post' As Justification: International Law and Democracy-Building after Iraq", *German Law Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 7, 2003, 709-723.; Nancy Jabbra, "Women, words and

threats to Israel's security,⁶⁷ immediate corporate interests in the sphere of energy, especially oil,⁶⁸ the promotion of US hegemony in the Middle East⁶⁹, and the transformation of the region, which at that time was the focus of conflict with the threat of further escalation. All three main arguments justifying military action against Iraq are summarised in the official speeches and acts of the Bush administration. In a speech before the General Assembly of the United Nations in September 2002, George Bush referred to all the Security Council resolutions adopted until then, stressing that in case of further non-compliance with the decisions of the UN Security Council, "the world must blame Iraq".⁷⁰ Iraq's non-implementation of the UNSC decisions resulted in "action", as the then president called it, and marked the decline of the Iraqi regime's legitimacy and power.⁷¹ In an address to the nation on October 7, 2002, he labelled the Iraqi regime at the time "a serious threat to international peace and America's determination to lead the world in countering that threat".⁷² Interestingly, Bush singled out Iraq as a distinctive example of a regime "run by a tyrant"⁷³, possessing WMD and "a willingness to use it in the most brutal way, using aircraft to disperse chemical agents".⁷⁴ The academic "justification" of the intention to intervene due to the possession and development of WMD was also not absent⁷⁵, and somewhat more extreme cases in which this cause is problematised as the "core" reason for the attack are also recognised in the literature already during 2003.⁷⁶ As an additional threat that needs to be suppressed, Bush indicated the possession of ballistic missiles, with which Iraq could "threaten the security of Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey, and other countries in the region where 135,000 American citizens live and work".⁷⁷ The securitising tone was also contributed to by the part of the speech in which the American president

war: Explaining 9/11 and justifying US military action in Afghanistan and Iraq", *Journal of international women's studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2006, 236-255.

⁶⁷ John Mearsheimer & Stephen Walt, "The Israel Lobby", *London Review of Books*, Vol. 28, No. 6, 2006, 3-12.

⁶⁸ Michael T. Klare, "For oil and empire? Rethinking war with Iraq"; Ahsan Butt, "Why did the United States invade Iraq in 2003?", *Security Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 2, 2019, 250-285.

⁶⁹ Zana Kaka Amin, "Why did the United States lead an invasion of Iraq in 2003", *International Journal of Political Science and Development*, Vol. 2, No. 11, 2014, 301-308.

⁷⁰ George Bush, "Address to the Nation on the Threat of Iraq".

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Zana Kaka Amin, "Why did the United States lead an invasion of Iraq in 2003".

⁷⁶ Michael T. Klare, "For oil and empire? Rethinking war with Iraq".

⁷⁷ George Bush, "Address to the Nation on the Threat of Iraq".

makes the claim that “the Iraqi dictator (prim. aut. Saddam Hussein) is a student of Stalin, who uses murder as a means of terror and control, in his cabinet, in his army, and even in his family”.⁷⁸ At the international political level, the legitimisation of the intervention took place in front of the UN Security Council, where Colin Powell’s speech, in which he tried to convince the members of this body to give their consent for the military intervention, remained impressive. The fact of the failed mission of UN investigators in Iraq was presented by Powell before the UN Security Council as “the deliberate concealment of WMD facilities and warehouses by the Iraqi regime”⁷⁹, which, according to him, is “just one part of the policy of avoidance that dates back to twelve years back since the occupation of Kuwait”.⁸⁰ Continuing to indict the Iraqi regime at the time, Powell argued that official Iraq followed the inspectors on many levels, not to cooperate with them but to “stalk, spy on, and keep them from doing their jobs”.⁸¹ Iraq did not fulfil its obligations under Resolution 1441, which obliged this country to provide a complete list of scientists associated with the development of WMD. Such a list was outdated and contained only five hundred names, even though UNSCOM had previously submitted a list with about 3,500 names.⁸² What UNMOVIC presented in its report of May 30 is in deep contrast with the facts presented by Powell in the Security Council. Reporting to the Security Council, a month before the military intervention was initiated, the Chairman of the Commission, Blix, denied the accuracy of the intelligence information presented by Powell. Namely, Blix refuted claims about the intentional hiding of materials and weapons by official Iraq, which, according to Powell’s claims, was “massive”.⁸³ He pointed out that out of numerous inspections, the Commission determined that in only one case was it a partial removal of military equipment.⁸⁴ According to him, the biggest problem of creating mistrust towards Iraq was the issue of hiding anthrax, nerve gas, and long-range missiles, which are prohibited according to Resolution 687.⁸⁵ The Chairman of the Commission concluded his presentation by asserting that until that moment “no solid evidence has been found that would indicate the mass production and/or possession of WMD”.⁸⁶

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Colin Powell, “Powell Ties Iraqi Reconstruction to War on Terror”, 2004, https://govinfo.library.unt.edu/cpa-iraq/transcripts/20040616_powell_reconstruction.html, 15/10/2024.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Colin Powell, “Powell Ties Iraqi Reconstruction to War on Terror”.

⁸³ Hans Blix, *Hans Blix’s briefing to the Security Council*, United Nations, New York, 2003.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

The cases of military interventions during the unipolar era reveal several common elements, particularly regarding justification, strategic approach, and operational goals. A central theme across these interventions is the humanitarian rationale, often presented as a moral imperative to secure international support for US actions. This justification has been crucial for obtaining broad international backing while promoting democracy and restoring stability. As the dominant unipolar power, the United States employed a blend of hard and soft power, termed “smart power”, to engage target states effectively. This approach included setting limited objectives, clear exit strategies, and an emphasis on minimising collateral damage, along with hybrid warfare and information operations. In the multipolar context, as seen in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, we observe continuity and divergence in intervention practices. The NATO-led intervention in Libya in 2011, justified on humanitarian grounds, achieved regime change but resulted in long-term instability due to a lack of post-intervention planning. In Syria, competing interests among various actors, including Russia and Iran, have complicated intervention dynamics, with multiple factions supported by foreign powers. Yemen illustrates the challenges of multipolar competition, where regional actors like Saudi Arabia and Iran pursue conflicting objectives, exacerbating humanitarian crises. These examples underscore the evolving complexities of military interventions, suggesting that future involvement will face significant challenges in achieving stability amidst diverse global interests.

Contemporary military interventions have undergone a significant transformation, evolving from large-scale unilateral invasions to sophisticated and multifaceted operations that prioritise humanitarian objectives, precision, and strategic multilateralism. This shift is characterised by several key elements that reflect the changing nature of global conflicts and international relations. Humanitarian justification (1) has become a prominent feature of modern interventions, with the protection of civilians and the prevention of human rights abuses often cited as primary motivations. The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine, in particular, has gained traction as a framework for justifying interventions in cases of mass atrocities or severe violations of international law.⁸⁷ Multilateralism and international support (2) have also become increasingly important, with interventions frequently seeking legitimacy through cooperation with organisations such as the United Nations, NATO, or the African Union. This approach fosters broad coalitions and distributes the responsibility and resources required for effective intervention. The use of smart power (3), which combines military force with diplomatic, economic, and cyber tools,

⁸⁷ For Sinocentric views on R2P concept, see: Andrew Garwood-Gowers, “China and the ‘Responsibility to Protect’: The implications of the Libyan intervention”, *Asian Journal of International Law* Vol. 2, No. 2, 2012, 375-393.

has become a hallmark of modern interventions, allowing for a more nuanced and comprehensive approach to exerting influence. Contemporary interventions are also characterised by limited objectives and clear exit strategies (4), focusing on specific goals such as countering threats or facilitating political transitions rather than engaging in protracted nation-building efforts. The emphasis on precision and minimisation of collateral damage (5) has become paramount, with advanced technology and engagement protocols designed to protect civilian lives. Additionally, modern interventions often extend beyond combat to encompass counterinsurgency and stability operations (6), supporting local governance and fostering long-term security in affected regions. Finally, the rise of hybrid warfare and information operations (7) has introduced new challenges, requiring intervening states to counter disinformation campaigns and cyber threats while managing public narratives in real time. In total, these seven evolving characteristics of contemporary military interventions reflect a more nuanced and complex approach to addressing global security challenges in the decades to come.

Testing China's military assertiveness in the contemporary system

China's approach to military interventionism is shaped by its Sinocentric worldview and specific security concerns.⁸⁸ Since its establishment in 1949, the PRC has never waged a military intervention against any foreign country.⁸⁹ Despite its non-interventionist policy foundations, China's global strategy reveals a gradual shift towards limited military engagement beyond its borders, as seen in Djibouti and potentially in Antarctica. This shift underscores China's intent to secure its national interests and establish a strategic foothold in regions of geopolitical importance. China's perspective on potential intervention differs from Western doctrines, which often invoke liberal democratic norms. Instead, Chinese military strategy, defensive in nature, is driven by a unique vision of a Sinocentric world order, where security policies are more self-referential and centred on regional stability from China's vantage. Geopolitically, China perceives Western containment strategies as a revival of Cold War tactics aimed at restricting its influence, particularly in areas like the South China Sea. Taliaferro's concept of geographic proximity plays a moderating role in China's approach, as Beijing calculates intervention costs more stringently in distant regions compared

⁸⁸ For more on medieval conflicts (14 and 15 century) and interventions in Asia see: Tansen Sen, "Zheng He's military interventions in South Asia, 1405–1433." *China and Asia*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2019, 158–191.

⁸⁹ Some scholars, however, claim that China's involvement in the Korean War was de facto a military intervention, but it does not meet all the criteria of that term. See more at: David Tsui, *China's Military Intervention in Korea: Its Origins and Objectives*, Trafford Publishing, 2015.

to areas of immediate interest. However, the unpredictability surrounding China's foreign and security policy remains a critical challenge for analysts.

What motivates China to consider military intervention beyond its borders? One significant factor is the principle of national reunification. China views Taiwan as an integral part of its territory and considers the reunification of Taiwan as a core national interest. From this perspective, any movement toward Taiwanese independence or foreign involvement is seen as a challenge to China's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Military action could be viewed as a legitimate means to achieve this reunification and protect what China perceives as its national interests. Additionally, Taiwan's geopolitical significance plays a crucial role. Its strategic location in the Asia-Pacific region is vital for enhancing China's maritime capabilities and ensuring access to key sea lines of communication. Gaining control over Taiwan could bolster China's regional influence and support its strategic objectives. Domestic political considerations also contribute to this viewpoint. The Chinese leadership faces internal pressures to assert strength in territorial matters, including Taiwan. Taking decisive action could reinforce the ruling Communist Party's legitimacy and commitment to national rejuvenation, fostering public support. Furthermore, defence and security concerns are important. Control of Taiwan could provide a buffer against perceived threats from external powers, particularly the United States and its allies. Military action might be seen as a defensive strategy to safeguard maritime boundaries and protect economic interests.

Argumentation about China's hesitation to militarily intervene in geographically distant areas can be based on several factors. By examining the postulates of Jeffrey Taliaferro's balancing risks theory, we can identify key reasons why China is unlikely to take such risks. Firstly, the theory highlights that major powers are prone to consciously accepting the risk of using force against peripheral states. However, in the case of China, the geographical distance between its mainland and potential areas of intervention plays a crucial role. China's primary focus is on maintaining regional stability and securing its immediate neighbourhood, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. Geographically distant areas pose significant logistical challenges, including extended supply lines, a lack of local infrastructure, and potential vulnerabilities in terms of military operations. These factors increase the operational complexity and risk associated with intervening in distant regions. Secondly, the theory implies that major powers might be willing to accept the risk of failure in military interventions. Nonetheless, China's approach to foreign policy has been characterised by cautious pragmatism.⁹⁰ It usually refers to the deliberate and calculated

⁹⁰ Nenad Stekić, *A Hesitant Hegemon: Layers of China's Contemporary Security Policy*, Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade, 2023.

approach that China adopts in its foreign policy decision-making. It is characterised by a combination of cautiousness, strategic thinking, and focus on practical outcomes. This approach reflects China's recognition of the complex and interconnected nature of global affairs and the need to balance its interests and goals with the potential risks and challenges involved.⁹¹ There are several key aspects to understanding Chinese cautious pragmatism. The first one is the non-interference principle, as China adheres to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other nations. This principle, rooted in China's historical experiences and its emphasis on sovereignty, shapes its foreign policy approach. China generally avoids intervening in the domestic affairs of other countries, particularly through military means. This reflects its preference for stability, respect for state sovereignty, and a desire to avoid potential entanglements or conflicts. Chinese foreign policy is driven by a careful assessment of costs, benefits, and potential outcomes. China's leaders prioritise the country's core interests, such as territorial integrity, national security, and economic development. When considering military interventions, China evaluates the potential risks, costs, and benefits in terms of its security, international reputation, and domestic stability. This strategic calculation is essential in determining whether or not China is willing to take the risk of military intervention in geographically distant areas. Economic considerations also play a crucial role in China's pragmatic approach. China's rise as a global economic powerhouse has significantly influenced its foreign policy decision-making. Economic factors play a crucial role in China's cautious pragmatism. The Chinese government prioritises economic stability, growth, and development, both domestically and internationally. Potential military interventions in distant areas entail economic risks, such as disruptions to trade routes, increased defence spending, and potential damage to economic relations. These economic considerations weigh heavily on China's decision-making process. China's cautious pragmatism is shaped by its historical experiences, particularly the traumatic memories of past conflicts and invasions. China has a long history of being invaded and occupied by foreign powers, which has left a lasting impact on its approach to security and foreign policy. The lessons drawn from history emphasise the importance of stability, self-reliance, and avoiding unnecessary risks or conflicts. Another aspect of China's cautious pragmatism is its preference for gradualism and incremental change. China often adopts a step-by-step approach in pursuing its goals, allowing for adjustments and reassessments along the way. This approach allows China to carefully manage risks, test the waters, and avoid sudden disruptions or escalations.

⁹¹ Ibid.

Table 1. Considerations for evaluating potential overseas military engagement by China

Humanitarian justification	International support	Smart power usage	Exit strategy	Collateral damage	Counterinsurgency and stability	Hybrid warfare
None to weak	Limited to mindlike states	To some extent	Unknown ZONE OF CRITICAL UNCERTAINTY			Assumption of success

Source: Author

The potential for Chinese military engagement abroad can be assessed through various factors (shown in Table 1) shaped by China's strategic priorities and historical approach to international affairs. Unlike unipolar-era interventions, China's engagement is unlikely to emphasise humanitarian justifications, adhering instead to a doctrine of non-interference and prioritising national interests. International support for such interventions would likely be limited to ideologically aligned states, signalling a selective coalition that could bolster regional influence but may lack broad legitimacy. China's utilisation of smart power, combining diplomatic, economic, and selective military measures, would facilitate a controlled approach, reducing reliance on outright force. However, a critical area of uncertainty (Table 1) lies in China's potential exit strategy, as a lack of precedent complicates predictions on how Beijing might disengage or define success in prolonged conflicts. Similarly, limited experience with counterinsurgency operations suggests challenges in post-intervention stabilisation efforts, especially if regional instability threatens Chinese interests. Collateral damage is another unpredictable variable, with China's likely preference for minimising civilian harm potentially shaping its operational tactics. Finally, China's approach to hybrid warfare, encompassing cyber operations, economic leverage, and limited military actions, indicates an assumption of effectiveness, aligning with its preference for indirect influence over large-scale military intervention (see Table 1). All these factors underscore China's cautious and strategic orientation toward military engagement, marked by strategic ambiguity and reliance on hybrid methodologies, though uncertainties in exit and stabilisation remain critical considerations.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the patterns of military interventions during the unipolar era, identifying four primary motivations driving superpowers to initiate military action. Furthermore, it has presented seven common factors that emerge across the three case studies presented: Yugoslavia (1999), Afghanistan (2001), and Iraq (2003). Notably, since its establishment in 1949, China has refrained from waging war or intervening militarily abroad. This

raises pertinent questions about whether China's continued economic and social growth will ultimately be tested in the arena of military assertiveness. The current international system, characterised by multipolarity, contrasts significantly with the unipolar context dominated by the United States, during which covert military operations were prevalent. In today's landscape, the actions of multiple global powers must be considered, particularly as China rises as a significant player. The Chinese leadership is acutely aware of the potential political, economic, and reputational repercussions that could arise from a failed military intervention. Such consequences might include damage to China's international standing, strained diplomatic relations, economic setbacks, and heightened domestic unrest. Given the stakes involved, China is likely to conduct thorough assessments of feasibility and potential outcomes before contemplating military engagements, especially in geographically distant regions.

Additionally, it is crucial to critically analyse contemporary military interventions in light of the theoretical frameworks that seek to explain the behaviour of great powers. While Russia's aggression towards Ukraine is often highlighted, it is essential to contextualise these cases within their unique circumstances. Russia's intervention in Ukraine, influenced by its geographic proximity, historical connections, and strategic interests, was driven by a perception of Ukraine as integral to its sphere of influence and national security. In contrast, the regions China might contemplate intervening in generally lack the same level of strategic importance or historical ties.

Regarding the situation with Taiwan, it is vital to recognise the political sensitivity and historical complexities associated with the Taiwan Strait. Taiwan represents a contentious issue for China, which views the island as a renegade province that should be reunified with the mainland. Although the Taiwan Strait is relatively close to China, the geopolitical implications of conflict in this area are profound. However, the unique dynamics surrounding Taiwan distinguish it from a broader willingness to engage militarily in distant regions. China's hesitance to intervene militarily in geographically remote areas can be understood through the lens of balancing risks theory, emphasising the influence of specific factors that shape China's foreign policy decision-making. Logistical challenges, cautious pragmatism, and a lack of strategic importance or historical ties with distant regions all contribute to this reluctance. While some contemporary military interventions by great powers may seem to contradict existing theories, they should be viewed as distinct cases, each influenced by their specific circumstances and contexts.

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