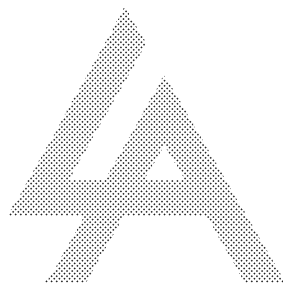
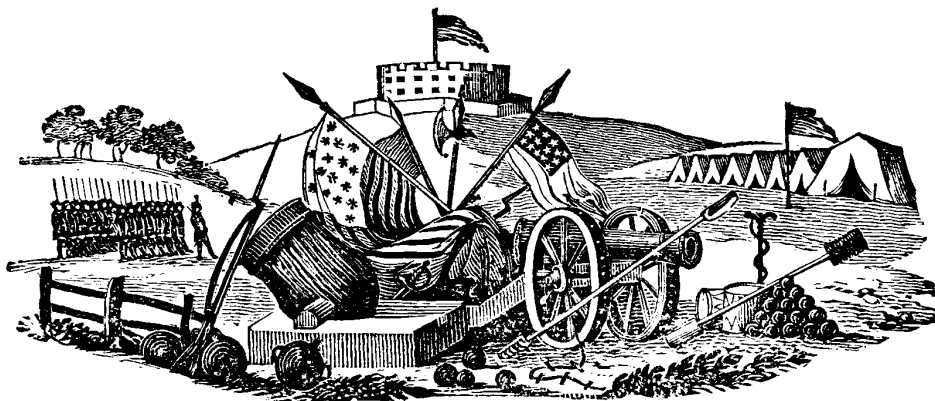


FOREIGN POLICY AND THE NON-AGGRESSION PRINCIPLE: CONCEPTUAL VERSUS PERCEPTUAL NON-AGGRESSION



E. G. ROSS



The Dictionary defines a principle as “a basic truth, law, or assumption”. But it depends on how basic you want to get. If you don’t get basic enough, your enemies will have you for breakfast. Too many otherwise sensible politicians, theorists, and tanked thinkers believe that non-aggression is a principle which can easily provide the basis for running state and foreign policy. The idea of non-aggression has been around in various forms for centuries. In bar room language, it means keep your fist out of the other fellow’s face unless he hits you first (or threatens to). Much of the politics of the US rests on this idea. It is an essential foundation for sound defense in a free society. But being an essential is not the same as being most essential.

INTERPRETING THE NON-AGGRESSION PRINCIPLE

The fact is that one cannot build a free nation or a free nation’s defense by using too narrow a view of the non-aggression principle. The attempt to do so has led many modern conservatives, libertarians, and liberals to the false idea that the US should never intervene in foreign affairs - although most of them would probably not feel the same

way if they witnessed a little old lady being attacked and could do something to stop it. The idea of this line of reasoning is that if no one initiates force directly against us, then we’ve no business “throwing our weight around”, regardless of the long-term consequences of inaction. This is defense reduced to the perceptual level, as animals might conduct it: “If it’s not in my face, no action is required.”

But man needs more. Man must have a conceptual level defense. Start with the obvious. By what standards do you determine when aggression has occurred? Judgment by standards requires thought. It requires mental work. It’s not a perceptual level exercise. Take, for example, a hunter who is shot for trespassing.

Suppose the land was not well-posted. Suppose it was unfenced and located amidst a dozen other parcels where hunting was okay. Suppose the hunter had lost his way. He could have easily believed he was operating legally. In other words, yes, he did cross onto the owner’s land. But was it aggression? Did he deserve to be shot? Similar complexities can arise in foreign affairs.

In Western justice, action is not enough to prove guilt. Intent to act wrongly must also be there. If not, then accidental injury could carry the same penalty as a deliberate stabbing. Not only does justice require judgment and punishment to match the crime, but determining crime requires conceptual insight into motivation. Opportunity and means are necessary, but insufficient.

It’s one thing to say people should not initiate force against others, but a different matter to thoughtfully assess when it occurs. While assessment can be hair-pullingly complicated, objectivity remains possible; it is not necessarily negated by complexity. A modern motor is also complex; it must be in order to work.

With national defense, trade, and strategic issues (i.e., foreign policy), we need more than simple, pawjerk answers about how to behave. Foreign policy is an area

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infused with conceptual content. That high-level content should not be sacrificed to simplicity.

NON-AGGRESSION AND NON-INTERVENTION

Yet a growing number of today's leaders insist that such simple answers are all we need. For instance, within the last few weeks I've heard Pat Buchanan, Bill Clinton, Ross Perot, and a half-dozen others declare that we "have no business" intervening in the affairs of foreign nations. This is the campaign trail version of the perceptual level view of non-aggression. But, again, how principled is it? Does non-aggression mean the same things as non-intervention and is this intelligent foreign policy? No and no. As a modern, efficient society cannot develop or exist without a complex base of a free market and the laws which help protect it, so a modern, efficient foreign policy cannot develop or be maintained without a wider base of thought than non-aggression-as-non-intervention. If foreign policy could be run so simply, then the brains of sheep (or wolves) would suffice.

AGGRESSION AND RIGHTS

Back to the human level. Imagine that little old lady being attacked. Say you didn't know her or her attacker, but decided that you had "no business" intervening in the affairs of other people. You therefore let her be beaten up and robbed. In a free society, that's usually your right. But does the right to refrain from intervention negate the right to intervene? No. By intervening, you'd probably have stopped serious injury and deprivation to an innocent. Sure, it's possible that the lady wasn't what she seemed, but unlikely. Your presumption of her innocence would be deemed reasonable in court, given your information and the urgency of quick action. By acting — by intervening — you were upholding the non-aggression principle by thwarting aggression.

THE NATURE OF DEFENSE

The same kind of overview applies to national defense issues. It's one thing to say the US Armed Forces should stay home and "just defend" America. But what constitutes a wise defense? Is it "just defense" if a boxer holds up his guard and never strikes back? No, it's just stupid. He would be a poor defender, quickly defeated.

Similarly, it's not "just defense" to gut a nation's ability to strike at the enemy or multiple enemies, as the USA is doing to its bomber and ICBM forces, its Air Force fighter squadrons, its Navy's high-tech attack submarines, its Army transport and back-up divisions, and so on. A good defender doesn't keep his fists at home. He doesn't sit and "take it". He takes it to the enemy. He tries to wipe out or debilitate the attacking forces, not just as they come, but at their source.

But what about now, "peacetime" (while nearly 50 wars are going on worldwide!)? The "take it to 'em" technique has its parallel in deterrence. A good deterrence must incorporate a capacity to move the battle to the opponent's turf. Otherwise he will feel confident that his base will suffer nothing and all the damage will be on you. He will retain the high ground.

Upholding the principle of non-aggression — defending liberty longer term — sometimes requires intervention even in smaller cases.

Look at one in the news, Haiti. By a narrow view of the non-aggression principle, we should not even consider military action to depose the dastardly regime currently running and ruining things. But a conceptual view might lead to a different conclusion.

First, our embargo isn't working. On their own, embargoes almost never bring down nasty regimes. A thirty-year US embargo on Cuba didn't do it. Nor did the huge Western embargo on South Africa. In both cases, it only made the people poorer, thereby taking away the economic base that could have sped more peaceful change for true liberty.

Second, most revolutions require considerable outside help, especially when the armed forces of an oppressive nation are part of the problem, as is the case in Haiti. Without outside pressure through the Contras from the US, it's unlikely the Sandinistas would have been kicked out of power (although they still hold more than they would have had US pressure been stronger and more consistent). Virtually every successful revolution in history — America's against the British included — required some force of arms from outsiders.

Even "purely domestic" or home-grown revolutions are built upon less direct outside help: trade. Trade permits a rising standard of living, which builds a middle class, which then demands changes and has the physical means to implement them. This was the story in South Korea, Taiwan, Chile, others. Embargos stifle this process of evolution. They serve to entrench oppression, rather than speed spirited, positive revolution. (This is not to say one should make no effort to prevent oppressors from obtaining key weapons, such as nuclear weapons or ICBMs. Embargos against such things may not hold forever, but they can buy crucial time.)

INTERVENTION FOR NON-AGGRESSION

Now, suppose a tyrant is so entrenched, and so expert at undercutting the means of a home-grown, reasonable revolution (as opposed to a switch of tyrants) that none is possible. What if he's keeping "his" people in a virtual torture chamber? And what if the refugees from his regime are becoming an expensive problem for us? Does that justify invading and toppling the regime? Definitely. Intervention for freedom, especially when failure to do so dearly costs not only the victims but US taxpayers, is perfectly rational. Yes, there are risks. Saving a little old lady might backfire, too. But one is playing good odds that the benefits of victory will substantially outweigh the costs, especially down the road.

Of course, assessing the benefits requires intelligence about the enemy. For instance, we know that Haiti's military wouldn't stand a chance against a US "Just Cause" (Panama) size operation, perhaps one much smaller. Indications are that the Haiti brass would put up a poor fight at little loss of life to the US. If, as with Kuwait, we got other nations to subsidize the liberation, then the loss of treasure to the taxpayer could be totally offset as well (as it was in the case of Kuwait). This would, I claim, be an example of a conceptual-level interpretation of the non-aggression principle. This may not be the only such interpretation. But it should indicate why non-interventionism is an unreliable guide for serving the cause of non-aggression. It is unreliable because it is anti-conceptual, i.e., anti-human.