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**Article — Published Version**

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Journal of Peace Research

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*Suggested Citation:* Binder, Martin (2015) : Paths to intervention: What explains the UN's selective response to humanitarian crises?, Journal of Peace Research, ISSN 1460-3578, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA, Vol. 52, Iss. 6, pp. 712-726-, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343315585847>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/190743>

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# Paths to intervention: What explains the UN's selective response to humanitarian crises?

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Journal of Peace Research  
2015, Vol. 52(6) 712–726  
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/0022343315585847  
jpr.sagepub.com



## Abstract

Over the past two decades, the United Nations Security Council has responded more strongly to some humanitarian crises than to others. This variation in Security Council action raises the important question of what factors motivate United Nations intervention. This article offers a configurational explanation of selective Security Council intervention that integrates explanatory variables from different theories of third-party intervention. These variables are tested through a comparison of 31 humanitarian crises (1991–2004) using fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis. The analysis shows that a large extent of human suffering and substantial previous involvement in a crisis by international institutions are the key explanatory conditions for coercive Security Council action, but only when combined with negative spillover effects to neighboring countries (path 1) or with low capabilities of the target state (path 2). These results are highly consistent and explain 85% of Security Council interventions after the end of the Cold War. The findings suggest that the Council's response to humanitarian crises is not random, but follows specific patterns that are indicated by a limited number of causal paths.

## Keywords

fuzzy-set analysis, humanitarian crises, humanitarian intervention, United Nations

## Introduction

On 17 March 2011, the United Nations Security Council (SC) adopted Resolution 1973, which authorized the use of 'all necessary measures' – except an occupation force – to protect civilians in Libya. Two days later, an international military operation was launched to enforce Resolution 1973. The intervention in Libya's civil war marks the latest episode in the post-Cold War practice of United Nations (UN) humanitarian intervention. Over the past two decades, the Council imposed sanctions, deployed peacekeeping operations (PKOs), or even carried out (or authorized) military interventions to respond to various humanitarian crises around the globe. But the SC's response remained highly selective. It has responded more strongly to some humanitarian crises than to others. What accounts for this variation?

This question raises the important issue of what factors motivate UN intervention. The main controversy among scholars has centered on whether these interventions are

to be best explained by humanitarian considerations and a shift of international norms, or whether geo-strategic and economic interests provide a more plausible account. Given the complexity of intervention decisions, however, some observers have argued that these decisions are not determined by any single factor, but that they rather involve a mix of material and ideational motives. More than 30 years ago, Walzer (2000 [1977]: 101) found no clear case of a humanitarian intervention, suggesting instead that there were 'only mixed cases where the humanitarian motive is one among several'. More recently, Lyon & Dolan (2007: 50) have suggested that 'there is a mixture of motives for humanitarian involvement as the certainties of altruistic humanitarian intervention are often blurred with self-interested power pursuits'. Also, Mason & Wheeler (1996: 95) argue that neither material factors

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nor humanitarian considerations are individually strong enough to motivate humanitarian intervention, but that they may be 'jointly sufficient to do so'.

Given the lack of studies that examine systematically the combinations of factors or causal paths that lead to or block intervention, the aim of this article is to test the 'mixed motives' argument. More specifically, I examine whether and which combinations of conditions are necessary and/or sufficient for intervention or non-intervention by the SC. This is done through a comparison of 31 instances of major humanitarian crises (1991–2004) using fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fs/QCA).

I demonstrate that two causal paths lead to humanitarian intervention. A large extent of human suffering and substantial previous involvement in a crisis by international institutions are the key explanatory conditions for UN intervention, but only when combined with either negative spillover effects to neighboring regions (path 1) or with low capabilities of the target state (path 2). None of these conditions is individually necessary or sufficient, but they are jointly sufficient to explain why the SC responds more strongly to some humanitarian crises than to others.

To develop this configurational explanation, the first part of the article presents the existing literature on third-party intervention. The second part conceptualizes SC intervention in humanitarian crises. Part three identifies explanatory conditions for SC intervention. The fourth part tests these conditions through a comparison of the major humanitarian crises after the Cold War. The fifth part presents the results that are discussed and interpreted in the sixth part. The last part sums up and briefly considers the normative and practical implications of the findings.

## Prior research

Relatively little academic attention has been devoted to the factors that motivate international institutions, including the UN, to intervene in conflicts and humanitarian crises. Earlier studies that researched into the subject frequently focus on situations where intervention has occurred, while crises that remain unaddressed go unstudied. Jakobsen (1996) examines ideational and material determinants of UN peace enforcement operations, but his study is limited to five positive cases after the Cold War.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Neack's (1995) study compares 18 Cold War PKOs to test whether state participation in

these operations was driven by their commitment to the international community, or by self-interest. More recent studies have begun to address this bias and analyze which instances of armed conflict the UN has selected for intervention and why. Gilligan & Stedman (2003) find that the UN is more likely to deploy peacekeeping missions in conflicts with a high number of deaths and less likely to intervene in states with large government armies. According to Fortna (2004), peacekeepers get sent to difficult cases for peacekeeping and shy away from militarily strong states. Mullenbach (2005) finds that UN peacekeeping is less likely if the target state is a major power or has strong allies and more likely if the UN has previously been involved in a civil war. Whereas these studies remain confined to PKOs, a recent study by Beardsley & Schmidt (2012) looks at the determinants of different levels of UN involvement in international crises where involvement is conceptualized as a seven-point level variable. They find that measures of the severity and escalatory potential of a conflict are better explanations of the extent of UN intervention than variables that measure the parochial interests of the five permanent veto-holding members (P5). However, their study is limited to UN involvement in interstate crises and does not examine internal conflicts with which humanitarian crises are usually associated. In sum, while this research improves our understanding of UN intervention in important ways, none of these studies analyzes causal combinations to explain why the UN responds to humanitarian crises with varying strength.

## Humanitarian intervention and the United Nations

This article adopts a broad conceptualization of humanitarian intervention which takes into account that humanitarian action is not a simple matter of either intervening militarily or 'doing nothing' (e.g. Crocker, 2001: 229). Rather, it is conceived as a response that varies considerably in terms of coerciveness and intrusiveness. Building on Ramsbotham & Woodhouse (1996: 106–135), humanitarian intervention may *range* from forcible military intervention to coercive non-military (e.g. economic sanctions), to non-coercive military (e.g. peacekeeping), to non-coercive non-military (e.g. humanitarian assistance), to complete non-intervention as a further and final option.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jakobsen does focus on combinations of factors.

<sup>2</sup> Ramsbotham & Woodhouse (1996: 113) define humanitarian intervention as 'cross-border action by the international community in response to human suffering made up of "forcible humanitarian intervention" [...] and "non-forcible humanitarian intervention"'.

This conceptualization is directly applicable to SC action. Having the 'primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security' (Article 24 of the UN charter) and the authority to determine whether a situation is a 'threat to international peace and security' (Article 39), under Chapter VII, the SC may opt for *coercive action*, including the collective use of force (Article 42) and the imposition of sanctions (Article 41). Further, although not formally included in the UN charter, the SC has authorized the deployment of 'robust' PKOs, whose mandate under Chapter VII includes the (limited) use of force. At the same time, the SC may decide to take *non-coercive* measures, including the deployment of traditional consent-based PKOs, observer missions, and the provision (or the call for provision) of humanitarian assistance as a means to restore peace and security. Finally, the SC may not take any action at all.

It has been widely noted that the decision whether the SC responds to crises or conflicts depends heavily on the interests of its most powerful members, most notably the veto-holding P5. However, as Gilligan & Stedman (2003: 39–40) have pointed out, precisely because P5 acquiescence is required for any SC action, the argument that P5 interests are decisive for UN action 'often approaches tautology'. The more relevant question is what factors motivate these interests and 'which cases get great power support'. Under what conditions do the members of the SC – including the P5 – agree to take or authorize strong action, and when can we expect that no such measures will be taken?

### Explanatory conditions for UN intervention

Existing research on third-party intervention offers a number of plausible conditions to account for UN intervention. These explanations are informed by constructivist, realist–rationalist, and institutionalist theories in international relations (IR). Whereas some of these factors are clearly associated with one specific theoretical approach, others are stressed by more than one theory. However, rather than to engage in competitive theory testing, the aim of this article is to draw from theories of third-party intervention, to determine whether any specific factors, and, if so, which combinations thereof, contribute to a better explanation of selective UN intervention. The question of to what extent some specific theoretical account, if any, can make sense of the findings will be discussed at the end of the article.

### Normative considerations

Constructivist informed studies on third-party intervention point to a profound change in the normative environment and to humanitarian considerations as drivers of outside intervention. From this perspective, the increase in third-party intervention was largely enabled by emerging norms of humanitarian intervention during the 1990s, which now frequently supersede the traditional principles of sovereignty in instances of 'supreme humanitarian emergencies' (Wheeler, 2000: 50; Finnemore, 2003). These norms were further strengthened since the UN World Summit in 2005, when UN member states agreed to the 'responsibility to protect' principle, which stipulates that coercive intervention, including the use of military force, may be warranted in cases of severe human rights violations (e.g. Bellamy, 2010). Against this backdrop of normative change, a number of studies show how humanitarian considerations have led to the imposition of economic sanctions and to military interventions in situations where no obvious security or geostrategic interests were at stake (Klotz, 1995; Hasenclever, 2001). Regarding the SC, even skeptics agree that its members have felt a 'humanitarian impulse' (Weiss, 2004: 39) when faced with cases of large-scale human suffering. While it is difficult for norm-based accounts to explain why humanitarian intervention remains selective (Boulden, 2006), constructivist research stresses that intervention decisions depend on *the extent of a crisis*. Interventions occur when the level of human suffering is high, and the resulting morally motivated pressure to act on behalf of the victims of a crisis is strong (Hasenclever, 2001: 211). Along these same lines, it has been argued that massive human suffering is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for intervention (e.g. Jakobsen, 1996: 212).

### Media attention

Pressure to act in the face of human suffering might result not only from the 'real extent' of a crisis but also by its perceived dimension. Analogous to the 'CNN effect', according to which media coverage compels, or at least influences decisionmakers to act, it has been argued that the decision to intervene depends on the *level of international media attention* for humanitarian crises.<sup>3</sup> Whereas media attention is a frequent explanation for specific foreign policy decisions, other observers claim that media coverage also operates at the level of the

<sup>3</sup> See Gilboa (2005) and Robinson (2011) for literature reviews.

SC. Malone (2004: 12), for example, refers to CNN as the SC's 'sixteenth member', and argues that 'the media plays an important role in the life of the Council, often producing international pressure for action to address man-made disasters'. There are at least two paths through which media may generate pressure to act. First, from a constructivist perspective, it is argued that, via mass media coverage, citizens and decisionmakers can identify with, or develop empathy for, the victims of conflicts and humanitarian emergencies (e.g. Barnett, 1998: 96). Second, seen from a rationalist perspective, a broader public exerts pressure on decisionmakers who, in turn, fearing reputational damage from inaction, act strategically. But other observers question the effects of media coverage. They argue that media coverage follows foreign policy decisions and not vice versa; furthermore, that there has been non-intervention despite strong media attention; or that media coverage might, through graphic images of dead combatants, prevent rather than promote intervention (Jakobsen, 2000; Robinson, 2001). These arguments reinforce the notion that media coverage is context-dependent; it does not seem to be 'sufficient on its own to cause intervention and is unlikely to even be a necessary factor in causing policy makers to act' (Robinson, 2001: 942).

#### *Spillover effects and countervailing power*

Realist-rationalist accounts of third-party intervention focus on material forces and stress a second set of potential explanatory factors. Conceiving of states as rational actors who strive for maximizing security (Waltz, 1979) or power (Mearsheimer, 2003), intervention becomes 'an instrument of foreign policy used to promote the interests of individual nations' (Feste, 1992: 1). Specifically, states intervene to change or maintain the international distribution of power, to broaden or defend their respective geopolitical spheres of influence, or to defend or extend their respective ideologies (Morgenthau, 1967). Several studies underline the importance of realist variables to explain UN intervention (e.g. Neack, 1995; de Jonge Oudraat, 1996). Two factors in particular may explain the degree of UN response: the first is *the level of spillover effects* emanating from a crisis, and thus the extent to which it poses a threat to international peace and security. Spillover effects may contribute to conflict diffusion through various mechanisms such as refugee flows (Salehyan & Gleditsch, 2006), transnationally operating rebels (Salehyan, 2009), international terrorism, or economic downturn. Spillover effects generate costs in that they produce negative externalities for neighboring countries, including SC member

states (de Jonge Oudraat, 1996: 518–519; Dowty & Loescher, 1996). The second factor is the extent to which possible target states of intervention are able to generate *countervailing power* against outside intervention. The strength of countervailing power, which affects the costs and risks of an intervention and its chances of success, may depend on several factors. First, countries with strong militaries are better able to resist UN responses (Doyle & Sambanis, 2006: 86). Second, beyond military strength, target countries can also resist UN action if they are allied with a P5 or another powerful state (or if they are themselves P5 members) that can use its political influence in the Council to prevent UN involvement on the territory of an ally (Mullenbach, 2005: 537). The same can be expected if a potential target state is located within the sphere of influence of a P5 or another major power (Luard, 1984: 165).

#### *Sunk costs and path dependence*

The final explanatory variable is emphasized by studies focusing on the role of 'sunk costs' and resulting path-dependence for third-party intervention. Path dependence – that is, self-reinforcing (or 'positive') feedback processes – often results from material and immaterial investments in an existing institution or policy that actors have made and are reluctant to abandon (Stinchcombe, 1968: 120; Pierson, 2004). This explains why institutions and policies may become path-dependent and persistent. Such previous investments or 'sunk costs' may not only include money or infrastructure, but also learning, coordination, or reputation.<sup>4</sup> Similar processes have been observed in third-party interventions, which are often costly undertakings and generate substantial learning and coordination effects. Von Hippel (1996) and Boettcher & Cobb (2009), for instance, have pointed to sunk cost effects to explain the persistence of Morocco's intervention against the Polisario Front in the Western Sahara conflict and the US war in Iraq, respectively. Burg (2004) has shown how incrementally the concerns for extensive investments in diplomatic prestige and material resources in the Bosnian crisis created an interest for UN intervention. Thus, depending on the extent of *previous involvement in a crisis by regional or international institutions*, the wish to secure these investments through continued or increased commitment is considered a powerful motive for UN action

<sup>4</sup> While the 'sunk cost trap' is often used to explain seemingly irrational behavior, sunk costs do not necessarily lead to fallacious policies (e.g. McAfee, Mialon & Mialon, 2010).



(Mullenbach, 2005: 538). Yet, while sunk costs might explain why certain established policies and institutional arrangements may persist, they do not account for why these particular policies were adopted in the first place.

In sum, I have identified five testable explanatory conditions for the variation in UN intervention. These are: (1) the extent of a humanitarian crisis, (2) the level of international media attention, (3) the strength of spillover effects, (4) the strength of countervailing power, and (5) the level of previous institutional involvement in a crisis.

I focus on these and not on other variables because they are the most prominent reasons given for the UN's uneven responses to humanitarian crises. Moreover, the explanatory power of the chosen variables is supported by previous research on third-party intervention (I will come back to this below). In the same vein, several other potential alternative explanatory factors were excluded from this analysis because they had been repeatedly rejected by other previous research. These include, for instance, the type of conflict (identity, religious, secessionist, etc.), the availability of primary commodities (e.g. oil) in the target state, or the existence of a peace treaty between the warring parties (Gilligan & Stedman, 2003; Fortna, 2004; Mullenbach, 2005). Finally, all of those conditions that are expected to influence SC decisions on intervention are international factors operating at the same level of analysis.

## Empirical analysis

Fs/QCA is now applied to determine whether one of these conditions, or some combination thereof, account for UN intervention. The method is particularly appropriate for the aim of this article; that is, the analysis of causal combinations, given medium-N situations (5 to 50 cases). Fs/QCA, which was pioneered by Ragin (2000), is now being applied increasingly in social science research, including IR. The method is based on Boolean algebra or set theory, allowing us to test whether conditions or combinations of conditions are necessary or sufficient for the presence of a specific outcome. It centers on *multiple conjunctural causality*, which means that combinations of causally relevant conditions, rather than single causes, produce a given outcome, and that that same outcome might be brought about by different combinations of conditions or 'causal paths'. In fuzzy-set logic, conditions and outcomes are not necessarily present or absent (1 or 0), but could have partial (i.e. 'fuzzy') membership in a particular set (e.g. 0, 0.2, 0.4, 0.6, 0.8, 1).

This allows us to make more fine-grained distinctions between cases.

Detailed explanations and technical applications of fs/QCA are provided elsewhere (Rihoux & Ragin, 2009; Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). But, in brief, all fuzzy-set analyses proceed in three steps: first, fuzzy-set membership scores must be assigned to each case under investigation; that is, the extent to which a case is a member of the sets formed by the explanatory or outcome conditions in which the researcher is interested must be determined (set calibration). The second stage examines whether one or more of the conditions under consideration are *necessary* for the outcome of interest. In set-theoretic terms, a condition is necessary if its membership scores are, for all cases, greater than or equal to the membership scores of the outcome. The third stage determines whether one or more conditions are *sufficient* for the outcome of interest. A condition is sufficient if its membership scores are consistently lower than or equal to the outcome. To check for this, the fs/QCA software<sup>5</sup> transforms the fuzzy-set membership scores into a (dichotomously organized) truth table, using the direct link between the rows of the truth table and the corners of a multidimensional vector space defined by the fuzzy-set conditions.<sup>6</sup> Then, via logical deduction, the truth table is minimized; that is, the software eliminates all of those factors that are irrelevant for the outcome.

Once we have obtained the minimized solution formula(e) – namely, the causal condition(s) that are consistently related to the outcome – we need to consider the quality of the results. Two parameters describe the extent to which the results 'fit' the data (Ragin, 2008: 44–68). *Consistency* indicates the extent to which the solution term fulfills the requirement of necessity and sufficiency.<sup>7</sup> The *coverage* of a solution term indicates the degree to which the solution formula(e) or causal path(s) explain the outcome of interest.<sup>8</sup> Fuzzy-set analyses are easily replicable. The required information is given in the sections that follow. Additional information is provided in the online appendix.

<sup>5</sup> University of Arizona (<http://www.u.arizona.edu/~cragin/fsQCA/software.shtml>), accessed 10 September 2013.

<sup>6</sup> For details, see Rihoux & Ragin (2009: 103).

<sup>7</sup> The formula for consistency is  $(X_i \leq Y_i) = \Sigma(\min(X_i, Y_i)) / \Sigma(X_i)$  for the analysis of sufficiency. For the analysis of necessity it is  $(X_i \geq Y_i) = \Sigma(\min(X_i, Y_i)) / \Sigma(Y_i)$ .

<sup>8</sup> The formula for coverage is  $(X_i \leq Y_i) = \Sigma(\min(X_i, Y_i)) / \Sigma(Y_i)$  for the analysis of sufficiency. For the analysis of necessity it is  $(X_i \geq Y_i) = \Sigma(\min(X_i, Y_i)) / \Sigma(X_i)$ .

Table I. Fuzzy-set membership scores for 31 humanitarian crises 1991–2004

<i>Cases</i>	<i>Years</i>	<i>Explanatory conditions</i>					<i>Outcome</i>
		(1) <i>Extent</i>	(2) <i>Spillover effects</i>	(3) <i>Countervailing power</i>	(4) <i>Institutional involvement</i>	(5) <i>Media attention</i>	<i>Strength of UN response</i>
Afghanistan	1991–2004	1	1	0.08	0.64	0.16	1
Angola 1	1991–1994	1	0.66	0.44	0.32	0.12	0.64
Angola 2	1998–2002	1	1	0.35	0.8	0.06	0.64
Azerbaijan (Karabakh)	1992–1994	0.68	0.59	1	0.16	0.09	0.16
Bosnia	1992–1995	1	1	0.38	0.8	1	1
Burundi	1993–2004	0.86	0.64	0.09	0.8	0.05	0.8
Colombia	1991–2004	1	1	1	0.16	0.11	0.16
Congo-Brazzaville	1997–1999	0.49	0	0	0.16	0	0.16
DR Congo	1996–2004	1	1	0.16	0.8	0.27	0.8
Georgia (Abkhazia)	1992–1994	0.13	0.13	1	1	0.06	0.32
Guinea-Bissau	1998–1999	0.1	0	0	1	0	0.16
India (Kashmir)	1991–2004	0.24	1	1	0.16	0.07	0
Iraq (Northern Iraq)	1991–1993	0.64	1	1	1	1	1
Liberia 1	1991–1995	1	1	0	1	0	0.64
Liberia 2	2000–2003	0.6	0.49	0	0.64	0.09	0.8
Mozambique	1991–1992	1	1	0.12	0.16	0	0.48
Myanmar	1991–2004	0.86	1	1	0.16	0	0.16
Nepal	1996–2004	0.06	0	1	0.16	0	0.16
Peru	1991–1997	0.64	1	1	0.16	0.07	0.16
Russia (Chechnya) 1	1994–1996	0.41	0	1	0.16	0.7	0.16
Russia (Chechnya) 2	1999–2004	0.86	0	1	0.16	0.37	0.16
Rwanda	1993–1994	1	1	0.06	0.8	0.22	1
Sierra Leone	1991–2002	0.82	1	0	1	0	1
Somalia	1991–1995	1	0.92	0	0.8	0.08	1
Sri Lanka	1991–2002	0.92	0.28	1	0.16	0.06	0.16
Sudan	1991–2004	1	0.72	1	0.32	0.07	0.32
Sudan (Darfur)	2003–2004	1	0.25	1	0.16	0.05	0.16
Tajikistan	1992–1997	0.32	0.3	1	1	0	0.32
Turkey	1991–2004	1	1	1	0.16	0	0
Uganda (Northern Uganda)	1994–2004	1	1	0.11	0.16	0	0.16
Yugoslavia (Kosovo)	1998–1999	0.1	1	1	1	0.87	0.64

*Case selection*

This analysis focuses on the SC's response to the most severe instances of ongoing violent humanitarian crises after the Cold War (1991–2004). To identify these crises, I rely on Väyrynen's operational definition of human-made humanitarian crises that encompasses a high degree of (1) collective violence, (2) displacement, (3) hunger, and (4) disease (Väyrynen, 2000). These indicators are measured with the help of various datasets, including the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP; for collective violence), the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI; for refugees and internally displaced persons), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and the World Health Organization (WHO; for undernourishment and infant mortality rates). Since many parts of the world are affected, to some extent, by

those dimensions of human suffering, this analysis is confined to the *major* instances of humanitarian crises. To identify these cases, I use the crisis in Kosovo as the 'minimum threshold'. The Kosovo crisis is an appropriate benchmark, because it is widely perceived as a relatively limited crisis that nevertheless led to a strong response when compared to most of the humanitarian emergencies with which we are familiar (e.g. Haass, 1999: 47; Lyon & Dolan, 2007: 69), as well as because it often is considered to be a prime example of selective interventionism and the application of double standards (e.g. Chomsky, 1999).<sup>9</sup> Applying the Kosovo crisis as a

<sup>9</sup> NATO's military intervention in Kosovo was conducted without SC authorization. Yet, in Resolution 1199, the SC imposed sanctions.

benchmark, all those crises that are included (like Kosovo) fulfill these minimum criteria in terms of a sustained, high level of collective violence (experiencing at least two consecutive years of armed conflict according to the UCDP, including at least one year of 'major armed conflict'), plus the prevalence of internal displacement, hunger, or disease. I discuss these criteria and thresholds in more detail elsewhere (Binder, 2009). This procedure, by which 31 major violent humanitarian crises after the Cold War are identified (Table I), makes sure that these crises are plausible candidates for SC action. More limited and shorter crises, whose escalation might be avoided by measures such as preventive diplomacy, are hence excluded from the analysis.

## Operationalization and data

### *The outcome condition*

The outcome variable in this article is the degree of SC response to ongoing violent humanitarian crises after the Cold War. Similar to Ramsbotham & Woodhouse (1996: 106–135), the degree of SC action is measured, first, in terms of coerciveness or intrusiveness – that is, the extent to which it violates the principle of sovereignty – and, second, by its costs in terms of financial resources and personnel. With these two indicators in mind, I propose that the strength of UN responses may range from (1) complete inaction or non-intervention to (2) humanitarian assistance, to (3) observer missions, to (4) substantial 'traditional' PKOs, to (5) economic sanctions, to (6) 'robust' PKOs, and, finally, to (7) military humanitarian intervention.

### *The explanatory variables*

**The extent of a humanitarian crisis.** The extent of crises and conflicts is operationalized in terms of the number of casualties and the number of *internally* displaced persons. Data are taken from Leitenberg (2006), DeRouen & Heo (2007), and the annual World Refugee Surveys of USCRI (Marshall, 2008). Additional information is taken from individual case studies. Detailed sources for these and all other variables are given in the online appendix to this article. The number of refugees is excluded from this variable so as to be able to differentiate between crises that remain contained within a country (internal displacement) and those that spill across borders (see below).

**International media attention.** Media attention is operationalized in terms of the average number of articles per crisis year in core print media of the societies of the liberal permanent members of the SC. Data are taken from

the Factiva database.<sup>10</sup> Since media attention rises dramatically once the intervention occurs, I only measure media attention preceding such responses.

**Spillover effects.** To determine the number of refugees, I rely on data from USCRI (Marshall, 2008). Whether transnationally operating rebels (Cunningham, Gleditsch & Salehyan, 2013) contributed to regional conflict contagion (interstate conflict) is assessed with the help of individual case studies, the UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia,<sup>11</sup> and information provided by Hewitt (2003, ICB dataset v.10) and Ghosn, Palmer & Bremer (2004, MID dataset v.4.0). The determination of the remaining factors, such as international terrorism or illegal drug production, is based on case knowledge (all sources are detailed in the online appendix).

**Countervailing power.** The military strength of a state is operationalized by the number of military personnel (i.e. the maximum number of military personnel during the period under consideration). Data are taken from the Correlates of War (COW) Project's National Material Capabilities dataset (v.3.02). To identify whether a target state has strong allies or is located within a global power's sphere of influence, I draw on individual case studies and the COW Formal Alliances dataset (v.3.03).

**Previous institutional involvement.** This is measured by the resources committed to a crisis (financial costs and reputation). Similar to the dependent variable, the extent of institutional involvement decreases on a scale from prior military intervention to substantial PKOs (both 'robust' and 'traditional'), economic sanctions, observation missions, humanitarian assistance, and, finally, to no previous involvement. Data are drawn from UN sources<sup>12</sup> and the SIPRI Multilateral Peace Operations Database.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> I have examined the number of articles published in the *New York Times* (NYT), *The Times* (London), and *Le Monde*. Because *Le Monde* has only been available digitally through Factiva since January 1995, for crises beginning prior to that date, the analysis is limited to the NYT and *The Times* coverage. I have used a combination of relevant crisis keywords, which must occur in the title or the first paragraph of an article. This is to ensure that only those articles that report *prominently* on the respective crisis are included in the analysis.

<sup>11</sup> UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia ([www.ucdp.uu.se/database](http://www.ucdp.uu.se/database)), accessed 8 May 2014.

<sup>12</sup> See (<http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/>), accessed 8 May 2014.

<sup>13</sup> See ([http://conflict.sipri.org/SIPRI\\_Internet/](http://conflict.sipri.org/SIPRI_Internet/)), accessed 8 May 2014.



### *Set calibration of the outcome and the conditions*

Once the outcome and the explanatory conditions have been operationalized, the resulting raw data have to be translated into fuzzy-set member scores – this is the so-called set calibration. To calibrate fuzzy-sets, the researcher may rely on theoretical or case knowledge as well as on meaningful patterns in the data. Because the calibration of a set strongly affects the results of the analysis, explicit justification must be given for the assignment of the scores.

For some concepts or data, multivalued fuzzy-set schemes may be used. For the outcome condition (the degree of UN response), a seven-valued fuzzy-set scheme (0, 0.16, 0.32, 0.48, 0.64, 0.8, 1) is assigned. ‘Strong’ responses (with membership scores higher than the crossover point 0.5) and ‘weak’ responses (with membership scores lower than 0.5) are distinguished by whether they are coercive (mandated under Chapter VII) or consent-based. Strong action encompasses military intervention (1), robust peacekeeping (0.8), and economic sanctions (0.64). Weak measures range from traditional PKOs (0.48) to observer missions (0.32) and humanitarian assistance (0.16). Finally, crises where no action was taken receive a score of 0.<sup>14</sup> When there is more than one reaction, the strongest response will be taken into account.

For many explanatory conditions, such as the number of victims or refugees, interval-scale data is available. This allows for a more formalized method (the ‘direct method’; Ragin, 2008: 89–94). With the help of the ‘qualitative anchors’ for full membership (1), full non-membership (0), and the crossover point (0.5), this method allows us to assign fuzzy-set scores for each case according to its original value.

Finally, for the remaining dichotomous indicators, such as alliance membership, the assignment of membership scores is straightforward. A score of 1 is assigned to cases in which the condition is present; otherwise, they receive 0.

Since it is not possible to discuss the calibration of all conditions within the limits of this article, the online appendix explains in detail and justifies the assignments of the membership scores of all 31 cases in the sets formed by the five explanatory conditions and the outcome condition. Also explained is the aggregation of the indicators. The resulting membership scores for all of the 31 cases of ongoing humanitarian crises between 1991 and 2004 are reported in Table I.

<sup>14</sup> I recoded the outcome variable in several non-equidistant ways. My results remain robust. Details are reported in the online appendix.

## **Results**

In order to explain (1) when the UN took strong action (i.e. coercive action under Chapter VII authority) to respond to humanitarian crises, and (2) under what condition no such measures were adopted, fs/QCA was applied, respectively, to the membership scores of the 31 cases reported in Table I. This was done using the software program fs/QCA 2.5. The program simplifies patterns in the data and ultimately identifies (combinations of) conditions that are necessary and/or sufficient for an outcome of interest.

The test for necessary conditions indicates that neither the presence nor the absence of any of the five explanatory conditions can be considered to be necessary for strong or limited UN response to violent humanitarian crises. The recommended thresholds for the consistency and coverage of necessary conditions are 0.9 or higher, and at least 0.6, respectively (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012: 143–147). All results of the analysis of necessary conditions are reported in the online appendix. The only condition that meets these criteria is the absence of media attention ( $\sim$ ATTENTION), which might thus be considered to be quasi-necessary for a limited SC response ( $\sim$ STRONG). Given that almost all 31 crises display scores for  $\sim$ ATTENTION that are greater than (or equal to) their scores in the outcome ( $\sim$ STRONG), this condition has a high consistency score (0.94). Moreover,  $\sim$ ATTENTION displays a relatively high coverage score (0.61). Yet, a closer inspection of the result reveals that the condition is ‘trivial’ (Braumoeller & Goertz, 2000) in that many cases display high values for the condition ( $\sim$ ATTENTION), whether or not the outcome ( $\sim$ STRONG) is present.

### *Explanations for strong UN action*

To examine the conditions that lead to strong UN action (in terms of sufficiency), I employ two models containing different combinations of the five explanatory conditions.<sup>15</sup> Regarding the analysis of sufficiency, the researcher has some leeway in determining the thresholds for consistency. This threshold distinguishes causal combinations that are a consistent subset of the outcome from those that are not. This threshold is determined by significant gaps in consistency values in the truth table. It can be lower than for the analysis of necessity,

<sup>15</sup> The four core conditions are the extent of a humanitarian crisis, the magnitude of its spillover effects, the strength of the countervailing power, and the level of previous institutional involvement (Model 1). These are supplemented by media attention (Model 2).

Table II. Fs/QCA results: Causal paths leading to strong SC response

	<i>Raw coverage</i>	<i>Unique coverage</i>	<i>Consistency</i>
(1) <b>EXTENT*INVOLVEMENT*SPILLOVER+</b>	0.71	0.18	0.92
(2) <b>EXTENT*INVOLVEMENT*~ COUNTPOWER+</b>	0.56	0.04	0.96
(3) <b>EXTENT*INVOLVEMENT*~ COUNTPOWER~ ATTENTION+</b>	0.51	0.44	0.95
(4) <b>EXTENT*INVOLVEMENT*SPILLOVER*ATTENTION+</b>	0.22	0.14	0.98

but it should be at least 0.75 (Ragin, 2008: 136). In this analysis, I use conservative thresholds above 0.9. The results of the analysis are reported in Table II. Note that Table II contains the totality of causal paths obtained by the analysis of the two models. In fuzzy-set notation, the asterisk (\*) stands for the logical operator *and*, the absence of a condition is indicated by the tilde (~), and the plus sign (+) indicates the logical *or*.

The analysis yields four combinations of conditions or causal paths that are sufficient for the outcome. According to the first causal path, the UN takes coercive action if the extent of a humanitarian crisis is high (in terms of victims or internal displacement), international institutions have been substantially involved in that crisis (i.e. if there are significant sunk costs), *and* if that crisis produces substantial negative spillover effects in terms of refugees or other negative externalities for neighboring countries. According to the second causal path, the UN takes coercive action in response to large-scale humanitarian crises characterized by substantial previous institutional involvement which occur in a country without strong countervailing power to resist outside intervention (i.e. a target state without significant capabilities or powerful allies).<sup>16</sup>

The third and fourth causal combinations support these findings because they all include either the first or the second path (indicated by the bold type in Table II).<sup>17</sup> Moreover, causal paths three and four indicate that media attention has indeterminate effects on the decision to intervene. While high media attention in the fourth path contributes to strong UN response, in the third path, indications are that UN intervention may occur despite the absence of high-level media reporting. This supports the critics' view according to which the impact of media coverage is limited and indirect, depending on the presence of other additional factors (Jakobsen, 2000;

Robinson, 2001: 954). Taken together, a combination of four factors – or two causal paths – is decisive in bringing about a strong UN response to humanitarian crises:

$$\text{EXTENT} * \text{INVOLVEMENT}(\text{SPILLOVER} + \\ \sim \text{COUNTPOWER})$$

This means that the determinants for coercive UN action are a large extent of human suffering and substantial previous investment in a crisis, when combined with either significant spillover effects for neighboring countries (path 1), or with military weakness, or no strong allies, thus rendering the target state unable to generate strong countervailing power against outside intervention (path 2). This finding demonstrates the importance of these four factors, also highlighting the particular significance of the extent and institutional involvement conditions, which are part of both causal paths. At the same time, none of the four explanatory conditions is individually sufficient to account for UN intervention. Moreover, countervailing power is only part of one causal path. This means that intervention can occur despite the military strength of a target state; namely, when a crisis involves a large number of victims, substantial sunk costs, and significant spillover effects.

How good is the 'fit' between the solution formulae and the data? Recall that two parameters are relevant in fs/QCA. The *consistency* scores describe the quality of a given set relationship. In this analysis, these scores are very high, varying between 0.92 and 0.98 (see Table II). As a result, both paths can be considered as quasi-sufficient for the occurrence of the outcome. They are quasi-sufficient because a few cases do not fulfill the sufficiency requirement; that is, the combined values of the causal combinations are greater, and not smaller, than the value of the outcome (as a result, these cases are located below the main diagonal in Figure 1). However, this applies only to very few cases that are 'near misses'. As indicated by the *raw coverage* scores in Tables II and III – a measure for the empirical importance of a causal path – the first solution term covers 71% of the outcome to be explained, while the second path covers 56% of the outcome. This shows that spillover carries more

<sup>16</sup> The consistency threshold is 0.93. Consistency values of causal combinations in the truth table equal to and above these scores receive 1 in the outcome column; 0 is assigned to causal combinations below these values. See Table III in the online appendix.

<sup>17</sup> The consistency threshold is 0.95.

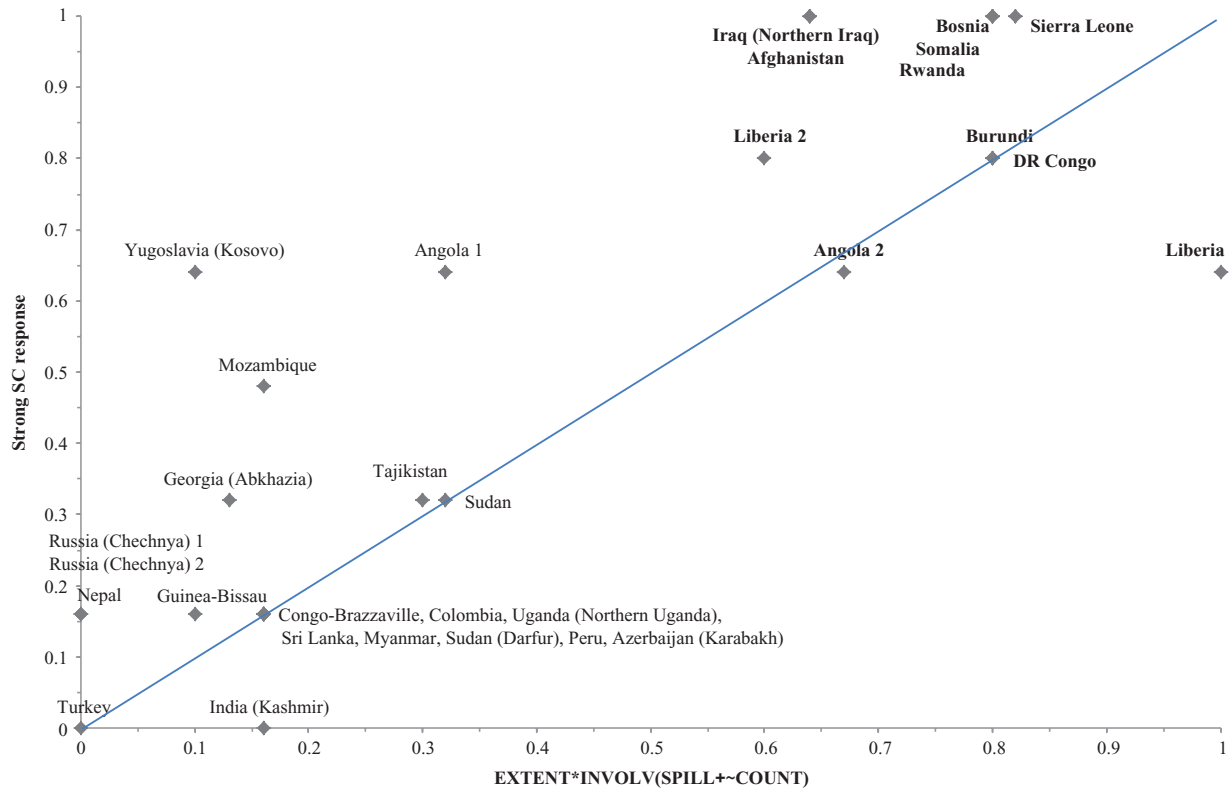


Figure 1. Cases covered by the causal combination

Table III. Cases covered by the four causal paths

	<i>Causal path 1</i> <i>EXTENT*INVOLVEMENT</i> <i>*SPILLOVER</i> <i>→ STRONG</i>	<i>Causal path 2</i> <i>EXTENT*INVOLVEMENT</i> <i>*~ COUNTPOWER</i> <i>→ STRONG</i>	<i>Causal path 1</i> <i>COUNTPOWER</i> <i>*~ INVOLVEMENT</i> <i>→ ~ STRONG</i>	<i>Causal path 2</i> <i>COUNTPOWER</i> <i>*~ EXTENT</i> <i>*~ SPILLOVER</i> <i>→ ~ STRONG</i>
Raw coverage	0.71	0.56	0.66	0.21
Unique coverage	0.18	0.04	0.53	0.08
Covered cases <sup>1</sup>	Liberia 1, Sierra Leone, Angola 2, DR Congo, Bosnia, Rwanda, Somalia, Burundi, Afghanistan, Northern Iraq	Liberia 1, Sierra Leone, Angola 2, DR Congo, Bosnia, Rwanda, Somalia, Burundi, Afghanistan, Liberia 2	India (Kashmir), Turkey, Azerbaijan (Karabakh), Colombia, Myanmar, Nepal, Peru, Russia (Chechnya) 1, Russia (Chechnya) 2, Sri Lanka, Sudan (Darfur), Sudan	Nepal, Georgia (Abkhazia), Tajikistan, Russia (Chechnya) 1
Consistency	0.92	0.96	0.96	0.92

<sup>1</sup> Cases with greater than (0.5) membership in the respective path.

importance than countervailing power (if combined with a large humanitarian extent and substantial prior involvement in the crisis). This is also reflected by the *unique coverage* scores of both paths (0.18 and 0.04, respectively). Yet, these scores are low, meaning that a substantial number of cases are explained by both causal paths.

The only exceptions are Northern Iraq (uniquely covered by path 1) and Liberia 2 (uniquely covered by path 2).

Figure 1 links the results of the analysis to the specific cases. The cases explained by the two causal paths are indicated by bold type; they are located in the upper right corner of the figure. These cases have high values

Table IV. Fs/QCA results: Causal paths leading to limited SC response

	Raw coverage	Unique coverage	Consistency
(1) <b>COUNTPOWER* ~ INVOLVEMENT+</b>	0.66	0.53	0.96
(2) <b>COUNTPOWER* ~ EXTENT* ~ SPILLOVER+</b>	0.21	0.08	0.92
(3) <b>COUNTPOWER* ~ INVOLVEMENT* ~ ATTENTION+</b>	0.61	0.51	0.98
(4) <b>COUNTPOWER* ~ EXTENT* ~ SPILLOVER* ~ ATTENTION+</b>	0.19	0.08	0.92

in both the causal combinations (*x*-axis) and the outcome (*y*-axis). Taken together, both paths cover 11 out of the 13 post-Cold War crises (or 85%) where the SC has taken coercive action under Chapter VII. These cases include crises to which the SC has responded by employing (or authorizing) the use of force (e.g. Operation 'Provide Comfort' in Northern Iraq, or UNITAF in Somalia), by deploying 'robust' PKOs (e.g. UN Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, MONUC II), or by imposing economic sanctions (e.g. the sanctions imposed on Angola 2 through SC Resolutions 1127 and 1173). The cases located in the upper left corner (Kosovo and Angola 1) represent instances where the SC took coercive measures; these remain unexplained by the results and, thus, require alternative explanations. In the case of Kosovo, the Council imposed sanctions despite the rather limited humanitarian extent of the crisis. In Angola 1, the Council imposed sanctions although the UN's prior involvement in the crisis had been confined to a small observer mission in the country (UNAVEM I).

#### *Explanation for limited UN action*

To determine under what conditions the SC does not take coercive action under Chapter VII, I employ the same two models as I did in the previous analysis of strong UN action. However, the results here are more diverse; that is, there are more causal paths that lead to the outcome. Some of these paths have very low coverage scores – they explain only a small fraction of the outcome. Only four paths have reasonably high coverage scores (more than 15%) and, hence, explain a substantial part of the outcome. These paths are reported in Table IV.

According to the first and the second causal paths, the UN does not take coercive action if a crisis occurs in a country that is able to generate strong countervailing power against outside intervention, and if international institutions have not been previously involved in that crisis. According to the second formula, SC response remains limited in situations of strong countervailing power, if the extent of human suffering is rather low, and if a crisis does not produce substantial spillover effects to

neighboring countries.<sup>18</sup> Both causal paths are supported by the third and fourth formula adding media attention.<sup>19</sup> Unlike the cases of strong SC action, the role of media attention here is clear. Little media attention is consistently associated with a limited SC response to a humanitarian crisis. The fact that countervailing power is part of all solution formulae highlights the explanatory power of this condition, and this allows for the following simplification of the result:

$$\text{COUNTPOWER}(\sim \text{INVOLVEMENT}+ \\ \sim \text{EXTENT*} \sim \text{SPILLOVER})$$

But again, strong countervailing power is not sufficient to explain why the UN fails to take strong action. Only in combination with either the lack of sunk costs or a limited extent of human suffering and spillover effects does it explain why UN responses remain confined to non-coercive measures.

Regarding the quality of the results, their consistency is very high (between 0.92 and 0.98; see Table IV). Moreover, the coverage scores in Tables III and IV show that path 1 has clearly more empirical weight than path 2. Figure 2 shows that the overall explanation covers a substantial number of cases, but the coverage is somewhat lower than it was for the analysis of the positive outcome. Of the 18 cases of limited UN response, 14 are explained by the solution formula (78%). They are indicated by bold type, located in the upper right corner of Figure 2. In these cases, the UN did not take any action at all (Turkey and India–Kashmir), or the UN response remained confined to non-coercive measures, such as humanitarian assistance (e.g. Chechnya) or consent-based peacekeeping (e.g. UN Observer Mission in Sudan, UNAMIS).

In sum, fuzzy-set analysis shows that the key determinants for *coercive UN action* are a large extent of human suffering and substantial previous institutional involvement in a crisis, if the crisis produces significant spillover effects for neighboring countries, or occurs in a militarily

<sup>18</sup> The consistency threshold is 0.92.

<sup>19</sup> The consistency threshold is 0.92.

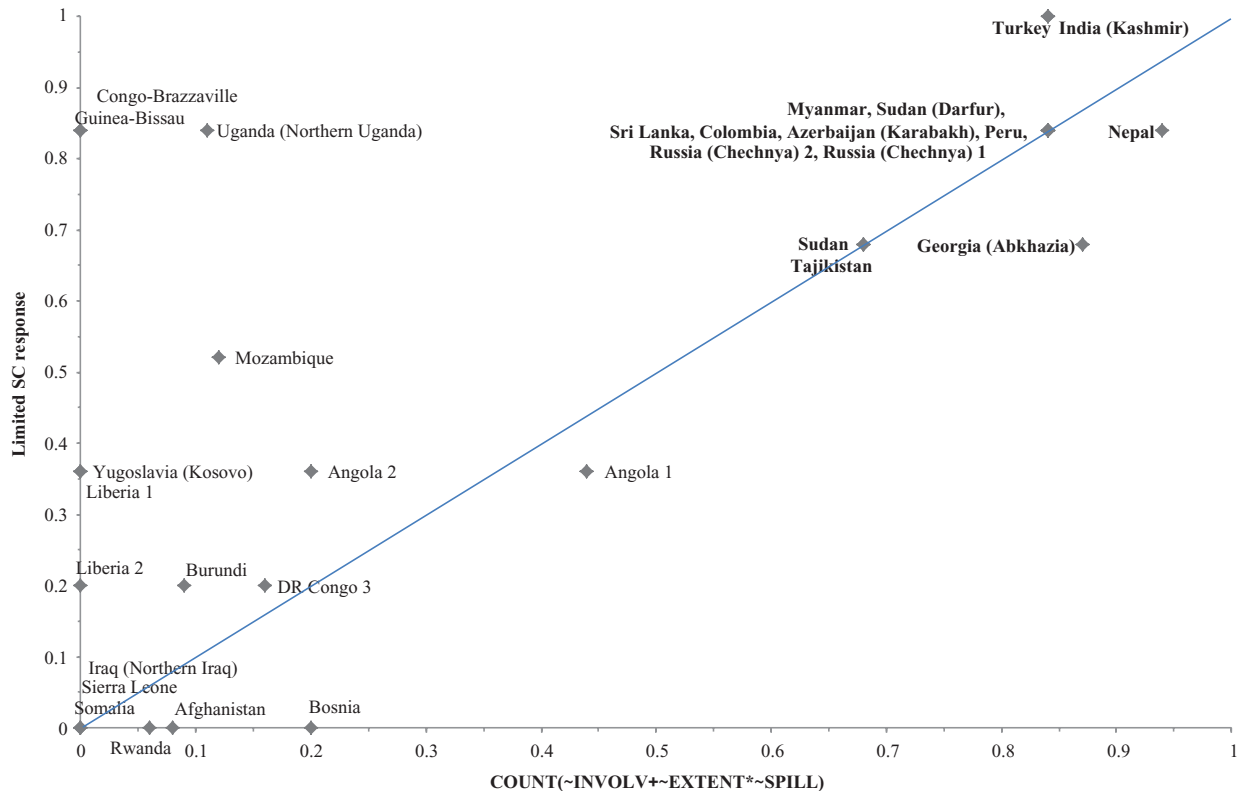


Figure 2. Cases covered by the causal combination

weak target state lacking the ability to generate strong countervailing power against outside intervention. *Limited UN response* is best explained by strong countervailing power, but only when combined with other scope conditions.

## Discussion

The results of the analysis have a number of implications that deserve closer attention. First of all, the findings show that there are clear patterns in the way the UN responds to humanitarian crises. Although every crisis may be historically unique, the SC's responses to these crises are not random. Rather, the way the SC selects crises for intervention follows specific trajectories that are indicated by a *limited* number of causal combinations or paths. Moreover, the paths are highly consistent and they cover most (but not all) crises.

Second, the analysis demonstrates that the variation in UN humanitarian intervention requires configurational explanation. None of the conditions emphasized by the different intervention theories is individually necessary or sufficient for strong or limited UN action. In combination, however, they provide for a powerful sufficient explanation of variation in UN humanitarian intervention.

Third, the findings of the fuzzy-set analysis are in line with previous research in the field of third-party intervention. This applies to the number of victims of a crisis or a conflict (e.g. Gilligan & Stedman, 2003), the number of refugees (e.g. de Jonge Oudraat, 1996), and the previous institutional involvement (Mullenbach, 2005), which these studies found to increase the likelihood of outside intervention. Likewise, the military strength of a target state was found to be negatively associated with the likelihood of intervention by a number of large-N analyses (Gilligan & Stedman, 2003; Fortna, 2004; Mullenbach, 2005; Beardsley & Schmidt, 2012). These studies lend further credibility to the results of the fuzzy-set analysis. However, it is crucial to note that fuzzy-set analysis follows a fundamentally different causal logic and serves a different purpose. Unlike statistical analysis, which is based on co-variation and focuses on the average net effects of single independent variables, fuzzy-set analysis is based on set-theoretic relationships of necessity and sufficiency, and focuses on causally relevant combinations to explain an outcome. Accordingly, the contribution of this article lies not in determining the effects of individual explanatory variables, but in identifying precisely which causal combinations or causal paths lead to strong or limited UN



action, respectively. These must be evaluated and interpreted in their entirety. At most, an individual component of a causal path can be considered as an INUS conditions (insufficient but non-redundant part of an unnecessary but sufficient condition) or as 'one cause within a combination of causes that are jointly sufficient for an outcome' (Mahoney & Goertz, 2006: 232).

Finally, how can we interpret the causal paths theoretically? As I have outlined above, some of the factors examined in this article are stressed by more than one theoretical perspective, which renders theory testing difficult. In turn, it is equally hard to make sense of the empirical results from a single theoretical account. A theoretically integrative perspective, which accepts the complexity of social phenomena and views different logics of action 'as complementary rather than to assume a single dominant behavioral logic' (March & Olsen, 2006: 702), allows us to sketch an intuitive and straightforward interpretation of the results. In line with constructivist and institutionalist inspired theories of third-party intervention, humanitarian concerns and the wish to protect institutional investments (sunk costs) are important drivers of UN humanitarian intervention. Yet, both factors seem to be highly context-dependent and lead to intervention only when joined with material considerations, as stressed by rationalist–realist intervention theories. In the first context, humanitarian considerations and sunk cost concerns seem to be sufficient for SC intervention when, additionally, the risks and costs of possible intervention are comparatively low because the target state is unable to generate strong countervailing power against outside intervention. In the second context, humanitarian concerns and concerns for sunk costs seem to lead to SC intervention when they are complemented by material concerns over the negative spillover effects to neighboring countries. In situations like this, where all three factors – humanitarian considerations, concerns for sunk costs, and the wish to contain spillover effects – push towards intervention, the constraining role of countervailing power seems to be less critical.

## Conclusion

This article has employed fs/QCA to compare the SC's response to more than 30 major humanitarian crises after the Cold War. The findings show that no single condition accounts for the Council's selective use of humanitarian intervention (broadly defined). Rather, the puzzling variation in the Council's response to humanitarian emergencies requires a configurational explanation that consists of a limited number of causal paths. It is

important to note that, while fs/QCA helps us to identify subset relations between explanatory conditions and an outcome condition in terms of necessity and sufficiency, it is not a substitute for an investigation into the causal mechanisms at work. This requires additional in-depth case study research both for the cases covered by the results and for the outliers, which require an alternative explanation.

How well does the Council function in addressing humanitarian crises? The SC's uneven response to humanitarian emergencies is frequently condemned by journalists, human rights activists, and policymakers, pointing to 'double standards'. Likewise, scholars note that the SC's selective enforcement of human rights undermines not only the credibility and, eventually, the effectiveness of humanitarian interventions, but also the legitimacy of international order more generally (e.g. Archibugi, 2004). The current debate on the SC's uneven treatment of the crises in Libya and Syria is a case in point. But this holds more generally. In fact, in only 13 of the 31 major humanitarian crises considered in this study did the Council members agree on strong measures. This suggests a poor track record. At the same time, it clearly is an improvement over the Cold War, during which the Council was largely paralyzed by super-power rivalry. After 1990, the SC has become much more active in peacekeeping and peacemaking. It is much less often blocked by vetoes than before, while the number of resolutions, including resolution under Chapter VII, through which 'robust' PKOs, sanction regimes, and peace enforcement missions are established, has increased dramatically (Wallenstein and Johansson, forthcoming). Nevertheless, the Council's humanitarian activity is characterized by a substantial selectivity gap in that it responds to more – but by far not all – crises. Ultimately, the Council is a deeply political body whose action requires an agreement among a majority of its members and the support (or at least the acquiescence) of the P5. As such, we cannot expect that this support is forthcoming in consistent ways. Against this backdrop, it was the aim of this study to identify under what conditions the Council members agree (or do not agree) to intervene.

Finally, my findings also carry important policy implications. Whether or not strong humanitarian action is taken by the SC has immediate practical consequences for decisionmakers in national and international institutions, for humanitarian organizations that operate in crisis areas, and, of course, for the populations affected by humanitarian emergencies around the world.

## Replication data

All data, along with the online appendix, can be found at <http://www.prio.org/jpr/datasets>. All the analyses in this article were conducted using the program fs/QCA 2.5.

## Acknowledgment

I thank Mathias Koenig-Archibugi, Matthias Ecker-Ehrhardt, Gary Goertz, Autumn Lockwood Payton, Benoît Rihoux, Scott Siegel, Georg Sørensen, Barçın Uluşık, Lora Viola, Bernhard Zangl, Michael Zürn, the three anonymous reviewers, and the editorial team for their helpful comments. Special thanks to Felix Braunsdorf for his excellent research assistance. Any remaining errors are mine.

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