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News media and the foreign policy decision-making process, CNN or Washington?

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Introduction

There is a great debate about the relationship between the news media and the foreign policy decision-making process, and the impact the former may have on the latter. Two theories have risen to explain this matter, the so-called "CNN effect" and the "manufacturing consent" thesis.

But these theories are in conflict, thus, agreement about the direct impact of the media on foreign policy is yet to be achieved. Even though for "many journalists, policy-makers and scholars, there really is little doubt that media profoundly affect the foreign policy process" (Livingston, 1997), recent research about the effects of the media on Western Governments in response to humanitarian interventions "fails to clarify whether or not the news media has (or has not) triggered recent 'humanitarian' interventions" (Robinson, 1999).

This essay will start by analysing foreign coverage and foreign policy making. The reason for this is that foreign events are dealt by the media through coverage and by foreign policy makers through the creation, modification and implementation of policies. Further on, the findings¹ of several authors, like Livingston (1997), Livingston and Eachus (1995), Jacobsen (1996 and 2000), Gowing (1994) and Mermin (1997) will be reviewed in order to set a grounding for the perceived conclusions about the impact of the news media on the foreign policy decision-making process.

Media-Foreign policy decision-making relationship

In order to illustrate how the news media have revolutionized the foreign policy making process, the image of the Soviet missile crisis in Bay of Pigs, during John F. Kennedy's government is often mentioned (Hoge, 1994; Livingston, 1997). During the first six days of the crisis, Kennedy and his advisers had the chance to deliberate in secrecy about which course of action they were to take. The capability of keeping the situation in secret kept foreign policy makers from dealing with "public hysteria" (Livingston, 1997) or media pressures.

Nonetheless, the context has changed considerably since 1962. Firstly, due to technological developments, real time news coverage allows information to be broadcasted 24 hours a day from anywhere in the world, with no regards for diplomatic secrecy. Secondly, since the end of the Cold War, the world is no longer bipolar, leading towards a lack of definition of American national interests, for they are no longer constructed around the idea of stopping the spread of communism. The latter leads towards the third point: there is policy uncertainty about foreign affairs. These contextual changes have redefined, it is argued, the relationship between the news media and the foreign policy decision-making process in the West, though there is great debate about its reaches and limitations.

On the one hand is the so-called "CNN effect", which is understood in a variety of ways. It comes from being understood as the capability of the news media (television in particular) to "shape the policy agenda" (Gowing, 1994); the "power" of news journalism "to move governments" (Cohen, 1994); "the idea that real-time communications technology could provoke major responses from domestic audiences and political elites to global events" (Robinson, 1999); the argument that "the media drives Western conflict management by forcing Western governments to intervene militarily in humanitarian crises against their will" (Jacobsen, 2000); "elite decision makers' loss of policy control to news media" (Livingston and Eachus, 1995); to the argument that the term "CNN effect" has been used imprecisely, for there are several types of media effects, deriving from different types of policies (Livingston, 1997).

On the other hand, the manufacturing consent theory "argues that the media does not create policy, but rather that news media is mobilized (manipulated even) into supporting government policy" (Robinson, 1999). There are two ways in which manufacturing consent may take place: the executive version, in which there is framing that conforms to the official agenda; and the elite version, in which news coverage is critical of executive policy as a consequence of elite dissensus (*ibid.*).

Media, Foreign Policy and Events

However, in my opinion, the first question to be asked regarding the impact of the media on foreign policy making decisions concerns how each of these actors, the media and policy makers, relate to foreign events.

Coverage

The media relate to events through coverage (or lack of coverage one may add). However, when it comes to foreign news, there are mixed trends. On the one hand, there is a tendency towards cutting back the amount of it as a response to little public interest (Hoge, 1994: 143). But on the other, some media are "expanding their foreign coverage" (*idem.*). Either way, the attention that media gives to foreign news seems to be focused to "the unusual and the violent" (*ibid.*). "Film footage of violence is the element of foreign news most likely to leap the hurdles barring entry to the evening news shows' 22 precious minutes of airtime" (Hoge, 1993: 3). Bias against peaceful news is noted.

Jacobsen (2000) divides conflicts in three phases: pre-violence, violence and post-violence. His findings are that during the pre and post-violence coverage is negligible; "Since coverage of conflicts that *might* explode in violence is unlikely to boost ratings, these conflicts are usually ignored" (*ibid.*: 133). In the post-violence phase coverage is also minimal, as an example of this, Jacobsen notes "Mine clearing is only news if Princess Diana is doing it" (*idem.*: 138). The coverage during the post-violence phase, however, tends towards the negative; failed projects, corruption, mismanagement, etc. (*ibidem*). The broad of coverage of a conflict, hence, happens during the violent phase, however, it is decided by "a host of different factors, most of which have nothing to do with humanitarian need such as: geographic proximity to Western countries, costs, logistics, legal impediments (e.g. visa requirements), risk to journalists, relevance to national interest, and news attention cycles" (Jacobsen, 2000: 133).

Thus, foreign news may be concluded, are subject to coverage in relation to its level of violence and general newsmaking and newsworthiness concerns. Girardet (1996) notes that there is a multiplicity of violent conflicts that have not received coverage at all. Conflicts are covered also in relation to their international implications, "It is doubtful that the media would have reported on Rwandans had it "just" been a case of Rwandans killing Rwandans" (*ibid.*: 57). He explains the lack of coverage of violent conflicts comes from the need of the international community to justify concerns "by reacting to something more morally

abhorrent than the mundane killing of ordinary human beings - just as Afghans killing Afghans, Sudanese killing Sudanese, or Angolans killing Angolans is apparently insufficient to mobilize more consistent coverage." (ibidem.: 58).

Girardet (1996) also points out that there is an obsession with the medium, rather than the purpose. The "technological conveniences" that news ICT's bring constitute a threat to quality journalism, since "All too often, information is confused with understanding, and high technology with journalism, so fascinated are the people by the vehicle rather than the purpose". The consequence is an obsession with immediacy, which shortens the journalist's "time to fully research and understand the issues at hand", encouraging "laziness and an overreliance on existent data" (ibid: 59-60).

Gowing (1994) believes that "There is far more real-time war than ever before" (81). Whatever is transmitted is determined by its graphic potential, "the main principle is: no pictures, then no serious coverage of a conflict" (idem.).

So far it is understood that foreign news is focused on conflicts; yet, only a few conflicts are covered, and such coverage is determined by a variety of factors independent to their level of humanitarian concerns, such as routine newsmaking and newsworthiness considerations; the quality of the coverage, just as well, is influenced by the use of technologies at hand. However, what drives the attention of journalists in the first place towards a specific conflict? Hoge (1993: 2) believes that "the new media's task has been made more difficult by an absence of clear, steady cues from Washington (...) the press traditionally has covered international affairs from the perspective of America's perceived interests". As Mermin (1997) notes, "American journalists turn to politicians and government officials for guidance in deciding what constitutes news". Furthermore, Washington constitutes a place "where newsworthy information is made public everyday" (ibid.). The same point is made by Livingston and Eachus (1995: 415) when they say that reporters "have been found to routinely turn to officials as news sources (Gans, 1979; Paletz & Entman, 1981; Said, 1981; Sigal, 1973), particularly in foreign affairs and national security reporting (Entman, 1991; Hallin, 1989; Livingston, 1994)."

Mermin's research entitled "Television news and American intervention in Somalia" reveals that Washington's decisions were the key to the subsequent coverage of the events, which fluctuated in amount and importance in relation to what was going on in Washington. Just as well, he notes that coverage was also drawn in relation to the priority Somalia played in the American agenda, as an example, he points out that during July of 1992, Somalia was never in the top of the news because it was not in the top of the foreign policy agenda (1997: 395).

In short, the coverage of a foreign conflict is determined by a variety of factors sometimes tangential to the event itself. However, the quality of the coverage, and by this we mean the way reports are fashioned, is also subject of external determinants. News reports about humanitarian crises are claimed to move governments towards action as the CNN effect presumes, or to frame contents in conformity to executive or elitist interests, as suggested by the manufacturing consent theory. This will be returned to later in this essay.

Foreign policy making process

Foreign policy in Western democracies, as is the case of the United States, is drawn upon the idea of a predetermined national interest. With the end of the Cold-War the main concern of USA's national interest, stopping the spread of communism, was over, yet the challenge is now that of a new definition of national interests. As Hoge (1993: 2) describes, "there is not yet an articulated official framework for U.S. foreign policy in a still new post-Cold War world". The Cold War, Hoge (1994: 137)

argues, provided a "gauge for determining the importance of events by how much they affected America's security versus its superpower rival". In other words, the Cold War provided Americans with a defined ideological stigmata, and this was revealed in the media: "The parameters of press coverage tended to be those of the country's foreign policy (...) The press was often critical, but of the execution of policy more than the aims." (Hoge, 1994: 137).

Joseph Nye (1999: 22) describes that the collapse of the Soviet Union challenges the way America conceives its national interests, since "'national interest" is a slippery concept, used to describe as well as prescribe foreign policy". Samuel P. Huntington argues that "without a sure sense of national identity, Americans have become unable to define their national interests, and as a result subnational commercial interests and transnational and nonnational ethnic interests have come to dominate foreign policy" (quoted in Nye, 1999: 22)².

Nye describes national interests in a democracy as follows: "national interest is simply the shared priorities regarding relations with the rest of the world" (1999: 23). Nye (1999) argues that policy making is more difficult today because of power complexities; he conceives power as a three-dimensional chessboard: the first dimension is the military and it is unipolar, with the USA on top of the world; the second dimension is the economic, which is multipolar, with the USA, Europe and Japan having the biggest shares; the third dimension is that of transnational relations, with a dispersed structure of power. In conclusion, the USA "is preponderant, but not a dominant power" (Nye, 1999: 24). Therefore, the world did not exactly become unipolar after the Cold War, hence, national interests and foreign policies ought to take other variables into account, like the level of risk U.S. national security faces. Nye establishes three categories in the hierarchy of risks to U.S. national security. The "A" list constituted by threats to American survival (like the one the Soviet Union represented); the "B" list, constituted by imminent threats to U.S. interests (but not to its survival), and the "C" list, formed by "contingencies that indirectly affect U.S. security but do not directly threaten U.S. interests", like Kosovo, Bosnia, Somalia, Rwanda and Haiti (Nye, 1999: 26).

Nowadays, Nye (1999) argues, the "C" list predominates in the foreign policy agenda, one explanation of this comes from the disappearance of the threat of the Soviet Union as an "A" list, but another one is that the "C" list is the main concern of media foreign coverage. However, he argues, "A human rights policy is not itself a foreign policy, it is an important part of a foreign policy (...) In the information age, humanitarian concerns dominate attention to a greater degree than before at the cost of diverting attention from "A" list strategic issues" (1999: 31).

However, as many researchers argue, this intrusion of the "C" list in foreign policy priorities product of media coverage, which is one way to describe the CNN effect, is a consequence of the lack of policy clarity (Gowing, 1994; Freedman, 2000; Hoge, 1994; Robinson, 2001). Just as policy clarity is perceived as necessary in determining the way media and foreign policy makers would react to a certain international contingency, political leadership is seen as paramount (Hoge, 1994, 144; Livingston, 1997: 1; Gjeltén, 2002, Kohut and Toth, 1994: 58)).

In short, in the USA, foreign policies are drawn around a set of priorities determined in relation to the degree of importance of the perceived national interests, which are also determined by levels of risk to national security. In the post-Cold War world, however, those interests are not clearly defined, in consequence, policies are difficult to determine. The media is believed to raise importance of tangential matters over more substantial concerns in cases of policy uncertainty, as well as lack of political leadership. Power concentration varies according to the dimension of concern, yet one dimension has repercussions on

the other. When it comes to policy-making, those involved in the process possess a different level of power, and to create a policy they must be subjected to a bargaining interaction "between a set of subsystems in the government" (Robinson, 2001: 534).

The relevance of the relationship between the news media and foreign policy makers goes beyond the fact that the former cover foreign events, and the latter make policies regarding foreign events. The importance of this relationship, thus, relies on two claims about it: firstly, the claim that the coverage of certain events has the potential to drive the policies that foreign policy makers conduct regarding the events covered (the CNN effect), secondly, the claim that foreign policy makers are the ones who drive media attention towards certain foreign events, and even determine the way those events are being framed (Manufacturing consent).

Media-Foreign Policy Making, CNN or Washington?

When trying to understand the relationship between the media and foreign policy decision-making, both theories, the CNN effect and the manufacturing consent come into contest. In this part of the essay, the conclusions that different researchers have reached regarding this topic will be reviewed, in order to present a wide scope of the dimensions of their findings.

Jacobsen (2000), as previously mentioned, studied the impact of media coverage on foreign conflict management in relation to the phases of violence of the conflict. He concludes that the direct impact of the media on foreign policy making is negligible in the pre and post-violence phases, and limited during the violence phase³. He notes that the CNN effect is necessary for interventions, but insufficient to cause them, for they are decided by other factors: action perceived as quick, with low risk of casualties and a clear exit strategy. The "direct impact of the media on Western conflict management is negligible because coverage is limited to a small number of conflicts in the violence phase". The consequent shifting of funds from "cost-effective, long-term measures to short-term relief efforts leading to a high ineffective allocation of resources" is the "invisible and indirect" impact that the media actually have on Western conflict management. This impact, he argues, "exceeds the direct impact generated by the CNN effect by far since the latter only affects a very small number of conflicts" (Jacobsen, 2000).

On the other hand, Livingston (1997)⁴ suggests a three-way typology of likely CNN effects. These are conditional on the kind of intervention that is being conducted, of which he recognizes eight types. The three CNN effects are described as follows:

First effect is media as accelerants, in this modality, media are presumed to shorten the time of decision-making response. Yet, the media can also become a "force multiplier", a "method of sending signals" to the opponent (1997: 2-4). This effect is most plausible to appear in conventional warfare, strategic deterrence, and tactical deterrence (ibid, 11).

Second effect is media as impediment, this takes two forms, as an emotional inhibitor, and as a threat to operational security. One likely manifestation of the emotional inhibitor effect is the "Vietnam syndrome" (Livingston, 1997: 4), in which, it is presumed, public support is undermined by the media coverage of casualties. As a threat to operational security, the media are said to compromise the success of an operation by broadcasting it and, thus, revealing strategic information to the enemy, frustrating the success of the operation. This kind of effect, Livingston notes, is likely to appear during conventional warfare, tactical deterrence, SOLIC, peace making and peace keeping operations.

The third likely effect of the media on foreign policy making that Livingston (1997) mentions is that of the media as an agenda setting agent. It is presumed that the coverage of humanitarian

crises puts the issue in the foreign policy agenda and drives intervention.

Livingston's typology of likely CNN effects is supported by the findings of other authors, however, the true existence of such effects still remains undetermined, though Livingston (1997) scepticism is more focused towards questioning the ability of the media to set the agenda.

Hoge (1994: 137) describes the quality of media as accelerants as a pressure for politicians to "respond promptly to news accounts". However, Hoge foresees a negative effect of media as accelerants, due to the fact that news accounts "by their very immediacy are incomplete, without context and sometimes wrong" (ibid.). In the case of Somalia, Mermin (1997: 399) believes that media stories may have accelerated the movement in Washington towards intervention, yet those stories were "clearly a product of that movement"⁵.

The "Vietnam Syndrome", denominated "bodybag effect" by Freedman (2000) is an important consideration for intervention, even without the media; as Jacobsen (1996) describes, one of the requirements for intervention is a low risk of casualties. Therefore, it can be concluded that is the fact of the casualties, not the broadcasting of them that has an effect on policy (Luttwak, 1994; Hoge, 1994), since casualties are "unacceptable if suffered for no purpose" (Freedman, 2000)⁶.

When it comes to operational security, from a military point of view, Maj. Lafferty, *et. al.* (1994) finds that during a conflict, media reports increase enemy effectiveness, but only to a certain climatic point, after this, the effectiveness will start decreasing as an outcome of information overload; "Therefore, the U.S. Military must recast its relationship with media and pursue a strategy of information overload to decrease enemy effectiveness" (ibid.).

The ability of the media to function as an agenda setter is the most questioned by Livingston (1997) since the so-called CNN effect has been overestimated. "The majority of humanitarian operations are conducted without media attention (...). Furthermore, the eventual media coverage itself was the *consequence* of official actions." (Livingston, 1997: 7) In the case of Somalia, Livingston (1997), Livingston and Eachus (1995) and Mermin (1997) conclude that the media were used by powerful elites to put pressure over other officials, and that coverage followed policy makers' actions.

However, Gowing (1994) by interviewing diplomatic and policy insiders finds that they often felt pressured and influenced by media coverage in their performance of foreign policy making. This fact reveals that the relationship between policy makers and the media is not a "one-way" one, rather it is one of reciprocal influence. Despite the influence of media over policy makers, Gowing (1994: 83) notes that media reports "shape the policy agenda, but do not dictate responses. They highlight policy dilemmas, but do not resolve them." In other words, the prerogatives on policy making belong to policy makers, media does not decide for them. Gowing (1994: 84, 85) concludes that in the future real-time television coverage will make no difference to policy making, the most likely situation is that a minor action would be taken just to show that "something" is being done; ultimately, events are what are important to policy makers, not the coverage of them (ibid.). The likely changes on policy strategy product of television coverage would be tactical, but not on the overall strategy (ibid.: 89).

One final consideration to review in this part of the essay corresponds to the circumstances under which Western governments are more likely to intervene during humanitarian crises. Jacobsen (1996) finds five conditions for intervention: first, a clear case of humanitarian need where the UN would give its authorization ⁷; second, domestic support to the operation⁸;

third, CNN effect, which is recognized as necessary but not sufficient to cause an intervention; fourth, linkage to national interests; and fifth, feasibility of success, which also includes a low risk of casualties (the greater the domestic support, the more casualties they are willing to take).

Livingston (1997: 9) suggests that when looking more closely to "post-Cold War U.S. "humanitarian" interventions, one is likely to find equally compelling geostrategic reasons for the intervention.", like it happened during the Kurdish refugee crisis in 1991, where Scowcroft notes that it was the sensibility towards Turkey's anxiety about allowing the Kurds to stay" what fundamentally motivated the action (quoted in Livingston, 1997: 10). Apart from geostrategic concerns, Livingston mentions that a series of strict conditions must be met before the deployment of force, regulated by the Presidential Decision Directive 25 (PDD25), these include "a clear statement of American interests at stake in the operation, the approval of Congress, the availability of funding for the operation, a fixed date of withdrawal of U.S. forces, and an agreed upon command and control structure" (Livingston, 1997: 10).

In short, what researchers have found the CNN effect to be is the ability of the media to function as accelerants, impediments or agenda-setters. However, the reaches of each of these effects have counterarguments and the implications of these effects, by this we mean how positive or negative they are for foreign policy making, are not yet defined. Just as well, the ability of the media to impact foreign policy is inextricably related to coverage, thus, the greater the coverage, the more direct the impact, however, the indirect impact of the media is also relevant for foreign strategy, since it could deviate efforts from the long-term, cost-effective, high priority concerns towards the short-term, cost-ineffective, low priority contingencies. Finally, humanitarian intervention is decided by a multiplicity of factors, out of which the CNN effect may be but one.

Conclusions

As a not clearly defined phenomenon, the so-called CNN effect appears like a rather simplistic cause and effect explanation of media-foreign policy decision making relationship; almost like a hypodermic needle theory taken to the sphere of policy making. On the other hand, the manufacturing consent theory implies some obscurity, even conspiracy behind the relationship between policy makers and the media. Not only does this imply that both media and audiences are passive entities, easy to manipulate, but also ignorant of the "reality" behind the framing and indexing of the coverage, since critical coverage is conceived only in cases of elite dissensus. Both these theories are in clear confrontation, and they invalidate each other. But as Robinson (2001) notes, the debate about effect vs. non-effect is unconstructive. Rather, new approaches towards understanding more clearly the relationship between media and foreign policy making are to be achieved.

Just as news media coverage is not limited to foreign events, foreign policy making is not limited to the foreign events covered by the media. Thus, it is not likely that the media could drive overall foreign policy for the mere fact that coverage is limited to a selected subset of events. However, it is likely that the media have the potential to lead towards the modification of the policies being conducted regarding the events covered. One way to explain this likely effect of the media on foreign policy is understanding it as a cycle of dialectic influence in which media reacts to policies and policy makers react to coverage in a continuum. In the long run, however, there is the possibility that dramatic changes would occur; yet the empirical evidence so far is that the policy makers' reaction to coverage of humanitarian crises is usually that of emergency relief. The perceived impact of the media is inextricably related to policy certainty, the greater the certainty the lesser the impact of the media. This points out other indirect effects of the media, such as those detailed by Jacobsen (2000) and Nye (1999).

The main conclusion of this essay is that news media and foreign policy making process influence one another, sometimes directly, others indirectly. The degrees of their mutual influence are proportional to other circumstances, such as newsworthiness from the media point of view, and policy uncertainty, from the foreign policy making perspective. However, the research reviewed is made from a Western point of view, and it is focused on cases of humanitarian intervention, hence it is insufficient to draw general conclusions about the impact of the media on foreign policy making as a whole. Furthermore, the conclusions achieved may not be accurate in the context of non-Western and/or non First World countries. As hinted before, new research is needed that would consider cases different to humanitarian intervention, and contexts outside Western countries in order to draw more accurate conclusions about the impact the news media and foreign policy making have (or may not have) in one another.

Post script

This essay was written in April 2002. Nowadays, the international agenda has been transformed because of the outburst of war in Iraq. Therefore, some of the situations presented in this essay have been modified. For a start, as suggested in the text, the end of the Cold War left the US without a clear definition of its national interests. After September 11th a new enemy emerged, as a result, so did a new international agenda: the war against terrorism, which led towards a military conflict meant to overthrow Saddam Hussain from the government of Iraq. Joseph Nye's distinction of the US power as preponderant, but not a dominant one (Nye, 1999: 24), is now clearer than ever. The US has established the reach of their military power (though the number of mistakes committed so far is remarkable); yet they were unable to convince the U.N. and the rest of the world in general about the legitimacy of their quest (also see Jacobsen's conditions for intervention (1996)). The discourse about the threat to US national security, following Nye's topology, has fluctuated between "A", "B" and "C" throughout the development of the current conflict against Iraq. The new war in Iraq, however, started from the Executive, and coverage followed it, therefore, there is no CNN effect in that respect. Nevertheless, recent coverage about casualties, both of soldiers and civilians and of prisoners of war, may give room for a CNN effect as an impediment on the fashion of the "Vietnam syndrome" to rise. Just as well, coverage of humanitarian needs of Iraqi people may develop a CNN effect as an accelerant, but presumably on other actors rather than Washington, since one of the justifications given for American intervention was precisely the goal of providing the people of Iraq with a better quality of life. In conclusion, even though there is potential of a CNN effect in the fashion of a "bodybag effect" to happen during the present conflict, it may not be as likely, since this war began as a matter of the "A" list of US national interest, hence, it is presumed that Washington will continue to use the media as a propaganda apparatus, so the framing and indexing of news will conform to the interests and guidance of the Executive, besides, there is great domestic support at the moment, which means the American people will be willing to take an increased number of casualties compared to a humanitarian intervention not so linked to their national interest. Many conclusions and assumptions can be given regarding the theories presented in this paper and the current conflict in Iraq. One thing that is certain, is that this war is a clear demonstration of how both theories of impact of media intervention in foreign policy making, the so-called "CNN effect" and "Manufacturing Consent" collide, and the outcome of this confrontation is yet to be seen.

Notas:

¹ Because of space constraints, emphasis will be given to their conclusions rather than their overall research.

² Also on this, see Jacobsen, 1996, pag. 206.

³ In a similar fashion, Livingston (1997, 9) notes, "the lack of media coverage of humanitarian emergencies is most striking."

⁴ See Livingston (1997) "Clarifying the CNN effect: An Examination of Media effects According to Type of Military Intervention"

⁵ This refers to Mermin's (1997: 399) findings regarding the 21 /November/1992 news reports.

⁶ Luttwak (1994) describes this as "mammismo". The groundings of this phenomenon are the change of demography, since families in the era of the "Great Powers" used to be larger (four, five, six or more children), and child mortality was high, therefore families were more used to the idea of losing young members. Nowadays, however, families are smaller and every member receives a large share of emotional economy.

⁷ This point seems a bit confusing, if there was not a clear case of humanitarian crisis, why would anyone want to intervene advocating humanitarian reasons?

⁸ Kohut and Toth (1994: 57) find that public opinion tendencies towards intervention are fashioned in the following typology: interventionists, 31% of the public, those who would use force to protect oil as well as for humanitarian purposes; noninterventionists, 29% against both missions; U.S.-centrics, 19% who would use force to protect oil, but not for humanitarian aid; and one-worlders, 21%, who would use force for humanitarian aid only.

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