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# What Variables Affect the United States Decision on the Level of Involvement During an International Crisis?

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**What variables affect the United States decision on the level of involvement during  
an international crisis?**

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**BY**

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**Political Science**

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## **Introduction**

The question being researched is what variables can better explain the level of involvement by the United States in an international crisis? This research question will better explain why the United States decides to use military force in some international crises while in others, they are not involved in at all. Answering this question will help predict if the United States will use military force in future international crises. This research will also show the importance of domestic politics in decisions made on an international level. To test this question, there will be a set of variables used to compare case studies to see their effects on the decisions made on the level of involvement by the United States during international crises. These case studies are after the Cold War to show modern political decisions. Also, the Cold War created turmoil that led to the United States involvement in numerous international crises.

## **Theory**

To see exactly what affects my dependent variable, the level of the United States' involvement in international crises, I have listed five main independent variables that can influence the level of the intervention. These independent variables are alliances, democracy, the economy of the United States, public opinion, and other involvement from sovereign states and international organizations.

The type of political regime of a country can affect the United States' involvement in their international crisis because the United States supports democracies and the establishment of democracies. Because the United States supports democratic countries then they will resist the use of military force against those countries, whereas if the nation experiencing the international crisis is a non-democratic regime then the president would support stronger military action against this nation.

Scholars have come to an agreement that democracies do not fight each other. This means that during a time of an international crisis, the United States would not use military force against another democracy. The United States also supports democratization and the formation of new democracies. The United States would provide greater aid and military support for the side of the international crisis that is supporting the formation of a democratic government. Alesino and Dollar found that when a country was experiencing democratization, there was a 75% increase in aid (Alesino and Dollar 2000).

H1: If the state experiencing the international crisis has a non-democratic government, then the president of the United States will support stronger use of military force.

The economy of the United States can determine whether there is an increase for intervention during an international crisis. If the United States economy is poor, meaning high unemployment and low Gross Domestic Product, then the president is more likely to support military force in international crises. The economy can affect the decision of a president for the level of intervention because a successful foreign intervention can improve presidential approval ratings that were low from a bad economy.

When the economy is poor, then a president is more likely to intervene in international crises to deter the public's attention from the bad economy to a foreign military conflict. Scholars have labeled this theory the diversionary use of force theory. This means during poor economic times, a president is more likely to use force in a foreign nation to divert the general public from the current domestic policies in the United States. Leaders are blamed for failing economies and as a consequence those leaders are using military force abroad to distract the public from the declining economy (Brule and Williams 2009). Although most would agree that international

factors should influence a decision on international crises more than the economy of the United States, James and Oneal found that domestic politics are more influential than the international environment. They also found that a president's approval rating improves during wars and international conflicts (James and Oneal 1991). These leaders are not choosing a random international crisis to get involved in, but one that is more likely to be successful and therefore improve their ratings.

My hypothesis for the variable of the United States' economy and its correlation with international crises is stated below:

H2: When the economy of the United States is poor then the president is more likely to use military force in international crises.

Public opinion is a growing factor in the role of the United States during an international crisis and the level of intervention. If the public feels strongly toward the international crisis, then they can sway the actions by the president. The public's opinion can cause ratings of presidents to change drastically if they are not in favor of foreign policy so decisions must be carefully executed for a favorable opinion of the citizens.

Public opinion has become increasingly more important as a deciding factor for the level of intervention made. A president focuses more on the long-term public opinion versus the short-term opinion, especially during elections. Even if the current public opinion of the situation is low, if the long term outlook is positive then the president will likely engage more in the conflict. If the public is not engaged in the international crisis, then a failure or success would go unnoticed. A president also wants recognition for their foreign policy so they are more likely to make the public aware of international issues and the United States involvement to show their

foreign policy capabilities (Baum 2004). The public does not usually focus on foreign affairs unless the United States military is involved (Knecht and Weatherford 2006).

Based on previous studies and opinions of scholars, my hypothesis for the affect that public opinion has on the level of intervention by the United States during an international crises is:

H3: When public opinion is favorably about involvement in international crises, then the more likely the president will use military force during the international crisis.

Other involvement from foreign states and international organizations can also increase the likeliness of an intervention by the United States. Involvement from other organizations and states can decrease the risk involved in the intervention and lower the costs, therefore making the option of military force more favorable. The confidence of a successful intervention will increase when the actors who are involved are supporting the United States. If the majority of states support the United States and their level of intervention, then the United States will favor a higher level of intervention. The opinion from international actors would be more favorably if more actors were involved in the international crisis and in turn would increase the likeliness of military force. Also, alliances that the United States has formed with countries that are involved in the international crisis can influence the level of intervention during the conflict. These alliances can be with the state that is experiencing the international crisis or with states that are involved in the international crisis.

More states being involved increases the legitimacy of the intervention and greater likeliness for a successful outcome (Koehane and Martin 1995). More states and organizations supporting a side of the international crisis will increase financial and military support, increasing the chance of a successful intervention. States are more likely to engage in international military disputes if

they have an alliance with an actor involved in the conflict. Alliances have different goals, from deterring military action or to support allies during international crises (Leeds 2003). This means that the United States will support their alliances by either engaging in a military conflict, enforce their diplomatic suggestions, or provide financial assistance.

H4: If more actors are involved in the international crises then the president is more likely to support military intervention during the conflict.

H5: If the United States has an alliance with an actor that is involved in the international crises, then the president is more likely to use military support during the conflict.

### **Case Studies**

To test the hypotheses, there is a comparison between two case studies: Libya and Syria. These cases have been chosen because they are both under President Obama. After the Cold War, there have only been three presidents to examine. I have not selected a case under President Bush because the War on Terrorism was the focus of his foreign relations and did not get involved in any other crises. Having both cases under one president allows me to focus on the variables of the environment during the international crisis instead of the politics of different presidents, which is why I did not include a case from the Clinton Administration. I have also selected these cases because of their importance during Obama's presidency. They have been the only two significant international crises made by the United States since Obama has been president.

First, I will give each case study a numerical value based on the ICB data of level of involvement from 1 to 4. The lowest level of 1 represents no U.S. involvement at all. The number 2 indicated low U.S. involvement, meaning financial aid or official approval or

disapproval of the conflict. The value 3 represents semi-military involvement by the United States. This means that the United States is supporting military efforts by opposition groups or the government by training and providing assistance to their troops without direct military involvement by United States soldiers. The final level is the value of 4, meaning direct United States military involvement. This means troops on the ground in the location of the international crisis or aerial bombings made by the United States military.

To show how each variable has changed, there are measurements for each variable and I will assign a value to each case study. For my first variable, the type of political regime, I will use the levels provided from the Freedom House scale. Based on this scale, each country is assigned a numerical value from 1 to 7. 1 indicates the highest level of freedom and 7 is the lowest level of freedom. For my second variable, the economy of the United States, I will be looking at the quarterly GDP data for the United States during the quarter of initial involvement in the international crisis. My third variable, public opinion, I will be using the Gallup poll to see what the public approval rating was of that particular conflict. For my fourth variable of involvement from other international actors, I will be looking at the number of countries and international organizations involved in the conflict. For my fifth variable of alliances, I will be looking for any alliances the country experiencing the conflict has with international organizations or with the United States.

### Libya

In February of 2011 in the midst of the Arab Spring, Libyans began protesting against their current leader Muammar Gaddafi. Rebels who opposed the current government formed a military and began fighting Gaddafi's forces to take control over the country under the umbrella



organization, National Transitional Council. The United Nations issued a statement calling for international support to help the Libyans and passed a resolution to create a no-fly zone. NATO began launching bombs on Libya on March 19 and coordinated operations on the ground. On October 20, Gaddafi was violently killed without a formal trial (Estep 2013).

For the United States, the Obama Administration decided to help aid the opposition rebels against the Gaddafi regime through limited air and missile strikes. They also helped the United Nations and NATO by enforcing the no-fly zone. Although there were no United States troops on the ground in Libya, they supported the military forces of the rebels by placing warships off Libya to conduct airstrikes on the Libyan air defenses, resupplying munitions, provided JSTARS surveillance aircraft to spy on Gaddafi's military, and helping administer strategic airstrikes and attack routes. Based on the ICB data on international crises and the level of involvement by the United States, the value of 4 is given to the United States involvement in Libya. The value 4 is the highest level of involvement in international crises. Although there were no troops on the ground in Libya, the United States military was actively involved in the conflict by provided air forces to conduct strikes against Gaddafi forces and providing navel assistance to launch airstrikes on targets (Barry 2011).

The first variable to look at in Libya to better explain the United States' level of intervention is their political regime before the uprisings and the level of freedom that individuals experienced. Under the measurements by the Freedom House, Libya is ranked 7 for political rights and a 7 for civil liberties. These rankings of 7 indicate the Libya falls under the category of least free. These rankings were given because Libyans lack political rights because of the severe government oppression and virtually have no civil liberties.

The second variable, the economy of the United States, I will look at the quarterly GDP of the United States during the months in which the United States was involved in the Libyan conflict. During the first quarter of 2011 when the Libyan uprisings began, the United States experienced a decline in the GDP growth rate by 1.3%. This was the only decline during 2011 and the first decline of the GDP growth rate since 2009 (U.S. Bureau of Economics 2013).

The third variable, the public opinion, I will be looking at Gallup polls taken that shows the approval ratings of American citizens of the conflict in Libya and the United States involvement. A Gallup poll taken in March of 2011, shortly after the Libyan conflict began, the public of the United States favored military action in Libya. 47% of respondents approved of the Libyan military action, 37% disapproved, and 16% had no opinion (Jackson 2011).

The fourth variable is other involvement by international actors. I have researched involvement by states, international organizations, and military alliances. Quickly after the Libyan conflict began, the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution creating a no-fly zone over Libya and also called on the international community to protect the Libyan people. In March of 2011, NATO allies began enforcing an arms embargo, maintaining a no-fly zone, and protecting civilians from attack in Libya under Operation Unified Protector. Many partner nations of NATO supported their efforts; these nations included Sweden, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and Morocco. On an individual state level, France and Great Britain, along with the United States, were major actors in supporting military efforts in Libya. France was one of the main promoters of UN Security Council resolution 1973 and the French were the first to send aircrafts to operate over Libya in March of 2011. Great Britain sent submarines, ships, and aircrafts to support the opposition efforts to topple to Gaddafi regime. Along with the United

States, France, and Great Britain, five more nations offered military support. These nations were Canada, Italy, Spain, Belgium, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (BBC News 2011).

An alliance is the fifth variable that is used to explain the United States involvement in Libya and other international crises. This looks at any alliances that the United States has with actors involved in the conflict. The United States is a member of the United Nations Security Council and supported the efforts of creating a no-fly zone and aiding rebel forces against Gaddafi. The United States is also a member of NATO which pledged to enforce the no-fly zone and provide military support to rebel forces (North Atlantic Treaty Organization).

### Syria

The Syrian conflict began in March 2011 as an uprising from anti-government protestors who opposed of the Assad regime. The uprisings gained momentum and became a bloody conflict in 2012 when the government began cracking down on demonstrators. The violence has only escalated into mass killings, bombs, and alleged chemical weapons. Along with rebel fighters, thousands of civilians have died in the clashed between the government and the opposition group. The international community is divided on the issue. The United Nations Security Council tried to pass a resolution that would create a political transition but it was vetoed by Russia and China. The General Assembly and Human Rights Council have both passed strong resolutions on Syria to investigate any human rights violations made by Syria (Human Rights Watch 2013).

The Syrian conflict is still unfolding, but the United States has pledged to use only limited military support against the Assad regime. After the accusations that the Assad regime used chemical weapons against his citizens, the Obama Administration stated that the United States

cannot ignore these human rights violations and use missile attacks to weaken the government forces. After large opposition by Congress and disapproval from the citizens of the United States, President Obama delayed any airstrikes made by the United States. Currently, the United States military is training opposition groups to help them against the government forces (Klare 2013).

Based on the level of intervention made by the United States, the ICB data would give the value of 2, which means the involvement by the United States was very low. These activities include official support for opposition groups and financial aid. The United States in Syria receives this level of intervention because the Obama Administration has officially condoned Bashar al-Assad and said that the United States supports the opposition groups.

To better explain the decisions made the Obama Administration, I will look at the effects of my five variables in leading to this level of intervention. The first variable examined is the political regime of Syria and the level of freedom and civil liberties possessed by citizens. Based on the Freedom House data on freedom and civil liberties, they give Syria a score of 7 for political rights and 7 for civil liberties. This is the lowest score possible in rating the level of freedom. This means that citizens of Syria have no political rights and limited civil liberties.

The second variable, the economy of the United States during the conflict, can be examined by the quarterly GDP growth rate. The GDP growth rate during Quarter 2 of 2012 was an increase of 3.7% (U.S. Bureau of Economics 2013).

The third variable, public opinion, was an important decision in the level of intervention made by the United States. A Gallup poll taken in September of 2013 found that 36% of Americans favored military action in Syria, 51% opposed it, and 13% had no opinion. This poll found that

the public opinion was at its lowest ever for any intervention that Gallup conducted in the past 20 years (Dugan 2013).

The fourth variable is involvement by other international actors. The United Nations tried multiple times to pass resolutions to create a transition to a new political regime and to condone the use of chemical weapons, but was consistently vetoed by Russia and China. France and Great Britain have joined the United States in trying to draft a resolution that can be agreed on by Russia and China that protects the human rights of citizens in Syria. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Qatar have all publicly stated that they support opposition groups and agreed with the United States that there needs to be an international response and would support an American airstrike. Hezbollah in Lebanon has been a main contributor to the Assad regime and has sent some of their troops to assist in the efforts against the opposition forces. Iran has also supported the Syrian government and Assad. Officials in Iran stated that any military action made by the international community would lead to serious consequences (BBC News 2013).

The fifth variable is alliances of the United States and their involvement in the Syrian conflict. The United Nations has attempted to pass resolutions to support the efforts of the Syrian rebels but these resolutions have been vetoed. NATO has remained out of Syria but supports their member, Turkey, in protecting their borders from attacks by Syria. They have also stated that there should be an international response to the accusations of chemical weapons and have shown support for opposition groups (LaFranchi 2013).

## **Conclusion**

The level of involvement in Libya and Syria were greatly different, especially because they were both under the presidency of Obama and in the same region of the world. In the case of

Libya, the level of involvement was direct military support from the United States. The United States deployed aircrafts and naval ships to conduct airstrikes against the government forces. In Syria, the United States initially stated that they would provide limited military support to rebel forces but the level of involvement is still debated. Currently, the United States has verbally supported the Syrian opposition and has promoted international resolutions but have not sent any direct military to aid the efforts. Below is a table to show the comparison of variables between both Syria and Libya.

	Libya	Syria
Level of Involvement	4	2
Political Regime	7, least free	7, least free
Economy	-1.3%	+3.7%
Public Opinion	47% Approval Rating	36% Approval Rating
International Involvement	Strong International Involvement	Weak International Involvement
Alliances	UN and NATO Support	No official UN or NATO Support

Based on the table above, the United States was more involved in Libya than Syria. This can be explained through the variables and how those affected the decision. First is the variable of the level of political regime. Both Libya and Syria received ratings of 7 on the Freedom House data on political freedoms and civil liberties. The United States would not support any military action in a democratic state, but since these nations are both extremely un-democratic and corrupt then it would lead to an increase in support for military action. This is true in the case of Libya, but did not affect the level of involvement in Syria. This leads to the conclusion that the political regime slightly affects the level of involvement by the United States. Based on these

results, H1: if the state experiencing the international crisis has a non-democratic government, then the president of the United States will support stronger use of military force, is inaccurate. Although the United States does not support military action in democratic nations, the lower the level of political rights and civil liberties does not lead to an increase in support for military action by the United States.

Second, variable two is the economy of the United States during the times of conflict. Libya and Syria occurred during a similar time frame, so the quarterly GDP growth rate was used to look more closely at the economy during those crises. During the first quarter of 2011 when the Libya conflict began and the United States was deciding their action, the GDP growth rate decline by 1.3%. With the economy on a downward slope, this would lead to an increase in support for military action to distract citizens from the poor economy. In the case of Syria, the GDP growth rate during the second quarter of 2012 increased by 3.7%. With the economy improving, President Obama did not need a distraction from domestic politics. This supports hypothesis 2 which states when the economy of the United States is poor then the president is more likely to use military force in international crises.

The third variable is public opinion that looked at the approval rating of military action in Libya and Syria. A Gallup poll was released that found that 47% of the public surveyed approve of military action in Libya right after the conflict began in February of 2011. The public's opinion was much lower in the case of Syria. A Gallup poll conducted a survey of the American public in September of 2013 found that only 36% of the respondents approved of military action in Syria. Along with the 11% difference in approval rating between Libya and Syria, the poll approval rating was the lowest ever for an international crisis. Based on these results, hypothesis 3 is accurate. Hypothesis 3 states when public opinion is favorably about involvement in

international crises, then the more likely the president will use military force during the international crisis.

The fourth variable to compare is involvement by other international actors and the international support for military action. In the case of Libya, there was near consensus among the international community to create a no-fly zone and support the opposition groups against Gaddafi. The UN and NATO both supported opposition efforts. There was much disagreement amongst the international community in Syria. While many United States allies supported resolutions to prevent Assad from using chemical weapons against his citizens, countries like Russia and China refused to pass the resolution. Many nations supported diplomatic actions in Syria but were divided on the use of military force. These results leads to the conclusion that hypothesis 4, if more actors are involved in the international crises then the president is more likely to support military intervention during the conflict, is accurate.

Finally, the fifth variable to compare between case studies is alliances. This variable looked at alliances that the United States has with the country experiencing the international crisis and how their international alliances were involved in the conflict. In Libya, the UN and NATO were both actively involved in enforcing the no-fly zone and aiding opposition efforts. In Syria, neither the UN nor NATO used military force but only stated that an international response to crisis is necessary. The UN attempted to pass a resolution but it was vetoed by Russia and China. This leads to the final hypothesis, and that hypothesis 5, if the United States has an alliance with an actor that is involved in the international crises, then the president is more likely to use military support during the conflict, is proven accurate.



Overall, hypothesis 2, 3, 4, and 5 were accurate. These variables contributed to the different level of involvement of the United States during these international crises. To improve hypothesis 1, it would be beneficial to create more values on the scale to see how different the political regimes in both Syria and Libya are. Further research is needed to expand the data. More case studies and more in depth analysis of the variables will improve the accuracy of the data.

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