Geography and the Limits of US Military Intervention

by
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INTRODUCTION

As the Cold War recedes into the pages of history, American military planners are redefining the missions of the various branches of the US defense establishment. The traditional focus on fighting the Soviet Union primarily in Europe is slowly being transformed into a focus on Third World conflicts. Each military branch contends that it is peculiarly well-suited to deal with low-intensity and mid-intensity contingencies around the globe. And each branch emphasizes its own versatility and global reach.[1] Confidence in the global reach of the US military may be much enhanced by the swiftness of victory in the recent Gulf War.

The new strategic focus on Third World conflicts and the concomitant budget debate frequently address two desires. One desire is for the United States to be able to intervene *anywhere* around the globe, wherever flashpoints exist. For example, "global power, global reach" is the shibboleth of Donald Rice, Secretary of the Air Force.[2] The other desire is to be able to fight any kind of a war, irregular or conventional, under any circumstances. These strategic and budgetary arguments assume that if American forces were properly equipped and if the political circumstances were right, then the United States *could* successfully intervene anywhere in any kind of war. But this assumption is belied by the pattern of US military interventions since the Second World War.

The ability of the United States to intervene militarily around the world is constrained by geography. Despite airpower, missiles, and nuclear weapons, the world's physical and political geographic configuration prevents the United States from having a military capability equal to its technological prowess or military largesse. Thus, the aim of this article is fourfold:

- to show that geographical **access** to a target area is a key predictor of US military intervention;
- to show that the geographical **isolation** of a target area is a key predictor of the success or failure of US military interventions;
- to suggest that, as a target area enlarges, military force becomes less feasible;
- to suggest generally that students of foreign policy and national security would do well to refocus on geography as an essential element of analysis, prediction, and policy recommendation.

This article does not suggest that geography is by any means the sole determinant of US military interventions, nor even the primary determinant. No doubt many variables affect the capacity to intervene: domestic political factors,

moral and legal restraints, military force structure, training, the importance of the target area, and the interest and possible reaction of other nations.[3] But geography is less changeable a factor than all these others and the salience of geographical features has changed little in the past forty years. Geography has a strong and independent influence on the United States' capacity to intervene and other variables cannot nullify the constraints of geographic realities.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL THESIS REVISITED

At the turn of the century the study of geography was central to politico-military strategists. A.T. Mahan, for example, not only extolled the value of a navy, but found that the determinants of national power lay in the physical environment. Of the six "principal conditions affecting the seapower of nations" — and of course seapower was the crux of national power — four of these came under the rubric of geography, i.e. "Geographical Position, Physical Conformation including as connected therewith natural productions and climate, Extent of Territory," and "Number of Population."[4] Even his last two determinants, "National Character" and the "Character of Governments" were important only because they might make the most of a country's geographical assets.[5]

Mahan was revered as a prophet in his own time but that time passed quickly. For one, the nature of the Great War suggested to many people that seapower had been overemphasized and too much money had been squandered on naval armaments considering that the World War had been fought and won by great armies on the continent.[6] In any case, technological advances of many kinds would soon turn the attention of politico-military strategists to new dimensions of warfare and new aspects of national power.

Mahan's case for seapower and the geographical determinants of national power had also been undermined by a rival prophet of geographical influences on power. Halford Mackinder asserted that strategists had "been in the habit of thinking that mobility by sea far outran mobility on the land."[7] The development and potential development of vast networks of railways on the European continent, he wrote, would redefine the importance of geographical features. In classic strategical terms, Mackinder was implying that the sea would no longer be the most efficient medium on which a country, like Britain or the United States, could establish "secure interior lines of communication"; that railroads would serve just as well, if not better, to provide secure, interior lines and have the added benefit of facilitating the economic development of vast hinterlands previously unexploited. Germany's masterful use of railways in the Great War provided evidence for Mackinder's devotees.

But just as the railway was a technological advance which altered the salience of geographical features (and Mahan's thesis), the advent of airpower appeared to make all previous calculations irrelevant. If the Blue Water school had its Mahan, and the continentalist school had Mackinder, a new group of air officers found their strategic prophet in Giulio Douhet.

Airpower suddenly and greatly reduced the resistance and time to travel between cities. Mobility in the skies now greatly outran both mobility on the

seas and on the land. Planes could cross the Channel, traverse a country, fly over great mountains, even seas, to drop their deadly loads. As Bernard Brodie summarized:

> The Air Force properly used would bring about the disorganization and collapse of enemy armies and navies — if the enemy homeland did not collapse first — and that was all there was to it.[8]

The second World War demonstrated that that was not all there was to it. But then, on the gleaming wings of science, came the explosive power of the atom. Thus, the ability to wreak unprecedented destruction with a handful of bombs easily delivered to their targets by plane or missile became for some the single determinant of national power.

With the apparent horror of nuclear war and simplicity of nuclear stalemate there were many other dimensions of national power which caught the attention of students of politico-military affairs. There were the complicated questions of economics, a fascination with psychology and personality, there were sociological influences to consider, decision-making theories, organizational studies, and much more.

Recently, the official end of the Cold War and the Iraqi conquest of Kuwait seem to have refocused attention on the prospect of small or limited wars fought in distant places outside of Europe with conventional forces. Indeed, much of the politico-military debate in the autumn of 1990 over the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait dwelt on the importance of geographical constraints, especially those of terrain and climate. We might now return to the study of geography, not as the primary determinant of foreign policy options or of national power, but as an essential dimension of politico-military strategy. The argument below shows that geographical access to and isolation of a target area are prerequisites for and key predictors of United States' military interventions and their success.

ACCESS: THE GEOGRAPHICAL KEY TO INTERVENTION

The first geographical dimension underlying US military intervention is access. Physical access to a crisis or target area is a key predictor of American military interventions. The geographical constraints on US military interventions due to access or lack of it become apparent when we compare crises to which the United States has responded with military force since 1950 to crises where the United States has not responded with military force (see Table 1).[9]

Intervention, we know, can be a difficult concept to define because there are so many types and fine lines.[10] However, we can enumerate the *direct* military interventions of the United States in the past forty years taking only those where regular combat troops, naval vessels, or combat aircraft were placed in direct confrontation to hostile forces in a target area. There have been at least fourteen such cases in the past forty years, leaving aside for the moment the reconquest of Kuwait which will be treated separately as a case study (see Table 1, column A).

Cases of non-intervention or cases where military force was contemplated or even threatened but not exercised are difficult to enumerate. We can, however, see the non-use of military force as the residual category of direct military intervention. In Table 1, column B are listed a sampling of crises where direct military intervention did not occur. A difference in the geographical characteristics of the target areas becomes immediately apparent.

With only one exception among the cases where direct military intervention occurred, the target areas were easily accessible to US armed forces, primarily by sea or sea-based aircraft. Of these fourteen cases, six are islands, one a peninsula and one an isthmus, four are coastal states and one involved naval action in international waters. In thirteen of the fourteen cases, American naval forces could position themselves unimpeded near the objective. In two cases, Panama and the Philippines, the intervening forces were stationed inside the country. The only case of military intervention in an area not easily accessible to American armed forces is the rescue mission to Tehran. This case of the Iranian rescue mission is also instructive, however, and is further discussed below.

On the other hand, if we examine crises where the United States chose not to intervene directly with military forces, we discover that many of the crisis areas have a range of uninviting geographic characteristics (see Table 1, column B). A number of these target areas are significantly inland and essentially inaccessible to sea-borne forces.

Among these fifteen cases of non-intervention, six occurred in Eastern Europe, well behind what was then known as the Iron Curtain. Two other crises occurred in landlocked regions: Afghanistan and Laos. In fact, Afghanistan was not only landlocked, but too mountainous and too close to Soviet borders.[11] The case of landlocked Laos is problematic but nonetheless informative. Laos was too close to China and its topography inhospitable above the Mekong river plains. Although President Kennedy sent naval forces into the Gulf of Siam, and 2,800 troops to the Siamese border with Laos, they were ostensibly to protect the territorial integrity of Siam. Siam is certainly accessible. But if the troops were sent to engage the Pathet Lao or cross the border, they did not do so. In fact, they remained some thirty miles from the border. Laos is not easily accessible.[12]

In the case of Ethiopia, the wars in the Ogaden region took place in burning desert hundreds of miles from the Indian Ocean. And although Colombia and Peru have long coastlines and could be reached easily by airlift, the drug producing regions are far inland over high mountains and under cover of thick jungle. Thus, in only four of the fifteen cases of non-intervention was the target area accessible.

The skeptic might make two objections. The first would be that the United States refrained from the use of military force for reasons other than geographical inaccessibility; for example, in Afghanistan. This may be true. And in some of these cases, the United States seriously considered or threatened direct military action. We cannot say that geographic inaccessibility caused it to refrain from direct military intervention. Neither can we know whether the United States would have carried out its threats or whether it would have been

able to do so. We know only that no direct military intervention occurred and that geographic inaccessibility is a correlate of non-intervention.

The other objection might be that the United States refrained from direct military intervention even when the target area was clearly accessible. This is also true. Other important considerations certainly influenced decisions to intervene with military force or to refrain from direct intervention. For example, Nicaragua and Angola have long littorals and are clearly accessible to amphibious and airborne forces. In fact, the accessibility of Nicaragua to US military forces was proved sixty years ago. In addition, Guatemala was within easy range of American bombers stationed in Panama, and Cuba is only ninety miles from Florida. In these four cases, political factors rather than geographic ones explain the decisions not to intervene directly.[13]

Non-geographic explanations, however, do not undermine the geographic thesis presented here. Geographic accessibility is not a sufficient reason to intervene, but it is almost a necessary one.

ISOLATION: THE GEOGRAPHICAL KEY TO SUCCESS AND FAILURE

Another way to demonstrate the geographical constraints of intervention is to compare successful interventions to failed ones.[14] Here the cases reveal another striking divergence and point to *isolation* of the target area as a key predictor of success or failure.

Of the eleven cases that can be considered successful (see Table 2, column A), six are islands, one is a peninsula, one is an isthmus and one was completely confined to action on the seas. In ten of these eleven cases of successful intervention, the target area was not only easily *accessible* but was also *easily isolated*. That is to say that, in every case but one, the conflict could be truly limited because the opposing forces were unable or unwilling to expand the scope or intensity of their actions. On the other hand, in all three cases of failed military intervention, the target areas were either not isolated or not accessible (see Table 2, column B). But let us look first at the cases of successful military intervention.

Among the interventions considered successful, the target areas were not merely accessible but so easily accessible as to be isolatable. In seven of the eleven cases, US naval forces could position themselves with minimal opposition and risk next to or surrounding the target area. In an eighth case, the Philippines (1989), naval forces were on hand but were not needed. In other cases, the risk to naval forces was higher but still not unfavorable. In Cuba (1962), American naval forces squared off against Soviet naval vessels but had them clearly outgunned and outnumbered. Only in the Persian Gulf action (1987-88) and the *Mayaguez* rescue mission (1975) did the US navy face openly hostile opposition. Thus, these eleven target areas were not only easily accessible to US military force, particularly naval forces, but they were also easily isolated. And this is the key factor. Whether on an island, isthmus, or peninsula, enemy forces were surrounded.

These observations corroborate the advice of Julian Corbett, historian and strategist, who warned at the turn of the century that limited wars by a maritime power should only be conducted where the battlefield can be isolated.[15] Corbett synthesized and refined the principles of Clausewitz and Jomini and extended their continentalist theories and maxims to apply to a maritime empire such as Britain. Using the vocabulary of Clausewitz, Corbett concluded:

> To satisfy the full conception of a limited object, one of two conditions is essential. Firstly, it must be not merely limited in area, but of really limited political importance; and secondly, it must be so situated as to be capable of being reduced to practical isolation by strategical operations.[16]

One might express skepticism at this point that in all the successful cases the target area was easily isolated. Lebanon, for example, appears first among the cases of successful intervention (1958), and then among the unsuccessful cases (1983). In 1958, however, the American landing was unopposed and a peaceful solution to the crisis was reached in the United Nations. In 1982-84, intervention in the same region was disastrous. But in 1982-84 the political object of the mission was, at best, vaguely defined and vaguely redefined.[17] The "object" in 1983 was not "reduced to practical isolation by strategical operations" perhaps because the object was not clear.[18] Isolation is not merely a matter of physical geography but of strategy and tactics. Contrast the case of Lebanon (1983) to that of Libya (1985).

Libya, like Lebanon, is a coastal state, but unlike Lebanon, Libya could be reduced to practical isolation in 1985. The United States landed no troops, only attacking with a combination of carrier and land-based aircraft. The US fleet in the Gulf of Sidra was virtually unopposed. The speed and surprise of the American attack meant that Libya's opportunity to respond was limited. And Libya's ability to retaliate or defend itself was further limited by preliminary attacks on radar systems. Further, there was no third power which could or would respond for the Libyans. The hit-and-run American attack against a vastly inferior military power within miles of a coast isolated the field of battle. Corbett would agree:

> the use of this [limited] form of war presupposed that we are able by superior readiness or mobility or by being more conveniently situated to establish ourselves in the territorial object before our opponent can gather strength to prevent us.[19]

One might also object that in the case of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the conflict was limited less by the geographical situation than by diplomacy and the specter of nuclear catastrophe. But here the geographical situation was inseparable from other considerations. The United States would have had every advantage in a limited conventional war and the US navy successfully imposed a blockade and was poised to launch air attacks. The question was whether the Soviets would choose to expand the scope of this confrontation by retaliating elsewhere in the world or by using nuclear weapons. Because they chose to do

neither, Cuba remained isolated, the confrontation remained limited, and the United States prevailed.

On the other hand, lack of success (see figure 2, column B) is partly, if not primarily, attributable to the obverse of the same geographical factors: accessibility and isolation. In the three cases of unsuccessful intervention, geography inhibited the military operations of the United States.

In the first case, Vietnam's generous coastline invited all the traditional naval supports: large scale resupply, amphibious operations, tactical air strikes, interdiction, and even harbor mining. But a fundamental geographic disadvantage was never overcome: South Vietnam was equally accessible to the enemy through a thousand miles of land borders with Cambodia, Laos, and North Vietnam. North Vietnam exploited this feature to fullest advantage. Moreoever, the tropical topography of the inland areas often minimized the effects of the United States' technological and quantitative advantages in airpower and artillery. As long as the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos and Cambodia was intact and as long as enemy units could take refuge in the notorious Parrot's Beak, the allied resistance could be outflanked.[20] In short, Vietnam was easily accessible but the field of battle was never isolated.[21]

As for the Iranian rescue mission of 1980, a different geographical problem contributed to the failure of the effort. While Iran is accessible by sea, Tehran was not. Tehran is over four hundred miles from the Persian Gulf and, at that time, no admiral would risk bringing a carrier group into that body of water. In this case, the target area was almost a thousand miles from the US fleet in the Arabian Sea. "People and equipment were . . . called upon to perform at extreme limits of ability where there was little margin to compensate for mistakes or ill fortune," wrote one chronicler.[22] The logistical difficulties of this air-sea operation were, at root, due to the enormous distance the would-be American rescuers had to traverse.

But just as geography was not the only determinant of the use or non-use of military force, in none of these cases of intervention was geography the sole guarantor of success or failure. Different political or technological factors might have turned successful interventions into unsuccessful ones or failures into success. Nonetheless, access and isolation are geographical factors which have great explanatory power for US interventions. Access is a key predictor of intervention and isolation a key predictor of success.

GEOGRAPHY, ACCESS, AND ISOLATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST 1990-91

The Persian Gulf crisis which began in August 1990 and ended in a direct US-led military intervention can now be examined apart from other cases to test the applicability of the propositions presented above. The crisis can also serve to remind us of the geographical sources of international politics.

The debates in the US which took place throughout the fall of 1990 showed the importance of geography, and all that geographic circumstances imply, as the United States considered its responses to Iraq's invasion and

annexation of Kuwait. Indeed, many people would agree that the fundamental issue underlying the Iraqi aggression was the control of oil — or, at least, remedying Iraq's debt problem by controlling more oil. This, by itself, is fundamentally a geographical phenomenon since natural resources, their location, salience, distribution, and transportation are all functions of the physical world which sustains and limits us. And, even beyond the issue of oil, the genesis of the crisis is a lesson in geography — from the long disputed borders of Iraq and Kuwait, to the way those borders evolved over the centuries, to Saddam Hussein's goal of gaining unrestricted access to Gulf waters long hindered by Kuwaiti control of two tiny islands at the mouth of the Shatt-al-Arab.[23]

The speed and surprise of the Iraqi invasion and the strong reaction by the United States was another lesson in geographic influences. Iraq's President Hussein was able to build up his forces rapidly on the Kuwaiti border and complete his invasion just as quickly because his access to Kuwait was unhindered given Kuwait's relative position and size. By the same token, Hussein's early, unqualified success strongly suggested to the United States and Saudi Arabia that he might just as quickly move down the coast over smooth terrain, into neighboring, virtually empty, and lightly defended oil producing regions of the Arabian peninsula. Hence, the advantage of access, which Hussein exploited fully in his invasion of Kuwait, also represented a profound threat to Saudi Arabia and engendered a strong response.

Just as important, however, as Iraq's proximity to Kuwait and the Saudi oil fields was the enormous distance the United States would have to traverse in order to respond with direct military force. American logistics and transport proved to be an enormous and complex task and distance and relative position were complicated by inhospitable climate. Computer components melted in the heat. Soldiers suffered heat exhaustion. Sandstorms made helicopter maneuvers dangerous and the fine desert sand wore out tank and aircraft parts faster than anticipated. Further, the extreme temperatures might have made a summertime offensive infeasible, especially if soldiers were expected to wear stifling chemical warfare suits.[24] It is not difficult to imagine how Hussein might have calculated that distance and terrain would insulate his armies in Kuwait against any military intervention by the United States.

If indeed Hussein concluded that he was beyond the reach of the US military, he may not have been far wrong. Kuwait has a littoral of only a hundred miles and is tucked away in the northeast corner of the Gulf where it is difficult and dangerous to assemble a sizeable flotilla and landing force. If forced to, the Iraqi army could have concentrated its defense entirely on the seacoast, making an American assault there potentially very bloody if not completely impracticable. But among the many things Hussein may not have counted on was that the United States would gain access to Kuwait and to the Iraqi Republican Guard through Saudi Arabia as well as through the Gulf. The liberation of Kuwait, in fact, depended upon the Saudis granting access through Saudi territory and Saudi airbases.[25] Already in place were ample port facilities and, in northern Saudi Arabia, a series of airfields along the pipeline and the border with Iraq.

And since this region had a negligible population, the potentially destabilizing buildup of Western troops could be kept well away from the traditionalist Saudi citizenry. Thus, access to Kuwait could be had from three sides: the Gulf, Saudi Arabia, and from southeastern Iraq once troops pushed over the borders of Saudi Arabia into Iraq.

The first attempts to isolate Iraq and Kuwait began in August 1990 with the exhortation to impose an international embargo of all trade with Iraq. The diplomatic, political, economic, and military isolation of the target area depended upon the actual geographic isolation of Iraq by gaining at least the tacit cooperation of Iraq's many neighbors. Normally this would be a daunting task. But Iraq was mortally threatening her southern neighbor, had fought a decade long war against her eastern neighbor, was hemmed by a NATO member to the north and had carried on a long feud with one of her neighbors to the west. The Syrian Desert separated Iraq from its only supportive neighbor. Jordan, in turn, was isolated by her own peculiar geography. The strategic isolation of the target area was complete.

The isolation of Kuwait and the Iraqi army for the allied military offensive was then a matter of deployment and operational plans. Forces were deployed to the south and the southwest of Kuwait. A flotilla was in fact assembled in the Arabian Gulf and later in the Persian Gulf, and amphibious landings were practiced. The attempt to surround, cut off, and isolate the Iraqi army was preceded by devastating air strikes, not only from carriers but, more importantly, from airfields in Saudi Arabia. Superior airpower kept the Iraqi air force impotent and destroyed dozens of the missile launchers which might otherwise have allowed Iraq to expand the scope of the war into Saudi Arabia. Later, the air strikes destroyed armored battalions, hindered troop movements, cut off supplies to the Iraqi troops, including food and water, and left tens of thousands dead in their trenches. Access made possible the large scale intervention. Strategic and tactical isolation of the battlefield made possible a speedy military victory and minimal allied casualties.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Policy-makers may not always or may not explicitly take geographical parameters into account in a crisis, but such considerations are likely to be offered by military leaders who are charged with evaluating military options for civilian leaders. Calculations of the likely success of US military options must take into account geographical factors because, despite a tremendous reach and arsenal of modern weapons, the United States' capacity to intervene is constrained by geography.

The ill-fated Iranian rescue mission offers one example of how geographic factors carry great weight in determining the success of intervention but can be underestimated by planners. When the rescue mission was first contemplated, Pentagon planners were not optimistic.[26] Tehran was simply too far from any base or open sea and the hostages were inside a guarded compound in the middle of a major urban area nine miles from an airport. Once the plans

were made, however, and special forces had been trained, those who were familiar with the plans came to believe they would work. Only Secretary of State Vance continued to raise objections based on the improbability of entering Iran undetected, covering the enormous distance to and from Tehran without mishaps, and extracting the hostages from their compound unharmed. The inherent risks of the plans were eventually obscured by the enthusiasm of the planners and the anxiousness of policy-makers to carry it through.[27]

The decision not to follow suggestions to intervene in Colombia or Peru in 1989 is, on the other hand, an example of those geographical considerations that may carry great weight in defense planning circles. In this case Pentagon planners objected to military intervention because targets would be difficult to identify, troops would be difficult to resupply, and the area was simply too large and too remote to allow for effective action by American forces unfamiliar with the terrain and unwelcome among the local populace.[28]

Clearly, policy-makers will take into account many other variables before they decide whether to intervene and how. And once intervention is underway, the options will change. But geography is a near-immutable and independent variable which should allow us to grasp our capabilities and limitations in short order. Thus, we can offer a typology of American military responses to crises based on geography.

Table 3 presents a typology of the maximum feasible military force given just one variable: the geographical disposition of the target. In any given category less force could be used than indicated, but more force, while not impossible, will be improbable, perhaps imprudent, and certainly costly. The typology is meant to apply only to the United States with its vast arsenal, huge navy, and extensive network of airbases and allies around the world. The typology would only apply to limited, conventional conflicts. The lesson is that as the target area enlarges and is less disposed to isolation by the interventionist forces, military force is less feasible.

CONCLUSION

We have attempted to show in this study that two geographic variables, access and isolation, can serve analysts for the purposes of prediction and explanation and can serve policy-makers as a frame of reference for US military interventions. Clearly, these two variables are not of themselves either deterministic or all-encompassing. Students of US security policy can surely find many reasons, aside from geographical ones, for US military intervention in some crises and not in others. And where American military operations success or fail, there are many important lessons to draw aside from geographical ones. Yet, it is perhaps remarkable how much geographical variables can explain. We are, after all, creatures of space and time and geography is a ubiquitous factor which must affect all military interventions (and non-interventions) offering both constraints and advantages.

TABLE 1

The Geographical Dichotomy of Intervention

A. **Use of Military Force**	(*)	B. **Non-use of Military Force**	(*)
Korea 1950-53	(2)	Communization of Poland, Romania and Bulgaria 1946	(5)
Quemoy and Matsu 1958	(1)	Berlin Blockade 1948	(4)
Lebanon 1958	(3)	Guatemala 1954	(3)
Cuba 1962	(1)	Hungarian Revolt 1956	(4)
Vietnam 1963-73	(3)	Cuba 1960, 1961	(1)
Dominican Rep. 1965	(1)	Berlin Wall 1961	(4)
Mayaguez 1975	(1)	Laos 1962	(5)
Iran 1980	(4)	Czech Revolt 1968	(5)
Lebanon 1982-84	(3)	Polish Revolt 1968	(5)
Grenada 1984	(1)	Arab-Israeli War 1973	(5)
Libya 1986	(3)	Ethiopia-Somalia 1973	(5)
Persian Gulf 1987-88	(0)	Angola 1974	(3)
Philippines 1989	(1)	Nicaragua 1979-88	(3)
Panama 1989	(2)	Afghanistan 1979-88	(5)
[Persian Gulf War 1990-91	(3)]	Colombia/Peru 1989	(5)

Notes:

(*) Geographical Character of Target Area:

0 = High Seas
1 = Island
2 = Peninsula or Isthmus
3 = Littoral
4 = Small Inland Area
5 = Large Inland Area

TABLE 2

Geographical Dichotomy of Success and Failure

A. **Successful Operations**	B. **Unsuccessful Operations**
1. Korea 1950-53	1. Vietnam 1963-73
2. Quemoy and Matsu 1958	2. Iran 1980
3. Lebanon 1958	3. Lebanon 1983-84
4. Cuba 1962	
5. Dominican Republic 1965	
6. *Mayaguez* 1975	
7. Grenada 1984	
8. Libya 1986	
9. Persian Gulf 1987-88	
10. Philippines 1989	
11. Panama 1989	
[12. Persian Gulf War 1990-91]	

TABLE 3

Maximum Feasible Military Responses

Geographical Target Area	:	**Character of Military Response**	**Example**
Island	:	Total Invasion	Grenada
Peninsula or Isthmus	:	Total Invasion	Korea Panama
Littoral	: : :	Naval Blockade Air Support Resupply	North Vietnam Lebanon Israel
Small Inland Target	: :	Air Strike Air Lift	Tripoli Berlin
Large Inland Target	: : :	Military and/or Economic Aid or Economic Sanctions	Afghanistan Colombia Iraq

Endnotes

1. See *New York Times*, 20 May 1990, A1; 21 May 1990, A1; 22 May 1990, A1; 22 May 1990, A1.
2. *New York Times*, 21 May 1990, A1.
3. Literature on non-geographical constraints on US military intervention is extensive. See *inter alia*: David W. Tarr, "Political Constraints on US Intervention in Low-Intensity Conflicts," *Parameters*, 10, no. 3 (Summer 1980) pp. 51-60; Eliot Cohen, "Constraints on America's Conduct of Small Wars," in S.E. Miller, ed., *Conventional Forces and American Defense Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); Herbert K. Tillema and John van Wingen, "Law and power in Military Intervention," *International Studies Quarterly*, 26, no. 2 (June 1982), pp. 220-50; Stephen T. Hosmer, *Constraints on US Strategy in Third World Conflicts* (New York: Crane Russak, 1987).
4. A. T. Mahan, *The Influence of Seapower Upon History, 1660-1783* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), pp. 25-43.
5. Ibid., pp. 43-76. Here, Mahan argues that a sound national character and sound government policy will aim at the development of sea-borne commerce and a navy in countries where geography allows it.
6. See *inter alia*: D.M. Schurman, "Historians and Britain's Imperial Stance in 1914," in J.E. Flint and G. Williams, *Perspectives of Empire* (London: Longman, 1973), pp. 171-88; L.L. Guichard, *The Naval Blockade, 1914-1918* (New York: Appleton, 1930), *passim.*
7. Halford J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *The Geographical Journal*, XXIII, no. 4 (April 1904), p. 432.
8. Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), p. 94; and see Giulio Douhet, *Command of the Air* (Washington, DC: Office for Air Force History, 1983 & 1991).
9. A crisis for our purposes has the following characteristics: (1) the use of military force by the United States is publicly discussed by White House or Cabinet officials; (2) violence in a foreign state threatens to change the status quo of power in that state or in another state within a relatively short time, e.g., eight weeks.

   The alert reader may note that rescue and humanitarian operations in Liberia (1990) and Bangladesh (1991) are not included in Table 1. While military *forces* were used in these operations, military *force* was not. By contrast to these two episodes, the Iranian rescue mission, which is included in Table 1, was: (A) one selection among many options which included the use of force, and (B) explicitly planned to use force to overcome resistance to the mission. Other military options included: air strikes, harbor mining, naval blockade. See Gary Sick, "Military Options and Constraints," in Warren Christopher, et al., *American Hostages in Iran: The Conduct of a Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). Yet, any reader who wishes to include Liberia and Bangladesh in the analysis will find these cases would lend support to the thesis below.
10. See, for example, Stanley Hoffman, "The Problem of Intervention," in *Intervention in World Politics*, Hedley Bull, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 7-28.
11. It is, of course, also true that a direct US military intervention into Afghanistan would have necessarily led to a direct confrontation with Soviet troops and this was *politically* undesirable.
12. See: *New York Times*, 13 May 1962, p. 1; 15 May, p. 50; 16 May, p. 1; 18 May, p. 1; 18 May, p. 10; 24 May, p. 7; 25 May, p. 3; and 2 July, p. 17.
13. Advocates of direct military intervention in Nicaragua and Angola never gathered enough domestic political support. In the wake of the Vietnam war, the American Congress was in no mood to accede to the demands of President Ford and Secretary of State Kissinger that the United States become actively involved in Angola. In Nicaragua, the Sandinistas always insisted they meant to threaten no other country. If Nicaragua teetered on the brink

of intervention by the United States, it was spared by the ambiguity of its intentions and capabilities.

In the case of Guatemala in 1954, the United States chose to work first through the inter-American Conference, and then to airlift munitions to Guatemala's neighbors, and then to back anti-Communist Guatemalan forces which succeeded in their attempt to overthrow the Communist regime.

In the case of Cuba in 1960-61, the outgoing President was reluctant to act and the newly inaugurated President chose not to use regular US military forces to intervene directly on behalf of the CIA-trained insurgents.

14. At this point one might object to some cases of intervention being classified as successful. Success and failure are political judgments and therefore subjective and value-based. For our purposes we can define failure as the non-achievement of any publicly stated goals in the use of military force. Success is the residual category.

15. Julian S. Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (1911; reprinted, A.M.S. Press, 1972), pp. 54-56.

16. Ibid., p. 52.

17. The Long Commission concluded that "U.S. decisions as regards Lebanon . . . have been, to a large degree, characterized by an emphasis on military options and the expansion of the US military role . . . [And] that these decisions may have been taken without clear recognition that . . . initial conditions had changed and that the expansion of our military involvement greatly increased the risk to, and adversely impacted upon the security of, the USMNF." See the *Report of the DOD Commission on Beirut International Airport Terrorist Act, 23 October 1983*, 20 December 1983. Even the official Marine Corps history incorporates the cynicism and confusion of the troops towards the political object of the Lebanon operations. See Benis M. Frank, *U.S. Marines in Lebanon 1982-1984* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, US Marine Corps, 1987), pp. 15-20 and 23.

18. Corbett, p. 52.

19. Ibid., p. 69.

20. The geographical thesis of this war is illuminated by Anthony James Joes, *The War for South Viet Nam, 1954-1975* (New York: Praeger, 1989), *passim*. See especially the concluding chapter. See also Clark Reynolds, *Command of the Sea* (New York: Morrow, 1974), p. 550.

21. Joes asserts that failure to close the Ho Chi Minh Trail was one of the principle reasons for the failure of the war but that "maintaining a physical barrier on the ground across Laos might have cost many American casualties. Undoubtedly, some experts would vigorously question the wisdom of planting a large American force in the Asian jungle so far from the blue-water navy." See *The War for South Viet Nam*, pp. 110-11.

22. Paul B. Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission: Why It Failed* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1985), p. 111. See also: Arthur T. Hadley, *The Straw Giant* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1986), ch. 1.

23. See Khalid al-Izzi, *The Shatt al-Arab Dispute: A Legal Study*, (3rd ed.; London: Third World Centre, 1981); and Kaiyan H. Kaikobad, *Shatt al-Arab Boundary Question* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). For a greatly detailed description of the geography and climate of Iraq, see *Iraq and the Persian Gulf*, (Oxford: Naval Intelligence Division, 1944), chs. I-IV. For a thorough history of the creation of modern boundaries, see David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace: Creating the Modern Middle East 1914-1922* (New York: Henry Holt, 1989).

24. Articles on the rigors of the desert were a staple in the *New York Times*, e.g.: "US Troops' Biggest Fight So Far is with 115-Degree Desert Heat," 15 August 1990, p. A19; "Planning at the Helm for Troops in the Sand," 23 August 1990, p. A15; "G.I.'s Learning to Cope with Sand," 23 August 1990, p. A15; "Disadvantage for US in Desert," 25 August 1990,

p. A6; "Preparing for the Worst," 26 August 1990, sec. 4, p. 3; "In the Saudi Desert: Heat, Sand, and Restlessness," 1 September 1990, p. A6; "The Troops are in the Desert in More Ways than One," 3 September 1990, p. A1, A5; "The Other Enemies: Fine, Pervasive Sand and Cutting Rocks," 10 February 1991, p. A18.

25. According to Bob Woodward's account in *The Commanders* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991) the first options discussed were retaliatory strikes from aircraft carriers, pp. 227, 228, 233; economic sanctions, pp. 228-29; and military aid to Saudi Arabia, p. 224. None of these options, by themselves or in combination, were thought acceptable. General Kelly's assessment was, "There's nothing we can do . . . We hope you political types aren't dreaming," (p. 232). The only viable plan depended upon the cooperation of the Saudis, who demurred for a short time before agreeing to plans presented to the King by the American Secretary of Defense. See pp. 263-73. And see *New York Times*, "Saudis Provide Wherewithal for Growing US Forces," 27 August 1990, p. A8.

26. See *inter alia* Hamilton Jordan, *Crisis* (New York: Putnam, 1982), pp. 52, 228, 253, 267-82; David McClellan, *Cyrus Vance* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1985), p. 152.

27. Ibid. Afterwards, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown insisted that "six or seven times out of ten such a rescue mission would have succeeded." Jordan, p. 278.

28. See *New York Times* 8 September 1989, p. A25; 14 September, p. D22; 19 September, p. A19; 21 September, p. A28; and 22 September, p. A14.