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Rethinking Small-Footprint Interventions

Stephen Watts and Stephanie Pezard

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ABSTRACT: This article reexamines the practices of small-footprint military interventions in light of the concept of “tipping points” as conceived by Thomas C. Schelling. If the concept is accurate, it can improve how we conduct such interventions.

Popular accounts of civil wars and insurgencies are filled with references to “windows of opportunity” and “tipping points”—moments in time when the dynamics of a conflict are supposedly shifting in ways that may portend a decisive change in a war’s trajectory. These concepts have been used in mainstream media accounts, professional journals, and special reports to explain recent events in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Nigeria, Syria, and elsewhere.

If windows of opportunity and tipping points accurately describe critical junctures in conflicts and can be identified either ahead of time or as they occur (rather than solely through the benefit of hindsight), the policy implications are substantial. After the painful experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States is committed to avoiding large-scale entanglements in other nations’ internal conflicts, seeking instead to “develop innovative, low-cost, and small-footprint approaches to achieve our security objectives.”¹ Unfortunately, US military doctrine and numerous other sources make clear that decisive intervention in civil wars and insurgencies typically is a manpower-intensive and costly endeavor.² If there are particular moments in time when a conflict is at a critical turning point, it may be possible for small-scale interjections of external forces to have disproportionately large effects. Conversely, if there are only short-lived opportunities in which the course of a conflict might be turned without a massive commitment of resources, then that knowledge might help the United States better identify when it should avoid intervention.

Despite the widespread appeal of concepts like windows of opportunity and tipping points to explain the trajectories of civil wars around the globe, there have been few attempts to apply them in a systematic way and even fewer efforts to explain their implications for foreign military intervention.³ As they are typically used, the terms do not distinguish between simple changes in a conflict’s trajectory—potentially fleeting and insignificant—and more meaningful junctures.

1 US Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, January 2012), 3.

2 US Department of the Army, *Counterinsurgency*, Field Manual (FM) 3-24 (December 2006); James T. Quinlivan, “Force Requirements in Stability Operations,” *Parameters* 25, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 59–69.

3 For exceptions, see Ben Connable and Martin C. Libicki, *How Insurgencies End* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, MG-965-MCIA, 2010); Gordon H. McCormick, Steven B. Horton, and Lauren A. Harrison, “Things Fall Apart: The Endgame Dynamics of Internal Wars,” *Third World Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (2007): 321–367; and I. William Zartman, “Ripeness: The Hurting Stalemate and Beyond,” in *International Conflict Resolution After the Cold War*, eds. Paul C. Stern and Daniel Druckman (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2000).

This article explores the concept of a tipping point and its implications for America's reliance on low-cost, small-footprint approaches to stabilizing embattled partner governments. More specifically, the article asks two questions: Are there identifiable opportunities in the course of an insurgency in which even relatively small actions could help tilt the conflict decisively in favor of the government? And if so, how can the United States best take advantage of these opportunities?⁴

Tipping Points

The concept of tipping was first formalized by the Nobel Prize-winning economist Thomas Schelling.⁵ Tipping points are a subset of "critical mass" or "threshold" dynamics in which the behavior of a certain proportion of the population—a proportion that is different in every circumstance—causes others to behave in a similar manner, leading to cascading effects. Tipping point dynamics typically occur as an iterated process. In the first step, a "critical mass" or "threshold" number of people makes a particular decision—for instance, to participate in a protest against a regime. Their behavior, in turn, provides information that causes other people to act in a similar fashion. After witnesses of an anti-regime demonstration observe that the regime did not engage in violent repression, they may become emboldened to participate themselves.⁶ As more and more people make the same decision, pressures continue to mount on those who had initially opposed such behavior. Loyalists, for instance, might have preferred that a regime stay in place, but once most of their neighbors change loyalties, they may feel uncomfortable, or even unsafe, engaging in public support of the regime. This description of tipping points assumes that relatively small events can have disproportionately large consequences if they lead to the crossing of certain thresholds.⁷ The crossing of such a threshold may not be *necessary* to achieve a particular outcome (for example, the overthrow of a regime, which might collapse due to foreign invasion or other causes unrelated to tipping point dynamics), but it should be *sufficient*.

The concept of a "window of opportunity" has already been applied extensively to internal conflicts, particularly in the form of William Zartman's arguments about the "ripeness" of conflicts for negotiated settlements. Tipping points, on the other hand, have not seen a similarly sustained discussion, despite the fact that journalists, experts, and practitioners frequently invoke the concept to explain conflicts or argue for or against intervening in them.⁸ If tipping points truly are sufficient to propel a conflict toward one outcome or another, being

4 This discussion is entirely focused on efforts to secure an end to conflict *on terms favorable to the partner government*, rather than on efforts to topple foreign governments. Tipping point dynamics are likely to be very different in the case of efforts to overthrow other governments; see Stephen Biddle, *Afghanistan and the Future of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2002).

5 Thomas C. Schelling, *Micromotives and Macrobehavior* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 99–102. This concept was popularized in Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2000).

6 Timur Kuran, "Now Out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989," *World Politics* 44, no. 1 (October 1991): 7–48.

7 Economists describe this situation as "increasing returns to scale." For a closely related discussion of increasing returns, see Paul Pierson, "Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics," *American Political Science Review* 94, no. 2 (June 2000): 251–267.

8 For partial exceptions see Connable and Libicki, *How Insurgencies End*, and McCormick, Horton, and Harrison, "Things Fall Apart: The Endgame Dynamics of Internal Wars."

able to identify them reliably and to understand their implications for foreign intervention is perhaps even more important than understanding windows of opportunity. Conflicts may tip in a variety of ways: toward resolution (an end to large-scale violence), toward qualitative differences in the nature of a conflict (such as from political to more criminal forms of violence, or from predominantly ideological to ethnic or other communal ends), toward a new equilibrium at a higher or lower intensity of violence, or toward a change in geographic expanse (such as from cities into rural hinterlands or from containment within a single country to spillover throughout a region). Each of these changes has implications for American strategic interests. Those interests may be secured by tipping a conflict toward one outcome or another, such as by confining it to rural peripheries or by containing it within a single country. Of particular importance is the relationship between tipping points and conflict termination.

When Do Tipping Points Occur?

If tipping points can only be identified after the fact, when hindsight has made a particular course of events appear inevitable, then they are of little use to policymakers. While it is impossible to specify tipping points across a broad range of conflicts, previous work on the dynamics of war termination suggest several broad categories of events in which tipping points would most likely occur.

Belligerents will continue to fight so long as the expected returns (based on each party's perceptions of the balance of power) exceed the anticipated returns from negotiation. Consequently, tipping points should emerge from one of three sources: a change in the balance of power, a similar change in the expected benefits of peace, or new developments that significantly alter the parties' perceptions of either of the sources just discussed. The list of events provided below is only intended as a summary of the most commonly cited *potential* tipping points.

Changes in the Balance of Power

In order to fight, a belligerent requires people to take up arms and to provide support to the fighters, resources with which to fight (weapons, money, and so on), and an organization and leadership to connect the various elements of the struggle and give them purpose. Sufficient degradation of any of these factors might induce a tipping point in a conflict. More typically, a tipping point evolves when several of these factors interact with one another.

- **Resources.** One of the strongest predictors of a decisive turn in a war is the loss of foreign state sponsorship to one or more of the parties to the conflict, particularly if easily lootable natural resources are not readily available to compensate for the shortfall.⁹ Especially in those cases where an insurgency gained much of its support through material incentives (for example, cash payments, opportunities for looting), the loss of revenues may touch off a cascade of defections.¹⁰ At least

9 Connable and Libicki, *How Insurgencies End*; Stephen Watts, "Enforcing Democracy? Assessing the Linkages between Peace Operations and Post-Conflict Democratization," paper presented at Columbia University's International Politics Seminar, March 2009.

10 Jeremy M. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

a half-dozen cases of wars that terminated decisively in the post-Cold War era were tied either directly (for example, Cambodia, El Salvador, Mozambique, and Nicaragua) or indirectly (for example, Guatemala and South Africa) to the end of the Cold War and the elimination of the resources both superpowers had been directing to their proxies. The loss of markets for contraband can significantly weaken a faction, but it seldom is as decisive as the loss of state sponsorship due to the presence of alternative markets and the existence of other criminal opportunities (for example, kidnapping for ransom).¹¹

- **Organization and Leadership.** Without leaders and structures in place to guide fighters, an insurgency is no more than widespread mob violence. Disrupting a faction's organization can, therefore, have potentially decisive effects. Two of the most powerful means to disrupt an insurgency are attacks on the group's leadership and the creation of splits among different factions within an insurgency.¹² The capture of the leaders of the Shining Path movement in Peru (Abimeal Guzmán), the Kurdistan People's Party in Turkey (Abdullah Ocalan), and UNITA in Angola (Jonas Savimbi) are often cited as examples of successful "decapitation" that led to a rapid disintegration of movements that had previously been strong.¹³ Although evidence suggests that successful leadership targeting produces important short- to medium-term effects, the longer-term effects are less clear, particularly if the government fails to build on the opportunity.¹⁴
- **Recruitment.** Damage to an insurgency's resource base or organization may harm its recruitment efforts—either because they demonstrate the insurgency's weakness or limit its ability to reward and protect supporters. But other events may directly affect rebel recruitment. Particularly for insurgencies in which revolutionary or religious fervor or communal solidarity play a greater role in motivating insurgent participation than do immediate material incentives, major shifts in popular perception of "the narrative" of the conflict might have significant effects on recruitment. If a government is able to enact significant reforms, or it is able to protect authoritative figures who challenge the legitimacy of "warlords," the popular appeal of rebel leaders may erode. Attrition strategies may also represent a means to reach such a tipping point, but they usually require large-scale—and protracted—interventions and are likely to fail if the opposing side

11 The divergent trajectories of Mozambique and Angola in the 1990s are revealing. After the end of the Cold War, both countries lost superpower sponsorship for their warring factions. The ready availability of oil and so-called "conflict diamonds" in Angola, however, helped to substitute for superpower subsidies and permitted that conflict to continue for over a decade longer.

12 On the "decapitation" of insurgencies, see Patrick B. Johnston, "Does Decapitation Work? Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Targeting in Counterinsurgency Campaigns," *International Security* 36, no. 4 (Spring 2012): 47–79. On offering incentives to split insurgencies, see Sir Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam* (1966; reprint, Saint Petersburg, FL: Hailer Publishing, 2005).

13 Johnston, "Does Decapitation Work?" Michael Tiernay, "Killing Kony: Leadership Change and Civil War Termination," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (2013).

14 See, for instance, Michael L. Burgoyne, "The Allure of Quick Victory: Lessons from Peru's Fight against Sendero Luminoso," *Military Review* (September–October 2010): 68–73.

shows exceptional cohesion and commitment.¹⁵

Changes in the Benefits of Peace

Changes in the costs of continued fighting are not the only way in which a war might take a decisive turn. Tipping points in a conflict might also arise from changes in the anticipated benefits of peace. Credible international peace operations to monitor and potentially enforce the implementation of a peace deal provide one of the most important means to make peace appear more attractive.¹⁶ The promise of economic assistance to make peace “pay” can also play an important role.¹⁷ Moreover, by inducing moderate factions to support peace, they may also facilitate military victory over the more extremist or criminal factions within an insurgency who are unwilling to accept a peace founded on compromise. Combining peace operations with offensive military operations designed to defeat “spoilers” can pose difficult challenges, but such a balancing act has been performed by international forces in Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and elsewhere.

Changes in Perceptions

Ultimately, what matters less than the costs of war or the benefits of peace is the parties’ *perceptions* of them. Systematically assessing the ways in which perceptions diverge from underlying realities is beyond the scope of this article. Numerous observers, however, emphasize two points in time at which perceptions of wars’ costs and benefits may shift in important ways.

First, the onset of war offers important information to the leadership of all sides. Wars are typically caused by misjudgments of other parties’ capabilities or intentions. Once violence escalates, leaders may quickly adjust their expectations. Wars may begin, for instance, when one party—either the government or insurgents—resorts to violence based on the expectation of a quick victory due to either the element of surprise or the expectation that the opposition will be unable to overcome internal divisions and quickly organize resistance. In such cases, if the initial onslaught is thwarted, the attacker may seek to defuse tensions rapidly rather than committing to a lengthy conflict. In cases of foreign military intervention, the initial days and months of a conflict may indelibly shape a population’s perception of the invader’s intentions, as in the concept of the “golden hour” used to explain the escalating violence in the months after the 2003 US intervention in Iraq.¹⁸

If a war is not defused in its very early stages, it will typically endure for an extended period as the warring parties accumulate information on the others’ capabilities and willingness to endure prolonged bloodshed. When neither side is able to defeat the other, the parties may eventually come to a common understanding of the costs of continued fighting

15 John E. Mueller, “The Search for the ‘Breaking Point’ in Vietnam: The Statistics of a Deadly Quarrel,” *International Studies Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (December 1980): 497–519.

16 Barbara F. Walter, “The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement,” *International Organization* 51, no. 3 (Summer, 1997).

17 Carrie Manning and Monica Malbrough, “Bilateral Donors and Aid Conditionality in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding: The Case of Mozambique,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 48, no. 1 (March, 2010): 143–169.

18 James Stephenson, *Losing the Golden Hour: An Insider’s View of Iraq’s Reconstruction* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2007).

and the probabilities of success on the battlefield. At this point, William Zartman's "mutually hurting stalemate" is reached, potentially representing another juncture in the conflict at which events may turn decisively.

It is important to note that not all conflicts have clear tipping points. Identifiable tipping points on the path toward durable conflict termination are relatively uncommon in part because truly decisive outcomes in wars are rare. Many if not most conflicts do not end decisively. Approximately half or less of politically inclusive countries with weak state institutions, for instance, return to war within five years of the end of a conflict.¹⁹ Since insurgencies so frequently draw on existing social networks for recruiting, they retain a strong ability to reconstitute themselves even after suffering substantial setbacks.²⁰ Even conflicts that end decisively may have no identifiable tipping point; instead, they tend to come to an end through a gradual process of stalemate (as in the Northern Ireland conflict or Mali's civil war in the 1990s) or attrition (as in post-Soviet Russia's second Chechen war).

Small-Scale Interventions and Tipping the Balance

From a policy perspective, more interesting than the examples previously mentioned concerning wars in which tipping points are clearly identifiable, are cases that may have had potential tipping points but failed to "tip" in the government's favor. Is it possible for outsiders to influence outcomes at these critical moments? And if so, what might such policies look like?

The previous discussion suggests at least six mechanisms through which external interveners might use "small footprint" interventions to induce decisive changes in an internal conflict:

- **Early intervention.** Early intervention—seizing advantage of the so-called golden hour—may help tip conflict dynamics in at least a couple of ways. First, counterinsurgents can attempt to disrupt rebel organizations before they grow robust and resilient. Second, counterinsurgents can help to set both popular and insurgent perceptions of the government's will and ability to fight in the early days of the war, while expectations are still relatively fluid.
- **Resource interdiction.** As discussed previously, the end of state financing has often played a decisive role in conflicts. In most cases state support for insurgents has ended either due to diplomatic efforts or to factors internal to the state sponsor, but military operations can also play a role. NATO airstrikes, for instance, were one of the factors that led Serbia to threaten to eliminate support for Serbian militias in Bosnia, thus bringing the ethnic Serbs to the negotiating table.²¹ Military operations to interdict criminal trafficking are sub-

19 Stephen Watts et al., *Countering Others' Insurgencies: Understanding U.S. Small-Footprint Interventions in Local Context* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, RR-513-SRF, 2014).

20 For one revealing case study, see Maya M. Christensen and Mats Utas, "Mercenaries of Democracy: The 'Politricks' of Remobilized Combatants in the 2007 General Elections, Sierra Leone," *African Affairs* 107, no. 429 (2008): 515–539.

21 Although these airstrikes were one of the factors that led to the Dayton Accords, they were clearly only one factor among many, and they likely were not the most important one. For a skeptical view of the effectiveness of the airstrikes, see Office of Russian and European Analysis, Central Intelligence Agency, *Balkan Battlegrounds: A Military History of the Yugoslav Conflict, 1990-1995*, Vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2002).

stantially more difficult, as the counternarcotics efforts in Colombia and Afghanistan have demonstrated. Typically, there are too many channels for contraband for military interdiction efforts to be decisive; however, there may be some exceptions. While contraband is highly mobile, markets are not. Cutting off insurgents from access to critical markets—as the United States did in the Battle of Sadr City and the Kenyans did by denying al Shabaab the markets and ports of Mogadishu and Kismayo in Somalia—can play important, if seldom truly decisive, roles.²² Where rebels are dependent on heavy weapons and armored vehicles—such as the Serbian militias in Bosnia—military operations may deny them the fuel they need to remain mobile.

- **Decapitation.** As discussed above, successfully targeting top insurgent leadership can also be effective, particularly in the short to medium term. Intervention by technologically sophisticated powers like the United States may offer significant technical advantages in targeting rebel leadership.²³
- **Splitting strategies.** Interveners may either help induce splits among rebel groups or take advantage of pre-existing ones. Providing resources to the government may help the government offer more incentives to defecting rebels, and external military assistance may help the government protect rebel defectors who might otherwise fear reprisals from their former brothers-in-arms. Policies designed to induce splits among rebel groups are a two-edged sword, however. Inducements such as the promise of amnesty and redress of certain grievances (for example, land reform) have been used to pry rebels away from an insurgency and to provide intelligence on remaining insurgents, thus leading to the cascading effects typical of a tipping point. On the other hand, fracturing an insurgency into multiple factions may make a conflict harder to terminate through a negotiated settlement because no single leadership can speak for the rebels.²⁴ If the government is too weak to offer meaningful inducements to rebel defectors or to protect them, splitting strategies may create greater incoherence among rebels without any corresponding strategic gains.
- **Strengthening pro-peace constituencies.** Warring factions often have a material interest in the criminal economies that form during wartime and may even seek to perpetuate conflict as a means to profit. Consequently, one of the most powerful means of drawing away support from insurgents may be by strengthening those portions of society—such as the licit business community—that have a vested interest in peace. Some religious leaders may also have an interest in peace, particularly since periods of conflict often draw power away from traditional sources of authority (such as religious leaders and elders) and concentrate it in the hands of military leaders and warlords. To the extent that outside interveners can protect and strengthen these pro-peace constituencies, they may be able to undermine the recruiting

22 David E. Johnson, M. Wade Markel, and Brian Shannon, *The 2008 Battle of Sadr City* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, RR-160-A, 2011).

23 Sean D. Naylor, “Years of Detective Work Led to al-Qaida Target,” *Army Times*, November 21, 2011; and David Spencer, “The Sword of Honor Campaign in the Cauca Valley: 2011-2013 Colombian Conflict Focus of Effort,” *Small Wars Journal*, May 31, 2013.

24 David E. Cunningham, “Veto Players and Civil War Duration,” *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 4 (October, 2006): 875–892.

potential of rebel leaders. Providing protection and support to such a large, dispersed group of actors, however, is extremely difficult to do through “light footprint” military operations unless the major parties to the conflict have already accepted a negotiated settlement (as in consensual peace operations).

- **“Playing for the breaks.”** Finally, in many cases, small-scale foreign interventions will neither create tipping points nor take advantage of them to bring a conflict to an end. Rather, they will simply prevent the defeat of a partner government.²⁵ Given sufficient time, either the international environment may shift in favorable ways, or the insurgents may make mistakes that the government can capitalize on. Both the intervener and the partner government, in other words, are “playing for the breaks.”²⁶ Such an approach minimizes the risk of over-reach by either the intervening state or the partner government. On the other hand, it is not clear that countries like the United States can sustain foreign military interventions indefinitely, and there are significant spillover costs associated with long-running conflicts.²⁷

This brief overview of the mechanisms by which external interveners may seek to capitalize on tipping points suggests many of the difficulties of successfully implementing such a policy. To fully understand the challenges the United States may face in attempting to tip conflicts in favor of partner regimes through small-footprint operations, it is helpful to examine a number of recent cases.

Recent Small-Footprint Interventions: A Complex Record

Analysts have frequently invoked the examples of recent US operations in the Philippines and Colombia to argue in favor of small-footprint interventions. This article instead examines a variety of lesser-known cases, in part because the Philippines and Colombia have been so thoroughly analyzed elsewhere and in part because these interventions remain ongoing, with the final outcome still to be determined.

Russian Intervention in Tajikistan

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and Tajikistan’s emergence as an independent state, a civil war rapidly evolved between the country’s Communists and supporters of the democratic and Islamist opposition. Although initially reluctant to become involved in the conflict, growing concern over Islamic radicalism and narcotics trafficking ultimately prompted Russia to intervene.

Russia possessed by far the largest and most capable fighting force in Tajikistan, the 201st Motorized Rifle Division, and it largely controlled the Border Forces along the border with Afghanistan. These forces were present in Tajikistan from the beginning of the war and began to act on behalf of the pro-Russian leader Emomali Rakhmon after he seized control of the government in December 1992 and relegated the Islamists

25 Stephen Watts et al., *The Uses and Limits of Small-Scale Military Interventions* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, MG-1226-RC, 2012).

26 Lincoln B. Krause, “Playing for the Breaks: Insurgent Mistakes,” *Parameters* 39, no. 3 (Autumn 2009): 48–64.

27 For spillover costs, see Paul Collier et al., *Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2003), Chapter 2.

and others to the role of an armed opposition movement, the United Tajik Opposition (UTO). Russia, therefore, had the opportunity to tip the conflict in a favorable direction due to its early intervention and its potential to interdict the UTO's supply routes from Afghanistan.²⁸

Despite these opportunities, the war raged for five years. Rather than tipping the conflict toward a decisive outcome, Russian support did little more than keep the Rakhmon regime from disintegrating. The Border Forces were incapable of interdicting the UTO's supply routes from Afghanistan, in part because of the inherent difficulty of policing a long and mountainous border and in part because Russian and government forces were themselves complicit in the smuggling.²⁹

In 1997, Moscow helped broker a peace deal between the Rakhmon government and the UTO featuring numerous power-sharing mechanisms. Within the first few years after the treaty was signed, however, Rakhmon engineered the removal of many opposition figures from the governmental positions they won as a result of the peace accords, and a number of prominent opposition politicians were assassinated. In 1999, the president won reelection with 97 percent of the vote. In part as a consequence, much political power in the country has remained concentrated in informal institutions beyond the control of the state. In most cases the various warlords of the civil war period retained the loyalty and capabilities of their paramilitaries, allowing them to remain the de facto political authorities of much of Tajikistan.

Both narcotics trafficking and Islamic radicalism have flourished in this environment. Through its intervention, in other words, Russia was able to keep its preferred leader in power, helped to end the country's civil war, and helped to keep the country at peace afterward. But its intervention did little to ameliorate the main factors driving its intervention in the first place.³⁰

French Intervention in the Central African Republic

The Central African Republic (CAR) has historically been an extremely weak state with small security forces and little penetration into the regions beyond the capital of Bangui. From the time of its independence it has been subject to repeated coups and governed for more than half of its existence as a modern, independent state by rulers who seized power by force.³¹

France had played a significant role in the country's politics since its independence, maintaining a military base in the country and subsidizing the CAR's armed forces, the *Forces armées centrafricaines* (FACA). In

28 Lena Jonson, *The Tajik War: A Challenge to Russian Policy*, Discussion Paper 74 (London: Royal Institute for International Affairs, 1998); and Dov Lynch, *Russian Peacekeeping Strategies in the CIS: The Cases of Moldova, Georgia, and Tajikistan* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

29 Sergei Gretzky, *Russia's Policy Toward Central Asia* (Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, 1997); Barnett R. Rubin, "Russian Hegemony and State Breakdown in the Periphery: Causes and Consequences of the Civil War in Tajikistan," in *Post-Soviet Political Order: Conflict and State Building*, eds. Barnett R. Rubin and Jack Snyder (London: Routledge, 1998).

30 Nasrin Dadmehr, "Tajikistan: Regionalism and Weakness," in *State Failure and State Weakness in a Time of Terror*, ed. Robert I. Rotberg (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003); International Crisis Group, *Tajikistan: The Changing Insurgent Threats*, Asia Report No. 205 (May 24, 2011); International Crisis Group, *Tajikistan: An Uncertain Peace*, Asia Report No. 30 (December 24, 2001).

31 Andreas Mehler, "Why Security Forces Do Not Deliver Security: Evidence from Liberia and the Central African Republic," *Armed Forces & Society* 38, no. 1 (2012): 49–69.

part as a result of the end of these subsidies in 1993, government payments of FACA wages fell deeply into arrears, ultimately leading several hundred soldiers to mutiny in 1996.³²

France was well-positioned to intervene at the beginning of the conflict, when it had the opportunity to impress upon the mutineers the costs of fighting and to disrupt their nascent organization. In Operations Almadin I and Almadin II, French forces put down two coup attempts in a matter of days in April and May 1996. France helped broker a series of peace deals involving the payment of back wages (by France), an amnesty for the mutineers, and ultimately a broader power-sharing deal (the Bangui Accords) monitored first by the African peacekeeping mission MISAB and later by the UN mission MINURCA. Thus, France seized on many of the strategies that might be expected to tip a conflict decisively in favor of the government. It acted at the very beginning of the crisis. By paying back wages to FACA soldiers, France could potentially split those mutineers with limited and legitimate grievances (wage arrears) from those with broader ambitions. And by helping to create a power-sharing agreement buttressed by external peacekeepers, France hoped to strengthen constituencies for peace.

Despite these efforts, another major coup attempt was launched a year after the foreign peacekeeping presence finally withdrew. Three years after the end of MINURCA and seven years after France had intervened, the government France had helped to prop up was overthrown.³³ That government, in turn, was itself overthrown within a decade. The conflict, in other words, failed to tip decisively.

African Interventions in Somalia

A wide variety of observers—ranging from the Secretary General of the United Nations to reporters and academics—have suggested that Somalia may have reached or passed a tipping point in the past couple of years.³⁴ Thanks to a conjunction of events: the end of the country's Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and inauguration of the internationally recognized Somali Federal Government (SFG) in 2012; the fracturing among the various factions of al Shabaab and its loss of popular support; and the military successes of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and Kenyan Defense Forces (KDF) against al Shabaab—Somalia seemed finally close to a possible victory against insurgent Islamist groups and to a functional government in Mogadishu.

Somalia has experienced four foreign military interventions since 2006: by Ethiopia (in 2006–09 and again since 2012); by AMISOM (since 2008); and by Kenya (since 2011). Although the first Ethiopian intervention was widely considered a disaster and resulted in larger

32 Fiona McFarlane and Mark Malan, "Crisis and Response in the Central African Republic: A New Trend in African Peacekeeping?" *African Security Review* 7, no. 2 (1998): 48–58; Watts et al., *The Uses and Limits of Small-Scale Military Interventions*, 77–83.

33 Watts et al., *The Uses and Limits of Small-Scale Military Interventions*, 77–83; Gabriella Ingerstad, *Willing and Able? Challenges to Security Sector Reform in Weak Post-war States: Insights from the Central African Republic* (Stockholm: Ministry of Defense, October 2012).

34 United Nations Security Council, "Special Report of the Secretary-General on Somalia," S/2012/74 (January 31, 2012), 9; veteran Somalia observer Ken Menkhaus offered a more measured judgment—see Ken Menkhaus, "Somalia at the Tipping Point?" *Current History* (May 2012): 169–174.

support for al Shabaab, interventions by AMISOM and Kenya have had very different results, in part because these countries were not perceived as negatively as Ethiopia. In these interventions, Kenya, AMISOM, the Somali government, and other external players such as the United States attempted to use several of the mechanisms described herein to ensure their interventions would lead to decisive changes. Kenya and AMISOM contributed to cutting al Shabaab's revenue by taking control of Mogadishu, whose markets and businesses represented an important source of revenue for the group, and Kismayo, which is a major port and a hub for the charcoal trade that sustained al Shabaab. Decapitation was also employed: US-targeted killings of top operatives, such as Aden Hashi Ayro in 2008, have played a disruptive role and may have compelled the group to rely on leaders of lesser quality.³⁵ AMISOM and the KDF have also taken advantage of ideological splits within al Shabaab. The relative peace that Mogadishu was experiencing as of late 2013 has led many in the Somali diaspora to return; this population represents a pro-peace constituency that has everything to gain from a lasting stabilization of the country. Their increasing presence and investments in Mogadishu may eventually act as a tipping point by creating incentives for more groups to invest in licit business opportunities rather than profiting from wartime economies.

There are limits, however, to what has been achieved in Somalia. It is unclear whether the loss of Mogadishu and Kismayo represents a tipping point for al Shabaab, which has proven highly capable of diversifying its sources of revenue from taxation of populations to weapons trafficking and piracy. The group is still reaping considerable benefits from the charcoal business of Kismayo, which a recent UN report claimed had been revived and even expanded, in part with the complicity of Kenyan forces.³⁶ It is also worth noting that many of the setbacks experienced by al Shabaab were brought about by the group's own misguided policies, such as the mishandling of the 2010–12 famine and the resulting loss of popular support and recruits. External interveners benefitted from these mistakes, which may make their achievements difficult to replicate in the future; insurgents, after all, are as capable of learning from their mistakes as are counterinsurgents. Perhaps most importantly, the optimism that accompanied the SFG's creation only a year ago has already started to fade. Thus far the SFG has proven itself nearly as corrupt and weak as its predecessors.³⁷ Without a capable and inclusive government to attract potential defectors from among rebel populations and to protect and reward pro-peace constituencies, even potential tipping points are highly unlikely to tip.

Somalia, however, may have tipped toward a change in the nature of its conflict. It is still unclear the extent to which al Shabaab has morphed from a Somalia-centered group that seeks to control large swathes of territory and could aim to take over the central government to a mainly terrorist group that operates indifferently between Somalia and other

35 Eric Schmitt and Jeffrey Gettleman, "Qaeda Leader Reported Killed in Somalia," *The New York Times*, May 2, 2008; Interview by authors with subject matter expert, Washington DC. October 2013.

36 United Nations Security Council, *Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea* (July 12, 2013), paragraph 152.

37 See, for instance, Matt Bryden, *Somalia Redux? Assessing the New Somali Federal Government* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 2013).

countries in the region. A series of events affecting al Shabaab over the past few years has certainly pushed it toward the latter direction. Sheikh Ahmed Abdi Godane's rejection of humanitarian aid during the 2010–12 famine that killed an estimated quarter million people created a rift between al Shabaab and the population and within the group itself.³⁸ This happened at a time when the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops took away one of al Shabaab's main rallying causes, the resistance to the Ethiopian "invasion." Popular support had been the backbone of al Shabaab's rise during the Ethiopian intervention (2006–09). It provided the group with recruits and facilitated the acceptance of its presence in entire regions of Somalia. This territorial control, in turn, represented an important source of revenue. Although much about al Shabaab's internal dynamics is still unknown, there are indications that the group's loss of popular support, combined with improved military performance on the part of AMISOM, may have had a cumulative effect. Groups that cannot recruit easily often turn to coercive methods; this further antagonizes populations, which in turn are less likely to join the group voluntarily. Imposing taxation on a smaller population base may have the same effect. The combination of al Shabaab missteps with improved AMISOM capabilities, in other words, does not appear to have tipped Somalia toward an end to its violence, but it may well have tipped the conflict to a phase in which forces hostile to the current government are unable to pose an existential threat. Even this result, however, is likely dependent on the continued presence of international forces for the foreseeable future.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Tipping points are seldom defined, and seem to signify little more than an important change—or possible change—in a conflict. We have argued that "tipping points" should be seen as a conjunction of conditions *sufficient* (or usually sufficient) to achieve an end of the conflict or a transformation of its character. The purpose of this article has been to flesh out this concept and its implications for small-footprint military interventions in support of partner governments. The very short descriptions of the post-Cold War conflicts in Tajikistan, the Central African Republic, and Somalia, as well as the even briefer mentions of other conflicts, have not been intended as rigorous empirical tests. Rather, they were intended to serve as illustrations of conflict and intervention dynamics at particular points in time that had the potential to be tipping points. Although we cannot draw any definitive conclusions from the illustrative cases, they do nonetheless offer a number of insights.

First, the term tipping point is almost certainly overused. The term is invoked by analysts far more frequently than they actually occur. If this question were only one of semantics, then playing fast-and-loose with the term would be harmless. But the term implies something substantive about a conflict: that its dynamics are likely to change in ways that fundamentally alter the course of the war. Seeing tipping points where none exist thus overstates the likelihood that conflicts can be decisively

38 Mary Hope Schwoebel, "Déjà Vu: Famine and Crisis in Somalia," (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace (USIP), September 12, 2011); United Nations Food and Agricultural Program (UN FAO) and Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET), *Mortality Among Populations of Southern and Central Somalia Affected by Severe Food Insecurity and Famine During 2010–2012* (Rome and Washington, May 2, 2013), 53.

resolved—and, as a corollary, the likelihood that military interventions can take advantage of these opportunities to secure durable changes that favor the strategic interests of the United States. In the cases of Tajikistan, the Central African Republic, and Somalia, external forces intervened at points in time and in ways that could be expected to be particularly favorable. Yet in neither Tajikistan nor the Central African Republic did interventions tip the course of a conflict toward a decisive conclusion. In the CAR, France secured a temporary peace that was quickly reversed once French forces and peacekeepers withdrew. In Tajikistan, Russia secured an enduring end to the civil war, but the post-conflict state that emerged was so weak that it was unable to make significant gains against either radical Islam or illegal narcotics trafficking—the primary interests that prompted Russian intervention. In Somalia, it is too early to say if the events of the past two years have created the basis for conflict termination or enduring gains in the strength of the Somali state. Recent events suggest that a decisive end to the conflict is unlikely, although the conflict may have entered a lengthy phase characterized more by transnational terrorism and lower-intensity violence than full civil war. Even this result, however, is almost certainly dependent on the continued willingness of AMISOM troop-contributing countries (especially Uganda and Kenya) to maintain a substantial presence in Somalia.

Tipping points do occur in some cases. The elimination of state support for an insurgency has often led to a decisive end to a conflict, particularly when the conflict-affected state does not have ready alternatives to support insurgency on a large scale (such as “conflict diamonds” or oil deposits readily controlled by rebels). Decapitation of insurgent groups has sometimes had decisive effects, particularly when the government is capable of exploiting the opportunity by offering reconcilable insurgent groups credible positive inducements (such as amnesty and an economic stake in peace).

The evidence in favor of many other potential tipping points is much weaker. Early interventions, for instance, did not help Russia, France, or Ethiopia. Although support for a partner government might be particularly effective if provided before a conflict escalates to the point of war, once a conflict does escalate, golden hours seldom appear to represent true tipping points. Similarly, if a government is not strong enough to act decisively, “wedge strategies” designed to split insurgent groups can lead simply to a more fractious opposition incapable of negotiating an end to conflict. Somalia’s TFG, for instance, did not secure any lasting gain from its co-optation of moderate Islamist opposition. Efforts to cut insurgents off from their black market revenues are seldom as decisive as ending state support to insurgents. Illicit trafficking is extremely difficult to interdict fully, and often the intervening forces of poorer states become captured by the criminal economies they are trying to police—an outcome observed in the Tajikistan and Somalia cases examined in this article and in many other instances. Finally, strengthening constituencies for peace is ultimately necessary to bring a decisive end to conflict, but without a large-scale stability operation of the sort the United States currently seeks to avoid, the empowerment of pro-peace constituencies is usually the *outcome* of conflict rather than a tipping point itself.

Small-footprint interventions may help the United States secure at least partial successes by weakening dangerous adversaries or by providing partner regimes a temporary reprieve in which to reform themselves. The examples offered here and many others, however, suggest their effects will usually not be decisive. Most conflicts, in other words, fail to tip decisively, even at particularly opportune junctures.

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