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Assessing Trade-Offs in U.S. Military Intervention Decisions

Whether, When, and with What Size Force
to Intervene



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Preface

This report documents research and analysis conducted as part of a project entitled *Costs of Not Intervening*, sponsored by the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff, G-3/5/7, U.S. Army. The purpose of this project was to develop a framework to assess the trade-offs between delaying or forgoing interventions and intervening in the early stages of an armed conflict in order to inform U.S. Army and U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) planning and decisions regarding whether and when to initiate U.S. military interventions.

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Summary

The research reported here was completed in November 2019, followed by security review by the sponsor and the Office of the Chief of Public Affairs, with final sign-off in November 2021.

When faced with the outbreak of a war or the onset of an international crisis that affects important U.S. interests, U.S. policymakers must consider how best to respond. They have a variety of options and tools available to them: doing nothing, engaging diplomatically, providing military or economic assistance to one or more of the involved parties, or committing U.S. forces either in a unilateral intervention or in a multilateral coalition. Even after an initial choice is made, policymakers still have several decisions to make. For instance, if the decision is made to use military assistance, how much aid should be provided, and should that aid consist of weapons, supplies, or money? In the case of military interventions, policymakers must decide the size and composition of the forces to be employed. Moreover, even if an initial decision is made to not become involved militarily, that decision can always be revisited, and a later intervention can be undertaken.

As policymakers consider these options, the costs and benefits of not intervening militarily might be difficult to assess in comparison with the costs and benefits of undertaking a military intervention. There are cases in which it is possible that a quick U.S. intervention to reestablish stability and force a settlement might have prevented a longer, more costly conflict that might then prompt a later but more challenging U.S. intervention. Failure to intervene might have strategic costs as well, such as an increase in regional or global instability or the loss of access to key strategic territory, bases, or ports. However, a decision to forgo intervention could have notable benefits. Depending on the situation, these might include not only economic savings or sav-

ings in terms of lives lost, but also the enhancement of U.S. reputation and diplomatic influence, the strengthening of other regional actors that are then empowered to handle future crises, or even the potential to prompt U.S. adversary intervention into what becomes, for them, a quagmire. An improved understanding of the potential costs and benefits of intervention and nonintervention, and the factors on which they depend, could improve the information available to policymakers and could lead to substantial benefits for the United States, given the often highly consequential nature of military intervention decisions.

Objective

To this end, the objective of this report is to create a framework that can be used to rigorously consider the trade-offs between intervening militarily immediately following the outbreak of a war or crisis, intervening later, and not intervening at all, as well as the trade-offs involved with decisions regarding the size of the potential intervention force to be employed. This framework can be used to provide a better understanding of the relationships between intervention timing, intervention size, and intervention outcomes to inform future debates about whether and when to undertake a military intervention.

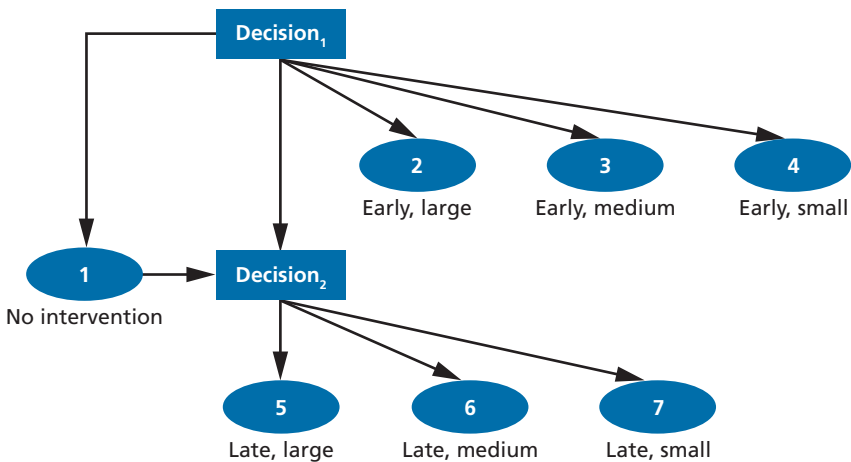
Although policymakers might decide to undertake a military intervention at any point during a war or crisis, we conceptualize the decision to intervene as occurring in two distinct stages. First, policymakers decide whether to intervene in the early stages of a crisis or war. This “early” decision period is intended to reflect the first U.S. consideration of a potential intervention in a crisis or war, notwithstanding any limited potential delays imposed because of the complexity of the U.S. policy process or the gathering of information on the events in question. If a decision is made to intervene in this initial period, policymakers would also need to decide on the size and scope of the U.S. intervention. Indeed, these decisions are likely to be made together because the set of feasible intervention options will likely affect the advisability of the intervention itself. Policymakers might have a wide variety of options for the forces they commit to an intervention, but we

stylize these choices down to three: the commitment of small, medium, or large forces. As these sizing decisions are considered, policymakers might view the problem in many different ways, such as deciding to “throw everything” at a particularly acute problem, conducting a very limited intervention designed only to monitor the situation or signal interest, or opting for something in between.

If policymakers decide not to intervene in this first decision period, they could (if the war or crisis continues) face a second decision period regarding whether to intervene later in the crisis or war and, if so, what size force to commit at that time. Taken together, this model suggests seven possible choices for a state considering whether to intervene. Figure S.1 illustrates a decision tree that can be used to conceptualize the decision points and available options.

In this report, we are interested in understanding how the decisions about whether to intervene, when to intervene, and with how many forces to intervene are associated with intervention and conflict outcomes. In other words, we aim to understand how outcomes differ as a result of the policymaker decision to choose one of the seven options shown in Figure S.1. We identify three categories of outcomes as being of particular interest: conflict outcomes, outcomes for the

Figure S.1
The Intervention Decision



intervening state (the United States), and outcomes for the host nation. Throughout the report, we explore the relationships between intervention decisions and these outcome measures, with the goal of identifying patterns and insights that can be used by planners and decisionmakers.

Research Approach

We assessed that it would be unlikely that a single approach would adequately allow us to assess the trade-offs inherent in the decisions regarding whether, when, and with what size forces to intervene, given the complexity of these decisions. Moreover, different approaches might have different strengths and weaknesses for addressing different aspects of these issues. We therefore investigated these questions using four distinct methods, then combined the results to develop a more comprehensive assessment of the trade-offs involved in the set of decisions described in the previous section.

First, we conducted an extensive review of academic and policy literature on relevant topics, including (1) the relationship between third-party interventions and conflict duration and intensity, (2) the costs and benefits of an intervention for the intervening state, and (3) the effects of third-party interventions on the host nation. We used the literature review to determine what previous research has already suggested about the relationship between interventions, intervention timing, and intervention size and conflict outcomes, outcomes for the intervener, and outcomes for the host. This literature helps to bound our expectations for what we might find using other methods as well as highlights aspects of our research question that have (or have not) previously been carefully investigated.

Second, we conducted a quantitative analysis using a database of 286 crises and wars since 1945 that we identified as involving U.S. interests to a degree that made a U.S. military intervention plausible. This database includes instances in which the United States intervened and those in which it did not. We categorized these cases according to three criteria: (1) whether there was an intervention, (2) whether an intervention (if it occurred) was early or late, and (3) whether an inter-

vention (if it occurred) was large, medium, or small in size. We then compared these categories of cases along several dimensions that reflect the three main categories of outcomes on which we focus: effects on the conflict, effects on U.S. interests, and effects on the host nation.

Third, we conducted a set of 45 short, focused case studies. These case studies include interventions and noninterventions, each addressing a consistent set of questions. Topics covered include an assessment of why an intervention did or did not occur, why it occurred when it did (early or late), and what the consequences of the intervention or nonintervention choice were for the United States and the host nation (or potential host, in the case of noninterventions). In particular, these case studies helped us to isolate the effects of intervention size and timing decisions on U.S. interests from selection effects that might drive more-general correlations or apparent relationships.

Finally, we conducted four in-depth counterfactual illustrations focused on the 1992–1995 Bosnian War, the 1950–1953 Korean War, the 2011 Libyan Civil War, and the 1979 Iranian Revolution. In these counterfactuals, we first describe what happened historically and why, then we explore what might have happened if the United States had made a different intervention decision, such as choosing not to intervene in the Korean War. We highlight the role of key actors and their interests and capabilities and explore how they likely would have acted in the alternative scenario. We explore the costs and benefits for the United States of this alternate decision and identify which factors would have been central to determining the counterfactual outcomes. We use the insights from these cases to illustrate broader observations about the trade-offs between different intervention decisions and outcome measures.

Results

The findings from these four research approaches provided insights into how intervention decisions affect all three categories of outcome measures that we assessed: effects on the conflict, effects on U.S. interests, and effects on the host nation. Next, we summarize our results of

greatest interest to policymakers (the effects of intervention decisions on U.S. interests) through the lens of the three key intervention decisions our research was designed to inform. A full discussion of our results related to other outcome measures is presented in Chapter Six.

The Intervention Decision: Should the United States Intervene?

Although military interventions can be very effective at advancing U.S. interests in some contexts and situations, they could have the opposite effect in other contexts, creating long-term entanglements and increasing economic and strategic costs without realizing U.S. objectives. Our analysis suggested that the United States achieves its political objectives in military interventions about 60 percent of the time. Moreover, U.S. intervention is not a requirement for protecting U.S. interests in all cases. Many nonintervention cases resolve in ways that do not have significant implications for U.S. interests; historically, more nonintervention cases resulted in improved outcomes for U.S. interests than resulted in deteriorated outcomes. Rather than presenting a bias toward intervening to solve problems, then, this study highlights for decisionmakers the importance of carefully considering local conditions in order to assess whether conducting a military intervention is likely to advance U.S. goals.

The factors that distinguish between intervention opportunities that advance U.S. interests and those that have the opposite effect appear to be contextual. In particular, our focused case studies, counterfactual case studies, and review of the literature all highlight the centrality of understanding how an outside intervention might shift the local balance of power for determining how the intervention could affect the course of the conflict and the leverage available to the United States to achieve its interests. If the U.S. intervention would serve to shift the power of the favored side in a conflict from either a stalemated or a disadvantaged position to a clearly advantaged position, then we would expect the intervention to help end the conflict and increase the likelihood that the United States is able to advance its other policy goals.

Historical examples of this dynamic can be seen in the 1991 Gulf War or the 1995 Bosnian intervention. Other dynamics, however,

could force policymakers to make explicit trade-offs across different outcomes. In the 1950 intervention into the Korean War, for example, U.S. intervention helped avoid the defeat of the Republic of Korea (ROK), but it also served to substantially prolong the conflict, likely increasing the near-term destruction of the Korean peninsula, particularly once Chinese intervention pushed the conflict into a lengthy stalemate. Although the end result helped to advance U.S. strategic interests and placed the ROK on a positive developmental trajectory, these achievements came at the cost of involvement in a lengthy conflict with a substantial human toll. In other cases, illustrated by our counterfactual study of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and by our analysis of the 2007 war in Yemen, any plausibly sized U.S. intervention likely would have been unable to dramatically alter the local balance of power in the desired direction, and intervention was therefore likely best avoided. Finally, a U.S. intervention could be largely superfluous if it occurs in a context in which the supported side already has the upper hand. This was partly the case in the 1965 Dominican Republic intervention, where a combination of local and regional actors likely could have achieved the same, generally positive outcome without U.S. intervention, or at least with a much smaller U.S. force. In the 1948 Costa Rican civil war, the U.S. decision not to undertake a military intervention at all helped to facilitate a regional response that settled the immediate conflict and put the country on a sustainable, positive trajectory for decades.

Our analysis also highlights that, despite the importance of determining the local balance of power when anticipating intervention outcomes, such a determination can be difficult in practice, particularly if the motivations and capabilities of third-party spoilers are not properly understood. The Chinese intervention to reverse U.S. advances in the Korean War, for example, was not anticipated, although it proved decisive for shifting the outcome of the war. The role Pakistan has played in the post-2001 conflict in Afghanistan provides another example.

The Timing Decision: Is It Better to Intervene Early?

Our analysis suggests that early interventions are associated with both the highest rewards and increased risks. In our quantitative analysis,

early interventions were somewhat more likely to achieve U.S. political objectives than later ones were. The short, focused case studies suggest more-equal rates of success between early and late interventions in terms of achieving U.S. objectives, but we also find many more instances where the early timing of an intervention was vitally important to those successes, and we find only one potential case in which the lateness of the intervention might have been beneficial. For example, quick U.S. responses to the 1991 Kurdish humanitarian crisis in northern Iraq and the rapid mobilizations and deployments undertaken in response to the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis were successful in good part because of the fact that they occurred early in the crises. Although some later interventions, such as the 2014 intervention into Iraq to combat the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), were also largely successful, our research suggests this degree of success was, for the most part, not *because* they began late in these conflicts.¹ One potential exception to this trend was the U.S. intervention in Bosnia. Although our counterfactual analysis suggests that an earlier U.S. intervention could have led to a similar outcome (while decreasing the humanitarian toll of the conflict), it would only have done so if the United States had been willing to pay a substantially higher price, including increased risk to its ground forces. The later intervention that occurred historically in 1995 required fewer trade-offs for the United States because the local balance of power was already moving away from the Bosnian Serbs before robust U.S. intervention began. Waiting to undertake an intervention later in a conflict could therefore provide a local balance of power that is more conducive to advancing U.S. interests, thereby limiting U.S. costs or increasing the feasibility of intervention—though there is, of course, no guarantee that such changes will occur.

More broadly, however, it is important to emphasize that the decision for policymakers about timing is really an iterative one that is closely intertwined with the decision regarding whether to intervene at

¹ To clarify, we assessed that a U.S. intervention prior to the fall of Mosul could have been more effective (and at lower cost) than the historical intervention that took place afterward. Once Mosul had fallen, however, U.S. patience in rebuilding Iraqi security forces before mounting a sustained counteroffensive appears to have paid dividends.

all. Early interventions, from this perspective, simply reflect instances when policymakers decided to intervene at their first opportunity to do so, while later interventions occur when policymakers decide to intervene at subsequent points in the conflict. But policymakers do not typically make a decision at one point in time to intervene at some later point in time, so there is no actual decision to “intervene late.” The decision that policymakers face is therefore similar regardless of when in the conflict it occurs. The analysis in the prior section regarding whether the United States should intervene at all therefore remains relevant regardless of when in the course of the conflict an intervention is being contemplated.

The Size Decision: Is It Better to Intervene with Larger Forces?

There is a tendency to assume that “more is always better” when deciding how many forces to commit to an intervention. Certainly, robust interventions appear both warranted and highly likely in response to direct threats posed to U.S. national security, such as the invasion of Afghanistan following the September 11, 2001, attacks and the response to the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

We also have evidence suggesting that larger interventions could be associated with better outcomes more generally. In our focused cases, for example, we found that large and medium interventions more often achieved U.S. political objectives. Further, we observed that there are more instances in which the size of a larger intervention is central to its success than is the case for smaller interventions. Large interventions, such as the 1991 Gulf War, highlight the value that larger forces can provide, particularly in cases of traditional combat and when facing large, powerful adversaries.

That said, we also find reasons for caution in the employment of larger forces. To begin with, a blanket application of large forces in interventions could often prove to be unnecessary, adding additional costs without realizing additional benefits, as was the case in the large U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic in 1965. But the potential concerns with large forces extend beyond a lack of efficiency. Our analysis indicates at least three circumstances in which forces of a more-limited size might be preferable. First, a large U.S. force might

produce a substantial backlash among either the local population or important regional actors, undermining the intervention's ability to achieve its objectives and potentially strengthening adversary forces. Second, a large U.S. force might seem highly threatening to an adversary and prompt unwanted escalation in the conflict or crisis. Third, a large force, particularly a large ground force, might take substantial time to mobilize and deploy, such that policymakers might prefer to send a smaller force that can be ready more quickly.

Even beyond these conditions that might suggest a preference for a force of a more-limited size, the introduction of large forces effectively increases the "bet" the United States is placing on the outcome of the intervention. As noted above, large forces can help to increase success, but in other instances, such as the post-2001 intervention in Afghanistan, even greatly increased forces might prove unable to fundamentally alter the dynamics of the conflict, increasing the costs of the intervention without substantially increasing its benefits. In our focused case studies, it is notable that large interventions encompass some of the most notable successes and the most notable failures for U.S. interventions. Small interventions, by contrast, tend to have less effect overall on U.S. interests and are, for the most part, associated with more-limited gains; they are also, in other circumstances, associated with more-circumscribed losses.

What determines when larger forces are a good bet to make in an intervention? Although this determination is partly affected by the U.S. interests involved, how large forces would be expected to affect the local balance of power and the degree of leverage the United States can exercise in the host nation appear to be central. When large forces allow the United States to tip the balance of power clearly in favor of the side it supports, it can generally expect these larger forces to help lead to better outcomes. The United States has tremendous military capabilities, so this dynamic is often relevant. There are, however, exceptions in which the introduction of large forces could prompt local backlash, unwanted escalation, inadvisable delays, or third-party intervention to counterbalance U.S. forces—such as the Chinese intervention during the Korean War—or could simply be insufficient to decisively alter the local balance of power. The decision to intervene with

large forces therefore represents a higher-risk, higher-reward strategy, the advisability of which should be carefully assessed according to the local context and the criteria noted above.

Recommendations

Using the key insights of our analysis, we make three recommendations to inform U.S. and Army planning and decisionmaking regarding future interventions.

Select Interventions Judiciously: Context Is Likely to Be Decisive

Our analysis clearly shows that military interventions can advance U.S. national interests in certain circumstances. But we also find suggestive evidence that, since 1945, the United States could be over-intervening in aggregate. Instances of U.S. interventions that failed to achieve their objectives and where U.S. interests might have been better served by not undertaking the intervention in the first place, such as the post-2003 intervention in Iraq, are often well-known. Equally interesting, however, is that we found few cases in which the United States did not intervene but likely would have been better off if it had, such as the 1978 Nicaraguan Civil War. More numerous were cases in which the United States did not intervene and saw its interests advanced partly because of its restraint, such as the 2006 Iranian nuclear crisis and the 1948 civil wars in Costa Rica and Colombia. In general, the costs of not intervening may have been overemphasized in analyses of U.S. intervention policy in comparison with the potential benefits of restraint.

However, this general observation is of more-limited value for policymakers charged with identifying which specific interventions are most essential to undertake and which can be safely avoided. Our analysis identifies four key criteria that can be assessed when deciding whether a military intervention is likely to advance U.S. interests or prove counterproductive or wasteful:

- *The local balance of power*: In crises and wars where the balance of power already tilts toward the side favored by the United States,

intervention might be unnecessary. However, where the United States' interests are under threat, intervention could make more sense, provided the U.S. intervention would be capable of turning the tide.

- *The role of spoilers:* If external actors might respond to a U.S. intervention by increasing their involvement in a crisis or war sufficiently to counteract the introduction of U.S. forces, then intervention could prove ineffective. U.S. adversaries might also respond to the intervention by taking actions in other theaters that undermine U.S. interests in a manner that a narrow analysis of the host nation might not account for. During the Cold War, for example, the United States had to carefully consider how the Soviet Union would react to its overseas activities in order to prevent unintentional escalation.
- *The potential risks of escalation:* If a U.S. intervention has the potential to directly threaten, or to be perceived as directly threatening, the security of a near-peer or other highly capable U.S. adversary, then the intervention has the potential to draw the United States into a wider or more-dangerous confrontation. Although such circumstances were limited in the cases we assessed, their potential consequences highlight the importance of considering this factor when making intervention decisions.
- *The degree of legitimacy:* Interventions taken without international legitimacy can affect U.S. relations with allies and the U.S. reputation more broadly. Legitimacy can also be vital for avoiding a backlash in the host nation; such a backlash could undermine the ability of the intervention to achieve its goals. This concern is most acute for interventions with large numbers of U.S. forces. In other cases (most notably, those involving humanitarian concerns for which a U.S. or multilateral intervention might be increasingly expected), it could be that a failure to intervene to prevent civilian suffering could sap the legitimacy of the United States as a global leader.

Earlier, Larger Interventions Are Higher Risk, Higher Reward

Our analyses suggest that earlier and larger interventions are overall more likely to result in positive outcomes for the United States. Moreover, our case studies illustrate clearly how both the timing and size of these interventions can be essential factors in their success in this regard. However, earlier and larger interventions are also associated with some of the most negative outcomes that we observe and, even when successful, involve substantial economic costs for the United States. These interventions therefore constitute “betting big.” They have a clear potential to achieve U.S. objectives, and in some instances, they might be the only way to do so. But there are several circumstances, most notably including the presence of highly capable third-party spoilers, where such interventions might be apt to fail nonetheless. When such interventions fail to achieve their objectives or when they generate additional, unforeseen complications, the strategic, reputational, and economic costs they can impose on the United States are enormous. Earlier, larger interventions should be undertaken only after a careful analysis of their likelihood of success, informed by an assessment of the factors noted above and an assessment of potential alternatives to military intervention.

Prioritize Collection and Analysis of Key Intelligence to Inform Intervention Decisions

The above two recommendations emphasize the importance of understanding the local context in order to inform intervention decisions. These factors, as much as anything the United States does in the actual conduct of the intervention, can determine whether an intervention advances or harms U.S. interests. This is an area in which focused intelligence and data gathering and subsequent careful analysis can have a significant impact. Intelligence collection to inform intervention decisions should focus on the following questions:

- *Warring parties and the balance of power:* Who are the warring parties? What is the balance of power between relevant parties? Would the balance be changed in a way favorable to U.S. interests with an intervention?

- *Motivations of the parties*: Is the war or crisis one that seems amenable to settlement? How long is each side willing to fight? Are the issues at stake likely to remain intractable, or could they be resolved through negotiation?
- *External spoilers and influencers*: Which external actors could become involved in ways that counter U.S. interests? What are their goals and capabilities? Are they likely to intervene with military forces or to exert other types of influence?
- *Local populations*: Will the local population of the host nation be supportive of a U.S. intervention? If not, what type of backlash is likely, and how severe will it be? What are the relationships between the other parties to the conflict and the local population?
- *Adversary responses*: How will adversaries respond to a U.S. intervention? Are they likely to feel threatened by it? Are there important escalation risks to consider? Do adversaries have the ability and motivation to undermine U.S. interests elsewhere in response to the intervention?
- *International community*: What will be the response of the international community to the intervention? Will the United States face backlash from allies for intervening or not intervening?

Ensuring high-quality and up-to-date information on these questions can support better decisions about whether and when to intervene and with what size force. Of course, the U.S. military, and the U.S. government more broadly, might already be collecting much of this information for some locations. We make this recommendation partly to emphasize the importance of filling any gaps that might exist with regard to countries where an intervention is being contemplated but also to emphasize the information that decisionmakers will need in order to apply the framework developed in this report to the intervention decision questions we explore.

The theme running throughout this report is that decisions about whether, when, and with what size force to intervene can have important implications for U.S. interests. These decisions can be optimized to maximize benefits to the United States but only if contextual factors are carefully weighed and analyzed. Simplistic advice for these com-

plex intervention decisions is not possible because there is no single approach that will work every time. Instead, each intervention decision must be made on its own terms. Our aim with this report is to reduce the complexity of this decision for senior leaders by identifying the key factors that should be weighed when making this decision, describing the mechanisms that link these factors to intervention outcomes, providing detailed historical examples, and assessing systematically the likely implications of specific intervention decisions executed in particular contexts.

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Abbreviations

DPRK	Democratic People’s Republic of Korea
GDP	gross domestic product
ICB	International Crisis Behavior
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PLO	Palestinian Liberation Movement
ROK	Republic of Korea
RUMID	RAND Unclassified Military Intervention Dataset
UCDP	Uppsala Conflict Data Project
UN	United Nations
UNPROFOR	United Nations Provisional Force

Introduction

When faced with the outbreak of a war or the onset of an international crisis that affects important U.S. interests, U.S. policymakers must consider how best to respond. They have a variety of options and tools available to them: doing nothing, engaging diplomatically, providing military or economic assistance to one or more of the involved parties, or committing U.S. forces either in a unilateral intervention or in a multilateral coalition. Even after an initial choice is made, policymakers still have several decisions to make. For instance, if the decision is made to use military assistance, how much aid should be provided, and should that aid consist of weapons, supplies, or money? In the case of military interventions, policymakers must decide the size and composition of the forces to be employed. Moreover, even if an initial decision is made to not become involved militarily, that decision can always be revisited, and a later intervention can be undertaken.

The decision about which course of action to take will depend on a variety of factors, including the U.S. interests at stake and assessments of the likely course of the crisis or war absent U.S. involvement. In the case of military interventions—the focus of this report—the decision will also be influenced by several other considerations, such as the available resources (forces and money), public support, and an assessment of the likelihood that a military intervention will allow the United States to achieve its objectives and protect its national interests. Further, ongoing shifts in the international distribution of power and influence, notably including the rise of China, are likely to affect U.S.

calculations in this regard to an increasing degree in the future, in ways that could differ from more-recent U.S. experiences.

However, although the use of military force is often considered in response to a war or crisis, military interventions are less common. Only a fraction of all international conflicts and crises provoke a third-party military intervention, and only a small fraction of those are interventions undertaken by the United States. In the majority of cases, then, policymakers choose not to intervene militarily, opting instead to limit their engagement to diplomatic pressure or providing some other sort of assistance or support (or opting to do nothing).

There are many cases where a decision not to intervene or to “wait and see” (effectively delaying an intervention decision) reflects an assessment that an intervention would be too costly, that it would tie up U.S. forces in a long-lasting engagement, that it would be politically unpopular, or that an intervention would be unlikely to advance U.S. national interests. For instance, the U.S. decision not to initially intervene militarily in Rwanda in response to the 1994 genocide was, according to notes from the National Security Council at the time, (1) the result of concerns over the costs of such an intervention, (2) uncertainty about whether an intervention force could arrive in time to substantially alter the course of the conflict and save lives, (3) the lack of appetite (among the general public and policymakers) for another U.S. intervention in sub-Saharan Africa in the wake of the perceived failure of the intervention in Somalia, and (4) the fact that Rwanda was seen as peripheral to U.S. interests.¹ The costs were therefore perceived as high, and the benefits were seen as uncertain or limited. In the recent Syrian civil war, involving a country arguably more directly relevant to U.S. strategic interests, the United States showed great hesitancy to intervene, waiting almost four years after the outbreak of the war in

¹ Marc Grossman, Executive Secretary, U.S. Department of State, “Discussion Paper for Deputies Committee on Peacekeeping Options in Rwanda,” memorandum to William H. Itoh, Executive Secretary, National Security Council, Washington, D.C., May 16, 1994; Susan E. Rice, National Security Council, “Updated Talking Points on Rwanda,” memorandum to W. Anthony K. Lake et al., Washington, D.C., May 7, 1994; Susan E. Rice and Nick Rasmussen, “Deputies Committee Meeting on African Peacekeeping Issues,” memorandum to Samuel R. Berger, Washington, D.C., September 20, 1993.

2011 before initiating a military intervention in the country and, even then, limiting the intervention in size and scope. In this instance, the decision to delay reflected a fear of being dragged into a long-running intervention, concerns about a potential confrontation with Russia and Iran (which were also active in the conflict), fatigue following the long conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, and a sense that a military intervention was unlikely to meaningfully advance U.S. objectives and interests.² The anticipated costs and uncertain benefits of undertaking interventions can often deter or delay their initiation.

For policymakers, what can be more difficult to assess in these discussions about whether and when to intervene, however, is the extent to which the lack of U.S. intervention could also have important costs or benefits. There are cases (Syria potentially included) in which it is possible that a quick U.S. intervention to reestablish stability and force a settlement might have prevented a longer, more costly conflict that might, in turn, prompt a later but more challenging U.S. intervention. Similarly, there could be reputational and strategic costs from a decision not to intervene. The limited U.S. response to the 1994 genocide in Rwanda presented a challenge to U.S. reputation and credibility as an advocate of human rights.³ Failure to intervene might have strategic costs as well, such as an increase in regional or global instability or the loss of access to key strategic territory, bases, or ports. One of the key reasons that the United States has been so active in the Middle East in recent decades, for instance, has been to ensure that key sea passages remain open and that oil markets remain stable.⁴ However, a decision to forgo intervention could have notable benefits as well. Depending on the situation, these might include not only economic savings or savings in terms of lives lost, but also the enhancement of U.S. repu-

² Dominic Tierney, "Syria and the Cycle of American Intervention," *The Atlantic*, October 24, 2016.

³ Samantha Power, "Bystanders to Genocide," *The Atlantic*, September 2001.

⁴ Richard N. Haass and Martin Indyk, "Beyond Iraq: A New U.S. Strategy for the Middle East," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 88, No. 1, 2009; Stacie L. Pettyjohn and Jennifer Kavanagh, *Access Granted: Political Challenges to the U.S. Overseas Military Presence, 1945–2014*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1339-AF, 2016.

tation and diplomatic influence; the strengthening of other regional actors, which are then empowered to handle future crises; or even the potential to prompt U.S. adversary intervention into what becomes, for them, a quagmire.

The costs and benefits of not intervening might be difficult to assess in comparison with the costs and benefits of undertaking an intervention and could, therefore, tend to be discounted by policymakers when making their intervention decision. However, an improved understanding of these costs and benefits could improve the information available to policymakers and lead to substantial benefits for the United States, given the often highly consequential nature of military intervention decisions.

Objective

To this end, our objective with this report is to create a framework that can be used to rigorously consider the trade-offs between intervening militarily immediately following the outbreak of a war or crisis, intervening later, and not intervening at all, as well as the trade-offs involved with decisions regarding the size of the potential intervention force to be employed. This framework can be used to provide a better understanding of the relationships between intervention timing, intervention size, and intervention outcomes to inform future debates about whether and when to intervene.

To construct this framework and explore these trade-offs, we will need to consider not only the historical U.S. experience with interventions of different timings and sizes, but also the historical record of cases in which the United States did not intervene. In addition to investigating the historical relationships between intervention decisions and relevant outcomes, we will explore the possible effects of alternative decisions. In cases where the historical decision was made to intervene, we will endeavor to estimate the possible costs and benefits of the alternative choice: a decision not to intervene. In cases where the historical decision was made not to intervene, we will explore the potential costs and benefits to the United States had the decision been

made to send military forces. Counterfactual comparisons are inherently challenging, especially given the heterogeneity of U.S. intervention and nonintervention cases. A full accounting of relevant costs and benefits will include not only economic costs and benefits, but also the strategic and reputational costs and benefits of each intervention and nonintervention decision; such costs and benefits are challenging to estimate, even for historical cases. In the remainder of this chapter, we discuss our theoretical framework and methodological approach to addressing these challenging questions in a rigorous way.

Theoretical Framework

Although policymakers might decide to undertake a military intervention at any point during a war or crisis, we conceptualize the decision to intervene as occurring in two distinct stages. First, policymakers decide whether to intervene in the early stages of a crisis or war. This “early” decision period is intended to reflect the first U.S. consideration of a potential intervention in a crisis or war, notwithstanding any limited potential delays imposed because of the complexity of the U.S. policy process or the gathering of information on the events in question. If a decision is made to intervene in this initial period, policymakers would also need to decide on the size and scope of the U.S. intervention. Indeed, these decisions are likely to be made together because the set of feasible intervention options will likely affect the advisability of the intervention itself. Policymakers might have a wide variety of options for the forces they commit to an intervention, but we stylize these choices down to three: the commitment of small, medium, or large forces. As these sizing decisions are considered, policymakers might view the problem in many different ways, such as deciding to “throw everything” at a particularly acute problem, conducting a very limited intervention designed only to monitor the situation or signal interest, or opting for something in between. For many situations—and depending on the issues involved—very large and very small interventions might not be plausible options for policymakers. The inclu-

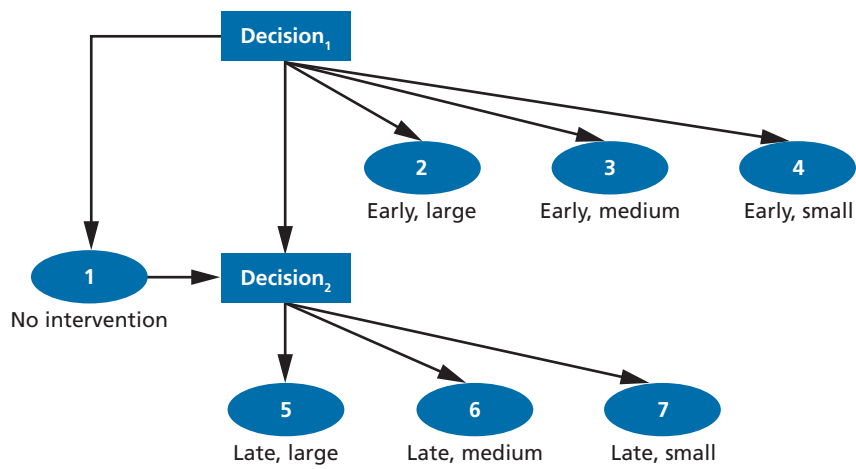
sion of a middle category that is more plausible in a wider range of circumstances is therefore an important aspect of this framework.

If policymakers decide not to intervene in this first decision period, they could (if the war or crisis continues) face a second decision period regarding whether to intervene later in the crisis or war and, if so, what size force to commit at that time. It is important to note that although we have reduced these decision periods to just two for analytical purposes, policymakers have the opportunity to revisit these decisions at any time; also of note is that the continuous nature of determining when and how to respond to these issues represents a challenge. Policymakers could face situations that become incrementally more concerning but without dramatic events that force a reconsideration of U.S. policy. Our reduction of the decision process to two distinct decision points could, therefore, make the process of deciding whether to intervene appear to be simpler than it would be in reality. In addition, it is important to clarify that because policymakers cannot make binding decisions never to intervene in a crisis or war—changed circumstances could always force a reconsideration—the “No Intervention” option therefore reflects circumstances for which policymakers have decided not to intervene at least at one point in time (and possibly more), and the crisis or war ended before this decision to forgo intervention was altered. Taking these issues into account, it is clear that this model of U.S. intervention decisions is highly stylized, but we use it in this report because it captures the main trade-offs facing policymakers and will enable us to group relatively more-similar decisions for analysis.

Altogether, this model suggests seven possible choices for a state considering whether to intervene. Figure 1.1 illustrates a decision tree that can be used to conceptualize the decision points and available options.

In this report, we are interested in understanding how the decisions about whether to intervene, when to intervene, and with how many forces to intervene are associated with intervention and conflict outcomes. In other words, we aim to understand how outcomes differ as a result of the policymaker decision to choose one of the seven options

Figure 1.1
The Intervention Decision



shown in Figure 1.1.⁵ We identify three categories of outcomes as being of particular interest: conflict outcomes, outcomes for the intervening state (the United States), and outcomes for the host nation. Within each of these categories are several more-specific outcomes of interest, identified in Table 1.1. For example, conflict outcomes might include the conflict's duration, its intensity, and the likelihood that the con-

⁵ There are, of course, numerous other factors that could affect intervention outcomes beyond these high-level decisions made at the outset of an intervention. Perhaps most notable among these, from the perspective of policymakers, are part of a series of more-operational decisions regarding how to actually execute the intervention, including decisions regarding rules of engagement, targeting, and a host of other issues. Although these decisions potentially are important to determining outcomes, we largely placed consideration of the effects of such decisions outside the scope of this report to focus more directly on the three essential high-level decisions discussed above. That said, how interventions are executed has the potential to confound our analysis if patterns we attribute to timing and size decisions turn out to be attributable to execution decisions. Because of this possibility, when we considered in our focused case studies and counterfactual cases (summarized in Chapters Four and Five) whether size and timing decisions made independent contributions to the advancement of U.S. interests, we assessed whether the execution of mission decisions was instead responsible for the observed patterns. We did not have a similar ability to account for these issues in our quantitative chapter (Chapter Three); this should be understood as an additional limitation of that analysis.

Table 1.1
Intervention Outcomes of Interest

Conflict Outcomes	Intervening State Interests	Host-Nation Outcomes
Duration	• Economic costs and benefits	• Economic trajectory
Intensity	• Casualties	• Political trajectory
Recurrence	• Reputational costs and benefits • Strategic costs and benefits • Domestic political costs and benefits	• Costs imposed by the conflict

NOTE: This report does not focus on either domestic political costs or military casualties, although both are discussed in Chapter Two.

flict will recur. Host-nation outcomes might focus on that country’s political and economic trajectory and the costs of the conflict borne by that country (e.g., economic costs or physical costs, such as destruction of property and loss of lives). Finally, the outcomes for the intervener might include the economic, strategic, reputational, and political costs and benefits of the intervention,⁶ the possible loss of U.S. military or civilian personnel, and whether the intervention or nonintervention advances state interests. Throughout the report, we will explore the relationships between intervention decisions and these outcome measures, with the goal of identifying patterns and insights that can be used by planners and decisionmakers.

⁶ There is a significant literature that considers the political costs and benefits of conducting military interventions at various points in the political and election cycles. We consider this literature in Chapter Two. We do not, however, directly consider political costs in the remainder of the analysis. The focus of this report is on how decisions about when and with how many forces to intervene shape the outcomes of those interventions and their ability to advance U.S. national interests. Concerns about the political costs of interventions to specific actors or parties is therefore outside the scope of the report.

Approach

We assessed that it would be unlikely that a single approach would adequately allow us to assess the trade-offs inherent in the decisions regarding whether, when, and with what size forces to intervene, given the complexity of these decisions. Moreover, different approaches might have different strengths and weaknesses for addressing different aspects of these issues. We therefore investigated these questions using four distinct methods, then combined the results to develop a more comprehensive assessment of the trade-offs involved in the set of decisions described in the previous section. Although we include a full discussion of the relevant methods in each of the main chapters of this report, we provide a brief overview here.

First, we conducted an extensive review of academic and policy literature on relevant topics including (1) the relationship between third-party interventions and conflict duration and intensity, (2) the costs and benefits of an intervention for the intervening state, and (3) the effects of third-party interventions on the host nation. We used the literature review to determine what previous research has already suggested about the relationship between interventions, intervention timing, and intervention size and conflict outcomes, outcomes for the intervener, and outcomes for the host. This literature helps to bound our expectations for what we might find using other methods as well as highlights aspects of our research question that have (or have not) previously been carefully investigated.

Second, we conducted a quantitative analysis using a database of 286 crises and wars since 1945 that we identified as involving U.S. interests to a degree that made a U.S. military intervention plausible. This database includes instances in which the United States has intervened and those in which it did not. We categorized these cases according to three criteria: (1) whether there was an intervention, (2) whether an intervention (if it occurred) was early or late, and (3) whether an intervention (if it occurred) was large, medium, or small in size. We then compared these categories of cases along several dimensions, including conflict or crisis duration and recurrence, likelihood of achieving U.S. political objectives, military and economic assistance to the host

nation (or location of the conflict or crisis), and political and economic outcomes for the host nation (or location of the conflict or crisis). We use these comparisons as another perspective on how decisions about whether to intervene, decisions about intervention timing, and choices about intervention size might be related to different outcome measures.

Third, we conducted a set of 45 short, focused case studies. These case studies include interventions and noninterventions, each addressing a consistent set of questions. Topics covered include an assessment of why an intervention did or did not occur, why it occurred when it did (early or late), and what the consequences of the intervention or nonintervention choice were for the United States and the host nation (or potential host, in the case of noninterventions). In particular, these case studies helped us to isolate the effects of intervention size and timing decisions on U.S. interests from selection effects that might drive more-general correlations or apparent relationships. The case studies address many of the same questions as the first two methodological approaches described, though they do not focus on the effects on conflict intensity because these appeared to be well-considered elsewhere. However, they allow for the inclusion of context and nuance as well as cross-case comparisons and observations.

Finally, we conducted four in-depth counterfactual illustrations focused on the 1992–1995 Bosnian War, the 1950–1953 Korean War, the 2011 Libyan Civil War, and the 1979 Iranian Revolution. In these counterfactuals, we first trace out what happened historically and why, then we explore what might have happened if the United States had made a different intervention decision, such as choosing not to intervene in the Korean War. We highlight the role of key actors and their interests and capabilities and explore how they most likely would have acted in the alternative scenario. We explore the costs and benefits for the United States of this alternate decision and identify which factors would have been central to determining the counterfactual outcomes. We use the insights from these cases to illustrate broader observations about the trade-offs between different intervention decisions and outcome measures.

Limitations

Although our use of four methods will give us advantages over the use of any single method, there remain limitations to the conclusions we will be able to draw. The dynamics of war and crisis situations can be immensely complex, and isolating the effects of U.S. interventions from the context in which they occur is quite difficult. Our analysis will not provide a single or simple answer. Instead, it will show how the relative costs and benefits of different intervention timing and size decisions depend very much on the context and that the relationship between intervention decisions and outcomes is highly conditional. We aim to provide decisionmakers with a framework for navigating the set of choices surrounding whether, when, and how to intervene, including insights into when early or late interventions are more likely to lead to favorable outcomes and when interventions tend to have costs that are not offset by their benefits. Finally, the purpose of this report is not to directly evaluate any notable previous or anticipated U.S. intervention decision. Such assessments certainly could be useful to learn lessons or inform specific decisions, but because each intervention decision and each context is unique, they might not provide, in isolation, more-general guidance to policymakers facing these choices in unanticipated contexts in the future. Instead, our objective is to consider the broader U.S. historical experience and to identify patterns, trends, and trade-offs to develop a generalizable framework that can help guide U.S. intervention decisions going forward.

Organization of This Report

We approach the question of how intervention decisions are associated with outcomes from a different perspective in each of the next four chapters. In Chapter Two, we cover the review of existing literature. In Chapter Three, we provide our quantitative analysis of the case universe. In Chapter Four, we discuss the key insights from our 45 short, focused case studies, including the patterns observed in the cases and what these patterns mean for the relationships between intervention timing, size, and outcomes. In Chapter Five, we discuss the key

takeaways from our four longer counterfactual case studies, including what we can learn about the circumstances in which different intervention decisions might be most or least effective in working toward key U.S. objectives at minimum cost. Finally, in Chapter Six, we synthesize these different methods to more comprehensively describe the trade-offs between different intervention decisions.

We also include two appendixes. Appendix A provides additional detail on our list of potential U.S. intervention cases. Appendix B, available online, provides the full text of our counterfactual case studies and can be downloaded at www.rand.org/t/RR4293.

What Do We Know? Reviewing Existing Literature

As noted in Chapter One, states must make a series of decisions when faced with a new conflict or crisis regarding whether to intervene militarily, at what time, and with what sized force. At each decision point, decisionmakers should consider three types of outcomes: the effect of the intervention on the outcome of the conflict (e.g., whether it escalates, ends, recurs), on the intervener's own national interests, and on the trajectory of the host nation.

For our first of four methodologies, we consider in this chapter what existing research can tell us about each of these questions and outcomes. Specifically, we explore key insights from previous work about the relationships between the presence, timing, and size of third-party interventions and three types of outcomes: conflict outcomes, outcomes for the intervening state, and outcomes for the host nation. We then identify the remaining gaps in this literature, with a focus on which gaps could be addressable using the other methodologies employed in this report. Significantly, the least has been written about how timing affects outcomes. Our report therefore has the potential to fill an important gap in prior analyses.

The Intervention Decision: When Do Interventions Improve Outcomes?

Conflict Outcomes

Even with an extensive body of previous research, there is no definitive answer to the question of whether third-party interventions into conflicts or crises tend to improve or worsen the outcomes of those conflicts and crises. Instead, it seems that the effect of the intervention depends heavily on the context: the nature of the conflict and its participants, the intensity of the conflict, and the relative strength of the participants.

Duration and Intensity

There are several reasons why interventions might lengthen the duration of a conflict or crisis. Watts, Johnston, et al., 2017, finds that “[i]nterventions—especially those of the United States—are associated with much lengthier periods of fighting. More specifically, interventions are associated with wars lasting some 50 to 60 percent longer than those not experiencing intervention.”¹ The two key variables mediating the relationship between interventions and conflict duration appear to be the balance of power between warring parties and the side on which the intervener chooses to intercede. Specifically, when the intervener chooses to enter the conflict on the side of the weaker party, effectively lowering the cost of conflict for that party or preventing it from being destroyed, the conflict is likely to last longer than it would have without such an intervention. By allowing weaker parties to continue fighting and reducing their cost of war, third-party interventions can delay the parties’ willingness to reach a settlement or delay the point at which they accept defeat.² Third-party interventions could also lengthen the

¹ Steven Watts, Patrick B. Johnston, Jennifer Kavanagh, Sean M. Zeigler, Bryan Frederick, Trevor Johnston, Karl P. Mueller, Astrid Stuth Cevallos, Nathan Chandler, Meagan L. Smith, Alexander Stephenson, and Julia A. Thompson, *Limited Intervention: Evaluating the Effectiveness of Limited Stabilization, Limited Strike, and Containment Operations*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2037-A, 2017, p. 125.

² Donald Wittman, “How a War Ends: A Rational Model Approach,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 23, No. 4, December 1979; Ibrahim A. Elbadawi and Nicholas Sambanis, “*External Interventions and the Duration of Civil Wars*,” Washington, D.C.: World Bank,

duration of conflict if they make the conflict more difficult to resolve by involving additional actors, triggering internal backlash, or otherwise changing conflict dynamics.³ Not all interventions extend the duration of conflict, however. An intervention that provides support to the side that already has the upper hand or military advantages could bring a quick resolution of conflict.⁴ Interventions might also speed the resolution of conflict when the intervener can serve as a guarantor of peace.⁵

Recurrence

Third-party interventions are also one of several factors that can affect conflict recurrence and settlement stability, but once again, this effect is conditional, mediated by several other factors.⁶ Past research finds that previous foreign backing on the side of the rebels increases the likelihood of renewed conflict because rebel actors might anticipate future aid and thus be more willing to contest settlement terms. Foreign assistance to governments was not found to affect the chances of conflict relapse.⁷ The type of intervention—that is, whether it is explicitly a peacekeeping, combat, or humanitarian mission—could also matter. Some research has found that multilateral United Nations (UN) peace

September 2000; Patricia L. Sullivan and Johannes Karreth, “The Conditional Impact of Military Intervention on Internal Armed Conflict Outcomes,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 32, No. 3, 2015.

³ David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009; David M. Edelstein, “Occupational Hazards: Why Military Occupations Succeed or Fail,” *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 1, Summer 2004, pp. 50–51.

⁴ Richard K. Betts, *American Force: Dangers, Delusions, and Dilemmas in National Security*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, p. 31.

⁵ Barbara F. Walter, “The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement,” *International Organization*, Vol. 51, No. 3, Summer 1997, p. 363.

⁶ This research has mixed findings, in part, because of differing definitions, focal points, and time frames.

⁷ Niklas Karlén, “The Legacy of Foreign Patrons: External State Support and Conflict Recurrence,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 54, No. 4, 2017.

operations can prevent recurrence, perhaps because such operations provide a mechanism of third-party enforcement.⁸

However, to fully understand the effect of interventions on conflict recurrence, it is worth considering some of the many other factors that might matter. Most importantly, research shows that some countries (especially those with low income) are more likely to get stuck in a cycle of poverty, low development, and conflict, with these factors fueling one another—termed a *conflict trap*.⁹ In other words, there are a wide variety of factors that might affect conflict recurrence. There is evidence that the presence of a third-party intervention is one of those factors, but the characteristics of the host nation matter to that outcome in key ways.

Intervening State Interests

When deciding whether to intervene in a conflict or crisis, states must weigh the likelihood that a military solution will advance their interests alongside the potential economic, strategic, and geopolitical costs of the intervention. This assessment involves considering the nature of the conflict or crisis, the actors involved, and the balance of power between those actors. States might be unwilling to intervene in cases where they expect that their intervention will not shift the balance of power sufficiently to change the outcome. For example, research has found that states are less likely to intervene in support of a very weak opposition group that has little chance of defeating the state.¹⁰ If states in the international system had perfect information about the balance of power in a given conflict (along with good information about

⁸ Michael Doyle and Nicholas Sambanis, “International Peacebuilding: A Theoretical and Quantitative Analysis,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 94, No. 4, December 2000; Caroline Hartzell, Matthew Hoddie, and Donald Rothchild, “Stabilizing the Peace After Civil War: An Investigation of Some Key Variables,” *International Organization*, Vol. 55, No. 1, Winter 2001; Virginia Page Fortna, “Does Peacekeeping Keep Peace? International Intervention and the Duration of Peace After Civil War,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 48, No. 2, June 2004.

⁹ Barbara F. Walter, “Does Conflict Beget Conflict? Explaining Recurring Civil War,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 41, No. 3, May 2004.

¹⁰ Watts, Johnston, et al., 2017.

other relevant factors), they would only intervene in conflicts and crises that they could influence to their desired outcome. In reality, however, states have much more trouble accurately assessing the balance of power and face obstacles in the form of private and asymmetric information. There are many cases in which U.S. policymakers might have made a different choice about an intervention if they had full information at the initial decision point. Because miscalculation does occur, interventions only sometimes advance the intervener's interests and could bring unexpected economic and other costs.¹¹ In this section, we consider what previous research has suggested about the implications of military interventions for the intervening party.

National Interests

Our understanding of which factors influence the relative success of military interventions at achieving political objectives (used here as a proxy for national interests) is based largely on the U.S. experience, because few other states have a sufficient number of interventions for a rigorous analysis. Previous RAND Arroyo Center work suggests that the type of objectives defined for an intervention directly influences the likelihood the intervention is able to achieve those objectives. U.S. military interventions are more likely to achieve their political objectives when those objectives are narrowly defined and are less successful when objectives are ambitious or sweeping in scope (e.g., build democracy, rebuild institutions, prevent the spread of communism). In practice, this relationship has meant that the United States has been less successful in interventions since the Cold War than was the case before and during it because intervention goals have become increasingly broad in scope.¹² Success can vary by specific objective as well. For instance, the U.S. record on democratization-focused interventions is (as would be expected) mixed, with some research finding that the military interventions have been successful in increasing levels of

¹¹ Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004.

¹² Jennifer Kavanagh, Bryan Frederick, Alexandra Stark, Nathan Chandler, Meagan L. Smith, Matthew Povlock, Lynn E. Davis, and Edward Geist, *Characteristics of Successful U.S. Military Interventions*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3062-A, 2019.

democracy in the host nation¹³ and some research finding little or no relationship.¹⁴

Other characteristics of the intervention and intervention context are likely to matter as well. First, the intervening state's military capabilities, both in absolute terms and compared with adversaries; strategy and tactics, and use of nonmilitary resources or tactics (economic or diplomatic) could also have direct implications for the likelihood of success (at achieving the desired end state) because these factors shape the course of the intervention, the ease with which the intervener is able to operate, and the resources at the intervener's disposal.¹⁵ Second, factors related to the host nation, such as whether the host supports the intervention and the economic and political development of the host nation,¹⁶ could be relevant to whether the intervention is able to successfully achieve political objectives or advance the intervening state's interests. For instance, weak political institutions in the host nation

¹³ James Meernik, "United States Military Intervention and the Promotion of Democracy," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 33, No. 4, 1996, p. 400; Margaret G. Hermann and Charles W. Kegley, Jr., "The U.S. Use of Military Intervention to Promote Democracy: Evaluating the Record," *International Interactions*, Vol. 24, No. 2, 1998, p. 108.

¹⁴ Jeffrey Pickering and Mark Peceny, "Forging Democracy at Gunpoint," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 50, No. 3, September 2006, p. 555; Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and George W. Downs, "Intervention and Democracy," *International Organization*, Vol. 60, No. 3, 2006, p. 647.

¹⁵ The United States has typically been more successful at achieving its political objectives with combat interventions than during stabilization or deterrence missions. This success could be because combat missions tend to be more heavily resourced, allowing for the application of overwhelming force supported by technological superiority. Kavanagh, Frederick, Stark, et al., 2019. Also see Patrick M. Regan, "Conditions of Successful Third-Party Intervention in Intrastate Conflicts," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 40, No. 2, June 1996; and Patrick M. Regan and Aysegül Aydin, "Diplomacy and Other Forms of Intervention in Civil Wars," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 50, No. 5, October 2006.

¹⁶ Host-nation support will be a key consideration, since interventions could face many more obstacles when the host nation is opposed. Edelstein, 2009, argues that host nations are most likely to support a large intervening force when they share a common threat perception or desired outcome with the intervener. An example in the U.S. context would be the high willingness of South Korea to host U.S. forces since the end of the Korean War. David M. Edelstein, "Foreign Militaries, Sustainable Institutions, and Postwar Statebuilding," in Roland Paris and Timothy D. Sisk, eds., *The Dilemmas of Statebuilding: Confronting the Contradictions of Postwar Peace Operations*, New York: Routledge, 2009.

can severely complicate any stabilization mission.¹⁷ The presence of third-party spoilers, either from within the host nation or outside it, might also be detrimental to the intervener's efforts to achieve national objectives through the intervention.¹⁸

Economic Costs and Benefits

Interventions also have significant financial costs for the intervener and can quickly tax the intervening nation's resources, both financial and military. There is the risk of overextension for intervening countries, which could jeopardize their security if a sudden crisis requires resources that are already mobilized elsewhere.¹⁹ More broadly, what appears initially as a "simple" military intervention could quickly take on broader aims that perpetuate the intervention and increase its costs, in what some have described as *mission creep*.²⁰ The so-called Pottery Barn principle ("you break it, you own it") illustrates that interventions can quickly morph into a constellation of complex nation-building tasks.²¹

Another way to consider the costs of the intervention is to explore the *opportunity cost*—that is, the loss of other alternatives (in this case, other forms of spending) that is the result of the decision to spend money on the military intervention. Most obviously, money spent on a military intervention is not available for domestic issues, such as education and healthcare, and the taxes from which military spending is

¹⁷ Kavanagh, Frederick, Stark, et al., 2019; Matthew Adam Kocher, Adria Lawrence, and Nuno P. Monteiro, *The Rabbit in the Hat: Nationalism and Resistance to Foreign Occupation*, Chicago, Ill.: American Political Science Association 2013 Annual Meeting, August 20, 2013.

¹⁸ Kavanagh, Frederick, Stark, et al., 2019.

¹⁹ Richard N. Haass, "Military Force: A User's Guide," *Foreign Policy*, No. 96, 1994, p. 21.

²⁰ See Michael Mandelbaum, "The Reluctance to Intervene," *Foreign Policy*, No. 95, Summer 1994, pp. 6–9; and Watts, Johnston, et al., 2017, p. 108.

²¹ Walter, 1997, p. 361; Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004, p. 150.

drawn might otherwise have contributed to economic growth through consumer spending, investment, and commercial expansion.²²

Reputational and Strategic Costs and Benefits

Interventions can have reputational and strategic consequences, both positive and negative, for the intervening state. Unilateral interventions could create tensions between the intervener and other states in the international system that disapprove of or oppose the original intervention. Such tension can have many implications, including sparking a competing intervention or increasing the challenges associated with basing access.²³ Interventions could complicate relationships with other major powers, including allies that disapprove or adversaries that feel threatened or provoked.²⁴ Military interventions that lack international support could also incur more-diffuse costs in the long term, for instance by spurring resentment against international norms, law, and institutions and contributing to their erosion.²⁵ The presence of an international coalition could advance the legitimacy of the intervention or provide a necessary aggregation of capabilities (especially important for small states). However, having more states involved creates coordination challenges.²⁶

Reputational costs could also be relevant. Research has explored whether deliberations over an intervention might have implications for

²² Among many others, see, for example, James H. Lebovic and Ashfaq Ishaq, "Military Burden, Security Needs, and Economic Growth in the Middle East," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 31, No. 1, March 1987; and Jülide Yildirim and Nadir Öcal, "Military Expenditures, Economic Growth and Spatial Spillovers," *Defence and Peace Economics*, Vol. 27, No. 1, 2016, p. 89.

²³ Pettyjohn and Kavanagh, 2016.

²⁴ Eelco van der Maat, "Sleeping Hegemons: Third-Party Intervention Following Territorial Integrity Transgressions," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 48, No. 2, 2011.

²⁵ Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2014.

²⁶ Sarah E. Kreps, "Multilateral Military Interventions: Theory and Practice," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 123, No. 4, Winter 2008/2009.

a state's credibility and reputation in future international disputes.²⁷ Indeed, U.S. policymakers have frequently argued for the central importance of credibility in U.S. foreign policy and national security.²⁸ Although there is some work that supports this view, the majority of recent research finds that operational context plays a significant role in mitigating any lasting reputational costs from past intervention decisions.²⁹

Domestic Political Costs and Benefits

An additional consideration for intervening states that is frequently discussed in the literature (although it is not a focus of this report) is the domestic political costs of military interventions. Here, too, findings have been mixed and ambiguous. The “diversionary hypothesis” has enjoyed significant popular adherence and some scholarly support, suggesting that leaders facing unpleasant headlines or flagging polls could be tempted to engage in foreign adventures to distract from the unpopularity of their domestic policies.³⁰ Related is work on the “rally effect,” which finds that political leaders can receive a surge in popular support following the start of a new military intervention or war—

²⁷ Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960; Christopher J. Fettweis, “Credibility and the War on Terror,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 122, No. 4, 2007/2008; Stephen M. Walt, “The Credibility Addiction,” *Foreign Policy*, January 6, 2015.

²⁸ See, for example, John McCain, “Obama Has Made America Look Weak,” *New York Times*, March 14, 2014; and Schelling, 1960.

²⁹ John Mitton, “Selling Schelling Short: Reputations and American Coercive Diplomacy After Syria,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2015.

³⁰ Russett, Bruce, “Economic Decline, Electoral Pressure, and the Initiation of Interstate Conflict,” in Charles S. Gochman and Alan Ned Sabrosky, eds., *Prisoners of War? Nation-States in the Modern Era*, Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1990.

although this bump could be short-lived.³¹ Different types of interventions might also generate different levels of public support.³²

Although interventions might provide some domestic political benefits, they almost always also have some political costs.³³ The type and magnitude of domestic costs can vary according to any number of factors. War represents a political hazard for leaders, which can be mitigated or aggravated by various factors—such as whether the leader is democratic or authoritarian or whether the war is incurring high costs or even potentially resulting in defeat.³⁴ Military casualties also affect the level of public support for an intervention (especially under certain conditions), but this relationship is complex.³⁵ In general, it seems that it might not be absolute numbers but instead the marginal increase in casualties that affects public opinion most. However, under certain conditions—especially when the stakes of the intervention seem high—the public could have reasonably high (but not unlimited) toler-

³¹ John E. Mueller, “Presidential Popularity from Truman to Johnson,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 64, No. 1, March 1970; Scott Sigmund Gartner and Gary M. Segura, “War, Casualties, and Public Opinion,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 42, No. 3, June 1998, p. 281; Patrick James and Jean-Sébastien Rioux, “International Crises and Linkage Politics: The Experiences of the United States, 1953–1994,” *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 51, No. 3, September 1998, p. 781; John R. Oneal and Anna Lillian Bryan, “The Rally ‘Round the Flag Effect in U.S. Foreign Policy Crises, 1950–1985,” *Political Behavior*, Vol. 17, No. 4, December 1995.

³² Bruce W. Jentleson, “The Pretty Prudent Public: Post Post-Vietnam American Opinion on the Use of Military Force,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 1, 1992; John R. Oneal, Brad Lian, and James H. Joyner, Jr., “Are the American People ‘Pretty Prudent’? Public Responses to U.S. Uses of Force, 1950–1988,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 2, June 1996, p. 273.

³³ A potentially important political cost of military intervention that is not discussed extensively in existing literature is the demand such deployments place on senior policymakers’ time and attention and the opportunity cost of not having those policymakers focused on key domestic, foreign policy, and national security issues.

³⁴ Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Randolph M. Siverson, “War and the Survival of Political Leaders: A Comparative Study of Regime Types and Political Accountability,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 89, No. 4, December 1995; Charles W. Ostrom, Jr., and Dennis M. Simon, “Promise and Performance: A Dynamic Model of Presidential Popularity,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 79, No. 2, June 1985, p. 355.

³⁵ John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion*, New York: Wiley, 1973.

ance for casualties.³⁶ In the U.S. context, support for additional military interventions has tended to decline for a time after conflicts that involve large numbers of casualties, especially after military defeats.³⁷

Host-Nation Trajectory

Previous work has also explored how external interventions affect the governance, economies, and societies of host countries. We focus on political and economic outcomes.

Political Outcomes

Work focused on political outcomes has emphasized how interventions affect the host nation's level of democracy and its record on political and civil rights. The results are mixed. Several studies have found that, in general, the existence of an intervention does not make the host nation more likely to democratize.³⁸ Other studies have found that there does seem to be such a relationship but that it depends heavily on context. The strategy of the intervener (both military and nation-building) and host-nation political institutions could affect the outcome.³⁹ However, the literature is more pessimistic about the duration

³⁶ Gartner and Segura, 1998; Eric V. Larson, *Casualties and Consensus: The Historical Role of Casualties in Domestic Support for U.S. Military Operations*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MR-726-RC, 1996, pp. 99–101; James Burk, “Public Support for Peacekeeping in Lebanon and Somalia: Assessing the Casualties Hypothesis,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 114, No. 1, 1999.

³⁷ Jennifer Kavanagh, Bryan Frederick, Matthew Povlock, Stacie L. Pettyjohn, Angela O'Mahony, Stephen Watts, Nathan Chandler, John Speed Meyers, and Eugeniu Han, *The Past, Present, and Future of U.S. Ground Interventions: Identifying Trends, Characteristics, and Signposts*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1831-A, 2017.

³⁸ Bueno de Mesquita and Downs, 2006; Meernik, 1996; Alexander B. Downes and Jonathan Monten, “Forced to Be Free? Why Foreign-Imposed Regime Change Rarely Leads to Democratization,” *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 4, 2013; William Easterly, Shanker Satyanath, and Daniel Berger, *Superpower Interventions and Their Consequences for Democracy: An Empirical Inquiry*, Cambridge, Mass.: National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper No. 13992, May 2008; Jeffrey Pickering and Emizet F. Kisangani, “Political, Economic, and Social Consequences of Foreign Military Intervention,” *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 59, No. 3, September 2006; Mark Peceny, “Forcing Them to Be Free,” *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 3, September 1999.

³⁹ Meernik, 1996; Hermann and Kegley, 1998; Downes and Monten, 2013; Peceny, 1999.

of observed changes to democracy, finding progress toward democracy is typically temporary.⁴⁰ There are comparatively few studies regarding the effect of intervention on a broader set of political outcomes, such as civil liberties, political rights, or human rights, and results on these outcomes are mixed (and sometimes, things get worse before they get better, especially in the area of human rights).⁴¹

Economic Outcomes

Research on the effect of interventions on host-nation economies is limited, and results are mixed. Overall, third-party interventions do not appear to have any discernable long-term effect on economic growth in the host nation, regardless of the regime type of the host or intervener.⁴²

Table 2.1 summarizes what we do and do not know about the relationship between military interventions and our three types of outcomes of interest.

The Timing Decision: Is It Better to Intervene Early or Late?

An intervening state can decide to intervene early (while the conflict or crisis is in its beginning stages), or it can opt not to do so but revisit the decision at a later time and decide to intervene then. Research provides some insight into the implications of the timing decision for conflict

⁴⁰ Nils Petter Gleditsch, Lene Siljeholm Christiansen, and Håvard Hegre, *Democratic Jihad? Military Intervention and Democracy*, Washington, D.C.: World Bank, Working Paper No. WPS4242, June 2007.

⁴¹ Frederic S. Pearson, Scott Walker, and Stephanie Stern, "Military Intervention and Prospects for Democratization," *International Journal of Peace Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 2006; Taylor B. Seybolt, *Humanitarian Military Intervention: The Conditions for Success and Failure*, Oxford, United Kingdom: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute and Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 270; Dursun Peksen, "Does Foreign Military Intervention Help Human Rights?" *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 65, No. 3, 2012.

⁴² Marie Olson Lounsbery, Frederic Pearson, and Andrea Kathryn Talentino, "Unilateral and Multilateral Military Intervention: Effects on Stability and Security," *Democracy and Security*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 2011; Pickering and Kisangani, 2006.

Table 2.1
Summary of Prior Research on Military Interventions and Outcome Measures

Category	Outcome	Effect of Military Interventions Found by Prior Research
Conflict	Duration and intensity	Mixed. Depends on balance of capabilities.
	Recurrence	Mixed. Depends on domestic context.
Intervening state	National interests (general)	Mixed. Depends on type of intervention, international context and coalition, relative military capabilities.
	Economic costs and benefits	Few economic benefits. Costs include real financial costs and opportunity costs.
	Strategic and reputational costs and benefits	Mixed. States must balance credibility gain from an intervention with possible negative reaction from international community.
	Domestic political costs and benefits	Interventions can trigger short term bump in presidential approval, but leaders could lose power over failed interventions, especially if gains seem low and military fatalities are high.
Host nation	Political and economic trajectory	Few long-term, lasting improvements.

outcomes and for the interests of the intervener and host nations, but the body of evidence surrounding the timing question is limited.

Conflict Outcomes

Duration and Intensity

Research on the timing of military and nonmilitary interventions suggests that there are two points during which an intervention (military or nonmilitary) might be able to shorten the duration of a conflict or crisis (or prevent a crisis from escalating). The first occurs immediately after the start of the conflict or crisis, before states have invested time and money in the conflict and before battle lines are fully drawn.⁴³

⁴³ I. William Zartman and Saadia Touval, "International Mediation: Conflict Resolution and Power Politics," *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 41, No. 2, 1985; Patrick M. Regan and Allan C. Stam, "In the Nick of Time: Conflict Management, Mediation Timing, and the

In the case of a crisis, most interventions will occur quickly (given the event's shorter duration) and will either successfully resolve the crisis and prevent escalation or fail, in which case the resulting conflict could escalate. The second point during which an intervention could be successful (and which likely applies only to conflicts) occurs after the point of *ripeness*: the point at which the parties to a conflict might be ready to come to the table and negotiate.⁴⁴ Interventions that occur after this point of ripeness can be effective at resolving conflicts through a few different mechanisms. First, after an extended period of fighting, both states might grow tired of conflict, run out of resources, or revise their expectations of success.⁴⁵ Second, it is possible that, at some point in the conflict, the stakes will be so high and the risk of crisis so large that warring parties are willing to come to the table to avoid that catastrophic outcome. Third, as the conflict wears on, new opportunities for solutions might emerge that bring parties back to the table.⁴⁶ Once any one of these points is reached, the intervention could be more effective at providing the final impetus that brings parties to the negotiating table.

Recurrence

There is also limited research that explicitly considers whether the timing of an intervention is associated with the likelihood of conflict recurrence. As already noted, the likelihood of conflict recurrence is largely determined by the characteristics of the host nation, rather than the intervention itself. Regardless of whether the intervention occurs early or late, preventing recurrence means dealing with the factors—

Duration of Interstate Disputes," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 2, June 2000; Christopher R. Mitchell, *Cutting Losses: Reflections on Appropriate Timing*, Fairfax, Va.: Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, Working Paper No. 9, 1995; T. David Mason, Joseph P. Weingarten, Jr., and Patrick J. Fett, "Win, Lose, or Draw: Predicting the Outcome of Civil Wars," *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 2, June 1999, p. 264.

⁴⁴ Zartman and Touval, 1985.

⁴⁵ Stephen John Stedman, *Peacemaking in Civil War: International Mediation in Zimbabwe, 1974–1980*, Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1991.

⁴⁶ Zartman and Touval, 1985; Stedman, 1991; Christopher R. Mitchell, *The Structure of International Conflict*, London: Macmillan, 1981, Ch. 8.

such as continued grievances and supplies of weapons—that can increase the risk of future conflict in the intervention or subsequent postconflict agreement.⁴⁷

Intervening State Interests

States make the decision to intervene by weighing costs against the likelihood that they will achieve their political objectives and advance national interests by intervening. Timing can be an important consideration that has implications for the likelihood of success and expected costs.

National Interests

Research suggests that the relationship between intervention timing and the likelihood that the intervention advances national interests is shaped by the type of intervention and the type of objective. Different intervention timings might be appropriate for different types of interventions. For example, although it could be worth waiting to see whether a political crisis (for instance, the noncompliance of a state with some international rules or a weapons inspection program) or a limited territorial dispute can resolve itself through diplomatic means early interventions could be essential during certain humanitarian crises to forestall mass atrocities, which often occur early on (e.g., Bosnia and Rwanda).⁴⁸ The strength of the adversary might also vary with the timing of the intervention, but it is not clear in what direction. In some cases, an earlier intervention might confront a weaker adversary before it reaches full strength; in others, the adversary might be weaker if the intervention is late, after it has been exhausted by fighting.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Stephen L. Quackenbush and Jerome F. Venteicher, “Settlements, Outcomes, and the Recurrence of Conflict,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 45, No. 6, November 2008.

⁴⁸ Jon Western and Joshua S. Goldstein, “Humanitarian Intervention Comes of Age: Lessons from Somalia to Libya,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 6, November/December 2011, p. 57.

⁴⁹ Stephen Biddle, comments to the authors, January 2019.

Economic Costs and Benefits

There is little research that directly considers the link between intervention timing and economic costs for the intervener. We can draw some inferences, however. An early intervention that is able to quickly end a conflict might ultimately be less costly than a late intervention, which might face a more complex conflict and challenge. On the other hand, a late intervention that is well timed could be cost-effective if that larger size allows the intervener to more quickly achieve intervention goals. An early intervention that does not successfully end a conflict quickly becomes resource intensive.

Strategic and Reputation Costs and Benefits

The timing of interventions could, however, have a larger effect on the strategic or reputational costs faced by the intervening power. The perceived legitimacy of the intervention and the stance of the international community are important for understanding the effects of intervention timing on the intervening state's strategic interests and reputation. Participating in interventions once they are sanctioned by the international community rarely results in significant reputational costs. But intervening early when international sanction is lacking or delaying participation (e.g., Bosnia) in interventions that are sanctioned and that aim at humanitarian goals could damage the state's reputation and could have strategic costs.⁵⁰

Domestic Political Costs and Benefits

Finally, there could be domestic political costs associated with the timing of interventions for democratic and autocratic leaders. The relevant mechanism is based on public opinion and approval. Domes-

⁵⁰ Kreps, 2008/2009. For example, interventions that occur before any diplomatic efforts toward resolution could face questions of legitimacy. The United States has been faulted in the case of Iraq for intervening without giving the processes of diplomacy sufficient opportunity to take their course. As Kreps argues, intervening as part of a coalition could help to reduce some of the strategic and reputational costs that might come with an early intervention. Also see Jon Western, "Sources of Humanitarian Intervention: Beliefs, Information, and Advocacy in U.S. Decisions on Somalia and Bosnia," in James M. McCormick, ed., *The Domestic Sources of American Foreign Policy: Insights and Evidence*, 6th ed., New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2012, p. 399; and Seybolt, 2007.

tic political costs might be higher when the domestic public does not support the intervention. For this reason, election timing could play a role in decisions about when to launch a military intervention.⁵¹ Early interventions might generally be harder to sell to the public, especially in the case of an emerging crisis or conflict, prior to the point at which the threat is severe enough to be readily apparent. However, there could also be political costs from intervening too late, especially if public pressure in support of a specific intervention is high.⁵²

Host-Nation Outcomes

There is very limited literature available on how intervention timing affects the outcomes for the host nation, beyond what was already described in the section on conflict outcomes (resolution, recurrence, and intensity) that focused on how timing can affect the interests of the intervening state. We can draw some inferences from this literature. For instance, an early intervention that is able to end a conflict more quickly could have more-positive outcomes for the host nation. As another example, early interventions into humanitarian crises could be better able to prevent serious atrocities or limit the damage inflicted on the host nation.⁵³ Apart from these indirect observations, we know little from previous work about whether intervention timing improves the future political or economic trajectory of the host nation.

Table 2.2 summarizes the key insights from our assessment of the prior literature regarding the relationship between intervention timing

⁵¹ Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Alastair Smith, Randolph M. Siverson, and James D. Morrow, *The Logic of Political Survival*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005; Stephen Biddle, comments to the authors, January 2019.

⁵² This pressure is hypothesized to come from media coverage and is known as the *CNN effect*. Empirical support for the CNN effect is also mixed. See, for example, Piers Robinson, “The CNN Effect: Can the News Media Drive Foreign Policy?” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 2, 1999; Babak Bahador, *The CNN Effect in Action: How the News Media Pushed the West Toward War in Kosovo*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007; and Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2005.

⁵³ Zartman and Touval, 1985; Western and Goldstein, 2011, p. 57.

Table 2.2
Summary of Prior Research on Intervention Timing and Outcome Measures

Category	Outcome	Effect of Intervention Timing Found by Prior Research
Conflict	Duration and intensity	Could reduce duration early in conflict or late, after mutual stalemate.
	Recurrence	Limited evidence.
Intervening state	National interests (general)	Success most likely early or late in the conflict. Type of intervention matters.
	Economic costs and benefits	Limited evidence.
	Strategic and reputational costs and benefits	Timing might matter little when intervener acts in line with international preference or approval, but decisions to intervene (or not) that run counter to international expectations could have strategic and reputational costs.
	Domestic political costs and benefits	Timing could be linked to electoral or political cycle.
Host nation	Political and economic trajectory	Limited evidence.

and outcomes. We highlight in gray those areas for which a lack of empirical study limits our current understanding.⁵⁴

The Size Decision: Should the Intervention Be Small or Large?

The final decision that states face when considering an intervention is that intervention’s size. In this section, we consider how intervention size is associated with key outcomes.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ James Dobbins, Michele A. Poole, Austin Long, and Benjamin Runkle, *After the War: Nation-Building from FDR to George W. Bush*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-716-CC, 2008.

⁵⁵ We consider large forces to be those in excess of a division of deployed U.S. forces and small forces to be those of brigade size or smaller.

Conflict Outcomes

Duration and Intensity

Research that considers the ability of smaller interventions to contain, end, or deescalate conflict is relatively mixed in its findings. For example, several RAND studies have found that small stabilization missions can lead to better outcomes for the state actor but do not typically shorten conflicts.⁵⁶ Findings on the ability of larger interventions to shorten conflict duration or to deescalate a conflict or crisis are also mixed. There is some evidence that larger forces could be better able to guarantee the terms of any settlement agreement, making one or both sides more willing to come to the negotiating table.⁵⁷ The extent to which a large intervention force is able to help the party it is supporting militarily could speed progress toward a resolution of the conflict.⁵⁸ Larger interventions are also associated with lower fatality levels (experienced and caused), at least during nation-building.⁵⁹ However, past experience in Afghanistan and elsewhere has underscored the fact that having a large force size might be necessary for conflict termination

⁵⁶ In addition to small ground forces, limited interventions might also rely on airpower through drone strikes or limited bombing campaigns. Previous work on the use of drone strikes to fight insurgency campaigns has mixed empirical results, with some research suggesting it can reduce militant violence and other research suggesting it can provoke backlash. The difference in effect could depend on the way the intervening state organizes and uses the strikes. Stephen Watts, Caroline Baxter, Molly Dunigan, and Christopher Rizzi, *The Uses and Limits of Small-Scale Military Interventions*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-1226-RC, 2012, p. 45; Watts, Johnston, et al., 2017. See also Patrick B. Johnston and Anoop K. Sarbahi, "The Impact of US Drone Strikes on Terrorism in Pakistan," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 60, No. 2, June 2016; and Javier Jordan, "The Effectiveness of the Drone Campaign Against al Qaeda Central: A Case Study," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 1, 2014.

⁵⁷ Walter, 1997; Watts, Johnston, et al., 2017.

⁵⁸ Watts, Johnston, et al., 2017; Kavanagh, Frederick, Stark, et al., 2019.

⁵⁹ James Dobbins, Seth G. Jones, Keith Crane, Andrew Rathmell, Brett Steele, Richard Teltschik, and Anga R. Timilsina, *The UN's Role in Nation-Building: From the Congo to Iraq*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-304-RC, 2005; Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey A. Friedman, and Jacob N. Shapiro, "Testing the Surge: Why Did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007?" *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 1, Summer 2012; James T. Quinlivan, "Force Requirements in Stability Operations," *Parameters: U.S. Army War College Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 4, Winter 1995–1996.

and deescalation but is by no means sufficient.⁶⁰ Large-scale interventions bring with them the potential for backlash from local populations, and even overwhelming military strength cannot guarantee the effective governance needed for lasting deescalation.⁶¹

Recurrence

As already noted, the primary drivers of conflict recurrence are endogenous to the conflict itself and to the local, state, and regional context in which the conflict occurs. However, although intervention size might not be directly related to recurrence, there are two possible indirect relationships. First, larger forces might be better able to guarantee the terms of any settlement agreement, reducing the likelihood for recurrence.⁶² Second, even if a larger intervention force cannot guarantee a victory for the supported side, it might be able to raise the costs of continued fighting in ways that highlight the value of stability and encourage settlement.⁶³

Intervening State Outcomes

Likelihood of Success

There has been a considerable amount of research exploring the link between the size of an intervention and the likelihood that it is successful in achieving the state's political objectives (which are overlapping with, but not identical to, the goals of terminating the conflict or preventing recurrence). Previous RAND Arroyo Center work found that the number of forces appears to matter most to intervention success in combat interventions, which includes cases in which the United States is able to overwhelm adversaries with the size and technological

⁶⁰ Watts, Johnston, et al., 2017.

⁶¹ Kilcullen, 2009; Patrick T. Brandt, T. David Mason, Mehmet Gurses, Nicolai Petrovsky, and Dagmar Radin, "When and How the Fighting Stops: Explaining the Duration and Outcome of Civil Wars," *Defence and Peace Economics*, Vol. 19, No. 6, 2008; Håvard Hegre and Håvard Møkleiv Nygård, "Governance and Conflict Relapse," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 59, No. 6, 2015; Charles T. Call, *Why Peace Fails: The Causes and Prevention of Civil War Recurrence*, Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2012.

⁶² Walter, 1997; Watts, Johnston, et al., 2017.

⁶³ Watts, Baxter, et al., 2012.

superiority of its military forces.⁶⁴ There also appears to be a relationship between the number of forces and the success of peacekeeping and nation-building efforts.⁶⁵ Prior research does not find any clear relationship between troop size and the success of deterrent interventions.

Economic Costs and Benefits

For interventions of equal length, larger interventions of course have higher direct monetary costs than smaller interventions. In fact, this is one of the primary reasons that policymakers often prefer smaller military responses to conflicts and crises.⁶⁶ However, a yearslong or decades-long small intervention intended to contain a threat could, in some cases, be more costly than a short, larger intervention, especially if the larger intervention more directly addresses the underlying issue and leads to a better overall outcome. The stakes and level of risk could matter as well. The smaller force could be more appealing when the stakes for the United States are relatively lower or when a larger force would be perceived as too provocative or aggressive. In high-risk situations and when the threat seems vital, however, the benefits of deploying a larger force might offset any additional costs.⁶⁷

Strategic and Reputational Costs and Benefits

There has also been little direct consideration of the relationship between intervention size and the strategic or reputational costs and benefits for the intervening state. However, we can make some general observations. The decision about how many forces to deploy is likely to send a signal to both allies and adversaries about the intervening state's level of commitment and degree of military strength.⁶⁸ When such a response is in support of allies and partners, it could improve U.S.

⁶⁴ Kavanagh, Frederick, Stark, et al., 2019.

⁶⁵ Dobbins, Jones, et al., 2005; Kavanagh, Frederick, Stark, et al., 2019.

⁶⁶ Watts, Johnston, et al., 2017.

⁶⁷ See, for example, U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, Washington, D.C., 2018.

⁶⁸ Schelling, 1960. See also Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1966.

credibility and strengthen bilateral ties. However, if the intervention is not supported by allies or if the large commitment is seen as an overreach, large force size could damage the reputation of the intervener, undermine the legitimacy of the intervention, and ultimately have strategic costs imposed by allies or adversaries that do not approve of the original mission.⁶⁹ However, there could be such costs from an under-response as well, especially if the under-response is seen as a failure to meet responsibilities.⁷⁰

Domestic Political Costs and Benefits

There has been little careful investigation of the relationship between intervention size and domestic political costs. Most likely this relationship operates through the connection between intervention outcomes and domestic political attitudes. The domestic public likely does not have well-informed preferences about the size of an intervention. Rather, any attitudes they have are likely tied to such factors as the perceived success of the intervention and the perceived importance of the intervention objective.⁷¹ Therefore, as long as the intervention is perceived to be going well and to have an important objective, there seems to be little reason to expect the domestic public to reward or punish political representatives according to intervention size.⁷²

However, there are three possible exceptions. First, it is possible that small-footprint interventions (which the public might not hear about or might know little about) could be used to reduce or even eliminate the political costs associated with unpopular military activities. Second, large interventions could attract negative publicity and trigger strong public reactions if they are seen as unnecessary and very

⁶⁹ Dennis Florig, "Hegemonic Overreach vs. Imperial Overstretch," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 4, October 2010.

⁷⁰ Berit Bliesemann de Guevara and Florian P. Kühn, "'The International Community Needs to Act': Loose Use and Empty Signalling of a Hackneyed Concept," *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2011; James Pattison, "Outsourcing the Responsibility to Protect: Humanitarian Intervention and Private Military and Security Companies," *International Theory*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2010.

⁷¹ Larson, 1996, pp. 99–101.

⁷² Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2005; Larson, 1996, pp. 99–101.

costly, especially during periods of budget austerity.⁷³ Third, large interventions of certain types (specifically, combat) have a higher risk than smaller ones do of having high U.S. military casualties, which can have negative political costs for domestic politicians.⁷⁴

Host-Nation Outcomes

As noted elsewhere, the key determinant of host-nation outcomes is likely to be the context and characteristics of the host nation itself, such as its level of political and economic development. As a result, intervention size might have a fairly limited effect on the political, economic, and development outcomes of the host nation, especially in the longer term.⁷⁵

However, intervention size could have an indirect effect in several contexts, most already mentioned elsewhere in this chapter. First, larger intervention forces could support better long-term outcomes if they are able to facilitate a durable peace settlement and prevent conflict recurrence.⁷⁶ Second, larger forces are likely necessary for the nation-building tasks typically required in a postconflict environment.⁷⁷ Other relevant factors include the level of political development of the host nation and the application of nonmilitary resources.⁷⁸ However, foreign intervention forces cannot stay forever, and having a large force in a postconflict situation could build a dependency on or trigger backlash against the intervening force within the host nation that could interfere with the long-term stability and independence of the host nation.⁷⁹

Table 2.3 highlights the insights that emerge from a review of research that considers the relationship between intervention size and

⁷³ Watts, Johnston, et al., 2017.

⁷⁴ Mueller, 1973.

⁷⁵ Pickering and Kisangani, 2006.

⁷⁶ Walter, 1997; Watts, Johnston, et al., 2017.

⁷⁷ Dobbins, Jones, et al., 2005.

⁷⁸ Kavanagh, Frederick, Stark, et al., 2019.

⁷⁹ Watts, Johnston, et al., 2017.

Table 2.3
Summary of Prior Research on Intervention Size and Outcome Measures

Category	Outcome	Effect of Intervention Size Found by Prior Research
Conflict	Duration and intensity	Mixed. Small interventions might contain conflict but are less effective at terminating. Larger interventions might speed conflict termination in some cases but can also trigger backlash.
	Recurrence	Larger interventions might be able to underwrite peace agreements and achieve more-stable military and political outcomes.
Intervening state	National interests (general)	Larger forces might more effectively advance intervener interests during combat and stabilization missions. Large forces can be provocative and counterproductive in some contexts.
	Economic costs and benefits	Limited evidence.
	Strategic and reputational costs and benefits	Limited evidence.
	Domestic political costs and benefits	Larger interventions could have higher political costs, to the extent that they are more expensive and have higher fatality rates.
Host nation	Political and economic trajectory	Effect of intervention size on host-nation outcomes likely depends on the nature of the conflict and intervention and on the domestic context.

outcomes. We highlight in gray the areas in which empirical assessment is lacking.

Synthesis and Limitations

In this chapter, we considered what previous research has to say about the relationships between military interventions, their timing, and their size and outcomes of the conflict (for the intervener and for the

host nation). Our review reveals that although the existing work is both extensive and diverse, the focus of the most-rigorous empirical work has been on the intervention decision: specifically, the effect of interventions on conflict outcomes and, to a lesser extent, the interests of the intervener. The effects of intervention size have also been studied, with this work focusing primarily on the relationship with conflict outcomes. There has been limited attention paid to the implications of different intervention timings.

The other key observation that emerges from our review of the literature is just how conditional the relationships between interventions (their timing and size) and relevant outcomes appear to be. In most cases, the direction and strength of the relationship depends on other mediating factors, such as the domestic context of the host nation, the side in the conflict that the intervention supports, and the presence of an international coalition, among others. Understanding the role of these mediating variables is important to our approach in the remaining chapters in this report. In the next chapter, we investigate quantitative patterns in our database of intervention and potential intervention cases.

Quantitative Analysis: Studying Trends and Patterns

To study the trade-offs between intervening and not intervening, intervening early and intervening late, and intervening with larger or smaller forces, it is useful to investigate general trends in the U.S. experience since 1946 to consider whether there have been systematic differences between different types of interventions. In this chapter, we describe how we built a data set of intervention and potential intervention cases and our approach to coding and categorizing these cases. Then we compare conflict outcomes, outcomes for the United States, and outcomes for the host nation following noninterventions and interventions of different sizes and timings. Although our data set is comprehensive, there remain a relatively small number of total cases from which it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions. Instead, we use the descriptive statistics presented in this chapter to explore trends and patterns. The case study-based methodologies we employ in Chapters Four and Five will be better able to isolate contextual factors and clarify any potential causal relationships.

Data Set of Intervention and Nonintervention Cases

To facilitate this analysis, we needed to construct a data set of cases that included not only historical U.S. military interventions but also potential cases of U.S. intervention that did not result in an intervention. For this data set, we needed to identify a set of cases in which U.S.

interests were plausibly sufficient to justify a U.S. intervention, regardless of whether one actually took place. Our approach was to construct a data set of cases made up of wars and crises: specifically, those wars and crises since 1946 for which the United States had a strong national interest. We drew the cases from two primary sources. To identify relevant wars, we used the Uppsala Conflict Data Project (UCDP) Armed Conflict Dataset;¹ for crises, we used the International Crisis Behavior (ICB) data set.² The UCDP data include major wars, such as the Vietnam War and the Korean War, and the ICB data include such events as the Berlin Airlift Crisis of 1948 and other lower-level confrontations. Each of these data sets considers each instance of a crisis or war as a separate event. Neither combines recurring crises or wars into a single series. We follow this coding.

To define those wars and crises in which the United States has a strong national interest, we included four types of cases: (1) those that posed a direct threat to the United States (e.g., the September 11, 2001, attacks or the Cuban Missile Crisis), (2) those that posed a direct threat to a U.S. treaty ally, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO], Korea, or Japan (e.g., the Korean War), (3) those that involved a security threat to the countries involved and occurred in an area of high strategic importance to the United States (specifically, Central America and the Caribbean, Europe, the Middle East and North

¹ The UCDP Armed Conflict data include conflicts and wars. We include only wars (annual battle deaths over 1,000) in our data. Therése Pettersson and Kristine Eck, "Organized Violence, 1989–2017," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 55, No. 4, 2018; Nils Petter Gleditsch, Peter Wallensteen, Mikael Eriksson, Margareta Sollenberg, and Håvard Strand, "Armed Conflict 1946–2001: A New Dataset," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 39, No. 5, 2002.

² To be included in the ICB data, an interstate interaction must meet three criteria: "a threat to one or more basic values, along with an awareness of finite time for response to the value threat, and a heightened probability of involvement in military hostilities." Michael Brecher and Jonathan Wilkenfeld, *A Study of Crisis*, Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2000, p. 3.; Michael Brecher, Jonathan Wilkenfeld, Kyle Beardsley, Patrick James, and David Quinn, *International Crisis Behavior Data Codebook, Version 12*, 2017.

Africa, and East and Southeast Asia), such as the 1991 Gulf War, and (4) severe humanitarian crises (e.g., the 1994 Rwandan genocide).³

We made the decision to limit our data set to only those wars and crises in which the United States had a strong national interest in order to remove those cases in which there was simply no realistic possibility that the United States would intervene. It is possible that we eliminated one or more crises or wars in which the United States intervened or might have considered intervening in this process of narrowing the universe of cases. However, the loss of any such case is likely balanced out by the benefits that we get from eliminating the larger number of cases that were not plausible intervention opportunities. We could also have chosen a more restrictive set of inclusion criteria that would have further narrowed the data. However, the more restrictive the inclusion criteria, the higher the chance that we begin excluding cases in which the United States could realistically have intervened. Furthermore, U.S. intervention decisions are very idiosyncratic, often the product of a confluence of events, personal interests, national interests, and timing, so criteria that are too narrow might have resulted in a sample that was not only missing meaningful nonintervention cases but also missing intervention cases. Such a set of cases would then provide a misleading and incomplete account of the trade-offs between intervening and not intervening and the factors that influence this decision and its effects on outcomes. After our attempt to balance these concerns, we were left with a data set of 286 cases, including 130 crises and 156 wars.

Coding Interventions

With this data set of cases defined, the next step was to identify which of the 286 cases had actually experienced a U.S. military intervention. To do this, we relied on a database of such interventions that was compiled and refined during a series of RAND Arroyo Center projects: the RAND U.S. Military Intervention Dataset (RUMID). The

³ We included large-scale humanitarian crises, defined as having greater than roughly 100,000 civilian deaths. It is worth noting that large refugee flows constituted an additional potential motivation for U.S. intervention. However, we were unable to reliably identify refugee data that would allow us to systematically assess whether cases should be included in our universe on these grounds.

data include entries for each U.S. military intervention since 1946 that meets our size threshold.⁴ We relied on the following size thresholds to identify military interventions for each domain:

- *Ground forces*: To qualify as an intervention on the basis of the ground forces involved, we required at least 100 person-years of presence in another country, for each year during which the intervention was ongoing. This requirement could be met by 100 soldiers for a full year, 200 soldiers for six months, etc., but *not* by 10 soldiers present for 10 years (that is, the size criteria must be met in each year of the intervention).
- *Naval forces*: To qualify as an intervention on the basis of its naval forces, we required the presence of a carrier strike group in the post-1945 era, or an equivalent size force in the pre-1945 era (when carriers were either less prevalent or did not yet exist).
- *Air forces*: To qualify as an intervention on the basis of the air forces involved, we required either roughly a wing-year of aircraft (roughly 80 planes) or an incidence of air-to-air or air-to-ground combat or strikes, which are relatively rare but we believe are always worthy of assessment.

For each intervention, the data capture information on duration, number of forces, types of forces, primary activity types, political objectives, and whether those objectives are achieved.⁵

To determine which of our 286 cases had experienced a U.S. intervention, we matched the case universe to the intervention data, using location, years, and (where needed) a description of each conflict, crisis, and intervention. Our matching process identified three key groups of cases. First, in 50 of the 286 cases, there were no substantial U.S. forces present in the country, and the United States then initiated a new intervention at some point in response to a war or crisis. Second, in 64 other cases, the United States already had forces present in the

⁴ The data cover the years 1898 to 2016, but we use only the post-1945 data for this analysis. As a reminder, we do not include covert missions or any special forces missions because these are typically classified.

⁵ For more information on this data set, see Kavanagh, Frederick, Stark, et al., 2019.

country in question before the war or crisis started, often as part of an ongoing deterrent force or as part of a previous intervention of some kind. These forces are usually present because there was the expectation of such a crisis or conflict or because there had been some conflict or crisis in the past. We treat these “forces already present” cases separately from the new interventions launched in response to a crisis (that is, no new intervention could be coded in cases where substantial U.S. forces were already present). The focus of most of our analysis throughout this report is on the new interventions and comparing them with the noninterventions, since this is the key decision point of greatest interest for this report. Finally, there are the noninterventions, or cases in which the United States did not intervene or have forces already present, of which we identify 172.

Categorizing Cases According to Timing and Size

As noted in previous chapters, we are interested in three key intervention decisions: the decision to intervene, the timing of the intervention, and the size of the intervention. These decisions highlight eight possible analytical categories of interest into which we sorted our cases:

- no intervention
- early, small intervention
- early, medium intervention
- early, large intervention
- late, small intervention
- late, medium intervention
- late, large intervention
- forces already present.⁶

⁶ These include cases where the United States already had troops in a location before the conflict or crisis in that location broke out. The precise coding of these cases is situation specific. In order to fall into this category, the United States had to have already forward deployed U.S. forces to a specific region or country for the specific intention of countering or deterring a given threat or security challenge. In some cases, this means U.S. forces were deployed to the country in question to deter against internal threats. In others, U.S. forces were deployed to a “threatened” country to deter an adversary. Forces deployed or stationed at home that were not specifically tasked with countering a given threat are not counted as already present.

We categorized our 286 cases into this taxonomy according to the timing and size of the intervention. For intervention timing, we coded interventions as either *early* or *late*. We set the threshold between early and late interventions at six months, meaning that all interventions that occurred within the first six months after the start of the crisis or war are considered early and all others are considered late. This threshold was determined by reading each of the intervention narratives to determine what constitutes a policymaker decision to intervene that could plausibly be understood to have been taken at the first opportunity or without substantial delay. Through this reading, we assessed that, for most conflicts and crises, this early phase (without substantial policymaker delay or hesitation) lasted about six months. After that point, policymakers generally appeared to have passed on an initial decision to intervene, such that subsequent interventions reflected a reconsideration of a prior decision not to become involved. Using this assessment, we coded early interventions as all those occurring within the first six months. In practice, this means that there are no late interventions into crises, since crises typically last little more than a year.⁷ Within the 286 cases, we identified five that are ongoing as of the end of 2018. In our analyses below, we exclude those that are ongoing when comparing the changes over time in our intervention and nonintervention cases because we cannot assess the postconflict status of an ongoing case, for example. There are also six cases that ended less than five years ago. These are also excluded from the comparative analysis.

To code the size of the U.S. military interventions, we used three categories: small, medium, and large. When coding intervention size, we took ground, air, and naval forces into account, but we weighted ground forces more heavily than air and naval forces because of the commitment implied. When considering only ground forces, small interventions are those with fewer than 3,000 ground forces (about the size of a brigade), medium interventions include interventions of 3,000 to 20,000 troops (roughly the size of a division), and large inter-

⁷ We code the intervention as starting at the time of deployment and follow coding the ICB and COW datasets to determine timing and phasing of conflict.

ventions include anything involving more than 20,000 troops.⁸ For independent air and naval interventions, we considered both the absolute size of forces committed (number of carriers or other naval assets, number of sorties or aircraft) as well as the relative size of forces committed compared with the total force. This relative size measure was an effort to address the fact that what was a large commitment of naval and air assets in the late 1940s might seem small in absolute terms by the standards of the late 1980s. Intervention-size coding used the “typical” force size, defined as the size of the force for the majority of the intervention (rather than the peak or minimum values). This definition means that if an intervention started off small but grew to 25,000 troops in the third year and remained at that size for the next seven years, it would be coded as a large intervention, since the typical force size was above the 20,000-troop threshold.

More challenging was how to code the size of interventions that combine ground, air, and naval assets. Although assessing an aggregate size across components necessarily requires an element of subjective judgment, we aimed to capture in our assessment the aggregate level of military effort or commitment to the intervention on the part of the United States. As noted above, our criteria focused first on ground personnel. Although the contributions of air and naval assets to U.S. military interventions should not be minimized, it is also worth noting that ground forces inherently involve and imply a greater commitment because of the associated time, costs, and risk. We therefore required a substantial commitment of air or naval forces before increasing an intervention’s initial size categorization (which was made using its ground component) from small to medium or medium to large. As an example, an intervention with 15,000 ground troops and naval and air commitments that were coded as medium in size independently would remain a medium intervention, but a 15,000-troop intervention with large air and naval components could increase to a large intervention. As another example, consider the Cuban Missile Crisis. In our data, the Cuban Missile Crisis involved about 2,000 ground troops, with very

⁸ We do not count naval or air personnel involved unless they are also active in ground activities.

large air and naval components. We code this intervention as medium, upgrading it from the small categorization that it would otherwise have had because of its ground forces. In contrast, the 1992 intervention in Bosnia involved about 4,500 ground troops and large air and naval components, but because the air and naval forces involved represented a smaller proportion of overall U.S. capabilities than in Cuba, this intervention is coded as medium—no size upgrade occurs.⁹

Table 3.1 shows the number of cases that fall into each of the eight categories and provides examples. As noted above, the most common outcome across the universe of cases is that there is no U.S. intervention. About 20 percent of all cases occur in places where the United States already had forces. Of the six intervention categories, interventions that occur early and are small are the most common. Late interventions are rare (there are only 12 out of 50 total), and there are no large, late interventions. Table 3.2 reveals similar trends when we break

⁹ These size categories are obviously still broad and might group together interventions that are quite different. For example, although our taxonomy will group interventions that occur eight months after the conflict or crisis start with those that occur five years later, these interventions could be different in important ways. Similarly, an intervention that involves 25,000 troops could be very different than one that involves 200,000. However, we decided that a simpler categorization scheme, even with these inherently arbitrary break points, was still preferable. In the case of size, commitments of 25,000 and 200,000 troops are significant and meaningful commitments of forces that are more similar to each other than either is to smaller commitments, which might represent a more-limited level of engagement or interest by the United States. Similarly, interventions that include 100 troops and those that include 2,990 troops are likely to be very different, but both are commitments that the Army can more easily absorb without experiencing significant pressure on readiness. Again, both are likely to be more similar to each other than to interventions of substantially larger sizes. For the timing, a similar argument applies. An intervention that occurs immediately after a crisis could be different than one that starts three months later, just as an intervention that starts at month eight will be different from one that starts five years in. However, both sets of cases are likely to share important similarities. The United States has undertaken very few late interventions and has never undertaken a late intervention into a crisis. If the country is going to intervene early, the intervention typically happens quickly. Interventions that occur after six months are alike in that something prevented them from happening more immediately, whether it was a disagreement, an uncertainty, or simply a change in perceptions of the importance of the cases for the United States. Of course, there will still be differences within each category of cases that our quantitative analysis will not be able to capture. We will use the focused and counterfactual case studies in Chapters Four and Five to help capture greater nuance along these dimensions.

Table 3.1
Intervention Categories and Examples

Category	Number of Cases	Examples
No intervention	172	Hungary, 1956
Early, small	27	Libya, 2011
Early, medium	6	Grenada, 1983
Early, large	5	Kuwait, 1990
Late, small	7	Libya, 2014
Late, medium	5	Bosnia, 1992
Late, large	—	—
Forces already present	64	North Korea, 1994

Table 3.2
War and Crisis Interventions, by Timing and Size

Category	Wars	Crises
No intervention	103	69
Early, small	11	16
Early, medium	1	5
Early, large	1	4
Late, small	7	—
Late, medium	5	—
Late, large	—	—
Forces already present	28	36

the universe of cases into crises and wars. Early and small interventions are still the most likely. There are nine interventions into crises that are not small and none that are late. Late interventions do occur into wars but slightly less frequently than those that occur early in the conflict.

Exploring Outcomes by Intervention Timing and Size

Before moving on to a discussion of how intervention outcomes vary across these categories, it is worth pausing to consider the implications of selection effects for this analysis and how selection effects might affect our ability to identify cross-category outcome differences using this quantitative approach. By *selection effects* we mean that some of the same factors that shape the outcome of the intervention—specifically, U.S. interests or the severity of the war or crisis—might also shape the timing and the size of that intervention, so it will be difficult to disentangle the effects of timing and size and those of U.S. interests. For example, we might find that early, large interventions are associated with the best postintervention outcomes for the host nation, but these might also be the cases in which the United States perceives the highest stakes and so commits the most effort and resources. As another example, we might find that large interventions have generally worse outcomes, but they might be large interventions precisely because they respond to more-severe wars or crises. A more sophisticated statistical analysis could help to control for these selection effects, but we are prevented from conducting such an analysis by the small number of interventions in many of our timing and sizing categories. With only five late, medium interventions, for instance, any attempt to use a more sophisticated quantitative modeling approach would not yield meaningful results.

Disentangling trends and patterns driven by intervention timing and size and those driven by selection effects (especially given the small number of cases that we have) will be challenging, so we will need to interpret our results with caution. For this reason, we consider the quantitative results in this chapter to be suggestive and useful in developing expectations for qualitative investigations (rather than using them as research findings). In the discussion below, we describe patterns and present hypotheses. We do not assess the statistical significance of observed differences. We then build from the trends and patterns observed here for our focused and counterfactual case studies to help isolate meaningful patterns from selection effects.

Outcome Measures

In Chapter Two, we outlined three types of outcomes that are of interest when considering the trade-offs between different intervention decisions. In this section, we will use these same three groups of outcomes: effects on the conflict, effects on the interests of the intervener, and effects on the host nation. We consider what patterns we can discern from our quantitative comparison, how they match to the results described in Chapter Two, and what expectations they set for our qualitative analysis.

First, we consider several conflict outcome measures:¹⁰

- **Conflict duration:** We measure conflict duration as the time from the start to the end of the conflict. Ongoing conflicts do not have a duration and therefore are omitted.
- **Changes in conflict intensity:** We measure conflict intensity using an annualized measure of the battle deaths that occurred on all sides of the conflict. We consider annual battle deaths in the first year of the war or crisis, the last year of the war or crisis, one year after the war or crisis ends, and five years after the war or crisis ends. The battle death data we use comes from UCDP.¹¹
- **War or crisis recurrence:** We consider the likelihood that the war or crisis recurs, using the UCDP and ICB data sets.¹² We code for any recurrence, including recurrence of a war or crisis, a

¹⁰ We do not consider whether the United States or the side the United States supported “won” in this analysis. First, in many cases, the United States did not intervene on one or the other side but instead intervened to monitor the situation and deter the Soviets. Any assessment of win/loss ratios would have to exclude those cases. This issue and the issue of which wars and crises tend to escalate and which do not are covered in greater depth in Bryan Frederick, Stephen Watts, Matthew Lane, Abby Doll, Ashley L. Rhoades, and Meagan L. Smith, *Understanding the Deterrent Impact of U.S. Overseas Forces*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2533-A, 2020; and Watts, Johnston, et al., 2017.

¹¹ Pettersson and Eck, 2018. The battle-death data is, however, affected by both missing observations and uncertainty about included totals. Other measures of conflict intensity are affected by similar limitations. We use this measure but note the uncertainty attached to given estimates.

¹² Brecher and Wilkenfeld, 2000; Brecher et al., 2017; Pettersson and Eck, 2018; Gleditsch et al., 2002.

crisis that later recurs as war, or a war that later recurs in a crisis phase.

Second, we consider outcomes that affect the interests of the intervening state:

- **Percentage of objectives successfully achieved:** We consider the percentage of total U.S. political objectives in each intervention category that are successfully achieved according to past RAND analysis of U.S. military interventions. The analysis uses coding drawn from RUMID, which includes all political objectives and the degree of success achieved.¹³ We include ongoing interventions, since some have achieved some portion of their objectives already.
- **Military and economic assistance:** We consider changes in the percentage of total military and economic assistance allocated to the host nation between the first year of the war or crisis and five years after the end of the war or crisis. We use this as one measure of the longer-term economic and strategic implications of the intervention for the intervening state.¹⁴ One consequence of an intervention could be a long-term military and economic assistance cost for the United States. Another possibility is that military and economic assistance function in place of (or, conversely, alongside) military force in certain contexts.

¹³ Political objectives are coded for success on a three-point scale. We only consider full success here. The process for determining and coding both political objectives and degrees of success can be found in Kavanagh, Frederick, Stark, et al., 2019. In that work, the authors identified all political objectives for each intervention and then coded the degree of success. They included multiple coders to increase robustness of the coding. Interventions could have many objectives, and success for each was coded independently. For example, in the case of the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, the United States was successful in defeating the Taliban but only partially successful at establishing stable governing institutions.

¹⁴ Compiled from U.S. Agency for International Development, *US. Overseas Loans and Grants, Obligations and Loan Authorizations, July 1, 1945–September 30, 2014*, Washington, D.C., 2015; and U.S. Agency for International Development, “The Greenbook,” webpage, updated April 29, 2013.

Finally, we consider outcomes for the host nation:¹⁵

- **Changes in polity scores:** We consider changes in the *polity scores*, a measure of the degree of democracy, in the host nation. Using Polity IV data, we compare the values between the first year of the war or crisis and five years after the end of the war or crisis for the host nation.¹⁶
- **Changes in gross domestic product (GDP) per capita:** We consider changes in GDP per capita between the first year of the war or crisis and five years after the end of the war or crisis for the host nation using Maddison GDP per capita.¹⁷ GDP per capita can be a measure of economic well-being and is sometimes used as a proxy measurement for the state's institutional capacity.
- **Changes in infant mortality:** We consider changes in infant mortality as a measure of social well-being and the country's development, comparing between the first year of the war or crisis and five years after the end of the war or crisis for the host nation.¹⁸

¹⁵ *Host nation* is defined as “where the forces are located.” For naval and air deployments, we consider the “host” nation to be the country whose airspace or nearby waters contains those forces. Note that the Cuban Missile Crisis is unusual in that U.S. forces are coded as being in Cuba because of their presence at Guantanamo, even though a large portion of forces were deployed in U.S. waters or airspace.

It is also important to note that the intention of the United States regarding the host nation varies in the cases in our data set. The United States was, for example, much more motivated to improve the trajectory of Afghanistan after 2001 than it was to improve the trajectory of Cuba after the Cuban Missile Crisis. This variation makes it difficult to interpret the patterns in the data for host-nation trajectory. We discuss the implications of this when we present those results. Although we are better able to account for such differences in our focused case studies detailed in Chapter Four, this heterogeneity in U.S. goals highlights a limitation of the quantitative analysis.

¹⁶ Monty G. Marshall, Ted Robert Gurr, and Keith Jagers, *Polity IV: “Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800–2017,”* Vienna, Va.: Center for Systemic Peace, 2018.

¹⁷ GDP per capita data from Angus Maddison, homepage, updated September 3, 2008. Jutta Bolt, Robert Inklaar, Herman de Jong, and Jan Luiten van Zanden, “Rebasing ‘Maddison’: New Income Comparisons and the Shape of Long-Run Economic Development,” Maddison Project Database, Version 2018, Working Paper No. 10, 2018.

¹⁸ World Bank, “Mortality Rate, Infant (Per 1,000 Live Births), 1960–2017,” online database, undated.

These data come from the World Bank and start in 1960, so we are not able to use this metric for all cases.

The different indicators provide relatively rough operationalizations of the different outcome measures described in Chapter Two. However, there are some outcomes of interest that we do not have quantitative metrics for at all and therefore cannot assess. In particular, the missing metrics affect our ability to consider the specific economic, domestic political, and strategic and reputational costs and benefits for the intervening state (we do have one economic measure, but it captures only a piece of the cost). With appropriate existing data sources not available, the process of developing new, reasonable operationalizations of these types of outcomes for both intervention and nonintervention cases unfortunately lies outside the scope of the present effort. Instead, we use the short, focused case studies and the longer counterfactual cases summarized in Chapters Four and Five to provide insight into these factors.

Comparisons

Conflict Outcomes

When considering conflict outcomes, we focus on conflict duration, conflict intensity, and conflict recurrence. We first consider conflict duration. Table 3.3 shows the duration of wars by intervention category. Most wars are relatively short; as expected, the vast majority of all wars in our data set last less than five years, with more than half lasting less than two years. However, even in this context, U.S. interventions appear to be associated with shorter wars. All wars with early U.S. interventions last five years or less, though there are several longer wars with late, small interventions. There are also several longer wars in the “forces already present” category. However, selection effects might be relevant to this association between U.S. interventions and shorter wars. It is possible that the trend observed in Table 3.3 results, for example, from an unwillingness by the United States to become involved in wars that appear too messy, too difficult, or likely to last more than a few years. Late interventions into wars, in contrast, are somewhat more likely to be associated with longer wars, but that may

Table 3.3
Conflict Duration by Intervention Type for War Cases

Category	Less than 2 Years	2–5 Years	6–10 Years	10-Plus Years
No intervention	49	35	13	4
New U.S. intervention	14	3	4	1
Early, small	10	1	—	—
Early, medium	1	—	—	—
Early, large	—	1	—	—
Late, small	2	—	3	1
Late, medium	1	1	1	—
Late, large	—	—	—	—
Forces already present	53	7	3	1

NOTE: Excludes ongoing crises and wars.

simply be because, in many cases, the war could have already been lengthy by the time the United States became involved.

In crisis cases (shown in Table 3.4), about two-thirds of crisis interventions occur in cases that resolve within less than one year, with the rest occurring in crises that last roughly one full year or, in relatively few cases, two years. For nonintervention cases, about 85 percent resolve in less than one year, suggesting that new interventions into crises do not seem to be associated with shorter crises than what occurs in the absence of interventions. However, it is important to note that the United States does not always withdraw forces at the end of a crisis, even if the initial crisis resolves. In many cases, including Afghanistan 2001, the United States remains for a lengthy postcrisis period of stabilization and other activities, which can last anywhere from a few months to many years. The duration of the initial conflict or crisis, then, does not necessarily tell us much about the cost or implications of that intervention for the United States.

Table 3.4
Conflict Duration by Intervention Type for Crisis Cases

Category	Less than 1 Year	1 Year	2 Years
No intervention	58	10	1
New U.S. intervention	17	6	2
Early, small	11	3	2
Early, medium	5	—	—
Early, large	1	3	—
Late, small	—	—	—
Late, large	—	—	—
Forces already present	24	11	1

NOTE: Excludes ongoing crises and wars.

Overall, U.S. interventions might be associated with shorter wars (particularly when those interventions occur early in the conflict) but not necessarily with shorter crises. Although it is difficult to disentangle these relationships from the selection effects that might be driving them, trends in duration suggest at least one other interesting observation. Although recent experience has been dominated by several long conflicts that have required extended commitments, U.S. experiences with interventions since 1946 have predominantly included shorter wars and crises.

The second conflict outcome metric that we consider is conflict intensity, measured by annual battle deaths. We consider both the number of battle deaths in the first year of the war or crisis and the percentage change in battle deaths between the first year of the war or crisis and five years after the end of the war or crisis (Table 3.5).¹⁹ The first observation is that, with the exception of the late, small category (driven by the relatively marginal U.S. intervention in the 1971 war in

¹⁹ All five-year postconflict comparisons in this chapter are calculated from the end year of the crisis or conflict.

Table 3.5
Change in Average Annual Battle Deaths, by Intervention Category

Category	Number of Cases	Percentage of Cases That Are Wars	Initial Average Battle Deaths (First Year of Conflict)	Percentage Change in Battle Deaths (First Year to Five Years Postconflict) ^a
No intervention	170	59%	5,744	-20%
New U.S. intervention	47	50%	8,612	-36%
Early, small	27	41%	4,447	+21%
Early medium	6	17%	2,830	-68%
Early, large	5	20%	4,927	-99%
Late, small	6	100%	44,019	-100%
Late, medium	3	100%	4,793	-100%
Late, large	—	—	—	—
Forces already present	64	44%	5,589	+200%

^a Excludes ongoing crises and wars and cases that ended less than five years ago.

Bangladesh), intervention and nonintervention cases look somewhat similar in terms of their average battle deaths in the first year of the war or crisis, with intervention cases being higher but not dramatically so. Second, our exploration suggests that U.S. interventions might be associated with larger decreases in battle deaths than either noninterventions or cases in which U.S. forces were already present. The observed decrease in battle deaths occurs across the size and timing categories and is largest for late interventions in percentage terms.

The early, small category appears to be an exception, with an increase in average battle deaths over time. Digging deeper, however, reveals that this increase is driven only by one case, in which the increase in battle deaths is largely unrelated to U.S. activity: the early, small intervention in response to the Iran hostage crisis. The intervention had numerous problems, but it was also unrelated to the subsequent initiation of the Iran-Iraq War, which is what produced the

spike in battle deaths in Iran.²⁰ If we drop that single observation, the decrease in fatalities for the early, small category is about 60 percent. Notably, the results in terms of changes in conflict intensity are largely similar across wars and crises once we address this one anomaly. Still, the size of the reduction in conflict intensity appears to be greater for late interventions than for early ones. The smaller number of late interventions means that we must interpret these patterns with caution. The other result in this table that deserves explanation is the large increase in battle deaths for the forces already present category. This, too, is driven by only one observation: the conflict in Waziristan in 2004, which experienced a rapid increase in battle deaths between 2004 and five years after the end of the conflict because of regional escalation in fighting between tribal groups and government forces. Dropping that observation lowers the increase in battle deaths to only 15 percent. Thus, this is a case in which estimates of changes over time could be heavily affected by individual outlier cases; as a result, we should take all trends in Table 3.5 with a large degree of caution.

As noted, even the patterns we see here are suggestive only. Selection effects are likely to complicate their interpretation. The United States likely chooses to begin new interventions in cases where policymakers believe that the intervention can have a significant influence. They might avoid those cases where hope for conflict resolution seems small or where the costs to bring it about seem extraordinarily high. Nonintervention cases, therefore, could be especially likely to see continuing increases in conflict intensity, but these increases (if anticipated) could be a reason for U.S. nonintervention rather than being caused by it. On the other hand, the United States might also position longer-term forces in locations where the threat of conflict and escalation is greatest. This could explain why conflict intensity appears to increase for “forces already present” cases in our analysis.²¹

The final conflict outcome measure we consider is war or crisis recurrence. If one goal of U.S. military interventions is to promote sta-

²⁰ We do not see strong effects by other outliers in our other intervention categories.

²¹ Further investigation reveals that this increase occurs only in war cases, and that average annual battle deaths falls in crisis cases where forces were already present.

bility and prevent crisis and conflict recurrence, then we would hope to see a clear association between U.S. interventions and lower rates of conflict recurrence.²² However, Table 3.6 suggests little difference at the aggregate level in the recurrence rates for cases in which the United States does or does not intervene. Wars appear to recur about 85 percent of the time, while crises recur about 60 percent of the time, regardless of whether there was a U.S. intervention. There are a few differences when we consider individual intervention categories, but the small number of cases and potential selection effects make it difficult to draw any real conclusions. In our universe for both wars and crises, recurrence seems lower for early interventions regardless of size (though the larger categories have few interventions). However, it is worth underscoring that recurrence rates following U.S. interventions,

Table 3.6
Conflict Recurrence, by Intervention Category

Category	Number of Wars	Recurrence Rate	Number of Crises	Recurrence Rate
No intervention	101	86%	69	58%
New U.S. intervention	22	86%	25	56%
Early, small	11	90%	16	50%
Early, medium	1	100%	5	60%
Early, large	1	100%	4	75%
Late, small	6	67%	—	—
Late, medium	3	100%	—	—
Late, large	—	—	—	—
Forces already present	28	92%	36	22%

NOTE: Excludes ongoing crises and wars.

²² As already noted, even where others disagree, interventions always respond to the perception of a threat or crisis, even if the crisis or threat later proves to be nonexistent.

on average, remain as high as recurrence rates following nonintervention wars and crises.

Taken together, these results provide little evidence that new U.S. interventions have any notable effect on conflict recurrence, regardless of the characteristics of that intervention. The differences across categories are small, and the number of cases on which the pattern depends are limited. Interestingly, conflict seems substantially less likely to recur in crises for which the United States already has forces present. The relationship does not, however, extend to wars.

Intervening State Interests

Next, we consider the effects of the intervention, its timing, and size decisions on the intervening state (the United States). We focus on two metrics: (1) the achievement of political objectives and (2) the medium-term implications for military and economic assistance spending. Table 3.7 shows the rate at which the United States achieves its political objectives in interventions with different sizes and timings. This

Table 3.7
Percentage of Objectives Successfully Achieved, by Intervention Category

Category	Number of Wars	Percentage of Objectives Successfully Achieved	Number of Crises	Percentage of Objectives Successfully Achieved
No Intervention	103	—	69	—
New U.S. intervention	25	54%	25	54%
Early, small	11	72%	16	44%
Early, medium	1	100%	5	83%
Early, large	1	60%	4	62%
Late, small	7	38%	—	—
Late, medium	5	25%	—	—
Late, large	—	—	—	—
Forces already present	28	53%	36	82%

rate of success uses prior RAND research that identified the political objectives of U.S. military interventions and coded the degree to which they were achieved, according to in-depth research.²³ These data do not contain information on the political objectives of noninterventions; at this point, we are not able to compare this outcome across the intervention decision point. We will conduct an assessment of the extent to which the United States achieves its objectives with a smaller set of nonintervention cases in Chapter Four.

Table 3.7 suggests that rates of success are higher, in general, for early interventions when compared with late interventions. This result also seems consistent with previous research described in Chapter Two that suggests that early interventions tend to be more likely to advance the interests of the intervener. This result could be because interveners have the most flexibility during the conflict's early phases, before both sides dig in and compromise becomes harder. The effects of size appear to be somewhat more mixed, with no consistent patterns emerging.

Selection effects could also play a role in explaining these patterns. It is possible that the United States intervenes early and contributes the most resources (not just forces, but also equipment, funding, and support) to cases in which more-important interests are at stake. This additional commitment, beyond what we can measure here, might explain the higher success rate as much as the timing of the intervention itself. We further explore the possible dynamics driving the higher success rates of early interventions in Chapter Four. It is also worth emphasizing that our analysis does not allow us to assess whether the United States achieves a higher rate of success on intervention objectives when it intervenes than when it does not. We will explore this relationship qualitatively in Chapters Four and Five.

Ideally, we would use proxy metrics in addition to the level of success to compare the strategic and reputational costs, domestic political costs, and economic costs and benefits of the intervention borne by the United States across categories. Practically, however, we lack the data sources to comprehensively conduct such an investigation. Instead, we

²³ See Kavanagh, Frederick, Stark, et al., 2019.

assess these dynamics in the short, focused case studies in Chapter Four and the longer counterfactual case studies in Chapter Five.

However, one aspect of the costs and benefits to the intervener for which we do have a relevant data source is the amount of U.S. economic and military assistance spending. Increased levels of U.S. assistance reflect, in part, an increasing economic burden, but they might also reflect a degree of success in establishing a partner receptive to receiving this assistance. Although they represent an economic cost, increases in military or economic assistance could also reflect a strategic benefit for the United States.

To assess changes in assistance, we first calculated the percentage of total military and economic assistance allocated to each country during the first year of the conflict. We did the same for the five-year postconflict period. Then we considered the change between the two.²⁴ Table 3.8 shows the change in economic assistance and Table 3.9 shows the change in military assistance. The two tables suggest a correlation between U.S. intervention decisions and future levels of economic and military assistance, but we believe that these patterns might not be that meaningful as a reflection of advancing U.S. interests. Table 3.8 suggests a modest correlation between U.S. intervention (early U.S. interventions in particular) and future increases in economic assistance. Table 3.9 suggests a notably stronger correlation between U.S. intervention (again, early U.S. interventions in particular) and future increases in military assistance. It is also worth noting that we reran the results of Tables 3.8 and 3.9 excluding two high-profile cases that were known to involve very high levels of U.S. assistance (U.S. interventions in Iraq post-2003 and Afghanistan post-2001) to see whether these patterns were driven by outlier observations; although the increases in military assistance correlated with U.S. interventions were somewhat more modest, they were not dramatically different from those reported in Tables 3.8 and 3.9.

²⁴ We use this particular metric to deal with the dramatic year-over-year fluctuations in military and economic assistance spending. The “noise” in these data makes it difficult to identify meaningful trends. Furthermore, the size of the swings in certain countries and the overall distribution of the data mean that outliers can significantly influence overall trends.

Table 3.8
Change in Economic Assistance to Host Nation, by Intervention Category

Category	Number of Cases	Percentage of Cases That Are Wars	Initial Economic Assistance to Host Country as a Percentage of Total	Economic Assistance to Host Country as a Percentage of Total, Five Years Postconflict
No intervention	170	59%	1.4%	2%
New U.S. intervention	47	50%	1.5%	3%
Early, small	27	41%	1.3%	4%
Early, medium	6	17%	0.6%	2%
Early, large	5	20%	0.6%	4%
Late, small	6	100%	1.4%	1%
Late, medium	3	100%	0.9%	1%
Late, large	—	—	—	—
Forces already present	64	44%	1.9%	3%

NOTE: Excludes ongoing crises and wars.

On the one hand, it is perhaps not surprising that U.S. assistance to a country would substantially increase in the aftermath of a U.S. military intervention into that country. In many cases, U.S. forces could still be present in the country five years after the end of the conflict that prompted the intervention, and the United States frequently undertakes substantial capacity-building and other efforts with the host nation as part of its postconflict stabilization efforts. Moreover, a recent U.S. intervention and the possible continued presence of U.S. troops could represent strong incentives for a country to accept U.S. assistance and agree to work with the United States more broadly. Iraq post-2003 represents a notable example, in which the pre-2003 regime under Saddam Hussein was swept away and replaced by one that was willing to accept U.S. assistance and was at least relatively more closely aligned with U.S. policy goals. Therefore, the possibility

Table 3.9
Change in Military Assistance to Host Nation, by Intervention Category

Category	Number of Cases	Percentage of Cases That Are Wars	Initial Military Assistance to Host Country as a Percentage of Total	Military Assistance to Host Country as a Percentage of Total, Five Years Postconflict
No intervention	170	59%	1.2%	1.7%
New U.S. intervention	47	50%	1.1%	16%
Early, small	27	41%	1.9%	24%
Early, medium	6	17%	0.04%	6%
Early, large	5	20%	0.03%	7%
Late, small	6	100%	0.0%	0.02%
Late, medium	3	100%	0.3%	0.03%
Late, large	—	—	—	—
Forces already present	64	44%	3.8%	5%

NOTE: Excludes ongoing crises and wars.

that U.S. intervention could increase the willingness of states to accept U.S. assistance seems plausible.

Complicating this assessment, however, is the fact that U.S. interest in providing military and economic assistance is also likely to be transformed by the intervention decision. Leaving aside the difficulties the United States had with pre-intervention regimes in such places as Iraq, Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Kosovo, the United States likely also became more willing to provide assistance to these countries after conducting an intervention there because it had become much more invested in their success for political and strategic reasons. Higher assistance levels might come to be seen as a small price to pay to increase stability or build capacity and to avoid damaging perceptions of a failed intervention in countries where the United States would have been unwilling to provide such assistance before the intervention. Therefore, we should be extremely cautious of interpreting increasing levels of assistance as

reflective only of the advancement of U.S. interests in the host nation. The United States could be gaining additional leverage and access to key countries, but it could also have simply become much more willing to provide these funds. It is not clear how much leverage the United States might be able to gain by providing increased assistance in post-intervention situations. Because it is especially difficult to disentangle these factors using only a quantitative approach, we will return to the question regarding whether and under what circumstances U.S. interventions might advance U.S. interests in Chapters Four and Five.

Host-Nation Outcomes

Finally, we consider the relationship between intervention decisions and host-nation outcomes using three metrics: (1) polity scores to assess changes in the level of democracy, (2) GDP per capita to assess changes in economic well-being and state capacity, and (3) infant mortality to assess changes in well-being and health. In this section, we explore the fundamental question of whether U.S. interventions of various characteristics appear to help the host nation in the medium and longer term.²⁵

Table 3.10 shows the changes in polity score between the first year of the war or crisis and five years after the end of the war or crisis.²⁶ If U.S. interventions increase the level of democracy of the host nation, we would expect to see positive increases in the polity score. We

²⁵ It is important to note when interpreting the results in this section that the U.S. commitment to helping improve the host nation varied substantially across the interventions in our data set. Although many cases involve clear commitments to nation-building and assistance (such as post-2001 Afghanistan and post-2003 Iraq), others might have seen much more limited involvement (such as naval missions to deter Soviet involvement in the 1971 India-Pakistan war over Bangladesh), while in still other cases, the United States might have actually wished the host nation ill (such as Cuba following the Cuban Missile Crisis or Iran following the Iran Hostage Crisis). Because the United States was, in most cases, at least generally interested in improving outcomes for the host nation, we decided to include the analysis showing overall patterns in these metrics. However, caution should be taken when interpreting them, and they should not be understood to reflect the limits of how much the United States might be capable of improving host-nation outcomes, if that were to be a priority.

²⁶ Polity scores rate the level of democracy of a state on a scale from -10 to 10, with 10 being a full democracy and -10 being a full autocracy. Marshall, Gurr, and Jagers, 2018.

Table 3.10
Changes in Polity Score, by Intervention Category

Category	Number of Cases	Percentage of Cases That Are Wars	Average Initial Polity Score	Change in Average Polity Score (Initial Year to Five Years Postconflict)
No intervention	170	59%	-2.5	+0.5
New U.S. intervention	47	50%	-2.5	-0.3
Early, small	27	41%	-2.8	-0.6
Early, medium	6	17%	-1.8	-1.3
Early, large	5	20%	-2.3	-0.7
Late, small	6	100%	-3.3	+3.0
Late, medium	3	100%	0.0	0.0
Late, large	—	—	—	—
Forces already present	64	44%	0.2	+0.4

NOTE: Excludes ongoing crises and wars.

include this measure because many U.S. interventions have increasing the level of democracy or improving governance as either an overt or unstated objective, but it is worth noting that democracy promotion is not an objective of all U.S. interventions.

Table 3.10 shows that, in terms of starting point, intervention and nonintervention cases have similar average polity scores. There are modest differences according to the type of intervention, with early interventions being associated with lower polity scores than are associated with late ones. However, there is little indication here that U.S. interventions have consistently contributed to an increase in the level of democracy of the host nation. Instead, changes are generally small and often are in the negative direction. One exception is the late, small intervention category. This differing result is driven by two cases: Bangladesh and El Salvador, which experienced significant increases in their level of democracy after small U.S. interventions. In the case of Bangladesh, the observed increase in overall level of democracy occurred

following a bloody war between India and Pakistan that eventually led to independence and the formation of a democratic Bangladesh. But it would be misleading to argue that the U.S. intervention, limited to the deployment of a carrier group to the Indian Ocean to monitor the conflict, played any important role in this democratization.²⁷ In the case of El Salvador, the United States originally supported the Salvadoran government in its fight against Leftist guerrillas, despite the fact that the government was less than democratic. It is true, however, that the United States was also involved in the negotiation of the cease-fire and supported the eventual holding of elections.²⁸ Looking at the data more generally, we see relatively few cases of significant increases in polity score across intervention categories. Among those cases with significant increases, such as Liberia in the 1990s, it can be hard to trace the direct line between the military intervention and democratization.²⁹ There are also cases in which U.S. interventions are followed by large decreases in democracy, including in Indonesia, where U.S. involvement in regime activities against Indonesian communists could have contributed to the decline in democracy observed in the 1960s in that country.³⁰ Finally, a comparison of wars and crises suggests no major differences between patterns in the two types of cases for this metric. Taking a holistic view of all the intervention cases in the data set, our analysis leads us to expect no substantial relationship between U.S. interventions and democratization of the host nation.

Turning to economic outcomes, our analysis in Table 3.11 suggests that, at the aggregate level, U.S. military interventions are not associated with any increase in GDP per capita in the five years after the end

²⁷ Lorraine Boissoneault, "The Genocide the U.S. Can't Remember, but Bangladesh Can't Forget," *Smithsonian*, December 16, 2016.

²⁸ William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977–1992*, Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1998.

²⁹ Terrence Lyons, "Liberia's Path from Anarchy to Elections," *Current History*, Vol. 97, No. 619, May 1998.

³⁰ Vincent Bevins, "What the United States Did in Indonesia," *The Atlantic*, October 20, 2017; Bradley R. Simpson, *Economists with Guns: Authoritarian Development and U.S.-Indonesian Relations, 1960–1968*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008.

Table 3.11
Changes in GDP per Capita, by Intervention Category

Category	Number of Cases	Percentage of Cases That Are Wars	Average Initial GDP per Capita (2011 Geary-Khamis dollars)	Change in Average GDP per Capita (Initial Year to Five Years Postconflict)
No intervention	170	59%	\$2,959	+13%
New U.S. intervention	50	50%	\$2,483	+12%
Early, small	27	41%	\$2,615	+10%
Early, medium	6	17%	\$1,303	+18%
Early, large	5	20%	\$2,706	+41%
Late, small	6	100%	\$2,723	−20%
Late, medium	3	100%	\$2,709	+15%
Late, large	—	—	—	—
Forces already present	64	44%	\$5,575	+19%

NOTE: Excludes ongoing wars and crises as well as cases that ended after 2013.

of the crisis or war when compared with nonintervention cases or cases in which the United States already had forces present. We do, however, see some differences within the intervention subcategories. First, increases in GDP per capita following large interventions (though few in number) appear to be somewhat greater on average than increases following smaller interventions and nonintervention cases are. Second, early interventions are also associated with better economic outcomes than later ones are, although our evidence is suggestive only. We also see one instance in which GDP per capita falls (specifically, for interventions that are late and small). This result is driven primarily by two interventions: the limited intervention in the Persian Gulf associated with the Iran-Iraq War and the intervention in Somalia in 1991. Taken together, then, our findings suggest that larger, earlier interventions are associated with greater economic growth, while later and smaller interventions are not, such that interventions overall appear to be broadly similar to noninterventions. The number of cases involved in many

of these subcategories, however, is quite small, so these results should again be interpreted with caution.

Our final outcome metric is infant mortality, which can be a measure of a country's level of development as well as its ability to provide basic services. Falling rates of infant mortality would indicate an improvement in development and the trajectory of the host nation. Table 3.12 shows the level of infant mortality at the start of the crisis or war for each intervention category and the percentage decline in the period between the first year of the crisis or war and five years after its end. With both metrics, there is little difference between the intervention and nonintervention cases at the aggregate level, but there could be some differences among intervention categories that are worth investigating. Specifically, larger interventions appear to occur in cases in which infant mortality rates are lower to start than is the case (in our sample) for smaller interventions, and there is some suggestion that postintervention reductions in infant mortality might be greater in late

Table 3.12
Changes in Infant Mortality Rate, by Intervention Category

Category	Number of Cases	Percentage of Cases That Are Wars	Average Infant Mortality (per 1,000 Live Births)	Change in Infant Mortality (Initial Year to Five Years Postconflict)
No intervention	170	59%	78	-19%
New U.S. intervention	47	50%	82	-19%
Early, small	27	41%	98	-18%
Early, medium	6	17%	73	-11%
Early, large	5	20%	43	-12%
Late, small	6	100%	92	-32%
Late, medium	3	100%	43	-22%
Late, large	—	—	—	—
Forces already present	64	44%	37	-21%

NOTE: Excludes ongoing wars and crises as well as cases that ended after 2013.

interventions. As elsewhere in this report, however, the influence of selection effects, the diversity in U.S. goals in these countries, and the small number of cases make it difficult to generalize.

Summary

Table 3.13 summarizes the results noted in this chapter. Because of the small sample size (especially in the case of late interventions and larger interventions) and selection effects, the quantitative evidence presented in this chapter is limited. Although we found that the starting conditions of conflicts that did and did not trigger U.S. interventions appear to be similar in most ways, selection effects still likely play a role in shaping intervention outcomes and decisions about whether, when, and with how many forces to intervene. These limitations were not unexpected; indeed, they were one of the key reasons this report includes four different, parallel methodologies. However, we still identified some patterns of interest, which will be interesting to compare, as we do in Chapter Six, with results from other methods that are better equipped to more directly address questions regarding whether these correlations might be causal.

We found very limited evidence that U.S. intervention decisions are associated with changes in the dynamics of conflicts. Patterns in conflict duration and conflict recurrence were not notably different from nonintervention cases. The exception to this observation is that we found an association between U.S. interventions (particularly, interventions that occur later in a conflict) and a reduction in conflict intensity.

We found more evidence that earlier interventions were associated with the advancement of U.S. interests, in comparison with later interventions. Unfortunately, we did not have data available to assess how intervention cases might have differed from nonintervention cases in this regard. We also found evidence that U.S. assistance (and military assistance in particular) increased after U.S. interventions, especially with earlier interventions. However, it remains unclear whether this increase in assistance should be interpreted as advancing U.S. interests.

Table 3.13**Summary of Quantitative Investigations into Relationship Between U.S. Interventions and Outcomes**

Category	Outcome	Patterns Observed	Caveats and Concerns
Conflict	Duration (conflict years)	No clear patterns observed.	Interventions are associated with shorter wars but longer crises. It is difficult to anticipate the direction of selection effects.
	Intensity (annual battle deaths)	U.S. interventions are associated with a somewhat greater decline in conflict intensity than noninterventions are. Earlier interventions are associated with a lesser decline in conflict intensity than later interventions are.	The United States might be more likely to select the most-feasible intervention opportunities for ending the conflict, which would tend to overstate the intervention's conflict-reducing effect.
	Recurrence	No clear patterns observed.	Intervention and nonintervention cases have highly similar recurrence rates.
Intervening state	National interests (overall; percentage of objectives achieved)	Earlier interventions are associated with a higher likelihood of achieving U.S. political objectives than later interventions are.	Potential selection effects include a higher likelihood of early intervention when there are higher stakes for the United States and therefore a greater motivation to commit sufficient resources (beyond force size) to succeed.
	Access and leverage (military and economic assistance to the host nation)	Interventions are associated with a notable increase in military assistance and a more modest increase in economic assistance. Early interventions are associated with increases in economic and military assistance in comparison with late interventions.	U.S. willingness to provide assistance to countries in which it has intervened might also increase dramatically. If so, then this metric might not reflect increased access to or leverage over the recipient country but instead a shift in U.S. political and strategic investment in the country.

Table 3.13—Continued

Category	Outcome	Patterns Observed	Caveats and Concerns
Host nation	Political (polity)	No clear patterns observed.	Intervention and nonintervention cases are broadly similar, with some apparent differences driven by cases that appear to be unrelated to democratization. Democratization might not always have been a U.S. goal.
	Economic (GDP per capita)	Interventions are broadly similar to noninterventions overall. However, earlier and larger interventions are associated with higher economic growth than later and smaller interventions or noninterventions.	There is a limited number of cases, particularly in later and larger intervention categories, reducing the level of confidence in the results. Economic improvements might not always have been a U.S. goal.
	Economic (infant mortality)	Interventions are similar to noninterventions overall. However, later interventions might be associated with greater decreases in infant mortality rates than earlier interventions or nonintervention cases are.	The very limited number of later interventions makes it difficult to generalize from those results.

Higher assistance levels might either produce or reflect greater U.S. leverage over the host nation, but they might also reflect increased U.S. willingness to provide assistance to a country in which it now has a much larger political and strategic investment.

Finally, we again found no clear evidence that host-nation outcomes differ substantially between intervention and nonintervention cases. Within the set of intervention cases, however, earlier and larger interventions were associated with larger increases in GDP per capita, while later interventions might have been associated with larger decreases in infant mortality. But these patterns, in particular, were driven by a small number of cases.

Although we view these patterns as suggestive only, the heterogeneity among them suggests that there could be trade-offs for policymakers among the three main outcome measures that we focus on. Earlier interventions, for example, could be those in which U.S. objectives are more likely to be achieved but also could lead to higher conflict intensity and lower decreases in infant mortality. We do not feel that the particulars of these trade-offs can be clearly established by this analysis (the number of cases in each category is quite small), but these patterns highlight the possibility that all outcome measures might not be correlated with one another and that U.S. decisionmakers might need to be aware that efforts to pursue one set of goals could make pursuing another set more difficult. In Chapters Four and Five, we will use case studies to explore relationships and trade-offs between intervention decisions and characteristics and outcomes, and we will attempt to provide greater insight into these relationships.

Lessons from Focused Case Studies

The third method we employed in our investigation of the likely effects of the decision to conduct a military intervention and of its timing and size was a series of 45 short, focused case studies. The quantitative investigations summarized in the previous chapter provided us with the broadest available review of the historical context and were helpful in identifying overall patterns in U.S. intervention decisions and outcomes. However, only relatively few consistent patterns were identified, and the interpretation of these patterns is complicated by the limitations of the analyses because of a variety of data and methodological issues previously discussed. These limitations highlight the potential value of more-detailed studies of specific cases.

When deciding to conduct more-detailed investigations into particular cases, however, one faces a necessary trade-off between depth and breadth. Conducting a smaller number of highly detailed cases can be ideal for investigating specific pathways or hypothesized causal relationships, but it risks identifying relationships that might not be generalizable if the cases selected are not representative. On the other hand, conducting a larger number of more-limited case studies can help to ensure a more representative set of cases and to consider different contexts but provides more-limited information on the precise operation of potential causal pathways.

In this study, we use both approaches. In this chapter, we consider a large number of case studies across different contexts in less depth.¹

¹ More information on the focused case studies is available from the authors on request.

Crucially, these focused studies allow us to explore cases that cover the full breadth of differing intervention timing and size combinations and to consider several nonintervention cases. In addition, this approach allows us to assess a wider range of in-country and international characteristics and their relationship to intervention decisions and intervention outcomes. As a complement to this approach, we also conducted four much more detailed counterfactual case studies, which are summarized in the next chapter.

Methodology

The focused case studies were intended to serve several purposes within our analysis. First, we used these case studies to explore the U.S. decisionmaking process in each instance, including the interests that motivated decisions to intervene and factors that shaped decisions about intervention timing. Second, we considered the outcomes of each intervention for the United States and for the host nation.² Third, we used the case studies to explore the dynamics of nonintervention cases to better understand why interventions did not occur in those cases and what the implication of the decision not to intervene was for U.S. interests and the host-nation trajectory. This section summarizes the methodology we employed to select and then conduct our focused case studies.

Selecting Cases

When selecting the cases for our focused case studies, we considered several factors. We wanted to ensure that the cases chosen included a sufficient number of nonintervention cases to provide a useful baseline and covered a wide range of intervention timings and sizes. Further, we also wanted the cases to cover a representative set of activity types,

² As discussed in Chapter One, we did not assess the third category of outcome measures (effects on the conflict) in these case studies. The effects of interventions on conflict dynamics were among the most robustly studied in the literature. For this reason, we decided to use our case studies to focus on the least well-studied outcome measures, including a particular emphasis on whether the interventions advanced the interests of the intervening state.

such that our cases were not unduly concentrated in, for example, all combat missions or all deterrence missions. Finally, we wanted to conduct the largest number of cases that resources permitted to ensure that our assessments of cases with particular timing and size characteristics were as likely to be representative as possible.

With these criteria in mind, we selected 45 cases from the list of 286 potential cases of U.S. intervention discussed in Chapter Three. During our selection process, we drew cases using the intervention categories described in Chapter Three: whether the intervention occurred early or late in a crisis or war; whether the intervention involved small, medium, or large U.S. forces; and combinations of these timing and size dimensions, as well as cases in which U.S. forces were already present before the onset of the crisis or war and cases in which the United States did not intervene at all—there were no historical cases that were late and large. After ensuring, to the best extent the universe of potential cases allowed, a sufficient number of cases from each category, we then randomly selected cases from each category while making sure that we also included a mix of activity types, including deterrence, combat, and stability operations.³ During this process, we intentionally oversampled intervention cases; in particular, we oversampled medium and large intervention cases, of which there have historically been fewer, given their greater substantive importance for policymakers. We therefore undersampled cases in which U.S. forces were already present or in which there was no U.S. intervention at all, although we still included 20 nonintervention cases. A full list of cases selected is shown in Table 4.1.

³ As shown in Chapter Three, most of these categories, or *buckets*, of intervention timings and sizes had sufficient numbers of potential cases to allow us to select a relatively large number for investigation. However, it should be noted that the United States has not historically conducted any interventions that were large and began late in the timeline of the crisis or war. The absence of cases in this category naturally limits our ability to assess the likely outcomes of U.S. interventions with both of these characteristics. There have been several cases that began late and involved medium-sized U.S. forces, however, and we conducted focused case studies on three of these: Bosnia 1995, Somalia 1992, and Iraq 2014. In addition, we selected one of these cases (Bosnia) for use in a more detailed assessment in our counterfactual case studies, discussed in Chapter Five.

Table 4.1
List of Cases Selected

Case Name	Years	Intervention Timing, Size
Malagasy Uprising (France–Madagascar)	1947–1948	No intervention
Berlin Blockade	1948–1949	Forces already present
Costa Rican Civil War (Costa Rica–Nicaragua)	1948–1949	No intervention
La Violencia (Colombia civil war)	1948–1958	No intervention
Yugoslav-Soviet Crisis	1949–1951	Late, small
Hula Drainage Crisis (Israel–Syria)	1951	No intervention
Burma-Kuomintang Crisis	1953–1954	No intervention
Guatemalan Revolution	1953–1954	Early, small
Lebanon Crisis (Lebanon–United Arab Republic)	1958	Early, medium
Rwandan Social Revolution	1959–1962	No intervention
Cuban Missile Crisis	1962	Early, medium
Dominican Civil War	1965–1966	Early, large
Biafra Crisis (Nigeria)	1967–1970	No intervention
Football War (El Salvador–Honduras)	1969	No intervention
Demilitarized Zone Poplar Tree Crisis (Korea)	1976	Forces already present
Entebbe Raid (Israel–Uganda)	1976	No intervention
Ogaden War (Ethiopia–Somalia)	1976–1977	No intervention
Litani Conflict (Israel–Lebanon)	1978	No intervention
Sandinista Rebellion (Nicaragua)	1978–1979	No intervention
Salvadoran Civil War	1979–1992	Late, small
Egypt-Libya Standoff	1980	No intervention
Gulf of Sirte Incident (Libya–United States)	1981	No intervention
Lebanon War (Israel–Palestinian Liberation Movement [PLO])	1982	Early, small
Grenada Conflict (Grenada–United States)	1983	Early, medium

Table 4.1—Continued

Case Name	Years	Intervention Timing, Size
Lebanese Civil War	1983–1984	Forces already present
Libya Bombing (Libya–United States)	1986	Early, small
Panama Invasion (Panama–United States)	1989–1990	Early, large
Kashmir Nuclear Confrontation (India–Pakistan)	1990	No intervention
Gulf War (Iraq–Kuwait)	1990–1991	Early, large
Shiite Uprising (Iraq)	1991	Early, medium
Kurdish Uprising (Iraq)	1991	Early, medium
Somali Civil War	1991–1997	Late, medium
Bosnian Civil War	1992–1994	Late, medium
Operation Accountability (Israel–Hezbollah)	1993	No intervention
North Korean Nuclear Crisis	1993–1994	Forces already present
Haitian Crisis (Haiti–United States)	1994	Early, medium
Afghanistan Invasion (Afghanistan–United States)	2001	Early, medium
Parsley Island Crisis (Morocco–Spain)	2002	No intervention
Iraq War (Iraq–United States)	2002–2003	Early, large
Lebanon War (Israel–Hezbollah)	2006	No intervention
Iran Nuclear Crisis (Iran–United States)	2006–2007	No intervention
Houthi Insurgency (Yemen)	2007	No intervention
Libyan Civil War	2011	Early, small
Iraq–ISIL	2014–present	Late, medium
Libya–ISIL	2015–2016	Late, small

NOTE: ISIL = Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.

Taken together, these cases cover a wide variety of historical eras, geographic regions, and activity types, from Latin American deterrence cases (the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis) to Middle Eastern stability operations (in 1982 Lebanon) to Asian combat missions (in 2001 Afghanistan). The cases concentrate somewhat more heavily in the Middle East and North Africa (20 cases) and Latin America (10 cases), with somewhat fewer cases in Asia (five cases) and Europe (three cases). Although there was randomness in our draw of specific cases, this distribution reflects our intention to avoid focusing on crises or wars that occurred in places where U.S. troops were already present, with the long-standing U.S. troop presence in both Western Europe and East Asia after 1945 reducing the number of cases in those regions. We view the decision regarding whether to “plus-up” forces in response to a crisis or war as distinct from the decision regarding whether to intervene in the first place; therefore, we deprioritized those cases for this study, although we still conducted some cases in which U.S. forces were already present for context.⁴

Guiding Questions

To ensure that the information from each of our 45 focused case studies was consistently collected by the research team and could be more easily compared, we developed a set of specific questions that would be answered across all of the cases. These questions were designed to focus on the U.S. intervention decision and the resulting effects, if any, of the intervention on U.S. interests. The questions asked varied depending on whether the case in question included a U.S. military intervention, although both sets of questions investigated similar, and parallel, factors. Box 4.1 lists the information collected in our set of focused case studies.

These questions focused on identifying the U.S. decisionmaking process in each case and the interests that motivated U.S. intervention (or made it plausible). They further investigated the outcomes of the case across four broad categories of U.S. interests: economic interests,

⁴ A more complete investigation of the effects of U.S. crisis deployments is undertaken in Frederick et al., 2020.

Box 4.1**Focused Case Study Questions****Asked for every case:**

- Describe the nature of the conflict or crisis.
- Describe the U.S. interests involved that made intervention plausible.
- Was the crisis or conflict one in a series?
- Discuss the size and scope of U.S. resources committed.
- Describe relevant other concurrent nonmilitary factors.
- Overall assessment of the U.S. intervention decision.

Asked for U.S. intervention cases:

- What was the timing of the intervention within the war or conflict?
- What factors most influenced the U.S. decision to intervene?
- If the intervention occurred late, was one considered earlier?
- If an earlier intervention was considered but not undertaken, why not?
- What casualties did U.S. forces incur during the intervention?
- What were the economic costs and benefits to the United States of the intervention?
- What were the reputational costs and benefits to the United States of the intervention?
- What were the strategic costs and benefits to the United States of the intervention?
- What were the costs and benefits of the intervention for the host or target state?

Asked for cases with no U.S. intervention:

- Was undertaking an intervention ever seriously considered?
- If an intervention was not seriously considered, why not?
- If an intervention was seriously considered, which factors were most important in policymaker calculations?
- What were the economic costs and benefits to the United States of not undertaking the intervention?
- What were the reputational costs and benefits to the United States of not undertaking the intervention?
- What were the strategic costs and benefits to the United States of not undertaking the intervention?
- What trajectory did the host nation take over the course of the war or crisis and its aftermath?

reputational interests, strategic interests, and the extent of U.S. military casualties when an intervention occurred. Taken together, these questions were designed to enable us to assess the relationship between U.S. military interventions of different types, timings, and sizes and the outcomes of interest to U.S. policymakers. Extensive exploration of nonintervention cases and the paths they took without a U.S. military presence was equally crucial to better enable us to understand how cases of U.S. intervention differ from the outset from cases in which the U.S. chooses not to intervene. That is, the comparison between intervention and nonintervention cases can help us understand the

selection effects (discussed in Chapter Two) that might complicate our efforts to understand the effects that interventions of different timings and sizes could have.

We use the focused case studies to explore two categories of outcomes: those affecting the United States and those relevant to the host nation's trajectory. Although we were able to consider the relationship between timing and conflict outcomes more completely in Chapter Three using quantitative metrics, outcomes for the United States and the host nation were more difficult to assess using this method. The focused case studies give us the chance to more carefully consider these outcomes using qualitative evidence. In Chapter Five, we will use more-in-depth case studies to consider all three types of outcomes.

Assessment and Insights

There are several patterns of interest that emerge across the case studies. This section summarizes these patterns through two lenses. After an initial discussion of the possibility that the size and timing of interventions are driven by the issues at stake in an intervention, this section reviews overall patterns in the answers provided to the case study questions noted in Box 4.1. We then discuss our effort to isolate the effects of U.S. intervention from other factors to identify its likely impact and how this impact might have varied by the intervention's timing and size. This section concludes with a summary of results and their implications.

Are the Timing and Size of Interventions Driven by the Issues Motivating Them?

The issues that have motivated U.S. interventions could be a signpost of the likely timing and size of an intervention if they reliably signal the level of effort or commitment the United States is likely to apply toward achieving its goals. For example, earlier and larger interventions could reflect cases with categorically greater U.S. commitment and interest, such that decisionmakers felt they had little choice but to intervene as early and forcefully as possible. If so, then the timing

of interventions in particular would be less an important policy lever and more a simple reflection of the issues involved. In two early intervention cases—the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 and the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001—policymakers perceived an imminent, direct threat to U.S. national security, and waiting further to address the situation would have been a highly implausible decision.⁵ For intervention cases with this motivation, questions regarding whether to intervene later might be irrelevant.⁶

Generally speaking, however, this sort of clear link between the interests at stake and the size and timing of the intervention is not what the bulk of our focused case studies suggest. Apart from the two cases just mentioned that involved direct, perceived threats to the United States, there was no clear link between motivating issues and timing or size. The types of issues that motivated earlier and larger interventions were also found in interventions that were later or smaller and, to a certain extent, even in cases in which the United States did not intervene at all. Regime change provides one example. For instance, there were early and large cases in which the United States intervened with the express intent of changing the regime of the country in question, such as Iraq 2003 or Panama 1989.⁷ However, there were also cases that saw early but small interventions for the same purpose, such as Libya 2011 or Guatemala 1953. Meanwhile, late interventions of both medium and small size in Iraq and Libya to roll back the rise of ISIL had similar

⁵ Howard L. Burris, “Soviet Concern Over Cuba,” memorandum to Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, October 2, 1962; Congressional Research Service, *Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy in Brief*, Washington, D.C., R45122, May 1, 2018.

⁶ As we will discuss in greater detail later in this chapter, acute and pressing U.S. interests might not necessarily lead to a commitment of the largest possible forces, given the trade-offs that might arise between the size of a force and the speed with which it can be generated and deployed. The U.S. interventions in Cuba 1962 and Afghanistan 2001 were both medium in size in our typology, for example.

⁷ Richard L. Millet, “Panama and Haiti,” in Jeremy R. Azrael and Emil A. Payin, eds., *U.S. and Russian Policymaking with Respect to the Use of Force*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, CF-129-CRES, 1996; Joseph J. Collins, *Choosing War: The Decision to Invade Iraq and Its Aftermath*, Washington, D.C.: Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, April 2008.

motivations.⁸ Further, there were nonintervention cases in which the United States would clearly have preferred to see a particular regime prevail in a contested struggle for authority in a given country, such as Nicaragua 1978, Costa Rica 1948, or Yemen 2007, but nonetheless decided not to intervene militarily.⁹ The size of the force for interventions to change regimes, then, might be driven more by other factors, rather than indicating the importance of the case for U.S. interests.

Other motivations for intervention also show diverse patterns in the size and timing with which the United States responded. Interventions undertaken largely for humanitarian purposes (at least initially) were present in many categories we assessed, from the early, small intervention to prevent a massacre in Libya in 2011 to the late, medium intervention to avert a famine in Somalia after 1991.¹⁰ Similarly, humanitarian motivations were not necessarily less likely to prompt intervention overall in our sample. In only a handful of our nonintervention cases were potential humanitarian motivations central (Madagascar 1948, Rwanda 1959, and Nigeria 1968).¹¹ Instead, humanitarian

⁸ Although ISIL was of course not fully in control of the recognized government of either state, it did exercise effective territorial control in many areas, and U.S. efforts to reverse this state of affairs are therefore similar to efforts to change regimes in other states.

⁹ U.S. National Security Council, "U.S. Policy to Nicaragua," memorandum of conversation, Washington, D.C., September 4, 1978; Marcia Olander, "Costa Rica in 1948: Cold War or Local War?" *The Americas*, Vol. 52, No. 4, April 1996; Barak Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt, and Madeleine Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-962-DIA, 2010.

¹⁰ Christopher S. Chivvis, *Toppling Qaddafi: Libya and the Limits of Liberal Intervention*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014; Maryann K. Cusimano, *Operation Restore Hope: The Bush Administration's Decision to Intervene in Somalia*, Washington, D.C.: Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, 1995.

¹¹ Central Intelligence Agency, Office of National Estimates, "Implications of Madagascar's Unfinished Revolution," memorandum, July 27, 1972; Roger Hilsman, Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, "Basic Elements in the Ruanda-Urundi Situation," memorandum to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, June 8, 1962; Henry A. Kissinger, "U.S. Options in Biafra Relief," memorandum to President Richard Nixon, Washington, D.C., January 28, 1969, pp. 1–6.

motivations were concentrated most heavily in early interventions of small or medium size, such as Haiti 1994 and Libya 2011.¹²

That said, we find some notable patterns in the issues at stake between intervention and nonintervention cases. In most nonintervention cases, the primary issues at stake for the United States reflected more-diffuse geopolitical concerns related to the regional balance of power or an interest in preventing escalation of conflict, such as India-Pakistan 1990, Morocco-Spain 2002, or Ethiopia-Somalia 1976.¹³ Among intervention cases, such issues were less common but were found in late, small interventions, such as Yugoslavia 1949.¹⁴ This pattern could suggest that broader geopolitical or security interests could be what policymakers are most willing to monitor and let play out, sometimes prompting intervention later in a crisis or war but often not. There are exceptions to this as well, of course, such as the early, large intervention in Lebanon in 1958.¹⁵

In summary, although we find only limited evidence that the type of issue most prominently at stake is associated with U.S. decisions regarding whether to intervene and the timing and size with which such an intervention might occur. Other associations do not appear to be so determinative as to suggest that policymakers do not retain substantial flexibility over the timing and size of interventions in most cases. Only direct threats to the security of U.S. home territory appear to be addressed early and with relatively sizable forces without exception. For other issues, we observe some trends and patterns but no ironclad rules. Humanitarian concerns might be more likely to be

¹² Millet, 1996; Chivvis, 2014.

¹³ Michael Krepon and Mishi Faruquee, eds., *Conflict Prevention and Confidence-Building Measures in South Asia: The 1990 Crisis*, Washington, D.C.: Henry L. Stimson Center, Occasional Paper No. 17, April 1994; Colin Powell, "Parsley Island," *The American Interest*, June 14, 2012; David D. Newsom, Director of the Office of Northern African Affairs, "U.S. Policy Toward the Ogaden," memorandum to Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs G. Mennen Williams, Washington, D.C., August 26, 1963.

¹⁴ "Dodging Armageddon: The Third World War That Almost Was, 1950," *Cryptologic Quarterly*, February 24, 1998.

¹⁵ Douglas Little, "His Finest Hour? Eisenhower, Lebanon, and the 1958 Middle East Crisis," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 20, No. 1, January 1996, pp. 27, 40–44.

addressed with smaller forces, and broader geopolitical concerns might be more likely to be addressed through military intervention later, if at all. The relationship between the interests at stake and the timing and size of the resulting intervention will be important to bear in mind as we investigate differences in the outcomes of interventions of various timings and sizes.

Patterns in Costs and Benefits to the United States for Different Intervention Decisions

Are there clear patterns in the outcomes for the United States of different intervention size and timing decisions? Do larger or earlier interventions tend to lead to different outcomes than interventions that are later or smaller? According to a summary of the focused case studies we conducted, we find some evidence for such patterns, but they tend to vary depending on the type of outcome measure being considered. In this section, we survey the patterns in three main types of outcome measures for the United States: economic costs and benefits, reputational costs and benefits, and strategic costs and benefits. We will initially focus just on describing the patterns we observe. In a subsequent section, we will consider a broader synthesis of whether we see patterns in the advancement of U.S. interests overall and will discuss in detail the factors that appear to explain the observed patterns.

Economic Costs and Benefits

Interventions have typically had net economic costs for the United States, sometimes dramatically so. U.S. economic interests were almost never notably improved following interventions, with the possible exceptions of Panama 1989 and Guatemala 1953.¹⁶ Instead, most interventions had either clearly negative effects on U.S. economic interests, such as Iraq 2003 and Afghanistan post-2001, or limited or uncertain

¹⁶ Panama Canal Commission, *Annual Report: Fiscal Year Ended September 30, 1990*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990; Nicholas Cullather, *Operation PBSUCCESS: The United States and Guatemala, 1952–1954*, Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency, Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1994.

effects, such as Bosnia 1995 or Haiti 1994.¹⁷ But there do not appear to be clear patterns in the timing or size of the interventions regarding these effects. Interventions with clearly negative effects on U.S. economic interests included those that were early (Iraq 2003) or late (Iraq 2014) as well as those that were small, medium, or large in size (Libya 2011, Afghanistan post-2001, and Iraq 2003, respectively).¹⁸ Nonintervention cases typically involved relatively low stakes for U.S. economic interests, with little evidence of dramatic changes in either direction. We therefore do not find evidence that U.S. decisions regarding the size and timing of an intervention are overall likely to affect U.S. economic interests, although of course individual circumstances can differ.

Reputational Costs and Benefits

Reputational costs and benefits appear to have been somewhat more divergent across intervention size and timing categories. Early interventions such as Iraq 2003 and Guatemala 1953 had clearly negative reputational effects for the United States, as did late interventions such as El Salvador 1979.¹⁹ Clearly positive reputational effects were rare. Those we identified (the 1990 Gulf War and the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis) were both early interventions, but there might not have been

¹⁷ Amy Belasco, *The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, RL33110, December 8, 2014; Neta C. Crawford, *United States Budgetary Costs of Post-9/11 Wars Through FY2018: A Summary of the \$5.6 Trillion in Costs for the US Wars in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, and Post-9/11 Veterans Care and Homeland Security*, Providence, R.I.: Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs, Brown University, November 2017; Kavanagh, Frederick, Stark, et al., 2019, pp. 196–228; United Nations, “UN Comtrade Database,” online database, undated b; U.S. Agency for International Development, 2015.

¹⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, “Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve,” webpage, undated; Stefan Karlsson, “The Total Cost of the Libya Intervention,” *Christian Science Monitor*, April 15, 2011.

¹⁹ Collins, 2008; David M. Barrett, “Sterilizing a ‘Red Infection’: Congress, the CIA, and Guatemala, 1954,” Central Intelligence Agency, Center for the Study of Intelligence, May 8, 2007; Cullather, 1994; Raymond Bonner, “America’s Role in El Salvador’s Deterioration,” *The Atlantic*, January 20, 2018; Paul P. Cale, “The United States Military Advisory Group in El Salvador, 1979–1992,” *Small Wars Journal*, 1996; Kevin Sullivan and Mary Jordan, “In Central America, Reagan Remains a Polarizing Figure,” *Washington Post*, June 10, 2004.

sufficient late intervention cases to know whether their absence in this circumstance was meaningful.²⁰

With respect to the size of interventions, we find both small and large interventions that had clearly negative effects on the U.S. reputation, including El Salvador 1979 and Guatemala 1953 (small) and Iraq 2003 and Dominican Republic 1965 (large).²¹ However, in the ten medium-sized interventions we assessed (excluding those in which U.S. forces were already present), we did not identify any such cases of clearly negative effects on the U.S. reputation. The two clearly positive cases for the U.S. reputation, the 1990 Gulf War and the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, were large and medium in size, respectively.

In sum, then, interventions that were medium in size were the most likely to avoid clear damage to U.S. international reputation. Any successes that occurred in enhancing the U.S. reputation came from early interventions, which were also the interventions with the most dramatically negative effects in this regard. We will return to this issue in the next section.

Nonintervention cases, for the most part, had limited costs or benefits for the U.S. reputation. Further, other countries did not assume that the United States would intervene in most of the cases we investigated, and we did not identify instances among our focused case studies in which a U.S. failure to intervene damaged its reputa-

²⁰ Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict, 1990–1991: Diplomacy and War in the New World Order*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993; Tom Mahnken, “The Gulf War in Retrospect,” *Foreign Policy*, January 20, 2011; Central Intelligence Agency, “Implications of Khrushchev’s Message of 28 October,” Boston, Mass.: John F. Kennedy Library, October 29, 1962a; David Coleman, “JFK’s Presidential Approval Ratings,” webpage, undated; Central Intelligence Agency, “The Crisis: USSR/Cuba,” Boston, Mass.: John F. Kennedy Library, October 29, 1962b.

²¹ Lawrence A. Yates, *Power Pack: U.S. Intervention in the Dominican Republic, 1965–1966*, Fort Leavenworth, Kan.: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1988; Lawrence M. Greenberg, *United States Army Unilateral and Coalition Operations in the 1965 Dominican Republic Intervention*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, November 1986; David Coleman, ed., “LBJ Regretted Ordering U.S. Troops into Dominican Republic in 1965, White House Tapes Confirm,” National Security Archive, Electronic Briefing Book No. 513, April 28, 2015; Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, “The Dominican Civil War of 1965,” *Huffington Post*, updated December 6, 2017.

tion. We did, however, identify at least two cases of nonintervention in which the U.S. reputation improved: Iran 2006 and Costa Rica 1948.²² It is notable that there might have been a greater presumption among other countries that the U.S. would intervene in these cases because of prior U.S. actions toward Iraq and prior U.S. intervention behavior in Latin America, such that avoiding the intervention improved the U.S. reputation.

Strategic Costs and Benefits

The strategic effects on U.S. interests of the interventions we investigated varied notably across the timing and size categories. All cases in which we observed notable deteriorations in U.S. strategic interests involved early interventions (Iraq 2003, Libya 2011, and Guatemala 1953).²³ Cases in which we found clear strategic benefits for the United States were split between early (e.g., Dominican Republic 1965 and Panama 1989–1990) and late (e.g., El Salvador 1979 and Libya 2015)²⁴

²² Simond de Galbert, *Back to the Future: Europe, the United States, and Iran Sanctions after the Nuclear Deal*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 2015; Gideon Rose, “What Obama Gets Right,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2015; Olander, 1996.

²³ Collins, 2008; Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, “Successes and Failures of the U.S. and NATO Intervention in Libya,” testimony presented before the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Washington, D.C.: Foundation for Defense of Democracies, May 1, 2014, p. 4; Michael Clarke, “The Making of Britain’s Libya Strategy,” in Adrian Johnson and Saqeb Mueen, eds., *Short War, Long Shadow: The Political and Military Legacies of the 2011 Libya Campaign*, London: Royal United Services Institute, 2012; Jonathan Marcus, “Why China and Russia Rebuffed the West on Syria,” *BBC News*, October 5, 2011; Paul Lewis, “Putin Insists Russia Wants to Repair US Relations – but Ill Will for Obama Is Clear,” *The Guardian*, April 17, 2014; Stephen Schlesinger, “Ghosts of Guatemala’s Past,” *New York Times*, June 3, 2011; Cullather, 1994; Barrett, 2007; Stephen M. Streeter, “Interpreting the 1954 U.S. Intervention in Guatemala: Realist, Revisionist, and Postrevisionist Perspectives,” *The History Teacher*, Vol. 34, No. 1, November 2000.

²⁴ Yates, 1988; Greenberg, 1986; Joseph B. Treaster, “20 Years After Dominican War, Wounds Linger,” *New York Times*, May 1, 1985; Julio Yao, “Legacies of the U.S. Invasion of Panama,” North American Congress on Latin America, March 22, 2012; Sullivan and Jordan, 2004; Erick O. Granados, *Impact of U.S. Foreign Policy and Assistance in El Salvador*, Quantico, Va.: U.S. Marine Corps Command and Staff College, May 2012; Christopher M. Blanchard and Carla E. Humud, *The Islamic State and U.S. Policy*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, September 25, 2018.

interventions. Given the very small number of late interventions, however, the presence of such strategic successes and a lack of clear strategic failures may or may not be notable.

With respect to size, we see a similar pattern to that observed with respect to reputational costs and benefits. Although cases with clear strategic benefits to the United States involved interventions that were small (El Salvador 1979), medium (Grenada 1983), and large (Dominican Republic 1965), the same cannot be said for cases with clear strategic costs for the United States.²⁵ These clearly negative cases for U.S. strategic interests occurred in small interventions (Libya 2011 and Guatemala 1953) as well as large interventions (Iraq 2003) but were not found in the medium intervention category. Medium-sized interventions appear to have avoided the most negative costs while maintaining a broadly similar rate of cases with clear benefits for the United States. Interpreting this finding is complex, however. In some instances, medium-sized interventions could reflect caution and restraint on the part of policymakers, who might have considered deploying large-sized forces. In other instances, however, medium-sized interventions could reflect a comparatively heavy investment of forces and resources into a situation in which the realistic alternative might have been a much smaller force. Medium size, then, is not an intervention characteristic likely to be of value to policymakers per se. In the next section, we describe the results of our analysis, which takes into account the context in which interventions of different sizes take place, and isolate the effects that the size of the intervention appears to have on the advancement of U.S. interests.

Interestingly, nonintervention cases also vary in their effects on U.S. strategic interests. The majority of nonintervention cases had no

²⁵ Richard Stewart, *Operation Urgent Fury: The Invasion of Grenada, October 1983*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2008, pp 26–36; Ronald H. Cole, *Operation Urgent Fury: The Planning and Execution of Joint Operations in Grenada, 12 October–2 November 1983*, Washington, D.C.: Joint History Office, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1997, pp. 1–5; Daniel L. Haulman, “Crisis in Grenada: Operation Urgent Fury,” in A. Timothy Warnock, ed., *Short of War: Major USAF Contingency Operations, 1947–1997*, Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala.: Air University Press, 2000; Ronald Reagan, “Remarks of the President and Prime Minister Eugenia Charles of Dominica Announcing the Deployment of United States Forces in Grenada,” October 25, 1983.

clear effect on U.S. strategic interests. However, although there are some cases in which not intervening led to an improved strategic situation from a U.S. perspective, such as Iran 2006, Colombia 1948, and Costa Rica 1948, there were also cases in which avoiding intervention was associated with a deterioration in U.S. strategic interests, such as Yemen 2007 and Nicaragua 1978.²⁶

Isolating the Effects of Intervention Decisions on U.S. National Interests

The focused case studies we conducted allowed us to collect detailed information regarding patterns in costs and benefits to the United States. As discussed in the previous section, however, it remains possible that the patterns we observe in these costs and benefits are not driven by U.S. intervention decisions but by other factors. Our detailed narratives and discussions of the cases allow us to assess the extent to which decisions about whether, when, and with how many forces to intervene affected the likelihood that U.S. interventions advance U.S. interests.²⁷ That is, how would one assess the effects of U.S. intervention decisions about size and timing in isolation from other factors?

In this section, we focus on whether the patterns we observe in intervention outcomes were in fact driven by the U.S. interventions (and their timing and size) themselves or whether they reflect other

²⁶ de Galbert, 2015; Rose, 2015; U.S. Department of State, *Communist Involvement in the Colombian Riots of April 9, 1948*, Washington, D.C., Report No. 4686, October 14, 1948; U.S. National Security Council, "Current Policies of the Government of the United States of America Relating to the National Security: Volume I, Geographical Area Policies: Part VII, Latin America - Colombia," Gale Group, November 1, 1952; Central Intelligence Agency, "OCI Handbook: Colombia," June 13, 1955; Olander, 1996; Andrew Exum, "What's Really at Stake for America in Yemen's Conflict," *The Atlantic*, April 14, 2017; Presidential Review Committee, "Summary of a Presidential Review Committee (PRC) Meeting on Central America. Issues Include Discussion on U.S. Policy and the Political Situation in the Following Countries: Nicaragua; El Salvador; Guatemala; Honduras," Gale Group, June 11, 1979; "U.S. Aid to the Contras," *Washington Post*, February 3, 1988.

²⁷ In this context, by *advance U.S. interests* we mean increase the ability of the United States to achieve its political objectives, enhance its security and strategic flexibility, and protect access and assets globally.

unrelated factors. To assess this issue, we reviewed each focused case study to answer five additional, related questions:²⁸

1. Did the intervention itself substantially help improve U.S. interests?²⁹
2. Did the intervention itself substantially help worsen U.S. interests?
3. If yes to either 1 or 2, was the timing of the intervention (early versus late) crucial to the effect that the intervention had?
4. If yes to either 1 or 2, was the size of the intervention (large, medium, or small) crucial to the effect that the intervention had?
5. If no intervention took place, did the absence of a U.S. military intervention itself substantially help improve or worsen U.S. interests?

In this effort, we did not assess whether the intervention or nonintervention played the dominant role in the outcome of the case, nor did we weigh its contributions against the actions of other actors or structural factors. Instead, we focused on identifying cases in which the intervention appeared to play an unambiguous, independent role in affecting the outcome. We took into account selection effect issues, such as the fact that in interventions against more-capable adversaries (e.g., more-difficult cases), larger forces were more likely to be committed. Further, we attempted to isolate the initial decision regarding the size and timing of the intervention from later decisions regarding how to execute the intervention within these parameters, including decisions regarding rules of engagement, targeting, with which domestic

²⁸ Specifically, we had two researchers review the focused case studies and independently provide answers to these questions. Across all cases, 94 percent of the answers they provided to these questions were the same. The remaining 6 percent of questions were discussed and adjudicated as a group to develop a consensus set of responses.

²⁹ When answering this question, coders were instructed to consider the responses to the questions about the specific types of U.S. interests detailed in Table 4.1 as a whole, and then identify whether there appeared to be clear evidence of the intervention having played an important role in the advancement of these interests, according to the history of the case.

groups to attempt to cooperate, and a host of similar potential issues. Although initial intervention decisions and execution-of-mission decisions both likely affected the outcome, our analysis was focused only on isolating the effects of the former. The following section reviews the results of these assessments.

Overall Trends

The overall rates at which interventions contribute to achieving U.S. interests do not definitively vary by the timing or size of the intervention, although there are some suggestive patterns. According to our analysis, U.S. interventions helped advance overall U.S. interests in roughly 60 percent of the cases we studied. This rate varies somewhat by size, with larger interventions more likely to advance U.S. interests (roughly 75 percent of large interventions and 80 percent of medium interventions) than smaller interventions (roughly 50 percent), but these differences may or may not be significant.³⁰ Adding to our caution about identifying clear patterns, large interventions encompass some of the clearest success cases (such as the 1991 Gulf War) as well as some of the clearest failures (the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and its aftermath).

Early and late interventions show nearly identical rates of having contributed to the advancement of U.S. interests (roughly 60 percent). U.S. interventions, then, have the potential to contribute to the achievement of U.S. interests across a range of timings and sizes. Although these rates of success might be similar across categories, with more possible divergence according to size, this potential still leaves open the possibility that some timings and sizes of interventions might assist the achievement of U.S. objectives more than others, given the possibility that, for example, the cases in which the United States has historically chosen to intervene early might be more difficult to achieve U.S. interests than those in which it chooses to intervene late. The possibility that there could be some independent effect of the timing and size of the intervention will be considered in the next two sections.

³⁰ This difference is certainly not statistically significant in the relatively small number of cases we considered.

U.S. Interests and the Timing Decision

When we assess not just whether the intervention contributed to achieving U.S. objectives but also whether the timing and size characteristics of the intervention were themselves important in this regard, we see clearer evidence that intervening early can assist the advancement of U.S. interests. As noted above, early and late interventions advance U.S. interests in roughly the same percentage of our cases. However, we can identify several early cases in which the fact that the intervention occurred early in the crisis or war specifically appears to have contributed to the advancement of U.S. interests. These cases typically involve circumstances that appear to directly threaten a U.S. interest and in which substantial delay would likely mean at least the near-term sacrifice of that interest. For example, in Lebanon 1958 (Operation Blue Bat), the United States rapidly deployed some 14,000 troops to Lebanon to stabilize the pro-Western government there.³¹ The decisive intervention, at a time when the government was near collapse, likely was essential to maintaining Lebanon's pro-Western orientation and, potentially its independence from the newly formed United Arab Republic.³² A U.S. intervention that was substantially delayed by even a few additional months, beyond the end of the term of President Camille Chamoun, might have led to a different outcome.³³ Similarly, after the Kurdish uprisings following the 1991 Gulf War threatened to be met with violent Iraqi government repression, the United States and other nations moved rapidly to provide humanitarian assistance and to establish a safe haven in northern Iraq.³⁴ The safe haven was enforced by a no-fly zone and the introduction of ground troops.³⁵ Had this intervention been substantially delayed, a humanitarian tragedy

³¹ Little, 1996, p. 27.

³² Little, 1996, p. 27.

³³ Little, 1996, pp. 40–44.

³⁴ James Cockayne and David Malone, "Creeping Unilateralism: How Operation Provide Comfort and the No-Fly Zones in 1991 and 1992 Paved the Way for the Iraq Crisis of 2003," *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 37, No. 1, March 2006, pp. 125–128.

³⁵ Alexander Benard, "Lessons from Iraq and Bosnia on the Theory and Practice of No-Fly Zones," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3, September 2004, pp. 463–464;

likely would have occurred among Kurdish refugees, and any attempts to establish a similar safe haven in northern Iraq might have involved fighting Iraqi ground forces.³⁶ This is not to suggest that even in similar circumstances early interventions will be sufficient, as illustrated by the 1991 U.S. intervention to establish a no-fly zone over southern Iraq to provide protection to Shiite demonstrators there.³⁷ Nor is an early decision always necessary. In retrospect, the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq likely would not have been less successful had the decision to undertake it been delayed further, even if it had eventually still been undertaken. But in cases where local circumstances are imminently threatening a U.S. interest and the U.S. intervention has the ability to prevent this threat, an early intervention can be clearly preferable to a later one.

On the other hand, we only identified one case in which the lateness of the U.S. intervention per se might have been beneficial, although the extent to which it was beneficial is unclear. The 1995 U.S. intervention into the conflict in Bosnia occurred after several years of fighting and ineffective U.S. efforts to terminate the conflict through other forms of pressure, which helped increase the susceptibility of the Bosnian Serbs to pressure.³⁸ Had the U.S. intervention occurred much earlier, it potentially still could have achieved a similar outcome for the host nation while reducing the dramatic humanitarian toll of the war, but an earlier intervention likely would have required the United States to bear greater up-front costs, potentially including higher casualties. This counterfactual scenario is explored in detail in Appendix B and summarized in Chapter Five. It illustrates potential circumstances under which a later intervention might be preferable,

Gordon W. Rudd, *Humanitarian Intervention: Assisting the Iraqi Kurds in Operation PROVIDE COMFORT, 1991*, Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 2004, p. 226.

³⁶ Benard, 2004, pp. 463–464; U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Operation Desert Shield/Storm: Costs and Funding Requirements*, Washington, D.C., GAO/NSIAD-91-304, September 1991, p. 3.

³⁷ Benard, 2004, p. 464; Phillip Gibbons, “U.S. No-Fly Zones in Iraq: To What End?” Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute, July 1, 2002.

³⁸ U.S. Department of State, *The Road to Dayton: U.S. Diplomacy and the Bosnia Peace Process, May–December 1995*, Washington, D.C., May 1997; Ivo H. Daalder, *Getting to Dayton: The Making of America’s Bosnia Policy*, Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2000.

such as the greater exhaustion of the combatants, which could enable an easier or more feasible intervention. Whether these benefits that can occur from waiting will be preferable to intervening earlier and avoiding the costs that also result from potentially years of warfare will, of course, depend on the circumstances.

In most late intervention cases, however, we did not see such potential trade-offs at work. Instead, in cases such as the 2014 intervention into Iraq to roll back the advance of ISIL or the similar 2015 intervention into Libya, an earlier intervention likely would have been preferable for U.S. interests or, at worst, broadly similar.³⁹ Although late interventions are generally less common than early ones are, and therefore represent a smaller set of cases from which to generalize, this overall pattern is worth noting.

U.S. Interests and the Size Decision

As noted earlier, large, medium, and small interventions appear to have some moderate differences in the rates with which they allow the United States to advance its interests. When assessing whether the size of the interventions specifically contributed to advancing U.S. interests, however, we find more evidence that the decision about the size of forces committed to an intervention matters.

Larger intervention forces could be helpful for a wide variety of reasons, including signaling a greater U.S. commitment to the success of the mission and providing more forces to undertake a wider number and variety of combat and noncombat tasks. One might assume, then, that larger interventions are, generally speaking, better. We find some evidence for this proposition. The large-scale U.S. intervention to reverse the Iraqi conquest of Kuwait in 1991, for example, was essential.⁴⁰ A smaller U.S. force would have sent a mixed signal to the international community regarding the seriousness with which the United States viewed Iraqi aggression, perhaps limiting the size of the interna-

³⁹ Cameron Glenn, "Timeline: The Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State," Wilson Center, July 5, 2016; Chivvis, 2014, pp. 25, 69.

⁴⁰ Freedman and Karsh, 1993, p. 409.

tional coalition that could be assembled and putting at risk victory over Iraqi forces on the battlefield.

However, our review of the focused case studies emphasized that making an intervention force larger should not always be assumed to improve the intervention's likelihood of success. There appear to be at least four circumstances under which limiting the size of U.S. forces in an intervention might be preferable. First, larger forces could raise political concerns for the host nation, with the potential to undercut the success of the U.S. intervention and the effective cooperation of the host government. As an example, the medium-sized U.S. intervention into Iraq following the 2014 capture of Mosul by ISIL was eventually successful in its objective, helping to roll back the territorial gains of ISIL and reestablish Baghdad's control over most of the country, although the long-term trajectory of the country remains unclear.⁴¹ A larger-scale U.S. invasion potentially could have achieved similar successes on the battlefield against ISIL (and perhaps done so more quickly), but it also would have risked a substantial popular backlash, given the recent history of the United States in Iraq, that could have undermined Iraqi stability more broadly and plunged the country and intervening U.S. forces back into a renewed civil war. In that case, restraint with the size of the U.S. force likely was a virtue.

Second, a more limited force could enable a more rapid U.S. response to a crisis. During the 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, only limited forces could be rapidly introduced into that country in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.⁴² However, the advantages that such a medium-sized force provided in terms of speed outweighed the potential benefits of waiting longer for a larger force to become available, and (along with air and naval assets) still proved to be sufficient for the initial objective of overthrowing the Taliban.⁴³

⁴¹ Glenn, 2016.

⁴² Joseph J. Collins, "Initial Planning and Execution in Afghanistan and Iraq," in Richard D. Hooker, Jr., and Joseph J. Collins, eds., *Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War*, Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, September 2015.

⁴³ Collins, 2015.

Third, a more limited force could help manage potential escalation risks that might accompany a larger U.S. intervention. During the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, the rapid deployment and mobilization of very sizable air and naval forces played an essential role in convincing Soviet decisionmakers of U.S. resolve and encouraging them to back down.⁴⁴ The ground component involved in this intervention was more restrained, however, reflecting concerns about potential escalation (among other things) if the Soviets and Cubans were to believe that a full-scale U.S. invasion of Cuba were imminent.⁴⁵ Although it was important for the United States to avoid a small, limited response that could have risked miscommunicating whether Soviet missiles in Cuba did, in fact, cross a U.S. red line, it was equally beneficial to moderate the size of the U.S. ground forces to avoid perceptions of potentially precipitous aggression.

Fourth, the larger intervention force might simply be unnecessary, not in terms of harming the achievement of U.S. objectives in the intervention but by soaking up scarce resources that perhaps could be better used elsewhere. In the Dominican Republic in 1965, for example, the United States intervened with what was later determined to be an overabundance of troops, expecting greater levels of resistance and violence than were present.⁴⁶ The size of the force committed was excessive, though it did not notably hamper the accomplishment of the mission, which did broadly advance U.S. interests. We did not assess the financial and opportunity costs of the larger intervention in detail,

⁴⁴ Adam B. Siegel, *The Use of Naval Forces in the Post-War Era: U.S. Navy and U.S. Marine Corps Crisis Response Activity, 1946–1990*, Alexandria, Va.: CNA, 1991; John M. Young, *When the Russians Blink: The U.S. Maritime Response to the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1990, p. 94; Graham T. Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd ed., New York: Longman, 1999, p. 123; Edward T. Russell, “Cuban Missile Crisis,” in A. Timothy Warnock, ed., *Short of War: Major USAF Contingency Operations, 1947–1997*, Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala.: Air University Press, 2000.

⁴⁵ Burris, 1962; Michael Dobbs, “One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War,” National Security Archive, George Washington University, June 4, 2008; Kavanagh, Frederick, Stark, et. al, 2019.

⁴⁶ Yates, 1988; Greenberg, 1986; Coleman, 2015.

but certainly a blanket policy of oversizing U.S. interventions would have clearly negative effects.

It is notable that the cases discussed above all discuss the decision between committing large forces to an intervention and committing medium forces. The decision between large and small interventions is likely less salient. Committing several hundred troops to an intervention compared with committing hundreds of thousands of troops would necessarily involve a radical reshaping of the mission and its goals; that is, policymakers are unlikely to need to decide between the two for the same end. But what about deciding between medium and small interventions? Do we see any evidence regarding how policymakers should approach this decision, and do they differ from the dynamics discussed above between large and medium interventions?

There certainly were small intervention cases in which it appears that a medium-sized force could have been better able to achieve U.S. interests. For example, in the small U.S. intervention into the Libyan Civil War in 2011, medium-sized forces could plausibly have improved the outcome from a U.S. perspective, particularly if these larger forces allowed for greater stabilization of the country in the postconflict period. Therefore, there are some instances in which more forces could be preferable at this lower end of the decision space as well.

It is more difficult to assess whether the characteristics noted above regarding when a smaller force might actually be preferable to a larger one also apply to cases in which U.S. policymakers might be choosing between a small- or medium-sized intervention force. Among the small intervention cases that were broadly successful, we did not identify any in which the small size of U.S. forces itself was clearly linked with this success. For example, the August 1982 U.S. intervention in Lebanon as part of a multinational force to evacuate PLO forces was broadly successful, though it is not clear that a larger, medium-sized U.S. force would have been less successful (however, it likely would have been unnecessary).⁴⁷ Similarly, a small U.S. intervention in Libya in 2015–2016 that was designed to counter gains made by ISIL in that country

⁴⁷ John H. Kelly, “Lebanon: 1982–1984” in Jeremy R. Azrael and Emil A. Payin, eds., *U.S. and Russian Policymaking with Respect to the Use of Force*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND

was broadly successful, but a moderately larger U.S. force might have been equally successful (if not more so).⁴⁸ This is not to suggest that the conditions discussed above regarding when the political context, speed of deployment, or escalation risks might make a smaller intervention preferable cannot apply to the decision regarding whether to employ a medium or small force. But we do not find clear evidence for these conditions in the cases we considered. There do appear to have been relevant cases regarding whether the size of the forces committed were unnecessary. The 1983 U.S. invasion of Grenada involved a substantial medium-sized force that met with very limited resistance from the tiny island nation of Grenada.⁴⁹ In this case, as with the 1965 intervention in the Dominican Republic, the forces committed likely were overkill, though they do not appear to have hampered the achievement of U.S. objectives.

To sum up, then, we find evidence that the question of what size force should be committed to an intervention to advance U.S. objectives should be considered carefully because it can have a notable effect on the likelihood of success in achieving U.S. objectives or advancing U.S. interests. But with respect to whether such forces should be large, medium, or small, we find that contextual factors are likely to be quite important. We will discuss the implications of these findings in greater detail later in this chapter.

U.S. Interests and Nonintervention Cases

The most-striking pattern among our nonintervention cases was how rarely they tended to evolve to either improve or worsen U.S. interests to any notable degree (again, absent U.S. military intervention). Overall, roughly three-quarters of cases saw the aftermath of the case as broadly similar to the status quo ante bellum from the perspective of U.S. interests. The Biafra War in Nigeria, for example, involved hor-

Corporation, CF-129-CRES, 1996; Caspar W. Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace: Seven Critical Years in the Pentagon*, New York: Warner Books, 1990, pp. 144–145.

⁴⁸ Eric Schmitt, “Obama Is Pressed to Open Military Front Against ISIS in Libya,” *New York Times*, February 4, 2016.

⁴⁹ Stewart, 2008, pp. 3–8; “Leader of Grenada Is Reported Killed by Troops,” *New York Times*, October 20, 1983.

rific numbers of civilian deaths—in the millions—and was a traumatic event for that country, but after its end in 1970, Nigeria remained a reliable U.S. partner in the Cold War and a producer of oil, just as it had been before the conflict.⁵⁰ Failing to intervene to halt the conflict and save lives does not appear to have notably undermined U.S. international leadership at the time. The 1953 crisis in Burma over the presence of Kuomintang troops that had taken up looting and resistance to the government led, through the application of U.S. diplomatic pressure on Taipei, to a partial withdrawal of troops that was enough to convince Burma that the United States was no longer complicit in their presence but that also did not fully resolve the underlying situation or instability, which persisted for years afterward.⁵¹ But the United States was able to preserve its relationships with both Burma and Taiwan in roughly the same shape they were before the crisis. In other cases, such as Yemen 2007, U.S. interests did notably decline absent a U.S. intervention, but it is also not clear that there was any plausible U.S. intervention that could have led to a notably better outcome.⁵² Overall, however, although the United States is rarely entirely absent from even these nonintervention cases and often applies diplomatic pressure or uses economic leverage in lieu of military forces, most of the nonintervention cases we considered did not involve any notable alteration in the status quo for U.S. interests.

Circumstances in Which Nonintervention Decisions Mattered

We did, however, identify a handful of cases in which U.S. interests were notably altered in the absence of a U.S. military intervention and in which the lack of intervention itself was likely an important factor

⁵⁰ Brian Edward McNeil, *Frontiers of Need: Humanitarianism and the American Involvement in the Nigerian Civil War, 1967–1970*, dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2014, pp. 68–70; Lasse Heerten and A. Dirk Moses, “The Nigeria-Biafra War: Postcolonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide,” *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol. 16, Nos. 2–3, 2014, pp. 169–176; Kissinger, 1969, pp. 1–6.

⁵¹ Kenton Clymer, “The United States and the Guomindang (KMT) Forces in Burma, 1949–1954: A Diplomatic Disaster,” *Chinese Historical Review*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2014, pp. 41–42.

⁵² Salmoni et al., 2010, pp. 273–274.

in leading to this change. Of these cases, there were more in which the lack of intervention led to positive outcomes for the United States than led to negative outcomes. Next, we will survey three such cases that led to positive outcomes, as well as a fourth case in which the opposite happened: U.S. interests declined, and a U.S. intervention might have helped.

Following a disputed election in Costa Rica in 1948, a mixed group of Costa Rican political exiles with communist ties and Nicaraguans invaded Costa Rica from Nicaragua. The United States declined to intervene in the crisis militarily to restore stability or prevent an increase in communist influence in the region. Instead, it supported a diplomatic effort through the nascent Organization of American States that succeeded in resolving the crisis, led to a durable transition to democracy in Costa Rica, and strengthened the Organization of American States, enabling it to play a constructive role in future regional crises.⁵³ A U.S. intervention to impose a friendly government in Costa Rica might have been able to achieve that narrower goal but likely would have undermined or put at risk these other positive developments, which is roughly what occurred in the later U.S. intervention to overthrow a communist-linked government in Guatemala in 1954.⁵⁴

In the 2006 crisis over Iran's nuclear program, the United States, deeply enmeshed in the conflict in neighboring Iraq, declined to take military action to attempt to destroy Iran's emerging nuclear capabilities. Exercising restraint at this time gave space both for the international community to build a broad-based sanctions regime to pressure Iran over its nuclear program and for Iranian leaders to conclude that a diplomatic deal with the international community might be a preferable arrangement.⁵⁵ These developments led to the conclusion of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015, which commit-

⁵³ Olander, 1996.

⁵⁴ Barrett, 2007; Cullather, 1994.

⁵⁵ Peter Baker, "Bush Warns Against Nuclear-Armed Iran; U.S. Presses Allies for U.N. Action," *Washington Post*, January 14, 2006; Ivo H. Daalder and Philip H. Gordon, "We Should Strike Iran, but Not with Bombs," *Washington Post*, January 22, 2006; David E. Sanger, "Why Not a Strike on Iran?" *New York Times*, January 22, 2006.

ted Iran to dramatically scaling back its nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief.⁵⁶ A 2006 U.S. military intervention might have been able to temporarily destroy Iranian enrichment facilities, but it also likely would have convinced the Iranian government of the aggressive intent of the United States and strengthened the determination of Iran to restart a covert nuclear weapons program in the future.

As a third example, a destructive civil war began in Colombia in 1948, the end result of intense political tensions between Liberals and Conservatives and the assassination of the Liberal Party leader, as Liberal guerillas fought bloody battles with the Conservative government and militias and plunged the country into chaos.⁵⁷ Despite a close historical relationship with the Colombian government, the United States opted not to intervene to halt the violence directly, although it provided the government with substantial military and economic aid.⁵⁸ Beyond a desire for stability and continued partnership with Colombia, the United States was also concerned with a potential upsurge in support for communism. After a decade of intense violence, the Liberals and Conservatives reached a power-sharing arrangement that returned a measure of stability to the country and kept it closely aligned with the United States. The decision to limit U.S. involvement to diplomatic efforts and aid, while doing little to limit the tremendous civilian toll from the conflict, likely helped avoid encouraging anti-American com-

⁵⁶ The Trump administration later decided to unilaterally withdraw from the JCPOA in favor of renewed sanctions and an effort to modify Iranian regime behavior in other areas, which has increased tensions. However, this later action does not alter the assessment that the nonintervention in 2006 led to an improvement in U.S. interests in the 2006 to 2016 period because international sanctions coordination increased leverage over Iran's decision to pursue a nuclear weapons program. Whether that increased leverage was best used in the negotiation of the 2015 JCPOA is a separate issue from an assessment of the likely effects of having forgone a military strike against Iran in 2006. See Zachary Laub and Kali Robinson, "What Is the Status of the Iran Nuclear Agreement?" Council on Foreign Relations, updated January 7, 2020.

⁵⁷ World Peace Foundation, "Colombia: La Violencia," Fletcher School, Tufts University, December 14, 2016.

⁵⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, Security Cooperation Agency, "Fiscal Year Series: Foreign Military Sales, Foreign Military Construction Sales and Other Security Cooperation Historical Facts," September 30, 2016.

munist sentiment and helped keep Colombia a key U.S. ally during the Cold War.

Although these cases illustrate how nonintervention can improve U.S. interests, we also identified one case in which a U.S. intervention could very plausibly have improved U.S. interests. In Nicaragua in 1978, decades of harsh dictatorship had produced widespread opposition to the government and a growing communist-linked insurgency in the Sandinistas. The United States sought to apply diplomatic and political pressure to force President Anastasio Somoza Debayle to either reform or leave office, the latter of which he did in July 1979.⁵⁹ Although the United States had made plans for a transition to a national reconciliation government that included the moderate opposition, it decided not to commit any military forces to ensure stability, and Sandinista forces were able to take advantage of the power vacuum and seize power themselves.⁶⁰ This marked a clear reversal for U.S. efforts to contain communism in Latin America, and it was a reversal that the United States proved unwilling to let stand. Throughout the 1980s, the United States provided extensive military support to the anti-Sandinista Contras, widening and prolonging the Nicaraguan civil war and helping to destabilize the broader region.⁶¹ This aid continued illegally even when prohibited by Congress, eventually leading to the 1987 Iran-Contra scandal. Although an intervention was not seriously considered by the Carter administration in 1979, a relatively modest U.S. intervention in that year could plausibly have helped to stave off a Sandinista seizure of power in the first place and to ensure that the transition to the moderate opposition that the United States had envisioned actually took place.

We highlight two key lessons that can be drawn from these notable nonintervention cases. First, the international context can be vital when determining whether wars or crises are likely to worsen or improve on their own. In 1940s Latin America, the United States held

⁵⁹ U.S. Department of State, "Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations: Central America, 1977–1980," webpage, undated.

⁶⁰ Presidential Review Committee, 1979.

⁶¹ "U.S. Aid to the Contras," 1988.

tremendous sway, and outside actors such as the Soviet Union were not yet capable of dramatically influencing events. In both Costa Rica and Colombia, the United States could feel reasonably confident that the diplomatic and other policy levers at its disposal could help shape events in the absence of well-funded spoilers. Similarly, there was broad-based international concern with the Iranian nuclear weapons program, even from some of Iran's erstwhile partners, such as Russia, enabling the United States to build up international pressure to apparently prompt a change in Iranian thinking about the utility of its nuclear weapons program. In late-1970s Latin America, by contrast, the Soviet Union had well-established funding networks and proxies in the region, enabling it to fund spoilers, such as the Sandinistas, that could divert events in ways the United States proved unable to counter absent the application of military force. Assessing the regional context, particularly the influence and motivations of potential third-party spoilers, can therefore be an important step when determining whether a war or crisis might require U.S. military intervention to safeguard U.S. interests.

Second, the relative strength and influence of the different factions on the ground is of course a vitally important factor in determining the outcome of a war or crisis, even absent any external interference. In Colombia 1948, for example, the United States remained confident in the ability of government forces to ultimately hold on to power throughout a decade of violence, making the decision not to intervene on the government's behalf easier.⁶² In Iran 2006, most U.S. analysts assessed that the likely result of military strikes against the Iranian regime would not have been instability and regime change but instead a reinvigorated popular backing for an otherwise increasingly unpopular regime, strengthening the case for pursuing diplomatic and economic leverage.⁶³ In Nicaragua, the United States misjudged the capabilities and support of moderate groups, leaving a vacuum that could be filled quickly by the Sandinistas. Accurate intelligence and

⁶² Central Intelligence Agency, "The Current Situation in Colombia," Situation Memorandum 32-49, May 31, 1949.

⁶³ Charles P. Blair, "War with Iran? Revisiting the Potentially Staggering Costs to the Global Economy," Federation of American Scientists, May 23, 2013.

assessments of the relative strengths of different actors can therefore be vitally important to the intervention decision.

Intervention Timing, Size, and the Host-Nation Trajectory

To this point, we have focused on summarizing changes in U.S. interests that occurred in intervention and nonintervention cases. It is also worth noting, however, that we see some notable trends in the trajectory of the host or target nation that appear to correlate with the intervention decision. Most notably, we observe many more positive trajectories in intervention cases than in nonintervention cases. In the 20 nonintervention cases we considered, only one had a clearly positive trajectory following the end of the war or crisis: Costa Rica 1948.⁶⁴ Most of the remainder followed a mixed or uneven trajectory, although there was also a substantial minority of cases with clearly negative trajectories for the host nation, such as Yemen 2007, Rwanda 1959, Somalia 1976, and Nicaragua 1978.⁶⁵

Although there were numerous intervention cases that also saw negative trajectories for the host nation, such as Iraq 1991, Guatemala 1953, and Somalia 1991, there were also numerous cases that saw positive trajectories, including Lebanon 1958, Panama 1989, Kuwait 1990, and Bosnia 1995. These positive host-nation trajectories tended to occur more often in large or medium interventions, though of course this relationship was not universal, as well-known cases such as Iraq 2003 illustrate. Nonetheless, conditions in host nations only

⁶⁴ Olander, 1996; Fernando F. Sanchez, *Democracy After War: Causes and Consequences of the 1948 Civil War in Costa Rica*, paper presented at the European Consortium for Political Research Joint Sessions of Workshops, Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala University, April 13–18, 2004; Desmond A. Turner, *Civil War and (Re)Building the State: Recovery in Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and El Salvador*, thesis, Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami, May 2017.

⁶⁵ Exum, 2017; Hilsman, 1962; United Nations, “Rwanda: A Brief History of the Country,” webpage, undated a; U.S. Department of State, “Interagency Intelligence Memorandum,” *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980*, Vol. XVII: *Horn of Africa, Part 1*, Washington, D.C., July 31, 1979; U.S. Department of State, “Memorandum from Paul B. Henze of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski),” *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980*, Vol. XVII: *Horn of Africa, Part 1*, Washington, D.C., June 3, 1980; John M. Goshko, “U.S. War by Proxy at an End,” *Washington Post*, February 27, 1990.

rarely improved absent a U.S. intervention, at least in the crisis and war cases we considered; when such interventions were conducted, positive trajectories became more frequent, particularly when the intervention was larger.

Implications and Conclusion

In the focused case studies we conducted, U.S. decisions regarding whether, when, and with what size forces to conduct a military intervention have not led to many consistent effects on outcome measures, such as the advancement of U.S. interests. Both clear successes and failures have historically accompanied nearly the full range of these decisions. We therefore do not find simple rules of thumb regarding how the United States should approach these decisions, always leaning in one direction or the other. One exception to this is the finding that U.S. military interventions typically have substantial net economic costs for the United States, roughly in proportion to their size and duration. Interventions with ancillary economic benefits in terms of greater future investment or trade opportunities sufficient to offset the direct costs of the intervention were rare.

What we have identified instead are a series of contextually dependent patterns in which U.S. intervention decisions in certain local or international contexts have tended to produce advantageous or disadvantageous results. Next, we summarize these patterns as they relate to each of the three key guiding questions of this report: whether the United States should intervene, whether it is preferable to intervene early or late in a crisis or conflict, and with what size forces it might most effectively intervene.

Insights into Intervention Decisions

The analysis in this chapter provides relevant insights for each of the three key guiding questions of this report.

When Should the United States Choose Intervention over Nonintervention?

Our analysis of the focused case studies suggests that military interventions are both highly likely and likely to occur early when the United States feels its national security is directly threatened. Alternative intervention decisions in such cases seem improbable. Outside of such unambiguous cases, however, our focused case studies suggest that interventions are likely to be most beneficial in situations in which a war or crisis is likely to deteriorate in a way that will harm U.S. interests, and U.S. intervention can make a difference in avoiding that outcome. Careful analysis of the local balance of power among key actors and the preferences of key regional and international actors will be essential in accurately making such a determination. The presence of third-party spoilers can be an important indicator that a situation could deteriorate to harm U.S. interests absent a military intervention. However, when the balance of power is more ambiguous or currently favors the U.S.-friendly side, and when third-party spoilers are absent (or present but so influential that a U.S. intervention might not be able to overcome them), the United States could benefit from deferring an intervention. Some situations could be likely to deteriorate but still lack a realistic pathway for a U.S. intervention to improve them.

If an intervention does not seem either necessary or promising on these grounds, then U.S. decisionmakers could note that, in the cases we assessed, a decision not to intervene was more frequently associated with an improvement in U.S. interests than a decline. We did not, for example, assess any nonintervention cases in which the U.S. reputation (either for resolve or for its humanitarian responsibilities) was substantially and negatively affected. There were some cases in which U.S. strategic interests declined as a result of nonintervention, but they typically were less frequent than cases in which U.S. strategic interests improved as a result of the decision not to intervene. Although of course this finding does not necessarily suggest that the United States should intervene less frequently and expect to see this pattern continue, it does seem to suggest that the United States likely does not need to

intervene more frequently, or in more circumstances, than has been its historical pattern in order to safeguard its interests.⁶⁶

When Should the United States Intervene Early, and When Should It Intervene Later?

The focused cases clearly suggest that the United States is likely to respond immediately if its national security is directly threatened. Absent such a condition, our focused cases suggest that intervening early could provide some independent benefit to advancing U.S. national interests in cases in which U.S. interests are imminently threatened and in which the U.S. intervention has the potential to relieve this threat. We only identified one potential case in which intervening later in a conflict or crisis, regardless of the issues motivating the intervention, might have provided an advantage (caused by the greater exhaustion of the primary target of the intervention). Although the literature suggests plausible additional theoretical circumstances in which waiting to intervene later could be preferable, we did not see these circumstances reflected in the limited set of cases we assessed.

When threats to U.S. interests are clearly diffuse, however, the benefits of intervening early are much less clear. The focused cases suggest that when the stakes involved in a war or crisis are somewhat lower (such as overall geopolitical concerns), the United States has often waited without adversely affecting the overall rates of success, even if it later decided an intervention was warranted. In our cases, the United States rarely experienced substantial costs from waiting with these types of issues at stake.

⁶⁶ To be clear, there are substantial endogeneity concerns with interpreting this observed pattern. The United States would seem much more likely to intervene in cases in which it assessed acute threats to its interests, such that the remaining set of nonintervention cases would not be expected to be replete with cases of sharp deterioration in these interests (absent dramatic failures in U.S. analyses or limitations on forces available for intervention). We therefore do not view this finding as speaking directly to whether the United States might be “over-intervening.” This finding is, however, notable in that it does not suggest any evidence that the United States could instead be “under-intervening.”

When Should the United States Use a Larger Force Rather than a Smaller One?

The focused cases suggest that large or medium interventions might more often advance U.S. interests than small interventions do. When facing larger or stronger adversaries in combat or when the potential intervention needs to affect a wide area or large population, the use of a larger force could be essential. Even in other cases, however, a larger force could still help achieve U.S. objectives and, at worst, might be redundant or unnecessary.

Although the benefits of larger intervention forces are clear in some cases, we also identified several circumstances in which more-limited forces are likely to be preferable and to better support the advancement of U.S. interests. These circumstances include when a larger force might produce a popular backlash in the host nation, when a larger force might enhance the risks of escalation with an adversary, and when waiting to mobilize a larger force might limit the timeliness (and therefore the effectiveness) of the U.S. intervention. Intervention decisions should be informed by an analysis of whether these conditions appear to be present in the particular circumstances being considered for an intervention.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we considered what can be learned about the costs and benefits of different intervention decisions across a large set of shorter, focused case studies. In the next chapter, we look in much greater depth at a smaller number of cases, exploring not only the real world intervention decisions the United States made but also possible counterfactual scenarios. We use the counterfactual case studies to further explore the observations made in Chapters Two through Four, with a particular focus on identifying those key factors and characteristics most likely to influence the relationship between intervention timing and size and the ability of the United States to advance and protect its national interests.

Counterfactuals

The final method we employed to assess the effects of different U.S. intervention timing and size decisions was a series of four in-depth counterfactual case studies. In these counterfactual cases, we not only provided more-detailed investigations of the historical effects of the U.S. intervention decision than was available in the shorter focused case studies detailed in Chapter Four, but also explored how the outcome of each case could have been altered if the United States made a different intervention decision. These counterfactual cases provide useful, realistic illustrations of the dynamics involved in specific situations and the effects that different U.S. intervention decisions might have. With only four cases, we must be cautious not to generalize observations from these four examples to the universe of cases. Still, there are some patterns we identify that appear to have broader implications. First, our counterfactual analyses suggest that, in some cases, even radically different U.S. intervention decisions might not radically alter the trajectory of the conflict or crisis. In other words, interventions are only one factor among many in determining the outcome of most crises or wars. Second, although the medium- and longer-term implications of U.S. interventions appear to be more modest in our four cases, the timing and size of the intervention might have more substantial short-term effects, especially for the host nation. In this chapter, we will also explore the conditions under which U.S. leverage over outcomes through intervention appears to be relatively greater.

This chapter first provides an overview of the methodology we employed when conducting the counterfactual cases, situating our

efforts within the political science literature on the method. We then outline the specific cases we selected for study and the results of each counterfactual investigation before concluding with a discussion of the implications we identify from this method.

Methodology

Constructing Counterfactuals

Counterfactuals are imagined alternative versions of real-world events in which key features are altered. For example, consider the trajectory of the Vietnam War had John F. Kennedy not been assassinated or the path of the United States over the past 15 years if the 2003 intervention in Iraq had not occurred. Counterfactuals can be a useful tool to evaluate causal theories because they allow researchers to explore how such imagined changes might affect a real-world outcome.¹ Counterfactual logic is necessarily embedded in any research that aims to understand causation: If a researcher finds that variable X is necessary for a certain outcome, then the absence of variable X (i.e., in the counterfactual scenario) should also be sufficient to produce a different outcome. This reasoning is built into most statistical analysis and qualitative case study research in the social sciences.²

Political scientists and historians have identified several counterfactual ideal types that can broadly be sorted into two baskets: statistical and computer-assisted approaches and qualitative approaches. Statistical and computer-assisted methods are typically used to predict outcomes that are measured numerically, such as the number of civil-

¹ See James D. Fearon, "Counterfactuals and Hypothesis Testing in Political Science," *World Politics*, Vol. 43, No. 2, January 1991; Richard Ned Lebow, "What's So Different about a Counterfactual?" *World Politics*, Vol. 52, No. 4, July 2000; Jack S. Levy, "Counterfactuals and Case Studies," in Janet M. Box-Steffensmeier, Henry E. Brady, and David Collier, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology*, Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2008; and Philip E. Tetlock and Richard Ned Lebow, "Poking Counterfactual Holes in Covering Laws: Cognitive Styles and Historical Reasoning," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 95, No. 4, December 2001.

² Jack S. Levy and Gary Goertz, eds., *Explaining War and Peace: Case Studies and Necessary Condition Counterfactuals*, New York: Routledge, 2007, p. 15.

ian casualties or the annual growth of a country's GDP, while qualitative counterfactual case studies are more useful in capturing nonnumerical outcomes.

Statistical and computer-assisted approaches alter one explanatory variable in a real-world case to estimate how the case might have turned out differently. For instance, Abadie, Diamond, and Hainmueller use statistical methods to create a *synthetic control*: essentially, a manufactured control case to the case of interest.³ The control case is constructed to have characteristics and properties drawn from the broader universe of relevant cases so as to be statistically similar to the case of interest, except for exposure to the treatment or the key variable in the analysis. Analysts can then estimate the effect of a key variable by comparing the outcome of the real-world case to the estimated outcome of the synthetic case. For example, Abadie and Garbeazabal use synthetic controls to estimate the economic effects of terrorism in Basque Country, Spain, in the late 1960's, comparing per capita GDP in the region (which has suffered from extensive terrorism) to a synthetic control region without terrorist conflict that is otherwise similar to Basque Country.⁴ Computer-assisted, agent-based models have also been used to generate quantitative estimates for counterfactual scenarios. This method uses computer simulation to understand nonlinear, networked relationships between the model's inputs and outputs. For example, Lustick, Garces, and McCauley build an agent-based model to identify critical junctures in the Syrian civil war between 2011 and 2014 to understand how U.S. policy decisions affected the number of civilian casualties.⁵

Qualitative counterfactual approaches draw on similar logic, assessing whether the observed outcome of a case would likely differ

³ Alberto Abadie, Alexis Diamond, and Jens Hainmueller, "Comparative Politics and the Synthetic Control Method," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 59, No. 2, April 2015.

⁴ Alberto Abadie and Javier Garbeazabal, "The Economic Costs of Conflict: A Case Study of the Basque Country," *American Economic Review*, Vol. 93, No. 1, March 2003.

⁵ Ian Lustick, Miguel Garces, and Thomas McCauley, *An Agent-Based Model of Counterfactual Opportunities for Reducing Atrocities in Syria, 2011-2014*, Washington, D.C.: Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide, August 2017.

if the value of a key explanatory variable were different. Qualitative approaches typically use within-case process tracing to identify critical junctures leading up to an empirically observed outcome. *Process tracing* is a means of identifying causal mechanisms by closely investigating the relationships among sequential events within a particular case.⁶ Qualitative approaches often involve developing competing counterfactual scenarios for key critical junctures within a case, then evaluating the evidence for the competing counterfactuals. For example, Frank P. Harvey evaluates the counterfactual claim that the 2003 Iraq War would not have happened had Al Gore been elected U.S. president in 2000. He lays out three competing counterfactual scenarios, then traces multiple decisionmaking junctures on the path to the 2003 war, exploring the evidence in favor of each counterfactual scenario.⁷ Similarly, Mona Yacoubian identifies five critical junctures in U.S. policy debates where policymakers considered multiple options regarding the Syrian civil war. For each critical juncture, she identifies plausible alternative decisions using these policy debates, then assesses the likely effect of implementing the alternative policy.⁸

Our review of the literature highlights four accepted best practices for conducting rigorous counterfactual analysis:

1. **Co-tenability (logical consistency).** Researchers using counterfactuals need to make sure that their counterfactual assumptions are logically consistent (or “co-tenable”) with the theories, facts, and initial conditions that are used to render the causal inferences.⁹ For example, Robert Fogel has argued that if railroads had not existed, the U.S. economy in the 19th century

⁶ Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005, p. 147.

⁷ Frank P. Harvey, “President Al Gore and the 2003 Iraq War: A Counterfactual Test of Conventional “W”isdom,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 45, No. 1, March 2012.

⁸ Mona Yacoubian, “Critical Junctures in United States Policy Toward Syria: An Assessment of the Counterfactuals,” Washington, D.C.: Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide, August 2017.

⁹ Fearon, 1991, p. 193.

would have seen similar growth anyway because of a stronger motivation to invent the internal combustion engine at an earlier date.¹⁰ However, according to Jon Elster's counterargument, if the technology for inventing automobiles existed, it would almost certainly have allowed the development of railroads; therefore, Fogel's counterfactual argument is not co-tenable because the counterfactual that he imagines is not internally logically consistent.¹¹

2. **Clarity.** Every causal argument must be defined as clearly as possible: What is to be explained (the *consequent* in the counterfactual arguments), what accounts for this outcome (the *antecedent*), and the causal path linking the consequent and antecedent should each be carefully defined.¹² Furthermore, the antecedent should be realistic. Lebow gives an example: Historians have raised the counterfactual argument that posits that if public health measures were implemented in time, the 14th-century Black Death pandemic mortality rate could have been lower. However, to implement public health measures, a ban on travel and trade would also need to be imposed. The wealthy and merchant classes at that time would have been unlikely to allow such measures to be implemented; the counterfactual argument might therefore be unrealistic for the 14th century, when the Black Death pandemic occurred.¹³
3. **Theoretical consistency and relevance.** Scholars using counterfactual analysis should articulate credible causal mechanisms between the antecedent and the hypothesized consequent.

¹⁰ Robert William Fogel, *Railroads and American Economic Growth: Essays in Econometric History*, Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Press, 1964, cited in Lebow, 2000, p. 582.

¹¹ Jon Elster, *Logic and Society: Contradictions and Possible Worlds*, New York: John Wiley, 1978, pp. 204–208, cited in Lebow, 2000, p. 582.

¹² Philip E. Tetlock and Aaron Belkin, eds., *Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics: Logical, Methodological, and Psychological Perspectives*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996.

¹³ Geoffrey Hawthorn, *Plausible Worlds: Possibility and Understanding in History and the Social Sciences*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 31–60, quoted in Lebow, 2000, p. 582.

“Well-established theoretical laws”¹⁴ should be a vital component that drives the analysis because, without a sound theory, there could be an infinite number of possible consequences (or outcomes) of the counterfactual scenario.¹⁵

4. **Minimum-rewrite (historical consistency).** Weber argued that counterfactual analysis should make as few changes as possible from the real world.¹⁶ One way to ensure plausibility and minimal rewrites is to focus on the set of choices that political leaders faced, especially when they came close to making another choice. Different scholars called the same concept the “closest possible world” test,¹⁷ the “minimal-rewrite of history” rule,¹⁸ or the “horizon of possibility.”¹⁹ These rules apply to the antecedent, not to the consequent.²⁰ That is, they involve a minimal change to the preceding circumstances or actions, while the later outcome might vary minimally, dramatically, or not at all. Analysts must recognize the interconnectedness of causes and outcomes and therefore consider what else in a historical event might change if the explanatory event changes and how such changes might interact to potentially affect the outcome.²¹

Counterfactual analysis should also refrain from several common pitfalls. Lebow warns that if researchers make too many leaps from hypothetical antecedent (explanatory variable) to hypothetical consequent (outcome to be explained), the probability of the consequent

¹⁴ Tetlock and Belkin, 1996, pp. 25–27.

¹⁵ Levy, 2008, p. 395.

¹⁶ Max Weber, *On the Methodology of the Social Sciences*, ed. and trans. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch, Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1949, Ch. 3, quoted in Levy, 2008.

¹⁷ Hawthorn, 1991, pp. 31–60.

¹⁸ Tetlock and Belkin, 1996, pp. 23–25.

¹⁹ Martin Bunzl, “Counterfactual History: A User’s Guide,” *American Historical Review*, Vol. 109, No. 3, June 2004, p. 857.

²⁰ Levy, 2008, p. 390.

²¹ Lebow, 2000.

occurring becomes increasingly smaller (*compound probability*).²² That is, counterfactuals should avoid overly long or complicated chains of reasoning and focus on simpler, more-direct relationships. Additionally, we cannot necessarily assume that one aspect of the past could be changed while everything else is held constant.²³ As noted above, scholars therefore need to recognize the *interconnectedness* of causes and outcomes and consider what else might change if the explanatory variable were to change.²⁴ Finally, scholars should be cognizant that history does not stop when the hypothesized outcome is reached: Subsequent events could return history to its original course. Scholars using counterfactual analysis should therefore be careful to ask whether history might revert to the course from which it was diverted regardless of a change in one or a few explanatory variables.²⁵

We used these best practices and endeavored to avoid these pitfalls when conducting our counterfactual case studies. Broadly speaking, each counterfactual case first develops a detailed model of the key actors in each case, including their interests and capabilities, then details how they interacted to produce historical events. Next, we specify the counterfactual being considered (specifically, the change in a U.S. intervention decision) and the capabilities that the United States would or could most realistically have brought to bear, as appropriate. After stipulating the change in the U.S. intervention decision, the case then explores the likely outcome of the case, given what has already been established about the interests and capabilities of the other actors involved. Each case concludes by assessing the similarities and differences between the historical and counterfactual events for a variety of outcomes, including the effects on the conflict or crisis, the trajectory of the host nation, and the effects on U.S. interests.

²² Lebow, 2000, p. 574.

²³ Lebow, 2000, p. 576.

²⁴ Tetlock and Belkin, 1996.

²⁵ Tetlock and Belkin, 1996.

Case Selection

In total, we conducted four in-depth counterfactual case studies.²⁶ To select the specific four cases we would study, we applied several criteria. First, we wanted to select cases in which a different U.S. intervention decision could have been broadly plausible. On the one hand, a U.S. decision not to intervene in the Cuban Missile Crisis would have been relatively difficult to justify, given the stakes involved for the United States. On the other hand, U.S. intervention in the ongoing (as of this writing) civil war in the Central African Republic also appears highly improbable, given the lack of clear U.S. interests involved. Selecting cases in which both intervention and nonintervention (or intervention of a different size and timing) could plausibly have occurred helps increase the utility of the case. Second, we focused on cases whose histories are relatively better known and better documented. This was for pragmatic purposes, to ensure that we would be able to develop the detailed understanding of the actors and their capabilities and interests necessary to conduct a rigorous counterfactual investigation. Third, we wanted to explore counterfactual cases that varied by their intervention category. That is, we wanted a mixture of nonintervention cases, intervention cases, and interventions with different timings and sizes, to the extent feasible with only four cases. Fourth, we also wanted to select cases that varied according to the issues that they presented for U.S. policymakers. We wanted to include some cases that focused on more-geostrategic issues, while others included an important humanitarian component. Finally, to the extent possible, we wanted to achieve variety in the region and time in which the cases took place.²⁷

²⁶ Although more in-depth cases studies are always preferable, the scope of this report limited us to conducting four such cases.

²⁷ Of course, with this many dimensions under consideration and only four cases to select, identifying cases that would allow us to directly assess the causal effects of intervention decisions on outcomes across each category was not possible. However, these counterfactual cases were not intended or designed for the testing of novel hypotheses in this manner. Instead, they were intended as an illustrative tool. They represent a plausibility demonstration but should not, on their own, be taken to represent clear evidence of generalizable relationships.

We selected the following four cases, listed in Table 5.1: the Korean War, the Iranian Revolution, the Bosnian War, and the Libyan Civil War.²⁸

Summary of the Counterfactual Cases

In this section, we briefly summarize each of the counterfactual cases we conducted, including narratives of both the historical events and what occurred in the counterfactual scenario. The full text of each of these cases and our complete analysis of them are available in Appendix B.

The Korean War

Historically, the Korean War erupted when North Korea invaded the South early in the morning of Sunday, June 25, 1950. The United States presented a resolution at the UN Security Council and condemned North Korea for its attack. When North Korea did not withdraw to the 38th parallel despite the UN's request, the United States intervened in the conflict as part of a multinational coalition under the banner

Table 5.1
List of Selected Counterfactual Cases

Case Name	Year(s)	Historical U.S. Intervention Decision	Counterfactual U.S. Intervention Decision
Korean War	1950–1953	Early, large intervention	No intervention
Iranian Revolution	1978–1979	No intervention	Early, medium intervention
Bosnian War	1992–1995	Late, medium intervention	Early, medium intervention
Libyan Civil War	2011	Early, small intervention	No intervention

²⁸ It is worth noting that although two of these cases (Libya and Bosnia) were investigated as focused case studies, as discussed in Chapter Four, we did not require that cases either were or were not investigated using both methods. The degree of overlap, therefore, is coincidental.

of the UN. Before these forces arrived en masse, the battle-hardened North Korean forces, with many veterans of the Chinese Civil War, achieved notable early successes. However, following a daring September amphibious landing behind North Korean lines at the port city of Incheon, UN forces recaptured Seoul and began to roll back the invading North Korean forces. By November 1950, UN forces had reversed the North's successes and penetrated deep into North Korea, approaching the border with China. By January 1951, the People's Republic of China had dispatched hundreds of thousands of "Chinese People's Volunteers" to back crumbling North Korean forces. The Chinese intervention reversed the tide of the war once again, but battle lines soon stabilized not far from the 38th parallel, the original line demarcating the border between North and South Korea. The parties came to realize that changing the front line further would be costly, and lengthy negotiations for an armistice began. After lengthy delays, the major-power participants finally reached an agreement essentially codifying the battlefield results and signed the armistice on July 27, 1953.

In our counterfactual case, the United States decides not to intervene to assist South Korea after the North Korean invasion. Without timely help from the United States and international forces, South Korea was largely conquered by the North in a matter of weeks, as a result of the North's superior military capabilities. After the end of the conflict, Korea's trajectory in the immediate postwar years would have substantially differed from the real-world case. The country would have been unified under the leadership of Kim Il Sung and would have formed close relations with other communist states, including the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. Economic conditions in Korea following this much shorter war would have improved to a higher level, at least initially, than seen in the real-world case, as a result of having avoided the devastation wrought by the lengthy conflict in the historical case; however, the medium- and longer-term prospects would have been more negative.

The Iranian Revolution

The Iranian revolution began in January 1978, when protests in the Shi'ia holy city of Qom erupted after an article critical of the popu-

lar exiled Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was published in a conservative newspaper. Over the course of 1978, the protest movement grew and spread across the country. As late as October 1978, U.S. officials believed that the Shah would be able to successfully put down the protests because his government had cracked down on opposition movements before. But the Shah's tepid response to the protests was not sufficient to quell the revolution as it spread, and on January 16, 1979, the Shah fled the country. On February 1, 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran and was greeted by crowds of millions. Within ten days of his return, Iran's military leadership declared that the military would subsequently remain neutral and withdrew to the barracks, leaving open the ability for Khomeini to form a new regime. This regime replaced a long-standing ally of the United States with an oppositional regime that took U.S. embassy staff hostage and has since played an antagonistic role toward U.S. allies and policy preferences in the region.

In the counterfactual scenario, President Carter decides to support a military coup in Iran in December 1978 to forestall a revolution that would likely yield an opposition government with an anti-American orientation. At the same time, the United States deploys the 3rd brigade of the 82nd Airborne and a battalion-sized Marine amphibious unit to secure key Iranian oil facilities in the south of the country. An additional Marine unit is also sent to Tehran to supervise the evacuation of U.S. citizens, the Seventh Fleet Carrier Task Force is moved to the Indian Ocean, and several U.S. Air Force F-111 Aardvark fighter-bombers are deployed to the Cairo West airbase in Egypt as a sign of U.S. support for the coup and as a deterrent signal to the Soviet Union.

The streets are quiet for a few months following the coup. Although few Iranians return to work, and strikes are therefore still in effect in practice, there are no protests. However, discontent with the government persists, and discontent grows as reports of heavy-handed actions from the military government grow and Khomeini denounces the military government from exile. Army mutinies spread throughout the country as many rank-and-file members of the military defect to the side of the protestors. Senior military leadership is paralyzed by indecision as the situation deteriorates, eventually deciding to flee the country along with the Shah. Available U.S. support was ultimately

not sufficient to fundamentally alter underlying revolutionary social currents in Iran. Khomeini returns to Iran within a month of their departure. U.S. forces continue to occupy the southern oil fields, preventing the Khomeini regime from gaining access to a significant source of income. Then, several months after the constitutional referendum, a group of Iranian students takes over the U.S. embassy compound in Tehran. Although most U.S. citizens have been evacuated from Tehran, a small staff remains to coordinate U.S. policy toward the new regime. When the regime refuses to release the hostages, U.S. and Iranian officials enter into secret negotiations. The United States agrees to withdraw from the oil fields in exchange for the release of the hostages. The next day, the U.S. embassy staff are driven to the airport and flown back to the United States, and the 82nd Airborne and Marine amphibious unit withdraw.

From here, history proceeds much as it did in the real-world scenario, albeit on a delayed timeline. Khomeini is even more popular than he was before the coup because of anti-Western and antimilitary sentiment, and this popularity helps his followers eliminate competing opposition groups and consolidate their authority over the government. A new constitution is drafted, and Iran votes overwhelmingly to establish an Islamic republic via referendum.

The Bosnian War

The end of the Cold War and the rise of ethnic nationalist leaders led to the dissolution of the six republics of Yugoslavia, as Slovenia and Croatia seceded after brief wars in 1991. On March 1, 1992, Bosnia voted to secede from Yugoslavia, touching off a civil war when members of the Serb minority organized to resist the establishment of an independent state. Between 1992 and 1995, the ensuing fighting was accompanied by *ethnic cleansing*, or the use of violence and intimidation against civilians that is designed to create an ethnically homogenous territory. The war generated the largest refugee crisis in Europe since World War II as well as widely documented war crimes, including genocide, mass rape, and the systematic mistreatment of civilians and prisoners of war. The international community initially responded by providing humanitarian assistance and deploying UN peacekeeping forces (the UN Provi-

sional Force [UNPROFOR]) to protect humanitarian relief convoys and later to protect UN-designated “safe areas.” This approach provided considerable humanitarian relief but failed to stop the conflict or prevent atrocities against civilians. NATO created and later began to actively enforce a no-fly zone and engaged in occasional air strikes in 1994 through mid-1995 that were derided as “pinprick” strikes because they inflicted little damage on their Bosnian Serb military targets. After Bosnian Serb forces overran the safe area of Srebrenica and massacred some 7,000 civilians in July 1995, U.S. and European leaders agreed that a new approach was warranted. At a conference of foreign ministers later that July, the allies agreed to use extensive air power in retaliation for future violations of safe areas and streamlined the authority to call in air strikes. After Bosnian Serbs shelled a marketplace in Sarajevo in August 1995, NATO launched Operation Deliberate Force, conducting airstrikes across the country on Bosnian Serb military targets. In combination with an increasingly successful Bosnian-Croat ground offensive against Bosnian Serb positions, the NATO operation eventually helped convince Bosnian Serb leaders to come to the table. On September 20, Bosnian Serb leaders agreed to participate in negotiations indirectly through Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic, concluding with the signing of the Dayton Accords in December 1995. On December 20, 1995, most of the UNPROFOR troops remaining in Bosnia changed helmets and became the Implementation Force, supplemented by additional NATO forces, bringing the total force to 60,000.

In the counterfactual scenario, the United States uses the August 1992 London Conference to take the leadership role on the international community’s response to Bosnia. U.S. officials engage in intensive diplomacy with NATO allies to ensure that European allies agree to steps to encourage Serbia, Croatia, and the warring parties in Bosnia to comply with their commitments to protect civilians and deescalate the conflict. Instead of taking an impartial approach to deliver humanitarian aid and encourage the parties to stop fighting, NATO announces that it will use military force to enforce the London Conference agreements, if necessary. Within a few days of the conference, it becomes clear that the Bosnian Serbs do not plan to comply with

the London Conference agreement. Shelling of Bosnian cities (including Sarajevo) continues, and an attack on a market in Sarajevo kills more than 20 civilians, generating outrage in the international media. In early October, Bosnian Serb forces appear to target humanitarian convoys crossing through their territory to reach Bosniak enclaves, killing five peacekeepers and two civilian aid workers. The attack on the peacekeepers and continued shelling of cities and towns triggers the threatened NATO intervention.

In early October 1992, NATO begins an intensive air campaign against Bosnian Serb positions around Sarajevo. NATO and UN officials demand that the Bosnian Serbs lift the siege of Sarajevo and remove heavy weapons from exclusion zones around cities and towns. They make it clear that if the Bosnian Serbs do not comply with these demands, NATO airstrikes will expand their targets. Bosnian Serb forces are given 72 hours to comply with these demands. In response, Bosnian Serb forces move to attack UNPROFOR positions, triggering an expansion of the bombing campaign to target key Bosnian Serb massed forces, command-and-control, and war infrastructure targets throughout the country. Although these strikes severely hamper Bosnian Serb military capabilities and mobility, they do not prove to be sufficient to immediately bring an end to the conflict. The United States decides to take several steps to increase pressure on the Bosnian Serbs, including tightening sanctions and deploying its own ground forces as part of an UNPROFOR Rapid Reaction force, with rules of engagement that allow them to attack Bosnian Serb forces within designated areas. U.S. forces become involved in substantial combat with Bosnian Serb forces, taking casualties of their own. Under this pressure, and beginning to see Bosnian and Croat forces alter the division of territory on the ground among the groups, Bosnian Serb leaders finally decide to accept the UN's offer to host negotiations. Leaders from Bosnian, Croat, and Serb factions travel to Geneva to participate in negotiations. UNPROFOR and rapid reaction forces, including U.S. troops, are deployed along the front lines of the war to monitor and verify the ceasefire, and NATO aircraft continue to monitor the military no-fly zone and continue reconnaissance missions to determine that forces on the ground are staying in place.

In Geneva, UN officials present a peace plan that consists of decentralized, ethnically based cantons or republics, united by a weak central government delineated by ethnically based power-sharing, similar to the Vance-Owen plan and others proposed over the course of the conflict. The parties negotiate over the division of territory among the three ethnic groups and eventually agree to a peace deal along these lines. Once the settlement is reached, UNPROFOR and the rapid reaction forces in place, including those from the United States, re-hat and become a postconflict stabilization force tasked with the implementation of the terms of the negotiated agreement. The stabilization forces remain in Bosnia for several years, drawing down gradually as the agreement is implemented. The eventual outcome of this counterfactual case therefore has many similarities with historical events, though it differs in the process of getting there and many of the details. The counterfactual case involves a much shorter, less destructive civil war in Bosnia, and the country remains a more ethnically mixed territory as a result. The United States avoids a period of apparent inaction that was damaging for its reputation, but it does so by bearing much higher direct costs of its own, including U.S. military casualties.

The Libyan Civil War

Following uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, demonstrations broke out in the Libyan city of Benghazi in February 2011, and “revolutionary councils” emerged across the country. Protests soon turned violent after heavy suppression from security forces, which included airstrikes against civilians and the use of mercenary troops as rebel groups took control of parts of the eastern provinces. Concern grew that large-scale civilian massacres were imminent as government forces approached rebel-held towns, especially in Benghazi, with a population of roughly 750,000. Although Libya and the United States had taken steps toward a normalization of their relations in the previous decade, President Muammar al-Qaddafi’s long history of brutality and support for terrorism left him few friends in the region or beyond and contributed toward an unusually broad willingness to see his departure. The United States and key European allies initiated Operation Odyssey Dawn on March 19, 2011, a civilian protection mission combining a no-fly zone

with strikes against the Libyan regime's ground troops and command and control centers, later continued as NATO Operation Unified Protector. With this international support, rebel forces gradually pushed back Libyan government troops until they had captured all key cities and killed Qaddafi by October 2011.

The intervention succeeded in averting a near-term humanitarian catastrophe and eliminating Qaddafi from power, but it was also accompanied by a variety of unintended consequences. In the aftermath of the intervention, Libyan politics remained fractured and chaotic, with a battered economy and persistent violence. The intervention undermined the stability of neighboring countries, with jihadist groups in neighboring countries benefiting from the instability in Libya and weapons proliferation throughout the region. Further, the Russian sense that the United States had violated an understanding regarding the limits of force that would be used in Libya contributed to a wider decline in relations between Russia and the West.

In the counterfactual scenario, President Barack Obama maintains the U.S. position of not seeking military involvement in Libya, a country that presents limited strategic interest for the United States and where the risks of entanglement are perceived to be high. In the absence of U.S. support, European allies decide they are neither willing nor able to conduct an operation on their own. Absent international intervention, the Libyan rebellion ends up defeated and Qaddafi remains in power. A failure of the rebellion, however, does not mean that rebel activity disappears in Libya. Instead, it morphs into a low-intensity conflict consisting mainly of guerilla-type attacks against Libyan government troops, infrastructure, and official buildings and that is mostly confined to the Benghazi area, where protests started in February 2011, and the Misrata area, which had shown particularly strong resistance during its siege by Qaddafi's troops from February to May 2011. Regionally, Qaddafi's continued hold on power results in lower levels of conflict from Mali to Syria because Libya no longer functions as a source of exported weaponry or fighters. U.S.-Russian relations are improved, at least over the near term, while U.S. relations with NATO allies are negatively affected following the U.S. refusal to intervene alongside them in Libya.

Results

The four counterfactual cases we conducted provide a wealth of detailed information regarding how U.S. military interventions did or did not affect the various outcomes of interest discussed in this report. These cases were not selected to be representative of general patterns across all cases but instead allow us to explore a wide range of diverse conditions. In our interpretation of the findings of these cases, then, we will discuss how these cases do or do not illustrate relationships identified by the other methods we have employed in order to shed additional light on how they operate and their plausibility. To this end, next we discuss two sets of results. We first explore the implications of the counterfactual case studies for the key outcome variables of interest: effects on the conflict, effects on U.S. interests, and effects on the trajectory of the host nation. Then, we summarize the implications according to the three key questions for policymakers in this report: whether to intervene, whether it is beneficial to do so early or late, and whether it is beneficial to do so with a large or small force.

Effects of Intervention on the Conflict

Each of our counterfactual cases illustrates how external interventions, mediated by the balance of power among the local actors, can affect conflict duration and intensity, sometimes lengthening its duration to achieve a preferred outcome for the United States. In Korea, the U.S. and UN intervention lengthened the conflict substantially, at first by staving off a rapid defeat by the Republic of Korea (ROK). The UN forces were of sufficient size to eventually provide an overwhelming advantage and push the war toward an end point while still in its first year, until the Chinese intervention shifted the conflict again into a stalemate, adding two years to the conflict. In Libya, the U.S. and allied intervention likely lengthened the conflict as well, preventing a rapid rebel defeat though eventually also providing enough support for a rebel victory.

In Bosnia, the historical U.S. and allied intervention was sufficient to change the local balance of power, convince Bosnian Serb forces that events were moving against them, and force an end to the

conflict. In the counterfactual scenario, in which the United States and its allies intervene earlier in the conflict, the United States needed to play a much more active role in ending the conflict, including the introduction of ground troops, to compensate for the weaker Bosnian and Croat forces also fighting the Bosnian Serbs and produce a similar outcome.

In our counterfactual scenarios in Libya and Korea, however, the U.S.-supported side loses the conflict in relatively short order absent the U.S. intervention. This again illustrates how intervening on the side of the weaker party could lengthen the conflict as the cost of achieving other U.S. objectives. Korea also illustrates the tremendous potential importance of third-party spoilers because the Chinese intervention transformed the conflict, intensifying it, lengthening it, and altering the eventual outcome.

The Iran counterfactual case, in which a U.S. intervention does occur, differs from the others. In the counterfactual scenario, the U.S. intervention was quite limited in scale for logistical and operational reasons and was not sufficient to dramatically affect the local balance of power when supporting a weak military regime in a country as large as Iran. The intervention nonetheless modestly increases the duration of the conflict without greatly affecting the ultimate result.

Overall, the counterfactual cases highlight the importance of the local balance of power as a mediating variable when determining the effect that a U.S. intervention should be expected to have on the duration and intensity of the conflict. These cases speak less to the potential effects on conflict recurrence because we intentionally limited how far into the future the counterfactual scenarios were projected to preserve their reliability.

Effects of Intervention on U.S. Interests

In two of our cases, the historical U.S. intervention clearly helps achieve U.S. interests. In Korea, the historical intervention helps avoid the defeat of a partner, strengthens the U.S. strategic position in East Asia, and provides a demonstration of U.S. credibility and commitment. In Bosnia, the historical U.S. intervention helps end a destructive conflict in Europe and restore confidence in U.S. international

leadership. In both of these instances, it is reasonably clear that the outcome would have been worse without an intervention, from the U.S. perspective. In the two other cases, however, the extent to which the intervention helped (or would have helped) advance U.S. interests is more limited. In Libya, the intervention helps avoid a civilian massacre and deposes a regime that had been unfriendly to the United States in the past. However, partly because of the lack of postconflict engagement by both the United States and its European allies, the intervention (compared with the counterfactual) also helped increase local and regional instability that worsened conflicts elsewhere, worsened relations with Russia, and eventually prompted a follow-up intervention several years later to help contain the growing chaos. In the Iran counterfactual scenario, the U.S. intervention provides short-term assistance to help maintain a friendly regime but proves unsustainable, given that partner's weakness.

It is also worth considering the relationship between U.S. interventions and the more-specific U.S. outcomes of interest discussed earlier, including any economic, strategic, and reputational costs and benefits. Continuing a pattern noted in Chapter Four, U.S. interventions were not associated with positive economic outcomes for the United States. In all cases we considered for this chapter, U.S. interventions, even those that achieved U.S. objectives, appear to have had net economic costs. In the Iranian counterfactual scenario, efforts to stabilize oil markets by controlling the oil fields were ultimately not successful beyond the very short term. In the Bosnia case, the earlier intervention hypothesized as our counterfactual likely had similar economic costs in comparison with the historical experience, with the greater intensity and costliness of the U.S. military effort in the counterfactual scenario (including increased U.S. casualties) being at least partly offset by several years of more-limited U.S. effort in the historical 1992–995 period.

Interventions have mixed reputational effects in our cases. In Korea, the historical U.S. intervention conducted through the United Nations demonstrated credibility and a strong willingness to defend against the spread of communism, increasing perceptions of U.S. international leadership. Absent this intervention, abandoning the ROK

would likely have had reputational costs for the United States as it sought to rally a coalition to contain communism. In Libya, the decision to intervene likely had mixed effects on the U.S. reputation. In some circles, the decision to intervene, including with UN authorization, suggested a commitment to protecting against human rights atrocities. However, the perceived expansion of the goals of the intervention beyond the short-term humanitarian imperatives to encompass the fall of Qaddafi reinforced concerns with U.S. leadership in other circles, most notably in Russia, that the United States was an incorrigible interventionist bent on regime change in non-allied states. In Iran, a U.S. intervention might have had more-negative effects on reputation, especially without international support. In Bosnia, the U.S. reputation for international leadership would likely have been improved with an early intervention instead of the historical later approach, though we did not assess the reputational effects that would likely have occurred if the United States had decided not to intervene in the war altogether.

Finally, in only two of the counterfactual cases did interventions have strategic benefits: Bosnia and Korea. In Bosnia, the U.S. intervention restored stability in a region very close to key European allies, though this benefit was realized in both the late (historical) and early (counterfactual) interventions. In Korea, the intervention provided the United States with an important regional partner and counterweight to Russia and China. In Libya and Iran, in contrast, it is not clear that an intervention, historical in the case of Libya and counterfactual in the case of Iran, had any net strategic benefits. The Libyan intervention helped increase regional instability and required a follow-up intervention to help stabilize Libya, while the Iranian intervention failed to save a key U.S. partner in the Middle East, forcing the United States to rethink its strategic approach to the region.

A key insight from this discussion of U.S. interests in our counterfactual cases is that those cases in which U.S. objectives were clearly advanced tended to involve larger forces than those cases in which they were not, though there was some overlap. Further, the large size of the intervention in Korea and the relatively substantial application of forces in Bosnia were an essential component of their ability to advance U.S. interests. However, our cases also suggest the limits of larger inter-

ventions. In Libya, a larger intervention might have helped advance U.S. interests in that country by providing troops and resources that could have been used to move that country more quickly on a path to stability and reconstruction. Such an intervention would likely have been unpopular both in Libya and in the United States, not to mention in the broader Middle East, and therefore the broader effectiveness of such a mission in advancing U.S. objectives is not clear. This constraint echoes one of the concerns with larger force sizes (the potential for popular backlash) identified in Chapter Four. In Iran, even a notably larger intervention (which was not logistically feasible at the time) might not have been sufficient to indefinitely maintain an unpopular, pro-Western regime in power, although we did not assess this option in our counterfactual case. Nonetheless, we can safely note that Iranian popular sentiment had turned resolutely in an anti-Western direction by 1979, a turn that would only have been exacerbated by a large-scale U.S. intervention to maintain an unpopular autocratic regime.

The effectiveness of larger interventions in advancing U.S. interests therefore also appears to be mediated by the effect that they have on the local balance of power and politics in the host nation and broader region, themes that we discussed previously in Chapters Two and Four. In Korea, Bosnia, and Iran, the local balance of power after the introduction of U.S. forces determines the degree of influence the United States is able to exercise in the advancement of its interests. Libya, meanwhile, illustrates the limits of this analysis because a large intervention might have been sufficient to secure a better outcome in the host nation itself but potentially at the cost of broader regional and geopolitical factors.

Effects of Intervention on Host Nation

Across the cases considered in this chapter, the effects of U.S. interventions on the host nations are (perhaps surprisingly) mixed. Only in Bosnia, where a substantial international intervention brought a decisive end to the conflict and led to sustained efforts (albeit only partly successful) to improve the economic and political trajectory of the host nation, was the effect of the U.S. intervention clearly positive. In Korea, the U.S. intervention led to a dramatic increase in the short-term dev-

astation experienced by the country, in comparison with a rapid Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) victory that would have unified the country. In the longer run, of course, the ROK, linked with the West, was able to begin a process of dramatic economic growth and, decades later, political liberalization, while the DPRK stagnated politically and economically in the war's aftermath. It is difficult to project the future trajectory of a unified Korea that had been spared the destruction of the Korean War, but a middle path between the historical ROK and DPRK trajectories seems plausible. Although this path likely would have represented a worse outcome for the South, it likely would have been an improved outcome for the North. In Libya, the U.S. intervention helps to topple the Qaddafi regime and avert a short-term humanitarian catastrophe. But it also creates instability and a vacuum of power that is later filled in part by extremists, such as ISIL. In the counterfactual scenario, in which the United States does not intervene, Qaddafi retains power, brutally repressing the opposition while remaining unable to fully stamp out a low-grade insurgency. The intervention is too recent for us to have a full sense of how the historical scenario will play out. Although the U.S. intervention has the potential to have improved the trajectory of the host nation by removing a regime that had stagnated political development, this possibility has been accompanied by chronic instability. In the counterfactual scenario in Libya, meanwhile, the absence of a U.S. intervention had limited effects on the trajectory of the host nation one way or the other.

The local balance of power with and without a U.S. intervention and the broader political and economic context of the host nation help explain the outcomes observed in our counterfactual cases. In Bosnia, the dominance of the U.S. and allied intervention gives the interveners the leverage to reshape Bosnian institutions and guarantee security, helping to facilitate an overall positive trajectory for the country. In Korea, the UN intervention—once the Chinese intervened—was only able to achieve this level of control over half of the country; the intervention did help set the ROK on a positive trajectory, although first the ROK needed to overcome a massive wartime toll. In Iran, the U.S. intervention does not notably alter the local balance of power or the host nation's trajectory. In part, this was due to the large number

of competing actors within the Iranian political system and the weakness of groups willing to ally with the United States. In Libya, the U.S. intervention was quite limited. Although it might have been feasible for a larger U.S. and allied intervention to provide greater postconflict security and facilitate a political settlement in the country, the Libyan transitional government was opposed to this option; instead, the limited U.S. intervention led to instability, characterized by competing militias.

The effects of U.S. interventions on the outcome categories that are illustrated by our counterfactual cases are summarized in Table 5.2. Table 5.3 summarizes the effects of intervention across the three counterfactual cases that consider the intervention decisions. Table 5.4 summarizes the effects of timing in the Bosnia case.

Implications

The Intervention Decision: Should the United States Intervene?

When deciding whether to intervene in a war or crisis in which important U.S. interests are at stake, our cases again illustrate the importance of considering the likely effect that a U.S. intervention could have on the local balance of power and, in turn, the leverage that the U.S. intervention would provide for the United States to alter the outcome. When the United States is able to decisively and sustainably intervene,

Table 5.2
Summary of Effects on Outcomes Illustrated by Counterfactual Cases

Category	Effect of U.S. Military Interventions
Conflict outcomes	Dependent on how U.S. intervention affects the local balance of power as well as the behavior and effects of third-party spoilers.
Intervener interests	Larger interventions, for the most part, provided greater leverage to advance U.S. interests. Local context and balance of power are also crucial.
Host nation	Local conditions of the host nation, including the local balance of power and the broader political and economic environment, shape outcomes. The feasibility of sufficiently larger or persistent interventions is dependent on international context.

Table 5.3
Summary of Effects of Intervention for Counterfactual Cases

Category	Korea	Libya	Iran
Intervention type	Early, large	Early, small	Early, medium
Historical or counterfactual U.S. intervention	Historical	Historical	Counterfactual
Conflict duration	Longer	Longer	Longer
Intervener interests	Improved	Mixed	No change
Economic interests	Costs because of conflict	Costs because of conflict	Costs because of conflict
Strategic interest	Improved	Mixed	Mixed
Reputational interests	Improved	Mixed	Possibly negative
Host nation	Short-term costs but longer-term improvement	Mixed	No change

Table 5.4
Summary of Effects of Timing in Bosnia Counterfactual Case

Category	Outcome
Conflict duration	Shorter
Intervener interests	Notably higher direct costs, but objectives achieved more quickly
Economic interests	Likely similar overall costs
Strategic interest	Likely similar, but objectives achieved more quickly
Reputational interests	Likely similar
Host nation	Reduced costs and faster conflict cessation

as in Bosnia, it has a greater chance of making the intervention, from its perspective, a success. At the other extreme, as in Iran, when no U.S. intervention that could feasibly have been conducted quickly could have sufficiently altered the local balance of power in a sustained way, a U.S. intervention is likely to provide limited benefits.

However, two other cases illustrate the challenges in making a proper assessment ahead of time regarding the effect that a U.S. intervention might be able to have. In Korea, the United States was highly motivated to intervene, given the strategic interests at stake, but it also did not foresee the effect that the Chinese intervention would have when deciding to expand the goals of the intervention to include taking the entire Korean peninsula. The result was a bloody stalemate that achieved many U.S. goals in comparison with a U.S. decision not to intervene at all but at a high cost. In Libya, the U.S. intervention was kept quite limited. Although it proved sufficient to achieve the proximate U.S. goal of toppling the Qaddafi regime, the failure of either the Europeans or the United States to remain engaged in the aftermath of the conflict was not anticipated at the time of the intervention decision and helped undermine the overall success of the intervention. An improved understanding of the role and the intentions of third parties, whether allies or adversaries, could have better informed U.S. decision-making, although such an understanding might have been more likely to alter the execution of the intervention than the decision regarding whether to intervene at all in our cases. For example, this improved understanding could have led to a U.S. decision to stop at the 38th parallel in Korea or led to a determination to extract guarantees from European allies regarding their commitment to the postconflict reconstruction in Libya before deciding to support that intervention.

The Timing Decision: Is It Better to Intervene Early?

Early interventions appear to have been preferable in all the cases we considered. In Korea and Libya, an early intervention was likely the only decision that was feasible, given the rapidity with which adversary forces would likely have won the conflict in both cases. That is, if the United States had opted against an early intervention, it likely would not have intervened at all. In our Iran counterfactual scenario, an early

intervention was also the most feasible alternative in comparison with a decision to intervene later, once Khomeini had returned to Iran and begun to consolidate power, although this early intervention did not dramatically alter the outcome.

Bosnia was our one counterfactual case to make an explicit comparison of the benefits and costs of intervening early in the conflict as opposed to waiting to intervene at a later point. The analysis of the early, counterfactual intervention scenario illustrates how waiting for a later moment in the conflict might only have provided limited additional benefits because, in its hypothesized early intervention, the United States is still able to end the conflict in relatively short order and stabilize the country while avoiding much of the devastation that occurred in the country throughout the 1992–1995 Bosnian War. Offsetting these benefits are a substantially increased level of risk to U.S. forces and the more-immediate direct costs of intervention paid by the United States, which were required to offset the lesser degree of exhaustion on the part of Bosnian Serb forces and the lesser degree of success from Bosnian and Croat forces on the ground. This counterfactual illustrates a potential pathway by which later interventions might be preferable in some cases, in that longer conflicts could allow time for the parties to reach a point when forcing a settlement becomes easier, and fewer costs might be paid by the interveners. If the interveners are willing to pay these costs, which of course cannot be taken for granted, then they might be able to achieve other goals more quickly and at lower cost to the host nation.

Taken together, though, the cases highlight the value of intervening early in a crisis or war in many circumstances, but they do not suggest that the United States should always intervene early. The alternative to intervening early, of course, is not intervening, at least for the time being, allowing policymakers to gather more information and see how events develop before committing U.S. forces. Avoiding an early intervention in Iran, for example, appears to have been preferable because it avoided an intervention that would likely have done little to advance U.S. interests. The difficulty for policymakers is properly assessing whether a U.S. intervention is an inevitability, given the interests at stake (e.g., the United States is highly likely to be drawn into

the conflict at some point), or whether it could plausibly be avoided altogether depending on how the situation develops. If the former is true, then an early intervention could be preferable, depending on how the intervention would affect the local balance of power (as illustrated in the Bosnia counterfactual). If the latter is true, then a wait-and-see approach could be more appropriate. But making the assessment of which category the case falls into requires a clear analysis of the interests at stake, the local balance of power, and the likely future trajectory of the situation.

The Size Decision: Is It Better to Intervene with Larger Forces?

Two of our counterfactual cases shed perhaps less light than the other two on the question of the size of the force U.S. policymakers should commit to an intervention and under what conditions. In Korea, the need for a large force was obvious, given the scale of the military challenge. In Iran, a more-limited, medium force was all that feasibly could have been generated in the counterfactual scenario, and so we did not assess the potential effects of a larger force for comparison.

In Bosnia and Libya, the lessons that can be drawn from these cases regarding the size of the intervention are more nuanced. In the historical case in which the United States intervened in Bosnia in 1995, the need for a substantial force was clear, given repeated earlier attempts to alter Bosnian Serb behavior using UN peacekeepers and the threat of limited air strikes as well as the comprehensive understanding by then of the strength of Bosnian Serb forces. In our counterfactual scenario in which the United States instead intervenes in 1992, we assessed that a larger intervention force ultimately would have been required for the United States and its allies in order to achieve the outcomes they sought. The United States does not know this immediately, however, and initially attempts in 1992 to employ more-limited forces before increasing the size, and belligerence, of the intervention to ensure greater success. Again, larger force sizes appear to have provided some benefits to the advancement of U.S. interests.

That said, our Libya case might illustrate the limits of that pattern. Although a larger or a more-sustained U.S. intervention in Libya likely would have better helped stabilize the country in the short term,

its long-term feasibility and advisability might have differed. On the heels of the U.S. experience in Iraq, a large 2011 U.S. intervention into Libya would likely have been immensely controversial, both in the United States and in the region. Although not as acute as the concerns regarding a large intervention in the post-2014 Iraq case discussed in Chapter Four, a large or more-sustained intervention in Libya in 2011 might have involved trade-offs among our outcomes of interest, likely shortening the conflict and increasing short-term stability while having more-uncertain effects on broader U.S. political and strategic interests.

The discussion for each of these three questions is summarized in Table 5.5.

Table 5.5
Summary of Implications for Intervention Decisions Illustrated by Counterfactual Cases

Question	Effect of U.S. Military Interventions
Whether to intervene	The United States is likely to advance its interests by intervening when doing so will shift the local balance of power in favor of the supported side. However, assessing whether the intervention is likely to produce this effect could be difficult, particularly when assessing the behavior of third parties is crucial. Good, locally specific intelligence and analysis is therefore critical.
When to intervene	Early interventions can help advance U.S. interests in many circumstances. Exceptions can include cases in which potential adversaries are strong but might weaken in the future or in which the United States might not have sufficient forces available to decisively alter the local balance of power. But the decision to intervene early is as much a decision about whether to intervene at all: When the interests at stake mean eventual U.S. intervention is highly likely, then early intervention might bring fewer risks. If eventual U.S. intervention is less certain, however, then keeping open the option to intervene later or not at all might be more advisable. Not every situation is improved by a U.S. intervention, early or not.
With what size force to intervene	Larger interventions are able to help advance U.S. interests in certain circumstances. This is not universal, however. In some cases, depending on the local balance of power, even large forces might be insufficient to advance U.S. interests. In others, the presence of larger U.S. forces would be likely to generate substantial backlash, suggesting that smaller forces might be more advisable.

Conclusion and Implications

In this report, we have considered the role of intervention decisions (whether to intervene, intervention timing, and intervention size) through four lenses: (1) using past research, (2) using quantitative data, (3) using a set of short, focused case studies, and (4) using a set of longer counterfactual case studies. In this chapter, we will synthesize and summarize the insights from across these four lenses and discuss the implications and recommendations for the Army.

The Effect of Interventions on Outcomes

Throughout this report, we have considered the effects of different intervention decisions on three main types of outcomes of relevance to policymakers: the effect of the intervention on the course of the conflict, on the interests of the intervening state, and on the trajectory of the host nation where the intervention takes place. Table 6.1 summarizes the findings from each of our four methodologies for each of these categories of outcomes.

Next, we will summarize these results regarding the effect of intervention decisions on conflict outcomes and the host nation's trajectory. The final category of outcomes, intervener interests (in this case, the interests of the United States), will be assessed in greater detail below, with our findings organized to answer the three main policy questions noted throughout this report: whether to intervene, whether it is better to intervene early, and whether it is better to intervene with a larger force. Although of course outcomes for the conflict and the host

Table 6.1
Summary of Findings for Outcome Measures

Outcome Measures	Literature Review	Quantitative Analysis	Focused Case Studies	Counterfactuals
Conflict outcomes	- Interventions can help terminate conflicts and reduce conflict duration, especially if the intervention is larger and earlier. - But the intervention's effect depends on its influence on the local balance of power and the potential for backlash.	- No clear patterns with respect to conflict duration or recurrence. - U.S. interventions, especially when later in a conflict, could be associated with a reduction in conflict intensity in comparison with nonintervention cases. - However, selection effects likely play a role, particularly in the case of timing.	Not assessed.	- Effects on conflict are highly dependent on how U.S. intervention affects the local balance of power, as well as the behavior and effects of third-party spoilers. - For example, early interventions can reduce conflict duration if they lead to a quick victory or dramatically increase it if they lead to a protracted stalemate. In some cases, the longer conflict is required to advance other U.S. interests.

Table 6.1—Continued

Outcome Measures	Literature Review	Quantitative Analysis	Focused Case Studies	Counterfactuals
Intervener interests	• Earlier interventions are advisable for some issues, such as disaster relief or atrocity prevention; for others, waiting might be preferable. • Larger interventions can advance interests, especially in combat and stabilization missions. • But these larger forces can also be counterproductive if they trigger a backlash.	• Earlier interventions are associated with a higher likelihood of achieving U.S. objectives than later interventions are. • Interventions are associated with a notable increase in military assistance and a more modest increase in economic assistance. • Early interventions are associated with greater increases in economic and military assistance in comparison with late interventions. • However, interpreting the relationship between levels of U.S. assistance and U.S. interests remains difficult. • Selection effects are likely relevant.	• The advisability of an intervention is dependent on its potential effect on the local balance of power, willingness to commit resources, and presence of spoilers. • Nonintervention cases improved more frequently than they deteriorated. • Early interventions are more likely when homeland security or vital interests are directly threatened. In other cases, waiting was not associated with worse outcomes. • Larger interventions help advance interests overall, but smaller forces could be preferable if there are concerns about backlash, escalation risks, or deployment timelines.	• Interventions had a mixed track record in advancing U.S. interests. • Where interventions were advantageous, they were larger in size, and a large number of troops directly helped achieve U.S. goals. • In other cases, where large interventions were not possible or attempted, our analysis of cases suggests large interventions would have been insufficient or led to backlash because of entrenched local adversaries and popular resentment of U.S. presence. • Large force size can therefore help in some circumstances but not universally.

Table 6.1—Continued

Outcome Measures	Literature Review	Quantitative Analysis	Focused Case Studies	Counterfactuals
Host-nation trajectory	Mixed or limited interventions tend to have highly contingent effects on host nations.	- No clear differences between intervention and nonintervention cases. - Earlier and larger interventions are associated with higher economic growth, while later interventions are associated with greater decreases in infant mortality. - Patterns within intervention subcategories are driven by a very small number of cases.	- Although results varied, interventions are associated with positive host-nation trajectories more often than non-interventions are. - Positive trajectories are more likely in larger interventions, with notable exceptions.	- Interventions, particularly when larger, have the potential to positively alter the host nation's trajectory. - However, their ability to do so depends on local conditions, including the local balance of power and the broader political and economic environment.

nation relate to or overlap with U.S. interests in some cases, we nonetheless highlight the results with respect to U.S. interests in particular because of their direct relevance to policymakers.

Effects of Intervention Decisions on Conflict Outcomes

Our research suggested that there could be contingent relationships between the U.S. decision to intervene in a conflict and the subsequent course of that conflict but that this relationship is not always in one direction. Although U.S. intervention might shorten conflicts or make them less likely to recur in some circumstances, it could have the opposite effect in others. Although we do not observe an overall pattern in the effects of U.S. interventions on conflict outcomes, U.S. interventions have substantial potential to affect these outcomes. However, it appears that their effects are dependent on other factors, such as how these interventions might affect the local balance of power in the conflict or how they will affect the calculations of third parties, including the local population in the host nation and other regional or global powers. Where a U.S. intervention establishes a clear balance of power in favor of the side on which it intervenes, or where an intervention incentivizes other states to support U.S. efforts, it can shorten or limit the conflict. Where an intervention merely forestalls defeat for the supported side or leads to a stalemate, or where an intervention causes a popular backlash or incentivizes other states to intervene to counter the U.S. effort, it could prolong or intensify the conflict. Careful analysis of these factors therefore appears to be crucial for anticipating the effect that U.S. intervention might have on conflict outcomes. We did not find substantial evidence that U.S. decisions regarding the timing or size of the intervention would be expected to affect conflict dynamics directly, though we would expect that timing and size could well affect the course of the conflict through these same intermediary variables of the local balance of power and third-party reactions. For example, a larger intervention force would be expected to alter the local

balance of power in a different way than a smaller force would, and it might affect the calculations of third parties in different ways as well.¹

Effects of Intervention Decisions on the Host-Nation Trajectory

We found a mixed overall pattern in our investigations into the relationship between U.S. intervention decisions and the trajectory of the host nation. Across our full data set of U.S. intervention and nonintervention cases, we did not identify clear differences in the later trajectory of the host nation. In the subset of cases for which we conducted focused case studies, however, we did identify many more instances in which U.S. interventions appear to have improved the economic and political fortunes of the host nation in comparison with nonintervention cases, in which the trajectory of the host nation tended to change in any notable way less frequently. That is, the U.S. intervention appeared to function like an experimental medical therapy: Prospects for improvement in its absence might be limited, but its application will not always be beneficial.

Our analysis also suggests that there could be trade-offs in the types of improvements in the host nation's trajectory because different aspects of these outcomes often do not appear to progress in tandem. Efforts to improve political liberalization, for example, might conflict in the short term with efforts to build state capacity or promote economic development. U.S. policymakers might therefore need to decide what aspect of the host nation's trajectory they wish to prioritize to increase their odds for success.

We also found suggestive evidence in both our qualitative and quantitative methods that larger interventions might be more likely to improve the host nation's trajectory than smaller interventions or noninterventions. Although this relationship is complex, our analysis highlights at least one important contingent factor: the degree of popular backlash prompted by the larger intervention. Where U.S. forces are generally accepted by the local population, their greater size can

¹ Further, an early intervention naturally has greater potential to affect conflict duration than a later intervention, given that the conflict has already persisted for some time when the later intervention takes place.

give them greater capacity to reshape host-nation institutions or build economic and state capacity. Where this is not the case, however, any improvements they attempt are more likely to be transitory.

Although the effects of U.S. interventions on conflict outcomes and the trajectory of the host nation are important considerations, ultimately this study aimed to inform the decisions of U.S. policymakers for whom the advancement of U.S. interests remains the paramount concern—although, as mentioned earlier, these other types of outcomes could be closely related to U.S. interests in many cases. Next, we summarize our results regarding the effects of U.S. intervention decisions on the advancement of U.S. interests for three main policy questions: whether the United States should intervene, whether it is preferable to intervene early, and whether it is preferable to intervene with larger forces.

Effects of Intervention Decisions on U.S. Interests

The Intervention Decision: Should the United States Intervene?

Although military interventions can be very effective in some contexts and situations at advancing U.S. interests, they could have the opposite effect in other contexts, creating long-term entanglements and increasing economic and strategic costs without realizing U.S. objectives. Our analysis suggested that the United States achieves its political objectives in military interventions about 60 percent of the time. Moreover, U.S. intervention is not a requirement for protecting U.S. interests in all cases. Many nonintervention cases resolve in ways that do not have significant implications for U.S. interests; historically, more nonintervention cases resulted in improved outcomes for U.S. interests than resulted in deteriorated outcomes. Rather than suggesting a bias toward intervening to solve problems, then, this study highlights for decisionmakers the importance of carefully considering local conditions to assess whether conducting a military intervention is likely to advance U.S. goals.

The nature of the U.S. interests at stake can also play an important role in determining whether an intervention occurs. Direct threats to U.S. national security, such as the September 11, 2001, attacks or the Cuban Missile Crisis, provoke immediate and decisive responses.

Other than instances of direct threat, however, the types of interests involved are no guarantee of intervention or nonintervention, reflecting how policymakers have historically made decisions on a case-by-case basis. Factors such as the geographic region, the presence or absence of international support, the number of other ongoing engagements, and the broader policy context at the time all play a role in determining whether the United States has historically chosen to intervene.

Separate from the question of when the United States *has* intervened, of course, is when *should* it intervene: That is, when will an intervention advance U.S. interests? The keys to distinguishing between intervention opportunities that advance U.S. interests and those that have the opposite effect appear to be contextual factors. In particular, our focused case studies, counterfactual case studies, and review of the literature all highlight the centrality of understanding how an outside intervention could shift the local balance of power when determining how the intervention might affect the course of the conflict and the leverage available to the United States to achieve its interests. If the U.S. intervention would serve to shift the power of the favored side in a conflict from either a stalemated or a disadvantaged position to a clearly advantaged position, then we would expect the intervention to help end the conflict and increase the likelihood that the United States is able to advance its other policy goals.

Historical examples of this dynamic can be seen in the 1991 Gulf War and the 1995 Bosnian intervention. Other dynamics, however, could force policymakers to make explicit trade-offs across different outcomes. In the 1950 intervention into the Korean War, for example, U.S. intervention helped avoid the defeat of the ROK, but it also served to substantially prolong the conflict, particularly once Chinese intervention pushed the conflict into a lengthy stalemate. Although the end result helped advance U.S. strategic interests and placed the ROK (though not the DPRK) on a positive developmental trajectory, these achievements came at the cost of involvement in a lengthy conflict with a substantial human toll. In still other cases, illustrated by our counterfactual study of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and our analysis of the 2007 war in Yemen, any plausibly sized U.S. intervention would likely be unable to dramatically alter the local balance of power in

the desired direction, and intervention is therefore likely best avoided. Finally, a U.S. intervention could be largely superfluous if it occurs in a context in which the supported side already has the upper hand. This was partly the case in the 1965 Dominican Republic intervention, where a combination of other local and regional actors likely could have achieved the same generally positive outcome without U.S. intervention (or at least with a much smaller U.S. force). In the 1948 Costa Rican civil war, the U.S. decision not to undertake a military intervention at all helped facilitate a regional response that settled the immediate conflict and put the country on a sustainable, positive trajectory for decades.

Our analysis also highlights that despite the centrality of determining the local balance of power for anticipating intervention outcomes, this determination can be difficult in practice, particularly if the motivations and capabilities of third-party spoilers are not properly understood. The Chinese intervention to reverse U.S. advances in the Korean War, for example, was not anticipated, although it proved decisive for shifting the outcome of the war. The role Pakistan has played in the post-2001 conflict in Afghanistan provides another example.

The Timing Decision: Is It Better to Intervene Early?

On the question of timing, our analysis suggests that early interventions are associated with both the highest rewards and increased risks. In our quantitative analysis, early interventions are somewhat more likely to achieve U.S. political objectives than later ones are. The short, focused case studies suggest more-equal rates of success between early and late interventions in terms of achieving U.S. objectives, but we also find many more instances in which the early timing of an intervention was vitally important to those successes and only one potential case in which the lateness of the intervention might have been beneficial. For example, quick U.S. responses to the 1991 Kurdish humanitarian crisis in northern Iraq and the rapid mobilizations and deployments undertaken in response to the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis were successful in good part because they occurred early in the crises. Although some later interventions, such as the 2014 intervention into Iraq to combat ISIL, were ultimately successful, our research suggests that most of the

ways in which these interventions were not successful could be attributed to them beginning late in these conflicts.² One potential exception to this trend was the U.S. intervention in Bosnia. Although our counterfactual analysis suggests that an earlier U.S. intervention could have led to a similar outcome while decreasing the humanitarian toll of the conflict, it would only have done so if the United States had been willing to pay a higher price itself, including increased risk to its ground forces. The later intervention that occurred historically in 1995 required fewer trade-offs for the United States because the local balance of power was already moving away from the Bosnian Serbs before robust U.S. intervention began. Waiting to undertake an intervention later in a conflict could therefore provide a local balance of power that is more conducive to advancing U.S. interests, thereby limiting U.S. costs or increasing the feasibility of intervention.

More broadly, however, it is important to emphasize that the decision for policymakers about timing is really an iterative one that is closely intertwined with the decision regarding whether to intervene at all. Early interventions, from this perspective, simply reflect instances when policymakers decided to intervene at their first opportunity to do so, while later interventions occur when they decide to intervene at subsequent points in the conflict. But policymakers do not typically make a decision at one point to intervene at some later point, so there is no actual decision to “intervene late.” The decision that policymakers face is therefore similar regardless of when the decision occurs during the conflict. The analysis in the prior section regarding whether the United States should intervene at all therefore remains relevant regardless of when in the course of the conflict an intervention is being contemplated.

The Size Decision: Is It Better to Intervene with Larger Forces?

There is a tendency to assume that “more is always better” when deciding how many forces to commit to an intervention. Certainly, robust

² To clarify, we assessed that a U.S. intervention prior to the fall of Mosul could have been more effective (and at lower cost) than the historical intervention that took place afterward. Once Mosul had fallen, however, U.S. patience in rebuilding Iraqi security forces before mounting a sustained counteroffensive appears to have paid dividends.

interventions appear to be both warranted and highly likely in response to direct threats posed to U.S. national security, such as the invasion of Afghanistan following the September 11, 2001, attacks and the response to the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

We also have evidence suggesting that large or medium interventions might be associated with better outcomes more generally. Our focused cases, for example, find that large and medium interventions more often achieve U.S. political objectives. Further, we observe that there are more instances in which the size of a larger intervention is central to its success than is the case for smaller interventions. Large interventions such as the 1991 Gulf War highlight the value that larger forces can provide, particularly in cases of traditional combat and when facing large, powerful adversaries.

That said, we also find reasons for caution with the employment of larger forces. To begin with, a blanket application of large forces in interventions could often prove to be unnecessary, adding additional costs without realizing additional benefits, as was the case in the large U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic in 1965. But the potential concerns with large forces extend beyond a lack of efficiency. Our analysis indicates at least three circumstances in which forces of a more-limited size could be preferable. First, a large U.S. force might produce a substantial backlash among the local population or important regional actors, undermining the intervention's ability to achieve its objectives and potentially strengthening adversary forces. Second, a large U.S. force could appear highly threatening to an adversary and prompt unwanted escalation in the conflict or crisis. Third, a large force, particularly a large ground force, could take substantial time to mobilize and deploy, such that policymakers might prefer to send a smaller force that can be ready more quickly.

Even beyond these conditions that could suggest a preference for a more-limited-size force, the introduction of large forces effectively increases the "bet" the United States is placing on the outcome of the intervention. As noted above, large forces can help increase success, but in other instances, such as the post-2001 intervention in Afghanistan, even greatly increased forces might prove unable to fundamentally alter the dynamics of the conflict, increasing the costs of the intervention

without substantially increasing its benefits. It is notable that the large interventions in our focused case studies encompass some of the most notable successes and the most notable failures for U.S. interventions. Small interventions, by contrast, tend to have less effect overall on U.S. interests: For the most part, they are associated with more-limited gains and, in other circumstances, more-circumscribed losses.

What determines when larger forces are a good bet to make in an intervention? Although this determination is, in part, affected by the U.S. interests involved, with direct threats to national security warranting a decisive response, how large forces would be expected to affect the local balance of power and the degree of leverage the United States can exercise in the host nation appear to be central. Where large forces allow the United States to tip the balance of power clearly in favor of the side it supports, it can generally expect these larger forces to help lead to better outcomes. The United States has tremendous military capabilities, so situations where this dynamic is salient are likely to occur frequently. There are, however, exceptions, in which the introduction of large forces could prompt local backlash, unwanted escalation, inadvisable delays, or third-party intervention to counterbalance U.S. forces (such as the Chinese intervention during the Korean War) or could simply be insufficient to decisively alter the local balance of power. The decision to intervene with large forces therefore represents a higher-risk, higher-reward strategy, the advisability of which should be carefully assessed according to the local context and the criteria noted above.

Recommendations

Using the key insights of our analysis, we make three recommendations to inform U.S. and Army planning and decisionmaking regarding future interventions.

Select Interventions Judiciously: Context Is Likely to Be Decisive

Our analysis clearly shows that military interventions can advance U.S. national interests in certain circumstances. But we also find suggestive

evidence that, since 1945, the United States could be over-intervening in aggregate. Instances of U.S. interventions that failed to achieve their objectives and where U.S. interests might have been better served by not undertaking the intervention in the first place, such as the post-2003 intervention in Iraq, are often well known. Equally interesting, however, is that we found few cases in which the United States did not intervene but likely would have been better off if it had, such as the 1978 Nicaraguan Civil War. More numerous were cases in which the United States did not intervene and saw its interests advanced partly because of its restraint, such as the 2006 Iranian nuclear crisis, and the 1948 civil wars in Costa Rica and Colombia. In general, the costs of not intervening may have been overemphasized in analyses of U.S. intervention policy in comparison with the potential benefits of restraint.

However, this general observation is of more-limited value for policymakers charged with identifying which specific interventions are most essential to undertake and which can be safely avoided. Our analysis identifies four key criteria that can be assessed when deciding whether a military intervention is likely to advance U.S. interests or prove counterproductive or wasteful:

- *The local balance of power:* In crises and wars where the balance of power already tilts toward the side favored by the United States, intervention might be unnecessary. However, where the United States' interests are under threat, intervention could make more sense, provided the U.S. intervention would be capable of turning the tide.
- *The role of spoilers:* If external actors might respond to a U.S. intervention by increasing their involvement in a crisis or war sufficiently to counteract the introduction of U.S. forces, then intervention could prove ineffective. U.S. adversaries might also respond to the intervention by taking actions in other theaters that undermine U.S. interests in a manner that a narrow analysis of the host nation might not account for. During the Cold War, for example, the United States had to carefully consider how the Soviet Union would react to its overseas activities in order to prevent unintentional escalation.

- *The potential risks of escalation:* If a U.S. intervention has the potential to directly threaten, or to be perceived as directly threatening, the security of a near-peer or other highly capable U.S. adversary, then the intervention has the potential to draw the United States into a wider or more-dangerous confrontation. Although such circumstances were limited in the cases we assessed, their potential consequences highlight the importance of considering this factor when making intervention decisions.
- *The degree of legitimacy:* Interventions taken without international legitimacy can affect U.S. relations with allies and the U.S. reputation more broadly. Legitimacy can also be vital for avoiding a backlash in the host nation; such a backlash could undermine the ability of the intervention to achieve its goals. This concern is most acute for interventions with large numbers of U.S. forces. In other cases (most notably, those involving humanitarian concerns for which a U.S. or multilateral intervention might be increasingly expected), it could be that a failure to intervene to prevent civilian suffering could sap the legitimacy of the United States as a global leader.

Earlier, Larger Interventions Are Higher Risk, Higher Reward

Our analyses suggest that earlier and larger interventions are overall more likely to result in positive outcomes for the United States. Moreover, our case studies illustrate clearly how both the timing and size of these interventions can be essential factors in their success in this regard. However, earlier and larger interventions are also associated with some of the most negative outcomes that we observe and, even when successful, involve substantial economic costs for the United States. These interventions therefore constitute “betting big.” They have a clear potential to achieve U.S. objectives, and in some instances, they might be the only way to do so. But there are several circumstances, most notably including the presence of highly capable third-party spoilers, where such interventions might be apt to fail nonetheless. When such interventions fail to achieve their objectives or when they generate additional, unforeseen complications, the strategic, reputational, and economic costs they can impose on the United States are

enormous. Earlier, larger interventions should be undertaken only after a careful analysis of their likelihood of success, informed by an assessment of the factors noted above and an assessment of potential alternatives to military intervention.

Prioritize Collection and Analysis of Key Intelligence to Inform Intervention Decisions

The above two recommendations emphasize the importance of understanding the local context in order to inform intervention decisions. These factors, as much as anything the United States does in the actual conduct of the intervention, can determine whether an intervention advances or harms U.S. interests. This is an area in which focused intelligence and data gathering and subsequent careful analysis can have a significant impact. Intelligence collection to inform intervention decisions should focus on the following questions:

- *Warring parties and the balance of power*: Who are the warring parties? What is the balance of power between relevant parties? Would the balance be changed in a way favorable to U.S. interests with an intervention?
- *Motivations of the parties*: Is the war or crisis one that seems amenable to settlement? How long is each side willing to fight? Are the issues at stake likely to remain intractable, or could they be resolved through negotiation?
- *External spoilers and influencers*: Which external actors could become involved in ways that counter U.S. interests? What are their goals and capabilities? Are they likely to intervene with military forces or to exert other types of influence?
- *Local populations*: Will the local population of the host nation be supportive of a U.S. intervention? If not, what type of backlash is likely, and how severe will it be? What are the relationships between the other parties to the conflict and the local population?
- *Adversary responses*: How will adversaries respond to a U.S. intervention? Are they likely to feel threatened by it? Are there important escalation risks to consider? Do adversaries have the ability

and motivation to undermine U.S. interests elsewhere in response to the intervention?

- *International community*: What will be the response of the international community to the intervention? Will the United States face backlash from allies for intervening or not intervening?

Ensuring high quality and up-to-date information on these questions can support better decisions about whether and when to intervene and with what size force. Of course, the U.S. military, and the U.S. government more broadly, might already be collecting much of this information for some locations. We make this recommendation partly to emphasize the importance of filling any gaps that might exist with regard to countries where an intervention is being contemplated but also to emphasize the information that decisionmakers will need in order to apply the framework developed in this report to the intervention decision questions we explore.

The theme running throughout this report is that decisions about whether, when, and with what size force to intervene can have important implications for U.S. interests. These decisions can be optimized to maximize benefits to the United States but only if contextual factors are carefully weighed and analyzed. Simplistic advice for these complex intervention decisions is not possible because there is no single approach that will work every time. Instead, each intervention decision must be made on its own terms. Our aim with this report is to reduce the complexity of this decision for senior leaders by identifying the key factors that should be weighed when making this decision, describing the mechanisms that link these factors to intervention outcomes, providing detailed historical examples, and assessing systematically the likely implications of specific intervention decisions executed in particular contexts.

List of Cases of Potential U.S. Intervention

Table A.1 provides additional detail on our list of potential U.S. intervention cases.

Table A.1
List of Cases of Potential U.S. Intervention

Country Location	Crisis or War	Start Year	End Year	Intervention Type
Poland	Polish Ukrainians	1945	1947	No intervention
Indonesia	Indonesian Civil War	1945	1946	No intervention
Union of Soviet Socialist Republics	Forest Brethren	1945	1951	No intervention
India	Partition Communal War	1946	1947	No intervention
Turkey	Turkish Straits	1946	1946	Early, small
China	Chinese Civil War, Phase 2	1946	1950	Forces already present
Vietnam	French Indochina War	1946	1954	Late, small
Madagascar	Third Franco–Madagascan	1947	1948	No intervention
Dominican Republic	Cuba–Dominican Republic	1947	1947	No intervention
China	Taiwan Revolt	1947	1947	No intervention
Greece	Truman Doctrine	1947	1947	Early, small
Israel	Palestine War	1947	1948	Early, small
South Korea	Cheju Rebellion	1948	1949	Forces already present
Czechoslovakia	Communism in Czechoslovakia	1948	1948	No intervention
Costa Rica	Costa Rica	1948	1948	No intervention
Yemen Arab Republic	Yemeni Imamate	1948	1948	No intervention
Costa Rica	Costa Rica–Nicaraguan I	1948	1949	No intervention
Israel	Arab–Israeli Conflict	1948	1948	Forces already present
Malaysia	Malayan Rebellion	1948	1957	No intervention
German Federal Republic	Berlin Blockade	1948	1949	Forces already present

Table A.1—Continued

Country Location	Crisis or War	Start Year	End Year	Intervention Type
Colombia	Seventh Colombian "La Violencia"	1948	1958	No intervention
Yugoslavia	Soviet Bloc–Yugoslavia	1949	1951	Early, small
China	Third Sino–Tibetan	1950	1950	No intervention
Philippines	Hukbalahap Rebellion	1950	1954	Forces already present
Indonesia	South Moluccas	1950	1950	No intervention
South Korea	Korean War	1950	1953	Early, large
Egypt	Suez Canal	1951	1952	No intervention
Israel	Hula Drainage	1951	1951	No intervention
Tunisia	Franco–Tunisian	1952	1954	No intervention
Morocco	Moroccan Independence	1953	1956	Forces already present
Guatemala	Guatemala War	1953	1954	Early, small
Italy	Trieste II	1953	1953	Forces already present
German Democratic Republic	East German Uprising	1953	1953	No intervention
Myanmar	Burma Infiltration	1953	1954	No intervention
Indonesia	Indonesia Darul Islam	1953	1953	No intervention
Taiwan	Offshore Islands	1954	1955	Forces already present
Algeria	Third Franco–Algerian	1954	1962	No intervention
Costa Rica	Costa Rica–Nicaragua II	1955	1955	No intervention
Israel	Gaza Raid/Czechoslovakia Arms	1955	1956	No intervention
China	Tibetan Khamba Rebellion	1956	1959	No intervention
Egypt	Sinai War	1956	1956	Early, small

Table A.1—Continued

Country Location	Crisis or War	Start Year	End Year	Intervention Type
Indonesia	Indonesian Leftists	1956	1962	Late, small
Hungary	Soviet Invasion of Hungary	1956	1956	No intervention
Jordan	Jordan Regime	1957	1957	No intervention
Tunisia	France–Tunisia	1957	1958	No intervention
Syria	Syria–Turkey Confrontation	1957	1957	Early, small
Morocco	Ifni War	1957	1958	Forces already present
Honduras	Mocoron Incident	1957	1957	No intervention
Taiwan	Taiwan Straits	1958	1958	Forces already present
Lebanon	Iraq/Lebanon Upheaval	1958	1958	Early, large
Cuba	Cuban Revolution	1958	1959	No intervention
German Federal Republic	Berlin Deadline	1958	1959	Forces already present
Iraq	Iraq–Shammar	1959	1959	No intervention
Iran	Shatt Al-Arab I	1959	1960	Forces already present
Panama	Central America/Cuba I	1959	1959	Forces already present
Rwanda	Rwandan Social Revolution	1959	1962	No intervention
Israel	Rottem	1960	1960	No intervention
Laos	First Laotian	1960	1962	No intervention
Republic of Vietnam	Vietnam, Phase 1	1960	1965	Forces already present
Nicaragua	Central America/Cuba II	1960	1960	Early, small
Angola	Angolan–Portuguese	1961	1974	No intervention
Kuwait	Kuwait Independence	1961	1961	No intervention
Tunisia	Bizerta	1961	1961	No intervention

Table A.1—Continued

Country Location	Crisis or War	Start Year	End Year	Intervention Type
German Federal Republic	Berlin Wall	1961	1961	Forces already present
Iraq	First Iraqi Kurd	1961	1963	No intervention
Cuba	Bay of Pigs	1961	1961	Early, small
Syria	Breakup of United Arab Republic	1961	1961	No intervention
Taiwan	Taiwan Strait III	1962	1962	Forces already present
Saudi Arabia	Yemen War I	1962	1963	Forces already present
Cuba	Cuban Missiles	1962	1962	Early, large
India	China-India Border II	1962	1963	No intervention
Algeria	Algerian Revolutionaries	1962	1963	No intervention
Laos	Second Laotian, Phase 1	1963	1968	No intervention
Cyprus	Cyprus I	1963	1964	Early, small
Haiti	Dominican Republic–Haiti II	1963	1963	No intervention
Sudan	First South Sudan	1963	1972	No intervention
Morocco	Algeria-Morocco Border	1963	1963	Forces already present
Rwanda	First Rwanda	1963	1964	No intervention
Panama	Panama Flag	1964	1964	Forces already present
Democratic Republic of the Congo	Congo II	1964	1964	Forces already present
Republic of Vietnam	Vietnam War, Phase 2	1965	1975	Forces already present
Iraq	Second Iraqi Kurds	1965	1966	No intervention
Indonesia	First West Papua	1965	1969	No intervention

Table A.1—Continued

Country Location	Crisis or War	Start Year	End Year	Intervention Type
Dominican Republic	Dominican Intervention	1965	1965	Early, large
Guatemala	First Guatemala	1966	1968	Early, small
Jordan	El Samu	1966	1966	No intervention
Nigeria	Biafra	1967	1970	No intervention
Egypt	Six Day War	1967	1967	Early, small
Cyprus	Cyprus II	1967	1967	No intervention
China	Cultural Revolution, Phase 1	1967	1967	No intervention
China	Cultural Revolution, Phase 2	1967	1968	No intervention
Jordan	Karameh	1968	1968	No intervention
South Korea	Pueblo	1968	1968	Forces already present
Oman	Dhofar Rebellion, Phase 1	1968	1971	No intervention
Laos	Second Laotian, Phase 2	1968	1973	No intervention
Czechoslovakia	Prague Spring	1968	1968	No intervention
South Korea	EC-121 Spy Plane	1969	1969	Forces already present
Honduras	Football War	1969	1969	No intervention
Iran	Shatt Al-Arab II	1969	1969	Forces already present
Egypt	War of Attrition	1969	1970	No intervention
Iraq	Third Iraqi Kurds	1969	1970	No intervention
Lebanon	Cairo Agreement–PLO	1969	1969	No intervention
China	Ussuri River	1969	1969	No intervention
Cambodia	Communist Coalition	1970	1971	Forces already present
Jordan	Black September	1970	1970	Early, small

Table A.1—Continued

Country Location	Crisis or War	Start Year	End Year	Intervention Type
Cuba	Cienfuegos Submarine Base	1970	1970	No intervention
Guatemala	Second Guatemala	1970	1971	No intervention
Pakistan	Bangladesh	1971	1971	Late, small
Cambodia	Khmer Rouge	1971	1975	No intervention
Yemen Arab Republic	North–South Yemen I	1972	1972	No intervention
Burundi	First Burundi	1972	1972	No intervention
Thailand	Communist Insurgency	1972	1973	Forces already present
Philippines	First Philippine–Moro	1972	1981	Forces already present
Philippines	Philippines–New People’s Army	1972	1992	Forces already present
Egypt	Yom Kippur War	1973	1973	Early, small
Oman	Dhofar Rebellion, Phase 2	1973	1975	No intervention
Israel	Israel Mobilization	1973	1973	No intervention
Kuwait	Iraq Invasion of Kuwait	1973	1973	No intervention
Turkey	Turco–Cypriot	1974	1974	No intervention
Iraq	Fourth Iraqi Kurds	1974	1975	No intervention
Indonesia	East Timorese, Phase 2	1975	1976	No intervention
Lebanon	Second Lebanese	1975	1976	No intervention
Ethiopia	Eritrean War	1975	1978	No intervention
Indonesia	East Timorese War, Phase 1	1975	1975	No intervention
Belize	Belize I	1975	1975	No intervention
Cambodia	Mayaguez	1975	1975	Early, small
Morocco	Moroccan March	1975	1976	Forces already present
Lebanon	Syria Mobilization	1976	1976	No intervention

Table A.1—Continued

Country Location	Crisis or War	Start Year	End Year	Intervention Type
Greece	Aegean Sea I	1976	1976	Forces already present
Angola	Angolan Control	1976	1991	No intervention
Uganda	Entebbe Raid	1976	1976	No intervention
Syria	Iraqi Threat	1976	1976	No intervention
South Korea	Poplar Tree	1976	1976	Forces already present
Indonesia	Second West Papua	1976	1978	No intervention
Ethiopia	Second Ogaden War, Phase 1	1976	1977	No intervention
Indonesia	East Timorese War, Phase 3	1976	1979	No intervention
Laos	Third Laotian	1976	1979	No intervention
Ethiopia	Second Ogaden War, Phase 2	1977	1978	No intervention
Egypt	Egypt–Libya Clashes	1977	1977	No intervention
Vietnam	Vietnamese–Cambodian	1977	1979	No intervention
Cambodia	Vietnam Invasion of Cambodia	1977	1979	No intervention
Belize	Belize II	1977	1977	No intervention
Iran	Overthrow of the Shah	1978	1979	Forces already present
Nicaragua	Sandinista Rebellion	1978	1979	No intervention
Afghanistan	First Afghan Mujahideen Uprising	1978	1980	No intervention
Ethiopia	Second Ogaden War, Phase 3	1978	1980	No intervention
Guatemala	Third Guatemala	1978	1984	No intervention
Lebanon	Third Lebanese	1978	1978	No intervention
Lebanon	Litani Operation	1978	1978	No intervention

Table A.1—Continued

Country Location	Crisis or War	Start Year	End Year	Intervention Type
Vietnam	Khmer Insurgency	1979	1989	No intervention
Iran	Anti-Khomeini Coalition	1979	1984	No intervention
Yemen Arab Republic	North–South Yemen II	1979	1979	Early, small
Iran	U.S. Hostages in Iran	1979	1981	Early, small
Morocco	Goulmime–Tarfaya Road	1979	1979	No intervention
Mozambique	Mozambique	1979	1992	No intervention
El Salvador	El Salvador	1979	1992	Late, small
China	Sino-Vietnamese Punitive	1979	1979	No intervention
Morocco	Tan Tan	1979	1979	No intervention
Poland	Solidarity	1980	1981	No intervention
Morocco	Operation Iman	1980	1980	No intervention
Tunisia	Raid on Gafsa	1980	1980	No intervention
Uganda	Second Uganda	1980	1986	No intervention
Afghanistan	Soviet Quagmire	1980	1989	No intervention
Iraq	Iran–Iraq	1980	1988	Late, small
Jordan	Jordan–Syria Confrontation	1980	1980	No intervention
Egypt	Libya Threat/Sadat	1980	1980	No intervention
Syria	Hama	1981	1982	No intervention
Libya	Gulf of Syrte I	1981	1981	Early, small
Iraq	Iraq Nuclear Reactor	1981	1981	No intervention
United Kingdom	Falkland Islands	1982	1982	No intervention
Nicaragua	Contra War	1982	1990	No intervention
Ethiopia	Tigrean and Eritrean	1982	1991	No intervention
Israel	War Over Lebanon	1982	1982	Early, small

Table A.1—Continued

Country Location	Crisis or War	Start Year	End Year	Intervention Type
Libya	Libya Threat/Sudan	1983	1983	Early, small
Lebanon	Fourth Lebanese Civil	1983	1984	Forces already present
Sudan	Second South Sudan	1983	1991	No intervention
German Federal Republic	Able Archer 83	1983	1983	Forces already present
Grenada	Invasion of Grenada	1983	1983	Early, small
Greece	Aegean Sea II	1984	1984	Forces already present
Thailand	Three Village Border I	1984	1984	No intervention
Thailand	Vietnam Incursion into Thailand	1984	1984	No intervention
Turkey	First Turkish Kurds	1984	1986	Forces already present
Vietnam	Sino-Vietnamese Clashes	1984	1984	No intervention
Iraq	Fifth Iraqi Kurds	1985	1988	No intervention
Tunisia	Expulsion of Tunisians	1985	1985	No intervention
Libya	Gulf of Syrte II	1986	1986	Early, small
Yemen People's Republic	South Yemen	1986	1986	No intervention
Vietnam	Sino-Vietnamese Border War	1987	1987	No intervention
Greece	Aegean Sea III	1987	1987	Forces already present
Lebanon	Syrian Intervention/Lebanon	1987	1987	No intervention
Thailand	Three Village Border II	1987	1988	No intervention
Libya	Libyan Jets	1988	1989	Early, small
Vietnam	Spratly Islands	1988	1988	No intervention
Somalia	First Somalia	1988	1991	No intervention

Table A.1—Continued

Country Location	Crisis or War	Start Year	End Year	Intervention Type
Panama	Invasion of Panama	1989	1990	Early, large
Romania	Romania	1989	1989	No intervention
Morocco	Galtat Zemmour II	1989	1989	No intervention
Papua New Guinea	Bougainville Secession	1989	1992	No intervention
Cambodia	First Cambodian Civil War	1989	1991	No intervention
Colombia	Eighth Colombia	1989	2016	Late, small
Indonesia	First Aceh	1989	1991	No intervention
Lebanon	Fifth Lebanese	1989	1990	No intervention
Afghanistan	Second Afghan Mujahideen Uprising	1989	2001	No intervention
Liberia	First Liberia	1989	1990	Early, small
India	Kashmir III—Nuclear Confrontation	1990	1990	No intervention
Kuwait	Gulf War	1990	1991	Early, large
Turkey	Second Turkish Kurds	1991	1999	Forces already present
Yugoslavia	Croatian Independence	1991	1992	No intervention
Kuwait	Bubiyan	1991	1991	Forces already present
Somalia	Second Somalia	1991	1997	Late, small
Turkey	First Kurdistan Workers' Party In Iraq	1991	1992	Forces already present
Iraq	Shiite and Kurdish Uprisings	1991	1991	Early, large
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Bosnian Serb Rebellion	1992	1994	Late, large
Liberia	Second Liberia	1992	1995	No intervention
Angola	Angolan War of the Cities	1992	1994	No intervention

Table A.1—Continued

Country Location	Crisis or War	Start Year	End Year	Intervention Type
Algeria	Algerian Islamic Front	1992	1999	No intervention
Iraq	Iraq No-Fly Zone	1992	1992	Forces already present
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Bosnian Independence	1992	1992	No intervention
Burundi	Second Burundi	1993	1998	No intervention
Cambodia	Second Cambodia Civil	1993	1997	No intervention
South Korea	North Korea Nuclear I	1993	1994	Forces already present
Israel	Operation Accountability	1993	1993	No intervention
Iraq	Iraqi Kurd Internecine	1994	1995	Forces already present
Rwanda	Second Rwanda	1994	1994	Late, small
Haiti	Haiti Military Regime	1994	1994	Early, small
Kuwait	Iraq Deployment/Kuwait	1994	1994	Forces already present
Yemen	South Yemeni Secessionist	1994	1994	No intervention
Philippines	Spratly Islands	1995	1995	No intervention
Croatia	Croatia–Krajina War	1995	1995	Forces already present
Eritrea	Red Sea Islands	1995	1995	No intervention
Taiwan	Taiwan Strait IV	1995	1996	Forces already present
Iraq	Sixth Iraqi Kurds	1996	1996	Forces already present
Greece	Aegean Sea IV	1996	1996	No intervention
Israel	Operation Grapes of Wrath	1996	1996	No intervention
Liberia	Third Liberia	1996	1996	Early, small
South Korea	North Korean Submarine	1996	1996	Forces already present

Table A.1—Continued

Country Location	Crisis or War	Start Year	End Year	Intervention Type
Democratic Republic of the Congo	Fifth Democratic Republic of the Congo	1996	1997	No intervention
Turkey	Second Kurdistan Workers' Party In Iraq	1997	1997	Forces already present
Iraq	UN Special Commission I	1997	1998	Forces already present
Yugoslavia	Kosovo Independence	1998	1999	No intervention
Afghanistan	U.S. East Africa Embassy Bombings	1998	1998	Early, small
Angola	Third Angolan	1998	2002	No intervention
Cyprus	Cyprus/Turkey Missile	1998	1998	No intervention
Iraq	UN Special Commission II/ Operation Desert Fox	1998	1998	Forces already present
India	India/Pakistan Nuclear Tests	1998	1998	No intervention
Democratic Republic of the Congo	Africa's World War	1998	2002	No intervention
Indonesia	Second Aceh	1999	2002	No intervention
Indonesia	Moluccas Sectarian	1999	2000	No intervention
East Timor	East Timor II	1999	1999	No intervention
India	Kargil War	1999	1999	No intervention
Yugoslavia	War for Kosovo	1999	1999	Late, large
Israel	Al Aqsa Intifada	2000	2003	No intervention
Philippines	Second Philippine–Moro	2000	2001	Forces already present
Afghanistan	Afghanistan–United States	2001	Ongoing	Early, large
Iraq	Iraq Regime Change	2002	2011	Early, large
Thailand	Myanmar–Thailand	2002	2002	No intervention

Table A.1—Continued

Country Location	Crisis or War	Start Year	End Year	Intervention Type
Morocco	Parsley Island	2002	2002	No intervention
South Korea	North Korea Nuclear II	2002	2004	Forces already present
Iran	Iran Nuclear I	2003	2004	No intervention
Sudan	Darfur	2003	2006	No intervention
Indonesia	Third Aceh	2003	2003	No intervention
Philippines	Third Philippine–Moro	2003	2003	Forces already present
Pakistan	Waziristan	2004	2006	Forces already present
Yemen	First Yemeni Cleric	2004	2005	No intervention
Philippines	Philippine Joint Offensive	2005	2006	Forces already present
Israel	Israel Lebanon War II	2006	2006	No intervention
South Korea	North Korea Nuclear III	2006	2007	Forces already present
Iran	Iran Nuclear II	2006	2007	No intervention
Yemen	Second Yemeni Cleric	2007	2007	No intervention
Yemen	Yemen–Aqap	2009	Ongoing	No intervention
South Korea	North Korea Nuclear IV–Satellite Launch	2009	2009	Forces already present
South Korea	Yeonpyeong Island	2010	2011	Forces already present
South Korea	Cheonan Sinking	2010	2010	Forces already present
Libya	Libyan Civil War	2011	2011	Early, small
Syria	Syrian Civil War	2011	Ongoing	Late, small
Philippines	Scarborough Shoal	2012	2012	No intervention
Turkey	Syria-Turkey Border Incidents	2012	2012	No intervention

Table A.1—Continued

Country Location	Crisis or War	Start Year	End Year	Intervention Type
South Korea	North Korea Nuclear V	2013	2013	Forces already present
Israel	Israel–Gaza	2014	2014	No intervention
Iraq	Iraq–ISIL	2014	Ongoing	Late, small
Ukraine	Donbass Conflict	2014	Ongoing	No intervention
India	India–Pakistan Border Firing	2014	2014	No intervention
Turkey	Turkey–Kurdistan Workers' Party	2015	2016	Forces already present
Libya	Libya–ISIL	2015	2016	Late, small
South Korea	Korean Land Mine	2015	2015	Forces already present
Turkey	Turkey–Russia Jet Incident	2015	2016	Forces already present

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When faced with the outbreak of a war or the onset of an international crisis that affects important U.S. interests, U.S. policymakers must consider how best to respond. One option they may consider is to directly intervene militarily in the war or crisis. In this report, the authors create a framework that can be used to rigorously consider the trade-offs between intervening militarily early in a war or crisis, intervening later, and not intervening at all, as well as the trade-offs involved in decisions regarding the size of the potential intervention force to be employed. This framework can provide a better understanding of the relationships between intervention timing, intervention size, and intervention outcomes to inform future debates about whether and when to undertake a military intervention.

The authors approached these issues in four ways. They conducted (1) an extensive review of academic and policy literature on relevant topics, (2) a quantitative analysis using a database of 286 crises and wars since 1945 in which important U.S. interests were at stake, (3) a set of 45 short, focused case studies, including both interventions and noninterventions, and (4) a set of four in-depth counterfactual illustrations, in which U.S. intervention decisions were altered from historical events to explore the implications. The findings from these four research approaches lead to recommendations regarding the contextual factors that are most essential for policymakers to consider when making intervention decisions.

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