

# First Principle of International Relations Should be ‘Do No Harm’

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*Many progressives call for Canada to “do more” around the world. The assumption is that this country is a force for good, a healer of humankind. But if we claim to be the “doctors without borders” of international relations, shouldn’t Canada swear to “first do no harm” like MDs before beginning practice? At a minimum shouldn’t the Left judge foreign policy decisions through the lens of the Hippocratic oath?*

Libya illustrates the point. That North African nation looks set to miss a United Nations deadline to unify the country. An upsurge of militia violence in Tripoli and political wrangling makes it highly [unlikely elections](#) planned for December will take place.

Seven years after the foreign backed war Libya remains divided between two main political factions and hundreds of militias operate in the country of six million. Thousands have died in fighting since 2011.

The instability is not a surprise to Canadian military and political leaders who orchestrated Canada’s war on that country. Eight days before Canadian fighter jets began dropping bombs on Libya in 2011 military intelligence officers told Ottawa decision makers the country would likely descend into a lengthy civil war if foreign countries assisted rebels opposed to Muammar Gadhafi. An internal assessment obtained by the *Ottawa Citizen* noted,

*“[there is the](#) increasing possibility that the situation in Libya will transform into a long-term tribal/civil war... This is particularly probable if opposition forces received military assistance from foreign militaries.”*

A year and a half before the war a Canadian intelligence report described eastern Libya as an “[epicentre](#) of Islamist extremism” and said “extremist cells” operated in the anti-Gadhafi stronghold. In fact, during the bombing, notes *Ottawa Citizen* military reporter David Pugliese, Canadian air force members privately joked they were part of “[al-Qaida’s](#) air force”. Lo and behold hardline Jihadists were the major beneficiaries of the war, taking control of significant portions of the country.

A Canadian general oversaw NATO’s 2011 war, [seven](#) CF-18s participated in bombing runs and two Royal Canadian Navy vessels patrolled Libya’s coast. Ottawa [defied the UN](#) Security Council resolution authorizing a no-fly zone to protect Libyan civilians by dispatching ground forces, delivering weaponry to the opposition and bombing in service of regime change. Additionally, Montréal-based private security firm GardaWorld [aided the rebels](#) in

contravention of UN resolutions 1970 and 1973.

The NATO bombing campaign was justified based on exaggerations and outright lies about the Gaddafi regime's human rights violations. Western media and politicians repeated the rebels' outlandish (and racist) claims that sub-Saharan African mercenaries fuelled by Viagra given by Gaddafi, engaged in mass rape. Amnesty International's senior crisis response adviser Donatella Rovera, who was in Libya for three months after the start of the uprising and Liesel Gernholtz, head of women's rights at Human Rights Watch, were unable to find [any basis](#) for these claims.

But, seduced by the need to "do something", the [NDP](#), [Stephen Lewis](#), [Walter Dorn](#) and others associated with the Left supported the war on Libya. In my new book *Left, Right: Marching to the Beat of Imperial Canada* I question the "do more" mantra and borrow from healthcare to offer a simple foreign policy principle: First Do No Harm. As in the medical industry, responsible practitioners of foreign policy should be mindful that the "treatments" offered often include "side effects" that can cause serious harm or even kill.

Leftists should err on the side of caution when aligning with official/dominant media policy, particularly when NATO's war drums are beating. Just because the politicians and dominant media say we have to "do something" doesn't make it so. Libya and the Sahel region of Africa would almost certainly be better off had a "first do no harm" policy won over the interventionists in 2011.

While a "do more" ethos spans the political divide, a "first do no harm" foreign policy is rooted in international law. The concept of self-determination is a core principle of the UN Charter and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Peoples' inalienable right to shape their own destiny is based on the truism that they are best situated to run their own affairs.

Alongside the right to self-determination, the UN and Organization of American States prohibit interfering in the internal affairs of another state without consent. Article 2 (7) of the UN Charter states that "[nothing should](#) authorize intervention in matters essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state."

A military intervention without UN approval is the "supreme international crime". Created by the UN's International Law Commission after World War II, the Nuremberg Principles describe aggression as the "[supreme international](#) crime, differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole." In other words, by committing an act of aggression against Libya in 2011 — notably bombing in service of regime change — Ottawa is responsible not only for rights violations it caused directly, but also those that flowed from its role in destabilizing that country and large swaths of Africa's Sahel region.

If Canada is to truly be the "good doctor" of international relations it will be up to Left foreign policy practitioners to ensure that this country lives up to that part of the Hippocratic oath stating, "First do no harm".

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