In what circumstances can a state legitimately put at risk the lives of members of its armed forces? An argument frequently used against military intervention, for example in the former Yugoslavia, is that a state can legitimately put at risk the lives of its young soldiers in the defence of its own territory but it has no such right if engaged in foreign interventions. This would be particularly so if the intervention contemplated were, as in Chamberlain’s infamous description of Czechoslovakia, in ‘a quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing’. It may, moreover, be argued that there are especially compelling arguments against the use of conscript forces for such foreign adventures.

In this chapter I shall assess some of the ethical issues raised by these arguments. I shall also consider two related issues: first, whether in order to minimise the casualties suffered by its own forces it is morally permissible for a state to maximise the damage wreaked on an adversary’s forces, as was arguably done by the coalition forces in the Gulf War; and second, what basis there is for choosing between interventions. If it is right to intervene in the former Yugoslavia, why not in Cambodia or Somalia? But how then do we avoid placing impossible demands on our armed forces?

All of these issues raise interesting questions about the mutual obligations that hold between a government and its armed forces.

Any use of military force – whether to conduct warfare in the classic sense or for intervention – can involve the threat or infliction of harm. Ethical constraints upon its use are, therefore, appropriate. The just war tradition thus provides a helpful framework for assessing when it is legitimate to use military force not only to wage war but also for intervention. The just war theory argues that it is only permissible to resort to war (the *jus ad bellum*); if war is declared by a competent authority; if no suitable peaceful means of resolving the dispute are available; for the sake of a just cause; and provided that
the harm judged likely to result from the war is not disproportionate to the likely good to be achieved, taking into account the probability of success. Moreover, the war should be conducted in such a way that the harm judged likely to result from a particular military action should not be disproportionate to the likely good to be aimed at; and non-combatant casualties should be minimised (the *jus in bello*). With appropriate modifications, these conditions can, in my view, be applied to assess the ethical permissibility of military interventions (Fisher, 1994:51–9).

An important but difficult issue that has to be settled in so applying the just war theory, is what would constitute a just cause for intervention. Given the great harm that can be caused by interventions and their misuse by great powers to interfere in the affairs of smaller states – as evidenced by the events of the first half of this century – international law has until recently deemed there to be a strong presumption against any intervention. Most commentators have tended to apply the just war criteria very restrictively regarding the only just cause for resorting to war as self-defence against aggression. This might then legitimise interventions to assist a country defending itself against aggression but not otherwise.

While accepting the moral presumption against intervention, I believe this is an unduly restrictive interpretation and that there may be other grounds that constitute a just cause for intervention. These may include not only interventions that approximate to the self-defence paradigm but also operations, legitimised by a UN mandate, designed to keep apart belligerent parties (peacemaking); to enforce a peace settlement (peacekeeping); or for humanitarian purposes that may range from bringing aid to a war-ravaged people to the prevention of massive abuses of human rights or even genocide. In such cases intervention to prevent suffering may be morally permissible. Indeed, where it lies readily within our power to prevent great suffering such as genocide from taking place, it may be difficult to resist the conclusion that we have not only a right but a duty to intervene.

Recognition that there may be other just causes than self-defence against aggression does not, however, justify reckless interventions. For even if the cause is just, intervention would only be sanctioned if the harm judged likely to result is not disproportionate to the good to be achieved, taking into account the probability of success. And it may be very difficult, if not impossible, to satisfy this