Operationalising the Responsibility to Protect: The Challenges of the Third Pillar Approach

Concept Note

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At the Global Governance Institute, Vesalius College (VUB)
5, Pleinlaan, B-1050 Brussels, Belgium

As the principle of Responsibility to Protect (RtoP) moves further away from discussions on norms towards operationalisation, and following the concerns raised by intervention in Libya, and the recent United Nations report on “The Role of Regional and Sub-Regional Arrangements in Implementing the Responsibility to Protect (RtoP)” (27 June 2011), plus the upcoming 2012 UN interactive dialogue on the operationalisation of RtoP, further thinking and clarity needs to be developed on the civilian and military capacities needed for a timely and decisive response under “pillar three” of the RtoP principle. Pillar three of the principle focuses on the international community’s responsibility to take timely and decisive action to prevent and halt genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and crimes against humanity in those instances where a State is unable or unwilling to protect its own populations.

Indeed, NATO’s activities over Libya in pursuit of UN Resolution 1973 have again raised questions over the timeliness, legitimacy, proportionality and effectiveness of military action. Such issues have now been made more acute given the emphasis on the operationalisation of the RtoP principle, which has strong support from regional actors such as the European Union (EU). There is a need to analyse the consistency, legitimacy and effectiveness of civilian and military tools under RtoP, especially in terms of how they impact on and complement preventive and re-building strategies.

With the nascent actions of the European External Action Service, the EU’s continued commitment to being an effective partner in multilateral global governance, and its unequivocal support of the principle of RtoP, such analysis is timely and important. This is an essential time to open up a policy and scholarly debate on the extant capacities of the UN, the EU and other regional actors to effectively engage in “pillar three” of RtoP, if required.

The workshop is timely in that it aims to provide policy and scholarly input to the upcoming United Nations General Assembly informal interactive dialogue on the “third pillar” of RtoP in July 2012, which is important because the dialogue will precisely and concretely discuss the 'third pillar' implementation toolbox. Paper contributions will form part of a publication that will be widely circulated within the UN system.

To weigh in on such issues and questions, the Madariaga-College of Europe Foundation, Global Action to Prevent War, the Global Governance Institute and the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect plan to organise a one-day workshop in Brussels.

The workshop will invite policy experts and scholars to submit papers for discussion, and the workshop would be an interactive event. The idea here being to bring together policy-makers from the EU, UN and regional organisations and scholars to debate the civilian and military challenges posed by “pillar three” of the RtoP principle. The workshop will be followed by a publication that will report on the proceedings, highlight recommendations for the GA debate and beyond, and catalogue the paper contributions.

Please submit queries to Daniel Fiott at dfiott@madariaga.org.