

US President Obama received the Nobel Peace Prize on 11 December in Oslo, Norway. He based his speech on the 'just war theory', which in the classical tradition stems from a moral duty to do no harm to others; where a set of criteria determines whether the use of force can be morally justified—namely just cause, right intention, right authority, last resort and reasonable chance of success (jus ad bellum) as well as in the conduct of war, proportionality of the use of force, and discrimination between combatants and civilians (jus in bello). While the Responsibility to Protect (RtoP) is mainly focused on the prevention of mass atrocities to avoid a situation where the use of force is necessary, Obama's speech nonetheless resonates with the following three aspects of the RtoP: First, Obama acknowledged that the use of force can be justified for certain purposes other than self-defense, namely on humanitarian grounds, to prevent the slaughter of civilians and to halt mass violence. The Responsibility to Protect calls for measures which range from peaceful to coercive, also recognizing that intervention to protect populations from mass atrocities may at times be necessary.

Second, Obama also noted the importance of finding alternatives to violence that lead to changed behavior and a lasting peace, and that "the closer we stand together, the less likely we will be faced with the choice between armed intervention and complicity in oppression". RtoP recognizes the importance preventing and halting mass atrocities through combination of measures, including diplomacy, economic incentives, sanctions, etc. Obama cited the examples of Congo, Burma and Darfur and calls for violations of international law to not take place without consequences.

Finally, Obama emphasized that all nations should adhere to international standards for how and when to use force, especially when military means are used for purposes other than self-defense. Many advocates of RtoP have been pushing for the development of specific criteria to guide the Security Council to decide when force is appropriate to protect populations from mass atrocities. The 2001 report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty highlighted principles for the use of force that similar to the just war theory, suggested conditions to be met at the onset of an intervention, namely just cause threshold, right intention, force as a last resort, use of proportional means, reasonable prospects of success and right authority by the UN Security Council.

The following are excerpts on his reflections, which we have divided in three sections: 1) just war, 2) the use of force and 3) building a lasting peace.

1. Obama's Nobel Remarks

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New York Times

Your Majesties, Your Royal Highnesses, distinguished members of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, citizens of America, and citizens of the world: I receive this honor with deep gratitude and great humility. It is an award that speaks to our highest aspirations -- that for all the cruelty and hardship of our world, we are not mere prisoners of fate. Our actions matter, and can bend history in the direction of justice. (...)

Just war

The concept of a "just war" emerged, suggesting that war is justified only when certain conditions were met: if it is waged as a last resort or in self-defense; if the force used is proportional; and if, whenever possible, civilians are spared from violence. Of course, we know that for most of history, this concept of "just war" was rarely observed. (...)

Moreover, wars between nations have increasingly given way to wars within nations. The resurgence of ethnic or sectarian conflicts; the growth of secessionist movements, insurgencies, and failed states -- all these things have increasingly trapped civilians in unending chaos. In today's wars, many more civilians are killed than soldiers; the seeds of future conflict are sown, economies are wrecked, civil societies torn asunder, refugees amassed, children scarred.

I do not bring with me today a definitive solution to the problems of war. (...)

We must begin by acknowledging the hard truth: We will not eradicate violent conflict in our lifetimes. There will be times when nations -- acting individually or in

concert -- will find the use of force not only necessary but morally justified. (...)

So yes, the instruments of war do have a role to play in preserving the peace. (...)
So part of our challenge is reconciling these two seemingly irreconcilable truths -- that war is sometimes necessary, and war at some level is an expression of human folly. (...)

Use of force

To begin with, I believe that all nations -- strong and weak alike -- must adhere to standards that govern the use of force. I -- like any head of state -- reserve the right to act unilaterally if necessary to defend my nation. Nevertheless, I am convinced that adhering to standards, international standards, strengthens those who do, and isolates and weakens those who don't. (...)

And this becomes particularly important when the purpose of military action extends beyond self-defense or the defense of one nation against an aggressor. More and more, we all confront difficult questions about how to prevent the slaughter of civilians by their own government, or to stop a civil war whose violence and suffering can engulf an entire region.

I believe that force can be justified on humanitarian grounds, as it was in the Balkans, or in other places that have been scarred by war. Inaction tears at our conscience and can lead to more costly intervention later. That's why all responsible nations must embrace the role that militaries with a clear mandate can play to keep the peace. (...)

Let me make one final point about the use of force. (...) Where force is necessary, we have a moral and strategic interest in binding ourselves to certain rules of conduct. And even as we confront a vicious adversary that abides by no rules, I believe the United States of America must remain a standard bearer in the conduct of war. (...)

Building a just and lasting peace

First, in dealing with those nations that break rules and laws, I believe that we must develop alternatives to violence that are tough enough to actually change behavior (...) Those regimes that break the rules must be held accountable. Sanctions must exact a real price. Intransigence must be met with increased pressure -- and such pressure exists only when the world stands together as one. (...)

The same principle applies to those who violate international laws by brutalizing their own people. When there is genocide in Darfur, systematic rape in Congo, repression in Burma -- there must be consequences. Yes, there will be engagement; yes, there will be diplomacy -- but there must be consequences when those things fail. And the closer we stand together, the less likely we will be faced with the choice between armed intervention and complicity in oppression.

This brings me to a second point -- the nature of the peace that we seek. (...) Only a just peace based on the inherent rights and dignity of every individual can truly be lasting. (...) I believe that peace is unstable where citizens are denied the right to speak freely or worship as they please; choose their own leaders or assemble without fear. Pent-up grievances fester, and the suppression of tribal and religious identity can lead to violence. (...)

(...) There's no simple formula here. But we must try as best we can to balance isolation and engagement, pressure and incentives, so that human rights and dignity are advanced over time.

Third, a just peace includes not only civil and political rights -- it must encompass economic security and opportunity. For true peace is not just freedom from fear, but freedom from want. (...)

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