

Whither R2P?

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With the exception of Raphael Lemkin's efforts and the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, no idea has moved faster in the international normative arena than "the responsibility to protect" (R2P, or the uglier RtoP in the current UN parlance), the title of the 2001 report from the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS). [\[i\]](#)

Friends and foes have agreed that the commission's contribution to forestalling and stopping mass atrocities was its specific framework with a three-pronged responsibility- to prevent, to react, to rebuild.

Prevention was not an ICISS afterthought, but the motivation for convening the commission in fall 2000 was to break new ground and about reacting to mass atrocities. Its comparative advantage, at least in comparison with other blue-ribbon groups, was a narrow focus- what used to be called "humanitarian intervention." Receptivity to its recommendations reflected not only the idealism of a few like-minded norm entrepreneurs but also its demand-driven character. After divisive and inconsistent instances of military humanitarianism in the tumultuous 1990s, states genuinely sought guidance about intervening across borders to protect and assist war victims.

The original formulations of R2P by the ICISS sandwiched military force in between the sliced-white-bread of prevention and post-conflict peace-building. These popular issues made military intervention for human protection purposes somewhat more palatable than it had been, especially to Third World critics. And then UN secretary-general Kofi Annan, who had used the bully pulpit far more than his predecessors to serve to push human rights in general and preventing mass atrocities in particular, [\[ii\]](#) heartily welcomed the report. Nonetheless, sovereignty remained paramount, the deployment of military force objectionable, and R2P contested.

As he has done for too many issues since taking office in 2007, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has sought to finesse controversy. His January 2009 report emphasized three supposedly equal pillars underpinning R2P- state responsibility, capacity building, and international responses. [\[iii\]](#) According to Ramesh Thakur, "the report did not retreat from the necessity for outside military action in some circumstances but it diluted the central defining feature of R2P."

[\[iv\]](#) I would be harsher: the Secretary-General sought to sidestep considering the third pillar, the sharp end of the R2P stick of using or threatening to use military force to stop mass atrocities. As James Pattison reminds us, "humanitarian intervention is *only one part*

of the doctrine of the responsibility to protect, but...it
is
part of the responsibility to protect."

[\[vi\]](#)

That reality became clear once again with R2P's first unequivocal application to justify the international action in Libya.

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So, whither R2P? Given R2P's declared goal of changing the discourse about a visceral humanitarian reaction and make mass atrocities a distance memory, how long can a norm be "emerging" before it "has emerged"? Whatever one's views about the current consensus or lack thereof, the responsibility to protect certainly has shaped international conversations- diplomatic, military, and academic- about responding to egregious violations of human rights and conscience-shocking humanitarian disasters. It would be useful to readers to review history.

R2P moves beyond the contested and counterproductive label of "humanitarian intervention." Beginning with the international response in northern Iraq in 1991m this moniker had led to target circular tirades about the agency, timing, legitimacy, means, circumstances, and advisability of using military force to protect human beings.