

Responsibility to protect: An idea whose time has come—and gone?
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An idealistic effort to establish a new humanitarian principle is coming under attack at the United Nations GARETH EVANS, a former Australian foreign minister and roving global troubleshooter, makes a bold but passionate claim on behalf of a three-word expression which (in quite large part thanks to his efforts) now belongs to the language of diplomacy: the “responsibility to protect”. In a recent book, he says there are “not many ideas that have the potential to matter more for good, not only in theory but in practice.”

(...) Whatever their motive, people of that cast of mind took heart from the moment in 2005 when the biggest-ever gathering of world leaders accepted the principle that they have a general “responsibility to protect” human beings from genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes and crimes against humanity. In a delicate formula which Mr Evans worked hard to craft, it was agreed that this concept, now known as R2P, referred mainly to the responsibility of states for their own people. Only in certain extreme circumstances, when states could not or would not protect their own citizens, or were actively harming them, might others step in. The concept was carefully modified so as to avoid giving prickly sovereign states the idea that they were about to be invaded at will by moralising outsiders.

(...) The apparent campaign to sabotage R2P is taking place in defiance of Ban Ki-moon, the UN secretary-general, who earlier this year drew up a report that presents the concept in the most cautious and reassuring of tones. As he argued, there were several benign and uncontroversial ways in which R2P could be made more real. For example, by helping decent states protect their people; or by having an effective early-warning system to trigger constructive action when things start to go wrong (or in plainer terms, when states start to collapse). He says action, military or otherwise, by external powers is a last resort.

Such assurances have failed to convince critics of R2P, who are adamant that the whole idea is just a cover to legitimise armed interference by rich Western powers in the affairs of poor countries. One person who takes that view is Miguel d’Escoto Brockmann, a Nicaraguan diplomat (and Sandinista priest-politician), who is now president of the General Assembly.

In a calculated snub to the idealists who tried to make the R2P idea nuanced and hence palatable, he says a more accurate name for the concept would be the “right to intervene” or R2I. Quite a number of countries might be persuaded to support a resolution diluting the commitment to R2P that was made by over 150 states at the UN summit in 2005. Possible backers include large and middle-sized powers of various ideological stripes—including India, Pakistan, Cuba, Sudan, Venezuela and Egypt. Some of these may try to induce smaller states in their neighbourhood to follow their sceptical line.

Supporters of R2P are complaining of a “surprise attack”. They say Mr d’Escoto brought the

debate forward by several weeks—to a snoozy period in late July. Conveniently enough, Mr Ban will not be around. On July 21st, before he left New York, Mr Ban made a short plea in R2P's defence, urging states to “resist those who try to change the subject or turn our common effort to curb the worst atrocities in human history into a struggle over ideology, geography or economics.”

Meanwhile Mr d'Escoto scheduled an eve-of-debate discussion by a four-member panel in which Mr Evans was the only supporter of R2P—pitted against three sceptics, including Noam Chomsky, a linguist and veteran critic of American foreign policy. Ed Luck, who is Mr Ban's adviser on R2P, was allowed to make a statement, but only the panel members could take questions from member states.(...)

One of the first international bodies to endorse the concept, or a version of it, was the African Union, which emerged from the discredited Organisation of African Unity. The AU's Constitutive Act included a provision for “the right of the Union to intervene in a member state pursuant to a decision of the assembly in respect of grave circumstances, namely: war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity.” It cited a new principle of “non-indifference” to large-scale crimes.

One of R2P's keenest sponsors was Kofi Annan, the Ghanaian who preceded Mr Ban as secretary-general. Mr Annan has agonised in public about the UN's failure in Rwanda, when he was head of un peacekeeping, and has argued that his success as a peace-broker in Kenya last year owed something to the existence of R2P as a moral instrument.

Meanwhile, America, far from dreaming up R2P as a crafty way of justifying imperialist adventures, was initially rather sceptical. Under the Bush administration, both the Pentagon and the State Department were intensely wary of signing up to anything that might bind them to take draconian action in the name of humanity.

Indeed, R2P was a part of a much broader 2005 reform of the United Nations that George Bush first sought to weaken, then only reluctantly accepted. And to this day, there are voices on America's political right that remain profoundly sceptical about the idea of costly pledges to wage wars in the name of protecting people from inhumanity.

Barack Obama's administration, with its internationalist instincts, is clearly a lot more comfortable with notions like R2P. The President, during the Group of Eight summit in Italy in July, made some supportive noises; and his UN ambassador, Susan Rice, made a more impassioned speech in defence of R2P last month, soon after visiting Rwanda.

But if R2P is no Western plot, it may not be the perfect way to ward off dreadful acts of mass

murder either. Perhaps its greatest drawback is also one of its touted merits: that it is so carefully crafted to conform with the current UN charter, which makes the Security Council the most important arbiter of war and peace.

All attempts to reform the membership of the council, which gives America, Russia, China, France and Britain the privilege of permanent seats and vetoes, have failed. So critics of R2P may well use the argument that five victors of the second world war should not have the crucial say as to when coercion may be used.

An angry, inconclusive General Assembly debate will not doom R2P. But it risks reinforcing the rift between an assembly that is perceived as representing poor, small and weak countries, and a council on which powerful, or once-powerful, countries have a disproportionate say.

And that would be seen in many quarters as sad and ironic, because, in the words of one R2P supporter, it is the “South that needs R2P the most.”

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