

Protecting R2P

Op-ed by Lloyd Axworthy and Allan Rock The Huffington Post 23 July 2009 This week, a principle adopted by world leaders four years ago to prevent mass atrocity will face a crucial test. The Responsibility to Protect, or R2P, stipulates that states, individually and collectively, have an obligation to protect populations from genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes or crimes against humanity. It expressly provides that the international community, acting through the Security Council, can have a direct role in providing protection to vulnerable populations.

R2P grew out of a tragic history of international indifference to violence within states whose most recent chapters began with the Holocaust. In the 1990s, the bloody chronology continued in Somalia, Rwanda, Srebrenica, and Kosovo, underscoring humanity's spectacular failure to respond to conscience-shocking crimes. Efforts to improvise a response were ad hoc and untidy, and in the case of Rwanda there was no response at all. The decade ended with Kofi Annan's eloquent plea to the General Assembly to find a way forward -- to reconcile state sovereignty and the moral duties born of our common humanity.

(...)Since the adoption of R2P, places like Darfur, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia and Sri Lanka have reminded us that there is a long way to go to bring the R2P doctrine from "words to deeds", as Secretary General Ban Ki Moon has said. Recognizing nonetheless that this extraordinary achievement is one that the world should safeguard, the Secretary General has produced a report on implementing R2P that sets out a strategy to transform R2P from idea to action. His report will be the subject this week of a debate in the General Assembly.

This is a significant time for the R2P doctrine. But there is skulduggery afoot. Opponents of R2P are at work to hijack a process intended to move the 2005 World Summit agreement forward. The President of the UN General Assembly, Father Miguel D'Escoto Brockmann, a professed R2P sceptic, appears to be throwing neutrality to the wind by organizing the events in such a way that a vocal minority will dominate the debate. The President is aided in this process by his special advisor, Nirupam Sen, former UN ambassador from India and one of the most hard-line R2P holdouts during the 2005 negotiations.

The opponents of R2P encourage misconceptions and rely on arguments that can, we contend, be addressed to the satisfaction of the fair-minded.

They argue that R2P is a product of western imperialism, a northern norm that has no support in the global south. They ignore the fact that the African Union led the way in 2000 by including a statement in their own Constitutive Act to the effect that AU member states would address the failure of an AU member to protect its population from mass atrocities. Final consensus at the World Summit was reached due in no small measure to strong support from these and other voices from the global south.

At this crucial time, R2P needs the voices of its champions. Canada and the supporters across Africa, Latin American, Asia and Europe that understand the importance of R2P should prevent the naysayers from rolling back 2005's historic achievement. In recent weeks both President Obama and his UN Ambassador Susan Rice have issued strong and unequivocal statements declaring that the United States is in full support of moving the R2P agenda forward. These good intentions must now be translated into an active diplomatic effort.

Rather than allowing the work of a few governments to defeat a global consensus, this week's debate at the General Assembly should be used to signal readiness to fill what Secretary-General Ban has called the "gaps in capacity, will and imagination" to make reality of the responsibility to protect. This should include strengthened early warning systems, the inclusion of gender into the R2P framework, greater guidance and support for peacekeepers asked to protect people, increased support for mediation, and the establishment of a standing UN emergency force.

A useful way to begin would be to focus on the ongoing tragedy of Darfur as a prime, real-time example of how unchecked state abuses continue to devastate a civilian population. Such a discussion would convert the General Assembly debate from a sterile and anachronistic rehashing of old sins into a contemporary examination of how to advance the basic human right of people not to be subject to mass murder and atrocity by powerful political players.

There is too much at stake to allow R2P to be weakened or withdrawn. It is needed now more than ever. The General Assembly should work this week to strengthen and not undermine it, and political leaders everywhere should ensure that their UN ambassadors are doing just that.

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