

Do the Right Thing: A genocide policy that works Sarah Sewall Boston Review September/October 2009

Inside the U.S. government's head, a tragic monologue about mass killings echoes. It goes something like this: "Genocide is evil. It must be prevented before it starts, and, if it starts, it must be stopped. But it is not really my problem. I will do something significant only if the alternatives become even more costly than taking action." And since the risks of acting appear immediate while the full costs of inaction accrue over time—even as tens or hundreds of thousands are killed in the interim—U.S. efforts to halt genocide have been embarrassingly rare. (...)

Advocates across the globe promote the

R2P

norm, particularly in reference to Sudan's genocide in Darfur. A 2006 Washington, D.C. rally brought together over 10,000 people, including then-Senator Barack Obama, to demand action. But for all its fury, sincerity, and visibility, the

R2P

effort has had little effect inside national governments, where the tough business of halting genocide must be undertaken. (...)

The international community, too, is divided in its opinion of

R2P

, as both Kosovo and Darfur have illustrated. Political sensitivities may turn the concept into just another platform for development assistance, and the UN Secretary General's desire to strengthen political support for

R2P

may unwittingly erode its meaning, pushing tough action, including military force, out of the equation entirely. (...)

The conundrum is how to strengthen

R2P

with diplomatic, economic, and military options, yet sustain the support of countries that fear

R2P

merely masks modern imperialist ambition. (...)

Taking initiative—unilaterally at the start, if necessary—may be the only way to realize the

Responsibility to Protect

. There is an inevitable slippery-slope problem in justifying intervention in the name of humanity, but we need only think back to Rwanda in 1994 to see that unilateral military intervention—while complex and costly—may have its place. (...)

We know that acting early is likely to be more effective and efficient. Yet time and time again, states and leaders will avoid acting, delay choosing among uncertain and costly options, and wait until the costs of not acting become higher than those of acting. This phenomenon is not unique to genocide. But it helps explain why, even as the United States has begun to acknowledge past failures and a new generation has awakened to a fresh set of possibilities, doing the right thing remains difficult.

Source:

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