

No, the U.N. General Assembly summit this month didn't produce nearly as much agreement on reform as the world body needs. On the other hand, the World Summit Outcome document does have one big item in its favor.

That's the completion of no less than a revolution in consciousness in international affairs by the adoption of what's known as the "responsibility to protect." The essence of responsibility to protect, as the document says, is this: "Each individual state has the responsibility to protect its populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity." The responsibility to protect doesn't begin when the mass killing starts, but before: "This responsibility entails the prevention of such crimes, including their incitement, through appropriate and necessary means." If a state fails to exercise its responsibility to protect its people, either through an inability to act effectively or through a government's own malicious intent, then that state in essence forfeits any claims it may have to forbid others from interfering in its internal affairs so far as the protection function is concerned.

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I say the responsibility to protect is a revolution in consciousness in international affairs for two reasons. The first is that the concept de-centers the state as the actor par excellence in international relations in favor of people, actual human beings, who are not after all subject beyond question to the whims of their rulers. With the privileges of statehood, such as the principle of non-interference, come responsibilities, protection first among them. Any government attempting to assert the former while ignoring the latter, at the expense of its own people, is in danger of losing its privileges.

The second and related revolutionary element of responsibility to protect is that it de-territorializes the enforcement and protection of the rights of man, or human rights. It is not only your government, that which asserts its sovereign power over you who live within its jurisdiction, that will either act to protect or fail to protect your rights, starting with the most basic right, your right to live. Others are called upon to act to protect you when your government does not. Where formerly there was no recourse for you but to try to flee, now you have a claim on the international community at large.

I know that we are not yet in a world in which we can make good on all such claims. But with the adoption of the responsibility to protect, we are a step closer.

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