

Crunch time for UN reform; The upcoming UN summit
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Besides the shift in language on development, the edited American draft significantly weakens a section on the so-called "responsibility to protect". Following the genocide in Rwanda and the NATO-led intervention in Kosovo, international lawyers have sought to secure language promoting humanitarian intervention to stop atrocities. The original draft called on states to acknowledge their responsibility to prevent such crimes against humanity, and to aid the UN in establishing an "early-warning" system to halt disasters-in-the-making. When states fail in this duty to protect their citizens, the drafters declared that the rest of the world "has the obligation" to act, and invited permanent members of the Security Council not to veto any such intervention.

In the first set of changes to the draft document, all this language was cut by American editors-State Department lawyers trying to avoid legal commitments and Pentagon strategists fearing some kind of automatic requirement of American arms to stop catastrophes. Instead, the American version simply said that outside countries should be "prepared to act". The superpower's critics quickly noted that it had once again lined up alongside a rogue's gallery of badly behaved states to oppose a human-rights agreement: in this case Pakistan, Egypt, Cuba, Iran and Syria.

But as with the development clauses, the American position has since softened somewhat. A letter from Mr Bolton this week suggests inserting language that the world has a "moral responsibility" to act to stop large-scale crimes against humanity. But the American ambassador remains opposed to creating a legal responsibility, which could, he argues, inappropriately predetermine the means to be used. In any case, his letter points out, the Security Council already has the power to authorise intervention. In a further concession, America has re-inserted support for a new UN-based "early-warning system" into its proposed text.

So even though many still worry that this section of the draft has been fatally weakened, the vaguer American version of "responsibility to protect" would be the first-ever clear international agreement that outside countries should be willing to act to stop atrocities in a country whose government cannot or will not stop them itself. This could form the political basis for a future intervention, possibly even military intervention, should the Security Council be presented with a case like the slaughter in Sudan's Darfur region

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