

Dilemma of UN's 'responsibility to protect' firmly back on the agenda

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In a recent letter circulated at UN headquarters, Bolton outlines the US position. He accepts that the international community has a role to play in cases involving crimes against humanity. He also makes clear that America stands ready to take collective action to protect populations from large-scale atrocities.

"What the United Nations does in a particular situation should depend on the specific circumstances," he says. Instead of requiring a narrow pre-determined reaction, the Security Council should be free to make a case-by-case judgment.

None of this is terribly controversial. But other aspects of Bolton's letter are bound to draw a sharp response. For instance, his demand to recognise the option of responding to a humanitarian crisis "absent authorisation of the Security Council" is deeply divisive. Military intervention without a UN mandate raises questions over a country's motives. The Iraq war, with the post-invasion humanitarian justification, is the obvious example.

Although it is tempting to attribute the friction at the United Nations to Bolton's abrasive personality -the "kiss up, kick down sort of guy" described in his aborted Senate confirmation hearings -the dispute over this idea of "humanitarian intervention" actually reflects a much deeper philosophical debate about the nature of world politics.

Finding a way for the international community to come together and establish the responsibility to protect could become a far more enduring legacy.