

Responsibility to Protect Weighed Down by Misconceptions Jonas Claes

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To the limited extent policymakers in Washington, D.C. are familiar with the Responsibility to Protect, the principle is frequently dismissed as “a U.N. thing” or “something the Canadians came up with.” Ever since the concept was first introduced in 2001, the U.S. response has remained lukewarm, even though heads of state and government unanimously endorsed the principle at the 2005 United Nations World Summit, the U.S. among them. The [hesitancy](#) in Washington stems from a common misperception that the principle justifies military force in the face of Syria-like situations and the U.S. eagerness to adopt a ‘unique’ atrocity prevention approach.

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In an effort to familiarize the U.S. capital with the principle, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Ambassador Richard Williamson (former Special Envoy to Sudan under President George W. Bush) co-chaired a senior Working Group on the Responsibility to Protect. The Albright-Williamson

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illustrates how the U.S. atrocity prevention policy, a recent foreign policy priority, complements rather than contradicts the important work conducted on the Responsibility to Protect at the U.N. and throughout the world.

Within most of the relevant U.S. government agencies, the Responsibility to Protect is considered a secondary U.N. instrument that remains a small part of the overall U.S. toolbox for atrocity prevention. While the practice would look almost identical, you will rarely hear the words Responsibility to Protect in Washington. The U.S. Mission to the United Nations in New York is the consistent exception to this trend; its representatives staunchly advocate for the principle at the annual dialogues on the Responsibility to Protect at the U.N. General Assembly.

Even foreign policy experts commonly misperceive the Responsibility to Protect as a justification for military force in the face of Syria-like situations. Yet, countries where there is a risk of atrocities, along with their neighbors, regional powers, and international or civil society organizations, can most effectively uphold their responsibility by acting at the first sign of identity-based tensions, well before the immediate, violent manifestations of conflict occur.

Ideally, the invocation of the principle by senior officials would trigger an automatic consideration of preventive tools, like intelligence gathering, media training, security sector reform, diplomatic condemnations, or even targeted sanctions.

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That being said, the principle that nations have this responsibility still remains more of an aspiration than reality. As the co-chairs conclude, the norm “is neither the panacea that some had hoped for nor the hollow promise that others resigned themselves to expect.”

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