

It isn't often that Lloyd Axworthy, Canada's former foreign minister and lion of the political left, has an idea that could appeal to American neo-conservatives and evangelical Christians. But the Paul Martin government is now promoting an Axworthy-generated plan to prevent genocide and atrocities that is slowly gaining adherents -- and some of the Liberals' most powerful allies could prove to be pro-war American conservatives such as former House speaker Newt Gingrich -- if both sides can overcome the divisions and suspicions engendered by the Iraq conflict.

Axworthy's brainchild is now a doctrine dubbed the "responsibility to protect" -- a proposal to impose upon the United Nations an obligation to shield people all over the world from genocide and ethnic cleansing at the hands of their own governments. It may sound warm and fuzzy on the surface, but underlying that vision is the cold hard recognition that military intervention may be necessary to achieve this end. Rejecting the sanctity of national borders that has been central to the UN since its founding in 1945, the proposal would create a sort of official licence to invade. As Axworthy, who says he initially "anguished over" the idea, explains, "You can't allow dictators to use the facade of national sovereignty to justify ethnic cleansing."

The notion of "humanitarian intervention" is not new. But it has a murky status, not having been explicitly written into international law. The UN Charter does allow military intervention, but only in cases of self-defence and threats to "international peace and security." But as Axworthy argues, while some humanitarian crises are global, others that are marked by purely domestic devastation are no less worthy of outside help. In the wake of the intervention in Kosovo, and the horror caused by the failure to intervene in Rwanda, Axworthy says he concluded that military intervention can be a necessity.

Canada subsequently convened a commission to examine the idea. It included politicians, diplomats and academics such as Harvard University's Michael Ignatieff, and concluded that while the "responsibility to protect" should be enshrined in law, there should be strict rules, among them that force be the avenue of very last resort. But its report landed in December 2001 and was quickly overlooked as the world struggled with the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. When it was finally noticed, some nations balked at the notion. "It was feared by many countries as a Trojan Horse for the interveners of the world looking for justification for marching into other countries," says Allan Rock, Canada's ambassador to the UN, who is now responsible for pushing the idea at the world body. And then the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003 -- pushed by neo-conservatives who believed in spreading democracy by force -- made talk of intervention taboo.

But the tide could now be turning. Earlier this year, the "responsibility to protect" idea was picked up by a high-level panel advising UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, and subsequently found its way into his own proposals for reform. The concept also surfaced last month in a report to Congress on UN reform, prepared by a U.S. task force co-chaired by Gingrich and former Democratic senator George Mitchell...

American support would be a "significant step" for the proposal, says Axworthy, who expresses delight and surprise at conservative interest in the idea. "They're the ones who look up north and think there are a bunch of pinkos up there that they don't want to talk to, including me." And in some ways, foreign policy liberals and neo-conservatives have much in common, says

Joshua Muravchik, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative Washington think tank. Both, he says, aim to promote democracy and human rights abroad.

But what has divided them to date are questions over the role of military force -- and that may now be changing

Now, with George W. Bush talking about "spreading freedom" abroad, the Clinton government may have a promising subject on which to engage the White House at a time when the two countries are drifting apart on many other fronts. But despite the potential for common ground, suspicions remain -- both toward America, and by Americans toward the UN. Outside of the United States, the proposal is best received as a potential check on unilateral American action. Rock has told his fellow envoys: "Would you rather live in a world in which that power is there but there are no rules to define how it's used? Or where there are clear rules governing its exercise, and you can participate in developing those rules?"

Rules imposed from the outside, though, make U.S. conservatives uncomfortable. And the U.S. State Department, meanwhile, is concerned about creating both a new right open to abuse by other countries -- as well as imposing a new, potentially onerous obligation on Washington to intervene. The acting U.S. envoy to the UN, Anne Patterson, has endorsed the general principle that the Security Council can "take action" in cases of large-scale atrocities. However, she has endorsed neither an explicit obligation to do so, nor particular guidelines. "It would be very hard to establish criteria or guidelines, as each case needs specific consideration of its specific circumstances," one State Department lawyer, who requested anonymity, told Maclean's. The council already "has ample authority to deal with situations involving large-scale atrocities" through the UN Charter's existing language on "international peace and security," he added.

And while the proposal focuses on the Security Council, critics say that, in practice, limits on who can take action would be fuzzy. Axworthy says he is opposed to "unilateral" interventions, but concedes that if the Security Council became deadlocked, as has been the case on Darfur, "you have to go back to a General Assembly initiative, or at least to regional bodies." But the line between a regional body and an Iraq-invasion-style "coalition of the willing" is hazy, skeptics say. Still, Rock says that the most pressing concern should not be over the possibility that humanitarian interventions could be abused, but rather that the world can no longer "stand by and let [genocide] happen." And, he adds, "The status quo is inadequate -- because it is grid-lock and inaction."

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