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There is a curious irony in the west's interpretation of the five-day war between Russia and Georgia over the breakaway province of South Ossetia. In much recent analysis, Russia is depicted as a neo-imperialist state, eager to wreak havoc on the west's carefully constructed system of international rules. (...)

Vladimir Putin was among the world leaders who, at the UN World Summit of 2005, endorsed the related doctrine of a **Responsibility to protect** – the idea that sovereign states have a **Responsibility to protect**

their own citizens, but that when they are unwilling or unable to do so, that responsibility must be borne by the international community. Underlying the principle was a novel appreciation that attacks on civilians can constitute a threat to international peace and security. If this doctrine has become a stumbling block in relations between the powers, it is not because certain states have refused to endorse it but because the definition of what constitutes international peace and security remains contested.

The boundaries of the **Responsibility to protect** principle have been tested in both Kosovo and, more recently, South Ossetia, where minority populations have sought independence for their territories on grounds of ethnic cleansing. Rejected by Russia, Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in February 2008 was regarded by many in the west as a test-case of the doctrine. As in the case of Sudan and Zimbabwe, Russian objections did not strike at the heart of the principle of conditional sovereignty; they were cast in terms of the need for greater scrutiny in the application of the doctrine. In a vain effort to stop the formal recognition of Kosovo's independence by the west, Russian diplomats warned of the dangerous precedent Kosovo would set for efforts to resolve inter-ethnic conflicts in other parts of the world. This week, as Russia pursued its attack on Georgia, it turned those warnings into bombs.

However, by focusing attention on Russia's grossly disproportionate use of force in response to Georgia's own military assault on South Ossetia, western commentators have overlooked an important diplomatic development. Notwithstanding their disenfranchisement in the case of Kosovo, Russian policy-makers have used the language of **Responsibility to protect** to justify their invasion of Georgia. Vladimir Putin could not have been clearer when he declared that Georgia had lost the right to rule South Ossetia on account of the humanitarian catastrophe that has taken place there. We might choose to ignore these comments as mere propaganda. But as long as Russia couches its interventions in this language, we can ensure at least a measure of accountability for Russia's actions.

Ultimately, if the **Responsibility to protect** principle is to facilitate, rather than disrupt, international cooperation in the resolution of ethnic conflicts, it will be essential for the major global players to negotiate a common understanding of its content. So far these negotiations have taken place behind closed doors within an exclusive group of western states. As I argue in a forthcoming paper for Policy Network, the extent to which Russia and other emerging powers agree to play by international rules will depend on the willingness of the west to integrate them into a shared international order. President Bush's threat this week to freeze Russia out of

international institutions in retaliation for Russias actions in Georgia would therefore represent a dangerous set-back.

Source: <http://www.newstatesman.com/asia/2008/08/russia-international-georgia-2>