

Explainer: What is Libya's 'responsibility to protect' its citizens?

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Lloyd Axworthy unpacks the UN Security Council resolution language, which applies a new doctrine aimed at preventing countries from killing their own civilians en masse

Lloyd Axworthy, president of the University of Winnipeg and former Minister of Foreign Affairs, was among the early champions of **Responsibility to protect**, or **R2P**, a doctrine aimed at preventing countries from killing their own civilians en masse.

The Globe and Mail's Graeme Smith has returned home to Istanbul after two weeks in Libya.

They spoke on Friday March 18 about the UN Security Council vote to take "all necessary measures" for protection of Libyan civilians.

Excerpts from the conversation:

AXWORTHY: This morning it seems that while the name's not being used, the spirit is being applied. The only hope now is they can do it fast enough to be effective.

SMITH: On the **R2P** website [<http://www.responsibilitytoprotect.org>], they've bolded a paragraph of the resolution: **"Reiterating the responsibility of the Libyan authorities to protect the Libyan population..."**

AXWORTHY: Each time that happens, it puts a further layer of credibility on it [**R2P**]. I mean, they used it in the Dafur resolution and now here. The language being used is very much drawn from the original documents, and the protection-of-civilian resolutions we brought into the Security Council back in 1999 and 2000. So slowly, surely, guardedly, the UN is acquiring a new definition of sovereignty, and a new definition of its responsibilities in keeping the peace. It remains to be seen, now, whether the implementation will follow through. A no-fly zone is a reasonably weak military tool; it was applied in Bosnia without much effect but in Iraq it did protect Kurds and others. So the important part of that resolution is the text that says all measures necessary. If Gadhafi breaks his self-imposed ceasefire and starts going after people with tanks, the no-fly zone will become more aggressive than the way it's presently described. That would be an important step forward, and one that's probably necessary.

SMITH: Because the no-fly zone is just one component of this.

AXWORTHY: That's right. People who haven't paid attention don't realize it's a series of ascending steps, ramping up from wagging your finger and sending diplomatic missions and making noises, to sanctions and other pressures. And each step needs to be deemed appropriate. ... It's important to keep your focus in these actions, so it doesn't look like an Iraq-style activity.

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SMITH: Why do you think we're not seeing explicit reference to the **R2P** concept in this resolution?

AXWORTHY: I don't know, and we've been arguing this is a time when we should be using it. Partly, I think there's history. The leadership in virtually all the governments today were not part of that exercise in 2005 when state leaders endorsed it. There may be some political reasons for not putting that label on it, in case it fires up opposition to the label itself or the branding itself. But when I read the resolution the words are all there, and the speeches last night, they're all saying we're here to protect civilians. Frankly, I don't care if they call it scrambled eggs. The fact is, it's being applied, and applied for the purposes for which the principle was established. It only strengthens it.... That groundwork we laid has started to pay off. (...)

SMITH: The thing about Libya is that it doesn't fall under the protection of any state with a veto.

AXWORTHY: In some ways we're picking these things off places where the conditions are most suitable for an **R2P** action, or its equivalent. But nevertheless, precedents are being set. Here's going to be an interesting question: if the application of force continues in Bahrain or Yemen or other places like this, will there be similar actions endorsed and implemented? The other focus will be whether there is any pivoting around this to the Ivory Coast.

SMITH: That was my next question: I was listening to a lecture by a military theorist named Dr. Thomas Barnett, and he was saying one of the problems with our current global system is we have a very good way of dealing with economically bankrupt states - with the IMF and the World Bank - but not with politically bankrupt states, states that are harming their own civilians. One of the weaknesses from the Muslim world's point of view is that a state like Libya, a pariah, gets ganged up upon, but a state like Bahrain, with its U.S. ally, likely will not.

AXWORTHY: It remains to be seen. There are other pressures that can be brought to bear in Bahrain. With the Fifth Fleet sitting there, there's an enormous American counterpoint that could be brought to bear. ... But I agree with Barnett's conclusions, because - and I don't want to get too far ahead of today's events - if you take the full **R2P** package, one of the most important elements put forward is rebuilding. That kind of international engagement doesn't stop with F-18s flying overhead, or bombing some bridges and tanks. It does carry with it the responsibility then to be involved in the rebuilding process.

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