

We can't dodge the hard part stabilising Libya

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(...) A single nod from the Chinese or Russians would have stopped international efforts to protect the people of Libya from Muammar Gaddafi's henchmen in their tracks. "Oh man . . ." somebody in the chamber could be heard to say. None of the assembled ambassadors raised their hands.

Russia, China and India, three notorious champions of state sovereignty and non-intervention, abstained. Nigeria, South Africa, Gabon, Lebanon and Colombia joined the West in supporting the resolution.

What this means for Libya remains to be seen but Resolution 1973 marks an important step forward in the battle to rid the world of mass atrocities. The question is no longer whether the world should act to stop mass atrocities but how best to do so.

The council has sent a clear signal of its commitment to the **responsibility to protect** principle (or **R2P**) that states governments have a duty to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. When they fail to do this, **R2P** demands the international community, acting through the Security Council, protect threatened populations. This is no academic abstraction: it was agreed in 2005 by all UN member states and endorsed by the Security Council.

This is not the first time the international community has used **R2P**. The council's hesitant response to Darfur was considerably strengthened after the adoption of

R2P

in 2005: the president of Sudan was indicted for crimes against humanity and the UN helped deploy one of the largest peace operations there.

African mediators were guided by **R2P** in their successful effort to stop the post-election violence in Kenya in 2008.

In Guinea and south Sudan the principle has contributed to the prevention of mass killing.

What, then, is special about Resolution 1973?

Besides the remarkable fact that the council was responding to Arab demands for military intervention - unthinkable just a month ago - those who criticise the council's foot dragging should remember this is the first time it has authorised force against a functioning government to protect civilians.(...)

(...)Building an international consensus on military intervention involves complex and painstaking diplomacy. The Arab League's call for a no-fly zone was a game-changer.

Some Arab governments were no doubt motivated by dislike of Gaddafi and a desire to divert attention from their own troubles. But only the most jaundiced would dismiss entirely the role of humanitarian concern.(...)

(...)Why didn't China cast its veto? China has endorsed **R2P** more than once but that doesn't mean it agrees with the West on how to act in the face of crises.

Chinese views about how to respond to major crises are influenced by the opinions of relevant regional organisations.

Diplomats knew that if the Arab League and the African Union were prepared to back the military option in Libya, China would not block it.

This is precisely what China told the council after the passage of Resolution 1973.

For its part, having accepted the need for a second resolution and tabling its own draft calling for a ceasefire, Russia was boxed in politically and unwilling to stand alone against the resolution.

Whether 1973 marks a decisive shift for the better or a new cautionary tale about the limits of humanitarian war depends on what happens next.

If the measures adopted succeed, not only will Libya be transformed but tyranny everywhere will be put on notice.(...)

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