

Africa must support Libya intervention

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For Africans to avoid a schizophrenic, ethical dead-end in which the West is criticised for intervening to save lives in Libya and simultaneously condemned for not having intervened when genocide erupted in Rwanda in 1994, it is important to explain the idea of the "responsibility to protect" before untangling the issues involved in Libya. (...) In the post-Cold War era respected African scholars and statesmen gave prominence to the idea of a "responsibility to protect". Francis Deng, the Sudanese current special adviser to the UN secretary general for genocide prevention, coined the idea of "sovereignty as responsibility" in 1996 and sought to use it to protect populations in danger as the UN special representative for internally displaced persons between 1992 and 2004. (...)

Africa's first UN secretary general, Egypt's Boutros Boutros-Ghali, similarly called for an end to absolute sovereignty and backed "humanitarian interventions" in Liberia and Somalia. His Ghanaian successor and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Kofi Annan, was also a vociferous proponent of "humanitarian intervention", under whose leadership the UN accepted the idea of "the responsibility to protect" in 2005. Though many African (and other developing country) leaders objected to this idea, fearing that such interventions could be abused by the "great powers" to threaten their sovereignty, the African Union's Constitutive Act of 2000 enunciated one of the most interventionist regimes in the world in cases of human rights abuses and regional instability.

Current events in Libya must thus be assessed in the context of a changing African doctrine to do with the duty to protect citizens from repressive governments, though this idea has been inconsistently applied in cases such as Zimbabwe and Africans still largely lack the military capacity to enforce a Pax Africana. Nevertheless, regional efforts in Sierra Leone and Burundi, as well as UN peacekeeping efforts in the Democratic Republic of Congo, have represented limited efforts to promote a "responsibility to protect". (...)

(...) Gaddafi's killing of scores of his own citizens justifies the UN approving this intervention. The Libyan strongman had earlier thumbed his nose at AU efforts to find a diplomatic solution. Africa must support efforts to rein in Gaddafi and his army, while keeping a vigilant eye on those enforcing the no-fly zone. This applies particularly to France, which has traditionally sent gendarmes to Africa in pursuit of parochial interests, allowing génocidaires to escape from Rwanda in 1994 and, more recently, supporting autocrats such as Chad's Idriss Déby. Working through its representatives on the UN Security Council, Africa must try to ensure that Libyan civilians do not become victims of Western "collateral damage" and that neo-imperial temptations are avoided in the oil-rich country.

(...) Based on Africa's own evolving norms to do with protecting civilians from oppressive regimes and the UN Security Council's support for the present actions in Libya, Africans should back this multilateral intervention. We must, however, remain vigilant about hidden agendas.

We should ensure that the UN is able to hold the interveners accountable, that rebel actions against civilians also be monitored and that the AU and the Arab League continue to be closely consulted. Only through such efforts can the ghosts of Suez and Iraq, now hovering over Libya, be banished.

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