Syria: The BRICs must help enact the Responsibility to Protect Álvaro de Vasconcelos European Union Institute for Strategic Studies

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The BRIC countries are comprised are of Brazil, Russia, India and China.

The brutal repression unleashed by Bashar al-Assad's regime against the peaceful demonstrators in Syria has reached levels that can no longer be tolerated by the international community. The violent crackdown, including the torture and murder of arrested citizens, clearly amounts to a crime against humanity. It is imperative that the international community acts before it is too late. The principle of the
Responsibility to Protect
should be immediately invoked. It is worth remembering that the principle approved by the General Assembly of the UN states that 'each individual State has the
responsibility to protect
its populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.'

Syria is of course responsible first and foremost for the application of this principle. However, as it has consistently refused to exercise this responsibility, or any kind of restraint, it is now up to the members of the Security Council not only to condemn the repression in the strongest terms but also to take 'timely and decisive' proactive action to stop Assad from killing his own citizens. This is the responsibility not only of the US and of European countries but of the other permanent members of the Security Council, Russia and China, and also of non-permanent members like Brazil or India.

The BRICs should care about Syria and bear their share of responsibility. No state can aspire to great power status without acknowledging the importance of the Middle East on the international foreign policy agenda. (…)

In Russia, politicians are playing the nationalist card with a view to the upcoming presidential elections and want to show their opposition to Western 'activism'. In India it is difficult to find support for the intervention in Libya, apart from in some intellectual circles. In China a debate is taking place between those who believe that China should support the revolution that has swept the Arab world and those who negatively view the wave of uprisings as 'turmoil' and fear its potential contagion effects in China itself. In Brazil, the dilemma is how to balance concerns about military action beyond peacekeeping with Brazil's new responsibilities as a global player anxious to be seen as a beacon of democracy and supporter of human rights. In this context, implementing the
Responsibility to Protect
has been recognised as a fundamental component of the protection of human rights, as

affirmed by the Brazilian Foreign Minister António Patriota in a recent article.

It is clear that the BRICs are not prepared to support another resolution that would allow for recourse to 'all necessary means … to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack', as happened in the case of Libya. But this is not currently being proposed by anyone considering that the circumstances on the ground are different in each of the two cases. What is necessary is to cease all cooperation with Assad, isolate him, show that he has lost all international support and approve a UN Security Council Resolution to impose international sanctions on his regime.

Many demonstrators in Syria are preparing to arm themselves to protect their lives. They feel inspired by the revolution in Libya. If they do take up arms the human consequences may be extremely serious as the regime is clearly prepared to resort to mass murder to remain in power. It is also difficult to predict what will be the regional impact of a civil war in Syria that is likely to see a split between the special forces loyal to the Assad regime and sections of the marginalised regular army. It is clearly in the interest of the international community that a peaceful solution is found, but for this the killing of civilians must stop. The BRICs have an enormous responsibility to help ensure that this happens.

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