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Operationalising the "responsibility to protect"

The Global Centre for R2P will be a catalyst for implementing the commitment of all countries to protect people around the world from genocide, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and war crimes.

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No idea has moved faster in the international normative arena than the "responsibility to protect" (R2P), the title of the 2001 report issued by the Canadian-sponsored but independent international commission. When United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan issued his famous "challenge of humanitarian intervention" in September 1999, he provoked such a furious backlash from so many countries that some wondered about his future in the U.N. Yet a mere six years later, the norm was endorsed by the world leaders gathered at the U.N. Mr. Annan called it one of his most precious achievements.

There is always a danger with revolutionary advances that commitments made at grand summits will suffer many a slip by the time action is required. Make no mistake: R2P is not just a slogan but a call for action by the international community. Failure to act will make a mockery of the noble sentiments.

Recognising that the global endorsement of the norm in 2005 was but the prelude to translating it into timely action to prevent crises and stop atrocities, a new Global Centre for R2P was launched on Thursday (February 14) at the U.N. headquarters in New York.

Consider this. In 2005, world leaders agreed that every country "has the responsibility to protect its populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity" and "should peaceful means be inadequate and national authorities are manifestly failing to protect their populations," the "international community, through the United Nations, also has the responsibility to help to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity." Yet some national diplomats insist, with straight faces, that "the World Summit rejected R2P in 2005."

The first danger is thus a shamefaced edging back from the agreed norm of 2005, a

form of buyer's remorse. We need continued advocacy and activism by civil society and concerned governments to remain steadfast and hold all governments' feet to the fire of individual and collective responsibility to protect at-risk populations. When Gareth Evans, co-chair of the R2P commission, gave a lecture last August in Colombo about R2P and what it meant for Sri Lanka, he unleashed a storm of hostility around the theme that the "so-called" R2P "is nothing but a licence for the white man to intervene in the affairs of dark sovereign countries, whenever the white man thinks it fit to do so." Rather flatteringly, Mr. Evans' 2007 visit to the island armed with R2P was compared to the coming of Columbus in 1492 and Vasco da Gama in 1498 with the Bible and the sword. One newspaper reported on "crackpot ideas" like R2P that have been "dismissed in academic and political circles as the latest 'neo-imperialist' tactic of the big powers to intervene in the affairs of small nations."

Many regimes which fear the searchlight of international attention being shone on their misdeeds will try to chip away at the norm until only a facade remains. They must not be allowed to succeed. Better that they live with this fear than their people fear the death and disappearance squads. Of course, they could remove the cause of such fear by working, by themselves or in concert with international friends, to remove the causes and prevent a crisis from arising.

A second, opposite danger of rollback lies with the aggressive humanitarian warriors who gave "humanitarian intervention" such a bad name in the first place. Iraq is the best example of why we, the authors and promoters of R2P, should fear our "friends" as much as our opponents in this cause. The developing countries' histories and their peoples' collective memories are only too full of past examples of trauma and suffering rooted in the white man's burden. The weight of that historical baggage is simply too strong to sustain the continued use of the language of humanitarian intervention.

The addiction of some analysts to that language is puzzling and problematic. Puzzling, because our R2P report argued explicitly and forcefully about the shortcomings of this terminology and the merits of a deliberate shift to the conceptual vocabulary of R2P. Many commentators simply ignore that, as if the argument has not been made. If they disagree with the report, they should confront the issue and explain why.

The problematic element arises from the politics of the discourse. Our report offered, and the U.N. High-Level Panel's and Secretary-General Kofi Annan's reports preferred (2001, 2004 and 2005), the R2P formulation as less confrontational and polarising, more likely to lead to a consensus across the bitter North-South divide. "Humanitarian intervention" approaches the topic explicitly from the Western interveners' perspective and isolates and privileges "intervention." R2P is victim-centred and surrounds intervention with prevention before and rebuilding afterwards.

History proves that sovereignty and the norm of non-intervention notwithstanding, regional and global powers have intervened, repeatedly, in the affairs of weaker states. R2P offers them better protection through agreed and negotiated-in-advance rules and roadmaps for when outside intervention is justified and how it may be done under U.N. authority rather than unilaterally. It will thus lead to the "Gulliverisation" of major power use of force, tying it with numerous threads of global norms and rules. Absent R2P, they have relatively more freedom, not less, to do what they want.

Another danger from over-enthusiastic supporters is misuse of the concept in non-R2P contexts. A group of retired NATO generals, for example, recently used it to justify the first use of nuclear weapons to prevent nuclear proliferation. R2P is rooted in human solidarity, not in exceptionalism of the virtuous West against the evil rest.

To date, our responses have typically been ad hoc and reactive, rather than consolidated, comprehensive and systematic. We need a "paradigm shift" from a culture of reaction to one of prevention and rebuilding. Millions lost their lives during the Holocaust and in Cambodia, Rwanda, Srebrenica, and Darfur. After each we said "Never Again," and then looked back each next time, with varying degrees of incomprehension, horror, anger and shame, asking ourselves how we could possibly have let it all happen again.

The Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (<http://www.GlobalCenter2p.org>) will work to make this doctrine a reality. Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon has welcomed its establishment as "an effective advocate in the struggle to prevent the world's most heinous mass crimes." Supported by Australia, Belgium, Britain, Canada, Netherlands, Norway, Rwanda and other foundations and private donors, it will generate research, conduct high-level advocacy and facilitate activities of those working to advance the R2P agenda. It will be the hub of affiliated regional centres in Asia, Australia, Africa, Europe and elsewhere.

As Dag Hammarskjöld, the Secretary-General who invented U.N. peacekeeping, famously said, it is not a proper job for soldiers yet only soldiers can do it. Traditional warfare is full-scale combat between enemy soldiers: us against them. Collective security is about combined military action against an aggressor: all against one. Traditional peacekeeping used neutral soldiers to separate rival forces: us between enemy armies. Peace enforcement operations authorised U.N. units to use force when challenged: us between civil war factions and against spoilers.

Between victims and perpetrators

Intervention to protect civilian victims of atrocities is us between victims and perpetrators. As such it requires different guidelines and rules of engagement, as well as

relationship to civil authorities and humanitarian actors, compared to other types of military operations. These differences need to be identified, articulated and incorporated into officer training manuals and courses.

Operationalising R2P with respect to the protection agenda in the field will mean adopting a bottom-up approach that brings together the humanitarian actors on the ground in conflict zones. Each context requires its own specific protection actions against threats to the people at risk there. The U.N. can provide the normative mandate at the global level for their protection and the forces and arms necessary for intervention if need be. The necessary action to prevent and rebuild has to be undertaken by the U.N. agencies acting collaboratively with local civil society actors, NGOs and representatives of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent. They can be brought together in a distinct protection cluster to assess needs and priorities for each vulnerable group requiring protection and identifying, in advance, the custom-tailored responses for prevention and rebuilding.

With a strong North/South character reflected by links to associated centres and affiliated research networks throughout the world, the Global Centre for R2P will be a catalyst for implementing the commitment of all countries to protect people around the world from genocide, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and war crimes. Based in our common humanity, R2P aims to rescue vulnerable communities so that groups condemned to die in fear can live in hope instead — else we will not be able to live with ourselves.

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