Protecting
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AS DELIVERED

Thank you Minister Patriota. Thank you also to Special Adviser Luck and Ambassador Viotti for your efforts. We appreciate Brazil’s initiative and welcome this opportunity to discuss and advance our common commitment to the Responsibility to Protect (R2P).

Seven years ago, all member states of the United Nations came together to endorse and accept a shared responsibility to protect populations from genocide, ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. While aspects of this principle would need to be elaborated further, we embraced a principle of protection anchored in the essential responsibility of States to protect their own citizens, our shared responsibility to take appropriate steps to assist States in exercising that solemn duty, and our preparedness to take timely and decisive action where national authorities manifestly failed to do so. The consensus agreement in 2005 reflected a recognition of our common humanity and a new clarity in our collective conscience that certain actions could not be allowed to stand.

The United States was then and is now a strong supporter of the concept of Responsibility to Protect.

R2P raises complex issues both in the abstract, as we are speaking today, and in specific situations, particularly when violence is escalating, good choices are narrowing, and tough judgments about collective action need to be made. Brazil’s contribution to this debate can help us refine and advance our shared commitment to R2P.

There is much in the spirit of Brazil’s paper with which we agree. We agree that “violence against civilian populations must be repudiated wherever it takes place,” that “prevention is always the best policy” and preventive diplomacy needs to be strengthened; and that it is always preferable when States live up to their sovereign responsibilities to protect their own populations. We believe that force should only be resorted to when peaceful means are inadequate, and that the use of force has costs and risks that must be weighed judiciously, including against the costs and risks of inaction or different actions. And, we appreciate the paper’s acknowledgment that all three pillars of R2P are integral to the concept.

There are also important elements with which we disagree, two of which we would highlight here. We believe it is a grave error to equate “manifest failure” with strict chronological sequence. Appropriate decision-making in this area requires not just “temporal” considerations but a comprehensive assessment of risks and costs and the balance of consequences, as the paper calls for elsewhere. We further regret any implication that in those circumstances where collective action is necessary, diplomacy should be considered “exhausted.” We should not eliminate the possible role of diplomacy, even – perhaps especially – in situations where forceful action is required.

The United States is committed to working with international partners to advance the concept of R2P.

We are also looking at how to improve our own capacity to address situations at risk. Last August, President Obama affirmed that “preventing mass atrocities and genocide is a core national security interest and a core moral responsibility of the United States.” He directed a government-wide review of U.S. ability to prevent and respond to mass atrocities and mandated creation of a new Atrocity Prevention Board to coordinate our internal efforts, with priority on prevention. This initiative emphasizes the need to mobilize a full and diverse range of tools. It also puts a premium on enhanced cooperation with international partners, including the United Nations.

Situations where the risk of mass atrocity is high can be volatile, unpredictable, and fast-moving. In the early 1990s, the civil war in Rwanda had so few casualties that it wasn’t even counted by the annual reports that track armed conflicts. Yet in just four months in 1994, nearly a million people were slaughtered, according to deliberate plans for their extermination. At any point in a swiftly moving catastrophe, we will need to ask ourselves when events are approaching a threshold of enormity that warrants collective action and assess the balance of cost and consequence between action and inaction. We all have to carry in our conscience the stain of collective failure in the spring of 1994. We will also always have to make judgments in the absence of certain answers.

There are no easy solutions when we confront the gravest of threats to innocents. But we cannot bind ourselves to inaction based on an unrealistic prerequisite of assured success. We welcome the opportunity for ongoing dialogue and continued work together with Brazil and other international partners to fulfill the Responsibility to Protect that we embraced in 2005.

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