

Our shared responsibility to protect Madeleine K. Albright and Richard S. Williamson Politico
2
2 July 2013

In less than a decade, the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) has emerged as a widely shared doctrine of international relations, an amazingly rapid development for a concept that did not exist at the time of the Rwandan genocide or Balkan wars of the 1990s. Every nation in the world, including the United States, has recognized a responsibility to protect civilians anywhere from genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, or ethnic cleansing, and — at least in theory — has pledged to act accordingly.

Sadly, the promise of R2P has been more noteworthy in the breach than in the honoring of our commitments. The current crisis in Syria, where Basharal-Assad's regime has declared all-out war on its own people, is the most visible case of our collective failure to protect vulnerable populations from the most serious crimes. Less noticed is the ongoing struggle to protect the many million citizens of Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and other places where political leaders and their allies regularly employ violence against the defenseless.

Yet the gap between our words and deeds should not serve as an excuse to scrap the whole R2P enterprise, which remains a rallying point around the world to try to prevent the conscience-shocking atrocities that did not stop after the Holocaust.

Syria

notwithstanding, R2P has clearly animated recent efforts to stop the worst from happening. Coalitions of like-minded nations, backed with U.N. authority, prevented atrocities in Libya and the Ivory Coast with careful application of military force. During recent elections in Kenya, and before then in the referendum on independence for South Sudan, the United States, other world powers, and regional neighbors worked together diplomatically and with local civil society to proactively defuse situations that many experts were predicting would escalate to massive violence.

That some atrocities took place in these countries should not obscure the reality that matters could have been much worse—and lives were saved—because of early attention and preventive action, not necessarily military. These cases are a reminder that R2P can serve as a useful framework for sustained focus on those oft-forgotten countries at risk of genocide and other forms of mass atrocity. The world's task should be to improve R2P's implementation, not get rid of it.

(...) R2P represents the idea that with state sovereignty comes the obligation to protect one's own citizens from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. (...)

Critics in the West have argued that the concept is little more than a thinly veiled neoconservative or liberal interventionist plot—depending on your politics—to engage in regime change; critics from within emerging powers such as Brazil or South Africa paint R2P as a cover for neocolonial ambitions. Lost in these debates, however, is the notion that R2P is at its core an instrument of prevention. (..)

To the degree that R2P and the Atrocities Prevention Board can help to re-orient U.S. and international thinking towards pre-crisis engagement as opposed to crisis management, both are worthy of continued development and investment. (...)

(...)

If the Responsibility to Protect doctrine can do anything, it is to begin to help move us away from a policy of indifference and waiting for the worst, and more aggressively adopt policies that prevent atrocities before they begin.

See the full article [here](#) .