

R2P, Libya, and the myth of regime change Tim Dunne Lowy Interpreter 5 September 2012 Tim

Dunne is a Professor of International Relations in the Asia-Pacific Centre for R2P, University of Queensland.

The UN General Assembly will consider the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) concept when it opens for business in the coming days. This year's dialogue on R2P is being framed by the UN Secretary-General's report on the issue of 'timely and decisive response' to humanitarian crises. 'Timely and decisive response' is a phrase closely identified with the international community's willingness and capability to prevent or protect populations at risk.

The ongoing prominence of R2P in the UN system suggests that those public intellectuals forecasting the death of R2P ought to admit that such calls were greatly exaggerated. Their arguments have been critiqued in earlier posts on The Interpreter.

R2P is not about to RIP, and neither is it on a life-support system. That said, there is no doubt that the diplomatic and decision-making framework known as R2P is under considerable strain. This is apparent in the UNSG's report, in which the Libya conflict only receives one paragraph's worth of direct discussion. It's a Basil Fawlty-like treatment ('don't mention the war'), in light of the noise Libya has generated.

There are two reasons for conceding that the coercive dimension of R2P is in trouble. First, the ongoing the fallout in the Security Council over Syria, suggesting deep divisions have opened up between the G3 (US, France, Britain) and the G2 (China, Russia). (...)

Second, and related, R2P has been tarnished by its association with regime change.

There is much to say about this complex relationship. The claim that the mandate for Libya was modified to enable the goal of regime change is generally asserted rather than supported by evidence. Still, as the influential Brazilian addendum to the R2P framework notes, there is a 'growing perception that the concept of the responsibility to protect might be misused for purposes other than protecting civilians, such as regime change'.

For this claim to be persuasive in relation to Libya, both of the following would have to be demonstrated: first, that the political leaders undertaking the action deliberately blurred the boundaries between protecting civilians and toppling Qadhafi; and second, that military leaders targeted command and control centres in a manner that was not consistent with the mandate. What follows is a consideration of the first of these two points (the second will be a topic for a later post).

Speaking at the National Defense University on 28 March 2011, billed as an 'address to the nation' on Libya, President Obama openly dealt with the mandate issue: 'Of course, there is no question that Libya — and the world — would be better off with Qaddafi out of power. I, along with many other world leaders, have embraced that goal, and will actively pursue it through non-military means. But broadening our military mission to include regime change would be a mistake'.

Two weeks later, on 14 April, the leaders of the G3 – Obama, Cameron, Sarkozy – wrote an op-ed questioning whether the action would have been justifiable if Qadhafi was to remain in power. They linked NATO's action to maintaining 'pressure' on the regime, and in so doing, raised questions about whether they were advocating a change of mandate.

However, the article also noted that it was 'our duty and our mandate under U.N. Security Council Resolution 1973 is to protect civilians, and we are doing that. It is not to remove Qaddafi by force'. What seems to have been going on in the minds of these leaders is that 'pressure' is within the mandate but using force to target the institutions of the state – beyond what was necessary to protect civilians — was not.

The op-ed definitely blurred the boundary at a time when Russia and others were openly questioning whether the NATO-led action was reaching beyond the actions authorised. The G3 leaders ought, in hindsight, to have said that the regime change 'path' was one that could only be brought about by 'non-military means' (as was stated more clearly in Obama's 28 March speech). (...)

In reality, when coercive power is unleashed against a regime that is committing atrocities, it is impossible to discretely isolate means and ends; protecting civilians from the air is bound to alter the balance of forces on the ground. Yet it remains important to distinguish between the intentions of the civilian leaders implementing 1973 from the unintended consequences of the military action they instigated – even if regime change was enabled by the primary goal of the mandate.

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