

Responsibility to Protect: A Concept to enforce Humanity?

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After the Rwandan Genocide in the 1990s where at least half a million Tutsi were slaughtered before the very eyes of a paralyzed international community it became obvious, that measures must be taken to prevent such unexampled inhumanities and that there needs to be a legal framework for actions to take place. In the course of this tragedy former Secretary-General of the UN Kofi Annan demanded in his address to the General Assembly in 1999 and 2000 that the international community has a responsibility to intervene when massive violations of humanity or ethnic cleansings are happening in any part of the world.

Thus a group of international experts formed the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) which eventually crafted „*The Responsibility to Protect*“(R2P) report in 2001. Since then the term R2P coined the engagement of the international community to „protect populations from genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes and crimes against humanity”¹.

An important milestone in enforcing R2P was laid during the 2005 World Summit. For the first time all nation’s leaders declared their commitment to R2P and agreed, that every nation has the responsibility to protect its own people and when nations fail the international community must fulfill this responsibility when inevitable even with the use of force. After Ban Ki Moon assumed office of Secretary General in 2007 he identified R2P as a priority, therefore it would be interesting to have a look on how the idea of R2P developed in recent years.

For half a decade, people in Darfur are suffering from grave inhumanities. Thousands of innocent civilians have been killed, brutal rapes are a daily occurrence, families are torn apart and innumerable children become orphans. In the face of this crisis the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1706 on 31 August 2006: it called for an immediate deployment of UN troops in Sudan to ensure peace. In this resolution an explicit reference to R2P is formulated invoking the protection of civilians in armed conflict. However, Sudanese President Omar El-Bashir barred the way to this attempt by claiming that this action is strongly violating the country's sovereignty. Not until a year of continued agony, UN peacekeeper troops were finally authorized to be stationed in Darfur.

Another disturbing situation is created by the military regime of Burma. Human Rights Watch accuses Burmese authorities of the systematic persecution of ethnic minorities and other inhumanities. Thus the question of R2P was raised, however, China and Russia stifled a resolution by using their veto. After the catastrophic Cyclone Nargis that affected over 1.5 Million people the Burmese regime refused international aid and did not take action to combat the humanitarian crisis. When discussing the option of R2P it became obvious that in this case the use of R2P would be a misapplication of the doctrine and furthermore, it is doubtful if a forceful intervention in that situation would have helped the people at all.

The most recent address to the concept of R2P was raised during the military conflict between Russia and Georgia just in this month of August 2008. Russia accused Georgia of genocide against the

¹ www.responsibilitytoprotect.org

Russian population of South Ossetia and took the “Responsibility to Protect” their own people as justification for the military intervention.

From these few examples it becomes clear that in spite of the incontrovertible sound idea of R2P some controversies still remain. How should we decide when R2P collides with national sovereignty? When is the use of R2P adequate and how can we make sure that intervention will bring real improvement? What can be done if permanent members of the Security Council veto against resolutions for other political interests? Can R2P be abused to justify unilateral military actions?

As many countries with solid political and social structures like Canada or Switzerland are promoting the R2P concept, other nations question the shift of national competencies to international responsibility. Whereas China might emphasize the importance of national sovereignty due to a culture of non-interference, other post-colonial nations, for instance, could assume that R2P is a modern instrument of control by the West. It is comprehensible, that one remains skeptical if a former colonial oppressor comes to you and tells you how to make your life better – with their help.

However, even wealthier countries of Europe or North America are not commonly in favor with R2P. As we are experiencing a time of global economic pressure many politicians are not happy with the idea of spending extra money on costly UN projects. Moreover, many Western countries claim, that R2P obliges them to interfere in remote conflicts that they are not interested in.

In 2003 another dark chapter of mankind dawned when the USA declared an unilateral war against Iraq. Being led on the basis of forged proofs this war was declared absolutely illegal after international law. Until now more than 100 000 civilians were killed and through daily suicide bombings there seems to be no peace for the children of Iraq. This lasting war is one of the biggest setbacks for R2P. Opponents seem to be affirmed, that one cannot expect decent support without any selfish interests from Western countries, at least the US.

However, in spite of all setbacks and counter-arguments. The basic ideas of R2P– the idea of a world community that ensures the protection of humanity and the dignity of man is inevitable for a healthy and moral development of mankind. As we see a lasting tendency of globalization, the formation of multi-cultural societies within nations and a growing interdependence of economic markets, there should be no space for mere national interests anymore. The well-being of the African population and the harmonious coexistence of different ethnic cultures throughout the world will sooner or later have impact on everyone’s lives.

In a time, in which modern media provides us the latest information, the argument of nescience can only be interpreted as moral callousness. However, when action is demanded, those in charge must stick to the basic tenets of reason.

Is there a future for “*Responsibility to Protect*”? – Definitely yes. The desire of global humanity and peace emerged long before R2P itself. Yet it is the first time that these aspirations become implemented in a concrete set of principles. History teaches us, that it takes time for far-sighted and courageous ideas to grow and prosper. It would be wrong to abandon hope because of present obstacles, but we should see the great future that lies within.