Review – Reconstructing the Responsibility to Protect

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Reconstructing the responsibility to protect: From humanitarian intervention to human security
By Michael J. Butler
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Is the doctrine of responsibility to protect (R2P) a dead letter? The answer to this question of subtle yet profound significance is complicated and, for this reason, scholars and students of international relations should welcome Michael Butler's *Reconstructing the Responsibility to Protect*, which not only provides an incisive and nuanced answer but teases out the important implications. On the one hand, R2P has obviously failed. It is rarely invoked by the United Nations Security Council while civilians continue to suffer in humanitarian crises around the world without so much as a shadow of R2P in the offing. An essential element of Butler's contribution is diagnosing this failure. That is, why has R2P floundered given its early promise and extensive support from the international community? An array of factors has beset R2P, including the dilemma of striking a delicate balance between political necessity and ideational ambition, its tenuous international legal foundation, and its Eurocentric bias in which human suffering has become subsumed under liberal-democratic international politics. Yet, the most fundamental cause of R2P's failure has been, and continues to be, its extremely close association—to the level of near conflation—with the issue of humanitarian intervention.

Humanitarian intervention is a vexing and longstanding dilemma bedeviling notions of international legality and ethics. The problem is evident. State sovereignty and the Westphalian model are built on the principle of non-interference and sovereign equality. Suspending the principle of state sovereignty and non-intervention for the purposes of humanitarian intervention—even temporarily—threatens the *sine qua non* of international politics. Unfortunately, despite international support for humanitarian intervention waxing and waning over different eras, a clear and viable solution to this fundamental dilemma does not exist. The obvious problem for R2P is that in bleeding into humanitarian intervention to the point of near equivalency, it is vulnerable to all the problems of the latter.

The real of acuity and paradox of Butler's work becomes evident in his diagnosis of the maladies of R2P. The paradox is that the "failure" of R2P, as the result of its conflation with humanitarian intervention, is not, in fact, a failure of R2P as such but a failure of humanitarian intervention. R2P has not "failed" because it has not been implemented and therefore remains untested—as originally conceived. Although intervention was always a component of R2P, its architects never intended it to constitute the whole of the doctrine. Rather, this "reactive" dimension is one of three dimensions, including rebuilding and, especially, prevention. Taken together, R2P, as originally conceived, was first and foremost an aspirational norm aimed at changing the very structure of international security provision. That it failed to solve the issue of humanitarian intervention is only epiphenomenal to its failure to actualize as a new norm of international security, one in which the international community bears ultimately responsibility for human security. Thus, the version of R2P that eventually materialized, which overemphasized its reactive component, is what failed—not R2P per se. The consequence, and what Butler's invites us to consider, is that the theoretical and normative purchase underpinning R2P has not been exhausted but rather has been ignored. It remains a viable—if untested—resource and guiding doctrine to reimagine security in global politics.

Contrary to some scholars (Glanville and Widmaier, 2020), Butler maintains that R2P—not as a solution to

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humanitarian intervention, but as an aspirational norm intended to transform international security—has not succeeded. But, does this mean that it has "failed," in the fatalistic sense? Butler, as his title suggests, argues that this is not the case, that R2P can be "reconstructed." To make this argument, he introduces the concept of "norm stagnation," thereby contributing to the well-known norm life-cycle model of Finnemore and Sikkink (1998). Breaking from scholarship assuming a linear, progressive process of norm diffusion (Harrison, 2004), Butler argues that stagnation can afflict norms even after they have reached a tipping point due to resistance from opposition, who seek the *status quo ante*, and due to a lack of internalization from ambivalent actors. Such opposition may cause norms to reach a point of stasis in which the future is uncertain. It is precisely this *uncertainty* that simultaneously signals failure and possibility. The failure of R2P is that it has not achieved normative status, which means the promise it once held may be lost. However, the possibility is that embedded in the nonlinearity of the norm life-cycle model, as theorized in Butler's concept of norm stagnation, is the potential for R2P to be resuscitated as a normative project.

The process of norm resuscitation—that is, reconstruction—begins with an objective assessment of the failures of R2P. As stated previously, the principal defect of R2P was its close association with humanitarian intervention. R2P was reduced from an aspirational norm to the latest "solution" to the dilemma of humanitarian intervention. Time and again proponents of R2P were forced to make political concessions to conciliate either their outright opponents or simply those from whom they lacked sufficient support. The result was an "R2P-lite" (Weiss, 2006), a hollowed-out version of R2P whose traction as a norm was paradoxically steamrolled by the very compromises its proponents made to increase its support among the international community. The problem is that for norms to gain traction there should be a broad scope of action in which norms can modify behavior (Shultz et al., 2007). Yet, in its conflation with humanitarian intervention, R2P narrowed the possible scope of action of behavior modification. Unfortunately, "narrowing the scope of relevant behavior in this way is sub-optimal" (Butler, 2025, p.79). Thus, where proponents of R2P went wrong was in abandoning ambition for the false promise of compromise and modesty.

The silver lining, however, is that in straying from the path of ambition, proponents of R2P may now be in a more advantageous position relative to its inception. A key contributing factor to the unsuccessful trajectory of R2P was the early disjuncture between its purpose and the international environment. This disjuncture, according to Butler, in which the insecurity of climate change, predatory market activity, forced migration, and pandemic disease were less evident, is no longer the obstacle to R2P that it once was. Although merely a quarter century has passed since the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty produced R2P, the world has witnessed not only an acceleration of global warming but a global financial crisis and a ruinous global pandemic. In large part, these disasters are—at least in their scope—a function of globalization. And, critically, it is this acceleration of globalization that renders the contemporary international environment propitious for a new iteration of R2P. This time around, however, proponents of R2P should embrace temerity rather than timidity, for the objective is not simply to revisit the quandary of humanitarian intervention; instead, the real objective is the very transformation of international society via a new norm of security provision.

If it has thus far been unclear, the author of this review wholly endorses *Reconstructing the Responsibility to Protect*. Butler's work is insightful, thorough, imaginative, and ambitious. His insight that R2P has not failed because it has never truly been implemented is original and profound. Architects of R2P designed it only to "solve" humanitarian intervention indirectly. Their direct purpose was the creation of a new norm of security provision in which the international community, along with the state, underwrote the security of the (human) individual rather than the security of the state. As Butler argues, this is still possible. Importantly, rather than starting from scratch, scholars, policymakers, and activists should revisit R2P—as it was originally intended. In this way, *Reconstructing the Responsibility to Protect* is, in no small part, an invitation to its readers to reconsider the possibility and promise of R2P. Many avenues for future research are to be found within these pages. What, for instance, does the return of interstate war and a multipolar system mean for R2P and norm diffusion more broadly? How should the doctrines of "protection" and "rebuilding"—two of the three dimensions of R2P—be designed to elicit maximum support from the international community? How does the return of Donald Trump to the presidency of the U.S. bode for R2P? On the one hand, an America-first agenda from the world's most powerful country is naturally inauspicious to a new international norm based on collective responsibility. On the other hand, given the Western bias that has disillusioned would-be proponents from supporting R2P, a less-pronounced international presence for the U.S. may, ironically, bode well for a renewed R2P if the actors that replace the U.S. are able to shed this bias and delimit their focus to

human insecurity rather than political considerations. Ultimately, time will tell, but Butler's work certainly provides ample evidence to give us pause to reconsider what we think we know about the responsibility to protect and the promise it may hold for the future of global politics.

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