

The Responsibility to Protect Has Turned into a Strategic Mistake

Written by Dan G. Cox and Bruce Stanley

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2018/10/01/the-responsibility-to-protect-has-turned-into-a-strategic-mistake/>

DAN G. COX AND BRUCE STANLEY, OCT 1 2018

The current Responsibility to Protect (R2P) concept and movement has its roots in Canada, specifically General Romeo Dallaire's experience commanding a failed UN peacekeeping mission in Rwanda during the Rwandan genocide. After General Dallaire was given an impossible mission with too few soldiers and too many restrictions on the use of force, Canadian military and strategic thinkers began to develop the notion that stronger nations had the right to protect people from mass atrocities whether or not those mass atrocities were committed by the central government or a civilian group within a given country. This moment of clarity where states had the right, but not automatic obligation, was very brief and soon replaced by a hardline approach spearheaded by Sarah Sewall, Samantha Power, and Michele Flournoy in which these and other proponents claimed states had a responsibility to protect people facing mass atrocities. Since states should respond based on their capacity to act, it is not surprising that the United States would be expected to contribute the most in terms of troops and treasure to the R2P endeavor.

The developing R2P doctrine is a strategic mistake because, if fully enacted, would require the United States to intervene in a dozen or more sovereign states simultaneously which would exacerbate the ill will created by the flurry of post-Cold War interventions the United States has already undertaken or is in the process of prosecuting. Further, such a massive scope of military intervention would add further to the US debt crisis. Having said this, one of the yet unreported strategic downsides is the fact that nefarious actors in the world can use this notion to violate sovereign states they feel are not behaving the way they want them to. The biggest abuser of the R2P doctrine is Russia.

While many in the western world believe all nations adhere to international law, the truth is that both Russia and China engage in lawfare. Their lawfare doctrine is aimed at exploiting legal conventions when it suits their strategic aims and flouting the law when it does not. Russia has used the R2P line of argumentation in an attempt to legitimize incursions into Georgia and Ukraine and could use these same arguments for invasions of Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Moldova, Macedonia and other states containing significant Russian diasporas.

In each of these states, ethnic Russians are treated badly often suffering from a lack of educational and employment opportunities. In some cases, ethnic Russian diasporas are discriminated against and sometimes violently abused. Putin can actually make an interesting case that intervention is necessary, although it might not reach the level most would agree is a mass atrocity, one could argue that a future mass atrocity is possible. Putin argues it is imminent when he intervenes exposing yet another strategic problem with R2P. Since all powerful nations are not honestly adhering to western international law, exploitation of the spirit of the law is possible.

The Russians also have an exclave of sovereign territory in Kaliningrad. In 2006, The Lithuanian government prevented the Russians from sending supplies back and forth on a rail line that ran through the Lithuanian countryside. Because of the bad blood between the two countries, Lithuania recently threatened to block access again. If Lithuania does block Russia, Russia would have a pretty solid argument that it needs to protect its people which might result in an invasion of Lithuania in order to re-open the rail line to Kaliningrad. This would cause a crisis within NATO.

In any case, R2P has become a strategic conundrum that is being abused by powerful nations, like Russia, to further

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their own self-interest while it could, over time, become a drain on the US and European economies and the political capital western nations have built with the rest of the world. It is time to honestly examine this movement and ask if a hard-line “responsibility” is strategically viable or if we should move back to a more flexible right to protect.

About the author:

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