

The End of the Responsibility to Protect?

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Critics of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and interventionism in general have long accused international humanitarian action of being a form of imperialism cloaked in humanitarianism. The BRIC/IBSA countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa; hereafter referred to as BRICS) are beginning to unite around this skepticism, countering western enthusiasm. The first four BRICS countries refused to vote in favor of the decision to intervene in Libya due to a desire to pursue policies of non-intervention. When NATO used the UN mandate in Libya to justify regime change, BRICS countries only hardened their support for non-intervention, with South Africa joining the quasi-alliance in the UN. After the recent resolution condemning Syria failed to pass through the UN Security Council, it seemed clear that for many politicians in BRICS countries, humanitarian intervention has become no more than an inappropriate violation of national sovereignty. Consequently, though the intervention in Libya can be considered a success, it has created a general cloud of suspicion surrounding western humanitarian efforts that will continue to be an obstacle to the implementation of the R2P doctrine elsewhere.

The R2P in Libya

In the early weeks of March, it seemed as though the rebel army in Libya was going to be crushed by Muammar Qaddafi's troops. Rebel forces were surrounded in Benghazi when the Security Council passed [Resolution 1973](#) authorizing a No-Fly Zone (NFZ) over Libya in order to protect the civilian population. Though the UN mandate specifically outlined a humanitarian mission to protect the Libyan noncombatants, NATO officials quickly made the decision that Qaddafi must be forced from power. Thus, the mission quickly morphed from the more passive act of enforcing a NFZ to a more offensively minded regime change operation. In conjunction with the rebel forces, NATO air strikes brought down the Qaddafi government. The night that Qaddafi's compound was overrun, in fact, [NATO airships repeatedly struck Tripoli](#) to facilitate the rebel advance. Even today, with Qaddafi on the loose, [NATO missiles are still aiding the efforts](#) of the National Transitional Council.

The Obama administration attempted to use the Libyan example as a way to redefine the way in which the United States formulates its foreign policy. The President and his advisers invoked the Responsibility to Protect to defend the decision to intervene in Libya and later released the Presidential Study Directive on Mass Atrocities that defined preventing potential massacres, like the one in Libya, as "[a core national security interest and a core moral responsibility of the United States](#)." For supporters of R2P, the presidential directive was evidence that the United States was reformulating its approach to atrocities around the world and institutionalizing R2P into American foreign policy.

Moreover, the Obama administration required a multilateral approach to the intervention in order to differentiate American actions in Libya from the unilateralism that came to define the foreign policy of George Bush. President Obama insisted that international action be requested by local forces, approved by



the Arab League and legitimized by the UN. Additionally, the insistence that European allies take the lead facilitated the rise of Obama's 'lead from behind' mantra.

For interventionists in the United States and Europe, the military action in Libya was considered a success: Qaddafi was removed from power without setting the boot of a western soldier on the ground. For the Obama administration, multilateral humanitarian intervention had become the norm.

History might look back favorably on the NATO decision to ensure the fall of the Qaddafi regime. Diplomatically, however, the decision to intervene in Libya and the subsequent expansion of NATO activities outside of the UN mandate were highly controversial. Brazil, Russia, and China [all abstained from the original mandate](#) (along with Germany); South Africa voted in favor, understanding that the resolution [would be used only](#) to protect civilians and allow the delivery of humanitarian aid.

Those states that were skeptical about the intervention were further antagonized by NATO's decision to pursue regime change in Libya. Though NATO officials reiterated their belief that the mission held true to the UN mandate, Russian officials openly accused the alliance of [overstepping its authority](#) and pursuing [regime change in Tripoli](#). As the NATO mission morphed into an offensive aiming at regime change, South African officials expressed frustration at the notion that NATO [had adopted its own agenda](#); China consistently reiterated its support for [maintaining the integrity of Libyan sovereignty](#) and for [finding a peaceful solution to the crisis](#); Brazil and India remained more muted in their criticisms, but have nonetheless [taken stands against the NATO air strikes](#). It is unsurprising, then, that the same countries that criticized NATO's mission creep in Libya were hesitant to cooperate with western powers regarding Syria.

R2P in Syria

Unlike in the Libyan case, the [proposed resolution](#) concerning Syria did not authorize any use of international force or sanctions, but rather was a strict condemnation of the violence. The resolution did, though, hint at the possibility of later sanctions should the violence continue and never explicitly ruled out foreign military action. Chinese foreign ministry spokesman [Ma Zhaoxu said](#) that the resolution would not "ease the situation" and the Russian envoy to the UN, Vitaly Churkin, [called the resolution](#) a way to legitimize "already adopted unilateral sanctions and [an attempt] to forcefully overthrow regimes."

The countries that abstained—Brazil, India, South Africa and Lebanon—all stressed the importance of finding a peaceful settlement through dialogue and reiterated the importance of Syrian territorial integrity. The link between NATO actions in Libya and the unwillingness of western allies to explicitly rule out the use of force in Syria was evident in the reactions of those opposed to the resolution.

South Africa [said that previous council texts](#) "had been abused and implementation had gone far beyond mandates" and that the council "should not be part of any hidden agenda for regime change." The Russian foreign ministry [was even more forthright](#), releasing a statement directly comparing the mission creep in Libya to the Syrian resolution:

Our wording proposals on the inadmissibility of external military intervention are not taken into account. And that, in view of the well-known events in North Africa, cannot but make us wary... The situation in Syria cannot be considered in the Security Council in isolation from the Libyan experience. The international community is wary of the statements being heard that the implementation of the Security Council resolutions in Libya as interpreted by NATO is a model for its future actions to exercise the "responsibility to protect." It's not hard to imagine that tomorrow "united defenders" may begin to apply this "exemplary model" in Syria as well.

The American ambassador to the United Nations [walked out of the UNSC meeting](#) after saying that the US was "outraged that [the UNSC] has utterly failed to address an urgent moral challenge and a growing threat to regional peace and security." American Secretary of State [Hillary Clinton opined](#) that Russia and China needed to "offer their own explanations to the Syrian people" and the [British Foreign Secretary](#) called the

vetoed “deeply mistaken and regrettable.”

While Russia and China wielded their vetoes and received the lion’s share of blame from western capitals, the abstention of South Africa, India, Brazil and Lebanon is perhaps more telling of the major divide within the Security Council. The failure to pass a resolution on Syria is directly related to the actions of the NATO-led intervention in Libya, during which the United States and its allies overtly overstepped the UN mandate authorizing action. More importantly, the disagreements within the Security Council will have a direct impact on the future of the Responsibility to Protect.

The Future of R2P

The inability of the United States and its allies to push through even a watered-down version of the Syrian resolution clearly demonstrates that President Obama’s humanitarian intervention norm is not a global one. The BRICS countries have determined that humanitarianism should not compromise the sovereignty of individual states and should not restrict the rights of governments over domestic matters. This stance, of course, directly contradicts the new humanitarian basis of American foreign policy.

Interestingly, this stand against the interventionism of the R2P in Syria was made possible by the implementation of the same doctrine in Libya. It is impossible to remove the current impasse from the context of the Arab Spring, including the intervention in Libya. Thus, we cannot predict how the world would have responded to the Syrian uprising without NATO’s abuse of Resolution 1973. However, the abstention of South Africa and the accompanying reference to ‘hidden agendas’ perhaps suggests that the South African government felt betrayed by NATO’s regime change operation. Moreover, by repeatedly invoking the potentially illegal NATO action in Libya, the Russia foreign ministry made it clear that their opposition to the western resolution was strengthened by the Libya experience.

Consequently, those who celebrated the multilateral implementation of the R2P doctrine have been disappointed by how powerful developing countries have refused to stand behind R2P in Syria. The refusal to support the resolution on Syria by the BRICS countries demonstrates the clash in ideology that will prevent another multilateral implementation of the R2P. Russia, perhaps the most outspoken BRICS country on this issue, made it clear that the Security Council split was more than semantics, [saying that the opposition to the resolution was](#) “not so much a question of the acceptability of wording as a conflict of political approaches.”

Of course, the ‘conflict of political approaches’ is not new. [Russia and China](#) vetoed imposing sanctions on Zimbabwe in 2008 and blocked a resolution condemning the actions of Burma in 2007. What is new, however, is the growing unity amongst Security Council members against the prospect of international intervention. While the BRICS countries certainly had reservations concerning the efficacy and morality of interventions, the ambitious and legally dubious NATO mission in Libya cemented their opposition to the tactic. Conversely, the United States and many of its European allies used the intervention in Libya to justify the righteousness and necessity of international action.

Whether the devotion of the west to R2P or the BRICS countries’ rejection of international action is better for humanity is irrelevant. The decision of NATO to push for regime change in Libya has brought the BRICS countries—two permanent UNSC members and three aspiring members—together, allied against any further international interventions. While many in the west are using the ouster of Qaddafi in Libya to validate the success of the R2P doctrine, the newly solidified alliance in the Security Council has viewed NATO actions in Libya to effectively block the ability of the west to implement R2P multilaterally. Considering the Obama administration’s disdain for unilateralism, the BRICS countries may have brought an end to the Responsibility to Protect doctrine.