



Rising Powers' Reluctance: India and R2P

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India's approach to R2P demonstrates very well the dilemmas that lead to rising powers' reluctance in global governance.

Rising powers have become indispensable actors in all areas of global governance, yet their approach to many issues has often been ambiguous and hesitant – think of climate change mitigation, which rising powers certainly acknowledge as a problem, but on which they have long been unwilling to accept binding emission targets, pushing instead for Intended Nationally Determined Contributions at the 2015 Paris conference. The same holds true for topics like the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), which touches upon core norms that have long been cherished by rising powers such as state sovereignty and the principle of non-interference.

At the same time, rising powers – or we should rather say powerful countries of the Global South, given the domestic crises that affect countries like Brazil and South Africa – seem to be willing to play an increasingly active role in several fields of global politics also against the backdrop of the United States' retreat from international responsibilities under President Trump. However, in most cases they have not developed a consistent course of action yet.

A notion that captures well rising powers' ambivalent, often indecisive and apparently muddling-through approach to global governance is that of 'reluctance'. Reluctance can be conceptualized as a peculiar way of policymaking that encompasses two necessary and jointly sufficient conditions: hesitation and recalcitrance.

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If we want to identify *hesitation*, we need to look for the following indicators: a lack of initiative, especially on the part of powerful actors like rising powers; delays regarding previously set schedules (e.g., in order to buy time); or ‘flip-flopping’, that is, inconsistent and contradictory policies or statements among members of the same government, or zig-zagging policy shifts. Hesitation therefore reflects the ambivalent and incoherent aspects that are usually associated with reluctance.

Recalcitrance amounts to a lack of responsiveness vis-à-vis the expectations and wishes articulated by important stakeholders and can be observed if an actor ignores or rejects the requests made by such stakeholders, or obstructs the initiatives taken by others to solve a problem. Importantly, both hesitation and recalcitrance need to be in place if we want to classify a policy as ‘reluctant’.

India and R2P

The case of India’s approach to the principle of the R2P is well suited to exemplify a rising power’s reluctance on a key global governance issue. During the Libya crisis of 2011, India was a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, and it abstained on Resolution 1973, which envisaged the creation of a no-fly zone and legitimized the use of all necessary measures short of a foreign occupation to protect Libyan civilians from the attacks by their own government.

India’s abstention can be interpreted as an instance of moderate reluctance: India was hesitant, much like other UNSC members, and especially since it has always put particular emphasis on the norms of sovereignty and non-interference. At the same time, India was somehow recalcitrant as the Indian

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representative voiced several concerns with regard to the resolution. Yet, India's abstention was remarkable as it amounted to a departure from its otherwise strict anti-interventionist approach. India has always rhetorically emphasized sovereignty and non-intervention, despite its own record of interventions in its neighbourhood in the 1980s. At the same time, India has always been one of the largest troop contributors to UN peacekeeping missions, albeit under the condition that these be UN-mandated and UN-led.

The implementation of UNSC Resolution 1973, however, led to much stronger and explicit reluctance on the principle of R2P on the part of New Delhi after 2011. The book *Perilous Interventions* by India's former Permanent Representative to the UN Hardeep Singh Puri constitutes an interesting account of India's approach to the topic. It offers a forceful expressions of India's recalcitrance vis-à-vis a perceived 'Western' appetite for interventionism. Puri clearly sees the intervention in Libya as a misuse of the notion of R2P for regime change and strongly condemns the West: '[t]he only aspect of the resolution which was of interest to them was the "use of all necessary means" – to bomb the hell of out Libya'. Besides recalcitrance, however, hesitation has also formed part of India's approach to R2P after 2011. In fact, India has not developed own initiatives on how to deal with the worst crimes against civilians; and despite its basic agreement with the principle of the Responsibility while Protecting (RwP), which Brazil proposed with the aim to improve the R2P's transparency and accountability, India did not follow up on it.

Conclusion

How can we then interpret India's reluctance on R2P and what lessons might be drawn from this specific case? Generally speaking, reluctance seems to

emerge as a result of normative tensions such as that between the need to protect civilians from the worst crimes, on the one hand, and the long-established norms of sovereignty and non-intervention, on the other. Competing pressures and expectations by domestic and foreign actors on a government can amplify such normative tensions and contribute to a reluctant foreign policy. In any case, however, reluctance does not automatically equate to a dysfunctional policy. In some cases, a reluctant approach can be useful for a government to pursue its goals, and in normative terms it is certainly preferable to blind interventionism. Further research is needed, however, on the drivers and the implications of reluctance in world politics.

Author's note: This text is based on my following articles:

Destradi, Sandra (2017). Reluctance in International Politics: A Conceptualization, *European Journal of International Relations* 23 (2): 315-340.

Destradi, Sandra (2017) India's Reluctant Approach to R2P: Lessons from Perilous Interventions, *Global Responsibility to Protect* 9 (2): 229-236.

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