

Interview: Alex Bellamy

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In this interview Professor Bellamy discusses the successes and failures of the Responsibility to Protect and the future of this doctrine.

Q. The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) is commonly understood to be a global political commitment, endorsed by all Member States of the United Nations at the 2005 World Summit, to prevent genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. Since the endorsement of this concept in 2005, how successful do you feel the international community has been in honouring this commitment?

It all, of course, depends on what we mean by ‘success’. To text for underlying progress, I tend to use three measures:

1. Are states more or less likely to commit atrocities? Here we’ve seen a steady decline that, of course, predates R2P (the commitment to R2P itself being a manifestation of changing international commitment to norms) –

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there's been a blip in the past couple of years owing largely to Syria and South Sudan but the overall trends are still downwards and the 'norm' is a much lower rate of atrocities than in any other decade since WWII.

2. Is the international community more, or less, willing to become engaged when atrocities are committed? For this, I've used the simple proxy of whether the UNSC passes a resolution in response to atrocity crimes (my dataset works on a threshold of 5,000 deliberately caused civilian deaths). Here we've seen clear progress linked to R2P – in the decade prior to R2P the council responded to around three quarters of all qualifying cases (itself up from two thirds in the 1990s), since 2005 that figure has climbed to 100%. In other words, the Council responds in some way or other to every major case of mass atrocity – that is quite a change from past practice.
3. When the international community responds, is protection a priority? Here the change is still more noticeable. Even when the UNSC did act in times of mass atrocity, until quite recently protection was not a priority. In only around a quarter of its responses to civil wars in the 1990s was some form of protection specifically mandated. That grew to around a half in the 2000s, but has now climbed to somewhere north of 90% – i.e. Since R2P not only is the UNSC likely to respond to atrocities, it is also likely to foreground protection in that response.

So, I think the underlying evidence is that R2P has been associated with positive shifts in international behaviour with respect to protection. That doesn't, of course, mean that all of these responses are effective (in some senses since we are talking only of the world's hardest and most difficult crises, we should expect a low success rate) – but if R2P is understood as a 'responsibility to try' to take measures at reasonable cost to protect civilians from atrocities then we have seen positive overall shifts.

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Q. Looking at a specific case of a response by the international community to a humanitarian crisis, the 2011 intervention in Libya was, at the time, heralded as a successful first true test of the R2P. In this instance, the Security Council authorized an intervention to protect civilians citing the R2P. The intervention may have stopped the massacre of civilians, but since 2011 Libya has experienced serious instability. Do you feel that the Libyan case harmed the R2P norm?

First, I'd start with the caveat that the use of force is always controversial, whether in the name of R2P or not, and it was always going to be the case that the use of force connected to R2P would prove controversial. Second, it is important to stress how significant [Resolution 1973](#) was not just for R2P but for the UN Security Council – the first time in its history that it had authorised force against a de jure state for human protection purposes – this is an important precedent of principle. Third, that said, this was never going to be a precedent that would be followed very often – it was caused by a range of contingent factors unlikely to be repeated often.

I'd agree with your assessment of the campaign itself – the intervention prevented a massacre and shortened the civil war. By doing these things, it undoubtedly saved a lot of lives. We need only look at Syria to see what happens when a country falls into protracted civil war. As unstable as Libya is today, it is better than Syria. The problems with Libya were twofold – first, the linking of R2P with regime change, which was done for understandable domestic political reasons, muddied the international normative waters. Second, the failure to sustain the peace raised questions about the efficacy of the intervention. On the latter point, it should be stressed that the UN developed plans for a follow-on mission but these were rejected by the Libyan

authorities themselves. Certainly, however, more pressure should have been brought to bear to get peacekeepers on the ground.

As for the longer term impacts on R2P, the effects were paradoxical. On the one hand, there was significant fallout and criticism of the campaign and the link with regime change. On the other hand and at the same time, the use of R2P has become much less controversial in the UN's political organs. The UNSC has become much more willing to use R2P post-Libya than it was pre-Libya (in fact, subsequent to 1973, the Council issues two more resolutions on Libya itself that contained R2P) and it has even started writing R2P into mission mandates (UNMISS, MINUSMA). Other organs, such as the Human Rights Council and General Assembly have also become more actively engaged (look, for example, at the UNGA's resolutions on Syria and DPRK). So, what's going on here? I think we need to distinguish R2P from the use of force. The former is, by itself, no longer considered controversial and is now a part of common working practice. The latter – whether it is related to R2P or not – remains controversial. What was controversial about Libya was not the invocation of R2P, but the manner in which force was employed. So we have some additional caution on the latter (though I firmly believe that Syria would have panned out exactly as it did had Libya not happened) – in a context where the bar was already set high – but that hasn't stymied the progress of R2P short of coercive force.

Q. Obama has recently said that the biggest mistake of his presidency was the lack of planning for the aftermath of Gaddafi's ouster in Libya. Obviously, effective exit strategies which allow a transition into peace are extremely difficult things to develop. But, aside from putting more pressure on the

Libyan authorities to get peacekeepers on the ground, what work could the international community have done to build peace in Libya?

That's a good question, that I'm not sufficiently well qualified to answer I'm afraid, being an expert on neither Libya nor peacebuilding. I would say two things, however. First, we need to be more modest in our expectations of what outsiders can achieve – incremental change is possible, but rapid development and political harmony was always going to be unlikely. Second, though, clearly the Western powers dropped the ball too rapidly and dramatically, and more could have been done to support the new authorities to establish and maintain order and facilitate political dialogue. Greater and more sustained political engagement might have helped produce better results. Also, the international community – through the UN or EU – could have looked at better options for civilian support for the new authorities.

Q. One of the most notable, and perhaps lamentable, changes to R2P since the 2001 International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty report, was the dropping of the 'Responsibility to Rebuild' – which focused on peacebuilding and exit strategies. Do you feel that getting this component of R2P back on the agenda might help avoid situations like those witnessed in Libya and, if so, how likely do you feel it would be for the international community to commit to this responsibility?

Good question. First, I don't think that Libya panned out the way it did because of the absence of a responsibility to rebuild – it wasn't that relevant actors 'forgot' about peacebuilding, it was simply that the political commitment, strategy and resources from both sides (Libyan and international) were not present. Second, R2P is not a stand alone principle; it exists within a broader framework of international peace and security. The World Summit may not

have included a ‘responsibility to rebuild’ but it did say quite a bit about peacebuilding and established an entirely new architecture within the UN system for it – the Peacebuilding Commission. Last year we had the system wide review of that architecture and there are signs that Member States are quite responsive to, for example, broadening the scope of the Peacebuilding Commission’s work. In terms of understanding post-intervention Libya, I’d suggest that the best lessons to be learned are those from within this peacebuilding architecture and there does seem to be a sense that the key recommendations stemming from the review have purchase in that regard. So that gets me to the third point, which is about political capital. Since 2005, and especially since 2011, the international community’s deeper consensus on R2P has been prefaced on the precise configuration agreed in 2005. I think there’s no will to consider opening that up to include peacebuilding and doing so would, I think, help neither R2P nor the peacebuilding architecture. Much better, I think, to see the two as aligned parts of a common whole agreed in 2005 and to focus on learning the lessons of Libya and reforming peacebuilding as fits that rather than trying to reverse engineer the concepts.

Q. Concerning the legacy of Libya, there have been some analyses that have argued that the Libyan case may have seriously affected the international community’s capacity to respond in a timely and effective fashion to the Syrian crisis. Do you feel that this is the case?

Simple answer; no. I think the international response to Syria would have been pretty much the same had Libya not happened. That’s because the factors actually driving Russian thinking, Western thinking and the positions of relevant regional actors are very much driven by Syrian related concerns and interests that would have been in play irrespective of Libya.

Q. Looking to the future, what do you see as being the greatest challenges for R2P in the next 5-10 years?

1. Conceptual challenges – clarifying the relationship between R2P and non-state armed groups and the relationship between the R2P, counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism policy agendas.
2. Political challenges – the ongoing challenge of persuading states to comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law and also commit the resources and personnel needed to protect populations in need. This will be an ongoing political challenge requiring leadership and involves not just persuading cautious states to get on board but also working with committed states to deepen their engagement.
3. Practical challenges – a) fine tuning early warning and linking it to good understandings of effective early response, so policymakers can be advised of conditions and options with greater confidence; b) developing evidence based guidance on the steps that different sorts of actors (Int Orgs, states, civil society, private sector etc.) can and ought to take to prevent atrocities; c) developing and implementing better strategies for the protection of people from imminent harm, including better approaches to displacement that puts protection at the fore.

Alex J. Bellamy is professor of peace and conflict studies at the University of Queensland. His books include *Kosovo and International Society* (2002), *Security Communities and Their Neighbours: Regional Fortresses or Global Integrators?*(2004), *Understanding Peacekeeping* (edited with Paul D. Williams and Stuart Griffin, 2004), *International Society and Its Critics* (editor, 2004), *Just Wars: From Cicero to Iraq* (2006), and *Fighting*

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