

Q&A with Michael N. Barnett

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How has R2P been implemented?

When the doctrine was first codified there was a lot of ambiguity about when there should be a responsibility to protect. Over the last several years, we've moved toward greater conceptual precision, so that when circumstances of concern arise, we now know whether in fact the doctrine can be applied or not.

The more technical side of implementation is whether you've got parties that are ready to contribute when an R2P situation has been declared—a situation that is still very much dependent on a clear convergence of strategic interests and moral concerns.

When you have a great power who has decided that they care enough to get involved, then you begin to have what may be seen as the implementation of the compliance with R2P. U.N. member states have not yet figured out how to actually close the gap between what's declared as necessary and what's accomplished.

There has been a century long history of states claiming that the international community does at some level have a responsibility to protect the weakest and most vulnerable populations. Is R2P a continuation of this? What are R2P's roots?

There have been other attempts by the international community to protect vulnerable populations. The legacies of humanitarian intervention back in the 19th century provide some of examples. Back then it was simply called civilizing missions. And it was often located under the rubric of "just war."

But the idea behind R2P is that you would find a purpose for the use of force that was beyond self-interest. And, that it was designed to protect whatever vulnerable populations e of concern.

If we think about responsibility to protect as the use of force for human rights or humanitarian concerns, then there has been some form of it in existence in the modern international community for centuries.

What about R2P's more immediate ancestors?

As we think about the immediate progenitors and ancestors of R2P, it has a degree of novelty. Though we can see a series of past episodes that are R2P-like, the clear formulation of an R2P doctrine—one that is not tantamount to humanitarian intervention, and that has a greater degree of consensus than any previous effort—that is a legacy of the 1990s.

Can R2P amount to an attack, or at least a diminution, of a state's sovereignty?

If sovereignty is understood as absolutist, in which sovereignty essentially gives the state permission to do in their house whatever they want, then it could be seen as an attack or relaxation of that conception. Although i would suggest that conception of sovereignty has been fairly rare and is probably limited to the post ww2—1990 period.

If we look at the long history of sovereignty beginning really in the 1600s then what we see is there's always been conditions placed on sovereignty. So in many ways R2P has a long history of precedents to draw upon.

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Tell us about the Arab League's decision on Libya?

The Arab League decision is still a shock to me. It is an example of when parties that have been historically reluctant to accept outside intervention feeling the need to call on R2P if not in name then in spirit. And that's quite a radical development. The Arab League's actions also demonstrates that when you have parties that used to be essentially vehemently opposed to R2P, and when they do accept R2P, it makes it more difficult for the United States to withhold military support.

It's at those moments that the United States is basically forced to match action with rhetoric. And so one of the interesting aspects of Libya is not so much whether it makes it more likely that R2P will be exercised in the future in terms of a declaratory policy, but rather whether it puts a little more emphasis behind the need to draw out the operational policy.

What impact did the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict have on making this case for prevention.

The Carnegie Commission is the unsung hero. When the Carnegie Commission published its report, it was not oblivious to or ignored history. Members of the committee were deeply aware of historical precedents. However in many ways the Carnegie Commission was responding very directly to the times--to the post Cold War. The commission along with some others established the groundwork for the notion of international communities needing to act.

The Carnegie Commission was more on the prevention side than it was on the response side. It was able to establish a theme about the international community's responsibilities: that when deadly violence occurs, it is no longer legitimate to look away or hide behind the principle of noninterference. I give a lot of credit the commission.