

Making Sense of the U.N. Impasse on Syria
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What does the United Nations Security Council rejection of a resolution on the violence in Syria say about the difficulties in advancing the “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P) as a consensus principle and practical policy goal?

Since the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) was unanimously endorsed by heads of state and government at the 2005 U.N. World Summit, political consensus on the principle’s utility has continued to grow. R2P represents a commitment to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. It puts the primary responsibility for protection on the state in question but also assigns responsibility to the international community to provide assistance, if necessary, from peaceful diplomatic and humanitarian measures up to the use of force sanctioned by the U.N. Security Council. So it seems paradoxical that the Security Council still remains unable to respond effectively to the ongoing atrocities being committed in Bashar al-Assad’s Syria. It’s important to distinguish the strong normative consensus on atrocity prevention from the application of the R2P principle in response to specific cases.

The February 4 vetoes by China and Russia on the Western-Arab draft Security Council resolution on the situation in Syria do not halt the advance of the R2P principle as a norm in international affairs, but they do illustrate the challenges in applying the most coercive and controversial tools within the R2P toolbox. Less coercive R2P tools have been applied in Syria, with mixed results. They include the Arab League Monitoring Mission, European Union sanctions, informal support for the Syrian opposition and condemnations by the U.N. Human Rights Council, the General Assembly and U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. The use of coercion against a sovereign yet repressive state will remain controversial, particularly if the geostrategic interests of powerful states do not align with moral imperatives. However, there is increasing recognition that sovereignty implies responsibilities, particularly to protect civilian populations. The pressure on President Assad and his guardians in the Security Council will continue to mount as the casualties increase. Indeed, Ban on February 8 called the Security Council’s failure to agree on a Syria resolution “disastrous,” saying it had encouraged Damascus “to step up its war on its own people.” He said the Arab League had asked for U.N. help on restarting its monitoring mission and that the U.N. stands ready to assist.

At USIP, we are analyzing the political barriers to the prevention of mass atrocities within our Working Group on the Responsibility to Protect, which is co-chaired by former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Ambassador Richard Williamson.

This Working Group, a partnership with the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Brookings Institution, aims to identify concrete steps to bolster the political will of U.S. and international decision-makers to respond in a timely manner to R2P crimes. [See also: Preventing Genocide: A Blueprint for U.S. Policymakers]

How does this political impasse affect the perceived utility of the U.N. Security Council as a tool for fostering peace and dealing with conflict?

The United Nations Charter confers on the Security Council primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security. It gives the Council unique legal authority. However, the Council is a political body and its decisions cannot be divorced from the foreign policies and national interests of its permanent members. The Council functions when the permanent members can identify a common interest and decide to act upon it. The risk of a political impasse is greatest when national interests do not converge, as illustrated by the Russian and Chinese vetoes on Syria. Despite the absence of decisive U.N. action on Syria, the role of the Security Council in international crisis management remains critical. The Council is a dynamic institution and has adapted to rapidly changing priorities in the post-Cold War

era. Civil conflicts, terrorism, weapons of mass destruction and other cross-cutting threats now are staples of its agenda, alongside specific conflicts.

In the 1990s, profound differences within the Security Council regarding state sovereignty, on the one hand, and the moral imperative to act forcefully in the face of gross human rights violations, on the other, prevented the Council from intervening in the Kosovo crisis.

Today, those member states opposing international involvement to protect human life are on the defensive. Thirteen Council members voted in favor of the resolution on Syria, including such R2P skeptics as India, Pakistan and South Africa. Russia is aware of the mounting pressure from the West and most of the Arab world. Just three days after the Security Council vote, Russia's foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, went to Damascus for talks with Assad and to present an alternative proposal to end the violence. Similarly, China is considering sending an envoy to Damascus to try to help resolve the crisis.

What are the motivations of Russia and China? Is Moscow turning more strongly against international pressure—be it military, economic sanctions, or diplomatic—on repressive governments facing popular revolts, namely Libya and now Syria? And how do you interpret China's position on using international pressure against regimes that are attacking their own populations?

The Russian and Chinese vetoes triggered widespread criticism from human rights activists, Western media and the other permanent members of the Security Council. But their vetoes are neither unprecedented, nor surprising. Russia and China have traditionally opposed nonconsensual international efforts to restore stability. They remain the heavyweights within a small but vocal group of R2P critics. China's foreign policy is based on its "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence," including mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. Both countries are reluctant to allow any potential erosion of national sovereignty, particularly if it implies the use of coercive measures against an allied regime or client state. Russia and China are struggling to keep their own dissident domestic voices in check. At the same time, Syria is a close economic partner and geostrategic ally of Russia, while China considers Syria a valuable trading hub. Even amidst the ongoing atrocities, arms shipments from Moscow to Damascus have continued.

The vetoes on Syria also represent a direct backlash following NATO's robust implementation of the Security Council resolutions on Libya. The NATO operation, following the first implementation of R2P in a Chapter VII U.N. mandate, undermined the growing political consensus on R2P and created concerns in Moscow and Beijing, but also in Brasilia and Cape Town, about the potential for the principle being abused for non-humanitarian objectives--in particular, regime change.

Considerable progress has been made in the last decade to clarify and put into operation the R2P principle, but we still have a long way to go to ensure that R2P contributes to the prevention of mass atrocities consistently and effectively.

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