R2P: A New and Unfinished Agenda

Lloyd Axworthy and Allan Rock*

l.axworthy@uwinnipeg.ca and Allan.Rock@uottawa.ca

Received 16 September 2008, accepted 30 October 2008

Abstract
Recent tragedies in Burma, Zimbabwe, Congo and Darfur demonstrate in all too dismaying terms that the international community has a long way to go towards ensuring that when a government manifestly fails to protect its population from a humanitarian catastrophe the precepts of national sovereignty don’t trump human rights. The promise of the principle of the “responsibility to protect” (R2P), embodying the imperative of international action to protect civilians when their own governments fail to do so or are themselves the predators, passed by the World Summit of leaders in 2005, has yet to be fulfilled as a firm international norm.

Keywords
International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty; UN World Summit 2005; climate change; gender; early warning; military intervention; UN Emergency Peace Service; UN Security Council; International Criminal Court; Darfur; Zimbabwe; Burma

Introduction

The impunity with which President Al Bashir in Sudan, President Mugabe in Zimbabwe and the military junta in Burma have carried out acts of repression, combined with the ineffectiveness of the international response, particularly at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and the African Union (AU), have set back efforts to establish standards that hold violence-prone regimes to account. The feeble international response has also triggered a resurgence of national sovereignty assertions, especially from China, India and Russia. Clearly, ever since coalition forces invaded Iraq in 2003 the act of international intervention has become anathema to many – especially in the global south. Support for international engagement to protect civilians has therefore

* We would like to thank Tobia Neufeld, Research Assistant at The University of Winnipeg, for her help in preparing this article.
suffered, largely from a misreading of the purposes of international intervention. The result is that tyrants have been left alone to rape, plunder, and kill. Russia’s cynical invocation of R2P in its attempt to justify its military actions in Georgia has only served to aggravate this problem.¹

But recent events have not been all negative. In Kenya, former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan proved the value of outside engagement when he succeeded in preventing an escalation in post-election violence, an outcome which he saw as an example of R2P in action. The International Criminal Court (ICC), by actively pursuing its legal warrants in Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Uganda, acts as one of the few international institutions attempting to hold war criminals accountable. The ICC has persisted despite a backlash from several countries, including some surprising players such as Canada, who have been lobbying the Security Council to defer ICC actions. Fortunately, the apprehension of Radovan Karadžić in Serbia reminds us of just how important it is to sustain the pursuit of justice in post conflict settlements.

Indeed, the fact that Bosnia-Herzegovina even with all its trials and tribulations is nibbling at the edges of acceptance into the European Union demonstrates that international intervention to stop conflict, as flawed as it often is, followed by extensive efforts at rebuilding and mentoring by agents of the international community, can over time succeed in restoring a sense of normalcy. Too often we do not look carefully enough at what international efforts can achieve, blinded as we are by the failures.

The steps taken by present UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to formalize the R2P principle in the UN system by appointing Francis Deng as Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide and Edward Luck as Special Advisor on the Responsibility to Protect, and the emergence of a well funded NGO to be a clearing house and promoter of the concept (the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect), are encouraging signs. So too is President-elect Barack Obama’s enthusiasm for R2P. Certainly leadership from the United States on this front is long overdue and there is new hope that the team being assembled by the incoming president will reflect a strong commitment to the implementation of R2P principles.² This could be one of the ways in which the new administration can show its intent to re-engage in the advancement of international justice.