

**Statement by Professor Jean Bricmont to the United Nations General Assembly
Interactive Thematic Dialogue on the Responsibility to Protect
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A More Just World and the Responsibility to Protect

I would like, in this talk, to challenge the intellectual assumptions underlying the notion and the rhetoric of R2P. In a nutshell, my thesis will be that the main obstacle to the implementation of a genuine R2P are precisely the policies and the attitudes of the countries that are most enthusiastic about this doctrine, namely the Western countries, and in particular the US.

During the past decade, the world has looked on helplessly as innocent civilians were murdered by American bombs in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. It has been a helpless bystander of the murderous Israeli onslaught on Lebanon and Gaza. Previously, we have seen millions of people perish under American firepower in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos; and many others have died in American proxy wars in Central America or Southern Africa. In the name of those victims, shall we say: never again! From now on, the world, the international community, will protect you!

Our humanitarian response is yes, we want to protect all victims. But how, and with which forces? How are the weak ever to be protected from the strong? The answer to this question must be sought not just in humanitarian or in legal terms, but first of all in political terms. The protection of the weak always depends on limitations of the power of the strong. The rule of law is such a limitation, so long as it is based on the principle of equality of all before the law. Achieving that requires clear-headed pursuit of idealistic principles accompanied by realistic assessment of the existing relationship of forces.

Before discussing politically the R2P, let me stress that what is at issue are not its diplomatic or preventive aspects, but the military part of the so-called “timely and decisive response”, and the challenge that it represents for national sovereignty.

R2P is an ambiguous doctrine. On the one hand, it is being sold to the United Nations as something essentially different from the “right of humanitarian intervention”, a notion that was developed in the West at the end of the 1970's, after the collapse of the colonial empires and the defeat of the United States in Indochina. This ideology has been relying on the human tragedies of the newly decolonized countries to lend a moral justification to the failed policies of intervention and control by the Western powers over the rest of the World.

Awareness of this fact exists in most of the world. The “right” of humanitarian intervention has been universally rejected by the South, for example at the South Summit in Havana in April 2000 or at the meeting of the Non Aligned Movement in Kuala Lumpur in February 2003, shortly before the US attack on Iraq. The R2P is an attempt to fit this rejected right into the framework of the UN charter, so as to make it appear acceptable, by stressing that military actions are to be the last resort, and must be approved by the Security Council. But, then, there is nothing

legally new under the sun, and I refer you to the concept note of the Office of the President of the General Assembly for a precise discussion of the legal aspects of the problem.

On the other hand, R2P is being sold to public opinion in the West as a new norm in international relations, one that authorizes military interventions on humanitarian grounds. For example, when President Obama, at the recent G8 meeting, stressed the importance of national sovereignty, the influential French newspaper *Le Monde* called it a step backwards, since R2P has already been accepted. There is a big difference between R2P as a legal doctrine and its ideological reception in the Western media.

However, in a post-World War II history that includes the Indochina wars, the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, of Panama, even of tiny Grenada, as well as the bombing of Yugoslavia, Libya and various other countries, it is scarcely credible to maintain that it is international law and respect for national sovereignty that prevent the United States from stopping genocide. If the US had had the means and the desire to intervene in Rwanda, it would have done so and no international law would have prevented that. And if a "new norm" is introduced, within the context of the current relationship of political and military forces, it will not save anyone anywhere, unless the United States sees fit to intervene, from its own perspective.

Moreover, it is beyond belief that the supporters of R2P speak of an obligation to reconstruct (after a military intervention). How much money exactly did the United States pay as reparations for the devastation it inflicted on Indochina or in Iraq, or that was inflicted on Lebanon and Gaza by a power it notoriously arms and subsidizes ? Or to Nicaragua, to which reparations for the Contra activities are still unpaid by the US, despite their condemnation by the World Court of Justice ? Why expect R2P to force the powerful to pay for what they destroy if they do not do so under current legal arrangements?

If it is true that the 21st century needs a new United Nations, it does not need one that legitimizes such interventions by novel arguments, but one that gives at least moral support to those who try to construct a world less dominated by the United States and its allies. The very starting point of the United Nations was to save humankind from "the scourge of war", with reference to the two World Wars. This was to be done precisely by strict respect for national sovereignty, in order to prevent Great Powers from intervening militarily against weaker ones, regardless of the pretext. The wars waged by the United States and NATO show that, despite some significant accomplishments, the United Nations has not yet fully achieved this primary goal. The United Nations needs to pursue its efforts to achieve its founding purpose before setting a new, supposedly humanitarian priority, which may in reality be used by the Great Powers to justify their own future wars by undermining the principle of national sovereignty.

When NATO exercised its own self-proclaimed right to intervene in Kosovo, where diplomatic efforts were far from having been exhausted, it was praised by the Western media. When Russia exercised what it regarded as its R2P in South Ossetia, it was uniformly condemned in the same Western media. When Vietnam intervened in Cambodia, or India in what is now Bangladesh, their actions were

also harshly condemned in the West.

This indicates that Western governments, media and NGOs, calling themselves the “international community”, will judge the responsibility for a human tragedy quite differently, depending on whether it occurs in a country where the West, for whatever reason, is hostile to the government, or in a friendly state. The United States in particular will try to pressure the United Nations into endorsing its own interpretation. The United States may not always choose to intervene, but it may nevertheless use non-intervention to denounce the United Nations as ineffective and to suggest that it should be replaced by NATO as international arbiter.

National sovereignty is sometimes stigmatized by promoters of humanitarian intervention, or of R2P, as a “licence to kill”. We need to remind ourselves of why national sovereignty should be defended against such stigmatization.

First of all, national sovereignty is a partial protection of weak states against strong ones. Nobody expects Bangladesh to interfere in the internal affairs of the United States to force it to reduce its CO2 emission because of the catastrophic human consequences that the latter may have on Bangladesh. The interference is always unilateral.

US interference in the internal affairs of other states is multi-faceted but constant and always violates the spirit and often the letter of the UN charter. Despite claims to act on behalf of principles such as freedom and democracy, US intervention has repeatedly had disastrous consequences: not only the millions of deaths caused by direct and indirect wars, but also the lost opportunities, the “killing of hope” for hundreds of millions of people who might have benefited from progressive social policies initiated by people like Arbenz in Guatemala, Goulart in Brazil, Allende in Chile, Lumumba in the Congo, Mossadegh in Iran, the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, or President Chavez in Venezuela, who have been systematically subverted, overthrown or killed with full Western support.

But that is not all. Every aggressive action led by the United States creates a reaction. Deployment of an anti-missile shield produces more missiles, not less. Bombing civilians - whether deliberately or by so-called “collateral damage” - produces more armed resistance, not less. Trying to overthrow or subvert governments produces more internal repression, not less. Encouraging secessionist minorities by giving them the often false impression that the sole Superpower will come to their rescue in case they are repressed, leads to more violence, hatred and death, not less. Surrounding a country with military bases produces more defense spending by that country, not less.

The possession of nuclear weapons by Israel encourages other states of the Middle East to acquire such weapons. The humanitarian disasters in Eastern Congo, as well as in Somalia, are mainly due to foreign interventions, not to a lack of them. To take a most extreme case, which is a favorite example of horrors cited by advocates of the R2P, it is most unlikely that the Khmer Rouge would ever have taken power in Cambodia without the massive “secret” US bombing followed by US-engineered regime change that left that unfortunate country totally disrupted and destabilized.

The ideology of humanitarian intervention is part of a long history of Western attitudes towards the rest of the World. When Western colonialists landed on the shores of the Americas, Africa or Eastern Asia, they were shocked by what we would now call violations of human rights, and which they called “barbaric mores” – human sacrifices, cannibalism, women forced to bind their feet. Time and again, such indignation, sincere or calculating, has been used to justify or to cover up the crimes of the Western powers: the slave trade, the extermination of indigenous peoples and the systematic stealing of land and resources. This attitude of righteous indignation continues to this day and is at the root of the claim that the West has a “right to intervene” and a “right to protect”, while turning a blind eye to oppressive regimes considered “our friends”, to endless militarization and wars, and to massive exploitation of labor and resources.

The West should learn from its past history. What would that mean concretely? Well, first of all, guaranteeing the strict respect for international law on the part of Western powers, implementing the UN resolutions concerning Israel, dismantling the worldwide US empire of bases as well as NATO, ceasing all threats concerning the unilateral use of force, lifting unilateral sanctions, in particular the embargo against Cuba, stopping all interference in the internal affairs of other States, in particular all operations of “democracy promotion”, “color” revolutions, and the exploitation of the politics of minorities. This necessary respect for national sovereignty means that the ultimate sovereign of each nation state is the people of that state, whose right to replace unjust governments cannot be taken over by supposedly benevolent outsiders.

Next, we could use our overblown military budgets (NATO countries account for 70 per cent of world military expenses) to implement a form of global Keynesianism: instead of demanding “balanced budgets” in the developing world, we should use the resources wasted on our military to finance massive investments in education, health care and development. If this sounds utopian, it is not more so than the belief that a stable world will emerge from the way our current “war on terror” is being carried out.

Defenders of R2P may argue that what I say is besides the point or needlessly “politicizes the issue”, since, according to them, it is the international community and not the West that will intervene, with, moreover, the approval of the Security Council. But in reality, there is no such thing as a genuine international community. NATO’s intervention in Kosovo was not approved by Russia and Russian intervention in South Ossetia was condemned by the West. There would have been no Security Council approval for either intervention. Recently, the African Union rejected the indictment by the International Criminal Court of the President of Sudan. Any system of international justice or police, whether it is R2P or the ICC, needs a relationship of equality and a climate of trust. Today, there is no equality and no trust, between West and East, between North and South, largely as a result of past US policies. If we want some version of R2P to work in the future, we need first to build a relationship of equality and trust and what I said before goes to the heart of the matter. The world can become more secure only if it first becomes more just.

It is important to understand that the critique made here of R2P is not based on an “absolutist” defense of national sovereignty, but on a reflection on the policies

of the most powerful states that forces weaker states to use sovereignty as a shield.

The promoters of R2P present it as the beginning of a new era; but in fact it is the end of an old one. From an interventionist viewpoint, the R2P backtracks with respect to the old right of humanitarian intervention, at least in words, and that old “right” was itself a step back from traditional colonialism. The major social transformation of the 20th century has been decolonization. It continues today in the elaboration of a genuinely democratic world, one where the sun will have set on the US empire, just as it did on the old European ones. There are some indications that President Obama understands this reality and it is only to be hoped that his actions will match his words.

I want to end with a message for the representatives, and for the populations, of the “Global South”. The viewpoints expressed here are shared by millions of people in the “West”. This is unfortunately not reflected in our media. Millions of people, including American citizens, reject war as a means to settle international disputes and strongly oppose the blind support of their country for Israeli Apartheid. They adhere to the goals of the non-aligned movement of international cooperation within the strict respect for national sovereignty and equality of all peoples. They risk being denounced in the media of their own countries as being anti-Western, anti-American or anti-Semitic. Yet, they are the ones who, by opening their minds to the aspirations of the rest of mankind, carry on what is genuinely of value in the Western humanist tradition.

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