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The Responsibility to Protect and the Failure to Respond

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The Responsibility to Protect and the Failure to Respond

Abstract

Commentators on global politics frequently observe the abject failure of states and global institutions to respond to local, regional, and global crises ranging from dramatic climatic events, humanitarian crises, warfare and violence, to the continuation of unsavoury rights-abusive regimes. In my own work in the field of the comparative politics of human rights, the types of observations that Abramowitz and Pickering make in this piece are all too common, and have led many in the past to make similar such observations that powerful states constantly engage in a grand human rights “double standard.”

Keywords

Human rights, Humanitarian intervention, Human rights enforcement, United Nations

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The Responsibility to Protect and the Failure to Respond

by Todd Landman

Commentators on global politics frequently observe the abject failure of states and global institutions to respond to local, regional, and global crises ranging from dramatic climatic events, humanitarian crises, warfare and violence, to the continuation of unsavoury rights-abusive regimes. In my own work in the field of the comparative politics of human rights, the types of observations that Abramowitz and Pickering make in this piece are all too common, and have led many in the past to make similar such observations that powerful states constantly engage in a grand human rights “double standard.”

In a 1999 [article in the *New York Times Magazine*](#), David Rieff argued that the selective intervention of states on behalf of human rights is a tragic betrayal of an otherwise impressive “triumph” of human rights in the latter half of the twentieth century. Stephen Krasner has long argued that powerful states will pursue human rights policies when they are in their interests to do so. Somewhat more critically, in [Theory and Reality in the International Protection of Human Rights](#), James Shand Watson contends that the failure of states to prevent a century of state-led violence, genocide, and continued rights abuse, proves that human rights are merely a fiction.

Beyond these various arguments, systematic empirical analysis of foreign aid allocation shows that states behave strategically in often ignoring the human rights practices of recipient states ([particularly now during the “war on terror”](#)), while other cross-national comparative research shows that the impact of international human rights law on state behavior is non-existent, counter-intuitive, or in the case of my own research, “significant, but limited.” Indeed, it appears that domestic processes of economic development and democratization, coupled with greater openness to international linkages through non-governmental and inter-governmental organizations serve as important supporting conditions for improvements in human rights protection on the ground.

Any assessment of the plight of billions of people around the globe will undoubtedly recognize that real efforts to match in reality what is pledged rhetorically requires some sort of commitment, or “buy in” from today’s great powers. This, however, is an old chestnut of internationalism that has been with us from the early realist arguments found in Thucydides and Machiavelli, through the attempts to establish the League of Nations, the debates to give real teeth to the United Nations, the latest efforts to fortify the security and rights mechanisms within the U.N. (as well as within the regional systems of Europe, Latin America, Africa, and Asia), to the establishment of the International Criminal Court.

In addition to the different experiments mentioned by Abramowitz and Pickering, I would add the Community of Democracies (which is restricted to democracies) and the U.N.-sponsored International Conferences of New and Restored Democracies (which are open to all member states) that have been organized since 1988 and currently chaired by Qatar. But any of these projects is always subject to the *realpolitick* of the great powers, whoever they may be at the

time a potential solution is offered. Abramowitz and Pickering are fully cognizant of this point as they discuss the difficulty of overcoming the veto on the U.N. Security Council and in realizing their modest idea of a small U.N. force that could respond to various crises in the world. In addition to the absence of response to the typhoon in Myanmar, the impotence of the United States and European Union in the face of the situation that developed recently in Georgia shows the limits and additional challenges to breaking this cycle of selectivity.

Perhaps one way to proceed is to start to cast human rights and humanitarian arguments in realist terms. Is it not in the national interests of states to surround themselves and to associate themselves with what Jack Donnelly calls “[rights-protective](#)” states? Can the rationalist approach and the realist paradigm (even in their most material manifestations), as well the real decision makers within the world’s great powers, incorporate the idea that the promotion of democracy, the rule of law, and the protection of human rights are actually in their interests as an *end* in themselves and as a *means* to achieving greater overall security and peace?

For too long, such arguments have been cast *as against* realism rather than *within* realism. Some worry that repeating the realist mantra (especially to international relations students) becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, but the observable behavior of states in terms of their selective attention to the world’s humanitarian and human rights problems (either immediate or long term) suggests that the balance of evidence still very much weighs in favor of the realist perspective. It thus seems that if any progress can be made, it is within realism and within the minds of policy makers who are worried about national interests and national security on a daily basis. The proposals offered by Abramowitz and Pickering are certainly laudable, but their realization will need to confront the challenge of incorporating humanitarian and human rights concerns into a realist world.

Dr. Todd Landman is Director of the Centre for Democratic Governance, Department of Government, at University of Essex. He is author of Issues and Methods in Comparative Politics, 3rd Edition (Routledge 2008), Studying Human Rights (Routledge 2006), and Protecting Human Rights (Georgetown 2005); co-author of Governing Latin America (Polity 2003) and Citizenship Rights and Social Movements (Oxford 1997); and co-editor of the Sage Handbook of Comparative Politics (Sage 2009). Dr. Landman has served as international human rights and democracy consultant for UNDP, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, CIDA, DFID, DANIDA, IDEA, UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Foreign Ministry of the Netherlands, Foreign Ministry of Mongolia, International Centre for Human Rights Policy, and Minority Rights Group International. His personal website can be found at <http://privatewww.essex.ac.uk/~todd>.