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A Break from the Old Routine....

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A Break from the Old Routine....

Abstract

Abramowitz and Woocher highlight a potentially significant shift in policy discourse in international relations with respect to humanitarianism and the prevention of genocide. For many years, the United States has suffered from the twin problems of the human rights “double standard” and “Catch-22.” On the one hand, particular countries have been seen as vital by the United States for intervention on humanitarian grounds even though many believed other geostrategic interests are at stake (e.g. Kosovo in 1999) and others have not (e.g. Rwanda in 1994). On the other hand, US intervention on humanitarian grounds can be criticized as heavy-handed or masking true intentions, or its failure to act can be criticized. It is thus compelling to examine this new way of thinking about genocide, and to reflect on how the logic itself could be applied to concerns that go well beyond genocide.

Keywords

Human rights, United States national security, United States foreign policy, Genocide, Conflict prevention

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A Break from the Old Routine....

by Todd Landman

Abramowitz and Woocher highlight a potentially significant shift in policy discourse in international relations with respect to humanitarianism and the prevention of genocide. For many years, the United States has suffered from the twin problems of the human rights “double standard” and “Catch-22.” On the one hand, particular countries have been seen as vital by the United States for intervention on humanitarian grounds even though many believed other geostrategic interests are at stake (e.g. Kosovo in 1999) and others have not (e.g. Rwanda in 1994). On the other hand, US intervention on humanitarian grounds can be criticized as heavy-handed or masking true intentions, or its failure to act can be criticized. It is thus compelling to examine this new way of thinking about genocide, and to reflect on how the logic itself could be applied to concerns that go well beyond genocide.

In reviewing recent thinking about genocide in general and the crisis in Sudan, Abramowitz and Woocher argue that the new thinking links humanitarian arguments based on an appeal to morals to a realist focus on US national interests. Genocide (or the threat of genocide) brings with it a mix of ills, including regional destabilization, radicalization, migration, and other “spillover” effects that have variable impacts on US interests. For far too long, human rights and humanitarian appeals have fallen on deaf ears, since they have been cast in moral terms only, and have not sought to make the connection to the vital interests of the very global powers that are needed to enforce international standards. This linkage is thus welcome if it catches the attention of the very audiences that have hitherto eschewed such concerns on statist and realist grounds.

If Stephen Krasner is correct (and I think he is) in his book *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton 1999) about the need for world powers to enforce human rights standards, then these powers are needed to develop the arguments, structures, and strategies to prevent (if possible) or respond to genocide. But in the post-Bush era, such a development in policy must not be unilateral and US-centric. Rather, it must be multilateral, use the institutions and norms that have been constructed since the Second World War, and offer real solutions to the threat of genocide.

The United States cannot go it alone, partly for the historical reasons of the double standard and Catch-22 outlined above, and partly because of the reality of global politics with the rise of the [BRIC](#) powers and the reduced fiscal capacity of the United States as it recovers from the current financial crisis. Despite Obama’s victory and a shift in attitude within US foreign policy, the world remains sufficiently skeptical of US motives that makes any unilateral strategy on genocide difficult to sustain. Moreover, the resources required for the prevention and response to genocide are large, suggesting that cooperation with key partners and allies in setting up the institutions and capacity for this policy is essential if it is to be successful.

The [Albright-Cohen Genocide Prevention Task Force](#) lays out a feasible and sensible blueprint, but perhaps too much emphasis is placed on political will and leadership, which are highly variable and time-dependent, whereas structures, institutions, and monitoring systems that use the best available data and evidence can offer long-term solutions to the problem of genocide “detection” and prevention. Conflict and human rights research have made many advances in the

collection and analysis of data at the local, national, and international level that can help assist in the development of appropriate systems.

The new thinking is a major step in the right direction and Obama can and should show leadership on this issue (as he has done on healthcare reform). However, long-term solutions rest on developing and funding multilateral institutions, increasing aid contributions to those areas of the world most in need and most at risk of genocide, and linking humanitarian arguments with vital national interests of the countries that have the power and capacity to prevent the worst forms of mass atrocity.

Todd Landman is Professor of Government and Director of the Institute for Democracy and Conflict Resolution at the University of Essex. His most recent publications include Measuring Human Rights (Routledge 2009), Human Rights, Volumes I-IV (Sage 2009), and the Handbook of Comparative Politics (Sage 2008). He carries out numerous international consultancies in the area of development, democracy, and human rights. www.todd-landman.com