

# Human Rights & Human Welfare

---

Volume 12

Issue 5 *October Roundtable: UN Secretary-General Report on "Responsibility to Protect: Timely and Decisive Response"*

Article 5


---

10-1-2012

## Strategies & Decisiveness: What Is Implied by a "Timely and Decisive Response" for RtoP Situations

H. M. Roff  
*University of Denver*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw>

 Part of the [Human Rights Law Commons](#), [International Humanitarian Law Commons](#), [International Law Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), and the [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Roff, H. M. (2012) "Strategies & Decisiveness: What Is Implied by a "Timely and Decisive Response" for RtoP Situations," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 12: Iss. 5, Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol12/iss5/5>



All Rights Reserved.

This Roundtable is brought to you for free and open access by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Human Rights & Human Welfare by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact [jennifer.cox@du.edu](mailto:jennifer.cox@du.edu), [digitalcommons@du.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@du.edu).

---

## Strategies & Decisiveness: What Is Implied by a “Timely and Decisive Response” for RtoP Situations

### Abstract

Reflecting upon United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's recent report concerning the third pillar of the Responsibility to Protect (RtoP), on the "timely and decisive response," two items become clear to me. First is that the third pillar is inherently coercive in nature, even though the report and many RtoP pundits stress that it entails more than merely sanctioning the use of force. Second is that this is unsurprising if we recall that the purpose of RtoP is to ensure the protection of particular human rights (rights against: genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing) and that having a right against others necessarily entails, in Kant's words, "an authorization to use coercion." I draw these two conclusions from the report's emphasis on developing a "strategy" and the continued employment of the terms "timely and decisive" response. Both the terms "strategy" and "decisive" are militaristic in character, and so imply a coercive means to the realization of political ends.

### Keywords

Human rights, United Nations, Responsibility to protect, Military intervention

### Copyright Statement / License for Reuse



All Rights Reserved.

### Publication Statement

Copyright is held by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver. User is responsible for all copyright compliance.

## Strategies & Decisiveness: What is Implied by a “Timely and Decisive Response” for RtoP Situations

by H.M. Roff

Reflecting upon United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's recent report concerning the third pillar of the Responsibility to Protect (RtoP), on the "timely and decisive response," two items become clear to me. First is that the third pillar is inherently coercive in nature, even though the report and many RtoP pundits stress that it entails more than merely sanctioning the use of force. Second is that this is unsurprising if we recall that the purpose of RtoP is to ensure the protection of particular human rights (rights against: genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing) and that having a right against others necessarily entails, in Kant's words, "an authorization to use coercion." I draw these two conclusions from the report's emphasis on developing a "strategy" and the continued employment of the terms "timely and decisive" response. Both the terms "strategy" and "decisive" are militaristic in character, and so imply a coercive means to the realization of political ends.

The concept of "strategy" is consequentialist; it is about matching means to ends. Historically, strategists were a class of political-military geniuses whose primary purpose was to use any means available to them to achieve foreign or domestic policy goals. Typically, then and today, the means utilized are coercive. That is, they employ power or force to obtain compliance with a desired outcome. While it is outside the scope of this response to offer a detailed analysis of the use of power in international politics, we can make the argument that many of the "tools" of RtoP are coercive. Negotiation, enquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement, and such are ultimately aimed at "hindering" the target state's actual or intended rights violations of its citizens by some sort of juridical mechanism, such as public shaming, or domestic or international audience costs. While these avenues are *less* coercive than sanctions, and sanctions are *less* coercive than military action, the core of coercive activity remains. One is forcing a state to behave. We can see the point more clearly when we link the tools of RtoP with the phrase "timely and decisive".

To provide a "timely and decisive" response only makes sense in military parlance. To be "decisive" is to strike effectively at a "decision point," that is, the site where an adversary is most vulnerable. For example, fighting against a hierarchically ordered terrorist organization requires that one take out the top leaders to succeed. The decision point, then, is the top leadership. We know that the strike is effective because it turns the engagement to one's favor. In terms of RtoP, we might say that whatever the decision point is, once it is hit, the target state, government, or leader ceases violating rights associated with RtoP. Such a decision point will vary depending upon the state, the leader, the conflict, and the type(s) of rights violation, and so any "decision point," or what Clausewitz and current military services call "centers of gravity," cannot be determined without reference to a specific case. Thus Ban is right to stress that "each situation is distinct" and that "the choices of methods and tools employed in each situation should be shaped by the circumstances on the ground and by informed judgment of the likely consequences." Where he is weak, however, is understanding that by responding – either "early and effectively" or (contrarily) "late" and "decisively" – one is always responding coercively because one is using a particular means to influence the actions of a state that would otherwise continue acting as it

desires (i.e. violating rights). By using power in this way, one is hindering the violation of a right, and by such hindrance the act is coercive; it just might be more or less so.

Timely and decisive responses are, therefore, only comprehensible as operational or tactical level determinations in the pursuance of a larger RtoP strategy. The result of this semantic analysis is twofold: it does no favors to RtoP to dress it up as a non-coercive norm, even though many would argue that it is impolitic to say so; and it makes no sense to discuss "timely and decisive" responses without taking stock of the militaristic and strategic implications. "Decisiveness" is necessarily coercive, as one has to employ force against a point until it capitulates. Perhaps states are aware of this fact, and this is why there is such reticence to actually develop an RtoP strategy.

&nbsp;

---

*After earning her Ph.D. in political science at the University of Colorado - Boulder, H.M. Roff pursued her research interests on international ethics and the ethics of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine. Dr. Roff's approach to international ethics is particularly Kantian, and she is also a recognized Kant scholar. Her research stays and affiliations include being a research fellow at the Lehrstuhl für Strafrecht, Strafprozessrecht und Rechtsphilosophie, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität, Erlangen-Nürnberg in Germany, and she continues to affiliate as a research fellow at the Eisenhower Center for Space and Defense Studies at the United States Air Force Academy. She is currently a Visiting Associate Professor at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver. Dr. Roff's publications include, *Global Justice, Kant and the Responsibility to Protect* (Routledge, forthcoming); "A Provisional Duty of Humanitarian Intervention" (*Global Responsibility to Protect*, 2011), "Kantian Provisional Duties" (*Jahrbuch für Recht und Ethik/Annual Review for Law and Ethics*, 2010), and "A Response to Pattison: Whose Responsibility to Protect?," (*Journal of Military Ethics*, 2009).*