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Failure through Consensus Building: Rethinking the Normative Status of the Responsibility to Protect in a Pluralist Global Order

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Abstract

The status and validity of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) norm have increasingly come under intense scrutiny given the significant outbreaks and scale of atrocity crimes continuing to occur globally. Yet despite claims of the norm's inevitable death, there remains broad rhetorical support, with the R2P still frequently invoked by states. In seeking to explain this puzzle, the article focuses on the role of consensus-building practices in shaping normative change, outlining the key drivers of the R2P's shift toward a less intrusive and more long-term-focused approach to mass atrocity prevention. Building on constructivist research into norm decay, the article argues that this growing emphasis on prioritizing consensus and the continued hybridization of the R2P is in fact further eroding the effectiveness of the norm as it is incorporated into a broader norm cluster, downplaying the R2P's unique focus as well as reinforcing the centrality of state sovereignty. Consequently, the growing consensus around a co-opted version of the norm has worked to restrict aspects of its application in practice despite increased rhetorical support from member states. The article therefore provides new insights into the role of rising powers in the process of norm shaping in an increasingly pluralist global order. Through this analysis, it is argued that a greater focus on the negative impact consensus-building practices can have on norm status and effectiveness is required in order to help improve understanding of the complex process of norm decay.

El estatus y la validez de la norma de Responsabilidad de Proteger (R2P, por sus siglas en inglés) se han encontrado bajo un intenso escrutinio debido al importante recrudecimiento y a la escalada de la cantidad de crímenes atroces que continúan ocurriendo en todo el mundo. Sin embargo, a pesar de las afirmaciones sobre la muerte inevitable de la norma, esta sigue teniendo un amplio apoyo retórico, y la R2P todavía es invocada con frecuencia por los Estados. Con el fin de intentar explicar esta paradoja, el artículo se centra en el papel que ejercen las prácticas de construcción de consenso sobre la formación del cambio normativo, esbozando, para ello, los principales impulsores del cambio de la R2P hacia un enfoque menos intrusivo y más centrado en el largo plazo para la prevención de atrocidades masivas. El artículo parte de la investigación constructivista sobre la decadencia de las normas y argumenta que este creciente énfasis en priorizar el consenso y la continua hibridación de la R2P están, de hecho, perjudicando aún más la efectividad de la norma a medida que esta se incorpora en un grupo de normas más amplio, minimizando el enfoque único de la R2P y reforzando la centralidad de la soberanía del Estado. En consecuencia, el creciente consenso en torno a una versión reapropiada de la norma ha conseguido restringir aspectos de su aplicación en la práctica, a pesar del aumento del apoyo retórico por parte de los Estados miembros. Por lo tanto, el artículo proporciona nuevas perspectivas con respecto al papel de las potencias emergentes en el proceso de formación de normas en un orden global cada vez más pluralista. A través de este análisis, argumentamos que se requiere llevar a cabo un mayor enfoque sobre el impacto negativo que las prácticas de construcción de consenso pueden ejercer sobre el estatus y la efectividad de las normas, con el fin de ayudar a mejorar la comprensión del complejo proceso de decadencia de las normas.

L'on s'intéresse de plus en plus au statut et à la validité de la norme Responsabilité de protéger (R2P), étant donné les importantes survenues et l'échelle des atrocités commises encore aujourd'hui dans le monde. Pourtant, malgré l'affirmation de la fin inévitable de cette norme, elle recueille encore un large soutien rhétorique, les États évoquant encore fréquemment la R2P. Afin d'éclaircir cette énigme, l'article se concentre sur le rôle des pratiques de recherche de consensus quand il s'agit de façonner l'évolution normative. Ce faisant, il décrit les facteurs clés de l'adoption progressive d'une approche centrée davantage sur le long terme et moins intrusive de la prévention des atrocités de masse par la R2P. Se fondant sur la recherche constructiviste concernant l'affaiblissement des normes, l'article affirme que cet accent croissant sur la priorisation du consensus et l'hybridation continue de la R2P continuent finalement d'éroder l'efficacité de la norme, alors qu'on l'intègre dans un groupe plus large de normes. La focalisation unique de la R2P est minimisée, la centralité de la souveraineté étatique renforcée. Par conséquent, le consensus croissant autour de la version de la norme adoptée a contribué à restreindre les aspects de son application en pratique, malgré un soutien rhétorique croissant de la part des États membres. Aussi l'article apporte-t-il de nouvelles informations quant au rôle des puissances émergentes dans le processus de façonnement des normes au sein d'un ordre mondial de plus en plus pluraliste. Par cette analyse, l'on affirme qu'il faut prêter une attention

plus importante sur les conséquences négatives que peuvent avoir les pratiques de recherche de consensus sur le statut et l'efficacité d'une norme si l'on souhaite enrichir notre compréhension du processus complexe d'affaiblissement des normes.

Key words: R2P; norms; rising powers; consensus building; Brazil; China.

Palabras clave: R2P; Normas; Potencias Emergentes; Construcción de Consenso; Brasil; China.

Mots clés: R2P; Normes; Puissances Émergentes; Recherche de Consensus; Brésil; Chine.

Introduction

The status and validity of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) norm have increasingly come under intense scrutiny given the significant outbreaks of atrocity crimes continuing to occur globally, in cases such as Gaza, Sudan, Myanmar, and Ethiopia, alongside the consistent failure of states and international institutions to limit and prevent such atrocities. The initial development of the R2P norm, formally adopted in the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document, aimed to radically shift expectations for how states and the international community should respond to the threat of mass atrocity crimes. This required placing a much stronger emphasis on the specific responsibility of every state to protect their own populations from mass atrocity crimes and the role of the international community to assist, and in some cases, take collective action to protect populations. Yet in light of the continuing failures of states and the wider international community to live up to this original ambition in the following decades, an increasing amount of literature on the R2P has suggested the norm may finally be dead (Al-Oraibi 2021; Mott 2024), or at a minimum no longer relevant to shaping debates over how states can and should respond to mass atrocity crimes (Moses 2024).

Nevertheless, despite the significant growth in claims of the norm's inevitable decline, there still remains a significant level of rhetorical consensus among UN member states when it comes to key aspects of the R2P norm. As Scherzinger (2023, 81) has evidenced, the R2P is still "frequently invoked in Security Council deliberations" in which the "overall levels of affirmative language have remained remarkably stable over time." However, as Scherzinger (2023, 83) also goes on to highlight, the potential of "future military interventions, sanctioned under the norm, seems unlikely," in part due to the contrasting positions of the Security Council's permanent members. Consequently, there is a need to better explain this apparent contradiction and to more directly address the question recently posed by R2P critic Hehir (2024, 208) as to "why the R2P norm emerged, proliferated but then has *not* led to a significant change in the behaviour of states as normative models would suggest." It is in response to this puzzle that this article is initially framed, working to more comprehensively theorize the dynamics behind the R2P's con-

tinued rhetorical support and the contrasting lack of effective response to ongoing mass atrocity crimes.

Central to addressing this puzzle is to understand how the focus of the R2P norm has evolved over time and to better assess the key drivers of this normative change and its impact on the norm's status and application. The starting point for this analysis is to recognize the varying levels of support across the R2P's three-pillar structure.[1] One can therefore point to a growing level of consensus built around the first two pillars of the R2P in contrast to the increasingly contested nature of Pillar III and its connection to the potential use of force. Critical to this growing division between the pillars has been the movement toward a greater emphasis on the use of preventive measures and development initiatives supported by UN member states, the UN Secretariat, and Non-Governmental Organzations (NGOs). This is most succinctly reflected in the UN (2023) Secretary General Report on R2P, which was solely focused on developmental deficits and the problems of state fragility as potential triggers for mass atrocity crimes, reinforcing the importance of Pillars I and II. At the same time, member states have sought to further restrict the R2P's intervention focus under Pillar III, along with any other practices that might be seen to directly challenge state sovereignty, either formally or informally. This shift can be seen to speak to a growing emphasis on consensus building around specific aspects of the norm following the heightened applicatory contestation in the years following the actions of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) forces in the 2011 Libyan intervention (Nuruzzaman 2022).

In response, this article examines how the prioritization of what must be defined as a thin form of rhetorical consensus under Pillars I and II has shaped debates over the application of the R2P norm. In particular, the emphasis states have placed on supporting practices that generate the least resistance, separate from wider questions concerning effectiveness. A key consequence of such practices has been the increased acceptance of a predominantly

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[1] R2P's three-pillar framework was first articulated in the UN Secretary General's 2009 report. Pillar I of the framework recognizes the responsibility of states to protect their own populations, Pillar II emphasizes the international community's responsibility to encourage and assist states to protect, and Pillar III recognizes the responsibility of the international community to take collective action if a state is manifestly failing to protect its populations.

state-centric interpretation of the R2P, one in which the primary responsibility of the state is reinforced, while the role of the international community to respond is downplayed or limited to less coercive actions (Welsh 2019; Barber 2023a). The consequences of this significant normative shift have so far been under-theorized. While there are huge potential upsides to a more preventive-focused approach to addressing mass atrocity crimes, the effectiveness and motivations behind current practices require further analysis. In particular, the extent to which a greater focus on specific forms of consensus building and less intrusive responses may ultimately weaken a norm's overall effectiveness and validity.

To develop this analysis, the article builds on recent constructivist norm scholarship to help provide a new conceptualization of the role of consensus-building practices in the process of norm development. Previously, much of the focus on the importance of consensus building has concerned the initial norm diffusion process, in which emphasis is placed on the role of formal negotiations in bringing about new collective consensus for a norm in order for it to become institutionalized (Park 2006). This is most apparent in the R2P norm research concerning the negotiation of the 2005 WSOD (Murthy and Kurtz 2015). Consequently, the idea of consensus building is most often viewed as having a singular positive impact, one that is integral to norm development and institutionalization. Consequently, while there has been a growing focus on assessing norm strength and robustness (Evers 2017; Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2019), much of the norm literature has failed to fully conceptualize how consensus-building practices shape the strength and validity of a norm beyond the institutionalization process. In particular, the connection between practices of consensus building and norm co-option.

For example, in recent research by Deitelhoff and Zimmermann (2020, 53) theorizing norm decay, they argue that a norm may change its scope but only loses its robustness when a change comes "hand in hand with decreased acceptance and decreased compliance." Yet what this fails to fully capture is the potential for a norm to change over time in ways that severely weaken its potential application and effectiveness without there being a clear overall decrease in acceptance or sustained challenge when it comes to noncompliance. In response, this article provides new theoretical analysis of how the development of thin consensus-building practices can, in fact, work to generate a slower form of norm decay, most often through connected practices of norm co-option. In this sense, the push to maintain limited forms of consensus can work to justify and support actions that over time severely weaken the norm's effectiveness yet without creating a sustained backlash against

the norm's existence. Rather than categorizing the R2P as experiencing a period of "norm stagnation" (Butler 2024a, 74), one can better categorize its status as one of gradual decay through co-option. Consequently, the R2P's original conception as a distinct normative project is now in decline, as states increasingly appeal to less contentious normative principles in a more pluralist global order.

The contribution of the article is therefore twofold; first of all, it provides new insight into the long-term impact of consensus-building practices on the status and value of international norms. Most notably evidencing how thin normative consensus can also work to severely impact the overall effectiveness of a norm, most notably through the connected practices of norm co-option. Second, it reinforces the importance of focusing greater attention on how changing geopolitical circumstances can create the space for normative innovation. In particular, highlighting the role of rising powers in the process of norm shaping as well as the impact changing power dynamics have on the space for norm innovation and co-option.

The article is split into four key sections. To begin, the article outlines the overall theoretical framework of analysis, drawing on key debates in the constructivist research of international norms. In doing so, it focuses on the under-researched role of norm consensus building, outlining how such practices can lead to forms of norm co-option. Through this analysis, it is possible to highlight how the process of consensus building around the R2P norm has increasingly focused on the implementation of limited and less intrusive forms of practice over time. In the second section, the article explores the changing nature of international society's normative priorities, shaped by two heavily interconnected factors. These are the influence of rising powers in a changing global order and the parallel decline of Western support for upholding liberal values in the face of rising nationalism. These two factors help explain why a more consensus-focused approach to the R2P has gained favor and the broader motivations behind the different state actors involved. The third section evidences the R2P's normative shift through a textual analysis of meeting records and country statements from UN General Assembly meetings on the R2P, both formal and informal, from 2009 to 2024. The coding of these documents focuses on the specific role of key rising powers, most prominently Brazil and China, and the rhetorical strategies and framings they have utilized in reshaping the focus of the R2P norm over this time period. Through this analysis, one can evidence a clear shift toward incorporating the R2P norm into broader, longer-term, and less contentious practices of human protection. In the fourth section, the article outlines the negative consequences of the

current consensus-building actions by states for the effectiveness of the R2P, highlighting how a reliance on less contentious practices can slowly weaken the original value of the norm. To conclude, it is argued that a greater focus on the negative impact consensus building practices can have on norm status and effectiveness is required to help improve understanding of the norm decay process in an increasingly pluralist global order.

Theorizing Normative Change: The Impact of Norms

Constructivist theory provides an essential framework for theorizing how "new norms emerge and diffuse" and thus change the behavior of international actors (Bloomfield 2016, 311). Central to mapping this change has traditionally been a focus on creating models through which the progress of norms can be traced (such as the norm lifecycle and spiral models) in order to better understand the stages a norm must go through in order to reach acceptance by the international community (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Risse and Sikkink 1999). The emphasis in these approaches is therefore heavily focused on tracking state compliance to norms, whereby states are seen to be pressured into adoption through a process of socialization dictated by the key influence of norm entrepreneurs. However, this form of constructivist scholarship has often been criticized for its implicit emphasis on what constitutes progress in international society and, furthermore, a lack of exploration into how states may contest and challenge the construction and implementation of such norms (Krook and True 2012). Part of the problem has been how orthodox models of normative change have "portrayed predominantly linear and diffusionist logics of norm evolution that underplay the complex interaction implicit in unpredictable outcomes at the systemic level" (Hunt 2016, 761). In response, an increasing body of literature has emerged that seeks to highlight contestation as a major conceptual concern for norm research (Wiener 2004; Welsh 2013; Niemann and Schillinger 2017). Central to this new emphasis on contestation has been a focus on the limitations of institutionalization, which is argued not to necessarily represent a moment of triumph for norms. Contestation over meaning can therefore persist, particularly as new circumstances and crises arise. Instead of seeing norms as "fully institutionalised once they are accepted by governments" a greater focus on implementation opens up the possibility of analyzing "how international norms are then diffused from state capitals through a range of regional and local levels" (Betts and Orchard 2014, 12). Tracking this process of diffusion is crucial to understanding how

the R2P has evolved in practice over the last two decades, in which rising powers, in particular, have been effective in reshaping debate around what practices should be central to the R2P's implementation.

As Deitelhoff and Zimmermann (2020, 52) have argued, there are most often two types of normative contestation occurring. validity contestation, which focuses on clarifying whether a norm is appropriate for a given situation, and applicatory contestation, which focuses on what actions the norm requires in a specific situation. It is ultimately the question of what actions should constitute effective R2P action in a concrete situation where the majority of contestation has historically focused (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2020, 62). This form of contestation thus has the potential to not just weaken the norm but in some circumstances can work to generate new forms of consensus (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2020, 57). In the case of the R2P, contestation over how the norm is applied has left considerable room for states to present new interpretations of how the R2P can be implemented in practice, resulting in a shift away from more interventionary and intrusive practices under the R2P. To further explain this process, one must also recognize the R2P as being a "complex norm" one with a range of prescriptions in which the failure of a government to protect its population can be seen to trigger a wide range of responses by the international community (Rhoads and Welsh 2019, 603). Thus, the norm has previously been seen as "particularly vulnerable to applicatory contestation, given that states can debate whether certain pillars should have greater emphasis (Welsh 2019, 56). Yet as the textual analysis will later highlight, the complex nature of the norm is important in explaining the growing consensus around Pillars I and II of the norm.[2] Both are now widely accepted and continually acknowledged by states, while at the same time, the potential for action to be taken under Pillar III is deeply contested and increasingly viewed as separate from the core aims of the R2P norm itself.

However, the growing consensus around Pillars I and II must ultimately be defined as a form of thin rather than thick consensus. In this sense, while there has been increased rhetorical acceptance when it comes to reinforcing the R2P norm's focus on the importance of prevention through assistance and development support (UN 2020), the parameters and effectiveness of such actions remain unclear and, at

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[2] The three-pillar system was introduced in the UN Secretary-General's 2009 R2P report. Pillar I outlines the responsibility every state has to protect its own population from four mass atrocity crimes, Pillar II stipulates that the wider community has a responsibility to assist another state in meeting this responsibility, and Pillar III specifies that if a state is manifestly failing in its responsibility, then the international community must be prepared to take appropriate collective action in accordance with the UN Charter.
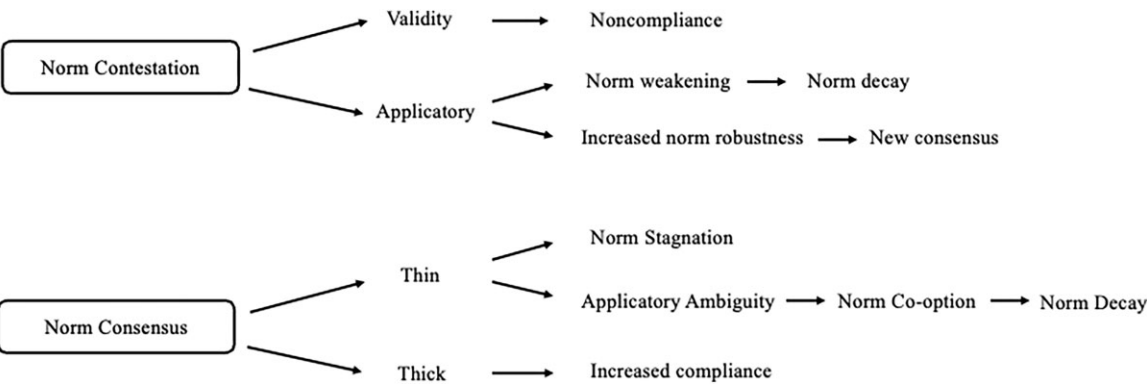
Figure 1. Dynamics of norm contestation and norm consensus.

times, purposefully vague. This has created significant practical problems when it comes to weighing up the R2P's overall effectiveness and unique status as a norm. Over time the parameters of the norm have thus become more imprecise, opening the opportunity for states to attach the norm to a range of policy areas and wider UN initiatives. One can thus categorize this process as one of norm "hybridization," in which different global norms are merged together to form a more complex norm (Fehl 2019, 897). This creates the potential for a wider range of responses as well as compromises over how to address the broader goals of a complex norm cluster, such as human protection. Thus, as Figure 1 outlines, just as norm contestation can weaken or strengthen a norm over time, so too can consensus-building practices. In situations where the push for consensus continues to generate applicatory ambiguity, the opportunities for norm co-option will remain high.

Consequently, as the article will later explore, this process of hybridization through consensus building has also resulted in the strategic co-opting of the R2P norm by key rising powers. As Panke and Petersohn (2012, 723) have argued, normative change can be brought about through "actors' attempts to limit the applicatory scope of a norm," yet in doing so they "do not openly challenge its legitimacy, its prescriptive status, or even its aim as such." "Co-opting agents," therefore, work to disregard aspects of the normative content while still selectively employing parts that fit with their own perceived interests (Björkdahl and Gusic 2015, 266). Through this process, it is possible to weaken the norm's overall effectiveness and leave it increasingly "empty and toothless" (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2020, 57). Key to understanding this dynamic is recognizing the R2P norm as experiencing unique applicatory ambiguity, whereby what it means to implement the norm has always been ill-defined and rarely placed under significant scrutiny. This ambiguity has allowed a

thin consensus to be built around more limited and less intrusive forms of practice, which over time have worked to further constrain the norm's effectiveness. Thus, states and other actors can point to forms of humanitarian and development responses as representing the implementation of the R2P norm, yet at the same time, mass atrocities committed against civilians continue to rise, and the outbreak of atrocities still often fails to generate any significant challenge from member states. One example of this practice, which will be further highlighted later, is China's response to mass atrocities occurring in Myanmar, in which it chose to prioritize local economic development in Rakhine State over other prevention measures (Zhang 2024, 256).

The consequence of this dynamic can be best theorized as a process of gradual norm decay through consensus building. Within the current norm literature, norm decay/degeneration has often been conceptualized as occurring when there is widespread noncompliance (Panke and Petersohn 2012, 723), whereby much of the focus is on the issue of contestation as the main source of declining norm robustness (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2020). In contrast, this article argues that consensus-building practices can also work to undermine norms and lead to decay (see Figure 1). In situations where consensus around the norm remains thin, any ambiguity surrounding norm application can be exploited through processes of co-option. In this sense, aspects of the norm may not be directly contested, yet ambiguity surrounding what constitutes effective application of the norm works to severely dilute its relevance over time. In the case of the R2P, thin consensus over the first two pillars of the R2P has allowed states to appeal to a range of less intrusive responses to prevention activity that have at the same time worked to reify the centrality of state sovereignty.

Similar to the idea of co-optation in the social movements' literature (Holdo 2019), norms can also

be slowly consumed into the wider strategic interests of particular states, diluting the original challenge the norm once posed to the status quo without causing direct claims of noncompliance. Thus, rather than the R2P facing a period of norm stagnation, in which it is "suspended between the tipping point and a full cascade (diffusion) and internalization" (Butler 2024a, 76), or norm regress, in which key proponents are actively contesting its legitimacy, such as the anti-torture norm (McKeown 2009), it is in fact slowly weakening as it is gradually co-opted by rising powers, limiting its effective application. In this sense, the shift toward a less contentious interpretation of the R2P does not simply reflect the prevailing attitudes of international society at this present time but must also be understood as reinforcing the decay of the R2P as a distinct normative doctrine. To examine this dynamic in greater detail, it is first critical to explore the key motivations and actors involved in supporting this shift toward redefining R2P implementation practices and the push for a greater emphasis on consensus building.

R2P Evolution and the Drivers of Consensus-Building

The creation of the R2P aimed to first and foremost shift expectations for how the international community should respond to mass atrocity crimes. Yet what that response should be or what kind of actions should be taken has always been left open. While there is a tendency in the literature to view the R2P's development as "stalled" since 2011 due to it being "associated with intervention and regime change" (Barber 2023b, 390), this overlooks the notable change in how the R2P is now discussed and framed in UN debates and practice. Over the last decade, the R2P has been increasingly linked to a much more expansive list of human protection initiatives, many of which now place a much greater emphasis on the importance of prevention, noninterference, and development. This has included examples such as the delivery of humanitarian aid and relief (Ralph and Gifkins 2017), quiet diplomacy techniques (Rosyidin 2020; Smith and Williams 2021), and poverty reduction (Dunford and Neu 2019; Bohm and Brown 2020). One can also evidence this shift by examining the focus and language of UN debates on the R2P and the views of foreign policy makers themselves. References to the prioritisation of prevention have increased in UN General Assembly debates on R2P,[3] as well as states now directly highlighting the R2P's connection to initiatives such

as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN General Assembly 2018a). Furthermore, one can point to evidence that diplomats also increasingly view the R2P as a foreign policy tool that can be "well integrated in development assistance" and "humanitarian aid" (Kolmasova 2023, 121). This marks a significant change from the initial debates and focus that surrounded the creation of the R2P, which were predominantly framed around the potential use of force and the circumstances under which sovereign noninterference claims could be overridden. As Staunton and Glanville (2022, 13) have argued, it was specifically the question of intervention that dominated the discussions during the creation of the ICISS document back in 2001, in which issues of prevention and rebuilding were deemed secondary.

Yet, while this shift toward the importance of further connecting the R2P to atrocity prevention has begun to gain greater recognition in the R2P literature (Crossley 2016; Jacob 2019), there has, however, been only limited discussion and theorization of the key factors that have worked to drive this specific change over time and its broader consequences for the norm. The following section will first analyze two heavily interconnected factors: the role and influence of rising powers in a changing global order and the parallel decline of Western support for upholding liberal values in the face of rising nationalism, helping to better explain the factors driving the focus on consensus building.

Rising Powers in a Changing Global Order

The R2P's normative realignment since the 2011 Libya intervention must first be placed in the context of ongoing power shifts in the international global order. As the unipolar American system has begun to give way to a more pluralistic international system, a greater number of states are now vying for influence and a more significant role in the management of global governance and international law, working to have their values and interests recognized (Cunliffe and Kenkel 2016). Rising powers have thus increasingly challenged the largely Western and liberal ideological principles that are seen to underpin the R2P norm (Zhang 2024, 255). While this shift has occurred over many years, much of the focus on explaining the dynamics behind the change has often been relatively undertheorized, in particular, the importance of rising powers in directly supporting and shaping this transition during a period of significant international change.

As Cooley and Nexon (2022, 103) argue, there have been substantial changes to the "mix of illiberal and liberal elements that characterize world

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[3] One can evidence this increase by comparing language use across 2 years of UNGA debates. In 2009, the General Assembly held three plenary meetings on the R2P, in which member states referred to prevention on seventy-eight occasions. In the three

2023 General Assembly plenary meetings on the R2P, there were 197 references to prevention, highlighting a substantial increase.

politics," with more autocratic and illiberal characteristics forming a greater part of the current dynamic. The perceived emboldening of illiberal powers works to create a world that is arguably safer for authoritarianism, with both China and Russia playing a notable role in attempts to roll back liberal elements, such as human rights language and its application (Cooley and Nexon 2022). Consequently, as rising authoritarianism and nationalism spread through the international system, the R2P becomes more vulnerable to attempts to reinterpret its focus and aims (Smith 2018). It is in this context that many states in the Global South have gradually sought to more strongly link the R2P to the defense of sovereignty and thus appeal to the need for more expansive prevention initiatives instead that do not pose direct challenges to sovereign integrity.

Subsequently, these conditions have created much more fertile ground for attempts to build consensus around the R2P norm by connecting it more closely to the UN development pillar as well as the principle of noninterference. As the following section will examine in detail, several rising powers have thus been instrumental in driving this shift and making the case for a more expansive interpretation of the norm. In doing so, a focus on noninterference and development has allowed states to avoid and bypass difficult questions about categorizing violence and the situations in which atrocity crimes are occurring. Furthermore, by connecting the R2P more closely to the UN development pillar, it is possible to lower the priority of the R2P in contrast to its original peace and security focus.

The Decline of Western Support

The concurrent rise in anti-liberal forces inside the West (Linsenmaier, Schmidt, and Spandler 2021) has also created the conditions for a further decline in the willingness of major powers, most prominently the United States, to actively support and attempt to uphold rules and responsibilities connected to human protection and the so-called liberal order (Hellmüller 2022). Part of this decline in support can notably be traced back to the wider consequences of the NATO intervention in Libya, which Ignatieff (2021, 178) argues worked to solidify "the conviction, among politicians and their publics alike, that protecting civilian populations was an enterprise fraught with hazardous and unmanageable consequences." Consequently, domestic support for many of the more cosmopolitan principles initially underpinning the R2P has significantly declined, with a far more cautious approach when it comes to framing responsibilities overseas. As Adler-Nissen and Zarakol (2021, 611) have argued, liberal institutions have become increasingly challenged by voters in

the West, in which previous appeals to liberal humanitarianism are more directly contested. US President Donald Trump specifically called for the primacy of sovereignty over multilateralism in his 2018 speech at the UN General Assembly, as well as deciding to quit the UN Human Rights Council the same year (Norris 2018). Consequently, key Western powers have over recent years become much less vocal when it comes to supporting and defending human rights initiatives and the more cosmopolitan elements of the R2P norm (Human Rights Watch 2024). With national priorities taking precedence, there is more space for other competing interpretations of best practice to take hold and gain consensus, with predominantly liberal interpretations gaining far less support across member states.

Furthermore, in response to these changing dynamics, R2P advocates, predominantly based in Western states, have also accepted the need to try and build a new consensus. This has mainly focused on trying to redefine what R2P is not about (threatening state sovereignty) and instead stress the role of prevention as well as the "responsibility to assist through development cooperation, training, diplomatic services, and other softer policies" (Kolmasova 2022, 1331). In this sense, the decline in support for the more liberal aspects of the R2P, both internally and externally, has forced many Western states to become more comfortable in appealing to and accepting a much more state-centric interpretation of the R2P norm, one that is perceived to garner stronger support across UN members.

To briefly summarize, both these trends have played a significant part in shaping the context of current R2P debates. Most significantly, through refocusing the R2P toward questions of how best to assist the institution of the state, thus working to link prevention practices to issues concerning development, good governance, and diplomatic consensus building. What this highlights is the impact that broader global trends ultimately have on the conditions for norm shaping within international institutions. This will be examined in greater detail in the following section, which traces the shift in approach by rising powers from 2009 to 2024.

Analysis of Rising Powers in R2P Consensus Building

To evidence the shifting nature of the R2P's focus, it is useful to analyze how states have discussed and framed the norm within the UN General Assembly both before the Libya intervention and in the decades following it. As Kolmasova (2022, 1337) has argued, BRICS countries became much more vocal about the status of the R2P norm in the aftermath of the Libyan intervention, in which there have been considerable

and consorted efforts by several states to significantly shift the R2P norm and its perceived parameters of action, particularly when it comes to atrocity prevention. Subsequently, one can underline the importance of framing as a powerful tool "for shaping the process of consensus building" (Charnysh, Lloyd and Simmons 2015, 328). However, the majority of literature on rising powers and the R2P has often been focused quite narrowly on the contestation that surrounds the potential use of force, with particular emphasis on the viability of Brazil's "Responsibility While Protecting" (RWP) concept and other attempts to generate restrictions on how force is applied in practice. In contrast, this section seeks to outline how rising powers have also attempted to shape the focus and framing of the R2P beyond just attempting to constrain the criteria for state intervention, working to also shift the norm toward a stronger emphasis on prevention and development. In doing so it builds on recent calls to better incorporate and analyze "a wider range of norm "shaping" processes" to help better reflect how changing global circumstances can have a knock-on impact on norm development (Stefan 2017, 88). In response, this section first examines the roles played by two important rising powers, Brazil and China, before going on to highlight the role of other key rising powers in driving support for a more consensus-based formulation of the R2P norm.

Brazil

The introduction of the RWP concept by Brazil is often seen as the most significant and coordinated response by a rising power to the R2P norm, following NATO's actions in Libya (Stuenkel 2016). The perceived stretching of the Security Council mandate sparked concern from many developing states that the principle of sovereign integrity was under threat and that this posed long-term consequences beyond just Libya. In particular, the actions of Western powers and the justifications they utilized sparked further skepticism of the role armed intervention can play in responses to mass atrocity crimes. In response, Brazil sought to challenge the perceived free pass that NATO forces were argued to have been given following the passing of Resolution 1973. At the core of Brazil's critique was a growing skepticism of the use of force and the greater damage it was argued to cause in the long run when addressing peace and security issues. The path forward was thus to bring in greater accountability and constraints on how force could be utilized by UNSC members. As Stefan has argued, the RWP principle therefore challenged claims that "non-Western powers can only either reject or implement a norm, but not contribute to its normative development" (Stefan 2017, 95). Yet

in the following months of discussion and debate, the RWP failed to gain significant traction and was eventually shelved by Brazil.

While the RWP concept failed to garner significant support to be fully actioned, it did arguably have the longer-term knock-on effect of further de-linking the R2P from intervention debates and indirectly reinforcing the importance of prevention. In this sense, many developing states would continue to be skeptical of the P5's willingness to seriously debate how force could be limited and made accountable in humanitarian situations. Brazil therefore played an important role in voicing the concerns of many other states and driving a growing skepticism of more interventionist approaches under the R2P norm (Stefan 2017, 108). In this context, it made sense for many developing states to place renewed emphasis on noncoercive prevention measures, while at the same time arguing for a much stronger divide between the three pillars. Consequently, we now see a significant number of states explicitly stating their prioritization of the first two pillars in UNGA debates, as explored in the sections below (UN General Assembly 2023a). This has ultimately meant further dissociation from debates over when sovereignty can be bypassed to questions of how the R2P can reinforce sovereignty and help states avoid interference in their affairs. In this sense, supporting sovereign integrity required a more expansive view of what the goals and focus of the R2P should now be when it comes to implementation. Over time, Brazil has gone from a state that was quite critical of the norm to one that has become a key player in reshaping the norm and working to refine its parameters (Scherzinger 2023, 93).

Brazil's comments in the 2019 UN General Assembly debate on R2P reflect the extent of this shift, particularly in the years following the RWP proposal. During this debate, Brazil began by strongly emphasizing the importance of long-term and structural prevention as integral to the R2P. In doing so, they argued that there must be a clear dividing line between "prevention and response so as to avoid conflating pillar II, related to prevention, with pillar III, related to response," suggesting that it is only when prevention measures fall short that response can come into play (UN General Assembly 2019a). Furthermore, in discussing the responsibility of the international community, Brazil stressed the need for noncoercive actions such as "mediation, negotiation, counternarratives to incitement to violence and actions to reduce the vulnerability of civilian populations" (UN General Assembly 2019a). With direct references to RWP or corresponding ideas now absent, these comments instead spoke to a renewed focus on a more preventive and sovereignty-focused approach to the R2P norm rather than a need to solely constrain the use of force.

More recently, Brazil has remained a key champion of the R2P, co-sponsoring resolution 75/277 in 2023, which included placing the R2P on the annual agenda of the General Assembly. As part of the 2023 UNGA debate on R2P, Brazil played an important role in again championing the need to connect the R2P to a range of other issues, suggesting "a comprehensive approach that strengthens coherence among political, security, development, human rights, and rule of law activities" (UN General Assembly 2023a). Central to this strategy is Brazil's emphasis on locating R2P as part of a longer-term project that must be about "promoting more inclusive, diverse and tolerant societies" (UN General Assembly 2023a). This speaks to Brazil's role in co-opting the norm to better fit with its own strategic interests. In particular, Brazil's aim is to be seen as a voice for the Global South, one that can work to reshape multilateral institutions and emphasize the central importance of both development and noninterference (Rodriguez and Thornton 2022). One can further highlight this aim through Brazil's longstanding emphasis on linking the R2P and the need for Security Council reform in its statements, suggesting that the Council's problem "lies primarily in its less than inclusive composition" (Patriota 2015). Brazil has thus placed reform at the center of its current G20 Presidency, with President Lula arguing that states need to "increase the number of countries in the Security Council" while also criticizing the actions of current permanent members in creating conflict (da Silva 2024). Consequently, by reflecting the concerns of developing states, Brazil continues to play a key strategic role in trying to build a level of consensus around the first two pillars of an R2P norm, which remains deeply connected to its wider ambition to reform global governance in an increasingly pluralist global order.

China

China is also playing a significant role in shaping global norms and has gained considerable influence through its growing economic power, allowing it to more effectively push agendas that are directly connected to its own internal interests when it comes to addressing international peace and security issues (Gowan 2024). Regarding the R2P, China's evolving approach to the norm has also been heavily influenced by the events of the NATO intervention in Libya. In the years following the intervention, China has influenced the adoption of a much more cautious approach to the utilization of the norm, initially sparked by concerns regarding the potential for the R2P to justify regime change (Fung 2020). As Foot (2020, 262) argues, Beijing continues to take a more conservative approach to the norm, one that seeks to

downplay the more cosmopolitan and liberal origins of the R2P. In doing so, China has aimed "to shape R2P in a direction that bolsters state primacy and reinforces non-interference in internal affairs," highlighting the key role of states in protecting their own citizens first and foremost (Foot 2020, 153). Thus, China continues to highlight the importance of national authorities when it comes to the implementation of R2P, while at the same time calling for much stronger state assistance that works to respect and reinforce state sovereignty (Rhoads and Welsh 2019, 612). This was expressed in the 2019 UNGA debate on R2P, in which China argued that "prevention is the key to implementing the responsibility to protect" and thus "we should step up our efforts to focus more on prevention and vigorously address both the symptoms and the root causes of conflict" (UN General Assembly 2019b). Consequently, the importance of preventing atrocity crimes before they occur is argued to help bypass the significant challenges of competing interests and contestation over authorizing more coercive protection practices, such as those deemed to pose a direct threat to state sovereignty.

While there has been considerable focus on China's attempt to uphold a less interventionist approach to the R2P, the complexities of China's position on mass atrocity prevention have arguably been under undertheorized. For example, while China has been supportive rhetorically of a greater focus on prevention, this is caveated with its preference for a demand-led response, one that is built on the consent of the state concerned and is focused on developing capacities and conflict prevention strategies. Consequently, as Zhang (2024, 242) has highlighted, China has sought to more strongly connect the R2P norm to the prioritization of economic development over "other long-term commitments, such as democracy promotion and liberal human rights." For example, during the 2019 R2P debate in the GA, China argued that "all countries should prioritize development and work together to promote the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" (UN General Assembly 2019b). This statement connects back to China's own strategic interests, whereby it has consistently sought to link its own Belt and Road Initiative to the UN 2030 agenda (People's Republic of China 2024) as a way to further legitimize its economic actions in states such as Sri Lanka and Myanmar (Feng 2020). This has ultimately proven an effective strategy for building greater consensus around the R2P, particularly among developing states, as the UN has become much more receptive to the importance of economic factors such as underdevelopment in generating violence against civilians (Foot 2020, 249). For example, in the 2023 UNGA debate, China spoke explicitly about its ambition to work more in sup-

porting developing countries in "responding to security challenges, maintaining common security, and enhancing their capacity to protect civilians with additional resources and means by realizing sustainable development" (UN General Assembly 2023b). In the case of Myanmar, this resulted in China claiming that it is fulfilling its commitment to preventing atrocity crimes through its action in directly supporting local economic development in Rakhine State (Zhang 2024, 256). However, it is notable that this emphasis on building consensus around the importance of a more development-focused approach to prevention has ultimately obscured China's own contestation about preventing peacetime atrocities (UN General Assembly 2023b). China has thus placed significant focus on the importance of supporting governments in power, while offering very little comment on more creative solutions to prevention in crisis situations, such as UN early warning systems, where a government may be the one persecuting its own people (Foot 2020, 153).

In this regard, one can highlight China's overall strategy as one of norm co-option, in which it has worked to shift the central focus of the norm toward its own shared interest in development while deemphasizing aspects of the norm it disagrees with. What this demonstrates is the way in which an emphasis on finding consensus can work to limit the potential for action and thus constrain the opportunity to discuss and implement more effective preventive policies in other areas.

Other Key Rising Powers

It is not just larger rising powers such as Brazil and China that have been significant in shaping the move for a more consensus-focused approach to the R2P. Other key rising powers, such as Turkey, have been explicit in emphasizing the need for greater consensus on the R2P and the importance of prevention and development as critical avenues for building consensus. In the 2023 UNGA debate, Turkey argued that the definition of the R2P "must be based on the broadest possible consensus among the international community, considering the concerns of all Member States" (UN General Assembly 2023a). In doing so, they appealed to a greater focus on economic welfare and social stability, as well as suggesting that "the scope of the responsibility to protect must therefore take into account the fight against terrorist organizations" (UN General Assembly 2023a). This line of argument speaks to a consistent theme of recent formal UNGA debates, in which the R2P is held up as a norm that works to reinforce state sovereignty and support state capacity, thus improving overall consensus for the norm. For Turkey, the R2P has been utilized as a tool to help validate its regional security aspirations, in which humanitarian claims have often

been used to further justify Turkish military operations in Syria and wider counterterrorism objectives against the Syrian Kurdish YPG (Şeyşane and Çelik 2015). Furthermore, in the 2024 UNGA debate on R2P, Morocco, a key regional power, was also among several states advocating for "a consensus-based approach to the responsibility to protect, underlining the need for a prevention programme" (UN General Assembly 2024). Morocco has long embraced the rhetorical shift in focus toward prevention initiatives and Pillar II support, participating in UN peacekeeping missions and training foreign law enforcement personnel, thus helping to position itself as a responsible security actor (Morabety 2017). Yet along similar lines to Turkey, Morocco's focus on prevention is heavily connected to its own counterterrorism interests in the region; thus, it seeks to gain important strategic advantages from supporting this more state-centric interpretation of the R2P (Mansour-Ille 2021).

One can also explicitly highlight the normative shift in understanding around the R2P norm, through analysing changing state opinion when it comes to the connection between the R2P and other norms over time. In the 2009 UNGA debate on R2P, the Philippines expressed concern that a focus on R2P "may further skew the balance against development" and thus emphasized the need not to water down other commitments such as those to development assistance (UN General Assembly 2009). Yet over time, this concern has in fact shifted in the opposite direction, with states now consistently highlighting the need to link the R2P to other agendas as a means to improve overall consensus. In the 2019 debate, many European powers were vocal in accepting this reframing of the R2P, with Norway explicitly reinforcing the need "to continue linking R2P to other related agendas, including peacekeeping, the protection of civilians, women and peace and security, sustaining peace and the Sustainable Development Goals" (UN General Assembly 2019a). By the 2023 debate, South Africa argued that the "R2P is very clearly aligned with sustainable development," and Argentina suggested that "development clearly enables us to reduce the zones of exclusion and poverty from which acts of mass violence arise" (UN General Assembly 2023a). Consequently, rather than these linkages being seen as taking away from other agendas, there is now an increasing push to expand these connections in order to help operationalize the R2P norm, in which the consensus around development provides an opportune way for states to suggest they are supporting the goals and ambitions of the R2P.

However, there are still a small number of states that remain critical of the R2P and the decision to hold formal debates on the topic, yet their concern is not based on the increased emphasis on pre-

vention and development support specifically, where there remains significant agreement. Instead, there is concern that this shift may simply be a "Trojan horse," allowing the R2P to gain greater support among a wider number of states, but underneath, it remains a norm that could still be utilized to challenge state sovereignty through the actions of powerful liberal states. This view is perhaps best expressed by Russia, which in 2023 explicitly called upon developing states "not to agree to attempt to artificially link R2P and development assistance and to undertake an objective evaluation of that concept" (UN General Assembly 2023a). They claimed that the R2P was simply being attached to "subjects that are popular in the United Nations" (UN General Assembly 2023a). What this ultimately suggests is that the consensus-building approach aimed at expanding the focus of the R2P has helped to build greater agreement, to the point at which Russia has been forced to try and disrupt this consensus as a way to continue its attacks on Western powers.

It is clear from the textual analysis of UNGA debates on the R2P undertaken that there is a growing consensus around expanding the focus of the R2P norm, with a conscious emphasis on the centrality of prevention and, more recently, development and state support. As Hunt has argued, "the behaviour of rising powers is just one example of non-linear change in a fluid and dynamical global order that orthodox interpretations of norm evolution struggle to explain" (Hunt 2016, 885). Consequently, this overall shift has been driven by several key factors, first of all, the changing nature of the current world order, in which support for more liberal and interventionist policy in response to atrocity crimes has become deeply contested, both by an increasingly authoritarian world order and the corresponding decline within Western states, shaped by the rise of populism and growing isolationism. By connecting the R2P to other agendas spread broadly across the three UN pillars of Peace and Security, Development, and Human Rights, the R2P norm has gradually become internalized into much larger UN strategic projects. Yet, while on the surface there are positive attributes to this push to find greater consensus between states on where the focus of R2P should lie, in the following section, this article will outline the practical realities of this agenda and its consequences for the R2P norm. In doing so, it will be possible to reinforce the dangers of blindly promoting a need for consensus at the cost of debating what kind of protection practices can be effective and the extent to which the R2P must at times be used to challenge the actions of states when it comes to stopping mass atrocity crimes.

The Limits of a More Consensus Driven R2P Norm

As so far highlighted, the evolution of the R2P norm has been marked by a gradual shift toward more consensus-driven responses to R2P situations and a strong emphasis on respect for state sovereignty. Yet, while on the surface, the connection of the R2P to a wider array of other norms suggests a greater flexibility in how states can respond to addressing mass atrocity crimes, I argue that the toolkit available to states has instead been blunted. In this sense, the thin consensus built around the R2P norm has been co-opted to fit under a wider umbrella of already available practices, which can be seen to gradually remove the central focus and uniqueness of the norm. In this sense, the central value of the R2P as a distinct international norm was, in the first instance, to "transform notions of responsibility and practices of accountability regarding civilian protection" (Butler 2024b, 270). This ultimately entails the potential challenging of state power and the use of coercive measures to hold states accountable and protect people from mass atrocity crimes. A responsibility that is shared by each state but also the international community collectively. Contrastingly, in the search for greater consensus between states on what the R2P norm entails in terms of practice, we have seen a coalescing around much less intrusive actions such as quiet diplomacy, humanitarian support, and longer-term development practices. Consequently, as Scherzinger has recently commented, "whether these measures can effectively prevent war crimes, or even genocide, remains to be seen" (Scherzinger 2023, 95). In response to this question, I make the case for why a more consensus-driven approach to R2P has so far been unsuccessful. Highlighting how the original value of the norm has begun to erode as it increasingly provides useful cover for states in their failure to respond and prevent mass atrocity crimes effectively.

Part of the push to expand what it means to implement R2P can be seen to have its roots in the deep contestation that surrounds the use of direct military intervention under pillar three of the R2P, alongside the continued difficulties of attempts to reach an agreement on its effective use and application. It is thus argued that by expanding the range of R2P responses beyond coercive intervention, it is possible to avoid the potential delegitimization of the R2P norm and thus help to build greater consensus for its application (Coen 2018, 1044). Making this shift is therefore argued to be the most effective way of avoiding accusations of hypocrisy or imperialism, which are seen to undermine the R2P norm (Moses 2019). This is a view increasingly shared by many states as well, who have vocalized that "humanitar-

ian interventions are not favoured due to past and potential abuses of the doctrine" (Ercan 2019, 330). Moving forward, however, the overall effectiveness of current state and multilateral initiatives that support "human protection through a consistent insistence on peaceful means" needs to be examined and analyzed in greater detail (Moses 2019, 239).

For those broadly supportive of this shift toward expansion, examples of more consensus driven diplomatic efforts are highlighted as offering an effective way of better implementing the R2P norm. One of which has been the greater emphasis on the role of so-called quiet diplomacy. This has particularly been the case in situations in which the atrocities taking place have involved a nation-state as the perpetrator. This approach is highlighted as an effective method for working toward human protection goals under the R2P, while at the same time respecting sovereignty and keeping diplomatic channels open. For Rosyidin (2020, 11), Indonesia's approach to the ongoing atrocities committed against the Rohingya in Myanmar, in which they chose to undertake "quiet diplomacy instead of naming and shaming or utilizing sanctions" is presented as a useful example of how states can avoid the use of force, or other coercive actions, in responding to mass atrocity crimes and highlights that coercion is not always required against authoritarian regimes. It is therefore argued that the noninterference principle is not directly incompatible with the R2P norm and thus Indonesia's approach to Myanmar is an example of a pillar II response that is ultimately supportive of equal sovereignty (Rosyidin 2020). Furthermore, to facilitate support for those on the ground, quiet diplomacy has also been used to help negotiate the provision of humanitarian aid as another way of implementing the R2P. This more humanitarian approach has thus been praised as an important pragmatic answer to situations in which the room for maneuver is severely limited. Consequently, as Ralph and Gifkins (2017, 645) have argued in relation to the case of atrocities in the Syrian civil war, the push by elective Security Council members to "negotiate humanitarian access to vulnerable populations" can also be highlighted as an important way in which an R2P response can still be implemented in an incredibly contentious situation, one where the Security Council is bitterly divided.

Furthermore, for those more skeptical of the reactive aspects of the R2P project, there has also been an increasing emphasis on the need to focus the R2P around a more long-term approach to poverty alleviation and development assistance. This is also reflected in the growing push by a range of states to connect the R2P to the Sustainable Development Goals (UN General Assembly 2023a). Bohm and Brown (2020, 65) have notably argued that much

more needs to be done to address the "international community's active systemic role in perpetuating poverty, repression, and uneven resource distribution." Consequently, it is argued that the R2P's approach to prevention must go far beyond early warning and capacity-building initiatives to work instead toward more systematically addressing structural inequalities. This line of argument certainly chimes with several statements made by states from the Global South, who have emphasized that sustainable development and poverty eradication are the best investments in prevention (UN General Assembly 2018b).

However, these positions and the move toward expansion have had a significant impact in indirectly watering down the R2P's original ambition, as well as making it less effective at preventing and responding to mass atrocity crimes. As Bellamy has rightly commented, the shift toward a more accommodating approach in terms of trying to keep open diplomatic channels with oppressor states has not proven successful in terms of gaining useful concessions; instead, he argues that "when it comes to atrocity prevention, quiet diplomacy has an unblemished track record of failure" (Bellamy 2020). Part of this failure comes back to a growing push toward consensus building, particularly in the Security Council, in which states have often toned down their criticism or have sought to privilege impartiality in the hope of gaining concessions in other areas, such as humanitarian access (Bellamy 2020). While this may appear to be a useful pragmatic response in certain situations, the longer-term reliance on this approach creates the possibility that the drive for consensus leads to less fruitful and effective mass atrocity prevention responses from states. As Pattison (2015) has highlighted, the use of diplomatic criticism must still be seen as a central part of reinforcing the R2P norm's overall legitimacy. The role of naming and shaming can thus be seen as critical in bringing atrocities to light and creating "common understandings of the actions of perpetrators across the international community" (Krain 2012, 576). By not staying silent, states play a crucial role in calling attention to potential violations, highlighting why certain crimes must concern all states, and working to generate greater public scrutiny of state actions.

Consequently, when it comes to the challenge of improving the R2P's record as a tool of prevention, recognizing and calling out serious human rights abuses that may potentially lead to future atrocity crimes must remain central to the R2P's strategy, even when this may initially generate considerable reproach. The long-term danger for the R2P and its effectiveness as a prevention tool is that the space for vocal criticism shrinks further to avoid what some states see as an intrusion into their internal affairs.

This has increasingly been the case within the UN Security Council, in which there is a reluctance of states to involve the Council in conflicts in which they are parties or which they perceive as resistant to outside involvement (Roberts and Zaum 2013). While quiet diplomacy can prove effective in certain circumstances, it must not at the same time become an excuse for states who might be less willing to call out potential atrocities in order to protect other national interests. The growing criticism of human rights in the UN has subsequently reinforced this urgent need for stronger collective support for human protection norms and the critical importance of vocal leadership in this area.

Regarding the greater connection between the R2P and development, this more long-term focus on prevention and state assistance has been critical to building new consensus around the norm. In doing so, the R2P has shifted from a predominant emphasis on the UN peace and security pillar to one that now also sits across the UN pillar of development. Yet the assumption that investing in development will inevitably lead to a decrease in atrocity crimes over time is not backed up by the current research. When examining the data, one can notably point to the fact that most atrocities occur in low-and medium-ranked countries, based on the Human Development Index (HDI) data (Gallagher 2022). Yet, as Gallagher (2022, 1040) rightly highlights, the "vast majority of low-ranked countries have not experienced mass atrocities this century," which brings into question the claim that "investing RtoP resources in development issues will aid mass atrocity prevention." Instead, it points to an attempt to downgrade the significance of the R2P norm by co-opting it into other agendas that have mass support, regardless of the historical evidence surrounding the triggers of mass atrocity crimes.

Furthermore, when it comes to more short-term peaceful responses to atrocity crimes, there also remain several ways in which the norm's unique focus and effectiveness can be undermined through such practices. As Welsh (2019, 64) has argued, the move to recognize humanitarian assistance and relief as R2P in action also runs the danger of "substantially diluting what is meant by 'protection'." In this sense, the R2P norm was not created as a tool to "facilitate the delivery of life-saving supplies, such as food and medical assistance" but to "ensure protection from widespread and systematic killing" (Welsh 2019, 64). The more the R2P is directly associated with previously well-established norms, such as humanitarian assistance, the greater the opportunity for the unique nature of the R2P's focus to be lost or undermined. As Gowen (2024, 272) highlights, there has been a clear "humanitarian turn" in Council diplomacy, as the institution has shifted away from more ambitious goals of conflict resolution to instead states focusing more attention on "fairly thin humanitarian resolutions."

For example, in response to the atrocities committed in Myanmar, humanitarian aid was highlighted as "a point of minimal consensus" between Western states and China, indicating the continued appetite for less confrontational action. Moreover, in the case of Syria, where attempts to secure humanitarian access to certain parts of the country have been championed as a pragmatic R2P response, it has at the same time opened space for Russia and China to more assertively challenge and water down previously established practices around aid delivery as uncontroversial (Gowan 2018). As Hopgood (2019, 10) argues, "Presidents Assad and Putin have tested this norm and found they can break it with impunity," by which they have been effective in bringing forward sovereignty claims against previously uncontested norms on the supply of humanitarian aid. This example is indicative of the challenge the R2P faces in the longer term, particularly when the bar is lowered in terms of what is recognized as an appropriate R2P response, generating further politicization of humanitarian norms.

As Stamnes (2009, 75) previously warned, invoking the R2P in situations that are well beyond its initial focus outlined in the 2005 WSOD comes with significant drawbacks. In this sense, while expanding and broadening the norm's connection to other human protection responses does not alone threaten the norm's effectiveness, the increased applicatory ambiguity caused by this expansion does open up space for greater norm co-option. Over time, this can mean more limited and less intrusive responses become further legitimized at the expense of contentious or ambitious approaches to protection and prevention that may challenge sovereignty claims or require coercive action. As the previous section outlined, the shift to R2P expansion is at the same time connected to wider global pressures working to reinforce the centrality of state sovereignty and the importance of supporting states to address the threats posed by mass atrocity crimes. The notable irony here is that the initial founding of the R2P concept was a specific attempt to reimagine state sovereignty and to challenge the way it could often act as a "tyrant's charter" allowing internal force for any purpose the sovereign saw fit (Sampford and Thakur 2015). Yet, the R2P has, over time, worked to also strengthen claims to noninterference in internal affairs as more states appeal to consensus-based responses that do not directly challenge authority, even in situations where atrocity crimes are already taking place. This more state-centric approach to the R2P has ultimately proved pivotal in helping the norm gain greater support from Global South states, who

have previously been more skeptical of how the R2P may be applied in practice.

However, the co-opting of the R2P norm by rising powers in particular has had a slow and corrosive impact on the norm, whereby actions deemed to support the goal of the R2P have continued to prove increasingly ineffective in addressing mass atrocity crimes globally, despite extensive rhetorical consensus on the importance of prevention. What this reinforces is the dangers of fixating on consensus, particularly when there is still significant ambiguity surrounding how the norm should be applied in practice. Over time, the R2P is thus likely to become subsumed into wider debates around development, poverty reduction, and state support, in which its value to such debates becomes less and less significant and through which the importance of sovereign authority can be strengthened. Concurrently, discussions concerning more immediate and potentially successful preventive actions are likely to be shut down and further muted.

Conclusion

This article has argued that what underpins a considerable amount of the current debates between states on the R2P norm is a notable level of consensus on the future direction of the norm. As Staunton and Glanville have highlighted, "prevention responsibilities have proven to be one of the few things that the international community has consistently agreed on" (Staunton and Glanville 2022, 13). Yet despite this agreement, the push to find consensus has delivered very little in terms of concrete action and response to addressing mass atrocity crimes. Consequently, given the increasing levels of atrocity crimes taking place globally, it has become difficult to support the argument put forward by Zimmermann et al. (2023, 101) that "the norm's critical claim to protect from mass atrocities is so far being upheld." Instead, there is evidence to suggest that the continued applicatory ambiguity surrounding the process of consensus building has resulted in norm co-option of the R2P. This process has worked to further erode the norm as it continues to be incorporated into a broader norm cluster, downplaying its unique focus and thus leaving the R2P doctrine in decay.

While there are some upsides in better connecting the R2P to the main pillars of the UN, its original connection to the peace and security pillar has become notably downplayed over time, opening space for states to co-opt the norm and redefine where the norm is discussed and the practices it is connected to. Ultimately, this speaks to the fact that preventing and responding to mass atrocity crimes is an incredibly costly and fraught process, which states often want to avoid whenever possible. As former R2P Special

Advisor Karren Smith has commented, atrocity prevention is too often treated as an "afterthought and an annoyance that distracts from what is regarded by the more powerful entities as the more important business of the UN, namely political and humanitarian affairs" (Smith 2023). In an environment where there is support for less costly and intrusive approaches to human protection, a majority of states are likely to see this as preferable despite the human cost of such actions.

Consequently, this article has argued that rather than place the idea of normative contestation at the center of the debate on the R2P's current status and influence, there is a need to better understand the role of consensus building and processes of co-option that have worked to restrict aspects of the norm's application in practice. In this sense, given the current geopolitical circumstances, a norm that is more clearly tied to development and state support will likely continue to have rhetorical support, particularly when it is increasingly not used to call out and challenge the specific actions of state leaders. Yet, as evidenced in this article, this has long-term implications for future attempts to respond to atrocity crimes, as well as potentially emboldening those seeking to make use of such tactics if their actions are increasingly unlikely to be publicly challenged. What this analysis therefore highlights are the continued resilience of "powerful "pluralist" norms—such as sovereign equality, national ownership, noninterference, and consent—that are enjoying renewed consensus in an era of resurgent nationalism" (Rhoads and Welsh 2019, 614). Subsequently, there is a need to recognize that the principle of prevention and continued appeals to less coercive measures cannot be framed as a panacea to the challenge of stopping the outbreak of mass atrocity crimes. In this sense, the transition to a more pluralist global order has opened the space for states to talk up the need for more long-term and less intrusive responses while, in the process, downplaying or even ignoring the outbreak of mass atrocity crimes. In theory, there could be some limited advantages to the R2P being repackaged as essentially a bundled development norm, through which the case for more immediate international aid and development support could be made from a security-focused position, thus helping to raise the significance of its delivery. Yet there is so far little evidence of states actively engaging in this kind of practice, in which direct appeals to the R2P have not been a major part of negotiations on aid delivery or development initiatives.

Finally, while the focus of this article has been on the role of states in shaping the contours of the R2P norm toward a thin form of consensus, it is important to also highlight the role of NGOs and civil so-

ciety groups in this process. While a full interrogation of this relationship is beyond the scope of this article, Kolmasova's (2023, 186) work on R2P advocacy networks evidences how "R2P advocates appropriated the framework to focus on softer measures, prevention and a state's primary responsibility to protect its people." The consequence of this has also been to reinforce a less combative understanding of the norm in the name of achieving greater consensus. While there may be short-term benefits to this approach, looking forward, states and the wider NGO and civil society community must seek to raise more critical questions of the current status quo, particularly during a time in which collective responsibility is downplayed and repackaged, to not disrupt fragile state consensus. If the R2P is to hold any promise of disrupting state failure when it comes to responding to mass atrocity crimes, then it cannot be a norm that is only shaped by humanitarian and development concerns but must also be connected to the demands of peace and security. Without this ambition, the norm is most likely to lose resonance, as the original normative ambition behind the doctrine further decays and states increasingly find other ways to frame the challenges created by mass atrocity crimes.

Acknowledgments

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