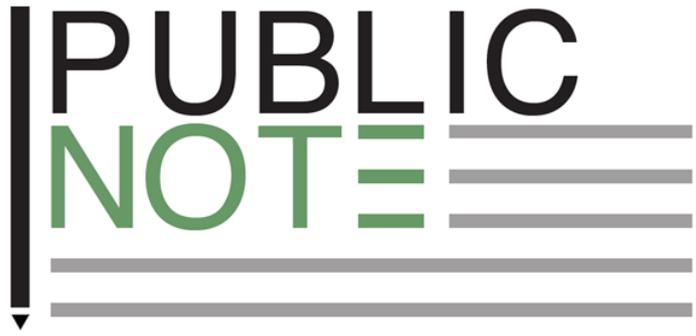# Should The United Nations Engage In Peacekeeping Missions Based On The Responsibility To Protect?

Lotta Mayr

PUBLIC
NOTE

Unanimously endorsed in 2005, the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) is the newest principle guiding United Nations (UN) peacekeeping, and the first including a legitimisation of the use of force. Asking whether the UN should engage in peacekeeping missions based on R2P, my research seeks a better understanding and assessment of the doctrine.

The main insight from the academic debate is the prevalence of different, contradictory interpretations of the central concepts comprising the R2P principle. A concept map illuminates the conflicting perceptions of sovereignty, security, protection and intervention. The UN discourse echoes these clashes, whereby disagreement around its meaning results in different evaluations of the principle. However, to study the doctrine and its representation in the UN as well as implications for peacekeeping, these contradictions and indeterminacies need to be better understood. The principle primarily needs clarification and delimitation to be advanced in the UN and evaluate its relevance for peacekeeping.

Lessons for Practice

- The concept map tool helped me to dissect the fundamental conflict surrounding the R2P principle and tie it to different understandings. Moreover, the resulting visualization could be applied as a coding system to analyse the UN discourse while simultaneously connecting it to both the academic debate and theoretical insights.
- Within the UN, the different interpretations allow member-states to evoke the same concept but achieve very different results and meanings for R2P.
- To consolidate a consensus at the UN and render the principle legitimate, R2P needs to consider, respond and adapt to the dominant criticism and clash of interpretations.

Keywords: responsibility to protect, conceptual analysis, discourse analysis, UN peacekeeping

Introduction

Since their first operation almost 75 years ago, UN peacekeeping has become one of the main tools to respond to complex violent conflicts. As the only international body claiming legal authority to endorse military interventions, they originally based this capacity on the need to defend international peace and security, later expanding to principles of solidarity or humanity (United Nations, 2010). Despite increased criticism and calls for reform, the new millennium has again seen the number of military and civilian personnel participating in UN peacekeeping operations around the world reaching unprecedented new highs. Not only the number of UN peacekeepers has become larger, but their mandates are also increasingly more complex (ibid.; Kenkel, 2013).

'To consolidate a consensus at the UN and render it legitimate, R2P needs to consider, respond and adapt to the dominant criticism'

In response to the failure at preventing the genocides of Rwanda in 1994 and Srebrenica in 1995, the General Assembly (GA) unanimously endorsed the R2P principle in 2005 (Bellamy, 2009). This affirms positive responsibilities for the protection of civil populations from genocide, mass atrocities, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, defining a new imperative for peacekeeping. The primary responsibility is assigned to the state, founded inherently in its sovereignty. At the same time, the international community is called upon to encourage and assist the state in its R2P. If a particular state is unwilling or unable to fulfil its responsibility or itself perpetrating the four specified crimes, the international community is "prepared to take collective action, in a timely and decisive manner" (United Nations, 2005, p. 30). Consequently, if peaceful means are deemed insufficient, the UN Security Council (UNSC) may authorize military interventions based on R2P (United Nations, 2005; Deng 2010). It has the ultimate authority to determine a threat to international peace and security and approve of actions, sanctions and interventions taken. Prevalent critiques on the UNSC's composition and functioning, labelled undemocratic and unrepresentative also play into the development of the principle (Newman 2013; Mahdavi 2015).

Conceptual Analysis

"My optimism is based on the fact that R2P has achieved something that other projects aimed at eliminating genocide and mass atrocities have not: genuine and resilient international consensus."

Alex Bellamy, Responsibility to Protect: A Defense, 2014, p. 1

Literature review

Bellamy's quote demonstrates the confidence in the R2P concept and the consensus it has brought about. Its main aim was to reconcile the theoretical and normative contradictions that blocked international response to mass atrocities and other crimes against humanity (Badescu & Weiss, 2010). The legitimate use of military force is contested: one side prioritises hard national sovereignty and non-interference, the other the need to protect civilians also within states, arguing for humanitarian intervention (Evans, 2008; Bellamy, 2010; Thakur, 2013). Therefore, R2P is fundamentally a normative project, aiming to reconceptualize intervention (Acharya, 2013; Thakur, 2013, 2017).

R2P proponents pride the concept as most significant normative shift in international relations since at least a century (Thakur & Weiss, 2009; Bellamy, 2010). Most academic literature concerns itself with the norm and its contestation or normative pull. The debate proposes certain framing or reframing of it, the addition or eradication of certain elements, essentially focussed on its formulation and content. Scholars counter critique of the norm by reiterating the meaning and objective of R2P, conceding that the other side has simply misunderstood (Bode & Karlsrud, 2010; Evans, 2008). A significant part of the literature is concerned with the diverse meanings inhabiting the concept, which is also what I set out to analyse (Badescu & Weiss, 2010; Acharya, 2013).

Concept map

Building on an extensive literature review, I argue that this disagreement can be traced to different, even contrasting interpretations of the four central concepts of R2P: sovereignty, security, protection and intervention (see the appendix for the concept map).

R2P proponents argue that the concept strengthens sovereignty through tying it to further legitimacy criteria. Critics disagree, maintaining that R2P undermines state sovereignty by providing grounds for international intervention. While critics tend to focus on a traditional view of state security as essential to the collective security system, R2P supporters gravitate towards the human security paradigm, prioritizing the safety of the human. One side asserts that the achievement of R2P lies in its shift from the rights of the intervening parties to the perspective and needs of the population to be protected, emphasizing the neutrality and centrality of protection to the doctrine. Critics object this, either by posing that protection is never a neutral exercise or arguing that this interpretation of protection denies the victims agency. Most controversially, the use of force is problematised. On the one hand, proponents emphasize the need for R2P to circumscribe military intervention internationally, to avoid great power unilateral action and tie it into a greater spectrum of collective action. On the other hand, R2P is described as a catalyst for military intervention, legitimising and thus intensifying the use of force. With the UN depending on the political will and capacities of its member-states, any justification of intervention enables powerplay and exacerbates global inequality, underlining the need to uphold non-interference.

'With the UN depending on the political will and capacities of its member-states, any justification of intervention enables powerplay and exacerbates global

Consequently, this conceptual impurity and diversity of interpretations can be recognized as not only significant to the academic debate, but also inherent to the R2P doctrine. Bode and Karlsrud (2019) describe normative ambiguity to be a central characteristic of international norms. It is necessary to reach consensus in the international community, and therefore integral to their formulation. This fulfils several functions, as both the UN and the individual states can use this flexibility to their benefit, constructing their behaviour as consistent with R2P and thus legitimate.

Discourse Analysis

The discourse analysis retraced the conflicting interpretations of the four concepts in the dominant UN discourse surrounding the doctrine's emergence and early consolidation. The selected cases are resolutions, concept notes and debate transcripts from 2005 to 2009, sourced from the UN digital library. Confirming the findings from the conceptual analysis, it revealed how different interpretations allow member-states to evoke the same concept but achieve very different results and meanings for R2P.

The prevailing disagreement around the meaning of the central concepts therefore results in ambiguity, restricting its compliance pull and effectiveness (Badescu & Weiss, 2010; Colonomos & Beardsworth, 2020). In turn, application has been uneven and limited.

Conclusion

While normative ambiguity has been established as fundamental function of international norms (Bode & Karlsrud, 2019), it seems to render R2P inoperable. However, this remaining unclarity not only undermines implementation, but also poses challenges to concluding on R2P for UN peacekeeping. Therefore, this position paper argues that the principle primarily needs clarification and delimitation, following both the academic debate and the UN discourse. To consolidate a consensus at the UN and render it legitimate, R2P needs to consider, respond and adapt to the dominant criticism.

In May of 2021, the GA convened a plenary meeting on R2P for the first time since 2009. The thereby adopted resolution requests annual reports on R2P from the SG, acknowledging that the concept needs further deliberation, but also renewing the commitment to it. Consequently, I look out to future research continuing the query on the representation of R2P and its central concepts at the UN. Moreover, it would be of great relevance to investigate the relevance of these findings to the field and reality of peacekeeping missions. The often-proclaimed gap between mandate and practice (Bode & Karlsrud, 2019), asks to reflect on the

divergence between the conceptual discourse analysis of R2P and its real application. Finally, it is necessary to grasp and apprehend its consequences for practitioners, peacekeeping staff, and most importantly, the populations being target of these missions and their protection from mass atrocity crimes.

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Appendix: Concept map
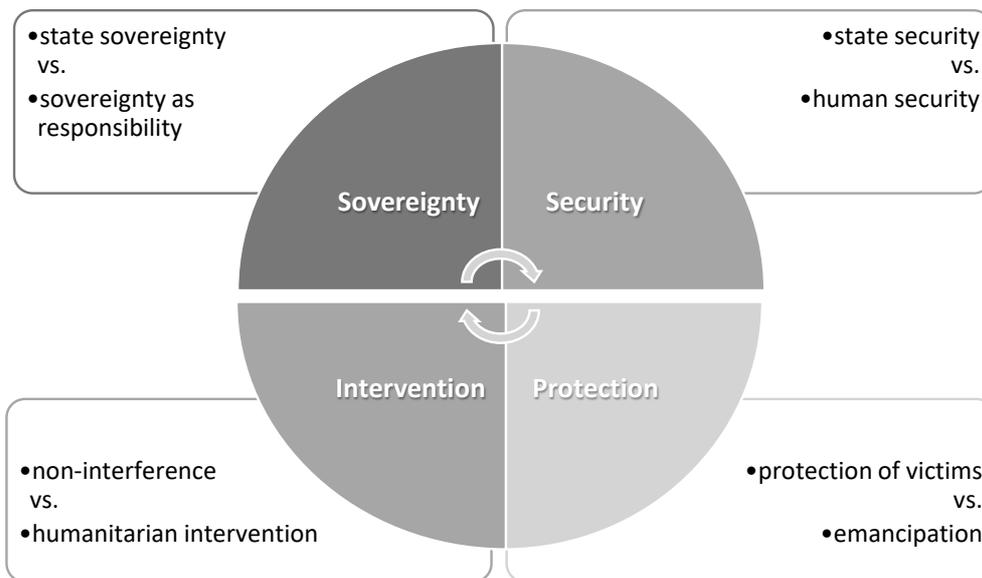
The concept map visualizes the disagreements around the four central concepts comprised in R2P outlined above: *sovereignty*, *security, protection*, and *intervention*. Inherent to each concept, opposing schools, varying underlying assumptions, and different focal points lead to contrasting resulting interpretations and conflict. The key components of the R2P doctrine thus equally represent the predominant inconsistencies and clashes.

A map like this helped me to detect and dissect the fundamental conflict in the debate surrounding R2P, as well as tie it to different understandings. Moreover, the visualization of the four-fold binary opposites proposed a straightforward coding system to analyse the UN discourse and simultaneously connect it to the academic debate and theoretical insights.

A note from the author

Hi, I am **Lotta Mayr**!

I am 21 years old and have just started my Master in Conflict Studies & Human Rights at Utrecht University. I already chose for my Bachelor in Philosophy, Politics & Economics with a special interest in international relations, diplomacy, conflict and global and socio-economic inequality. After initially diving deeper into political philosophy, qualitative research and welfare politics, my exchange at Sciences Po Bordeaux resurfaced these interests. Taking courses in international relations as well as African and Postcolonial studies, I decided to shift my focus towards conflict studies and write my thesis in the field. The conceptual discourse analysis allowed me to combine the philosophical perspective with my interest in global politics, diplomacy and international relations.

I feel very lucky to get the opportunity to publish this small insight into the research for my Undergraduate thesis. At the same time, even the few months between the writing process and publication, but especially the new learnings from my Master have already broadened my perspective and given me the chance to reflect on my findings and place them in their bigger context. Therefore, I look forward to continue to grow, learn and adapt and define my point of view from further experiences and research.